China's digital nationalism

Schneider, F.A.; Lu, Z.

11

CHINA'S DIGITAL NATIONALISM

Florian Schneider

Introduction

In 2016, Taiwanese singer Chou Tsu-yu from the multi–national girl band Twice is forced to issue a tearful apology to her mainland Chinese fans after online commentators had identified her holding a miniature flag of the Republic of China (ROC) that governs Taiwan; the outrage that ensued online over her waving this symbol of Taiwanese autonomy threatened to end her career and cost the parent company Twice its lucrative mainland audience.

In 2019, in the wake of the Hong Kong protests, the NBA manager Daryl Morey posted an image on his Twitter account that supported the protesters, leading to an angry and swift online backlash, boycotts, and cancelled games; the NBA had to issue an apology to the citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In 2020, during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Danish broadsheet published a satire of the PRC flag, replacing the five golden stars with viral particles. Chinese online outrage culminated in a flood of memes that mocked the Danish flag, and more generally the Danes. China's ambassador to the country warned Denmark that it risked losing the respect of the Chinese people (see Schneider 2021a on this case).

As these examples illustrate, falling foul of angry Chinese nationalists on the internet can have dire consequences, whether for individual, companies, or states. Online vitriol seems ubiquitous, in digital China, and it often shapes current affairs and international relations in toxic ways. At times, such nationalist sentiments spill into the streets, for instance, during the protests that shook many Chinese cities during the 2012 Sino–Japanese dispute over islands in the East China Sea (Gries et al. 2016), or they lead to discrimination against foreigners in China, for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chris Hughes' contribution in Woods et al. 2020). The groundwork for such behaviours is often laid in online forums, social media platforms, and chat apps. And in those spheres, nationalism is a constant feature of political discourse.

This chapter explores the workings of China's digital nationalism. In what follows, I will outline what digital nationalism is, how it operates in China, and what makes its dynamics special. At first glance, digital nationalism may simply seem to be popular nationalism expressed on the internet. Popular nationalism is indeed a crucial input to digital nationalism, so much so that the digital dimension can appear merely like an extension of popular

sentiments that play a role elsewhere in Chinese politics, for instance, during nationalist street protests or commercial boycott activities. However, as this chapter will show, digital nationalism has its own dynamics, whether in China or elsewhere. It is driven by the inter-connected activities of organizations, technologies, and users, and these activities generate digital nationalism as the emergent property of complex information and communication networks.

To explain these processes, this chapter first discusses conceptual issues related to socio-technological interactions in digital systems. This chapter then proceeds by introduc-ing the three inputs into China's digital nationalism: the organizations in digital China's political economy, the algorithms and interfaces that govern interactions on the PRC inter-net, and the internet users who engage with each other and with nationalist discourses online.

How digital nationalism works

The observation that online forums have become home to often aggressive nationalist expressions and activities has led to several key terms that describe the phenomenon. Most notably, this includes online nationalism or internet nationalism (Breslin & Shen 2010), cyber-nationalism (Jiang 2012; Leibold 2016; Wu 2007), techno-nationalism (Platin & De Seta 2019; Qiu 2010), and digital nationalism (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez 2020; Schneider 2018a). These concepts are often used interchangeably, and they frequently refer simply to popular nationalism expressed online. While this can be a convenient shorthand, it risks overlooking, or collapsing, the complexities that unfold when ideologies and commu-nity sentiments become mediated through digital technologies. In this section, I will tease apart these processes and distinguish between four dimensions of nationalism in digital soci-eties: techno-nationalism, online nationalism, cyber-nationalism, and digital nationalism. I propose definitions for these terms and describe how each operates, respectively, through policy, discursive practices, social practices, and socio-technical dynamics.

Techno-nationalism: nationalist policy and cyber-sovereignty

A crucial foundation for nationalism in digitally contexts is how the institutions of the nation-state create the legal and political frameworks for national media ecosystems to func-tion. These activities might best be called 'techno-nationalism': the use of state policy to create and maintain digital systems for national use. A techno-nationalist agenda allows nation-states to introduce and oversee the physical infrastructures that make internet com-munication possible, for instance, through the construction and regulation of fibre-optic connections or wireless network towers. It also drives governments to regulate the internet and its related technologies, whether indirectly through policy frameworks that govern digi-tal commercial activities or through direct intervention into communication practices in the form of censorship or propaganda.

China is a prominent example of techno-nationalist politics (Schneider 2018a, ch.8). The construction of the so-called 'Great Firewall', and of a media ecology that uses home-grown digital services instead of multi-national platforms, is informed by a geo-political and geo-economic outlook that extends the logic of territorial sovereignty to digital realms. This emphasis on 'cyber-sovereignty' is certainly not unique to the PRC (Shklovski & Struthers 2010, Goode 2021), but the Chinese government has been particularly vocal about its sover-eignty framework (Creemers 2020). Indeed, the idea of cyber-sovereignty today informs all

aspects of PRC digital politics, from the regulation of the domestic market to the promotion of regulatory principles in international contexts like the Belt and Road Initiative (Shen 2018) or global internet governance more broadly (Creemers 2016). It is before this backdrop that we need to understand nationalist expressions and activities on the PRC internet.

