Chapter 72

Factors Influencing Online Poll Participation:
An Examination of Perception of Online Polls, Information Literacy, and Political Efficacy in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the degree of participation in online polls and its relationship to the perception of online polls, information literacy, and the political efficacy of Internet users in mainland China. Data was gathered online from a sample of 419 Internet users. Results show that perceptions of both the usefulness and trustworthiness of online polls positively correlated to participation in online polls but not to information literacy or to political efficacy. Contrary to expected results, political efficacy did not relate to online poll participation. However, regression results suggested that Internet users who often participated in online polls were usually males who were literate in publishing and believed that online polls were an effective and trustworthy means to express opinions on public issues. Limitations and implications for future studies are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Since September 20, 1987, with the first email, "Across the Great Wall, we can reach every corner in the world," sent from China, the Internet has significantly infiltrated every area in China. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2011), the number of netizens in China reached 457 million in December 2010. Meanwhile, in a white paper "The Internet in China" published by the Chinese government, it was reported that over 80% of China's netizens regard the Internet as their main daily news source and admitted that the Internet played a unique role

in the reporting of important news events and in fully satisfying people's need for information (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2010).

Because of its interactive property, the Internet is now widely used in citizen journalism to promote the voices of the audience, especially those from the grassroots. One of the commonly used methods for audiences to express views is through participation in online polls. According to a content analysis of 100 online newspaper websites in the U.S., Schultz (1999) found that 24 out of 100 conducted online polls. Similarly, editors in China from both state-owned and commercial websites also used online polls as an important means to interactively solicit users' participations in polls and to instantaneously report results to the public on different issues, except for some politically sensitive topics restricted by the government. The dramatic development of social media further facilitates the usage of online polls, as publishers are able to initiate all kinds of polls on topics ranging from lighthearted and sometimes trivial subjects in entertainment to serious and thought-provoking ones in politics. However, the online polls discussed in this paper refer only to public affairs polls related to political, economic, or social issues.

Many websites, especially those well-known portal websites in China, often post online polls for important news topics in public affairs. As scientific public opinion polls are not commonly conducted in China, online polls have developed into an important way for Internet users to express their opinions and participate in community affairs. To some extent, the results of "unscientific" online polls are often regarded as public opinions, and journalists often quote them in their stories. The government also regards them as a dashboard in the public policymaking process. In view of this increasingly popular trend and also given the little attention paid to the validity and reliability of online polls, it is necessary to examine Internet

users' perceptions of online polls in China and factors influencing Internet users' participation in online polls.

Furthermore, despite the fact that China is still under a tightly filtered traditional media system and the country is undergoing a period of transition from a totalitarian state to reform and openness, the Internet has rapidly become an important channel for expressing opinions, especially in user-generated content using social media in the Web 2.0 era (Leung, 2009). It was against this backdrop that this study explored the factors, such as perceptions of online polls, perceived self-information literacy, and political efficacy, which may have significant impacts on online poll participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Polls Participation

Past research has demonstrated that "cybercitizens" use the Internet to participate in the political process and have effectively accomplished political ends. With the widespread use of social media, the nature of political action will witness a dramatic change (Hill & Hughes, 1999). In China, engaging in online polls has become a novel form of political participation and civic engagement for cybercitizens. However, online polls have been criticized for their lack of reliability and validity. In examining the implementation of online polls, Wu and Weaver (1997) summarized five commonly recognized problems: 1) manipulation; 2) shaping the results by stuffing the ballot box or including repeat submissions; 3) class bias; 4) bias of selection in cooperation; and 5) bias of participation-nonparticipation. Meanwhile, despite the press reporting countless examples of anecdotal evidence that online polls are unscientific, Internet users, with a variety of motivations, continue to participate.

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