

**Governing by the Internet:
Local Governance in the Digital Age**

Rongbin Han
(Corresponding author)

hanr@uga.edu

Department of International Affairs
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

Linan Jia

lj09169@uga.edu

Department of International Affairs
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

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Abstract

In what ways has the expansion of the Internet transformed local governance in China? Through analysis of over 2000 leaked official emails from a district-level Internet propaganda office, the article finds that the Internet has served more as a tool to enhance control rather than to improve governance at the local level. In particular, local authorities have prioritized Internet commentating tasks assigned from upper levels while keeping a close watch on negative publicity of both national and local problems. Their occasional responses to online complaints are often more likely meant to satisfy superiors and pacify the public rather than to address citizens' concerns. Such a "ruling by the Internet" strategy may bring short-term gains such as preserving social stability on the surface, but may harm the regime in the long run with accumulated social dissatisfaction.

The rise of the Internet has transformed the dynamics of the state-society interaction in authoritarian regimes such as China (Yang 2003b; Boas 2006). In particular, the new technology has significantly empowered Chinese citizens vis-à-vis the party-state and expanded the scope of socio-political participation by enabling various actors, especially those previously excluded from the governance processes, to engage in politics, through online expression, participation, and mobilization (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Gao and Stanyer 2014; Lagerkvist 2007, 2010; Tai 2006; Yang 2007, 2009; Zheng 2008). Meanwhile, the Chinese party-state, known for its resilience and adaptability, has been actively attempting to tame the Internet and use it to the government's advantage through a series of control, co-optation, and manipulation efforts (Han 2015a, 2015b, King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2017; MacKinnon 2011; Noesselt 2014; Schlaeger and Jiang 2014). Based on a rare dataset of leaked emails from a district-level Internet propaganda office, this article explores the impact of the Internet on local governance in the digital age. In particular, it intends to address the following question: have local authorities used the Internet as an opportunity to improve governance—by becoming more responsive and accountable to citizens—or more as a tool to enhance control over the public?

Through analysis of more than 2000 official emails in the dataset, the authors find that while local authorities in China have utilized the Internet to engage the citizenry and improve governance to some degree, they have made more serious efforts to monitor, control and shape online information flows. More specifically, local authorities have not only prioritized Internet commenting tasks assigned from both

the central and local governments, but also kept a close watch on online information flows, especially negative publicity. Though local authorities have occasionally responded to citizen complaints, such responsiveness is limited and instrumental in nature as they only accommodate a small number of petitioning citizens, and the responses appear to be more about satisfying the upper levels and pacifying the public than addressing the concerns of citizens. This is not entirely surprising because local authorities likely are not motivated to use the Internet to improve governance, particularly as they are under pressure from above to control the Internet and doing so helps them to use the Internet to their advantage. For instance, in addition to deploying Internet commentators to fulfil tasks of cheerleading for the leadership and opinion manipulation assigned by the central government, local authorities have mobilized the same force to advance local propaganda initiatives, both to maintain their own image, and to please upper levels of government.

Close examination of the Internet's impact on local governance is crucial to assess the resilience of Chinese authoritarianism in the digital age. Findings in this article suggest that the Chinese party-state has adopted a "rule by the Internet" strategy that uses the new technology more as an instrument to surveil, control, and manipulate public participation than as a vehicle to improve responsiveness and accountability in local governance. Such emphasis on control bears complicated implications for local governance as well as for the resilience of authoritarian rule. In particular, while granting local authorities the power to watch, control and shape online information flows may marginalize critical voices, promote official discourse, and even

temporarily pacify dissatisfied citizens, this strategy may be ineffective and even counterproductive because local authorities' online activities not only risk alienating citizens, but also partially disable the policy feedback function of the Internet by disrupting and distorting the signaling process between the state (the central government) and the citizenry. In short, while utilizing the Internet as a tool to enhance control rather than to improve governance may bring short-term gains, such as preserving a surface appearance of societal harmony, it is likely to harm the regime in the long run: it might logically lead to accumulation of social discontent—which may contribute to social instability and the erosion of regime legitimacy—and weaken the regime's ability to discipline its agents and satisfy social needs.

Local Governance and the Digital Impact

The Chinese authoritarian regime has often been depicted as internally fragmented (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009; O'Brien and Li 2006). The fragmentation of the party-state clearly has important policy implications, particularly in that this means local officials and government agencies enjoy considerable leeway in policy making and implementation. Local autonomy may bring about both positive and negative policy consequences. For instance, some argue that local autonomy in policy innovation is a critical factor that can help explain the success of China's economic reforms (Kelliher 1992; Montinola, Qian, and Weingast 1995). However, discrepancies in incentive structures and policy goals between central and local authorities have also given rise to the principal agent problem, often leading to

selective policy implementation at the local level (Edin 2003; O'Brien and Li 1999). In fact, many of China's socio-political ills can be attributed to the central-local divide. For instance, the notorious peasant burden issue in the late 1990s largely occurred because local authorities, especially those below the county-level, were tasked with numerous unfunded mandates from upper levels of the government (Bernstein and Lv 2003). Similarly, land disputes and soaring housing prices, both important sources of popular discontent in today's China, are at least partially attributable to the fact that local authorities were incentivized to capitalize the land after the 1993 taxation reform which granted most rich revenue sources to the central government. Such central-local divisions also serve as critical opportunity structures for popular protest in China by enabling citizens to lodge rightful resistance—Chinese citizens have often confronted and protested against misconduct of local officials and government agencies by citing laws, policies, and promises from the central government (O'Brien and Li 2006).

