

**Supervising Authoritarian Rule Online:  
Citizen Participation and State Responses in China<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract*

This essay examines citizen participation in and state responses to online supervision in China. It argues that the internet has only empowered Chinese citizens in selective ways by enabling them more to expose individual cases of corruption and official misconduct than to pursue systematic changes. Such ‘selective-empowerment’ effects allow the state to differentiate its responses, eliminating more threatening forms of citizen activism while bringing less threatening forms under control. Such a ‘selective-empowerment and differentiated-response’ model helps explain why the authoritarian state can preserve its power in setting the agenda, means, and goals of online supervision despite the empowering effects of the internet.

Keywords: Online Public Supervision, Anti-Corruption, Technological Empowerment, Authoritarian Resilience

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## **Supervising Authoritarian Rule Online: Citizen Participation and State Responses in China**

Without competitive elections and other institutions to foster accountability, officials in authoritarian regimes have ample opportunities to engage in corruption or other misconduct. Autocratic leaders are often not incentivized to discipline their agents.<sup>2</sup> Instead they may use corruption as a mechanism to secure patronage from the governing coalition whose loyalty is essential for their political survival.<sup>3</sup> However, rampant corruption and official misconduct can be detrimental to authoritarian rule as it may chip away at the regime's legitimacy and weaken its capacity to rule.<sup>4</sup> This is why authoritarian regimes such as former Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, and China have all installed anti-corruption institutions and enforced various measures to punish deviant officials.<sup>5</sup> To curtail corruption and check corrupt officials more effectively, authoritarian states may tolerate or even encourage citizen participation. However, public participation is a 'double-edged sword' for an authoritarian state: on the one hand, it may benefit the regime by increasing citizens' political efficacy enhancing their trust in the state and by more effectively controlling corruption, thus boosting state performance; on the other hand, it may erode regime legitimacy as the process *per se* can be frustrating for citizens while at the same time campaigns run the risk of exposing the pervasiveness of governmental corruption and misbehavior to the public.

The expansion of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet has further complicated the dilemma authoritarian regimes face as they now essentially have no choice but to tolerate and accommodate citizen participation. Studies reveal that ICTs have expanded both official channels to engage the public and the space for citizen-driven participation initiatives,<sup>6</sup> thereby empowering

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<sup>2</sup> See Gabriella R. Montinola & Robert W. Jackman, 'Sources of Corruption: A Cross-Country Study,' 32 *British Journal of Political Science* 147 (2002); James R. Hollyer, B. Peter Rosendorff & James Raymond Vreeland, 'Democracy and Transparency,' 73 *The Journal of Politics* 1191 (October 21, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell A. Seligson, 'The Impact of Corruption on Regime Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Four Latin American Countries,' 64 *Journal of Politics* 408 (2002).

<sup>5</sup> William A. Clark, *Crime and Punishment in Soviet Officialdom: Combating Corruption in the Political Elite, 1965-1990* (1993); Sergio D'áz-Briquets & Jorge Pérez-López, *Corruption in Cuba: Castro and Beyond* (2010); World Bank, *Corruption from the Perspective of Citizens, Firms, and Public Officials - Results of Sociological Surveys* (2013); Andrew Wedeman, *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (2012); Melanie Manion, *Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (2009). For cases in North Africa and Middle East, see Kate Gillespie & Gwenn Okruhlik, 'The Political Dimensions of Corruption Cleanups: A Framework for Analysis,' 24 *Comparative Politics* 77 (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Nasr G. Elbahnasawy, 'E-Government, Internet Adoption, and Corruption: An Empirical Investigation,' 57

citizens in authoritarian regimes that lack effective institutions for policy input and feedback.<sup>7</sup> However, such idealized image of technological empowerment is far from the complete picture. With the help of sophisticated censorship measures, innovative propaganda strategies, and a strong repressive apparatus, authoritarian states such as China and Putin's Russia have achieved a considerable level of control over online information flow.<sup>8</sup> Such cases of authoritarian adaptability confirm the resilient authoritarianism thesis.<sup>9</sup>

A number of pertinent questions remain such as has the expansion of the internet rendered authoritarian states more tolerant or restrictive towards citizen participation? How do state responses shape citizen participation online? This essay tackles these questions by exploring citizen-driven online supervision efforts through non-state digital platforms and the state responses in China. The China case is particularly revealing given that the authoritarian regime is considered one of the strongest in the world and that it has been undergoing a state-sponsored anti-corruption campaign that brought down thousands of officials. Examining online supervision in such a context and against such a background thus allows a more nuanced understanding of technological empowerment and state responses.

The article contends that the internet has empowered Chinese citizens, but only in selective ways as they are enabled more to expose individual cases of corruption and official misconduct than to pursue systematic changes. Such 'selective-empowerment' happens to play into the hands of the party-state, allowing it to eliminate more threatening forms of citizen participation and to tolerate less threatening ones. Such a 'selective-empowerment' explains *how* authoritarian regimes may optimize citizen participation despite the impact of the new technology.

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*World Development* 114 (2014); Thomas Barnebeck Andersen, 'E-Government as an Anti-Corruption Strategy,' 21 *Information Economics and Policy* 201 (2009); Seongcheol Kim, Hyun Jeong Kim & Heejin Lee, 'An Institutional Analysis of an E-Government System for Anti-Corruption: The Case of OPEN,' 26 *Government Information Quarterly* 42 (2009); Chon-Kyun Kim, 'Anti-Corruption Initiatives and E-Government: A Cross-National Study,' 14 *Public Organization Review* 385 (May 8, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Paul M. Healy & Karthik Ramanna, 'When the Crowd Fights Corruption,' 92 *Harvard Business Review* 122 (2013); Dieter Zinnbauer, 'Crowdsourced Corruption Reporting: What Petrified Forests, Street Music, Bath Towels, and the Taxman Can Tell Us About the Prospects for Its Future,' 7 *Policy & Internet* 1 (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Gary King, Jennifer Pan & Margaret E Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,' 107 *American Political Science Review* 1 (2013); Rebecca MacKinnon, 'China's 'Networked Authoritarianism',' 22 *Journal of Democracy* 32 (2011); Florian Toepfl, 'Managing Public Outrage: Power, Scandal, and New Media in Contemporary Russia,' 13 *New Media & Society* 1301 (2011); Ronald Deibert et al., *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering* (2008); Ronald Deibert et al., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace* (2010); Shanthi Kalathil & Taylor C Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Nathan, 'Authoritarian Resilience,' 14 *Journal of Democracy* 6 (2003); David L Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (2008).

The analysis draws on extensive sources. Firstly, the project combines ‘guerilla ethnography’ across the Web<sup>10</sup> and long-term observation of China’s most popular internet forum, Tianya Club (*Tianya Luntan*, Tianya.cn), to gather data. Tianya.cn is an ideal site to observe online supervision because it offers channels for citizens to complain and has served as the base for many online supervision cases. Secondly, the project uses the case library compiled by People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center (PDOPOMC thereafter). The library contains 525 relevant cases of ‘public opinion events’ between 2008 and 2015, 57 of which relate to governmental or official misbehavior. These cases are further analyzed to identify how they are exposed online. Third, to show the evolution of online supervision, the project also resorts to studies by Chinese scholars who collected hundreds of online supervision cases over the years. Their findings are also used to triangulate the PDOPOMC data. Lastly, media reports and official documents also serve as important sources to decipher the state’s perception and behavior. Drawing on multiple sources rather one specific dataset is necessary as the goal of this project is to provide a big-picture view of online supervision and state responses in China.

### **Citizen Participation and Online Public Supervision**

Citizen participation has historically been an important part of contemporary Chinese politics. The mass line (*qunzhong luxian*), as an organizational principle of the CCP, prescribes that party cadres shall consult the masses, incorporate their opinions and suggestions in policy making, and solicit their input when enforcing the resulting policies. During the Maoist era, citizens were mobilized in mass campaigns to check party-officials’ misconduct and ideological deviances.<sup>11</sup> In the post-Mao reform era, although the party-state resorts to mass campaigns less frequently,<sup>12</sup> it has continued its emphasis on the ‘mass line,’ at least rhetorically, as a means to supervise the state apparatus and governmental officials. To achieve the goal, the state has restored and established various institutions for public participation, including the letters and visits system (*xinfang zhidu*) and administrative litigation.<sup>13</sup> Paramount leaders such as

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<sup>10</sup> Guobin Yang, ‘The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere,’ 24 *Media, Culture & Society* 469 (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Wedeman, *Double Paradox* supra Note 5.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth A. Quade, ‘The Logic of Anticorruption Enforcement Campaigns in Contemporary China,’ 16 *Journal of Contemporary China* 65(2007); Zengke He, ‘Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Reform China,’ 33 *Communist & Post-Communist Studies* 243 (2000).

