Online Public Sphere and Democracy in China

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Abstract: The Internet, as a new medium has great practical and potential impact on society. One potential impact is the improvement that online space has made in public and private discourse, providing the marketplace of ideas vital to a democracy. This article reviews the relationship between online space and the democracy process in China. Both literature review and case studies suggest that the Internet is increasing the rise of democracy in China. Chinese online space is acting as a public sphere that allows ordinary citizens to discuss public affairs. When the public opinion is strong enough, it can influence public policies to ensure that they reflect and match real public interests. This is a big step in the progress of democracy in China.
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Internet development in China

Chinese Internet use has proliferated rapidly since its networks became widely accessible to the public in early 1996. According to an official report by the China Internet Network Information Center, an estimated 0.62 million Chinese citizens accessed the Web in October 1997, rising to 103 million in mid-2005, second at that time to the United States (CNNIC, 2005). By the end of 2007, Chinese netizenship had increased to 210 million, expecting to surpass the U.S. in raw numbers in the next half year (CNNIC, 2008).

The size of this online population forms a huge marketplace for ideas, at least in theory. Hartford (2000) has suggested that the Internet development in China, would result in “the inexorability of the political opening—alternative sources of information, communications channels beyond government control” (p. 255). Zheng and Wu (2005), meanwhile, have found that the Internet seems to have made a more substantial political impact in China than in democratic countries. They cite a litany of public opinion results in support of their point. In China, nearly 80% of the people think that by using the Internet they can better understand politics, compared to 43% in the United States, 31% in Japan, and 48% in South Korea. Further, nearly 61% of Internet users in China think that by using the Internet, they can have more say about what the government does, compared to 20% in the United States, 24% in Japan, and 26% in South Korea (Zheng & Wu, 2005, p. 525). They attribute the difference to a perception that in democratic countries, people have channels beyond Internet to express personal opinions and to participate public affairs, while in China people don’t have as many alternative venues (Zheng & Wu, 2005).

Will the Internet provide China with the “marketplace of ideas” fundamental to modern democracy? Will the positive perception of the ability of the Internet to foster public discourse demonstrated in Zheng & Wu (2005) be realized? In what other ways might the rise and development of the Internet promote, or even hinder, democracy in China? These are the questions we try to answer in this research.

The Internet and democracy
Does the Internet promote democracy? This is a hot topic in social and political science. The common popular assumption is that the Internet, with its open access and various channels for participation, including weblogs and online social networks, is ultimately a force for democratization (MacKinnon, 2008). Critics, though, suggest that the openness and freedom of the Internet is disruptive, lacking the moderating influence of more traditional channels of political discourse. Howard Rheingold’s oft-cited Virtual Communities (1993), typifies most early thought on the subject. Rheingold stressed the positive potential, while worrying about whether the Internet would be able to realize that potential in the real world; “virtual communities could help citizens revitalize democracy, or they could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse” (Thornton, 2002).

There are at least three factors that support this positive potential of the Internet. First, the scale and scope of the Internet makes it possible for more people to participate in public discussions; the ITU estimates that there are over 1.4 billion Internet users globally, millions of domains, and hundreds of billions of websites and files available (Google indexes more than 20 billion separate pages). No other medium offers such scale. Second, the manner of communication online is structurally more democratic; the underlying basic structure treats all content and users similarly. Third, the Internet has revitalized relations between media and the public, providing the public improved access to media content, and faster feedback mechanisms. Finally, the Internet provides a direct channel for the formation and promulgation of public opinion in all of its forms. The rise of modern mass media, while also important for democracy, had the side effect of emplacing a mediator on public discourse. Traditional media became the gate, the filter, the moderator which determined the focus and terms of political discourse (Altshull, 1984; Schudson, 1995). Thus, the Internet has the potential to democratize a public sphere which had become increasingly media-moderated, if not controlled.

The Internet not only reaches huge numbers users, it provides them additional opportunities to communicate with one another, increasing people’s ability to engage in the activities of the public sphere. Thornton (2002) suggests that the Internet has caused an explosion of direct participatory democracy. Individuals from middle-income groups and lower-income groups, people who live in areas distant from political power centers, those who previously had no practical direct access to political participation at the policy level, now find that they can have a voice through the Internet. For information presentation, Internet meets citizen’s demand for
political information in a more convenient form and at a lower cost (price and time) than traditional media. This capability could help to improve people’s participation in public affairs. Studies of the actual impact of the Internet on political participation, however, are mixed. Krueger (2002) found that early research suggested online political participation reflected existing patterns, but would still open access to some groups. Tolbert & McNeal (2003) analyzed data of American presidential elections and found that individuals with access to the Internet and online election news were significantly more likely to vote in presidential elections. Kann et al. (2007) recognize the potential for increasing political participation among youth, yet caution that virtual space is not the same as real space, even for the public sphere.

