

Citizenry Participation: A critical perspective

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At the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, socialist democracy and harmony was defined as part of China's national modernisation goal to be accomplished within the first two decades of the 21st century. China has since developed a series of new regulations and initiatives aiming at increasing governance transparency and encouraging citizenry participation. This article discusses citizenry participation under the backdrop of the contemporary Chinese society. Drawing on recent internet development and application data, the article discusses opportunities and challenges of using internet as a platform to promote political democracy in China. Strategies to deal with the perceived challenge are articulated based on critiques on Habermas's ideal of public sphere and Paulo Freire's theory of participatory communication. The proposition this article argues for is that participation is not a gift bestowed by the government to its citizenry. It is a societal action performed by the citizen. The perception of participation as a societal action implies two crucial aspects of constructive participation, namely responsibility and capability of participation.

KEY WORDS: *political democracy, citizenry participation, public sphere*

Introduction

At the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (2002) it was resolved that socialist democracy and political civilization form part of China's modernisation goal of the first 20 years of the 21st Century. The Chinese government has since introduced a series of regulations and initiatives to facilitate the accomplishment of this goal. One of the most influential initiatives is the introduction of the Regulation on Publishing Governmental

Information. The regulation was passed at the Executive Meeting of the State Council in January 2007 and reinforced from May 2008. The Regulation recognises the right of the public to be informed and to participate. It requires governments of all levels to make information concerning public interests available. This is a significant step moving away from the traditional distribution system of “Red Letter Head” document, which treat most of governmental document as confidential information. Another prominent initiative is the promotion of e-governance. Chinese President Hu Jintao demonstrated his determination for this cause by visiting the People Network and having a symbolic live chat online with internet users in June 2008. Imitating Hu’s conduct, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao did his online live chat in February 2009. Subsequently, local governments of all levels setup “online hearing” links as public feedback channels. Could internet be a catalyst for radical political transformation in China? This study explored the role of internet in practicing political democracy in China. Habermas’ ideal of public sphere was applied as conceptual framework. Drawing on recent statistical data and information of internet development in China; content analysis of online forum and discussion on the Chinese People Network; and a questionnaire based survey in a rural area in north of Guangdong, this article observed that the sustained rapid development of internet application by Chinese people in recent years. The enthusiasm of Chinese government for advocating political communication via internet presented a promising prospect for political democracy in China. China’s conceptualisation of democracy was explored to strengthen the relevance of the discussion. Finally, critical challenges facing the Chinese government and people on the adventure towards political participation and democracy were examined.

1. The Paradox of freedom on the net

Internet is one of the most influential information technologies developed in the twentieth century. It is regarded by some scholars as a means for the democracy that, as coined by Habermas, emphasises the processes of norm and value formation taking the form of discursive public communications (Calhoun 1992). Most significantly, internet is perceived as an alternative to the top-down, one-to-many, and centralised broadcasting mass media. It offers a decentralised network which potentially allows access to free information, balanced information flow, and public digital dialogues. The new medium thus has inspired the hope of liberation from the oppression of the “old” mass media.

Internet is hailed as a means for democracy also because it has “given freedom of speech its biggest boost” since the first amendment of United State’s Constitution (Thussu 2006). Internet offers the possibility to break the restriction of the mass media by unmaking the media consensus on what and who should have access to the public sphere. As an alternative medium, internet 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).

Technically, the internet allows interactivity among users, multidirectional and spontaneous flow of communication, boundary-free access by the public, publication without gatekeepers and anonymity of participants. It provides “the means for highly differentiated provision of political information and ideas, almost unlimited access in theory for all voices, and much feedback and negotiation between leaders and followers” (McQuail 2005).

However, the perceptions of the role of internet as a means for democracy are diverse. Some scholars argued that internet did not practically fulfil its original promises. While it is agreed by many that internet has the potential to be a democratising means, 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) 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 existing problem of digital divide.

The ultimate function of internet is determined by factors beyond the technological ones. Some political economists argued that what determined the future of new media is politics, not technology (Williams 2003). First of all, digital divide, which exists between and inside nations causes both economical and political problems. Along with the progresses of internet

technology and its application, the gaps between technologically rich and poor is expanding. 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 de-regulation and privatisation of the media industries (Williams 2003). Without appropriate intervention, the internet might bring about another elitist media realm that excludes the disadvantaged.

