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Hugo de Burgh, Emma Lupano, and Bettina Mottura

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From “Propaganda” to “Guided Communication”

Animating Political Communication in Digital China

*Qin Lei**

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the recent boom in the use of animated cartoons for political communication in China which began in late 2013. A series of political cartoons are examined against the background of a comprehensive media revolution designed by top-following the Chinese Communist Party’s (hereafter CCP) new understanding of the role of media and public opinion. I argue, by looking closely at the creative use of political cartoons, that the CCP has adjusted its views on the role of media in the digital age – from propaganda mouthpiece, to guiding opinion unifier for popularizing the Party’s rule. Their efforts and success in stimulating a significant number of responses through the use of animated cartoons has given rise to a new communication model of mixing top-down and bottom-up flow of message. Behind the new model was the CCP’s changing understanding of the public: from “target audience of propaganda” to guided audience, and then to central players in popularizing the Party. The major media reform since Xi took office in early 2013 has laid institutional, managerial and editorial foundations to sustain this conceptual change in practice. The boom in political cartoons is the most conspicuous result of that.

Keywords: cartoon; China; media reform; new media; political communication; propaganda; public opinion; Xi Jinping.

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From its earliest days, the internet has been regarded as a “dictator’s dilemma”, i.e., it is very difficult to garner the benefits of the internet (e.g., social development and economic growth) without paying the potential political cost of destabilizing the rule (Dickson 2016). Ever since the burgeoning studies of the internet in the early 1990s, techno-optimism has featured strongly in Western scholarly debates on the role of internet in society. With his 1995 bestseller, *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte, the former MIT media lab director, has paved the way for a future generation of techno-optimists. The book demonstrates his unapologetic optimism for the future of the internet on account of its capacity to break down national and linguistic barriers and bring the world together, as is evidenced from the title of the book’s epilogue, “An Age of Optimism”. The internet, as has been argued, is built as a robust decentralized communication system that is by its nature resilient to control.

Students of the internet in China have likewise been preoccupied with the internet’s potential political impact, which leads to a dichotomous theoretical framework of control vs. resistance, top-down vs. bottom-up, and mainstream vs. dissidence. The underlying implication of such studies is the potential impact that the internet has on the one-party state system.

In 1998, Yuezhi Zhao prepared the ground for the study of media commercialization from a politico-economic perspective. Her nuanced study of the history of the commercialization of the print media in China from the 1920s to the 1990s underlines the love-hate relationship of the Chinese government with media marketization, as well as the care that newspapers have to take to tread safely between the “Party line and the bottom line” (Zhao 1998). In his book, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (2009), Guobin Yang has also provided a pioneering study of China’s cyberspace as a place of synthesis between creative energy, conflict, community and control. Xiaoling Zhang’s *The Transformation of Political Communication in China* (2001) goes one step further in examining the intricate relationship between media and politics as China emerges as a global superpower. Zhang investigates how discourses, ideologies and contentions negotiate with each other to give rise to what he calls “resilient authoritarianism”, i.e., how the Party has to allow a certain degree of contention in the media in order to improve governance while limiting the contention within controllable limits and maintain the stability of its rule. In a similar vein, Maria Repnikova (2017) argues for a more deep-seated connection between the Chinese media and political power. By examining the bureaucratic and personal

links and the intricate power relations between the central authorities and critical journalists, who are conventionally viewed as daring dissidents against authoritarian rule, Repnikova highlights the “fluid, state-dominated partnership characterized by continuous improvisation” (*ibid.*, 10) in Chinese critical journalism.

These monographs are among a long list of studies with wide-ranging themes, which include media control, especially internet control, e.g., Schambaugh (2007) and Tsui (2003); the development or deficiency of the “public sphere” and “civil society”, e.g., Luo (2014), Negro (2017), Tai (2006), Lei (2018), Herald (2011); and the synergy of Party ideology and market rationality, e.g., Shi (2008), Stockmann (2013), and Zhao (2000). The cohort of studies on China’s new media either focuses on its boom from a technological viewpoint or adopts a conventional analytical line in investigating new media’s relationship with the Party-state and the potential for social democratization, e.g., Lu, Chu and Shen (2016), Lee and Chan (2016) and so on. Discussions on the technological, economic and political significance of new media in China have underlined a similar problem, as to whether digital media lead to “convergence [with] or divergence [from]” the central political power, these being the actual words used in the titles of several articles on new media, such as that by Lun Zhang (2017).