<sup>13</sup> Xi Chen, ‘Collective Petitioning and Institutional Conversion,’ in Kevin J. O’Brien (ed) (2008) *Popular Protest in China* 54; Carl F. Minzner, ‘Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions,’ 42 *Stan. J. Int’l L.*

Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have all stressed that the Party and its cadres should be subject to ‘mass supervision’ (*qunzhong jiandu*).<sup>14</sup> In effect, the latest Chinese Constitution explicitly stipulates that citizens ‘have the right to criticize and make suggestions regarding any State organ or functionary,’ and ‘to make to relevant State organs complaints or charges against, or exposures of, any State organ or functionary for violation of law or dereliction of duty.’<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the state has encouraged ‘public opinion supervision’ (*yulun jiandu*) and ‘media supervision.’ First coined by then Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang at the Party’s 13<sup>th</sup> Congress,<sup>16</sup> the term repeatedly appeared in subsequent CCP political reports. At the 14<sup>th</sup> National Congress, Jiang Zemin stressed the necessity to ‘take public opinion supervision by the media seriously.’<sup>17</sup> At the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Jiang called to ‘integrate intra-party, legal, and mass supervision, and give scope to the role of public opinion supervision.’<sup>18</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congresses reiterated the importance to ‘strengthen democratic supervision’ and to ‘allow public opinion supervision.’<sup>19</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress juxtaposes ‘intra-party supervision, democratic supervision, legal supervision, and public opinion supervision’ as critical means to enable the people to ‘oversee the exercise of power’ and to ensure that power is exercised transparently.<sup>20</sup> Beyond rhetoric, the state has also allowed

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103 (2006); Kevin J. O’Brien & Lianjiang Li, ‘Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China,’ 51 *The China Journal* 75 (2004); Minxin Pei, ‘Citizens v. Mandarins: Administrative Litigation in China,’ 152 *The China Quarterly* 832 (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Deng Xiaoping, ‘Dang he Guojia Lingdao Zhidu de Gaige’ [Reforming the System of the Party and State Leadership] (Feb. 4, 2005), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-02/04/content\\_2547080.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-02/04/content_2547080.htm); Jiang Zemin, ‘Zuo Yige Xinshiqi Hege de Lingdao Ganbu’ [On Being A Qualified Cadre in the New Era], in *Lun Dang de Jianshe* [On Party Building] (2001); Hu Jintao, ‘Zai Qingzhu Zhongguo Gongchandang Chengli 90 Zhounian Dahui shang de Jianghua’ [Speech at the 90th Anniversary Ceremony of the Chinese Communist Party] (Jul. 1, 2011), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-07/01/c\\_121612030\\_6.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-07/01/c_121612030_6.htm); Xi Jinping, ‘Zai Dang de Qunzhong Lunxian Jiaoyu Shijian Huodong Zongjie Dahui shang de Jianghua’ [Speech at the General Assembly Concluding the Party’s Mass Line Education and Practice Campaign], *People’s Daily* (October 9, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> See Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (2004), Article 41.

<sup>16</sup> Zhao Ziyang, ‘Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di 13 Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de Baogao’ [Political Report at the CCP 13th National Congress] (October 25, 1987), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/20/content\\_697069.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/20/content_697069.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Jiang Zemin, ‘Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di 14 Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de Baogao’ [Political Report at the CCP 14th National Congress] (October 12, 1992), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/20/content\\_697148.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/20/content_697148.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Jiang Zemin, ‘Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di 15 Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de Baogao’ [Political Report at the CCP 15th National Congress] (September 12, 1997), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/20/content\\_697207.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/20/content_697207.htm).

<sup>19</sup> Jiang Zemin, ‘Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di 16 Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de Baogao’ [Political Report at the CCP 16th National Congress] (November 17, 2002), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-11/17/content\\_632278.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-11/17/content_632278.htm); Hu Jintao, ‘Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di 17 Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de Baogao’ [Political Report at the CCP 17th National Congress] (October 24, 2007), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content\\_6938568\\_5.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content_6938568_5.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Hu Jintao, ‘Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di 18 Ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de Baogao’ [Political Report at the CCP 18th National Congress] (November 17, 2012), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c\\_113711665\\_6.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_113711665_6.htm).

investigative journalism to flourish despite continued censorship and other forms of political constraint.<sup>21</sup> It should, however, be noted that the regime lacks the political will to completely unleash the full potential media supervision. After all, for the party-state, fighting corruption is a ‘double-edged sword’ because ‘though the anti-corruption campaign hits cadres and party members that violate party disciplines and laws, it hurts the organization and damages the image of the party.’<sup>22</sup>

Both ‘mass supervision’ and ‘public opinion supervision’ imply only citizen participation under the auspices of the party-state in official discourse, and as such are narrower than ‘public supervision.’ However, as contentious politics scholars find, Chinese citizens in the reform era have resorted to popular contention to lodge complaints and check corrupt officials. In particular, they often exploit the internal fragmentation of the regime and employ boundary-spanning strategies to maximize effectiveness and to avoid risks.<sup>23</sup> As such “rightful resistance” focuses on specific localized goals rather than seeking regime transition, it provides the regime with necessary policy input and helps it discipline local agents, serving as what has been described as ‘constructive noncompliance.’<sup>24</sup>

Evidently, existing literature on citizen participation and popular contention in China suggests an image of benevolent authoritarian regime that at least is partially responsive and accountable. While this is a little counterintuitive, it can be rational for the regime: so far as it can keep popular protests and critical reporting local, and targeting only lower levels of authorities and officials, the party-state can reap the benefits of popular contention without risking being overthrown.<sup>25</sup>

The arrival of the internet may have changed the dynamics of public participation

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<sup>21</sup> Yuezhi Zhou, ‘Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in Post-Deng China,’ 1 *Journalism Studies* 577 (2000); Benjamin L. Liebman, ‘The Media and the Courts: Towards Competitive Supervision?’, 208 *The China Quarterly* 833 (2012); Xiaoping Li, ‘“Focus” ( Jiaodian Fangtan ) and the Changes in the Chinese Television Industry,’ 11 *Journal of Contemporary China* 17 (2002); Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (2013); David Bandurski & Martin Hala (eds), *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism* (2010); Maria Repnikova, *Limited Political Openings under Authoritarianism: Critical Journalists and the State in China* (2014) (Ph.D. Dissertation, Oxford University).

<sup>22</sup> CCDI, ‘Tuchu Jijian Tese’ [Highlight the Features of Discipline Enforcement] (Jun. 1, 2015), [http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xsjw/series8/201505/t20150531\\_57143.html](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xsjw/series8/201505/t20150531_57143.html).

<sup>23</sup> Xi Chen, ‘Between Defiance and Obedience: Protest Opportunism in China,’ in Elizabeth J Perry & Merle Goldman (eds) (2009) *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* 253; Kevin J. O’Brien & Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (2006); Yongshun Cai, ‘Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China,’ 193 *The China Quarterly* 24 (2008); Ching Kwan Lee & Yonghong Zhang, ‘The Power of Instability : Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China,’ 118 *American Journal of Sociology* 1475 (2013).

<sup>24</sup> Lily L. Tsai, ‘Constructive Noncompliance,’ 47 *Comparative Politics* 253 (2015).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Lorentzen, ‘China’s Strategic Censorship,’ 58 *American Journal of Political Science* 402 (2014): 402–14; Peter Lorentzen, ‘Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime,’ 8 *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 127 (2013).

and supervision by opening both formal and informal channels for citizen engagement. For instance, the state has promoted e-government to improve administrative capacity, provide public services, and interact with citizens.<sup>26</sup> By the end of 2014, the state had set up 57,024 government websites,<sup>27</sup> most of which incorporate petition channels.<sup>28</sup> The internet has also increased the amount of uncontrollable information by creating a nascent public sphere, promoting civil society, and facilitating citizen mobilization and even dissident activism.<sup>29</sup> In effect, Chinese internet users often call themselves ‘netizens’ because the term implies a sense of citizenship absent in the offline world. Undoubtedly, the party-state has responded with strict censorship<sup>30</sup> and innovative propaganda strategies such as ideotainment—the juxtaposition of popular cyber culture and ideological constructs—and astroturfing—the deployment of state agents to fabricate pro-regime voices.<sup>31</sup> But there is no doubt that the internet has empowered citizens to oversee state apparatus and officials beyond state authorized channels.

