Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Columbia University

Master of Arts, Thesis:

Internet Facilitated Civic Engagement in China's Context

: A Case Study of the Internet Event of Wenzhou High-speed Train Accident

Program: East Asian Regional Studies

Weatherhead Institute of East Asian Studies

Name: Xiaowen Xu

Advisor: Prof. Guobin Yang

2011.12

Abstract

The Internet events in China have attracted a lot of attention in studying the impact of new communication techniques on civic engagement and development of online public sphere. By analyzing the case of the Wenzhou high-speed train accident in July, 2011, this thesis explores a broad scenario where netizens apply the Internet in different ways and for different goals, including information flow, online activism, charity, and rumor refutation. The thesis attempts to show how netizens' use of the Internet affects the state-society dynamics and their relationship with other social actors, in what way it suggests improvement in China's civil society, and why these characteristics and functions of the Internet have come into being.

Keyword: Internet event; civic engagement; civil society

Introduction

Thanks to the ever increasingly convenient access to Internet as a technical expedience, Chinese netizens have emerged as an incipient force engaged in the political terrain, discussing political issues, expressing sentiments and pursuing collective interests, bearing the desire to influence policy-making processes. The Internet contributes to a public sphere in between the private sphere and the state. On the stage of the Internet, the relationship between citizens and the state has been reshaped, which is "mutually empowering" according to Zheng,[1] or interpreted by Yang as "coevolution".[2] On the one hand, citizens develop skillful tactics and exploit innovative techniques in negotiating with the power control. On the other hand, the state also begins to adapt to surging online public opinion, and apply more refined, rigorous, and bureaucratically complex techniques of control in this expanded space.[3]

Online public opinion, albeit scattered and less influential previously, now tends to integrate themselves upon specific issues or events and trigger massive public response and discussions in a relatively short time, fueling the so-called online collective incidents, or Internet events (网络事件)[4]. Chinese Internet events include a variety of concerns, which, according to Yang, can be classified to seven categories: popular nationalism, rights defense, corruption and power abuse, environment, cultural contention, muckraking, and online charity.[5] In most research, Internet events are treated and analyzed separately as categorized into these different fields. Moreover, online activism attracts most of scholarly attention, dwarfing other issues which have less conflictive characteristics. Nevertheless, in fact, the virtue of Internet can never be oversimplified into a confrontational field vis-a-vis the state; it provides a vigorous overall sphere where citizens are endeavoring to construct a multi-dimensional civil society developed independent from the authorities. The thesis will show how

---

[1] Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, P166.
[2] Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, P13.
[3] Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, etc, ed., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, P11, 449.
[4] Min Jiang, "Chinese Internet events", *The Internet in China: Online Business, Information, Distribution and Social Connectivity*, Ashley Esarey, Randy Kluver, ed., New York: Berkshire Publishing, expected 2012.
[5] Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, P55.

netizens' use of the Internet affects the state-society dynamics and their relationship with other social actors, in what way and why it facilitates some advancement in China's civil society.

On the evening of July 23rd, 2011, two high-speed trains, travelling on a railway line in Southeastern China's Wenzhou city in Zhejiang Province, collided on a viaduct. It was a destructive accident that finally caused 40 people dead, and over 100 people injured. The burst of the tragedy immediately aroused online public attention and stimulated information distribution, fierce debates and mutual-assistance in real society. Within two days after the accident, "Wenzhou high-speed train rear-ending accident" had been the top of hot topic rank in *sina* microblog, under which there were more than 5.3 million posts.[1] Public discussions and reaction in the cyberspace demonstrate the vivid scenario of civic engagement in an emerging civil society.

Literature review

Internet Event and China's Civil Society

Despite its incipient and weak character and fluid definition, China's civil society favors Internet diffusion in several ways, and vice versa. The civil society, main components of which are urban civic associations and informal online communities,[2] provides a social associational and discourse basis for using new communicational technologies. At the same time, China's civil society, referred by most scholars as semi-independent, or "third realm" (He, 2006), manifests the context of state-society relations where new media technologies play for societal engagement and political participation. In turn, the impact of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) on civil society is shown by the fact that users embrace the Internet as artful means of displaying civic virtues and new possibilities for involvement in political, voluntary and other social groups. (Tai, 2006; Yang, 2003)

From the technological perspective, the impact of the Internet on civic

---

[1] http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2011/07-25/3208523.shtml
[2] Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, P212.

engagement is mainly predicated on its traits: open, instant, and omnipresent. Online political and social activities, benefiting from the Internet-enabled technologies, are less expensive, faster and more accessible. Borrowing the concept of "leveraged affordances"[1] of the Web in the study of online protest (Jennifer Earl & Katrina Kimport, 2011), it also reduces costs of time and money for organizing and participating in online communication and discussions. How people use the Internet technology, and how much they leverage the affordance of technology in online public sphere are crucial to determine the impact.

Research on China's Internet events mainly chooses cases of online activism and draw upon its confrontational characteristics in civic engagement, applying social movement theories. There are considerable discussion as to why and how some Internet events and online movements come into being, and succeed in exerting pressure on the government and spawning significant changes. Contributing factors always mentioned include political opportunities and constraints, resource mobilization, organizational structure, strategies, framing of political issues, and emotions, etc. (O'Brien, 2008; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Garrett, 2006; Yang, 2009). In fact, however, Internet events are not always conflictive one-dimensionally, but involve different fields indicating sophisticated relationship with the authorities and society, even in a single case like the one chosen for this thesis. Understanding how various fields intersect with each other to form a dynamic system and promote the process of the event might shed light upon the value of the Internet in advancing civic engagement and the gradual progress of China's civil society.

Four Fields of Online Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is defined as individual or collective actions to identify and deal with issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms from individual volunteerism to involvement to political campaigns. Civic engagement

---

[1] Affordance is defined as the actions and uses that a technology makes qualitatively easier or possible when compared to prior like technologies. Jennifer Earl & Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011, P32.

accompanies the sense of personal obligation individuals uphold being a part of their own community.

