Chapter 14
A Gradual Political Change?
The Agenda Setting Effect of Online Activism in China 1994–2011

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ABSTRACT

In order to understand the contradiction of freedom versus control regarding the Internet use in an authoritarian rule, this study is designed to explore a gradual political effect by investigating the agenda setting effect of Internet activism on government political agenda in China from 1994 to 2011. In total, 145 Internet activism cases and 526 articles from official newspaper are collected for the analysis and discussion. The results suggest a bottom-up agenda setting effect from online activism on political agenda, and this agenda setting effect includes a potential transition from issue level to attribute level. This study also finds that the development of online activism itself obtained a stronger attention from official media, and the continuous growth of activism in forms and scopes generated constant pressure that finally gradually brought about the change of government behavior and strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Early studies on Internet believe that the technological advantages provided by the Internet can help the dissemination of information, accelerate the political participation and provide effective tools for collective actions. The Internet, therefore, could ultimately strengthen democracy in a society. However, with the fast diffusion of the Internet from developed countries to developing countries and from educated urban professionals to broader user groups, accumulated empirical studies have been conducted to examine the different dimensions of the Internet uses in different regions, and the results suggest that the role of the Internet in a society has been largely influenced and shaped by its political system. The usage of the Internet by ordinary citizens is actually restricted by many political, cultural and social factors. Among them, government surveillance and censorship is the recognized obstacle to digital democracy particularly in authoritarian countries.

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Internet activism research, as one of the fields in Internet and democracy studies, is usually conducted from two major perspectives. One of the perspectives is to focus on the capability of the Internet in promoting activism and focus predominantly on the analysis of individual incidents particularly the success stories. The other group of scholars puts the context first and argues that the use of Internet does not necessarily lead to a more democratic society. Particularly in the studies focusing on authoritarian regimes, the state usually plays a crucial role in supervising the development of the Internet, which makes the digital democracy still an optimistic hypothesis in these countries (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). Besides abundant case studies conducted from these two major perspectives, a few researchers also mentioned a “gradual change” view of point, which assume that the Internet use may set a process of gradual change to facilitate the democracy transition within a authoritarian rule (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Yang, 2011). Inspired by this assumption, the current study is designed to explore whether Internet activism in China over a long period of time, regardless of success or failure, may bring about changes in to the government behavior with implications for the political culture and environment. This study analyzes the official newspaper reports on activism cases to explore whether there is a bottom-up agenda setting effect of the activism on official media, what is government’s attitude towards and treatment of these reported Internet activism cases, and most importantly, whether government’s strategies changed over time. These changes may disclose a gradual political transition driven by grassroots political pressure based on or enhanced by the Internet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet Activism and Democracy

Activism is the practice of using intentional actions to support one side of a controversial issue. It usually relies on a network of individuals, groups, or organizations that share collective identity and attempt to bring about social, political, economic, cultural, or environmental changes (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Activism can take a wide range of forms of action, from personal blogging to large-scale anti-globalization movement, or dispersive individual protest including cultural jamming. Internet activism, as the name suggests, refers to the activism enhanced by or based on new media technology. The new media technology here includes mobile devices, Internet and a variety of digital contents and networking programs such as online videos, forums, blogs and social networking sites. Scholars focusing on Internet activism usually apply theories from two fields: contemporary social movement studies and new media studies. Social movement theorists regard the Internet as a new communication tool that can facilitate the progress, expand the influence, and mobilize the resources to repackage the traditional movement (Castells, 1997; Chadwick, 2005; Garrett, 2006). Media and Internet theorists, on the other hand, believe that the Internet has formed a public sphere that can promote political debate, political deliberation and then political activism (Dahlberg, 2001; Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). Thus a potential threat to the current regime can be posed. These different views are generated because of emphases on different types and dimensions of social protests. While in fact, in today’s highly penetrated digital environment, the traditional movement and new media activism, or in other words, the offline protest and the online action always interweave with each other. The movement tool function and the public sphere function of the Internet are usually convergent, representing a comprehensive role of Internet activism in political change. Either from the social movement perspective or from the new media perspective, a
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