The Implications of Digital Democracy for China’s Governance:
Does Public Opinion Matter in the Age of the Internet?

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本論文為初稿，非經作者同意，請勿引用。
Abstract: A new democratic paradigm is coming into being. This unique paradigm is increasingly characterized by the widespread application of advanced Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in present-day’s democratic theory and practice. There has been an accelerating growth of a relatively sophisticated literature in the West, especially in the United States, that researches widely on the impact and implications of ICTs on societies and political systems both in industrial democracies and developing countries. Their focus centers upon the political application and implementation of ICTs, seeing them as primary tools in the working of a democratic political system or the evolution of democratization. Yet there is little work done that tackles the issue of the impact or implications of digital democracy for the governing mechanism in the Communist China. In one respect, they have either overlooked or undervalued the role the Internet-enabled public opinion played in an (un)democratic countries like China. This article addresses the issue and proposes two basic research questions: First, Is the Chinese government as much in control of public debates on the Internet as it is of debates in other forms of traditional media? Secondly, Does the Chinese government still control and manipulate public opinion as much as it has conventionally done? To approach the questions set above, this article will incorporate a case study—Who Ditched You, Shenzhen—which is an online article circulated in mid-November 2002, with theoretical discussions to reflect the theme of new technologies and its impact and implications on the governance. It is hoped that the explorations of this research are expected to yield a number of contributions that could be related to the wider themes of (virtual) public participation and political transformation both in China and other like-minded authoritarian states like Vietnam, Myanmar, and North Korea.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Internet, Governance, Public Opinion, Public participation, China

Introduction

The Chinese political system is in transition. Commentators have focused on various factors driving the changes: economic development, new generations of leaders, the opening of the country to the outside world, increasing pluralism of sources of information, and contestation from below such as civil society or village elections.1

1 See, for example, Yun-han Chu, Chih-cheng Lo and Ramon H. Myers, eds., The New Chinese Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities after the 16th Party Congress (Cambridge: Cambridge
One recent development that brings all of these factors together is the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet, to the People’s Republic of China (PRC).\(^2\) At the core of the information technology revolution is the Internet, which was originally developed in the late 1960s for military and security reasons. Globalization, backed by a market-oriented economic philosophy—liberation, privatization, and deregulation, has helped boost the significant growth and diffusion of Internet technology in established democracies and most developing countries.\(^3\) As the information revolution (IT) now sweeping across Asia has widen the ordinary citizen’s access to information,\(^4\) it impels academics to ponder whether the IT revolution, beyond its economic repercussion, may pose any impact upon other arenas such as politics and society in Communist China, where popular opinion (\textit{yulun}) has been usually thought to be under the strict control of the Party and government, and thus manipulated by being limited to only official information sources and also guided by state-imposed agendas.

As witnessed, the Chinese media in the 1990s has been the rising tension between the greater degree of market competition and the media’s political role—the propaganda.\(^5\) Following the increasing commercialization of the Chinese media, it

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has carved potentially newer spaces of public expression both for journalists and ordinary people. Absolute media controls have seemingly given way to economic policies seeking to stimulate market competition. Press subsidies have also been increasingly cut down or even suspended and the media governing structures have been streamlined to better conform to the general principles of market economy. These changes in the media sector have resulted in the processes of de-centralization of media governance, specialization of media contents, and multiplication of media production and distribution. Whether the emergence of a commercialized media sector in China, including digital media like the Internet, has been democratizing in that it is closer to ordinary people, addressing at least some of their concerns, speaking their language, treating them as protagonists, and providing them with wider access to participate through their presence online, remains to be systematically further examined from a long term perspective. More specifically, is the Internet enhancing civil discourse, through which public opinion on domestic or foreign policies can be much expressed in a public form, and is it facilitating the emergence of “public space” in China? As the Chinese former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping bluntly put it:

Don’t think that a little mental pollution doesn’t matter much, that it’s nothing to be alarmed at. Some of its ill effects may not be immediately apparent. But unless we take them seriously and adopt firm measures right now to prevent their spread, many people will fall prey to them and be led astray, with grave consequences. In the long run, this question will determine what kind of people will succeed us to carry on the cause and what the future of the Party and state will be.” (October 12, 1983)
Deng’s attitude toward potential public opinion indeed sheds light on further enquiry into whether Internet-enabled public opinion could possibly influence the trajectory of future China’s political socioeconomic development. Could the Internet news outlets and cyber opinions evolve into course as what the Chinese authorities circumscribe and anticipate “…to serve the people, serve socialism, guide public opinion in the right direction, and uphold the interests of the country and the public good” (Article 3)? Does the formation of digital democracy have any political implications for China’s governance? These are secondly questions that situate under the category of two basic research questions, i.e., First, Is the Chinese government as much in control of public debates on the Internet as it is of debates in other forms of traditional media? Secondly, Does the Chinese government still control and manipulate public opinion as much as it has conventionally done?

