

Organizing the Digital Media Landscape in China 2017-2023

An Analytical Study in Light of Path Dependency Theory

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Abstract:

The study examines the regulatory policies of China's digital media landscape between 2017 and 2023, employing path dependency theory. The study relied on a qualitative analysis approach to examine key laws and regulations, such as the Cybersecurity Law (2017), the Regulations on the Ecological Governance of Online Information Content (2020), the Algorithmic Recommendation Provisions (2022), and the Measures for the Management of Generative AI Services (2023), within intertwined political and economic contexts. The findings demonstrate that the country did not enter the digital age with a radical change in the foundations of its media governance. Over the years, the Chinese government has adopted increasingly stringent policies to control cyberspace, reorienting traditional censorship tools to address modern digital challenges. Here, the shift in China's regulatory philosophy is clearly evident: from controlling the final media product to controlling the smart infrastructure that produces, generates, and distributes it, aiming to proactively control media content to ensure political stability and control and achieve "cyber sovereignty".

Keywords: *Regulatory Policies; Digital Content; Digital Censorship; Cyber Sovereignty; Path Dependency.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the digital revolution in China, the state has begun developing strategies to regulate the internet and cyberspace. The policies pursued have been driven by several factors, most notably political stability and control of information. When linked to the theory of "path dependency," It is clear that the media and press are pivotal tools for maintaining "political stability" in China, (Abu Marheel, 2020) given their central role in shaping popular acceptance of the ruling Communist Party. Therefore, directing public opinion has become the main pillar of official media and propaganda, (Lang, 2025) as it is used as a tool to disseminate the views of the party leadership at the domestic and foreign political levels. (Xu & Flew, 2022) All of this witnessed a major transformation after "Deng Xiaoping" assumed advisory authority in the country between 1977 and 1989, (Al Jazeera Net, 2017) where he established a decentralized economic administrative system, along with rational and flexible long-term planning, to achieve effective and disciplined economic growth. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025) These efforts had multiple impacts on Chinese society, thanks to which China's GDP doubled, rising from 59.3 trillion yuan in 2013 to 121 trillion yuan in 2022, with an average annual growth rate of more than 6%. The country also emerged as a major force in stabilizing the global economy, accounting for a third of its growth during this period, after its share of the global output, estimated at 12.3% to more than 18%. Socially, the country has expanded its middle class to more than 400 million people, becoming the second-largest consumer market in the world. In the field of communications, it has built a massive fiber optic network and internet infrastructure, with 5G stations reaching approximately 3.22 million by the end of 2023. (Xinhua, 2023)

This growth has completely changed the face of party control over the media, which has become more accountable. (Singh, 2012, p. 04) To keep pace with the rise of new digital news platforms, the People's Republic of China has intensified its efforts over the past eight years to create a legal framework to control the flow of information online, targeting platforms' algorithms by defining their obligations and responsibilities. (Liu & Ibrahim, 2024, p. 17) The widespread use of news, supported by the government, such as the launch of the (Internet Plus) (Creemers R. , 2017) and (Made in China) (Kuai, Lin, Karlsson, & Lewis, 2023, p. 1523) projects, has contributed to changing the traditional systems related to news production, distribution, and consumption. It has also posed a direct threat to the party's media and propaganda policies. The user-centric algorithmic model challenges the legitimacy and influence of the centralized, monitoring model of news production in the official media. Therefore, the government's regulation of this type of news distribution aims to reduce these threats and direct public opinion in line with the state's discourse. In this area, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), known as the CAC, is leading the process of regulating algorithmic and artificial intelligence-based news aggregation applications. The laws and regulations imposed on internet content, technologies, and companies also apply to algorithmic news (as content), algorithms (as technology), and news aggregation applications (as internet companies). (Xu & Flew, 2022) This administration updated the provisions related to the circulation of news online on June 1, 2017, (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2017) and they include: official accounts on (Weibo), (WeChat) public accounts, mobile news apps, and live streaming platforms are required to obtain a government license (Article 5). Online news providers must have specialized editors, content reviewers, and

technical personnel to obtain the necessary operating license (Article 6). They must also be subject to supervision and inspection by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and local Cyberspace Administration Offices (CAO) (Article 19). This difficult-to-obtain license must be renewed every three years and is a legal requirement for republishing and distributing news (Article 9). In order to survive in the market and achieve sustainable growth, these platforms are forced to strengthen self-regulation and adjust their business strategies to align with government direction.

The Chinese regulations stand out as the first significant government attempt to legally enforce algorithmic regulation, as the Chinese state has recently placed the digital economy at the heart of its development strategy. (Fes Briefing, 2023, pp. 2-3) From the issuance of the Cybersecurity Law in 2017, to the Algorithmic Recommendation Regulations Management phase in 2022, and then the issuance of measures for the use of generative artificial intelligence in 2023, the study argues that understanding these laws requires an awareness of the Chinese political and economic contexts that contributed to their formulation and formation, so that the “state” can impose its control over online media discourse. To understand the logic of these policies, the study employs the perspective of “path dependency,” which generally refers to the causal connection between previous stages in a certain chronological sequence. Sociologist (William H. Sewell Jr.) suggests that “what happened earlier will affect the potential outcomes of a sequence of events that will occur later.” Political scientist (Margaret Levi) offers a narrower definition of the concept, emphasizing that “path dependency is associated with a country starting to follow a certain path, and then the costs of retreat become very high”. This conception of path dependency demonstrates that previous steps push in a certain direction and toward further movement in the same direction. (Pierson, 2000, p. 252) We are thus faced with a choice between two concepts: the first broad and the second narrow. To achieve greater clarity, this research paper relies on the concept in its narrow sense, employing it as an important theoretical and analytical framework, as it allows us to trace the evolution of the Chinese legislative vision in the field of media and helps reveal continuity within the logic of state hegemony over the media. Current legislation and legal regulations are not separate from their predecessors, but are linked to them, even if they come through advanced technical means and mechanisms. Regulations related to algorithms are read within a series of accumulated (previous) legislative interventions, which play a crucial role in defining the contours of contemporary digital governance. In other words, the algorithmic regulation of news and AI-generated content in China is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a link within an evolutionary path aimed at tightening control over the information sphere.