Notwithstanding this rich tapestry of studies on the state-society struggle over the control of online information flow, only a few studies have looked into how the internet has expanded the scope of public supervision. Among them, Gao and Stanyer explore how netizens hunt down corrupt officials through ‘human flesh search’ (*renshou sousuo*)—the man-hunt practice that relies on netizens’ collective participation to dig out information about the target.<sup>32</sup> Ang studies the Chinese spin-offs of I-Paid-A-Bribe platform ([ipaidabribe.com](http://ipaidabribe.com), IPAB hereafter) and argues

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<sup>26</sup> Jesper Schlaeger & Min Jiang, ‘Official Microblogging and Social Management by Local Governments in China,’ 28 *China Information* 189 (2014); Jesper Schläger, *E-Government in China: Technology, Power and Local Government Reform* (2013); Christine Zhen-Wei Qiang, *China’s Information Revolution: Managing the Economic and Social Transformation* (2007).

<sup>27</sup> CNNIC, ‘Di 35 Ci Zhongguo Hulianwang Fazhan Zhuangkuang Tongji Baogao’ [The 35th Survey Report on the Development of China’s Internet] (Feb. 2015,) <http://www.cnnic.cn>.

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Hartford, ‘Dear Mayor: Online Communications with Local Governments in Hangzhou and Nanjing,’ 19 *China Information* 217 (2005).

<sup>29</sup> Guobin Yang, ‘How Do Chinese Civic Associations Respond to the Internet? Findings from a Survey,’ 189 *The China Quarterly* 122 (2007); Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (2008); Johan Lagerkvist, *The Internet in China: Unlocking and Containing the Public Sphere* (2007); Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (2009); Michael S Chase & James C Mulvenon, *You’ve Got Dissent* (2002); Ashley Esarey & Qiang Xiao, ‘Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere,’ 48 *Asian Survey* 752 (2008).

<sup>30</sup> King, Pan & Roberts, ‘How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression’ supra note 8; MacKinnon, ‘China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’’ supra note 8.

<sup>31</sup> Johan Lagerkvist, ‘Internet Ideotainment in the PRC: National Responses to Cultural Globalization,’ 17 *Journal of Contemporary China* 121 (2008); Han, ‘Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China’s ‘Fifty-Cent Army’,’ 44 *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 105 (2015); Chin-Fu Hung, ‘China’s Propaganda in the Information Age: Internet Commentators and Wen’an Incident,’ 46 *Issues & Studies* 149 (2010).

<sup>32</sup> Li Gao & James Stanyer, ‘Hunting Corrupt Officials Online: The Human Flesh Search Engine and the Search for Justice in China,’ 17 *Information, Communication, & Society* 814 (2014).

that they fail not only due to state repression, but also because long-term authoritarian rule has resulted in the lack of citizens' self-organizing ability and constructive civic engagement experience.<sup>33</sup> These studies are inspiring, but limited in quantity and narrow in focus, thus cannot provide the big picture of public supervision online and state responses. In particular, in what ways has the internet altered the dynamics of public supervision? Why does one type of participation thrive while the other fails? How the best understand the intriguing relationship between 'digital empowerment' and 'resilient authoritarianism' in the realm of public supervision? The following sections attempt to bridge the gap through examination of the struggle over online supervision, arguing that the Chinese state has demonstrated a control-freak tendency, intending to limit participation outside controlled channels regardless of its nature. However, the internet has selectively empowered different forms of online supervision, rendering some types of citizen participation more successful than others.

### **Online Public Supervision Reflected in Anti-Corruption**

Online anti-corruption supervision here is defined as any form of citizen participation through non-state online platforms to disclose and criticize official corruption and government misconduct such as bribery, misuse of public funds, an extravagant lifestyle, fabricating credentials, nepotism, and so forth. Given the complexity of the concept itself and the vastness and fluidity of online participation, it is impossible to definitively identify the entire population of online anti-corruption supervision cases. That being said, measuring the trend of citizen activism in this sphere over the time is still a doable task. Chinese scholars have used corruption cases that are first exposed online as an indicator. They have either found such cases from a pool of online public opinion events<sup>34</sup> or searched keywords about corrupt behaviors before separating out those first exposed online.<sup>35</sup> Despite the discrepancies and methodological

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<sup>33</sup> Yuen Yuen Ang, 'Authoritarian Restraints on Online Activism Revisited: Why 'I-Paid-A-Bribe' Worked in India but Failed in China,' 47 *Comparative Politics* 21 (2014).

<sup>34</sup> DU Zhizhou & LI Xin, 'Woguo Wangluo Fanfu de Zhuyao Tezheng: Jiyu 217 Ge Anli de Shizheng Fenxi' [The Characteristics of Internet Anti-corruption: An Empirical Analysis of 217 cases], 4 *Zhongguo Xingzheng Guanli [Chinese Public Administration]* 35 (2014); LI Weining, 'Zhongguo Kaishi Jinru Hulanwang Xinchangtai' [China Enters Internet New Normality], (Dec. 25, 2014), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2014-12/25/c\\_1113781011.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2014-12/25/c_1113781011.htm).

<sup>35</sup> XIE Jinlin, 'Wangluo Fanfu Fazhan Qushi, Tedian ji Duice Yanjiu: Jiyu 2004-2013 Nian Dashuju de Fenxi' [The Trend, Features and Coping Strategies to Online Anti-corruption: An Analysis based on Big-data between

problems,<sup>36</sup> these studies reveal a general trend, which is also confirmed by analysis of the PDOPOMC dataset: online anti-corruption activism first became noticeable around 2004, gathered momentum in 2008, peaking in 2013 and then declined (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1:** Number of Online Anti-Corruption Cases Annually (2004-2015)

Sources	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
A	1	2	3	7	17	43	42	112	182	228		
B	3	1	0	4	13	17	47	55	67			
C									174	229	54	
D					5	6	6	6	16	7	8	3
(%)					2.94	6.32	15	12.24	28.07	17.07	14.55	16.67

Sources: A= XIE, ‘Wangluo Fanfu Fazhan Qushi’ supra note 35; B=DU & LI, ‘Woguo Wangluo Fanfu de Zhuyao Tezheng’ supra note 34; C= LI, ‘Zhongguo Kaishi Jinru Hulianwang Xinchangtai’ supra note 34; D= counts of anti-corruption cases and the percentage to the total number of online events collected by PDOPOMC.

### *Categorizing Anti-Corruption Supervision*

An examination of anti-corruption cases—both those identified by Chinese scholars and the 57 cases in the PDOPOMC dataset—reveals three major types, namely *citizen journalism*, *insider reporting*, and *man-hunt*. In the *citizen journalism* type, citizen journalists play the central role in evidence gathering, issue framing, and exposure of corruption. The internet serves largely as a loudspeaker to hail public attention. Citizen journalists often have their personal anti-graft websites (See **Table 2** for some examples), but rely increasingly on popular social media platforms. Typical cases in the category include the exposure of LI Xin and LEI Zhengfu. LI Xin, then Deputy Mayor of Jining, Shandong Province, was ousted in June 2004 after his corruption story went viral online, with a picture of him kneeling before his mistress pleading with her not to report him to the authorities. The case was first exposed by a citizen journalist LI Xinde on his anti-graft website *Public Opinion Monitor Network* (*Zhongguo Yulun Jiandu Wang*).<sup>37</sup> Likewise, LEI Zhengfu, party chief of Beibei District, was the first of the 21 Chongqing officials brought down by the exposure of a

2004 and 2013], 2 Beijing Xingzheng Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of Beijing Administrative College] 39 (2014).

<sup>36</sup> The samples are likely biased as less successful cases as well as other forms of online anti-corruption activism are not included.

<sup>37</sup> DAI Dunfeng, ‘Fushizhang Guixiang Shenyuan’ [Deputy Mayor kneeling down to abyss], *Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern Weekend] (Jul. 22, 2014). The report shows that traditional media outlets received the materials earlier—*Southern Weekend* in February and *Beijing Youth Daily* in April—but did not publish anything until it exploded online.

series of sex tapes in late 2012.<sup>38</sup> The tapes were first exposed by citizen journalist ZHU Ruifeng.