**Literature Review**

For the past decades there has been a growing trend in Western democracies of declining trust and support of the governed in government, particularly in the United States. The mistrust between government and the governed is the subject of a collected volume, *Why People Don’t Trust Government*, in which a number of essays provide an account of the roots of and explanations for mistrust in the American context. The mistrust also reveals a problem for the future of governance. La Porte, Demchak and de Jone, for example, argue that the Internet has increasingly become

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the prime gateway for the public into government bureaucracies and their services in the information age. Governance ought to adapt accordingly.10

Increasingly, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has arguably made impact in the sphere of traditional institutions and processes of governance. In this regard, electronic governance is likely to impact the productivity and performance of the public sector, empowering electronic government to boost and revive citizen involvement within the governing process.11 This has something to do with digital democracy in the information age that we are living.

“Digital democracy”12 is usually viewed as the utilization of electronic communications technologies and networks in enhancing democratic processes and improving participation in democracy. Steven Clift, the founder of the world first Web forum with regard to digital democracy—the Minnesota E-Democracy Project13—argues, “E-democracy suggests greater and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today’s representative democracy as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges.”14 In short, digital democracy is closely related to civil online engagement in public affairs.

As far as digital democracy literature is concerned, Marshall McLuhan was one of the first scholars to explore the effects of media and technology on humankind. In

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12 Digital democracy is usually referred to as cyberdemocracy, e-democracy, electronic democracy and techno-democracy. The term teledemocracy was prevalent before e-democracy (digital democracy) was coined in 1994 in the midst of online civic efforts in Minnesota, United States.
his seminal book *The Medium Is the Message* (1967), McLuhan argued that people have historically associated messages with what people are saying (their content), and have tended to ignore the importance of the media. He reversed the traditional discourse of “content dominance over medium” and held that the medium is of great significance because the environment can heavily shape public messages. Moreover, McLuhan’s popular concept of the “global village” highlights that technologies are extensions of human beings. In his observations:

> In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action.\(^6\)

His vision of “global village” has shed light on a number of aspects of later literature about how the technological innovations may transform public lives, including the changes in contemporary political systems. In *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler examined the overwhelming impact of technological advance in the 1970s upon human lives. The society was undergoing a structural change from an “industrial society” to a “super-industrial society.”\(^7\) Toffler further considered the impact of the information and knowledge revolution on society, which he called “the third wave” following the second wave of the industrial revolution. In what he termed the “Twenty-first-century democracy,” he held that educated citizens could achieve “direct democracy” by “using advanced computers, satellites, telephones, cable, polling techniques, and other tools.”\(^8\)

Toffler’s visions have inspired others to explore the possibility of renewing the classical model of Athenian democracy associated with regular mass participation in

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public debate, consultation, and decision-making amongst the citizenry. In his influential work *Strong Democracy*, Benjamin Barber demonstrates the weakness of modern liberal democracy. He thinks that liberal democracy is a “thin democracy” in which “democratic values are prudential and thus provisional, optional, and conditional.” Instead, he proposes “strong democracy”—a new form of participatory politics for a new age. He states:

> *Strong democracy requires unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry. It requires institutions that will involve individuals at both the neighborhood and the national level in common talk, common decision-making and political judgment, and common action.*

The idea of the “television town meeting” can enhance, in Barber’s thought, “direct” public participation and citizen-powered decision-making process. In this regard, new technology as an intermediary medium is essential to achieve the “strong democracy” because citizens can conduct deliberative discussions and debate via the interactive form of electronic town meeting amongst (local) communities, and thus to improve “thin” democracy.