Against the research paradigm of control vs. resistance, little has been said about how the internet and new media have changed the model of communication in China and the Party’s role in facilitating such a change. Brian McNair, in his textbook on political communication (2003), presents the twenty-first century as acceleration and deepening of the practice of politics in all its forms before a global audience. The internet and new media have turned McLuhan’s metaphor of the planet as a shrinking “global village” into a truism (1994). Hence, scholars like Brian McNair, Philippe Maarek and Gadi Wolfsfeld have called for a closer examination of the rising level of professionalization in political communication, i.e., the role of the agent between political organizations and the media (McNair 2003). Instead of inquiring about the effect of the new technology on political communication, it is better to ask, “Who is using the new technology, in what ways, within what social and political context, and with what effect?” (Maarek and Wolfsfeld 2003, 6). The essay asks precisely these questions with regard to the context of China under President Xi Jinping.

This essay examines the recent boom in political animated cartoons arising in China since late 2013. The most prominent was the “Thirteen

What”, a three-minute English music video featuring an animated image of Xi Jinping promoting China’s Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, referred to by *The Wall Street Journal* as “the psychedelic music video” (Dou 2015). The exploration of this phenomenon is followed by an investigation into the process of professionalization in political communication in Xi’s China. The essay situates the rise of political animation against the top-designed media revolution and the Chinese Communist Party’s new deployment of the media’s role. I argue, by looking closely at the creative use of political cartoons, that the CCP has been well aware of the internet’s “dilemma”, and has proactively adjusted the media’s role to thrive in new patterns of communication in the new media age. A review of media policies from Mao to Xi allows us to map the shifting understanding of the media: first, as the Party’s propaganda mouthpiece, then as a means of promoting social development, and now as an agent for popularizing the Party and its leader. The new role expected of the media matches the CCP’s changing understanding of the public: first, as the “target of propaganda”, then as guided recipients, and now as voluntary advocates for the Party. The wild spread of animated apps and videos, as well as their creative imitations from netizens, testifies to the breaking-down of the rigid dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up models. It was at least partially the expectations regarding Xi’s major media reform that swept away not only the conceptual, but also the institutional, managerial and editorial aspects of the Chinese media.

This study primarily adopts the methodologies of empirical investigation into new media texts, with quantitative effect analysis and a critical historical approach to China’s media policies. The materials examined in the study include online sources from new media platforms and published user data reports, as well as published media policies and quotes from Party leaders’ talks. The article thus consists of three sections: the first examines the phenomenon of the rise of political animation and cartoons, the second traces the Party’s changing understanding of the media’s role, against which these political cartoons arose; and the third further elaborates on the actualization of this changing conception in media reform since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013.

1. ANIMATING POLITICS

New animated political cartoons have been released since Xi took a firmer grip on the country's ideology. This was done in the light of the soaring number of internet users in China. As of December 2017, the total number of internet users in China hit 772 million (CNNIC 2018). Among them, 753 million were mobile internet users, constituting 97.5% of the total number of internet users. In June 2014, mobile internet users outnumbered PC users for the first time (CNNIC 2014). The 2018 report further shows that 93.3% of internet users were on WeChat, totalling 720 million. By the end of 2017, there were over 6 million public WeChat accounts, and over 280,000 government service WeChat accounts – a significant phenomenon arising since 2014 (Tencent Big Data Report 2018).

It was against the backdrop of this formidable force of internet users that, from late 2013, a series of political animated cartoons have been posted online and have reaped viral spreading. Most of these political animations are credited to the mysterious film production studio 复兴路上工作室 (“Studio on the Way to Rejuvenation”), a studio that has made its presence since Xi called for the forming of the “new-type mainstream media” in October 2013. The studio has neither a website, nor searchable basic information, and has been mentioned only briefly in some online articles¹. The word “rejuvenation” has been mentioned repeatedly since former president Hu Jintao's term of office. President Xi Jinping further equated the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” to his concept of “the Chinese dream” in talks during late 2012 and early 2013². However, the studio's name can also be understood as “Studio on the Fuxing Road”, a major boulevard in Beijing where the headquarters of CCTV and State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT) are located.

