

INTERNET AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CHINA

by

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Two decades ago, some scholars predicted that information technology would lead to political participatory democracy (Masuda 1985). Today this prediction remains largely as an ideal, even in technologically developed societies. However, this does not mean that technology has no role to play in participatory democracy. This article reported a case study on the role of internet in promoting political participation in China. It was observed that the rapid development of internet technology and application in China and the government's enthusiasm for advocating political communication via internet shone a gleam on the country's path towards political democracy, yet the democratising journey did not appear to be smooth at all. The study showed a constellation of issues crying for resolution, including enormous inter-regional and intra-regional digital divides, lack of interest in participation amongst the majority of internet users, and strict media regulation system. It was concluded that the ultimate functioning of internet as a political participation platform is determined not by the technology, but by human, including the authority and the citizenry, who use the technology and act as actors on the platform. Internet is no better than any other information technology, therefore should not be given undue weight regarding its impact on political participation. Finally the article suggested that for successful political democratisation, China must, on the one hand, lift further its control over the media system to allow more open and free

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political debates. On the other hand, there is a need for public media education to encourage and empower Chinese public to take part in political democracy.

KEYWORDS:

Internet, public sphere, political participation, China

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It might symbolise a turning point in China's internet politics when President Hu Jintao appeared on the People Network (www.people.com.cn) and had a live chat online with the net users on 20th June 2008. Responding to questions by Chinese internet users, President Hu said that he surfed the web for three major purposes, namely viewing national and international news; understanding internet users' concerns and opinions; and understanding net users' comments and suggestions for the (Chinese Communist) Party and the state. He affirmed that the Chinese government paid great attention to some suggestions and comments posted by internet users, and viewed the internet as an important channel of learning people's sentiment and pooling people's wisdom. Imitating President Hu's action, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made his first live chat online on 28th February 2009. Since then, a new term "wang shang ting zheng" (网上听政 meaning "online hearing", or "listen to people online") became popular and fashionable in China. The Chinese government's intention to further democratise its governance was also spelled out in Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's report to the 11th National People's Congress (the 3rd Session) in March 2010. According to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese government will speed up the establishment of a healthy decision-making, implementing, and monitoring system; and will develop supportive environment for the public to criticise and scrutinise the government; and will support the surveillance role of public sphere (Wen 2010). Can internet speed up China's political democratisation? This article aimed to explore the role of internet as public sphere in the contemporary Chinese context.

1. INTRODUCTION

The influence of media on society has been a perpetual hot topic in communication research. Denis McQuail observed that the entire study of mass

communication was based on the assumption of the significance of media effects. However, "there is little agreement on the nature and extent of these assumed effects" (McQuail 2002). Theories about the power of media were swayed from the omnipotent models such as the Magic Bullet theory of the 1930s, to the limited effect theories of the 1950s, and to the rediscovery of media power from the 1960s. Similarly, perceptions of the nature of media effects rocked, to and fro, between positive and negative endpoints. However, the vibrations of thinking about media effects do not repeat at the same level. They reflected changes of material (e.g. technology), intellectual (e.g. research methodology) and societal (e.g. commercialisation) circumstances and brought forth human knowledge of media, media effects and communication.

In his famous book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas depicted the endangerment of democratic society by a corrupted mass media system. He observed that public sphere's political function had transformed since the 1870s (Habermas 1989). The transformation was due to the commercialisation of the mass media industry, manipulation of the media contents, and regulation of the mass media. Habermas argued that the influx of private interests had changed the public sphere, which "becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed - rather than in which public critical debate is carried on" (Habermas 1989). Habermas's argument pierced to the reality of the weakening of the mass media's function as a means for political participation. In the course of its commercialisation and constitutionalisation, the mass media become a source of power and a platform to exercise power. The degradation of the mass media from a public sphere for critical debates and rational discussion to a stage for performance of power is threatening a society's democratic features, such as openness and plurality. The corruption of mass media thus imperils the foundation of a civil society by destructing its public sphere.