The study derives its importance from the idea of the growing role of intelligent algorithms in shaping digital content, and their rise as a central player in the production and distribution of news across the world. This has been accompanied by increasing regulatory interventions led by many countries to re-engineer the flow of information online and impose digital sovereignty. However, this may entail its own contradictions, given the unprecedented questions raised by artificial intelligence algorithms about accountability and their ability to modify themselves, “producing new code,” as Chinese researcher (Min Jiang) points out. While the United States entrusts the task of governance to the self-regulation of industry, Europe is working to form a broad regulatory structure to have a global impact. (Candace , 2025) Meanwhile, the Chinese experience, as a model that combines intelligent technologies

and the principle of central political orientation, seeks to achieve technological sufficiency and strict government control simultaneously. From this perspective, this research paper will review and analyze the policies adopted to regulate the digital media landscape in China, with a focus on regulations related to digital platforms. It also seeks to explore the evolution of the legislative vision regulating the flow of information via the internet by investigating the following question: How do Chinese regulatory policies (2017-2023) contribute to the transformation of the structure of the digital media landscape within its development vision aimed at consolidating cyber sovereignty? This problematic gives rise to a set of sub-research questions that analyze the regulatory and sovereign dimensions of this transformation.

1/ How did the Cybersecurity Law of 2017 contribute to institutionalizing the regulatory path for digital media and news content in China?

2/ How did the Algorithmic Recommendation Regulations of 2022 contribute to consolidating China's centralized approach to the evolution of its digital policies?

3/ How does the Generative Artificial Intelligence Regulation of 2023 reflect the continuation of the sovereign approach to managing the flow of information online? And what is its position within the evolutionary path of China's digital legal system?

1. The Evolution of the Legislative Vision Regulating the Digital Media Landscape in China 2017-2023

1.1. Cybersecurity Law (2017)

The strict regulatory process to regulate the digital media landscape in China began with the issuance of the Cybersecurity Law in 2017. (National People's Congress, 2017) This law came as part of the Chinese government's efforts to build a comprehensive legal system that reflects its desire to achieve independent "cyber sovereignty" (Article 1) by imposing restrictions on internet use and online information exchange. It also came in response to a digital acceleration and a deep awareness of the importance of protecting national security from transnational technological threats. Article 1 serves as the philosophical foundation and strategic vision of this law, demonstrating that cybersecurity in China is not merely a technical or technological issue, but rather part of a comprehensive strategy pursued by the state to protect its political and economic interests globally. (Harrell, 2025) In the context of path dependency theory, this legal transformation can be understood as a continuation of comprehensive security policies aimed at imposing central control over the internet and digital media. (Cheng, 2022) The law clearly stipulates, particularly Articles 9, 12 and 24, that network operators must secure their systems against attacks and hacking, monitor information content and prohibit news activities that may affect national stability. "No individual or organization may use the Internet to carry out activities that threaten national security, harm the dignity and interests of the state, incite the subversion of state authority, overthrow the socialist system, incite secession, harm national unity, promote terrorism or extremism, spread hatred or racial discrimination, spread violence or obscene information, fabricate or disseminate false information with the aim of disrupting the economic or social system, or infringe upon reputation, privacy, intellectual property rights or other legal rights and interests of others" (Article 9).

The (Article 12) enshrines media censorship and limits digital freedoms in China, and is a natural continuation of government policies since the founding of the Communist Party of China in 1921. (Mao Zedong) emphasized in his opening remarks at the (Yan'an) Conference on May 2, 1942, that “the purpose of our meeting today is to ensure that literature and art are integrated into the revolutionary machine and serve as powerful weapons to unite and educate the people, and to attack and destroy the enemy”. (Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2022, p. 06) These discourses were then rooted and sanctified as the ultimate guide to literary and artistic policies since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. With the advent of the Internet in China in 1994, the government began implementing censorship policies similar to those in place under Mao, known as the (Great Firewall). This is a set of technical and legal tools aimed at blocking foreign websites and monitoring the content available to citizens, (Guo, 2024) essentially transforming the Internet into a strict control tool for the flow of information and using the available tools to maintain political power. This material demonstrates the Chinese government's commitment to confronting any external or internal threats that may arise from digital content.

In the event of a violation of the law (Article 24), "network operators shall improve the management of information disseminated by users, immediately stop the transmission of prohibited information, keep relevant records, and report them to the competent authorities." This ensures that misinformation or content that could threaten the stability of the system is not disseminated. This is also part of a broader strategy of systematic economic control over digital platforms. These policies force companies to invest in compliance systems, which increases their operating costs. This then favors large companies over small or emerging companies, which may not have the capacity to comply promptly or efficiently. This legal measure, then, represents indirect control of the economic environment of digital platforms under the guise of information regulation, as indicated by numerous reports issued by (Freedom House), which emphasized that regulatory measures related to this law will inevitably impact freedom of expression in the Chinese digital space. (Shahbaz, 2018)