Online nationalism: nationalist discourses in online spheres

A sizable body of empirical media and communications scholarship has examined the nationalist discourses that groups, organizations, and individual internet users produce in forums and on social media (Feng & Yuan 2014, Jiang 2012, Shen & Breslin 2010, Schneider 2018b, Wu 2007), and it is these discourses that might most appropriately be called 'online nationalism'. The outrage against Taiwanese singer Chou for waving the ROC flag is as much an expression of online nationalism as angry vitriol against NBA manager Morrey for supporting Hong Kong protesters. But online nationalism also incorporates the creation and posting of images, emojis, videos, and other digitally native contents that contribute to nationalist discourses. The memes that Chinese online users created to criticize the Danish broadsheet for its insensitive COVID-satire are an example of Chinese online nationalism.

At this level of analysis, the question tends to be how an increasingly diverse range of actors deploys, and possibly alters, the building blocks of nationalism online, and how the resulting discourses relate to more traditional forms of nationalist expressions, for instance, in legacy media like newspapers, radio, and television, at cultural sites like museums or mass events, or in political contexts like official documents, parliamentary debates, or the speeches of leading politicians. These 'offline' discourses remain important, especially where they set public agendas, frame current affairs, or legitimate policies and institutions, so an important issue in the study of online nationalism is how online and offline discourses interact.

That said, it bears keeping in mind that human activities do not neatly divide into online and offline behaviours; in our ubiquitously digital societies, the two realms of human activity are intimately linked. Media formats 'converge' online (Jenkins 2006); for instance, when a politician's speech is filmed, digitized, edited, and then posted on a video sharing platform. Consumers of such contents may access them online, but they are still tethered to the material world. They have physical, bodily reactions to their online engagements. They pay their hard-earned wages for access to certain media contents. And they relay their responses to people they know through face-to-face interactions. Our everyday feelings, physical activities, and social dynamics in material space are overlaid by a stratum of data flows into which we dip at many moments of our day, and this is also true for how internet users express community sentiments like nationalism.

Cyber-nationalism: digitally enabled nationalist activism and mobilization

The definition of online nationalism that I have provided here highlights how nationalist dynamics unfold through discursive practices on the internet, but it does not yet tell us much about the social practices that are tied to these discourses. This is where the concept of cyber-nationalism becomes useful. Cyber-nationalism shall here describe the strategic use of computer technologies ('cyber') in the service of nationalist projects. When nationalists mobilize to flood a discussion with online vitriol, when they organize street protests through their social media networks, when they coordinate their protest activities through chat apps, or when they finance their endeavours through e-commerce, they engage in cyber-nationalism.

In that sense, cyber-nationalism is a particular strand of cyber-activism: a digitally enabled form of socio-political mobilization. Where online nationalism describes nationalist representations and discourses, cyber-nationalism describes mobilization and practice. These two dimensions are related, and they often overlap: any nationalist activism is informed by nationalist discourses, and it, in turn, contributes to those discourses. A good example of this connection are the consumer boycotts that often accompany Chinese public anger at foreign brands for perceived offences against the Chinese nation. The backlash against the NBA in 2019 produced a great deal of online nationalism, in the form of social media commentary, but it also spilled over into cyber-activism aimed at shutting down NBA games in China and shaming anyone associated with American basketball. Analytically, however, it can be helpful to distinguish these processes and ask how they interact in specific cases. When online anti-Japanese sentiments lead to street protests, then it is because nationalist actors have tapped into social networks for activist coordination and mobilization.

Digital nationalism: the socio-technical systems behind contemporary nationalism

In both online nationalism and cyber-nationalism, technology provides the medium or vehicle through which actors express themselves and act. Digital technology effectively increases, diversifies, and makes more visible who can contribute to public discussions and activities about the nation. Nationalism relies on what scholars of technology call the 'affordances' of the medium, that is: the 'latent cues in environments (…) that hold possibilities for action' (Parchoma 2014, 360). Indeed, when Benedict Anderson (1983/2006) famously explored the origins of 'imagined communities' like the nation, he focused strongly on the affordances of media technologies like the printing press, as well as on the political economy of print capitalism that created those affordances. It is these technological affordances and political economy dynamics that the term digital nationalism is meant to capture.

Digital nationalism refers to the nationalist discourses and practices that emerge as actors interact with each other through socio-technical systems. In this sense, digital nationalism describes the overarching framework within which online nationalism and cyber-nationalism play out. Studies of digital nationalism then also frequently incorporate discursive and social practices online, minimally as empirical cases, but they draw attention to the chains of interactions between organizations, technical systems, and people that generate nationalism in our inherently complex contemporary societies.

This is why digital nationalism is not simply an extension of nationalism to online forums. Digital nationalism possesses dynamics that profoundly alter the rationale of nationalism itself. Once nationalism becomes filtered through digital systems, it behaves in new and at times unexpected ways. When discourses and social practices move through digital systems, they become part of complex socio-technical networks in which people and algorithms interact. Take the example of the official smartphone app that promotes Xi Jinping thought, an application called 'Study (Xi), Strong Country' (Xue Xi Qiang Guo), but colloquially referred to as 'Xi's little red app' (Zhong 2021): the app itself is a form of infrastructure, and its interface design and algorithm shape how users interact with its contents. At the same time, the app communicates statements that fall into the category of 'online nationalism', so: contributions to the nationalist discourse in online spheres. But the app also mobilizes Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members around certain policies, using a gamified point system to nudge them towards the state's techno-nationalist agenda. All levels of digitally

mediated nationalism come together in this context, generating a digital nationalism that can have unintended side-effects. For instance, users frequently 'game' the system by letting videos run in the background or flipping through content without paying attention, simply to gain more points. Such externalities are typical for digital nationalist dynamics, which are an example of complex networked processes.

