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**New Media, Public Participation and the Government in China:
from the *BBS* to the *Weibo* age.**

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Durham University

School of Modern Languages and Cultures

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

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Abstract

China has seen an ever-accelerating development of information and communication technology (ICT), as well as a growing number of internet users, which has led significant changes in information dissemination and public participation. This study aims to investigate how ICT-mediated public participation influences China's social and political development. It firstly attempts to discuss whether the concept of public sphere can be applied to China's cyberspace by examining technological empowerment. It focuses on investigating in what ways and to what extent social media contribute to public participation in China. More importantly, it aims at providing an in-depth analysis of the ICT-mediated relationships among the three key elements – government, media and public. It then explores the Chinese government's evolving attitudes towards the new media platforms and the ICT-mediated public participation these enable.

The scope of the research falls within the period between the *BBS* and the *Weibo* age. Three data collection methods are employed: questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews and case studies. The three case studies are from the years 2003 to 2010, and coincide with the leadership of President Hu Jintao (2003 – 2012). The study indicates the existence of a bottom-up communication approach between the public and government in the Chinese context and concludes that an online public sphere has already been formed in China's cyberspace. A triangular analytical framework of 'government-media-public' interaction has been developed to explain the operational pattern of the Chinese quasi-public sphere. This study provides an in-depth evaluation of the diverse forms of public participation in modern China and is intended to shed light on what impact online public participation can have in an authoritarian country.

Key words: public sphere, ICT-mediated public participation, 'government-media-public' interaction.

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List of Abbreviations

3C	computing, communication and content
3G	the third generation of mobile communication
4G	the fourth generation of mobile communication
BBS	Bulletin Board System
C&R	Custody and Repatriation
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CDMA	Code-division multiple access
CMC	computer-mediated communication
CMNET	China Mobile Net
CNNIC	China internet Network Information Centre
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CTR	click through rate
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
GDP	Gross domestic product
GPRS	General Packet Radio Service
ICT	information and communication technology
IM	instant messaging
MII	Ministry of Information Industry
MSN	The Microsoft Network
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCFC	National Computing and Networking Facility of China
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NIMBY	not in my backyard
NPC	National People's Congress
NPCSC	Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
PRC	the People's Republic of China
PX	para-xylene
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SEPA	State Environmental Protection Administration
SMS	Short Messaging Service
SNS	Social Networking Site
STARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
VPN	virtual private network
WAP	wireless application protocol
WWW	World Wide Web

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On 28th February 2015, an environmental documentary film *Under the dome* was released on the major video websites in China. It was produced by an independent journalist, Chai Jing. The film caused an uproar over the issue of air pollution in China's cyberspace. The total number of views reached 200 million within 48 hours (Xiang, 2015). Although the authorities quickly deleted and blocked the film, it managed to arouse fierce discussions through widespread dissemination on major social media platforms, especially on *Weibo* – the Chinese version of *Twitter*. This documentary made Chinese citizens begin to recognise the dangers of smog and the urgent need to improve air quality. Apart from its profound social influence, it also rang a warning bell, forcing government departments to respond to environmental issues and to take serious action. It was a novel example of the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) promoting the interaction between the public and the government while increasing public participation in China.

Cases like Chai's documentary have happened frequently in recent years, each occurrence touching on a vital topic and having a clear call to action. On the media side, internet companies and major websites seek public attention through a series of marketing strategies, striving to attract comments and to increase the number of forwards. Although there exists great diversity in the views presented on these websites and most of them are easily swayed, the media companies have managed to provide a public space for internet users to argue with each other, to criticise a particular case and to discuss countermeasures. On the government side, reactions can be ambiguous or unpredictable. On sensitive or controversial topics, arbitrary actions may be taken. For instance, Chai's documentary film, the environmental department initially made an official response, but the documentary was later blocked and the related comments were deleted. This leads to the assumption that ICT is a prerequisite

in such cases. Technology empowers the public to express opinions on new media platforms, but it also allows the government to control the information flow. However, the question that remains unclear is: what role ICT plays in the interaction between the public and the government, and whether it acts in a pivotal role that promotes interaction or as a potential risk factor in socio-political change in China. A study investigating the mediated role of ICT in the changing relationship between the public and the government might address these issues.

1.2 Research questions

The global information revolution has been intensified by the spread of ICTs, and governments have struggled to capture the economic, social, cultural, and political implications of this revolution (Tai, 2006). Zheng (2008, p.18) also demonstrated that ‘information technology is not only perceived as the most modern indicator of scientific and technological progress but also as a symbol of the modernity of the Chinese state’. According to the China internet Network Information Centre (CINIC) (2018), 772 million Chinese – more than half of the country’s population, have accessed to the internet, and the number of mobile internet users has increased to 753 million. There are approximately 316 million *Weibo* users and 720 million instant messaging service users. The total number of online news users has reached 647 million. All these figures illustrate the evolution of ICTs, as well as their enormous influence on China’s social and political development.

Since the number of internet users is increasing dramatically, it is important to investigate the influence of information dissemination and public debate across social media on the public sphere, which is the key theme of this thesis. Habermas (1989, p.231) initially defined the public sphere as ‘a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed’. Access to this domain is ‘open in principle to all citizens [who may] assemble and unite freely, and express and publicise their opinions freely (ibid, p.231)’. Today, internet technology has extended the traditional channels of spreading information, which was once limited to physical space.

However, reviews of Habermas's public sphere have showed a dichotomy: some have adopted the concept of public sphere in Chinese studies, whereas others have argued that the theory does not suit in the Chinese context because it is not a western society (Chen and Hu, 2014). Given China's rigorous network monitoring system and limited freedom of speech, scholars have had to use a relaxed notion of the public sphere, adopting more neutral terms such as public space, social space or focusing on the public rather than the public sphere (Yang, 2002; Lean, 2004). Wang (2005) even proposed the building of a green space for public opinion in his book on green media, which alluded to Habermas's concept.

By contrast, Huang (1993) argued that since 'public sphere' and 'civil society' are two concepts developed in western countries, neither can be applied to China because 'they presuppose a dichotomous opposition between state and society' (Huang, 1993, cited in Tai, 2006, p.50). However, other scholars have indicated that it is possible for advanced ICTs to drive the public sphere in China to become more independent and more rational (Xiong, 2012). Drawing from previous debates, this study attempts to investigate whether China's cyberspace is equipped with a public sphere.

There is no denying that the proliferation of ICTs has provided more opportunities for public participation in social issues. Luo (2010) proposed the overthrow of the Manchu Qing government as the first wave of ideological revolution in China's modern history, which broke the chains of two thousand years of feudalism. The 'reform and opening-up' policy of the late 1970s is considered to be the second wave. Now the prevalence of the internet and of network culture appears to be the third wave of ideological revolution in China. The Chinese government has been the driving force behind explosive ICT development because it is believed that ICT is one of the key factors in boosting economic growth and in bridging interregional development gaps (Wu, 2007). However, an ambivalent attitude from the Chinese government is reflected in its information censorship mechanisms (Wacker, 2003). In short, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exploits the economic value of the

internet, while constraining its other potential.

In contrast to traditional media, the internet has the overwhelming advantages of speedy and wide dissemination, and of open discussion (Barmé and Davies, 2004; Zhou, 2005; Yang, 2006). Chinese people have turned to the internet for information acquisition and public expression. Scholars began to explore the position of ICT in public participation about two decades ago, and it has been acknowledged that, as information technology removes the limitation of physical proximity, it can enhance people's engagement with democratic affairs (Barber, 1998). However, the public is not the only beneficiary; the government can also gain advantages from this change, as can the media companies, and a mutual empowerment exist between the state and enterprises regarding internet-driven economic development: the Chinese government allows the development of internet companies which produce and deliver goods to the people, and thus maintain and even reinforce its legitimacy (Zheng, 2008). This research seeks to establish the Chinese government's evolving attitudes towards the rapid development of ICTs and the accompanying ICT-mediated public participation.

The progression of new media in China, especially from the Bulletin Board System (*BBS*) to the *Weibo* age, has attracted much attention in the last two decades. It has greatly affected Chinese society in various aspects, among them public participation and government policy. In countries where authoritarianism is deeply rooted, a systematic and reliable mechanism for gauging public sentiment on key issues is usually absent, and that is certainly true of China in particular. The internet allows public participation as it has fewer barricades, and so it may be the closest alternative for the government to take the public pulse (Tai, 2006). Internet platforms have provided opportunities for the public to express their voices and demands, which further foster public participation. Therefore, a primary task is to investigate this technological empowerment and how social media service contributes to the public participation in China.

From the dawn of the internet, the Chinese government has undergone a process of establishing and modifying rules to cope with the evolution of technology. With the public's evolving attitudes towards public participation, the government's monitoring and managing approaches have shifted over time; for example, Esarey and Xiao (2011) applied information regime theory to explain the political and social effects of digital media in China. They argued that with the advance of ICTs and the development of the media market it has gradually unleashed the state's information control and public movements. Though established approaches of monitoring and controlling media have been seen, the Party leaders emphasised 'the value of cooperation rather than confrontation and calling for a new relationship between media and authority' (de Burgh, Zeng and Mi, 2012, p. 1013). Since China is going through a critical period of political and economic transformation, the public has also been entrusted with the responsibility to supervise the performance of government departments and to take part in the decision-making process. This research aims to investigate the relationship among the new media, public participation and the government's policy in China.

The scope of this research falls within the period between the *BBS* and the *Weibo* age. The three case studies are from the years 2003 to 2010, and coincide with the leadership of President Hu Jintao (2003 – 2012), in which the relationship among the government, media and the public has experienced a noticeable change in process. Here, the evolution of ICTs has mitigated the government's attitude towards the media market, from one of complete control to a relatively open and adaptive approach. The media itself, especially the internet companies, have gradually moved to a new media place, striving to deal with the government's control while ensure self-interest. Secondly, the interaction between media and the public has experienced a substantial change, too. Internet media companies seek active engagement and support from the public to generate profit. As the public has begun to master new technologies, the frequency of using ICT products for expression increases day by day. As a result, the

appeal for an open and democratic public environment for participation has emerged. Plenty of cases have shown that the recent situation between the Chinese government and the public was not always a zero-sum game¹. Both parties have made use of ICTs to seek a balance between the government and society. Consequently, the leadership of the Communist Party and the legitimacy of the central government can be guaranteed, and Chinese citizens get to live in a more democratic society.

An increasing number of cases have received extensive attention through dissemination via the internet, and wide public participation has influenced the final settlement of these cases to a large extent. However, what exactly the process is and how it promotes China's democratisation progress remains unclear, which leads to my research question:

How does ICT-mediated public participation influence China's social and political development?

It focuses on the following sub-questions in particular:

- How far has social media contributed to public participation in China?
- What are the dynamics and forms of public participation in China's cyberspace?
- In the highly developed information age, what kind of public events can draw long-term attention in China's cyberspace, and what consequences do these public events have?
- How do Chinese government departments react to the controversial impacts of the ICT-mediated public participation?

¹ A zero-sum game is a situation in which the potential gain for all players combined remains constant. No augmentation or loss can occur and the gain is distributed between the competitors such that a win for one player is a loss for the other(s).

In modern China, ICT-mediated public participation plays a vital and irreplaceable role in its social and political changes. In this network ‘revolution’, many offline and online cases have taken place. Despite the success or failure of these cases, their impact on social and political development is worth studying. The first question considered in this research focuses on discussing how social media contributes to public participation in various stages of technological development. It attempts to investigate a combination between social media and public participation, instead of just discussing the technology itself as in other studies.

Moreover, the originality of my second research question looks at the dynamics and forms of public participation in China’s cyberspace separately. A finding of corresponding dynamics and forms at different levels is drawn. Furthermore, the third research question explores what kinds of online public events can gain the sustained and long-term concern of Chinese netizens, especially in today’s online environment that public events take place frequently. It also examines the final results can be obtained from these events. These two aspects contribute to the originality in my study as they received little attention in other studies so far.

Finally, as government’s role is a vital stakeholder in public events, their coping mechanism under the influence of ICT development in every public event deserves an in-depth investigation for all researchers who are interested in the social and political change in modern China. The originality in my study is that I focus on the patterns of government’s attitudes and reactions in coping massive online events through empirical evidence.

In short, the significance of my research questions is to unveil how government and public interact under the special social and political environment in China, and the role media plays in this relationship. The answers to these questions are conducive in understanding China’s ‘special democratic’ system, which is very different from the United States and European countries. It is also meaningful in clarifying the patterns

of public participation under the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.

1.3 Introduction of methodology

To examine the relationships between the three elements in the ‘government-media-public’ theoretical framework of this research, three research methods have been used: questionnaire survey, semi-structured interview and case studies.

The questionnaire sought to collect netizens’² opinions about the empowerment effect of ICT and the public’s attitudes towards government regulations and the decision-making process. Conducting the questionnaire anonymously eases concerns for Chinese citizens and allows them to express their genuine opinion and experience.

Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the perspective of the media market in the triangular interactive relationship in China. Interviewees were chosen from commercial internet companies, state-owned media enterprises and official media departments. The diversity of data was guaranteed as the interviewees came from different organisational backgrounds. The interview explored: the media practitioners’ evaluation of ICTs and online public participation, their knowledge of the government’s strategy towards the mass social events, and most importantly, their professional views about the changing relationship among the three elements.

Three social events were chosen for case studies based on their peculiar meaning in Chinese society, and each had a specific emphasis. The purpose of the case study was to gather background information and authentic material to elaborate the dynamic relationships between the three factors. The Sun Zhigang case concerned the issue of human rights; it investigated the relationship between the public and the government, and raised the possibility of the existence of an online or quasi-³public sphere in

² Netizens refer to the general internet users.

³ ‘Quasi-’ means ‘similar to, but not exactly the same as’.

China. The Xiamen PX plant case focused on the problem of environmental protection in China, and particularly the relationship between the media companies and the official sectors. The Yihuang self-immolation case was mainly about the situation of people's livelihood in China, and it discussed the relationship between the public and media companies. Through the review and discussions about this incident, I have explored the core operation process of online public participation via different kinds of social networking site (SNS).

1.4 Thesis structure

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the thesis. It includes a brief background information, an outline of the key concepts relating to this study, the researcher's motivation, and the research questions. It also briefly introduces the research methods.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework of the study. It reviews previous studies on similar topics and elaborates the structural transformation of 'public sphere' in western countries and in China. It then reviews the development of civil society and the historical context of public sphere in both China's physical world and cyberspace. An analytical framework about the 'government-media-public' triangular model is proposed. Finally, this chapter discusses the information regime theory and its adaptability in the Chinese society.

Chapter 3 discusses the contextual and technological background of the study. First, it considers the specialty of the introduction and popularisation of the internet in China as an authoritarian state. It then compares the characteristics of the main media platforms along the development of ICT. This chapter serves as a reference to better understand the media platforms involved in my case studies.

Chapter 4 describes the main methodological approaches of the study. Three research methods have been employed to collect primary data, including three questionnaire surveys (one survey for each main case), semi-structured interviews and three representative case studies. It explains the sampling procedures, the collection of data,

the techniques and the theory support for data analysis. Ethical considerations are covered at the end of this chapter.

Chapters 5 to 7 focus on three real-life cases, which are used to investigate ICT-mediated public participation and to examine the proposed triangular system. **Chapter 5** starts with an introduction of the suspicious death of Sun Zhigang, a college student, in Guangzhou Custody and Repatriation (C&R) Centre. The case concerns the issue of human rights and represents a meaningful event that resulted in the change of government law and regulation. This chapter examines the government-public interrelationship. It firstly investigates the technological empowerment which fostered the launch of online activism and online public participation in the *BBS* age. The chapter then explores the spontaneous cooperation between online activism and offline campaign. The process is examined to find out whether public sphere and civil society has formed in China. Finally, this chapter demonstrates the changes of government attitudes towards online activism – from strict prohibition to possible tolerance.

Chapter 6 uses the Xiamen PX plant case to explore the interrelationship between the government and media companies in the blog age. This case focuses on the environmental protection issue during the rapid economic development in China. Because of the appropriate coordination between the massive online activism and the real-world protest, this controversial chemical plant had been finally relocated out of Xiamen by the local government. It is seen as a great success of netizen participation, as spontaneous real-world public assembly is risky and illegal in China. Hence, this chapter examines the role of media in the triangular framework. It evaluates the performance of traditional and new media in mass event. A comparison of Chinese government's attitudes towards the commercial media, state-owned media and foreign media companies is also drawn.

Chapter 7 analyses the Yihuang self-immolation incident, which is closely related to

people's livelihood in China. This chapter focuses on the media-public relationship under the contextual background of the *We Media* age (details see section 2.5.1.1). The main media platform *Weibo* in the Yihuang incident is examined as it provides an 'all-around' interactive pattern, in which more space and autonomy is empowered for public participation. It then discusses whether social networking sites could be treated as a vehicle for the instant and spontaneous dissemination of a social event. The dynamics and forms of public participation is also investigated in this chapter. It demonstrates that *Weibo* has already become an online public sphere with its own characteristics. In the end of this chapter, I identify the potential problems of *Weibo* being the online public sphere, which can be solved through the collective efforts of all three factors in the triangular system.

Chapter 8 summarises the key findings and implications of this study, and gives a comprehensive answer to the research questions. It indicates the theoretical and practical contributions of the study and acknowledges its limitations. Suggestions for future research bring the thesis to a close.

A list of references and appendices follow the conclusion.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the previous studies relating to my research area – the role of the internet in socio-political development in China. It consists of four substantive parts. The first considers the notion of the ‘public sphere’ in the western world and discusses the possibility of ‘civil society’ in China. The second evaluates whether the Chinese internet environment forms an online, quasi-public sphere. The third part presents the conceptual framework for the thesis in terms of the information regime theory and the role of the internet in China’s current social economic and political development. Finally, the fourth part provides an analytical and theoretical framework for the research – the triangular structure of the internet in China. This is followed by a summary.

2.2 The notion of the public sphere and the development of civil society in China

In the 1980s, Habermas’s public sphere theory attracted much interest worldwide, especially when his work was translated into English in 1989. American scholars of Chinese studies introduced the concept of the public sphere to investigate Chinese society from a historical and a modern perspective (Wakeman, 1993; Huang, 1993). Researchers in China began to study the public space and civic society (Xu, 2003), and with the development of the global economy and information technology, the idea of the media as one of the manifestations of the public sphere was also brought to the forefront. To explore the role of the media in relationship to the claim for a public space in China, the first step is to trace the origin of the concept of the public sphere.

2.2.1 The origin and definition of the ‘public sphere’

German theorist Hannah Arendt (1958) first proposed the notion of the public sphere, describing it as a ‘public realm’, and indicated that ‘while human life always evolves within societies, the social-being part of human nature, political life, was intentionally

constructed by only a few of these societies as a space for individuals to achieve freedom through the construction of a common world' (ibid, p.2). Habermas (1989) described the 'public sphere' as a realm in which individuals can exchange views on major issues of common interest, cultivate rational critical discussion and produce public opinion. He asserted that, with the development of civil society, the public sphere surpassed the traditional limitation within the 'intimate sphere of the conjugal family' (Habermas, 1989, p.29). It developed into a broader space which could be defined as the 'tension-charged field between state and society' (ibid, p.141). In western culture, places like the ancient Greek square, the town halls of England, coffeehouses, local churches, even street corners had been part of a public space enabling citizens to discuss public affairs. Public opinion was formed in numerous similar places, which fostered environments where political parties were nurtured. Though such a public sphere does not necessarily involve every individual in society or play a decisive role in the implementation of parliamentary proposals, the existence of a public sphere contributes to the positive development of representative democracy (Li, 2006).

The precondition of accessing the public sphere was that individuals should be 'propertied and educated' (Habermas, 1989, p.37) to enable participation in real places like coffeehouses or space like magazines, journals, and TV news. Those who did not meet the requirements would be excluded from even the most modest participation (Habermas, 1989). Habermas's public sphere was thus possessed of certain restrictions and was not completely open to all sectors of society. The restrictions made it a bourgeois public sphere.

The rise of capitalism brought significant changes to western people's lives. With economic prosperity there emerged a hierarchy of power in the western world, which actuated citizens' demand for discourse power. Information exchange became more active in leading to an extension of the public sphere. It gradually switched to a broader realm by recognising the 'private sphere', which comprised civil society in

the narrower sense, dealing with the realm of commodity exchange and social labour.

The public sphere here represented a social need to turn political authority to a rational authority through individuals and groups congregating, debating and deliberating to form public opinion (Habermas, 1989). It acted as mediation for the interaction between the government and the public (Poster, 2001). Consequently, Xia and Huang (2008) pointed out that the concept of the public sphere is formed on the basis of the division between the state and the society, and an antagonistic relationship between the individual sphere and the authority sphere. The assembly of individuals forms a politically-critical opinion space which oversees and influences the state.

The public sphere as proposed by Habermas can be seen as an introspection of capitalist society in the 19th century. It is worth pointing out that the ultimate goal of the public sphere is to cater to the needs and interests of the public, and to establish public recognition. No matter if it is in a capitalist country or a welfare state, these ‘public’ factors are essential to the public sphere (Xiong, 2012). Hu (2014) reinforced the notion of the public sphere as a space for citizens to freely discuss and identify public problems and engage in the state’s political actions, referring to a realm beyond political authority which represents the postulate of democracy.

From these previous studies, one can identify three key elements involved in the public sphere: the public, public opinion and a public medium. ‘The public’ refers to a certain number of citizens who have gathered voluntarily, who are not constrained by the government or any kind of political authority. They put individual or group interest aside to debate social and political issues for the sake of the common good. ‘Public opinion’ is the consensus built on critical consciousness which evaluates, supervises and regulates the government’s actions. ‘A public medium’ refers to a platform or channel where public opinion is cultivated and disseminated.

2.2.2 The public sphere: from the perspective of the media

Habermas (1996) raised an additional concept, the ‘political public sphere’ which

offered innovative understandings of the previous notion of the public sphere. He proposed that the public sphere should be seen as an 'early warning system and a sensor' (Habermas, 1996, p.359) for societal problems, which not only detected and identified the problems, but also cultivated debate. Public opinion formed in the public sphere should be strongly influential so that the authorities will take over the problems and come up with solutions. It is a 'network of interaction' (Habermas, 1996, p.360) for exchanging views in which ideas will be filtered and integrated to form strong public opinion on specific issues. The public sphere is not an organisation; rather, it is an open flexible interaction network. It exists between the state and society as an accommodating mechanism in which private approaches are adopted to process the social issues that people have encountered. This adds new topics and materials to the public sphere; and through the public sphere, political power is adjusted to rational public power.

Wu (2007) argued that the institutional core of the public sphere lies in communicative networks, which are amplified by the press and mass media with the development of information technologies. The communicative networks enable individuals to 'participate in the reproduction of culture, and for a public of citizens of the state to participate in the social integration mediated by public opinion' (Habermas, 1987, p.319). A number of scholars shared the same insight: the media helps to expand the range of participation among the general public (Laclau and Mouffee, 1985; Douglas, 1989; Downing et al., 2001; Curran, 2002); it integrates people's views and reflects the general level of public opinion, while shaping and directing the tendency of public opinion through its overwhelming advantage of wide dissemination and wide reach (Curran, 1991; Hartley, 1992; Morley, 1992; Dahlgren, 1995); and the transparent nature of the media fosters public discussion in a rational and critical way (Sparks, 1998).

The media played a constructive role in the public sphere in the early phase, and expanded, reinforced, and shaped it (Negt and Kluge, 1993). It actively promoted

public participation and democracy in the state. The difference between the private sphere and political authority forms a kind of discursive democracy, which requires the media to bridge the gap by encouraging citizens to gather to debate the societal and political issues and by publicising views collected from the public. It works as the representative carrier of public opinion and assists effective protest. The media can also introduce marginalised or isolated groups to the public, presenting an alternative channel for those groups to express their voices and demands (Curran, 2000). Liu (2013) analysed the role of the media from the perspective of information equality, indicating that a good public sphere function for the mass media offers access for citizens to engage in rational and critical discussion and to obtain information about the actions and proceedings of governmental institutions.

Another contribution of the media in the public sphere is publicity (Chambers, 2000). Since information garnered from the public sphere reflects the interest of various groups in society, disseminating such information through the mass media can attract extensive attention from the public. It also draws the public to examine the issue, which positively influences the generation of rational and critical deliberations within the public sphere, rather than turbulent and irrational invective. Because the media represents public opinion, it offers opportunities for people to articulate their views that consequently shape government actions (Curran, 1991).

However, Habermas (1989) questioned whether the mass media, especially the commercial broadcast media, can isolate individuals from each other and impede citizens from coming together for vibrant discussion. This may lead to a threat to the physical existence of communities with shared interests and opinions in public life, and there are potential risks in transmitting and amplifying ‘the rational-critical debate of private people assembled into a public’ (Habermas, 1989, p.188). As a result, Habermas blamed the mass media for the collapse of the public sphere, where the public is divided into ‘minorities of specialists who put their reason to use non-publicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical’

(Habermas, 1989, p.175). In other words, the media splits the public into intellectuals and grassroots, which is inconsistent with the premises in the construction of the public sphere. Mass media intervention may also manipulate the public sphere and lead to a manufactured public sphere, which may not be able to achieve the goal of influencing a government's actions (Wu, 2007).

Although Habermas (1989) criticised commercial media for the decreased influence of the public sphere, the media did perform as a social platform in connecting individuals, increasing participation, expanding the realm of debates, and forming rational critical public opinion (Garnham, 2000; Curran, 2002). Technology development has also enabled computer-mediated communications (CMC), which provided a broader access for ordinary citizens and catered for traditionally marginalised and isolated groups, promoted proactive engagement at a global level.

2.2.3 Civil society in China

The concept of civil society is indispensable in the discussion of the public sphere. Since these two concepts emerged and developed during the same period in China, they have attracted extensive discussion. Civil society is the aggregate of non-governmental organisations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens (Castells, 2008). Wang (2013) indicated that the bourgeois public sphere appeared in the period of laissez-faire capitalism. Along with the emergence of the modern state and advancement in commercial trade, the modern type of public sphere was formed (Wang, 2013). A new social stratum involved judges, doctors, priests, teachers, merchants, bankers, publishers, manufacturers and other professionals in society, who are represented as the core force in civil society. They gathered together in the form of reading groups and openly expressed their views on public affairs.

Tai (2006, p.51) defined civil society as a concept that is 'functional rather than normative, and it must be understood in dynamic terms by taking into consideration the different socioeconomic, political, and historical conditions under which it is

used'. Schak and Hudson (2003, p.1-2) extended the concept to Asian societies and argued its applicability: 'civil society is not all or nothing, either existing or not existing'. In other words, the pattern of civil society varies with the degree of authoritarianism in the societies concerned: 'it may advance, stop, or even go backward' (ibid, p.1-2). Convergence is embodied in the process of developing civil societies, but each will have its own properties and characteristics (ibid).

This section will discuss the possibility of civil society in China. Chinese scholars tend to use the term *minjian* to indicate a similar meaning to civil society. It is difficult to find an English equivalence for *minjian*; it is often used as the opposite to the term *guanfang*, which means 'official'. Hence, *minjian* might be translated as 'private', 'nonofficial' or 'unofficial', with connotations of 'independent', 'marginalised' or 'outside the system' (meaning here the Chinese political system), depending on the context in which it is used (Zhou, 2006, p.202).

Civil society in the Chinese context traces back to the age before the founding of People's Republic of China. It rooted from one of the traditional Chinese traits – the 'relationship culture'. In contrast to Anglophone who assume the autonomy of individuals, Chinese people tend to recognise themselves as members of a group. For example, before one person is an individual, he/she is a member of a unit in the first place. The initial unit is one's family, then the person advances as a member of many other units or networks in which responsibilities of the groups are prescribed as overriding duties over oneself. This idea was also reinforced in traditional Chinese education: the norms and benefits of a unit override individual interest (De Burgh, 2017).

After the overturn of Qing Dynasty, in the early period of Republic of China, administration of most regions was under military command which were in the hands of local elite families and chamber of commerce. In urban areas, in addition to local elite families and commerce communities, study societies (*xuehui*), student unions

and labour federations burgeoned with strikingly modern and foreign ideas. They were the initial localised forms of civil society in China. Due to the minimal administrative presence of provincial and central government, at the level of county and municipality, these local elites concerned mostly with constructing their local area and providing public services, such as water conservancy, education, road building, electrification, small-scale industry and charity (Dikötter, 2014). Study societies and student unions published translated foreign news, educational articles and criticising commentaries to evoke people's awareness of revolution and reform and to promote intellectual renewal. They started from informal gatherings and grew into more formally organised groups and societies, social spaces such as temple grounds, restaurants, teahouse, parks and theatres were used for political debates and events planning (ibid). Activities ranging from delivering political messages through chalk scrawl on city walls and handing leaflets on the street to confrontational demonstrations were all the early forms of public participation promoted by civil society in China (Strand, 1995). Therefore, pre-1949, there existed 'a traditional civil society' which was 'very localised and detached from wider national or political issues' who 'cooperate(d) with the state to provide services to the needy'; however, it did not have 'representative bodies which can make cases to the rulers with the public backing of their members' (De Burgh, 2017, p.5656).

Scholars have argued that Chinese civil society has remained in its infancy because citizens have not experienced fully-fledged citizenship in terms of civic rights and participation (Zhang, 2002), but also indicated that China was on track to become a mature civil society if the state can play a positive role in bringing Chinese civil society to its full capacity (ibid). Due to the deep-rooted authoritarian rule in China, the omnipotence of the government is the primary factor that suffocates the autonomy of social forces. However, Chinese civil society differed from the tripartite model of civil society promoted by neoliberals in the West (Tai, 2006). For the time being, since the economy in China is gradually breaking away from the influence of the

state, it is likely to be the principal power in nurturing ‘free-wheeling and autonomous groups’ (ibid, p.64), demonstrating that the media market is stepping out of the shadow of the government and evolving into a role that actively interacts with both the public and the government.

There are three main points in the debate on civil society in modern China. First, the unprecedented development of the 1990s and 2000s has been widely recognised as the result of economic liberalisation (Tai, 2006). Second, although there is no particular format for democracy in China at present, civil society is the emergent trend and will be indispensable in the progression of democratisation in China (ibid). Third, compared with the ‘civil society vs. state’ model in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, civil society in China is confronted with a more complicated situation, where on the one hand it acts as a rival that takes on the power of the government, while on the other hand it cooperates with the government to ensure its own survival through institutional and legal protection that the government provides (ibid). As Tai (2006, p.64) clarified, it is ‘a powerful force and will likely remain so for years to come’ in China.

The rapid rise of the internet was considered to be ‘the newest and perhaps the most liberating’ channel that carries mass communication in China (Tai, 2006, p.79). It has brought new opportunity to the foreground of civil society in shaping political action and influencing social developments in the country. The prevalence of the internet serves as a tool for both communication and socialisation in China, and it has provided a means for the achievement of civil society in an increasingly networked world (Tai, 2006). Although there are difficulties created by the government’s control, the internet is still a technology that empowers civil society to negotiate with government and brings new prospects for civil society in the new age. Unlike the conventional mass media, the internet as both a social space and a new media market is very relevant to the study of civil society in recent years. It can be seen as a liberating force that promotes the formation of civil society, especially in authoritarian

regimes like China.

2.3 Conceptualising the Chinese internet as a quasi-public sphere

2.3.1 The physical existence of a public sphere in China

After the concept of the public sphere was introduced in China, it aroused heated discussion in academia. Cai (2012) analysed it from a historical perspective. The social structure of ancient Chinese society was based on the notion of *jia guo yi ti*, which means the integration of family and state, and the power of the state was entrusted to the monarch. Under the rigid hierarchy system, individuals were restricted to the family space. This social structure resulted in the loss of individual expression for public rights and embodied a deficiency in the independence of societal growth. A highly authoritarian society generated long-term suppression and top-down constraints, which led to a lack of awareness of independent expression and civic rights. The informal social structure squeezed individuals' power and blocked channels for public participation (Cai, 2012). Deng (2011) pointed out that, in modern China, the relationship between society and the government has evolved to a state in which the two sectors depend on each other but also contradict. Yet he also argued that the dependent relationship is in the leading role. Gao (2013) argued that Chinese society over this period has not had the opportunity to form a public sphere.

Traditions in Chinese politics did not include a clear separation between the 'private sphere' and the 'public sphere'; society and the state were regarded as an integrated entity (Yu and Xing, 2011). Although the reform and opening-up policy has improved this to some extent, China is still a highly bureaucratic state, and the concept is only accepted at the bottom level of the hierarchical system. Therefore, it is difficult to foster an antagonistic relationship between the state and society, such as exists in western countries. Yu and Xing concluded that:

'the public sphere can only exist in the overlapping space between the state and society in China. It is under the political authority's governance. No matter how it develops, it cannot grow beyond the state's control' (Yu and

Xing, 2011, p.84).

‘Public sphere’ and ‘civil society’ are two concepts developed in western countries, which are not suitable in the context of China because ‘they presuppose a dichotomous opposition between state and society’ (Huang, cited in Tai, 2006, p.50). Huang (1993, p.225) proposed an alternative term – ‘third realm’ – to illustrate the specificities of Chinese socio-political life, which refers to a ‘third space conceptually distinct from state and society’. Yet the ‘state-society’ model has still been widely used in analysing the social structure in China (Jing, 2005; Tang, 2005). Debates continue over the applicability of the concepts of the public sphere and civil society in China, due to ongoing process of social transition in which the relationship between the state and society is no longer integrated (Sun, 2004). A tendency towards structural differentiation is thus reflected. The state has narrowed its scope of control over society, which has gained a certain degree of free mobility of resources and free movement space (ibid).

2.3.2 The online public sphere in China’s cyberspace

Agreeing with Sun, Pan (2010) pointed out that, to infer an in-depth and thorough interaction between the media, state and society, it is necessary to understand ‘public sphere’ as a historical phenomenon rather than a fixed subject. Tai (2006, p.51) also argued that ‘the conception of public sphere should not be treated as immutable; rather, it must be conceptualised as fluid, adapting to new formations of political, social, and institutional forces’. Hence, a wider domain of the public sphere needs to be considered to cater for the particularities of the social-political structure in China, and this leads to the emergence of the online public sphere.

The prevalence of the internet has evidently expanded the realm of public communication by breaking the boundaries of the traditional physical public sphere. The mass space constructed on the internet forms a virtual public sphere (Du and Cao,

2013). Some scholars have also claimed that the medium of the internet generates an exceptional advantage for the emergence of the public sphere online (Chen, 2006).

Downing et al. (2001) argued in advance that the internet had the potential to become the first global public sphere, as the first medium through which ‘individuals and independent collectives throughout the globe may hope to communicate, in their voices, with an international audience of millions’ (ibid, p.202). Thus, on a purely technical level, the internet as a public sphere is unlimited (ibid). The public sphere in the contemporary mediated communication environments can therefore be defined as ‘the collection of places and spaces from neighbourhood cafes to internet chat rooms’ (Bennett et al., 2004, p.437). By this, the active role of the media, especially internet media, has extended the original meaning of the public sphere.

However, there are debates over the development of the online public sphere in authoritarian countries. Lu (2014) has observed that, in the early phase of the internet age, because of access restrictions in the media market and content censorship mechanisms, the online public sphere in China was still under the control of the government and official media. However, Wu (2007, p.42) believed:

‘the emancipatory role of the internet especially poses a threat to authoritarian rule in regimes such as China where the traditional media fail to perform their role as a democratic institution in the public sphere’.

Information technology advances were manifested in the popularity of social networking sites, and user-generated *We Media* and online versions of encyclopaedia created a break in the government’s control (Lu, 2014). Citizens who used to be message receivers have gradually switched to sharers and producers of messages, generating a bottom-up approach to form public opinion (Deuze, 2007).

Information digitalisation decentralised the traditional hierarchy system in the offline world and led to harmonisation, equality and empowerment (Rheingold, 1994; Castells, 2001). The internet provided a horizontal structure for citizen networking and an autonomous environment for public participation, hence making the internet

an ideal tool for ‘from-below’ politics (Castells, 2001; Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). The unidirectional communication in the traditional media⁴ made it easier for political authorities to manipulate information, whereas the openness and bi-directional nature of the internet enabled communication by different voices (Luo, 2010).

The increasing volume of internet use and citizen participation has enabled democracy and publicness in the online public sphere. The internet has become the major medium for the public to express political opinion and exercise democratic power in China (Shi, 2010). Chen and Hu (2014, p.25) drew the analogy of citizens inputting raw material (public opinion) to the public sphere, and the political authorities then conducting a degree of processing and shaping before it finally transfers to the output for public policy formulation and implementation.

The internet media have generated a new sense of community in which individuals are reunified (Poster, 2001; Ferdinand, 2000), and which have restructured the public sphere by providing an uninhibited and nonconforming form of communication (Reid, 1999). Citizens’ views were integrated, which further fostered the socialisation of political power and led to progress in democratisation, highlighting the spirit of media dissemination (Tan, 2008; Yang, 2009).

Luo (2010) believed that the internet and online culture awakens, stimulates and reinforces citizens’ awareness of democracy, freedom and equality in China. Virtual space displays a sense of freedom that Chinese citizens have long been seeking, and the nature of online virtual space is in accord with Habermas’s premises for the public sphere (ibid). The Chinese characteristics featured in the online public sphere stand between the virtual space and the real world; thus, the internet works as a medium

⁴ Traditional media here includes press, broadcast, newspaper and TV.

that bridges and coordinates the two societies and the realm of their mutual relationship (Xiong, 2012). In this sense, China's online public sphere is somewhat detached from the state, which makes it possible to form a rational public sphere for interaction between the state, individuals and other stakeholders (ibid).

However, other scholars hold sceptical views regarding the form of the online public sphere and its influence. Lu (2014) argued that Habermas's concept of the public sphere was centred on political action, which led to a risk that the communication pattern may be affected or even damaged by political power. He then put forward two standards that public opinion should meet:

- It is formed rationally on the basis of individuals' self-awareness in identifying and assessing the situation of issues; and
- It is formed through discussions or debates on the basis of critical judgement and the continuous process of public rectification.

China's cyberspace was still immature and inadequate, which hardly captured the humanistic connotation, the spirit of rational and critical enlightenment, or the freedom to reach a consensus that was embedded in the public sphere (Dong, 2010). This led to what could be described as a semi- or quasi-public sphere (ibid). Other studies have explored the applicability of the public sphere in cyberspace and asserted that the current so-called online public sphere is not the ideal prototype for Habermas's public sphere, neither does it fit the concept of 'bourgeois public sphere' in its level of commercial consumption (Zhu and Liu, 2010). It is more likely to be a half-public sphere because it only provides part of the functions of the public sphere; there is still much room for improvement (ibid).

Previous research has investigated several typical spaces on the Chinese internet and concluded that it is hard to achieve Habermas's public sphere in *BBS* (Jing and Yang, 2007), while blogs have their deficiencies as well, such as lacking rationality (Liu, 2009; Ding, 2008; Wang, 2006). Yuan (2010) detected the flaws in the construction of public sphere on *Weibo*: commercialisation, collective unconsciousness, and capacity

for public attention which may hinder the formation of public consensus on such social media platforms.

Other structural defects in the online public sphere in China have also been spotted (Du and Cao, 2013). It seems that the online public sphere has already come into existence, but that it may not function properly. The internet as an information exchange medium can sometimes carry false or fake messages, which can weaken the credibility of the online public sphere and even mislead the public and result in collective bias. It is also quite possible that core opinion leaders in cyberspace can point the direction of online public opinion, and internet-enabled mass public participation in the virtual space where fierce debates frequently take place rarely results in a widely-accepted consensus view. Hence, due to the randomness of participation, the fragmentation of online content and the irrationality of many internet users, the online public sphere has merely existed at a theoretical level in China (Hu, 2014).

A functional defect in the online public sphere was also detected. Corresponding to Habermas's concern about the influence of consumerism in the media space, Qiu and Gao (2010) pointed out that the advancement of the internet undoubtedly brings opportunities for the construction of a public sphere, but has also enhanced consumerism in cyberspace, which introduced new challenges as the information may be filtered, manipulated or isolated by the online media market (Qiu and Gao, 2010).

Hauser (1998, p.83) argued that a utopia of the independent public sphere that engaged citizens in 'enlightened debate' would be limited unless there was a customised institutional arrangement in the cyberspace, while Hu (2014) suggested that a mature and rational public sphere should be constructed under the non zero-sum-game model in which a win-win can be achieved. Authentic democracy and freedom in cyberspace can be fully achieved only in the context of a legal framework; the construction of the online public sphere cannot be accomplished at one stroke, and

collective efforts from internet media, netizens and the state are needed (He, 2014).

2.4 ‘Information regime’ and the role of the internet

In 1966, Deutsch had emphasised the importance of information for the state’s governance. Bimber (2003, p.18) proposed the concept of an ‘information regime’ to describe periods of stable relationships between information, organisations and democratic structures and characterised the following conditions:

1. A set of dominant properties of political information, such as high cost;
2. A set of opportunities for and constraints on the management of political information that these properties create; and
3. The appearance of characteristic political organisations and structures adapted to those opportunities and constraints.

The concept was originally used to explain information effect on political organisations in the US. In American political history, the information regime was interrupted by information revolutions which involved changes in the accessibility of information. As Esarey and Xiao (2011, p.301) have pointed out, an information revolution disrupts a prior information regime by generating new opportunities for political communication and the organisation of collective action. This highlights the role of intermediary organisations in the information flow between citizens and the state, and how information enables or constrains political opportunities.

In the light of Bimber’s theory, Esarey and Xiao (2011) built on different periods of the information regime to reflect the government’s changing attitudes towards the media market and information management in China. Three phases of information regime were identified: a Soviet-style propaganda state; commercial media; and the digital age.

Information Regime 1 dealt with the period when China was in the shadow of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideology between 1949 and 1978, in which the media market was completely dominated by the government and information was tailored to promote the CCP’s policies. As Zheng (2008) has indicated, the pursuit of sustainable

economic growth made the ruling party embark on science rather than democracy in order to maintain the state's leadership. According to Deutsch:

‘it might make sense to think of government somewhat less as a problem of power and somewhat more as a problem of steering. Steering is decisively a matter of communication, and information is essential for communication’ (1966, p.82).

Therefore, totalitarian rule over information was how the government manipulated communication among the public.

Information Regime 2 (1979 – 2002) began with the opening-up policy, which brought major changes in China (Esarey and Xiao, 2011). Reform policies in urbanisation and marketisation led to the media industry evolving to a commercialised market and no longer being an affiliate of the government. Although it gained freedom to some extent, the government created ‘media evaluation small groups’ (*yueping xiaozu*) at various levels in society to monitor media companies, to ensure that information flow adhered to the government's rule (Barmé, 1999; Brady, 2008). After the internet was introduced in China in 1987, a multi-layered strategy was adopted for the surveillance of online content, in which the controversial ‘Great Firewall of China’ attracted extensive criticism (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013). However, scholars have found that the public's support for CCP rule was actually strengthened due to the commercialisation and the decentralisation of the media (Brady, 2008; Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011).

Advanced information and communications technology led to Information Regime 3 (2003 – now), in which the media industry stepped into the digital age (Esarey and Xiao, 2011). Technological connectivity fostered a variety of internet media. The government developed a series of computerised censor systems to filter and block online information. Scholars have pointed out that the internet might pose ‘an insurmountable threat to the regime and that such a threat may arise from internet use in the mass public, civil society, the economy and the international community’

(Chase and Mulvenon, 2002, cited in Zheng, 2008, p.79). Multiple actors were engaged in the information flow, which further aroused debate on the construction of the public sphere, as discussed in the first section.

The internet, as a fundamental medium in Information Regime 3, has played a vital role in the interaction between the public and the government. As Tai (2006, p.97) indicated, ‘the internet, unlike any of the conventional media, was primarily invented as a technology to eliminate the possibility of a central control mechanism’. It facilitated information dissemination by exposing ordinary Chinese citizens to a brand-new and broader environment. He also emphasised that the public is less likely to use the internet in the way designed or desired by the regime (ibid). Zheng (2008) assessed the phenomenon as pressure for political authority and social support for reform in China.

Hachigian (2001) claimed that the internet would weaken the monopoly of the CCP’s rule, but Kalathil and Boas (2003, p.136) argued that ‘the authoritarian state is hardly obsolete in the era of the internet’. Thus, controversy appeared over the influence of new media on the government. Wu (2007) argued that the advent of the internet has brought opportunities for economic development in China in the form of promoting digitalisation in media, business, banking and other industries, and that the government has taken advantage of the internet, using it as an extended information platform and actively supporting state-controlled mainstream media for propaganda (ibid). It has also pushed forward tight information control to prevent the spread of democratic ideas on other internet media platforms (ibid).

Hence, the evolution of the information regime has facilitated changes in the nature of communication and led to new forms of media, an adaptation of government institutions and increased opportunities for the public. It is one of the theoretical framework that has structured this research.

2.5 Analytical framework: the triangular structure of the internet in China

Du and Cao (2013) identified three fundamental factors that sustain the running of the online public sphere in China: technology, citizens, and government. This provides a basic structure of the online public sphere. Several studies have empirically investigated the issue from multiple dimensions, and a comprehensive analysis of the complex interactions, relationships and power structures of the three factors is needed in future research.

I have developed a theoretical model focusing on the triangular relationship among the government, the public and the media, focusing on Chinese society and its particular background. The internet is used as part of the media market in the framework to elaborate the evolution and process of public participation and how social change is generated, and each sector's role in the dynamic system. Figure 1 shows the operational mechanism in my triangular system. The three key elements constitute the online, quasi-public sphere in China. I attempt to find out the process of the interaction between these three elements and how they contribute to the online public sphere.

These discussions have demonstrated that the public sphere is used as a normative theory to analyse the role of mass media in modern society. In the following section, I analyse the roles, functions and interrelations between each of the three elements in the 'government-media-public' triangular system.

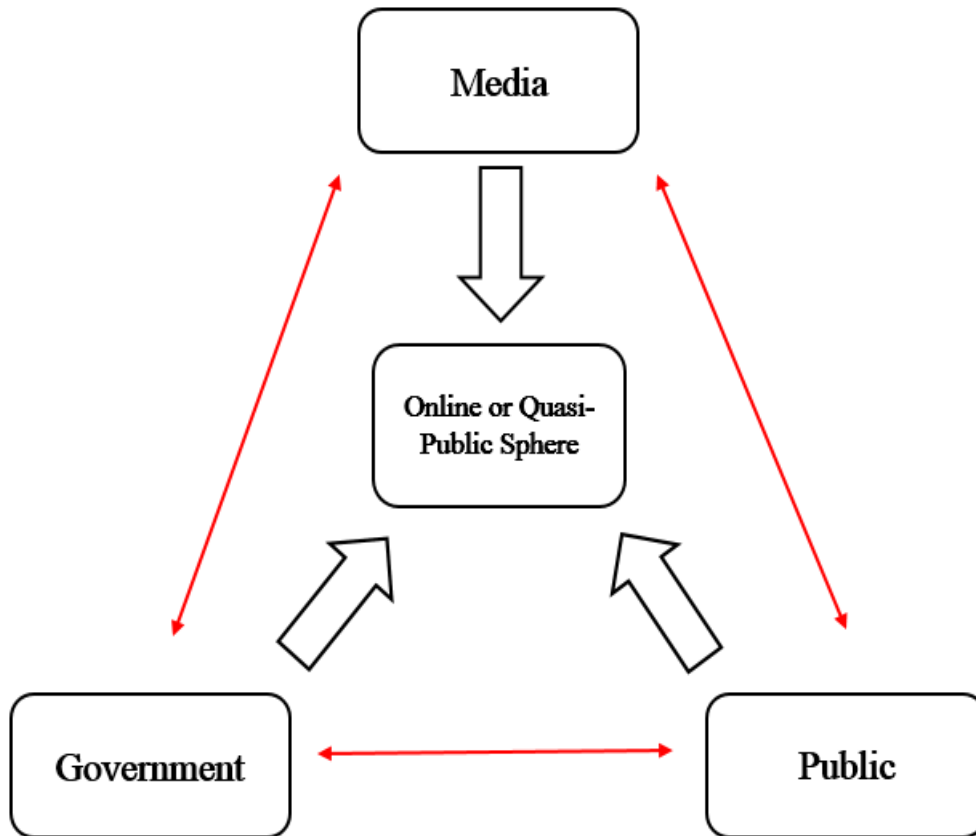


Figure 1. Operational mechanism in the ‘government-media-public’ triangular system.

2.5.1 The internet as the commercial media market: the empowerment of the public

As Drori et al. (2003, p.268) indicated, science:

‘provides the cultural scripts for nation-states to act on or support action [...] Nation-states are obliged by their role as actors/agents to move toward the achievement of social goals. In their search for successful paths to achieve these goals, they rely on the available cultural scripts’.

This suggested that technology brings ideological changes to society, as it reflects the codified presentation of ‘rational thinking’ and ‘rational order’ (ibid, p.268). The term ‘techno-nationalism’ has been coined to indicate the influence of technology in guiding the leadership, which leads to the construction of a new ‘nation-state’ (Zheng, 2008, p.23). The notion begins with its fundamental effect on both national security and economic prosperity, and therefore ‘a nation’s development policy must have explicit strategic underpinnings, and that technology must be indigenised at all costs

and diffused system wide' (Feigenbaum, 2003, p.14).

Unlike the liberal and democratic institutions in western countries, the CCP has to put economic development first, and this could guarantee the legitimacy of the Chinese governmental authority and obtain support from the public (Zheng, 2008). It explains why the Chinese government has treated the internet and ICT as a technological support for economic development over the last three decades. Zheng (2008) emphasised the mutual empowerment between the state and enterprises: internet-driven economic development enables the provision of internet goods to the public, which helps maintain and even reinforce the government's legitimacy.

The internet has fostered a new media market that underlines the influence brought by the development of ICT. As Kalathil and Boas (2003) concluded, the progression of ICT leads to 'the invigoration of an independent private sector or the emergence of new domestic business elites' (cited in Zheng, 2008, p.31). Lu and Wong (2003) studied the expanded influence in the context of China, indicating that the internet is an important source of economic growth and creates essential opportunities for entrepreneurship. It has already been acknowledged that the internet is beneficial to the expansion of the media market and other forms of business; however, how it influences the democratic change to Chinese society, and the mutual empowerment between the state and the government, need further investigation.

One noticeable advantage of ICT is that it enables an immensely greater volume of information flow than other forms of media, and at a much lower cost and higher speed (Bimber, 2003). With this insight, Tai (2006) pointed out that the internet, as a new media format, compensates for the weaknesses of the existing media forms and fundamentally changes the types of conventional media, bringing new options to the market. The internet is gradually turning China into a western-style information society, albeit with modifications and adaptations (Zhang and Woesler, 2002).

What changes exactly did ICT and the internet bring to Chinese citizens? First of all,

Chang and Tai (2003) have stated that:

‘whether the Chinese government likes it or not, the burgeoning public awareness and demand for a free press, the commercialisation and internationalisation of the Chinese media, and the increasing pressure from the world community may make the next step – what to say and what to publish without fear of state interference – irreversible’ (Chang and Tai, 2003, p.43).

This was in line with Margolis and Resnick’s (2000) argument that, in terms of democracy, the most powerful influence is its competence in delivering information to the public in a speedy and efficient manner. Since information represents power, for people living in authoritarian states like China, ‘democratisation of information’ (Tai, 2006, p.180) on the internet has special implications.

Secondly, the internet fosters a new model that supports freer and more effective interaction between government, media and public. As Tai indicated:

‘the internet marks a dramatic departure from all previous communication models: it not only enhances the conventional one-to-many communication but also fosters brand-new types of communication in which users’ messages can be sent by a heterogeneous user base to a heterogeneous audience’ (Tai, 2006, p.162).

It facilitated the construction of a relatively flexible communication space shaped by large numbers of sufficiently motivated groups of people (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004).

As the internet evolved and went through its infancy, it started to penetrate every aspect of people’s ordinary life (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Citizens are experiencing a ubiquitousness and ‘banalisation’ of the internet and other related technologies (Graham, 2004). Consequently, users have developed routines in using the internet to expand the media space, and their expectations have become broader (Lievrouw, 2004). *We Media* came into being under such circumstance. The following section introduces this new concept and discusses its forms and characteristics.

2.5.1.1 Definition of *We Media*

We Media is also known as ‘citizen journalism’ or ‘individual media’, which is a concept derived from an expert columnist in the IT field in Silicon Valley, Dan Gillmor. Gillmor put forward the concept of ‘Journalism 3.0’ in his blog in 2001: ‘Journalism 1.0’ was identified as the traditional media or old media; ‘Journalism 2.0’ refers to the cross media or new media; and ‘Journalism 3.0’ is defined as *We Media* under the popularisation of a blog-like service. Gillmor further identified ‘Journalism 3.0’ to be journalism’s next wave, and argued that, with the peer-to-peer dissemination form and the two properties of ‘share’ and ‘link’, media services such as the blog cultivated an enormous amount of grassroots publishing (Gillmor, 2004). Since then, the writing and editing of news no longer has to follow the 5W1H principle;⁵ instead, it has changed to a form where the story is presented with its original ‘taste and flavour’ (Bowman and Willis, 2003). More significantly, audiences do not have to be passive receivers who only take a unidirectional approach to news consumption. They become active disseminators in a way that marks the transfer of mainstream media to the model of user communication in news transmission.

At the end of 2002, Gillmor formally proposed the concept of *We Media* in his article *News for the Next Generation: Here Comes We Media*, published in the journal *Columbia Journalism Review*. He pointed out that, due to the booming social media services mediated by information and communication technology, users who favour technology can no longer bear to be passive audiences, and therefore they try to participate in interaction with news information. They become a vital and influential

⁵ ‘5W1H’ refers to who, why, what, when, where, how.

part in the circle of news dissemination, which makes them the future mainstream media.

Supporting Gillmor's view, the Media Centre of the American Press Institute published a research report on *We Media* co-proposed by Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis. They commissioned '*We Media* as a way to begin to understand how ordinary citizens, empowered by digital technologies that connect knowledge throughout the globe, are contributing to and participating in their own truths, their own kind of news' (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p.5). In short, it refers to the kind of media channel that enables citizens to publish what they see and what they hear. Such channels include online communities on blogs, microblogs, *WeChat*, and *BBS*/ forums.

To further describe the content and the intent of online communication that often occurs in collaborative and social media, Bowman and Willis (2003) used the term 'participatory journalism', which they defined as:

'the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires (ibid, p.9)'.

They pointed out that the new form changed the long-lasting top-down broadcast model in media communication to a bottom-up intercast model, which constitutes an evolution in the roles of different parties engaged in news dissemination. Originally characterised by media organisation control, all news is filtered through an organisation before getting to the audience. But in the *We Media* age, since participants are peers and have the ability to change roles, news is often unfiltered by a mediator before getting to its audience. It is also called the intercast model, in which peer-to-peer and social network communication represents an equal interaction form.

In the west, the concept of *We Media* has already been replaced by citizen journalism. However, because it is difficult for citizen journalism to expand, *We Media* seems to be easier for people to accept.

2.5.1.2 Characteristics of *We Media*

From the birth of the blog to the rise of the microblog, everything changed. There appeared a crack in the iceberg of discourse power, and the right of speech has been expanded to an unprecedented degree. Anyone with a computer and a network connection is able to produce and publish news, which is the so-called ‘everyone is a journalist’ culture. It signifies speaking opportunities for the silent majority in the virtual world. However, there are consequences to the bottom-up model when everyone is able to collect, edit and publish news. While according to Gillmor’s argument in *We the media* (2004), it is undeniable that a majority of people remain consumers, yet their horizons are broadened at an unprecedented rate and will eventually be balanced from various perspectives. Therefore, the concept of *We Media* actually came into being as a grassroots revival.

Gillmor (2004) was of the opinion that, in the past 150 years, there have been two verified forms of media communication: one-to-many (books, newspapers, radio, television, etc.) and one-to-one (letter, telegraph, telephone, etc.). For the first time, the internet has realised many-to-many and few-to-few communications, which has greatly changed the pre-defined roles of audience and news producer by blurring the borders between these two roles. The microblog, as a typical example of the new media, is an aggregation of all forms of communication. It is rooted in the openness of ICT, to which is attached the numerous possibilities of the internet, and some of the applications may even be beyond the designer’s expectations.

As illustrated by Gillmor (ibid), the application of the *We Media* has assisted media communication, which substantially refers to grassroots’ conversations. Hence, a

major characteristic of the developing *We Media* should be its grassroots characteristic, i.e. the ‘We’.

In this thesis, I argue that the communication forms of the new media remain as one-to-many and one-to-one, but there is a change in the body of communication.