The Internet influences the engagement of netizens in four aspects, which will be analyzed in detail later based on the selected case. Firstly, it offers additional sources and channels for information and news sharing, by decreasing the costs and increasing the speed of information flow. The status of the Internet as alternative media vis-a-vis official traditional media has a rather significant meaning in China's context. In a comparative survey among ten countries, Chinese people have higher level of trust in that by using ICTs, they would understand better of politics and government officials can better learn and serve the people's intentions.[1]

Secondly, the Internet has also transformed the arena of public opinion in China in that it provides an open sphere for debates by an ever-increasing number of Net surfers who express and discuss their opinions. The Internet influences China's civic engagement via both deliberative democracy and online activism. Against the background of China's semi-autonomous civil society, the Internet plays an important role in realizing political deliberation through political discussion and participation. Whereas democracy requires a structural change, deliberation can take place within the existing political framework. Online activism reflects social protest towards negative aspect of the current transformation since the reform of 1970s. Rapid economic development and institutional transition have brought structural problems.[2] Contentious online activism thus emerges as netizens are mobilized or organized to require transparency and accountability from the authorities, condemn corrupt officials, oppose irresponsible business organizations and denounce immoral behaviors among privileged individuals, and so on. In this way, people have chances to vent fury on malfeasance and injustices.

Thirdly, the Internet also plays as an important platform for charity promotion, humanitarian activities and social assistance in China. With a less developed civil society and insufficient power of NGOs or professional organizations, China's charity

[1] Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. New York: Routledge, 2006, P203, 204.
[2] Yongnian Zheng, Technological empowerment: the Internet, state, and society in China, P47.

activities are less institutionalized or organization-based, but hinge more on individual volunteerism or mass media initiatives. According to statistics in 2004, the total sum of donations collected by China's official and semi-official humanitarian associations was about 5 billion RMB (780 million US dollars), which took up only 0.05% of China's GDP in that year. As a contrast, the percentage in the United States was 2.17%.[1] Thanks to the prevalence of the Web, there are increasing cases of charity activities managed online, such as college students calling for donation online to heal diseases of their parents. The Internet broadens the communication channel and expands the radius of calls for help, so that social assistance does not have to be confined to a limited space. It also precipitates the spread of information, enhancing the efficiency of social assistance and donation process.

Fourthly, civic engagement on the Internet also includes self-filtering and self-cleaning of information. Technically speaking, the Internet, fast, direct and interactive, facilitates the process of information correction. Socially speaking, rumor refutation is no longer the privilege of the authorities by virtue of online communication. On the contrary, resources are decentralized from the center to the overall public who can also contribute to the discovery of truth. Then, are netizens rational and critical enough to discern false information from truth? How do netizens deal with tons of messages from online communities? The ability of information screening and verification reflects the level of media literacy and consciousness of responsibility of modern citizens.

Research Questions and Methods

This thesis attempts to discuss several research questions:

1) How does the online public utilize the Internet to meet their demands in different fields?

2) What is the relationship between the online public sphere and the real society and the state? How does netizens' use of the Internet influence this

---

[1] Beiping Zhang, Daxuesheng wangluo qiuzhu: Shishang beihou de kunjing, *Qingnian Yanjiu*, 2006 (11), P15

relationship?

3) How do these fields interconnect with each other to form an interactive system among different social actors and suggest progress of China's civil society?

4) Why can the Internet be utilized by netizens for various goals? Why China's civil society experiences such changes?

This thesis mainly employs the method of case studies to view the four fields of civic participation in cyberspace: information, discussion & question, charity, and self-purification. To begin with, in order to learn about the general public opinion of this event, the thesis picks two representative online forums/ communities, and observes posts of different topics and its chronically changing track. Next, it recounts the case from each of the four fields respectively. Finally, it summarizes some major findings and inspires some thoughts concerning the reasons and factors of why the Internet is utilized in these ways.

Online Public Opinion of Different Contents and Phases

In order to capture the online opinion throughout the process of the accident, this thesis selects two representative online forums for analysis: Strengthening Nation Forum (强国论坛 *Qiangguo luntan*) and *Tianya* (天涯). *Qiangguo luntan* is a bulletin board on the website of the *People's Daily*, one of China's biggest official newspapers. It is the earliest forum for public affairs based on news website. Although sponsored by the party organ, it has a comparatively tolerant atmosphere for dissent voices including some fierce criticism against the government. *Tianya club* is mainly a base for Chinese young white-collar class who are active in discussing current affairs and participating in public life. The forum under its service wins fame in exposure of several notorious scandals such as the Shanxi kiln slave scandal in 2007.[1]

Within time period from July 23rd to mid-September, we find hundreds of

---

[1] http://wiki.nus.edu.sg/display/cs1105groupreports/Tianya+Leads+Public+Sensation

heading posts pertaining the accident: 119 in *Tianya* forum and 428 in *Qiangguo luntan* (Since mid-September, the number of relevant posts has sharply decreased). The themes can be sorted into six categories as follows (Since some posts belong to multiple categories simultaneously, the sum of posts in each category overpasses the total number):

1\ **victim/ donation/ volunteer work**: spread information of searching and rescuing, fundraising, blood donation and voluntary work; name-list of victims, etc.

2\ **criticism/ question/ skepticism**: criticism of the cause of the accident; question the official investigation results; comment on the accident, etc.
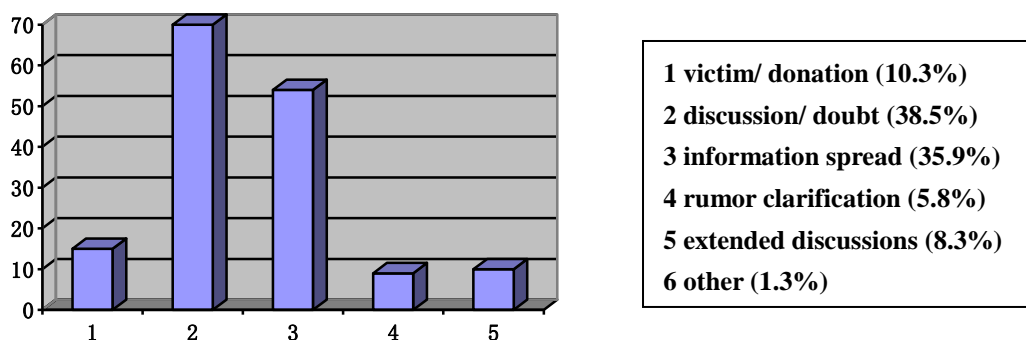
3\ **news dissemination; information update**: spread related news, especially first-hand news and video clips; forward news from traditional media.

4\ **rumor clarification/ response to doubt**: expose and clarify rumors; justify controversial information; feedback to doubts.

5\ **extended discussions**: infer to broader political or social topics indirectly related to the accident, such as the railway system, corruption in government, etc.