¹ These include 复兴路上工作室发布 ‘十三五’ 神曲 (“Studio on the Way to Rejuvenation Releases ‘Thirteen What’”) on *Southern Metropolis Daily* on 28 October 2015, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2015/10/南方都市报-复兴路上工作室发布十三五神曲/>. And 复兴路上工作室再推新作 (“Studio on the Way to Rejuvenation Releases New Work”) on *cpcnews.cn* on 17 April 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0417/c385474-26863354.html>.

² The Party's official news website has published a summary of and the entirety of President Xi Jinping's talks during this period. The talks related to the topic of “the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and “Chinese dream” and can be found at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0901/c40531-25581189.html>.

The first political cartoon to emerge was 领导人是怎样炼成的 (“How Leaders Are Made”), a five-minute cartoon video comparing the presidential election in China with those in the West, such as the US and UK. The video was launched in October 2013, and attracted over 10 million viewings within five days of being posted online³. The wild growth of viewings earned the video special coverage on primetime CCTV News on 17 October 2013 (youku.com 2013). CCTV News, notorious for the rigid, stuffy format of its reports, gave credit to the video’s fun way of clarifying how state leaders were elected in China. Unlike any previous primetime news, the anchor used a few internet expressions that were very familiar to Chinese netizens. Among these was the word “little editor” (*xiao bian* 小 編), an online term for editors, but used in a playful, jokey way to demonstrate his/her creativeness in presenting sensitive topics in a light-hearted manner. In the same month, the cartoon’s viral spread also sparked an online debate, in which netizens widely regarded the video as being “down to earth”, “friendly” and “cute”⁴. In its never-before-seen characterization of Chinese political leaders, the video presents all of the then Politburo Standing Committee members, including President Xi Jinping, as well as past political leaders Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, in cute, little images with their ID photographs attached to animated cartoon bodies. Adding to the “mainstream” stance of the video content is the title’s apparent reference to a Soviet novel, widely read in socialist China, *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky (1932). The video also presents the then US President Barack Obama dancing Psy, and the UK Prime Minister David Cameron turning somersaults. Relaxing and cheerful background music is used, along with a voice-over in a naïve, childlike voice. Behind the façade of this light entertainment format lies a highly political message: hard work is a must in the long, meritocratic path to becoming Chinese president. The video implicitly criticizes an over-simplified admiration for Western democracy, and concludes: “Every road can lead to presidency and every state adopts its own way. [...] As long as the public is satisfied, the state moves forward, society develops; [and] the way [one state undertakes] is the right way, isn’t it?” (*Figure 1*).

³ Statistics from total viewership on Youku, Youtube and Tudou.

⁴ The “Comment” area below the video on Youku remains open; a forum on “How Leaders Are Tempered” had been created on Baidu Tieba, the largest Chinese online community, with over 700 active comments from netizens. The forum was then shut down before the 19th Party Congress in 2017.



Figure 1. – “How Leaders Are Made” (screen capture from Youku by author).

The video was first posted by Fuxing Lushang Studio on Youku, and, according to Zhao Jianxin, editor-in-chief of Youku in an interview (news.ifeng.com 2015), surprised all video editors by successfully passing internet censorship (chinanews.com 2013). Zhao then made a bold decision to move the video from the “short video” section to the “information” section and the viewership immediately skyrocketed. The head portraits of members of the 18th Party Congress were taken from official photographs published on xinhua.net. The launch took place barely two months after Xi’s first national meeting on “propaganda and thought work”, convened in August 2013, when Xi particularly emphasized “creative ways for propaganda work” to “tell a better story of China”. Thus, the timing of the launch, as well as its unchecked, wild spread online, suggests that the video was at least approved and supported by state officials, if not directly funded by the government.

While similar critiques on the Western electorate system have long been discussed and circulated among intellectuals⁵, it was the refreshing image of political leaders in new media form and language that caused such high excitement. The voice-over speaks in a jovial tone, explaining political terms and concepts, and using an informal online language familiar to all young netizens. Excitement and shock combined to bring the video viral spread both within and without China. China reporter Austin Ramzy of *The New York Times*, known for covering political dissidence in China, grudgingly extolled the video as “such an effort

⁵ A search in *People’s Daily*, CCTV News, and the Party journal for political theories *Qiushi*, and commercial media like fenghuang.net with key words like “Western political elections” will suffice to show the abundance of discussion. Many of the titles bear words like 真相 (“truth”), with the purpose of exposing corruption behind modern elections and criticizing the self-congratulatory Western democratic model.

to humanize China's leader had hardly been seen before [...]” (Ramzy 2015). The fact that the video spread like wildfire over all the online media websites, such as Youku and Tudou, indicates the widespread public excitement in seeing brand-new images of their political leaders, who had been portrayed with fossilized images on mainstream TV for decades. In addition to viral spread and the positive audience response, the video triggered imitative efforts to “cutify” Party leaders from lower-level government-managed websites and creative netizens alike.