Previously, ‘one’ referred to an organisation; a news agency or the individual who has to rely on a news agency. The blog is a newer generation of media output that grew out of the new media, which makes the body of communication to independent individuals. Because these individuals are in possession of the publishing rights for news, the numerous ‘one’ became ‘many’, and ‘many’ evolved to ‘We’. This is the link and difference between the *We Media* and traditional media.

Compared with general internet media, *We Media* has more space for public participation and autonomy. As relatively independent individuals, participants in *We Media* are less likely to be influenced by the organisational structure as they are in both traditional and new media, and are less likely to be influenced by external issues such as economic factors. The equivalent of *We Media* in Chinese is ‘自媒体’ [zi mei ti], in which ‘自’ [zi] refers to ‘self’ but with the connotation of freedom. It implies that, compared with new media discussed in this thesis, *We Media* shows an evident improvement in the degree of autonomy (Zhang, 2008).

2.5.2 The public: the interplay of public participation in China’s physical and online worlds

Oldenburg (1997) coined the term ‘the third place’ to refer to the physical area where citizens can participate in and discuss social, political and public affairs. It is a generic designation where ‘regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals’ are hosted (ibid, p.16). It refers to physical spaces beyond the realms of home and work, such as the German beer garden, Main Street, the English pub, the French café, the American tavern and the Chinese teahouse. Freedom of association and assembly in the third places are essential features that contribute to the political

process of a democracy (Tai, 2006).

The internet, according to Tai (2006, p.169-171) was seen as the 'fourth place' for the following reasons:

- It created a brand-new social space as opposed to the history of human communication in the 'third space' and traditional media communication; new communicative possibilities and new social relationships were cultivated.
- internet-based communication extends beyond relations in the physical world and redefines them. The internet is both informational and participational, hence, it brings people together and invites the participation of those who care.
- The internet as a social space has generated potential that no previous media form was able to achieve, as it removes boundaries of time and geography in terms of information sharing.
- The internet gathers people with diverse experience and arguments, which accumulates the collective social capital. In return, it presents more opportunities for public participation in new ways.

To better comprehend the internet as the fourth place, the distinctiveness of the internet as a communication tool should be recognised. Because online relationships are often born out of and complement offline connections, in some cases they can lead to fresh relationships which would not be possible in the physical world, and in other cases they reinforce offline relationships (ibid, p.171). The socialising effect of the internet empowers Chinese people and affords them the opportunity to gather, to build connections and to express themselves in various ways. It highlights the feasibility of ICT-mediated public participation that would otherwise not be possible in the physical third places.

Since the long-term governmental monopoly on information was disrupted by information technology, people have also gained access to first-hand or more original information, allowing them to make their own rational judgements; they are then empowered with diverse means of public participation (Zheng, 2008, p.95).

2.5.2.1 Civic engagement in China's physical world

Scholars share similar views of the definition of public opinion. Putnam (1993) defined civic engagement simply as active participation in public affairs. Walzer (1980, p.64) indicated that citizens' 'interest in public issues and devotion to public causes are the key signs of civic virtue', while Shao, Lu and Wu (2012) defined civic engagement as all activities that citizens participate in to influence public policies and public life. Plummer and Taylor (2004) believed that public participation in China started in the 1980s when many development projects were funded by international financial organisations, because a primary requirement of these organisations was to conduct a public participation exercise as part of their environmental impact assessment. Dong (2008) used the term 'civic engagement' to describe the phenomenon in which individuals in civil society voluntarily participate in social activities or public affairs. It is an opportunity for citizens to become engaged in the implementation of public policy and to ask for a more democratic society. The process of civic engagement implies citizens sharing social responsibilities and achievements. Everyone has the opportunity to express their opinions, to maintain their self-interest and to contribute for the sake of common good (ibid).

Chen (2010) argued that the principle of public participation is that vulnerable groups attempt to express opinions for their interests and take part in government decision-making, which is another form of power distribution. According to an official report in China, the government would not have initiated policy changes in the past years without intensive civic engagement on the internet (Yang, Han and Miao, 2004).

According to Li, Ng and Skitmore (2012), the Chinese government established a 'principle of mass participation' which is essentially different from public participation in international discourse. They identified the distinction between the two as: the former forced the people to cooperate in and support the implementation of governmental policies, plans or projects; whereas the latter focused on 'the rights

of people to be informed, consulted and heard in the decision-making process' (ibid, p.9). According to the notion of public participation in the West, the government is obligated to inform the people about proposed policies, plans or projects, to supervise the implementation process, and to provide open access to information and decision-making to the public (Zhao, 2010).

However, public participation in China's real world seems to be much more difficult than in western countries. Shao, Lu and Wu (2012) argued that communication structures have been a crucial factor because China historically lacked a social system that promoted horizontal communication among citizens. Since the long-rooted vertical communication system was usually controlled by the government, citizens' active exchange of views was limited (ibid). Because information is a source of power, the government has to control information flow to ensure its position, and so restricts citizens' access to information (Wang and He, 2004). Shao, Lu and Wu (2012) found that there were two major problems that had long plagued civic engagement in Chinese society: civic disengagement and civic disorder. The former refers to citizens' indifference to public affairs, and the latter to various forms of disturbance led by certain groups of people such as illegal parades, sit-ins, sabotage, and riots (ibid).

However, these factors began to change with the rapid economic development in China. Radical social transition put Chinese citizens under growing pressure from local governments, big companies or special interest groups, which fostered people's increasing demands for expression to defend their civic rights (Shao, Lu and Wu, 2012), and which enhanced their awareness of public participation. Civic engagement has now attracted extensive attention in China, which 'not only resonates with deliberative democracy that represents the latest development of western democratic theory and practice, but also consists of the most important part of China's efforts in developing democratic politics' (ibid, p.76).

2.5.2.2 Online public participation

In terms of cyberspace, it has been argued that the internet has the most potential in contributing to expanding 'macro public spheres' that link citizens on a global or local level (Keane, 2000, p.77). Dahlgren (2001) considered internet a nurturing base for multiple microspheres that generate deliberative places to exchange views among politically engaged people. Wu (2007) has argued for the construction of the online public sphere in which the internet actively promotes the process by enabling mutual interaction between citizens and digital media at both local and global levels. It has created appealing possibilities for little-known individuals and politically-marginalised groups and re-structured public issues (Ferdinand, 2000). Given the situation in China and its lack of judicial independence, the courts often conspire with government departments and it is understandable that the people resort to the virtual court to redress the issues that they perceive as unfair and unjustified, thus 'swaying the tide of public opinion' (Tai, 2006, p.19). It seems that the internet has the potential to deal with inequality and injustice in Chinese society, as it helps the public to gain visibility in China.

Regarding the improvement of democracy, scholars have long argued that information technology will promote the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Diamond, 1993; Linz and Stepan, 1996). Barber (1998) also asserted that the use of information technology can enhance public participation in democratic affairs. Another role of information technology was highlighted, in that technological advancement enhances equality in information flow and expands the size of communities (Etzioni, 1993). The growing attention on the effect of the implementation of ICT on societies and the public sphere has prompted discussions on the democratic potential of digital new media in creating new opportunities for public discourse and political participation in both industrial democracies and developing countries (Dahlberg, 2001; Gimmler, 2001). Liang (2010) examined the democratic potential in China and argued that

online political participation had been adopted as a brand-new form of political engagement and the evident features of such participation have facilitated the democratisation process, which has had positive influences in the construction of open, transparent and efficient systems of government.

Online public participation in China is neither an established concept nor is it well-defined:

‘it is a broad combination of public participation and online activities, i.e. the public use internet as a medium to collect and release information, and a series of commenting and discussing activities with the intention to influence the public affairs and government’s decisions’ (Yang, 2010, p.25).

It thus seems that online public participation in China is isolated from the institutional system, which makes it more suitable and effective to have an influence, given that it removes the political constraints and involves individuals and groups (both well-known and little-known) in the process. This study focuses on whether online public participation serves the broad range of ‘the public’ and the process of how social-political influence is effected.

2.5.2.3 Dynamics and forms of online public participation

The history of ICT development in China shows a great diversity of innovation. Although the functions and forms vary, they have changed the relationship between the government and the public. For example, e-mail, *BBS*, online forums, online chatrooms, instant messaging services, blogs, podcasts and *Weibo* are all new media tools that facilitate the practice of public participation. New media tools have surpassed the traditional participation channels both for cost and speed. They also overcome geographical limitations and political suppression and enable broader public participation. Pavlik (1994) confirmed these advantages and argues that the internet removes physical barriers and reinvents dispersed communities in cyberspace.

As Shao, Lu and Wu (2012, p.78) indicated:

‘new media may function in breaking information asymmetry, offering alternative participation channels, providing unique motivation for civic engagement, and consequently promoting the development of democratic politics in China’.

The internet and mobile communication channels have created a new realm in which privilege is reduced, but freedom and equality are promoted. Due to the plethora of interactive websites and *We Media* in cyberspace, the online public sphere is varied.

Xiong (2012) analogised individuals as ‘nodes’ and internet media space as the ‘surface’ in the online public sphere and made the following categorisations:

- The ‘node-to-surface’ mode refers to the independent media spaces assigned for individual users, but open access is granted to the public. These include social networking sites, blogs, *QQ-zone*, *Weibo* and *Renren* in China.
- The ‘surface-to-surface’ mode refers to the communication space that is built on the basis of common interests, such as online forums and community sites.
- The ‘formal and official’ mode refers to websites hosted by formal media companies or governmental departments with the purpose of attracting public engagement and collecting public opinion, such as the commercial news web portals *Sina* and *NetEase* and the state-owned media outlet *Xinhua Net*.

Chen and Hu (2014) made the following categorisation of the evolution of China’s online public sphere and ICT development:

- Web age. This represents the one-way information flow manifested by the digitalisation of knowledge. Citizens acted as information consumers, and *BBS* and forums were the main channels for people to discuss public affairs. The online public sphere in the web age mainly functioned for information dissemination, propaganda and marketing.
- Blog age. This represents a bidirectional pattern of information flow. Both elite and grassroots entities emerged in blog spaces and proposed various topics for open discussion.
- *Weibo* age. This empowers the opportunity of speech for every citizen in society, and switches the public from message receivers to message producers.

Two conclusions can be drawn from these previous studies: firstly, the evolution of ICT has stimulated citizens’ demands within an authoritarian state for equal

participation in civil society; and secondly, ICT has empowered public participation, nurtured public opinion, and further called for government response.

2.5.2.4 The effects of online public participation

In the process of online public participation, we cannot ignore the controversial aspects such as ‘the bandwagon effect’ (Zhang and Stening, 2010), ‘group polarisation’ (Sunstein, 2002) or ‘cyber bullying⁶’ (Xue, 2011). These side-effects are worth investigating as this research seeks to provide a comprehensive study of online public participation.

Tai (2006) found that the internet has transformed the realm of public opinion in Chinese society in at least three ways. Firstly, it has generated a new communication platform on which the speed of information flow is determined by ‘aggregation of individual behaviours on the network or in the community’ (Zhang and Stening, 2010, p.57). Secondly, it has produced opinion leaders who constantly sway or direct the trend of public opinion (Tai, 2006, p.188). Finally, it has generated ‘the bandwagon effect’, which can influence the rationality and criticalness of public opinion (Zhang and Stening, 2010, p.57).

The anonymity of the internet poses dangers. Xue (2011) pointed out that anonymity allows users to express irrational opinions unscrupulously, and people may use online expression as a channel for catharsis. The aggregation of disorderly opinions on the internet may cross the rational boundary of online public participation, and the pressure from such public opinion can have negative effects on government policy, for example, the phenomenon of cyber bullying. Sunstein (2002) used the term ‘group polarisation’ to demonstrate another negative influence: the phenomenon where

⁶ ‘Cyber bullying’ is a form of bullying or harassment using electronic means.

individuals in a community may hold irrational views initially and then online discussion allows information to spread in the community, which leads to irrational debate in the community and finally the emergence of ‘extreme’ public opinion. He also argued that the internet, to some people, is a breeding ground for extremism, because it enables those who hold the same opinion to communicate easily and frequently without hearing dissenting views (ibid). In such an extreme situation, rapid and intense information flow may alter other citizens’ positions. ‘Group polarisation’ reflects the lack of moral principles and ethical restrictions in the online environment, which may result in destructive or irrational participation that can become a threat to social stability (Xue, 2011).

Zhang and Stening (2010) have highlighted the importance of information sharing and the mobilisation of public opinion. They argued that:

‘given the nature of information cascades and fission effects in dissemination of public opinion in a networked environment, it also leaves plenty of room for wirepullers to manoeuvre public opinion in favour of special interests’ (Zhang and Stening, 2010, p.112).

Wang (2014) also emphasised the passive spread of information at a higher speed on the internet, which generates wider negative social effects. For example, the Guo Meimei⁷ incident on *Weibo* in 2011 led to a reputational crisis for the Red Cross Society in China.

As Xue (2011) indicated, unlike traditional media, blocking or prohibition will not be effective on the internet and a wholesale clear-out may break the ecological balance in cyberspace and lead to unanticipated negative consequences in society and for

⁷ Guo Meimei was general manager of the Red Cross Society of China, and constantly flaunted her possessions on *Weibo*. This resulted in people doubting the credibility of the Red Cross and sharply decreased the amount of donations.

economic development. Thus, the key problem is ‘how to stimulate ICT-mediated participation while ensur[ing] the orderliness and rationality of the participation and avoid[ing] chaotical or meaningless behaviours’ (Yang, 2010, p.26). Proper government control, guidance and regulation may help build a rational online environment (Xue, 2011), but how control should be implemented needs to be further examined. Scholars have also proposed amending the legal system, clarifying the obligation and responsibility of each actor involved in ICT-mediated participation to promote better outcomes (Sheng, 2007), but this would require long experience and examination.

2.5.3 Government: the progression of responses and countermeasures

Historically, China has struggled to construct a society with a strong legal system. Ever since the foundation of the PRC, in the wake of societal change, economic development and the progression of globalisation, the Chinese government has altered its policies on information control and media management. This has led to a substantial transition in the public’s role – from ‘obeying’ to ‘expression’. This section will review these changes in the relationship between government and media, and how the Chinese government uses mass media to deal with its citizens.

In recent years, the interaction between the government and the public has not always been a zero-sum game, because public participation is the main form of the interaction. Yang (2009) proposed the concept of ‘online activism’ to describe one typical pattern of public participation in cyberspace, referring to an individual’s or an organisation’s active engagement in ‘contentious activities associated with the use of the internet and other new communication technologies’ (ibid, p.14). However, online activism is not the same as public movements.

2.5.3.1 Public events: social movements and online activism

In China, the internet has performed two principal functions: as a new form of media

and as a new form of association (Zheng, 2008). It has not only acted as a public channel for communication of citizens' views, especially social grievances, but has also fostered the constitution of new social organisations or groups (ibid). Zheng (2008) found that the internet was a new area in which the state and society could both benefit in pursuing their interests, but that there were also areas in which the two actors' interests would conflict. He emphasised the function of the internet as a new form of association as:

‘in the highly developed information age, the forms of public participation, which are choosing and practicing by social groups, may have different consequences in China's real world’ (Zheng, 2008, p.47)’

Social events formed on the internet can be contentious and potentially seditious, challenging ‘normalised practices, modes of causation or systems of authority’ (Beissinger, 2002, p.14). Arendt (1970, p.7) defined ‘events’ as an interruption of ‘routine processes and routine procedures’. Social events formed on the internet can be purposeful, aiming to ‘transform rather than to reproduce, to overturn or alter that which, in the absence of the event, others would take for granted’ (Beissinger, 2002, p.14-15). With a specific purpose in mind, the organisers of social movements have to create new events or use existing events to challenge the regime or normalised practices, but there are structural constraints and conditions that promote or hinder the movements, such as accumulated resources and government policies (Beissinger, 2002). Zheng (2008, p.136) stated that if a collective action or social movement is considered to impede the legitimacy of the state or pose a threat to the authority, it invites a crackdown or suppression by the state, but if the movement is perceived to be beneficial to the state, it is more likely to succeed (ibid). Given the context in China, since protests in the physical space are under strict surveillance and sometimes dangerous, the internet becomes an attractive medium for the organisation and practices of similar actions (Tai, 2006). An evident change is that the government now holds a relatively tolerant attitude towards online protests, partly because they are less likely to pose real threat to the regime and the stability of society, and partly because

of the difficulties in detecting and eliminating gatherings in cyberspace (ibid, p.291).

Apart from the distinction in space, online activism differs from real-world protests in dynamics and form. There are no particular forms of online activism because internet users react to all issues, be they political or societal, as long as they involve injustice, grievance or inequality, whereas protests in physical spaces usually aim at one specific issue or topic. Neither is there a clear rule to indicate whether protests or gatherings in cyberspace are legal or illegal. All these properties put forward challenges to the government in controlling online public participation. As Xiao (2011) has argued, the emerging patterns of public opinion and civic engagement make it relatively easy to mobilise wide public participation to promote awareness of civic rights, freedom of expression and governmental accountability.

2.5.3.2 Challenges and control

The internet also functions as a new form of association in which intellectual websites and intellectual groups emerge. Zhou (2006) identified that the internet enables Chinese intellectuals to expand the space in which they exchange views and foster vibrant discussion. They have switched from regularly published academic journals and intellectual magazines to cyberspace with few access restrictions. The intellectual websites showed ‘an unprecedented degree of openness, frankness, and tolerance’ (ibid, p.177). Debates led by intellectuals covered a range of topics and critical commentary, including national current affairs and international affairs, between the New Leftists and the liberals (ibid). Thus, the interaction between the government and the public engages a special group – the intellectuals. For the government, because the internet has revealed a new domain in which intellectuals can promote a public e-sphere, this area must stay under the control of the authoritarian power and not develop as a threat to the government (ibid). As Zheng (2008, p.94) has recognised, ‘there are always potential challengers inside China even with tight political control by the communist regime’, and although the government actively takes measures to

control or eliminate the social influence of such challengers, the public (both average citizens and intellectual groups) have developed innovative ways to bypass this control.

Zhang and Stening (2010) identified the positive influence of the internet on public participation, as the free flow of information and mobilisation of public opinion enabled by the internet helps to break the long-existing 'Chinese walls' which defined the boundaries between social groups, communities, organisations and individuals. It also reduces the cost of the organisation and mobilisation of potential supporters. Tai (2006) summarised the approaches that Chinese internet users have adopted to avoid the government's surveillance, such as anti-blocking software, mirror sites, proxy servers, remailers and anonymous e-mail services, which are actually reflections of the 'vulnerability of the state regulatory mechanism' (ibid, p.116). Zheng (2008) also pointed out the difficulties that the government is facing: first, it is challenging for the state to find who the organisers are for social campaigns; secondly, that the internet spread information among the potential activists and challengers more efficiently than the conventional forms of communication; and thirdly, that the internet help neutralise and rationalise those public who are more sympathetic to challengers.

2.5.3.3 **Censorship**

Zhou (2001, p.16) clarified the general principle of internet administration from the perspective of the Chinese government as 'developing it actively, strengthening its management, seeking advantages and avoiding harmfulness, making it serve our purpose'. In line with this principle, an ideal scenario for the state was clarified, which is to encourage active development and make full use of new technologies to reinforce control and avoid negative effects (Zhou, 2006). Hachigian (2001, p.118) also summarised a three-part internet strategy proposed by the government: 'providing economic growth and some personal freedoms, managing the internet's risks, and harnessing its potential'. Therefore, it seems that the political authorities

have recognised the potential challenges to the regime posed by the internet, and the government has demonstrated that the new media has been recognised and is being treated similarly to the traditional media such as newspapers, radio and TV.

Regarding the administration mechanism of the internet, Lessig (1999, cited in Zheng, 2008, p.8) once argued that ‘governments anywhere can most certainly regulate the internet, both by controlling its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it operates’. However, Zhang and Stening (2010) have indicated that the prevalence of the internet, especially *Web 2.0*, makes it very costly to filter and monitor online public content. They pointed out that the traditional method of oversight and control has decayed and is reduced in its effectiveness with the advent of highly interactive media space on the internet.

There are two factors that can make the work of censoring particularly daunting (Xiao, 2011, p.52):

- The exclusive many-to-many communication pattern on the internet sets few barriers to entry access. It poses difficulty in controlling the source of information and the dissemination process.
- The complicated network topology of the internet contains massive numbers of connections, overlapping clusters and self-organised communities. The growth of these nodes in the network is at an exponential speed, making the traditional methods of information control inoperable in the online environment. For example, forcing a publisher or programme producer to self-censor content is less effective on the internet.

A number of researchers have explored the current situation of internet control in China. An empirical study led by the Open Net Initiative showed that ‘China’s internet filtering regime is the most sophisticated effort of its kind in the world’ (Bambauer et al., 2005, p.3). King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) found that each website is secretly supplied with up to 1,000 censors who abide by the government’s rules, and around 20,000 – 50,000 internet police and monitors are engaged in the huge effort of

internet surveillance, plus numerous ‘50 cent party members’⁸ to direct the information flow or disseminate government-oriented information (Chen and Peng, 2011).

King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, p.328) found that expressions are censored on Chinese social media in at least three ways:

- The Great Firewall of China. This disables the connection to certain websites from China, foreign sites in particular. It is an obvious problem for foreign internet firms, and for Chinese users who wish to interact with the outside world through these services. However, it does little to limit access to foreign information and the expressive power of Chinese netizens as people can use VPNs (virtual private networks) to cross the Firewall or find other sites to express themselves in similar ways.
- Automated keyword blocking prevents netizens from publishing text that contains a banned word or phrase, thus limiting freedom of speech. However, a range of countermeasures have been developed to outwit the automated programs. Analogies, metaphors, satire and other evasions are used to avoid the blocking.
- Manual censoring is a complementary mechanism to the first two barriers. Once information has passed the Firewall and automated blocking and been posted on the internet, censors read and manually remove that which they find objectionable and inappropriate. Manual censoring cannot be evaded by the netizens’ tricks mentioned earlier.

A growing method for state control is the use of a subtler approach to manipulate online public opinion, such as resorting to undercover commentators to guide the direction of consensus (Tai, 2006). However, the implementation of such intense restrictive methods may not be as effective as expected because of the ever-evolving information technologies, which are extremely difficult to keep pace with (ibid). Xiao

⁸ The term ‘50 cent party members’ (*wumao dang*) refers a large-scale censoring and information guiding mechanism. It is a group of people who are supposedly paid 50 Chinese cents for every praising post on government and party-related topics, quickly criticising or removing content on politically-sensitive issues such as corruption and negative acts of government officials (Hassid, 2012).

(2011) proposed that, for those far-sighted officials, they should discern the developing trend in information technology and adopt selectively tolerant approaches or even embark on internet expression as a barometer for public opinion. Internet expression can be used to assess public opinion, the average citizen's real needs and people's perceptions on the state and authority (ibid), and so allow the government 'to be more responsive to citizens' concerns and to provide a safety valve for the release of public anger (ibid, p.59)' which is beneficial for the stability of the society and of the authorities. Online public opinion can also be used as an effective tool to promote political change and if the interests and agendas of different political agencies do not match or agree, it will facilitate the support of one side over the other (ibid).

Based on the expansion of public participation on the internet, the explosive growth in the number of internet users and the changes in the government's corresponding control mechanism, Xiao (2011) found that the situation had gradually changed the relationship between the state and the public: 'authorities are increasingly taking note and responding to public opinion as it expresses itself online' (ibid, p.47). Xiao also found that online public participation centres on societal or political issues that concern the collective interest, and this has changed the internet into a training ground and an agile medium to inform the government about the people's demands. This encourages the regime to learn to adapt to these new circumstances and become more responsive. Compromise has already been made in response to the challenge, in the tolerant attitude towards public participation, rule-changing action and negotiation, and has presented the possibility of 'better governance with greater citizen participation' (ibid, p.60).

Zhang and Stening (2010) supported Xiao's view and indicated that, although China is still under single-party rule and the government strictly controls internet use, the digital revolution has toppled the wall that used to stop citizens from exchanging views with one another and interacting with the rest of the world. Just as Xiao (2011) argued that online public opinion shows the growing influence on Chinese society, the

government no longer has absolute control over information dissemination and public participation.

2.6 Summary

This chapter has proposed the ‘government-media-public’ triangular analytical framework in my research by reviewing the historical situation of the public sphere in both China’s physical world and cyberspace, and the possibility of its existence in contemporary China. It has conceptualised the Chinese internet as a ‘quasi-public sphere’.

Information regime theory was discussed in the context of Chinese society. It is used throughout my research as a theoretical framework to analyse the relationship between government and media companies in the current situation in China.

By considering the roles, functions and characteristics of the public, new media and the government, this chapter has explored how the three elements contribute to the ‘online public sphere’ in China. It also discussed internet empowerment from the perspective of the commercial media market, indicating the possibility of public participation in the online public sphere. Moreover, an important concept – *We Media* – was introduced, as it is the outcome of technological empowerment which is essential in the development of public events, as demonstrated in the case studies in later chapters.

This chapter then elaborated on the characteristics, elements and possibilities of public participation in China’s physical world and ICT-mediated participation, addressing the first research question: how far has social media contributed to public participation in China? It analysed the advantages brought by the diversity of internet innovations, which relates to another research question concerning the dynamics and forms of public participation in China’s cyberspace. The controversial effects of online public participation were also discussed.

In light of Yang’s (2009) multi-interactionism theory and previous studies, this

literature review has made the assumption that the interaction between the government and the public is not always a zero-sum game in the modern age, which implies negotiation and cooperation between the two. The assumption is examined in this research through case studies. Previous research has demonstrated that the challenges proposed by the public and the control mechanisms implemented by the government undergo a compromise stage. Censorship, as a particular governance approach in China, was dealt with through an analysis of the government's changing rules in information control, which addresses the research question of how Chinese government sectors react to the controversial effects of ICT-mediated public participation. The research will explore the actual negotiating and compromising process during government-public interaction. It will conduct a comparison of the features of social movements and online activism in China, which addresses the third research question, of what kind of public events can draw long-term attention in China's cyberspace and what consequences these public events may have.

Chapter 3. Contextual Background

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the historical context for internet development in China and situates the case studies against the development of the internet in China as a commercial operation. Part one describes the historical development of the internet in China and part two discusses the era of *Web 2.0*. In the third section, I categorise the development of blog era into three stages, and discuss three common Chinese blog platforms: *Sina*, *NetEase* and *Q-zone*. The final section examines the development of social networking sites in China including the *Renren* Network, which is similar to *Facebook*. I also consider the development and current situation of microblogging in China on two representative microblog platforms: *Sina Weibo* and *Tencent Weibo*.

3.2 Internet development in China

In the late 1980s, with funding support from World Bank and help from German experts, China began to explore the use of the internet. Like other countries, early efforts at creating internet networks focused on academic information exchange. Initiated as the earliest high-tech information infrastructure project among the ‘key discipline development projects’ in China, the first networks developed were supported by the State Development Planning Commission, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the National Natural Science Foundation of China and the State Education Commission, with the cooperation from Peking University, Tsinghua University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In 1994 China realised the full function of the global internet and became the 71st country to register on the global computer network and completed the setting of *CN* as a top level domain name

Initially, only a few state-owned websites had permission to publish news, including *people.com.cn*, *Xinhua.net*, *china.com.cn*, *CCTV.com*, *China Radio International Online*, *China Daily* and *China Youth International*. Soon after, China began to realise the significance of computer information technology in its economic development and

encouraged fast development of the internet for commercial use. In 2004, three major commercial network portal companies – *Sina*, *Sohu* and *NetEase* – announced the first full year of profitability. Thereafter, many commercial network firms went public through Initial Public Offerings, illustrating the tremendous expansion of internet use. Government and market actors played a vital role in developing the information technology sector. Figure 2 shows the development of website and domain names in China from 1997 to 2015, which by that time had risen to over 31 million.

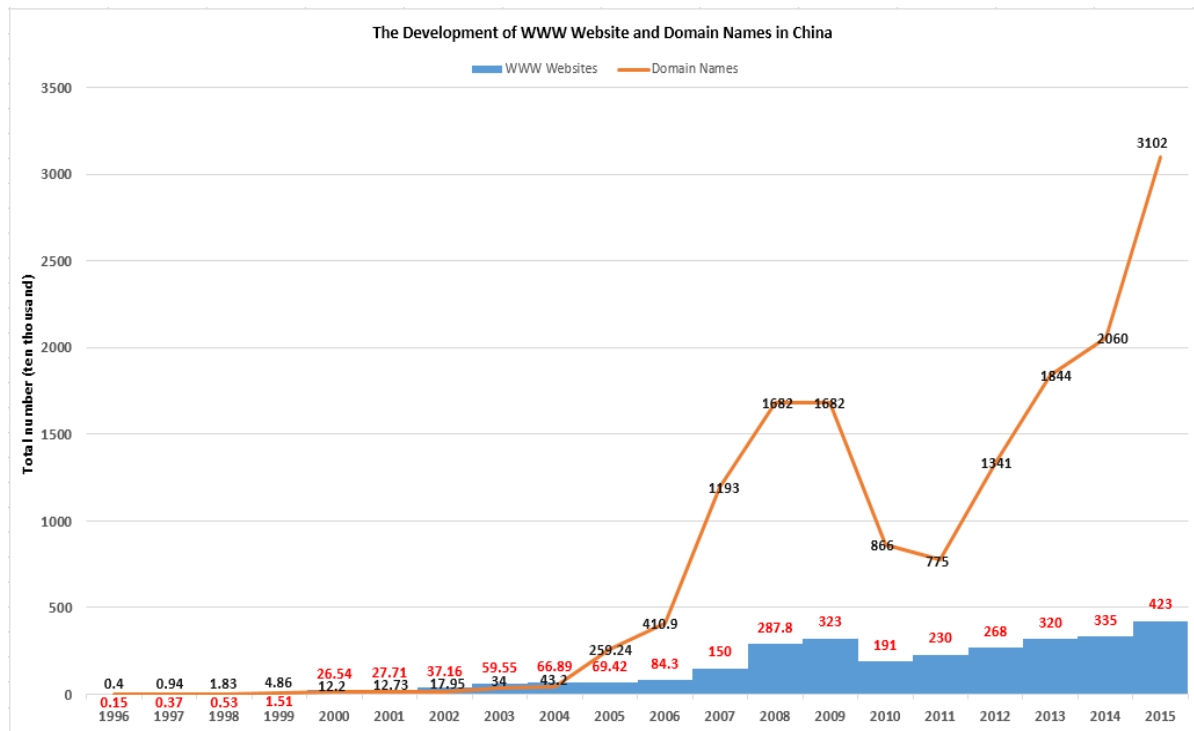


Figure 2. The development of websites and domain names in China.

Figure 3 shows the sharp increase of internet and mobile users in China and by 2015 the internet penetration rate had risen to around 50%. From the earliest dial-up network to today’s broadband internet and fibre networks and the popularisation of mobile phones, internet access has become easier, faster and more flexible and has led to the growth of internet users in China. It also indicates that the Chinese internet is the outcome of users’ practices and habits in their daily production, circulation and consumption of online content.

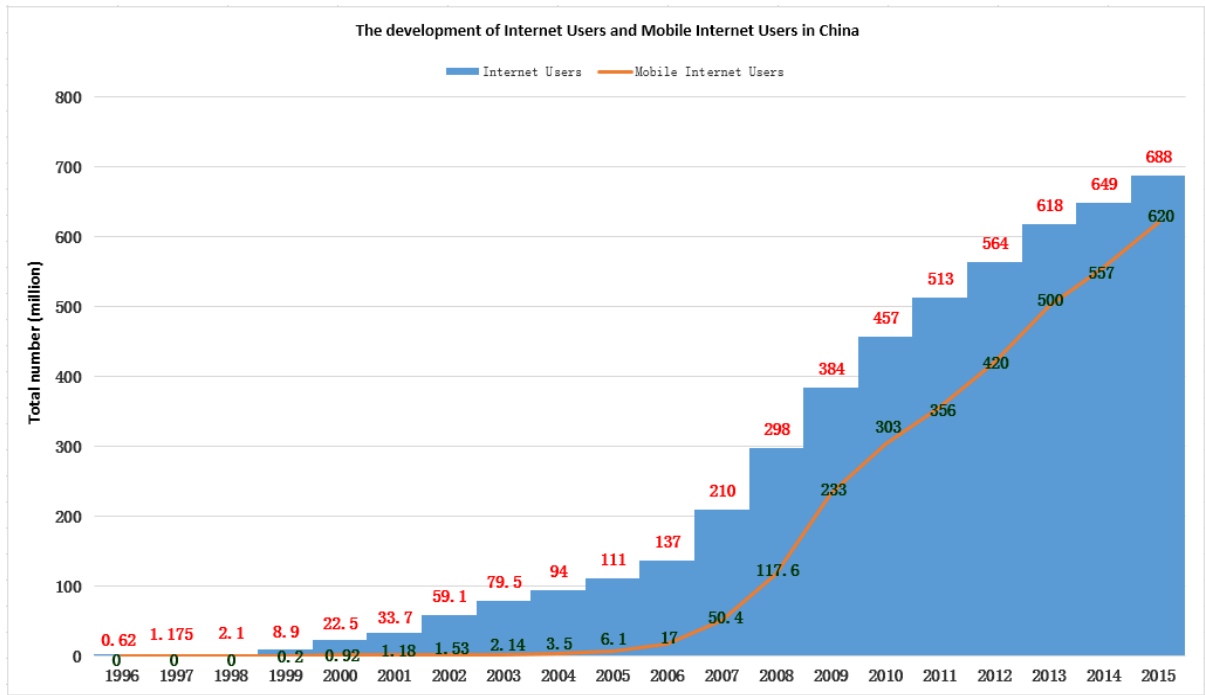


Figure 3. The development of internet users and mobile users in China.

Table 1 summarises the symbolic events in the internet development in China from 1987 to 2013. Figure 4 gives a timeline of the launch dates of the principal events during the internet development. This two charts include technology development, the government's usage of the internet, commercial development, and the regulations and conventions of internet management.

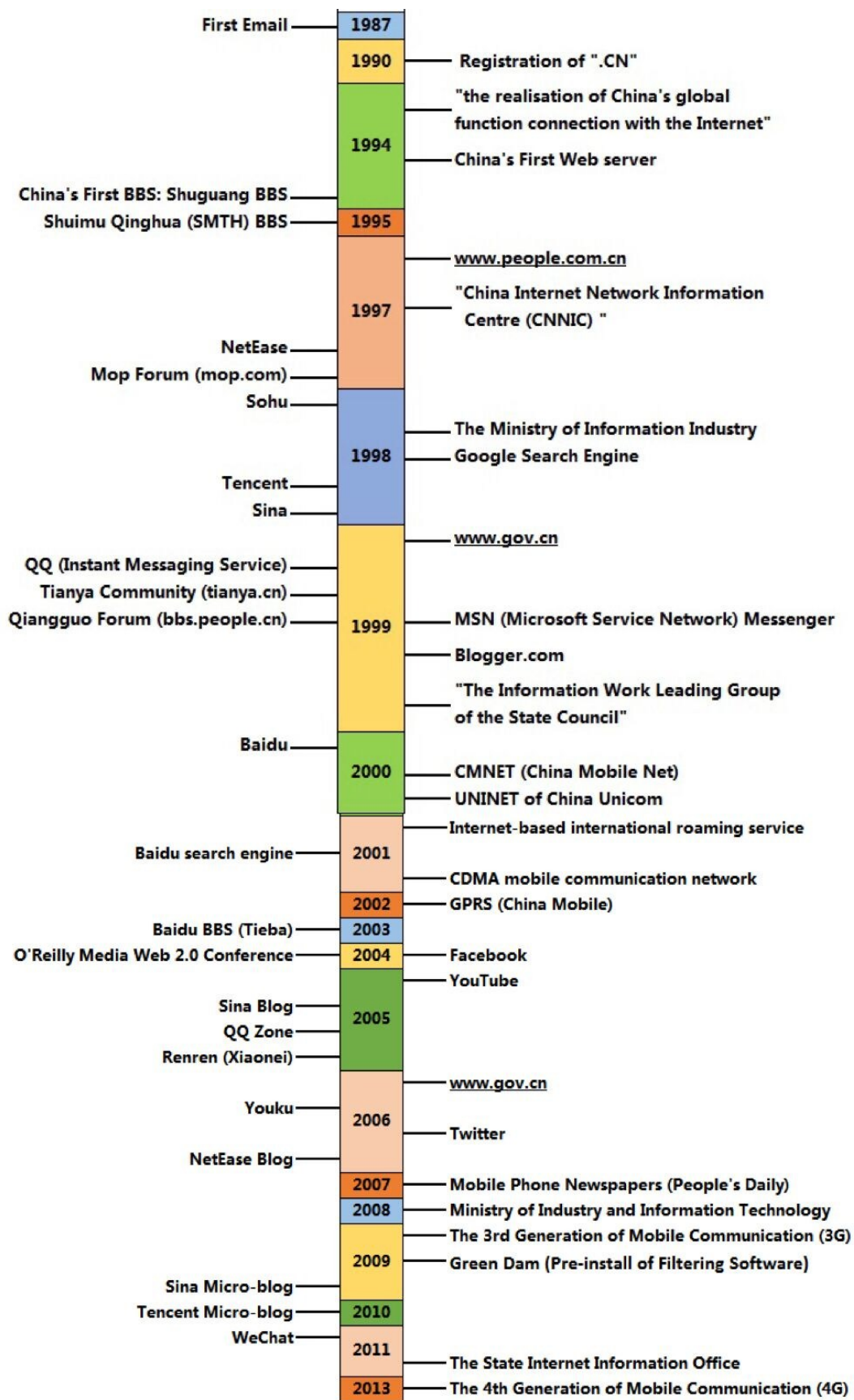


Figure 4. A brief timeline of launch dates of internet development.

Table 1. The internet Timeline of China

The Initial Stage	
1987-09-20	The first email was sent from China to Germany. The content of the email was ‘Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world’.
1990-11-28	The registration of the top level domain .CN was completed, symbolising China’s own identity on the internet.
1994-04	On April 20, 1994, the The National Computing and Networking Facility of China (NCFC) project accessed the internet via an American company – Sprint, representing the realisation of China’s global function connection with the internet . China was officially recognised as a country that had the full function of the global internet.
1994-05	The first BBS in Mainland China was put into operation – Shuguang BBS, developed by the National Crime Research Centre for Intelligent Computing Systems.
1996-11-15	China’s first coffee bar with network was opened in Beijing.
1997-01-01	The first key news propaganda website of the central government was opened in China. <i>People.com.cn</i> sponsored by <i>People’s Daily</i> joined the internet.
1997-06-03	Under the authorization of the Information Work Leading Group Office of the State Council, Chinese Academy of Sciences set up

	China internet Network Information Centre to perform the duty of National internet Information Centre.
1997-11	CNNIC issued the first Statistical Report on internet Development in China : by October 31, 1997, 299,000 computers in total had access to the internet; there were 620,000 internet users, 4066 domain names registered under <i>CN</i> , approximately 1500 WWW websites, with an international bandwidth of 25.408M.
1999-01-22	The launch of Government Online Project was proposed. The home site www.gov.cn was put into trial operation.
1999-12-23	The Information Work Leading Group of the State Council was established.
2000-05-17	China Mobile Net (CMNET) was put into operation. China Mobile officially launched the ‘GoTone WAP (wireless application protocol)’ service.
2000-07-19	Unicom Net of China Unicom was officially put into operation.
2000-12-12	Websites such as <i>people.com.cn</i> , <i>Xinhua.net</i> , <i>china.com.cn</i> , <i>CCTV.com</i> , <i>CRI Online</i> , <i>China Daily</i> and <i>China Youth International</i> were approved by the State Council Information Office to publish news, becoming the first key news websites that had obtained the permit to publish news.
2001-02	China Telecom began to provide the internet-based international roaming service .

2001-12-03	CNNIC issued the first ‘Survey Report on internet Bandwidth in China’ .
2001-12-22	China Unicom declared that the first-stage construction of the CDMA mobile communication network of China Unicom had been completed. The building-up of the CDMA network indicated that the development of the mobile communication technology of China had entered a new field.
2002-05-17	China Mobile took the lead in officially launching the GPRS service nationwide.

The Growing Stage

2003-03-20	Sun Zhigang , a young man from Hubei Province, was detained and beaten to death in Guangzhou. After this incident was first exposed by the local newspaper, the major network media in China intervened actively, and wide attention was drawn from the society. The internet brought into play its powerful role in media supervision and urged relevant departments to solve this case.
2005-08-11	Yahoo announced to transfer all business operations of Yahoo China to Alibaba.com . This was the first case for a global internet giant giving all of its China’s business to a local company .
2005-11-07	Beijing Olympic Organising Committee announced that Sohu.com became the internet content service sponsor of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. It is the first time that the internet content service is set to be one of the sponsored items in the history of Olympic Games .

2005	<p>Blogs and attached concept of Web2.0 promoted tremendous development of China's internet. The emerging concept of Web2.0 marked the beginning of a new evolution stage of new media on the internet. As it was widely used, there also emerged a series of socialized applications such as Blog, RSS, WIKI, and Social Networking Sites, etc.</p>
2006-01-01	<p>Website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (www.gov.cn) was formally launched. This website is a composite platform for the State Council and its departments, along with people's governments of each province, autonomous region and municipality to release information of governmental affairs on the internet and provide online services.</p>
2006-08	<p>Investigation Report of China Blogs in 2006 issued by CNNIC shows that till August 2006, blog authors have increased to 17,485,000.</p>
2007-02-28	<p><i>People's Daily</i>, the largest comprehensive print media and the newspaper of the CPC central government, formally issued mobile phone newspapers all over the country. It became a landmark event in the integration of modern communication technology and news media.</p>
2007-08-21	<p>The 'Blog Service Self Discipline Convention' was formally released in Beijing. This Convention advocated the real name registration system. Over 10 renowned blog service providers jointly signed the convention on the site of the release meeting.</p>

The Social Networking Service Stage

2008	With the rapid spreading of SNS websites as <i>kaixin001.com</i> and <i>Renren.com</i> , SNS has become one of the most popular internet applications in 2008.
2008-05	As for relief news after the earthquake on May the 12th, 2008, in Sichuan Province, <i>people.com</i> , <i>Xinhuanet.com</i> , <i>chinanews.com</i> and <i>CCTV.com</i> had released about 123,000 pieces of news on the earthquake relief (including pictures, texts, audios and videos) by May 23, 2008, and played a leading role in news releasing; <i>Sina.com</i> , <i>Sohu.com</i> , <i>NetEase</i> and <i>Tencent</i> jointly released 133,000 pieces of news. The above eight websites received 11.6 billion hits on news with up to 10.63 million follow-up replies. The internet played an important role in news releasing about earthquake relief, helping people find their missing kin, delivering aids and soliciting donations. The development of China's internet media has come to a new stage.
2008-06-20	Former Chairman Hu Jintao communicated with the internet users online through the China Force <i>BBS</i> on <i>people.com</i> . As a key channel for information exchange, the internet has attracted more and more attention of the government.
2008	Up to June 30, 2008, the total number of internet users in China reached 253 million, ranking first in the world for the first time. On July 22, the CN domain name became the world's top national domain name with a large registration number of 12.188 million.

2009-01-07	Ministry of Industry and Information issued three licenses of the third generation of mobile communication (3G) to China Mobile Communications Corporation, China Telecommunications Corporation and China Unicom Network Communications Co., Ltd.
2009-05-19	Ministry of Industry and Information issued ‘ Notice to the Pre-install of Filtering Software for Safe Surfing on the Computer ’. The filtering system ‘ Green Dam ’ was officially introduced.
2009	Since the second half year of 2009, web portal including <i>Sina</i> , <i>Sohu</i> , <i>NetEase</i> , and <i>People.com</i> initiated or tested the microblog (Weibo) function. Public figures, entertainment celebrities, enterprise institutions, and numerous internet users joined <i>Weibo</i> , making <i>Weibo</i> one of the most popular internet application in China.
2010-03	The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued the first batch of three internet TV licenses .
2010-06-08	State Council Information Office published the first white paper on ‘The internet in China’ , elaborating the Chinese government’s fundamental policies on the internet as ‘positive utilization, scientific development, law-based administration and ensured security’.
2010-09-08	<i>People’s Daily Online</i> launched a service called ‘ Straight Access to Zhongnanhai – the Message Board to Central leaders and Central institutions ’. The message board highlighted the interactivity of the internet, aiming to provide a space for the internet users to communicate and propose suggestions to the Central leaders and institutions.

2010	<p>In 2010, the social influence of public opinion on the internet had deepened. A series of events, such as ‘The Rescue in Wang Jialing Mine Disaster’, ‘The Yihuang Self-immolation incident’, and ‘The Son of Li Gang Drunk Driving and hit’ were exposed on the internet, and aroused the widespread concern all over the society.</p>
2011-01-21	<p><i>Tencent</i> launched WeChat, an online instant messaging application.</p>
2011-05	<p>The State internet Information Office was officially established with the aim of strengthening the construction, development and management of internet and improving the administration level of virtual network society. It reflected the great attention paid to the internet by authorities at the state level.</p>
2012	<p>2012 witnessed the rapid development of government microblogging. By the end of October 2012, the number of government accounts on <i>Sina Weibo</i> had reached to 60,064, an increase of 231% compared to the same period in 2011; up to November 11, the number of government accounts on <i>Tencent Weibo</i> reached 70,084.</p>
2013-02-01	<p>In the year of 2013, the issue of personal information security received highly attention.</p> <p>The first personal information security standard ‘Individual Information Protection Guidelines on Information Security Technology in Public and Commercial Service Information System’ was implemented, symbolising the individual information protection has entered to the law system in China.</p>

2013-11-19	The State Statistics Bureau signed a big data collaboration framework agreement with 11 internet firms, including <i>Baidu</i> , <i>Alibaba</i> , etc. The aim is to collectively promote the application of big data in the government's statistic work to improve the scientificity and promptness of the government statistics.
2013-12-04	The first batch of licenses of the fourth generation of mobile communication (4G) . China Mobile Communications Corporation, China Telecom Corporation and China Unicom Network Communications Co., Ltd. gained the operation license.
2013	The year of 2013 witnessed the rapid development of e-commerce . The online retail transactions reached 1.85 trillion RMB Yuan. China surpassed the United States and became the world largest online retail market.
2013	Internet finance emerged in 2013. <i>Alibaba</i> launched an online deposit service product <i>Yu E Bao</i> on the basis of Alipay; <i>Tencent</i> launched Micro pay. Internet financial products enriched the public's way of investment and influenced the traditional financial industry.

3.3 The era of *Web 2.0*

The term *Web 2.0* was coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 to refer to software designed in such a way that it is completed only by the intentional and creative use of the consumer. As she predicted:

‘The Web we know now, which loads into a browser window in essentially static screenfuls, is only an embryo of the Web to come. The first glimmerings of *Web 2.0* are beginning to appear and we are just starting to see how that embryo might develop... The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens. It will still appear on your computer

screen... The Web will also appear, in different guises, on your TV set, your car dashboard, your cell phone, hand-held game machines and maybe even your microwave' (DiNucci, 1999, p.32).

According to O'Reilly and Dougherty (2004), a *Web 2.0* site, rather than enabling users merely to read the content, invites them to contribute: to comment on published articles, to create a user account or to publish articles on the site, which enables the increase of user participation. Corresponding to DiNucci's prediction, a *Web 2.0* site encourages the user to rely more on their browser for the user interface, application software and file storage facilities, which promotes user engagement in a variety of forms. It has been referred as 'network as platform' computing (O'Reilly, 2005). The major features of *Web 2.0* include social networking sites, self-publishing platforms, tagging, 'Like' buttons and social bookmarking (O'Reilly, 2005). Users can provide data and exercise some control over it (Hinchcliffe, 2006).

In social science, *Web 2.0* was defined as a 'service-oriented architecture that encourages, explicitly or implicitly, human interactions and participation, through which knowledge and content are generated, disseminated, shared and used over network applications' (Zhang, 2010, p.1). Through the exploitation of the network effects in a social mode (human interaction), *Web 2.0* is empowered with the strength of not only linking Uniform Resource Locator (URL), but also linking people (Zhang, 2010). Typical *Web 2.0* applications are Bulletin Board Systems, *Wikipedia*, the blogosphere and social networking services. By turning applications into platforms that enable user content generation and interaction, it has becoming a system of converged and integrated new media comprising the internet, mobile communications and various entertainment industries in which human interaction, information exchange and knowledge-sharing are supported (Zhang, 2010). Such a collective platform is also an important sphere in which public opinions are formed and mobilised. It is the result of the convergence of computing, communications and content (3C) networks (Zhang, 2010). Compared with the *Web 1.0* era, in which search engines and mass portals are the key business model, *Web 2.0* brought a

completely new experience for internet users. Instead of passively consuming what is already on the site, *Web 2.0* enables users to participate in the World Wide Web, to take the lead in content creation and to have a say in what they consume (Zhang, 2010). As Dan Gillmor (2004) indicated, internet users are changing their role from purely information recipients to newsmakers, storytellers and information distributors on a converged, open and interactive platform.

With all these technological developments and user experience evolution in the era of *Web 2.0*, Chinese citizens are able to absorb diverse opinions from the public rather than the mainstream information sources. This encourages the public to use the opportunities provided by *Web 2.0* to express their views and to negotiate with the government. Such enhanced forms of online public participation under the relatively tight internet regulations in China show the possibilities of the interaction between the public and government.

The concept of *Web 2.0* is manifested through *BBS* and forums, blogs, SNS and IM. In comparison with the World Wide Web about two decades ago, users play a more active role in the internet. Extensive user participation leads to a more diverse world on the internet that enables free minds and ideas to meet, which further triggers sparks of inspiration (Feng, Liu and Wang, 2008).

3.3.1 ***BBS* and online forums**

BBS is a website system running custom software that allows users to connect to the system through a terminal program. It was the precursor of current popular online forums. *BBS* offers functions such as bulletin boards, classified discussion areas, news-reading, uploading and downloading software and data, on-line games and direct chat with other users. Many *BBS* are maintained by a webmaster who runs the system in their spare time. Low-cost, high-performance and interactivity are key features of *BBS*. Interactivity, in particular, allows users to exchange messages through email, discussion areas, public message boards and sometimes via direct chat.

Originating from the *BBS*, an internet forum is a website system that supports online discussion. It is a technological evolution of *BBS*, although many forums still use the name *BBS*. It emphasises the communication function by supporting a large amount of user-generated content. This makes forums different from normal chatrooms in a way that messages are longer and are at least temporarily archived. Users can post messages or content on various topics, such as entertainment, current events, education, travel and leisure. Some forums have a specifically defined theme, while others cover all kinds of topics. Users share resources with each other in various forms as well.

‘Chinese *BBS* has two major categories: comprehensive and specialised *BBS*. The former type of *BBS* usually has hundreds or thousands of discussion boards (or sub-forums) on a wide spectrum of topics such as job-hunting, travel, literature, news, entertainment, sports, love, etc. The most trafficked *BBS*, *Mop* and *Tianya*, are both of this type. In contrast, specialised *BBS* usually have a single theme such as photography, cars, or electronic device, etc. (Jin, 2008, p.27)’

With the expectation of being ‘the online home for global Chinese’, the *Tianya* Community is a popular *BBS* and forum. Launched on March 1, 1999, it has attracted more than 130 million registered users with 250 million visitors per month (*Tianya*, 2018). The founder of *Tianya* was interested in the stock market at the time and created *Tianya* as a forum for people to discuss and learn about stock. When *Tianya* was launched, the users were mainly university teachers and personnel from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and *Xinhua* News Agency. It was positioned as a forum with high-quality user base and content. In 2005, with the rise of the blog, *Tianya* launched its own blog service. In 2006, it gained a development funding and, with support from Google, *Tianya Laiba*, its social networking service and *Tianya Wenda*, a question and answer service, were launched. The content in *Tianya* also concerns people’s livelihoods, which helps it occupy a portion of the Chinese public opinion space.

Qiangguo is an affiliated forum of the *People’s Daily Online*. It was launched on May

9, 1999. The early form was the ‘Anti-violence in North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) protest *BBS*’, which had significant influence in China and abroad within the first month of launching. On June 19, 1999, the forum name was changed into *Qiangguo*. As the first official forum created by the state-owned media website, it is an essential platform for the Chinese government leaders to interact with the public. On June 20, 2008, former Chairman Hu Jintao used *Qiangguo* to communicate with internet users (Liu, 2008). Before this, the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Li Zhaoxing and some other leaders also interacted with people through *Qiangguo* (Yang, 2006).

Baidu Tieba was established in November 2003. It is the largest Chinese online communication platform and was produced by the Chinese search engine company, *Baidu*. The initial idea was to use the internet search idea to create an online community that brings people with the same interests together. By searching the key words, users can have access to the *Tieba* that they share interests with. *Baidu Tieba* covers a wide range of topics for people to express, share and exchange opinions. According to *Baidu*, by 2012 there were more than 600 million registered users, including 200 million active users; 4.5 million kinds of *Tieba* and 3 million *Tieba* hosts (*Wikipedia*, 2018).

Yang (2012, p.51) has observed that Chinese netizens usually ‘combine elements of the existing forms with creative adaptations of old forms or new inventions’ while performing online activities. He pointed out that the postings on *BBS* and forums are like the electronic versions of big-character wall posters, which used to be a main form of public expression in modern Chinese history. This influenced how people make use of *BBS*, for example, in the early stages, when it was used for airing grievances (ibid). Therefore, *BBS* posts bore the weights of historical meanings, and the concerns in the present society. A *BBS* is:

‘A virtual community for online public discussions and debates on a broad spectrum of topics that cover miscellaneous aspects of society and life. The

information on *BBS* keeps pace with current events and news in real society. Offline events and major discussions on *BBS* are picked up at roughly the same time' (Giese, 2004, p.28).

'The many-to-many information sharing and exchange among users on *BBS* is highly dynamic and interactive. The hierarchical structure of a *BBS* is: site administrators, board moderators and common users. Board moderators are usually elected by users and they can also be dismissed, which guarantees the proper execution of rights by board moderators' (Jin, 2008, p.31).

For discussion of politically sensitive topics on the Chinese internet, online forums, chatrooms or *BBS* are the preferred spheres for public discourse (MacKinnon, 2008, p.248). Chinese *BBS* forums have been popular since the late 1990s, well before blogs emerged, and quickly formed cohesive virtual communities (Yang, 2003). It is well documented that Chinese government officials pay attention to *BBS* comments on certain issues and have taken netizen sentiment into account when formulating responses to crises such as the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 US 'spy plane' crisis (Xu, 2007). The 'flatness' of *BBS* is one of the reasons contributing to the popularity of the medium, meaning that the conversation threads on *BBS* platforms are made by hundreds and thousands of people; whereas blogs only represent the individual voice of one person or a small group of authors (MacKinnon, 2008). Such characteristics enable a high degree of anonymity for *BBS* users, which eases Chinese netizens' concerns regarding political risk. This is of particular importance considering China has the largest number of incarcerated internet writers in the world (ibid).

3.3.2 **Instant Messaging services**

Instant messaging (IM) is a type of online chat which offers real-time text transmission over the internet. Short messages are typically transmitted bidirectionally between two parties, when each user chooses to complete a thought and select 'send'. Some IM applications can use push technology to provide real-time text, which transmits messages character by character, as they are composed. To make

the product more popular, many advanced IMs include added features such as file transfer, clickable hyperlinks, voice chat and video chat. It is usually possible to save a text conversation as message history in a local log file for later reference, which makes it similar to the persistent nature of emails (*Wikipedia*, N.D.). Non-IM types of chat include multicast transmission, usually referred to as ‘chat rooms’, where participants might be anonymous or might be previously known to each other. IM systems tend to facilitate connections between specified known users often using a contact list also known as a ‘friend list’.

IM is a set of communication technologies used for text-based communication between two or more participants over the internet or other types of networks. IM chat happens in real-time. An important feature that distinguishes online chat and IM from other technologies such as email, is the perceived quasi-synchrony of the communications by the users. There are many IM systems provided by different internet companies, some of the most popular ones are *iMessage* (Apple Inc.), *Window Live Messenger* (Microsoft Corporation) and *Skype* (Microsoft Corporation). In China, an IM service called *QQ* is the most widely used, with at least 829 million active users per month in 2014 (WeAreSocial, 2014).

QQ is a web-based IM platform launched by *Tencent* in 1999. The main platforms for *QQ* users are PCs and mobile phones. *QQ* supports comprehensive communication features, including online chat, file transfer, clickable hyperlinks, voice chat and video chat. Users can easily and immediately switch IM application between computers, mobile phones and other wireless products. *QQ* is available in a variety of platforms and systems, including Microsoft Windows, OS X, Android, iOS and Windows Phone. By the end of the second quarter of 2015, the number of monthly active *QQ* users had reached 843 million (627 million using the mobile application), and online *QQ* users reached 233 million at peak time (Tao, 2015).