Meanwhile, the amount of space available for topical information is definitely larger on the Internet than in traditional media, which allows the public to access a wider range of political information, and to some extent bypass media agenda-setting. In a democratic society, citizens should be able to deliberate on issues relevant for the society as a whole. But what issues are important, and what information should members of the public base their arguments and debate upon? Before Internet’s appearance, mass media played a decisive role in this respect.

From a positive view, their selection prioritizes the potentially infinite number of issues a society faces and helps focus public debate on the most urgent. However, the negative effect is also apparent; by controlling and limiting the political agenda, they neglect the pluralistic interests and demands of society make it difficult for a wider public to express or recognize, much less deal with, other issues or concerns. In political economic terms, by setting the agenda, news media frame debate and help establish the dominant political ideology, contributing to the rise of hegemonic power. This situation is altered by Internet in several ways.

The first, and most obvious is the disintermediation provided by the internet. Users are not longer restricted to what media are available locally; they have access to the world, and in many places, to the raw information and data that news reports are based on. But, as the hucksters expound, “Wait, there’s more!” The Internet not only provides additional capacity for storing information to traditional mass media, arguably allowing them to cover more topics of public concern, but it provides ordinary citizens the same capability to publish, provide information in a variety of forms, and raise their own issues, even if they may be of interest to only a small group of people (Waal & Schoenbach, 2008). The presence on the Internet of hundreds of thousands of blogs, and over 10 billion user-generated videos, attests to this potential. To be short, in
cyberspace, more people can provide more information, raise more issues, and discuss more topics more conveniently, and to a wider audience, than could be accomplished with traditional communication channels. This potential is undoubtedly good to public participation.

However, as critics point out, there is a dark side. Much of that information is trivial, silly, or wrong. It’s estimated that more than two-thirds of the blogs on the Internet are abandoned. Much is made of the propensity of many participants on political blogs to flame and resort to name-calling in lieu of reasoned argument. Serious concerns are raised about deceptive websites, phishing, spamming, and pornography, just to name a few of the lesser-valued uses and content. It may be that the Internet is not so much a library or a polite debating society as a perpetual avalanche of information and communication. Whether society and individuals can develop the means to cope with the flood, and learn to evaluate raw information, is often at the heart of judgments about the eventual impact of the Internet on democracy.

The structure of the Internet also differs in its interactivity, in its ability to allow users to communicate individually, in groups, and en masse. As such, it allows a level of direct interaction with a variety of publics: community groups, political organizations, state agencies, and politicians. Websites for politicians and state agencies are widespread in Western countries. One of the essential principles of democracy is that individuals have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, to ensure that those decisions reflect the needs, desires, preferences, concerns, and viewpoints of the people (Todman, 2002). The Internet has provided more mechanisms and channels for members of the public to express their opinions. Emails to politicians, listservs and RSS feeds from political organizations, chatting via instant messaging or in chat rooms, diary sharing in blogs, group discussions on various boards or in virtual worlds, links on online social networks, even YouTube videos; all new mechanisms that facilitate and contribute to people’s involvement in public affairs. It offers new means to connect information and experience (Hermes, 2006). All these practices influence the process of public decision making directly or indirectly, just like the metaphor from Hermes (2006, constitute the threads from which the social fabric is knit. Internet makes it easier for ordinary people to deliberate matters of shared concern, which is the second way that Internet increases democracy.

Not all of this potential contributes to, or substitutes for, the public sphere. The Internet bridges public and private space, it is used for entertainment, for consultation, for commerce,
information and for communication. While the potential is there, much still depends on how the internet, as a communication system, is used (Bates, 1989, 1990).

The rise of the Internet also allowed for changes in mass media content and in practices of media reception (Hermes, 2006). Journalism has an intimate relationship with democracy. The dominant views that mass media functions as democracy’s watchdog and as mediator for citizenship (Overholser and Jamieson, 2005), and also the fate and quality of democracy is in the hands of the reading public (Hermes, 2006). Internet has changed the mass media and then changed the way that media in which media nurture and bolster the public.

