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Social media, public discourse and civic engagement in modern China

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the theoretical view of cyberspace's role in engagement in public discourse and civic activities, the current study investigates how social media use is related to public discourse and civic engagement in mainland China. Moreover, we examine how political interest, general trust in people, and life satisfaction modify the interdependence of social media use and public discourse and civic engagement. Data analyses based on a survey of 1, 202 online Chinese show that social media use is significantly related to both public discourse and civic engagement. In addition, political interest has a consistent, strong modification on the role of social media use in public discourse and civic engagement. Both general trust in people and life satisfaction moderate some of the relationships examined but not all of them. Theoretical and empirical implications of the results are discussed.

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Civil society is commonly referred to as "the intermediate public realm between the state and the private sphere" and includes any "organized or unorganized, discursive or non-discursive activities" that happen in this public sphere[2] (Yang, 2003, p. 406). Such an independent public sphere was nearly non-existent during the Maoist era because of the dominant party state and strict restrictions on associational lives (Jennings, 1997; Yang, 2007). Yet, scholars argue that the capitalist development in China's post-reform era facilitates the development of a civil society (Chen, 2002; He, 1997; Huang, 1993; White, 1993, 1996). Moreover, the rapid development of communication and information technologies in the past two decades has made the Internet and social media widely available to ordinary Chinese citizens, fundamentally changing the ways of communication and bringing new elements to the development of a public sphere in China.

Prior studies have discussed the emergence, size and nature of the public sphere or civil society in China (Tang, 2007; Yang, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2010), but few have examined the potential influence of social media on aspects of the Chinese civil society. To fill in this gap and as a first step, we examine the relationship of social media with two aspects of the public sphere in China: public discourse and civic engagement (Putnam, 1996; Yang, 2010). We also examine how individual characteristics, such as political interest, life satisfaction, and interpersonal trust might moderate the relationship between social media usage and citizens' participation in public discourse and civic activities due to the significance of the factors suggested in the literature.

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[2] Public sphere here means everything that is outside of the domestic/familial sphere and the state/governmental sphere (Fraser, 1990).

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Our paper is structured as below. First, we discuss the developmental stages of the Internet and social media in mainland China. We then theoretically explain how social media use could influence both public discourse and civic engagement in China. Next, we explore how the effect of social media on public discourse and civic engagement might differ among Chinese citizens dependent upon their individual characteristics such as their levels of political interest, life satisfaction and general trust in people.

1. The development of Internet and social media in China

Since the Internet was first introduced to China in 1994, the number of Internet users has increased exponentially in the country. In 1997, China only had 1 million Internet users, but this number skyrocketed to 11 millions in 2005 and to 649 millions in 2014 (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 1998, 2008, 2015). During this time period, social media have gone through three developmental phases and have gradually become one of the most popular media types in China.

Before 2005 the bulletin board system (BBS) was the main form of social media. Popular BBS sites included online forums with major portal sites such as Sina.com, Sohu.com and 163.com, and more specialized bulletin board sites such as Tianya, Maopu, Qiangguoluntan (i.e., Strengthening the Nation Forum) and Xicihutong. Even today, BBS is still fairly popular among Chinese netizens. Between 2006 and 2008, multiple social media sites emerged where users can interact with friends and post pictures, status, and comments. Renren.com (a Chinese version of Facebook), for example, was one of the most widely used social media platforms during this phase. A chatting software QQ also became popular during this time. Since 2009, social media have entered the third phase whereby various social media applications were launched and quickly became popular among Chinese people, first Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter) in 2009, and then Weixin (an instant messaging social media platform) in 2011. Weixin has immediately attracted an unprecedentedly large amount of users and become the most popular social media tool in China, followed by QQ and Weibo (CNNIC, 2014). Today approximately 89% of online Chinese use Weixin and other instant messaging apps, 61% use QQ, and 44% use Weibo and other micro-blog sites (Kantar, 2015).

Social media have fundamentally changed the ways people entertain, shop and communicate with one another (CNNIC, 2014). Chinese use social media to obtain news, monitor friends' status, upload pictures, update their status, post their dairy, comments and share information, watch videos and listen to music. However, there are slight differences in the use of each type of social media. While Chinese netizens primarily use QQ and other social media sites to upload pictures, diary and to update their status, they use Weibo and other micro blogging sites to obtain news and monitor the status of people whom they are interested in. Weixin and other instant messaging apps are primarily used to chat with friends and monitor friends' status.

The majority of the Chinese Internet users are young, with 78% younger than 39 years old. Most of them only have high school education or lower, and spend an average of 26 hrs on the Internet in a typical week.[3] In contrast, Chinese social media users are slightly more educated, with approximately half of them with an associate's degree or higher. They also tend to be younger, with nearly 65% of them below the age of 30 (CNNIC, 2015).

2. Social media and public discourse

Social media help build a public sphere where people can exchange ideas freely through "meetings, debates, dialogues and discussions" (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquezb, 2011, p.194; Chadwick, 2008; Habermas, 1991). With social media, individual citizens can now easily access and gain information on various political and social issues and become more informed and rational (Dahlberg, 2001). In addition, social media and computer networking offer "cheap, decentralized, two-way communication" and enable people to participate virtually through email lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups, and the like (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 164). Therefore, social media provide a unique virtual space for citizens to engage in free and open dialogues, whereby "participants put forward and challenge claims and arguments about common problems, not resting until satisfied that the best reasons have been given and fully defended. Participants attempt to come to an understanding of their interlocutors and to reflexively modify their prediscursive positions in response to better arguments" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 165).

To use a popular Chinese BBS, Qiangguoluntan, as an example, we find that a variety of political topics were discussed in August 2015 alone. Subscribers of this BBS had heated discussions on issues such as corruption, the anti-corruption movement by President Xi Jinping, territorial disputes with Japan, pension system for migrant workers, health care reform, pollution and environmental protection, reform of state-owned enterprises, recent stock market crash, and law and constitutionalism in China. The discussions on this site are quite free and open. For instance, a discussion thread under the discussion panel of "Monitor by the People" called for ordinary Chinese citizens to use this panel to expose misconducts of government officials and monitor governmental activities.[4] More than 200 people responded to the thread and debated on whether or not the panel can really influence politics. One user complained about the deletion of her post on some governmen-

[3] According to the CNNIC (2015) report, about 37% of online Chinese have middle school education and 31% have high school education or technical/vocational training, whereas those with an associate's degree or higher only comprise 22% of online Chinese.

[4] In a thread titled "Let us develop supervising and monitoring government behavior as a daily habit," the creator of the panel maintains that this panel will enable ordinary Chinese people to monitor governmental actions by revealing misconduct of government officials; therefore they called for Chinese citizens to turn "supervising and monitoring government behavior as a daily habit." To read the post, see http://bbs1.people.com.cn/post/71/1/2/93823058.html.

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