QQ Group is an additional feature which supports multi-person chat. The ‘group

manager' (a user who creates the group) invites friends, colleagues, relatives or other users with shared interests to the group. Group members can communicate via text, voice or video within the group space. Information sharing and resource exchange are also feasible through the group forum, group album and group file sharing. The group manager can appoint someone as a group manager (multiple group managers are supported in *QQ*), dismiss the group, and invite and remove group members.

WeChat is an application designed for IM on smartphones. It is another popular product launched by *Tencent* in 2011 and by 2018 it was one of the world's largest standalone mobile apps by monthly active users, with over 1 billion monthly active users (902 million daily active users) (Long, 2017). *WeChat* is a mobile social networking application that provides text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, group talk, video chat, sharing of photographs and videos and location sharing. It can exchange contacts with people nearby via Bluetooth and provides various features for contacting people at random if desired. Users can send previously saved or live pictures and videos and other items either individually or in a group chat. It is currently available on Android, iPhone, BlackBerry, Windows Phone and Symbian phones. Web-based OS X and Windows application are also available.

'Moments' is the friend-sharing feature in *WeChat* but since this research focus on ICT-mediated public participation from *BBS* to the *Weibo* age, the influence of *WeChat* will not be involved. However, *WeChat* is gradually growing into an influential tool in information exchange and dissemination in China.

3.3.3 Blogs

'Blog' is a contraction of 'web log'. It is the fourth online communication form since the emergence of Email, *BBS* and *ICQ*. It is a discussion or information site published on the Web consisting of discrete entries (posts) displayed in reverse chronological order (the most recent entry appears first). The posts can be personal diary, article, graph or video to document and share information. They became popular after the

September 11 attacks in 2001. A blog is usually operated by an individual, or occasionally by a small group with shared interest. They are known as bloggers. The comment board is a place for readers to interact with the blogger or other audiences. As an important part of social media, blogs represent a new way of life in the information era.

In China, there are three stages in blog development: the forming stage (before 2001), the rising stage (2002 – 2005) and the evolution stage (2005 – now). *Sina* was launched in April 2005 by one of the largest web portals in China, *Sina Network*. The ‘star policy’ in *Sina* made it the most popular blog channel in China, featuring entertainers, scholars, celebrities and popular grass-root bloggers. The key features of *Sina* are its number of visitors, the ‘friend’ function, the message function, a comment board and topic categorisation. It also includes a photo album, music, podcast and blogger question & answer function.

Q-zone is a personal web space platform established by *Tencent* in April 2005. The main function of *Q-zone* is blogging, but because it is linked with the user’s *QQ* account, it reaches a wider user base. The customisable interface in *Q-zone* allows users to set personalise their site, which gives users a strong sense of belonging. *Q-zone* has many features and functions which have greatly boosted its market share to 606 million active users (*Tencent*, 2017). Although initially similar to other platforms, it gradually transferred the original blog site into a multi-functional social networking site to meet the demand of internet users. Therefore, the number of *Q-zone* user kept growing while blog sites experienced a decline. The development route of the blog has changed from the earliest massification of grassroots blog culture to a niche space for bloggers with specialised knowledge. As a result, the public shows a tendency in using social networking sites with higher level of interactivity, such as *Q-zone* and *Weibo*.

Blogs and other forms of internet expression and discussion have created a new realm

for public discourse (Lagerkvist, 2005). However, bloggers in China live in a less free and democratic atmosphere because of government censorship, which prevented blogs from realising the full function of an alternative press (MacKinnon, 2009). The commercialisation of blog services provides a space for celebrities from various fields to share information and to meet the demands of their fans. There are also popular bloggers who post journalistic reports or literary articles for large audiences, who engage instead in irony, parody and innuendo, enabling informed readers to ‘read between the lines’ about the bloggers’ real point (Esarey and Xiao, 2008). It is a newly created alternative approach for bloggers to avoid the censorship system. Though such an approach makes it possible for blogs to serve as a platform to form public opinion and to exchange information, the Chinese blogosphere is still under the surveillance of the Chinese government, which makes it different from the United States and other Western countries in terms of blog’s relationship to government and media.

3.3.4 Social networking sites

Social networking sites are platforms for individuals to form and maintain online friendships, taking advantage of the advancement of communication theory and the understanding of complex social networks. Individuals use the functions in SNS, such as messaging and sharing information to extend their connections in the online world. In SNS such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Renren*, users create a profile to represent themselves, including information about their age, location and interest. They allow users to post blog entries to keep as an online journal and to share with friends. Uploading pictures and videos on SNS is another popular form of documenting and sharing one’s life. Users can extend their connections through searching for people with similar interests. Compared with the blogosphere, SNS focus on the increase and consolidation of online acquaintanceships. A similar feature between the blogosphere and SNS is that users in both environments can easily create and join groups or communities who share the same interests and activities, but the messaging service

and other communication channel in SNS empowers higher level of interactivity.

Social network theory is the foundation of SNS. A social network is defined as a set of social entities that includes people and organisations that are connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships and who interact with each other (Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1997; O'Murchu, Breslin and Decker, 2004). The traditional form of a social network service focuses on relationship types such as friends and face-to-face relationships, but SNS in the *Web 2.0* age brings more focus to the online virtual community and computer-mediated communication (Kwon and Wen, 2010).

Boyd and Ellison define SNS as:

‘web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site’ (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p.211).

Kwon and Wen simplify the definition of SNS as:

‘a web-based service which is based on certain meaningful and valuable relationships including friendship, kinship, interests and activities, etc. Social network services allow individuals to network for a variety of purposes including sharing information, building and exploring the relationship, etc.’ (Kwon and Wen, 2010, p.255)

The two terms – ‘social network site’ and ‘social networking site’ – are often used interchangeably in public discourse. In this research, ‘networking’ is chosen to emphasise the relationship initiation. SNS help expand and strengthen one’s connections by facilitating networking, which is an essential channel for information exchange and resource sharing in the online public sphere (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The uniqueness of SNS is that it allows users to dominate, shape and articulate their social networks, and it is easier for users to make themselves visible on the online networks compared with off-line networks. (Boyd and Ellison, 2008)

SNS is a cyber-environment in which a variety of online communities are nurtured. The multimedia communication elements in SNS such as instant messaging, photos and video clips make it a collaborative tool to accelerate group formation and escalate group scope and influence (Kane, et al., 2009; Pfeil, Arjan and Zaphiris, 2009; Ross et al., 2009). It provides a straightforward approach to extend and strengthen connections between users with shared interests and activities (Kwon and Wen, 2010). The online communities formed on SNS cover a wide range of topics such as history and art, while others may pay special attention to law, human rights and environmental protection. The growing influence of SNS, not only on the individual's side, but also on society's side, has successfully drawn the attention of industry and academia, which in return has boosted user growth and the development of SNS (Lin and Lu, 2011). Online advertising is a popular business mode taking advantage of SNS. By mixing personal and business messages, companies create a particular context that sets the stage for online marketing. As Nielsen (2009) indicated, an appropriate amount and frequency of business postings together with a user-preferred casual message style is beneficial to guarantee a more stable customer base.

The popularisation of modern communication devices has facilitated the advancement of SNS. SNS have penetrated people's lives and greatly influenced how people network in the modern society (Kiesler, et al., 2002; Lin and Lu, 2011). It empowers individuals to exhibit themselves, connect to a social community and extend and reinforce the relationships with others (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007; Kane, et al., 2009). After benefiting from SNS, users usually spread it to their friends and relatives. Positive feedback increases the number of platform members (Powell, 2009). The use of SNS satisfies individuals' need for social relatedness by giving them a sense of belonging in social network or social communities (Kiehne, 2004).

3.3.4.1 *Renren* Network

The *Renren* Network, formerly known as *Xiaonei*, was one of the earliest SNS in

China and particularly popular among college students. In February 2011, *Renren* announced that it had reached 160 million registered users, and this had increased to 31 million active monthly users by April the same year (Chao, 2011).

Xiaonei was launched in December 2005 by four students from Tsinghua University. It is a Chinese social network service with a *Web 2.0* concept designed for college students. Initially it provided services with an interface similar to early *Facebook*; users were only able to use email address and specific IP address from designated colleges to register and log in. The initial idea was to control the user base and to encourage users to post blogs and pictures under their real names. *Xiaonei* became China's largest online community among tertiary institution in 2008. In August 2009, *Xiaonei* officially changed its name to *Renren* and repositioned itself beyond the student market. The name change from *Xiaonei* ('on campus') to *Renren* ('everyone') reflected its determination for transition to be a SNS not merely dedicated to university students, but to all Chinese internet users. To expand its market, some additional features were launched, such as the customisation of personal interface and profile, an advanced search function, alumni communities and interest groups.

Renren gained success in the following years, but with the rise of *Weibo* and *WeChat*, it has experienced a huge decline, and its market value has shrunk nearly 92% from 2011 to 2017 (Wang, 2017).

3.3.5 Microblogging in China

In recent years, microblogs have emerged as an important social media platform for Chinese citizens to share information, to debate and to network, (Svensson, 2014) and in 2010 microblogging made its big breakthrough in China. Several important news stories and public events were first spread in the microblog sphere, which made more people turn to microblogs to obtain timely and accurate information. Whereas the use of *Twitter* in the West is quite low in most countries – for example, only 18% of the American population used *Twitter* in 2013 – a bigger percentage of the Chinese

internet population is actively using microblogs. According to official statistics, 55.8% of Chinese citizens have access to the internet in 2018 and 40.9% of them are microblogs users (CNNIC, 2018). The 2017 *Sina Weibo* report indicated a total of 376 million monthly active microblog accounts. *Weibo* users produced around 4.3 billion posts in 2017 (*Weibo* report, 2017). Diversity is shown in the identity of microblog accounts: both general citizens and organisations use it as a main social media. A strong need for a public space is revealed through the popularity of microblogs. Chinese people need a place where they can make a voice, acquire and disseminate information. Yang claims that:

‘like users of other Chinese SNS, *Weibo* users do all sorts of things. Most people are engaged in chitchat, sharing even the most intimate details about personal life. Others talk about current affairs and politics. Still others use it for civic organising and mobilisation for online and offline action’ (Yang, 2012, p.50).

The substance of microblog is a combination of blog and instant messaging as it allows users to create and deliver a short message through mobile phones, which provides a fast way of communication. Lu and Qiu (2013) summarised the technological characteristics of microblogging as content fragmentation, multichannel integration and viral dissemination. They argued that such characteristics have revolutionised content consumption. Users are able to act as both sources and sensors of information. Sources refer to the online sharing of one’s observation and opinions on certain issues. Sensors refer to users’ own processing of information to understand other people’s perceptions on certain topics, to enhance one’s situational awareness and to probe into the thoughts of the populace (Lu and Qiu, 2013).

Microblogging is significantly influencing the establishment of civil society and the public sphere in contemporary China (Lu and Qiu, 2013). Multivariate features are generated: the impacts of microblogging are both contradictory and symbiotic. Unlike official authority, it gives rise to the organisation of social campaigns, the formation of opinion leaders and to the emergence of internet rumour and manipulation,

entertainment media and ephemerality.

In China, speech and connectivity on microblogs is not only guided by state control and censorship, it also involves a variety of stakeholders and relationships. The Chinese government both encourages and controls the use of microblogs to ‘shape’ public opinion. Internet companies propagandise their own products and services and empower privileges to certain users for commercial consideration (Lagerkvist, 2012). In the meantime, influential users take creative strategies to benefit from microblog channels. Taking *Sina Weibo* as an example, it encourages and privileges opinion leaders and celebrities to promote its market share and enhance the popularity of the platform, which raises official concern and has resulted in the government forcing the company to control and censor the content posted on *Weibo*, especially for the more outspoken users (ibid).

3.3.5.1 *Sina Weibo*

‘*Weibo*’ is the Chinese word for ‘microblog’. *Sina Weibo* is a Chinese microblogging website with a *Web 2.0* concept. Akin to a hybrid of *Twitter* and *Facebook*, it is one of the most popular SNS in China and *Weibo.com* is one of the most visited online platforms for internet users to share, communicate and acquire information, which is used by over 40.9% of Chinese internet users, with a market penetration similar to *Twitter* (CNNIC, 2018). It was launched by *Sina* Corporation on 14 August 2009 and as of December 2012 had 503 million registered users, about 100 million messages are posted each day (Tao, 2015). According to *Sina*’s report, the monthly active users of *Sina Weibo* reached 376 million (*Weibo* report, 2017).

Sina Weibo implements many features from *Twitter*. A user may post with a 2,000 character limit, mention or talk to other people using ‘@Username’ formatting, add hashtags, follow other users to make their posts appear in one’s own timeline, repost, select posts for one’s favourites list and verify the account if the user is a celebrity. Each *Weibo* user has a personal profile that may include basic information

(e.g., hobbies, hometown, etc.) and statistics (e.g., total posts, followers and followings). Official and third-party applications allow users to access *Sina Weibo* from other websites or platforms. Mackinnon (2008) claimed that *Sina Weibo* can be considered as an upgrade of *BBS* due to its features of message threading and the freedom of commenting other's posts. It is a more sophisticated medium which obtained great popularity among Chinese netizens. Various levels of verification are also available.

3.3.5.2 *Tencent Weibo*

Tencent Weibo is another Chinese microblogging website launched by *Tencent* in April 2010. Like *Sina Weibo*, the idea of *Tencent Weibo* is to connect all users together but with support to the user's *QQ* account. *Tencent* company does not intend to launch *Tencent Weibo* at a strategic level, but as a marketing tactic to curb competitors. With the support of *Tencent QQ*, *Tencent Weibo* has an important characteristic, which is the large amount of *QQ* overlap with *Tencent Weibo*.

In February 2011, the number of registered users on *Tencent Weibo* reached more than 100 million (*Tencent Tech*, 2011). However, although *Tencent Weibo* was developed with great expectations and was even positioned as an important social media platform in China, at *Tencent 2015* annual meeting, *Tencent Weibo* was referred to as an essential service and that 'we need to give way to develop *WeChat*' (Wang, 2014). This message showed that, over the past few years, *Tencent Weibo* never caught up with its competitor, *Sina Weibo*, and this niche product finally reached the end of its mission.

3.4 Comparison of different online platforms

As shown in Table 2, compared with other online platforms, *Weibo* has the widest range of communication patterns. It includes all three communication modes: 'one to one', 'one to many' and 'many to many'. Even with a text limit of 2,000 words, the content displayed on *Weibo* covers all categories of topics and focuses more on latest

news and hot issues. In terms of user relationship, acquaintance exists in most SNS and IM platforms, while strangers are mostly gathered by shared interests or opinions. Overall, among the existing online platforms, *Weibo* has developed into a very mature ICT application with high immediacy and strong interactivity, which enhances its potential of becoming an online public sphere in China.

Table 2. A comparison of different online platforms

Online Platform	BBS/Forum	Blog	SNS (Facebook, Renren)	Instant Messaging (QQ)	Weibo
Communication Pattern	One to many; users cannot delete others' comments.	One to many; blogger can delete readers' comments.	One to many; SNS personal page owners can regulate comments and information on their own sites.	One to one; one to many in group chat or chat rooms	One to one; one to many; many to many; every user can comment on other's posts and can delete one's own comments.
Characteristics of Information	Unlimited text, a wide range of topics; dynamic up-to-date information communication and exchange; posts are usually short and concise.	Unlimited text, a variety of topics; less dynamic in hot issues and latest news; posts are longer and more in-depth than BBS/Forum.	Unlimited text, daily life topics; focus on interpersonal relationship.	Unlimited text, include variety forms of picture, audio and video; random chat topics.	Limited text in 2,000 words; all kinds of topics; focus on latest news and hot issues.
User's Relationship	Most are strangers; gathering by same interest.	Most are strangers; some audiences are attracted by celebrity bloggers.	Most are acquaintance.	Acquaintance	Most are acquaintance; strangers gathering by same posts.
Immediacy and Interactivity	Weak immediacy; weak interactivity	Normal immediacy; weak interactivity	Strong immediacy; strong interactivity	Strong immediacy; very strong interactivity	Very strong immediacy; very strong interactivity

3.5 Summary

The first part of this chapter demonstrated that the internet is developing at a staggering rate in China. Internet access has become easier, faster and more flexible and there has been a huge increase in internet users in China. During the initial stage, the Chinese internet imitated ICTs from developed countries, but by the SNS stage, China had established a variety of internet companies which brought advanced and creative technological products and applications with their own characteristics. The second part of this chapter focused on the era of *Web 2.0*.

Overall, this chapter has presented the contextual background of the thesis through an analysis of the historical development of ICT in China, to enable a better understanding of the role that it played in the three case studies. As will be explained

in the following chapters, *BBS*/forums played a significant role during the development of the Sun Zhigang incident; in the Xiamen PX plant event, blogging represented a vital online platform to mobilise a grassroots campaign; and in the Yihuang incident, *Weibo* was used by the victims and their representatives to appeal for justice.

This chapter has covered popular online platforms, which are the main technology supports for public participation in my case studies. Therefore, it facilitates the readers of my thesis to better understand these online products, as they are mainly used by Chinese netizens. This chapter has also discussed the fundamental issues of internet governance and information monitoring systems in China, which will help the readers to grasp the unique situation of the Chinese internet environment.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the main research methods used and the rationale for choosing them.

The ‘government-media-public’ analytical framework of the research requires examination of each group. To do this, three research methods were employed: questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews and case studies.

The questionnaire surveys sought to investigate the netizens’ opinions about the empowerment of ICT and the public’s attitudes towards government regulations and decision-making. Conducting the questionnaire survey anonymously reduced worries for Chinese citizens and offered them the opportunity to express their views freely. A questionnaire survey is also a direct way to answer the research questions from the perspective of the public.

Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the media’s perspective.

Interviewees were chosen from commercial internet companies, state-owned media enterprises and official media departments. A wide range of interviewees can provide diverse information from different aspects in the media domain and it helped understand their experiences and opinions toward the empowerment of social media services, the dynamics and forms of online public participation, their knowledge about the public events chosen in the case studies, and most importantly, their professional views about the changing relationship among the three parties.

Choices about the cases were made deliberately on the basis of their meaning in Chinese society. The aim of the case studies was to collect materials to examine the dynamic relationships between the three elements, but each had a specific emphasis. The death of Sun Zhigang was mainly about the issue of human rights; it was used to explore the relationship between the public and the government, and to discuss the

possibility of online or quasi-public sphere in China. The Xiamen PX plant case focused on the problem of environmental protection in China, and the relationship between the media companies and the official sectors. The Yihuang self-immolation incident concerned people's livelihood in China. Through the information and discussions about this incident, I investigated how online public participation develops on social networking sites.

This chapter begins with the explanation of two types of data in my thesis: the primary data and secondary data. It then covers the design and the content of the three main research methods. The last section deals with the ethical consideration in my thesis.

4.2 Primary data and secondary data

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Here, primary data refers to the original data collected through the questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. Secondary data is extracted from existing materials, including previous studies in the area, newspaper reports, online articles and comments.

4.2.1 Primary data

There were two parts in the questionnaire. The first consisted of control variables to collect basic personal information from the respondents, and their opinion of ICT. There were three different versions of the second part in the survey, which corresponded to the three cases in the thesis. It consisted of explorative questions which investigated the respondents' experience in citizen engagement, motivations in public participation, views in the online public sphere and attitudes toward government performance.

Because the number of internet users is enormous, it is not feasible to conduct a study individually and questionnaires are the most suitable approach to such large research subjects. The data collected from a questionnaire is presented in a relatively systematic and straightforward way, which can also alleviate the difficulty in

analysing and interpreting it.

To explore the media's perception of ICTs and its coping mechanism with the increasing number of users and the government's control, the collection of objective data was vital in this research. Since questionnaires largely depend on a self-judgment scale that leads to a collection of subjective data, it was unlikely to be the appropriate method here. There is a limited number of major internet media companies in China, which made the use of semi-structured interviews possible. A semi-structured interview not only collects data for specifically designed research questions, but can also inspire new ideas which provide additional data and more in-depth insights from the view of media practitioners.

Data from the government was also needed in this thesis. Because the administration system of China's network is becoming more and more transparent to the public, government regulations and policies for the internet and ICTs can be easily found through official publications. Due to certain restrictions and pressure, Chinese government officials may not answer questions in a meaningful sense regardless of the form of questionnaire or interview. There is thus little meaningful data that can be collected from government officials. Therefore, information concerning the government was retrieved using an indirect approach by means of a case study. I investigated the government's role through the analysis of its interaction with the other two factors in the triangular framework, and the implications for the result of the questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews.

4.2.2 Secondary data

Secondary data inspired the design of methodology in the research. By exploring the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies, I learned about the challenges and difficulties that might arise, and gained knowledge that help solve the problems. By investigating media reports from various resources, details of the three cases were found which offered solid data for the case studies in the research.

To meet the aim of the study, it was also necessary to take into account the perspectives of different actors from varying institutional backgrounds. A critical realist perspective was therefore appropriate. Though online materials are not exactly academic literature, they are an essential part of the secondary data in this thesis. Blogs, journals and commentators' articles form part of a full picture of the online public sphere for public participation. Revisiting the reports of the related events uncovered initially little-known background information and indicated how public opinion was formed. Thus, such materials supplied data from different perspectives for the case study, which helped in the analysis of the three cases in a comprehensive and logical way. It served as a supplement for the primary data and enhanced the objectivity and thoroughness of the thesis.

4.3 Questionnaire Surveys

Questionnaire surveys were used to investigate how the public perceive the opportunities offered by ICT, how they make use of them, their views on three well-known ICT-mediated public participation cases, and their opinion on the government's old and new regulations in information control and media market. Because Chinese citizens do not enjoy real freedom of speech, this anonymous survey allowed people to express their views without further worries. The questionnaires were designed directly corresponding to the research questions, and was the easiest and most effective way to get answers from the public.

4.3.1 Design of the questionnaire

The questionnaire surveys were conducted on two professional survey websites, *wenjuan.com* (a domestic Chinese site) and *typeform.com* (a Spanish online survey site). To explain why questionnaires were held on two different sites, it is necessary to bring up the censorship mechanism of the Chinese survey website. Since network access is limited and under government control, many foreign websites are difficult to access in China. To avoid network connection problems, I decided to conduct the

survey on a domestic Chinese website. Questionnaires regarding the Sun Zhigang case and the Xiamen PX plant case went through the survey site's internal investigation process successfully. However, the questionnaire regarding the Yihuang self-immolation case was censored as it was held 'inappropriate to disseminate'. An employee of the survey company suggested deleting the third questionnaire as it might be blocked or banned in the data collection process. Therefore, an alternative way was sought. After investigation and testing, *typeform.com* was chosen as it can be accessed freely in China and, as with *wenjuan.com*, anonymity of the respondents is guaranteed.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the link of the survey was put on the commentary areas of major website portals such as *NetEase*, *Sina* and *Tencent*, *BBS* and forums such as *Tieba.Baidu.com*, *dzh.mop.com*, *BBS.Tianya.cn*, *zhihu.com*, *club.kdnet.net*, *BBS.xmfish.com* and *Yihuang Forum*. Popular social networking sites such as *Sina Weibo*, *Tencent Weibo*, *QQ* groups were also used, and a link to the survey was also sent directly to internet users who had commented, discussed or forwarded information about the three cases on *BBS*/forums and *Weibo* platforms. These measures guaranteed that the primary data was collected from members of the public who were concerned about the three cases.

To demonstrate the reliability of the questionnaire, in the recruiting message that sent to the potential respondents the following points were made clearly. It firstly introduced the background information of the researcher and the study aim, with a declaration that the questionnaire was only to be used for academic research. Blair et al. (1977) and Andrews (1984) pointed out that if questions or groups of questions concerning the same topic were preceded by a medium-length introduction (30 words, Blair et al., 1977; 16 to 64 words, Andrews, 1984), the collected data quality could be greatly increased. Hence, I briefly explained the specific case that related to the questionnaire. There was also a reminder for respondents indicating that only those who knew the case or participated in its dissemination or discussion should answer

this survey. It also stated that all questionnaires would be destroyed when this research project is completed. Considering the situation in China, these declarations can alleviate respondents' concern when answering and ensure a higher response rate. Since it is impossible to collect data from every member of society, it is also necessary to decide the portion of a population to be surveyed. According to Roscoe (2007), a sample size between 30 – 500 is appropriate for most research. In the event, 115, 109 and 133 respondents answered the three questionnaires, with an average response rate of 36%. Some of the respondents worried about the sensitivity of the three cases and refused to complete the questionnaire (stated in their replies to my survey invitation). Thus, among all surveys, the numbers of valid copies are 105 (the death of Sun Zhigang case), 105 (Xiamen PX plant event) and 110 (Yihuang self-immolation incident).

4.3.2 Content of the questionnaire

Prior to the survey questions, a summary of the case was presented in the beginning of the survey, and then there were two parts to each questionnaire. The first consisted of control variables to investigate the background information about respondents and their experience of using social networking services: for example, the respondent's gender, age, occupation, income level, education background, online active time, location information and which social networking sites that they were using or has registered for. It also included respondents' attitudes towards online topics and public events, their motivations and ways of getting involved in public participation, and their views on the government's information control.

It is necessary to clarify that the purpose in designing the first part of the questionnaire is due to the uncertainty of the respondents to the survey. As explained in the following section (4.4), different from the semi-structured interviews in my study, the number and identity of participants is explicit, and they are only limited to media practitioners. Hence, the demographic features of the survey respondents were

considered necessary when designing the questionnaire. In addition, the initial plan was to examine if there exists a relationship between people's background information (e.g. gender, age, occupation, educational level, income level) and their preference and perception on public participation. However, the survey results did not demonstrate a significant relationship between these two aspects. The background information of the survey respondents drawn from the first part of each questionnaire is summarised below (Table 3) for readers' reference. As can be seen in Table 3, the respondents to each survey covered a wide range of population group. Hence, the survey result is representative and can be generalised to a wider extent.

Table 3. Respondents background information in the questionnaire survey

		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
Gender	Male	77.14%	74.29%	60%
	Female	22.86%	25.71%	40%
Age	Below 18	1.90%	0.95%	10%
	18-25	39.05%	34.29%	31.82%
	26-35	32.38%	45.71%	39.10%
	Above 35	26.67%	19.05%	19.10%
Education background	Primary school	0	0	0
	Junior high school	0.95%	0	3.64%
	Senior high school	4.76%	2.86%	16.36%
	Bachelor's degree	52.38%	71.43%	47.27%
	Master	35.24%	22.86%	28.18%
	PhD	6.67%	2.86%	4.55%
Current occupation	Student	24.76%	20.95%	30%
	Worker	5.71%	5.71%	3.64%
	Farmer	0.95%	0.95%	1.82%
	Civil servant	11.42%	6.67%	10%

	Professional	37.14%	36.19%	27.27%
	Freelancer	14.29%	13.33%	14.55%
	Other	5.71%	16.19%	12.73%
Annual income level	Less than 21000	22.86%	27.62%	30.91%
	21000-24000	2.86%	4.76%	4.55%
	24000-30000	1.90%	2.86%	6.36%
	30000-48000	14.29%	6.67%	10.91%
	More than 48000	58.10%	58.10%	47.27%
Location	Tier-1 cities	37.14%	63.81%	23.64%
	Non-tier-1 cities	54.29%	32.38%	68.57%
	Overseas	8.57%	3.81%	11.43%
Time spend on internet	Less than 1 hour	6.67%	5.71%	10.91%
	1-2 hours	34.29%	23.81%	26.36%
	2-4 hours	41.90%	34.29%	39.09%
	More than 4 hours	17.14%	36.19%	23.64%
SNS using/registered	BBS/forum	58.26%	57.80%	41.82%
	Blog	45.22%	39.45%	25.45%
	Weibo	85.22%	84.40%	77.27%
	Renren	61.74%	48.62%	50%
	Q-zone	67.83%	74.31%	77.27%
	WeChat Moments	98.26%	91.74%	90%
	Douban	40.87%	35.78%	19.09%
	Others	10.43%	6.42%	2.73%

The rationale of the questionnaire survey is to explore the mechanism of public participation through self-declared data. In the second part of the surveys, a set of common questions were designed to gain an overall image of the patterns of public participation. Questions regarding ‘the social networking sites that respondents are using or have used before’ and ‘the events that they are interested in’ inform the

respondents' preference in new media platforms in the context of ICT development. Questions regarding 'the reasons for pay attention to or participate in social events' and 'the ways in getting involved in social events' inform the dynamics and forms of public participation. Questions regarding respondents' 'experience and perception of censorship' can inform the general situation of government's information control and attitude towards online public participation.

The third part of the surveys were designed specifically for each selected case. It involves questions regarding the 'information dissemination channel in each case' and 'respondents' judgement in the reliability of information source', which inform the application of new media platforms in each case in different political, social and technological environments. Questions regarding the respondents' 'evaluation of the event result and the influence of the event' inform participants' perception on 'government-public' interaction in each case.

In addition to these common questions, each of the survey had its own emphasis. In the survey of the Sun Zhigang incident, by asking 'which medium the respondents prefer to believe as an information source', 'their evaluation on the collaboration between new media and traditional media', and 'the ranking on the influential level of different media platforms', the results can inform the transition of traditional media and new media platform in the Sun Zhigang incident as it is situated in the initial stage of new media in China. It also examines the existence of online public sphere and the changing 'public-government' relationship with the emergence of new media.

In the survey of the Xiamen PX plant case, questions regarding 'respondents' attitudes and experience of the offline movement in the event', it can inform the public's perception on both online and offline public participation, as well as the role of media in promoting social campaign. While questions regarding respondents' 'judgement on the substance of the event – PX plant', the result can inform whether rational public opinion can be formed in face of controversial topic. Questions regarding the

respondents' view on 'whether the government should guide public opinion' can inform the public's perspective on 'government-media' relationship.

In the survey of the Yihuang self-immolation case, questions regarding the respondents' view on 'how to react to the livelihood issue – house demolition and relocation' can inform the public's awareness of using media to solve social issues and to safeguard their own rights. It helps explore the 'public-media' relationship. Moreover, questions regarding the respondents' perception on 'the Yihuang victims' behaviour throughout the event' can inform their ability in judging massive information and whether rational public opinion can be formed in the cyberspace.

To summarise, the purpose of the questionnaire is to isolate 'the public' from the triangular framework, focusing on how the public makes use of the social media products in large social events. Besides, these questionnaires were designed with various detailed questions to reply the derivative problems brought by the related cases, which could be treated as the supplement to restore the events. For example, respondents provide information regarding the evolving public participation in different ICT developments which reflects technological empowerment. Also, exploratory questions in the public opinion on these three typical cases from different areas indicate what kind of public events or incidents can draw people's long-term attention based on a thorough demographic analysis.

Since participation is voluntary, it is reasonable to consider the possibility of selection bias that may influence the result of this thesis. To address this, the findings of the questionnaire were considered together with the secondary data collected from media materials. The copies of the questionnaire surveys are presented at Appendix 1, 2 and 3.

4.4 Semi-structured interviews

4.4.1 Design of the interviews

According to Blakeslee and Fleischer (2007):

‘[i]nterviews are opportunities to explore with a participant, in an in-depth manner, a situation, experience, or issue. Interviews provide information both about the person being interviewed and from that person’s perspective. They provide insight into the person’s thoughts, perceptions, feelings, motivations, responses, and actions in relation to the issues or situations being explored in the research’ (Blakeslee and Fleischer, 2007, p.129).

Located somewhere between the extremes of completely standardised and completely unstandardised interviewing structures is the semi-standardised interview, which is also called the semi-structured interview (Berg, 2001). This type of interview involves the use of a number of predetermined questions or topics. These are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewees are allowed to digress and the interviewer is permitted to probe further beyond the answers to their prepared and standardised questions (ibid).

Semi-structured interview was used to look into the research questions from the media market’s perspective. It targeted at the staff from major web portals and social networking websites in China, such as *Sina*, *NetEase*, *Tencent* and some major *BBS*/forums, as well as those who had worked or were currently working in state-owned media enterprises, and official media departments. Interviewees were practitioners who worked as an editor, content operator, technician or manager in the media market. A wide range of interviewees can provide sufficient information from different aspects in the domain and by comparing commercial and state-owned media enterprises, we can examine the differences in the content operation and administration between the two, and investigate the changes in the government’s attitude towards information control and internet media.

Eight interviews were conducted. The interviewees were contacted through a recruiting email that explained the study and provided a list of provisional interview questions. The purpose of the study, interview procedures, data protection and other ethical issues were also explained in the email. The identity of interviewees is anonymised as *Interviewee 1*, *Interviewee 2* ... in the thesis.

4.4.2 Content of the interviews

Prior to the interview, an information sheet was provided to the participants which included information of the researcher, the thesis topic, the length of the interview, and two alternative ways of conducting the interview (by telephone or online instant messaging service). I indicated that the telephone interviews would be recorded. No matter which way they chose, anonymity was always the primary consideration.

The interview questions attempted to explore the media professionals' perception of the rapid development of new media in China and the role of the media market in the triangular system. It focused on their views on the evolution of information technology from *BBS*/forums to the *Weibo* age. A copy of the interview questions is at Appendix 4. I also sought to determine, from their professional experience, the sort of public events that can draw long-term attention in China's cyberspace and their comments on the examples of public participation during the boom of the internet in China and their views towards the influence of new media on the development of the three cases. The interviewees were also asked to compare the roles of the print media, radio, television and new media in the development of this kind of social event, and to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each.

The interview also examined whether the media market has the ability to influence internet users' behaviour and to determine the extent to which the media market can guide public opinion, and how internet media companies balance their own profits and professional ethics in light of the government's regulations and policies. The interviewees were also asked to rank these factors and explain the priority consideration in the operation of new media companies; in other words, which of the three parts of the triangle takes the bigger proportion of the power, and whether ICT had changed that. The interview also included the practitioners' comments on the interaction between the public and the official sectors via the internet, the regular pattern of the interaction, and the chances of success or failure in online public

participation.

The interview also explored the coordination between media companies and the government's censorship policy. It looked at the information control and which government departments that internet media companies need to deal with, as well as the responsible departments for the supervision, reward and penalty of the companies. It also sought to explore the government's intention in the control of the internet media and the particular measures taken to fulfil that intention. Finally, it asked the interviewees to evaluate the current environment of China's cyberspace, assess whether it was more liberal or more rigid, and speculate on whether a public sphere exists in China's cyberspace.

4.5 Case Studies

As a method for in-depth investigation, the case study provides a highly detailed, contextualised analysis of an event combined with data, investigators and theories. Feagin et al. (1991) argued that the case study method permits researchers to discover complex sets of decisions and to recount the effect of decisions over time, and political and social scientists pay close attention to such phenomena.

Some authors supported the idea of furthering understanding by focusing on the details of particular cases (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Stake, 2000). Flyvbjerg (2001) argued that social science should not try to emulate the natural sciences in a search for context-independent predictive theories, but rather should concern itself more with producing context-dependent knowledge. This means making greater use of case studies as detailed exemplars from which to better understand a phenomenon.

Stake (2000) suggested that:

‘a case is often thought of as a constituent member of a target population. And since single members poorly represent whole populations, the case study is seen to be a poor basis for generalisation. Often, however, the situation is one in which there is need for generalisation about that particular case or generalisation to a similar case rather than generalisation

to a population of cases. Then the demands for typicality and representativeness yield to needs for assurance that the target case is properly described. As readers recognise essential similarities to cases of interest to them, they establish the basis for naturalistic generalisation' (Stake, 2000, p. 23).

This vicarious experience is the way in which people gain knowledge and amend their experiences. Hakim (2000) argued that the greatest proportional gain in confidence in the results of a case study project is achieved when the number of cases is increased from one to two or three. Simply put, more cases provide more data to relate to theory and therefore more evidence to use when the aim is to further understanding.

According to Yin (1994), multiple case studies can provide more compelling evidence than a single case study, and Schofield (2009) stated that, where findings have emerged from a number of places, this increases the researcher's confidence in applying their hypothesis to a new situation.

Given the uniqueness of China's internet environment and the complexity of the national condition, I chose three typical cases in ICT-mediated public participation. Typical cases could be described as those showing the attributes of a wider population (Rose, 1991). Hakim (2000) defined a strategic case as being one which can provide the most evidence for use in explanation. Patton (1987) also defined a critical case as being a test case, being chosen as where a theory is most or least likely to be proven.

Hence, choices about the cases were made deliberately and on the basis of their representative meaning in Chinese society. The triangular system acts as a theoretical framework, and the purpose of the case studies is to collect materials from different perspectives to elaborate the relationships between the three aspects.

The three incidents I chose are symbolic public participations in the context of ICT development and reflect different levels of people's concern, from the public good to private good. The case study of the death of Sun Zhigang aimed to investigate the cooperation between traditional media and new media, the unprecedented opportunities empowered by *BBS*/forums at the beginning of the digital age, and

active public participation from all sectors of society. It helped explore why the incident directly caused change in laws and regulations, and whether the online or quasi-public sphere existed during the case. The Xiamen PX plant case focused on the substantial change in the public's awareness of civil society, environmental protection and civic rights. The dynamics of the case come from a broader sense, meaning participation for the public good. Instant messaging services, social networking sites and blogs were the main platforms for public expression and the major channels for information dissemination. This case emphasised the role of ICT-mediated public participation and its shift to real-life mass movements. It shed light on the confrontation between the public and the government facilitated by ICT tools.

The Yihuang self-immolation incident was sensational because the focus switched to the real concerns about people's livelihood. Information and discussions about this incident were primarily on *Weibo* and other social networking sites, which led to a wider range of public participation. Media guidance and how government dealt with relevant information played a significant role in the development of this incident.

The death of Sun Zhigang is a typical example that demonstrates people's concern about human rights, justice and legislation. Through cooperation between traditional media and new media, information about the incident was disseminated widely and attracted extensive discussion. The internet became the major platform for people to question, interact and petition and resulted in individuals' real-name participation in demanding for constitutional change. Public opinion finally drew senior leaders' attention and led to the abolition of a law. The reaction to the incident was regarded as a milestone of public participation via internet (mainly *BBS*/forums and Web portals) and it also represented the turning point between traditional media and new media.

The Xiamen PX plant case and the other cases relating to building chemical factories show people's increasing awareness of environmental protection and their growing requirements for good living conditions. In the Xiamen PX plant case, information flowed via *SMS*, *BBS*/forums and blog discussions. The residents in Xiamen gathered

to protest against the building of a chemical factory in their homeland. It eventually led to a change in the local government's decision-making and represented various dynamics and forms of public participation in local development. It stands for the new cooperation between online activism and real-life movements. In this case study, I attempted to explain the relationship between the government and the media companies from different aspects.

Finally, cases of forced house demolition and relocation are piling up one on top of another. It is one of the consequences of China's rapid economic development, but it is also an essential matter concerning people's livelihood which requires urgent resolution. A number of families suffered from either local government or some enterprise's violent eviction and house demolition. The Yihuang self-immolation incident is a typical example of violent house demolition which attracted extensive attention for a long time. Government authorities and demolition workers came to the home of the Zhong family, and three family members climbed to the roof and burnt themselves with gasoline in protest. In the dissemination of this incident, *Weibo* played a vital role. This thesis has analysed the existing materials on the incident, retrieved the development history, investigated the relationship between the turning point of this incident and the internet, and discussed the causes of the prompt solution of this specific incident. After several severe incidents, the government changed the original policy from 'administrative forced eviction and demolition' to 'judicial forced eviction and demolition' in which the decision-making is given to a local or higher court instead of local government. Since the court is not a stakeholder in the forced demolition cases, it seems that the victims can finally gain justice. However, it does not stop tragedies of people losing their lives or property in the eviction process. It is typical of the cases that the public pays continuous attention but has not sought a solution. Analysis of these cases can help explain the interaction between the public and media, which means the technological empowerment for the public when they are using the online platforms. In this case study, I also proposed the dangers of online

rumours and fake information in media space.

In the chapters of three case studies, I analyse the cases in a thorough way and discuss the interaction between the media companies, netizens and government departments in real-life situations. I also look into the cases from different stakeholders' perspectives, attempting to find out how public participation influences the government's decision-making using the device of public consensus via the China's cyberspace. There is also a comparison of the cases to determine the conditions and challenges in the process of changing the government's decision-making and the influential factors contributing to the netizens' behaviour and the forms of public activity to test if media has made a difference.

4.6 Ethical considerations

All data gathered from participants is confidential. All respondents in the research are anonymous and participation was voluntary. Prior to data collection, a declaration was made to indicate that all the information collected is merely for academic research and the respondents were provided with an information sheet that explained the aim of the study, the study procedure and other related issues.

The data will never be shared, and will be safely stored on a secured computer. When the thesis was completed, the questionnaires from respondents and interview records were destroyed. Ethical approval of the research was obtained from the university ethics committee on 03/03/2016.

Chapter 5. The death of Sun Zhigang incident

5.1 Introduction

In August 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping emphasised the need for traditional media to adopt ‘internet thinking’ to speed up the convergence between traditional and new media, and to build up several influential media groups (Guo and Gu, 2014). The successful collective efforts made by traditional media and the new internet media emerged in 2003, and the coverage of the death of Sun Zhigang most clearly reflects the collaborative effects of the traditional media and the internet. It illustrates the unprecedented opportunities empowered by *BBS* and forums and other information and communication technologies during the booming age of China’s internet development and the active participation of different sectors of society, including students, media professionals, public intellectuals, scholars, law professionals and ordinary citizens.

This thesis uses three cases to present the triangular system in ICT-mediated public participation: government, media and the public. The case of Sun Zhigang is one of the earliest examples of how a popular outcry online prompted a change in government policy in China (Chung, 2008). Thus, the incident can be regarded as a telling example of the changing relationships between the public and the government through mass media. It helps explore why the death of Sun Zhigang changed relevant laws and regulations, even though civil society in the Western sense has not formed yet in an authoritarian country like China. This case also inspires discussion about the formation of an online public sphere and the emergence of a quasi-civil society in China.

In this chapter, I first contextualise the case study by chronicling the incident, then elaborate on the changing role of Chinese netizens during the Sun Zhigang incident, drawing on the results of the survey, and finally introduce the features and the causes of a new communication approach between the Chinese government and public.

The chapter also investigates the establishment of an online public sphere in China during the case and develops its definition, analysing its three key elements. It attempts to investigate the Sun Zhigang incident under the information regime theory, and analyses the changing relationship between public and the government at the start of the digital age.

5.2 A satisfactory solution gained by the grassroots campaign

The Sun Zhigang incident took place at 2003. It was a milestone that promoted the construction of China's legal system and implied an increasing watchdog role for both traditional and new media (Xu, 2014). It was the very first time in Chinese media history that an ordinary citizen was given extensive attention in the national media, which made Sun a known figure nationwide and his case a media event (Yu, 2006).

The incident took place during a nationwide fight against Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. In the spring of that year, the internet became the main channel for the dissemination and exchange of information as people were confined to their homes to avoid contracting the virus. This set the stage for a national reflection on China's socio-political system, especially in relation to the state's incompetence in reacting to the epidemic, and the failure of the mainstream media to give it timely coverage during the early stages of the outbreak.

5.2.1 The trigger for the campaign – key moments of a citizen's abnormal death

Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old male graduate from Wuhan Technical Institute, was employed as a graphic designer in the Guangzhou Daqi Garment Company. At about 10 p.m. on March 17, 2003, he was questioned by a police officer on his way to a local internet café. Because Sun was not carrying his identification card and failed to provide proof of his registered work unit and temporary residence permit in Guangzhou, he was taken to a local police substation on suspicion of being a

‘Sanwu’⁹. On the detainee registration form, in response to the questions, ‘Do you have a permanent address?’ and ‘What is your income source in Guangzhou’, the answers recorded were ‘None’. However, in the questioning record, it clearly stated ‘valid identification certificate: ID number: 4221*****9523’. Also, in the ‘Sanwu’ Person Registry of Guangzhou Custody & Repatriation Transit Point, the place where Sun was later transferred from the police substation to, it stated ‘registered work unit: Guangzhou Daqi Garment Company’ (Yuan, 2003). It showed that the police had controlled the content of the forms without Sun Zhigang’s evidence.

One hour later, at around 11 p.m., Sun’s roommate (also a classmate) took a phone call from Sun, saying that he had been detained at Huangcun police substation for not having a temporary residence certificate. Sun asked the roommate to bail him with Sun’s personal ID and cash. Sun’s roommate arrived at the substation with Sun’s valid identification card, residential evidence and employment certificate, but the two policemen on duty refused to release him, claiming ‘Sun is a person in trouble’ without providing any further explanation (Yuan, 2003).

On the next day, March 18, Sun was transferred from the police substation to Guangzhou C&R Transit Point. Another friend of Sun’s took a phone call from him and was told that Sun’s employer was required to come and bail Sun from the transit point. When the employer came with all of the certificates, the staff there told him that as the transit point would be closed shortly and that he had to come back tomorrow. However, on the night of March 18, Sun was transferred to Guangzhou C&R Centre (Yuan, 2003).

On March 20, Sun was bullied and beaten by eight inmates in the same ward and by

⁹ ‘Sanwu’ refers to an illegal migrant without a valid identification certificate, a Temporary Residence Permit or a valid employment certificate.

two nursing workers. He was found dead the next morning and the death certificate provided by Guangzhou C&R Centre showed that the cause of his death was ‘sudden attack of heart disease’. However, on April 18, an autopsy report provided by the forensic science centre at the Medical School of Sun Yat-sen University showed that Sun had been beaten and abused in the 72 hours before his death. The main reason of Sun’s death was injuries and internal bleeding caused by blunt trauma. The doctor on duty at the C&R Centre on March 18 claimed that Sun said he had a heart disease history, so they deduced that he was dead because of a heart attack. However, this statement was challenged by Sun’s family, and Sun’s father indicated that his son never had heart disease (Yuan, 2003).

Information about Sun’s death was blocked by local officials. Though Sun’s parents made great efforts to find out the truth of their son’s death, the information they obtained was far from adequate. Lawyers refused to take their case out of fear of challenging the local authority (Guan and Si, 2003), and so Sun’s family posted their story on the internet, along with a petition letter, and turned to the media for help.

5.2.2 Interactions between traditional media and new media

The significance of the case lies in that for the first time, the positive reinforcing power of social media as a new agency was seen. Traditional media had existed primarily as a government organ for public information and propaganda.

Chen Feng, one of the journalists who edited a Sun Zhigang report for the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, recalled that the In-depth Reporting Team had just been founded in 2003. In March 2003, when he was trying to find new information, Chen joined in the discussions with other journalists and media professionals on the *Xici Forum*.

Coincidentally, a friend of Sun Zhigang posted the story of what happened to Sun on the discussion board, and Chen saw the story and reported it to the editor of the *Southern Metropolis Daily*. The editor authorised following the story, and Chen began to investigate. This was the origin of the coverage of the incident in the traditional

media, but collected from the internet.

On the tenth anniversary of the Sun Zhigang incident, Chen Feng was interviewed by the law channel of *People.cn*, an official website of the *People's Daily*,¹⁰ which had reported the Sun Zhigang incident on both its web portal and newspaper in 2003. As he said in the interview:

‘From the perspective of communication and media study, the rapid development of ICTs and internet in China fostered a new era for communication and the media industry. Major web portals reposted the related reports at the time, which pushed the incident to a climax and gained the state’s attention’ (Chen, 2013, N.P.)¹¹.

Chen also emphasised that Sun’s status as a recent graduate from university was a key point in the development of the case. ‘First of all, it is obvious that Sun has no history of crime. This is tangible evidence for judicial authentication (Chen, 2013, N.P.)¹². However, he also admitted that this point was overlooked in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*’s reports.

On April 25, after an exhaustive investigation, the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a relatively progressive Guangzhou newspaper known for its critical and investigative journalism, first published a detailed report on the death of the 27-year-old graphic designer. The report was titled ‘*The death of Sun Zhigang under the Custody and Repatriation System*’ (Chen, 2003, N.P.). The report was followed by a commentary article: ‘who is responsible for the unnatural death of a citizen’ (Zi, 2003, N.P.). To start with, the report revealed that officials ignored the death of Sun Zhigang and stonewalled for more than a month. The report also described the desperate situation of Sun’s family to the public. The paper then conducted a series of investigations and

¹⁰ *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party.

¹¹ Translation provided by the author.

¹² Translation provided by the author.

overcame various difficulties and external obstacles. A journalist accompanied Sun's families to appeal and collect evidence in these three places: Huangcun police substation, Guangzhou C&R Transit Point and Guangzhou C&R Centre. Though the officials there treated them poorly and the last two agencies refused their visit, the journalist and Sun's family managed to obtain a few important documents including the Detainee Registration Form and the Sanwu Person Registry. It also confirmed the local Guangzhou regulations that Sun should not have been detained in the C&R Centre if his friend had provided a valid identification card for Sun. There was an editorial along with the report, which demonstrated that Sun died after being beaten in custody, and it accused government authorities of causing Sun's death (Zi, 2003). It delivered a clear message to the public that such a tragedy could have happened to anyone and that all members of society needed to recognise this fact: 'In the powerful state apparatus, who is not a nobody? ... Who is not an ordinary citizen?' (Hand, 2007, p.122).

Although reports appeared in other small newspapers, related reports were not allowed to be published in the mainstream Chinese media. However, news about Sun was already spreading across the country on the internet. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* posted its article to internet portals on the same day as publication (Chung, 2008), and *Sina.com* – China's largest news portal – and other popular websites reprinted this report, ensuring the Sun case spread nationwide. After the story was posted on *Sina.com*, it attracted over 4,000 comments in two hours (Xiao, 2003). Subsequently, although the Party authorities in Guangdong banned the local media from publishing further reports on the case, the national media (*People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, *China Youth Daily* and *China Newsweekly*) and other powerful local media (*Beijing Youth Daily*, *Yangcheng Evening News* and *Southern Weekly*) quickly picked up the story and gave full coverage to the case, which soon became a fixture in daily headlines. These print media outlets spontaneously collaborated with online media, such as *Sina*, *Sohu*, the *People's Daily Online* and *Xinhua*. They began

to publish large-scale follow-up reports, and the case captured the attention of Chinese society as a whole.

The name Sun Zhigang also hit chat rooms, *BBS* and email groups on April 25 (Yu, 2006). The case would have been closed without the public noticing, if it were not for Sun's father's determination to pursue it, the willingness of *Southern Metropolis News* to publicise the case and, most importantly, Chinese netizens' joint efforts to push the case both online and offline. Online chatrooms and forums were full of discussion of the Sun case, and most of the netizens focused on civil rights in China. Chinese *BBS* such as the *Strengthening Nation Forum*, the *Development Forum*, the *China Youth Forum* and the *Tianya Forum* were flooded with comments and appeals (Yu, 2006). The outcry of *BBS* participants continued to fill cyberspace and created such a strong public opinion that the mainstream media finally adjusted its agendas to satisfy the people's 'right to know'. Sun's case was regarded as a direct denial and infringement of citizens' constitutional rights and freedom by the system (Xiao, 2003). Online discussions of the case revealed a wave of anger over Sun's death and demands for justice and punishment. Comments also included a wide range of complaints about the C&R system and the pervasive phenomenon of abuses of power by law enforcement officials. A large number of well-known intellectuals and scholars, such as Mao Yushi (a famous economist), Qin Hui (a historian) and He Weifang (a famous legal scholar), openly expressed views under their real names, offering useful suggestions to improve related C&R regulations (Yu, 2006). Sun's fellow university graduates and thousands of netizens, legal experts, scholars and lawyers wrote articles and declarations, staged several waves of online protests and raised petitions that sought legal justice for Sun (ibid). Even the *Study Times*, a Central Party School publication, said that 'the case should not be glossed over by processing it as an isolated incident (Hand, 2007, p.123)' and appealed for amendments to the legal system to prevent such abuses in the future. The case also stimulated a wave of reporting on other abuses in the C&R system (Chen, 2003).

5.2.3 The launch of online activism and public participation

The nationwide reports and heated discussions on the internet finally drew the central government's attention. As the *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported, both the central government official and the provincial leader had ordered the police department to investigate this case to protect the civil rights of every Chinese citizen and to give justice to Sun's family. On May 13, *Xinhua* and other news outlets announced that the authorities had detained twelve suspects, including five employees at the C&R Centre, who were being investigated by the procuratorate (Lu, 2003).

If it was not for the spontaneous collective efforts of reporters, media outlets, legal experts and lawyers, the news of the arrests might have led to the case fading from public consciousness, but Chinese legal reformers occupied a vital position in the sphere of public discourse. Legal experts and lawyers discussed the problems involved in Sun's case on online forums and at meetings. They then conveyed the outcome of the discussions to the press, which transformed the issue of legitimacy to one of public outrage over the incident. Several innovative legal petitions were also submitted. On May 14, one day after the arrests of suspects, three legal scholars, Xu Zhiyong (from Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications), Teng Biao (from China University of Political Science and Law) and Yu Jiang (from Huazhong University of Science and Technology), submitted a formal petition (a Review Petition) to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) stating that regulations in the C&R system for detaining migrant workers and sending them to their home place was a violation of the Constitution and demanded that Congress conduct further investigation. They stated that:

'we expect conversations, discussions and public participation on the internet. We expect professionals both in Law and other academic areas to think about the case and offer suggestions. We also expect the government to respond actively to the public opinion and to form effective interaction'

(Teng, 2003, N.P.)¹³.

At least four major national papers – the *People's Daily Online*, *China Youth Daily*, *Workers Daily* and *Legal Daily* – reported on the petition at great length, and the information was disseminated nationwide through the internet. On May 15, the *People's Daily Online* posted an article titled 'Through the Sun Zhigang Case: Investigate if custody and repatriation policy is contrary to China's Constitution' (Chen, 2005). On May 16, the *China Youth Daily* published a report titled 'Three Chinese citizens submitted a formal petition to NPCSC in accordance with the law'. The report stated that the three legal scholars were not merely concentrating on the Sun case, but were focused on the entire C&R system (Lian and Han, 2013). Print media, together with internet news providers, worked to keep the case in the spotlight, ensuring the coordination of newspaper and internet news reports. Meanwhile, public discussions about the case continued in internet chatrooms (Liebman, 2005).

Reports contained in those principal papers had a remarkable effect; the press joined in on a national scale, striving for justice for Sun and exposing similar abuse cases at detention centres elsewhere. On May 21, a large group of professionals and well-known scholars had a conversation and discussion about the Sun Zhigang case and the C&R system in Beijing (Long, 2007). On May 23, another group of five legal experts (including the well-known Chinese jurist He Weifang) filed a second petition which ensured the issue of migrant workers stayed in the spotlight (Yuan, 2003). Emphasis on the C&R system for detaining migrant workers contradicted the authorities' attempts to argue that Sun's death was an isolated case.

On May 18, Sun Zhigang's cremation ceremony was held in Guangzhou. An online memorial website titled 'Heaven does not need a Temporary Residence Permit' was

¹³ Translation provided by the author.

created by Sun Zhigang's friends, which drew nearly 300,000 people to mourn on this website.

On May 30, the *People's Daily Online* posted a commentary titled 'How far can the Sun Zhigang case go' and stated that:

'If we want to improve the supervision of law enforcement through the Sun case, problems that originate in the law can no longer be ignored. The Sun case can have a final settlement only through revealing detailed facts and providing an open investigation procedure, and allowing the public's necessary queries' (Hao, 2003, N.P.)¹⁴.

This commentary further guided the orientation of public opinion and echoed the appeal of internet users.

As regards the suspect attackers, the authorities moved quickly to bring the case to trial. On June 5, the trial of the thirteen defendants opened in Guangzhou Intermediate People's Court, and they were charged with abusing or inciting the abuse of Sun Zhigang. According to the published courtroom testimony, nursing workers at the C&R Centre were enraged by Sun's screaming for help when relatives of other detainees visited the centre and ordered eight patients to beat him as a punishment. All thirteen were convicted and received sentences ranging from three years' imprisonment to death. There were other trials on the misconduct of officials, and six public security officers were convicted of dereliction of duty and given prison sentences ranging from two to three years. Another twenty-three officials were given administrative punishments.

There were reports and articles published in the print media and the internet questioning the case as the trial approached. An article in the *People's Daily* questioned the justification of the trial, criticising the lack of crucial information

¹⁴ Translation provided by the author.

available about the case. Moreover, the government allowed *Xinhua* to report on the trial proceedings and so there were few other reports on the trial. Although a number of journalists attempted to cover the trial, the three Guangzhou courts that heard the cases only gave permission to five media outlets to attend. Recording and note-taking was also prohibited for those who were allowed to observe (Liebman, 2005).

Arrangements in the courts were not fully followed. Protests against the ban on reporting emerged on the internet with reporters from five central media outlets signing an online public letter criticising the restrictions. Some reports openly questioned the evidence at trial, arguing that Sun's injuries could not have been merely caused by the defendants' fists, and the procuratorate charged that Sun had already been beaten by the police before he arrived at the detention centre. Similarly, online media wondered why a videotape of the beatings that was said to exist was never submitted as evidence.