The rapid development of new information technologies, particularly internet technologies, in the turning of the 20th century stimulated another wave of rethinking on the role of media in society. There is, again, little agreement on the consequence of the new information technology. In the new information technology, optimists see the hope of liberation from the oppression of the "old" mass media and the salvation of the degeneration of the public sphere, while pessimists sense the danger of worsening of digital

divides and abusing of technological power for political and economical oppression.

From the optimistic side, internet is hailed as a means for democracy because it has “given freedom of speech its biggest boost” since the first amendment of United State’s Constitutions (Thussu 2006). While the First Amendment to United State’s Constitutions affirms constitutionally the freedom of speech, internet offers material potential for freedom of speech. Firstly, internet offers an alternative to the top-down, one-to-many, and centralised broadcasting mass media. It allows interactivity among users, multidimensional and spontaneous flow of information, and boundary-free access by the public. Secondly, internet provides the possibility to break the gate-keeping of mass media. It promises a space for the public to voice, articulate, and debate on dissonant perspectives that might be “too extreme or repellent for the mainstream media to touch” (Meikle 2002). Thirdly, internet allows anonymity of participants. Therefore it is potentially a safe and encouraging space for free expression.

However, there are sceptical or even opposing views about internet’s role as a means for democracy. Some scholars argued that internet did not practically fulfil its potential. There were few empirical evidences of the internet promoting intercommunication and participation. Perceived factors that prevent the fulfilment of internet’s function in democratic transformation include the following (McQuail 2005):

- 1) The glut of information limited the effective use of the information;
- 2) The internet virtually created private lifestyle alternatives to public and political life;
- 3) The cacophony voices impeded serious discussion online;
- 4) The difficulties for many in using the technology prevented them from participating in the process;
- 5) The internet is mainly used by the minority that is already politically interested and involved. This thus worsened the already existed problem of digital divide.

It is worth to point out that these factors have been distinguished mostly in research projects undertaken in western societies. Thus, their relevance to other societies needs to be studied carefully. The ultimate function of technology in a society is the combined result of constellations of factors that belong to multiple dimensions. These include technological, political, social, cultural and economical dimensions. Some political economists argued that

what determined the future of new media is politics, not technology (Williams 2003). First of all, the gaps between the technologically rich and poor become additional oppressions on the already deprived. Even in a technologically advanced country such as the United States, digital divide is not only a problem but a worsening one. The position of "the affluent that have greatest access to the new technology" is exacerbated by the process of deregulation and privatisation of the media industries (Williams 2003). Without appropriate intervention, the internet might bring about an elitist public sphere that excludes the disadvantaged. Political power relations are another determinant that can impact the use of information technology. While internet offers the potential for the public to express alternative views, to debate issues of interest, and to criticise the authority, the new information technologies allow easier and more efficient online surveillance and screening. The ruling powers will make every effort to take advantage of the technology and to hold on to the control. Therefore, internet can become an effective means for manipulation and oppression by dictators. It was already showed by some researchers that internet had been turned into another branch of the propaganda machine by political parties (McQuail 2005).

In addition to political factors, cultural factors also take their share in determining the actual function of the internet. Culture matters because it is involved in all those practices "which carry meaning and value for us", "which depend on meaning for their effective operation" (Hall 2003). It is people who use internet give meaning and value to the technology and its application. Therefore, the function of a technology varies when it is used by different people. On the other hand, meaning is dynamic. As meaning is "produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate" the technology" (Hall 2003). The diversity and dynamicity of technology's function demands a contextual perspective in media application practice and research. For example, the perception of what is "cacophony" varies for people of different cultural or social groups. People who are more sensitive to "cacophony voices" may become reluctant to participate when the discussion is perceived to be cacophonous. The story could go in opposite direction. Those who are perceived as making "cacophony voices" by the majority may feel the social pressure and be forced to keep silent. No matter which way it takes, the result is that in practice internet

does not necessarily avert cultural differences as causes of oppression, in spite of its technological claim of freedom, openness, and diversity.

