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The influence of online forum and SNS use on online political discussion in China: Assessing "Spirals of Trust"

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ABSTRACT

Echoing the significance of mobile online networks in fueling the Arab Spring, the present study seeks to better understand social media influences in China by studying political activity among Chinese netizens. A survey of Chinese college students examines the influence of online social networks in the context of political attitudes and political participation. Study results reveal a moderate but positive impact of online forum and social networking site use on online political discussion. Implications for political change in the social networking era, particularly in regimes that practice Internet censorship like China's, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Dating back to Poole's (1983) prescient treatise on *Technologies of Freedom*, the diffusion of new media has inspired hopes that they can reinvigorate democracy (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Lagerkvist, 2010; Papacharissi, 2006). As recent headlines taken from 2011s "Arab Spring" and U.K. riots bear out, the rise of mobile and social media are revolutionizing Habermas (1962, 1989) conception of a public sphere, or forum for political discussion (Jeffres et al., 2008b; Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Kellner, 1998; Rheingold, 1993), even emerging as the tool of choice for dissidents in the middle and near East (Lagerkvist, 2010). New media have played crucial roles in organizing activity and spreading information in those movements, especially "in light of the absence of an open media and a civil society" (Khondker, 2011, p. 675). Social media are also surfacing as key players in the Far East (Sun, 2010), where they stimulated unprecedented online campaigning in Singapore (Khoo, 2011), helping propel the opposition to gain six parliamentary seats in this otherwise tightly controlled one-party state (Mydans, 2011).[1]

Exploring the reciprocal influences between new media diffusion, economic growth and political participation, scholars contend that GDP is a good indicator of the possibility of transition (e.g., Gilley, 2004; Lum, 2004). When a post-totalitarian

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[1] The Singaporean example is particularly compelling because, like so many other countries in the region, the island nation remains dominated by a single party that controls the national media system (e.g., Lau et al., 2008). As in these other statist regimes, unrestricted political speech remains practically illegal and thus demands a greater level of risk and commitment than in the West (e.g., Anokwa et al., 2003; Lagerkvist, 2010). However, as one island observer noted, "social media have lowered the barriers of entry into political discourse everywhere. . .the effects have been electric" (Cenite cited in Mydans (2011, p. 2)).

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country's per capita reaches around $3200, it has entered "the danger zone." When it reaches above $4500, political pluralism becomes highly likely. The probability of democratization doubles every year as income per capita grows from $1700 to $8400. Although this does not imply causality, the correlation between economic prosperity and democratic transition remains robust (Lipset, 1959; Lum, 2000; Gilley, 2004). Economic development can predict political participation such that people in the more economically developed regions are more likely to participate in politics because they are more knowledgeable and politically active. This begs the question of how much further China's robust economy can grow in the absence of corollary media liberalization, particularly as new media continue to diffuse throughout the country.

Social media are thus playing an important role in spreading the news and challenging the Chinese government (Sun, 2010). Reporting on a July 2011 bullet train crash—which resulted in 39 dead and more than 200 injured—*USA Today* (MacLeon, 2011) observed that:

> *An increasingly vocal public, aided by Twitter-like social media, has criticized the government for mishandling the aftermath, and challenged the limited explanation given to the date of the crash. . .Chinese bloggers and journalists have aggressively questioned the government's handling of the crisis, from the death toll to the lack of reliable information (p. 1).*

In light of this transformative potential, the present study addresses the influence of the Internet and emerging social media (e.g., social networks) in China by studying their effects on the political activity of Chinese users. Study findings should help us gain a better understanding of the political influence of social media in similar political and media contexts.

2. Literature review

With roughly double the number of Internet users as her American counterparts, China also stands poised to be transformed at the hands of emerging online and social media. Given that mass media are strictly regulated in China (e.g., Anokwa et al., 2003; Lagerkvist, 2010; Wu et al., 2011), the Internet presents an ideal "public sphere" for less filtered political discussion, particularly on politically sensitive topics. This raises the question of whether enhanced Internet connectivity promotes more political participation in China. Recent events suggest that Chinese leaders see the Internet as a force to reckon with, as President Obama's 2010 visit to China was broadcast live online. At that time, Chinese leader Wen Jiabao used the Internet to answer a set of screened questions, although a portion of Obama's sensitive speech was not broadcast.

Chinese leaders are thus searching for a balance between Internet access and political participation, as the country's burgeoning user base is a pacesetter among emerging economic powers. By July of 2011, China boasted 485,000,000 Internet users—double that of the U.S.—with penetration recently hitting a 'critical mass' exceeding a third (36.2%) of the population (CNNIC, 2011). The overall number of social networking users in 2010 was 235 million—or over 50% of China's Internet base that year. Online forums or bulletin board system (BBS) retain their significance, accounting for 148 million users, or 32.4% of the total online population (CNNIC, 2011).

The Internet thus provides an accessible, if unevenly filtered forum for Chinese users—including dissidents—to share information and even politically sensitive opinions (Sun, 2010). This stands in marked contrast to the state-controlled media which, true to the authoritarian model (Anokwa et al., 2003), remain heavily censored (Lagerkvist, 2010). Hence the Internet's unique status as an open channel helps explain its relative popularity in China, particularly among younger users, and even belies the portrait of political apathy painted by several observers (e.g., Elegant, 2007; Schell and Shambaugh, 1999). In fact, youthful Internauts have assumed the vanguard in movements arising around such issues as the emerging transnational Chinese cultural sphere (Yang, 2003a), Chinese cyber-nationalism (Wu, 2007), the setting of public agendas that can affect government decision making (Zheng and Wu, 2005), and the formation of collective action and social norms (Arsene, 2008).

In-depth social scientific investigations of the relationships between media use, political affairs and democratic aspirations are, in light of political sensitivities, rarer and more difficult to conduct in state-controlled media systems such as China's (Mou et al., 2011). Here social networks sites (SNSs) such as Renren.com (a Facebook imitation) and *Weibo* (a Twitter imitation) are closely monitored. In light of these limitations, it is useful to consider parallel work addressing social media influences in other national contexts.

2.1. Understanding social media use

The different impacts of various media forms on political participation have long been recognized by scholars (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; Xenos and Moy, 2007). Distinct from old forms of media, social media can include both web-based and mobile technologies. These might encompass Internet forums, email, social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, vlogs, wikis, and voice-over IP, all of which emphasize extending traditional social networks online, while sharing information. As a consequence, the dynamism that social media bring to political participation may exceed that of traditional media, particularly as catalysts for social capital (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007).

Scholars (e.g., Shah et al., 2001b) uncover strong ties between informational uses of media and social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), which can be defined in several different ways: their own conception incorporated volunteer work, attending organizational meetings and working on projects. Early claims that the Internet could build social and political capital (Dahlberg, 2001) were not borne out by the data, however, at least not during its initial diffusion phase (Castells, 2001). In fact, some commentators cautioned that the proliferation of fragmented cable and online modalities may well

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