5.2.4 The result of the social campaign – a change in the legal regulation

The online and offline public participation in relation to the Sun Zhigang case marks the first successful social campaign since the internet was introduced in China.

On June 6, He Weifang, a well-known jurist, was invited by *Qiangguo Forum* (a BBS belonging to *People's Daily Online*) to discuss the Sun case for nearly two hours with internet users around the world (Zeng, 2008). He expressed appreciation for the internet users' passion and concern about the Sun case on *Qiangguo Forum* and indicated that their activities not only showed the public's awareness of social improvement and legal development, but also might lead to the modification of the C&R system.

On June 11, the online portal *zaobao.com* owned by the Singaporean *Union Morning Post* published an article titled 'The sound of Dengwen Drum [meaning public opinion] on the internet' (Lu, 2003), which stated that:

‘In China’s cyberspace, the virtual Dengwen Drum was beaten loudly by thousands of internet users in recent days. The cause is a young man’s death in Yamen (an ancient expression for an official department)’ (ibid, N.P.).

The author claimed that the public opinion formed by Chinese internet users regarding the Sun case had already been delivered to government leaders, which showed the capability of ‘*Shangda Tianting*’¹⁵ of the new media. To the surprise of many, on June 18, former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao chaired a State Council executive meeting, which approved in principle ‘Measures of Aid and Management of Urban Vagrants and Beggars without Life Support (draft)’ (Yuan, 2003). On June 19, *Southern Weekly* published a review article titled ‘To achieve social justice, even face the end of the world’, which represented the strongest voice for abolishing the unfair system (Lian and Han, 2013). Finally, on June 22, three months after the death of Sun Zhigang, the State Council announced the abolition of the *Measures of Custody and Repatriation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars in Cities* implemented in May 1982, and its replacement with a new regulation: *Measures of aid and management of urban vagrant beggars without life support* (Zhu, 2009), and this as subject to a feature on June 23 on the *Focus Interview* programme on China Central Television.

China’s State Council announced the abolition of the C&R regulation following the trial. Although the official statement suggested that the change was made as a reflection of social development in China, the link between the change and the Sun Zhigang case was clear. New regulations replaced the C&R regulations and came into effect on August 1. The new rules highlighted local authorities’ responsibility for helping migrant workers with support instead of punitive detention. This was a result of media pressure and the spontaneous collective efforts made by legal experts, lawyers, journalists, scholars, public intellectuals and the general public. Exposing

¹⁵ ‘*Shangda Tianting*’ literally means citizens’ opinions directly reaching the top leaders’ ears.

problems in the system to force changes to the regulations was the ultimate goal of this unprecedented nationwide collaboration between different sectors in society.

Although some officials in the government seemed to be predisposed to altering the media pressure, it actually pushed the event to the forefront and aroused the public's and the Party-state's attention, especially with the assistance of the internet. Academic observers acknowledged that media pressure was one of the factors that resulted in the change to the regulation. It was also the first case in which the media could be said to have propelled a change in China's legal system. The success also demonstrated the ability of activists (legal experts and scholars), whose concerns were in line with the central leadership goals – in particular of the newly appointed former Chairman Hu Jintao – of protecting migrant workers, strengthening the legal system and reducing official abuses.

5.3 The changing relationship between the public and the government mediated by ICTs

The Sun Zhigang case represents the first time social media operated to facilitate a social campaign with the support of new technology. Three conditions were required for this social campaign to be successful: firstly, wide accessibility of information and communication technology for ordinary people; secondly, a platform provided by the commercialised media industry, such as *Sina* and *NetEase*; and the general socio-political space formed after the reform and opening up in which the public could express concerns and engage in public events.

The Sun Zhigang case was not an accidental event. It was the result of the conditions being in place. It seems to have been a spontaneous event that rose from collective efforts; however, there were deep socio-political, technological and commercial conditions. To begin with, the reform and opening-up policy had changed the previous situation of citizen engagement in which the central propaganda policy played a dominant role. There was little space for the public to develop an awareness of civil rights, to give voice and to achieve citizen engagement. Since the internet was

introduced in China, along with the commercialisation of the media industry and other markets, the public have gained the opportunity to gain diverse information instead of Party-guided information. Awareness of democracy and civil rights have been gradually cultivated, and technological development has provided easily accessible information channels, which the average working salary class can afford. Another condition is the unintended consequence of the commercialisation of the media market. The media products launched by internet companies have provided a platform for people to express views and to exchange information; 2003, when the Sun Zhigang case took place, is a point of qualitative change in Chinese society and this change required all of these conditions to come together, and so in the Sun Zhigang case, the final result was not accidental.

5.3.1 From message receivers to information producers and disseminators: the establishment of a bottom-up communication approach

The Sun Zhigang incident was included in the *2003 Yearbook of Guangzhou*, as it had a lot of influence on Guangzhou, and in 2004, a number of major web portals chose Sun Zhigang as one of the ‘Ten Chinese characters of 2003’, with the comments such as ‘Sun Zhigang’s death led to the abolishment of the “evil law” and started a new meaningful era’ (Xu, 2004, N.P.). This shows that the incident was not only a milestone for defending human rights, but also a landmark event that showed the power of online public opinion in Chinese society. The last sentence in Sun Zhigang’s epitaph is ‘Promoted the development of the Chinese legal system at the cost of a young man’s life, a citizen who deserves to be memorialised’ (Liu, 2003, N.P.)¹⁶. This shows the negotiation space between the government and the public changed from barely zero to enlarged possible interaction.

¹⁶ Translation provided by the author.

5.3.1.1 The landscape of traditional media: from the government-oriented propaganda pattern to the commercialised pattern

Before 2003, the traditional media occupied the leading position for disseminating information. A feature of traditional media in China was the elitist trend in content production and the domination of communication channels in which the editorial department acted as the gatekeeper for content production. All media channels, including print, radio and television media, was all under the control of the official media management departments; the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China. If individuals who were not members of the editorial department wished to express opinions to society, the only approach was traditional media channels.

In the Sun Zhigang case, four major newspapers covered the incident: the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, the *Yangcheng Evening News*, the *Guangzhou Daily*, and the *Nanfang Daily*. In general, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* has been marketised and liberalised to a large extent during the media reforms. *Nanfang Daily* is government-oriented. The other two stay neutral.

The *Southern Metropolis Daily*, as the leading commercial media in Guangzhou, was the first newspaper that engaged in the Sun Zhigang's case, covering it both in hard copy and online. It also opened a hotline for readers to express opinions, grievances and dissatisfaction towards the authorities. Motivated by the petition from the legal scholars, *Southern Metropolis Daily* also opened discussions on the C&R system. A series of in-depth analyses was conducted which had constitutional implications.

Overall, in the Sun Zhigang's case, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* played a prominent and irreplaceable role in terms of continuous in-depth investigation, expression of public opinions, and the re-examination of the constitutionality in China's law system.

Compared with the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, although *Yangcheng Evening News*

and *Guangzhou Daily* did not carry out as many independent investigations, they re-published articles from other sources, and the *Nanfang Daily* covered Sun Zhigang's incident for the purpose of government remedy. It did not make any report to expose the incident, which differentiated it from the other three newspapers, but highlighted the decisive policy-making by the government, all its duties originating from the traditional role as the Party newspapers. In most of the cases, the aim of the articles was to relieve public sentiment, reduce condemnation of the government, protect the authority of the Party and government, and facilitate the government's social management agenda (Li, 2008).

However, the emergence of the internet broke the long-term information monopoly on information channels. From the comment areas of the major web portals to content providers on the *BBS*/forums and blogs and today's social networking websites, instead of asking for help from traditional media, individuals can directly give voice to a broad range of audiences without geographical limitation. It is inevitable that the transformation of media channels will change the way content is processed.

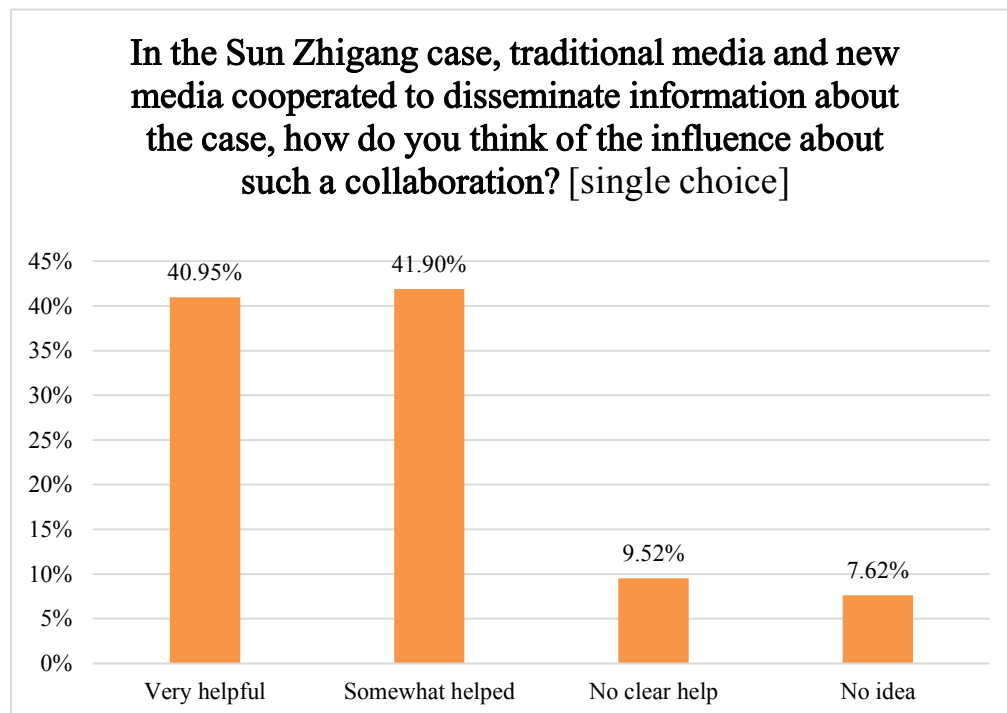


Figure 5. Reaction to the influence of collaboration.

As can be seen from Figure 5, 82.85% of respondents believed that the collaboration between the traditional media and new media was very helpful or somewhat helpful in the development of the case. This suggests that, in the perception of the public, if a social incident was to gain a satisfactory settlement in Chinese society at the time of the Sun case, collaboration between traditional media press and new media platforms was a significant and necessary precondition. In the past, a news clue was collected and investigated by the professional journalist; then it would go through the internal review conducted by the editor, and finally appear on traditional media such as newspapers, radio programmes or TV reports. With ICT empowerment, individuals can now directly publish news and commentaries on the internet. If a report attracts the attention of public intellectuals, opinion leaders or other popular accounts in social networking sites through multiple layers of posts and reposts, it can spread more broadly at speed. It is the kind of power that cannot be found in the transition process of traditional media.

5.3.1.2 Bottom-up communication approach – the negotiation pattern initiated by the public

Information technology advancement, manifest by the popularity of social networking sites, user-generated media and online versions of encyclopaedias, has created a breakthrough in government control. Citizens who used to be message receivers have gradually switched to being sharers and producers of messages, generating a bottom-up approach to form public opinion (Deuze, 2007). The internet fosters a new model that supports freer and more effective interaction between government, media and the public. As Tai indicated:

‘the internet marks a dramatic departure from all previous communication models: it not only enhances the conventional one-to-many communication but also fosters brand-new types of communication in which users’ messages can be sent by a heterogeneous user base to a heterogeneous audience’ (Tai, 2006, p.162).

It facilitates the construction of a relatively flexible communication space that is shaped by large numbers of sufficiently motivated groups of people (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004). In this section, I discuss the key features of the bottom-up approach and elaborate the new negotiation pattern initiated by the public.

Spontaneous participation in China's cyberspace

In the Sun Zhigang incident, spontaneous netizen involvement triggered the unblocking of information moving from the public to the government. Even though the Guangzhou government took measures to control the local media's reports on Sun Zhigang, the traditional media from other provinces or cities could report the case and disseminate the information to the public. More importantly, numerous internet users spontaneously helped the dissemination of the case via web portals, online chatrooms, *BBS* and forums. They were thousands of scattered nodes in cyberspace, but they came forward to follow and participate in the same event. It was a spontaneous collective movement – incidental grassroots activism.

The sympathy effect is one of the reasons that lead to the spontaneous public participation. Migrant workers are the major labour force in the urban areas in China and are needed as cost-efficient labours, but they do not have access to the social benefits that the urban residents enjoy such as pension, health and unemployment insurances. They are a marginalised group and are less valued in the Chinese society (Li, 2008). Sun Zhigang was one such migrants. The marketised traditional media provided opportunities for the weak and the powerless to speak out. A sympathy effect spread through the domestic migrants in a similar condition to Sun Zhigang. The net-fuelled rage and sadness resulting from Sun Zhigang's death led to the spontaneous participation among the grassroots.

Although the Sun Zhigang incident occurred a decade ago, the discussions of the case kept continuing in chatrooms, *BBS*/forums, blogs, *Weibo* and other social networking sites. For example, on the *Tianya Forum*, memorial articles for Sun Zhigang written

by internet users and journalists have prompted extensive responses. Some people show sympathy over Sun's death, some pay respect to Sun's death by promoting the development of legal system in China, some continue to discuss related systems or regulations, some appeal for more human rights, and others hold anti-government opinions.

Media material was collected as secondary data in the research (the collection deadline was 1 May 2016). Five major web portals and a forum website were investigated, in which the news sections of *Sina*, *Tencent*, *Sohu* and *NetEase* represent commercial media, while *People.cn* represents the state-owned media. The data is presented below.

- ***Sina* news:** Searching for the term 'Sun Zhigang incident' in the context and relevancy fields yielded 3,165 articles from 2003 to 2016, and in title and relevancy, there were 305 results using the 'Sun Zhigang case' and 66 using the 'Sun Zhigang incident'. I then narrowed down the searching area to a defined period (from 25 April to 22 June 2003), and a more accurate figure was gained – 198 results. This was the time from the first media coverage of the Sun Zhigang story by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* to the abolishment of the C&R system. Most significantly, on 10 June 2003, *Sina* opened a special column for internet users to discuss the Sun Zhigang incident. It comprises a variety of articles, commentaries, news reports, photos and audience comments, and a space for the public to review and interact with each other.
- ***Tencent* news:** From searching the term '2003 Sun Zhigang incident' on *Tencent.com*, 586 results came up between 2003 and 2016. I then filtered the results by content and title, and around 200 items related to the Sun case were found.
- ***Sohu* news and *NetEase* news:** When searching reports in *Sohu* News and *NetEase* News, the searches would automatically go to their affiliated search

engines (*Sogou Search* and *Youdao Search*), which expanded the search scope to the entire internet. Therefore it was not possible to trace back the original reports produced by the two web portals. The search result of *NetEase* even gives an error message saying that the content contains keywords that cannot be found. This may be because the original reports are broken or were deleted after the website updates. Thus, for the study, I did not collect data from these two sites.

- ***People.cn***: In this state-owned media site, there were 1,027 pieces of news and articles about the ‘Sun Zhigang incident’ from 2003 to 2016 found by searching the context field on the news section of *People.cn*. After being searched by title, the results yielded 36 entries of ‘Sun Zhigang case’ and 17 entries for the ‘Sun Zhigang incident’. Also, there were at least 60 items of news, articles and commentaries from the period between 25 April and 22 June 2003. Additionally, as with *Sina news*, *People.cn* also has a special column on the Sun Zhigang incident. The content of the column is not only about the story of Sun and its follow-ups, but also includes professional commentaries written by public intellectuals, offering insights and suggestions on the management of migrants and reviews of the new policy – *Measures of Aid and Management of Urban Vagrants Beggars without Life Support*. As a governmental web portal, it played a vital role in handling the Sun Zhigang incident from the media side and effectively led public opinion in a positive direction.
- ***Tianya BBS***: There have been 7,677 posts about the case based on a search by context and relevancy. While searching by title and relevancy, 483 results appeared, of which 153 posts were made between 25 April and 22 June 2003. These *BBS* posts contained different content with varied purposes. Some of them focused on disseminating accurate information about Sun’s case, and some made great efforts in appealing for attention and public participation,

while others had posts written from a personal perspective to express feelings and emotion. Memorial posts have kept appearing and prompted more *Tianya* users to recall the case, reminding people to use history as a mirror for evaluating government policy and performance. Compared with the aforementioned web portals, the *Tianya BBS* can be considered as an online public sphere in the sense that it has a relatively higher level of freedom as the content is directly generated by users.

This shows that the Sun Zhigang case is a milestone social event in China's internet age. Commercial and state-owned media sites have an extensive number of posts on various aspects of the Sun Zhigang case. More importantly, the censorship system did not raise any troubles for these posts. The topic of human rights is rising on the media sites, which maintains the popularity of the Sun Zhigang case and it is continuously discussed in the online communication space. This reflects the high level of spontaneous public participation and demonstrates the early phase of public sphere in China's cyberspace.

Easily accessible technology – the raised possibility of government-public communication

As discussed in the previous section, technological conditions are a vital factor in the Sun Zhigang case. One noticeable advantage of ICT is that it enables an immensely greater volume of information flow than other forms of media, and at a much lower cost and faster speed (Bimber, 2003). With this insight, Tai (2006) pointed out that the internet, as a new media format, compensates for the weaknesses of existing media forms and fundamentally changes the types of conventional media, bringing new options to the market.

Shao, Lu and Wu (2012) stated that:

‘New media may function in breaking information asymmetry, offering alternative participation channels, providing unique motivation for civic

engagement, and consequently promoting the development of democratic politics in China' (p.78).

Internet and mobile communication channels create a new realm in which privilege is less important, but freedom and equality are presented more.

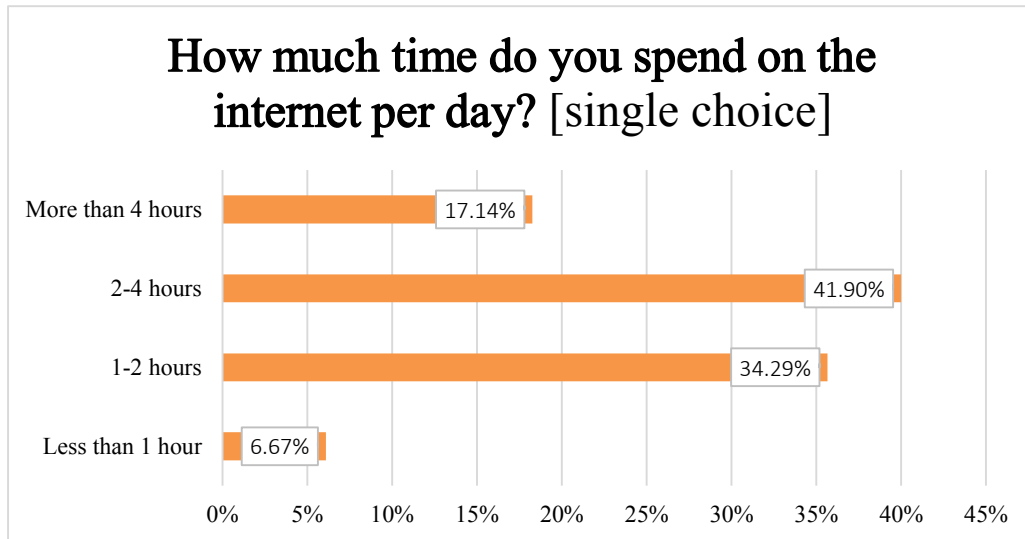


Figure 6. How long do you spend on the internet per day?

My questionnaire survey included questions that focused on the habits around using the internet. Figure 6 shows that 76.19% of the respondents spend more than 1 hour per day on the internet, and 17.14% of the respondents spend more than 4 hours. It shows that internet use has already penetrated people's daily lives regardless of how they exactly use it.

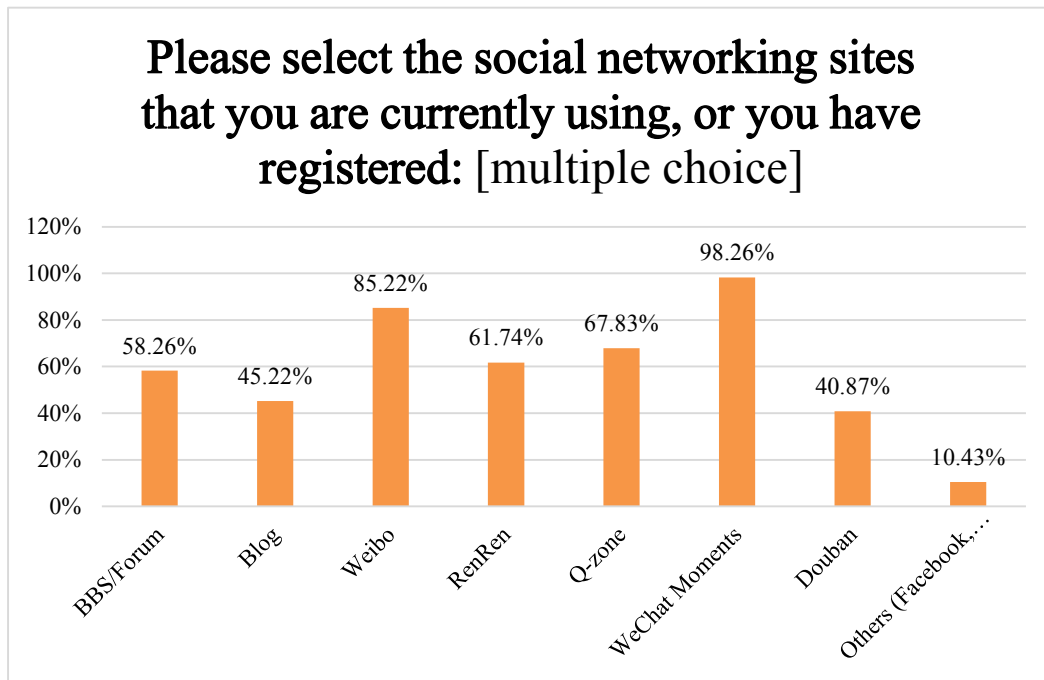


Figure 7. The SNS that you are currently using, or you have registered.

With ICT developing at a staggering speed, a variety of social networking sites have sprung up in the last two decades. As some of the world's most popular SNSs are blocked in China, a huge market for domestic social networking sites has developed. Figure 7 shows that 98.26% of the respondents use *WeChat Moments* and 85.22% of respondents use *Weibo* (similar to *Twitter*), which represent the top two popular SNSs in China. Also, 67.83% of the respondents use *Q-zone*, 61.74% of respondents use *Renren* (the functions and characteristics of these two SNSs are similar to *Facebook*). A majority of the respondents use or have registered more than one SNS and the number of *BBS/forums* and *Blog* users is 58.26% and 45.22% respectively, indicating that they are still regularly used by internet users in China.

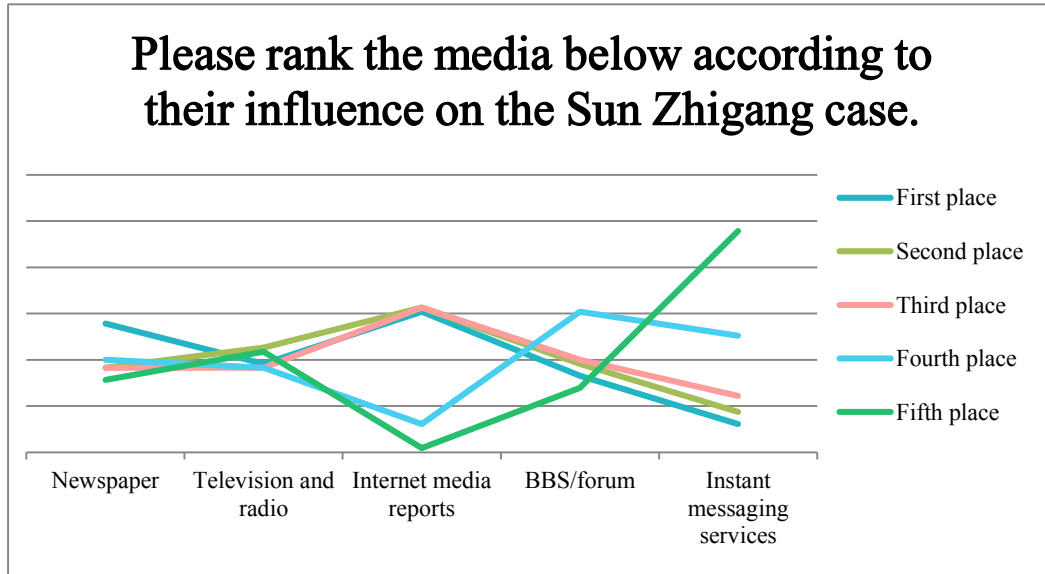


Figure 8. The rank of media according to the influence on the Sun Zhigang case.

Based on the respondents' ranking of media influence on the Sun Zhigang case in Figure 8, from the most important to the least important, internet media reports ranked 2.16, newspapers, 2.77, television/radio, 3.01, *BBS*/forums, 3.06, and instant messaging services 4.00. This indicates that in the eyes of the public, major web portals had already replaced the monopoly power of the traditional press in disseminating information and spreading news at the time. Due to the promptness and interactivity of new media services, *BBS*/forums and web portals have become the major platforms that attract numerous citizens to discuss and comment on different social issues about the Sun Zhigang case, and thereby to promote the progress of such cases.

Interviewee 2 indicated that:

‘from *BBS*/forums to the age of blogs, and until the present *Weibo* age, there is not too much change in the substance of online activities performed by the general public. The procedures remain to be view, edit and comment online content’.

He acknowledged that the development of ICT, the reduced cost of smart phones, the increased internet and mobile internet speed, and the popularisation of multimedia products, enabled people to ‘get connected’ anytime and anywhere. As in the Sun

Zhigang case, the easily accessible technology raised the possibility of solving the problem successfully. With the new media platform emerge new ways of the information dissemination, which made the negotiation between the public and the government becomes possible. The popularisation of ICT enables internet users to gain and share diverse information and cultivates the habit of analysing and solving problems for the public. For example, at the beginning of the Sun Zhigang case, the Sun family used a social media platform to post information of the case and sought for help. The popularisation of ICT also provides the negotiation space for sensitive social events. Although the government did not directly communicate with the public in the Sun Zhigang case, the easily accessible technology overturned the original zero negotiation situation and empowered the public to be actively involved in social events.

Dynamic interaction between online and offline campaign: a mutual support

Online public participation in China is neither an established concept nor is it the well-defined:

‘it is a broad combination of public participation and online activities, i.e. the public use internet as a medium to collect and release information, and a series of commenting and discussing activities with the intention to influence the public affairs and government’s decisions’ (Yang, 2010, p.25).

In the Sun case, the interaction between online and offline activities appears to be involuntary. Citizens collaborated incidentally with professionals’ (law experts and scholars) offline activities. In China, protest via traditional media or in the physical world is often accompanied by the high political risk. It is dangerous to plan or organise offline mass events, especially parades and public assemblies. It requires a report to be made to the local police department and approval to be granted; however, the whole process is complicated and the approval is extremely difficult to get.

Why do you pay attention to the events you chose and actively participate in them? [multiple choice]

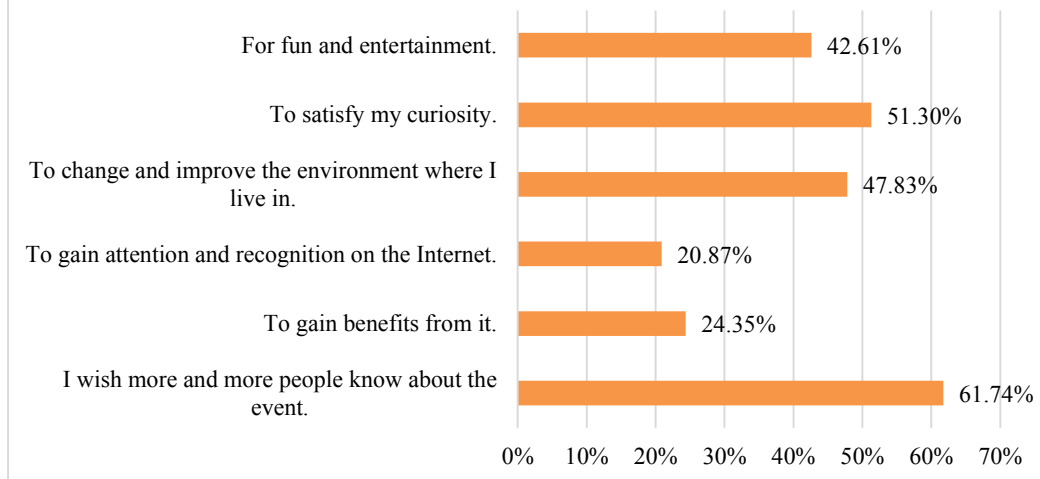


Figure 9. Why do you pay attention to these events and actively participate in them?

In Figure 9, the top three reasons for why people pay attention to and participate in online public events were identified as ‘I wish more people know about the event’ (61.74%), ‘to satisfy my curiosity’ (51.3%) and ‘to change and improve the environment where I live’ (47.83%).

How do you get involved in these online public events that you chose? [multiple choice]

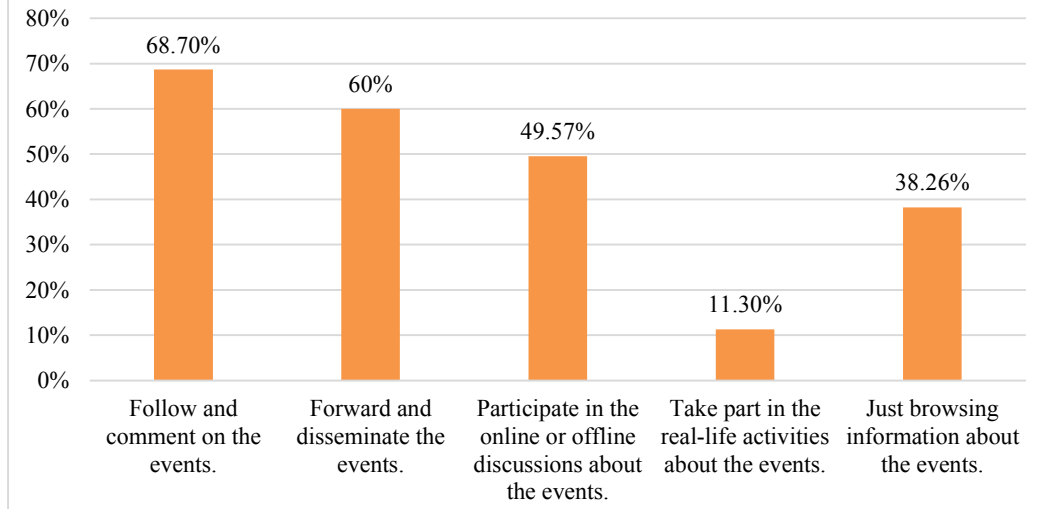


Figure 10. How do you get involved in these online public events you chose?

Given the answers to what internet users are concerned with and why, it is important to know how they participate in online public events. In Figure 10, 68.7% of the respondents tend to follow and comment on events, 60% prefer to forward and disseminate the events, and 49.57% have participated in online or offline discussions about events before. These online activities are effective in publicising the events and increasing people's concern about the developing process of the related events. In terms of online activities, the participants are free to choose the form of participation, which can protect them from censorship while trying to support the campaign. The offline discussions and other activities in the physical world create a private environment for the public to receive and exchange information. If people are attracted by the event, they may search for related news online, which forms a cycle of online and offline activities and elaborates the mutual support between the online and offline campaign.

Zheng (2008, p.136) stated that if a collective action or social movement is considered to impede the legitimacy of the state or pose a threat to the authority, it invites a crackdown or suppression by the state, but if the movement is perceived to be beneficial to the state, it is more likely to succeed (ibid). Given the context in China, since protests in the physical space are under strict surveillance and sometimes dangerous, the internet becomes an attractive medium for the organisation and practices of similar actions (Tai, 2006). An evident change is that the government now holds a relatively tolerant attitude towards online protests, partly because they are less likely to pose real threat to the regime and the stability of society, and partly because of the difficulties in detecting and eliminating gatherings in cyberspace (ibid, p.291).

Hence, there are still 38.26% of respondents 'just browsing information about the event'. This is partly the result of China's special online environment and the government's censorship policy. Some internet users may just browse information

without having any actual participations in ‘sensitive’ events or public affairs. This situation also explains why only 11.3% of the respondents chose to take part in real-life activities around the events. People worry about the punishment and negative influence that may result from real-life participation.

Taking the public figures and law experts’ participation in the Sun Zhigang case as an example, they initially acquired information from the online platforms and then performed a series of offline activities such as real world meetings to debate the legality of the C&R system, petitions filed to the central government and articles published under their real names. Afterwards, media reports on these offline activities proliferated on the internet and provoked a new round of public attention and discussion. It reflects a fermentation effect which highlights the influence of the intellectuals on the public – the inspiration and guidance for public opinion.

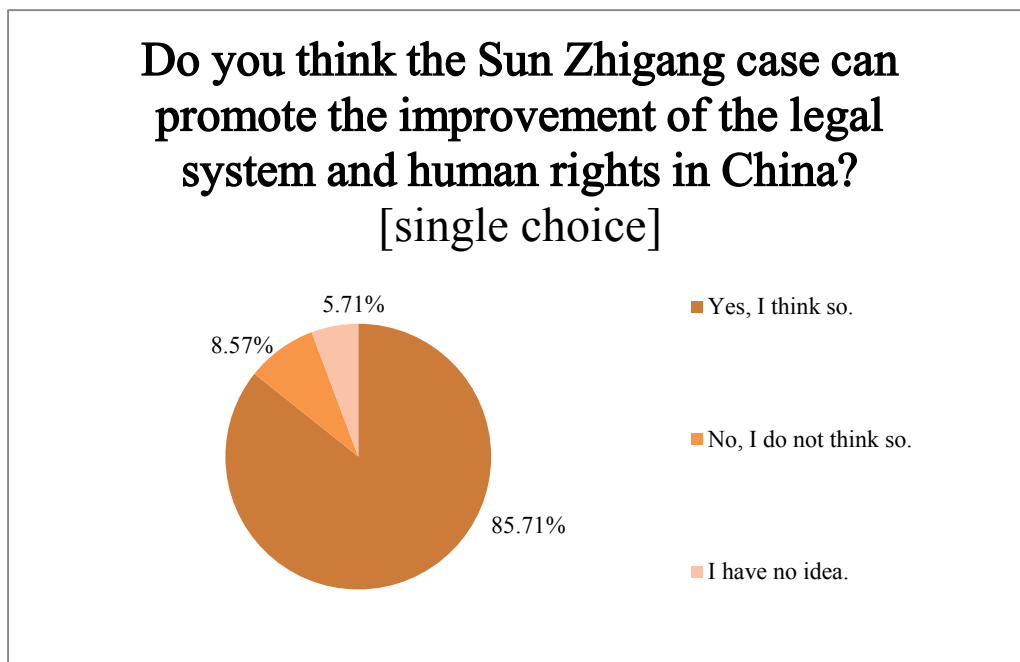


Figure 11. The Sun Zhigang case – the improvement of the legal system and human rights.



Figure 12. Will you pay attention to human rights cases?

The successful outcome of the Sun Zhigang case has enhanced the public’s awareness of civil rights and strengthened their confidence in using collective power to solve sensitive social events. As shown in Figure 11, the questionnaire survey shows that 85.71% of the respondents believed that the Sun Zhigang case has promoted improvements in the legal system and human rights in China. In addition, 84.76% indicated a willingness of continuing to follow cases on human rights through traditional media or internet media; and 49.52% demonstrated a proactive attitude by searching the related information on their own (Figure 12).

The successful collaboration between online and offline participation in the Sun Zhigang case dispelled the original ‘security’ concern among the public and showed the public that it is not dangerous to take part in an online campaign. The diverse forms of participation also increased the coverage of social actors by embracing different social levels of citizens, such as the scholars in law studies and professional journalists who contributed to the offline campaign, grassroots citizens – the major force of the online public opinion – and the victims of the event – the initial

information source. Such collaboration can force government officials to react to the public's appeal. The campaign is not only about how to express dissatisfaction and rage among the public, but to come up with explicit demands and feasible solutions to the social event which resulted by the collective efforts between common netizens, intellectuals and opinion leaders.

As *Interviewee 2* stated, among the three cases in my study, only the Sun Zhigang incident resulted a significant change in public policy: 'The achievement was mainly facilitated by the role of traditional media. The social campaign on new media platforms has not maturely developed yet'. Thus, the Sun Zhigang case is seen as a successful example of public participation in the mediation of both traditional and new media and also a satisfied result of the collaboration between online and offline campaign. It has had profound impact on different fields, including law, media, human rights, and public policy.

5.3.2 The establishment of an online or quasi-public sphere in China

As summarised in the literature review chapter, there are three key elements in the public sphere: the public, public opinion and the public medium. The first factor, the 'public', refers to a certain number of citizens who gather voluntarily, are not constrained by the government or any kind of political authority, and put individual or group interests aside to rationally debate on general societal problems for the sake of the common good. Secondly, 'public opinion' signifies contention centring on critical consciousness, which means to criticise, supervise and respond to the government's actions. The third factor, 'public medium', refers to the platform or channel where public opinion is cultivated and disseminated. It is a materialised form of the public sphere and often is the body or symbol for the public sphere. In the following sections, I discuss the three key elements in the Sun Zhigang case to examine the existence of public sphere in China.

5.3.2.1 The public in the Sun Zhigang case

To investigate the characteristics of the ‘public’ and to test the premise of the ‘public sphere’ in Habermas’s definition, my questionnaire survey included three questions about the respondents’ educational background, current occupation and income level. The result shows that 94.29% of respondents who know or have participated in the Sun case received a university education; the reason might be that better educated people are more likely to concern themselves about such public events. It might also be important that the internet was still a new invent to Chinese netizens at that time. A majority of the general public did not have knowledge of or access to the internet, let alone using it as a tool for public participation. On the contrary, it is easier for people with higher education background to learn and possess the ability to perform online participation. It also implies that higher education provokes and encourages people’s awareness in participating in public events.

In terms of the respondents’ occupation, approximately 73.33% of them were professionals, students or civil servants. The ‘other’ occupations (about 6%) were college lecturers and practitioners in the financial and IT industries.

The design of the question on respondents’ income levels is based on the *2014 Chinese per-capita income among 31 provinces* by *Xinhuanet.com*. It shows that 58.10% of the respondents had an annual income level above the average of developed cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. However, 22.86% of respondents’ annual income was less than ¥21,000. This may because 24.76% of the respondents were students without a stable income.

Li (2006) objected to Habermas’s premise that individuals should be ‘propertied and educated’ before accessing the public sphere as it imposes restrictions that fail to include all sectors of the society as ‘the public’. However, education background and income level are two properties of the public who are engaged in Sun Zhigang case. The results of the survey indicate that the majority of individuals who have

participated or are concerned about the Sun Zhigang case received higher education, and more than half have an annual income that exceeds the average level in developed cities.

A noteworthy contextual background for the Sun Zhigang case is that it took place during the nationwide fight against SARS in 2003. In the spring of 2003, the internet became the main channel for information exchange as people were confined at home to avoid infection, which set the stage for national participation in the Sun Zhigang case. Because news of SARS was initially blocked by the government, people already had doubt with the government and questioned the media's failure to provide timely coverage. Therefore, when the Sun Zhigang incident happened, many people felt a strong will to participate in online or offline activities in various forms (Yu, 2006).

This background set the scene for people to have the time, space and dynamic to get involved in the Sun Zhigang case. The incident crossed a variety of topics, including the inequality of human rights, the legality of government regulations and the misconduct of civil servants, which naturally provoked the public's eagerness in learning the truth, and an empathy effect that motivated people to offer help via online or offline participation. In particular, given that China is a country with a huge number of migrant workers, what happened to Sun Zhigang could happen to any of them, which further provides a reason for public participation in the case at the time. People began to realise the need to prevent such a tragedy happening again and to change the situation of human rights in China.

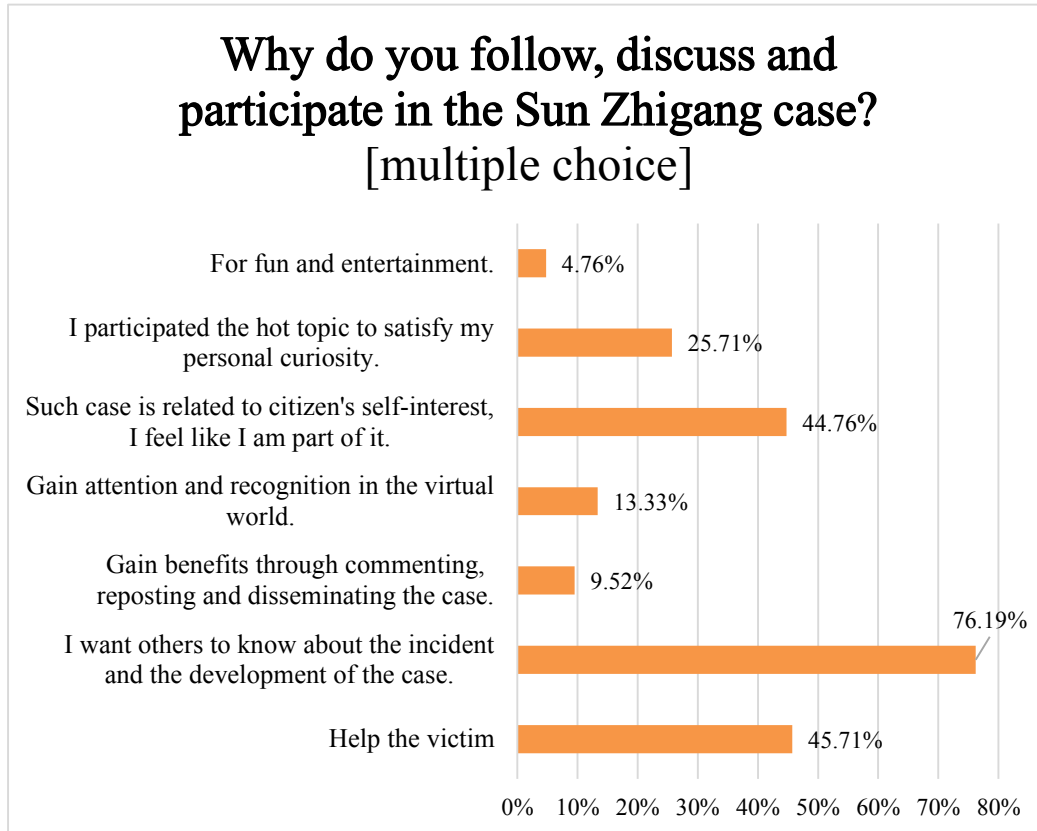


Figure 13. Why do you follow, discuss and participate in the Sun Zhigang case?

Figure 13 shows that the top three reasons for ‘why do you follow, discuss and participate in the Sun Zhigang case?’ are ‘I want others to know about the incident, and the development of the case’ (76.19%), ‘I want to help the victim’ (45.71%), ‘Because such a case is related to citizens’ self-interest, I feel like I am part of the case’ (44.76%).

Sun Zhigang represents a huge group of migrant workers who come from rural areas and sought to make a living in large cities at the time. The development and the final result of the Sun Zhigang case is closely related to the public interest, both for general citizens and migrant workers. People may have felt like they were being part of the case in the hope that their participation could contribute to preventing the reoccurrence of such an incident and to solving similar problems for other migrants and citizens. Therefore, it actually meets the initiative of the ‘public’ in public sphere: ‘for the sake of the common good’.

My data summarised the demographic features of the ‘public’ in the Sun Zhigang case. It first demonstrated that most of the respondents who knew or participated in the Sun Zhigang case had a higher education background, professional and formal occupation, and a stable annual income. It also suggests the conditions that restrict the ‘public’ who could engage in the beginning of the internet age in China. Moreover, as *Interviewee 1* indicated, Chinese people are inculcated with the value of working for public good. Politics is a common interest among the public; people like to discuss political and social issues and are eager for justice and the improvement of the public’s livelihood. At the time of the Sun Zhigang incident, people had the sense of justice which drove them to take part in sensitive public events. They would try their best to spread information to get more people involved in the social campaign. Nowadays, because of the easily accessible technology, most of the netizens have the knowledge to participate in social events. Although some of them actually may not have a higher education background or a stable job, I still hold the opinion that the ‘public’ should have some particular conditions or restrictions, such as the education background, legal awareness, and reasonable expression skill, to perform a rational public participation and consequently form the online public sphere in China.

5.3.2.2 Public opinion in the Sun Zhigang case

A majority of netizens who viewed the reports of the Sun Zhigang case at the time, joined the online discussion focusing on why Sun was detained, what the C&R system was, whether it was suitable in the modern society and how to evaluate the legislation process through the Sun Zhigang incident. These questions led to extensive debate on the Sun Zhigang case.

In the early phase of the Sun Zhigang case, netizens were extremely angry after learning the whole story. For example, one netizen named ‘Professor’ published an article on a forum with the title ‘*Today, I am angry and embarrassed by this horrible murder case in Guang Zhou!*’ (Li, 2008, p.22) In addition, a commentary published on

the *Sina* web portal strongly upheld the justice for Sun and appealed to the police department to investigate the case and demanded to punish the criminals severely.

A large number of netizens felt sympathy and were sadly immersed in the incident.

The public opinion at this phase turned to offer the help to the victim's family. For example, there was a comment:

‘A young graduate deceased miserably and shockingly. We feel sorry and lamenting. It totally disappointed the public’. While another commented as ‘Another tragedy happened, I know this would not be the last one. If the C&R regulation stays unchanged, such kind of incident will happen again!’ (ibid, p.22)

As shown in Figure 14, 64.76% of respondents held the opinion that the identify of Sun was a positive influence on the development of the case. Additionally, 24.76% influenced the case to some extent because the fact that a newly graduated designer was beaten to death can arouse extensive anger among the public and the substance of the case was about human rights which can arouse sympathetic reaction as well. The special identity of Sun did not help the spread of the incident to those who have faced or are likely to be involved in the same situation.

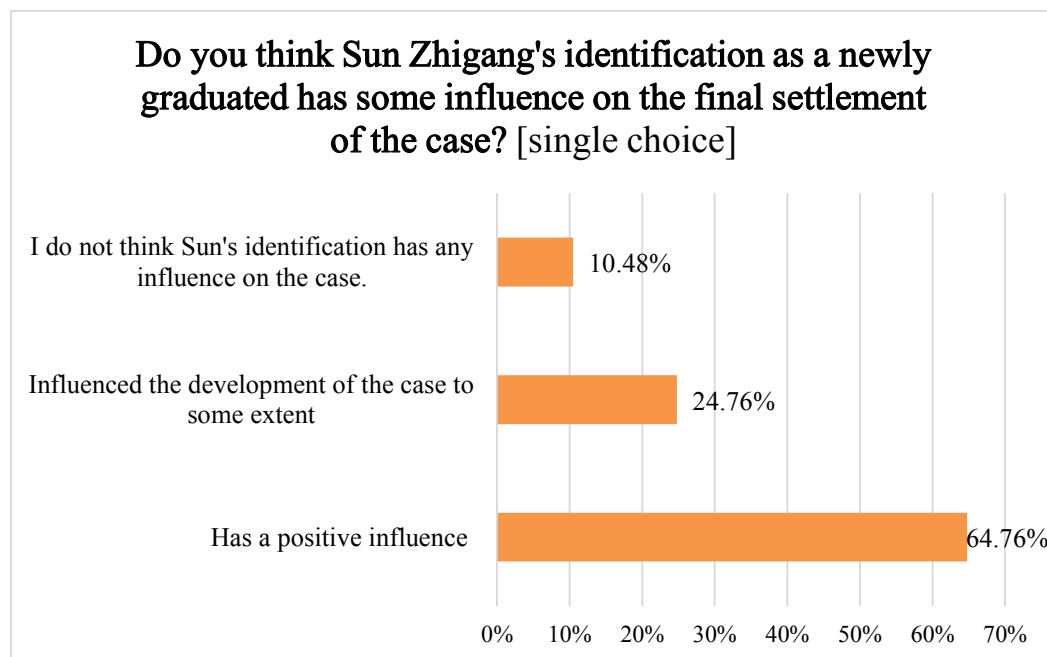


Figure 14. Do you think the identification influence on the final settlement of the case?

In the later phase of the Sun Zhigang case, when the public rage had calmed, public opinion stepped towards to the essential cause of the incident. The netizens begun to criticise the performance of the local government and denounced the illegality and irrationality of the C&R system. For example, one comment on the *Sina* portal was:

‘We call for the National People’s Congress to execute its function of supervision, to make proposals to regulate the C&R process (ibid, p.22)¹⁷’.

One netizen even came up with specific proposal to replace the C&R regulation. Others joined to discuss and made suggestions to modify the proposal. Another comment was:

‘We must abolish the C&R system. Because it is against human rights. It does not conform with the socialist system in our country (ibid, p.22-23)¹⁸’.

5.3.2.3 Public medium in the Sun Zhigang case

The in-depth and high-profile reports made by the traditional media consisted the pivotal reason that led to the abolishment of the C&R system and the issue of a new regulation. Content on the new media platforms during the Sun Zhigang case is not comparable to the traditional media reports, especially under the condition that the traditional media channels had already established long-term reputation and gained public trust. Also, a majority of credible public opinion originated from the traditional media channel as well.

¹⁷ Translation provided by the author.

¹⁸ Translation provided by the author.

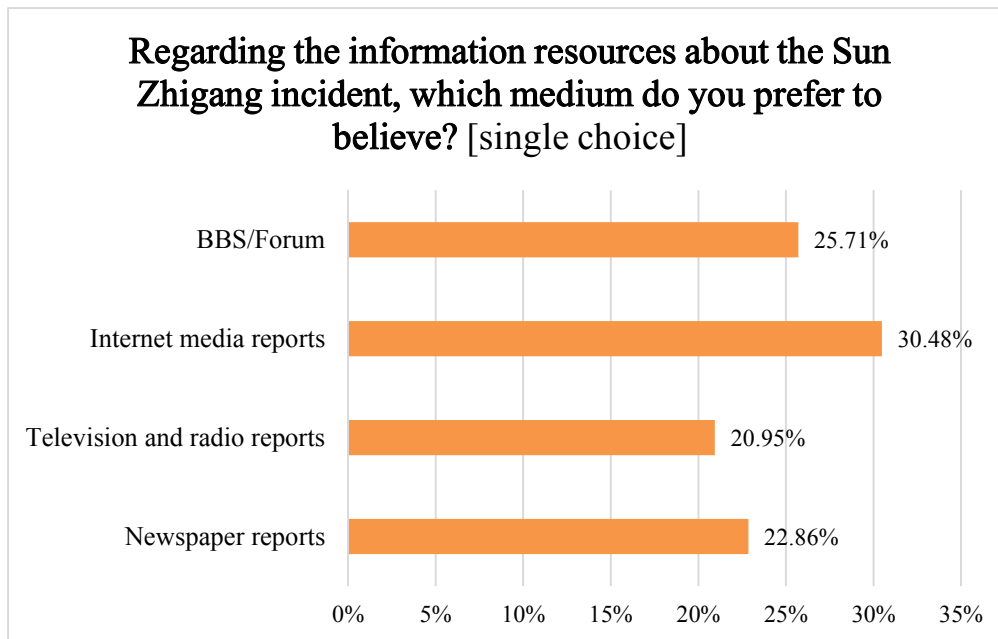


Figure 15. Which medium do you prefer to believe?

As can be seen in Figure 15, 56.19% of respondents preferred to believe in the new media platforms when searching the information resources on the Sun Zhigang incident, but there was still 43.81% of the respondents who trusted the traditional media resources from television, radio and newspaper reports. It indicates that in the initial age of China’s cyberspace, although the new media technology was developing rapidly, traditional media was still perceived as a reliable information source and people treated it as the official platform.

The extensive and diverse public discourse on the internet made it a powerful medium to form public opinion. *Interviewee 5* indicated that:

‘the new media implemented an all-dimensional reporting pattern. Due to the market competition, the commercial (new) media channels use ‘content’ to attract users. It leads to more comprehensive, more objective, and more knowledgeable information appeared on the internet’¹⁹.

The online platforms provided an expansive public space, which allowed the

¹⁹ Translation provided by the author.

assembly of netizens with shared interests and views despite the geographical and background barrier. The online space separated the public from the official sectors, which allowed the public to think dependently and critically. It avoided the influence of the authorities in the form of public opinion. By breaking the traditional limitations, the public came up with alternative ways to solve sensitive issues.

Interviewee 6 pointed out that:

‘with the emergence of the four major web portals (*Sina, Sohu, NetEase, Tencent*), people started to read news via the internet. Compared with newspaper and television, it had the advantages of resourceful content and fast speed. However, online public participation was not intense at the time’²⁰.

Interviewee 7 stated that:

‘The forms of online participation were: 1. post information (e.g. what the person had experienced, witnessed, or comment on a social event); 2. forward and share online content. But the latter one accounted for a much larger proportion’²¹.

According to my survey data, the forms of public participation in Sun Zhigang incident can be divided into two categories: indirect participation and direct participation. In Figure 16, the indirect participation includes: ‘I commented and discussed with others about the incident on the internet media reports commenting section, *BBS* and forums’, which accounts for 30.48% of all respondents; ‘As a disseminator, [31.43% of the respondents] posted and reposted related reports of the incident in *BBS* and forums’. These indirect actions can be regarded as a major and moderate kind of public participation, both in 2003 and in more recent years. The anonymity of the virtual world eases the public’s concern about participating in such

²⁰ Translation provided by the author.

²¹ Translation provided by the author.

events. Normally within a very short period time, a typical event like the Sun Zhigang case can lead to thousands of comments on major web portals or hundreds of posts on various *BBS*/forums sites. Also, it is a convenient and efficient way to follow social events and to exchange opinions with other internet users.

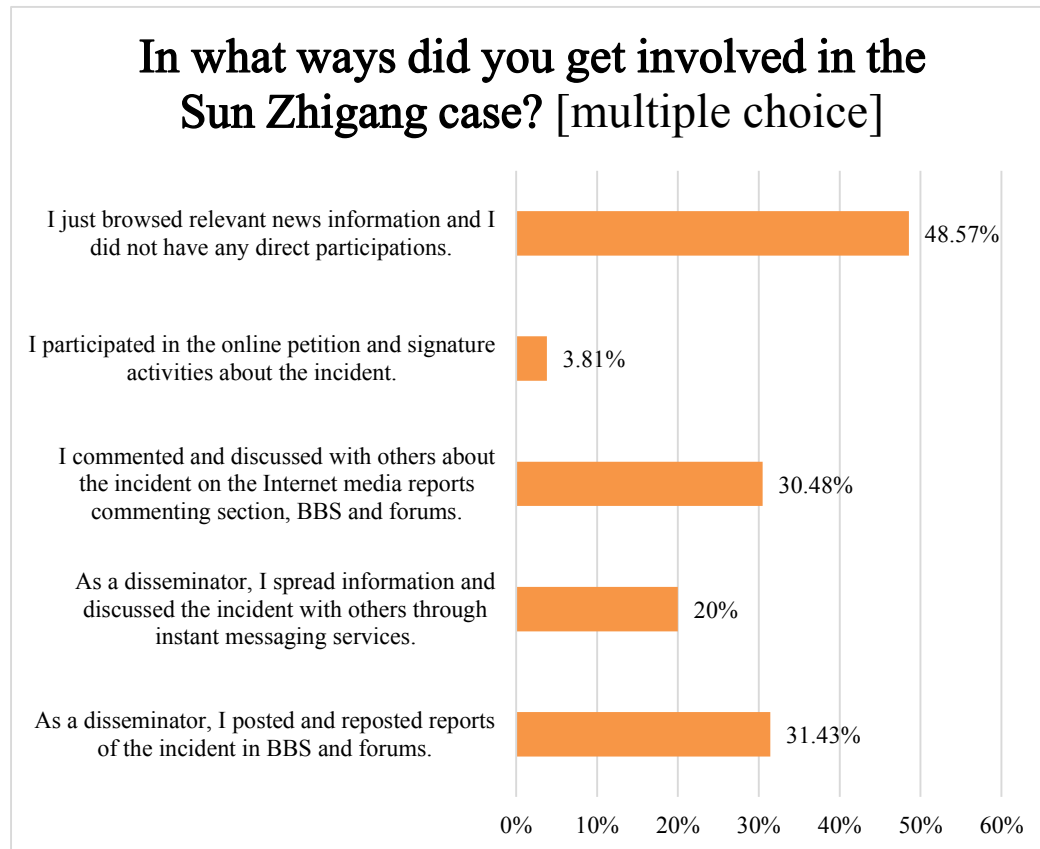


Figure 16. In what ways, did you get involved in the Sun Zhigang case?