The protection of vital information infrastructure (Article 21) and the protection and localization of personal data (Article 37) are a consecration of the of controlling data and protecting it from external exploitation, to maintain the security of personal information, not to mention the establishment of a system of penalties and fines for violators of cybersecurity requirements (Articles 59, 61, and 68). These provisions emphasize the strict monitoring of networks and Internet platforms in China. They also clarify the path taken by this country in imposing censorship and limiting electronic threats that may affect its political and economic stability, and that the country has begun to establish a coherent system to govern the digital domain, in which regulating Internet use is a central element in China's project to build a controlled digital environment, in addition to achieving the global spread of China's new model of “digital authoritarianism,” by working to export norms and laws to regulate cyberspace and digital technology, i.e., what is known as “social software”. This is due to its possession of vital digital infrastructure in many countries around the world, the adoption of Chinese laws by many countries, and China's participation in international technical standard-setting bodies. (Scharre, 2018)

Based on the theory of “path dependency,” this regulatory beginning established an institutional and legal foundation that naturally made it natural for China to later develop more specialized and precise laws. It also enacted the first legislative framework to regulate censorship of online news and information content, thus activating control tools within a political context characterized by the centralization of power under the leadership of the Communist Party, and supporting an ambitious agenda aimed at placing digital technologies at the heart of propaganda, public opinion management, and social control. (Creemers, 2017, p. 85) In light of the growing importance of the Internet in shaping public opinion, and with the growing role of digital platforms in producing and distributing content, the Chinese authorities began to build an institutional and legislative path that would enable them to regulate the media landscape in accordance with their political vision, and ensure their continued dominance of the information space, in the face of the soft threat coming from the “Western liberal model” of freedom of expression and the media, and an economic context that seeks to protect the rapidly growing national digital economy system, especially with the rise of major Chinese technology companies (Tencent (1998), Alibaba (1999), Baidu (2000)), known as the “Chinese Technology Giants (BAT).” Thus, controlling cyberspace has become synonymous with controlling global production in the digital age. (Lawton, Moura, Tobin, & Silva-Rêgo, 2023) This situation has forced the Chinese state to adopt a comprehensive control strategy that ensures the continuation of its political hegemony without undermining the dynamism of the digital economy. This law can also be considered an extension of a process that began early with traditional media censorship policies, where the new laws represent an adaptive continuity that preserves the core principles of censorship, but reshapes them through legal and algorithmic tools that are compatible with the changing environment of digital media.

The legal provisions on content monitoring, fines, and criminal liability (Articles 12, 24, 47, 59, and 61) demonstrate that the state seeks not only to regulate the network structure, but also to reengineer the flow of information by holding digital platforms—including algorithms—responsible for ensuring content compliance with socialist values and a centralized political system. Regulation has shifted from traditional censorship to invisible control of media consumption patterns through software design itself. This approach complements the “Digital Silk Road” (Mochinaga, 2021) project, which reflects China's ambition to export an alternative regulatory model to Western hegemony over global information flows, embodying Chinese standards for managing and directing the flow of news and content globally. (Scharre, 2018) Thus, the new algorithmic regulation cannot be understood in isolation from the structural dynamics entrenched by the party. Since the late 1970s, China has pursued a unique reform path that combines economic development with limited openness, while maintaining political control by the Communist Party of China (CPC). This policy has deepened under current President (Xi Jinping), with the emergence of a distinctive digital model that leverages technology as a means of economic growth and simultaneously as a tool of social and political control. (Qiang, 2019) This path was reinforced in 2017 by the issuance of a series of laws and regulations supplementing the Cybersecurity Law, which further emphasized the responsibility of digital platforms to monitor published content. This was not merely a temporary response, but rather the embodiment of a long-term development strategy aimed at tightening control over the

information infrastructure, in line with the CCP's political vision of protecting political and social stability, undermining Western hegemony in the digital space, and securing global economic leadership.

1.2. Regulations on the Ecological Governance of Online Information Content (2020)

2020 witnessed a significant update, with the issuance of the Regulations on the Ecological Governance of Online Information Content by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), which came into effect on March 1, 2020. (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2019) This update came in a sensitive context related to the escalation of social protests in Hong Kong due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the pace of tightening censorship practiced by the Chinese state. (Serrano Moreno, 2023, p. 09) (Chang, Hobbs, Roberts, & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2022)

The new updates emphasize the obligation of digital news platforms to create a healthy online information environment, combat and immediately report "harmful" content such as fake, inflammatory, pornographic news, and material that may threaten the stability of the state. New restrictions are also imposed on private media institutions, and the principle of direct liability for the content published by these platforms is enshrined (Articles 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). The regulations hold digital platforms such as (WeChat) and (Weibo) responsible for monitoring content published by users, immediately deleting illegal or harmful information, and reporting such content to the relevant government agencies (Articles 10 and 11). They also impose penalties on platforms that do not effectively monitor content (Chapter Four: Articles 34 to 40), and emphasize the dissemination of the country's core socialist values (Articles 5 and 6). (Creamers) pointed out that this approach is a direct extension of the policy of "self-censorship" where companies monitor content on behalf of the government under the name of collaborative governance. (Creemers R. , 2020)

Politically, the regulation is part of a broader strategy adopted by (Xi Jinping) since coming to power in 2012 of combining economic development with ideological control. In this regard, (He & Warren) and (Qiang) assert that the Chinese regime has shifted from a complete reliance on economic performance to a combination of performance and social harmony as criteria for the ruling party's legitimacy by regulating the digital public sphere under the banner of "social harmony". (Sheehan, 2024) These regulations are therefore not only understood as a means of regulating internet content, but also as part of a reengineering of the public sphere to reflect socialist values and support the party's narrative of "national rejuvenation". (He & Warren, 2011) Economically, the regulations came in response to the party's attempt to regulate the digital economy, especially with the growth of giant technology companies such as Tencent, Alibaba, and Baidu, which have come to exercise quasi-sovereign power within the market and society. In this regard, (Creemers) explains that the Communist Party was keen to preempt these threats by redrawing the boundaries between the "digital economic space" and the "digital political space", (Creemers R. , 2017) which was embodied in the provisions of these regulations by obligating major technology companies to carry out internal censorship procedures and delete content that does not align with official socialist values (Articles 6 and 7), given that digital data represents, according to (Kania), a "strategic resource" that should be subject to state oversight rather than remaining under the control of the market or private actors. (Kania, 2019) Therefore, the state required digital

platforms to implement content oversight (Chapter 6, Articles 30 to 33) and user management systems (Chapter 4, Articles 18 to 24).