6\ **sympathy/ emotion**: display sympathy and mourn for victims; literature works expressing sympathy.
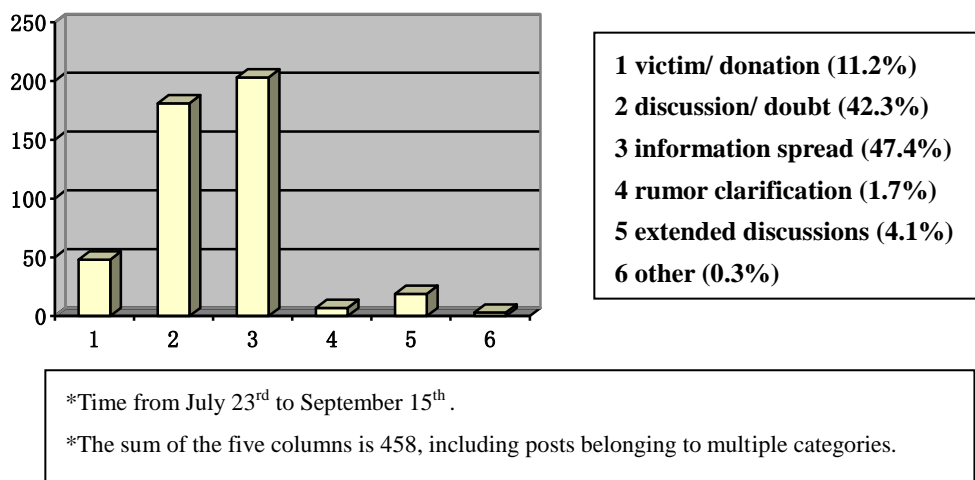
Graph 1 Heading Posts in *Tianya* Forum

1 victim/ donation (10.3%)
2 discussion/ doubt (38.5%)
3 information spread (35.9%)
4 rumor clarification (5.8%)
5 extended discussions (8.3%)
6 other (1.3%)

*Time from July 23rd to September 15th.

*The sum of the five columns is 156, including posts belonging to multiple categories.

Graph 2 Heading Posts in *Qiangguo luntan*

1 victim/ donation (11.2%)
2 discussion/ doubt (42.3%)
3 information spread (47.4%)
4 rumor clarification (1.7%)
5 extended discussions (4.1%)
6 other (0.3%)

*Time from July 23rd to September 15th.
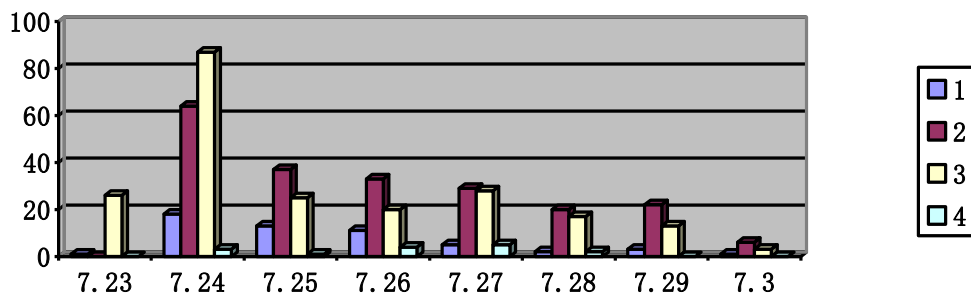*The sum of the five columns is 458, including posts belonging to multiple categories.

As shown in the two graphs, the most common topics in these online forums were related to news related to the accident, and further discussions and debates. Moreover, larger percentage of heading posts in *Qiangguo luntan* (47.4%) than *Tianya* (35.9%) spreads updated news about the accident, investigation and reimbursement for victims; the former was leveraged more as an information communication platform. Also, both forums contribute a lot for expression of public opinion. The percentage of questioning or critical posts in *Tianya* (38.5%) is slightly smaller than that in *Qiangguo luntan* (42.3%). However, despite its fewer heading posts, the interaction of ideas and attitudes in *Tianya* was much hotter than in *Qiangguo luntan* in that the posts in the former always triggered much more replies. Some even have as many as thousands of threads and several hundred thousands of clicks; whereas most posts in *Qiangguo luntan* have less than 10 replies.

These characteristics of the two online forums may be ascribed to two reasons. Firstly, two forums have different social resources and rely on various organizations. *Qiangguo luntan* is based on the *People's Daily* newspaper, which was thus backed up with abundant news and information resources in a relatively short time. Therefore, it mainly plays as a provider of second-hand news. For example, many news there have been posted by the user "society channel" which should have certain connections with the social news sector of the *People's Daily* website. On the contrary, *Tianya* is a completely commercial website. Secondly, because of their differentiated

sponsorships and backgrounds, they have distinct values and different degrees of restriction from the authorities. There are more possibilities that dissident voices in *Qiangguo luntan* are monitored, censored or deleted, yet discourses that are radical and confrontational against the official framework in *Tianya* tend to be more tolerated.

On the other hand, from a chronological perspective, the progress of the public opinion reflects some critical trends of the fluid public opinion throughout time. During different phases, the Internet was used for various uses.

Graph 3 Heading Posts across Time (*Tianya* and *Qiangguo luntan*)

*Time from July 23rd to July 30th.

*altogether 547 heading posts (not involving replies or comments) from searching results. The sum of the five columns is 614, including posts belonging to multiple categories.

Graph 3 shows the changing public opinion within about one week after the crash. It is apparent that at the same day of the accident, posts spreading related news and information took up the largest part, and maintained the leading role in the next day. In the second day, posts making criticism and expressing discontent increased sharply, forming a vivid online discussion field. During later days until the end of July, pure content of news came down, and comments and analytical content always remained the largest part.

One thing should be noted here is that for information with respect to victim identification, mobilizing donation and volunteer work, and rumor refutation, the value of online forums has not been strongly leveraged. These tasks were mainly

undertaken by micro-blog, the more instant and interactive online media, which will be discussed later.

Four Fields of the Internet Event

Internet as an Information Field

The Internet has been leveraged by the public as a form of alternative media especially in emergencies and accidents for its fast features. In the case of Wenzhou high-speed train accident, many of the earliest news, photos and videos were made by amateur journalists or photographers. These independent journalists, without confined to rules or regulations of media organization, have more leeway to record what they see in a relatively short time. The high speed, openness, fluidity and decentralization of the Internet enable the public to communicate within network of communities, generate information, and distribute information cheaply and effectively.[1]

The train accident happened at 20:34, July 23rd. Six train carriages derailed after the rear-ending, two of them fell down the viaduct and were seriously destroyed. At 20:27, netizen "Smm_miao" (Smm_苗) sent a micro-blog, stating that she saw a high-speed train moving uncommonly slowly in the heavy rainstorm; 28 minutes later, she took the first photo of the scene with a cellphone, confirming the accident and showing the rescuing work. Four minutes after the accident, one of the victims in the D301 train, whose online ID is "Yuan xiaoyuan" ("袁小芫"), posted the first micro-blog informing the accident. It was one hour earlier than the first online news from official media.[2] Roughly the same time, another trapped micro-blogger "yang quan quan yang" ("羊圈圈羊") also sent out a message on *sina* (新浪) micro-blog asking for rescue.