The complexity of these networks matters. It generates what network scholars have called 'emergent properties': outcomes that are more than the sum of their parts (Monge & Contractor 2003, 233; Morçöl & Wachhaus 2009, 46). To fully appreciate how digital nationalism behaves, as an emergent property, it is important to understand two crucial parts of complex networked processes: resonance and variability (see Hollnagel 2012). Resonance refers to feedback loops between interconnected activities. These can be human activities, such as making statements about the nation, reading the news, or connecting with an acquaintance online. They can also be technological interactions, for instance, when algorithms filter data, curate content on a social media feed, or assess the level of interaction that a digital artefact generates. Each activity has its own outcome, its 'output', which, in turn, serves as an input to some other activity: for instance, interaction with an online post may cause an algorithm to assess it as highly relevant, which pushes it onto a social media feed, leading a user to read the piece and leave a comment, and so on. Importantly, the links through which interactions run are non-linear (Morçöl & Wachhaus 2009, 49). They double back on each other to generate feedback loops, and this means that a change in one activity can have layered and often delayed effects on the output of another. In other words, these interactions create resonance within the system.

In a system characterized by resonance, the 'variability' of outcomes can become unpredictable, so much so that a sudden even minor amplitude variation in one activity can have extreme effects that shake the entire system. A useful example is how seemingly 'banal', low-key nationalist expressions serve as an input to commercial websites and social media platforms, which facilitate their spread because of the traffic they generate. Online nationalism then builds up over time, leading to long-term effects that generate sudden bursts of variance elsewhere in the system, such as unanticipated cyber-nationalist activism in the face of a perceived offence against the nation. In that sense, digital nationalism has a 'temperature' that is affected by a series of complex interconnections and couplings 'upstream'. Under certain conditions, a change in one activity can filter through chains of socio-technical interactions to radically affect the amplitude of nationalist temperature. This is how sudden and surprising nationalist outbursts 'emerge' from the complexity of networks that had ostensibly transported relatively benign 'low temperature' patriotic undercurrents (Schneider 2021b). The result is not necessarily in the interest of the authorities, as occasional CCP condemnation of commercialized patriotism illustrates (Wang 2021).

In practice, China's networks feature three types of activities that interact to generate such outcomes. These are organizational, algorithmic, and user activities, and I will go through each, in turn.

The organizational inputs into China's digital nationalism

China's digital nationalism is in no small part affected by the activities of organizational actors, specifically organizations in two realms of the political economy: official agencies under the auspice of the CCP or the PRC state, and commercial actors like the large media and technology conglomerates that provide the infrastructure and much of the content of digital China.

Official actors: how the Party and the state contribute to digital nationalism

In China's digital nationalism, one centrally important input is the official establishment. State and party institutions promote an official version of nationalism, replete with party-approved symbols and rituals. This 'state-led nationalism' (Zhao 2004) is meant to promote citizens' attachment to the state and inspire unity, pride in China and its achievements, and an overall 'rational patriotism'. To achieve this end, state-led nationalism relies on a narrative that collapses China's past into 5,000 years of continuous history, frames China's tumultuous entry into modernity as the outcome of foreign aggression during the so-called 'century of humiliation', and presents Chinese current affairs as a success story in which the party has guided the nation along a 'road to revival' that will ultimately lead to unification, prosperity, and international recognition (Cohen 2002; Callahan 2010).

Much of this contemporary state-led discourse is not originally digital. It dates to the 1980s, and it became a particularly important part of the CCP's legitimation strategies after the fall of the Soviet Union and the events on Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Hughes 2006). Since then, it has been promoted through 'patriotic education' (Wang 2012), state media (Zhao 2008, 168), museums and exhibitions (Denton 2014), and official propaganda campaigns such as the one that celebrated the China Dream under Xi Jinping in 2013 (Sun 2019). However, the internet and especially its mobile version have become such a universal source for information in China that the CCP had to update its propaganda strategies to remain relevant and effective.

In part, this has meant simply digitizing official materials and placing them on China's web, for instance, by encouraging state media to post their reporting online, by creating online archives to flank the efforts of museums and important patriotic sites, or by launching dedicated government websites to relay the official position on current affairs issues like territorial disputes (Schneider 2018a). At that level of engagement, the authorities essentially treat China's digital networks as an 'info-web' and use the central position that their institutions maintain within those networks to inject the 'correct' (read: officially approved) symbols and statements into discourses about the nation, its leaders, and their sovereignty (Schneider 2016).

Simultaneously, the authorities have rolled out communicative efforts that increasingly use the affordances of the medium to their advantage. This has meant creating entirely new digital communication platforms like the state-run search engine China Search (ChinaSo. com) or the mobile solution for studying Xi Jinping thought mentioned earlier. It has also meant changing the strategies for engaging with citizens, at least in part. Traditional CCP propaganda relays official positions and flags the ideological buzzwords (or tifa) of the day (Qian 2012), which frequently makes the messaging appear wooden, even patronizing. While such traditional propaganda continues to play an important role in China's political communication, it is today accompanied by contents and styles that aim to persuade rather than dictate.