Deuze (2006) has argued that the emerging practices of participation in new media contexts have important implications for how individuals engage with media. He summarizes them into three new configurations or modes of engagement in terms of ‘participation, remediation and bricolage’. Participation means individuals become active agents in the process of meaning-making. Deuze suggests that institutional control over news content has been weakened with the rise of the Internet, as ‘ordinary people’ appear in new roles both as producers and actors in the news. Remediation means that people adopt, modify, manipulate, and reform consensual ways of understanding reality; they not only break down media’s traditional role as mediator (disintermediation), they create, reformulate, repackage, and republish news and information (remediation). The phrase ‘bricolage’ refers to the process where people reflexively assemble their own particular versions of reality (Deuze, 2006, p. 66).

This becomes important to understanding the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere. The simple assumption is that individuals use media, including the Internet, to reinforce their existing political attitudes and beliefs. The visit websites of politicians and groups whom they support; they seek confirming news and information from publications reflecting their interests and values. That belief underlay one the presumed benefits of a shared mass media – that everyone would have access to the same basic information. While this does happen, for the most part, Internet users tend to make use of a wider range of news and information sources. The same Internet that allows individuals to target like-minded sources, also allows users to visit the websites of rival political groups and to seek not only raw information, but the interpretations and arguments of those of differing views. For critical evaluators, this can be a strength, letting them choose information and opinions as they like instead of having to follow the herd, and training their debating skills in order to defend their views and positions. In this way, the new
communication technology is assumed to facilitate a new type of citizenship commitment that combines exchange of information and evaluation (Hermes, 2006), and comes closer to the “marketplace of ideas” at the heart of the democratic ideal. Picone (2007) has examined the changing relationship between newspapers and their readers. The traditional roles of newspapers such as agenda-setter, watchdog and content provider are revisited in relation to the possibilities online media offer their readers in terms of participation: share, rate, tag, comment and produce news, etc. As newsreaders become news users. The key concepts of the changed relationship are participation, trust, community, lean-back/lean-forward and so on (Picone, 2007).

Thus, Internet can increase democracy in general. The basic logic is that Internet as a new kind of public sphere provides more opportunities for ordinary people to discuss and influence public affairs to make sure that public policies are fit for personal proper demands, which is an essential meaning of democracy.

**Public sphere in China: from real world to online space**

The idea that the Internet can increase democracy is widely-held; although one must acknowledge not always achieved. The real impact, as with any factor, depends on the context, and the use and the development of the Internet is different in different countries. Drezner (2005) undertook a comparative study of the relationship between Internet and politics in different countries. He found that the Internet’s impact on politics varied depending on the political system. The Internet, he found, functions as a reinforcement of the pre-existing dynamics between states and non-state actors, rather than as an agent of democratic change worldwide (Drezner 2005). Of course, most states implement the Internet and develop mechanisms for its use that are consistent with existing political and social values, so it’s not a great surprise that that tends to be the early effect. This raises the question what’s the relationship between Internet and politics in China?

Following Drezner’s logic that Internet reinforces the pre-existing systems, we should begin by reviewing the concept and role of the public sphere, represented by mass media, in China before the widespread diffusion of the Internet. In those days, China was experiencing a dramatic policy of reformation and opening-up, primarily of the economic sector, but to some extent also the cultural and political sectors. Media not only reflected these changes, but also acted as part of the social transition in China, referring to it as a process of commercialization.
Before Chinese reformation in late 1970s, the predominant role of all media was as an organ of the party, with their political orientation and fundamental policies depending largely or totally on those of the Party (Sun & Chang, 2001). Media didn’t need to care too much about market or readership because they were financially supported by government subsidy. They functioned as tool for the Party and government to create and disseminate political propaganda, rather than acting as a public sphere for citizens to discuss public and political issues.

With China’s economic and social reformation, media have also had to evolve. The Party and the State reduced their financial subsidy of media gradually, which meant that most media have to rely on generating their own revenues, using traditional sources such as circulation and advertising. As a result, media are becoming increasingly commercialized, with their commercial attributes admitted. Media have had to take market and economic factors into account in their daily decision-making, including struggling to enhance their reputation and audience in order to take advantage of those revenue sources tied to audiences. Keen market competition has acted as a stimulus for shifting media content and coverage to come closer to reflecting the interests and needs of the general public; pursuing their own professional goals and interests while at the same time serving the audience (Li Xiaoping, 2002).