Within hours after the accident, many netizens tried hard to contact their family members or friends at scene to verify and spread the latest process of what happened including the rescue work, attaching photos and video clips shot by amateur

---

[1] McCaughey, Martha & Ayers, D. Michael, ed., *Cyberactivism*. P129.

[2] Earliest online news from official media Xinhua News Agency:
http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2011-07/23/c_121711451.htm

photographers or nearby residents. Grassroots information intertwined with official news kept the public informed of mostly updated and first-hand facts. On 24th, *Youku Paike*, an amateur videographer, obtained and uploaded an exclusive interview with the very first villager who arrived on the initial scene and successfully rescued over 10 people. This video had over 1.4 million views until the next day, and was one of the most viewed video on *Youku*, China's domestic video website.[1]

Internet as a Dissident Field

As shown in Graph 3, posts discussing and debating the cause of the tragedy surged in the next day. Netizens focused on different topics at different period since the accident. In the first phase immediately following the accident, netizens primarily expressed their perceptions of the cause, criticism for the technical quality of the train and discontent for the careless searching and rescue process.

The hottest discussion was all kinds of reasoning why the accident happened. The cause given by the official media was that the engine lost power and the train halted now that struck by the thunder. However, the explanation could not convince netizens, who proposed their opinions and queries. For example, on early 24th, *Tianya* forum posted a theme post summarizing opinions on the accident, including indignation for the technical and managerial problems of the railway system.[2] Firstly, if the accident was indeed caused by the thunder, why did the lightning-protection techniques not work out? An editorial on the website affiliated with the *People's Daily* said, ironically, the Railway Ministry had warned of the risks of lightning in a notice four days before the crash, but new measures had not been put into effect.[3] Secondly, the two trains did not run according to the schedule, then why did none of them report mistakes to the dispatch center? Why did the second train not receive any signal of danger during this time?[4] Shortly after the accident, these questions had been fiercely discussed online.[5]

---

[1] http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/videos/wenzhou-high-speed-train-crash-aftermath-5-most-viewed-videos.html
[2] http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2220966.shtml
[3] http://gx.people.com.cn/GB/179456/15285817.html
[4] http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2221093.shtml
[5] http://bbs1.people.com.cn/postDetail.do?boardId=1&treeView=1&view=2&id=111165134

The subsequent cleaning and rescuing process continued to arouse public condemnation. Shot by a local journalist in Zhejiang, the wreckage of trains was smashed and buried in a newly-dug hole at scene immediately afterwards. Some netizens commented:

"The ruined train body is the first-hand evidence for accident identification that should be reserved carefully for later investigation. But now, it has been interred in a hurry. Is it a proper decision?"

"Citing the 24th article of Regulation on the Emergency Rescue, Investigation and Handling of Railway Traffic Accidents, any unit or individual cannot damage the accident scene, or forge, hide or destroy related proofs."[1]

The hasty rescuing process in order to restore the railway as soon as possible was blamed as measures to destroy evidence. In the dawn of the next day, the rescuing personnel declared there were no signs of life and searching was suspended that afternoon; but it was sarcastic that in late afternoon, a little girl (*Yiyi*) was surprisingly discovered alive and rescued.[2] What's more, the quick dismissal of three senior officials of Shanghai Railways Bureau before the investigation result came out also prompted the public querulous voices.[3]

In the evening of July 24th, Yongping Wang, spokesperson of the Ministry of Railways, hosted a news conference answering all questions on the accident, where his inappropriate speech and frivolous attitude, considered showing irresponsibility and indifference for life, further aggravated the public anger. He could not give a convincing cause or other important information for the accident, either. His improper and personalized language was forwarded and mocked online and meanwhile criticized by the mass media. Here is a comment from a netizen on *Tianya*:

"There were still a lot of questions to be asked, but the news conference finished within only half an hour! … This is really a tactical conference. Borrowing what the spokesman said, 'I

[1] http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/07-29/3220491.shtml
[2] http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/stories/wenzhou-train-crash-police-captain-shao-yerong-saves-yiyi.html
[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/25/world/asia/25train.html

can only say, this is a miracle.'"[1]

The surging public opinion because of the bad influence of his performance had some impact: later at August 16th, Wang was deposed from his position.[2]

In the second phase, the number of casualties and the plan of compensation became the focus of discussion. Until the next day of the accident, according to the official media, altogether 35 people died and 192 were injured, nevertheless without announcing the total number of passengers in the destroyed train cars. Netizens expressed their questions: how can the authorities order to cease searching & rescuing even before knowing the exact number of passengers? Some netizens proposed to investigate and publish the list of victims which was practicable because passengers bought train tickets with real name. The number of victims became a hot topic soon. Some netizens calculated and deducted with sporadic information from all channels. Here is what a micro-blogger who worked as a volunteer in the hospital said online:

"After a whole day of volunteer work, I've known a lot of things which I should not have known. Until this afternoon, I estimate that number of the dead may have passed 179… At 14:00, hundreds of families at the funeral parlor were excited that many bodies were cremated directly without permission. There are so many that have been found and died in hospital, not to mention those not found or buried at scene. There are at least two to three hundred!"[3]

On July 26th, Xinhua News Agency, the biggest official news agency, declared the compensation for the first bereaved family was 500 thousand RMB (about 78,500 US dollars). This was again blamed by online public opinion as setting a standard for reparation as soon as possible in order to appease public grievance.[4] The national anger accumulated fast that accused the priority of speed, scale and performance effect in the strategy of authorities, while regardless of social justice and security.

---

[1] http://bbs.city.tianya.cn/tianyacity/Content/329/1/341577.shtml
[2] http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-08-16/193223000832.shtml
[3] Boxun News, http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2011/07/201107261040.shtml
[4] http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2224669.shtml

Confronted with fierce public indignation and criticism, Premier Wen Jiabao on 28th went to the crash spot, and mourned for the dead. He then held an open-air news conference where he emphasized the importance of saving life and guaranteed a responsible response to the public on behalf of the special investigation team directed by Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang.[1] He also made sure that the investigation be public and transparent for supervision under the society. On the same day, the new leader of Shanghai Railways Bureau disclosed that according to preliminary survey, the derailment was triggered by a serious fault in design of the signal equipment, which went wrong after disrupted by the thunder.[2] The accident exposed problems in quality of equipment, ability of professionals, and control capability.[3] On 29th, the compensation standard was raised to 915 thousand RMB (144 thousand US dollars) according to the Tort Liability Law.[4] Since the end of July, although some questions were still being debated by netizens, large scale of protest has declined. The most attracting topic was when the final investigation report would come out.