Revealing the threat of oppression of the internet is by no means to reject entirely the positive potential that internet has to offer, but to draw attention to the need for a dialectic approach to technology. It might be naive to think that technological potential would be automatically accomplished. The functioning of media in a society is complex. It involves the interplay of all kinds of power of the society, including those of political, cultural and societal dimensions. McLuhan has rightly pointed out more than four decades ago, that “the medium is the message” and “it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message” (McLuhan 1964). Whether the internet will become a tool of freedom or one of oppression, is not determined by technology, but by human who use it.

2. DATA COLLECTION AND FINDING

This research takes a qualitative approach to explore the role of internet as a means for political participation in China. The research drew on secondary data analysis of the 24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (here after referred to as 24th Statistical Report) published by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) in July 2009; content analysis of the Chinese People Network’s online forum; observation of provincial government official websites of the 31 provinces of the mainland China, and a questionnaire survey carried out at Jintang township in 2008.

2.1 SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS OF CNNIC’S 24TH STATISTICAL REPORT

China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) was founded in 1997 as a not-for-profit organisation. In terms of the chain of command, it is under the administration of the Chinese Academy of Science, which is a national academic institute. CNNIC has been conducting surveys and publishing reports on internet development in China twice a year since 1997. The survey and report are supported by the Chinese authorities, including the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (CNNIC 2009). CNNIC’s report is regarded as one of the most completed and relatively reliable information resources of China’s internet development. It is widely cited within and without China. The 24th Statistical Report was published by CNNIC in July 2009.

2.1.1 INTERNET USER POPULATION

The term "Internet User", as used in CNNIC's 24th Statistical Report, was defined as all Chinese citizens aged six or above that accessed the internet over the six months before the survey taking place (CNNIC 2009). China's internet user population and internet penetration rate had increased steadily since 1997. China emerges to be one of the most populous countries in terms of internet users. However, given its large population, China's internet penetration rate is still relatively low. According to the 24th Statistical Report, China's internet user population was 338 million in June 2009. The internet user population had increased by 40 million (13.4%) since the end of 2008. Internet penetration rate had risen from 22.6% in December 2008 to 25.5% in June 2009. A typical Chinese internet user was a young city man holding a senior high school certificate (see also the discussion in the following section).

2.1.2 DISTRIBUTION OF INTERNET USER POPULATION

There were significant disparities in distribution of internet user population by location, age, and education. According to the 24th Statistical Report, 71.7% of the Chinese internet users lived in urban area, 28.3% lived in rural area. The majority (83.5%) of the internet user population were between the age of 10 and 40.

TABLE 2.1.1 DISTRIBUTION OF INTERNET USER POPULATION BY AGE

Age groups	Percentage of the Internet User Population	Accumulated Percentage
Below 10	0.9%	0.9%
10-19	33%	33.9%
20-29	29.8%	63.7%
30-39	20.7%	84.4%
40-49	9.9%	94.3%
50-59	4.0%	98.3%
60 and above	1.7%	100.00%

(Abstracted from CNNIC's 24th Statistical Report)

Education level of the internet user population was generally low. The majority (67.3%) of the internet user population's education levels were between junior high school (being equivalent to Year 7 of the Australian standard) and senior high school (being equivalent to Year 12 of the Australian standard).

TABLE 2.1.2 DISTRIBUTION OF INTERNET USER POPULATION BY EDUCATION

Education level	Percentage of the Internet User Population	Accumulated Percentage
Primary school or below	7.6%	7.6%
Junior high school	26.3%	33.9%
Senior high school	41.0%	74.9%
Junior college	12.7%	87.6%
Higher education	12.4	100%

(Abstracted from CNNIC's 24th Statistical Report)

2.1.3 INTERNET APPLICATION

The top three categories of internet applications by Chinese users were entertainment, information acquisition and communication. Of the category of entertainment, online music was the most popular usage by the Chinese users. 85.5% of the respondents claimed that they had used online music in the past six months. Of the information acquisition categories, the usages mainly fell in online news and online search. Usages of internet for communication purpose were considerably diverse. The usage of instant messaging topped the list of application for communication, with 72.2% claims. Apparently, internet was used by Chinese users mainly as a source for entertainment, information and interpersonal communication (instant messaging). Internet users' participation in online discussion (forum and BBS) was relatively low. This result supports the above mentioned argument that internet did not seem to promote intercommunication and participation.