The party has realized that it needs to be persuasive if it wants its interpretation of nationalism to attract China's tech-savvy internet users, especially its youths. To rejuvenate its outreach, propaganda leans heavily on pop-cultural references, especially those familiar from Japanese animation, manga, and gaming (or 'AMG' culture). This is visible in the way the Chinese Communist Youth League has moved its activities to digital spheres (Guo 2018): on popular social media and video sharing platforms like Sina's Weibo, Bilibili, or Douyin (the Chinese version of Tik Tok), the Youth League produces original content steeped in internet memes, and it promotes content designed by private actors such as social media

influencers and content creators. Good examples include the way the Youth League has pushed nationalist content created by domestic online commentator LexBurner, cartoonist Wuheqilin, or animation artists Lin Chao (creator of the popular nationalist anime 'Year Hare Affair'; see Guan & Hu 2020). In many ways, official attempts to promote nationalism are a public–private partnership between the authorities and entrepreneurs who are able to make a living with their nationalist products. Yet where such private actors promote a hollowed-out nationalism that does not involve official oversight, they are quickly shut down. This then also explains the seemingly contradictory phenomenon of state and party officials criticizing commercial actors for 'selling' patriotism (Wang 2021); in digital China, nationalism may sell well, but it has to be sold on the party's terms.

Another important dimension of official efforts to promote and 'guide' nationalism is the way the authorities manipulate online discussions. The party and state employ dedicated influence operators, and these paid commentators talk up the party, appeal to nationalist sentiments, and discredit critics online. Collectively, they have become known as China's 'fifty-cent army' (wu mao dang), based on the debatable assumption that they receive 50 cents (five 'mao') for each comment they leave online (Han 2018: ch.5).

Not all online defenders of the official position are necessarily paid for their interventions into public discussion. Many are private citizens driven by genuinely held beliefs about the nation and the need to uphold its dignity, and so the party and state can rely on a sizable 'voluntary fifty-cent army' of internet users (ibid.: ch.7) who are willing to swamp online discussions with nationalist commentary. This again illustrates how official governance augments its state and party activities with the actions of private individuals who are not necessarily associated with the establishment.

Public–private collaboration also extends to regulatory issues. The party and state's attempts to 'guide public opinion' are not limited to online propaganda efforts. They also encompass censorship of unwanted expressions. Much of this censorship relies on state action, for instance, blocking foreign services like Facebook or YouTube, or arresting and trying individuals who have infringed upon the PRC's laws and regulations for online conduct. However, the authorities outsource much of the day-to-day regulation of online discourses to private actors, creating a 'public–private nexus' (Creemers 2018) that operates at three tiers: the corporate level, the level of group and thought leaders, and the level of individual users.

The first tier of the governance effort focuses on the corporations that run China's platforms. These companies rely on licences to operate in China's market, and they need to conform with state guidelines on opinion guidance if they want to remain in business. This means that much of the censorship on platforms like Sina Weibo, Weixin, Bilibili, or Douyin is enforced by moderators who work for the respective company.

The companies then hand down the pressure for regulation to a second tier: opinion leaders and group moderators. For instance, anyone who runs a social group on Tencent's chat app Weixin is personally responsible for the behaviour of the group members and can lose their platform privileges or even their account in cases of misconduct. This means that these power users are under constant pressure to civilize the discussions they oversee, for example, by repeatedly reminding group members of community guidelines or ejecting members from the forum if they voice potentially controversial views.

Finally, the companies and the group moderators each pass on the responsibility for managing platform expressions to the individual users themselves. This third governance tier relies on self-regulation. Faced with the constant threat of having their posts removed, the views of their content throttled, or their accounts deleted, users have strong incentives to self-censor. The pressure is particularly high for streamers and bloggers who rely on platform

feeds for their income, but small-time users are also affected: in a country where social media platforms like Weixin are no longer a service but an essential infrastructure for everyday life (Platin & De Seta 2019), having one's account closed effectively removes the user from their social circle and impedes their access to everything from ride-sharing to payment services to e-commerce. It is not hard to see how these measures would inspire self-regulation and conformity.

These governance strategies are of course not limited solely to issues of nationalism, but the degree to which the authorities have approved nationalism as the go-to framework for interpreting politics makes it potentially hazardous to question nationalist assumptions online, both for individuals and for platform providers.

Commercial actors in China's digital political economy

The Chinese state and the CCP are crucial actors in China's digital ecosystem, but they do not provide the most popular platforms and services that citizens use on an everyday basis. In fact, many of the official offers are minor players compared to the commercial alternatives that dominate the capitalist landscape of digital China (Hong 2018). Those alternatives come from China's internet and technology giants, most importantly the 'BAT', an acronym that stands for Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent. Baidu runs China's largest commercial search engine, one of its most prominent Wikipedia-like online encyclopaedias, and China's dominant map and location service, but it is also a powerhouse in artificial intelligence (AI) research. Alibaba is famous for its e-commerce platforms, specifically Taobao and AliExpress, but it is further involved in financial technology, AI, surveillance, social engineering, and video entertainment. Tencent is originally a video game publisher and vendor, but it also runs the hugely influential chat app Weixin along with its many essential everyday-life functionalities. These three conglomerates are flanked by numerous other influential companies, such as Sina, which runs the microblogging service Weibo (Sullivan & Sapir 2013), or ByteDance, the enterprise behind Douyin/Tik Tok (Zhang 2021). Together, these corporate actors design and manage online communication within the PRC, and they do so according to the logic of what scholars call the 'platform economy' (Kenney & Zysman 2016).