These regulations come within the context of tightening cyber censorship under the banner of "Internet sovereignty," a key principle of Xi Jinping's policy. (Freedom House, 2020) They represent a continuation of a long process of government interference in the internet that began in the mid-1990s, during which the state used the internet as a political and economic tool, gradually developing tools of censorship and control. (Creemers R. , 2017) China has thus followed a cumulative path focused on controlling communication and information through increasingly complex legal and regulatory tools. As (Mahoney) explains, path dependency means that prior policy choices constrain and guide subsequent ones, (Mahoney, 2000) which is clearly evident in these regulations as a consecration of a long tradition of digital content management. These regulations, then, represent a new chapter in an ongoing historical process toward building a "safe and positive socialist cyberspace," in which digital censorship serves two dual purposes: the first is related to political legitimacy, and the second is guiding the digital economy within an evolutionary framework that fundamentally relies on previous paths of Chinese internet governance.

1.3. Regulations related to recommendation algorithms (2022)

By 2022, regulation of China's digital landscape had shifted from focusing on network security and data protection—as was the case with the 2017 Cybersecurity Law—to addressing new complexities imposed by the expanding role of algorithms in the flow of information and the speed of its circulation across major Chinese media platforms such as (Jinri Toutiao) and (Weibo). In a logical continuation of the media regulatory path initiated by the Cybersecurity Law, the Regulations on the Administration of Recommendation Algorithms for Internet Information Services, issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) in December 2021 and entered into force on March 1, 2022, (Cyberspace Administration of China, Legal Text, 2022) represent the first legal framework regulating the use of algorithms in online information distribution in China, and a qualitative shift towards expanding the scope of its control to include information flow mechanisms. (Article 1) stipulates that these regulations are linked to the basic national laws represented by: The Cybersecurity Law (2017), the Data Security Law (2021), and the Personal Information Protection Law (2021). The Chinese state has attempted to develop its system based on its previous experiences in controlling media content through escalating regulatory tools. Tightening control over the "generation, filtering, and organization of information" (Article 2) expresses the state's determination to continue building a technological path that serves the Communist Party's goals and strategy of building a digital governance system based on cyber sovereignty and the protection of national security. This is in line with Chinese policy, which views cyberspace as an extension of the country's political and economic authority. (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2010) Article 3, meanwhile, identifies the bodies responsible for oversight and coordination, emphasizing an important principle of Chinese policy: "participatory management under central leadership". (an & Kytä-Pirjola, 2024)

The (Article 4) focuses on ethical standards related to algorithms: "Algorithmic recommendation services must comply with laws and regulations, respect social morality and

etiquette, adhere to business and professional ethics, and follow the principles of fairness, openness, transparency, scientific rationality, honesty, and integrity”, while (Article 5) focuses on self-discipline: “Establish and improve industry standards, industry standards, and self-discipline management systems, and encourage and guide algorithm recommendation service providers to formulate and improve service specifications, provide services in accordance with the law, and accept social supervision”. This legal measure is concerned with shaping a media environment consistent with core socialist values. While the requirement to adhere to the principles of “fairness, openness, and transparency” (Article 4) appears to be an adoption of universal standards, in the Chinese context it is used to build digital media that serves regime stability rather than opening up media pluralism. Furthermore, the push for self-discipline by industrial organizations under Article 5 expresses a combination of formal and informal regulation, consistent with China’s economic transformation toward a socialist market economy. The connection between these provisions and media and news content is very important, as controlling information and news distribution algorithms allows the state to control public opinion in a subtle and subtle manner. It also ensures the promotion of the official narrative and reduces the spread of dissenting or sensitive information. From the perspective of path dependency theory, it is noted that China continues to use new technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to control traditional forms of media control it previously exercised across the media.

On the other hand, these regulations cover a wide range of measures aimed at guiding the use of technology, including "algorithmic recommendations" to support socialist values, protect national security, and the public interest, while emphasizing the need to "inspire public opinion with positive trends and values" (Article 6). Article 7 obligates digital companies, such as news and social media platforms, to build robust algorithmic security infrastructures, including technological ethics reviews, anti-fraud, and personal information protection. Articles 8 and 9 also emphasize companies' responsibility to prevent digital addiction and the spread of harmful information, in line with China's policy of building a "healthy information environment". In parallel, Articles 10 to 15 address the issue of algorithmic management more precisely, including improving the management of user forms (Article 10), ensuring the provision of content consistent with official values on home pages and essential links such as hot searches (Article 11), and improving transparency and reducing harmful algorithmic interference (Article 12). While Articles 14 and 15 clearly prohibit algorithmic manipulation of public opinion through excessive recommendation or manipulation of search lists. Chapter Two intersects with Chapter Four, titled “Supervision and Management,” as its articles (23 to 30) embody the most comprehensive regulatory framework for state oversight of algorithmic recommendation services, and emphasize the deepening of cyber oversight authority in China within the logic of general proactive control (Articles 23 and 24). This legislative detail intersects with developments in the news sector, as China seeks to tighten control over the so-called "digital public space". After the 2019 Hong Kong protests demonstrated the importance of recommendation tools in mobilizing social mobilization, "algorithmic recommendation rules" represent a preventative response to fortify the digital space in mainland China against mobilization-related uses, and give the regime greater ability to "manage/restrict" the flow of information away from mass agitation. They can also be considered a vivid example that can be linked to the theory of "path dependency", as the traditional media control that China relied on to control newspapers and television in

the 1980s has today evolved into an "algorithmic control" model based on imposing "flexible algorithmic control and censorship," in which modern technology is employed to support older control tools in a more sophisticated and dynamic manner.

