

Will the Internet Form the Public Sphere in China?

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ABSTRACT

The Western perspective in examining the political impact of the Internet concentrates on whether this new medium will revitalize the public sphere so as to further representative democracy to ideal form of participatory democracy. This paper examines the political impact of the Internet on China, a large developing country that lacks sophisticated representative democratic politics. It analyzes the revolutionary changes that the Internet has brought to the Chinese Internet users and the government's regulations on the new medium. It asks whether the Internet will form the Habermasian public sphere in China and concludes that the Internet enhances the Chinese netter's political participation, but it needs long-term research to decide to what extent the Internet will improve democracy in China.

Keywords: Internet, political impact, democracy, China.

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC), especially the Internet has ushered human communication into a new age that McLuhan's "global village" is becoming true in the cyberspace constructed by the computer networks around the world [1]. The "cyberspace," a term created by William Gibson in his science-fiction novel *Neuromancer* forms online communication in the virtual, electronic space [2]. National boundaries can no longer restrict information and culture transmission with this shift from geographical communities to virtual communities, which has profound implications for both democracy studies and democratic politics [3].

As a powerful global medium, the Internet has inspired hope of revitalizing the public sphere, which is vital to democracy but has collapsed due to commodification of the mass media [4]. The notion of the public sphere that theorizes the role of interaction among citizens in the political process can be traced

back to the ancient Greek. But it was after Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962 that the concept of the public sphere and its central role in democracy became the heart of democracy studies [5].

In Habermasian discourse, the public sphere "connoted an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters" that forms public opinion "in the strong sense of a consensus about the common good" [6] to influence decision making. And modern mass media are deemed as "the chief institutions of the public sphere" [7]. Curran interpreted how the classical liberal theory stressed on the role of the public sphere and thus the role of the mass media in democratic politics:

According to classical liberal theory, the public sphere (or, in more traditional terminology, 'public forum') is the space between government and society in which private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state: formal control through the election of governments and informal control through the pressure of public opinion. The media are central to this process. They distribute the information necessary for citizens to make an informed choice at election time; they facilitate the formation of public opinion by providing an independent forum of debate; and they enable the people to shape the conduct of government by articulating their views. The media are thus the principal institutions of the public sphere or, in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberalism, 'the fourth estate of the realm.' [8]

However, Habermas thought that the public sphere has declined in the 20th century due to commercialization and ownership conglomeration of the mass media, and democracy is thus in crisis [9].

The Habermasian discourse of improving democracy by reclaiming the public sphere has continuously been applied as a main theoretical framework in studying the development of media technologies and democracy since the 1960s. The advent of the Internet inspired optimistic views of the emergence of a revitalized public sphere that will enhance democracy substantially. Unique technological characteristics of the Internet, such as that it is open and decentralized, accessible to any citizen, and hard to censor, led advocates to believe that this new medium will facilitate an informed public citizenry and increase public participation in political process.

But the critics think that since universal access is not guaranteed, the Internet is not providing equal opportunities for citizens' participation in political discussion. Moreover, corporate media giants "are aggressively working to dominate the Internet" [10], which suggests the pessimistic future of commercialization of the Internet. As Rheingold noted, "the odds are always good that big power and big money will find a way to control access to virtual communications; big power and big money always found ways to control new communications media when they emerged in the past" [11].

Will the Internet revitalize the public sphere and enhance democracy to advanced stage, or will it help political and economic powers exercise more information control over common people than before? As Splichal [12] generalized that the contemporary debate about the political impact of the Internet is still ongoing. However, research efforts so far are quite concentrated on developed countries. It is understandable because the Internet originated from the United States and developed much earlier and faster in Western democratic countries, hence it is not surprising that social practice of virtual democracy, such as "digital cities," has soon come into being and attracted academic attention. Developing countries are lagged much behind in the construction of information infrastructure. Furthermore, authoritative governance is still the most popular political system in developing countries. Therefore, what should be concerned in developing countries is whether the Internet will form the public sphere to help establish democratic politics.