Digital China is fundamentally a capitalist economic system. As such, it relies on the ability of enterprises to extract value from digital interactions. Much like capitalist media conglomerates in the US or elsewhere, it does so by commodifying content, mining and selling data, and generally monetizing and exploiting the activities, interactions, and labour of users (also known as 'digital labour', 'free labour', or 'playbour'; see the contributions in Scholz 2013). This has profound effects on how actors behave. In an environment where the scarce commodity is time, digital spheres become an 'attention economy' (Bueno 2017): an economic system in which the priority is to attract as much cognitive engagement as possible. Particularly effective strategies include using simplistic, one-sided issues as 'click-bate' and appealing to strong emotions, especially outrage and fear. Nationalist discourses reliably produce these requirements, and so there is a strong incentive for content producers and anyone who wishes to be seen on China's internet to frame their concerns in nationalist terms.

Importantly, the commercial rationale of platforms and their attention economy develops its own dynamics due to the way actors assess their success at generating attention that can be monetized, for instance, through advertising revenues, subscriptions, or micro-transactions. The platforms measure attention and interaction through metrics like page views, 'likes', and other numerical indicators, which can, in turn, skew the logic that informs content production. The issue is not whether users absorb, process, enjoy, or even internalize specific

content; these aspects of media consumption become negligible. What matters are the communicative strategies that generate engagement, good or bad. To truly make content go viral, an aggressive style or exaggerated frame of reference can be extremely effective, and so the commercial rationale of digital China generates strong incentives for nationalist expressions.

Digital designs and algorithmic mechanics

The incentive structures in China's digital economy are the outcome of feedback loops between organizations and individuals, but those loops are enabled through, and mediated by, digital technology. The capitalist incentives in China's media environment are problematic on their own, but they become truly powerful because of the way digital measures such as clicks, likes, and shares are algorithmically relayed through the system.

In digital networks, it is no longer just people who interact; users engage in social, political, and economic activities through digital interfaces, which are coupled to algorithmic processes. Importantly, technological designs are by no means innocent in the making of these interactions. They are not neutral contraptions that users can wield to whichever end they choose. This is succinctly captured by Malvin Kranzberg's (1995, 5) dictum that 'technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral'. Artefacts have politics (Winner 1980; see also Woolgar & Cooper 1999), and those politics are built into them by design.

This is not to say that technology and its designs rigidly define how users interact, but they generate the 'functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object' (Hutchby 2001: 444). This is precisely the technological 'affordance' mentioned earlier: digital designs create a range of plausible and practical possibilities for how users can deploy them. In networked socio-technical processes, technological artefacts like search engines, social media platforms, and web resources are part of our interaction chains and shape our behaviours, so much so that they function like 'actors' (Latour 2005).

Much like elsewhere in the world, and as outlined above, Chinese digital designs are strongly driven by commercial and regulatory rationales that produce their own 'media logic' (Chadwick 2013). In the Chinese case, that logic combines an authoritarian suspicion of unregulated collective activity with a commercial incentive to have users generate viral content that can be monetized. Chinese interfaces and backend processes anticipate these demands and guide users into patterns of behaviour that promise to maximize profit while minimizing political risk.

Take the example of how social media providers like Tencent of Sina designed their algorithms to control public debate: the main news feeds do not show posts chronologically but based on often obscure algorithmic choices that balance popularity (likes, shares, comments), personal preferences (user histories), commercial incentives (sponsored content and advertising), and political considerations (conformity with official regulation). Much like on Facebook, these systems benefit from viral engagement, and few things generate such viral engagement like the fear or anger accompanied by nationalism, which turns nationalism into a privileged topic in algorithmically curated feeds.

Similar dynamics operate in many online forums, especially those that rank comments based on the degree of interaction they produce. This is true for many news comments sections, but it is also the case in seemingly more innocuous settings. Take the online encyclopaedia Hudong Baike as an example (Schneider 2018a, 176–181) – a direct competitor to Baidu's encyclopaedic service. Until a major relaunch of its site in 2019, Hudong allowed users to comment on entries and each other's posts, and it then showcased those discussions

by presenting the five most popular comments. On topics that touched on national sover-eignty or identity, the most popular comments were frequently the most chauvinistic. This is not to say that there were no nuanced interventions and alternative views; such comments also existed, but they could only be accessed by clicking through and expanding the various comment threads. Defaults are powerful (most users only ever use and view default options), and so the knowledge aggregator's design choices contributed to the impression that nation-alism was both the most popular and most appropriate lens through which to view China and its role in the world.