During this process, media developed a certain level of editorial freedom and independence, gradually. Government control still exists, and is exerted (often quite directly and bluntly) at times, but media in China have become more of a communicating channel for both government and ordinary people, rather than just the “mouth and throat” of the Party. One of the most important phenomena emerging in the developing traditional media markets is the rise of investigative reporting; individual examples of government wrongdoings are now being exposed to the public.

The most remarkable example of this is the launch of Focus (Jiaodian Fangtan) - a China Central Television TV investigative news show. This 13-minute-long program officially began to broadcast on April 1, 1994. It focused on exposures of truth and criticism, marking the first time that television in China had come out and openly criticized bureaucracy, corruption, pollution and other social problems. The program proved to be a big success, and was warmly welcome among public. As New York Times correspondent Elizabeth Rosenthal observed: Every evening at 7:38 more than 300 million people tune in to the 15-minute program whose hard-hitting
investigations and interviews show just how far the Chinese media have come since the days when they provided little more than Communist Party dogma (Xiping, 2002).

The program symbolized an attempt to test public opinion and the receptivity of government to criticism in a more open society, and under a more competitive market-oriented environment for the media. It demonstrated that TV can act as more than a government mouthpiece and can play a role, albeit a limited one, on matters such as anti-corruption. The ‘Focus’ phenomenon helped galvanize public debate, helping to place pressure on government to tackle the problem after it is made public. More importantly, such public discussions have prompted people and officials to think hard about the underlying reasons for problems such as corruption, and how the system should be improved to avoid problems in the future, or consider how their policies should be structured to overcome them. At the same time, many authorities have made their routine work more transparent and up-to-standard after recognizing the power of media and public. As a result, the media have indirectly influenced the government, and the whole society to some extent, to become more progressive (Xiaoping, 2002). This example shows that mass media is becoming the most important place for public to get involved in public affairs.

Through those revolutionary activities, media work as watchdog on behalf of public. They supervise authority and impact policymaking. They not only keep people better informed, but also increase awareness of their rights, and their role within the emerging “reformed” society. As a result, people have a greater and clearer sense of their rights, obligations and responsibilities, as well as common values of society. They become more active in speaking out and making suggestions on how to run a better society, encouraged by reformations in the political process and in the media. Thus, one could say that traditional media in China are beginning to act as public sphere in a certain sense. This more open atmosphere for public discussion on real life affairs and long-term solutions is conducive to the development of a more open, tolerant and democratic society in the long run (Li Xiaoping, 2002), and the public sphere it requires.

It was within this context that the Internet began to grow and diffuse. Adoption and use of the Internet has been rapid and widespread, at least in major urban areas (availability and diffusion in many rural areas is still limited by the available telecommunications infrastructure). Thanks to the open atmosphere made by traditional mass media, the Internet played an important role as a contributor to the developing public sphere from the very beginning of its development.
The formation of a Chinese online public sphere can be divided into two phases (Luo, 2007). At the beginning of the introduction of Internet, from 1996, its political potential and energy was underestimated by government. As a result, few restrictions were initially imposed on it. Actually, in order to capture more public attention and interest, government provided a vast amount of free web space to individual users. It was at that time that BBS (bulletin board systems) flourished. These small-scale online discussion forums later became the most important online public sphere in China. Those engaged in current affairs, such as Qiangguo Luntan (Strengthen nation forum) and Fazhan Luntan (Development Forum) are especially popular. Because of the government’s ideological monopoly in the other forms of mass media, Internet forums have become a major venue for the public to exchange information and voice their opinions on political issues (Luo, 2007).

With the development of online forums, the State became more aware of both the real and the potential influence on public affairs of open forums. A series of new laws and regulations were launched seeking to restrict discussion on forums and on other domains. Among them is a posting censorship system, i.e. requiring that all postings to websites have to be reviewed by the web masters before they can reach a public readership (Luo, 2007). The use of key-word filtering as a censorship measure is another case that illustrates how information technology can assist totalitarianism. Politically sensitive words or terms are blocked out in search engine findings, and thus people are unable to obtain the information they want. Many Western portals and Web-based companies generated negative publicity at home by agreeing to implement censoring measures on their China domain sites.

