The Digital Silk Road: China’s Quest to Wire the World and Win the Future

With the world’s largest online population, estimated at about one billion users and a booming digital industry, China has expanded its global digital footprint in recent years.

Chinese tech multinationals built the backbone telecommunication infrastructure used by millions of people across the world. China stands to become an even more significant actor in shaping the internet in the foreseeable future through the Digital Silk Road, the digital component of Beijing’s multibillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduced in 2015, the Digital Silk Road brings advanced IT infrastructure, fibre-optic cables, data centres, 5G networks, Cloud solutions and smart cities to countries worldwide. Rather than a well-defined set of projects, China’s digital initiative seems to be an umbrella term for a collection of telecommunications and data-related products and services delivered by China-based companies.

In The Digital Silk Road, Jonathan Hillman delves into key features of China’s digital expansion. Assiduously researched and compellingly written, the book starts by examining the rise of China as a technological superpower, provides a description of ‘the battlefield’ and ends by offering suggestions on what America can do if it is to emerge triumphantly.

Through seven chapters, Hillman covers the many aspects of the Digital Silk Road, ranging from Huawei-installed networks in Glasgow, Montana, to the submarine cable connecting Pakistan and East Africa to Europe; from BeiDou Satellite systems to safe city surveillance equipment in Hangzhou as well as facial-recognition software used to repress the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Entitled ‘CTR +C’, the second chapter is worth mentioning for its depiction of Huawei’s rise as a unique case of copying and stealing. Beyond benefiting from generous government subsidies, he documents how Huawei stole secrets from its competitors’ laboratories, showrooms and computers. It also poached some of their top engineers and hired coaching services from IBM and other US firms to improve internal management.
Hillman succumbs to the common pitfall of picturing technological imitation as a Chinese characteristic, a culturally driven practice that defines Chinese firms. This is by no means specific to China. The history of late development or catching up is one of emulation, reversed engineering and indeed outright stealing. The US itself applied strict protectionist measures during the 19th century and continued copying British inventions long after independence.

The book then sheds light on stories of marginalized communities in the US, left out by the American market-based approach to telecommunications coverage. These communities, like developing countries, were left with no better alternative than Chinese companies such as Huawei that provide financially competitive services. Hillman argues that for most developing countries and disadvantaged groups, data security is a secondary issue, not a priority. Ultimately, the choice of providers comes down to the price.

At the heart of The Digital Silk Road lies the unsubstantiated claim that global digital data could only be secure if collected, stored and controlled by western companies and allies. Yet, it remains unclear why more expensive, US-based tech firms would represent safer options for developing countries. As shown by Edward Snowden, the US National Security Agency has accessed the data of millions of people, both in America and abroad, by tapping directly into the servers of Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo among others.

So far, there is no evidence of any similar global surveillance programme conducted by Beijing. This is not to say that the Chinese do not engage in spying – they certainly do – but so does everyone else.

Computer networks began to allow espionage on an unimaginable scale from the 1960s during a heightened period of the Cold War. Now, spying can be done from the comfort of a desk chair. Some have argued that Washington’s relentless campaign to ban Huawei is less about the potential security threat the Chinese tech firms present than about the fear of the US losing its long-held dominance over cyberspace.
This being said, China is building a dystopian model of the internet mixing censorship, mass surveillance and repression. Behind the Great Firewall, Hillman provides a thorough account of an increasingly controlled internet with content removals, restrictions on the use of virtual private networks, account closures and systematic user-tracing and arrests. Far from the early hypothesis that the internet would usher in a wave of democratic transformations, including in China, the Chinese Communist Party has managed to use digital technologies to contain dissent and consolidate its grip over power.

According to Hillman, China is currently on a charm offensive to export its authoritarian internet governance model to other developing countries. While framing China as an active promoter of its own internet model seems convincing, it is an interpretation that rests largely on assumptions.

A related concern about The Digital Silk Road is the idea that ‘China’ is a homogenous entity with a clearly defined project, a master plan to conquer the global internet. Hillman’s characterization of China is vague and assumes intrinsic characteristics that apply to all Chinese actors. No distinction is drawn between private and state-owned firms. In his account, the Communist Party pulls all the strings. However, the 2020 Chinese crackdown on its tech titans suggests a more complex story.

Alibaba, China’s giant e-commerce group, was fined $2.8 billion for breaching anti-monopoly rules and Jack Ma, its co-founder and chief executive and once China’s richest man, was forced to lay low for several months. Strict new regulations targeting Chinese tech companies, from taxi-hailing apps to online-tuition platforms, mirror the CCP’s desire to rein in the power of digital capital and indicate existing tensions between the state’s interests and those of digital entrepreneurs.

Hillman concludes with some policy solutions to allow America to win the ongoing ‘network war’. Recognizing that no information empire has emerged without an active state behind it, the author calls for more industrial policy supporting US tech firms. He also suggests the creation of a large coalition of democratic countries, reminiscent of the Cold War grouping, to curtail China’s digital authoritarianism.