Other cases of design bias are more subtle. Nationalism can often appear banal, in online contexts, for instance, when a search engine like Baidu returns the simplified character script used in mainland China (rather than the traditional script used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and many diaspora communities abroad), or when it produces results that default to domestic PRC contexts, sources, or perspectives. These outcomes are not generated by individual people with a nationalist agenda; they are produced by a combination of design and algorith-mic choices that privilege common denominators among users, such as a physical location that common sense would suggest as the user's 'homeland'. However, common sense is never natural, nor is it neutral. It is commonly shared knowledge created by communication, and it is precisely the seemingly self-evident insistence on the national context, with its nationalist references like flags, colour-schemes, emblems, and so on, that normalizes that context as the default for political action (see also Billig 2009). The defaults of the platforms seamlessly interact with the defaults of political assumptions, creating and reinforcing an algorith-mically generated comfort-zone. In other words, digital interfaces, algorithms, and biases produce the very sense of 'homeland' in the first place.

User-generated discourse and practice

This chapter has so far discussed the organizational and technological actors that create inputs into the complex socio-technical systems that constitute digital China, but a third set of actors is largely still missing from this picture: the individual users. Due to the technolog-ical affordances of the medium, internet users are not merely consumers, they are producers of content, or 'produsers' (Bruns 2006).

Users who create and spread nationalist statements online likely do so for a host of rea-sons, most of which are difficult to explore empirically. Online nationalists might be moti-vated by state funding, by commercial rationales, by conviction, or by the wish to make themselves intelligible in the readily available vernacular of nationalist discourse. In fact, we know relatively little about the people behind online nationalism. One assumption is that popular nationalism is driven by 'angry youths' (Rosen 2009), which have moved online to become what is commonly called 'little pinks' (Wu et al. 2019; see also Fang & Repnikova 2018 for a critique); others have questioned whether it is really young people who are most nationalist in contemporary China (Johnston 2016).

Regardless of who precisely fuels nationalism in China, or why, their interactions with the socio-technical systems of digital China generate widespread references to the commu-nity of the nation. These processes sit on top of contemporary community sentiments more broadly, for instance, imagined communities built around popular cultural appreciation. Indeed, the Chinese case illustrates how the social practices from one digitally imagined community translate to the context of another: the Chinese internet socializes its users into a digital cultural environment characterized by idol worship, ubiquitous fandom practices, and conspicuous pop-culture consumption, generating what Zhang (2016) calls 'fandom

publics'. Many internet users take the lessons they have learned from these fandom publics and apply them to other contexts, such as when they perform their role as Chinese citizens. Liu Hailong (2019) and his colleagues have shown how contemporary popular nationalism in China today draws from fandom patterns. They call the result 'fandom nationalism', to reflect how nationalist activities in digital China rely on many of the communicative and mobilization strategies familiar from the way fans behave online.

Chinese fandom publics frequently initiate 'flame wars' and 'meme wars', in which fan groups attack each other online in support of celebrities or in attempts to defend their interpretations of cultural franchises. The debates that ensue on such occasions are often highly toxic, not to mention deeply political, for instance, when fans go head-to-head over their understandings of 'correct' gender roles and sexuality. A high-profile case in 2020 was the vicious disputes over homo-erotic fan depictions of beloved television actor Xiao Zhan. In cases such as these, fan groups tend to be highly organized, to the point that they describe their own community mobilization and activism in militaristic terms like armies, invasions, and battles for commanding heights.

Fans frequently organize in this fashion to flood online forums, social media pages, or microblogging hashtags in attempts to drown out statements that offend their sensibilities. Perceived antagonists are mocked relentlessly, usually through the kind of crude memes familiar from online satire, which is known as e'gao in Chinese (Gong & Yang 2010). In extreme cases, internet users investigate their perceived enemies through crowd-sourcing, a practice known as the 'human flesh search engine' (Herold 2011), and then publish their identities online. This 'doxing' then frequently leads to severe forms of harassment.

All these practices have become part of the toolbox that nationalists use online to defend China against perceived enemies, domestic or foreign (Liu 2019). For example, in 2016, nationalist users swamped the Facebook page of Tsai Ying-wen with angry insults, after the Taiwanese public had elected the liberal, independence-leaning politician as the president of the ROC. But fandom nationalism also targets perceived traitors of the nation at home, for instance, Olympic athletes who do not measure up to the high expectations of the nationalists, intellectuals like the author Fang Fang who dare to criticize state policy like China's COVID-19 management, and celebrities that are suspected of being sympathetic to causes such as Hong Kong or Taiwanese autonomy.

In all such cases, and much like in fandom conflicts, the strong antagonisms and crude shouting matches leave little room for nuance, discussion, or even reconciliation. This is not to say that there are no counter-movements: internet users with more liberal sensibilities frequently dismiss crude nationalist commentators on China's internet as 'pink maggots', 'fifty-centers', 'cyber red guards', and 'patriotraitors'. The meaning of nationalism is clearly a site of strong contestations in digital China. Nevertheless, the viral dynamics of loud, nationalist viewpoints frequently drown out dissent and create what psychologists call a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann 1993): a dynamic in which those who disagree with the dominant narratives no longer dare to speak out. This is then part of why it is so difficult to assess how widespread aggressive nationalism truly is in China. The loud and highly visible online nationalism that emerges from Chinese digital networks may not represent the majority, but it is effective at setting the agenda and framing Chinese politics, all while silencing alternative discourses.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how digital nationalism works in China. It made the case that nationalism in digital spheres develops unique dynamics, and that we should view those