The restricting policies posed negative influence on the development of online public sphere. Mackinnon (2008) quoted Kluver’s opinion that Chinese government has used online mechanisms for citizen feedback, complaints and suggestions, etc. as part of a strategy to bolster regime legitimacy. Online forums such as BBS, chatrooms and blogs also are serve as a “safety valve” by allowing people let off steam about government corruption or incompetence, and giving people more things to do with their frustrations before considering taking their gripes to the streets. This conclusion is based on the fact that most Chinese Internet users seek out entertainment online, rather than hard news or serious political discussion; “rather than being an information highway, the Internet in China is more like an entertainment highway” (MacKinnon, 2008). MacKinnon (2008) concludes that only tech savvy users who know in advance what
exists and what they are looking for will access pages about Chinese authorities’ human rights abuses.

It should be admitted that Internet has been developed in China primarily as a tool for business, entertainment, education, and information exchange. Government censorship and regulation exist in to help in blocking activists from using the Internet as an effective political tool. However, that tool has tended to be used in a somewhat targeted manner. The Internet, as a medium, has continued to provide ordinary citizen a public sphere to discuss public affairs and influence public policy, within certain limits. And portions of the public are finding innovative ways to minimize or bypass standard filtering efforts. China will find, as have other countries, that once you allow access to a wider range of communication sources, and open the door to public expressing opinions and debating public issues is open, it is hard to be reverse course and return to a closed media system. As a newspaper commentary said, with the popularity of the Internet in China, more and more Chinese would like to voice their opinions online, as their anonymity seem to be well protected. Such opinions online have played an important role in affecting China's policy making. So far, the Internet can no longer be called a place of entertainment, but an important part of promoting social advancement and protecting the rights of the general public (Chinanews.cn, 2007). Thus in the long term, the Internet is likely to help democracy to evolve within Chinese society, if slowly and incrementally.

In Habermas’ Public Sphere Theory, the concept of a public sphere plays an important role in realizing democracy. But before the public sphere can work, the public needs to have both right and space (opportunity) to express and exchange their opinions on public affairs (Tang & Shi, 2001). Mass media have a fundamental and basic relation with the formation of public sphere because of its basic social function of deliver information to a wider public, and as a forum for public discussion and debate critical to the evolution of public opinion. The Internet is structured in such a way that it, too, can provide mechanisms in support of the public sphere. In some ways, the Internet, as a new medium characterized by interactivity and unlimited information, may provide a more efficient, convenient, and widely available forum allowing ordinary people to argue about public affairs and discuss political activity. Even with the restrictions from a still somewhat authoritarian government, the Internet as a public sphere can still be an improvement than other media. For example, even in the early stages of computer networking, online bulletin boards (BBS) provided a myriad virtual spaces where people could
publicize their ideas, creating what many researchers called “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1992, 2000) with pluralism existing among its variety of communicators, sources, information and opinions. Many researchers think that this virtual community will undoubtedly have positive effects on the expansion on public sphere in the real world (Tang & Shi, 2001). Some even argue that the online community is not completely “virtual” but practical/real in a certain sense. It’s a sphere where people can supervise state power, criticize governmental wrongdoing and influence public policy making (Zhao, 2005). And there are also scholars who assume that online community is an ideal public sphere in many facets (Rheingold, 2000). These scholars admit that flaws exist in this community, but they insist that with the potential conceived by the new features, online community can operate well as public sphere.

**Case study one: Sun Zhigang incident- Internet alternate legislation**

The Sun Zhigang Incident is a case that has been analyzed by many scholars from different views. Sun is a college graduate from Central China Hubei province. He went to work in an apparel company in the South China city of Guangzhou. On March 17, 2003, on his way to an Internet café, Sun was detained by the police for failing to present his temporary resident card. Three days later, he was beaten to death while still in police custody. On April 25, 2003, Nanfang Du Shi Bao (Southern Metropolitan News) first published an investigative reporting about the case, which ignited a tremendous reaction in society. Many well-known scholars of law and political science, as well as professional lawyers, participated in online debates. On May 14, three young lawyers delivered their statement, suggesting the Central Government to address the issues raised by the existing Measures for the Custody and Repatriation of Vagrants and Beggars in Cities law. They expressed their expectation to talk and discuss their concerns with the government.

