

## **Connected Viewing Roundtable**

### **Flow versus Firewalls: the Politics of Access in Streaming Mainland Chinese TV**

Regulation of TV distribution by the Chinese State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) combined with rigorous regulation of the internet via the “Great Firewall of China” creates a space in which Mainland Chinese consumers of media have incentive to continuously develop and adopt disruptive online distribution technologies with which to access content not available through state-owned or approved channels. TV that is not legally distributed on state television stations may be available online, accessible directly via Chinese or foreign websites. Yet even digital access often requires reliance on one (or many) VPN services - a key disruptive technology - among other adaptive mechanisms for access. Where does the distinction between the terms “on-demand” and “flow” lie when users must first breach a firewall to access desired content? Is there any “flow” when users manipulate the distribution channel in order to access preferred series (which may be concurrently streaming)? How can we discuss and categorize the activities that users first engage in in order to access TV content that is not state-approved?

#### *Unauthorized Access=Flow*

Unlike industry portrayals of Chinese TV content pirates, many users deploy unauthorized content due to a disruption of flow caused by government content, rather than exclusively due to willful theft. The problem of immediacy of access drives users like water, into the cracks and crevices of the online distribution system so that they can access their desired content. Users deploy VPN to circumvent the Great Firewall and access their desired content. Notably, because the Chinese government does not publicly

acknowledge the existence of the Great Firewall, it also cannot legally prevent users from purchasing firewalls to circumvent the “non-existent” wall. At its core, the irony of television regulation in China is that the space of greatest “flow” is the VPN user space that exists behind the Great Firewall of China. Until either corporations, the Chinese government, or both provide Chinese consumers with similar levels of access to TV locally and legally, consumers will still be drawn by content available on grey market VPN-driven sites like [www.pps.tv](http://www.pps.tv), a site which offers extensive free content to consumers. There exist a broad range of immediately accessible content that competes with state-owned television content for eyeballs online with social media access rates are just as high or higher. Global media corporations have some incentive to try to enhance market share by leveraging social media spaces (thus pushing back against Chinese government television content regulations). However, the unpredictable regulatory environment of the Chinese social media space at this point suggests that any investment in the market needs to be viewed with a long-term lens that is frequently unappealing to companies that rely on quarterly profits as a determination of the success and advancement of individuals leading the initiatives.

*Users Have Huge Range of Free (yet Disrupted) Entertainment Options*

Indeed, the tagline of pps.tv, a popular site that users can access from behind the Great Firewall, highlights one of the central principles of connected viewing. *Pei ni kan shijie*, means to “accompany you while you watch the world,” suggesting the broadly expanded array of options for media consumption with VPN usage. Chinese television releases compete with “free” SVOD versions of Chinese dramas, Chinese films, Korean dramas, Korean films, animation, and American premium television series, most of

which are available free and immediately to Chinese consumers with very limited internet search requirements. Yet, the most popular sites, while offering an excellent opportunity to access the most eyeballs, also present a continuous potential threat in service breakage or changes in user registration requirements by regulators. Social media sites, even those focused almost exclusively on entertainment, threaten social stability because they present the potential for mass mobilization and can be blocked or changed at a moment's notice. Thus, escaping the clutches of the Great Firewall offers users a dynamic, but temporary, escape from television content restrictions.

Flow in the context of Chinese TV, even in the digital frontiers that exceed the space of regulation, exists only as a constrained freedom that depends on staying ahead of SARFT and central government digital security regulations. Most importantly, it is also a class-based liberty that relies on one's ability to fluidly navigate digital terrain and pay for digital services.