The second category – direct participation – includes the following: ‘as a disseminator, I spread information and discussed the incident with others through instant messaging services (using *QQ*, *MSN*, mobile *SMS*, etc.)’, which accounts for 20% of all respondents; Only 3.81% of respondents participated in the online petition and signature activities in relation to the incident. Direct participation in these two forms did not have the anonymity of indirect participation. The monitoring system operated by the state-owned mobile companies (e.g. China Mobile Communication Corporation) or the mandatory installation of a censoring system in major Instant Messaging providers (e.g. *Tencent*) may have been a barrier to participation.

Moreover, the substance of online petitions and signature activities equates to the real-life demonstrations and real-name citizen engagement. It explains why most of the online petitions and signature participants were limited to Sun's friends, colleagues, classmates and family members. Finally, 48.57% of the respondents chose to just browse relevant news information and did not engage in any forms of participation. One may argue that browsing information is not a form of public participation and people may just see it the same as reading news. However, it cannot be denied that some people were worried about the censorship system and punishment measures operated by government officials. Hence, instead of directly engaging in the activities, they used a moderate way to follow the case.

There is no doubt that ordinary netizens have contributed to the Sun Zhigang case. Though the forms of their participation are considered to be relatively moderate compared with the conventional forms of social campaign in the physical world, online activism and public opinion were formed with the assistance of the offline activities performed by professionals in law and academia. The key turning point was the two rounds of real-name petitions filed by legal experts and scholars. On May 14, three legal scholars filed an innovative legal petition focused on the C&R regulation. On May 23, another group of five legal experts filed a second petition, which ensured the issue of migrant workers stayed in the spotlight. These real-life activities also included the articles published by journalists and intellectuals under their real names. Direct participation was more powerful and influential than indirect participation in promoting the development of the Sun Zhigang case. While citizens engaging in such activities could be put in a sensitive position or even receive a warning from government officials, it was these pioneers that inspired the massive online movement and facilitated the outcome of public participation.

To sum up, the forms of public opinion expressed in the Sun Zhigang case went through two phases: firstly, the dissemination of the Sun Zhigang's story via the internet and the formation of online contention; secondly, individuals transferring

their online public participation to real-name activities, which in turn, further promoted online discussion and information exchange to create a deeper level of public opinion in demanding that the government reveal the facts of the Sun Zhigang's death and investigate whether the government's regulation was lawfully justified or suitable for Chinese society. Direct participation forms detailed public opinion with specific demands, while indirect participation promotes the dissemination of public opinion.

5.3.2.4 Online or quasi-public sphere in China's cyberspace

Wang (2013) indicated that the bourgeois public sphere appeared in the period of laissez-faire capitalism. Along with the emergence of the modern state and advancement in commercial trade, the modern type of public sphere was formed (Wang, 2013). 'Civil society', as a new stratum, involves judges, doctors, priests, teachers, merchants, bankers, publishers, manufacturers and other professionals. They are presented as 'the core force' in civil society. They gathered together in the form of reading groups and openly expressed their views on public affairs.

As discussed above, the turning point in the Sun Zhigang case was when legal experts and scholars filed a petition to the NPCSC. Before the two rounds of formal petitions were filed, legal experts and lawyers discussed the problems involved in the Sun Zhigang case in online forums and meetings. They actually formed a small civil society group that made its way to the NPCSC and delivered the voice of the public to the authorities, whereas the general public's discussion and participation in the case can be considered as 'grassroots civil society' that was stimulated by the evolution of ICT, which enabled equal participation in such an authoritarian state. The only difference is that public participation in China takes place in cyberspace, whereas in western countries, it usually takes the form of offline activities.

Oldenburg (1997) coined the term 'the third place' to refer to the physical area where citizens can participate in and discuss social, political and public affairs. It is a generic

designation where ‘regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals’ are hosted (ibid., p.16). Thus, the third place here can be treated as the area where citizens can participate and discuss social, political and various public affairs in the real world. Since it is extremely difficult to form an assembly to discuss sensitive topics like the Sun Zhigang case in China, the creation of a ‘third place’ as a public medium for citizens to congregate for information exchange or form public opinions is hardly possible. Individuals who organise or attend a real-world assembly may face penalties from the government.

The internet, according to Tai (2006, p.169-171) was seen as the ‘fourth place’ for the following reasons:

- It created a brand-new social space as opposed to the history of human communication in the ‘third space’ and traditional media communication; new communicative possibilities and new social relationships were cultivated.
- internet-based communication extends beyond relations in the physical world and redefines them. The internet is both informational and participational, hence, it brings people together and invites the participation of those who care.
- The internet as a social space has generated potential that no previous media form was able to achieve, as it removes boundaries of time and geography in terms of information sharing.
- The internet gathers people with diverse experience and arguments, which accumulates the collective social capital. In return, it presents more opportunities for public participation in new ways.

For these reasons, ICT-mediated participation can be feasible in cyberspace and may become a negotiable method between the public and the government. In reconstructing the Sun Zhigang incident, to investigate the interaction between the public and media (both traditional and new media), three periods should be discussed. At first, in March 2003 when Chen Feng (a journalist for the *Southern Metropolis Daily*) was trying to find news stories, he joined the discussions with other journalists and media professionals on *Xici Forum* and came across the story, his editor approved it and Chen began to prepare coverage of related news. This indicates how a

traditional press journalist makes use of the internet to get stories. Traditionally, it used to be very difficult for citizens to attract the press's attention to follow a normal person's story – the public has limited to the traditional media industry. However, in the Sun Zhigang case, the *BBS*/forums, a new and popular social networking site at the time, had fewer restrictions and a much wider readership than print media, and Sun's story could be spread widely and promptly. As a result, it is the forum that provided an online space for the development of the Sun Zhigang case at the hands of the public, which finally made the journalist pay attention to the incident and dig deeper into the Sun Zhigang case. It is the first stage of how the case moved from new media (cyberspace) to traditional media.

Secondly, on April 25, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* first published a detailed report on the death of Sun Zhigang which was picked up by other outlets and reached the national stage until it became the stuff of daily headlines. These print media outlets spontaneously collaborated with online media, such as *Sina*, *Sohu*, *People's Daily Online*, and *Xinhua* and began to publish large-scale and follow-up reports.

To better understand the second stage of the development in the Sun Zhigang case, the survey asked about the information source in the case. In Figure 17, the result shows that 68.57% of respondents gained information about the incident from internet reports and 38.10% through *BBS*/forums. The figure greatly surpasses the total number of traditional media as an information source, including newspaper (36.19%), television and radio reports (23.81%) and shows that an instant messaging service (19.05%) was still at the developing stage during Sun's case. From this perspective, firstly, the internet had already become important in spreading effective information and sharing popular news story during the Sun Zhigang case. Although the main contribution of the major web portals at that time was to provide online news reports, which did not have the function of social networking services, it was the main source for netizens to know the recent development of social events. Secondly, the *BBS*/forums were a feature of the early days of the internet and provided a space for

articles and commentaries on the Sun Zhigang case in a form of citizen journalism or grassroots publication. It also allowed netizens to make any comments, discuss with each other and even criticise the official sectors directly. Although censorship is getting stricter than before, online platforms still made the public sphere possible in China's cyberspace and worked as the 'fourth place' which makes online public participation on sensitive social events feasible and reliable (Tai, 2006).

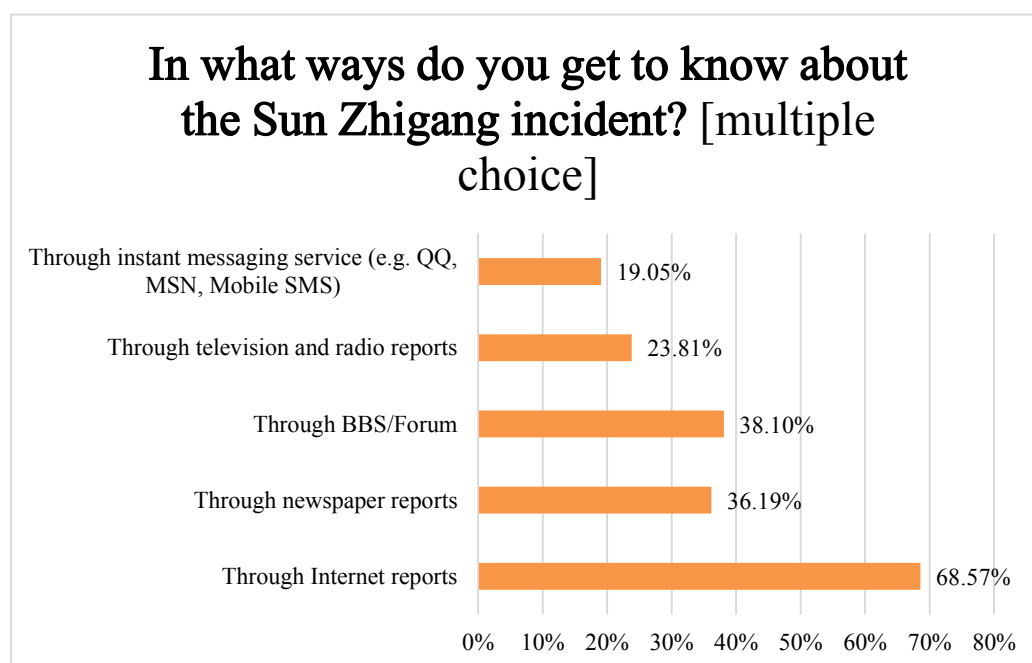


Figure 17. In what ways do you get to know about the case?

Finally, in the third stage after the reports were released, online chatrooms and forums were filled with discussions of the Sun case, and most internet users raised the focus to a higher level – civil rights in China. *BBS* such as *Qiangguo Forum*, *Development Forum*, *China Youth Forum* and *Tianya BBS* were flooded with comments and appeals (Yu, 2006). The outcry of *BBS* participants continued to reverberate in cyberspace and resulted in the formation of such a strong public opinion that mainstream media finally adjusted their agenda to satisfy people's 'right to know'. With all the emotions expressed by the public, be it anger, criticism, sympathy or passion, public opinion eventually led to a tipping point – finding the root of the problem and this was followed by the submission of the petitions. At least four major

central papers reported on the petition at great length, and the information was disseminated nationwide through the internet. The prevalence of the internet has evidently expanded the realm of public communication by breaking the boundaries of the traditional physical public sphere. The mass space constructed on the internet forms a virtual public sphere (Du and Cao, 2013). Some scholars have also claimed that the medium of the internet generates an exceptional advantage for the emergence of the public sphere online (Chen, 2006).

The function of an online public sphere resembles the three key elements in the traditional public sphere: at first, views that are presented in online extensive debates and free access to open discussion lead to citizen communities having critical awareness; secondly, the internet includes the characteristics of equality, directness, interaction and effectiveness, which enables the existence of an open medium; and thirdly, citizens congregate on online platforms and discuss conveniently, providing a good possibility for fostering rational critical public opinion.

In the Sun Zhigang case, according to the survey results, 38% of respondents held the opinion that public space on the internet was not sufficient at the time. Although many people engaged in the case, some comments were censored and deleted. Still, 49.6% agreed that there was enough public space on the internet and a great number of people engaged in discussion. This shows that the public has the passion to take part in an online discussion or engage in online public participation. More importantly, it implies the internet users' eagerness for the formation of an online public sphere.

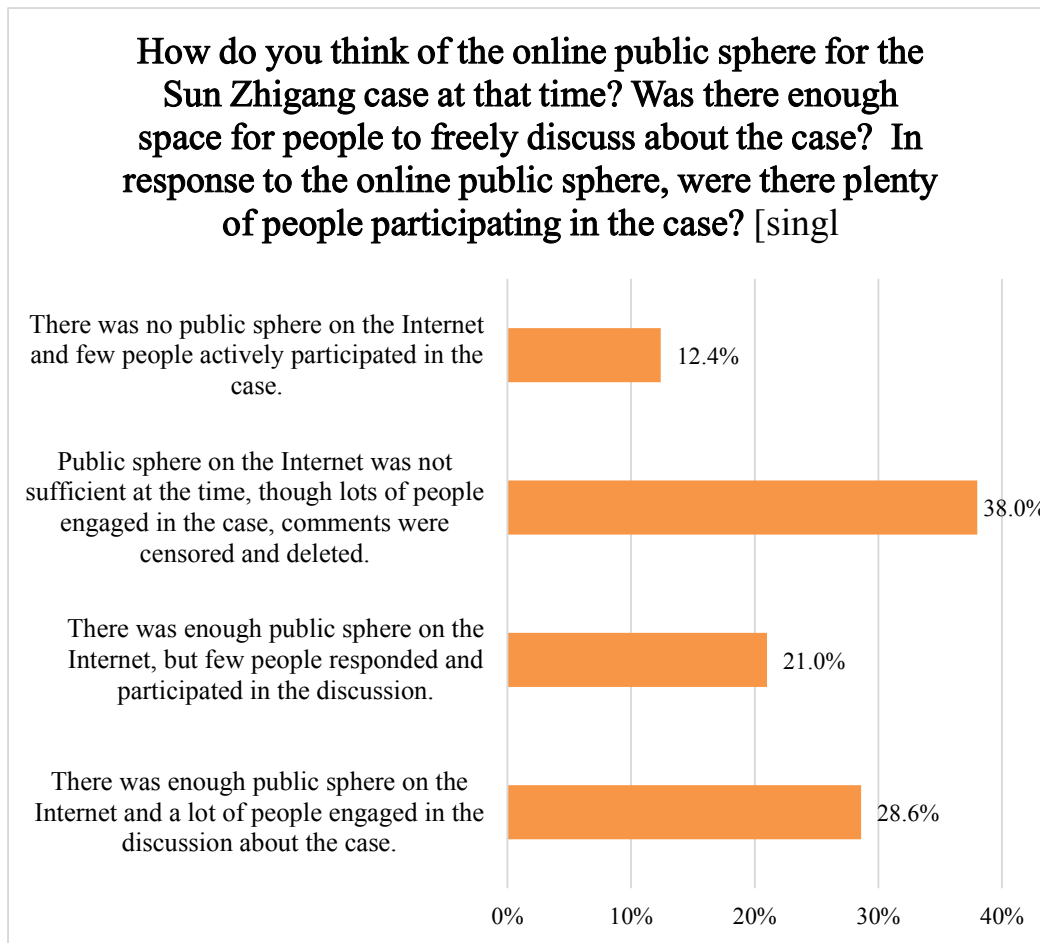


Figure 18. The formation of the online public sphere and the public participation during the case.

Xiong (2012) analogised individuals as ‘nodes’ and internet media space as the ‘surface’ in the online public sphere and made the following categorisations:

- The ‘node-to-surface’ mode refers to the independent media spaces assigned for individual users, but open access is granted to the public. These include social networking sites, blogs, *QQ-zone*, *Weibo* and *Renren* in China.
- The ‘surface-to-surface’ mode refers to the communication space that is built on the basis of common interests, such as online forums and community sites.
- The ‘formal and official’ mode refers to websites hosted by formal media companies or governmental departments with the purpose of attracting public engagement and collecting public opinion, such as the commercial news web portals *Sina* and *NetEase* and the state-owned media outlet *Xinhua Net*.

Since SNS had not been fully developed in 2003, the latter two models of the online public sphere are reflected in the Sun’s case. The *BBS*/forums were the main platform that enabled an information flow among internet users. Formal websites acted as an

information source and portal that invited the public to get involved in the case and they sometimes functioned to guide the direction of public opinion.

5.3.3 The government's performance during the information regime III

The growing wealth of Chinese citizens and the availability of advanced ICTs have precipitated Information Regime III, in which the media industry has stepped into the digital age. A growing proportion of Chinese citizens gained the technological capability to express their views via digital networks around the country and, indeed, around the globe. The result has been a freer expression of public opinion, although free speech could be transitory due to computerised censorship and the repression of dissidents.

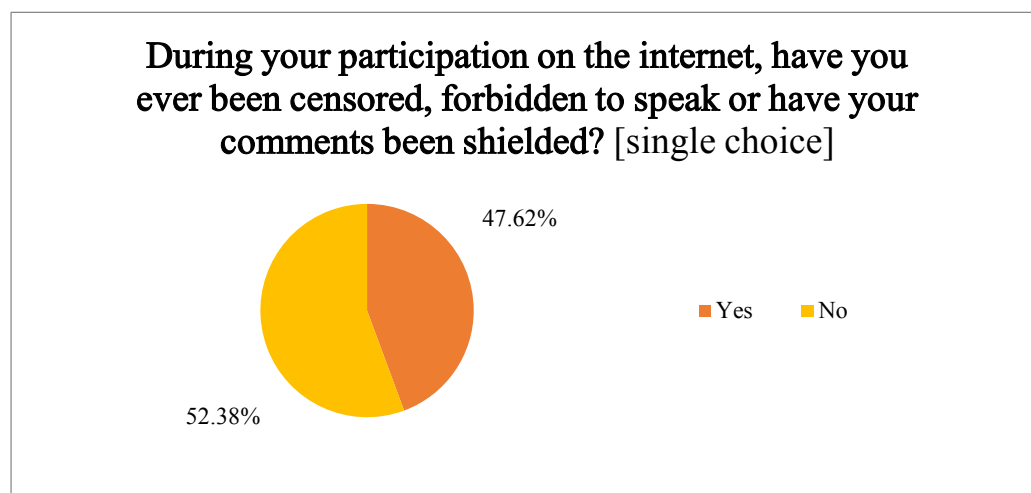


Figure 19. The treating methods toward participation on the internet.

Thus, the dominant properties of political information in Information Regime III are proliferation of information and communication technology (cell phones and personal computers), the media linked to the web and e-government. The government developed a computerised censorship system to filter and block sensitive online information which led to government regulation restricting internet use. According to my survey, 47.62% of the respondents have been censored or forbidden to speak while participating in social events on the internet, or their comments on such public events have been shielded (Figure 19). One point mentioned by *Interviewee 6* is that

‘in the early age of social networking sites in China, it indeed awakened the collective wisdom. But soon the government began to realise as well and quickly took over the control of the internet, then made the new rules and restrictions’²². It seems to be more difficult for other public cases to reproduce the successful model of the Sun Zhigang case in today’s cyberspace. Although technological development has empowered easy access to information exchange and online public opinions can be formed more efficiently than before, government officials only pay attention to the hotly debated issues. The current situation is that any kind of overly-sensitive or anti-Party public participation will be censored or deleted in the very early stage without any negotiation, which represents the bottom line for such an authoritarian state like China.

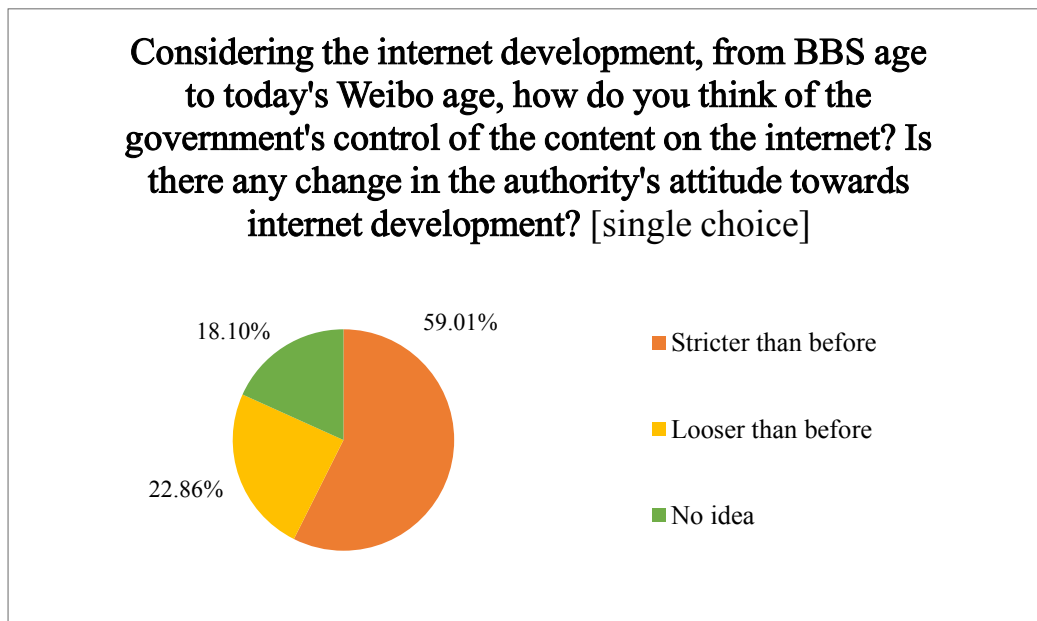


Figure 20. What do you think of the government’s control of the content on the internet?

Scholars have pointed out that the internet might pose ‘an insurmountable threat to the regime and that such a threat may arise from internet use in the mass public, civil

²² Translation provided by the author.

society, the economy and the international community' (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002, cited in Zheng, 2008, p.79). In Information Regime III, citizens are empowered by opportunities that include rapid communication with like-minded individuals, greater political expression, more accessible information, easier mobilisation, and less formal restriction than the official media. The dominant official sectors are the Ministry of Information Industry, Information Office of the State Council, the Central Propaganda Department, web portals, media websites, blogs, and covert party organisations (influencing public opinion) (Esarey and Xiao, 2011). Considering the development of the internet, from the *BBS* age to today's *Weibo* age, 59.01% of the respondents in Figure 20 thought the government's control of online public participation and media information was stricter.

The internet as a fundamental medium in Information Regime III plays a vital role in the interaction between the public and the government. As Tai (2006, p.97) indicated, 'the internet, unlike any of the conventional media, was primarily invented as a technology to eliminate the possibility of a central control mechanism'. It facilitated information dissemination by exposing ordinary Chinese citizens to a brand-new and broader environment. Zheng (2008) assessed the phenomenon as pressure for political authority and social support for reform in China.

With the rapid development of ICT in China, government departments have to deal with public affairs effectively and immediately, and also react to the controversial impacts of online public participation skilfully and intelligently.

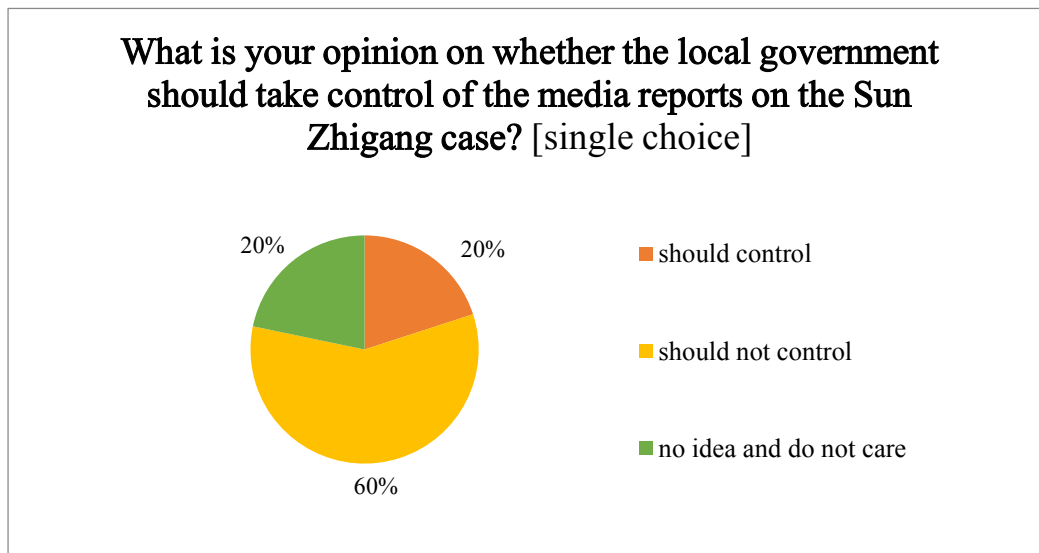


Figure 21. Whether the local government should take control or not.

In Figure 21, 60% of the respondents hold the opinion that local government should not take control of media reports on the Sun Zhigang case. This is because netizens at the time had already formed an awareness of seeking the truth and gaining more reliable information about the story. The regulatory actions performed by the local government seemed to be inadvisable and invalid in 2003, as the authority ignored the power of the internet and did not appreciate the empowerment of the social networking services.

However, the central government faced a background of a nationwide fight against SARS, and conducted a series of immediate and effective measures to manage online and offline public participation. At first, the central-level media quickly picked up the story and gave full coverage of the Sun Zhigang case, which soon became a fixture in daily headlines, and even the *Study Times*, said that ‘the case should not be glossed over by processing it as an isolated incident’ (Hand, 2007, p.123) and appealed for an amendment to the legal system to prevent such abuses in the future (Zhou, 2003).

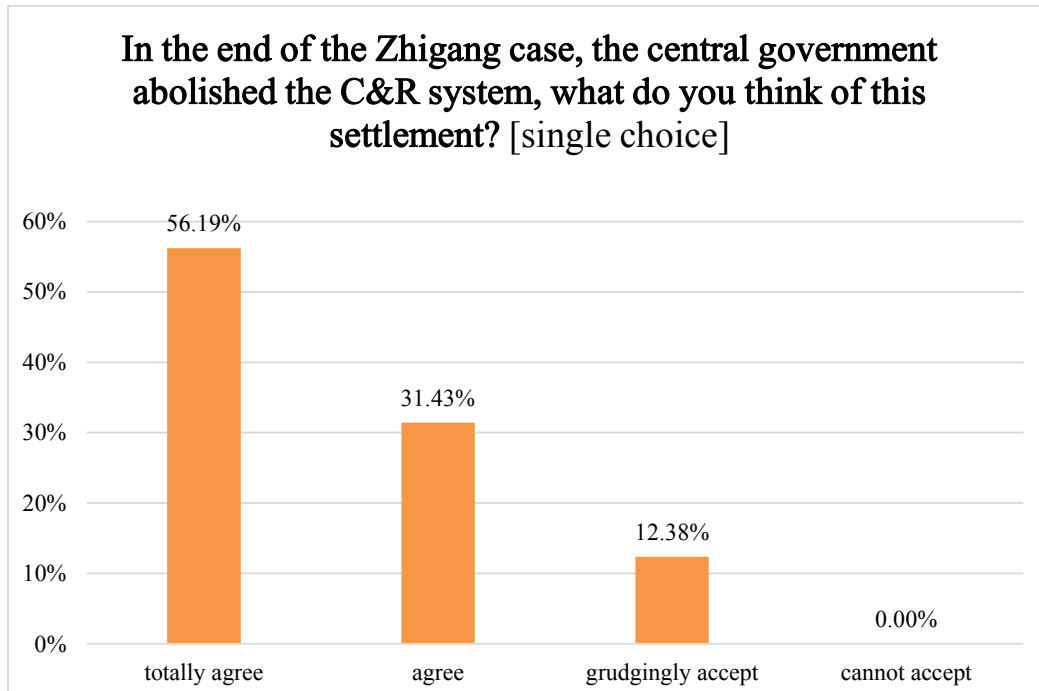


Figure 22. What do you think of the government's settlement?

In response to my survey, 87.62% of respondents in Figure 22 totally agreed or agreed with the settlement that central government abolished the C&R system at the end of the Sun Zhigang incident, while none of the participants disagreed. It is obvious that when facing public events about unfairness, injustice or human rights, Chinese netizens are likely to unite and are willing to make great efforts in public participation. In such cases, the central government attempts to firstly calm the public's emotion, then collect the public opinion from various sides and finally produce a solution that might not satisfy everyone, but which will maintain the stability of society. In the Sun Zhigang case, there was a huge difference in the performance of central and local government because the local government acted on its own account and regardless of the powerful public participation and the widely-spreading public opinion; whereas the central government took the issue to a higher level while considering the stability of the whole society. This is supported by *Interviewee 6*, who said :

‘the government’s attitudes toward the internet is inconsistent. For the local governments, their main task is not to react to the public opinion or solve the problem, but to make the superior government satisfied. In the face of

sensitive cases, some local officials choose to block the information to avoid condemnation; whereas other local officials make proactively reactions by listening to public opinion. In most of the cases, what makes the public unsatisfied is the government's attitudes. They are angry because instead of correcting, local governments tend to cover up the mistake. The win-win method for the government is to face public events directly, react promptly before things getting worse'²³.

In terms of the government-public relationship, *Interviewee 3* believed that:

'it is a dynamic relationship. The government plays a dominant role in the triangular system, while the other two parties are the controlled objects. However, the growing trend is that the public also use the internet to monitor the government's performance'²⁴.

In the Sun Zhigang case, the final result shows that the evolution of the information regime has promoted changes in the properties of government-public interaction.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I analysed the government-public interrelationship through the investigation of the Sun Zhigang case. As an early grassroots campaign through social media, it resulted directly in the change of a law and represented the beginning of a bottom-up approach for public participation. Sun's death triggered the social campaign both online and offline. In the initial stage of the internet age in China, explosive news like the abnormal death of an ordinary citizen could easily arouse public opinion. A series of spontaneous interactions between the traditional and new media took place. Prior to the popularisation of the internet, the state-controlled traditional media mainly functioned in two landscapes: pro-government propaganda channel and the commercialised pattern. However, the Sun Zhigang case showed the technological empowerment which enabled the bottom-up approach from normal

²³ Translation provided by the author.

²⁴ Translation provided by the author.

netizens to the local or central government. It represented a transition process in which the public transferred from the initial message receivers to information producers and disseminators. Public opinion was then delivered to the government through social campaign. Hence, the new bottom-up approach – ‘the public-generated communication in negotiating with the government’ – was formed and it fostered the launch of online activism and online public participation at the time.

In the Sun Zhigang case, spontaneous netizen involvement triggered the unblocking of information moving from the public to the government. Though the local government attempted to control the local media, thousands of internet users spontaneously gathered to help the dissemination of the story via the internet. They were numerous scattered nodes in cyberspace, but they came together and participated in the same event and formed an incidental grassroots activism. Offline activism was led by public figures and professionals in the law and other academic domains. Activities involved physical meetings to debate the case, petitions filed to the central government and commentaries published under the writers’ real names, which provoked a fermentation effect on the internet and acted as a guidance for public opinion.

The spontaneous participation, especially the collective efforts made by the general netizens on the internet and the offline activities of the practitioners, was the vital force that led to the success of the social campaign. Unlike other tools, the privilege of the internet offered effective guarantees and protection for those netizens who were engaged in the campaign. It changed the authoritarian hierarchy relationship to a negotiable form. The extensive online activism and public participation demonstrated the establishment of an online public sphere and a quasi-civil society in China. Three main factors in the definition of public sphere – public, public opinion, and public medium – were discussed. Manifested in *BBS*/forums posts and debates, online chatroom discussions, and comments on the major media portals, it testified to the existence of online public sphere in China’s cyberspace.

The success of the Sun Zhigang campaign was not an accidental event. It was the result of several important conditions being in place; socio-political, technological and commercial conditions. The reform and opening-up policy changed the previous situation of public participation, in which central propaganda policy played a dominant role. The public used to just have only limited space to voice for themselves and achieve public participation. However, the introduction of the internet broke the long-term information monopoly. The public are exposed to diverse information, which has gradually cultivated the awareness of democracy and civil rights in Chinese society. Compared with the physical forms of social campaign, the government changed its attitudes towards online public participation from strict prohibition to possible tolerance. It allowed opportunities for the public to debate and comment on social events and, mirroring the information regime theory, marked a cut-off point in China's media history – the beginning of the third Information Regime, the digital age. Technological development offered easily accessible information channels, which brought new options in the communication form between public and government. Together with the commercialisation of the media industry, the products launched by the internet companies provided a platform for people to express views and to exchange information. The Sun Zhigang case was the unintended consequence when all these three conditions accidentally met.

Chapter 6. The Xiamen PX plant event

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I use the Xiamen PX plant case as an example to explore the interrelationship between the government and the media companies since 2005, the beginning of the blog age, particularly on the government's different regulations towards the media: whether it has become stricter, the extent to which the media has sufficient independence of content generation and dissemination, and how the two parties (government and media company) respond to each other's development.

In the first part, I analyse the Xiamen PX plant incident as a successful cooperation between the media and the government in both online and offline public participation. The second part explores the incident based on the primary data collected from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, attempting to explain the changing relationship between the government and the media in the context of public participation.

6.2 Background

In 2007, preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games entered their final phase with a surge of public issues. As a country full of vigour, China resolved to use the upcoming games as a chance to display a positive image to the world. Meanwhile, the flourishing of the new media platforms nurtured a large number of writers and commentators on the internet. In the new *Web 2.0* era, there emerged the 'citizen voicing' phenomenon, particularly on the topic of public affairs. The 2007 Xiamen PX plant case happened in an atmosphere of highly motivated public participation when new media companies were exploring ways of connecting, interacting and dealing with the government.

The ICT boom and continuous growth of new media services provides a variety of online platforms that resemble an offline public assembly. However, the new technology also puts the media market and the government in a tricky situation in

which the new media companies are trying their best to find a secure way to make profits and the government is continue altering its monitoring approach and regulating function. Therefore, the interaction between the government and the media market is seen as a dynamic relationship between the regulator and regulated.

6.3 A successful collaboration between the government and media in both online and offline public participation

In my framework, the primary aim of media companies is to make profits by providing ICT services. In China, there are no media companies that can challenge the government's control. A series of regulations prohibit: content related to pornography, gambling and drugs; information that contains sensitive words or topics; and opinions that question the legitimacy of the CCP and its governing capacity. Media companies are treated as a type of business by the government, though a special one because they provide the public with a powerful tool of communication that has been and will be tightly controlled. In the same time, the government in the framework plays multiple roles. At the primary level, the government represents the policy-making power in China's cyberspace. It also monitors and assures law enforcement in the online or quasi-public sphere and regulates all media companies in the Chinese market.

However, as the government cannot directly control its citizens, it only responds to the ICT-mediated public participation and receives the feedback via online platforms.

6.3.1 The role of the traditional media in the event

Building a new chemical plant in a dense urban area was strongly opposed by Xiamen residents, and this reflected the power of the new media in 2007, when technology not only served as a massive platform for the dissemination and discussion of such news stories, but when they were censored, it provided a way to circumvent the government's information control.

Xiamen, which is known as the 'Egret Island', has long been famous for its beautiful harbour and the national scenic landscape of Gulangyu Island. Called the 'Best Place

to Live' by the United Nations, it is a tourism destination with a long history and exquisite environment. Haicang District is particularly known for its living environment and it has become a new hot spot of real estate development in recent years. Local government vigorously promoted the development of the district and encouraged a large number of citizens to purchase houses and move to the area. However, in 2006, with the successful introduction of a Taiwanese para-xylene (PX) chemical plant, Haicang District was re-positioned as a petrochemical production base (Huang, 2010).

In February 2004, the municipal government of Xiamen approved the building of the plant without consulting the residents. In 2006, the Tenglong Aromatic PX Corporation invested ¥10.8 billion to build a local PX chemical plant to replace imported para-xylene. It was expected to create ¥80 billion worth of industrial output per year, which equals a quarter of Xiamen's GDP. In July 2006, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) approved the project and construction began in November (Li, Liu and Li, 2012).

In July 2005, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) had approved the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of the project. Due to the many benefits it would bring in terms of prestige for local government, annual economic growth of Xiamen and regional prosperity, it was listed as one of the seven large PX projects on industrial planning in China's 11th Five Year Plan (2006-2010) by NDRC. It was announced that the new plant aimed would be a world-class petrochemical giant emerging on the west bank of the Taiwan Strait (Hung, 2013).

Although the building of the plant passed EIA and was approved by the national government, people were sceptical. To respond to the public's doubts and ease social tension, a new EIA was realised. However, more than 90% of citizens opposed the project as reflected in both the internet voting and the public hearing (Yao, 2013). Anonymous comments, such as '[w]e don't know who and in what ways the EIA was

made, how can we trust it?', and '[t]his must be the government's trick. They are trying to fool us again!' were widely disseminated on the internet (ibid).

In August 2006, the Haicang Land Development Corporation began land expropriation for the project and cleared 1.28 square kilometers of land in 40 days. It was claimed to be a 'record speed' for Haicang by the local media (Huang, 2010). As construction began, environmental pollution started to be visible and could not be ignored. The nearby residents in Wenying village and other neighbourhoods noticed that a sour smell always hung in the air at night and sometimes it was so pungent that they could hardly fall asleep. The unpleasant smell was also frequently detected by the faculty and students in the Haicang School, which was affiliated to Beijing Normal University. Residents in the adjacent 'Future Coast' neighbourhood saw a growing number of giant industrial chimneys and noticed increasingly stale air. They reported the pollution situation to the local environmental department, governmental department and news media repeatedly, but nothing happened. Citizens who spent their lives saving to buy houses or invest in Haicang District became anxious and angry (Huang, 2010).

At the end of 2006, Professor Zhao Yufen of the department of chemistry in Xiamen University, Yuan Dongxing and other academics started negotiations with Xiamen city government which lasted for months. Mayor He Lifeng declared that the project had not been approved by the current city government, and it had been proposed to the State Council by three former mayors and the city government. He also pointed out that, when the Xiamen government was considering the project, Xiamen University and the Third Institute of Oceanography of the State Oceanic Administration were in full agreement with the proposal, and Xiamen University even set up a chemical science institute for it. Ding Guoyan from the municipal Party Committee stated that he was an outsider to the field of chemical industry, and that he never heard that PX can explode. The assessment of the project had recognition from environmental specialists. Later, three academics – Zhao Yufen, Tian Zhaowu and Xu

Xun – reviewed issues of toxicity and hazard and concluded that, due to the sensitive position of Haicang District, they would like to invite international experts to join the project assessment. The Xiamen government did not accept the suggestion (Huang, 2010). Academics also pointed out that plants in Taiwan and Korea are usually located 70 kilometres away from residential areas due to the highly toxic petrochemical discharge and the risk of explosion and leaks, and they recommended a distance of 100 kilometres from residential areas. However, the plant in Xiamen was only 4 kilometres away from two university campuses and 6 kilometres from the city centre, and had around 100,000 people living within a 5 kilometres radius (Li, Liu and Li, 2012). There was also disagreement over the level of toxicity of PX (She and Lin, 2016).

Although PX plants in other countries had seen no major safety accidents, a PX plant in Zhangzhou City suffered two explosions in 2013 and in 2015 which refocused public attention. It is noteworthy that the PX plant in Zhangzhou City was the one originally belonged to the Xiamen PX plant. The detailed situation of the relocation will be discussed later. This was also reflected in the questionnaire data I collected: 53.33% of respondents believed that PX is a highly toxic chemical that can be transmitted through water or air; 26.67% thought it highly toxic but that it cannot affect human health as long as direct contact was avoided; 18.10% believed it to be of low toxicity; and only 1.90% thought it safe and of zero toxicity. This again shows the lack of accurate information and the variety in the perception of PX among general public.

The plant was scheduled to begin production in the summer of 2007. Professor Zhao Yufen, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), submitted a petition with 105 CPPCC members' signatures which called for the suspension and relocation of the plant, arguing that a PX plant located in a populous area would increase the risk of cancer and birth defects if a leak or explosion were to occur. Neither the relevant departments at the national level nor the Xiamen local

government approved her petition; on the contrary, the construction of the plant was accelerated (Li, Liu and Li, 2012).

On 11 March, *Southern Metropolis Daily* became the first newspaper to cover Zhao's petition. In a 5-page story that also ran on the popular Web portal *Sohu.com*, the newspaper quoted Zhao and criticized development projects undertaken by local officials in China without due consideration for the citizens. The article provided key information on the Xiamen project, including the number of residents living in the immediate vicinity, and it also reviewed past industrial accidents in China. Within a week, three newspapers (*China Chemical Industry News*, *China Youth Daily*, and *China Business*) ran news features on the project that emphasized the issues raised by the CPPCC delegates.

Media reports of the petition drew the attention of the national environmental department. On 14 March 2007, SEPA officials responded to the issue saying that relocating an approved project was beyond their jurisdiction and thus, no follow up actions could be taken (Huang, 2010). The Secretary of Xiamen's Municipal Committee, He Lifeng, organised a meeting for the local officials on 18 March 2007 and announced that, '[w]e must unify our thinking. The delegates at the CPPCC have expressed their concerns. But we do not need to pay attention to it. We must speed up the construction of the PX plant' (Huang, 2007). Two days later, the Haicang district Party committee held another meeting to unify He's message and demanded acceleration of the project construction (Ansfield, 2013)

6.3.2 The role of the new media: grassroots participation in public affairs through online platforms

In April, a team sent by the NDRC went for an on-site visit to Haicang district. On 15 May, the team leader met with Professor Zhao and claimed that the PX plant in Xiamen had met all government requirements and standards, and there was no chance to stop or relocate the plant (Li, Liu and Li, 2012). From then on, negotiation between

the Xiamen experts and the government at both central and local level was ineffective. Traditional media reports on the hazardousness of PX were banned, although the magazine *Phoenix Weekly*, based in Hong Kong, managed to publish a report titled *Chemical Misgivings in an Island City – Xiamen*, which was widely-spread among Chinese citizens (Huang, 2010).

As Xiamen's traditional media were prevented from reporting opposition to the PX project, new technologies began showing their strength. Xiamen-based freelance journalist Zhong Xiaoyong started following the PX story on his personal blog, written under the penname Lian Yue. On 18 March 2007, Lian began posting comment on the PX project with a shocking title – *Xiamen Suicides*. In a long article, Lian revealed deterioration of air quality in Xiamen during 2006 using official statistics. *China Business*, a traditional outlet, re-published Lian's article the same day. However, there was no trace of this report in any of the local traditional media and only one new media platform – Lian's personal blog – contained information about the report (Hung, 2013).

Lian published a series of blogs criticising the project. He emphasised its effects on public safety and environmental pollution. On 29 March 2007, He published a blog appealing to Xiamen residents to break the information control and to save themselves (Hung, 2013). Over the next few months, visits to Lian's blog increased as the site became an important source of Xiamen PX-related information, particularly in Xiamen itself, where the content was pasted across local online chat rooms. As Lian aggregated news stories on his blog, he also wrote a number of critical editorials for traditional commercial newspapers outside his home province, including Hunan's *Xiaoxiang Morning Post* and Guangdong's *Southern Metropolis Daily*.

The posts on Lian's online personal blog include *Xiamen Suicides*, *Xiamen citizens should act like this*, *Xiamen Residents Have Primarily Achieved a Win*, *Please Cherish the Ten Days*, and *Xiamen Experience*. The posts could also be found on a

few traditional media platforms (Gang and Bandurski, 2011).

A local resident Wu Xian set up a *QQ* group named *Return My Clear Water and Blue Sky in Xiamen* and it attracted many members (Huang, 2010). A few other websites including the popular local internet forum *Little Fish Community* and the public *BBS* of Xiamen University all reposted Lian's blogs. The citizens in Xiamen, who had no previous knowledge or information about the PX construction, were alerted of the imminent threat to their local environment.

This suggests that, in the PX plant case, there was a mutual relationship between the traditional media and new media. When the traditional media was banned from publishing relevant reports, the new media was able to disseminate social events because of its openness, autonomy and high interactivity. Lian published articles on his blog which encouraged internet users to comment and forward his posts. These blogs were spread to other forums and online chat groups, which promoted more discussions and thus formed a series of online public participation with significant influence.

The dynamics of reporting in the traditional and new media are similar. They start by covering first-hand news when a social event breaks out, which helps increase the view rate, click rate and audience's comments, meaning more profits can be expected. However, the difference is that in an authoritarian country, traditional media suffers more restrictions and stricter control by the government. Local traditional media platforms do not have autonomy in deciding whether to report a sensitive social event due to the local government's direct control. Whereas for the new media has greater autonomy, a secure environment and more effective information flow, which makes it suitable for the dissemination of sensitive social events. It can also stimulate grassroots participation.

6.3.3 Online platforms triggered offline mass participation

Discussion of the Xiamen PX project continued throughout April and May 2007 as a

handful of reports from newspapers such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Information Daily* were published in cyberspace, augmented by comments in online chat rooms or on blogs. The proliferation of the anti-PX messages via emails and mobile instant messages reached a high level, leading to people's intolerance of the government ignoring their voices and demands to relocate the plant. Notably, one particular *SMS* text message was sent around 28 May spread to about 1.5 million mobile phone users in Xiamen:

'Taiwan's Chen Yuhao and the Xianglu Group have begun construction on a PX chemical project in Haicang. Once this highly toxic chemical goes into production, it will mean that an atomic time bomb has been released on Xiamen Island. Xiamen people will have to live their lives with leukaemia and with children born with congenital defects. We want life, we want good health! International organisations have determined that this sort of special project should only be developed 100 kilometres or more outside a city, but Xiamen is only 16 kilometres from the project at farthest. For the sake of our future generations, please act!' (Liu and Zhao, 2010, p.329).



Figure 23. Screenshot of the message.

'Did you receive the message?' became the opening remark when Xiamen citizens met each other for the following three months. There was a great stir among the citizens after this information spread and the sentiments of fear aroused by this information affected the normal life of people in Xiamen.

As the call to protest buzzed around the city, the government made an abrupt reversal. On 29 May, an emergency meeting was convened, and the provincial party committee

in Fuzhou demanded the leaders in Xiamen report on the project and deal with the public outcry (Ansfield, 2013). On the early morning of 30 May, the executive vice mayor Ding Guoyan announced the decision to suspend construction of the PX plant and to conduct a more comprehensive environmental assessment of the entire industrial zone (Ansfield, 2013).

The mass protest known as the 'leisure walk' took shape slowly. In the beginning, around 300-600 people assembled on the pavement outside the city government offices. However, they were forced away and people found that the bridge to Haicang district was blocked. By midday of 1 June, thousands of the crowd coursed through the streets, passing government offices, and shouting the Party motto 'Serve the people!' Some of the people called out the leader of the municipal party by name, 'He Lifeng, take a hike!' It turned out that the government's decision to suspend and further assess the project was not enough for the public. The protesters' demand was to expel the plant (Ansfield, 2013). Banners with slogans, such as 'Boycott PX, Protect Xiamen', 'Stop Construction, No Postponement' and 'Resist the PX Project, Protect City Residents' Health and Protect Xiamen's Environment', were held up (Hung, 2013).

The demonstration signified the transition from the online campaign to the real world mass event. During this process, the discussions on *BBS*/forums, blogs and online chat groups moved to the state-owned mobile messaging platforms. It facilitated a form of demonstration in the physical space and the demonstration process was broadcast and disseminated by the participants and activists through the internet.

In China, an offline campaign is the final step for citizens to express their opinions. It is a collective result of the aggregation of online activities. In terms of media companies, the main contribution is to provide an online public sphere that enables netizens to gather together to discuss social events. In online public sphere, as the opinions accumulate and netizens' emotions reach a peak, they may alter to an offline

approach for greater influence.



Figure 24. Photos of the demonstration from the internet.

6.3.4 New patterns of government regulating behaviour

The turnabout had occurred. The Xiamen government agreed that the project might have to be shelved, but the most eye-catching event happened when the government choose to use mobile communication channels to announce the decision during and after the demonstration. The text-messages sent in the following days went like this:

‘The PX plant had already been halted and closed. We are doing an environmental assessment and it takes more than half year. So if you have any ideas or suggestions, please go through the proper channels to give the government feedback. We will make sure to share your opinions and suggestions with the government’ (Liu and Zhao, 2010, p.330).

The government’s channels to communicate with the general public were open, including local newspapers, TV, the internet and, in particular, mobile phone services. These were convenient information platforms people can submit their advice or opinions to the government, and from which the government can collect, process and send feedback.

The development of this anti-PX demonstration had alarmed high-ranking officials in Beijing. On 4 June, Director Ma Kai from NDRC indicated at a press conference organised by the Information Office of the State Council that all construction on the Xiamen PX project had stopped and that the government would listen to public opinion and experts’ suggestions (Huang, 2010).

Later, the municipal government collaborated with the local newspapers to appeal to people to support the PX project. From 5 June, the Xiamen Association of Science and Technology and *Xiamen Daily* co-edited a brochure called *How much do you know about PX* with an initial print run of 250,000 copies. It was released to government departments, public institutions, districts in Xiamen city, schools, universities, major tourist spots, hotels, public venues and transportation hubs. The *Xiamen Daily*, *Xiamen Evening Post*, *Xiamen Business Daily* and other local newspapers used severe political wording in daily propaganda editorials, such as

‘Don’t forget the pain after the wound is healed!’, and ‘Don’t lift a rock only to drop it on your own feet!’ (Huang, 2010).

On 3 June, the Xiamen Municipal Public Security Bureau made an announcement that the organisers of the demonstration must turn themselves in within three days or they would be severely punished. The Xiamen Public Security Bureau announced that the ‘leisure walk’ incident on June 1 and 2 was a severe violation of the law and that people who had participated should surrender themselves as soon as possible. It also detained and questioned some of the participants and organisers, but they were soon released (Huang, 2010).

After weeks of mounting tension, local political leaders formally responded to the torrent of online and offline protests by reaffirming the suspension of the project pending a further environmental review for six months from June to December 2007. Meanwhile, the Xiamen municipal government announced a public hearing and deliberation to demonstrate the shift of the government’s stance from strong condemnation of criticism to embracing all forms of public opinion (Hung, 2013).

The new environmental assessment was released on 5 December 2007. It said that Haicang District was too small to buffer the detrimental influence of atmospheric pollution, and that the municipal government should re-consider its development plan and whether the area should be a petrochemical industrial zone or a secondary city centre. It also called for an early decision (Hung, 2013).

This shows that the Chinese government possessed the wisdom and approach to handle mass events. In the Xiamen, the official sector’s solution was to alternate between a mercy and an authority stance. It announced the government’s decisions through *SMS*; collected public opinion through both the traditional and new media platforms; and disseminated the knowledge of PX plants in a scientifically-oriented way by distributing brochures, but it also declared the demonstration illegal and announced the punishment of the ‘rebels’ in government departments and newspapers.

In the context of the Chinese society, offline campaign has more chances to arouse the attention of the central government, thereby to push local government to focus on the real issues and to deal with social incident in a more effective and proper way.

6.3.5 **The triangular dynamics among the government, internet companies and the public**

Unsurprisingly, most Xiamen citizens were profoundly sceptical of the government's response at first, and 700 comments were made on the government-backed web portal within a few hours (Ansfield, 2013). A representative example reads:

‘The PX plant is still being built; Quick, turn on your pollution gauges; If the chemical plant does not go, we will go; Get out! Can't the people's government think about the people? The day PX plant comes production is the day I leave Xiamen’. (Ansfield, 2013, p.141)

On 8 December, *Xiamen Network* opened a public voting platform called *Listen to the public's voice, make scientific decision – Environmental Impact Assessment Report on the key areas in Xiamen (Haicang District) and public participation event*. However, an hour after the page opened, it was suddenly closed. The voting page disappeared the next day and the web address automatically transferred to another page. *Xiamen Network* explained that they stopped the public voting because of technical problems – the vote did not impose restrictions on IP addresses. The final voting result was: 55,376 against PX (more than 90%) and 3,078 in favour (Huang, 2010).

Similarly, in my questionnaire around half of the participants (51.43%) indicated that pollution was the reason that they opposed PX plant, 18.10% opposed it because of

the NIMBY²⁵ effect, and 5.71% were behaving for conformity, this means ‘Because others say that PX is dangerous, I am against it’. Only 6.67% actually supported the project and 3.81% believed there was no harm in the production of PX, whereas 14.29% showed support provided that the site selection of the PX plant was reasonable. The overall result was 75.24% opposed and 24.77% in favour.

On 13 December, Xianglu Tenglong Corporation (the PX project executor) authorised *Southern Weekend* to publish an apology. It stated that: 1. PX is of low toxicity and cannot lead to cancer or birth defects; 2. Haicang PX plant used world-leading patent technology with huge investment in environmental protection to ensure the safety, stability and reliability of the project; 3. Haicang PX plant can exist harmoniously with the local residents. The letter also declared that Xianglu petrochemical had passed the environmental assessment; and the discharge from the plant did pass the environmental standard. However, the strategy did not change the citizens’ minds (Huang, 2010).

²⁵ NIMBY (not in my backyard) effect refers to a psychological phenomenon that the residents oppose a proposal for a new development because it is close to their neighbourhood and people believe that it may have negative influence on their health, living environment and property value. Residents usually believe that the new developments are needed in the society, however, they should be further away from the neighbourhood.



Figure 25. A photo of the public hearing.

On 13 and 14 December 2007, a public hearing was convened to offer the opportunity for Xiamen citizens to express their concerns and opinions. However, they did not have the power to make the final decision. Some 107 representatives were chosen and invited to this public hearing; half from the municipal People's Congress and Political Consultative Committee, and half from the general public. The public representatives were selected through a televised lottery from 624 people who registered online. However, some journalists claimed that not all of the participants were randomly selected (Ansfield, 2013). Yuan Dongxing and Lian Yue were among the public representatives. *Xinhua* news reported the public hearing's result: 91 were against the project, 15 supported it and 1 abstained (ibid).

The Party Secretary of Fujian Province, Lu Zhangong, said:

‘In the face of such public opposition, we need to carefully reconsider the project. We should look at the problem using the principles of scientific development, democratic decision-making, and valuing public opinion’ (Hung, 2013, p.50).



Figure 26. A photo of the PX project relocation, from *Southern Metropolis Daily*.

It showed that government's active response to a public event like the PX plant case could gain support from the general public and prompt democratic participation, such as in the public hearing. In my questionnaire, it also explored the public's view on the final outcome of the PX plant case, and 95.24% were satisfied with the government's decision.

On 18 December, *Ta Kung Pao* released the news of the relocation of PX project from Xiamen to Gulei Peninsula in Zhangzhou. On 19 December, the *People's Daily* published an article titled *The construction of the Xiamen PX project: continue, stop or relocate?* Stating that 'experts from various domains agreed that relocate PX project to the west side of the Straits is the best choice' (Huang, 2010, p.35). After a 6-month consideration period, the Xiamen municipal government finally announced in December that the plant would relocate to Gulei Peninsula in the neighbouring Zhangzhou city, and that the investors' losses would be paid for by the government. This decision was formally approved by China's Environment Protection Ministry on 20 January 2009.

6.4 The changing relationship between the government and media under the context of public participation

This section focuses on the government-media interaction in the triangular system. It combines the questionnaire, semi-structured interview and documentary data to

explore the changing relationship between the government and media companies after the Xiamen PX plant incident. It begins with a discussion of the survey results and then analyses the case from the perspective of media practitioners with the data collected from interviews. It then addresses the interaction between the government and the media to develop a dynamic framework of the relationship of the two parties.

6.4.1 Data analysis of questionnaire – public opinion towards Xiamen PX plant event

There were 109 responses to the questionnaire. Four of the respondents indicated that they had no idea about the incident, and their data was excluded from the research. More than half (58) knew about the incident and 47 had participated in the discussions of the incident.

6.4.1.1 Dynamics and forms of netizen participation during the Xiamen PX plant incident

The survey contained a question exploring the information source of the PX incident:

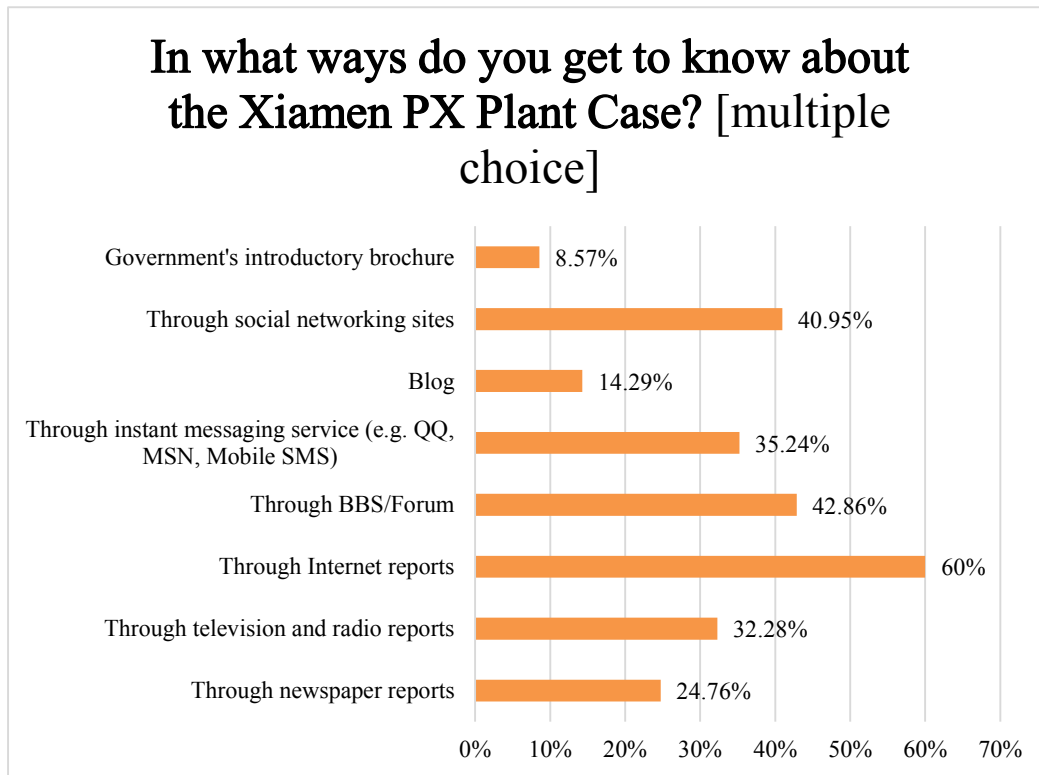


Figure 27. In what ways do you get to know about the 'Xiamen PX plant case'?