dynamics as consisting of legal and policy frameworks (what I have called 'techno-nationalism'), discursive practices ('online nationalism'), social mobilization ('cyber-nationalism'), and socio-technical systems ('digital nationalism'). In the Chinese case, political and commercial actors collaborate to create profitable and politically acceptable spheres for online interactions, which users then enter to engage in all manner of activities. With official actors strongly lacing these environments with the symbols and discourses of state-led nationalism, users pick up these building blocks of community sentiment and often revamp them for their own purposes. Due to the complex feedback loops that characterize these interactions in commercially driven and technologically mediated networks, nationalism becomes an emergent property that can take on a life of its own. It can turn on foreigners and compatriots alike, in ways that are not under any single actor's control.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial. China's digital nationalism is set to shape Chinese domestic politics and international affairs for the foreseeable future. But it is also a cautionary tale. It illustrates what happens when powerful political actors set nationalism as the primary parameter for political discourse, and when private groups and citizens run with these parameters to make sense of politics. This is then a much broader issue that is bound to affect politics anywhere that community sentiments are filtered through the digital networks of capitalist platforms that seek to commodify culture and monetize attention – which is to say everywhere.

References

Anderson, Benedict. 1983/2006. *Imagined Communities* (3rd ed.). London & New York: Verso.

Billig, Michael. 2009. *Banal Nationalism* (9th ed.). London: Sage.

Breslin, Shaun, and Simon Shen. 2010. "Online Chinese Nationalism'. *Chatham House Asia Programme Paper ASP PP 2010/03*, retrieved 9 August 2021 from: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0910breslin_shen.pdf

Bruns, Axel. 2006. "Towards Produsage: Futures for User-Led Content Production." In *Proceedings Cultural Attitudes towards Communication and Technology 2006*, edited by Fay Sudweeks, Herbert Hrachovec, and Charles Ess, retrieved 9 August 2021 from http://eprints.qut.edu.au/4863/1/4863_1.pdf.

Bueno, Claudio C. 2014. *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*. London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Callahan, William A. 2010. *China—The Pessoptimist Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chadwick, Andrew. 2013. *The Hybrid Media System—Politics and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, Paul. 2002. "Remembering and Forgetting: National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China." *Twentieth-Century China* 27 (2): 1–39.

Creemers, Rogier. 2016. "Recognizing China's Internet Governance despite Its Foundational Opposition to Western Values." *China US Focus*, retrieved 15 December from https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/recognizing-chinas-internet-governance-despite-its-foundational-opposition-to-western-values.

Creemers, Rogier. 2018. "Disrupting the Chinese State: New Actors and New Factors." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5 (3): 169–197.

Creemers, Rogier. 2020. "China's Conception of Cyber Sovereignty: Rhetoric and Realization." In *Governing Cyberspace: Behavior, Power, and Diplomacy*, edited by Dennis Broeders and Bibi van den Berg, 107–142. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Denton, Kirk A. 2014. *Exhibiting the Past—Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Fang, Kecheng, and Maria Repnikova. 2018. "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China." *New Media and Society* 20 (6): 2162–2185.

Feng, Miao, and Elaine J. Yuan. 2014. "Public Opinion on Weibo: The Case of the Diaoyu Island Dispute." In *The Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands: How Media Narratives Shape Public Opinion and Challenge the Global Order*, edited by Thomas A. Hollihan, 119–140. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Goode, J. Paul. 2021. "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Nationalism." *Nations and Nationalism* 23: 363–376.

Gong, Haomin, and Yang Xin. 2010. "Digitized Parody: The Politics of Egao in Contemporary China." *China Information* 24 (1): 3–26.

Guo, Shaohua. 2018. "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online." *Communication and the Public* 3 (1): 19–33.

Guan, Tianru, and Hu Tingting. 2020. "The Confirmation and Negotiation of Nationalism in China's Political Animations – A Case Study of *Year Hare Affair*." *Continuum* 34 (3): 417–430.

Gries, Peter. 2004. *China's New Nationalism—Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gries, Peter, Derek Steiger, and Tao Wang. 2016. "Popular Nationalism and China's Japan Policy: the Diaoyu Islands protests, 2012–2013." *Journal of Contemporary China* 25 (98): 264–276.

Han, Rongbin. 2018. *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Herold, David K. 2011. "Human Flesh Search Engines: Carnivalesque Riots as Components of a 'Chinese Democracy'." In *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, edited by David K. Herold and Peter Marolt, 127–145. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hollnagel, Erik. 2012. *FRAM: The Functional Resonance Analysis Method: Modelling Complex Sociotechnical Systems*. Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Hughes, Christopher R. 2006. *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hong, Yu. 2017. *Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Hutchby, Ian 2001. "Technologies, Texts and Affordances." *Sociology* 35 (2): 441–456.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York & London: New York University Press.

Jiang, Ying. 2012. *Cyber-Nationalism in China. Challenging Western Media Portrayals of Internet Censorship in China*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.

Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2016. "Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing." *International Security* 41 (3): 7–43.

Kenney, Martin, and John Zysman. 2016. "The Rise of the Platform Economy." *Issues in Science and Technology* 32 (3): 61–69.

Kranzberg, Melvin. 1995. "Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws'." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 15 (1): 5–13.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social — An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leibold, James. 2016. "Han Cybernationalism and State Territorialization in the People's Republic of China." *China Information* 30 (1): 3–28.