Political power is another determinant that cannot be neglected. While the internet offers the potential for the public to express alternative views, to debate issues of interest and to criticise the authority, the ruling power is not sitting there idly. New information technology such as filtering software and protocols has made censorship by governments more effective (Thussu 2006). There is also evidence that the internet has been turned into another branch of the propaganda machine by political parties (McQuail 2005). New information technology thus may be used as efficient means for manipulation and oppression as well for democracy and liberation.

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 that 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 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 stress the need for a dialogical approach to

technology. It is naive to think that technological potential will 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. Habermas’ notion of public sphere

Public sphere was first coined by Jurgen Habermas in his famous book entitled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1961. In the book, Habermas constructed the “bourgeois public sphere” in the backdrop of the eighteen-century societies of British, France, and Germany. He defined the bourgeois public sphere as the sphere of private people coming together as a public, and engaged the public authorities in public debates over general rules governing relations in the civil society (Habermas 1989). The following are some observations derived from Habermas’ conceptualisation of public sphere.

Public sphere was the medium between the “private realm” and the “public authority” (Habermas 1989). The public sphere was included in private realm as it was constituted by private people. It was coextensive with public authority, in the form of state publicity. Therefore, the functioning of public sphere was a process of intercommunication between the civil society and the state authority. The political function of public sphere was to transform the “political authority” into “rational authority” through open dialogues between the civil society and the state authority, and amongst the publics.

Habermas identified two roles assumed by the bourgeois in public sphere - property owner and human being. He argued that privatised individuals possessed both the roles simultaneously in public sphere (Habermas 1989). As property owners, the privatised individuals communicated through rational-critical debate “in the political realm”. As human beings, they communicated through critical debate “in the world of letters” about experiences of their subjectivity. As property owners, the bourgeois 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 bourgeois assumed all aspects of

humanity rooted in their experiences and education. Habermas contended that the dual identity of the public was the foundation of a fully developed bourgeois public sphere. He 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).

The “bourgeois” engaged in the public sphere as public. Together they communicated as a citizenry in the name of the civil society and on behalf of the public. The abstraction and generalisation of the privatised individuals as a public characterised the equality and liberty of the public sphere. This perception represented at least two implications. Public sphere was a public forum allowing equal and liberal communication process. Habermas claimed that communicating as a public, the bourgeois “were already under the implicit law of the parity of all cultivated persons”, and able to take part in critical public debates “without regard to all pre-existing social and political rank and in accord with universal rules” (Habermas 1989). He maintained that the public opinion generated under these conditions was in accordance with reason and quite just and right. Another implication of perceiving the public sphere as being public was the universal accessibility to it. Habermas stressed universal accessibility as a principle of the public sphere with which the civil society stood or fell. He asserted that a public sphere without universal access was not significant at all. The word “universal” in the context of the eighteen-century bourgeois public sphere actually had a boundary. It only referred to “cultivated persons”. Then there were a large number of people who missed the opportunity of being educated, therefore were excluded from the bourgeois public sphere, thus, in a strict sense, was not universally accessible. This is essentially one of major shortcomings and needs to be addressed when applying Habermas’ theory to the contemporary world.

Habermas has constructed an idealistic equal, liberal and universal accessible public sphere bearing the mission to channelise the communication process between the Authority and the Public. Notwithstanding the historical and geographical applicability of Habermas’ theory, the ideal of democratising a society implicates the rhetorical rational of public communication originated in the ancient Athens, and, also the emancipation theory of participatory communication of modern South America. It offers a useful framework for investigating the interrelations among media, communication and democracy.

3. Internet and citizen participation in China

China is one of the fastest emerging economies in the 21st Century. The development of its information technology, typically the internet, matches well with its economic development. This section provides background information of internet development and citizen participation in China.

3.1 Internet development

China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) has been conducting surveys and publishing reports on internet development in China twice a year. CNNIC’s statistical report on internet development in China is one of the most comprehensive and reliable information resources of China’s internet and mobile development. It is widely cited within as well as outside China.

3.1.1 Population of net citizen and its Distribution

The 28th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (hereafter referred to as the 28th SR) was launched in July 2011. In the 28th SR, the term “net citizen” was defined as Chinese citizens aged six or above who accessed the internet over the six months before the survey taking place (CNNIC 2011). The Report revealed that a typical Chinese internet user was a young man or woman holding a school certificate and lived in city.

Significant disparities were found in the distribution of internet user population by location, age, and education. According to the 28th SR, China’s net citizen population has reached 485 million by the end of June 2011, counting 36.2% of the national population. Of the net citizen, 27% lived in rural areas. The majority (80.5%) were between the age of 10 and 39.