Municipal level government news portals took the lead. In February 2014, Qianlong.com under the management of Beijing's municipal propaganda department, released the cartoon series “Where Has President Xi Jinping's Time Gone?”. Here, Xi's image is similar to the one in “How Leaders Are Made”, and revolves around a graphic of activities such as investigation, state visits, meetings, study and personal hobbies of reading, hiking, football playing, etc. Xi's fully-packed schedule presents an image of a talented and versatile president, who, despite his many likings, sacrifices his personal leisure time to serve the state and its people. Towards the end, a graphic summarizing his activities shows that Xi made 12 trips for investigation within China, visited 14 different countries across five continents, and presided over 40 meetings during his first 15 months in office. The animated Xi holds up a sign, reading: “Undertaking this job means having basically no time of my own”, a highly publicized quote of Xi's to the Russian media, referring to a popular pop/folk song, “Where Has Time Gone?” (*Figure 2*).



Figure 2. – “Where Has President Xi Jinping's Time Gone?” (screen capture by author).

“A Kind of Love Called Uncle Xi and Mommy Peng”. The photographs portray the President as a man of the people, showing love and care for the First Lady Peng Liyuan, who, unlike previous wives of Chinese presidents, regularly accompanies Xi in state visits, wearing designer outfits. The photographs capture moments when Xi casts a tender glance at the First Lady during a busy state visit, with the apparent purpose of characterizing the President as a good commoner husband.

Creative netizens quickly followed suit in cartoonizing the President as a good husband, and it quickly travelled back to the official media websites. A week after its release came the wildly popular song, 习大大爱着彭麻麻 (“Uncle Xi Loves Mommy Peng”), composed by Yu Runze, a grassroots live streamer and online singer from Henan province. The cheesy rap song was also made into a video by *People’s Daily*, with nine children singing the song, accompanied by original cartoon images and photographs of the First Couple. Within five days of being posted, the video reaped over 22 million viewings and was quickly reposted on all major news portals, including CCTV News and various video platforms. Cultivating the First Couple’s love story is a clear example of the combined efforts to do so by all sectors of the online community – state-owned media, commercial media, and grassroots netizens (*Figures 4-5*).



Figure 4. – “A Kind of Love Called Uncle Xi and Mummy Peng” (screen captures by author).



Figure 5. – “Uncle Xi Loves Mommy Peng” (screen capture by author).

These are videos that keep the Party happy, while harvesting a huge viewership for profit. Large media corporations and commercial platforms lead the game with their advantages in funding and human resources. Inspired by their huge success, a series of similar animated cartoons, entitled 跟着大大走 (“Follow Uncle Xi”), have been made to introduce Xi’s call for multilateral economic co-operation with bordering countries in Asia at the Bo’ao Forum in 2015. The animation also promotes the China-initiated pan-regional projects such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. The subsequently made 十三五神曲 (“Magic Song of the Thirteenth Five-Year-Plan”) not only caused a similar viral spread, but also became a widely known internet meme through its catchy lyrics and words.

New media accelerated the game with renewing creativity. Shortly before the 19th Party Congress, the *People’s Daily* launched an automated WeChat conversation app for the Two Sessions Conference. Users enter a simulated WeChat messaging window by clicking a link shared by other users, and a chat window pops up with greetings from Premier Li Keqiang, who invites questions about government’s work to be discussed the conference. When users type in simple replies, they are prompted to various answers concerning the government’s policies, vision and achievements in various aspects of the Chinese economy. In other words, users feel that they are chatting over WeChat with the Premier on China’s economic policies. Not surprisingly, official WeChat accounts were launched for Xi Jinping and the 19th Party Congress. The latter includes schedules, topics, discussions and other information for the public and journalists, making it the very first time that the CCP has proactively reached out to its people on social media accounts to promote its new members and policies (*Figure 6*).



Figure 6. – “Two Sessions Invite You to Group Chat” (app screen capture by author).

