

RISKS AND SOLUTIONS OF INTERNET CAPITAL MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

The rise of new media, represented by the Internet, has changed the established communication pattern in China. Internet companies, on their way to capital expansion, have invested in media on a large scale to reach group interests, resulting in that private monopoly capital has gradually infiltrated the public opinion system, yet the control of public opinion by Internet capital poses many potential risks. It is essential to curb capital control of public opinion, to counter capital monopoly and to maintain justice in the public opinion environment.

Keyword: Internet capital, public opinion manipulation, anti-monopoly

Introduction

On November 10, 2020, the State Administration of Market Regulation published the "Anti-monopoly Guidelines on the Platform Economy (Draft for Public Comments)", and the Central Political Bureau meeting held on 11 December made "strengthening anti-monopoly and preventing disorderly expansion of capital" one of the eight key economic tasks of 2021, reflecting the problem of domestic capital. On February 7, 2021, the Anti-Monopoly Committee of the State Council issued the Anti-Monopoly Guide of the Anti-Monopoly Committee of the State Council on the Platform Economy.

A series of regulatory actions show a determination to tighten regulation of Internet platforms.

The Chinese government is increasingly wary of the threat to economic and political stability posed by the expansion of Internet capital influence, and further tightening of controls is expected to follow, indicating that domestic anti-monopoly moves perhaps only just beginning.

The regulatory concern lies in the fact that the negative impact of Internet monopoly is gradually amplifying, and while the accelerated expansion of capital challenges the boundaries of monopoly, it also begins to challenge the rules of the game. As Internet Lab's Fang Xingdong and others pointed out in "A Study of 20 Years of Anti-monopoly History and Characteristics of China's IT Industry", "Internet giants, by establishing ecosystems and setting rules, have mastered absolute discourse and have obvious control and influence over public opinion, and have also formed factional power based on their strong service ecology and capital advantages."

1. Expansion of Internet capital

Internet capital groups usually start out in the Internet technology sector, as it is in line with the general trend of productivity development as well as technological progress, coupled with the fact that the legal policies in various aspects of the Internet are not yet complete in its infancy and the government strongly supports the development of technology companies, which gives Internet technology companies the opportunity to develop and grow.

In recent years, however, the "savage" expansion of Internet capital has exceeded expectations. Looking at the development history of domestic Internet capital, it is clear that it has grown and expanded in two directions, namely to financial capital and to the media. Internet giants have been buying up mainstream media, increasing their penetration into media resources and almost replacing traditional industry giants as the main protagonists in the media world.

Before the rise of the Internet, discourse was held by the government and professional media organisations, mainly those market-oriented media engaged in news content production, and the Chinese public opinion arena was dominated by the official public opinion arena supported by mainstream media. With the continuous development of new media technology, especially the rise of new media based on the Internet, the voice of the general public has been released to the greatest extent. The penetration of the Internet is becoming increasingly evident, the speed of public opinion dissemination is significantly accelerated, and the influence of public opinion is increasing. With the investment of Internet companies in the news media and the creation of some new Internet companies, the existing pattern of public opinion dissemination is gradually being changed.

2. The path and Internal logic of Internet capital manipulation of public opinion

Internet capital is constantly expanding its commercial footprint, and in addition to supplementing its own platform with necessary content sources, the Internet giants are also attempting to satisfy their group interests by controlling public opinion. The profit-seeking

nature of capital has made its interference with public opinion phenomenally. Public opinion has gradually become a tool held by a few, and the media has gradually become a vassal of the tech giants.

2.1 Pathways

Capital control of public opinion does not mean that it has 100% control over public opinion. It is too costly and unworkable to control every major and minor issue, and capital forces usually choose to penetrate slowly. Once a system of public opinion propaganda is in place, capital groups will mobilise the system's resources to defend their own interests in the event of a "problem".

2.1.1 Control media

Capital groups generally control public opinion by infiltrating influential traditional mainstream media. In addition, in the Internet era, capital also seizes the right to speak through online media. In recent years, internet capital has invested in the media on a large scale, controlling media platforms and influencing people's thoughts, behaviour and public opinion through the media, causing the state apparatus and society to revolve around the interests of capitalist groups. On the one hand, they engage in deep advertising and marketing cooperation with media platforms and channel traffic to their various platforms, while on the other hand some core media or media platforms with a wide range of users give them extensive influence over public opinion.

The Internet giants have used their media resources to continuously create public opinion and political lobbying, monopolising the power of speech. The development of cyberspace does not give everyone the right to speak freely. In fact, once the interests of the platforms on which they operate have been touched, the capital-controlled media platforms have imposed restrictions on speech on the grounds that it "violates the relevant laws and regulations". When the mass and online media focus on scandal, vulgarity, violence, celebrity, privacy and fashion, and do not break out of the framework set by the capitalist groups to focus on serious political issues, they achieve their aim of controlling public opinion.