**Table 2: Selected Personal Anti-Graft Websites**

Owner	Website	Year
LI Xinde (former reporter)	Public Opinion Monitor Network (Zhongguo Yulun Jiandu Wang) ( <a href="http://www.cnyulun1.com/">http://www.cnyulun1.com/</a> )	2003-10
XU Xiang (former reporter)	I Want Justice Network (Wo Yao Zhengyi Wang) ( <a href="http://www.zyw51.com/">http://www.zyw51.com/</a> )	2003
JIANG Huanwen (professional whistleblower)	China Tipping-off Network (Zhongguo Jubao Wang) (no longer available)	2004-5
CHENG Kangming (trained as media professional)	Righteous Anti-Corruption Network (Zhongguo Zhengyi Fanfu Wang) ( <a href="http://blog.51.ca/u-252860/">http://blog.51.ca/u-252860/</a> )	2004
LIN Yu (aka LU Ningping)	The Masses' Mouthpiece Network (Zhongguo Baixing Houshe Wang) ( <a href="http://web1826412.m1.jjisp.com/">http://web1826412.m1.jjisp.com/</a> )	2004-11
ZHU Ruifeng (reporter)	People's Supervision Network (Renmin Jiandu Wang) ( <a href="http://www.rmjd.com/">http://www.rmjd.com/</a> )	2006
ZHU Yishan (aka LU Zhou (businessman; forced eviction victim)	Public Opinion Network (Minyi Wang) ( <a href="http://www.zys110.net/">http://www.zys110.net/</a> )	2006-12
GE Shuchun (writer; professional whistleblower)	Anti-Corruption and Rights Defense Network (Zhongguo Fanfu Weiquan Wang) ( <a href="http://www.fanfu10.com/">http://www.fanfu10.com/</a> )	2007

*Insider reporting* cases are often initiated by insiders who are close to corrupt officials—their disgruntled mistresses, angry wives, or competitors—and thus have direct compelling evidence. For instance, in June 2013 then deputy director of the State Administration of Archives FAN Yue was exposed by his mistress for being corrupt and engaging in extramarital affairs. FAN resigned before everything was put online, apparently under the pressure of imminent exposure.<sup>39</sup>

The *man-hunt* type refers to cases in which netizens take advantage of social media and utilize collective intelligence to dig out evidence, attract public attention ultimately for the state to punish corrupt officials.<sup>40</sup> The ‘human-flesh search’ of ZHOU Jiugeng and YANG Dacai are typical examples. ZHOU, director of a District

<sup>38</sup> TIAN Wensheng, ‘Chongqing Chuli 21 Ming She Buya Shipin Dangyuan Ganbu’ [Chongqing Punished 21 Officials Involved in the Sex Tape Scandal], *Zhongguo Qingnianbao [China Youth Daily]* (May 8, 2013); Andrew Jacobs, ‘Chinese Officials Find Misbehavior Now Carries Cost,’ *New York Times* (Dec. 26, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, ‘Revenge of the Mistresses,’ *New York Times* (Jul. 31, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Gao & Stanyer, ‘Hunting Corrupt Officials Online’ supra note 32.

Housing Administration in Nanjing, Jiangsu, threatened to punish ‘developers that sell apartments below costs’ in December 2008, amidst nationwide anger at skyrocketing housing prices. Irritated netizens launched a massive ‘human flesh search,’ finding pictures of him wearing a 100,000-*yuan* (16,000 USD) watch and smoking 150-*yuan*-a-packet (25 USD) cigarettes.<sup>41</sup> He was soon dismissed. YANG Dacai, then deputy chief of the Work Safety Administration of Shanxi Province, was fired in August 2012 after netizens, especially those from Tianya.cn, exposed the fact that he owned dozens of expensive wristwatches.<sup>42</sup> YANG became a target of netizens only by virtue of the fact that he displayed a suspicious smile at the scene of a traffic incident with 36 deaths.

The above are similar to sporadic forms of citizen vigilantism exposing isolated corrupt officials. Existing studies and the author’s observations suggest several other types of online anti-corruption activism, notably *everyday complaints*, the *IPAB* type, and the *civil/political movement* type. Chinese netizens complain about corruption on various platforms such as blogs, forums, and micro-blogs on a daily basis. Such *everyday complaints* are abundant in number, but often attract little attention for various reasons—either they are not sensational enough, too common, or too trivial—therefore these cases only serve as candidates for ‘public opinion events’ (*yulun shijian*) that become online spectacles. Tianya.cn attracts numerous complaints of this sort. Its two special boards, *Grassroots Voices* (*Baixing Shengyin*) and *Exposure* (*Baoguang*), together produced over 84,000 threads between April 2014 and July 2015, mostly about different types of government misconduct.<sup>43</sup>

The *IPAB* type refers to the efforts by Chinese citizens to replicate the Indian *I-Paid-A-Bribe* platform ([ipaidabribe.com](http://ipaidabribe.com)), which allows citizens to report corruption cases they witness.<sup>44</sup> Inspired by the success of *I-Paid-A-Bribe*, dozens of Chinese replicas popped up in the middle of 2011 and immediately went viral. One of such sites, [www.fanxinghui.com](http://www.fanxinghui.com), received over 1000 tip-offs within five days, and its servers crashed within three days after its launch as a result of the heavy volume of traffic.<sup>45</sup> Unlike personal anti-graft websites run by citizen journalists, the *IPAB*-like

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<sup>41</sup> CUI Jie, XIAO Shuijin & Shu Jian, ‘Zhou Jiugeng An de Qianqian Houhou Shishi Feifei’ [Ins and Outs of the Zhou Jiugeng Case], *Jiancha Ribao* [*Procuratorial Daily*], (Dec. 10, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, ‘China’s ‘Brother Wristwatch’ Yang Dacai Jailed for 14 Years for Corruption,’ *The Guardian* (Sept. 5, 2013), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/05/china-brother-wristwatch-yang-dacai-sentenced>.

<sup>43</sup> Data were collected on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The starting date April 9, 2014 was when the *Exposure* board started to have regular number of postings. Threads less than a week old are excluded.

<sup>44</sup> Ang, ‘Authoritarian Restraints on Online Activism Revisited’ supra note 33.

<sup>45</sup> LI Ying, ‘Shanzhaiban ‘Woxinghuile’ Wangzhan Chuanhong Zhongguo’ [I-Paid-a-Bribe Clones Went Viral in

platforms are specialized anti-corruption forums where the administrators play no role in verifying the case or framing the issue. These platforms were short-lived, with virtually all of them being shut down by August 2011.

The *civil/political movement* type situates anti-corruption as part of broader social/political movements, which more often than not seek to instigate more fundamental changes to the regime, including a more systematic cure to corruption. For instance, the New Citizens Movement, which advocates constitutionalism and political reforms, also calls for wealth disclosure of government officials. Though not targeting individual officials, introducing such a policy could certainly prevent corruption more effectively.

The above categorization is devised primarily for analytical purposes. In reality, many cases demonstrate mixed features and can transform from one type to another. An everyday complaint may catch public attention and go viral. Insiders may approach media professionals or muckraking journalists to avoid risk and improve efficacy. In effect, ZHU Ruifeng, the citizen journalist who first exposed the LEI Zhengfu case, claimed that over 90 per cent of the tips-offs he received were from within the officialdom, often entwined with internal power struggles.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, this categorization allows more nuanced examination of the impact of technological empowerment and state adaption as will be shown in the following two sub-sections.

### ***State Responses: Intention and Practice***

In response to the rise of public supervision online, the state in theory can either collaborate with netizens by accommodating citizen activism or suppress them. Between 2008 and 2015, the Party's mouth-piece *People's Daily* published 83 articles that referencing 'online anti-corruption.' Though many of these articles regarded online anti-corruption as having 'limitations and negative effects' and 'should be institutionalized,' not a single piece denies its positive impact.<sup>47</sup> By allowing and responding to public participation in anti-corruption, the state can turn the internet into a safety valve to let off political pressure.<sup>48</sup> In addition, popular participation can also bring to the state's attention the need to resolve more detrimental complaints

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China], *Guangzhou Ribao* [*Guangzhou Daily*] (Jun. 16, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> LIN Shanshan, 'Zhongguoshi Fanfu' [Chinese Style Anti-corruption], *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan* [*Southern People Weekly*] 78 (Nov. 30, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Data obtained through the built-in search engine of [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn).

