

Chapter 15

Impact of Internet Use on Civic Engagement in Chinese Rural Areas: A Preliminary Research

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ABSTRACT

Few prior studies have addressed the political impact of the Internet on civic engagement in rural areas. This preliminary study aims to explore the connection between Internet use and civic engagement of rural Internet users. Based on the surveys implemented by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the authors find that using the Internet does enhance the level of civic engagement among rural Internet users in China. However, better use of the Internet faces some obstacles, too. They are the young age of rural users and the limited Net bandwidth. Implications of these obstacles are discussed. The chapter concludes that, under certain circumstances, there is great potential for Chinese rural Internet users to become more actively engaged in public affairs in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet, an interactive and enabling peer-to-peer information and communication technology (ICT), has proven to be an invaluable communication means that continues to change the conduct of public life (Bimber, 1998, 2003;

Chadwick, 2003). In addition, what economists call the positive externalities of technology might also be a significant contributor to the broader public interest. Numerous speculations have emerged about the impact of Internet use on civic engagement in the populace (Katz & Rice, 2002; Macintosh & Stephen, 2003; Norris, 2001). The idealistic speculations see the Internet as

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strengthening civil society and democratic politics more generally as it expands the opportunities for communication and mobilization. Besides, the worldwide efforts to deploy the Internet in the public sector (digital or electronic government) and the explosion of political information on the web mean that the Internet has already become an important resource for civic information and a significant platform for civic engagement and participation. For example, among those of the 191 United Nations member states, 179 interact with citizens via e-government portals (United Nations Online Network of Public Administration and Finance [UNPAN], 2006). Thus, how to engage citizens online to improve governance and facilitate the democratic citizenship has become one of the key challenges for the proponents of e-government in specific and e-citizenship more broadly (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Pratchett & Krimmer, 2005; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005; West, 2007; Yildiz, 2007).

However, few discussions have mentioned the impact of Internet use on rural civic engagement. This absence may not be a big problem for developed countries, since the disparity between the urban and rural areas is no longer significant in these countries after decades of industrialization and urbanization. Nevertheless, this is not the case for many developing countries. In fact, there is a consensus in the international community that the arrival of broadband Internet constitutes a critical take-off point in a rural community's path to economic and social development in less developed countries (International Telecommunication Union, 2009). Even in the United States, recognizing that ICTs play a critical role in expanding business and education opportunities as well as enhancing the competitiveness of the nation's small towns and rural communities, the Obama administration has decided to inject \$6 billion into the rural broadband internet project through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (White House, 2009). Unfortunately, these recent efforts focus more on economic and

development dimensions rather than being concerned with the impact of Internet use on civic engagement in rural areas.

This study is intended to fill the void. In light of the survey data provided by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the leading Internet research organization in China, we have the opportunity to explore whether Internet use among rural people has an impact on their engagement in public affairs preliminarily. We believe China's case has peculiar implications not only because China is characterized as a country with a startling urban-rural gap, but also because this country is known for operating possibly the most sophisticated Internet censoring and monitoring system in the world (Cherry, 2005). Such control can translate into an imagined surveillance force, forcing Internet users into self-censorship (Harwit & Clark, 2001), and the consequence of which may be a widespread indifference to public affairs. The absolute control over the Internet has also created a popular image that Chinese Internet users can do nothing but play. Nevertheless, this misleading image may ignore the real struggles of Internet users in China (Yang, 2009). We assume that the impact of the access to the Internet among the rural users deserves a careful examination.

The popular image mentioned above may be reinforced by the unfavorable conditions in which farmers live. Historically, the agricultural industry and its workers (i.e., farmers or villagers) have existed under extremely unfavorable conditions compared to their urban counterparts. Although China has experienced an exponential economic growth over the past three decades, the development of the farming industry and rural communities has lagged far behind the economic expansion. While farmers account for roughly three-quarters (or 0.8 billion) of the total population in China, they have primarily been working as cheap laborers to contribute to the economic growth. Generally, the rural-urban migrant workers are permitted only in the lowest wage, lowest skill, and least pleasant urban jobs that are not

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