On June 20, 2003, Premier Wen Jiabao signed an edict abolishing the 1982 Measures for the Custody and Repatriation of Vagrants and Beggars in Cities. This is a case where an ordinary citizen’s death prompted public discussion and debate, directly leading to abolishing of a national law, a result completely unprecedented in the history of the People’s Republic of China.

Sun’s case is “ordinary citizen’s victory” in the information age. The Internet contributed much, as a deliberation channel, to this exciting outcome. During the process, the Internet played a crucial role in allowing citizens a “right to speak” and a forum for their words. The story was
initially exposed online at Xici.net, a popular BBS, which inspired the reporters of the traditional newspaper, Nanfang Du Shi Bao, to do a deep and professional investigation. After the first newspaper reporting, almost all of the relevant information, in-depth reports, and commentaries on the incident were published and circulated on the Internet. Some of the most influential web forums developed special web spaces to engage the public in discussions that touched upon the issues of social justice, inequality, legislation, human rights, and constitutionalism.

Online spaces not only provided a platform for ordinary citizens to deliberate public affairs but also facilitated political participation. The political meaning of this incident lies in that it was a public protest movement that grew out of Internet communities, and had a substantial impact on society (Luo, 2007). Min (2007) defined political participation, in general, as action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes and is considered part of an informed citizenry. Deliberation can help participants become more confident in their views and willing to express them and hence increase their self-efficacy in political affairs because the more citizens learn, think, and talk about something, the more they tend to feel capable of dealing with it (Min, 2007).

This incident reflected a positive interaction between public and government, with Internet as the medium, presenting a good model of Institutional reform and public policy-making. Public participation and opinion is the first and the most important stage of the public policy process, including policy agency, program planning, policy legalization, implementation, etc. The public opinion and expert’s participation, as well as the media function in raising the issue, are the noticeable influencing factors, because of their vital significance in public policymaking.

At the same time, this case demonstrated the growing maturity of public awareness of issues centering on civic rights and responsibilities. The outcome of this case is often regarded as a momentous advancement in the formation of Chinese civil society (Luo, 2007). And the whole case of Sun Zhigang is undoubtedly a landmark incident demonstrating the potential of information technology in advancing democracy in China. It is a symbol that online space is an effective impetus to democracy improvement in China. AFP made a commentary in this way, “It may be decades before China gets democracy, but for many Chinese, political participation of sorts is only a mouse click away” (AFP, 2008).

**Case study two : Tigergate-online participation to public affairs**
“Tigergate” is another example that indicates the development of an online public sphere in China. This saga resulted from publication and distribution of several photos of South China tigers. The South China Tiger is one of the world's 10 most endangered animals. Wild populations are estimated at between 20–30 individuals, but many suspect there are none left in the wild, as they have not been sighted there since 1964. On October 12, 2007, one of the tiger photos was exposed to public in a press conference held by Shaanxi provincial forestry department, as a proclamation that the South China Tiger had been discovered anew. The photo, together with another 70 unpublished photos, was allegedly taken by a farmer, Zhenglong Zhou, on October 3, 2007 in his home county of Zhenping, located in Northwest China’s Shaanxi province. Given the context that China Tiger was probably extinct in the wild, Zhou’s photos sparked national attention.

Although the local government couldn’t conceal their excitement about the photo, suspicion rose up among Internet users. The day after the photo hit the Internet, a netizen named Dang Zhi Hui Qiang wrote a post “Is South China Tiger another piece of Fake News?” on Tianya BBS, speculating that the "tiger" was a fake, the photo doctored with Photoshop. This post was replied to, commented on, and echoed by, lots of Internet users. Most of these netizens also expressed their confusion and suspicion, while others insisted that the photo was real. The debate spread like wildfire in cyberspace, attracting self-styled citizen reporters, panels of academic experts, government officials and, most importantly, more and more normal citizens into a “mouth war” about whether the photo was real or not. Those who suspected the photo was fake were called the “strike the tiger" camp, and those insisted the image and the tiger were authentic were called the "defend the tiger" camp (Ye, 2008 ). The whole incident was dubbed "Tigergate" after past American scandals like “Watergate” (Xinhua, 2008).

One climax came after another in the debate. In October, one of the biggest non-official portals, Sina.com, ran a blog held by a local official to defend the farmer and the local government. This blog alone was visited more than a million times. Another big commercial portal, Netease, scored an eyeball-grabbing coup by posting 40 digital photos of the tiger, purportedly taken by the farmer and invited users to evaluate them.