Authoritative governance depends on the government's omnipotent control over information, and common citizens find it impossible to participate in discussions of political issues through using the mass media as the public sphere in Habermasian sense. The advances of the Internet may irrevocably transform developing nations from authoritative governance towards democracy by allowing free transmission of information, which is said to be the "currency" of democracy [13]. Different from the West, the focus of the political impact of the Internet on developing nations is not to "revitalize" the public sphere, but rather to create, or to enlarge the public sphere as the basis for moving forward to democracy.

In fact, for Western democratic polities, the advent of the Internet may provide citizens a new means of communication, or it may give the elites more privilege than common citizens, yet it will not likely to change the nature of the political life of those societies, i.e. democracy. But for developing countries, the Internet might be a great shock to society because the hard-to-censor nature of this new medium is not compatible with the controlled media system and is very likely to cause new tension between the government and the media. This paper will take

China as a case of developing nations, where the Internet is developing quickly, and to study whether the Internet will form the public sphere to foster democracy in the country.

Western democracies prefer diversity of information or media diversity [14]. Unlike the West, the Chinese political and communication systems highly emphasize the people's political identity and conformation to the government. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949, the mass media have been controlled by the government as the mouthpieces to unify the people's thoughts to keep political homogeneity. The mass media must unconditionally conform to the Party's propaganda purposes [15] and the concept of the mass media as the public sphere is politically wrong in such context.

Within the context of China's "commandist media system" [16], the Chinese citizens are not able to discuss state issues via the mass media; on the contrary, they must restrict their behaviors according to the government's guidance and education publicized in the mass media. Nonetheless, the passive status of the Chinese people in their political life may be changed due to the advent of the Internet. Since China linked to the Internet from 1992, both the Internet and the number of Internet users have grown up quickly. The number of Internet users was some 300 in 1994, but in 2002, the number jumped to 45.8 million [17]. What influences will the Internet bring about, or may have brought about to the Chinese political and media systems? Will this virtual public space form the public sphere in China? How will the Chinese government manage to keep information control on the Internet? This paper will address these questions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Habermasian Concept of the Public Sphere and Its Implications to Democracy

Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962 in German, later it was translated into French in 1978 and into English in 1989. It was basically "a comparative and historical account of the development of the bourgeois public sphere in England, France, and Germany" [18]. Since the book came into being, the normative concept of the public sphere and its central role in democracy has been continuously applied as the theoretical framework to the critical analysis of the development of democracy in Western countries. Even Habermas himself was surprised by the fact that his work had been stimulating serious academic discussions for more than 30 years [19].

Habermas' work relied on a description of a historical moment during the 17th and 18th centuries, when public spaces such as coffeehouses and salons became the center of public debate about political issues. For Habermas, openness and accessibility to the public space and public participation in political discussion are indispensable conditions for the formation of public opinion within the public sphere to influence decision-making. As Habermas said:

By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into

being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and TV are the media of the public sphere. We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. Although state activity is so to speak the executor, it is not a part of it. Only when the exercise of political control is effectively subordinated to the democratic demand that information be accessible to the public, does the political public sphere win an institutionalized influence over the government through the instrument of law-making bodies. [20].

For Habermas, the 18th century coffeehouse was an ideal forum within which newspapers and journals were read and discussed, and rational critical discussions on political issues were framed with reference to and on behalf of broader social interests [21]. The flourish of modern mass media enlarged the public sphere for people to participate in political discussions [22]. In fact, the mass media almost substitute physical public spaces to play the role of the public sphere in modern times. But Habermas' thought that commercialization of the mass media indicated the collapse of the public sphere and thus a crisis in democratic politics [23].