This case inspires thoughts on the exact effect of online opinion and Internet events. Why do various online incidents produce different consequences? What factors or tactics applied by netizens influence the effect of online events on real social life and decision-making of the government?

Firstly, despite authoritarianism, the Chinese state apparatus is somewhat fragmented horizontally and vertically. The central government is by no means an inseparable entity, but constituted of departments with differing priorities (O'Brien, 2008); the central-local divide renders a chance for public resentment to be utilized and directed by the central government to monitor localities. (Tai, 2006) Meanwhile, lack of the rule of law or other legitimate channels to influence government policies, as well strict control on offline civil movements, popularize the Internet as a safe and efficient tool to amplify the public voice (Meikle, 2002). These political opportunities ignite the eruption of online criticism and precipitate intervention from the central

---

[1] http://china.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2011/07/27/012097405.shtml
[2] Boxun News, http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2011/07/201107261040.shtml
[3] http://ccnews.people.com.cn/GB/15278314.html
[4] http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/07-29/3220491.shtml

government or upper-level government. In this specific case, Premier Wen's address to implement thorough investigation and strong attitude towards implicated officials reflected this central-local division. The central government disengaged itself from the local Railways Bureau and local officials and stood along with the public, by dismissing officials in responsibility and adjusting the compensation policy as a positive feedback to the public anger.

Secondly, interaction strategies and the framework of claim adopted by the online public during the interaction with the authorities as well matter a lot for success. On one hand, according to Albert Hirschman, "voice" activities that promote gradual political liberalization are more acceptable for the regime than "exit" activities that directly challenge the state. (Zheng, 2008) [Note that in Hirschman's theory, voice means to protest, exit means to keep quiet and not protest.] Throughout the entire process, criticism and protest were largely limited to the cyberspace and no radical collective activities were reported offline. The moderate approaches of the public proved to be a "voice" strategy rather than "exit" which might have provoked the authorities. On the other hand, the most critical task of issue-framing is to gain a shared understanding of the problem and possible solutions, and constructing legitimacy, rather than criminal activity or national security threats, to circumvent a total crackdown from the authoritarian regime.[1] Justification of issues explains why some posts are channeled by the state and generated a satisfactory official response whereas others received no attention. In general, Chinese authorities accept and encourage discussions focusing on local power agencies or concrete social problems, while issues concerning the central regime or power center or overall problems are seldom accepted. In this case, opinions questioning technological weakness and malfeasance of officials were responded by the authorities, while opinions discussing the central power struggles as the factor of this accident were disregarded or even screened.

It has been widely accepted that news media have the potential to promote civic engagement, and the thriving of the Internet further expands this process by supplying

---

[1] McCaughey, Martha & Ayers, D. Michael, ed., *Cyberactivism*. P93.

a sphere for political expression and debating.[1] However, the effect of online protest and questioning against the government agencies relies on what kind of strategies and tactics netizens adopt, and whether their framework of discussion is tolerated by the authorities.

Internet as a Charity Field

After the accident happened, the Internet, especially the micro-blog, soon became a sphere communicating mutual-assistance information and mobilizing charity activities. The online network and communication tools played a significant role in blood donation, volunteer work, victim searching and identification of victims.

At 10:45pm on the 23rd, micro-blog "Zhejiang qiuzhu SOS" (浙江求助 SOS) sent a message reporting the shortage of blood stock in hospital.[2] At 11:40pm, three hours after the accident, a micro-blogger *daocao yun* (稻草云), who is a journalist of a local radio station in Zhejiang, posted, "the blood reserves in Zhejiang are in terrible shortage." She also publicized the address of the local blood bank with some advices for listeners and netizens who would like to donate blood.[3] This original post had been forwarded by individuals, media and other humanitarian organizations for over 14,000 times, let alone secondary and further forwarding. Throughout the night, thousands of people rushed to the blood center after obtaining the message, forming a long queue hoping to donate blood.[4] The funding donation was also implemented online. Chen Lihao, a committee member of the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) of Zhuhai in Guangdong Province and chairman of the board of a software enterprise, mobilized a donation campaign through *sina* micro-blog in the morning of 26th. He stated that this message is forwarded every time, he would donate one RMB to the little girl survivor *Yiyi*, applicable within 24 hours.[5] Large numbers of netizens responded this with huge enthusiasm, finally forwarding it

---

[1] Dhavan V. Shah, Jaeho Cho, William P. Eveland, JR. and Nojin Kwak, "Information and Expression in a Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation", Communication Research, 2005, no. 32, 532.
[2] http://weibo.com/soszj?key_word=%E6%B8%A9%E5%B7%9E&is_search=1
[3] http://weibo.com/1256385245/xg8ES8ln6
[4] http://www.eeo.com.cn/ens/2011/0724/206994.shtml
[5] http://weibo.com/1969451625/xgvTDAYVF

900 thousand times and making near 200 thousand comments. Chen later donated 1 million *yuan* to *Yiyi*, and more than 70 thousand *yuan* to the special police captain Shao Yerong who insisted on saving efforts even after the suspending order from above.[1]

It is interesting to notice that some posts appealing for donation in the name of the China Red Cross Society, an official charity association, always faced a lot of irony. Netizens expressed their reluctance to contribute through this organization. Despite on a private base, the China Red Cross Society has been implicated liaison with the government and corruption scandals and its reputation has been heavily tarnished. Although it was later discovered as a mistaken message, it proved a sharp contrast between the credibility between GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) and grassroots donation campaigns.