TABLE 2.1.3 MAJOR INTERNET USAGES BY CHINESE USERS

Applications		Use rate as claimed by the respondents
Entertainment	Online music	85.5%
	Online video	65.8%
	Online game	64.2%
Information	Online news	78.7%
	Online search	69.4%
Communication	Instant messaging	72.2%
	Email	55.4%
	Blog	53.8%
	Forum and BBS*	30.4%

*BBS refers to Bulletin Board System

(Abstracted from CNNIC's 24th Statistical Report)

2.1.4 PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERNET

For the Chinese users, internet was a resource of information for reference, but not trustworthy. According to the 24th Statistical Report, while the majority of the Chinese internet users recognised internet as a major information resource, less than half of the users considered the information on the internet to be more trustful than those on the television. The contrast between using internet as information resource and trust in online information was even more significant for people with higher education background.

TABLE 2.1.4 INTERNET AS INFORMATION RESOURCE

User groups	Use Internet as information resource	Trust in Internet information
The whole Internet user population	84.3%	48.0%
University student users	90.5%	37.1%

(Abstracted from CNNIC's 24th Statistical Report)

Using internet seemed to raise the users' interests on current affairs, but did not promote participation significantly. The 24th Statistical Report showed that 81.7% of the internet users claimed becoming more concerned about social events by using internet, while only 56.1% of the users said that they often expressed their opinions online. This was consistent with the above discussed result of internet usage among the Chinese internet users. Internet was used mainly as information resource for the purposes of entertainment, information and personal communication by Chinese users. Perceptions of the internet as a means for participation varied between people of different education groups. Less university students claimed expressing opinions online than primary and high school students did. The 24th Statistical Report observed: "(T)he higher the education and income is, the lower the proportion of internet users expressing opinions online" (CNNIC 2009).

2.1.5 ONLINE INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

There were significant digital divides between regions in China. It appeared that online infrastructure development was closely associated with economic development. The most digitalised regions were economically developed ones, while the least digitalised were economically underdeveloped. The

three provinces/municipalities topped the list of website numbers in China were Beijing, Guangdong, and Zhejiang. These three provinces/municipalities were also the top three regions in China in terms of number of registered IPv4 addresses. Similarly, the three provinces/municipalities with least website number and least registered IPv4 addresses were identical. The three least wired regions in China were Ningxia, Qinghai, and Tibet.

TABLE 2.1.5 MOST AND LEAST WIRED REGIONS

Provinces (municipalities)	Percentage of IPv4 Addresses in China	Percentage of Websites in China
Beijing	24.3%	11.1%
Guangdong	9.1%	13.0%
Zhejiang	5.4%	11.1%
Ningxia	0.2%	0.1%
Qinghai	0.2%	0.1%
Tibet	0.1%	0.1%

(Abstracted from CNNIC's 24th Statistical Report)

2.2 CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE PEOPLE NETWORK

The objective of the content analysis of People Network's online forums was to study the content coverage of the online discussions. People Network was selected because of its significance in China's online political communication. It is the online version of People's Daily, which is one of the major national official newspapers in China. Observation between 15th March 2010 and 29th March 2010 saw more than two millions of daily visiting counts of the website. It is a channel by which Chinese officials gain access to opinions and thoughts of the publics. When President Hu chatted with internet users in June 2008, he said that the Nation Strengthening Forum on the People Network was one of the websites he usually visited (PeopleNetwork 2008). The research included analysis of the "hot topics" of the People Network and analysis of the topics posted on the Nation Strengthening Forum of the People Network. Preliminary observation showed that dissent voices took up a considerable proportion of the online discussions. It was also observed that discussion topics were mostly of urban issues. Therefore, the content analysis was focused on the following categories to explore the coverage gap between rural and urban issues, and the orientation of political dissent voices.