Habermas stressed that the political nature of the public discussion within the public sphere is crucial to democracy. As he noted:

The rational-critical debate of private people in the salons, clubs, and reading societies was not directly subject to the cycle of production and consumption, that is, to the dictates of life's necessities. Even in its merely literary form (of self-elucidation of the novel experiences of subjectivity) it possessed instead a "political" character in the Greek sense of being emancipated from the constraints of survival requirement. [24].

But this expanded public sphere has lost its political character and Habermas thought that within the framework of the manufactured public sphere the mass media are useful only as vehicles of advertising but not vehicles of political discourse. As he noted:

When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public

communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.

Today the conversation itself is administered. Professional dialogues from the podium, panel discussions, and round table shows – the rational debate of private becomes one of the production numbers of the stars in radio and television, a salable package ready for the box office; it assumes commodity form even at "conferences" where anyone can "participate." Discussion, now a "business," becomes formalized; the presentation of positions and counterpositions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game; consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form. [25].

As Dahlgren analyzed that the "increasing prevalence of the mass media, especially where the commercial logic transforms much of public communication into PR, advertising and entertainment, erodes the critical functions of the public, therefore the public sphere declined" [26].

Habermas aimed to further the "project of Enlightenment"—democracy by reconstructing the public sphere, in which critical reason will prevail representing the democratic tradition [27]. The advent of the Internet has brought about an intense academic concern on its impact on democracy. Will the Internet revitalize the Habermasian public sphere and enhance democracy?

Western Perspectives of the Political Impact of the Internet

The Internet, with the virtual, electronic cyberspace has inspired academic debate on its political impact on democracy. Advocates believe that the Internet will revitalize the public sphere and further representative democracy to the ideal participatory democracy. Representative democracy has been the basic political system in Western countries for more than two hundred years. However, it "is often seen as the second best solution" [28], while the Athenian direct participatory democracy has always been the metaphor of ideal form of democracy. Advocates believe that the Internet will revitalize the public sphere in Habermasian sense to enhance democracy to a new stage of participatory democracy.

However, critics see this new technology as an anti-democratic force, which will enhance economic and political powers to exercise more information control than ever before. Although the Internet at present is "still out of control in fundamental ways," critics believe that very soon "the political and economic big boys" will "seize it, censor it, meter it, and sell it back to us" [29]. They think that the Internet is rapidly being subjected to the same commercial forces that have controlled traditional mass media [30].

Critics think the Internet is an elite medium. Papacharissi concluded that from different studies of cyberdemocracy projects, "those who can access online information are equipped with additional tools to be more active citizens and participants of the public sphere" [31] than those who do not have the access.

In the nutshell, the Western perspective in examining the political impact of the Internet concentrates on whether the Internet can revitalize the public sphere so as to further representative democracy to the ideal form of participatory democracy. Developing countries that lack sophisticated democratic politics have been largely overlooked. Then how will the Internet influence developing countries like China? Will it be a progressive force to enhance democracy, or will it be a negative force to enhance the government's capability to exercise information control

3. AUTHORITATIVE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM: THE CHINESE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Before the Enlightenment thoughts of democracy were introduced into China during the 19th century, centralized state power and hierarchy have been the characteristics of Chinese political culture throughout China's history of feudal times. In accordance with the political system, the communication system was also one-way and hierarchical, in which different people were entitled to access different amount of information and only the emperor and the central government had monopoly on true and complete information about the society [32].

From the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, modern mass media, mainly the newspapers, emerged in China. Western concepts such as "science" and "democracy" were introduced into Chinese political culture and China started the process of modernization. But unlike the West, during the past century, China's mass media have never become privately owned business that runs independently from the government [33]; on the contrary, the Chinese mass media have always been assigned political tasks, from the early political newspapers propagating the abolishment of feudalism, to the instruments for partisan struggle between the CCP and Kuomintang for power in China, and to the mouthpieces for the CCP for unifying the people's thoughts after 1949. The mass media in China have never become the public sphere but rather represent the "state publicity" in Habermasian sense.