Most memorable of all is Tencent’s clapping app that invites users to digitally clap for Xi’s long opening speech at the 19th Party Congress. Users are required to listen to a short audio clip of Xi’s talk, and are then given 19 seconds to punch the “clap” button on the touch screen to applaud Xi’s talk. The more you mash the screen, the higher the scores you receive. The maximum possible number of claps in a round is about 1,000. The background image of the mobile game is a photograph taken from the back row of the meeting hall, so that users identify themselves as members at the Congress, actually clapping for Xi (Tencent 2017) (Figure 7).

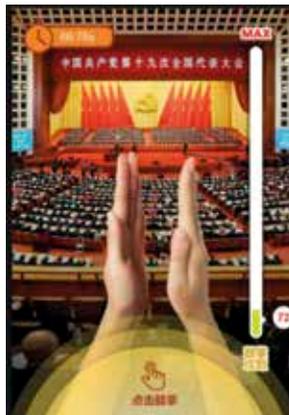


Figure 7. – Tencent’s Clapping App (mobile app screen capture by author).

2. FROM PROPAGANDA TO GUIDED COMMUNICATION

These collaborative efforts across communication sectors suggest a changing communication model, as can be seen from the CCP's changing policy on the media. In the Mao era, the media were primarily understood as a tool for propaganda to mobilize the masses for revolution. Documents circulated internally during the 1930s (1928-35. Collection of Documents of the Chinese Communist Party Center) suggest the utmost importance that Mao placed on propaganda work. Before each uprising or military combat, a significant amount of time and effort had to be devoted to propaganda work – hence the famous Mao recipe of 30 per cent battling and 70 per cent propaganda work. Despite Mao's heavy emphasis on in-depth investigation to implement effective propaganda work, the media's role was merely understood as a tool for propaganda and the audience as targets of "education".

This understanding of the audience was carried over to Deng Xiaoping's administration. Situating propaganda work within the framework of "spiritual civilization construction", Deng paid great attention to the work of educating the people: "To cultivate new socialist successors is politics itself" (CPLRC 1994, 256). He referred to journalists and editors as "the warriors on the battlegrounds of thought" and likened them to "the engineers of the human soul". "In this recent transitional period, in the work of socialist spiritual civilization and the whole socialist construction, their [journalists', editors' etc.] responsibilities in the aspects of thought education are particularly significant" (*ibid.*, 140).

The communication model of a one-directional flow of information remained largely intact with regard to Jiang Zemin's media policy. He pointed to the double nature of the news media: "not only as the mouthpiece, but also as a third industry" (Chen 2003, 21) that allowed the media to pursue not only social interests, but also economic interests, though serving as the mouthpiece remained the primary role (*ibid.*, 15).

Hu Jintao's administration has to some degree downplayed the media's propaganda function, by seeing it as an important means of improving governance. During his visit to the *People's Daily*, Hu pointed out the importance of the media, not only to "uphold the banner for the Party", but also to serve the people and "create a good environment of public opinion to promote Party's proposals [...] to effectively channel public opinion and social situations (通达社情民意), to guide hot topics of society (引导社会热点), to dredge public emotion (疏导公众情绪), and to improve media supervision (搞好舆论监督)" (Hu 2008).

The time that Xi took office coincided with the crisis of Western major news outlets, where the news media were under severe attack for corrupting political democracy. The mainstream news media were entrapped in a credibility crisis, especially in the United States after the 2016 presidential campaign. “Platform media” like Facebook, Twitter and Google were accused of having led to inflammatory, sentiment-based communications that gave direct rise to right-wing momentum in events such as the election of Donald Trump, and Brexit. In November 2017, *Collins English Dictionary* assessed the facts, and chose “fake news” as the Word of the Year for 2017. Originating from the 2016 US presidential campaign, the term “fake news” is defined as “false, often sensational, information, disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Collins 2017). The wild spread of unchecked, biased and fake news on the media has been heavily associated with Trump’s campaign. Best known is perhaps the study conducted by the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, led by media scholars such as Yochai Benkler and Ethan Zuckerman, who concluded that the mediascape had been subjected to “asymmetric vulnerabilities”, greatly to the favour of the political right wing (Benkler *et al.* 2017). Social media were accused of posing a fundamental challenge to the core principle of “informed democracy”, in which the West took great pride⁶, so much so that after the election former US President Barack Obama openly accused the media of helping to “undermine the US political process” (*The Guardian* 2017)⁷.