Accordingly, these regulations confirm that content moderation activities are not merely a strategic choice made by digital platforms, but rather constitute a structural part of their operational nature. From this perspective, every component of the platform is subject to careful design and coordination. Furthermore, algorithms cannot be considered closed entities or immune to institutional and human intervention, as indicated by Pasquale (2016) and Massanari (2017). This is because algorithmic content distribution mechanisms do not operate in a technical vacuum, but are shaped according to organizational and institutional orientations dictated by either platform operators or external regulatory authorities. (Xu & Flew, 2022)

From a path dependency perspective, these regulations represent an updated continuity; the state has not abandoned its traditional media control strategies, but has reshaped them to suit the nature of algorithmic media interaction. The shift, in this case, was not the result of a sudden rupture, but rather the cumulative product of a series of political and regulatory choices. China dealt with the challenges of the digital environment through a "closed-loop" mechanism that made "digital freedom" an undesirable political burden for the ruling Communist Party, and its fear of losing control over the "public imagination" through automated recommendation systems, especially during the period of escalating protest movements based on social networks, such as the "White Paper" protests on November 27, 2022, sparked by anger over the strict "zero-Covid" policy after the tragic fire in (Ürümqi). The lockdown measures sparked accusations of obstructing the emergency response. As anger escalated, demands shifted from rejection of health measures to calls for major political reforms, with students at prestigious universities, most notably Tsinghua University, mobilizing to demand democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of expression, art, and writing. (Al Jazeera Net, 2022) Faced with strict censorship and the lack of a safe space for expression, protesters—mostly young people using social media and the internet—have resorted to innovative symbolic means, with the “white paper” becoming a symbol of protest and an expression of silent rejection of censorship. This symbolic form, previously used in protests in Hong Kong and Russia, expressed a visible protest against censorship. (Maya Wang), a China researcher at Human Rights Watch, described it as "the ultimate act of protest against fear, when the protest message is vulnerable to persecution". (Lawler & Chen, 2022) (Maria Repnikova), an American political communication researcher specializing in Chinese affairs, believes it represents a remarkable transition from a specific demand to a broader political movement, noting the scarcity of public calls for press freedom in China over the past two decades. (Al Jazeera Net, 2022) Accordingly, the "white paper" has become a transient symbol of censorship, embodying the eloquence of silence and a visible protest against authoritarianism that traditional control tools have been unable to contain.

From an economic perspective, it can be said that the “algorithmic recommendation regulations” are closely linked to the protection of the Chinese digital economy, the “China Silk Road.” They came within a broader context of tightening control over major technology companies within the “anti-monopoly” campaign, which requires them to inform users of the

basic principles and operating mechanisms of algorithms (Article 16), while giving them the option to disable the algorithm or control their personal tags (Article 17) to protect digital rights of “transparency and privacy”, but, within a political framework that maintains “cyber sovereignty” and controls public opinion to build a digital economy that enshrines the concept of shared responsibility between companies and the state (Chapter Four: Articles 24 and 25). However, it is subject to central management and regulation, as companies are required to clearly indicate their registration numbers and conduct periodic security assessments, while regulatory authorities are required to review applications and conduct inspections according to clear and systematic rules. While Articles 28, 29, and 30 emphasize the need for companies to cooperate with assessment and inspection processes, while ensuring safeguards are in place to protect the confidentiality of data and commercial information, and at the same time, they open the way for individuals and entities to report violations. The regulations include social media applications (Douyin, ByteDance, WeChat, and Tencent), digital news companies (Jinri Toutiao, Tencent News), and foreign companies operating in the Chinese market that provide algorithm-based services. These provisions are a response to growing domestic and international demands to stop “algorithmic manipulation,” which has led to major scandals such as “digital addiction” and “privacy violations.” The European Union Data Strategy (2020) emphasizes European rights in the digital world, (European Commission, 2020) while the European Approach to Artificial Intelligence (2020) outlines measures related to infrastructure and computing, high-quality data, and linking strategic sectors to artificial intelligence. (European Commission, 2020) The European Council report on human rights and digital governance (2024) reviews the potential benefits and risks of the (Metaverse) and its impact on human rights and the rule of law. (Council of Europe & IEEE Standards Association, 2024) However, through its legislation, China has attempted to secure user confidence without weakening the state's control over the flow of information. This has been achieved by emphasizing the protection of specific social groups, such as minors (Article 18), the elderly (Article 19), workers (Article 20), and consumers (Article 21), by adapting platform algorithms to serve their needs and prevent their exploitation, while providing effective complaint portals (Article 22). Algorithms, then, are no longer purely technical tools, but rather have transformed into tools that ensure centrally directed “digital justice”.

Chapter V (Legal Liability: Articles 31, 32, and 33) represents the penal and enforcement framework that underpins China's strict regulatory system for algorithmic recommendation services. It stipulates a precise classification of violations according to the nature and severity of the violation, a “multi-tiered penalty system”. (Article 31) addresses violations related to transparency and basic compliance, imposing gradual measures that begin with warnings and requests for correction, escalating to fines and suspension of updates in serious cases. (Article 32) addresses violations related to ethical obligations and the protection of the rights of special groups (such as minors, the elderly, and workers). (Article 33) outlines the responsibilities of service providers and emphasizes penalties for fraudulent registration or service termination without compliance with cancellation procedures, including cancellation of the algorithmic registration itself as a maximum penalty.