Indeed, one of the few practicable measures discussed in the 1980s was electronic town meetings via local cable television networks by which local citizens could discuss or debate local issues. Yet this concept of electronic of town conferences or electronic town hall meetings remains a more primitive and top-down mode of communication which preceded the commercialized application of the Internet. It was not until 1992 that the National Science Foundation of the United

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20 Ibid., p. 261.
States lifted the ban on commercial traffic on the Internet, thereby the earlier debates over “teledemocracy” encouraged a more innovative mode of mass participation in public affairs. In this respect, the Internet emerged to open up newer prospects for an Athenian democracy in the information age.

Ted Becker and Christa D. Slaton argue that a “new democratic paradigm”—electronic democracy and teledemocracy—is coming into being, which is characterized by the widespread application of advanced ICTs in present-day democratic theory and practice. To achieve teledemocracy, the critical mass is urged to synergize “scientific deliberative polling, comprehensive electronic town meetings and the Internet.”

Tony Kinder further presents the survey results of the application of teledemocracy in 31 European cities. Focusing on teledemocracy at the local (city) level, he argues that its adoption in those European cities under review has shown the increased level of interactivity between citizens and local councils, improved quality of services and enhanced services availability, which has beneficial effect on the quality and legitimacy of local government.

As a matter of fact, teledemocracy functions in a sense like neighborhood salons that help aggregate individual preferences into a collective choice. Online democratic practice involves Internet users participating in rational and critical deliberation and consultation, hence reviving the heated discussions about “public sphere” in cyberspace.

Since Habermas’s important publication, The Structural Transformation of the

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Public Sphere, about the rise and fall of the liberal bourgeois public, his continuously evolving theory of the “public sphere” has inspired numerous works on deliberative democracy and a more democratic media system. The notion of the Habermas’s theory of the public sphere is based upon the ideal of a “deliberative” as opposed to merely “informed” public. It is a “public” space between the state and civil society in which citizens can debate issues of common concern. As a result, a well-functioning public sphere is dependant on both on access to pertinent information about the actions of governmental institutions and opportunities for citizens to engage in rational and critical deliberation that results in the formation of public opinion and the shaping of governmental conduct.

The Introduction of the Internet into China and Its Diffusion

Information revolution is now sweeping across both industrial and emerging economies. At the core of the information technology revolution is the Internet, which was originally developed in the late 1960s for military and security reasons. Globalization, backed by a market-oriented economic philosophy—liberation, privatization, and deregulation, has helped boost the significant growth and diffusion of Internet technology in established democracies and most developing countries. ICTs are now an integral part of the whole realm of human activities. Manuel Castells notes that we have seen that ICT is (re)shaping the material basis of society at an accelerated pace. He argues that the new information-centered technological revolution is now fundamentally altering every aspect of our lives. In other words, it seems we live in a world, that in the expression of Nicholas Negroponte, has

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become “digital.” In another work, Castells goes on to describe work the specific role of the Internet as “the fabric of our lives,” adding that,

“...if information technology is the present-day equivalent of electricity in the industrial era, in our age the Internet could be likened to both the electrical grid and the electric engine because of its ability to distribute the power of information throughout the entire realm of human activity.”

Castell’s notions posit that political life has become so extensively situated within the domain of the networked media. This article itself does not, however, suggest that technology absolutely determines social activity, usually dubbed “technological determinism,” nor does the realm of society and politics condition the entire course of technological change, which is usually termed as “social determinism” or “social construction of technology.” Instead, it is premised in this paper as a two-way interaction between the technology and sociopolitical development.

In the Chinese context, as mainland China is gearing up to transform its economy from central planning into one of the world’s key IT-driven economies, it provides a crucial test case for other like-minded regimes—Vietnam and North Korea, particularly—as to the ways in which governments may handle the threat or grasp the economic opportunities from cyberspace. As Hu Angang, a renowned Chinese scholar, enthusiastically holds, China, under economic globalization, ought to adopt the knowledge-driven strategy as its most significant national development approach in the twenty-first century. He explains that the application of ICTs can not only “bridge the divide between China and developed countries in terms of knowledge

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32 See, for example, Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, eds., Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1994).
33 See, for example, Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, eds., The Social Shaping of Technology (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), second edition.
development, but also shrink the digital gap between hinterland and coastal China.\textsuperscript{34}

To date, Internet access has been expanding rapidly and extensively chiefly due to direct support and promotion by the Chinese government. As we may observe in the recent semi-annual survey report on the development of China’s Internet, released by the quasi-official China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), the estimated total number of Internet users by July 2005 was 103 million, the world’s second largest Internet market after the United States.\textsuperscript{35} The Table (1) below illustrates this.

