

Chapter 58

Citizens' Use of the Internet and Public Service Delivery: A Longitudinal Study of the First- Level Administrative Divisions in China (1997–2014)

Qinfeng Zhu

City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Marko M Skoric

City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Tai-Quan Peng

Michigan State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines citizens' use of the Internet as a popular feedback mechanism, and argues that it can help improve institutional performance. Specifically, it assesses the relationship between Internet penetration rate and public service delivery across 31 first-level administrative divisions in People's Republic of China from 1997 to 2014. A hierarchical linear modelling was conducted using secondary data released by the National Bureau of Statistics and the China Internet Network Information Centre. The result shows a positive relationship between Internet penetration rate and public service delivery when controlling for GDP per capita and education level. The positive relationship increases over time in general. The implications of Internet use for performance-based legitimacy and its impact on political change (or stability) in the authoritarian context are further discussed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3706-3.ch058

INTRODUCTION

Although subjected to heavy censorship, Internet use in China is associated with the growth of a critical and participatory citizenry (Lei, 2011; Zhang & Lin, 2014). Pundits and scholars have often viewed the rise of Internet and new media as a challenge to the political status quo (Howard, 2011; Castells, 2012). This confrontational perspective underplays the collaborative dimension of citizen-state relationship, particularly on the common ground of good governance (i.e., the outcome and capacity of making and implementing public policies and delivering services). Indeed, a good living standard and the functioning of daily lives is the primary concern of most ordinary citizens. They are concerned about common problems—clean air, affordable housing, education, neighborhood safety, and health care. In response, governments, democratic and non-democratic alike, have to ensure a decent level of public services delivery in order to earn support from their citizens (Fukuyama, 2013). This may be particularly important for the Chinese authorities because they rely heavily on performance to claim regime legitimacy (i.e., the acknowledge rightfulness of rule) (Nathan, 2003; Zhu, 2011).

The widespread use of the Internet and its potential to reinvigorate citizen engagement presents the Chinese government not only with pressure to perform, but more importantly, it provides valuable resources for the improvement of institutional performance. Besides cultivating civic virtues such as interest in public issues and commitment to public causes (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994), Internet use, particularly expressive use, can function as a feedback mechanism allowing information of citizens' needs and wants, opinions on public issues, and evaluations of specific policies to flow up the political hierarchy. While popular feedback is necessary for the achievement of good governance under any type of regime (Weller, 2008), this online feedback mechanism may be particularly important in a country like China where the traditional methods of participation and the institutions of feedback are limited.

With this in mind, we focus on the potential of citizens' use of the Internet for improving governance in the context of China. Specifically, this study examines the relationship between Internet penetration rate and public service delivery across the 31 first-level administrative divisions (except for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Macao Special Administrative Region) from 1997 to 2014. While acknowledging that Internet build-up in China is part of a centralized plan to induce socioeconomic modernization (Kalathil & Boas, 2003), we draw on David Easton's (1965) political system theory and focus on Internet use as popular feedback to explain the relationship.

INTERNET USE AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN CHINA

During the past twenty years, the world has witnessed the exponential growth of the Internet. With the rise of social media platforms in particular, the Internet has transformed into networks of social ties (e.g., social network sites (SNS)) and common interests (e.g., online discussion forums) (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Zhang & Wang, 2010). Consequently, new forms of personalized public engagement have emerged, no longer requiring significant organizational resources nor a shared identity. Instead, people engage with public issues through decentralized content (co-)production and personalized expression that is centered around personal problems, lifestyles, and interests (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The structural designs and technological features of new media afford users to talk about public issues with various underlying mechanisms, ranging from liking and sharing online content and expressing one's opinions, to social conversations and even occasional deliberations (Skoric & Zhu, 2015). New tech-

10 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/citizens-use-of-the-internet-and-public-service-delivery/295042

Related Content

Civic Engagement of Students: Perspectives of Bangladesh

SSM Sadrul Huda, Tanveer Kabir and Tanvir Alam Siddiq (2019). *International Journal of Political Activism and Engagement* (pp. 1-9).

www.irma-international.org/article/civic-engagement-of-students/236661

E-Government and Related Indices: Telecommunications Infrastructure, Human Capital, Institutional Efficacy, and Online Services

Kathleen M. Boyer-Wright and Jeffrey E. Kottemann (2020). *Open Government: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 1810-1824).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/e-government-and-related-indices/235256

Globalization as a New Framework for Human Rights Protection

Reannon Navaratnam and Isabelle Yeeun Lee (2017). *Defending Human Rights and Democracy in the Era of Globalization* (pp. 17-49).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/globalization-as-a-new-framework-for-human-rights-protection/166641

Voice and Accountability: Rural Women's Associations as Platforms for Civic Engagement in the Primary Health Sector in Nigeria

Idongesit Eshiet (2019). *International Journal of Political Activism and Engagement* (pp. 10-22).

www.irma-international.org/article/voice-and-accountability/236662

Do the Math: There's an Opportunity Gap for Black Students

Jacquelynn Anne Boivin and Jessica Scoville (2023). *Handbook of Research on Solutions for Equity and Social Justice in Education* (pp. 222-245).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/do-the-math/319773