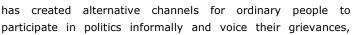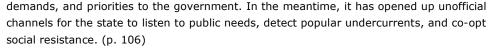Jian Xu, **Media Events in Web 2.0 China: Interventions of Online Activism,** Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2016, 153 pp., $55.00 (hardcover), $29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Mingxiao Sui
Ferrum College, USA

How has the Internet transformed media events in authoritarian regimes like China? According to Jian Xu in *Media Events in Web 2.0 China: Interventions of Online Activism*, the Internet has decentralized both the Chinese Communist Party's and the government's control over domestic media events, facilitating "a deliberative turn in China's political development" (p. 110). Specifically, he contends that the Internet

has created alternative channels for ordinary people to participate in politics informally and voice their grievances, demands, and priorities to the government. In the meantime, it has opened up unofficial channels for the state to listen to public needs, detect popular undercurrents, and co-opt social resistance. (p. 106)

Media Events in Web 2.0 China begins by theorizing the Internet as a form of "alternative media," i.e., media that are often operated by grassroots users and nonprofit organizations to voice the oppositional viewpoints that are otherwise under- or misrepresented in mainstream media. After systematically reviewing the concepts and practices of Chinese alternative media, the book identifies three major modes of Internet-based activism in China: *culture jamming* (i.e., digitized satires and copycats), *citizen journalism* (i.e. eyewitness reporting and independent investigation initiated by the public citizens), and *mediated mobilization* (i.e., collective activity in the online sphere, also referred to as "*online weiguan*"). In accordance with this "media event" framework, the next three chapters detail the practices, characteristics, and impact of each of these three modes of online activism, using a qualitative analysis that aggregates interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis. The final chapter discusses how online activism may have transformed China's political development.

China has long stood out as a unique case regarding the impact of digital revolution on citizens' participation in political and civic activities. On the one hand, the proliferation of online forums, chatrooms, blogs, and social media has advanced public engagement in political decision making (Fishkin et al., 2010). To a certain extent, this may even signal a democratic turn in China's political development. On the other hand, the Chinese government has been tightening its control over Internet-based communication approaches. For example, since November 2017, China has been enforcing real-name registration in order to regulate its citizens' posts and comments on most online media. Moreover, most Chinese social media platforms (e.g., the domestic microblog site *Sina Weibo*) are known to have deleted a large number of politically sensitive posts (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012).

Thus, whether and how the Chinese online media could facilitate political and cultural transformations remains controversial. Motivated by this question, Xu has a long-established interest in investigating the intersection of technology, politics, and sociology in today's China. In particular, this book focuses on how the Internet has created a new media ecology that may transfigure the Chinese political and cultural spheres.

As opposed to most scholarly work, which treats the Internet as a digital technology, Xu theorizes the Internet as a modern successor to the alternative media that once existed in China, including the big-character posters (wall-mounted posters written in large characters) of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the nongovernmental periodicals that facilitated the government's 1978-89 liberal reforms.

Another distinction of this book is Xu's adoption of the "media events" framework, developed by Dayan and Katz (1992). The genres and manifestations of media events are well examined in Western nations. Following the recent reconceptualization of media events as a globalized media culture (Hepp & Couldry, 2010), Xu frames recent cultural and political activism in Chinese cyberspace as a media event that represents three critical reforms in contemporary China: cultural transformation, decentralization of government-funded mainstream media, and increasing public engagement in collective actions.

First, Xu theorizes *shanzhai* media culture—grassroots activities that imitate established mainstream media to produce playful, parodic, counterhegemonic ideology—as "a performative activity of culture jamming with *e'gao* spirit [*e'gao* translates as 'wicked fun' and refers to an intentional incoporation of comedy elements within serious themes to entertain people] and *shanzhai* ethos" (p. 35). He then exemplifies online folk gala—a copycat of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala—as a popular type of *shanzhai* culture to detail how grassroots media carnivals have weakened the dominant status of government-funded media and facilitated a more open and dynamic media culture.

Second, the book investigates how another type of media event—citizen journalism, or eyewitness reporting, group discussion, and independent investigation initiated by the ordinary citizens in cyberspace—has reformed crisis communication in China. With a systematic analysis of the 2003 SARS epidemic and the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Xu demonstrates that the Internet has greatly promoted citizen journalism, enabling ordinary citizens to take an active role in investigating disastrous events.

Third, the author discusses how *online weiguan* has transformed the government's investigation of political scandals in China. According to Xu, the Internet opens an interactive avenue for ordinary Chinese people to disclose and discuss political scandals, to mobilize the other's emotions and opinions, and to press the government to respond to scandals. As a result, *online weiguan* represents a new mediated form of political participation in contemporary China.

The Internet as an alternative medium, Xu argues, thus inspires hope that digital technology will decentralize the mainstream media and the government's control over China's media events. Xu draws this argument from an empirical analysis of a series of recent cases, where he contends that many practices of online activism in China are initiated from the bottom up, by ordinary citizens. As Xu

concludes, "the case studies in the book have demonstrated the variety of digitally-mediated political communication as well as the deliberative politics in China's Web 2.0 era" (p. 111).

Other scholarly works, however, have questioned the power of the Internet to democratize politics (e.g., Effing, Van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011). According to Hindman (2008), even in democratic nations like the United States, online activism does not follow an egalitarian pattern; the digital sphere is still dominated by mainstream media and well-educated elites, e.g., large business owners, professional journalists, and senior executives. In authoritarian nations like China, the Internet's ability to decentralize the mainstream media's control over media events is especially limited by the government's restrictive censorship and regulation of online activism (Esarey & Xiao, 2011).

Given this competing perspective, one would expect *Media Events in Web 2.0 China* to include analysis of some oppositional cases that may suggest how the Internet has reinforced the centralization of the Chinese government's control over media events. For example, in 2017, when Chinese democracy activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Xiaobo Liu died of liver cancer, his death was noted on few if any Chinese online platforms and social media, despite widespread mourning on foreign social media like Facebook and Instagram. Indeed, an argument can be made that the Internet has enabled the government to further control online activism more than it has facilitated public participation in it. However, Xu's book neglects to engage with such arguments.

All told, *Media Events in Web 2.0 China*'s systematic analysis of recent and representative media events, including the *shanzhai* gala and citizen journalism in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, provides a fascinating insight into how the Internet has transformed the political and cultural spheres in China. However, while its findings may shed light on the "deliberative turn" in contemporary China, it does little to dispel scholarly disagreement as to what extent the Internet and other digital revolutions can overturn the control that the government, traditional media, and the elites exert over online activism. Despite this limitation, scholars from various disciplines with interests in the role of social media in repressive nations, the revolution of China's political practices, or comparative analysis of online activism in democratic and authoritarian countries will welcome this book's theoretical framework and empirical analysis.

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