Table 3.1.1 Distribution of User Population by Age

Age groups	Percentage
Below 10	1.3
10-19	26
20-29	30.8
30-39	23.2
40-49	11.6
50-59	4.8
60 and above	2.4

(CNNIC’s 28th SR)

Education level of the internet user population was generally low. The majority (69%) 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 3.1.2 Distribution of Internet User Population by Education

Education level	Percentage of the Internet User Population
Primary school or under	8.7
Junior high school	35.1
Senior high school	33.9
Junior college	10.5
Higher education	11.7

(CNNIC’s 28th SR)

The application of internet in China was mostly as an information resource. According to the 28th SR, the top four categories of internet applications by Chinese users were online search (79.6%), instant messaging (79.4%), online music (78.7%) and online news (74.7).

3.1.2 Regional Digital Divide

CNNIC’s 28th SR showed significant digital divide between regions. Online infrastructure development appeared to be positively correlated with economic development status. The most digitalised regions were economically developed ones, while the least digitalised were mostly less developed in economy. The three provinces/municipalities topped the list of website numbers in China were Beijing, Guangdong, and Zhejiang. The same three provinces/municipalities were the top three regions 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 were Ningxia, Qinghai, and Tibet.

Table 3.1.5 Most and Least Wired Regions

Provinces (municipalities)	Percentage of IPv4 Addresses in China	Percentage of Websites in China
Beijing	25.5	16.3
Guangdong	9.6	15.8
Zhejiang	5.3	10.6
Ningxia	0.2	0.2
Qinghai	0.2	0.1
Tibet	0.1	0.1

(CNNIC's 28th SR)

3.2 Online forum content analysis

The content analysis of PN's online user forums aimed to study the coverage of the online discussions. PN was selected because of its significance in China's online political communication. It is the online version of People's Daily, one of the major national official newspapers in China. Observation between 15th March 2010 and 29th March 2010 saw daily visiting counts of PN going above two millions. It is a channel by which Chinese officials gain access to opinions and thoughts of the publics. PN was chosen by President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to do their live chats with internet users, in June 2008 and February 2009 respectively. President Hu told Chinese internet users that the Nation Strengthening Forum (NSF) on the PN was one of the websites he usually visited to gather public opinions (PeopleNetwork 2008). This research included analysis of the "hot topics" of the PN and those posted on the NSF. Preliminary observation showed that dissent voices took up a considerable proportion of the online discussions. It was also observed that discussion topics were mostly about urban issues. Therefore, the content analysis was focused on the following categories in order to explore the coverage gap between rural and urban issues, and the orientation of political dissent voices.

Table 3.2.1 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.

3.2.1 Coverage of hot topics on the PN

The PN conducts its daily ranking of hot topics by counting number of responses to each topic posted on the PN. A list of the Top 100 topics, which have attracted the most responses, is generated daily and announced on the PN. The sample for this study included PN's Top 100 Hot Topic List of 29th March, 30th March, 31st March, and 1st April 2010. Table 3.2.2 outlines the coverage of the top 100 hot topics of the four sampled days.

Table 3.2.2 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 PN 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.

3.2.2 Coverage of discussion on the NSF

The NSF online anonymous participatory forum contains discussions supposedly political and aimed at strengthening the nation. The sample of this study included 1200 messages posted on the NSF at the following time slots:

Table 3.2.3 Sample Time slots of the NSF

Time/Date
18.35 – 20.05, 28 th March 2010
10.40 – 17.40, 31 st March 2010
22.20 31 st March – 11.20 1 st 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 3.2.4.

Table 3.2.4 NSF 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 NSF 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.

3.3 Observation of official websites of provincial governments in mainland China

President Hu and Prime Minister Wen's online live 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. PN reported that the President and Prime Minister's online 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). Observation of official websites of provincial governments in China was conducted in order to measure the range to which the claimed "fashion of online hearing" had reached. The observation covered all the 31 websites of the Chinese provinces and municipalities administrated directly under the Central Government.

As observed on 10th April 2010, all the 31 websites of the provincial governments in mainland China had established their "online hearing" links. Most of the links (27 out of 31) were labelled as personal "mailbox" of the chiefs of the governments. The four exceptions included Henan Province labelled the online hearing link as "Online Petitions"; Yunnan Province directed the online hearing link to the provincial People's Congress, instead of the chief of the government; and Shanxi Province and Guangxi Province labelled the online hearing link as "Comments and Suggestions". 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".