The results, shown in Figure 27, were that 60% of respondents found out about the Xiamen PX plant case through internet media reports, followed by *BBS*/forums and social networking sites (42.86% and 40.95%, respectively). Only 14.29% found out through blogs, which might be a consequence of the development of new media; *Weibo* (a microblog site similar to *Twitter*) has replaced the blog in terms of both information production and consumption. The decline of users of blog services has led to the successive closure of the once-popular blog sites. The figures also indicate that traditional media is no longer in the leading position in the coverage of unexpected public events.

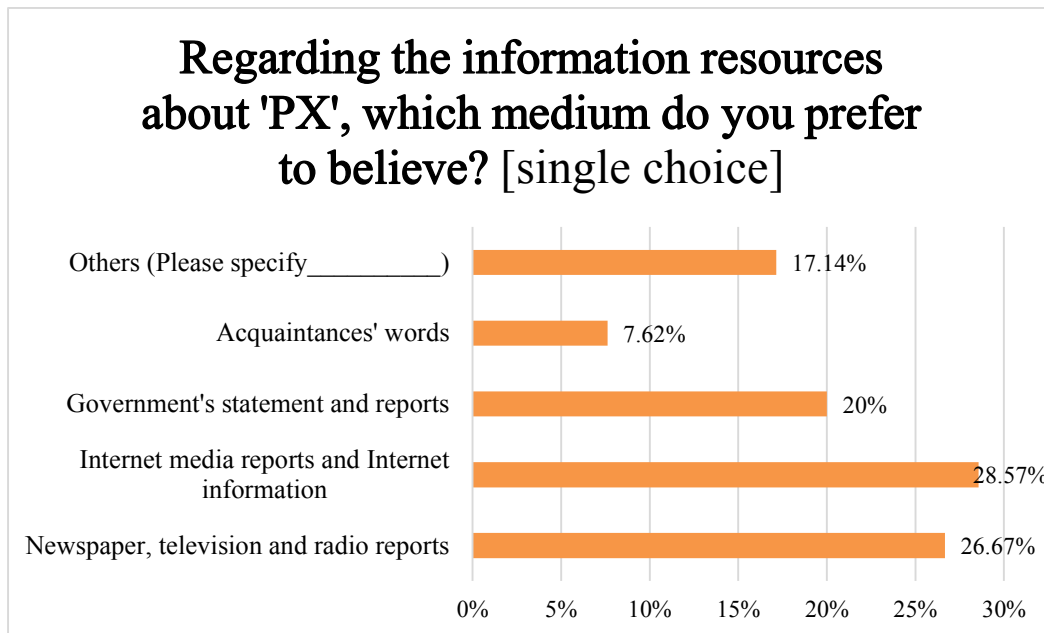


Figure 28. Which medium do you prefer to believe?

When asked about the reliability of each information source, 26.67% showed a preference to believe information provided by traditional media channel (see Figure 28). People who believed the new media accounted for 28.57%. Although this proportion is slightly higher than those who prefer traditional media, it still represents only around a quarter of respondents. This suggests that people may be sceptical of content generated and disseminated on the internet, even with its advantages of speed, wider scope and greater efficiency in spreading information. In addition, 20.00% of respondents chose to believe official government statements and reports, which shows the influence of the government's use of new media in propaganda. If the government can make use of the internet to provide timely explanations, it may reduce the public's anxiety over an issue.

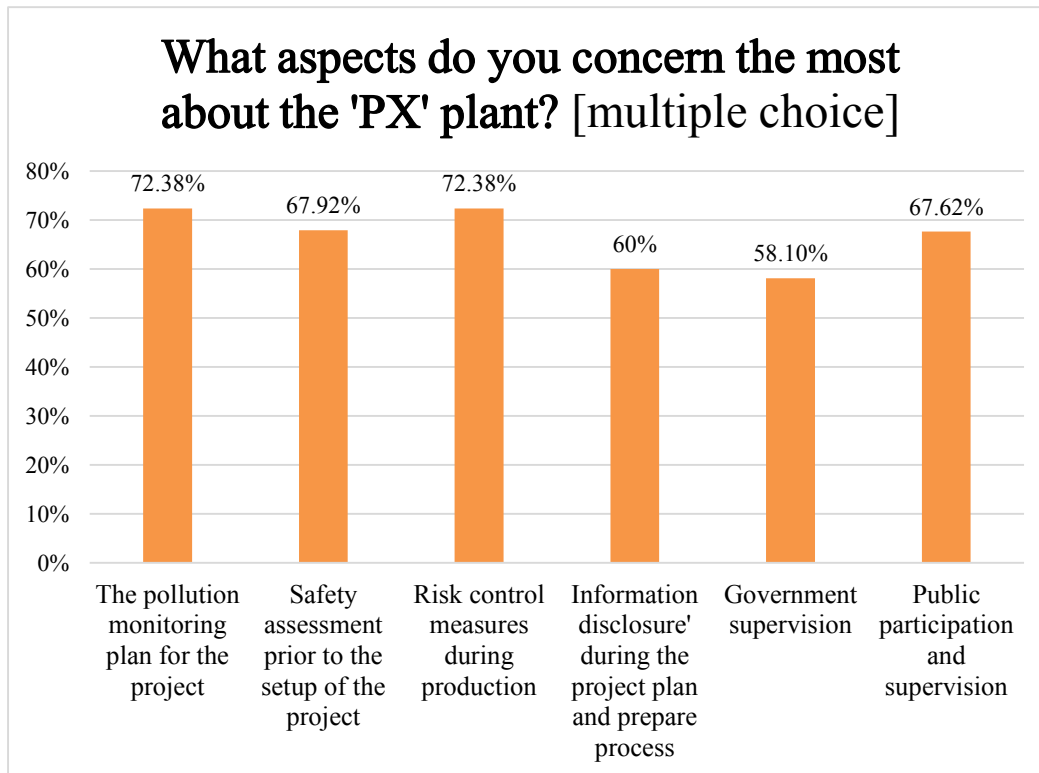


Figure 29. What concerned you the most about 'PX' project?

Figure 29 shows that 72.38% of respondents believed that the priority was to have effective monitoring and control methods for the PX plant, specifically for pollution and other kinds of risk that may occur during production. It also shows that the public was more in favour of public participation and supervision rather than government supervision (67.62% and 58.10%, respectively) of a controversial chemical plant like this one. The result suggests that people expect to have more say in the decision-making process of the construction of a plant that has potential risk, especially for those near where they live. Though the sample size was small, it shows the popularity of grassroots media such as blogs and QQ groups because it is the capacity for providing information that the public truly care about; for instance, the freelance journalist and blogger Lianyue who listed the dangers of PX, and the QQ group which allowed information exchange between the public.

Figure 30 shows that 65.71% of respondents followed the case because they wanted to contribute to the dissemination of the event, and 60.95% were driven by the sense

of involvement because they were the stakeholders and the existence of the plant was associated with their own interest.

When it comes to a heated public event, people are willing to take part in spreading information and commenting on it. If it is related to an individual's specific interest, there is a good chance that they will be directly involved in the form of public participation. Technology also enables a variety of channels for citizen engagement, for example, blogs and QQ groups in this case. These new forms of social media have changed and enhanced the effectiveness of public participation.

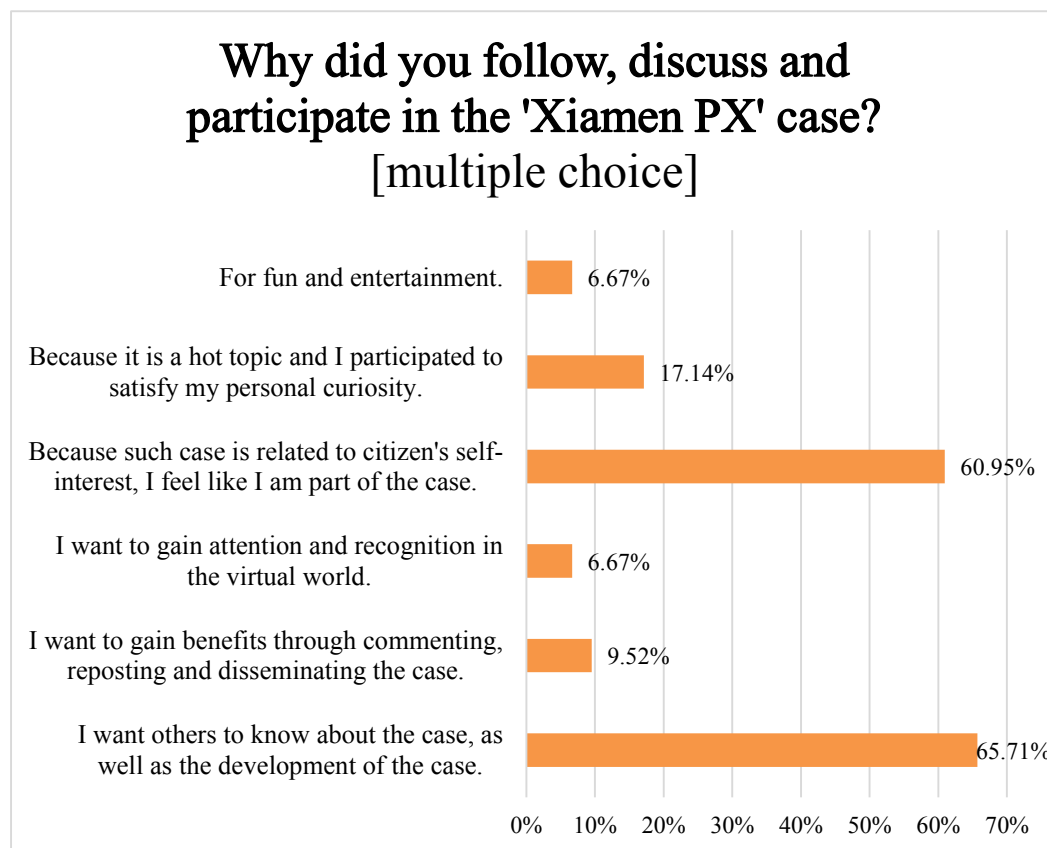


Figure 30. Why did you follow, discuss and participate in the 'Xiamen PX' case?

6.4.1.2 Netizens' concern about offline activities

As shown in Figure 31, only 9.52% of the respondents claimed that they organised or participated in the protest events against Xiamen PX project at that time, while 64.76% only paid attention to the protest events, but did not take any practical action.

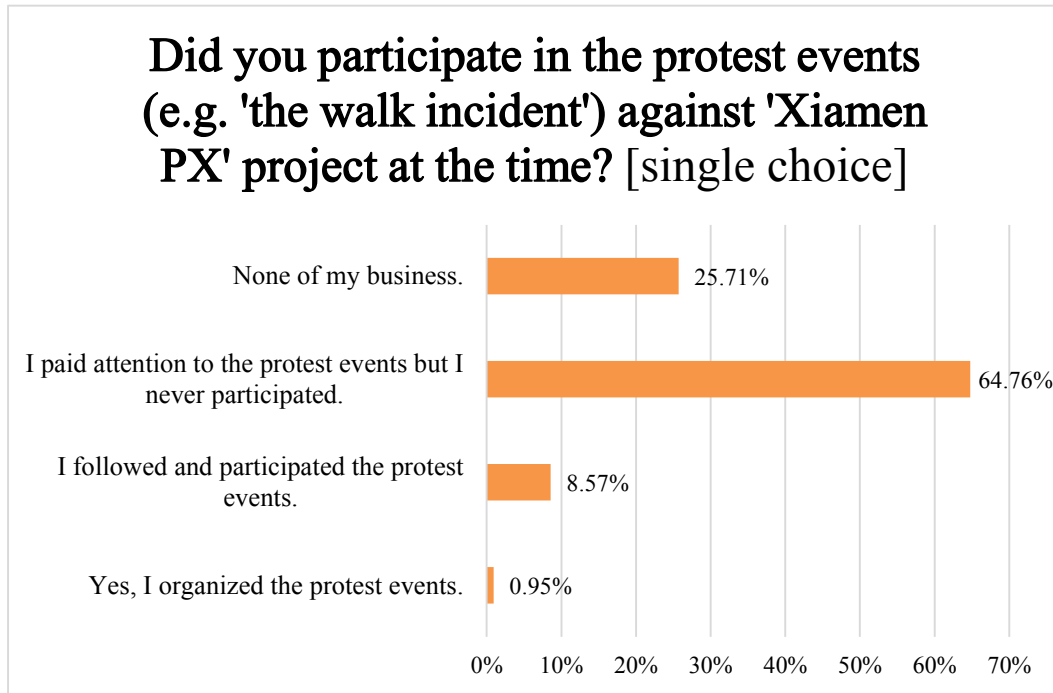


Figure 31. Did you participate in the protest events against 'Xiamen PX' project at the time?

This figure represents the mainstream attitude of Chinese netizens when they face sensitive events or public movements. Another 25.71% of respondents indicated that they chose to ignore public assemblies like the Xiamen PX protest, as they operated on the margins of legality. This further confirms the common attitudes of Chinese netizens – avoid involvement in any risky public affairs. However, 8.57% of respondents admitted that they participated in the 2007 Xiamen real-life protest events. The reason was that they thought the plant could have a bad influence on the ecosystem and the citizens' health in Xiamen. They also believed that citizen's action could influence the government's decision-making. Extra comments were added in the survey by the same group of respondents, indicating that their true reason for participating in real-life protests was that only Xiamen residents could defend their own homes.

However, more than half of respondents indicated that the possible consequences of mass protest was the reason they did not participate in real-life protests, 35.24% were sceptical of the substance of mass protest and 24.76% listed their concerns as including the legitimacy, rationality, and validity of protest in China.

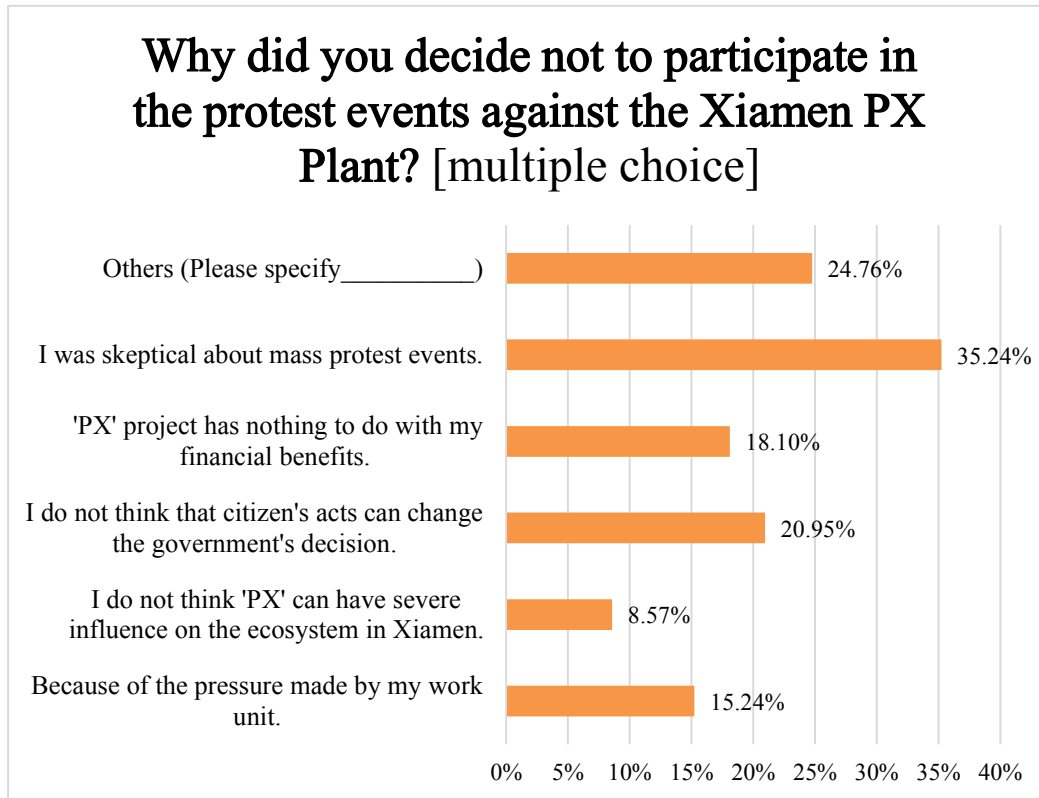


Figure 32. Why did you decide not to participate in the protest events?

6.4.1.3 Government's responsibility for regulating the online public sphere

When asked about government intervention in public participation, surprisingly, 75.24% of the respondents supported to some extent the government's intervention in guiding public opinion for incidents like the Xiamen PX project, to ensure their credibility, and 1.9% indicated that the government should take strict control of public opinion on the internet. Only 22.86% held the opinion that citizens have the freedom of speech and public opinion should not be guided by the government.

Combined with the respondents' response in using online information, the result implies that, firstly, most netizens realised and admitted the possible influence of online rumour, cyber-violence and network hype on Chinese online public sphere. Thus, they were open to a certain degree of government control over irresponsible and irrational public opinion aroused on social networking sites. Secondly, netizens often suspect the validity of information collected from the internet; for example, the

viewpoints proposed by controversial intellectuals. Therefore, some Chinese netizens would expect the government to provide more specific and more accurate information about public affairs so that they could decide how to react.

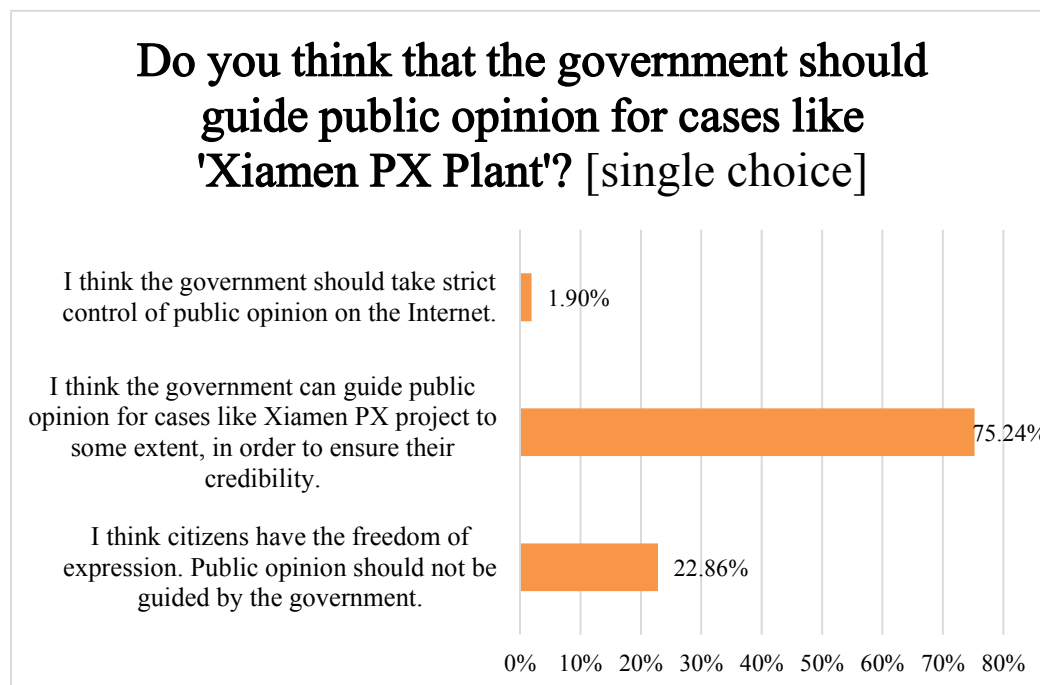


Figure 33. Do you think that the government should guide public opinion?

6.4.2 Commercial media platforms: ‘dancing with shackles’

Although the reform and opening-up policy has improved this to some extent, China is still a highly bureaucratic state, and the concept is only accepted at the bottom level of the hierarchical system. Therefore, it is difficult to foster an antagonistic relationship between the state and society, such as exists in western countries. Yu and Xing concluded that:

‘[t]he public sphere can only exist in the overlapping space between the state and society in China. It is under the political authority’s governance. No matter how it develops, it cannot grow beyond the state’s control’ (Yu and Xing, 2011, p.84).

6.4.2.1 The Fish Community Forum (*xmfish.com*): autonomic operation but under government’s restrictions follow government’s instructions

During the Two Sessions (NPC and CPPCC) in March 2007, the most popular topic

was the petition co-signed by more than 100 CPPCC members against the PX plant in Xiamen. However, because the plant was expected to make huge contribution to the local GDP and as it had been approved by the national department, the main reaction was to guide the public to support the project saying it was beneficial for local development. However, concerns for environmental impact, toxic emissions, and damage to the landscape kept growing. Xiamen residents who used to be very proud of the town's environment began to discuss the topic on the *Fish Community Forum*. Between March and June of 2007, discussions related to the topic kept appearing and it reached a point that on one day, of 30,000 total posts, 20,000 focused on PX. In the middle of May, the call for a 'collective stroll on 1 June' was spread via *SMS*, online posts and *QQ* groups. Administrators of *Fish Community Forum* felt increasing pressure from government departments. They were forced to write guarantee letters by the Network Security Department, and local police constantly visited the company to 'ask for information' and some departments even visited unannounced for urgent inspections. The staff experienced huge pressure during the time.

On 29 May, the government forced *Fish Community Forum* to censor all posts before publishing, and anything related to PX was prohibited (Huang, 2010). Administrators realised that the forum had already lost the initiative in sharing information between the grassroots in Xiamen, and they decided to close the website for a week. During that period, users could only access a picture of the landscape in Xiamen with words 'Love Xiamen, Love Fish' when opening the website. On 1 June, citizens began to stroll on the street. With the shutdown of *Fish Community Forum*, information and images about the stroll were moved to *Tianya Forum*.

Fish Community Forum is owned and operated by Xiamen Retui Network Limited, which is a private company. It has a licence issued by Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and is registered with the Xiamen Network Security Department. It is a legitimate company which aims to provide a platform for people in Xiamen to interact and to exchange information. The PX plant event pushed it into the

spotlight from obscurity. The public is the ultimate beneficiary of *Fish Community Forum* as it provides an online public sphere to interact on events that concern every Xiamen citizen. However, this particular topic touched the objective of the local government which caused a series effect on *Fish Community Forum*. In response to public opinion and potential mass event, the government's immediate reaction was to block the channel where the public opinion was formed. The expected function of *Fish Community Forum* was to serve as a medium for the aggregation of public opinion and prompt negotiation between local government and the public. However, the government chose to directly administrate the medium instead of responding to the netizens.

As the *Interviewee 1* indicated, 'the relationship between government departments and internet companies is all about regulate and be regulated, manage and be managed, comply and be complied'. *Interviewee 2* supported the statement and summarised it as:

'Internet companies are supervised and regulated by relevant functional government departments. The relationship is like "dancing with shackles". Internet companies are always looking for a solution while walking on the edge of laws and regulations. In fact, the traditional media and internet companies have to face the same problem under this situation'²⁶.

Since *Fish Community Forum* is a private company, it has no choice but to follow the government's instructions. It implies a model of government-media interaction in which the government takes the leading role. From asking for guarantee letters, filtering the content posted on the website to physical intervention of onsite inspections, it gradually increased pressure on the company. According to *Interviewee 2*:

²⁶ Translation provided by the author.

‘In recent years, it has been made clear that internet companies are mainly and directly regulated by Cyberspace Administration of China, and they are also monitored by Public Security Bureau, Ministry of State Security, The State Council Information Office and other related official departments. The operation of internet companies is controlled by Cyberspace Administration of China in both central and local level. If any problem bursts, the internet companies would receive a notice letter from official departments and they need to solve the problem accordingly as soon as possible’²⁷.

In this case, *Fish Community Forum* had a dilemma over whether to serve its users or obey rules from the authority. With rounds of government intervention, the administrators chose to shut down the website temporarily so that it stayed away with this sensitive topic. It is a situation that all private internet companies could face – to take side between the governing departments and the users.

6.4.2.2 **Blog service providers’ position: complying with government’s regulations**

According to CNNIC (2007), by the end of November 2007 there were 180 million internet users in China, including approximately 47 million blog users, 80% of the bloggers started using the internet after 1999 and 50% of bloggers had experience in using the internet for 1-5 years.

Bullog: used a ‘wait-and-see’ approach to temporarily maintain the information

In 2006, because of personal experience in being censored by *Sina* (the most popular commercial blog site at the time), Luo Yonghao determined to setup a platform that tolerated free speech. Huang Bin, who was in the software industry, also wished to create a space that sustained knowledge sharing among the young generation which should differentiate from the Party-led media place such as *CCTV* or *People’s Daily*. They became partners and created *Bullog.cn* which attracted many popular public

²⁷ Translation provided by the author.

speech writers who competed with each other, which encouraged positive circulation within the network. One commentator indicated that:

‘Writers in *Bullog* have the competence in writing articles for newspapers. They offered more vibrant products for *Bullog* which was absent from the newspaper. I consider it as a way of showing off for their superior intellectuality, which is good. These bloggers do not work to despise others, neither do they lower others to improve their position. The only goal is to introduce reading enjoyment for audiences. It is a pure writer-reader relationship, which is a habit derived from the *BBS* age’ (Li, 2013, N.P.)²⁸.

Many people perceived *Bullog* as a commentary site, but Luo has indicated that commentary was not the initial plan for this blog site. Only a quarter of the writers that he invited to *Bullog* paid close attention to current affairs, but because they were all very productive writers, their blogs made up nearly 80% of the site’s updates.

In the Xiamen PX plant case, both large-scale website portals such as *NetEase* and local sites republished news reports about the plant. They were forced by related government departments to delete relevant content afterwards. Whereas *Bullog* survived in maintaining content on PX and became one of the few websites that had information updates. On 1 June 2007, during the collective stroll, a writer from *Bullog* used short message service to live broadcast the protest with text updates every three to five minutes. The coverage was republished by major media sites (Li, 2013).

At the time, people were worried that this may have caused trouble to *Bullog*. On the next day, Luo arrived in the office early and anxiously worried about the consequence. However, no government departments contacted *Bullog* for covering the story. He then nervously sought an update with the local department and the reply was ‘we have not heard anything. You may do what you like’. Luo then confirmed that the government had not ordered them to delete the content related to PX on *Bullog*. He

²⁸ Translation provided by the author.

said that:

‘We never challenged the authority. If the order [had been made] to delete blogs and relevant content, we follow the order. Because most of the website will take the initiative of deleting articles and content that they believe are ‘risky’. ‘Courage’ is the characteristic that is often overrated about me. In fact, I am not that brave. [...] I follow the authority’s instructions. Foreigners often question whether I delete articles on *Bullog*. Of course I do, it is impossible not to. If I resisted the government order, *Bullog* would have been shut down long before’ (Li, 2013, N.P.)²⁹.

Interviewee 6 described the priority in the operation of internet media companies, as:

‘complying with government regulations and policies must be the primary position. Because in China’s media environment, survival is our first objective, especially under the circumstance that the government hold the ultimate power [...] ‘internet companies are mainly regulated by central and local Cyberspace Administration of China, meanwhile the Security Bureau might arrange some ‘undercovers’ in many internet companies. We mostly deal with the official network managing departments, and we also have a specific administrative department in our company which occasionally announce a variety of government instructions. The instructions inform what content needs to be deleted, what content should not be commented, what should not be recommended. Sometimes I did not realise what had happened until I read the instruction’³⁰.

Internet practitioners: probing the government’s reaction within the tolerant scope

Chang and Tai have stated that:

‘[w]hether the Chinese government likes it or not, the burgeoning public awareness and demand for a free press, the commercialisation and internationalisation of the Chinese media, and the increasing pressure from the world community may make the next step – what to say and what to publish without fear of state interference – irreversible’ (Chang and Tai, 2003, p.43).

²⁹ Translation provided by the author.

³⁰ Translation provided by the author.

This was in line with Margolis and Resnick's (2000) argument that, in terms of democracy, the most powerful influence is its competence in delivering information to the public in a speedy and efficient manner. Since information represents power, for people living in authoritarian states like China, 'democratisation of information' (Tai, 2006, p.180) on the internet has special implications.

After the Xiamen case, when speaking of *Bullog*'s involvement in this collective event, Luo said that:

'I think it is a social activity for citizen awareness and public participation. We are lucky to be involved and to provide a platform for free speeches. We are proud of this. Offering a space for public voice is a meaningful thing... In fact, I feel happy for the readers of *Bullog*. Articles that discuss social problems usually have a higher click through rate on our platform' (Li, 2013, N.P.)³¹.

This statement implied that: at first, as a private service provider, it takes the government's orders seriously; secondly, influential bloggers are opinion leaders in collective events and finally, that elite bloggers' insistence on advocating for public affairs and citizen awareness attracts larger audiences.

No matter whether it is an established commercial site or grassroots site, the government plays the leading role in government-media interaction in China. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked to explain the considerations in operating an internet media site according to its importance. Four factors were given: commercial interest, ethical codes for media professionals, government regulations and policies, and supervision and guidance of users' behaviour. The interviewees ranked the factors according to their importance and their own working experience. Of eight interviewees, seven put government regulations and policies as the priority in

³¹ Translation provided by the author.

media operation, followed by commercial interest. Only one respondent took commercial interest as the top consideration, and he was from a state-owned media company.

The third consideration was supervision and guidance of users' behaviour, but they function more as a guidance rather than supervision. Being a media service provider, neutrality is the key attribute in covering news reports. The problem is that some media companies may mostly push negative news – social contradictions and problems to appeal to audiences – which is irresponsible. Positive news is worth coverage as well, because it is also what is happening in society.

However, there are internet media companies which do not practice this principle. The 'clickbait' is a common approach used to draw audiences' attention, which is understandable and necessary. The *Interviewee 8* sees the 'clickbait' as a creative method, because massive amount of news appears every day, and a good editor needs to have the ability to find 'good' news that worth being the spotlight and recommend it to the audiences. *Interviewee 7* also indicated that the:

'clickbait triggers audience's curiosity when browsing the internet, leads them to click the button, and consume the news. It is an inevitable trend in the digital age in which people are surrounded with segmented information'³².

Media service providers need such methods to maintain the sustainable development of the company, but it is ethically acceptable only under the condition that the headline tells the facts regardless of what kind of word game is applied. It merely influences the audience's decision as information consumers. Manipulating the wording in the headline to intentionally guide public opinion towards a social event is irresponsible and unethical for media practitioners. These are all the controllable

³² Translation provided by the author.

factors from the media market side. For the government, it is acceptable that media companies are using these techniques for profit as long as they keep a distance from the bottom line. It was an unwritten agreement between the media companies and the government until the boom of user-generated content in *Web 2.0*.

Taking blogs as an example, in principle, bloggers can freely write articles and post commentaries on blog sites. Service providers usually invite opinion leaders or popular bloggers to their sites to attract audiences and increase the click-through rate. Another intention is to use the bloggers' opinions. *Interviewee 6*, who worked in a large commercial blog site, indicated that this was achieved by the recommendation mechanism and use of visual effects to make the topic eye-catching. The government is in a regulator position in the government-media interaction, but these methods that media companies adopt imply that they do not always compromise with authority: '[t]hey are probing the government's reaction through these tricks and activities within the tolerant scope. Their attempts cannot cause hard conflicts between the government and media companies (*Interviewee 5*)³³. *Interviewee 1* also indicated that:

'internet media companies would not arbitrarily publish sensitive information or official announcement on their own, and they would not take the initiative to present the topic against the government's bottom line'³⁴.

For instance, in *Bullog*, the founder understood that allowing bloggers to write commentaries and broadcast text on the incident may have irritated the authorities and invited trouble. *Bullog* did not delete or apply any filters; instead it waited for the government's response and if the order was to delete relevant content, *Bullog* would do so. In some large commercial blog sites, such content would not have been

³³ Translation provided by the author.

³⁴ Translation provided by the author.

published. A unique feature of internet media companies is the technology that creates an environment for testing the government-media interaction. To serve their consumers, they provide a platform for public opinion, including risky content; to follow the government's lead, technology allows them to withdraw published content. As long as the content is published, information has already been disseminated to a wide audience. When the government shows dissatisfaction, they delete the content and obey the authority's orders but this reinforces the public's desire to know the truth which leads to more dissemination of the censored information between citizens. This is a common argument for media companies in the negotiation with the government.

Interviewee 2 emphasised that:

‘If you crossed the bottom line, apart from being forced to shut down, the website should bear the legal responsibility. Because of the consequence, internet companies usually train the editors, informing what kind of information is strictly prohibited, and instructing them to setup a keyword filter to block and monitor the information flow’³⁵.

As for the consequence of breaking regulations:

‘generally, internet company should accomplish the instructions given by government departments. If the internet company continues to disobey or makes a critical mistake, the principal of the company will be queried and a self-criticism letter is needed. The company will be issued a fine and asked to suspend updating the website, or it will be shut down’ (*Interviewee 6*)³⁶.

Ethical codes for media professionals appear to be the least important factor for media practitioners in China. As explained by *Interviewee 6*:

‘under the big picture of government control, there is no complete freedom

³⁵ Translation provided by the author.

³⁶ Translation provided by the author.

of speech for media service providers. They can take advantage of technology to gain extra space in covering social events, but it does not represent a guaranteed safe and free environment³⁷.

Licenses for news report are difficult to get for internet companies as are journalist certificates for those who work in the cyberspace. The government's strategy is to control information so that few practitioners are empowered with legal rights to perform as professionals.

It is said that the success of *Bullog* is because of the scarcity of truth and trust in the physical world. *Bullog* accidentally undertook the function of information gathering and dissemination in the PX plant case. Unlike other media sites which automatically censored content in this area, it used a 'wait-and-see' approach to temporarily maintain the information. Many journalists in the print media often sought valuable information and alternative perspectives from the users in *Bullog*.

Bullog did once receive a compulsory order because of sensitive articles published on the site. A government department asked another founder, Huang, to produce a letter assuring the government that no more sensitive content would appear on *Bullog*. Huang considered this to be a formality and no actual harm was done to *Bullog* itself. This site was constantly praised for its contribution to gathering elite bloggers and opinion leaders. However, *Bullog* was closed in 2013. Luo denied the closure was due to political pressure or operation cost, it was simply that too few people used blogs anymore.

6.4.2.3 *QQ* group (*Tencent* instant messaging platform): connecting netizens' communication from the real world to the virtual world

Dong (2008) used the term 'civic engagement' to describe the phenomenon in which

³⁷ Translation provided by the author.

individuals in civil society voluntarily participate in social activities or public affairs. It is an opportunity for citizens to become engaged in the implementation of public policy and to ask for a more democratic society. The process of civic engagement implies citizens sharing social responsibilities and achievements. Everyone has the opportunity to express their opinions, to maintain their self-interest and to contribute for the sake of common good (ibid). Chen (2010) argued that the principle of public participation is that vulnerable groups attempt to express opinions for their interests and take part in government decision-making, which is another form of power distribution.

The relationship between the government and internet media companies

From March to June 2006, visits to Lian's blog increased as the site became an important source of Xiamen PX-related information, particularly in Xiamen itself where the content was pasted across local chat rooms. A local resident, Wu Xian, set up a QQ group called *Return My Clear Water and Blue Sky in Xiamen*. Due to the large number of members, it was then divided to three different groups. With the growth of members, the topic of the group interaction gradually transferred from the dangers of PX to how to against the PX plant through practical acts.

On 27 and 28 May, Wu called for a public assembly and asked members to bring banners with 'Oppose PX, Protect Xiamen' and yellow ribbons to the Xiamen market. On 29 May, when Wu arrived at Xiamen market with his printed materials, he noticed that there were three police cars nearby and an increase in the patrol force at the nearby railway station. He also received a text message from one of QQ group members saying 'Police cars have already been despatched to Xiamen Mart'. He soon realised the danger of the situation and went back home. Wu immediately posted a message in the QQ group – 'Evacuate'. The public assembly failed (Liu and Zhou, 2007).

At 5pm the same day, two plainclothes policemen visited Wu's home and inquired

about the assembly. They requested a guarantee letter from Wu with the words ‘I will not release any information about PX and assembly on the internet. I believe the government can handle it’. On the afternoon of 30 May, Wu went to an internet cafe opposite to Xiamen railway station and continued discussing the collective stroll with members of the *QQ* group. At 9 pm, he was arrested and records of the chat seized. Wu recalled ‘I was asked to sign and fingerprint each page of the [now printed] chat record. Repeated signature and fingerprint’. The next day he received a detention warrant for 15 days. On 16 June, Wu was released and went back home. He kept discussing the updates of the Xiamen PX plant incident and related media reports in the *QQ* group, but he was not detained again (Liu and Zhou, 2007).

QQ is an instant messaging platform produced by *Tencent*, which is a private company registered in Shenzhen’s Network Security Office. If there is any illegal information on *QQ*, the network police will find out who is in charge of its dissemination. Other *QQ* members and administrators can also report illegal or dangerous content to the authorities. In the Xiamen PX plant case, the only consequence was that the group leader or administrator Wu Xian was detained by the local police. The group was not forced to shut down. From the business perspective of *Tencent*, *QQ* is merely a medium that carries information between general netizens conveniently and efficiently.

In the Xiamen PX plant case, the government had no right to shut down *QQ* and the only approach was to investigate and assign responsibility to the group leader, which had no further influence on the functioning the group. This implies a form of interaction between the government and the media market. It also confirms the objective of the government, which is that no illegal information should be disseminated through any application or platforms of new media.

The group leader was detained for organising an unauthorised assembly as the organisation of a parade or an assembly needs permission from the public security

office. Therefore, in this case, there is no punishment of the commercial company which provided the medium. *Interviewee 2* explained that:

‘Commercial companies have the ability to balance the considerations. We are all working to incorporate an approach that addresses commercial interest, ethical codes for media professionals, government regulations and policies, supervision and guidance of users’ behaviour. The relationship between internet companies and government is not absolute antagonistic’³⁸.

Mutual benefit for the government and the media company: seeking common grounds while maintaining differences

Shao, Lu and Wu (2012) found that there were two major problems that had long plagued civic engagement in Chinese society: civic disengagement and civic disorder. The former refers to citizens’ indifference to public affairs, and the latter to various forms of disturbance led by certain groups of people such as illegal parades, sit-ins, sabotage, and riots (ibid). Zheng (2008, p.136) stated that if a collective action or social movement is considered to impede the legitimacy of the state or pose a threat to the authority, it invites a crackdown or suppression by the state, but if the movement is perceived to be beneficial to the state, it is more likely to succeed (ibid). In the PX plant event, the aim of the ‘collective stroll’ was to oppose the PX plant. It did not touch the government’s objective – the leading position of the Party – which implies a negotiable space between the government and the public. This explains why there was no repression in the first two days of the demonstration.

In the questionnaire, 78.09% of respondents advocated ‘mass protest’ as a means of public participation, and 24.76% believed it was the only effective approach for the government to understand public opinion and therefore to influence the government’s decision. This shows a contradiction within Chinese citizens: they advocate

³⁸ Translation provided by the author.

democratic public participation and engagement in real-life protest, but when asked about their willingness to participate, a majority refuse because of the possible consequences. Therefore, since protests in the physical space are under strict surveillance and sometimes dangerous, the internet becomes an attractive medium for the organisation and practices of similar actions (Tai, 2006).

In the interviews with practitioners in the media market, it was commonly agreed that the government's objective was to suppress political-sensitive topics, particularly anti-Party and anti-government behaviour, and three illegal aspects of pornography, gambling and drug-related crime (*Interviewee 8*). Acts touching on these objectives, either in the physical world or the virtual environment, will be treated seriously. Internet companies who provide services for information exchange regarding these topics should have a filter system to censor key words. For those who failed to perform the initial stage of information filtering, the worst punishment was to temporarily close the website and order rectifications. If the result was still a danger to society stability, government departments have the right to shut down the website completely. 'It is the same situation with the supervision towards newspaper media, the government can suspend or stop publication of a newspaper who publish political-sensitive topics'³⁹, *Interviewee 8* from a popular social networking site indicated.

However, this does not mean that there is a contradiction between the media market and the government. The ultimate goal of the media market is to make a profit while serving its customers. Internet companies will not challenge the authorities, and neither will they attempt to control the information flow with the risk of losing customers. The ideal mode of government-media interaction is a mutual beneficial resolution. For example, large popular media sites usually have a Public Opinion

³⁹ Translation provided by the author.

Product in which the company cooperates with the government by providing timely updates of social conflict to the authorities so that the government can provide prompt reactions to the problem. It is a coping mechanism for the government to control the development of social conflict, to avoid the small problem changing into large social event and to prevent the cause of mass incident. *Interviewee 8* implied:

‘They are two different institutions, one is the media, and the other is the government. It is impossible for them to have no contradictions. It is a usual fact – couples have contradictions; even best friends can contradict each other. The ultimate solution is to seek common grounds while maintain differences’⁴⁰.

For media companies, it is certain that the bottom line is off the list of the content generated on their platforms. He phrased the government-media interaction as ‘Media companies are dancing with shackles. If the dance turns out to be good, government welcomes its performance’. Apart from restrictions on politically-sensitive topics, anything is negotiable between the government and the media company, which leads to the function of ‘Public Opinion Product’. In the meantime:

‘The Chinese government has gone through a process of adapting to the development of internet – from ignoring it to see it as a threat. It has changed from blindly suppress the internet to learn to take advantage of it. In many cases, the government remains in the condition of passive acceptance. It is pushed by public opinion to solve the problems. (*Interviewee 6*)⁴¹’

The survival approach for both internet media companies and netizens

Unlike the liberal and democratic institutions in western countries, the CCP has to put economic development in primary place, and this could guarantee the legitimacy of the Chinese government and obtain support from public. It explains why the Chinese

⁴⁰ Translation provided by the author.

⁴¹ Translation provided by the author.

government has treated the internet and ICT as technological support for economic development over the last two decades. Zheng (2008) emphasises the mutual empowerment between the state and enterprises that resulted from the internet-driven economic development which enables the Chinese government to provide goods to the public and thus to keep and even reinforce its legitimacy.

The media in China evolved from the initial propaganda stage to today's commercial stage. The government is the invisible hand which pushed the development; it is a requirement for economic development, and the government recognises its benefits. The substance of media products is to provide a medium and channel for information exchange among the public – to create an online public sphere which is rarely possible in the real world. Media platforms consist of a public square with all kinds of voices, and the government cannot listen to every voice in the square. Media companies are an efficient medium to help the government hear the voices which might otherwise lead to social instability. For instance, by tracking the QQ group in the Xiamen PX plant case, the government stopped a potential assembly in the physical space. Here, I should clarify that the Xiamen PX plant case is used only to explore the patterns in government-media interaction, not to argue that the government is making good use of the media market.

Another common and positive influence of such interaction is to spot problems early and to provide timely and efficient solutions. One of the basic functions of media companies is to push social news to millions of people so that it catches public attention. It helps media companies to make profits by increasing the click through rate (CTR) and satisfies citizens' need for public participation through venting on the media platforms. The majority of internet media companies only have the right to republish news rather than being a news source (*Interviewee 1*). Depending on the services the media companies offer, if one wishes to be a novel news information provider, the company needs to apply for a License of Cyberspace News Information Service from the Cyberspace Administration of China, which entitles the company to

collect, investigate, edit and publish news, particularly for current political affairs (Niu, 2017). The supervision and management of internet news providers relies on the Cyberspace Administration of China and local cyberspace administration offices. It is the official policy of the government to control content generated by the media companies.

The government changed its attitude from banning internet media companies from producing news to allowing those with a license. This showed the dynamic interaction between the government and the media market. Internet companies keep discipline and abide by government regulations in generating and disseminating information through the adoption of censor and filter techniques, which leads to agreement between the two parties. From the commercial side, companies are able to attract more customers as an information provider; from the authority's side, it is easier to control the information source and, more importantly, through media companies' reports of politically sensitive posts, the government is able to listen to the extracted public opinion and make prompt responses rather than diving into the mass of online platforms. It is the ideal mutual beneficial situation for the government and the media market, which is also the only way for internet companies to survive in China.

However, with the rapid development of online media, user-generated content became publicly accessible through the popularisation of social networking sites. The Government could not stop the development of the media market, but is able to track the information flow through the regulation of media service providers. For instance, in the Xiamen case, *QQ* acted as a medium that supported user-generated content on the dangers of PX and citizens' protests about the plant. It became an online space for the formulation of public opinion, but it only existed in cyberspace. When the group leader planned to organise an assembly, the state intervened and stopped the collective protest. There was no further consequence for group members or the service provider, *Tencent*. This implies that the government may tolerate public participation in cyberspace but anything that can turn into unauthorised physical participation is

prohibited. The government has the technique to track netizens' online behaviour through the 'interaction' with media companies. An evident change is that the government now holds a relatively tolerant attitude towards online protests, partly because they are less likely to pose real threat to the regime and the stability of society, and partly because of the difficulties in detecting and eliminating gatherings in cyberspace (Tai, 2006, p.291).

6.4.3 State-owned media platforms: following the government's orders

According to Li, Ng and Skitmore (2012), the Chinese government established a 'principle of mass participation' which is essentially different from public participation in international discourse. They identified the distinction between the two as: the former forced the people to cooperate in and support the implementation of governmental policies, plans or projects; whereas the latter focused on 'the rights of people to be informed, consulted and heard in the decision-making process' (ibid, p.9). According to the notion of public participation in the West, the government is obligated to inform the people about proposed policies, plans or projects, to supervise the implementation process, and to provide open access to information and decision-making to the public (Zhao, 2010).

However, public participation in China's physical world seems to be much more difficult than in western countries. Shao, Lu and Wu (2012) argued that communication structure has been a crucial factor because China historically lacked a social system that promoted horizontal communication among citizens. Since the long-rooted vertical communication system was usually controlled by the government, citizens' active exchange of views was limited (Sun, 2008). Because information is a source of power, the government has to control information flow to ensure its position, and so restricts citizens' access to information (Wang and He, 2004).

According to my questionnaire about the Xiamen PX plant controversy incident, only

11.43% of the respondents had received the text message about the event. In an authoritarian state, it is risky to organise or participate in a protest in the real world and so it is understandable that only one-tenth of the respondents were involved in the collective demonstration. Even if they were alerted to the harm that PX might bring to the local environment and to their own health, they had to believe that citizen activity can influence the government's decision. Even though the number of people who were actually involved in the real world protest is smaller than those who participated on the internet, it is one of the few methods that can cause a sensation in society and attract attention from the highest levels of the Party. Thus, *Interviewee 8* indicated that:

‘In Xiamen PX plant event, blog is a burgeoning platform, which explains its great influence. People are increasingly concerned with environmental issues, health issues and security issues. Thus, they use all kinds of channels to express voices. If someone has bad motivation and if there is no guidance, it may produce rumours. If the government does not handle properly, it may cause mass incidents’⁴².

Social events formed on the internet can be contentious and potentially seditious, challenging ‘normalised practices, modes of causation or systems of authority’ (Beissinger, 2002, p.14).

SMS was the easiest and most widely available channel for information exchange at that time. Compared with other forms of dissemination on the internet which requires a device (laptop or computer), network access, and the ability to use internet, *SMS* can reach nearly all age ranges of citizens, from young to the old using just a working mobile phone. In the Xiamen PX plant case, it played an essential role in calling for and organising the protest, which successfully reached about 1.5 million people in Xiamen and mobile subscribers in other cities (Liu, 2014). Within a short period of

⁴² Translation provided by the author.

time, the text message was circulated widely.

The day after the text message was sent, 29 May 2007, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* seized on the phenomenon and covered it with a report titled *A Text Message Circulated by Millions of Xiamen Residents*. *Xinhua Net* and other internet companies reported the topic as well (Cody, 2007). Content of the message included three points: the dangers of PX to health, how the plant failed to meet international regulations, and an appeal for protest. These three factors combined together to arouse grave concerns among the citizens.

To cope with the widely spread message and social disquiet, the local government censored and blocked all *SMS* messages relating to the demonstrations. In addition to information control, three more methods were implemented to reduce the number of potential protesters. Firstly, CCP members, civil servants and anyone who held a position in government institutions were warned to abstain from the demonstration. Secondly, schools and universities were ordered to extend teaching hours to hold back students. Thirdly, grassroots administrative networks such as residents' committees were ordered to persuade the residents in their neighbourhood not to take part (Huang and Yip, 2012).

Going against local authorities' warnings, a large number of citizens responded to the *SMS* messages and online discussions and showed up for the demonstration. People walked through the city's commercial district and surrounded the government offices to protest against the plant. Text messages and online petitions played a vital role in mobilising around 10,000 citizens for the demonstrations on 1 and 2 of June (Hung, 2013).

At 09:24 of 1 June, China Mobile Communication Corporation closed its mobile service in Xiamen. At 12:46, the municipal government made a press release to announce the postponement of the PX project and an ongoing environmental assessment (Kennedy, 2007). It declared that the construction of the plant had already

stopped, and that the new assessment would take half a year. The government emphasised that citizens must use normal channels to report opinions and suggestions, and that the public's concern would be passed on to the environmental specialists. However, the press release clearly did not stop the development of the 'collective stroll'.

In China, mobile communication companies are all state-owned and strictly follow the government's orders. Compared with the communication channels on the internet, it is much easier to set filters to control what kind of message can be sent. A censor system can be applied to mobile service providers as a whole, or in a more straightforward approach the service can be disabled, which is the solution that the government took on the first day of the demonstration. However, when the turnabout occurred in Xiamen, local government also used *SMS* services to announce its decision.

There is no doubt that mobile communication companies should serve their consumers' needs, which is the basic responsibility of service providers. However, when it is involved in collective action such as the Xiamen PX plant case, the government occupies the top position in the hierarchy system. More importantly, it is also used as a speaking channel for the government to disseminate official announcements.

However, the government's attitude towards social affairs has gradually changed in the highly developed information age. *Interviewee 5* held the opinion that:

'The attitude of the government towards public opinion has transformed from rejecting to accepting and negotiating. Now it is more like mutual promotion: government has paid more attention to public participation on the internet. The change is because they sensed threat. Therefore, the government department has transformed to service-oriented mode and changed the former 'arrogant' official attitude. I believe there will be more

mutual beneficial situations, and less failure modes'⁴³.

Interviewee 8 believed that:

‘In recent years, the government has realised that covering up or blocking information of public events is not conducive in solving the problem. Many internet users could be easily manipulated if they do not understand the truth. We can see that the press conference system has been perfected to fill the need [...] It is not an antagonistic relationship between government and the public. If there exist some divergences, as long as the objective is assured, mutual respect can be achieved between government and the public. It is a great progress. In fact, a large amount of business in internet companies are offered by the government; the existence of internet enterprise is not to fight against the government, it is meaningless’⁴⁴.

6.4.4 The Chinese government and foreign media companies: comply or be blocked

Regarding the administration mechanism of the internet, Lessig (1999, cited in Zheng, 2008, p.8) once argued that ‘governments anywhere can most certainly regulate the internet, both by controlling its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it operates’.

A number of researchers have explored the current situation of internet control in China. An empirical study led by the Open Net Initiative showed that ‘China’s internet filtering regime is the most sophisticated effort of its kind in the world’ (Bambauer et al., 2005, p.3). King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, p.328) found that expressions are censored on Chinese social media in at least three ways: at first, The Great Firewall of China; and secondly, automated keyword blocking prevents netizens from publishing text that contains a banned word or phrase, thus limiting freedom of speech; and finally, manual censoring is a complementary mechanism to the first two barriers.

⁴³ Translation provided by the author.

⁴⁴ Translation provided by the author.

When a foreign media company enters the Chinese market, government cannot place restrictions on the company itself but to use the Great Firewall of China to block the foreign site. There is no negotiation between the Chinese government and foreign media sites and the effect depends on the situation in Chinese society; for example, during the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989, *YouTube* was blocked but during the Beijing Olympics in 2008 it was opened again. However, there are technical means for people to across the wall and to access the blocked foreign media sites.

During the collective stroll, some citizens collaborated with friends who had computer access by sending live updates by mobile phone. The computer users then disseminated the updates through online forums and blogs. As the march went on, many citizens took pictures and filmed the demonstration and uploaded it on *Flickr*, *YouTube* and domestic video sharing sites. These practices broke the government's rules. There were attempts made to block the information flow, but it was disseminated too fast and too broadly and the authorities could not control it.

6.4.4.1 *Global Voices*

Global Voices is a non-profit multilingual media site which contains an international network of bloggers, freelance journalists and translators that follow, report, summarise what is going on in the blogosphere or share the current global affairs. Most importantly, it is accessible in mainland China. Under the John's blog, there were a great number of comments made by Chinese audiences. A number of bloggers came to Xiamen to broadcast about the protests in real time, including two Guangzhou-based bloggers, 'Beifeng' (a media expert) and '37' (John Kennedy, a young American interested in China), who sent text messages to their colleagues to post online. Kennedy posted his blog on *Global Voices* on 1 June 2007. It recorded text updates, pictures and videos of the demonstration in Xiamen.

6.4.4.2 *Flickr.com*

Flickr is an image and video hosting service and a popular website for users to share and embed personal photographs and build an online community. It is widely used by photo researchers and by bloggers to host images that they embed in blogs and social media.

During the collective stroll, many participants posted images on *Flickr* to avoid censorship and the pictures can still be found on *Flickr* today. The Chinese government cannot restrain *Flickr* as the same as it regulated the domestic sites, and the usual censoring approach of deleting sensitive information cannot be fulfilled. From June 2007, the government has intermittently blocked *Flickr* and on 7 June 2007, users in mainland China could not see any pictures when accessing the site. *Flickr* technicians conducted a series of tests and found that there was nothing wrong from the technical side, it was because of Chinese government's block. The Great Firewall filtered pictures under the domain name: *farm1.static.flickr.com* and *farm2.static.flickr.com* (Kennedy, 2007). The Chinese government did not explain the reasons for the block, many citizens indicated that it was 'unacceptable' and 'dissatisfying' to them.

From June 2007 to July 2008, users in mainland China can access *Flickr* if they install an add-in in Firefox browser called 'Access *Flickr*', which allows them to load all the pictures. On 31 July 2008, with the opening of Beijing Olympic Games, *Flickr* was reopened to users in mainland China and all the pictures could be accessed normally. On 3 July 2009, *Flickr* was blocked again under the domain name *farm4.static.flickr.com*. In July 2014, *Flickr* was blocked completely in China. Figure 34 shows that *Flickr* is blocked when using a Chinese IP address.



Figure 34. Webpage screenshot of *Flickr.com* when using a Chinese IP address.

6.4.4.3 *YouTube*

YouTube was blocked in China from October 2007, but on 31 October 2007, people could visit the site again. However, the government offered no explanation about the re-opening. On 15 March 2008, *YouTube* was blocked a second time. Cai Mingzhao, vice director of the State Council Information Office, denied the authority's involvement and promised to investigate the issue. The block was temporarily removed, but on 4 March 2009, people found out that *YouTube* was blocked again and assumed it was related to the ongoing Two Sessions (NPC and CPPCC). A spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to respond to the block and declared that 'Chinese government is not afraid of the internet' (*Wikipedia*, 2018). *YouTube* confirmed the block and announced that it had no idea why it was censored and sought to recover the connection. On 29 March 2009, Chinese users could not access *YouTube* for the third time. Qin Gang, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when answering a foreign journalist said: 'Regarding what can be viewed on the internet, people should view what is accessible and ignore the inaccessible sources' (*Wikipedia*, 2018). Figure 35 shows that *Youtube* is blocked when using a Chinese IP address.



Figure 35. Webpage screenshot of *Youtube.com* when using a Chinese IP address.

On 6 August 2009, an article in *China National Defence News* pointed out that *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Flickr* and *YouTube* are tools that could be used for propaganda by hostile western forces and declared that the government should ‘speedup the improvement in network isolation, censoring, locking and counter striking online attacks’. Since then *YouTube* has remained blocked in China, but there have been reports of intermittent access for a short period, probably due to modifications to the Great Firewall, technical faults or the updated technology from the service provider.