In conclusion, the Regulations on Recommendation Algorithms (2022) confirm China's continued development of a digital legislative system based on “path dependency,” integrating traditional forms of media and political control with modern digital technology regulatory tools. Algorithms, as the hidden engine of the contemporary media space, are subject to the

logic of "digital sovereignty," which reshapes the digital public sphere according to the priorities of the party and the state. The legal text, then, presents a popular and advanced model in which political systems exploit artificial intelligence technologies to build new forms of media dominance and social discipline in the digital age.

1.4. Generative AI Services Administration Legislation (2023)

The technical characteristics of generative AI require the Chinese government to fill potential legislative gaps resulting from accelerating technological development and clarify implementation methods. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) regulates generative AI—and algorithmic AI more broadly—through a disparate set of regulations, which are responsive in nature and focus on solving specific problems as they arise. (Chen Q, 2024)

1.4.1 First regulation: The "**Provisions on the Administration of Deep Synthesis Internet Information Services**", (Cyberspace Administration of China, Legal or regulatory text, 2022) entered into force on January 10, 2023, and addresses the proliferation of deep fakes online and the associated fraudulent activities. These provisions define “deep synthesis” (Chapter V: Supplementary Provisions Article 23) as “the use of generative algorithmic technologies such as deep learning and virtual reality to produce texts, images, sounds, videos, and virtual environments...” while holding service providers responsible for protecting users’ personal data (Chapter III: Articles 14 to 17). Article 22 stipulates strict legal accountability for service providers and technical supporters in the event of their violation of the Regulation, and this article emphasizes escalating penalties when necessary: “If deep synthesis service providers and technical supporters violate this Regulation, they will be punished in accordance with relevant laws and administrative regulations; “If this results in serious consequences, they should be severely punished according to the law,” however, the emergence of intelligent language models such as (ChatGPT) and other competing language models such as (Deepseek) has quickly proven its potential for use in areas beyond creating human images and avatars. Industry experts have predicted that the AI+ model used to optimize a specific task will transform into the (AI+) model used to completely reshape workflows. (Chen Q, 2024)

1.4.2 Second regulation: The "**Interim Measures for the Management of Generative AI Services**", (Cyberspace Administration of China, Legal text, 2023) was issued by the Cyberspace Administration in July 2023 and entered into force on August 15, 2023. It focuses on publicly available generative AI services. The initial draft focused on censoring content generated by large language models (LLMs). With a large number of companies entering this field, the final version saw substantial changes compared to the original draft. It explicitly clarified that censorship does not include research and development activities or uses not intended for the general public. It also extends regulatory control to include core socialist values, prohibiting the publication of any content that could threaten national security or social stability. Instead, companies are required to obtain government approval before launching large language models (LLMs). (360 Business Law, China’s approach to AI regulation, s.d.) This legal expansion toward AI does not constitute a break with previous regulations, but rather represents an organic evolution of the regulatory process for China's digital media landscape. The state seeks to continually adapt to new tools of political control

imposed by emerging technologies, (Business Insider, 2024) while remaining true to the fundamental principles of "Cyberspheric Sovereignty" and maintaining social harmony under the leadership of the ruling Communist Party.

The **Measures for the Management of Generative AI Services** (2023) includes several legal articles directly related to the media field, particularly those related to content supervision, the responsibility of service providers, and oversight of the uses of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion and social mobilization.

Despite China's adoption of an "innovation" strategy, the media sector will remain under strict censorship, according to Article 2, especially when it comes to mass-circulation smart services (news, photos, and videos). Therefore, it can be said that media control in China has not changed in essence, but rather in its tools (algorithms and security policies based on artificial intelligence technologies). China's regulatory approach to general artificial intelligence (AGI) aims to encourage innovation in line with the interests of the Communist Party (Article 6), while simultaneously addressing global challenges related to AI, such as safety, fairness, transparency, and accountability. Articles 4 and 7 reflect a dual censorship approach that combines ideological control and technical regulation. Article 4 requires generated content to adhere to basic socialist laws and values, prohibiting any content deemed false, harmful, or contrary to public norms. Article 7 requires accuracy and diversity in training data, while emphasizing respect for intellectual property and protection of personal data, including the requirement to obtain prior consent from individuals. Articles 9 and 10 impose legal responsibility on service providers as producers of online content: "Generative AI service providers shall bear responsibility as producers of online information content, in accordance with the law, and shall fulfill their obligations related to online information security," and "Service providers shall be required to maintain confidentiality regarding user information and usage records, through which users can be identified, or be unlawfully passed to third parties". These legal provisions relate to the "social responsibility of the media," focusing on the characteristics that AI-generated content should have, such as accuracy, security, and compliance, while taking into account the protection of privacy and personal data (Article 11). Article 12, meanwhile, addresses concerns about misinformation resulting from the use of deep synthesis services. Among the new requirements stipulated in the article is the need to place clear identification marks on generated content: "Service providers must label generated content, such as images and videos, in accordance with the provisions of the administrative regulations for online information services resulting from deep synthesis". This article emphasizes proactive media regulation by placing an algorithmic label that makes AI-generated content traceable, especially those related to discourse or counter-narratives. The imposition of labeling in China is linked to previous measures that establish comprehensive censorship in cyberspace, which China has adopted since the middle of the last decade.