3.4 Questionnaire based survey of residents of Jintang

The survey of residents of Jintang aimed to explore the problem of digital divide. The questionnaire based survey was carried out in 2008 in Jintang. Guangdong is a developed province in terms of its economy and internet capacity. It has the highest GDP ranking in

China in recent years. Guangdong's GDP was 3.9 trillion yuan in 2009 (PeopleNetwork 2009). As showed above in Table 3.1.5, Guangdong was also one of the three provinces with most IPv4 addresses and websites in 2009. However, development in Guangdong is largely unbalanced. The northern mountainous region 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. In Jintang, 350 questionnaires were distributed among the households. Results of the survey of 219 valid responses included:

1) Most of the household in Jintang 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 technological development 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 lack of financial resource (54.63%), lack of knowledge of technology (24.07%), and lack of 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.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The above findings reveal that Chinese government and its people were embracing the new information technology for political communication. This encouraging outlook was built along three dimensions, namely technology, institution, and the publics. First of all, internet had developed rapidly and steadily in China in recent years. Secondly, Chinese state and local governments had demonstrated willingness to institutionalise e-governance and promote

political participation. Finally, the users were using internet as a tool for information and expression. These three dimensions offer an effective analysis structure to explore the opportunities and challenges of using internet as a means for political participation.

4.1 Technology

The findings supported the assertion that China had become one of the most wired countries in the world. In terms of infrastructure, internet is widely accessible in China, thanks to the government's nation project of "Connecting Every Village" (Wang 2008). The finding also revealed serious digital divide in China. It is beyond a shadow of a doubt that building the material network to have every village physically connected is an enormous task. However, it is a harder and more complicated issue to have the technology used effectively. Digital divide existed inter-regionally as well as intra-regionally, as demonstrated in the above discussions. These disparities had dwarfed internet's role as an equal, liberal, and universal accessible public sphere. The finding supported the prospects that internet was used more by the minority who had acquired greater online capacity due to their existing political, cultural or social advantages. 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 PN showed that topics relevant to rural issues counted less than 1% in both of the Top 100 Hot Topics and the discussions on the NSF. The rural society's "Aphonia Online" was 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 had less online capacity, were marginalised in political participation. Therefore, 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 constrains economic development and political participation. In this sense, the internet, to the powerless and disadvantaged, is a technology of oppression, rather than one of freedom. Daniel Lerner labelled the negative reciprocal impacts between economic and communication development as "the vicious circle of poverty" (Lerner 2010). A start must be made to break this vicious circle for the rural people to be able to access not only the technology but also its benefits.

4.2 Institution

Chinese government's promotion of internet as a platform for political participation reflects the needs for political democracy development in China. These needs have been developed as the result of the pull-and-push forces of the government and its people. It might seem unimaginable to some people that political democracy is encouraged by the Chinese government. This might be partially, if not entirely, due to differences in perceptions of democracy. Notably, in Chinese official discourses, the term "democracy" is seldom used by itself. Usually it is used in conjunction with an adjective, either "socialist" (socialist democracy) or "people's" (people's democracy). Chinese socialist theorists claim that China's political system is "people's democratic system under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party" (Yang 2008). People's democracy refers to the system of people's congress. The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is regarded as the foundation and warrantee for socialist political democracy (Yang 2008). Apart from the leadership of the CCP, another distinction of China's socialist political democracy is the articulation about the relationship between individual interests and collective interests. Socialist political democracy places collective interests above individual interests (Yang 2008). Under this conceptualisation, democracy does not seem to be in conflict with the upholding of CCP's leadership in China. On the contrast, socialist political democracy is a means for strengthening CCP's leadership. By looking at Chinese official documents and propaganda materials, one could find that development of socialist political democracy has been repeatedly mentioned by Chinese state and CCP leaders and appeared in almost every major report of the state government (e.g. annual government reports) and of the Central Committee of CCP (e.g. national congress reports of the CCP) since 1978. The end of 1970s was a turning point in the history of the People's Republic of China, when the Cultural Revolution ended and the country started its journey of reform and opening. Development of socialist political democracy was urged in the 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, the late Chinese leader who was widely recognised as the "chief architect" of China's modernisation. Deng's proposition of the relationship between democracy and socialism was an important component of his theory of "socialism with Chinese characteristics". In 1979, Deng pointed out that "without democracy there would be no socialism, and thus no socialist modernisation" (Research Institute 2008). Deng's theory has been supported and followed by his successors Jiang Zemin (in office from 1989 to 2003) and Hu Jintao (in office from 2003