TABLE 2.2.1 ONLINE DISCUSSION CONTENT ANALYSIS CATEGORIES

categories	Definitions	
Rural Issues	Contents concerned with rural issues, including both positive and negative voices.	
International Issues	Contents concerned with international issues, including both positive and negative voices.	
Political Dissent Voices (explicitly negative comments, except those concerned with rural issues)	People Oriented (PO)	In allusion to individual problems, including corruption problems of government officials.
	Constitutional Oriented (CO)	In allusion to system problems, including critical comments of the political system and state government.
Crime	Crime other than those may be included in the category of Political Dissent Voices.	
Others	Other issues that could not be allocated in the above categories.	

2.2.1 COVERAGE OF HOT TOPICS ON THE PEOPLE NETWORK

The People Network conducts its daily ranking of hot topics by counting number of responses to each topic posted on the People Network. A list of the Top 100 topics, which have attracted the most responses, is generated daily and announced on the People Network. The sample for this study included People Network's Top 100 Hot Topic List of 29th March, 30th March, 31st March, and 1st April 2010. Table 2.2.2 outlines the coverage of the top 100 hot topics of the four sampled days.

TABLE 2.2.2 TOP 100 HOT TOPIC CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

Categories	Counts on 29/3		Counts on 30/3		Counts on 31/3		Counts on 1/4		Total	
Rural Issues	0		1		0		1		2	
International Issues	3		4		7		7		21	
Political Dissent Voices	PO	24	PO	21	PO	24	PO	21	PO	90
	CO	7	CO	2	CO	3	CO	4	CO	16
Crime	3		4		1		0		8	
Others	63		68		65		67		263	
Total	100		100		100		100		400	

It appeared that political dissent voices represented a remarkable proportion of the online discussions. More than one quarter (106/400) of the hot topics voiced political dissent opinions. Most (84.9%) of the dissent voices were about problems of individuals, particularly corruption problems of government officials. There was no criticism of the leaders of the state level, though there were criticisms about the monopoly of state enterprises.

Rural issues received very little attention in the discussions. Of the 400 hot topics posted on the People Network on the four sampled days, there were only 2 (counted for 0.5% of the total) topics related with rural issues. The two topics were “What are the difficulties in water management?” posted on 30th March and “Why Xiaogan Village suffers from decades of poverty?” posted on 1st April. These two topics attracted only 19 and 26 replies respectively on the day when they were posted. In contrast, the hottest topics on 30th March and 1st April, both were concerned with corruption amongst governmental officials, attracted 104 and 182 replies respectively.

2.2.2 COVERAGE OF DISCUSSION ON THE NATION STRENGTHENING FORUM OF THE PEOPLE NETWORK

The Nation Strengthening Forum is an online anonymous participatory forum, on which the discussions are, as hinted in the name of the forum, supposedly political and aimed at strengthening the nation. The sample of this study included 1200 messages posted on the Nation Strengthening Forum at the following time slots:

TABLE 2.2.3 SAMPLE TIME SLOTS OF NSF

Time/Date
18.35 – 20.05, 28th March 2010
10.40 – 17.40, 31st March 2010
22.20 31st March – 11.20 1st April 2010

The time slots were selected so that the observation covered contents posted during day and night times. The coverage of discussions is outlined in Table 2.2.4.

TABLE 2.2.4 NATION STRENGTHENING FORUM CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

Categories	Counts on 28/3 18.35-20.05		Counts on 31/3 10.40-17.40		Counts on 31/3 22.20 -1/4 11.20		Total	
	Rural Issues	6		7		9		22
International Issues	47		46		57		150	
Political Dissent Voices	PO	145	PO	211	PO	195	PO	551
	CO	36	CO	73	CO	26	CO	135
Crime	18		21		8		47	
Others	948		842		905		2695	
Total	1200		1200		1200		3600	

Analysis results of the Nation Strengthening Forum were in consistence with those of the Top 100 topics discussed above. Dissent voices took up remarkable proportion of the online discussions. Most of the criticisms were people oriented, rather than constitution oriented. There was no criticism of the state leaders observed. Rural issues were largely neglected in the discussions.