Article 14 outlines mechanisms for content monitoring and response to illegal uses: "Upon discovery of illegal content, service providers must take immediate measures to address it, such as halting generation, stopping publication, or deleting it; improving models through training to correct problems; and reporting to relevant authorities. If users employ generative AI for illegal activities, appropriate measures must be taken in accordance with the law and agreements, such as issuing warnings, restricting functions, suspending or terminating service provision; keeping relevant records; and reporting to relevant authorities".

This legal provision embodies China's approach to imposing strict censorship on online content using advanced algorithmic methods, embodying a principle the state has adopted in the field of media regulation since the 1990s, namely "information sovereignty". According to path dependency theory, this provision does not represent a radical change in control methods, but rather an ongoing regulatory process to achieve social stability and balance in the digital/information space. On the other hand, Articles 15 and 18 focus on transparency and accountability, allowing users to report violations or problems they encounter while using AI. "Service providers must establish effective mechanisms for receiving complaints and reports, provide accessible interfaces for this purpose, disclose processing procedures and response timelines, promptly address complaints and reports from the public, and provide feedback on the processing results". Furthermore, "users have the right, when they discover legal or regulatory violations in generative AI services, to submit complaints or reports to the competent regulatory authorities". Article 17 emphasizes the security assessment of social mobilization and public opinion-influence services, "Service providers with public opinion characteristics or the potential for social mobilization must conduct security assessments in accordance with relevant state provisions, and complete registration, modification, or deregistration procedures for their algorithms...". This article clearly demonstrates that the Chinese authorities are focusing on the role of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion, by integrating technological governance tools into the field of political security. It also reflects the state's concern about the expansion of the scope of expression and uncensored mobilization, such as that which occurred in the 2019 Hong Kong protests and the 2022 student protests. This means that the regulatory path in China is subject to the priority of central political control, through its establishment of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) in 2014.

2. A deductive reading of the development of the legal path regulating the digital media landscape in China

China has witnessed a massive transformation in the media sector since the 1990s. With the advent of the internet and the proliferation of smartphones, the country has begun adopting new technology policies to expand its control over cyberspace. Economically, this sector represents a major source of development, especially with the growth of major technology companies such as Tencent, Alibaba, and Baidu. These companies operate within a strict regulatory framework that protects the country's economic interests and ensures they maintain their global position as a strong competitor in the technology market. (Chen & Wu, 2022) It can be said that legislative policies regulating the media sector in China were designed to meet political (party stability) and economic (stimulating the digital economy without endangering the regulatory system). These policies shifted from traditional censorship to complex digital censorship. China saw the need to continue its regulatory path in the media sector, which has become a pivotal element in its development strategy. The "online news information services administration" was issued in 2015 (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2005) to impose legal censorship on the flow of information, including news information. The authorities directly linked digital news to social security, emphasizing that information turmoil would inevitably lead to political turmoil. The regulatory path was supported by the issuance of the "Online Information Content Environmental Governance Regulations" in 2020, which regulated the methods of collecting, processing, storing, and

transmitting news data across borders. These regulations aimed to impose deeper censorship on the flow of foreign information, or even that related to domestic opposition.

With the growing importance of algorithms in the distribution of news content, China issued regulations in 2022 for algorithmic recommendation systems, moving to a more sophisticated stage of regulation. The regulations no longer focus solely on monitoring final content, but rather intervene in the core technical mechanisms that control the flow and distribution of information on digital platforms, for the first time in China. Government authorities are requiring companies to disclose their "transparency" algorithms and prohibit recommendations that could lead to social division or the dissemination of "incorrect/alternative" political views. Thus, China has entered a phase of "regulating the news distribution systems themselves," not just monitoring content, emphasizing the continuity of regulating the techno-media spheres in a manner consistent with the state's political and economic objectives. In this context, China has demonstrated its willingness to impose government control over the distribution and circulation of information online, (Zeng, 2021) as a fundamental step upon which digital media can be built, becoming an important strategic tool for shaping discourse and engineering public opinion.

In 2023, China completed its regulatory journey by issuing important legislative regulations in 2023, namely the "Provisions on the Administration of Deep Synthesis Internet Information Services" and the "Measures for the Management of Generative AI Services". The new regulations are a logical extension of previous policies, aiming to regulate the production and distribution of AI-generated news, and to ensure that it is not used to spread false information that may mislead public opinion and is inconsistent with core socialist values. With this legislative vision, China has expanded its development strategy towards controlling the new generation of technical tools, to ensure its continued dominance in the age of automation. Accordingly, It can be said that China has followed a systematic, cumulative path to managing the media landscape, moving gradually and thoughtfully from general legislation to protect cybersecurity in 2017 to detailed regulations controlling algorithms in 2022, and then to regulating the use of the most advanced technical tools such as generative artificial intelligence in 2023, in line with its strategic policies and to achieve "cyber sovereignty" and impose its own media model at the domestic and international levels.

The previous regulatory trajectory reveals that each regulatory phase was built on the outcomes of the previous phases. Each law or regulation was linked to profound political and economic transformations, from escalating trade tensions with the United States to the COVID-19 crisis, and then to the rise of generative AI technologies. Therefore, China has consistently adapted to changing circumstances and conditions. At the same time, the state has maintained its political objectives related to ensuring internal stability, protecting digital sovereignty, and promoting its centrally directed media model. This regulatory trajectory reveals that the development of digital media legislation in China was not a reaction, but rather the product of long-term planning based on an accumulation of policies to further control the media sector in a manner that serves its political objectives. Cyberspace has become a new arena in which major countries compete to assert their dominance over data and information.

