"An Empirical Study of the Impact of Internet Public Opinion on Chinese Public Policy"

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This presentation discusses the impact of public opinion expressed in the Internet on the formation of public policies in China. As the Internet becomes an important channel for Chinese citizens to express their demands and ideas, policy-makers are paying more attention to these online opinions. The Government requires the news office of the State Council to extract and compile internet public opinion everyday for the Central Political Bureau. The central ministries, provinces and cities are all equipped with special agencies in charge of internet administration, and to send daily internet public opinion trends to the main party leaders, who in turn make special instructions to revise some public policies.

Statistical analysis of more than 1,000 hot public events in China from 2007 to 2011 was performed, regarding time distribution, event types, geographic distribution, industrial distribution, and media exposure. The authors studied how these different aspects play a role, if any, on the relationship between public opinions and public policies.

According to the research results, the impact of social public opinion on national public policy was increasing year by year, reaching its peak in 2011. National events, social livelihood events, and current hot topics have greatest influence on public policies. Moreover, events first exposed by newspaper and internet news often have significant influences on public policies, while "opinion factors" which influence public policies include types of events and whether there is third party participation.

"Digital Divide and Internet Use in China: Can the Internet Facilitate Citizenship Engagement?"

■ Zhongdang Pan, Gang Jing, Yang Liu, Wenjie Yan, Jiawen Zheng, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

This presentation explores the relationship between Internet use and citizenship engagement in China, a society in transition. Different from other survey-based studies, this paper looks into this question by explicitly taking into account of the vast geographic diversity in China. It addresses three inter-related research questions: (1) What are the patterns of geo-economic and geo-social diversity in not only Internet usages but also manifestations of citizen engagement in China? (2) What might account for such aggregate-level diversity? (3) What are the relationships between Internet use and civic engagement characteristics at the individual level and to what extent do such relationships vary among different geo-economic and geo-social contexts?

The data analyzed came from a nationwide sample survey conducted in the second half of 2010, where face-to-face interview by trained interviewers in their respective dialects was used. The final sample contains 37,279 complete interviews from 31 province-level units. The overall response rates were at 62% in provincial capital cities and 69% in other cities or towns respectively.

Study results show that Internet penetration and civic engagement varied among geographic regions, defined by location (e.g., coastal versus inland regions, north versus south) and socio-economic conditions (e.g., rural versus urban, highly versus less developed areas). What's more, results from the multi-level models showed strong support for the following explanations of citizen engagement: 1) Possession of material and civic competence resources sustained higher levels of citizen engagement. 2) Individuals' political interest and internal political efficacy functioned as psychological resources for higher levels of citizen engagement. 3) Media use had differential effects on the four engagement measures, while more frequent exposure to news on the traditional media corresponded to higher levels of public affairs knowledge as well as the likelihood to vote. On expressive engagement and civic participation, it was the number of the traditional media used that played a significant positive role. Internet user had higher likelihood of engagement and upon passing the threshold, engaged to a greater degree, however, they were less likely to vote. 4) There were significant variations across locations in how much media use, especially Internet use, affected individuals' citizen engagement.

"Internet Use, Social Network, and Civic Participation in Urban China"

■ Jianwen Zheng, Zhongdang Pan
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This study analyzes data from a nationwide representative sample survey conducted in seven major Chinese cities, in order to find out to what extent the advent of the Internet facilitated civic participation and opinion expressions among the general public in China.

Results of the study show that different from what had been observed among the politically active netizens, the overall levels of civic participation and expressive engagement among the general public in urban China are quite low. Besides, there are same general patterns across all the seven cities, namely, 1) citizens with higher education and party membership tended to be more engaged in both outcome measures than those with lower education and without party membership; 2) personal income, however, was negatively related to civic participation and expressive engagement in urban China.

The puzzling negative effect of personal income from urban China should not, however, be interpreted to mean that possession of more economic resources undermines citizens' abilities or interests to get engaged. Additional observation from the data shows that possession of modern household appliances was positively related to both civic participation and expressive engagement. Therefore, it is likely that the self-reported personal income in China could indicate some results of complex processes beyond individuals' possession of economic resources. More data on the factors related to the self-reported income will be needed in order to have a clearer understanding of the empirical property and conceptual meaning of this variable.

"Internet Facilitated Civic Engagement in China's Context: a Case Study of the Internet Event of Wenzhou High-speed Train Accident"

■ Xiaowen Xu
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This paper attempts to show how the use of Internet affects the state-society dynamics and their relationship with other social actors, in what way it suggests improvement in China's civil society, and why these characteristics and functions of the Internet have developed.

On the evening of July 23, 2011, two high-speed trains travelling on a railway line in Southeastern China's Wenzhou city in Zhejiang Province collided on a viaduct. It was a destructive accident that caused 40 deaths and over 100 injuries. The tragedy immediately aroused online public attention, fierce debates and mutual-assistance in real society. Within two days, "Wenzhou high-speed train rear-ending accident" topped the hot topic list in sina-microblog, the most popular microblog in China, under which there were more than 5.3 million posts.

This study mainly looks into four fields of civic participation in cyberspace: information, discussion and question, charity, and self-purification. The author picked two representative online forums/communities, and observed how posts of different topics chronically changed tracks, then recounted the case from each of the four fields.

Analysis shows how the information flows among different actors and how the online public sphere is formed during the process. Firstly, netizens on spot spread news and first-hand information through the Internet, which offers an important source for traditional media, while online communities received and forwarded official news from traditional media and the government. These news and information then led to charity activities, and further discussions, doubts and rumors. Secondly, individuals and professional humanitarian associations used the Internet to disseminate information of searching, contacting, blood donation, and so on, while online communication mobilized citizens to be engaged in civic activities. Thirdly, the Internet provided a relatively independent and egalitarian space for dissident netizens to exchange their ideas. Prominent suspicion and criticism from the online public sphere, amplified by traditional media, then induced feedbacks from the authorities. Fourthly, online communities displayed potential power in controlling the purity of the public opinion. Some individuals or self-organized alliances dedicated to rumor refutation functioned as a semi-official and convenient platform to clarify doubts. Furthermore, government agencies also took advantage of the Internet's low cost and high speed to correct hearsays online.

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