2.3 OBSERVATION OF OFFICIAL WEBSITES OF PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS IN MAINLAND CHINA

Provincial government official websites were observed to measure local governments' reaction to the state authority's call for online political inter-communication. President Hu and Primer Minister Wen's online chats with internet users reflected Chinese government's attention and recognition of the power of internet and public sphere. These two occasions of online live chat were used to publicise the government's intention to promote online political participation. The instances were reported broadly in various official media and echoed with welcoming voices amongst the Chinese internet users. People Network reported that the President and Prime Minister's on-line communication with the internet users embodied the national leaders' great attention of the development of internet. It had also motivated a fashion of online hearing among governments and officials of various levels (PeopleNetwork 2009). The news about President Hu's visit to People Network and his online live chat ranked within China's Top-10 Domestic News of 2008. In order to measure the extent of the claimed "fashion of online

hearing”, all the 31 official websites of provinces and municipalities administered directly under the Central Government were observed. As of 10th April 2010 when the observation took place, all the 31 websites of the provincial governments in mainland China had established their “online hearing” links. These links allow the users to send messages to the government officials. Most of the links (26 out of 31) were labelled as personal “mailbox” of the chiefs of the governments (see Table 2.3.1 below). Almost all the online hearing links were on the home page of the provincial government’s official page, except Sichuan Province, of which the Governor’s Mailbox appeared as a sub-link on the page entitled “Interaction and Exchange”.

TABLE 2.3.1 ONLINE HEARING LINKS OF PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS

(Observed on 10th April 2010)

Provinces/municipalities	Labels of the Online Hearing Links	
	As appeared on the websites (Chinese characters)	Translation of the label
Beijing Municipality	市长信箱	Mayor’s Mailbox
Tianjing Municipality	市长信箱	Mayor’s Mailbox
Hebei Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Shanxi Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Inner Mongolia Autonomous	主席信箱	Mailbox of the Autonomous Region’s Chairman
Liaoning Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Jilin Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Heilongjiang Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Shanghai Municipality	市长信箱	Mayor’s Mailbox
Jiangsu Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Zhejiang Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Anhui Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Fujian Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Jiangxi Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Shandong Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Henan Province	网上信访	Online Petitions
Hubei Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Hunan Province	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox
Guangdong	省长信箱	Governor’s Mailbox

Province		
Guangxi Autonomous	建言献策	Comments and Suggestions
Hainan Province	省长信箱	Governor's Mailbox
Chongqing Municipality	市长信箱	Mayor's Mailbox
Sichuan Province	省长信箱	Governor's Mailbox
Guizhou Province	省长信箱	Governor's Mailbox
Yunnan Province	云南省人大信箱	Mailbox of Yunnan Provincial People's Congress
Tibet Autonomous	主席信箱	Mailbox of the Autonomous Region's Chairman
Shaanxi Province	建言献策	Comments and Suggestions
Gansu Province	省领导信箱	Provincial Leader's Mailbox
Qinghai Province	省长信箱	Governor's Mailbox
Ningxia Autonomous	主席信箱	Mailbox of the Autonomous Region's Chairman
Xinjiang Autonomous	主席信箱	Mailbox of the Autonomous Region's Chairman

2.4 QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY OF RESIDENTS OF JINTANG

The survey of residents of Jintang was aimed to explore the problem of digital divide. The questionnaire survey was carried out in 2008 in Jintang, a mountainous township in inner-north of Guangdong province. Guangdong is one of the most developed provinces in terms of its economy and internet capacity in China. Its GDP in 2010 was 39081.59 trillion, ranking the first at provincial level in China (People'sDaily 2010). As showed above in Table 2.1.5, Guangdong was also one of the three provinces with most IPv4 addresses and websites in 2009. However, there are considerable development disparities within the province. The northern mountainous region of Guangdong is economically backward compared with the southern coastal region of the province. Jintang was therefore selected in order to demonstrate the problem of intraregional digital disparity of development in China. 350 questionnaires were distributed among the households in Jintang. 219 valid responses were collected. Results of the survey included:

- 1) Most of the household in Jintang, as self-estimated, were under the poverty threshold of US\$1.25 per day. Of the 219 valid responses,

68.95% indicated a family annual income below RMB3000 (approximately US\$450 at the time when the survey took place).