Undeniably the Chinese government has acted as a vital driving force for boosting Internet and e-commerce diffusion. Anyhow, such an amazing quantity achievement within a rather short period of time coincides with Dali Yang’s argument that, although China is a latecomer to the Internet world, the government can act swiftly to play a key part in unleashing the Internet’s economic potential.\textsuperscript{36}

Table 1 Internet Growth in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Computer Hosts</th>
<th>Internet Users</th>
<th>Domain Names (.cn)</th>
<th>Web Sites</th>
<th>International Bandwidth (Mbps)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1997</td>
<td>299,000</td>
<td>620,000</td>
<td>4,066</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>18.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1998</td>
<td>542,000</td>
<td>11,750,000</td>
<td>9,415</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>84.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1999</td>
<td>747,000</td>
<td>2,100,000</td>
<td>18,396</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1999</td>
<td>1,460,000</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
<td>29,045</td>
<td>9,906</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2000</td>
<td>3,500,000</td>
<td>8,900,000</td>
<td>48,695</td>
<td>15,153</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2000</td>
<td>6,500,000</td>
<td>16,900,000</td>
<td>99,734</td>
<td>27,289</td>
<td>1,234</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 2001</td>
<td>8,920,000</td>
<td>22,500,000</td>
<td>122,099</td>
<td>265,405</td>
<td>2,799</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2001</td>
<td>10,020,000</td>
<td>26,500,000</td>
<td>128,362</td>
<td>242,739</td>
<td>3,257</td>
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<td>Jan. 2002</td>
<td>12,540,000</td>
<td>33,700,000</td>
<td>127,319</td>
<td>277,100</td>
<td>7,597.5</td>
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<td>July 2002</td>
<td>16,130,000</td>
<td>45,800,000</td>
<td>126,146</td>
<td>293,213</td>
<td>10,576.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jan. 2003</td>
<td>20,830,000</td>
<td>59,100,000</td>
<td>179,544</td>
<td>371,600</td>
<td>9,380</td>
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<td>July 2003</td>
<td>25,720,000</td>
<td>68,000,000</td>
<td>250,651</td>
<td>473,900</td>
<td>18,599</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 2004</td>
<td>30,890,000</td>
<td>79,500,000</td>
<td>340,040</td>
<td>595,550</td>
<td>27,216</td>
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<td>July 2004</td>
<td>36,300,000</td>
<td>87,000,000</td>
<td>382,216</td>
<td>626,600</td>
<td>53,941</td>
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<td>Jan. 2005</td>
<td>41,600,000</td>
<td>94,000,000</td>
<td>432,077</td>
<td>668,900</td>
<td>74,429</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2005</td>
<td>45,600,000</td>
<td>103,000,000</td>
<td>622,534</td>
<td>677,500</td>
<td>82,617</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Case Study: Who Ditched You, Shenzhen?

The case is about an online controversial article, which appeared on cyber discussion fora under the title of “Who Ditched You, Shenzhen,” (Shenzhen, ni bei she pao qi) written on November 16, 2002, by a Chinese Netizen nicknamed “wo wei yi kuang” (crazy for her). The 18,000-characters long article, permeated with pessimism with regard to the future prospects of Shenzhen, one of the country’s most successful Special Economic Zones, provided illustrations of many sorts of deep-seated problems there, such as the inefficient government agencies, city development, social security, urban environment management and the fact that several leading IT corporations, banks and multinationals had shifted their headquarters to Shanghai. Surprisingly, the article was swiftly circulated and widely discussed online and offline with the result that Shenzhen and its relevant issues generated a good deal of cyber debates such as the comparisons of future developments between the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta, the integrated cooperation between Shenzhen and Hong Kong (better known as Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, CEPA), as well as the prospects for Shenzhen city. This has at last contributed to a later face-to-face dialog between the author and the city’s mayor.