2.1.2 Control resources

In the era of big data, the internet giants control a lot of data and market share. Users and traffic are the basis for the survival of the Internet majors, from consumer preferences to travel records to income earning capacity, from daily emotions to social preferences, almost the entire daily life related to the Internet is under the "monitoring" of the big companies. The monopoly of

data and algorithms has become a powerful tool for the expansion of Internet platforms, and once the platforms modify their algorithms, the media and readers are greatly affected. In a networked structure, those people or organisations at the nodes of high-density connectivity have access to a constant flow of enormous resources, creating a "rich get richer" horse-trading effect. Rather than redistributing the resources controlled by 'hierarchical power', the Internet giants have long been able to amass resources through the Matthew effect.

Internet companies' algorithms and user behaviour are deeply intertwined, making them more responsive to user preferences. Artificial intelligence algorithms have penetrated into almost every product we use, filtering and filtering a huge amount of content, services, products and even friends for us, which saves us a lot of time and money and significantly increases the efficiency of using the internet. The problem, however, is that the technical algorithms lack rational guidance, recommending only what we want to see and even things with negative values, with singular and deviant values, meaning that the technology is not neutral but ideological.

2.2 Internal logic

The birth of the Internet was not only a technological revolution, but also a social revolution that turned the whole mode of operation of society upside down. As a public platform, the Internet has provided a space for public discussion, expanded the dissemination of information and brought greater public awareness to society. However, instead of being a non-commercial zone that accommodates greater political participation and ends inequality and commercial monopoly, the Internet today presents a grim picture of the ongoing concentration and monopoly of a capitalist group, due to constant commercialisation and privatisation.

Capital as a tool is used by people who represent different interests, and the political tendencies of the platforms they build are different. Internet platforms are profit-seeking and tend to make choices that are in their own commercial interests, for example, by using algorithms to connect people with similar interests to form information cocoons; by using algorithms to tap into people's badtaste to increase traffic; and by inducing people to overspend, making private lending expand in a disorderly manner.

On the road to capital expansion, the media is an object that all interest groups want to exploit. In order to gain the support of public opinion, it is necessary to learn how to use the media effectively to spread one's voice and to win over the public opinion represented by the "silent majority", which has become the soft power of the various groups fighting for their interests.

When internet capital groups control public opinion, they control the power of discourse and rule-making in cyberspace. Internet giants make full use of online discourse and the setting of online issues that meet the requirements of their interests to exert influence on public opinion and popular thought, controlling and guiding the direction of discourse in cyberspace, thus serving the interests of the group.

3. Potential problems of Internet capital control of public opinion

Capital as an instrument is not inherently good or bad, it depends on who it serves. In the hands of a government committed to serving the people, it is often possible to concentrate on doing great things; such capital does not belong to a private individual and the people have the power to monitor it. In the hands of a capitalist, because capital is by nature profit-seeking, profit maximisation will remain its ultimate goal, even in areas where national security and ideology are at stake.

In addition to the obvious and direct manifestations of capital sprawl, such as monopoly and unfair competition, it may also extend to the realm of public opinion. While the visible and direct manifestations are easy to observe, the indirect negative effects are particularly insidious, and are best represented by the control and distortion of the public opinion field in the online media by sprawl.

The control of social opinion platforms by capital and the perpetuation of media cover-ups can jeopardise ideological security and pose a number of serious problems.

3.1 Internet giants accessing "excessive" data and violating user privacy

Large digital platforms can read a large amount of user data, either data voluntarily provided by the user, or data identifiable to the platform (such as the IP address of the user's computer and development system), and possibly data collected by the platform to track the user's activities on and off the platform (tracking cookies).

In obtaining users' personal information, platforms often collect more data than the competing market will allow as a way to consolidate their market power, as there is not sufficient competition. This process is a clear violation of user privacy, and with internet companies often using lengthy and vague terms in their privacy agreements, it is generally difficult for users to know how the company collects data and what it is used for. In light of this, the adoption of effective means to strengthen data protection has undoubtedly become an issue that must be faced by large digital platforms.

3.2 Subjectivization and closure of news dissemination due to algorithmic recommendations

In cyberspace, capital-controlled social media platforms use big data technology to analyse users' information consumption behaviour and preferences, and apply algorithmic recommendations to commercial marketing. The success of algorithmic recommendations in providing users with personalised commercial marketing has led to an increasing number of media and social media platforms using "algorithms" to determine news hotspots and news topics, with the role of "news gatekeepers" that the news media plays in disseminating news gradually being replaced.

The problem, however, is that social media platforms tend to target users' existing political views and homogeneous communities, trying to control what the public reads, hears and sees on the internet by catering to their personal interests. silos" and "information cocoons".