It is fair to say that the internal fragmentation of the Chinese party-state conditions local governance in China. In particular, while local authorities, especially those at the grassroots level, play an indispensable role in mediating the state-society interaction, they are often trapped between the central government and the citizenry. As the popular saying goes, “thousands of strings from above, all attached to the single needle at the bottom” (*shangmian qian tiaoxian, xiamian yigen zhen*). Local authorities are held responsible for numerous tasks assigned from above while having to directly deal with citizens. In particular, local officials in today's China are under huge pressure to maintain social stability amidst ever-rising popular dissatisfaction

and social unrest (Wang 2015).

However, the pivotal role of local authorities in state-society interaction also allows them to work the system to their advantage. In particular, such a role gives them the incentive and ability to distort the signaling process between the public and upper levels of the government. On the one hand, keeping citizens ill-informed about central policies and commitments can prevent such information from being used by citizens to engage in rightful resistance against local malfeasance. On the other hand, the pressure to achieve performance goals such as stability maintenance means that local officials are motivated to cover up complaints from below. By “hoodwinking those from above and cheating those from below” (*qishang manxia*), local officials may infringe citizens’ rights, ignore their grievances, and get away with their misconduct without sanctions and even get rewarded in some cases. This explains why local authorities can be extremely bold in suppressing protesting citizens: through ruthless repression, local authorities hope to prevent protests from escalating by “nipping them in the bud” (*esha zai mengya zhuangtai*).

The Internet may have transformed state-society interaction in China, especially by empowering citizens. Besides enabling a nascent public sphere (Hu 2008; Lagerkvist 2007; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2015; Yang 2003b) and promoting the development of civil society (Tai 2006; Yang 2003a), the Internet has also provided alternative channels for civic participation (Xiao 2011; Shi 2014; Jiang, Meng, and Zhang 2017). These new options for civic engagement, in particular, constitute a challenge towards local governments in several ways. First, though some argue that certain Internet tools

such as social media seem to be “unattractive as a potential outlet for organized social protest” (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017, 119), the new technology has undoubtedly helped citizens monitor the behavior of local cadres and governments, expose their malfeasance to the public, and even hunt down corrupt officials (Gao and Stanyer 2014; Nip and Fu 2016; Gao 2016; Gorman 2016; Lee and Lio 2014). Second, the Internet also renders it more difficult for local authorities to cover up scandals and suppress protesters as ordinary citizens now have greater influence on agenda-setting using Internet-enabled tools and platforms (Hassid 2012; L. Tang and Sampson 2012; Y. Wu et al. 2013). Moreover, online experiences often encourage and embolden citizens while also making them more critical towards the government and its agents. Compared to traditional media users and non-media users, Internet users are found to be more politically opinionated, more critical about the political condition, and more likely to participate in collective action (Lei 2011; M. Tang and Huhe 2013). All these studies suggest that the Internet may empower social actors and help ensure some level of “publicity driven accountability” in local governance (Distelhorst 2012).

The Internet not only challenges the government, it may well help connect it, especially local authorities, with citizens, or at least serve as a tool for the state to engage the citizenry. Indeed, the Chinese government has set up e-government sites at different levels and in different sectors to improve administrative capacity, provide public services, and engage citizens (Damm 2006; Lagerkvist 2005; Lollar 2006; Qiang 2007; Schlæger 2013; Y. H. Wu and Bauer 2010; Zhang 2002; Zhou 2004). As of December 2016, there are 53,546 government sites across China (CNNIC 2017).

Most e-government sites offer not only basic functions such as publicizing state policies, reporting official activities, and providing public services, but also include channels such as mayor's boxes that allow citizens to make inquiries, comment on policies, and voice grievances (Hartford 2005). E-government sites are also becoming more interactive as they have begun to embrace popular social media applications such as the mobile instant messenger WeChat and the Twitter-like Weibo as well as mobile web services (Zhao, Zhao, Alexander, and Truell 2016).

Far from passively waiting for citizens to engage with them on e-government sites, local authorities have also begun using social media such as Weibo, WeChat, and Internet forums to actively manage public participation. For example, Schlaeger and Jiang (2014) find that local authorities utilize official microblogs to experiment with ways to improve social management and political legitimacy, enhancing their ability to deliver individualized services and institute state surveillance. Esarey (2015) however, argues that, though official micro-blogging could help cadres win hearts and minds of the public, it may also provide netizens the opportunity to challenge the state. Similarly, local authorities have used WeChat to reach out to their constituents and the public, especially at times of unfolding crises and disasters (Tai and Liu 2015). Though local authorities engage citizens on social media sites only half-heartedly (Wang and Han 2015), it's clear that the Internet, social media in particular, has become a critical factor in local governance. Provided that local authorities utilize it properly, the new technology may help them to more effectively monitor and shape popular opinion, more rapidly address crises online, or at least function as "safety

valves” by allowing citizens to vent online (Hassid 2012; Chen 2016).