As a matter of fact, an online critical essay would rarely attract as much attention as this. In addition to featured Web sites launched by popular Chinese Internet portals such as Sina, Sohu and Netease, the traditional and mainstream media also picked up the momentum to cover this hot issue. Dramatically, on January 19, 2003, nearly two

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months after the article was posted online, the author took part in a roundtable discussion with the then-mayor of Shenzhen, Yu Youjun. This has indeed marked for the first time that a high-profile government official would conduct a face-to-face and two-and-half-hour conversation with an ordinary cyber writer regarding his popularly known critical essay. During the discussion, former Mayor Yu acknowledged, “Your article has not only caught the attention of Web readers but also the government. I saw the article the second day [after it was posted online]. A colleague of mine in the office downloaded it for me. I read it two, three times and was deeply impressed.” And he also summed up his talk with the author as “equal, candid and democratic” dialogs. Later, an “Investigation and Study Group” from the State Council also went and visited Shenzhen in late July 2003 to collect opinions and comments for the city’s future planning and development. The author, together with Shenzhen officials, was all invited to a discussion with the Group. In other words, it sent a message at the very least that the leaders in Beijing are now willing to pay more attention to opinion expressed in cyberspace.

In addition to the official meeting with the cyber writer, the Shenzhen government proactively responded to a wide range of online contributions—queries and critiques—by launching a government-centered Web site in order to possibly direct and guide public debates in favor of the government and its designated policies. The Web site (http://www.southcn.com/news/gdnews/hotspot/szbbhpq/) set up by

Southcn.com portal (Nanfang Wang, The Southern Net) is under the auspices of the propaganda department of Guangdong province. The quasi-official Web site conveyed an unambiguous message from the then-Mayor Yu that “So long as Shenzhen citizens don’t abandon their city, no one could abandon it.”

This case marks a significant milestone for good interactions between local government and citizens. The extent to which the public opinion and debates will be guided and manipulated in “right” and “correct” directions upheld by the government is yet another issue that is beyond the scope of this article. The authorities do give more weight to public opinion that is facilitated and mediated by the ICTs. In this regard, this has effectively profound political implications in light of governance in the Chinese context.

Firstly, despite the Chinese government Web presence mostly for the purpose of propaganda, the interactive mechanism between the governed and government initiated online may in a sense invite “virtual” public participation in the better solution of public affairs and in turn stimulate and nurture gradual deliberative discourse upon which “strong” democracy precisely rests. The public participation in the decision-making process that is facilitated in cyberspace has on the other hand effectively widened the channels for the China government, whether local and central, to gather public opinion when initiating public policies. Public opinion articulated online is not merely an indulgently personal venting, but profoundly a positive involvement in public affairs in an opener and freer public domain that is less

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42 There are a number of channels that the PRC governments may gauge public opinion. Except for traditional press and media, such as internal references written and/or compiled by the official Xinhua News Agency, meetings of Party Congress, People’s Congress, and People’s Political Consultative Conferences are common ways that are adopted by the authorities. Uniquely there is an official mechanism, dubbed “xinfang zhidu” (petition system), which is usually referred to as the system of letters and visits by ordinary people.
constrained by officially sanctioned agendas or editorial polices in traditional media. This is why public opinion mediated in Chinese cyberspace is particularly significant from the governance perspective.

Secondly, this controversial article has also aroused citizens from different cities to query their local authorities about its city development and prospects. In a similar vein, issues like “Xiamen, Who Has Abandoned You?” and “Shanghai, Who Is to Ditch You?” are frequently raised and debated on the Internet chat rooms. In other words, this classic case highlights the “virtual” demonstration effect in digital democracy, in which local Netizens are inspired by precedents to take a bolder stance to demand a responsive and effective government toward their policies. This kind of “virtual” participation and online consultation sharply contrasts the traditional political participation in which there are only limited participatory spaces for getting involved in National/Provincial People’s Congress and the National/Provincial Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. As a result, the case _per se_ has not only made online public opinion heard by the authorities, but has also held officials more accountable and responsive to citizens’ needs. Most importantly, the enhanced civic participation in public affairs regarding city-based development is distinctive in ways that were unavailable to past generations.

As Joseph S. Nye Jr. maintains, information dissemination implies that “…power is more distributed and networks tend to undercut the monopoly of traditional bureaucracy.” The speed of the Internet has thereby to some extent constrained governments’ agenda, requiring more rapid responses to events.43 In the Shenzhen case, the interactions between the local government officials and the cyber writer appear at first glance only to affirm seemingly positive and effective public

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communication. What should not be simply overlooked, however, is that underpinning this virtuous circle is the Internet-enabled public opinion. To restore the government's credibility and public trust, and to strengthen its hand, the Shenzhen city council took the revolutionary step of keeping abreast of the changing opinion of its citizens, and trying to respect the right of the people to have access to government information. Given that the public opinion discoursed and debated in cyberspace may not be allowed the final say on the direction of development of the city, the change of public attitudes and sociopolitical behavior has a far-reaching impact on the government in connection with its roles, institutions and bureaucracies in the information age. In this sense, the Communist government has gradually taken public opinion more into consideration when initiating and implementing public policies. This has also contributed to a better response to expressions of popular will and potentially the increase of Chinese government legitimacy and support.