Another humanitarian project which would have otherwise faced more obstacles if not for the Internet was victim tracing. People who could not find or get in touch with their family members publicized information of missing people and asked netizens for help. 48 hours since the accident, posts searching for missing people and contacting relatives had mounted over 4 million.[2] Before the publication of the official list of victims, the Internet and online network took the responsibility to spread related information and realized mutual aid. For instance, netizen *yaoqi* posted on the 23rd, "a middle-aged man named Li Jun said he was the first who crept out of the train and was sent to hospital." This post was later replied by an ecstatic netizen who claimed to be Li's sister.[3] On other major online forums such as *Tianya* and *Qiangguo luntan*, postings looking for missing passengers and collecting these information were also noticeable. We see a lot of posts forwarding official statistics of dead and missing people; more posts collected updated information and searching messages.[4] For example, one post initiated on the 25th on *Tianya* named "with no

---

[1] http://yuqing.people.com.cn/GB/210108/227324/index.html
[2] http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2011/07-25/3208523.shtml
[3] Ibid.
[4] http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2221268.shtml
http://bbs.city.tianya.cn/tianyacity/Content/237/1/17669.shtml

reliable official list of victims, we do it by ourselves" constantly gathered scattered pieces of information from the microblog and hospitals.[1]

The third area of humanitarian activities was voluntary work. Compared with the previous areas, voluntary work depended more on existed humanitarian organizations. In the night of the accident, in the online instant discussion room of Voluntary Worker Bureau of Wenzhou Humanitarian Association, hot talks about the rescuing kept relentlessly. Some organizations opened micro-blog to recruit volunteers online. These organizations also used the online platform to mobilize donation and other forms of assistance. According to a rough calculation, the total voluntary worker teams enrolled in rescuing summed up to 50, with membership from 3000 to 4000.[2]

In China, the social security system and assistance mechanism provided by the government are only enjoyed by a limited number of people. When encountered with disasters or emergencies, it is imperative to resort to available social forces for help. Crisis often exposes state weakness and presents a chance for civic associations to play an active role and expands the space of civil society. [3] Nevertheless, state-dominated, governance-driven political atmosphere lacks active involvement of civil society as an independent or mighty actor. (He, 2006) This leads to the less organizational characteristic of civic engagement in humanitarian work and community services in China. By virtue of the Internet as an efficient communication tool, the necessity of organization base is further weakened and direct connection between donors and victims is favored. On one hand, some of charity activities are mobilized by formal and professional organizations, but more often than not, they are initialized online by individuals, online informal communities, or less commonly, media. These years Chinese society has witnessed several instances of social donation in a large scale, initiated by individuals who asked help online for their family members or friends.[4] If only these campaigns could keep a transparent record of

---

[1] http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/funinfo/1/2749999.shtml
[2] http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2011-07/25/c_121713892.htm
[3] Shawn Shieh, Guosheng Deng: An emerging civil society: the impact of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake on grass-roots associations in China. The China Journal, Jan. 2011 (65), P181-196.
[4] Online charity: realistic enthusiasm in virtual world. China's New Week, 2006. 1.9, P38-39.

donations, they may even gain more credibility and sympathy as a flexible mechanism than official or semi-official professional organizations.

Internet as a Self-clarification Field

During the process of this Internet event, the cyberspace also formed a self-purification sphere where rumors were eradicated by netizens themselves rather than the authorities. In *sina* microblog, a new user "microblog rumor refutal" group (*weibo piyao* 微博辟谣) showed up in November 2010.[1] *Weibo piyao* is officially affiliated with *sina* microblog and dedicated to filtering and exposing fake information in all areas, from political news to scandals of celebrity, via searching, contacting related sources, or via reports from general netizens. It also punishes rumor-mongers by forbidding them to write microblogs or to be followed for a certain time period. "We will not stand with anyone, we will try our best to dig out the truth as long as the public have questions", said the leader of *weibo piyao* group.[2] Now it has more than 630 thousand followers. There are also other self-organized users endeavoring to spike rumors and clean the atmosphere of online public opinion such as "rumor refutal union" (*piyao lianmeng* 辟谣联盟)[3]. It was founded in May 2011, and has had about 190 microblogs now, many of which were forwarded hundreds of times. What's more, top BBS or online forums such as *Qiangguo luntan* also created theme posts to collect rectification of gossips.

There were several rumors since the burst of the crash. The news conference on the 24th reported that the number of dead people was 35. Hearsays had it that the number would not be more than 35 from the official loudspeaker, which would cause the dismission of the Secretary Municipal Committee. The authorities concealed the truth to abate the seriousness of accidents. It seems coincident that, listed by some netizens, the casualties in several major domestic accidents from 1993 to 2011 were all 35. However, later this message was disproved by *weibo piyao*: 18 out of the 37 figures were fabricated. Another case was a photo showing a woman throttled by

---

[1] Microblog homepage: http://www.weibo.com/weibopiyao
[2] http://www.chinanews.com/it/2011/09-15/3329748_2.shtml
[3] Microblog homepage: http://www.weibo.com/piyaolianmeng

several policemen. The photo was interpreted as ruthlessness of the authorities for the bereaved families, which was said to have been filtered by the Ministry of Railways for twice. But after the crosscheck by *weibo piyao*, this photo was found coming from earlier news on dismantling illegal constructions in another city.[1] This message was then forwarded more than 15 thousand times for correction.

Besides these comparatively independent groups, agencies representing the authorities also applied the Internet as a convenient and instant media to clarify truths for the public. Another hot debated hearsay originated from a photo of the accident spot taken by a photographer of Xinhua News Agency. A man's arm was found holding a handrail in the train car which fell down the viaduct in the accident, after the rescuing finished. The photo generated guess that passengers had been buried alive. This added to the great indignation of the unthoroughness of rescuing procedure. Xinhua News Agency released a message on its official microblog, stating that the person in the photo was actually a rescuer.[2] The journalist who took the photo also uploaded more photos of the same set to verify the truth.

Individual netizens also took responsibility to clean off fake information. On the 25th, a photo was posted online, claimed to record a parade in Hong Kong mourning victims of the train accident. Later, netizen *nanjing wanshi le* (南京万事乐) pointed out that this was an old photo taken in last August reflecting Hong Kong citizens mourning victimized hostages in Philippines, and called on careful judgement.[3] Then this was forwarded by media and individual microblogs fast and many microblogger delete the previous mistaken photo as a correction.

The cooperation between grassroots and authoritative forces reflects the desire to root out information impurities and create a clean online environment. This trend, on one hand, provides a believable and semi-formal stage for the authorities to precipitate the communication of official information in response to hearsays. On the other hand, it also indicates that Chinese netizens have already learned to think more

[1] http://weibo.com/1866405545/xgOrKz57F

[2] http://www.weibo.com/2177386743/xgr05sVEx

[3] http://weibo.com/2010njwsl?key_word=%E8%8F%B2%E5%BE%8B%E5%AE%BE%E9%81%87%E5%AE%B3%E6%B8%B8%E5%AE%A2&is_search=1

rationally, comprehensively, and responsively as members of public sphere. Grassroots participation in this kind of campaigns does great favor to repair the social trust system and conduct social grievance. It makes up the shortcoming of official information source. For example, in February 2010, rumors of earthquake spread in Shaanxi. When people resorted to official source for confirmation they found the government homepage was not accessible and no answering on the phone of the local Earthquake Bureau. The shortage of believable of information added to people's panic.[1]

Discussion

Interaction among Netizens, Organizations and State

We have analyzed the four fields of civic engagement with the aid of the Internet in the Wenzhou train accident, respectively. How do these fields construct a panoramic view of the utilization of the Internet by netizens? How does the online public sphere interact and cooperate with other social factors, such as social organizations and state, in each field and the entire system? Summarizing what we obtain in previous analysis, we may draw a diagram showing the intersecting fields and interrelation among these different roles.