The CCP's "Party journalism" that ensures the Party's domination over information is a highly centralized press system, in which all the press are regarded as the "Party's press" [34]. Before the late 1970s' reform and opening policy, China's press system operated to a great extent as what the classic *Four Theories of the Press* [35] described the communist press system in the former Soviet Union. The Party's ideology directed the press, and the social functions of the press were supposed to propagate policies, to educate, to organize and to mobilize the mass [36]. Chinese scholars feel that China followed the Soviet Union model even further than former Eastern European socialist countries. The aim of journalism is not to reflect public opinion, but to "use the Party's, or even the highest leader's thoughts to unify the people's thoughts" [37]. The Habermasian concept of the mass media acting as the public sphere seems very alien and politically wrong within such a media context.

Commercialization of the media started from the early 1990s when the country stepped into a market economy. The Party's absolute authority met challenge, and some researchers started to ask whether media commercialization would lead China to political democracy as what had happened in the former Soviet

Union and South Korea [38]. However, the Chinese government has managed to control the media in terms of the ownership, the recruitment of personnel and editorial tone.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA AND THE GOVERNMENT'S REGULATIONS

Since the Internet may create great opportunity for China to leap into the information economy, it expanded very rapidly since the 1990s in China. For example, in December of 1998, the number of Internet users of the United States was 28.6 times more than that of China, but in July of 2000, this gap was shortened to 8.1 times [39].

However, the development of the Internet has brought political and social risks to the Chinese government. It is not surprising because "the political significance of CMC lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media" [40]. Huang, Hao and Zhang [41] analogized the impact of the Internet on China to that of Gutenberg's moving typing printing to Europe in the Middle Ages.

The decentralized nature of the Internet and the digital, non-physical form of information make the Chinese government facing the most serious threat from foreign-originated information since 1949 because what worked for the censorship of traditional mass media will not work for the Internet [42]. The Internet creates access for Chinese users to online materials both inside and outside China, especially the external information that is under the government's control. It also allows individuals to participate in political discussions, all of which pose serious threat to China's political and social system.

Facing the challenges, the Chinese government is determined to maintain its information control over the Internet. The former Party Secretary General Jiang Zemin warned that the Party and the government must develop, utilize and regulate the Internet as a "new battlefield of public opinion and propaganda" [43]. Contrary to the nature of the Internet as a self-governing organization, the Internet in China is carefully and rigidly organized and administrated.

According to China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), from 1994 to 2002, the Chinese government has released 13 regulations referring to Internet-related activities, including Internet networks of all institutions, ISPs, webmasters of BBS, business websites and individual Internet users [44]. These regulations are:

1. February 18, 1994, State Council Order No. 147, *Regulations of China's Computer Information System Security*;
2. February 18, 1994, State Council Order No. 147, *Application Procedure for the Security of Computer Information Networks linked to International Computer Networks*;
3. February 1, 1996, State Council Order No. 195, Revised on May 20, 1997, *Regulations of Computer Network and Internet Management in China (Trial Basis)*;
4. February 16, 1996, Beijing Public Security Bureau Announcement No. 3, *Announcement of*

- Computer Information Networks Registration with the Public Security Bureau;*
5. June, 1997, Informatization Office of the State Council, *Regulations for Internet Domain Names Registration in China (Trial Basis);*
 6. June, 1997, China Internet Network Information Center, *Application Procedure for Internet Domain Names Registration;*
 7. December 8, 1997, Informatization Office of the State Council, *Application Procedure for the Regulations of Computer Network and Internet Management in China (Trial Basis);*
 8. September 20, 2000, State Council Order No. 291, *Regulations of Telecommunications in China;*
 9. September 20, 2000, State Council Order No. 292, *Regulations of Information Services Providers;*
 10. October 8, 2000, Ministry of Information Industry Order No. 3, *Regulations of Internet BBS;*
 11. November 6, 2000, Press Office of the State Council & Ministry of Information Industry, *Regulations of Websites Regarding News Publishing (Trial Basis);*
 12. April 3, 2001, Ministry of Information Industry, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Cultural Affairs & National Bureau of Business, *Regulations of the Internet Business;*
 13. October 11, 2002, State Council, *Regulations of the Internet Business.* (This is the new regulations of the Internet Business that substitutes the above one).