**Implication of Digital Democracy for China’s Governance**

As it has been widely perceived, the Chinese government has conventionally practiced “a system of information control and censure, with an intricate grading process for who at what level is allowed to see which kinds of information.”\(^{44}\) This is, in one respect, in order for the Communist regime to rein in information flows and uses, ensuring the central (Party) leaders can govern its subject more effective. In theory, the mass media in China is to serve people and have them voice their needs, so that the Party may adjust their policies in accordance with their needs. In practice, however, “the press fulfills this task more in the manner of a secret police than that of a public forum, using inner dossiers and the careful selection of letter to the editor by

special ‘mass work departments’…”45 As a result, the mass media in China are usually seen as an extension of the Party-state, popularly dubbed “mouth and tongue”46 (hou-she) of the Party. In other words, the mass media is traditionally exploited by the authorities to serve as tools of propaganda (xuanchuan jiaoyu) and for purposes of agenda-setting (yulun daoxiang).47 It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to become the mediaspace for true and deliberative public discussions to take place.

Indeed, while Western concepts of “public opinion” have been extensively addressed, there has been a dearth of scholarship on China’s counterpart. It is partly because this reflects the political reality in China that publicly posting unauthorized bills like posters in the street are banned. For one thing, those who have long been accustomed to perceiving communist China as an autocratic regime believe that the top communist leaders need not give any heed to what their people think, let alone the idea that public opinion may influence government policy. Since the legitimacy of the regime is fundamentally not based upon the majority support of the electorate as we have seen in Western liberal democracies, outsiders may form the impression of a total monopoly of Chinese government control over its media as well as its effective tools of political manipulation. In other words, under the cardinal guidelines of Chinese political correctness, the Chinese public are often perceived as unlikely to form any independent opinions over political expression, and thus extremely difficult to make any significant impact upon public policies. But things may be changing

47 As Lowell Dittmer notes, public opinion, prior to the mid-1990s in China, was primarily referred to “…leadership views as reflected in the official media which the masses are expected to share.” See Lowell Dittmer, “The Politics of Publicity in Reform China,” in Chin-chuan Lee (ed.), China’s Media, Media’s China (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), p. 90.
because of rising public opinion and governance thanks to the introduction of information technologies.

In the wake of new information technologies, new ideas about governance have emerged both in the developed and in the developing worlds, stressing greater bureaucratic transparency, institutional effectiveness and efficiency, and administrative openness, convenience and interactivity. The various government agencies and organizations may consequently on the one hand enable more effective problem solving in less expense of government such as transaction costs and on the other hand assure greater citizen participation, which is closely related with social capital, in public affairs than in the past. In a sense, this can be argued as principal and integral threads of electronic government (e-government) in the Internet age.48

Social scientists have well noted that the mode of computer-mediated communications (CMCs) utilized by individuals and civic network groups may shape and facilitate grassroots democracy, bringing ordinary people and opposition parties as well as dissent groups into the democratic participatory processes, and possibly curing the flawed of democratic government.49 The rationale holds that with more civic engagement in public discourse online, the concept of government/governance may transform into a regime which is more accountable and responsive to its people, in particular in those authoritarian states. In this regard, the Internet-enhanced democratic revival could foster the democratic potential to become a more open and deliberative online platform particularly for periphery groups to engage in public

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48 For instance, the World Bank Web site on E*Government defines e-government as “…the use by government agencies of information technologies that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, business, and other arms of government.” And the goals for e-government are delineated as “…better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management.” See <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/definition.htm>, accessed September 30, 2005.

discourse than that of traditional media like newspaper and television.

Moreover, it is often argued that new technologies could transform the mode of political communication and that this in turn may alter the nature of political participation, as well as the milieu in which political discussions are made. Against the backdrop is that academics and politicians have usually concerned about the defective nature of government in modern democratic practices and institutions, resulting in the increased deterioration in the quality of civic discourse, the rising level of public cynicism and the erosion of public participation as well as social trust. The outcome of civic disengagement with public affairs, institutions and governments have accordingly plagued both well-established democracies and newly democratizing states across the world, reinforcing citizens’ disenchantment with, if not alienation from, political processes.