The Internet has undoubtedly transformed politics, especially local governance. But this process has been accompanied by extensive and growing state monitoring and control efforts. As Boas (2006) points out, being a tool or “medium of communication,” the Internet’s political influence is largely contingent upon the actors who control it and how they intend to use it. Authoritarian regimes such as China have learned to tame the Internet while exploiting its beneficial aspects. The government does not even attempt to hide its intention to control the Internet and manipulate online expression. State-run media has consistently attempted to justify the state’s Internet governance (and control) practices as necessary to protect “moral goodness, personal security, and social stability” (Cui and Wu 2016). In practice, the state has not only established the world’s most sophisticated surveillance and censorship system to monitor and control the flow of information online, but also deployed more innovative propaganda tactics such as ideotainment—by wrapping official ideological constructs with popular cyber cultural formats—and online astroturfing—by sponsoring state agents to fabricate seemingly spontaneous pro-government voices—to reinvigorate state propaganda in the digital age (Han 2015c; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2017; Lagerkvist 2008; MacKinnon 2009, 2011; OpenNet Initiative 2005; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017). It is argued that though state control (and manipulation) in China may be imperfect, it may be sufficient to maintain authoritarian rule (Boas 2006). In particular, some recent studies argue that by strategically controlling information flow—for instance allowing general criticism

but suppressing collective action expressions or tolerating criticism of local officialdom but not top leadership—an authoritarian regime such as the Chinese party-state may benefit from freer expression without risking being overthrown (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Lorentzen 2014; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017).

While the party-state as a whole may have attempted to strategize its approach to the Internet to perpetuate its rule, Internet governance in China is by no means designed, implemented, and optimized by a single rational and omnipotent entity. Among all other factors, the process first and foremost well reflects the fragmentation within the regime: Internet governance in China is in fact decentralized, and despite considerable central coordination and organization, local authorities play an indispensable role in controlling and utilizing the Internet as well as media at large (Esarey and Xiao 2011; Han 2018; MacKinnon 2009; Zuckerman 2010). This point, which has yet to be sufficiently discussed, is important to note, as discrepancies and even conflicts of goals, incentives, and interests between the central government and local authorities may affect Internet governance just like in other policy realms in China. From the central government's perspective, strategic censorship—by limiting criticism of top leadership but tolerating attacks on the local officialdom and by adapting controls to social tensions, benefits the regime as a whole (Lorentzen 2014). It should be noted that local authorities are not just willing agents of the central government to implement strategic censorship. Rather, as discussed in the previous section, local officials often have strong motivation to shape, distort, and hinder the signaling process between the central government and the citizenry. For instance,

local governments often make their best efforts to prevent the exposure of local scandals, governmental misconduct, and official misbehavior. Plenty of evidence shows that they have gone to great lengths to remove negative publicity online, sometimes even by bribing government censors beyond their own jurisdiction (Xi and Zhang 2014). The same rationale may help explain, at least partially, why local government agencies and individual officials sometimes are actively using popular social media sites such as Weibo, WeChat, and Internet forums to engage citizens, especially given their need to “dilute” negative information and guide public opinion in online crises, though these actions often are also intended to please their superiors (Schlæger and Jiang 2014; Esarey 2015; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017; Wang and Han 2015). The pivotal role of local authorities in governing and controlling the Internet is further reinforced by the fact that netizens often post their complaints on local platforms, including local forums and e-government sites that are either subject to direct control or under heavy influence of local governments. All these indicate that, although not perfectly, local authorities will be able to directly monitor, control, and shape online expression, and their effort might not always be in line with directives from the central government.

In sum, the expansion of the Internet may shape local governance in China in at least two ways. First, the new technology enables local governments to better reach and respond to both the upper levels and citizens while making it easier for the latter to engage them, check their behavior, and provide feedback. Second, the Internet can also serve as an instrument for the state to surveil, control, and manipulate citizens. In

particular, as an increasingly important venue of socio-political participation, the Internet itself has become a top target of governance, and local authorities play an indispensable role in this process by undertaking much of the regulating and control responsibility. How do local authorities in China balance these two different functions of the Internet? Have they used the Internet to bring about improved governance at the local level, especially in terms of enhancing government responsiveness to citizens, or have they used the Internet more as a tool to enhanced authoritarian control over the public? The following section illustrates an example of local governance in the digital age based on a case study of Z, a county-level district of City G in Province J.¹

The Internet in Local Governance: The Case of District Z

Analysis below is primarily based on a collection of leaked emails from the Internet Propaganda Office of District Z (ZIPO hereafter).² Thus far, the only systematic analysis of this dataset is the seminal research by King, Pan, and Roberts (2017) on the “50-cent army.” However, in addition to revealing activities of the “50-cent army,” the dataset is also a valuable resource to study local governance in the digital age. The

¹ Following the suggestion of a reviewer, the paper anonymizes all specific administrative units to avoid potential controversy.