to present). In his speech at the Central Party School of the CCP in 2002, Jiang Zemin suggested that socialist political democracy development was an important objective of socialist modernisation in China (Yang 2008). In 2004, Hu Jintao called for institutionalisation, standardization, and streamlining of socialist political democracy in China (Research Institute 2008). In his report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the CCP (2007), Hu proposed to “orderly increase political participation” by Chinese people (Research Institute 2008). At the same Congress, a series of strategies were suggested to facilitate people’s democracy. These included establishing institution for democracy; diversifying forms of democracy; and widening democratic channels (Editorial_Group 2008). Therefore, Chinese state and party leaders’ online live chat with internet users, the promotion of online public discussion and expression, and provincial and local governments’ online feedback facilities were virtually strategies for implementation of the national goal of political development. While the promotion and institutionalisation of internet as a platform for political participation can be deemed as the materialisation of China’s political development agenda, the Chinese conceptualisation of “socialist political democracy” justifies China’s strictness of media regulation and thus explains the above content analysis findings.

Content analysis of the discussions on PN 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 PN. There are various factors that might have contributed to this result. First of all, the existing mass media administration hierarchy in China might have effectively prevented criticism of the state government and its leaders. Mass media in China are stratified in accordance with their primary geographical distribution/broadcast scope and administrated by respective governments. For example, Southern Daily, a provincial newspaper, is administrated by the government of Guangdong province. As a municipal newspaper, Guangzhou Daily 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 is no medium 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 NSF on the PN 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-principles . 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.

Media regulation is important because of the potential influence of the 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.

4.3 The Publics

In Habermas' theory of public sphere, the privatised individuals who act together as public citizenry were bourgeois. They assumed the dual identity of property owners and educated human beings. As property owners, they were motivated to influence political powers for their common interest. As educated human beings, they were proficient to debate rationally, critically and efficiently. The concept of public has changed as public sphere in the contemporary world is no longer a club for the wealthy and educated bourgeois. The right to participate and to communicate is recognised internationally as the fundamental human right (UNESCO 1980). In the case of China, the publics, as participants in people's democracy, refer to all Chinese citizens, including workers and farmers, educated and uneducated. The extension of the concept of public to include ALL people brings attention to the public's capacity to participate in communication. Daniel Lerner identified three factors affecting media consumption in any country namely cash, literacy, and motivation (Lerner 2010). Together these factors determine whether a person can afford to, is able to, and wants to engage in mediated communication. Economical factor is important as a hungry person would likely opt to buy a piece of bread instead of a newspaper if that is the last penny in his pocket. Economy determines material conditions of communication; however, it does not induce engagement in communication by itself. People's engagement is largely affected by social,

cultural, and psychological factors, including literacy and motivation. Literacy and motivation determine whether communication will take place and how.

The findings discussed above showed that internet had brought about both opportunities and challenges for Chinese public's political participation. The opportunities were mainly demonstrated in three ways. Firstly, internet was an important information resource. Secondly, internet increased users' interests in current affairs. Thirdly, internet was a platform for expressing and sharing opinions on policies, and political and societal phenomena. Internet's functioning as an alternative medium for information, expression and debating is particularly meaningful to Chinese people; because all the other media in China are still operated under strict regulations. The opening up of online discussion and expression offers a platform for Chinese people to practice and learn rational and democratic participation in a public sphere.

The research finding revealed 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 accessing internet. This challenges the Chinese concept of people's democracy, which requires its public sphere be accessible to all Chinese people, regardless of education or occupation. Further more, the rate of active participation among the internet users was relatively low. Many Chinese internet users were spectators, rather than committed participants. Paulo Freire argued that genuine participation should be committed involvement (Freire 1984). With a large online user population does not mean accomplishment of online political democracy. 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. Therefore, the need for building the public's communication capacity is urgent. While it is crucial to help those lacking economic power to kick start the breaking of the vicious circle of poverty, it is equally, if not more, important to promote 'political participation motivation' and to improve literacy for participation amongst the Chinese public.

In a nutshell, technology alone does not guarantee democracy or participation. It is the human, including the state authority and the publics, who determine how technology is used and for what cause, and thus determine the future of political democracy and participation in a country. Chinese government's determination to promote e-governance and to encourage

online political participation indicates a significant step towards democratising China's political system. However, participation is not granted by the authority, but acted by the citizenry. The efficient functioning of the public sphere is relied on the willingness, commitment, and proficiency of the citizenry to participate in the communicative actions, and the establishment of an encouraging and supportive political and cultural atmosphere for open and free dialogue.

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