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Hassid, 'Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life,' 62 *Journal of Communication* 212 (2012).

because sensational, severe, and/or with hard-to-deny cases are more likely to stand out than less severe cases. Alternatively, the state can impose constraints on and suppress netizens' participation. It may censor online expression, penalize platforms that host deviating expression, and punish regime critics. As human rights watchers have documented, the state has harassed, detained, and jailed hundreds of outspoken netizens, opinion leaders, and dissident activists because of their online activities.<sup>49</sup>

Evidently, both options—*accommodation* or *suppression*—have advantages and limitations. Accommodation can help pacify aggrieved citizens and reinforce regime legitimacy, but may ultimately result in escalating the targets to higher authorities, exposing the pervasiveness of corruption, or overloading the state's accommodation capacity. The suppression option, confirming the state's capacity and will to suppress may deter spread and escalation of citizen activism, but it is costly and alienating—this is why the state often utilizes softer means such as bureaucratic absorption, buying-off, and mobilization of social ties rather than direct suppression to demobilize social unrest.<sup>50</sup> Given the pros and cons, it is rational for the state to employ a mixed approach and differentiate its responses to different forms of public supervision.

This raises the interesting question how the state decides which cases to suppress and which ones to tolerate? Studies suggest that the state has two major priorities. Firstly, it is concerned with 'stability maintenance,' thus prioritizing control of collective mobilization expression over general criticism.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, it attaches importance to its 'general legitimacy,' lending more attention to cases reflecting negatively on the top leadership than charges against lower-level officials.<sup>52</sup> Bearing such concerns in mind, *civil/political movements* are clearly most threatening because they not only actively mobilize collective action, but also often seek systematic changes to the regime. All other types are less threatening as they mostly are unorganized, seek specific remedies,<sup>53</sup> target lower-level officials,<sup>54</sup> and involve

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, see Zheng, Technological Empowerment supra note 29.

<sup>50</sup> Lee & Zhang, 'The Power of Instability' supra note 23; Julia Chuang, 'China's Rural Land Politics: Bureaucratic Absorption and the Muting of Rightful Resistance,' 219 *The China Quarterly* 649 (2014); Kevin J. O'Brien & Yanhua Deng, 'The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties and 'Harmonious Demolition,' 74 *The China Journal* 1 (2015); Yanhua Deng & Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters,' 215 *The China Quarterly* 533 (2013).

<sup>51</sup> King, Pan & Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression' supra note 8.

<sup>52</sup> Lorentzen, 'China's Strategic Censorship' supra note 25.

<sup>53</sup> XIE Jinlin reported 647 online anti-corruption cases between 2004 and 2013, which is the highest among all. See XIE, 'Wangluo Fanfu Fazhan Qushi' supra note 35. In comparison, the state itself investigated over 16,044 officials at or above the county level between 2008 and 2013. See CAO Jianming, 'Zuigao Renmin Jianchayuan

limited online mobilization rather than offline action. Among these types, *citizen journalism* may be slightly more threatening because of the persistence and activist nature of citizen journalists. The *IPAB* type is in effect not that threatening because it is highly susceptible to state control and can only operate within state-prescribed boundaries—owners of those sites often attempt to register their sites. *Everyday complaints* are the least threatening for lacking impact. In this sense, if the state optimizes its strategy to the threat level, *civil/political movements* are most likely to be suppressed, followed by *citizen journalism*, *IPAB spinoffs*, *man-hunt*, and *insider-reporting* types. Moreover, the state shall try to accommodate all forms of participation other than *civil/political movements*, and perhaps ignore most *everyday complaints*.

However, the state's reaction only partially conforms with such a 'threat-driven' hypothesis. Firstly, it has indeed tolerated *everyday complaints* to a certain extent. Despite censorship, complaints targeting official misconduct are observed on all major online platforms. Tianya.cn even hosts boards—*Grassroots Voices* and *Exposure*—that are specifically designed for netizens to air grievances. And as expected, since such complaints often lack publicity, the state can conveniently ignore them: of a total 300,000 plus postings from *Grassroots Voices*, 91 per cent attracted less than ten comments and 41 per cent attracted none. As a result, state tolerance of *everyday complaints* works just like its petition system: it is instrumental to regime stability, but ineffective for petitioners.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, the PDOPOMC cases, all of which received some state attention, are mostly sensational cases attracting huge publicity: of 57 cases, 18 related to sexual scandals, 14 were about extravagant lifestyle or misuse of public funds, and four pertained to improper public behavior.<sup>56</sup>

Secondly, the state has harshly suppressed citizen/political movements as might be expected. Take the New Citizens Movement as an example. Led by law professor and activist XU Zhiyong, the relatively moderate movement does not openly call for

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Gongzuo Baogao (Zhaiyao)' [Report on the Work of the Supreme People's Procuratorate (Summary)], Jiancha Ribao [Procuratorial Daily] (Mar. 11, 2013); CAO Jianming, 'Zuigao Renmin Jianchayuan Gongzuo Baogao' [Report on the Work of the Supreme People's Procuratorate], Jiancha Ribao [Procuratorial Daily] (Mar. 18, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> High-ranking officials often only become targets due to fights within officialdom or between corrupt officials and their mistresses. See XIE, 'Wangluo Fanfu Fazhan Qushi' supra note 35.

<sup>55</sup> Lianjiang Li, Mingxing Liu & Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Petitioning Beijing: The High Tide of 2003–2006,' 210 *The China Quarterly* 313 (2012); Yongshun Cai, 'Disruptive Collective Action in the Reform Era,' in Kevin J. O'Brien (ed) (2008) *Popular Protest in China* 163.

<sup>56</sup> DU & LI find the state responding to 85% of their cases, excluding false alarms. In their sample, 35% are about sexual scandals, 26% are about extravagant lifestyle, 20% are about abuse of power, and 5% are about fabricating credentials. See DU & LI, 'Woguo Wangluo Fanfu de Zhuyao Tezheng' supra note 34.

regime change. Nonetheless, it advocates constitutionalism and political reforms, with one of its specific goals being institutionalizing the wealth disclosure of officials. To push this agenda, several demonstrations were staged in Shenzhen, Beijing and Jiangxi in 2012 and 2013. Harsh repression followed, leading to at least 24 arrests.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, information related to the movement has been constantly censored, making it hard for the group to spread their ideas and push for their agenda online.

However, state responses also contradict the ‘threat-driven’ hypothesis to a significant extent in that the party-state has proved to be much more repressive than expected. Instead of tolerating and coopting citizen journalists, the state has constantly suppressed them and routinely crushed their anti-graft websites, forcing them to move the sites to overseas servers. For instance, ZHU Ruifeng’s personal anti-graft website, *People’s Supervision Network (rmjdw.com)*, is based in Hong Kong. Yet, it has been constantly blocked by the Great Firewall and attacked. Moreover, his social media accounts have been suspended quite a few times and ZHU himself was harassed by the authorities.<sup>58</sup> The state has also suppressed the *IPAB spinoffs* ruthlessly. Inspired by the Indian example, *IPAB* replicas started to flourish in June 2011. Despite their willingness to cooperate with the authorities, the state decided to put an end to all such sites within only two months—by then there were over sixty of them attracting more than 300,000 visitors daily.<sup>59</sup> And this was not the last wave of suppression. In the first seven months of 2013, the state banned another 89 such ‘illegal’ anti-corruption websites.<sup>60</sup>

The state has also suppressed *insider-reporting* and *man-hunt* (and also *citizen*

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<sup>57</sup> See the report to Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Sept. 8, 2013), [https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/24th/public - UA\\_China\\_09.08.13\\_%288.2013%29.pdf](https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/24th/public - UA_China_09.08.13_%288.2013%29.pdf). The Chinese Human Rights Defenders provides a list of 70 activists arrested between March 2013 and April 2015. See Chinese Human Rights Defenders, ‘Individuals Detained in Crackdown on Peaceful Assembly, Association & Expression’ (Oct. 12, 2016), <http://www.chrdnet.com/2013/07/individuals-detained-in-crackdown-on-assembly-and-association/>.

<sup>58</sup> YE Bing, ‘Renmin Jiandu Wang Jizhe ZHU Ruifeng Tan Wangluo Fanfu’ [People’s Supervision Network Reporter ZHU Ruifeng Talks about Online Anti-corruption] (Dec. 21, 2012), <http://www.voachinese.com/content/citizen-watchdog-web-anti-corruption-20121221/1569810.html>; VOA, ‘Beijing Minjian Fanfu Renshi Mianlin Jingfang Yidi Zhuabu’ [Citizen Anti-Corruption Activist Facing Possible Arrest] (Sept. 7, 2011), <http://www.voachinese.com/content/article-20110907-anti-corruption-activist-129362328/787335.html>; BBC, ‘Renmin Jiandu Wang Beifeng, Chuangbanren Zhu Ruifeng Xiaoshi’ [People’s Supervision Network Forced Shutdown and Its Founder Zhu Ruifeng Went Missing] (Jul. 16, 2013), [http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2013/07/130716\\_china\\_zhushuifeng\\_site](http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2013/07/130716_china_zhushuifeng_site).