The consequence of the chronic lack of communication is that people's views are becoming more and more radical, less and less tolerant of different points of view and increasingly misunderstood by each other, a point that is undoubtedly aggravated by today's form of social media. The seemingly humanized intelligent automatic recommendations are in fact making internet users more and more closed and immersed in their own single values, unable to receive diversified information, news dissemination is becoming more and more subjective and closed, and socially correct values and positive energy information cannot reach internet users.

3.3 Freedom of the press turning to freedom of capital

The emergence of the online public sphere has changed the form in which information is disseminated and received. But production is not the same as presentation. Capital is behind the operation of information in the Internet era. Internet giants have infiltrated almost all online media and influential traditional mainstream media. Information control has shifted from the production of information to the presentation of information, and capital manipulates public opinion through its control of information resource positions. In addition, capital platforms will tweak their algorithms to keep users' articles out of sight, or to make them more visible. But the algorithms are unsupervised and there is no one to judge the fairness of their algorithms. On the one hand, they disseminate news and information to the public that is favourable to them, and on the other hand, they block negative news that is unfavourable to them. This leads to freedom of the press becoming freedom of capital in disguise.

Freedom of the press means that journalists are accountable to the facts, not to the capital

behind the media. But in a highly commercialised and capital-manipulated media society, journalists are more accountable to commercial pressures than to society. Journalists, as individuals, cannot guarantee the quality of their journalism or that the content of their news is in line with objective facts.

News reporting under the manipulation of capital is more about entertaining audiences and meeting the needs of ratings and circulation than meeting the real needs of the people. The mass media has become a tool for capital to control society. Capital controls society at large through the media's public opinion propaganda function, and the result is that there is a serious imbalance of discourse in the capital-controlled media market, with a great deal of news being distorted, news being misrepresented, authority being lost, and industry standards being lowered.

3.4 Creating unfair competition among enterprises and weakening the spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation

Because of the vast amount of data and market share available to them, the Internet giants have an unparalleled advantage over new entrants in their market segments, using the traffic in their hands to constantly squeeze out other market competitors, manipulating public opinion for marketing purposes and achieving profits through monopoly, rather than following the route of technological progress.

Internet opinion manipulators are not required to bear the consequences of marketing failure. Eager business leaders will spread false rumours about competitors through the Internet in order to complete their capital performance, adopt malicious suppressive behaviours against new entrants, create public opinion incidents, damage competitors' reputation among user groups, and also reduce competitors' credibility in the eyes of potential investors, ultimately diluting and dismantling competitors'. Such vicious competition is bound to damage the orderly business competition environment and weaken the spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation.

4. Risk prevention measures for capital control of public opinion

Public opinion can monitor the government, but when capital can manipulate public opinion, then there is a disguised manipulation of politics by capital, which is clearly a red line that must not be touched.

The opinion media should become the spokesperson for positive social energy and correct values, and not become a negative opinion field to be exploited under the expansion of disorderly capital. The existence of capital today is an objective fact, and it is important to recognise the

value of its existence as well as its possible harm, and to regulate its rights and obligations within the legal framework. We should find ways to prevent capital from damaging the public opinion environment to prevent irreversible harm, but also to stimulate its positive side and fulfil the social responsibilities assigned to it by the times.

4.1 Anti-monopoly

Without a genuine anti-monopoly, there is no protection against capital's control of public opinion. As long as capital is a monopoly, it will inevitably compete for profits by manipulating public opinion. To prevent capital and Internet giants from moving towards monopoly and disorderly expansion, it is necessary to strengthen regulation and resolutely prevent the phenomenon of "winner takes all" for Internet platform giants.

4.1.1 Strengthening the regulation of the digital economy

Clarify data ownership. As platforms rely on technical advantages and implement differential trading prices based on big data and algorithms (i.e. big data "ripening"), it is necessary to clarify the rules and permissions for the distribution of data rights and interests among data owners, developers and users. In the process of data collection, attention should be paid to the regulations on the collection method of users' private data, whether the data is collected with the explicit consent of users, whether the consent of users is induced in a hidden way, and the ownership and disposal rights of data after data collection.

Commercialisation of data. First, data trading should be transparent. By clarifying the rules of data trading and adopting the way of establishing a data exchange to regulate data trading behavior, the market order of data trading is maintained and the legitimate rights and interests of all parties to data trading are protected. Secondly, data procurement should be legalised. Platforms should strengthen internal controls to prevent data leakage, and customers should not purchase data from illegal channels. Thirdly, the collection of digital taxes. Many countries are currently carrying out digital taxation, and for our situation, as large platforms hold a large amount of user data, which generates value after being used commercially, this value-added should be taxed.