Online community sites such as Tianya, Cameraunion, and Baidu Post Bar ran discussion forums. The discussion site Xici.net took a Chinese expression about viewing a fight from a safe
The “Tigergate” incident illustrates how cyberspace can act as public sphere, promoting public discussion and debate. Firstly, in this debate, the Internet showed itself as a public space for everyone to express their own opinion. It fostered an outbreak of freedom of speech. The full range of public thoughts was on display. The resulting discussion and debate also demonstrated that the Internet as a public platform of mass communication has changed Chinese people's lives and their ways of looking at the world. No matter they agreed or disagreed with what they read, they will seriously and professionally try to find proof supporting their arguments via web searches and even field investigations (Li, 2007). Ordinary citizens used certain minor details in the photograph from different perspectives as proof of their claim. The official Xinhua News Agency said that the scandals over forged photos of the China Tiger showed the power of Internet in helping netizens get their voices heard; individual Internet players have proved that they are no less powerful than the world’s leading news broadcasters in achieving and riveting people’s attention. The structure and reach of the Internet empowered individuals to speak aloud and to be heard, or perhaps, to make their scandals universally known. Such a sweeping effect challenges the government’s ability, not just in governance (Li, 2007).

Secondly, the discussion online was expanded into the offline world and encouraged people to take real action to find the truth. For example, Jinsong Hao, a graduate student majoring in law in Beijing, filed a lawsuit against the State Forestry Administration in the No. 2 Intermediate People’s Court in Beijing on December 10, after the administration dismissed his request to reconsider the “Fake Photos of China Tiger”. Hao argued in his complaint that he has the right to request the reconsideration because as a taxpayer, he has the right to receive truthful information from the government, and the right to refuse false information. “As a citizen, I have the right to know the truth,” Hao said (Hvistendahl, 2007). Even the central party organ People’s Daily officially credited Netizens’ behavior in Tigergate incident, in a commentary on November 22. The commentary said, the public does not want to merely speculate, we want to turn over the last card to see what really is there.

Thirdly, although it’s a incident occurring largely within larger society, the Internet discussion did not stay at a superficial technological level of authenticity, but also touched the deeper issue of government credibility and oversight of local authorities. If the photos were
proved to be authentic, they would represent the first sighting of wild China tiger since 1964. It would be a big deal for provincial authorities because a large amount of funding would be allocated from the central government to protect the animal; tourism and related business investment would likely also be attracted. That’s one of the most important motivations for netizens to continue seeking the truth. They couldn’t allow local officials using fake photography to beguile funding from central government. According to a poll held by Netease.com, more than 80% voted for an investigation into the scandal, in order to prevent their tax money from being misused to prop up dishonest local officials. Tigergate thus tapped into the national outrage over rampant corruption and shameless mendacity at the local level (Ewing, 2007). At the beginning of the debate, the Shaanxi government said they couldn’t understand why the public didn’t just trust the government. A mass appeal newspaper Southern Metropolis Daily answered this question by quoting a popular dissident, saying “the era when people blindly believe what the government tells them is over. Likewise, the era when the people are too afraid to speak out is also over” (Duerme, 2007). While problematic for authority, the willingness to express this kind of suspicion and distrust is a positive sign for the growth of democracy in China.

**Conclusion**

The literature review and case studies indicate that Internet has the potential to help increase the development of democracy in China. Online spaces can act as a public sphere allowing ordinary citizens to discuss public affairs, and when the public opinion is formed and has enough power, it can influence public policies, helping to ensure that they reflect and real public interests. This is a big step in the progress of democracy. However, the literature is mixed as to the actual impact of the Internet on politics and the development of a public sphere, and the cases, while giving evidence that the Internet can have significant impacts, remain isolated examplars. Further, there are aspects of the Internet and its use that have a similar potential to do negatively impact the development of a participatory democracy, such as the presence on the Internet of violence, irrationality in online public opinions, inequality between online participants and non-online participants and so on.

The fact that we’re aware of both the positive and the negative potential of what is, after all, a very open and largely unstructured global communication system, is a positive sign. With such an awareness, the growth, adoption, and use of the Internet can be critically examined to see
what are the specific influences of those factors, and how those impacts are related to the structure, use, and regulation of the Internet? This is what should be examined in future studies, and can serve as the foundation of public policy promoting the optimal utilization of the potential of the Internet for fostering the development and use of public spheres in support of democratic ideals.

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