<sup>59</sup> XIAO Huanhuan, ‘Woxinghuile’ Yongjiu Guanbi, Minjian Fanfu Wangzhan Tanhua Yixian?’ [‘Woxinghuile’ Permanently Shut Down; Private Anti-corruption Websites Short-lived?], *Guangzhou Ribao [Guangzhou Daily]* (Aug. 11, 2011); SHANG Xi, ‘Duojia Minjian Fanfu Wangzhan Guanbi’ [Multiple Private Anti-corruption Websites Closed Down], *Jinghua Shibao (Beijing Times)* (Aug. 12, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> GAO Yuan, ‘Fanfu Wangzhan de Jianghu’ [The Rivers and Lakes of Anti-corruption Websites], *Fazhi Zhoumo [Legal Weekly]* (Jul. 18, 2012).

*journalism*) by punishing outspoken netizens and opinion leaders.<sup>61</sup> In 2013, the state launched a massive anti-rumor campaign in which many online supervision activists were punished. ZHOU Lubao, who was active in exposing YANG Dacai, was arrested in August on charges of ‘blackmailing and extortion.’<sup>62</sup> DONG Rubin, who participated in the instigation of an inmate’s suspicious death in Kunming in 2009, was detained in September.<sup>63</sup> The state also jailed Charles Xue, an American Chinese investor and outspoken Weibo celebrity with over 12 million followers,<sup>64</sup> for buying sex. However, Xue’s confession on state media was all about his improper online behavior as an opinion leader.<sup>65</sup> The campaign created the intended chilling effects: Weibo opinion leaders reduced their activities by 40 per cent compared to the previous year,<sup>66</sup> and started to play safe in online supervision. As ZHU Ruifeng puts it, ‘The arrests of Big-Vs (opinion leaders) shut everyone up.’<sup>67</sup>

Suppression also applies to *everyday complaints*. For instance, state censorship often escalates to eliminate online expression relevant to collective mobilization or top leaders as in the case of Wukan Incident and the hidden wealth of Premier Wen Jiabao’s family scandal respectively.<sup>68</sup> In 2009, Tianya.cn was forced to shut down the entire *Grassroots Voices* board for five weeks for the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).<sup>69</sup>

In general, the party-state demonstrates a control-freak tendency, attempting to suppress every form of online supervision. Yet, the effectiveness of state suppression varies—besides *social/political movements*, which are most aggressively suppressed, all other types are also suppressed albeit less harshly. However, four of them except

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<sup>61</sup> For repression of average netizens, see ZHANG Yang, ‘39 Ming Wangshang Zaoyao Chuanyao Zhe Bei Chengchu’ [39 Online Rumor Mongers Punished], *People’s Daily Overseas Edition* (Jul. 21, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> YUAN Guoli, ‘Zhiming Wangluo Baoliaoren ZHOU Lubao Bei Pibu’ [Well-known Online Muckraker ZHOU Lubao Arrested], *Jinghua Shibao [Beijing Times]* (Aug. 25, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> YUAN Guoli, ‘Wangluo Mingren ‘Bianmin’ She Sanzongzui Bei Pibu’ [Internet Celebrity Bianmin Arrested for Three Crimes], *Jinghua Shibao [Beijing Times]* (Oct. 17, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Chris Buckley, ‘Crackdown on Bloggers Is Mounted By China,’ *New York Times* (Sept. 11, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, ‘Gaoqiang Nei de ‘Xue Manzi’ Tan Lianggao Sifa Jieshi ji Wangluo Da V Xinlu’ [Charles Xue Talk about Judicial Interpretation by the Supreme People’s Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate and His Road towards an Internet Opinion Leader] (Sept. 15, 2013), <http://www.mps.gov.cn/n16/n983040/n3874062/n3874077/3902456.html>.

<sup>66</sup> CHENG Shuwen, ‘Woguo Wangluo Fanfu Xian ‘Duanyashi Jiangwen’ [Online Anti-corruption Cools Down Dramatically], *Nanfang Dushibao [Southern Metropolis Daily]* (Dec. 26, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> *Mingpao*, ‘Jieguan Kaifang Zao Qisu Minjian Fanfu Xian Handong’ [Disclosure of an Official’s Hotel Staying Record Leads to Lawsuit, Civil Anti-Corruption Enters Cold Winter] (Jan. 23, 2015), <http://news.mingpao.com/pns1501231421949603128>.

<sup>68</sup> See QIAO Long, ‘Wukancun Cunmin Xu yu Gongan Duizhi, Wangluo Quanmian Fengsha Xiangguan Taolun’ [Villagers in Wukan Continue to Confront the Police, Relevant Discussion Completely Banned Online] (Dec. 13, 2011), <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/wk-12132011104143.html>; Keith Bradsher, ‘China Blocks Web Access to Times after Article,’ *New York Times* (Oct. 26, 2012).

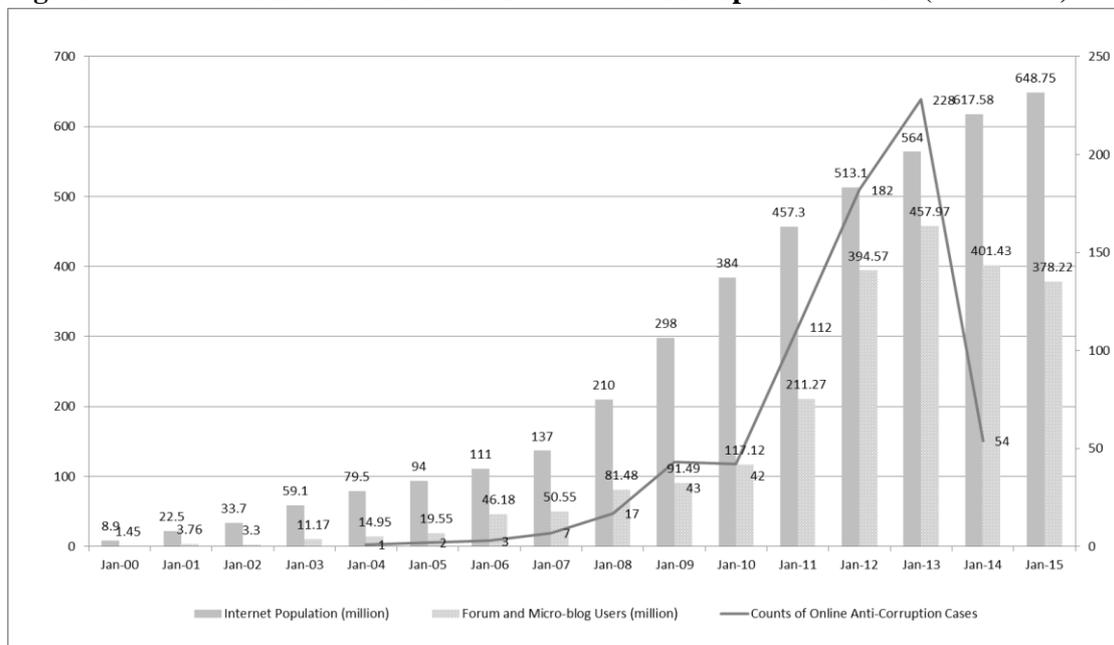
<sup>69</sup> See ‘Baixing Shengyin Chongxin Kaiban le’ (Grassroots Voices Re-Opens) (Oct. 13, 2009), <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-828-11410-1.shtml>.

the IPAB type survive and continue to function. This outcome requires an explanation, which leads to the next section on the nature of digital empowerment.

### *A Story of Selective Empowerment*

As an inherently participatory process, public supervision online bears clear features of technological empowerment. Using the number of ‘corruption cases first exposed online’ as the indicator, the rise and fall of online supervision correlates with changes in the internet population, particularly that of social media (see **Figure 1**). This suggests that the interactivity among netizens enabled by social media clearly facilitates collective collaboration in hunting down corrupt officials.