China was well aware of the debate and Xi, at the start of his presidency, decided to take a firm grip on the media. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee passed the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform” in November 2013 (china.org.cn 2014). The document was proposed by the central leading group – the top designers of China’s continuing reform, and incorporated specific guidelines for media construc-

⁶ In his “Opinion” article in *The New York Times*, Thomas B. Edsall, the renowned Professor of Political Journalism at Columbia University, accused new media of being the cause of “democracy, disrupted”.

⁷ The first half of 2017 has witnessed numerous articles on major Western media outlets, such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Guardian* and so on, discussing the effect of the radicalization of public opinion caused by political communications on new media. A quick search, using key words such as “new media” and “democracy”, will produce a long list of results.

tion as the key components towards China's success in continuing this reform. The document proposed to "construct internationally first-rate media [to] improve its capability for international communications and [to] strengthen the construction of the external discourse system". In the conference on "national propaganda and thought work" in August 2013, Xi Jinping asked for external propaganda work to be strengthened and improved, to "forge new concepts, new categories and new expressions to communicate throughout China and abroad (打造融通中外的新概念、新范畴和新表述)", as well as to "tell Chinese stories well, communicate the Chinese voice well, and demonstrate Chinese characteristics well (讲好中国故事、传播好中国声音、阐述好中国特色)" (Zheng 2016, 23).

Among the new tasks was the Party's leadership in the media: "The media organized by the Party and the government is the propaganda battleground, and must be surnamed 'Party'" (Xi Jinping talk, 2016a). Yet the emphasis on "new" indicates that the government has realized that the traditional means of propaganda no longer fits the digital age, and new means must be found for propaganda work to catch up with new media development. The traditional key word, "propaganda", which features in the Party-audience single-directional flow of information, has now been replaced by the more neutral term "news discourse (新闻舆论)", granting the public some agency under the Party's guidance. In his 19 February talk, Xi referred to "news discourse" as "an extremely important *work* of the Party", associated with governance, policy management, and stabilizing the state (治国理政、定国安邦(的大事)). "To manage well the Party's news discourse work concerns the flag and the road, concerns implementation of the Party's theories, guidelines and policies, concerns the smooth advancement of major works of the Party and the state, concerns cohering and attracting centrifugally the whole body of Party members and peoples of different ethnicities, and concerns the fate and future of the Party and the state".

Xi's policy called for a new model of communication. The public is no longer seen as the passive target for mobilization, nor as the target for social development through education. Instead, it has been realized that the online public now have unprecedented opportunities to air their opinions, so that netizens need to be attracted to the Party, not dictated to by it. For the first time, the non-political body of "netizens" is being regarded as "part of the people" in co-forming public opinion. Xi stated that "our officials need to go wherever the people go; or else how do we link with the people?" (Xi 2016a). Hence, the talk highlighted the 48-word sum-

mary – previously discursively mentioned in Xi’s visits to major news organizations of the *People’s Daily*, the Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television: “Raise high the banner (高举旗帜) [of Marxism-Leninism], direct [proper] guidance (引领导向) [of public opinion], focus on the central tasks (围绕中心) [of the Party], unite the people (团结人民), encourage high morale (鼓舞士气), spread public morals (成风化人), create cohesion (凝心聚力), clear up fallacies (澄清谬误), distinguish between truth and falsehood (明辨是非), join China and the outside (联接中外), connect with the world (沟通世界)”. In an internet age where control and one-directional propaganda have become impossible, Xi asked the media to increase the quality of its reportage and its “ability to attract and infect”, and should “respect the developmental rules of public opinion itself”.

These abstract guidelines were specified in Xi’s opening report at the 19th Party Congress, when he required the Party to place “high importance on constructing and innovating the means of communication” and, following the crisis in the major Western media, to “effectively improve the impact of propaganda (传播力), the guiding capacity (引导力), the influence (影响力) and the credibility (公信力)” of the Party’s news and public opinion. The popular cartoon videos have testified to the impact of new media’s propaganda, while their political message has exerted its guiding capacity by stimulating the rise of similar videos to further “spread the public morals” of Party-endorsed mainstream socialist values and to create cohesion.

3. MEDIA REFORM

Starting in 2014, a series of acts have been undertaken following the call from the top designers of reform. In 2014, the Central Internet Security and Information Leading Group (CISILG) was established under the direct leadership of Xi Jinping, in an attempt by government management to keep pace with the rapid development of the internet. In President Xi’s address to the group in 2014, internet security and development were viewed as core elements of national strategy: cybersecurity was seen as a matter of national security, and informatization was key to China’s modernization project (HPRC 2017).