In the case of China, the new media like the Internet and blogs have increasingly empowered grass-roots citizens to acquire, disseminate and exchange (alternative) information from outside, which is usually unavailable from the official media. This has indeed reinvigorated the popular concept “yu lun jiandu”—supervisory function of public opinion mediated and enabled by the mainstream media and the Internet—to be possibly realized under current political atmosphere. To the CCP, “yu lun jiandu” is a valuable supplement to the traditional form of supervisory roles lead by the

52 The Chinese term “yu lun jiandu” was first raised in the CCP Central Committee’s “Political Report” delivered to the Party’s 13th Congress (1987) and consecutively repeated in the 14th (1992), 15th (1997), and 16th (2002) congresses.
“Commission for Discipline Inspection” (jilu jiancha weiyuanhui) at various levels, when particularly corruption is rampant across China. As such, the mechanism of “yulun jiandu” is somewhat democratic governance for it not only acknowledges the importance of public opinion but also incorporates it into better-functioned administration in Communist China where market economy has been deeply taking root and replying more upon efficient and effective governance.

Without doubt, the stern Internet control over Chinese cyberspace by the authorities, primarily the propaganda departments and public security organs, has never given way to the liberal philosophy of free flow of information on the Net. They have instead relentlessly contained the medium which from time to time runs afoul of government-imposed agendas and state-initiated policies. In addition to occasions of major socio-economic crisis such as the SARS outbreak, official surveillance of the Internet contents and discussions is especially tight at times of particular significance to the regime, such as the congresses of the China Communist Party (CCP) and the National People’s Congress. A number of measures and guidance are adopted by the authorities to maintain its control over the Net as they have traditionally done to the traditional media. These measures range from imposing great Net firewall, censoring, filtering and blocking websites, tough Internet regulations, criminal penalty, to promoting self-censorship among Internet practitioners and Net users. Yet the Internet control in China is not foolproof, nor has the Internet

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governance achieved much success there.\textsuperscript{56} In part this is because clearly defined implementation mechanisms are deficient,\textsuperscript{57} and loopholes do exist. It is therefore the Internet, online chatrooms and personal blogs, have incrementally created a shift in mass communication that allows the public to speak and debate en masse. There are indeed political implications in light of digital governance in an authoritarian regime like China.

One of the most important implications is that the “virtual” public discourse enabled via Internet fora has effectively pushed and even challenged the sanctioned boundary of free speech; they have demanded a greater degree of response and accountability from the government toward public affairs that concern local citizens. In other words, the evidence generated from Shenzhen’s case may suggest that public opinion mediated in Chinese cyberspace has had an impact on the government in a way that leads to a more transparent and accountable governing system there. Internet users may not directly or quickly subvert communist rule, nevertheless, they have maneuvered and mobilized the deemed “reactionary” power to frequently challenge the government’s perceived agendas and bring forth sociopolitical relaxation, albeit it is still premature to talk about political democratization for the time being.

\section*{Conclusion}

Ever since the late Qing dynasty in the second half of the 19th century, modernization has been the major project for Chinese leaders as they compete with their Western counterparts, as well as their more recently developing neighbors in East Asia. The

\textsuperscript{56} See, for example, Assafa Endeshaw, “Internet Regulation in China: The Never-ending Cat and Mouse Game,” \textit{Information & Communications Technology Law}, Vol. 13, No.1, March 2004, pp. 41-57.

core of modernization at the time of the Qing dynasty was to industrialize China to safeguard the country from Western commercial and military aggression. To make China a strong (qiang) and wealthy (fu) state was the top priority of the newly established Republican government. In Mao’s China, the “Great Leap Forward” (da-yue-jin) in the late 1950s epitomized his ambition to speed up the process of industrialization, which he conceived of as a nationwide mobilization to construct a massive steel and iron sector as the strategic industry in the development of a communist society. Nonetheless, Mao did not succeed in hauling China out of its still desperate backwardness. Instead, following the disastrous “Cultural Revolution,” a series of government measures were implemented, known as the “second revolution,” under Deng Xiaoping’s reign. Deng’s successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, have also addressed the theme, with different national strategies that reflect the information age. In Jiang’s words, “Digitalization will become a power house in the modernization process, and information technology (IT) is one of China’s top priorities and a driving force behind the country’s economic development.”