² This email archive was released by an anonymous blogger “Xiaolan” in 2014 and has been publicly available since then. Gary King at Harvard University and his colleagues are the first group of political scientists using this data in scholarly research (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). According to them, based on the size and complexity of the archive, as well as the result of reference verification by the researchers, the authenticity of the archive should not be a concern. Since the dataset is publically available and it provides scholars with unprecedented amount of valuable information, they believe it is appropriate to use the dataset strictly for scholarly research. The authors agree with them on this point.

dataset contains 2,370 emails received and sent between February 11, 2013 and November 28, 2014, among which 354 are from the Outbox, and 2,016 are from the Inbox. Besides ZIPO, there are 97 agencies involved, ranging from provincial state agencies such as the Propaganda Department of the CCP Province J Provincial Committee, to grassroots level social service agencies such as a primary school. In total, there are three superior party/state organs at the city and provincial levels: the Propaganda Department of the CCP's Province J Provincial Committee, the City G Municipal Internet Propaganda Office, and the External Propaganda Office under the CCP City G Municipal Committee. The majority of government agencies in the dataset are 66 district-level bureaus, commissions, and offices covering almost every aspect of local governance. These agencies include the Education Bureau, the Development and Reform Commission, the Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation Bureau, the Tourism Administration, and the Bureau of Sciences and Technologies, just to name a few. There are also nine sub-district and township level agencies, two village-level governments, and ten other communities which appear in the dataset. Interestingly, there are also social service agencies that are normally not considered part of the government apparatus, including local primary schools and local health centers. Overall, the dataset covers an impressive number of government agencies at different administrative levels and in different sectors.

Admittedly, the dataset has two potential limitations. First, it represents only one locality and that makes it hard to generalize the findings. In particular, as one of the famous old revolutionary areas, District Z may demonstrate certain features in local

governance that are uncommon in other localities. While the concern is well-grounded, findings here should bear broader implications because local governments in China share similar bureaucratic structures despite local variations. The cadre management system ensures that local authorities across China follow similar ways of assigning and implementing tasks (Rothstein 2014). Moreover, though analysis below is based primarily on the ZIPO dataset, the authors have triangulated sources from District Z with additional data from elsewhere whenever possible.

Second, the Internet Propaganda Office is only a specific branch of the local government, and thus may not show a complete picture of local governance. This is a valid concern and the discussion here on local governance in the digital age is clearly not exhaustive. For instance, although the dataset does not contain any censorship directives, this by no means implies that local authorities play no role in censoring online expression, as thousands of leaked state censorship directives have suggested otherwise. Rather, it is likely that such tasks are handled by a separate state agency. Having said that, the authors believe that there is no better government agency to study than the Internet Propaganda Office in order to understand local governance in the digital age as this office is the locus of Internet governance for local authorities. Its internal email communications not only reveal much of how the state governs the Internet (and local authorities' role in it), but also shows how government agencies at different levels and in different sectors interact with each other and local residents.

Categorizing Local Government Activities Online

Unlike the research of King, Pan, and Roberts (2017), which focuses on the “50-cent army,” this article explores a broader spectrum of local governance activities. For this purpose, the authors coded all emails in the dataset based on their content and the results show that these emails fall into five categories. The first category, *online publicity*, refers to online propaganda efforts by local authorities, especially activities of Internet commentators (aka the “50-cent army”) to guide public opinion in response to online crises or state propaganda initiatives. This category also includes cases in which online commentators fabricated “interactions” with local officials during their online interviews with citizens. The second category is *online monitoring*, which refers to local governments efforts to monitor online information flows, especially complaints of local residents and media exposure of local problems. The third category is labeled as *online accountability* and includes all cases in which the local government responded to online complaints. This category helps explore whether the Internet has increased government responsiveness or not. The fourth category, *bureaucratic communications*, includes internal directives, notifications, or work reports from subordinate or superior agencies. Emails with unidentifiable content and auto replies are coded as *other*. The last two categories are of less interest here as the authors are more interested in exploring the implications of the Internet for state-society interactions. Table 1 summarizes the results. Figure 1 plots the categorical distribution of the emails in both inbox and outbox across time, with the “other” category excluded since it is of little relevance to our analysis.