Liu, Hailong, ed. 2019. *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Mihelj, Sabina, and César Jiménez-Martínez. 2020. "Digital Nationalism: Understanding the Role of Digital Media in the Rise of 'New' Nationalism." *Nations and Nationalism* 27 (2): 331–346.

Monge, Peter R., and Noshir S. Contractor. 2003. *Theories of Communication Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morçöl, G. and Wachhaus, A. 2009. "Network and Complexity Theories: A Comparison and Prospects for a Synthesis." *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 31 (1): 44–58.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1993. *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Parchoma, Gale 2014. "The Contested Ontology of Affordances: Implications for Researching Technological Affordances for Collaborative Knowledge Production." *Computers in Human Behavior* 37: 360–368.

Platin, Jean-Christophe, and Gabriele De Seta. 2019. "WeChat as Infrastructure: The Techno-Nationalist Shaping of Chinese Digital Platforms." *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12 (3): 257–73.

Qian, Gang. 2012. "Watchwords: The Life of the Party." *China Media Project*, retrieved 9 August 2021 from http://chinamediaproject.org/2012/09/10/watchwords-the-life-of-the-party/.

Qiu, Jack L. 2010. "Chinese Techno-Nationalism and Global WiFi Policy." In *Reorienting Global Communication: Indian and Chinese Media beyond Borders*, edited by Michael Curtin and Hemant Shah, 284–304. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Rosen, Stanley. 2009. "Contemporary Chinese Youth and the State." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68 (2): 359–369.

Schneider, Florian. 2016. "China's 'Info-Web': How Beijing Governs Online Political Communication about Japan." *New Media and Society* 18 (11): 2664–2684.

Schneider, Florian. 2018a. *China's Digital Nationalism*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schneider, Florian. 2018b. "Mediated Massacre: Digital Nationalism and History Discourse on China's Web." *Journal of Asian Studies* 77 (2): 429–452.

Schneider, Florian. 2021a. "COVID-19 Nationalism and the Visual Construction of Sovereignty during China's Coronavirus Crisis." *China Information* 35 (3): 301–324.

Schneider, Florian. 2021b. "Emergent Nationalism in China's Sociotechnical Networks: How Technological Affordance and Complexity Amplify Digital Nationalism." *Nations and Nationalism* 28 (1): 267–285.

Scholz, Trebor, ed. 2013. *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Shen, Hong. 2018. "Building a Digital Silk Road? Situating the Internet in China's Belt and Road Initiative." *International Journal of* Communication 12: 2683–2701.

Shen, Simon, and Shaun Breslin, eds. 2010. *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations*. Lanham: Lexington.

Shklovski, Irina & Struthers, David M. 2010. "Of States and Borders on the Internet: The Role of Domain Name Extensions in Expressions of Nationalism Online." *Policy & Internet* 2 (4): 107–129.

Sun, Zhen. 2019. "Utopia, Nostalgia, and Femininity: Visually Promoting the Chinese Dream." *Visual Communication* 18 (1): 107–133.

Sullivan, Jonathan & Eliyahu V. Sapir. 2013. "Strategic Cross-Strait Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Three Presidential Terms." *China Information* 27 (1): 11–30.

Wang, Lei. 2021. "Mashang ping: 'tonggao aiguo' bu shi aiguo, shi yi zhuang liuliang shengyi" [Immediate Criticism: 'Published Patriotism' Is Not Patriotic, It Is a Business in Traffic]. *The Paper*, retrieved 15 December 2021 from https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_14716236

Wang, Zheng. 2012. *Never Forget National Humiliation—Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Winner, Langdon. 1980. "Do Artifacts have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109 (1): 121–136.

Woods, Eric Taylor, et al. 2020. "COVID-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange." *Nations and Nationalism* 26 (4): 807–25.

Woolgar, Steve, and Geoff Cooper. 1999. "Do Artefacts Have Ambivalence? Moses' Bridges, Winner's Bridges and Other Urban Legends in S&TS." *Social Studies of Science* 29 (3): 433–449.

Wu, Jing, Li Simin, and Wang Hongzhe. 2019. "From Fans to 'Little Pink': The Production and Mobilization Mechanism of National Identity under the New Media Commercial Culture." In *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China*, edited by Liu Hailong, 32–52. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wu, Xu. 2007. *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Yang, Guobin. 2020. "Performing Cyber-Nationalism in Twenty-First-Century China: The Case of Diba Expedition." In *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China*, edited by Liu Hailong, 1–12. Abingdon: Routledge.

Zhao, Suisheng. 2004. *A Nation- State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Zhao, Yuezhi. 2008. *Communication in China − Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*. Lanham & Plymouth, MI: Rowman & Littlefield.

Zhang, Weiyu. 2016. *The Internet and New Social Formation in China: Fandom Publics in the Making*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Zhang, Zongyi. 2021. "Infrastructuralization of Tik Tok: Transformation, Power Relationships, and Platformization of Video Entertainment in China." *Media, Culture, & Society* 43 (2): 219–236.

Zhong, Raymond. 2019. "Little Red App: Xi's Thoughts Are (Surprise!) a Hit in China." *The New York Times*, February 14, retrieved 9 August 2021 from 2https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/technology/china-communist-app.html.