Despite this censorship, many media sites and TV stations had their official channel on *YouTube*, including the *CCTV* and a number of *Weibo* accounts share videos on *YouTube* and some few video sites have a special column for content on *YouTube*. As with all the information control mechanisms by the Chinese government, people can find a way to bypass the censor system and access the content they wish, but it requires advanced technical skills. It is uncertain whether the Great Firewall is not sufficient to completely block foreign media sites, or if the government has changed its attitude from zero tolerance to a tacit permission.

The attitude of the Chinese government towards foreign websites is very strict. A

large number of foreign websites are banned, and only a small number can be accessed. The government uses the most advanced technology to ban information from overseas that might threaten the dominant position of the Party in addition to websites that are connected with pornography, gambling and drugs. For now, there appear to be more restrictions and less openness in China's cyberspace. There is no negotiation space between foreign internet companies and the Chinese government, and if they fail to comply with Chinese regulations it will be difficult for them to enter the Chinese market and gain the high profits from the large population of Chinese netizens.

6.5 Summary

In this chapter, I investigated the government-media interaction in the Chinese context. Based on the Xiamen PX plant event, I found that, the government takes a dominant position in the relationship with media companies. However, a mutual beneficial relationship was also revealed. From the government's side, the main reason for allowing and promoting the development of the media industry is the pursuit for economic growth. Meanwhile, the government has recognised other gains – use media space as a tool to collect public opinion and use it to spot problems in advance. Here, problems refer to the contention that may threat social stability and the Party's regime.

My interviews with practitioners in the media industry revealed that: sensitive topics, particularly anti-Party and anti-government behaviour, and three illegal aspects of pornography, gambling and drug-related crime, are strictly prohibited in media space. These factors draw the government's bottom line which put 'shackle' on media companies. I examined the performance of commercial media companies, state-owned media platforms and foreign media websites during the Xiamen PX plant incident. It showed that the government's order is the only thing that none of these media companies would challenge if they wish to survive and develop in China. For example, after rounds' of government intervention, *Fish Community Forum* chose to

temporarily shut down its site to stay away from sensitive information.

However, the restrained relationship between the government and media company is not always absolute. Internet media companies can fledge to large-scale media space and fulfil their responsibility as service providers if they can keep a distance from the state's bottom line. Operators in media companies have developed their strategies to avoid negative consequences while serving consumers' needs. For example, during this case, *Bullog* used a 'wait-and-see' approach. The service provider did not delete or filter any sensitive information regarding the Xiamen PX plant in advance, which temporarily maintained the information flow on its site.

Moreover, my study has demonstrated a 'probing' pattern during the operation of media companies. Similar to *Bullog*, media practitioners have developed a common sense as probing the government's reaction in terms of what can be provided to the public. From the authority's side, it is easier to control the information source rather than to control the general public's behaviour. Hence, the government has also demonstrated a certain degree of tolerance. From the media's side, it is a way to gradually extend its reporting coverage and to expand the media space for the public. 'Clickbait' is another strategy that media service providers usually use to maintain the sustainable development of the company. To develop in the competitive media market, they intentionally employ word game and visual effects in the headlines of posts to catch audiences' attention. Such strategy draws public attention when reporting social events, which facilitates the form of public opinion in the media environment.

Furthermore, my interview data revealed the considerations in operating internet media based on the practitioners' perception and experience. They prioritised government regulations and policies in media operation, followed by commercial interest. However, there is one exception in which a practitioner from state-owned media company indicated that profit is the first consideration. The result is interesting

given the different backgrounds of commercial and state-owned companies. Guidance for users' behaviour and professional ethical codes are perceived as less important during their daily practice. It implies the characteristics of media operation in China, which is resulted by the power relationship in government-media interaction.

Finally, the government has also showed a tendency of using media channels to handle mass events. In the Xiamen PX plant case, the public used online group chatrooms and SMS to organise demonstrations. To respond, local newspaper and brochures were used to disseminate the scientific fact about PX and the chemical plant in order to ease public's concern. SMS was the main channel to publicise the government's announcement and online voting platform was opened to collect public opinion.

Overall, based on my analysis of the government and media's performance in the Xiamen PX plant event, my study demonstrated a peculiar relationship between the government and media companies in China: cooperation for coexistence; supervise and to be supervised.

Chapter 7. The Yihuang Self-immolation incident

7.1 Introduction

Due to the boom in the microblogging market, social events in the *Weibo* age can be spread at a faster speed and discussed over a wider range, ultimately leading to a settlement, be it satisfying or disappointing. The reasons for choosing the Yihuang incident to study include that demolition has always been one of the fundamental issues in economic development for almost over 40 years since China's reform and opening up policy. More importantly, resettlement is a crucial problem that directly relates to people's livelihoods. The Yihuang self-immolation incident is a highly representative case that contains key elements inherent in the demolition process in China. The case is also significant in the way that it took place in the first year of the development of *Weibo*, and represents the earliest and the most typical public event that both the victims and regular internet users used the microblog service to safeguard their lawful rights and to interact with government departments through *Weibo*.

This chapter discusses the relationship between the public and media companies through the Yihuang self-immolation incident, which represents one of the three relationships in the triangular system. Here, the public includes both cyberspace netizens and the general population. In terms of media companies, it focuses on those which are most prominent in hosting *Weibo*, as it was the most influential social networking platforms during the Yihuang incident. As an extension of physical interpersonal relationships, it helps to build new connections between *Weibo* users, which makes it a significant space for people's interpersonal activities.

In the same way as the previous two case studies, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey were conducted for data collection. Compared with the previous two chapters, the Yihuang case in this chapter represents a classic event concerning

the people's livelihood issues in China. It attempts to investigate the interactive relationship between the public and the media companies using a similar structure and procedure as in the previous two cases, but with different emphasises in terms of the vehicle for instant and spontaneous dissemination of a social event, and the changing roles between the public and the media market in a social event.

The chapter begins with a discussion on the crucial changes in media communication. It then focuses on the main media platform in the Yihuang event – *Weibo* and how the event developed in the media environment of *Weibo*, where it presents the analysis of data and explores how *Weibo* empowers public participation. The discussion in Section 5 focuses on the interaction between the public and *Weibo* by arguing that *Weibo* acted as an online public sphere in the Yihuang event, highlighting three features of netizens' activities on *Weibo* demonstrated by public participation. It also considers the possibility of safeguarding citizens' rights through social media, the drawbacks and risks. Finally, summaries are drawn in Section 6 from the case study, in terms of the interactive relationship between the public and media companies in a social event.

7.2 The new media-public relationship: profitmaking as empowerment

For media communications in the traditional environment, there was always one or several levels of gatekeeper to filter and process the information before distribution. Figure 36 illustrates the communication and dissemination system in traditional media. The gatekeeper could be an editor, senior administrator, or government official who was in charge of censorship. The public, who remain completely passive in the traditional media communications system, could only receive the information that has been pre-processed. Traditional one-to-one and one-to-many media forms are unidirectional communication, in which public do not have the opportunity to interact with the media market. They cannot choose how to access information and what kind of information they want to receive. Therefore, it is a hinder to public participation.

Because of the layered censorship and filter system, the public are the last one who receive information in the old communication flow.

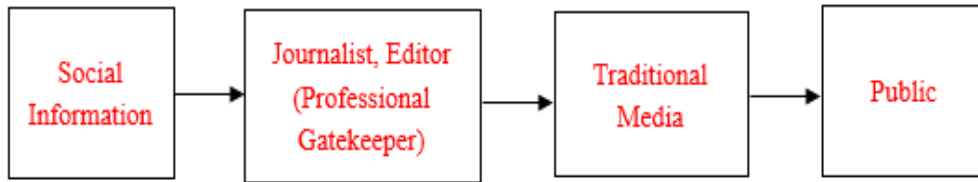


Figure 36. The traditional media communication and dissemination system.

The traditional Chinese mainstream media has two distinct attributes: it is owned by the state and has some administrative functions as an official department; and it makes profits via commercial operations. From the political-economic perspective, it is not surprising that the mainstream media cannot avoid censorship and self-censorship when they come to a forbidden zone (Jiang, 2012). Therefore, in the Yihuang case, traditional media communications were not fully effective during the first stage, especially when part of the internet retransmitted news was deleted. Before then, online public opinion had not become strong enough and the Yihuang government continued to interfere in the event and led it to the second phase, which brought up the usage of *We Media* in this specific case.

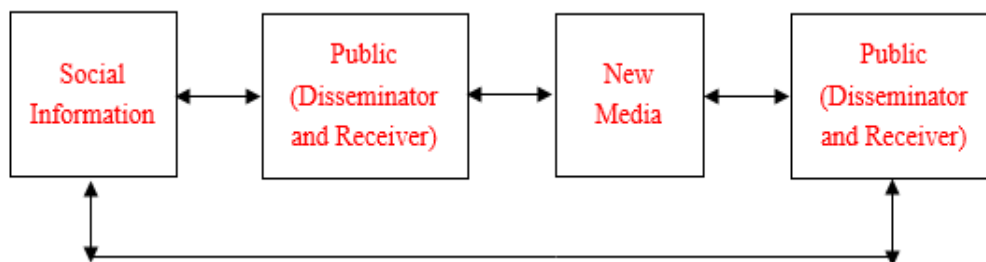


Figure 37. The new media communication and dissemination system.

Tai (2006) pointed out that the internet, as a new media format, compensates for the weaknesses of the existing media forms and fundamentally changes the types of conventional media, bringing new options to the market. Figure 37 shows that there

are three elements in the new media communications system – information, the public and the new media platform – which form a multi-layered, circulating network. There is a mutual interaction between these elements in the way that they complement and restrict one another.

The main change in the form of media communication is the switch from one-to-many to many-to-many due to the emergence of the internet media. The arrival of *Weibo* promoted and expanded information dissemination in a fissured approach. No matter whether it is the domestic *Weibo* or other foreign microblog sites, one common function is reposting. This means that any registered user can forward the information they receive. With the ‘follow’ and ‘listen in’ functions, it is visible to all followers of one single user when the information is reposted. Information distribution in *Weibo* is like a huge network with nodes spreading everywhere; users subscribe to whatever they are interested in posting and reposting information, and then subscribers are followed by others. The process goes on over and over again setting up a special network structure for *Weibo* to disseminate information.

Weibo operates on a ‘self-guarding’ mechanism, meaning that the disseminators themselves decide whether to spread the information or not. With the characteristic of spontaneity, waves of public opinion can be formed within a short period of time and it generates a large-scale sensation effect. Unlike discussions on news portals, in which a moderator usually performs censorship of the comments, *Weibo* users have more power over what they want to express and to spread. For cases that appeal for help and justice, such as the Yihuang incident, victims or an information source can attract thousands of comments within a few hours. This shows that *Weibo* enhances the expression and dissemination of public opinion and illustrates a distinct feature of *Weibo* – all around communication mode. Through posting and reposting, it creates a constant range of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many user interactions. One

positive consequence is that the space and speed for netizens to discuss current affairs has been greatly enhanced (Gao, 2012).

An ambivalent situation is shown in the recent reactions of the Chinese government to online communication. The central government has paid more attention to data mining in Chinese social media to probe the attitudes and opinions of Chinese citizens so that they can take actions to stabilise the one-party control (Denyer, 2013). It implies that, in the eyes of Chinese political leaders, online media is perceived as a powerful tool. However, the central Party has issued a memo addressing the dangers of foreign ideas which can be threatening to their leadership and alerted the party cadres across the country (Buckley, 2013).

Since China is an authoritarian country, public participation usually abides by the top-down approach. The central Party informs or orders government department at all levels, it then passes down institutions, organisations and communities. It is a general authoritative mechanism with a keen sense of compulsion, which tends to have a less satisfactory effect on public participation. New media has already changed this obsolete mechanism to some extent, but *Weibo* takes public participation to a higher stage in the way that information can be circulated with less cost, fewer barriers and faster speeds due to its 'self-guarding' feature. The leading role in public participation is now in the hands of the public. *Weibo*'s enormous network supports active participation and expands the depth and width of information dissemination based on people's sincere feelings. Users who are concerned about a particular social event naturally take part in this, whereas those do not wish to be involved can simply ignore the message. An example explains the mobilisation effect on *Weibo*: a celebrity appealed for netizens to repost a message for a charity proposal and promised that she would donate ¥1 for every repost. The message received 75,000 times repost and the celebrity donated ¥80,000 to charity. It is a frequently used approach for charity work with *Weibo*. The example shows the aggregation structure of *Weibo* that mobilises

public participation. Mutual trust between users and their followers generates a horizontal social network which enhances the result of propaganda (Yan, 2014).

7.3 The Yihuang incident and its engagement with the *We Media*

The Yihuang case, known as ‘Yihuang’s self-immolation’, occurred on 10 September 2010. The Zhong family had lived in Yihuang County, Jiangxi Province, since they moved away from Anhui Province in the 1980s. In 1999, they built a three-story house, which was their biggest property, with three real-estate licenses (Wang and Wu, 2010).

Yihuang is a small county in Jiangxi province in southeast China. Before 2000, this county did not have transit roads, state roads, highways, railways, water transport, or air transport, so it was very impoverished. Economic development was the most important priority for the Yihuang government. In 2007, local government decided to build a new bus terminal in the east part where the Zhong family’s house was located. However, the Zhong family and the Yihuang government could not reach an agreement about relocation compensation. Hence, the Zhong family refused to move out, and this became the fuse for the subsequent tragedy.

7.3.1 Stage 1: Fuse of the Yihuang case – silence on mainstream media due to government control

From 18 April 2010, the Zhongs faced harassment with their power supply being shut off and later their water supply too (Wang and Wu, 2010). On the morning of 10 September 2010, the Yihuang county chief led more than one hundred officers to the Zhong family home and tried to demolish it. They surrounded the house, pulled down the warning line, and even called a grab excavator and fire engines near the house. During the process, the officers quarrelled with the Zhong family and detained several family members. The Zhongs tried in vain to stop the demolition. Following this, the mother of the family, Luo Zhifeng, and an old friend of the family, Ye Zhongcheng,

climbed onto the roof and in protest set themselves on fire. The second daughter, Zhong Ruqin, also immolated herself and suffered severe burns. Fourteen minutes after the fire started, Luo Zhifeng and Ye Zhongcheng were rescued and taken to an ambulance. All three were in critical situation and were sent to a hospital in the provincial capital, Nanchang. Ye Zhongcheng died on 18 September 2010 (Wang and Wu, 2010). This stopped the planned forced demolition. After the self-immolation occurred, all cell phones and cameras belonging to Zhong family members were confiscated, as were the neighbourhood's video machines. The remaining photos which recorded the entire process of the incident were shot by the Zhong's neighbour, who lived some distance away (Ma, 2012).

A local citizen in Nanchang came to the hospital on 11 September 2010. He discovered the case and offered to help by appealing over the internet. The following day when the eldest sister, Zhong Rucui, checked the internet, she saw that their family news had made headlines and caused a stir on the Net (Wang and Wu, 2010). *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Xiaoxiang Morning* were the first two mainstream newspapers to report the incident on 12 September 2010, but the news was quickly suppressed and censored in the mainstream media and major web portals by the Propaganda Department and the web censors (Lam, 2010).

On 14 September 2010, the *People's Daily* published a commentary titled *The people whose houses are to be demolished cannot always safeguard rights by relying on 'self-harm'*. The article stated that:

'The protection and remedy of civil rights cannot wait to the moment when conflict breaks out. A citizen whose house is to be demolished usually stands in a weak position; they have poor bargaining and negotiation skills. In such scenario, it is important to guarantee citizens' right to know and to participate, which can have positive influence in the rights remedy process. Completing the price estimation system of house demolition, hearing system, and other legal systems that relate to house demolition and

relocation should be the remedy prior to implementation of demolition’ (Zhang, 2010, N.P.)⁴⁵.

On 12 September, the Yihuang government released an official report that explained the event as an accident. Also, the officers claimed that the Zhong family played the ‘old trick’ of spilling gasoline to intimidate the officers but inadvertently burned themselves. The Zhong family rejected the statement and insisted that the three immolated themselves to protest against the forced demolition. To reflect the truth to the central government and protect their rights and interests, Zhong Rujiu and Zhong Rucui, daughters of the Zhong family, decided to fly to Beijing to file a petition on 16 September. This day was considered to be the watershed of the Yihuang self-immolation incident.

7.3.2 Stage 2: Turning point: the bustle of *Weibo* – ‘*The Battle in the Ladies Room*’ disseminated widely online

On 16 September, the Zhong sisters went to Nanchang airport and planned to fly to Beijing at 8:15am to report their situation and be interviewed by Hong Kong *Phoenix Television*. However, more than 40 Yihuang government officials blocked them at the airport, demanding that they solve the problem on the spot, and prohibited the sisters from making a petition bypassing the local authorities. Helpless, the sisters hid in the female lavatory. Their initial plan of reporting to Beijing was abandoned due to the blocking by the local government officials. (Bi, 2014)

While the sisters were trapped in the lavatory, they contacted Liu Chang for help using a mobile phone; he was a journalist at *New Century Weekly* and they informed him of the circumstances. Liu Chang posted a *Weibo* with the headline ‘Emergency!’

⁴⁵ Translation provided by the author.

Call for help!’ and appealed for assistance from internet users (Figure 38 and Figure 39). At first, only a few *Weibo* users forwarded the post. However, twenty minutes later the situation changed because the *Sina Weibo* opinion leader Murong Xuecun re-posted it. The post had then been forwarded 2,368 times and received 986 comments. A huge number of *Weibo* users had been exposed to the problem that the Zhong sisters were facing.

‘[Emergency! Call for help!] At 7am today, the two daughters of self-immolation victims in the Zhong Family were trapped in the airport. They intended to redress the injustice for their family by appealing in Beijing. However, they are now caught and controlled by local government officials. The sisters’ family member tried to call the police for help, but nothing worked. They are still trapped in airport under the detainment of local government now. They are crying desperately for help now! [Changbei airport police station, Jiangxi Airport Police Bureau, Tel: (0791)7112285]’⁴⁶

Figure 38. Translation of Liu’s microblog.



Figure 39. Screenshot of Liu’s microblog.

Followed the post, Liu contacted Deng Fei, who was a journalist at *Phoenix Television* and tried to call for more journalists to follow the event. As an opinion leader, Deng Fei began a live broadcast about the situation of the Zhong sisters on

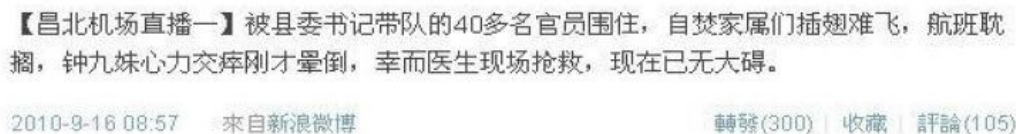
⁴⁶ Translation provided by the author.

Weibo under the name *The Battle in the Ladies Room* (Bi, 2014). The sisters kept updating through the phone link with Liu Chang to describe their condition. Meanwhile, Liu typed their words into his computer and sent it to Deng through *QQ*. Within one hour, Deng posted nine microblogs about the Zhong sisters.

At 08:57 a.m., Deng posted the first message and received 105 comments and 300 reposts.

‘[Changbei Airport live broadcast 1] Being trapped by 40-ish government officials led by the County Party Secretary, family members of the victims are unable to escape. They missed the flight. Zhong Rujie was too exhausted and passed out. Fortunately, she was not seriously hurt after the doctors’ emergent treatment on the spot’⁴⁷.

Figure 40. Translation of Deng’s first live broadcast on *Weibo*.



【昌北机场直播一】被县委书记带队的40多名官员围住，自焚家属们插翅难飞，航班耽搁，钟九妹心力交瘁刚才晕倒，幸而医生现场抢救，现在已无大碍。

2010-9-16 08:57 来自新浪微博 转发(300) | 收藏 | 评论(105)

Figure 41. Screenshot of Deng’s first live broadcast on *Weibo*.

Deng also joined a *QQ* group of journalists and appealed for the media to pay attention to the event (Tang, 2011). At 09:10, Deng posted a third microblog which attracted more *Weibo* users’ attention with 1,861 reposts and 662 comments (Figure 43).

⁴⁷ Translation provided by the author.

‘[A reality version of ‘Connected’ (a Chinese movie) is on. Chinese directors, you have a good script now.] Two girls were besieged at the ladies’ lavatory of Nanchang Airport by 44 local officials, they can only contact the outside by mobile phone. Three family members have burnt themselves to defend their own house, and now both the sisters are intercepted again. What a fabulous story of documentary, it is even more valuable than the movie, it is time to pick up your cameras’⁴⁸.

Figure 42. Translation of Deng’s third live broadcast on *Weibo*.

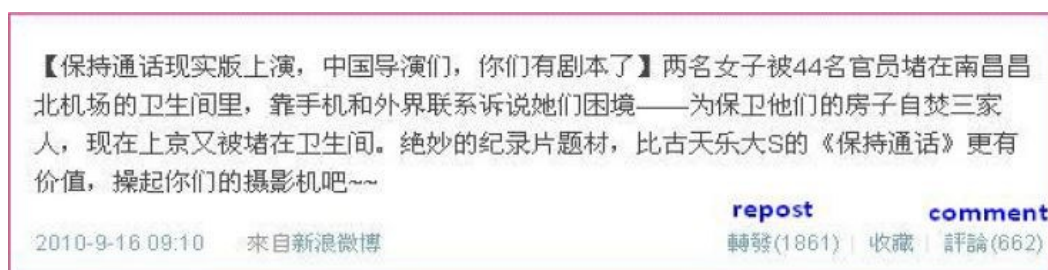


Figure 43. Deng’s third live broadcast on *Weibo*.

(Screenshots of *Sina Weibo*, accessed in Sept 16, 2010, <http://www.Weibo.com/u/1642326133>; Note: some posts about the Yihuang Incident on *Sina Weibo* have already been deleted.)

At 9 a.m., the *Ku6* video website, a popular Chinese video site which is similar to *YouTube*, contacted the Zhong sisters and interviewed them via their mobile (Bi, 2014). The chief editor of *Ku6* was the journalist who revealed the death of Sun Zhigang – Chen Feng from *Southern Metropolis Daily*. The Zhong sisters had to lower their voices to deliver their position of being trapped in the ladies’ room to the outside world. At around 11 a.m., a record of the interview was uploaded on the internet in which Zhong Rucui sobbed, ‘they are so scary. They are no different from

⁴⁸ Translation provided by the author.

bandits' (Deng, 2013, N.P.). At the same time, *Tencent Weibo* promoted the topic of 'Ladies' Room Scandal' to its homepage (Deng, 2011).

At 10 a.m., Zhang Guodong, a journalist from *Southern Metropolis Daily*, arrived at the airport and helped the Zhong sisters to escape from the ladies' room, where two local female officers were on guard (ibid). At noon, Deng Fei received a phone call from a staff member of *Sina Weibo*, notifying him that *Weibo* was under pressure to delete the posts of the live broadcast of the Zhong sisters' situation. Later, another staff member from *Sina Weibo*, Liu Xinzheng, demonstrated that *Weibo* had been activated by 'the ladies' room event' on the day. A majority of opinion leaders and users with verified identification were re-posting and commenting on the event. *Sina Weibo* was filled with information of the ladies' room battle. In addition, live broadcasts posted by Deng Fei were gathered to a file and uploaded to *Tianya*, *Kaidi* community, *Mop* and other forums.

The incident attracted a wide range of attention and became breaking news. During the forty minutes of being trapped in the ladies' room, the *Weibo* broadcast attracted a huge number of people which spotlighted the event. People from all levels of society supported the Zhong sisters and condemned the local government. Realising the power of media, the younger sister, Rujiu, opened *Sina Weibo* and *Tencent Weibo* accounts on 17 September 2010 (Jiang, 2012). Her accounts immediately attracted more than ten thousand followers. Deng Fei posted: 'The 22-year-old girl will no longer kneel down and bow her head like her father's generation, she will use *Weibo* to defend her rights' (Jiang, 2012, p.136).

The Yihuang government and local officials became the targets of public criticism as soon as the incident was exposed on *Weibo*. An overwhelming wave of public criticism, supported by traditional media, public figures, public intellectuals and thousands of ordinary netizens, exerted unprecedented pressure on the authorities. To quell the public outrage, on 17 September, the day after the dramatic interception at

Yihuang Airport, the Fuzhou municipal government and the higher-level government of Yihuang County announced that they would punish eight Yihuang County officials who were responsible for the self-immolation incident. Among them, Qiu Jianguo, Party secretary of Yihuang County and Su Jianguo, Magistrate of Yihuang County, were immediately suspended from office and were placed under investigation. One month later, the provincial government announced that the two officials would be removed from their positions. Six other officials were also dismissed because they were directly responsible for the self-immolation incident (Liu, et al., 2010). These severe sanctions were unprecedented in the history of the nation in terms of social events (Wang, 2012).

7.3.3 Stage 3: Final settlement – facilitated by the synergy between mainstream media and *We Media*

In the early morning of 18 September, Zhong Rujiu announced on *Sina Weibo* and *Tencent Weibo* that her uncle, Ye Zhongcheng, the victim in the self-immolation incident, was dead. Even worse, the Yihuang county party secretary Qiu Jianguo led more than one hundred people to seize the corpse and stopped the hospital issuing a death certificate, without which the Zhong family could not prove that Ye was dead. She also stated on her *Weibo* that her siblings and she were under house arrest.

The same night, another turning point occurred; the Fuzhou city mayor came to the hotel where the Zhong family was under house arrest and promised that they would be freed and that the government would send the best doctors to treat the remaining two victims of the self-immolation event. From the moment, the situation began moving to a new direction.

In the following days, Zhong Rujiu continued to post messages and photos of these events on *Weibo*, refuting the Yihuang officials' explanations, and revealing details of the whole event. She also received help from *Weibo* users who assisted her to arrange

the best surgeons to treat her family members. It represents that online support have transformed into offline action.

On the evening of 26 September at 8:23 p.m., Zhong Rujiu posted on *Weibo* appealing for help again, indicating that her mother was in a critical condition, and urgently looking for burns specialists. This post was forwarded for 11,488 times with 3,134 comments (Figure 45). It showed *Weibo* users carrying out useful actions instead of just browsing information. Among all forwarders, there were even a famous actor – Yao Chen, a Professor from Renmin University of China – Zhang Ming and other celebrities and opinion leaders.

‘Dear netizens, my mother is in critical situation now. She didn’t have any sleep last night. Her belly is bloated as if it is about to explode. Her life is in great danger. The hospital cannot figure out a solution and the medical facility has reached its limit. We are in desperate need for expert in Burn to rescue her out of dander. We appeal for help to transfer my mother and sister to another hospital that can provide better treatment! Please, everyone, I am begging, please help us! I am kneeling down for your help, please’⁴⁹.

Figure 44. Translation of Zhong’s post that appealing for help.

⁴⁹ Translation provided by the author.

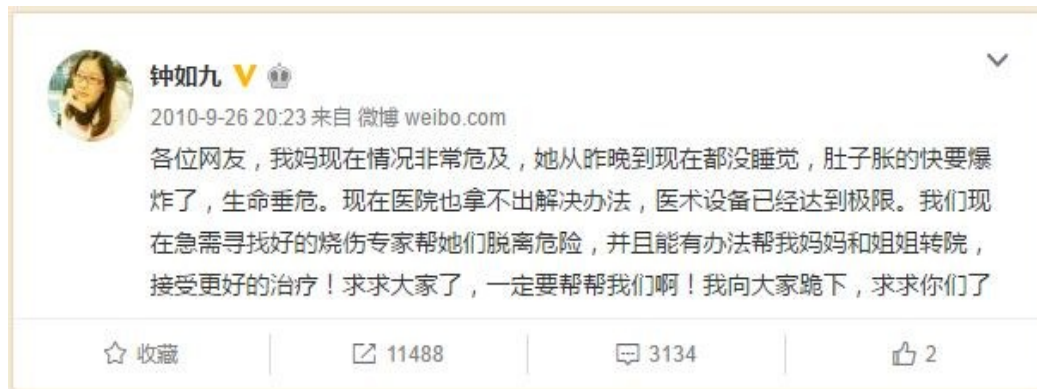


Figure 45. Screenshot of Zhong's post that appealing for help.

Although the new media platform used the advantage of the communications format to create a public consensus, the traditional media did not remain silent in the later stages. They used their own advantages to guide public opinion during the development of the event, which also could be seen as a consolidation of public opinion. After the Yihuang incident fermented into a public event on *Weibo*, traditional media began to interview the stakeholders of the event. For example, on 16 September, one of the popular TV programmes on *Phoenix Television*, named *Social Visibility*, conducted an interview with the Zhong brothers. At the same time, *Southern Weekly*, *Guangzhou Daily*, *Modern Express* and other traditional media companies interviewed the Zhong sisters by telephone. Some traditional media which originally had held a neutral attitude began to shift their positions. After a series of in-depth reports that explored the facts of the Yihuang event, on 18 September, *Xinhua* News Agency released the news: *The Party Secretary of Yihuang county, county magistrate and other relevant officials have initiated a formal investigation of the incident* (Gao, 2012).

After the news was forwarded by several mainstream traditional media outlets including *CCTV*, the direction of public opinion gradually changed, and the pressure of public comments eased. Meanwhile, the incident became the focus of attention among citizens all across the country. With the full involvement of the authoritative official media, increasingly traditional media began to rethink its role in the case. The

internet began to focus on how public power was being abused, on the lack of supervision of public power, and the dereliction of duty by government officials. With public opinion tending to become more rational, *News 1+1*, which is one of the most influential TV programmes on *CCTV*, shot a news film entitled ‘*Yihuang accountability, not just a question mark!*’, which tried to shape public opinion to maintain the credibility of Yihuang government officials and let audiences focus on the event result. The *Economic Information Daily* published an article under the title *There is one kind of demolition accountability, in which the essence is to cope in accordance with public opinion*. It stated that ‘dismissal is no longer the administrative punishment, but a normal job transfers within the government organisation’ (Gao, 2012, p.33), which suggests that the government’s response was not fair. The continuous follow-up reports and in-depth analysis by traditional media brought its superiority into full play, which consolidated its position in guiding public opinion.

On 20 September, the *People’s Daily* published an article in response to Yihuang official Hui Chang’s speech of *no demolitions, no new China*, and indicated that local government should avoid causing conflict during demolition. The article stressed that:

‘[i]n the pursuit of economic develop, local government merely focused on the profits without consideration for the people. It ignored the interests and will of the people, and even used the excuse of ‘supporting the development’ to tread down the public’s civil rights, social justice and media monitoring system. It is a developmental alienation’ (Liu, 2011, p.45)⁵⁰.

According to Wang Cailiang, lawyer for the Zhong family, the Yihuang government and the Zhong family reached a settlement after negotiation. Details of the agreement

⁵⁰ Translation provided by the author.

were publicised online on 27 September 2010: the government agreed to stop demolishing Zhong's house and paid the Zhong family ¥300,000 (\$47,044) as compensation for Zhong's death, and covered the medical costs for Zhong's wife and daughter for their injuries (Wang, 2011). By May 2012, their medical costs had reached four million yuan (\$627,256) (Wang, 2012).

7.4 Data Analysis

In this chapter, apart from secondary data that are collected from previous researches, online materials and media reports, two additional sources of data are analysed: one set from the questionnaire survey and one set from semi-structured interviews. In terms of the questionnaire survey, it is collected randomly for those who have knowledge or participated in the event. From the perspective of the 'public', it aims to explore all kinds of participation in the Yihuang incident, and more importantly, their attitudes and perceptions of public participation through *We Media* in such social events. The semi-structured interviews target at practitioners in the internet media industry. From the perspective of media professionals, it investigates the profit-empowering relationship between the public and media companies, as well as their professional perceptions of whether can *Weibo* be seen as online public sphere.

Data analysis of the questionnaire survey is divided into four groups. The first group of data corresponds to the role of social media in the face of a social event, i.e. the instant and spontaneous dissemination of information and how it promotes the development of a social event. The second group of data answers one of the main research questions – the dynamics and forms of online public participation and how they are reflected in the Yihuang event. The third group of data deals with people's perceptions in public participation through *We Media*. The final group of data explores problems that may occur during such online public participation of a social event.

In terms of the data collected from interviews, it is discussed in comparison to the questionnaire survey to find out the similarities and differences between the two stakeholders in using media as a channel to facilitate public participation. It also explores considerations from the media side in providing the platform that caters both the needs of consumers and government regulations, e.g. the flexibility in providing a virtual space for public participation without touching the government's bottom line, their professional suggestions in the problems that may occur during online public participation and possible solutions.

7.4.1 Social media as a vehicle for the instant and spontaneous dissemination of a social event

One of the survey questions asks respondents' experience in using SNS. Figure 46 shows that of the people who know or participated in the Yihuang case; 77.30% have registered and used *Weibo*, whereas only 25.50% of them have registered and used a blog service. This implies that the prosperity of the blog age has already passed, and *Weibo* is becoming the most popular and most widely-used platform, which represents the transition of new media to *We Media*.

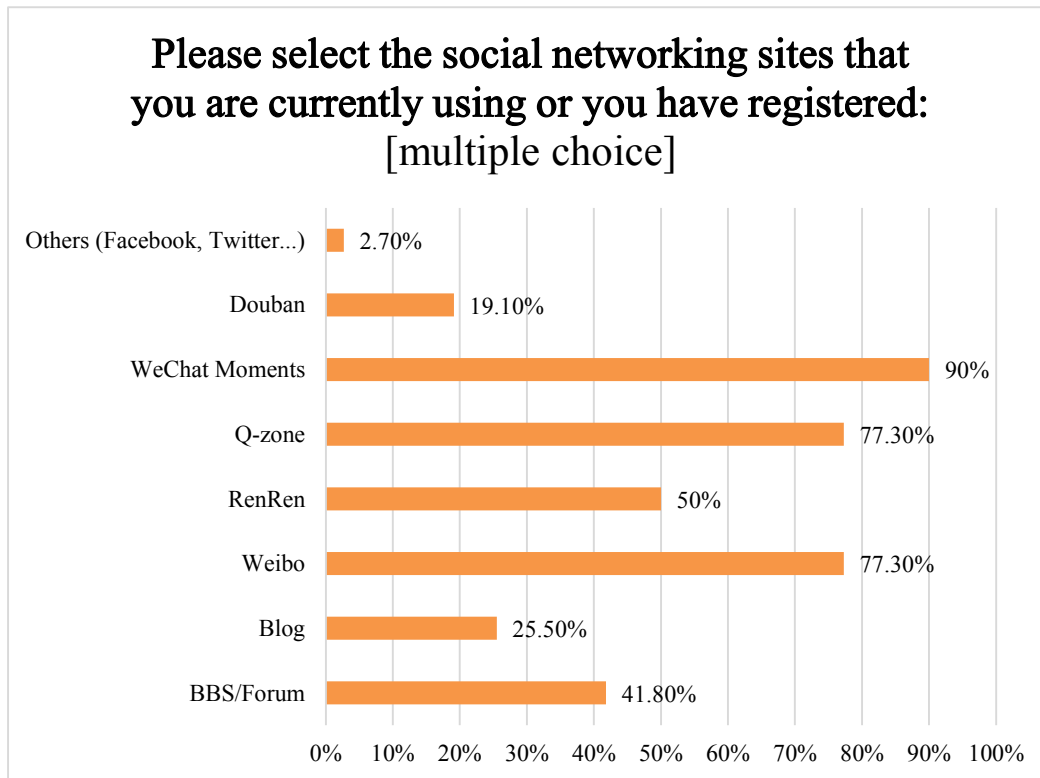


Figure 46. Distribution of social networking sites.

Figure 46 also indicates that the numbers of all respondents who registered and used *WeChat* Moments and *QQ* zone are also relatively high, at up to 90% and 77.30%, respectively. Because this research focuses on the period between the *BBS*/forums era and *Weibo* era, it would not extend to the application of *WeChat*; the researcher also believes that *WeChat* Moments has many limitations for online public participation as it is only visible among close friends and family members, and thus has a higher degree of privacy than *BBS*/forums, blog and *Weibo*. For *Weibo* as a communication platform, its openness and transparency is much higher, which makes it easier to promote the establishment of public voices from different communities and to gather public opinion under one particularly hot *Weibo* post, or under the same *Weibo* topic.

One of the interviewees from the media industry explained the evolvement of social media sites as:

‘The time when *BBS*/forums was popular represents the pioneers of internet users in China, it was merely the assembly of people with common interests. The difference between *Weibo* and *BBS*/forums is the acceptance

of diversity in the user community. *Weibo* gathered people with different interests and standpoints in one platform, which is beneficial in enhancing the information flow and the integration of various opinions. It caters for all social groups' participation' (Interviewee 1)⁵¹.

The other interviewee expressed that

'the reason why *Weibo* takes the leading role in the social media market is that it solved the most practical problem: real-time updates of information. With the convenience provided by portable devices, such as mobile phone, *Weibo* becomes the handiest application that allows every user to be the publisher on the first scene of a social event' (Interviewee 6)⁵².

As can be seen from Figure 47, among all respondents, 64.50% have heard about the 'Yihuang self-immolation incident' and 35.50% demonstrated clear knowledge of this case. Some 18.20% actually participated in the discussion of the incident through online and offline channels.

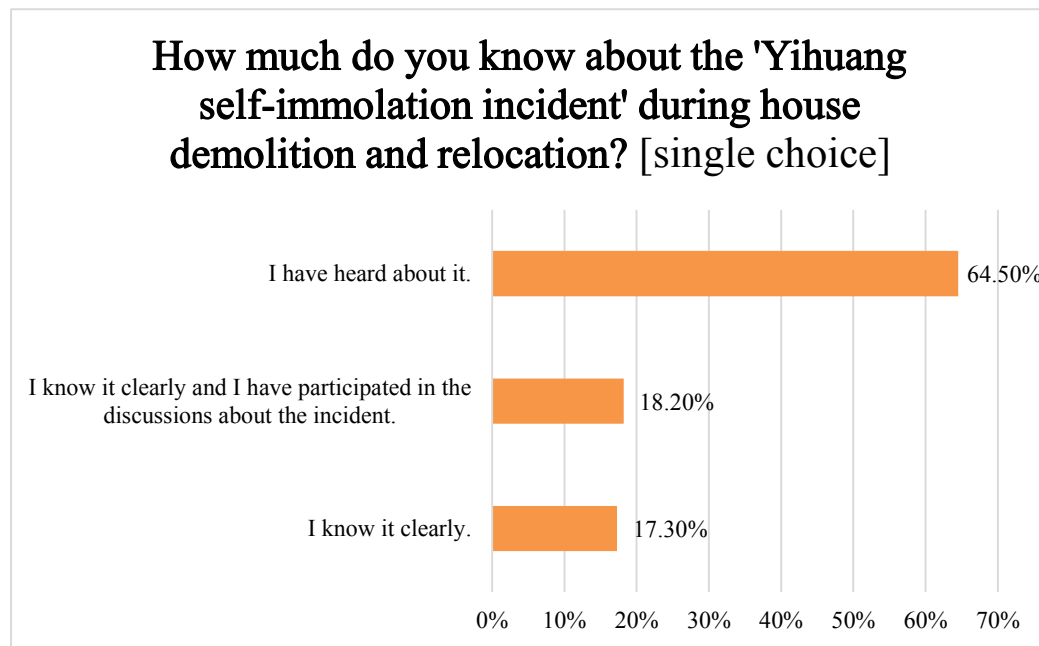


Figure 47. Distribution of respondents' knowledge of the Yihuang incident.

⁵¹ Translation provided by the author.

⁵² Translation provided by the author.

The survey also explored the channels of accessing information on the Yihuang incident in 2010. As mentioned in Chapter 3, 2010 was the first year after *Weibo* was launched. Major web portals were still the platforms where people searched for news information, such as *Tencent news*, *Sina news*, *NetEase news*, and *Sohu news*. 62.70% of respondents in Figure 48 indicated that they learnt about the Yihuang incident from major news portals, which illustrates the extensiveness and pervasiveness of media websites.

Corresponding to the result of the questionnaire survey, the internet is the major information source of the Yihuang event. Interviewees in the media industry also highlighted the phenomenon and explained that, ‘the advent of the internet makes it possible for people to make a direct voice, not something passed on by the third-person. It is a huge progress (*Interviewee 6*)⁵³.’ It is acknowledged by his peer as well, ‘internet provides a channel, a medium, a platform and most importantly, a bridge for message to be delivered to the target (*Interviewee 3*)⁵⁴.’

⁵³ Translation provided by the author.

⁵⁴ Translation provided by the author.

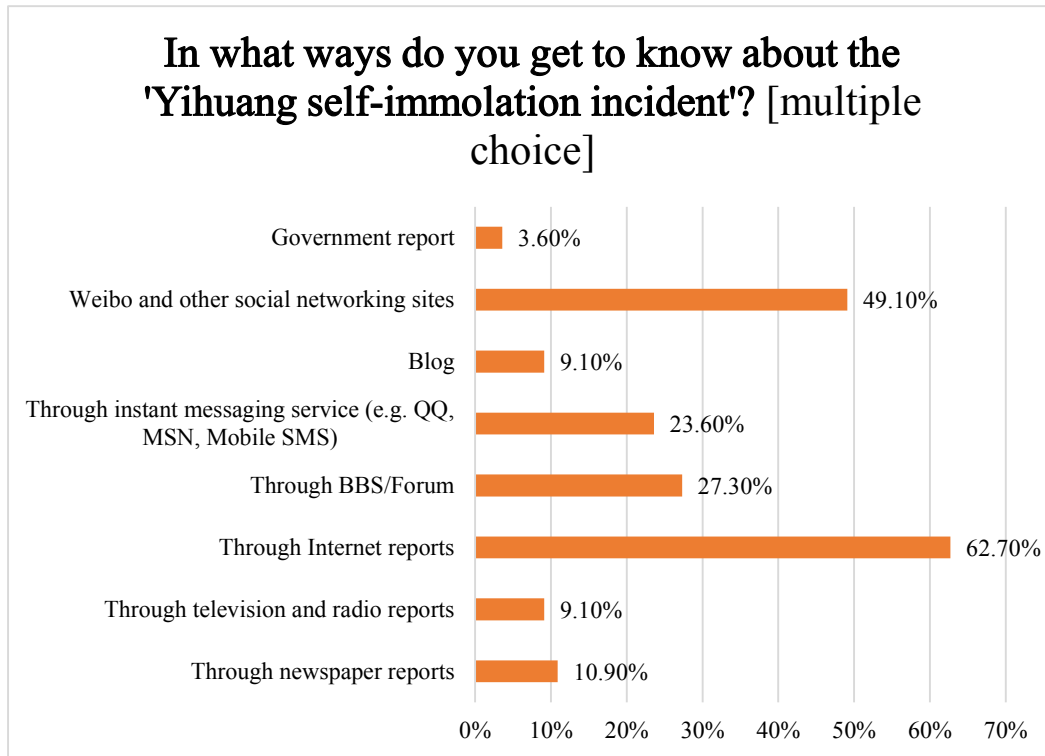


Figure 48. Channels of accessing information about the Yihuang incident.

Considering public participation in the Yihuang case in a real sense, it is necessary to observe the degree of involvement between social networking sites and their users. As Figure 48 illustrates, 49.10% of respondents said that they got to know the development of the Yihuang case through *Weibo* and other social networking sites. Compared with other relatively developed new media [*BBS*/forums (27.30%), *SMS* platform (23.60%), and blogs (9.10%)], it shows a visible growth in public participation for *Weibo* users. A noteworthy point is that blogs had already reached their peak at the time, whereas *Weibo* was in its infancy. To explain the gap between blogs and *Weibo* (9.10% and 49.10%, respectively) in distributing information for the Yihuang case, one fact needs to be considered: a majority of blog users moved to *Weibo* in the earlier stage.

Because of the features of *Weibo*, especially the instantaneity, high interactivity and the chain reaction brought by the many-to-many communication model, opinion leaders on blogs have been attracted to *Weibo* in search of a freer, less restricted and

larger platform to gain more recognition and a stronger sense of self-achievement. In the meantime, statistics on traditional media as an information source for the Yihuang case [newspaper (10.90%), TV and radio (9.10%), and government reports (3.60%)] indicate that the traditional media has lagged far behind new media in information distribution.

7.4.2 Dynamics and forms of online public participation in the Yihuang Case

In public events, online public participation refers to:

‘[u]sing the internet or other new media technologies to carry out the public collective action. There are many ways of using new media, one is to organise and mobilise public movement through the internet; or take cyberspace as the main positions and expand various forms of protest or action’. (Bian, 2012, p.122)

This new type of online public participation includes public action which only take place in the virtual world of the internet. The network collective protest, such as a so-called human flesh search, hackers, and network pranks can all be seen as broad network operations. Yang and Zhang (2010) defined a human flesh search as a search approach bringing together the power of internet users to know answers, wherein looking for answers is shifted from the search engines to internet users. In fact, human flesh search refers more to a search mechanism, purifying the information provided by search engines through the use of artificial participation to obtain accurate answers. This new type public participation also includes the off-line action (participation in the physical world) using the network as a medium or intermediary place from the online to the offline, and eventually expand operations in the physical world; for example, the 2007 Xiamen ‘PX’ plant protests.

Zhang and Stening (2010) identified the positive influence of the internet on public participation, as the free flow of information and mobilisation of public opinion enabled by the internet helps to break the long-existing ‘Chinese walls’ which defined

the boundaries between social groups, communities, organisations and individuals. It also reduces the cost of the organisation and mobilisation of potential supporters.

From the standpoints of media professional, the dynamics of participating a social event include two reasons: useful and interesting.

‘Useful refers to the effectiveness in appealing for help, e.g. safeguarding one’s rights; interesting refers to a psychological need of being existent, one wishes to find a sense of self-identification and self-achievement through participating online activities, e.g. there are many grassroots “senior users” in *Weibo* and *Zhihu* (Chinese version of Quora, a Q&A website) who wish to be the influential accounts “Big V” (users with their identity verified and have a huge amount of followers) or the intelligent group of the community, therefore, they use these two sites as a platform to exhibit their knowledge to gain a sense of self-achievement and even to gain some business opportunities (*Interviewee 1*)⁵⁵.’

Figure 49 illustrates people’s motivations in engaging the Yihuang event. According to the survey result, 55.50% of respondents wanted to help more internet users to understand the incident comprehensively. These respondents firstly got information from the internet, then edited and forwarded the secondary information spontaneously, which represents the communicator or disseminator of the microblogging fission effect.

⁵⁵ Translation provided by the author.

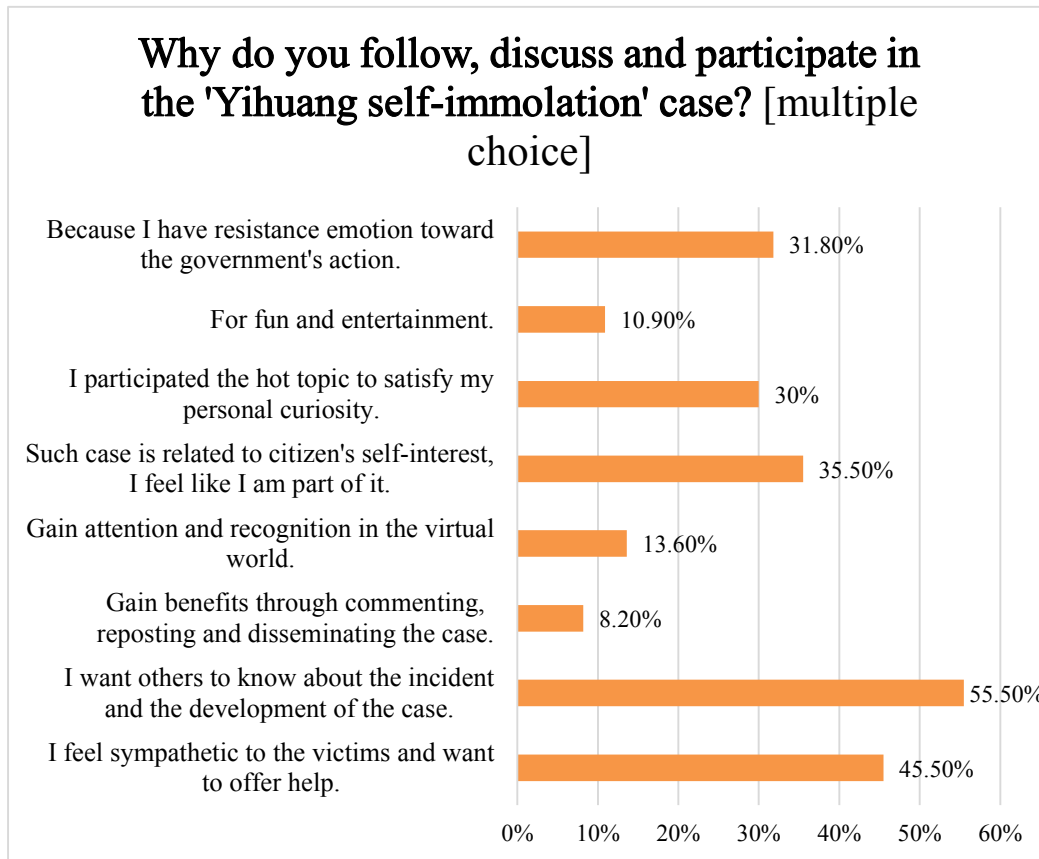


Figure 49. Motivations of participating in the Yihuang event.

There were also 45.50% and 35.50% of respondents who believed that the motivation of their online participation was to feel sympathy for the Zhong's family and want to offer a help, or that they may have encountered such incidents themselves, hence they think the Yihuang incident relates to their own interests and feel like they are part of the case.

However, there is also an irrational side of online public participation via *Weibo*. As seen from the data, there are 31.80% and 30% of the respondents respectively chose the options of 'resistance emotion towards the government' and 'satisfy personal curiosity'. The first motivation is because the Chinese government does not have a sustainable satisfactory performance in such demolition cases, and violent demolition has often occurred over the last three decades. Negative emotion has accumulated to a high level in Chinese society. Therefore, when people learned about the Yihuang

incident on the social networking service platform, they intuitively get involved to forward information and comment on the incident before validating its authenticity.

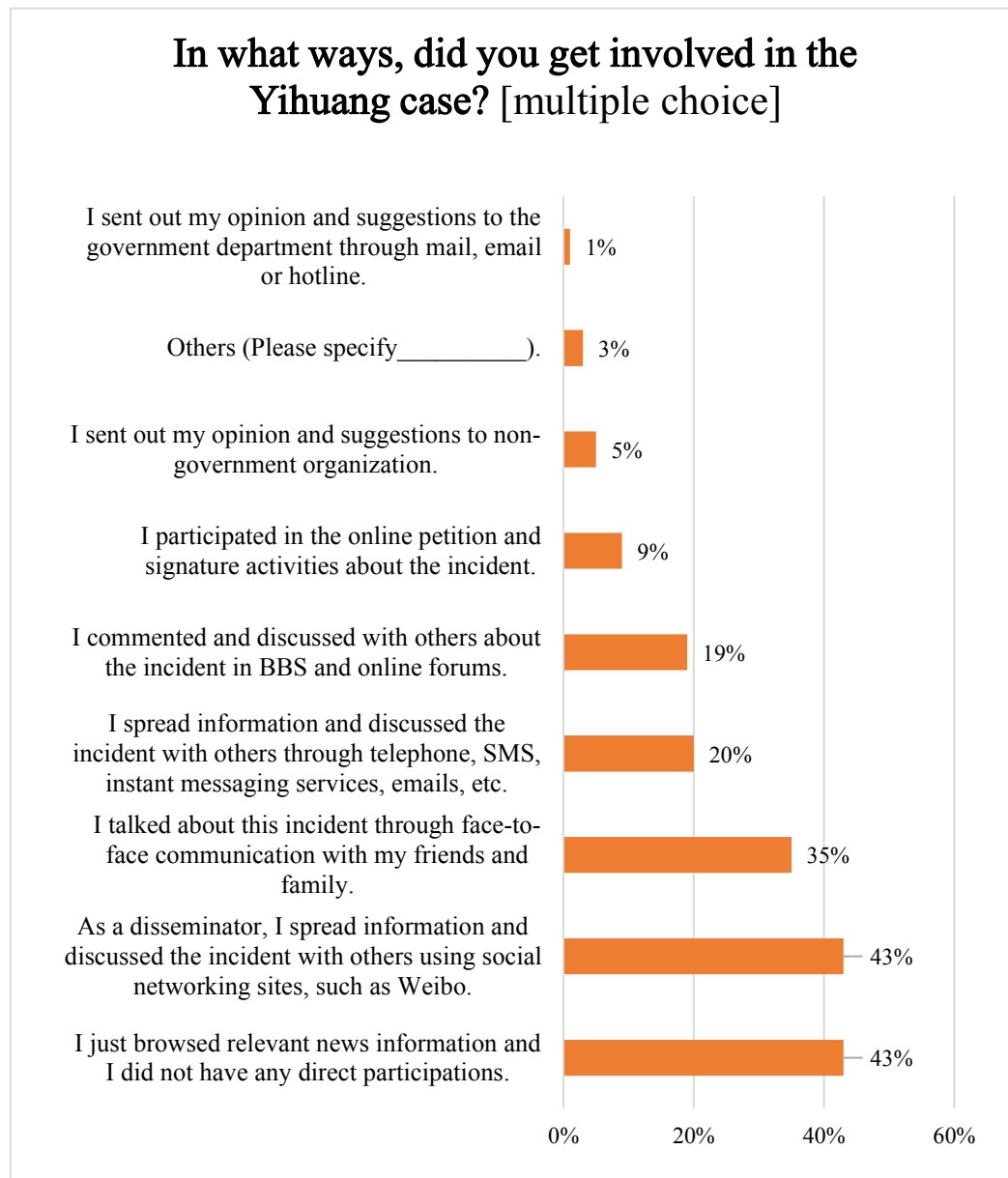


Figure 50. Forms of public participation in the Yihuang event.

Figure 50 illustrates the forms of public participation in the Yihuang event. Although 43% of respondents indicated that they just browsed relevant news information and did not have any direct participation, another 43% expressed their participation as disseminators. They spread information and discussed the Yihuang incident with others using social networking sites, including *Weibo*. This again suggests that *Weibo*

has become the first choice for the internet users to participate in social events among *We Media* platforms.

According to the media practitioners, the common forms of online public participation are: posting information via *BBS*/forums, using the advantages of social media and *We Media* by posting microblogs, giving a thumbs-up to a post, commenting and forwarding a post (*Interviewee 8*). Among of these forms, people who are capable of longitudinal thinking often use blog or long microblog to express their views. Whereas a majority of internet users prefer to use the fastest and simplest way of participation – posting microblog, commenting and forwarding (*Interviewee 6*). *Interviewee 1* pointed out that, many government departments have opened their verified *Weibo* account to publish official information and to provide a space to interact with the public. The enhanced public participation in anti-corruption is a typical example of the combined effort made by the public and the government.

7.4.3 The public's perceptions on participating the Yihuang case as a social event

Internet users have a high level of sympathy towards the victims in the Yihuang self-immolation incident, as shown in Figure 51. The total number of the respondents who felt sympathy for the victim was as high as 77%. Yet only 5% believed that this extreme behaviour was vexatious and unreasonable. Although 33% of the respondents demonstrated their sympathy and approved of using extreme behaviour to protest in the event, nearly half (44%) held a reserved attitude.