Table 1: Coding Results of ZIPO Dataset

Categories	Inbox	Outbox	Total
Online Publicity	1459	150	1609
Online Monitoring	87	162	249
Online Accountability	20	2	22
Bureaucratic Communications	151	37	188
Other	299	3	302
Grand Total	2016	354	2370

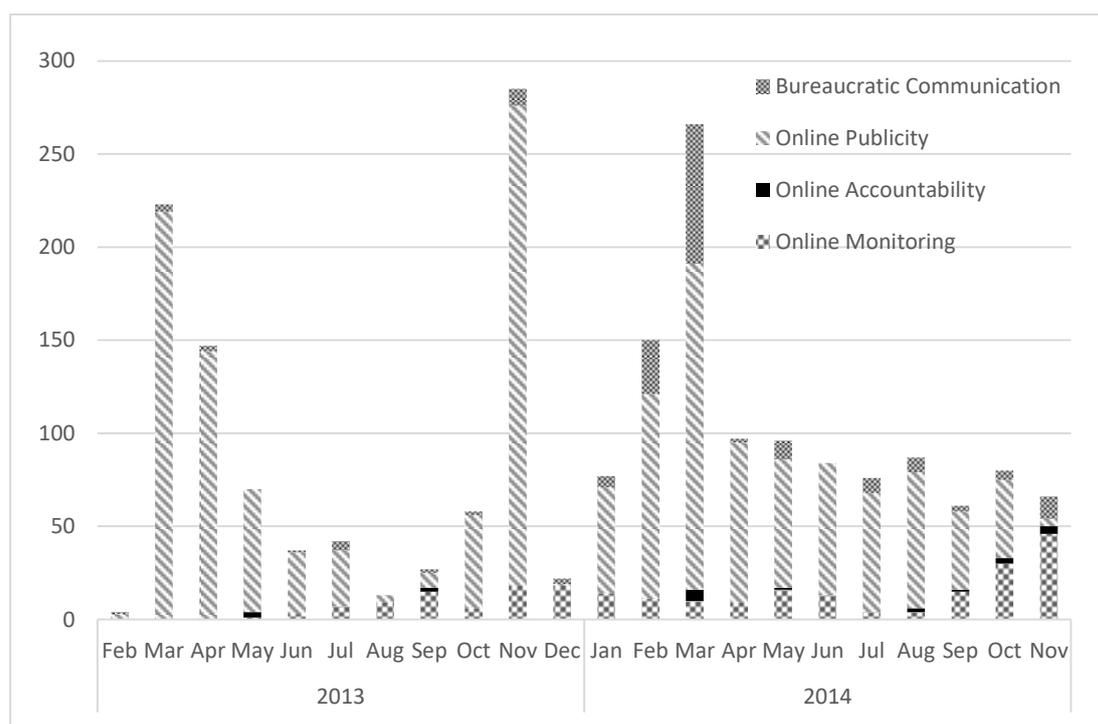


Figure 1: Categorical Distribution of Emails across Time (Excluding “Other”)

The coding results demonstrate several important features of ZIPO’s work. First, online publicity, especially Internet commentating, constitute a highly significant part

of its responsibility. Out of the total 2370 emails, 1609 falls into the category of online publicity. Among these emails, 1582 are related to Internet commentating and 27 are self-praising publicity efforts by local government agencies. This is not entirely surprising as the Chinese state, especially since President Xi Jinping came into power, increasingly relies on Internet commentating to produce pro-regime voices and guide popular opinion online (Han 2015b; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017; Miller 2016). The propaganda apparatus, especially the Internet propaganda offices, and the Communist Youth League system are the two major sponsors of the “50-cent army” (Han 2018). ZIPO likely only exemplifies how local authorities perform Internet commentating in today’s China.

Like King, Pan, and Roberts (2017), the authors find that Internet commentators in District Z were mobilized for nationwide propaganda initiatives. The specific topics include online crises such as riots in Xinjiang, or at politically symbolic moments like the Qingming Festival, the National Martyr’s Day, the CCP’s National Congress, and the NPC and CCPCC meetings. Internet commentators were also deployed to promote President Xi Jinping’s idea of the China dream and to defame the pro-liberal public intellectuals. Like King, Pan, and Roberts (2017), the authors have also observed “distinct spikes” of the Internet commentating activities by ZIPO. However, besides championing national propaganda initiatives, some of ZIPO’s Internet commenting work was local in nature. Internet commentators in District Z actively posted about local moral characters such as a primary school teacher who later became one of the top ten “Touching China” moral role models, and a cadre who died searching for

trapped students in a flood. The 50-cent army forces under ZIPO were also mobilized to promote local culture and local products: in October 2013 and January 2014, they were deployed to promote locally-produced navel oranges, first to crack down on fake products from other localities, then to cheer the “Navel Orange Festival” hosted by the local government. Then in March 2014, they were asked to post about a local opera that tells its revolutionary history using folklore.

Second, the coding results show that monitoring online information is another key area of ZIPO’s work, though it may not be as prioritized as Internet commentating tasks. Of the 2370 emails coded, 249 are related to online monitoring; Moreover, among these 249, 222 are about social grievances and citizen complaints, indicating that the local government may have paid special attention to negative publicity. Local authorities monitor online information flows not just for themselves. They have been gathering, compiling and reporting online information about events that are beyond their jurisdiction for upper levels of the government. In an annual working report dated December 2013, ZIPO proudly claimed that, “as of October 2013, [we] have reported a total of 594 public opinion messages to [upper levels], 123 of which were partially quoted by the Provincial Propaganda Department [to report to the Central Propaganda Department] and 12 pieces were fully adopted.”³

³ ZIPO, *2013 niandu Z Qu yuqing xinxi gongzuo qingkuang huibao (District Z 2013 work report on public opinion monitoring)*, December 20, 2013, email communication in ZIPO Dataset.