- 2) There was a remarkable internet capacity gap between Jintang and national average. Only 8% of the respondents claimed having a computer at home.
- 3) The most populous mass medium (Internet was listed as one of the mass media options in the questionnaire) was television. 93% of the respondents indicated having at least one television set at home.
- 4) The three most felt constrains to improvement of family income were lacking financial resource (54.63%), lacking knowledge of technology (24.07%), and lacking information (13.89%).
- 5) Awareness of local development was remarkably low. The survey used one of the most aggressive development project implemented by Qingxin County (of which Jintang was a subordinate township) in recent years as an instance to ask the participants about their awareness. Only 16.23% of the participant indicated awareness of the project, while the majority claimed that they had never heard about it.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The rapid and continual development of internet and the government's apparent promotion of online political participation displayed an encouraging outlook of democracy development in China. However, whether and how this outlook will be realised remains uncertain. The determinants of the ultimate results of technological potential are multidimensional. The following discussions focus on the pros and cons of internet as a means for political participation in China, drawing on the findings presented above.

3.1 UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY – THE UNFULFILLED MYTH

The establishment of "online hearing" links on all the provincial governments' websites showed Chinese government's effort to institutionalise the internet as a political participation platform. However, this does not necessarily implicate efficient functioning of the internet for political participation in China. The notable inter-regional and intra-regional disparities of online capacity have dwarfed internet's role for open, free and equal political participation. The finding of this research supports the prospects that internet is used more by the minority who has acquired greater online capacity due to their existing political, cultural or social advantages, while the

disadvantaged majority are lagging behind. According to World Urbanization Prospects of the United Nations, as of 2010, China's rural population made up 55.1% of the nation's total population (UN 2010). However, the voices of this majority were scarce on the internet. Content analysis of the online discussion coverage on the People Network showed that topics relevant to rural issues counted less than 1% in both of the Top 100 Hot Topics and the discussions on the Nation Strengthening Forum. The rural society's aphonia online is arguably associated with the disparities of online capacity, as demonstrated in the analysis of CNNIC's 24th Internet Development Report and the case study of Jintang. Apparently the rural population, who have less online capacity, are marginalised in participation. Thus, in reality, internet's claim to provide universal access is not fulfilled. The economically poor and politically powerless are disadvantaged in accessing information and voicing themselves on the internet. Lacking information and technologically disadvantaged, as the residents of Jintang claimed in the survey, in turn constrain economic development and political participation. In this sense, internet, to the powerless and disadvantaged, is a technology of oppression, rather than one of freedom.

3.2 POLITICS VERSUS TECHNOLOGY

Content analysis of discussions on the People Network found that political dissent voices were mostly people oriented. However, unlike most of the western countries where the state government and leaders, and party chiefs are the foci of discussion on the internet, there was no criticism of the Chinese state leaders on the People Network. This is due to a combination of factors. First of all, the existing mass media administration hierarchy in China may have effectively prevented criticism of the state government and its leaders. Mass media in China are stratified in accordance with their primary distribution/broadcast range and administrated by respective governments. For example, Southern Daily is a provincial newspaper. It is administrated by the government of Guangdong province. Guangzhou Daily is a municipal newspaper. It is administered by the government of Guangzhou. There are many unwritten rules in the Chinese mass media circle. One of these rules is that a medium could not criticise officials ranking above of the administrative level of the medium. For instance, a municipal newspaper may criticise officials below the level of the mayor, but not those above. A provincial newspaper may criticise a mayor and any officials

whose level is below the level of the provincial governor. Apparently, according to these rules, there are no media possessing the power to criticise the state leaders. Secondly, online message screening may have contributed to manipulating discussions on the internet. For instance, the Administration Regulations of the Nation Strengthening Forum on the People Network stated that the Forum reserved the right to delete messages that disobeyed its regulations (PeopleNetwork 2010). Notably, the first regulation of the website was to prohibit posting messages that violate the state's constitutions and law, and that violate the policies of reform and opening and the Four-fundamental-principles¹. Given these written and unwritten regulations, one might speculate that the absence of criticism of state leaders on the Nation Strengthening Forum was not a coincidence, but the result of media system control in China. Media regulations are essential for many good reasons, including maintaining "orderly and organizationally productive" debates (Castells 2010). However, if the regulations become obstacles to open and productive interactions between the citizens and the states, they lost their legitimacy and need to be reviewed.