Entering the Internet age, the Chinese state is witnessed to assure its economic competitiveness in a globalized context where information largely drives global and domestic economy. The government keenly bolsters the development of information and network technology, but at the same time, it has been persistently trying to minimize the undesirable effects that the Internet has brought about since it was introduced in the early 1990s. Because the political impact of the Internet has caused

58 In Deng’s words, “The reform we are now carrying out is very daring. But if we do not carry it out, it will be hard for us to make progress. Reform is China’s second revolution. It is something very important that we have to undertake even though it involves risks.” Deng Xiaoping, “Reform is China’s Second Revolution,” Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1998), available at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol3/text/c1160.html>, accessed May 30, 2002.

the Beijing government unease as it threatens its long-held monopoly over the flow of information, the regime has adopted a variety of strategies to harness it, limit the sociopolitical impact of the new technology to an acceptable degree, and hopefully to turn it to the government’s benefit, particularly in the prospects of e-commerce, e-government and scientific benefits.

Still, when ICTs converge on the political environment in China, ICTs allow the greater possibilities of the public gaining more latitude in expressing opinions. Empirical evidence reveals the Chinese government has long been torn by the ambivalence brought about by the Internet: the Internet as an engine to drive economic growth on the one hand and as a subversive challenge to undermine the ruling Communist Party on the other hand. As a consequence, controls other than stifling ICTs would be critical for the CCP’s agenda to achieve the century-long modernization process and in the meantime, consolidate its power.

Indeed, while the government can exert some control over the Web contents and messages/information posed online, the state control over the new medium is indeed diminishing, when particularly compared with traditional press and mass media. The Internet has in fact incrementally created a shift in mass communication that allows the public to speak en masse as the empirical evidence of Shenzhen case illustrates.

The case provides episodic evidence that the Internet has already made a difference in China since its wider application from the late 1990s. The increasingly intense glare of the Internet and other ICTs has enhanced the public’s awareness of the government’s warts and blemishes. In this respect, this incident reveals two significantly interwoven implications: it shows on the one part the increasing difficulty of constraining a story when more and more Chinese Netizens are gaining access online, and on the other part, it manifests that popular opinion in China today
is not going to be as easily controlled and manipulated as it was before the introduction of the Internet to the mainland.

There is an interesting quote by former President Jiang Zemin, which was in response to the question of how China would be changed by the Internet:

*I'm getting old and sometimes I have trouble using a mouse. But my grandson is very good at navigating the Internet. I tell him that there is a positive side to the Internet, because it can help promote the spread of information and understanding. And there is a negative side, which is when misinformation is spread. So I tell my grandson that he should use the Internet to enrich knowledge, and he should not use it to visit pornographic sites. But my grandson lives far away from me. I cannot tell him what to do. I can only advise him what to do."

It seems the Chinese leadership begin to realize that the Internet will be increasingly difficult to administer despite its heavy-handed control, and the reality is often the case that the authorities may only regulate and intimidate but not compulsorily direct Internet users how precisely to navigate online. After all, the new media like the Internet may bring about a potentially subversive challenge to the communist rule in the future because the long-practiced information control mechanism as one of its key pillars to maintaining political power has been growingly confronted. As Nina Hachigian notes, “If Internet use continues to grow in China, and an economic or political crisis occurs, the Internet will suddenly become both a field and a tool of battle.” This is actually an extension of arguments held by some commentators that the Internet’s impact upon authoritarian regimes will consequently heighten political

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challenges in a crisis. This has profound political implications for other authoritarian countries.

To sum up, the dramatic increase in alternative information available online is potentially a great challenge to the CCP’s propaganda-filled media environment. The Internet-enabled public opinion in China is, as a result, bound to grow significance in the future. After all, the Internet’s political impact will be shaped and determined less by the intrinsic nature of the Internet itself, and more by the underlying political dynamics of public opinion.

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Bruce Bimber, for example, coins the phrase “accelerated pluralism” to show that the Internet will facilitate grassroots mobilization and civic organization, and it will particularly accelerate the process of “…an intensification of group-centered, pluralistic politics. See Bruce Bimber, “The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism,” Polity, Vol. 31, No. 1, Fall 1998, pp. 133-160.