---

[1] Jinli Kong, The impact of information society on social management: the case of Shaanxi earthquake rumor. *Guanlixue Yanjiu*, 2010.5, P63-64.
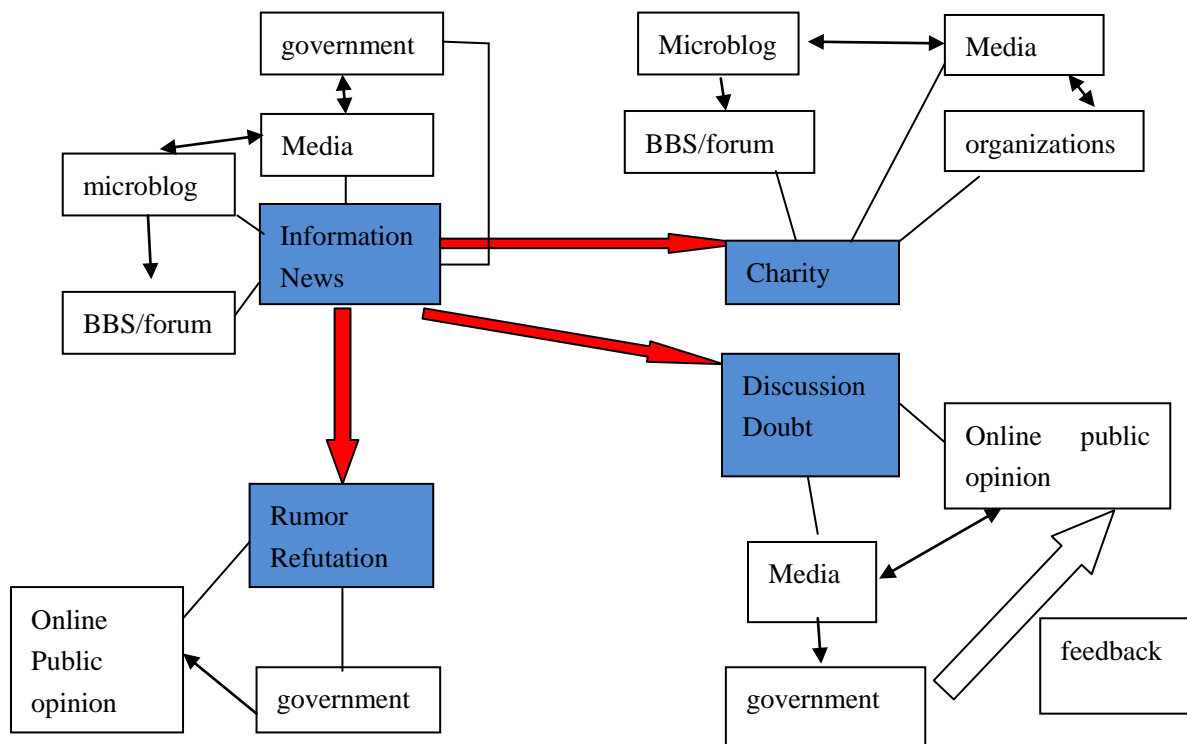
From this diagram, we can know about how the information flows among different actors and how online public sphere is adopted during the process. Firstly, netizens on spot spread news and first-hand information through the Internet immediately after the accident, which offers an important source for traditional media; meanwhile, online communities also received and forwarded official news from traditional media and the government. These news and information led to charity activities in next step, and further discussions and doubts from the public; news included rumors that to be cleaned off. Secondly, individuals and professional humanitarian associations applied microblog to disseminate information of searching, contacting, blood donation, etc, which were forwarded and assembled in online forums. Online communication mobilized citizens to be engaged in civic activities. Thirdly, the Internet also provided a relatively independent and equal space for dissident netizens to vent their voice and exchange their ideas. Prominent suspicion and criticism from the online public sphere, amplified by traditional media, could induce feedback from the authorities. The feedback may further inspire new thoughts

and opinions. Fourthly, online communities displayed potential power in controlling the purity of the public opinion. Some individuals or self-organized alliances dedicated to rumor refutation function as a semi-official and convenient platform to clarify real facts. Furthermore, government agencies also took advantage of the Internet in terms of its low costs and high speed to correct hearsays online.

What are the causes of these functions and influences of China's Internet and civic engagement in different fields? There are several conditions embedded in the context of political reform and social transformation that may explain these features. To begin with, China's fragmented regime offers considerable political opportunities for online protest and activism. The decentralization of state power and conflicts of interests in central and local government and various sectors accompanied with the reform process make it possible for the grass-roots force to play a wedge in between them. This supported the legitimacy of public dissatisfaction and censure towards the local government and specific agencies.

Next, the marketization of traditional media in the reform on the one hand forms an alliance with the grassroots. Previous homogeneous official media transmitting one central voice began to deliver various voices. In order to cater to as more audiences as possible, many media organizations learn to care for the taste and requirement of the mass and construct a union with the public opinion on many issues. As a result, some traditional media perform as representatives of the grass-roots and criticize negative aspects in political and social life. On the other hand, the remaining control and restriction of traditional media from the regime also set space for the Internet as a supplementary information source and challenging media, as exemplified by the performance of amateur journalists at the very beginning after the accident. Contrary to the traditional media which had to report the crash according to the central guideline, the Internet media supported by the mass have greater degree of freedom in coverage.

Moreover, the increasingly tolerance for civil society and NGOs from the government recently facilitates organizational basis and public enlightenment for online charity. For instance, there is research showing that during the Wenchuan

earthquake in 2008, Chinese society witnessed an increasingly sophisticated domestic NGOs sector, and a growing willingness on the part of the government to accept a limited role of NGOs in disaster relief and charity projects.[1] But the power of professional NGOs is still limited, and that explains why individual-initialized charity activities surged online in this case.

Last but not the least, with the ever-growing exploitation of the Internet as a political and social-cultural arena, Chinese netizens gradually start to perceive the new media more critically and rationally: they begin to question and re-check the information online by digging out other sources. This trend of improving media literacy would contribute to a free market of public opinion and a justice and benign public sphere in China.