Institutionalisation of the online participation platform is no better than an invitation from the state authority to political participation. Genuine participation required an open, free and balanced dialogical culture. Without any intention of denying Chinese government's effort to promote political democracy via the internet, the result of this research suggested that for effective functioning of the online participation platform in China, further reformation in the mass media regulation system is essential. The Chinese government needs to advance beyond the superficial "invitation" and talks about political participation. It needs more substantial actions to encourage and enable genuine participation.

3.3 PUBLIC SPHERE – A PLATFORM FOR THE CITIZENRY

Political participation by means of public sphere requires readiness of three realms of the society, namely the readiness of the state authority, the public citizenry and the private individuals. This conceptualisation is drawn on Habermas' notion of public sphere. According to Habermas, public sphere is the medium between the "private realm" and the "public authority". It is

¹ The Four-fundamental-principles are: to keep to the road of socialist, uphold the people's democratic dictatorship, uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and uphold Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao Zedong.

"the realm of private people assembled into a public who, as the citizenry, linked up the state with the needs of civil society". The political function of the public sphere is to transform the "political authority" into "rational authority"(Habermas 1989). This rationalisation is a process of interaction between the authority and the public through open dialogues. It is a process participated by the state authority and the assembled individuals. Reviewing his theory of public sphere nearly 30 years after he first proposed it, Habermas contended that institutional guarantees of the state were not sufficient for a public sphere to function politically (Calhoun 1992). The state authority may be influential in institutionalising the platform for political participation. However, participation is not granted by the authority, but acted by the individuals together with their peers as the citizenry. Therefore, whether and how the platform for participation will accomplish its claimed functions to voice the needs of the society and to rationalise the authority is not only determined by the government, but also by the private individuals and the public citizenry. The efficient functioning of the public sphere relies on the willingness and commitment of the private individuals to participate in the communicative actions, and the establishment of an appropriate political and cultural atmosphere amongst the citizenry.

The research result showed considerable disparities in the distribution of internet user population by location, age, and education in China. The economically poor and politically powerless population were further disadvantaged in their capability to access the internet. Further more, the rate of active participation among the internet users was relatively low. Many Chinese internet users were spectators, rather than committed participants. Internet, like other information technology, is a tool to be used. As it is demonstrated in the above findings, users may decide to use the internet for many purposes other than political participation. Thus with a large online user population does not mean accomplishment of online political participation. The success of internet's role as a means for political democracy in China could not be claimed until the majority of the society are included and act as committed participants on it. In this regard, there are two challenges which China must deal with to achieve genuine political participation. The first challenge is the enormous digital divide. The penetration rate of internet in rural and economically underdeveloped areas is still rather low in China. In these areas, radio and television remain the primary communication channels. Making use of these traditional media to empower

people politically and economically is equally, if not more, urgent and important for China's political democratisation. The other challenge is the lack of participation amongst the public. This demands attention to issues of the system and the public. On the one hand, China needs to review and lift further its media control system to allow more open and free political debates. On the other hand, there is a need for public media education. According to Habermas's theory, one of the necessary conditions for the public sphere to successfully function is the public citizenry's dual identity of property owner and educated human being. As property owners, the public citizenry were aware of the importance of politics and committed to critical debates in order to influence various social and political powers in their common interest. As human beings, the public citizenry assumed all aspects of humanity rooted in their experiences and educations. Habermas argued that when the two roles converged, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm (Habermas 1989). Accordingly, the public media education should aim at enhancing the public's awareness of the importance and sense of responsibility of political participation and their capacity to rationally and effectively participate in democratic debates.

The rapid and substantial development of internet application in recent years and the government's interest in using internet as a platform for political participation present a positive prospect for political democracy in China. However, one cannot be overly cautious about giving undue weight to technology and ignoring factors of human and society. It is a tougher mission and demands greater determination to empower and encourage the public to participate the democratisation process.

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