**Figure 1: Internet & Social Media and Online Anti-Corruption Activism (2000-2015)**



Notes: Data of internet and social media population are from China Internet Network Information Centre (<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>). Social media includes only internet forums and micro-blogs. Annual counts of online corruption cases between 2004 and 2013 are from XIE, ‘Wangluo fanfu fazhan qushi’ supra note 35. The number for 2014 is from LI, ‘Zhongguo kaishi jinru hulianwang xinchangtai’ supra note 34. Though XIE and LI used different methods, they reported similar counts for overlapping years. Moreover, since the decline in 2014 is a confirmed trend, adding LI’s number shall not affect the findings.

Technological developments also shape the forms of online anti-corruption supervision. Early online anti-corruption cases such as the exposure of LI Xin in June 2004 (see the *citizen journalism* example above) featured a combination of citizen journalists and personal anti-graft websites. Netizens contributed primarily by turning the scandals into public spectacles, forcing the state to respond. Such a pattern emerged because around 2004 only less than 10 per cent of the Chinese population

was online and popular social media were largely absent. Citizen journalism was a viable option as it relies primarily on individuals while personal websites allow full control by owners, are good for branding, and more importantly can be quickly rebuilt after state repression, which has happened to most of these websites.

The rise of more interactive and interconnected social media has made it easier for citizens to provide corruption tip-offs, to crowd-source evidence gathering, and to increase publicity. Internet forums and Twitter-like Weibo accounts are the most important social media platforms for anti-corruption. The PDOPOMC data shows that among the 57 cases, internet forums and Weibo users accounted for 30 and 23 cases respectively with the remaining four exposed on video sharing sites, blogs, and the instant messaging platform WeChat. Similarly, two studies by Chinese scholars respectively reported 59 and 52 per cent of their cases being first exposed on internet forums and 24 and 15 per cent on Weibo.<sup>70</sup> Even citizen journalists now rely more on social media: the LEI Zhengfu scandal, though first exposed by ZHU Ruifeng on his personal site, did not mushroom until it was posted on Weibo by another journalist.<sup>71</sup>

The indicator of ‘corruption cases first exposed online’ represents the more successful forms of online supervision—namely *citizen journalism*, *man-hunt*, and *insider reporting*. These types are deemed as more successful because they are longer lasting, have achieved anti-corruption goals, and have demonstrated a stronger ability to survive state suppression. Admittedly, these forms are less threatening to the regime than the social/political movements, hence they are less harshly suppressed, but their relative success should also be attributed to the fact that they are much better empowered by the internet and social media, which provides fertile ground for them to flourish, including open access, large active user pools, and convenient information exchange tools. These types are also much more difficult to suppress. Firstly, due to their sporadic and unpredictable nature the state finds it hard to target a specific individual or group. Secondly, utilizing popular social media platforms have insulated them from state suppression because shutting such platforms down would be extremely costly to the business interests involved and with respect to the risk of irritating non-political netizens.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> DU & LI, ‘Woguo Wangluo Fanfu de Zhuyao Tezheng’ supra note 34; XIE, ‘Wangluo Fanfu Fazhan Qushi’ supra note 35.

<sup>71</sup> ZHU Wei & LI Song, ‘Wangpu Chongqing Beibei Quwei Shuji Lei Zhengfu Buyu Shipin Shijian Diaocha’ [Investigating the Online Exposure of the Sex Tape of Chongqing Beibei District Party Chief Lei Zhengfu] (Nov. 23, 2012), <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2012/1123/c1001-19681439.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, ‘Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression,’ in Danielle Allen &

**Table 2: The Selective Empowerment of Public Participation Online**

<i>Types</i>	<i>Technological Empowerment</i>	<i>State Responses</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
<i>Everyday complaints</i>	Flourish on social media but lack publicity in general	Accommodated and censored; platforms more tightly controlled	Surviving
<i>Citizen journalism</i>	Citizen journalists as key; personal anti-graft websites, social media to attract attention	Anti-graft websites repressed, citizen journalists harassed; social media platforms more tightly controlled	Modest success; declining but surviving; relying more on social media
<i>Man-hunt</i>	Netizen collective intelligence via social media to identify clues, dig out evidence, and gain publicity	Social media platforms more tightly controlled	Modest success; declining but surviving
<i>Insider-reporting</i>	Insiders use social media to gain publicity	Social media platforms more tightly controlled	Modest success; declining but surviving
<i>IPAB spin-offs</i>	Specialized anti-corruption platforms	Websites shut down	Suppressed
<i>Civil/Political movements</i>	No specified public platform	Ruthless suppressed	Suppressed

In contrast, the other three types—*everyday complaints*, *IPAB-spinoffs*, and the *civil/political movement* type, benefit differently from the expansion of the internet and social media and they fail to leverage the internet’s growing and anarchical strength. *Everyday complaints* may take place on any platform that allows online expression and have flourished on internet forums and micro-blogs. However, as there are too many of them, they suffer from a scarcity of attention. The *IPAB* type requires independent platforms, which are technologically feasible, but at the same time easy

targets of state repression. Though anti-graft websites by citizen journalists are also easy targets, they rely less on netizen participation and more on individual efforts and the persistence of citizen journalists; in addition, they can be easily resurrected after repression. Crucially, citizen journalists are increasingly relying on social media as their primary platform, making it harder for the state to suppress. The *civil/political movement* type, closely watched and suppressed by the state, does not benefit from the expansion of social media to the same extent compared to the other types because they cannot openly act online. **Table 2** summarizes the selective empowerment model and its impact on each form of participation discussed here.

A further comparison between *citizen journalism* and *the IPAB* type is also telling about the selective empowerment effects. Admittedly, *citizen journalism* was more a product of the Web 1.0 era that survived into the Web 2.0 era while the *IPAB* type is entirely Web 2.0. For *citizen journalism*, individual citizen journalists are crucial and they are strongly self-motivated in public supervision and the internet—notably personal anti-graft websites and increasingly social media platforms—provides a tool to gain publicity and amplify their voices. In contrast, *IPAB* spinoffs are essentially Web 2.0 platforms that serve as specialized hubs for netizen participation. Though they can enhance netizen interactivity and thus make online supervision more effective, the platforms *per se* are vulnerable to state suppression. Moreover, as their owners are much less committed compared to citizen journalists and they do not ‘own’ the anti-corruption information *per se*, shutting down the platforms is sufficient to eliminate them from the game.

### **The State Logic of Public Supervision**

The evolution of online anti-corruption supervision reveals a momentum of ‘state advances and citizens retreat,’ broadly mirroring what has happened in China’s economic sector since 2008. The trend is particularly evident in the Xi Jinping era.<sup>73</sup> Such a trend reflects the tensions between the state and technologic dynamics of public supervision. Technologically, the internet has enabled citizens to participate in public supervision in both broader and more in-depth ways. More importantly, it allows average citizens to compete with the state to set the agenda, making the ground rules, and designating goals and limits of supervision. Although like popular

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<sup>73</sup> Dali L. Yang & Junyan Jiang, ‘Guijin Mintui: The Global Recession and Changing State-Economy Relations in China,’ in Dali L. Yang (ed) (2012) *The Global Recession and China’s Political Economy* 33.

contention in China, most forms of netizen participation in online supervision are not aimed at fundamental regime changes, the state is on high alert with regard to the potential of citizen-driven activism, particularly when it is outside the prescribed channels. In effect, though the Xi administration has made anti-corruption its signature project, the party-state has also tightened its control over citizen participation online. Such intention is on full display in the following quote from *Global Times*, a subsidiary of the *People's Daily*,

‘Anti-corruption is a significant and sensitive issue. To effectively fight corruption and avoid complicated negative implications, it is essential for the whole society to trust the CCP Central Committee, use the Center’s information and attitude as the sole ruler, and consciously align with the Center in the process.’<sup>74</sup>

This rationale drives the state to suppress even relatively unthreatening forms of online supervision. It also explains why the state has escalated its efforts to co-opt netizens by channeling them through official reporting and petitioning platforms set up by various state agencies. Through co-optation, the state goes beyond passively reacting, and more effectively brings online supervision under its control.