Figure 1 shows that the volume of online monitoring emails seems to be negatively associated with the volume of online publicity emails: from February to May, and September to December in 2013, as well as from January to May in 2014, there were three peaks in Internet commentating while online monitoring recorded relatively low volumes. While this can be a coincidence, it may also indicate that ZIPO focused less on online monitoring when there were more Internet commentating assignments. Another possible explanation is that the government reinforced its censorship during volume bursts of online commentating, thus reducing the amount of negative publicity for it to monitor. In other words, censorship and opinion manipulation may go hand in hand in such cases. Another more intuitive explanation is that local authorities tend to prioritize Internet commentating over online monitoring. While logically the state may enhance both online monitoring and Internet commentating during online crises or politically sensitive moments, the second explanation makes sense for several reasons: (1) not all Internet commentating tasks happened at politically sensitive moments or crises; (2) several Internet commentating tasks such as cheerleading for President Xi's Chinese dream idea and the Party's National Congress were apparently assigned from the central government, and thus likely received priority treatment; (3) compared to online monitoring, execution of Internet commentating can be more effectively monitored, as the achievement by a particular government agency is much more quantifiable.

Third, the coding results show that local authorities have occasionally responded to citizen complaints, though such cases constitute a very small percentage. There are

only 22 such emails in the entire dataset, relating to issues such as land expropriation, environmental problems, and arbitrary education charges. For instance, there are two emails in the dataset about one specific land expropriation case. The first email, dated May 4, 2014, was a report from ZIPO to district leaders about a petition posted one day before on a government-backed petition site for residents across Province J to lodge complaints and provide policy feedback. The petitioner claimed that his land was taken without compensation and he was stonewalled by village and township cadres. A township deputy director allegedly threatened him, saying that “you will get hurt if you continue to mess with us, and the township government will cover your medical bills; if you win the fight, I’ll send the police to arrest you!”⁴ The report was also forwarded to the target of the complaint, Township S. The second email, dated May 21, was a follow-up investigation report sent by ZIPO, on behalf of the district, to the superior municipal information office. The two emails seem to showcase enhanced responsiveness and accountability of local governance in the Internet age. In fact, besides reporting to upper levels, ZIPO also pushed local cadres to engage the petitioner directly online. The authors checked the link of the petition and found two replies from the Township S and its deputy director within a matter of days (on May 5 and 6, 2014) after ZIPO forwarded them the petition.

⁴ See Qiugongdao, *Z Qu S Zhen H Cun: Tudi bei zhengyong cunmin yaoqiu buchang (Village H, Township S, District Z: Land expropriated with villager asking for compensation)*, available at: goo.gl/HZf6Gq.

Local authorities in District Z responded not just to issues like land expropriation that may potentially provoke collective action. They also quickly reacted to a broader array of citizens' complaints. When a resident complained about a school offering extra courses on Saturday for extra charges, the local education bureau replied within two days. The authorities were also not just monitoring governmental platforms. For instance, one of the emails related to a complaint about garbage disposal of a factory on Lebangwang, a local portal site that provides various kinds of online services. The post appeared on August 24, 2014, and an investigation report was submitted the next day to ZIPO by the street government that has jurisdiction over the factory.

These cases reveal a procedure of “publicity driven accountability” (Distelhorst 2012) in local governance (see Figure 2). After a citizen posts a complaint online, local authorities, often including multiple local agencies at different levels, may start collecting information. The case will be forwarded to relevant agencies to investigate and then report back to ZIPO, the platform where the complaint was posted, and sometimes to upper levels of government.

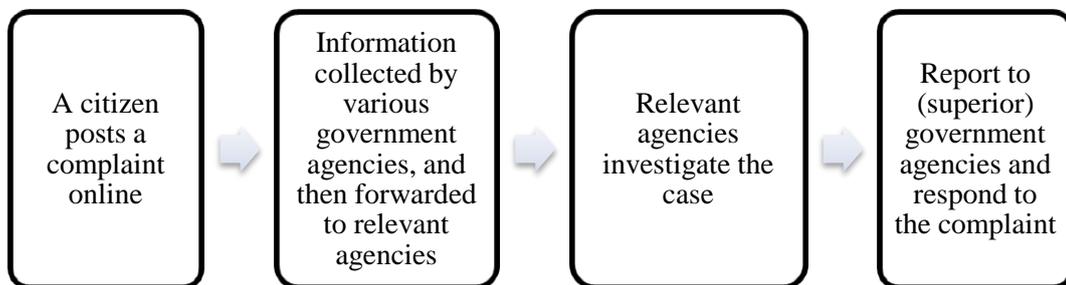


Figure 2: Procedure of Local Government Response to Citizen Complaints

Discussion

Analysis of the empirical evidence indicates that local government in District Z seems to be preoccupied by surveillance and manipulation tasks. They have only responded to citizen complaints in very few cases. Though their reactions were quite prompt in general, such promptness may not be sufficient evidence of enhanced accountability and responsiveness in local governance. As the Internet enables local authorities to monitor online expression more closely, communicate with other government agencies more efficiently, and engage citizens more directly when necessary, it is only logical to expect quicker responses from them. This point echoes reports on corrupt local officials being punished by the state within a matter of weeks or even days after being exposed online (Gao and Stanyer 2014). However, the limited number of such responses compared to the number of emails on Internet commentating and online monitoring is quite telling about the priorities of the local government.

