For the past couple of decades, the Internet has been one of the most contentious arenas for public discourse in China, a site of confrontation between authorities eager to exert control and users attempting to re-appropriate discursive spaces. In his book *The Internet in China: From Infrastructure to Nascent Civil Society* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), Gianluigi Negro explores the development of the Internet in China through a historical approach that combines political economy, cultural, and public studies.

Ivan Franceschini: In the book, you describe the evolution of Internet governance since the 1990s. What are the main innovations introduced under the administration of Xi Jinping?

Gianluigi Negro: In my opinion, Xi Jinping introduced three main innovations. The first is a stronger role for the state. The establishment, in 2017, of the Cyberspace Administration of China directed by president Xi himself, the enactment of the Cybersecurity Law later in the same year, and the promotion of the social credit system are just a few examples that reflect a more concrete attempt to institutionalise the Internet under a clearer legal framework, a process that had started with the previous leaderships but that has been quite unsuccessful so far. The second innovation is the rising role of Party ideology in the Internet economy. The slogan ‘all the media should have “Party” as its family name’ (*meiti xing dang*) covers also the Internet, especially online news media. The promotion of an integrated communication strategy, for instance through the launch of the China Media Group (CMG, *zhongyang gaungbo dianshi zhongtai*), also known as Voice of China (*zhongguo zhi shen*), puts online media in a central position. CMG is not only the result of a merger of the former China Central Television, China National Radio, and China Radio International, but also an impressive investment in media convergence that might lead to the broadcastisation of the Internet with the potential effect of reducing the plurality of voices in the media, as well as limiting the online discussion. Finally, the third innovation consists of the rising role of China in the global debate on the
future governance of the Internet. The Chinese authorities have been advocating for a model based on the concept of ‘Internet sovereignty’ (wangluo zhuquan), which puts the government at the top of the decision-making process, over private and civil society sectors. In the past decade, China has played an increasingly important role in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the most authoritative international multilateral and intragovernmental institution in media governance. For instance, in 2014 Mr Zhao Houlin was appointed ITU secretary general (he was recently re-elected for a second mandate), while in 2017 Professor Jiang Song from Tsinghua University was appointed editor-in-chief of ITC Discoveries, the new scientific journal of the organisation. In other words, under the presidency of Xi, China has not only been further promoting its vision of Internet governance at the domestic level, but it has also been contributing actively to the shaping of the political and scientific international discussion.

**IF:** In one of the chapters of the book, you discuss how people in China use the Internet. Did you notice any significant difference with the way Internet is used in China and, say, in Europe or the United States?

**GN:** Yes and no. The Chinese Internet can be considered unique in that its market is characterised by domestic players that in some cases perfectly match the needs of Chinese users. Think, for instance, about the success of the e-commerce and delivery services in megalopolises like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The lifestyle of white collar workers, the usage of Internet mobile communication (97 percent of Chinese users navigate the Internet from a mobile phone), as well as the structure of Chinese cities give rise to specific needs. To contrast, in both Europe and the United States the smaller size of the cities, a lower mobile Internet penetration (65 percent in the EU in 2017), not to mention a relatively underdeveloped online payment infrastructure could explain a different attitude, at least in the realm of e-commerce services. As for other media, the Internet cannot be analysed without taking into account the economic, social, political, and historical situation at the local level. On the other hand, as several observers have pointed out, we are facing a global trend in polarisation of public opinion. In China we have witnessed several cases of nationalism, such as the uproar over the recent Dolce and Gabbana advertisement, while in both Europe and in the United States there are growing concerns regarding online haters and the spread of fake news.