Briefly, these regulations stress on the following aspects regarding restricting free flow of information and free speech on the Internet: First, all computer networks that connect to the global Internet must register with the Public Security Bureau for security reasons. The Public Security Bureau should establish special institutions supervising and guiding the management of the Internet.

Second, all the Internet connections must be routed through the network of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication, or one of three other major networks run by government agencies.

Third, websites of the mass media and official institutions must register with the Press Office of the State Council before they can publish news. Business websites must get the permission from the Press Office of the State Council before they can be linked to foreign websites or carry news from foreign sources. No website can create, copy, publish and distribute harmful information containing the contents that is harmful to national security, attacking socialist institutions, destroying national integrity, destroying ethnic harmony, slandering, cult promotion, pornography and violence.

Fourth, webmasters of all kinds of BBS, online forum and chat rooms are responsible to supervise online exchange of opinions. They should delete the harmful information as stated above as soon as they find it. Meanwhile, they should keep the record of the time, account number and domain name of the user who sends harmful information for 60 days in case the police needs to investigate.

Fifth, all individual Internet users must register with the Public Security Bureau within 30 days and sign a promise not to harm the nation and not to commit crime online. This Beijing local regulation policy is obviously adopted by many cities, and it is deemed as a state policy. The Internet users should not create, copy, browse and distribute harmful information as stated above, or they may face punishment under Criminal Law.

Sixth, young people under 18 are not allowed to go online in Internet Cafes, and the owners of the Internet Cafes must see that only adults can be their customers.

Besides these officially published regulations regarding domestic Internet institutions and individual users, it is believed by many that the government positively controls external information by blocking undesirable websites at the router level [45]. In Ramo's [46] words, the Chinese government is trying to make an electric Great Wall. But to what extent such blocking is applied is somehow confusing, because such blocking is not pronounced overtly and officially, therefore it is difficult to detect the standard of the Chinese government regarding what is undesired [47]. However, it is clear that the Chinese government will by no means give up efforts to control the Internet. The Chinese government deems the Internet just as other mass media -- a "new battlefield" that must be occupied by the Party's ideology.

5. CONCLUSION

The Internet is a revolutionary communication technology. For a country like China that has exercised information control and stressed on ideological homogeneity, the Internet provides a possibility of improving the country's democratizing progress by creating the public sphere on this virtual, electronic cyberspace. Compared with the traditional mass media, the decentralized, hard-to-censor Internet may break the government's information monopoly and provide public space for citizens to discuss state issues and form influential public opinion that is not represented by the government-controlled traditional mass media. It is possible that the democratic nature of the Internet would help to shift the traditional hierarchical political culture to modern democratic political culture in which citizens can equally participate in political activities.

But it still needs long-time research before we could conclude that to what extent the Internet will improve democracy in China. On the one hand, the Chinese government is trying to regulate this new medium to restrict its impact on free communication of information and free speech. It needs long-term practical research to detect how effective such regulations work. On the other hand, the Chinese citizens, especially the Internet users who are most likely the rising bourgeois class in society need time to learn how to practice as qualified citizens of democratic politics. The Internet provides a possible vehicle for the formation of the public sphere, but the key factor of constructing a democratic political system is still the citizens who will act as the critical rational public within the public sphere.

Although it is hard to conclude at this stage of how much progress the Internet will bring about to China's democratization in the near future as alluded above, one thing is clear that this new medium is a pro-democratic force in

developing countries with its ability to break the government's information monopoly. Being well-informed with diversity of information brought by the Internet is a good start for the Chinese citizens to qualify themselves as the rational critical public for constructing the Habermasian public sphere in this country.

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