There is no doubt that the Internet and online public sphere are highly involved and play an impressive role in civic engagement. The Internet shares the responsibility of information spread and confirmation with the authorities and official media; it is involved in the mobilization of charity services; it is also open for public discussion, deliberation and debating.

Official Discourse versus Online Discourse

The Internet contention has its own features: they are symbolic and discursive in form due to the virtual media they rely on; most events are episodic and quick to diffuse.[2] The way the Internet facilitates civic engagement and activism is also based on a challenging framework of discourse. In the case of Wenzhou high-speed train crash, the official media used a framework of non-political, emotion-stimulating and humanitarian story-telling, while the online public relied on a more complicated framework, both non-political and political, both cooperative with and dissident against the mainstream media and the authorities in different fields.

After the accident, the higher-ups issued directives to CCTV (China Central Television) and the media: "Newest requirements regarding Wenzhou accident

---

[1] Britton Roney, Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake. *China Information*, (2011) 25, 83-104.
[2] O'Brien, ed., *Popular Protest in China*, P129.

reporting: 1. Use death and casualty numbers issued by authoritative departments; 2. Reporting should not be too frequent; 3. Report more moving stories, such as people donating blood, taxis drivers not taking fares, etc.; 4. Don't investigate the cause of the accident, use information issued by authoritative departments; 5. Don't do reflections or commentary [on the accident/issues].[1] The government hoped to contain the dissident emotion of the public and emphasized non-political aspect of the accident. Moving stories were highlighted while the disastrous aspect that may instigate public anger was downplayed.

On the contrary, the online public created a very different discourse in debating representing the consciousness of grass-roots, which is suspicious and confrontational. For example, a popular post on *Tianya* which has been clicked more than 360,000 times narrated what a journalist saw in Wenzhou:

"The rescuing attempt is widely publicized with the related agencies trying their best to deal with the aftermath. However, what I see in every hospital and settlement are mostly volunteers. They are taking care of the injured, serving their eating and drinking, doing the laundry and contacting their families."[2]

However, the dissident discourse is only one section of what the netizens employed. In charity mobilization and organization and rumor fighting, the online community pursued collaboration with the authorities and formed a benign cooperative relationship with the government. It is becoming more and more mature not only to contend the authorities, but to undertake social obligations as a part of the community.

With the assistance of the Internet as innovative communication technologies, netizens were constructing a more independent and rational public sphere online, adjusting and complicating its relation with the government and society in differentiated areas.

---

[1]

http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/stories/chinese-reactions-to-governments-handling-of-wenzhou-train-accident.html

[2] http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/2226546.shtml

http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/videos/wenzhou-high-speed-train-crash-aftermath-5-most-viewed-videos.html

Conclusion

News media has the potential to promote civic engagement, and the thriving of the Internet further expand this process by supplying political information and a sphere for political expression.[1] Many research works discuss this issue either from the perspective of the Internet as a technology affordance, or from the netizens as an independent force utilizing the technology. This thesis adopts a broader view to explore the concrete interaction among different parts of the social life and attempts to generate a dynamic picture of how netizens participate in political and social life, and, during this process, negotiate with the authorities.

In such a non-democratic state as China, the ties between collective online activities and civil society or democratization hold more special significance. Since cases pile up where these incidents raised national attention and resulted in adjustment in decision-making or changes in the governmental attitudes, many scholars especially the indigenous speak highly of them, who convince that they considerably contribute to and supplement the mechanism of public superintendence. The diffusion of the Internet and the fledgling civil society in China energize each other in coevolutionary dynamics, and the state will encounter both the virtual and social pressure from them.[2] Progress of civic engagement is also partially attributed to the Internet: netizens leverage innovative ICTs to communicate news, discussion, conducting charity and self-discipline in spreading information.

Nevertheless, the power of the Internet for civic engagement is far from omnipotent. The counterbalancing force from the online grass-roots is still restricted in transforming the policy-making process. Most successful cases aimed at local-level or agency-level issues instead of central government or nationwide occurrences. The party-state is supportive of such cases which assist to reduce central pressures of overseeing localities in a country of such a vast territory, meanwhile dredging and

---

[1] Dhavan V. Shah, Jaeho Cho, William P. Eveland, JR. and Nojin Kwak, "Information and Expression in a Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation", Communication Research, 2005, no. 32, 532.
[2] Guobin Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China: Coevolutionary Dynamics and Digital Formations", China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition, Lowell Dittmer, and Guoli Liu, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman& Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 303-318.

diverting public grievance to some places without ruining the topmost government legitimacy. [1] Besides, China's fledgling civil society filled with incipient organizations and associations fails to fully undergird the online community, which may impede its further value in implementing charity campaigns or reconstructing social trust. In conclusion, under contemporary context, the Internet remains the strongest force for civic engagement and democracy available for Chinese people,[2] while how this force is utilized by the public to interact with, complement or challenge the authorities is still waiting for observation in more details.

---

[1] Tom Downey, "Cyber Posse", New York Times Magazine, Mar. 7, 2010. 43.
[2] Yongming Zhou, Historicizing Online politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2006.

Bibliography

Earl, Jennifer & Kimport, Katrina, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011.

Garrett, R. Kelly, Protest in an Information Society: A Review of Literature on Social Movements and New ICTs. *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Apr. 2006. P202-224.

Leib, Ethan & He, Baogang, ed., *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

McCaughey, Martha & Ayers, D. Michael, ed., *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Meikle, Graham, *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. Pluto Press, 2002.

O'Brien, Kevin, ed., Popular Protest in China. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Tai, Zixue, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Yang, Guobin,

- The Internet and Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment, *Journal of Contemporary China* (2003), 12(36), 453-475.
- "The Internet and Civil Society in China: Coevolutionary Dynamics and Digital Formations", *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*, Lowell Dittmer, and Guoli Liu, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman& Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 303-318.
- *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, P13.

Zheng, Yongnian, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Zhou, Yongming, *Historicizing Online politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2006.

Acknowledgement

My deepest gratitude goes first and foremost to Professor Guobin Yang, my supervisor, for his constant encouragement and guidance. He has walked me through all the stages of the writing of this thesis. Without his consistent and illuminating instruction, this thesis could not have reached its present form. Second, my thanks would go to my beloved family for their loving considerations and great confidence in me all through these years. I also owe my sincere gratitude to my friends and my fellow classmates who gave me their help and time in listening to me and helping me work out my problems during the difficult course of the thesis.