II. Methodology

Given the nature of the problem at hand, which requires a thorough analysis of the policies, legal regulations, and political and economic trends that govern the Chinese media/news landscape in light of the rise of smart technologies, the choice of a qualitative analytical approach (Walt, et al., 2008) based on policy analysis from a historical-evolutionary perspective (path) is appropriate. Policy analysis helps provide deeper insights into the positions, perceptions, opinions, and contexts surrounding the issue. (Kilonzo & Ojebode, 2023, p. 70) The Chinese context cannot be understood through legal description alone, but rather requires a chronological (historical) tracing and contextual analysis that takes into account the interconnectedness between regulation in the past and present. This prompts us to combine textual analysis of regulatory documents with an interpretive reading that takes into account the context governing the production and distribution of digital news within the theory of path dependency. Furthermore, the study's limitations, in terms of its focus on the Chinese case and its time span from 2017 to 2023, were designed to achieve consistency while maintaining the analytical depth necessary to answer the study's questions.

III. Results and discussion

By tracing the legal path regulating the digital media landscape in China, from the Cybersecurity Law (2017) to the Measures for the Management of Generative AI Services (2023), it becomes clear that the Chinese state has adopted a strategy based on gradual, proactive control of digital infrastructure. This path did not take shape arbitrarily, but rather was in line with major shifts in the political and economic environment. On the one hand, geopolitical shifts and concerns about foreign interference imposed the concept of "cyberspace sovereignty" as a tool for achieving national and ideological security. On the other hand, the economic growth of major technology companies posed a challenge to the Communist Party's authority, prompting them to impose strict legal intervention to control emerging economic powers such as the giant internet platform (Jinri Toutiao), owned by (ByteDance). (AP News, 2021)The most important findings of the analysis of the previous laws and regulations can be summarized in the following points:

1/ The Chinese Cybersecurity Law of 2017 constituted an important legislative vision for institutionalizing the regulatory path for digital media and news content in China. It established a strictly controlled digital environment, enabling the government to control the dissemination of news and information in line with its interests and ideological orientations. The law transformed the concept of "cybersecurity" from a technical issue into a strategic tool for enforcing "cyber sovereignty" by regulating the flow of information, monitoring content, and holding digital platforms accountable. This law, based on a "path dependency" perspective, also established a legislative basis that later enabled the enactment of more specialized laws to regulate algorithmic recommendations and the outputs of generative artificial intelligence, in a deliberate gradual development to regulate digital media. Legal articles (9, 12, 24, and 59) reflect the state's transition from traditional censorship tools to intelligent algorithmic regulatory models that have reshaped the digital media landscape to achieve political hegemony and balanced economic growth, such as supporting local digital platforms such as Weibo, Baidu, and (TikTok). Therefore, the law represents a starting point for establishing an integrated regulatory system for media content censorship, through the

integration of legal and technical tools employed to engineer public opinion, protect regime stability, and confront the geopolitical challenges imposed by Western information hegemony.

2/ The 2022 "Provisions on the Management of Algorithmic Recommendations for Internet Information Services" demonstrates that Chinese legislative policies seek to regulate the digital space and limit the diversity of alternative viewpoints or discourses through advanced and alternative algorithmic mechanisms, emphasizing the logic of proactive regulation. Algorithms in China are not understood as neutral technical systems, but rather as governance tools subject to strict oversight and central supervision. They are used as a functional extension of traditional censorship tools, "harnessing technology to achieve political hegemony and societal stability".

3/ The "Interim Measures for the Management of Generative AI Services" issued by the Cyberspace Administration in 2023 embody China's sovereign approach to regulating the flow of information online by expanding censorship to include AI-generated content, ensuring it aligns with core socialist values, and prohibiting any content that threatens national security or social stability. The legal provisions reflect a dual approach combining ideological control and technical regulation, emphasizing that the regulatory approach will remain tied to the principle of "information sovereignty".

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the theory of "path dependency" provides an appropriate framework for understanding and analyzing Chinese digital regulation. The "Cybersecurity Law" influenced the nature of subsequent regulatory measures, producing a regulatory pattern characterized by cumulateness. It revealed China's continued pursuit of a historically rooted pattern of intense, direct state oversight of communications and media systems, a natural extension of the tradition of media censorship that originated in the era of traditional, directed journalism. As China entered the digital era, the basic structure of legislation remained unchanged. Rather, it transformed to accommodate the challenges of new technology by developing more precise oversight tools such as classification systems, mandatory registration, and technical security inspections. This shift served the fundamental political purpose of imposing media hegemony, social control, and maintaining the centrality of political leadership. Accordingly, The Chinese state has not limited itself to simply confronting new technical challenges by updating its legislation. Rather, it has sought to devise hybrid regulatory models that combine technological dimensions, economic regulation, and public control to govern the Chinese digital news/information landscape as a model for "algorithmic media governance" with a complex "control-monitoring-flexibility" nature. This approach intersects with China's strategy to build a "healthy cyberspace" by institutionalizing algorithmic scrutiny and reintegrating digital services within the state's regulatory framework. Chinese legal legislation, therefore, embodies a continuation of a historical trajectory linking the development of traditional Chinese media, control of contemporary digital platforms, and the orientation of algorithmic/generative content toward achieving the state's goals of political and social stability. Today, it is attempting to support trust and transparency in AI applications by issuing new regulations, which will come into effect in September 2025, requiring clear classifications for all AI-generated content ("AI-generative content" 2025). (360 Business Law, s.d.)

The study opens an important research horizon to explore the ethical dimension in digital media legislation in China, after the analysis revealed a growing trend towards employing the concepts of "public interest," "core socialist values," and "a healthy media environment" to regulate media content. These concepts call for in-depth research targeting media ethics within legal texts. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of conducting comparative studies between media legislation in Algeria and its counterpart in China, particularly in terms of political and legal references, and oversight and accountability mechanisms, to extract the differences between the model of digital sovereignty with a directive tendency, as in China, and the model of institutional organization that oscillates between openness and discipline, as is the case in Algeria.

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