Enhance data interoperability and portability. Encourage competition by lowering barriers to entry for competitors and conversion costs for consumers, in particular by requiring dominant platforms to make their services compatible with various networks so that content and information can be easily ported between them.

4.1.2 Internet platform regulation

Promote the dismantling of barriers between platforms. Take measures to intervene in the current situation where internet companies are incompatible with each other and are not able to access each other.

Restrict platform companies from operating in adjacent business lines. The focus will be on regulating "synergies" in the industry chain, restricting the entry of a single company into a new industry that fully integrates the upstream and downstream chains, thereby allowing specific projects to run through the entire industry chain. A single corporate entity may be allowed to engage in multiple businesses, but it must take a specific organisational form.

Impose non-discrimination requirements and prohibit dominant platforms from offering preferential treatment to their own products. Impose non-discrimination rules that require dominant platforms to offer equal terms for equivalent products and services and will apply to prices and access conditions to ensure fair competition and promote online innovation.

Consider prohibiting future mergers and acquisitions by dominant platforms. Any acquisition by a dominant platform would be presumed to be anticompetitive in nature unless the merging parties can show that such a transaction is necessary to serve the public interest and that similar benefits cannot be achieved through internal growth and expansion.

4.1.3 Algorithmic regulation

Algorithm regulation is actually part of platform regulation. Behind algorithm rules are commercial interests, and in order to maximise profits, algorithms may go against social justice and only recommend to people what can potentially bring commercial benefits, rather than what is most suitable and appropriate. To build a relatively harmonious internet environment, the giants must consider their own product values, especially their algorithmic values.

Intelligent algorithms have been adopted in large numbers by major technology companies, and their regulation is necessary given the huge scale of their ecology and the potential risks and social impacts that cannot be ignored. The regulatory regime for algorithms in China is gradually being improved and refined, but the specifics need to be refined and improved.

Firstly, promote transparency in algorithms. Transparency is not about making the technical secrets of source code public, but about monitoring and controlling the risks of algorithm application. As the designers and controllers of algorithms, large technology companies and other stakeholders should disclose possible biases and vulnerabilities in the design,

implementation and use of algorithms, the sources of data and the potential harm that may be caused to individuals and society. Transparency in algorithms should address transparency in the use of algorithms by platforms, transparency in the factors that go into the decision making of algorithms, and make algorithmic transparency a necessary 'diagnostic tool' for potential problems in the application of algorithms, which is essential to address the social, ethical and equity issues that may arise from the use of automated decision making systems by platforms. Ensuring algorithmic transparency through legislative means, clarifying the obligations of developers to disclose information, and finding a balance between transparency and factors such as trade secrets and proprietary information, are essential to improving the algorithmic rule.

Secondly, prior risk assessment or impact assessment report prior to automated decision making using algorithms. The specification platform establishes an inventory of automated decision-making systems, and all automated decision-making systems included in the inventory should be included in the prior assessment of impact, granting the regulator investigative powers to access information related to the automated decision-making system.

Thirdly, private avenues of redress should be available to any individual whose civil rights have been improperly infringed by an algorithm. Individuals should have the right to challenge the reasons for collecting data and to request a human review of automated decisions, ensuring that individuals or organisations adversely affected by algorithmic decision-making have the right to challenge and complain about the algorithm.

4.2 Public opinion governance

In cyberspace, the plurality of opinion subjects and the diversity of communication platforms may pose risks to social stability and ideological security. Public opinion governance involves the regulation and guidance of public opinion, to ensure that public opinion supervision functions properly and to create an orderly public opinion environment.

4.2.1 Guaranteeing the independence of the press

The mainstream media and mainstream news websites, as the eyes and ears of the Party, must break the monopoly of the discourse of a few elites, adhere to journalistic professionalism, and ensure party and people's integrity. The freedom of the news media must be guaranteed to avoid being taken over by the power of capital and losing the right to speak in the news media space. The news media should be allowed to negotiate with large technology platforms on anti-monopoly issues under certain conditions to avoid them becoming tools for capital profit and to provide a safe harbour for media platforms as a way to guarantee a free and diverse news market.

4.2.2 Strengthening the regulation of online media to ensure the authenticity of news

When a media platform is judged and sanctioned by the platform itself, and the platform bans or even outright deletes netizens by applying the relevant regulations, and there are no relevant authorities to regulate and manage it, then the platform will soon become an extra-legal place to create public opinion, cover up problems, or even suppress dissidents, so online media regulation is very necessary.

Truthfulness is the lifeline of news, and the most fundamental mission of the news media is also to ensure the truthfulness of news, and to achieve the purpose of guiding public opinion through the true presentation of news information. False news not only cannot play a role in guiding public opinion, but may even lead to public opinion wars. The mainstream media must check the facts, play the authority of the mainstream media, disclose the information needed in the future in a timely manner, and guide public opinion to the right track.