**IF:** In the late 2000s, cyber-utopian discourses about the Internet in China were quite widespread. Do you think that kind of optimism is still warranted today?
GN: True, in the late 2000s cyber-utopiamism was quite popular. Again, this was the result of a period of a general openness that extended to academia and the whole of society. Foreign intellectual influences about technological determinism should also not be discounted in this regard—with works like Nicholas Negroponte’s *Being Digital* and Alvin Toffler’s *The Third Way* being translated and introduced to the Chinese public. At that time, a number of Chinese intellectuals expressed the belief that the Internet had the power to support pluralism and forms of democracy in the country. Indeed, in the 2000s there was an active debate on blog platforms. This trend also had economic origins, as between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s there was severe competition among different Internet services in various online markets. The possibility to express personal opinions on different blog platforms gave Chinese bloggers the chance to continue expressing their political views on different service providers when their blogs were shut down.

Nowadays, the Chinese academic and social discussion regarding the Internet looks different. From an intellectual perspective, it should be noted that exchanges with foreign countries are very limited and two of the most widely read books related to the Chinese Internet are a biography of the Alibaba Group founder and executive chairman Jack Ma and a history of Tencent. The two books celebrate the achievements of Alibaba founder Ma Yun and Tencent CEO Ma Huateng, providing examples for the readers to follow with strong nationalistic undertones. The Internet economy also is very different. Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent are now ‘three kingdoms’ (*sanjutou*) that have established a ‘stable oligopoly’ over the Internet in China. This is a situation which, on the one hand, has reduced the variety of platforms available to Chinese users, while on the other hand facilitates the ability of both companies and government to keep online discussion under control. In this regard, it is important to note the mushrooming of online public opinion centres, such as the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre (*renminwang yuqing jianceshi*), tasked with collecting and analysing online discussions. In other words, the patterns of political control have changed. Ten years on from the historic online chat of former President Hu Jintao at the online newsroom of the People’s Daily, the impression is that the Chinese authorities have further developed their skills in channelling the public opinion (*yulun yindao*) —or, to use President Xi’s words, are doing their best to occupy the ‘main battlefield of public opinion struggle’ (*yulun douzheng de zhu zhanchang*).
However, the time of technological determinism is over not only for China. Edward Snowden’s leaks in the summer of 2013 and the failed ‘Twitter revolutions’ during the Arab Springs, contributed to the development of new research trends such as digital dystopia, balkanisation of the net, and spinternet, which emphasise the role of governmental and private business stakeholders in influencing public opinion, as well as other technological, commercial, political, nationalistic, and religious factors that are splintering the Internet at geographic and commercial levels.

IF: There has been some talk about the death of blogging in China. Is that the case? What about their micro-successors?

GN: Calling it a death is probably overstating the matter, but the fact that blogging was not even inserted into the list of the preferred online activities of Chinese Internet users in the last Report of the China Internet Network Information Centre is definitely an ominous sign. Equally significant was the decision of NetEase—which less than a decade ago was one of the leading online platforms in China—to shut down its blogging service in August 2018. In general, the Chinese market is changing very fast. Between 2012 and 2013, some observers even predicted the impending end of Sina Weibo—the main platform for microblogging in China—because of the terrific growth of Wechat and, more recently, Tik Tok. As in the United States and in Europe, in the last decade video and visual communication has grown dramatically, eroding the time that users spend on, and the attention they pay to, online written texts and stimulating a process of gamification. However, to this day microblogging remains one of the preferred activities of Chinese Internet users, with 337 million of users—42.1 percent of the online population—using microblogs. At the beginning of this year there were speculations of an imminent closure of Sina Weibo due to political reasons. However, as a media historian, I prefer to see this ‘normalisation’ of the microblogging service as a natural continuity of blogging. Today it is more difficult to read online investigations like those of Zuou Shuguang, Wang Xiaofeng, and Sister Hibicus just to name a few ‘citizen reporters’ who made the headlines in the previous decade. Nevertheless, Sina Weibo has played and is still playing an important role like in publicising cases, such as the explosion in the harbour of Tianjin in August 2015. More recently, Sina Weibo also played an important role in fostering online debate about the #MeToo movement. In this sense, the platform might be still considered a public square.