Moreover, responding to citizens' online complaints promptly does not always mean being more responsive or accountable to the public. Deeper analysis of the dataset reveals that local authorities were more concerned about answering to superiors and pacifying the public rather than truly addressing the problems. As the land expropriation case shows, while local authorities replied to the complaint almost immediately and also provided an explanation to the municipal government, they were highly dismissive both times. The report to the upper level municipal government dismissed the petition, claiming that local cadres had obtained the petitioner's permission and fully compensated him before taking his land. After

detailing the amount of compensation for the petitioner’s land, plants, and fruit trees, it concluded that “all due procedures were followed and all compensations were completed.”⁵ The township’s reply to the petitioner on the complaining platform, which was identical to the report to the municipal government, denied all the accusations in the petition and the deputy township director’s reply to the petitioner was a blatant self-defense. Moreover, neither the township government, nor the deputy director responded to the petitioner’s follow-up post that challenged their responses. The petition essentially ended in the middle of nowhere, though other netizens witnessing the dispute also criticized the governmental responses for being “overly partial and too arbitrary” and demanded further investigation of the case. The very fact that local authorities denied their responsibility completely despite evidence suggesting otherwise betrays their real purpose: they care more about pacifying the public and answering to their superiors than addressing the concerns of the citizens.

Additional evidence from District Z confirms such a rationale of local authorities. For them, responding to online complaints serves primarily as a means to achieve important policy goals such as social stability maintenance. As stressed in a document on Internet propaganda work dated May 14, 2014, ZIPO recommended that local

⁵ ZIPO, *Z Quwei Bangongshi guanyu “Z Qu S Zhen H Cun Cunmin tudi beizhengyong yoaqiu buchang zhengdikuan” de yuqing diaocha qingkuang huibao* (Public opinion investigation report by District Z Party Committee Office regarding “Village H, Township S, District Z: Land expropriated with villager asking for compensation”), May 25, 2014, email communication in ZIPO Dataset.

government should strengthen the work of public opinion relevant to the district and improve the coping mechanisms. Specific measures included,

Enhance surveillance of key websites, forums, blogs and Weibo. Standardize the online information collection and reporting system. All departments (units) should establish an online publicity response system to implement the tracking, registration, and recording of online opinion handling and to improve the coping mechanism in cases of major online incidents. [The coping mechanism] should fine-tune the timing, efficacy, and degree when responding to online events, and [government agencies should] act according to the principles of "react promptly, check the facts, and handle properly" to manage scientifically as well as actively and steadily guiding popular opinion during such online incidents.⁶

This was not just a policy recommendation. Rather, it reflected what local authorities had actually done. In its 2013 work report, ZIPO boasted about its achievements in five major areas, including expanding capacity for online publicity work, handling online events, guiding online opinion, better reporting online information to upper levels, and setting up an official Weibo account. The document mentions nothing about enhancing government responsiveness or accountability, and

⁶ ZIPO, *Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang quanguo wangluo xuanchuan gongzuo de yijian (Suggestions to further strengthen online propaganda work in our district)*, May 14, 2014, email communication in ZIPO Dataset.

reacting to citizen complaints seems to be covered in the section on handling online events, which states:

[We] established and improved the online opinion response mechanism and the major online events coping mechanism, and also enforced the public opinion work responsibility system. [We] further strengthened the surveillance of key websites, forum, blogs, and Weibo. We collected and compiled online information related to the socio-economic development of our district, especially negative publicity that may cause instability or major mass incidents... and reported to district leaders and the municipal Internet propaganda office. As of November 2013, we have 108 issues of Internet Public Opinion Special Reports, reported 144 online events, and received 21 instructions from the district Party leaders. There was not a single case of omission, false report, or concealment of major online events.⁷

The above two quoted passages again confirm that at least the local government is concerned more about monitoring, controlling, and manipulating online information than becoming more responsive and accountable to citizens.

One may ask if the findings here are only applicable to District Z. Abundant circumstantial evidence suggests that authorities in other localities in Province J are not quite enthusiastic about improving government responsiveness to citizens as well. As Table 2 shows, about 70% of the total 45,487 complaints posted on the provincial

⁷ ZIPO, *Qu wangxuanban 2013 nian gongzuo zongjie he 2014 nian gongzuo silu (ZIPO's work report for 2013 and work plan for 2014)*, December 20, 2013, email communication in ZIPO Dataset.

level government-backed petition site between January 22, 2011 and August 24, 2017 received no government response at all. Several cities, including City G where District Z is located have reported a non-response rate of 78% or above, meaning local authorities responded to less than 22% of all complaints. These numbers are telling, especially considering that the site is specially designated for citizens to lodge complaints. The low response rates clearly confirm one of the key findings of this article: local authorities are not motivated to even engage the public, let alone whole-heartedly address problems for citizens.