On August 18, 2014, the top designers of China’s overall reform CLGCCR (Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Continuing Reform) passed the “Guiding Opinion on Promoting the Convergence

of Traditional and New Media” (Tang *et al.* 2014), within which media reform through convergence was seen specifically noted as an important part of the continuing reform in China. The document specifically notes the waning influence of traditional media and the soaring social role of new media, and prescribes general directives that traditional media, with their rich resources in personnel and capital, should actively incorporate talents, skills and flexible operation mechanisms from new media firms. Both, according to the document, should rely on converging their competitive edge and create updated communication methods better suited to the new position of Chinese society. Traditional media, i.e., those with closer tie to the Party, should take the lead in “reorganizing the media and redesigning communication processes by using their operating and managerial experience and human resources. They should also contribute to the functionally and structurally organic consolidation of new media groups and to the creation of reasonable, efficient development patterns” (Tang *et al.* 2012, 16).

The call for media convergence is far more profound than the superficial task of launching mobile clients’ accounts or public social media accounts. Instead, it is an in-depth media revolution that transforms many aspects of the media: the concept of the media now is a “new type of mainstream media (新型主流媒体)”, with rich human capital, resources and up-to-date communication skills; communication methods are envisaged as replacing the one-directional flow of information with a participatory role for the wider public; operating systems are to adopt a flexible form, with integrated co-operation between different departments, rather than departments working unilaterally under the vertical management of the corporate’s central leadership, as at CCTV in the past (CPC News 2015). In 2014, the mainstream media advanced fast-forward with convergence. The *People’s Daily* launched an unprecedented news production model, called the “Central Kitchen” (paper.people.com.cn 2014). The new system of operation fully absorbed the new media communication skills, streamlining a full team of programmers, service, sales, news-editing, contents customization and visualization, under an overall planning and monitoring group. In addition, since 2014, traditional media such as the *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News and CCTV quickly launched and promoted social media accounts on WeChat, Twitter, Facebook, and mobile clients. The Facebook and Twitter accounts of these media corporates grew so popular that each attracted a large number of subscribers. In 2015, the number of Facebook followers of CCTV and the *People’s Daily* surpassed that of CNN and *The New York Times*,

becoming the world's most popular mainstream media on new media (cctv.com 2015).

The viral political cartoons are only possible within this new context of media convergence. The supply of content material concerning political news and recent policies, and even the political leaders' personal lives, by Party-led traditional media like Xinhua or CCTV (e.g., Tencent's clapping app includes a key points summary of Xi's talk) will be based on close co-operation between political editors, news-gathering teams and leaders of the media corporates as gatekeepers, and possibly state officials in the propaganda department too. The next step is to closely align the content team with the visualization and animation teams, so that the political message can be accurately translated into immediate animation. This can be hardly done by using the pre-reform structure of media corporates, because their management is highly hierarchical under central leaders, with different teams for content, animation, print media and new media that function separately from each other in parallel departments. With new models like the "Central Kitchen", political sensitivity and knowledge of traditional media can be effectively translated into messages to the taste of the general public, in which the commercial media and new media like WeChat have long been proficient.

4. CONCLUSION

New developments and reforms in Chinese media organizations have suggested a destabilization of the single-directional flow of information from state to public. Efforts and success in the Party-initiated use of new media have triggered new dynamics in political communication, where the previously separated sectors of Party organs, commercial media, independent new media firms, and grassroots netizens now join hands to promote mainstream values, as the Party has liberalized forms in representation. The process of cartooning politics streamlines efforts and talent from different players in communication (e.g., Party mainstream media, commercial new media companies and independent visualization companies) and attracts the attention of millions of netizens. This is a clear result of Xi's call for media convergence. Since 2014, the dichotomy of "top-down" vs. "bottom-up" has no longer provided a satisfactory definition of political communication in China since 2014. The Chinese state is taking a proactive role in channelling the energy of its highly

talented civil society into political practice towards what it promises will be the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. This study aims to serve as a starting-point in evaluating the altered communication model, from propaganda to guided communication, where audience response has been endowed with the utmost importance. Yet it remains to be seen how effective Xi’s media policy can actually be in changing public opinion about the Party or in achieving greater social coherence.

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