Various online official reporting platforms have long been in place. At the central level, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate set up its online reporting platform as early as in 2003. In late 2005, the party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and the Ministry of Supervision (MOS) publicized a joint online outlet for their offline reporting offices (CCDI’s letters and visit office and MOS’ reporting center).<sup>75</sup> In 2009, the MOS set up a unified reporting website for the state supervision system ([www.12388.gov.cn](http://www.12388.gov.cn)).<sup>76</sup> However the Xi era marks a new chapter in the state’s co-option efforts. On 19 April 2013 under the order of CCDI and MOS, all major online portals, including state media outlets and popular gateways, set up an ‘Internet Reporting and Supervision Special Zone’ on their sites. These special zones provide a unified interface together with guidelines and links to state agencies for

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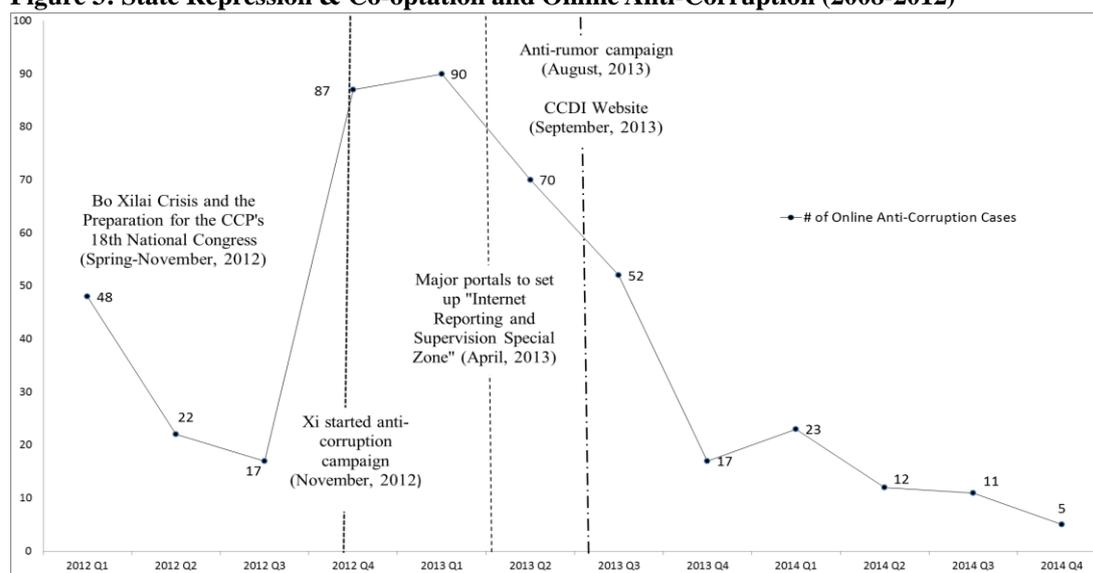
<sup>74</sup> ‘Sheping: Chuanyan Zhenjia Nanbian, Dajia Zhixin Zhongyang’ [Editorial: It Is Hard to Distinguish Truth from Lies in Rumors and People only Trust the Center], *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global Times] (Dec. 24, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> LI Youjun, ‘Wei Jiaqiang Jiandu Zhongjiwei Jiancabu Gongbu Fanfu Jubao Wangzhan’ [To Strengthen Supervision, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Ministry of Supervision Publicized Reporting Website], *People’s Daily* (Dec. 29, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Xinhua News Agency, ‘Zhongyang Jiwei Jiancabu Tongyi Kaitong Quanguo Jijian Jiancha Jubao Wangzhan’ [The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Ministry of Supervision Publicized Unified National Discipline and Supervision Reporting Website] (Oct. 28, 2009), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-10/28/content\\_12349280.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-10/28/content_12349280.htm).

netizens to tip-off corruption.<sup>77</sup> In addition, the state has turned to popular social media platforms. By 2014 disciplinary and supervision agencies had set up 792 official accounts on major micro-blogs and over 130 accounts on the instant messaging platform WeChat. Netizens were invited to take snapshots of misbehaving officials and report to supervising agencies.<sup>78</sup> On Tianya.cn over 500 government agencies have set up official accounts and in 2013 alone they have responded over 2200 complaints.<sup>79</sup> The state has also further integrated its online reporting system. In September 2013, CCDI and MOS took a major step by integrating all existing central-level official reporting platforms into one joint portal, [www.ccdi.gov.cn](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn), which allows citizens to report corruption and follow up on their reports. This portal allegedly has increased citizen participation in the state-led anti-corruption campaign. According to an official report, since the site was launched tip-offs skyrocketed from around 200 to over 800 every day.<sup>80</sup>

**Figure 3: State Repression & Co-optation and Online Anti-Corruption (2008-2012)<sup>81</sup>**



Note: The counts of online anti-corruption cases are from LI Weining, ‘Zhongguo kaishi jinru hulianwang xinchangtai.’

<sup>77</sup> JIANG Lulu, ‘Fanfu Xipingtai, Zhitong Zhongjiwei’ [The New Anti-corruption Platform directly links to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection], *Huanqiu Renwu* [Global People] (May 6, 2013) 40.

<sup>78</sup> LI Qiufang, ZHANG Yingwei, SUN Zhuangzhi, WANG Xiaoxia & WU Haixing (eds), *Zhongguo Fanfu Changlian Jianshe Baogao No. 4* [No. 4 Report on Combating Corruption and Upholding Integrity in China] (2014).

<sup>79</sup> Yuan Wang & Rongbin Han, ‘Paying Lip Service or Taking it Seriously? How the Chinese Government Responds to Online Complaints,’ paper presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> China Internet Research Conference, Edmonton, Canada (May 27-28, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> WANG Shu, ‘Shubiao Zhitong Zhongjiwei Shi Ruhe Liancheng de?’ [How Linking to CCDI through a Click Is Made Possible?], *Xinjingbao* [The Beijing News] (Sept. 3, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> The dip in 2012 may have reflected the tight state control triggered by the political crisis in which the Party Chief of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, was removed dramatically and the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of CCP in November.

It is likely that cooptation and suppression efforts by the state have effectively reduced the number of citizen-driven anti-corruption cases (**Figure 3**), establishing a ‘state-dominant mode’ in online supervision. As a media scholar puts it, now online anti-corruption has changed from ‘online exposure leading to disciplinary investigation’ to ‘public discussion following official announcements of corruption cases by disciplinary commissions.’<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

The expansion of the internet has challenged authoritarian regimes’ agenda setting power in public supervision, forcing them to balance between benefits and harms from increased citizen participation. Yet, some authoritarian regimes have adapted quite successfully to the digital challenges. The China case manifests well the dichotomy between the technological empowerment and authoritarian resilience. This article shows that the internet has empowered Chinese citizens to hunt down corrupt officials and to some extent enhanced government accountability. However, online supervision has achieved only limited success, largely serving as a way to expose individual corruption cases rather than as a vehicle for systematic changes.<sup>83</sup> This is a result of both state response and technological empowerment. Evidently, the party-state has considerable despotic power and is ready to exercise it: it has not only ruthlessly suppressed *civil/political movements*, but also crushed other less threatening types such as *IPAB spinoffs*, *citizen journalism*, *man-hunt*, *insider reporting*, and *everyday complaints*. However, state suppression has resulted in differentiated outcomes, showing that not all forms of citizen activism are equally empowered, with the *IPAB* spin-offs most vulnerable to state suppression.

The state-society interaction over online supervision in China highlights the necessity to further disaggregate the broad concepts of technological empowerment and authoritarian adaptation in the digital age. Though social actors in authoritarian regimes are empowered by new technologies, they are not all empowered equally or in exactly the same way as different digital platforms may cater to different actors or specific types of social activities. Correspondingly, state adaptation is oftentimes multi-faceted as the state may differentiate its responses to various forms of citizen

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<sup>82</sup> ZHANG Yang, ‘Liangge Yulunchang’ Gongshidu Zengqiang’ [The Common Ground between ‘Two Public Opinion Spheres’ Expands], *Renmin Ribao* [People’s Daily] (Dec. 26, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> See John Sullivan, ‘China’s Weibo: Is Faster Different?’ 16 *New Media & Society* 24 (2014).

activism according to will and capacity as well as the specific technological empowering effects. Observable outcomes, therefore, may project different images of authoritarian rule—responsive, repressive, or fragmented—and an understanding of authoritarianism should not be confined to either of these depictions.

## GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS

Romanisation (Hanyu Pinyin)	Chinese Characters	English Translation
Tianya Luntan	天涯论坛	Tianya Club
yulun shijian	舆论事件	public opinion events
qunzhong luxian	群众路线	mass line
xinfang zhidu	信访制度	the letters and visits system
qunzhong jiandu	群众监督	mass supervision
yulun jiandu	舆论监督	public opinion supervision
renrou sousuo	人肉搜索	human flesh search
Beibei Qu	北碚区	Beibei District
Baixing Shengyin	百姓声音	Grassroots Voices
Baoguang	曝光	Exposure
Wukan Shijian	乌坎事件	Wukan Incident