Table 2: Government Responses to Online Complaints in Province J

Prefectures	Non-Response Cases	Total Cases	Non-Response Rate (%)
F	1880	2591	72.56
G	4658	5924	78.63
J	1987	5266	37.73
JD	923	1271	72.62
JJ	4436	6325	70.13
N	9545	12209	78.18
P	1836	2349	78.16
S	3057	4518	67.66
X	871	1249	69.74
YC	1658	2469	67.15
YT	692	1013	68.31
Other Provinces	233	273	85.35
Other	26	30	86.67
Total	31802	45487	69.91

Source: Data collected and compiled by the authors.

The finding also resonates with existing studies. For instance, according to Kluver (2005), one of the most important goals of China's e-governance system is to improve surveillance over government agencies and citizens, as well as to maintain

the legitimacy of the ruling regime, rather than facilitating efficient communication between citizens and the government. Similarly, based on analysis of government responses to online complaints on China's most popular Internet forum, Wang and Han (2015) find that local authorities often tend to just pay lip services to pacify netizens and to please upper levels rather than actually solving the problems. Such studies show that observation in District Z is unlikely an idiosyncratic case.

Conclusion

The expansion of the Internet has brought about both opportunities and challenges in local governance in China. On the one hand, the Internet may improve governance by facilitating local governments to better serve and engage citizens through platforms such as e-government sites and social media platforms. The new technology can also help enhance government responsiveness and accountability in local governance by facilitating public participation and social mobilization. In particular, compared to the pre-Internet era, the Internet has weakened the ability of local governments to control the information flow or block the signaling process between citizens and the central government, meaning that citizens can have their voices heard by the public or upper levels of the government more easily. However, the Internet has also increased the authoritarian state's capacity to monitor, control, and manipulate social participation. Given that local authorities are incentivized to please upper levels and cover up local

malfeasances, they may often be inclined to use the Internet for control purposes rather than governance improvement.

Possibly due to the issue of data availability, previous studies of cyber politics in China tend to focus either on the techniques and behavior of state control, such as censorship and “fifty-cent army,” or on how the Internet may enhance government responsiveness and accountability. In general, few studies have attempted to provide a more comprehensive picture of how the Chinese government may balance between these two potentially conflicting functions of the Internet. By using a rarely studied dataset, this study looks systematically into the “black box” of authoritarian state and examines how state’s Internet governance works from within. Doing so allows the authors to bridge the gap in existing studies and to integrate the evaluation of the two functions of the Internet both as a tool of state control and a vehicle to improve governance.

Findings in this article show that the Internet has transformed local governance in China, but not so much in the direction of improving government responsiveness and accountability as one may expect or hope. While there are some signs of local authorities reacting to online complaints, much of the evidence has pointed to the enhanced state surveillance, control, and manipulation of public participation via the Internet. In fact, the case of District Z shows that local authorities often only respond to a small portion of citizen complaints online and such responses only constitute a small portion of their online activities. Even in cases when they do respond to citizens,

such responses tend to be instrumental and ineffective because the real purpose is usually more about satisfying the superiors or pacifying the public rather than addressing the problems. In contrast, the case of District Z also suggests that local authorities attach much more importance to Internet commentating and online monitoring tasks, both of which are crucial for the party-state, particularly local authorities, to better rule by the Internet. Internet commentating has been utilized by both the central government and local authorities to fulfil propaganda initiatives such as cheerleading for the leaders, promoting state ideology, denigrating regime critics, as well as managing online crises. Such tasks are increasingly important given that more traditional state propaganda tactics are increasingly ineffective (Tong and Lei 2013). Online monitoring serves as an early-warning mechanism, through which the party-state and local governments keep a closely watch on online information flows, especially negative publicity, so that they can choose to intervene when they deem necessary.

This article reveals only an incomplete picture of local governance in the digital age due to limitations of the dataset. Without a more comprehensive dataset that covers multiple localities or multiple government agencies in a given locality, other factors that may impact government response rate can hardly be properly evaluated. In particular, the analysis has focused on how local authorities may utilize the Internet to surveil, manipulate, and sometimes engage citizens but sheds little light on their role in censoring and repressing online expression. Though this is unlikely to affect the key argument of the article—local governments use the Internet more as a tool to

enhance control over rather than to better serve the people—a more comprehensive study will clearly help better assess the Internet’s impact on local governance as well as authoritarian resilience in the digital age. It is likely that utilizing the Internet to enhance control rather than to improve governance may bring short-term gains, but in the long run, it may harm the regime: social dissatisfaction may accumulate while the regime’s ability to discipline its agents and respond to social needs may be weakened. Such factors in turn may threaten socio-political stability and contribute to the erosion of regime legitimacy. Thus, unless the state adapts to improve its governance, to what extent the state (and local authorities) can prevent the escalation of citizen activism and maintain its rule depends not only on its capacity to monitor and manipulate online information flows, but also on whether it can effectively censor and suppress deviating public expression online.

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