Chapter 8
Government Website, Social Media, and Citizens’ Perceptions of Corruption: Evidence from Chinese Cities

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author aims to empirically examine the effect of social media use and e-government adoption on citizens’ perceived corruption. It is hypothesized that the use of social media by citizens is positively related to their perceptions of corruption, while the use of government websites is negatively related to perceived corruption. The author draws on a recent national telephone survey of citizens in 36 major cities in China to empirically test the above hypotheses. The multilevel model estimates suggest that social media use is insignificantly related to corruption perceptions, but government website use is negatively associated with perceived corruptions. The findings of this study help understand the anti-corruption effects of social media and e-government, and also generate helpful implications for other countries and regions in utilizing digital applications for anti-corruption purposes.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2019-1.ch008
INTRODUCTION

Corruption is one of the key challenges to good governance, primarily due to its ubiquitously and chronically negative consequences in various aspects of political operations, economic activities, and social development (Rothstein, 2011). How to fight against corruption and keep the government clean is among the top policy priorities of many countries and regions around the world. The rise and penetration of information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the ubiquitous use of Internet and social media applications, is advocated as one effective approach to reduce corruption and retain government integrity (Lee & Lio, 2016). Government transparency can be substantially strengthened through online information disclosure and dissemination, which helps deter and curb corruption (Srivastava, Teo, & Devaraj, 2016). With the help of ICTs, the government can minimize procedural loopholes by digitalizing business processes (Elbahnasawy, 2014). Internet and social media applications equip the ordinary citizens with new means to fight against corruption, since the active online participation of citizens help better monitor and scrutiny government misconducts and embezzlements (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010).

The rise of ICTs also challenges the monopoly of media by the government in many nondemocratic developing countries, e.g., China (Yang, 2009). Given the diversified media channels citizens can access, it is theoretically interesting and practically imperative to examine the differentiating effects of media exposures on citizen attitudes towards corruption. Do citizens relying on social media applications to acquire news and other information perceive a higher level of corruption than those solely consuming government-controlled media? In this chapter, the author aim to empirically examine the effect of social media use on citizens’ attitudes towards corruption.

Social media platforms, while not free from state censorship, are often full of rumors and grapevine news with disproportionally negative reports of the government (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Government-controlled media as the mouthpiece of the ruling party, in contrast, are more positive and supportive of the party and the state in eliciting and reporting news (Zhu, Lu, & Shi, 2013). Given the negativity bias embedded in social media applications, citizens who rely on them to acquire information are more likely to perceive the government as corrupted than those who use alternative information sources such as state-owned media. The author hypothesizes that the use of social media by citizens is positively related to their perceptions of government corruption, and the use of mass media attenuates the social media effect on perceived corruption.
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