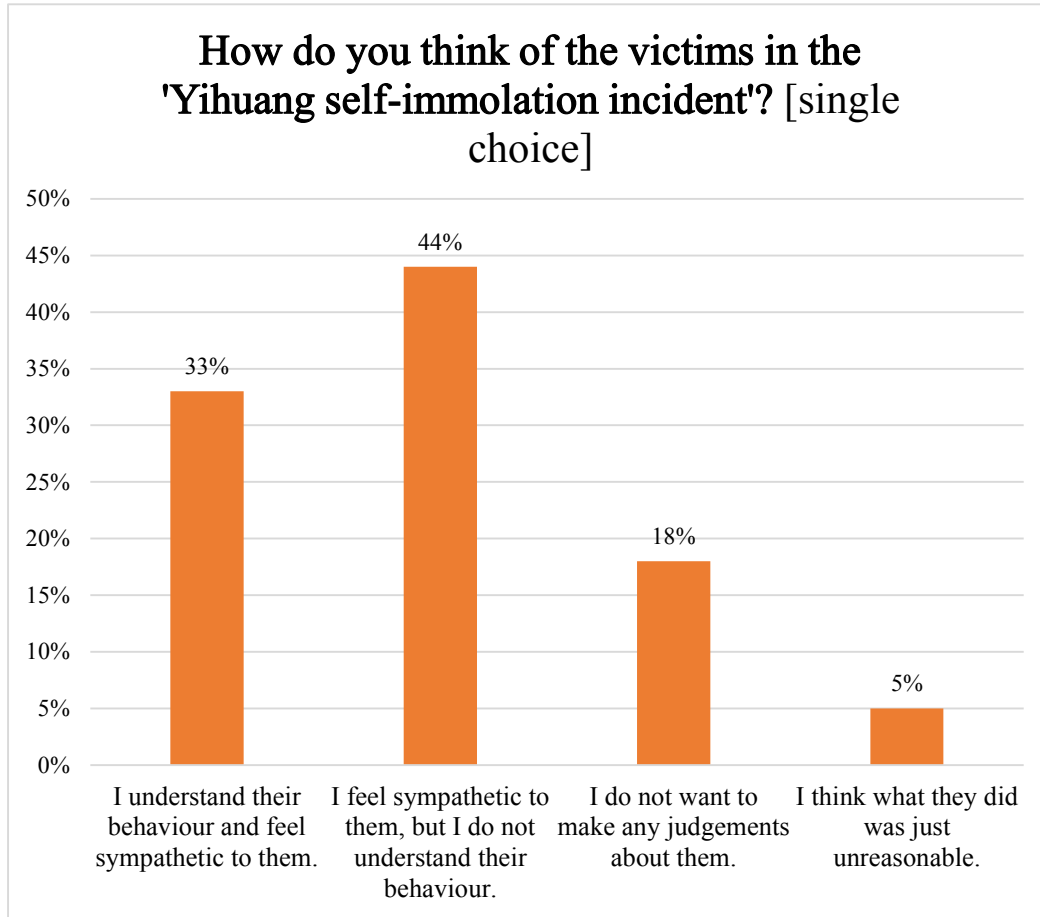


Figure 51. Perceptions on the victims of the Yihuang incident.

Some 45% of the respondents indicated that they were sceptical about the Zhong sisters' behaviour regarding the 'live broadcast' on *Weibo* (Figure 52). The doubt is that there may be a great chance of 'media hype' that intentionally stirs the contention on *Weibo* through the so-called 'live broadcast'. Figure 52 and Figure 53 demonstrate a variety of feelings and perceptions that the public have when confronting a social event. It is natural and normal, as these people come from different backgrounds with a wide range of competence in judging a social event.

As for the media side, *Interviewee 2* hold the opinion that, it is gratifying to see different standpoints and views in the discussions of a social event on *Weibo*. Because it shows the wide involvement of the public, not merely expressing critics toward the government, but also rational judgement.

‘What the public wish for is very simple. They hope the exposure of a social event on the internet can help solve the problem. They want their voice to be heard by higher authorities. It is similar to make an online petition or appealing for help on behalf of others. Because voices on the internet often have audiences and supporters (*Interviewee 6*)⁵⁶.’

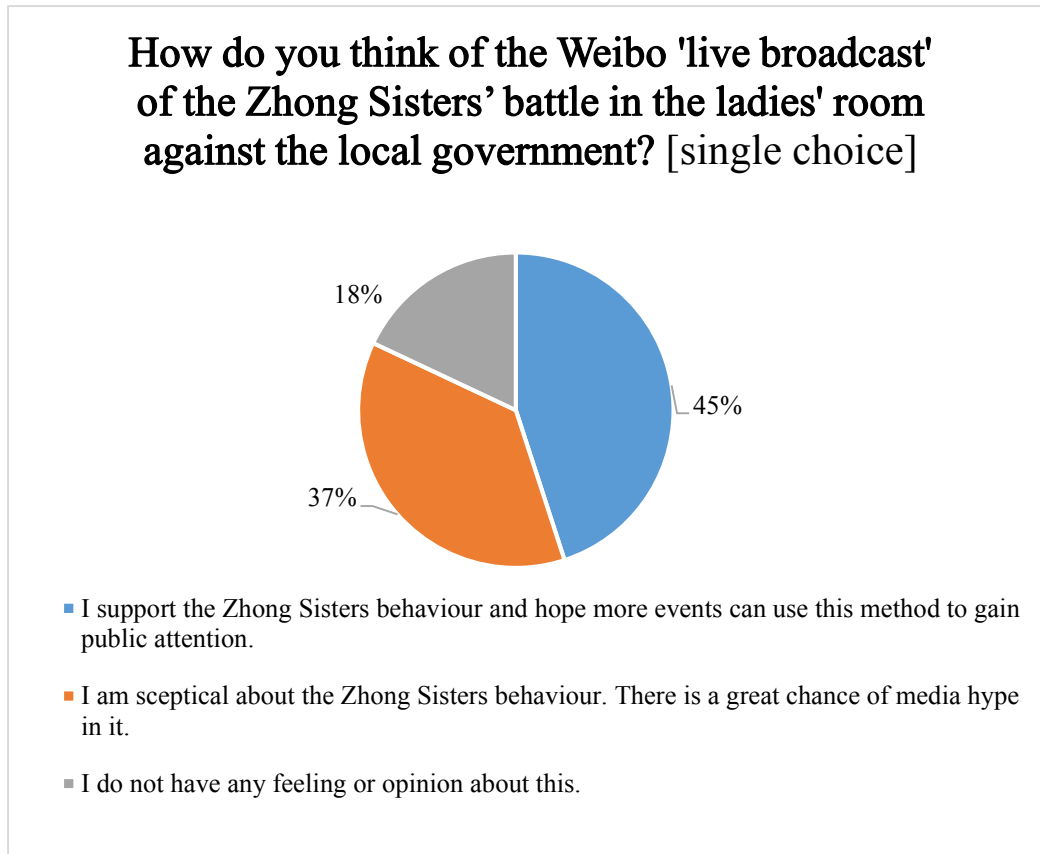


Figure 52. Attitudes towards the *Weibo* 'live broadcast'.

To further investigate people's perception of the Yihuang incident as a social event, the survey contained a question asking whether the netizens will continue to pay attention to cases like this that concern people's livelihood in China or not (Figure 53); 41% of the respondents would like to follow the case but only passively receive information through traditional media or internet media, while 33% would like to follow the case actively by searching for relevant information themselves. However, a

⁵⁶ Translation provided by the author.

different attitude is demonstrated by media practitioners. Around a quarter of the respondents looked at social events which related to people’s livelihood in the same way as normal news without special feeling, and no one tended to ignore such information.

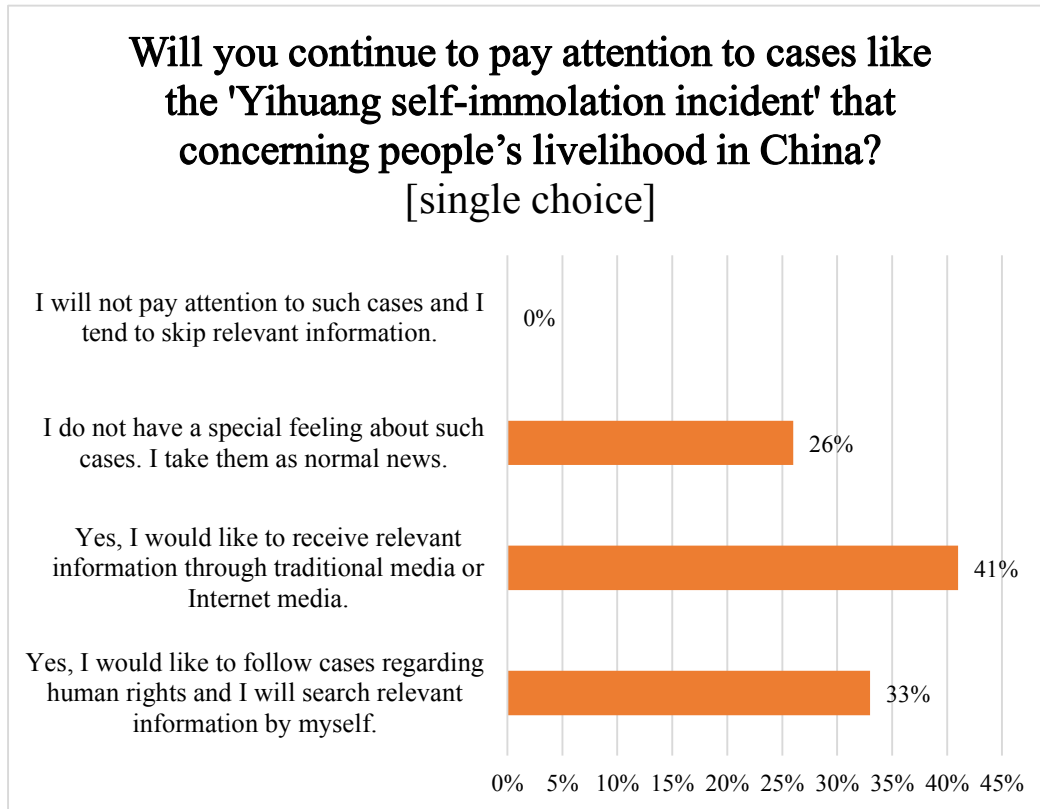


Figure 53. Attitudes of continuing to participate in social events.

The Battle in the Ladies’ Room was the turning point at which *Weibo* demonstrated its strength. Therefore, respondents’ participation in the second stage of the event was crucial as it implies a general perception of whether to participate in a social event. 35% of respondents indicated that they were involved in the most representative online activity, *the Battle in the Ladies Room* on *Weibo* during the 2010 Yihuang incident. They commented or reposted the information regarding the Zhong Sisters’ situation (Figure 54). Although this accounts for a small portion of the respondents, we cannot ignore the fissionable effect and the multi-directional feature of *Weibo*. With a third of respondents actively participating on *Weibo* at the time, the fissionable effect and many-to-many communication mode could reach a much larger population

and ensure the Yihuang event gained sufficient attention from the society as a whole and cause a sensational effect.

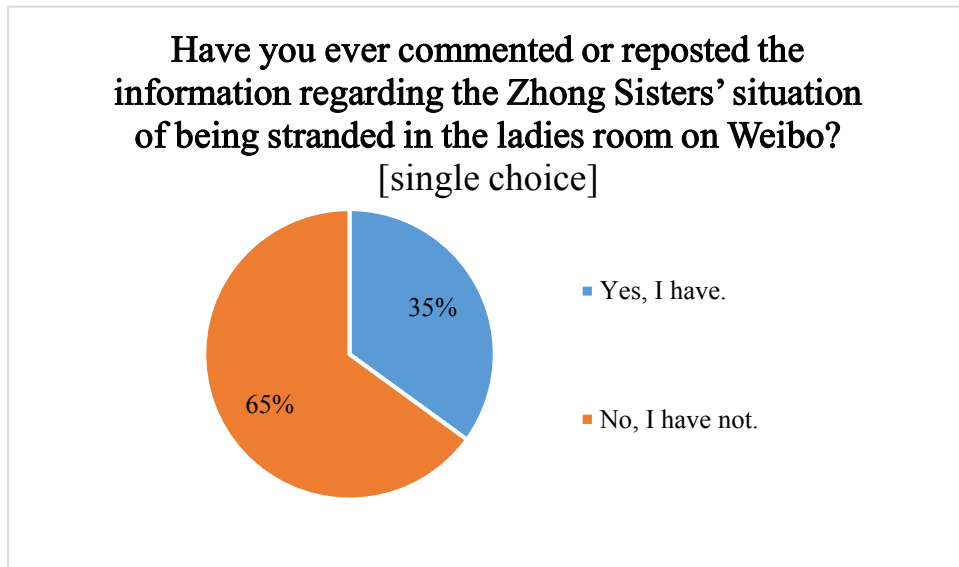


Figure 54. Participation in the key stage of the Yihuang event.

As illustrated in the forms of public participation in Figure 50, 35% of the respondents chose to talk about the Yihuang incident through face-to-face communication with their friends and family, and 20% used spreading information and discussing the incident with others through telephone, *SMS*, instant messaging services or emails. It shows that some respondents preferred a more private and secure way to contribute in the diffusion of the Yihuang incident. The proportion was much higher than the other two low-tech options, which are more likely to reveal their true identity to the relevant government department. These two options were ‘I participated in the online petition and signature activities about the incident (9%)’ and ‘I reflected the comments and suggestions to civil right organisations (5%)’. Only 1% of the respondents considered reflecting opinion and suggestions to the government department through mail, email or hotline would be useful.

The figures demonstrate that, in an authoritarian country like China, most people tend to choose online or offline public participation which have to ensure their anonymity.

It can also be understood as they do not want to get trouble with the government because their behaviour on the internet.

7.4.4 Problems of online participation via *Weibo*

The occurrence of a social events like the Yihuang incident, which provokes conflict between citizens and government agencies, significantly reduces the credibility of government. There is a possibility that government officials could directly interact with the citizens. Ultimately, the government usually collects public opinion from *We Media* platforms, such as *Weibo*.

Weibo has delivered many benefits and advantages for online public participation and for the government to collect public opinion. Yet, there are still some problems that worth attention, including irrational emotion among the public, intentional shifts of public opinion by celebrity influence, and the credibility of information on *Weibo*.

As demonstrated in the motivations for participating a social event (Figure 49), resistance emotion towards the government is one of the respondents' reasons. The internet has become a channel for people to vent the resistance and hatred towards the officials and the rich, which can lead to irrational civic engagement. In the Yihuang event, the influence of irrational public participation cannot be ignored. Figure 55 illustrates people's perceptions of the influence of irrational emotion in the Yihuang event.

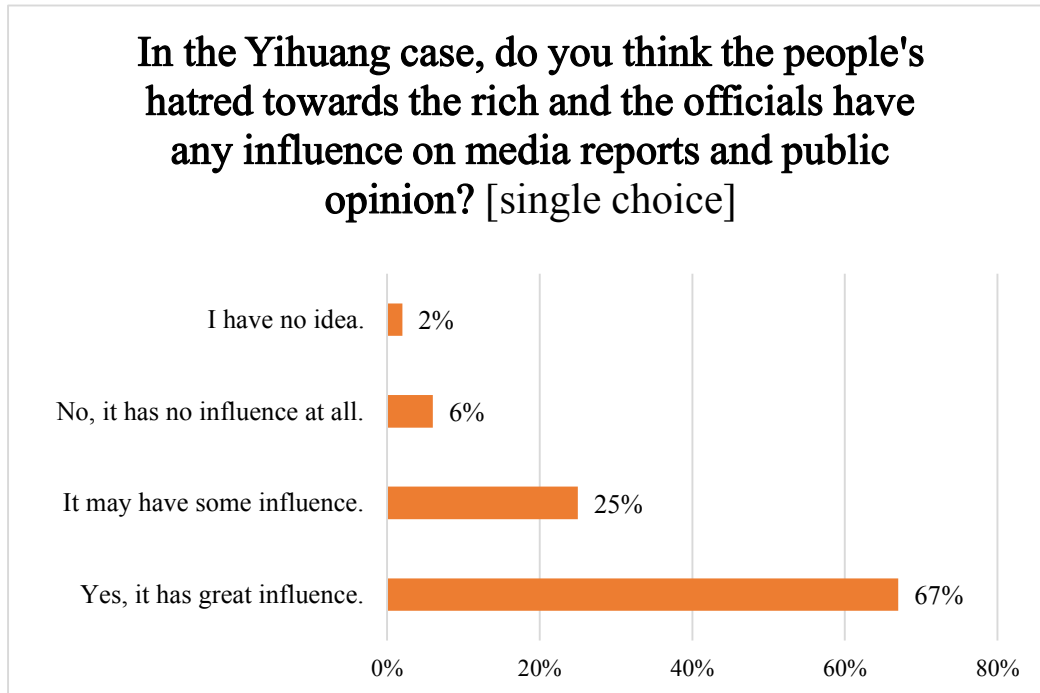


Figure 55. Perceptions on the influence of irrational emotion.

My survey result shows that 67% of respondents considered people's hatred towards the rich and the officials had a great influence on the media reports and public opinion. A quarter of them believed that *Weibo* may have had influence in solving a social event to some extent. Only 6% thought it had no influence at all. For the consideration of forming rational public opinion, the authenticity of information on platforms like *Weibo* needs to be distinguished either from the perspective of users, media market or the government.

Many celebrities and popular accounts on Weibo reposted and disseminated information about such house demolition and relocation cases. How do you think about their acts in influencing the development and final result of the case? [single choice]

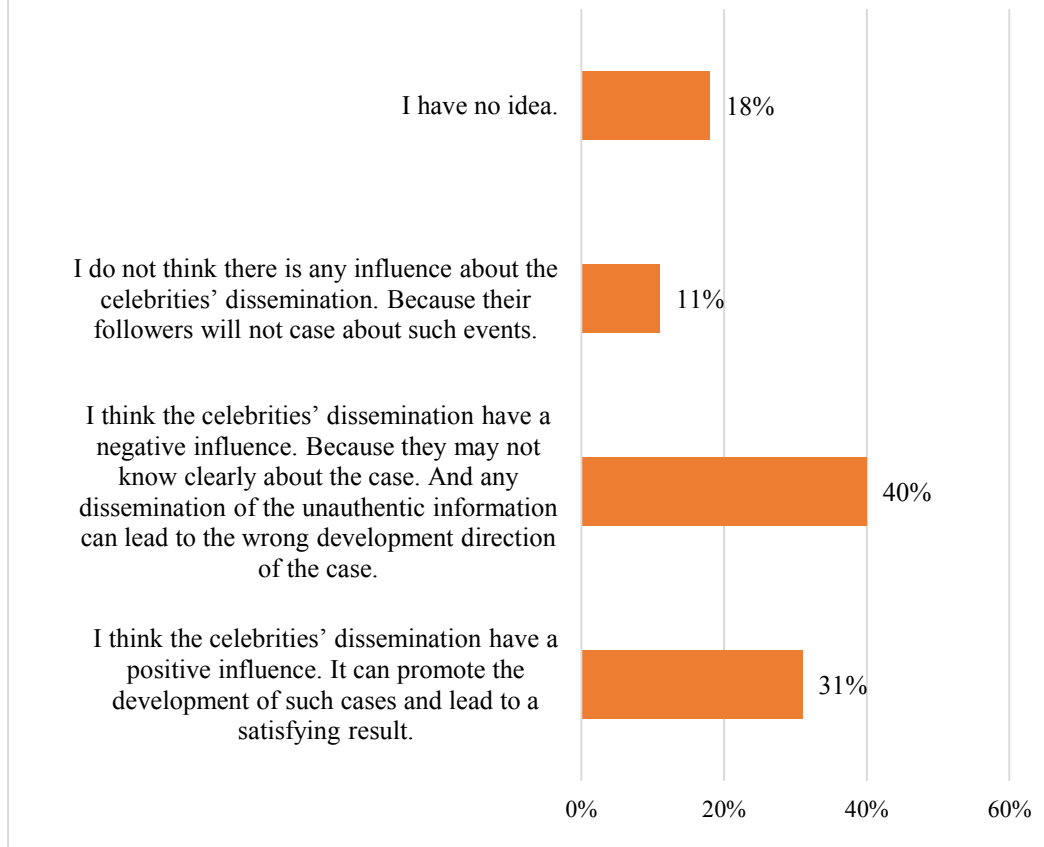


Figure 56. Celebrity influence.

Celebrities and popular accounts on *Weibo* frequently repost and disseminate information about house demolition and relocation cases. According to the survey result (Figure 56), 40% of respondents held the opinion that the celebrities and public intellectuals' disseminations had a negative influence on the development and final result of social events because they may not know the facts of the case. Any dissemination of unauthentic and fake information can lead to the case developing in the wrong direction. But there were still 31% of the respondents who agreed on the positive influence of celebrities' involvement in the event because the celebrity and

opinion leaders usually have large fan groups, which makes it easier for information posted on their account to reach a wider audience.

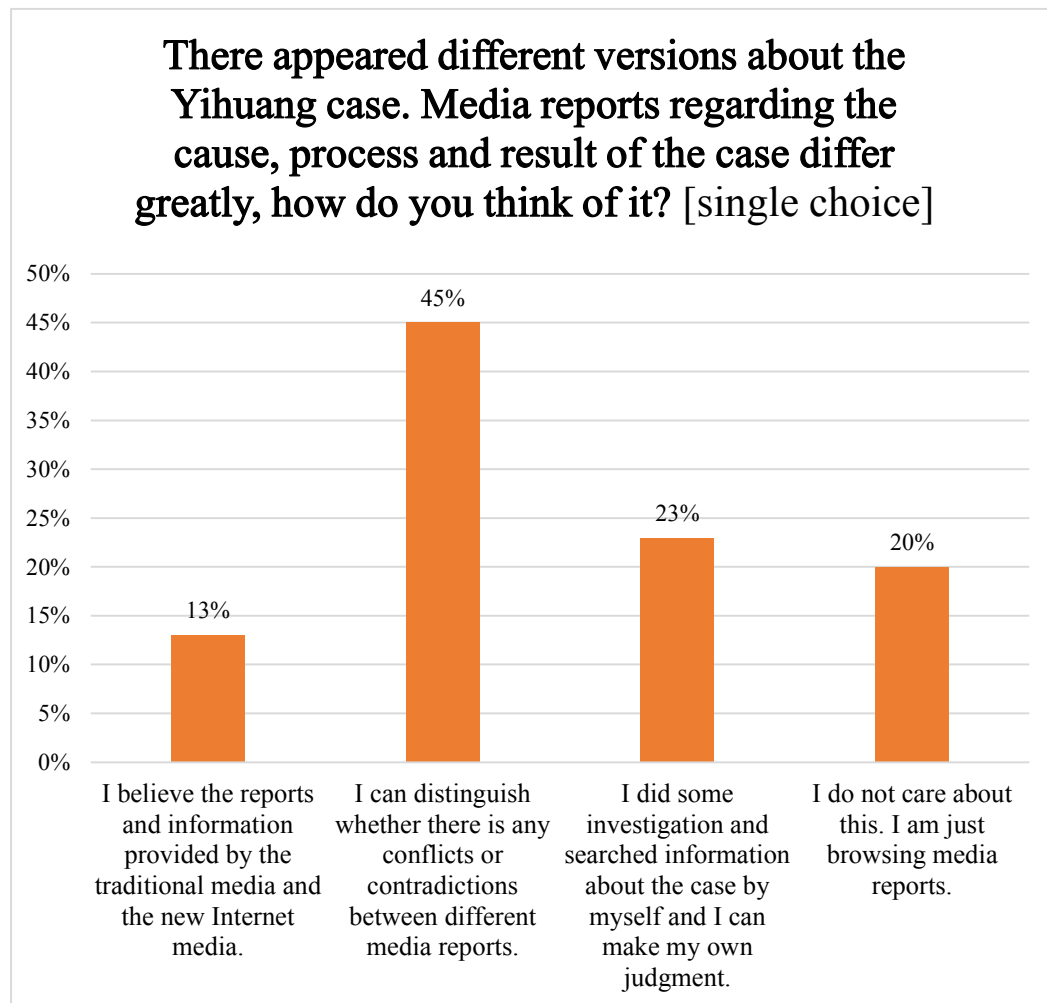


Figure 57. Attitudes towards different media reports.

With all the potential problems stated above, there are still many netizens can behave rationally in the face of a social event via an online platform. During the Yihuang incident, various versions of the case, process and results appeared in different media reports, and 45% of respondents in Figure 57 believed that they were able to distinguish the conflicts and contradictions between different media reports. At the same time, 23% would do further investigation, search for information about the case by themselves, and make their own judgment. As illustrated in Figure 58, when reading the comments and discussions about the Yihuang case on *Weibo* and other

social networking sites, 52% held a sceptical attitude to online information and they only take reaction after identifying whether it is the fake or genuine.

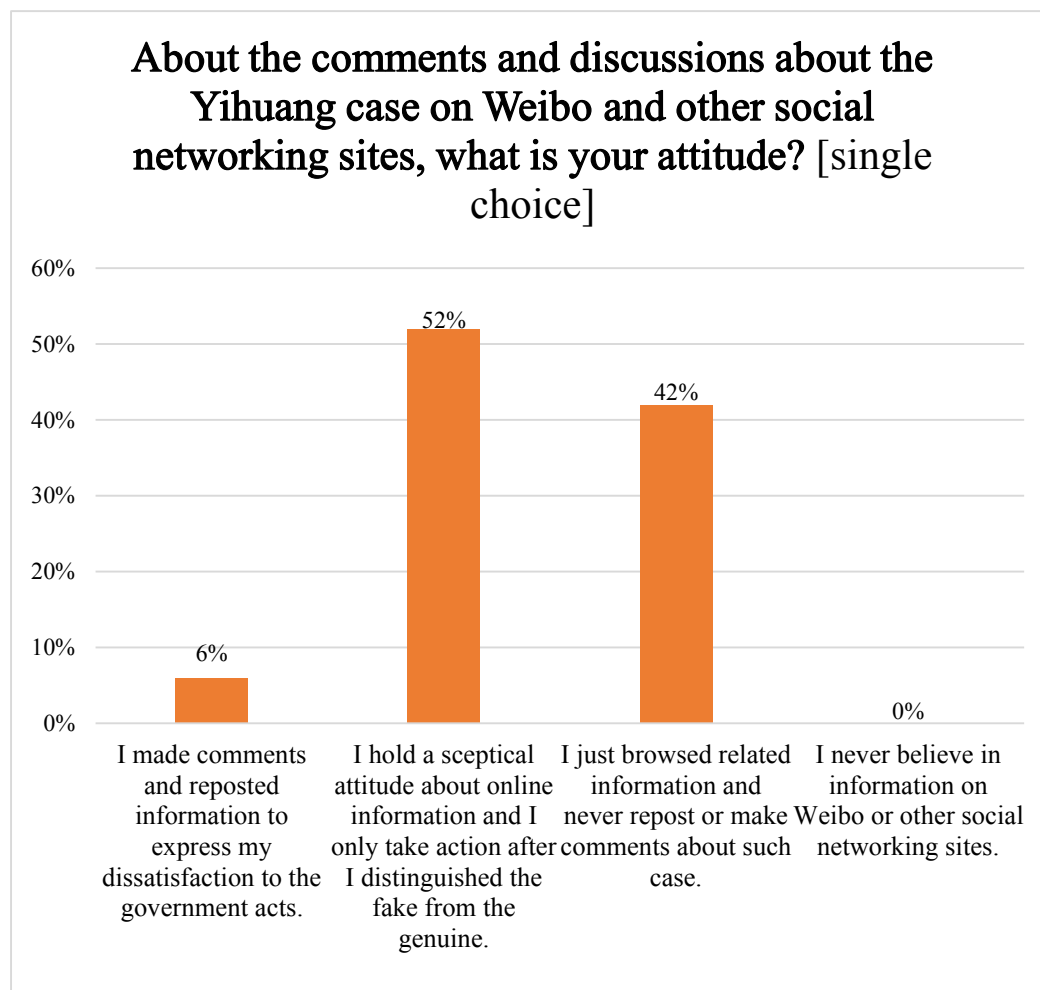


Figure 58. Attitudes towards online information created by the public.

7.5 Discussion

7.5.1 Role of *Weibo* on public participation

From the emergence of *We Media* and the advancement of ICT, a series of upgrading and replacement of the platforms has occurred. The media products involved in this period are (in a chronological order): *BBS*/forums, blog, microblog and *WeChat* Moments. In this study, *Weibo* is regarded as the most representative platform in the *We Media* age, especially in the response process of social and public events. *Weibo* has played a decisive role in cases like the Yihuang incident. The intervention of

Weibo in the Yihuang case makes it the point that manifested the advantages of the *We Media*.

Weibo's potential to evoke 'truly' open debates was questioned by some scholars (MacKinnon, 2011; Morozov, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; 2013). One argument is that *Weibo* mainly functions as an entertainment space with popular users and topics emphasising recreation, hence it is an apolitical space (Sullivan, 2012). Moreover, the debates on *Weibo* were seen to be undermined by the combination of censorship mechanism and the party-paid *Weibo* writers which reduced open and enduring participation (MacKinnon, 2011). The presence of government is now more evident on social media than before (Sullivan, 2013), and the pessimistic outlook of *Weibo* being apolitical is further validated by the government's crackdowns against 'online rumours'.

However, there were optimistic views, as well (Jiang, 2010; Noesselt, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2011). Scholars emphasised that some degree of online public discussion is actually allowed by the Chinese government (Jiang, 2010), and that online protest was seen taking place on a regular basis (Yang, 2011). For the Chinese netizens, *Weibo* is a strong tool to oversee the authorities and to organise collective resistance (Noesselt, 2014), and the Chinese internet is seen as a 'catalyst for social and political transformation' (Xiao, 2011, p.60).

Weibo is a product that is comprised of the features of both new internet media and mobile networks. Despite the advantages of vast information, wide coverage, high interactivity, instantaneity and multimedia, it also included the 5A⁵⁷ elements of the mobile network (Yuan, 2011). By connecting offline interpersonal interaction to the communication within online communities, it has promoted the expansion of the scale

⁵⁷ '5A' represents anyone, anytime, anywhere, anything, anyway.

of *We Media* distribution. Together with the low cost and high speed of *Weibo*, it has created a barrier-free and bidirectional environment for communication. Users of microblog have developed a pattern for self-proclamation, self-organisation and self-networking that forms a social behaviour in which information is distributed on the internet and then transferred to the whole society (Castells, 2008).

Interviewees from the media industry also highlighted the 5A influence on *Weibo*.

Interviewee 6 demonstrated that

‘the advent of *Weibo* led to the explosive growth of information flow on the internet. It used to take at least half a day or one day for a social event to be exposed to the public. But real-time updates of information on *Weibo* make it an immediate effect: a social event is known by the public as soon as it takes place. People can immediately post comments and spread information to a wider range of audience. The current situation is that everyone can act as a journalist or a commentator. Such fresh pattern is the reason of information explosion on *Weibo*’⁵⁸.

The argument is supported by the peers as well. *Interviewee 8* indicated that the greatest contribution of the internet is that it solved the problem of asymmetric information.

‘It is mainly reflected in the *We Media* age. Because everyone can be a reporter. When an incident happens, netizens can take photos or videos, then post it on *Weibo* or on a more private place – *WeChat* Moments. For these social events that attracted extensive attention, they came into notice because of the huge amount of repost. The difference is that, traditionally, mainstream media is the source that provokes attention, but nowadays, it is the user-generated content that causes wide attention. It is even referenced by traditional media and finally leads to a series of investigation by media professionals (*Interviewee 7*)’⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ Translation provided by the author.

⁵⁹ Translation provided by the author.

Therefore, *Weibo* has enormous potential impact on both the individual and society. As a social networking platform in the virtual environment, *Weibo* keeps the connection between various levels of communication, including individual-to-individual, individual-to-organisation and individual-to-public, which consolidates the collaboration effect of the internet on these different parties. The following section elaborates on how the collaboration effect is achieved taking the Yihuang case as an example.

Every micro-blog user can follow others or be followed, so they are both the information receiver and the publisher. Once released, any information can be automatically displayed on all their followers' pages in the first instance; once there is a retransmission or comment created, all of their followers can also receive the real-time information. Information transmission on *Weibo* follows the 'geometric multiplication' rule, but in the process, no one can decide what kind of dissemination can be or cannot be most widely spread, because this will be a joint decision made by all participants. Even if the original thread was censored or deleted, the retransmitted ones are still there for the participants to forward or comment.

The key turning point of the Yihuang case was the live-broadcast through *Weibo*. It amplified the issue, created awareness and evoked enormous response from netizens. Opinion leaders such as Murong Xuecun and Deng Fei played a vital role in the retransmission and spread of information. Generally speaking, opinion leaders are celebrities and have a considerable number of followers on *Weibo* (Jiang, 2012). Thanks to the special transmission mechanism of *Weibo*, more netizens learned the news in real-time.

Deng Fei is a journalist on *Phoenix Weekly*, but he preferred *Weibo* as the communication platform because he thought the magazine was weaker on timeliness compared with the network (Deng in Jiang, 2012, p.136). Deng Fei attributed the rapid spread of his live-broadcast to the large number of subscribers on his *Weibo*

account, however, he perceived the ‘airport blocking’ incident itself as a more important trigger:

‘Firstly, there was obvious conflict, and live-broadcast threads represented an uneven fight between weak women and the authoritarian government. So, women retransmit this to support their female compatriots; common people retransmit this as vulnerable groups to express their discontent with strong power’ (Jiang, 2012, p.136), Deng explained.

In the Yihuang case, *Weibo* served not only as the platform for information dissemination, but also the channel for the victims to appeal for their interests. It acted as a tool that carried the appeal for help and the space that formed public opinion. Because of the features discussed earlier, *Weibo* manifests a new form of supervision by public opinion, which makes it a valid channel for a vulnerable group to have the opportunity to speak and fight for civil rights. The phenomenon that numerous audiences on *Weibo* oversee a social event gained the attention of major traditional media. The joint power of these two media forms increased public pressure. In the eyes of the public, *Weibo* is seen as the information source, opinion space, and spectating centre for such an incident. It is an irresistible trend that *Weibo* will be used as an effective channel to interact with the government. Meanwhile, being able to target the livelihoods of citizens, gathering public opinion, *Weibo* provides a platform for the government to learn more about its people.

7.5.2 Characteristics of *Weibo* as online public sphere

Dahlgren (2001) considered internet a nurturing base for multiple microspheres that generate deliberative places to exchange views among politically engaged people. Su (2016) argued that the advanced ICTs make it possible to generate ‘virtual public sphere’, a kind of space that can be relatively independent from both the state and dominant corporate economic institutions. Although ICTs cannot result in the fundamental change in economic and political structures of the various societies in which they function, they brought new circulations and forms of power to the people

which is beneficial to democratic participation. As Marolt and Herold (2014) indicated that, 'online China' comprises of those spaces for interaction and negotiation that influence 'offline China', and allow their users greater freedom despite ubiquitous control and surveillance by the state authorities.

According to an analysis report of public opinion on the internet in China for 2010, there were 20 social incidents that aroused extensive public opinion and 60% were voiced through *Weibo* (Zhang and Luo, 2011). As the influence of *Weibo* continues to expand, an increasing number of scholars, experts, celebrities, and victims of social incidents have started using *Weibo* in the early stages. Heated topics on *Weibo* changed from daily trifles to social events, which promoted it to develop into the most influential media that intervenes in public affairs. It fundamentally changed the status of traditional media and new media (*BBS*/forums and blog) in the power-relationship of user involvement in forming public opinion. Traditional media is no longer the exclusive source of information. *Weibo* appears to be the first choice no matter it is for information distribution or collection. It covers almost all fields of people's life, be they major incidents, disaster relief, civil rights, or social assistance. It is the most-frequently used platform for the distribution of important information, which in most cases has vital influence in promoting the development of the events.

Combined with the current Chinese social context, the public expected that *Weibo* would play an important role in the formation of public opinion, promoting the discussion of hot social issues and other aspects in Chinese modern society (Gao, 2009). Microblogging has expanded the characteristics of the interaction between the *We Media*'s decentration, personalisation and socialisation. It also has obvious advantages in providing more freedom of personal expression, more adequate right to know, and greater public participation of both social and political aspects. From the perspective of technology, some scholars emphasised that microblogging has the ability to amplify public opinion and empowers users to express themselves online (Zheng, 2008); '[i]t is not only a simple network tool, nor a platform of new media, it

actually became a medium and an amplifier of public opinion, also can be treated as a laboratory of public opinion' (Luan, 2010, p.101). From the observation of communication methods, Ren and Zhu (2009) hold the opinion that microblogging could be the most democratic space for free speech:

'*Weibo* has pushed the social public participation of individual communication to a climax, and it also builds up a real-time and three-dimensional social communication network which includes the interaction between public, media and government'. (ibid, p.27)

Weibo can also be seen as an extreme influential public space full of the guidance of public opinion:

'As a grassroots' public sphere, *Weibo* would accomplish the integration of dispersed social aspects...and provide the convenience of political study for the community of citizens in a democratic society' (Liu, 2009, p.21).

Some scholars have even indicated that:

'*Twitter* has played a revolutionary role in both interpersonal communication, international communication and political communication. The *Weibo*, from mainland China... not only symbolises the dawn of the civil society, but also shows the governance philosophy with Chinese characteristics'. (Zhao, 2010, p.46)

As *Interviewee 2* indicated, 'the substance of *Weibo* has already changed in China. It is more than a social networking site, but a media'⁶⁰. When *Weibo* was initiated in 2009, the maximum word count of a post on *Weibo* is 140, which means that the content needs to be clear and simple. Also, because the procedures of making a post on *Weibo* is easier than *BBS*/forums, together with the popularisation of smart phones, it is natural that more and more netizens become *Weibo* users. A user base of millions

⁶⁰ Translation provided by the author.

people enhances its influence and forms a positive cycle within the user community and information flow (*Interviewee 8*). *Interviewee 2* further emphasised the diversity of user community in *Weibo*, which makes it an epoch-making product in the media history. The user community is constituted by a variety of accounts registered under the name of general public, government departments, media professionals, and celebrities (actors, singers, entrepreneurs, public intellectuals, etc.). It is a public space that carries the voice from all sectors in the society. Information flow is multi-directional and users have the equal power in accessing and disseminating information. It is what makes the general public's online activity valuable and powerful. To quote from one of my interviewees, 'voices of the people exist all the time and social media gives them a channel to be expressed and heard (*Interviewee 2*)⁶¹.'

A number of researchers have already investigated the media market for public opinion, but until today, there has been no unified definition and conclusion for the role *Weibo* has played in the media market. Briefly speaking, there are some common characters between *Weibo* and new media (e.g. popular online chatrooms, *BBS* and blog sites) in the formation of public opinion, but there are differences that makes it unique in the *We Media* age. To begin with, *Weibo* originates from the social networking activities in physical space. In addition to expand one's social connections, it also carries individuals' reactions to the social and public events in real life. A leap in the development of internet users and a diverse trend in netizens' activities has already been seen in recent years. *Weibo* provides a macro environment for people to take part in public events, to express opinions and to exchange information. Secondly, *Weibo* is the preferred space for people to unburden personal

⁶¹ Translation provided by the author.

feelings. People use it to express their feelings for the events that took place in the physical space – as a witness, a privy, a victim or an activist. Thirdly, the scale of *Weibo* has already surpassed the traditional media. It has almost reached the maximum level of openness and autonomy, factors that used to restrict new media market have little influence on *Weibo*.

Table 4. The distribution statistics on the ‘Yihuang incident’ via main online platforms (by 25th April 2011) (Shi, Hu and Wang, 2011).

Online Platform	News Comments	BBS/Forums	Sina Weibo	Blog
Statistics	7,112	33,495	44,990	181

In 2010, online media platforms could be generally categorised into four groups: news comments, *BBS*/forums, *Sina Weibo*, and blogs. As seen in Table 3, these media platforms demonstrated different level of performance in the dissemination of the Yihuang incident. *Weibo* carried the largest information flow. Since the live broadcast of *The Battle in the Ladies Room*, users made the most of the platform by clicking ‘thumbs up’ on posts relating to the development of the incident. They also commented and reposted to express their attitudes, promote information flow and expand influence. *Weibo* users followed every stage of the incident and made *Weibo* a central sphere in which public opinion was formed. (Shi, Hu and Wang, 2011)

Based on the Yihuang case, I have found a series of characteristics to explain the establishment of *Weibo* as an online public sphere:

The resonance of topic. It refers to the psychological condition of whether people can find something that relates themselves to the topic. It is the principal factor that determines whether public opinion can be formed in the online space provided by *Weibo*. The more psychological relatedness the topic has, the more likely it can attract

the public's attention. The more people are mentally stimulated, the higher the chance that they will express their views and create more traffic on *Weibo*. Hence, it is more possible for the form of public opinion. For example, in Figure 52, 45.50% of the respondents to my survey indicated that they participated in the Yihuang incident because they feel sympathetic to the victims and 35.50% felt they were part of the case as same problem can have happened to them.

The degree of participation. It refers to the scale of discussion; that is, the extent to which users engage in opinion exchange and information dissemination. Public participation in hot topics on *Weibo* usually goes through the spread process of the one-to-many and many-to-many dissemination effect. The degree of participation directly influences the scale of the media space. In the Yihuang case, it starts from the former journalist Deng Fei to spread what had happened in the Zhong family, and the information was passed to his followers, to next-level of followers, consequently, more and more people were involved in the case.

The extent of traditional media intervention. The majority of traditional media have opened official *Weibo* accounts. They use *Weibo* to collect and process information to further leaven social events; and by setting social events to a *Weibo* hot topic, they help intensify the strength of public opinion in a 'Weibo-nised' approach. For example, after the Yihuang incident fermented into a public event on *Weibo*, traditional media began to interview the stakeholders of the event, such as the TV programme – *Social Visibility* from *Phoenix Television*, and newspapers from *Southern Weekly*, *Guangzhou Daily* and *Modern Express*.

The attention paid by opinion leader. In a human network, people who actively pass information to others and influence others' perception of public events are seen as 'opinion leaders', also known as famous 'verified' accounts on *Weibo* (Yan, 2014). Relying on a large number of followers and powerful effect, comments and reposts of social events made by opinion leaders are quickly updated within their fans group,

which radiates opinion and information relating to the event to a broader and deeper range. It is another influential factor. For example, Deng Fei and Liu Chang in the Yihuang case. The involvement of opinion leaders in a social event also has impact on the general public's degree of participation.

7.5.3 The dissemination features of user behaviour during the online public participation on *Weibo*

This section discusses the primary features of internet users' behaviour on *Weibo* in terms of the online public participation. Here, I use a metaphor to explain the dissemination features on *Weibo*. Assuming *Weibo* is the surface of still water, social events, which rely on public opinion and public participation, are the stones thrown into the water that causes ripples. The 'stone' is the first post that starts the information flow, in other words, the 'stone' represents the source of public opinion. Comments, discussions and reposting then make public opinion diffuse concentrically. Netizens' activities resemble ripples on the water. Hereby, three communicative features emerge: the 'soaring' feature, the 'fissionable' feature and the 'domino' feature.

7.5.3.1 The 'soaring' feature

The 'soaring' feature refers to the phenomenon when a social event raised extensive attention mainly due to the common resonance among the public. The reason netizens' activity may bring the 'soaring' feature is because the topic of a social event is highly resonating for the general public. As discussed in the previous section, resonance is the principal factor for *Weibo* to be an online space to gather public opinion. High resonance stimulates people to follow the event and participate in the discussion to form a public sphere. However, such subjective emotion cannot lead to unified public opinion but generate diverse voices. Also, these events are usually controversial topics that can reflect people's value orientation, behaviour intention

and judgement ability. The diversity in these three aspects makes it difficult to achieve consensus. The ‘soaring’ feature is embodied when people debate on the same topic.

In contrast to the traditional media space, the ‘soaring’ feature is the one non-controllable element in *Weibo* as a typical *We Media*. During my interviews with the practitioners in the media industry, in their daily practice, although ‘guidance of public opinion’ and ‘professional ethical codes’ are perceived as less important comparing with following government’s regulations, they would try hard to take an objective and neutral stand in social events. However, such principle is difficult to guarantee in *We Media*. Because the public often take sides in the face of a social event, which can influence the direction of public opinion.

To gain recognition and amplify one’s own opinion, netizens would like to intentionally spread the event in the virtual space. Opinions that are self-collected and self-analysed by netizens would be published on *Weibo*, and sometimes even quoted by the traditional media. The intellectual group on *Weibo* integrates various opinions and promotes the debates to a more intensive and in-depth stage. Consequently, it puts pressure on the stakeholders of the social events, the government departments in particular.

7.5.3.2 The ‘fissionable’ feature

The ‘fissionable’ feature represents a communicational process through *Weibo* users’ activities such as subscribe, repost, and comment. Once the first microblog of a social event is posted, it would be viewed and might be reposted by the followers who will further spread the information to their next-level followers. This pattern pushes the case to the ranking list of hot topics on *Weibo* and substantially increases the exposure and visibility of the incident, which attracts more netizens to take part in the dissemination. Then this accumulation of all users’ activities advances the ranking position of the topic, which additionally attracts more attention and participation.

There are two key points of the ‘fissionable’ feature. The first one is the assembly of the public. Individuals interact through social networking sites for the mutual interests and goals. If the interaction is maintained at a certain density and duration, a social network is formed in the cyberspace (Rheingold, 1994). During the evolving process of *Weibo* to become an online public sphere, topics that are strongly stimulating, peculiar, and novel usually gain high popularity and are more likely to be sought after and eventually turned into a ‘carnival’ for netizens. A virtual community is thus formed on *Weibo*.

The other point is the aggregation of the discourse. The form of an online space for public opinion usually occurs with the popular words on *Weibo*. It is an aggregation process of the discourse. When netizens are discussing social events with sensitive topics, they create ‘argot’ to avoid restrictions and censorship. When the discussion reaches a certain level, the ‘argot’ becomes a trending word on *Weibo*, which would be a notable tag for the social event. It also signifies the arrival of the peak point in the online space.

7.5.3.3 The ‘domino’ feature

The ‘domino’ feature refers to the trend that, due to the unpredictability of netizens’ activities, one social event may explode on cyberspace and turn into another event or phenomenon that receives extensive public participation. The ‘domino’ feature is reflected from two perspectives. Firstly, the original information brings the intense public opinion, which means that the content of only one *Weibo* post could arouse massive discussions and debates concentrating on one social event. Although one *Weibo* post just has a few words, it usually contains more information than it looks. A tree structure can be found in the phenomenon in which the branches and leaves contains different level of information from various parties.

Moreover, the ‘domino’ feature is also reflected through the massive influence brings by *Weibo* on all stakeholders involved in a social event. Online discussions and

debates, coordinated with the offline mobilised activities draw the social event into people's real lives. It magnifies the practical influence of the event and promotes the public opinion to the peak level. It explains how social event contained in one post can mobilise the participation of all society and develop into an influential case. Through the crossing and scattered interactive pattern among the *Weibo* users, it leads to diverse public opinion.

7.5.4 Safeguarding citizens' rights on *Weibo*: avoiding the bottom line of Chinese central government

The state has attempted to reduce the emerging trend of collective action through surveillance, prevention, and intervention. The state has harshly suppressed mass campaign that challenging the legitimacy of the political power, however, it also demonstrated increasing tolerance towards environmental, livelihood, and civil rights issues (Hassid, 2012; Yang, 2009).

The narrowly defined socioeconomic or environmental injustice is the core reason that drive most protest cases, whereas the pursuit for solutions to normative claims within the current Chinese political system is less visible (Lu et al., 2012), consequently, in more recent online protests, many participants have not necessarily been direct victims of injustice or deprivation.

On 10 October 2010, the Jiangxi provincial party committee announced the dismissals of Qiu Jianguo from the position of Yihuang county party secretary and Su Jianguo from the position of Yihuang county mayor (Bi, 2014). Although the announcement did not include any official interpretation of the Yihuang event, it is the first one among the nine similar forced demolition cases in recent years in which the government officials in command received punishment (ibid).

The Tragedy of Self-immolation on Weibo Live, the influential central-level legal news publication *Law and Life*, commented that the Yihuang event reflected the power of *Weibo* to safeguard citizens' rights and interests: if *Weibo* is absent from the event,

people would not have been exposed to the tragedy of the Zhong family and the journalists would not have the opportunity to gain news clue and make immediate report; the Zhong sisters would end up of being caught and forcefully returned to Yihuang, and the event would close lamentably (ibid). In the previous eight events, information about these cases were deleted and the government prohibited any new posts of such issues. The public knew little about what happened to the victims. Therefore, *Weibo* provided a space for the grassroots to disseminate information and gain exposures, while dodging the censorship in China. Everyone is empowered to be a 'journalist' and to provide information to the public. It has changed how information is accessed, as well as the communication forms among the government, media, and individuals.

From *BBS*/forums to *Weibo*, the number of internet users has increased explosively. With the features of *We Media* penetrated into people's daily life, public participation becomes much easier and more convenient, e.g. safeguarding one's civil rights (*Interviewee 8*). Assuming there is no internet, *Weibo* or *WeChat*, the gap between government and public will remain distant. Social events will rarely be noticed by the higher authority. It was easy for local governments to conceal and suppress a social event in the past. But nowadays, online public participation makes a social event highly visible, which exerts pressure to all levels of the authority and forces the problem to be investigated and solved. It is a development that represents the progress in fairness and justice (*Interviewee 4*).

Throughout Yihuang incident, the well-known reporters' *Weibo* live, the victims' own microblogging account and release of the information which attracted a large number of *Weibo* users to support and prompt the case. 'Safeguarding rights on *Weibo*' has become a very significant and indispensable way for Chinese netizens to protect their civil rights in the modern information society. Safeguarding rights on *Weibo* means to disclose information and influence public opinion, which is based on citizens' expression rights and the right to information.

Weibo has been successful in pushing citizens to defend their rights for a number of reasons. Firstly, the nature of the forced demolition is a common social problem in contemporary China, which strongly influences people's livelihood. Compared with the so-called politically sensitive issues, more people are likely to be affected by house demolitions. In this case, all the victims' family wanted was to seek a legal solution to the social injustice, and it was not about politically sensitive issues such as political reforms or the corruption of top officials within the central government. The higher political authorities in China therefore had no qualms about meting out punishment to the local officials responsible for the pain suffered by the family. In my questionnaire survey, 52% of respondents agreed with the decision made by Jiangxi Provincial Government, 43% grudgingly accepted two officials' dismissal, while only 5% of the respondents disapproved. This shows the prior purpose of the central or the higher-level government is to maintain social stability, when they are involved in dealing with the issues or social events, which did not cross the bottom line of questioning the Communist Party's leadership and including other politically sensitive keywords. The central government often chooses to sacrifice local officials to appease the agitated and radical mood of internet users and defuse heated public opinion. Therefore, if a typical social event seeks to safeguard rights on *Weibo* or gain a solution in the physical world, the basic points that the victim needs to remember are to exclude issues of a highly politically sensitive nature and never cross the bottom lines of the Communist Party or Central Government.

In terms of the government's bottom line in online public participation, result of the interviews is summarised as: firstly, illegal information relates to pornography, gamble and drugs; secondly, information that contains sensitive words or topics, e.g. Tiananmen Square event, Falun Gong, ethnic and religion-related problems; finally, extreme opinions that question the legitimacy of the CCP and its governing capacity.

Secondly, the power of safeguarding rights on *Weibo* comes from the special characteristics and advantages of the microblogging platform in the new media age.

Weibo, as almost the highest developed form of internet communication so far, shows a great strength in transmitting information. Compared with the traditional media, *BBS*/forums and blogs, *Weibo* depends on its mesh transmission, real-time searches, ease of use and other powerful functions, which make the former platforms obsolete. Anyone can post a *Weibo* message anywhere, as long as they own a mobile phone that is connected to the internet. The convenience of mobile terminals plus the real-time search makes *Weibo* live become a very simple thing. Fans could reach the micro bloggers' post at the first circle, then they forward the second-hand information which will be seen by their own fans. Although each microblogging account has different influential levels because of the number of fans, once the attention of numerous microblogging users is attracted, especially the well-known micro blogger or the public intellectuals, the information will be spread out at a staggering speed. The Yihuang case shows the advantages of *Weibo*, which include its focus function, real-time tracking, and promoting effect. The victim of the Yihuang incident opened a *Weibo* account and released the latest relevant information for the first time, and this can be treated as the headstream of information sources. Then, the opinion leaders guide the online discussion, which directly changes the focus of the internet users. Subsequently, a large number of internet users forwarded the posts and made the comments of relevant information, which formed a strong opinion field. It is almost impossible for victims to use newspapers, TV or even the traditional blog to achieve this remarkable effect. *Weibo* operators also intentionally promoted and allowed the issue to ferment so as to attract more users and increase their activity (Wang, 2012). Generally, the more users that participated in denouncing Yihuang officials, the more powerful public opinion and pressure became; the Zhong family's persistence and the concerns from all the parties on *Weibo* added pressure on the local government, ultimately increasing the possibility that their demands would be fulfilled.

Finally, *Weibo*, as the new technology representative of *We Media*, provides the possibility for breaking through the unreasonable information block. In the era of

traditional media, individual citizens lack the right to express their own opinion. Although they can ask for help from the traditional media, it is useless and disappointing to wait for a reply for such a long time. Besides, in the traditional media, all news should be censored by the editor or the ‘gatekeeper’ from the leadership level, and should follow the instructions issued by the information management department. However, *We Media* microblogging has changed the pattern of the right to speak which used to hold by the monopoly reporter editing. The victims could release the relevant information individually, freely, and in real-time. Once it caused concern among other internet users, the information would be quickly diffused. This type of communication is difficult to block and censor, so eventually it will form substantial public opinion. Internet users who spread information through *Weibo* even have the ability to organise real-life activism to support and influence the event from the virtual network space to the physical world. The Yihuang case only involved county-level government and officials, who were not powerful enough to control information or censorship on *Weibo* operated by the dominant internet companies in the more developed cities, nor were they aware that 140-word posts (no word limitation since 2016) on micro-blogging would trigger great public pressure nationwide, or that the updated information could be easily disseminated without administrative interference and become known to public opinion watchers at higher levels of the government.

My survey found that up to 64% of the respondents believed it is useful to use *Weibo* to assert one’s rights and eventually gain a satisfactory result. A quarter believed that asserting one’s rights on *Weibo* is extremely effective, but only 4% of the respondents held the opinion that it is useless and meaningless to use *Weibo* to assert one’s rights. This shows that in today’s *We Media* age, most internet users would choose *Weibo* as the first choice to release first-hand information when they are facing injustice in such social incidents, and also are eager to be followed and forwarded. Therefore, asserting one’s rights on *Weibo* is a convenient and flexible tool to offer the help for citizens,

while the right relief channel is blocked or invalidated in physical world. Technology, politics and civil rights resonated in the online public sphere – *Weibo*.

7.5.5 Problems of *Weibo* as the online public sphere

In the *We Media* age, one remarkable feature is that the public's voice and influence has become increasingly visible (Shi, 2013). Because of the universality of *Weibo*, it has highlighted the 'grassroots' feature which helps safeguard citizens' rights in information acquisition and dissemination. It breaks the restrictions of the traditional media channels with its openness and wide acceptability of diversity. It brings much higher speed and convenience to general users in terms of information acquisition, but also generates an online platform with a pool of users of uneven quality, which leads to a chaos in the distributed information. In addition to the rising phenomenon of fragmented information, it sets a huge challenge in governing online content and public opinion. One possible consequence is that any social event being disseminated on *Weibo*, no matter whether it is fact or fake news, small or large, can have vast power with a chain effect and influence the trend of public opinion (Mu, 2013). The containment of rumour remains a profound challenge for the service provider.

Tsinghua National Laboratory for Information Science and Technology has collected and analysed 9,079 rumours on *Weibo* from August 2011 to May 2013 (Liu et. al., 2015). The category of rumours could be divided into 5 topic types: political, economic, cheating, social living, and common sense. Political rumours and social living rumours amounted to around 70%. Even though the common-sense rumours made up only 10%, they were the ones which appeared repeatedly in the same or similar format.

Weibo, where some posts are automatically censored and the remaining ones monitored by human censors, can be very effective. Approximately 30% of sensitive posts are deleted within 30 minutes of publication, and after one day 90% have been removed (Zhu et al., 2013). But unanticipated, sudden events leave censors no time to

prepare. In these cases, they can only react, and often only after an event has become broadly known. The speed of publishing and distributing content on social media, and especially on *Weibo* with its large numbers of participants, makes it impossible at times to prevent sometimes large numbers of people from accessing seemingly problematic content and spreading it.

Guowei Cao, who was the CEO of *Sina*, was interviewed in September 2012 and indicated that the containment of rumour dissemination and the business model for *Weibo* would be the first two and the most important tasks for future development. Xue (2011) indicated that, unlike conventional media, blocking or prohibition does not function well on the internet; whereas a whole clear-out may break the ecological balance in cyberspace and lead to inestimable negative consequences for society and economic development. Rumour dissemination has been one of the top problems for *Weibo*. As *Weibo* develops, the huge flow of information with more instant dissemination and freer speech will make it a hotbed for rumour dissemination. Terrible rumours can even cause huge social panic and unrest. Rumour refutation work is a long-term strategy work for *Weibo* (Li, 2016).

7.5.5.1 Causes of rumour on *Weibo*

Three factors are summarised for the cause of rumours on *Weibo*: physical reason, psychological factors, and social reasons. Physical reason relates to the nature and settings of *Weibo*. Unlike the layered censorship system in traditional media, it lacks a customised filtering system that cleans out rumours and fake news (Yang and Zhang, 2010). Users' self-discipline is the only 'firewall' that *Weibo* can rely on. However, many of its users do not have the competence as information providers. The consequence is that content on *Weibo* has a relatively high level of subjectivity and uncertainty. Without the traditional gatekeeper to censor content that is about to be distributed, people with bad motives take advantage of *Weibo* and made it the breeding ground for rumour (Quan and Fang, 2012). Combined with the instantaneity

of information dissemination through *Weibo*, when rumours are received by the innocent but less-competent users, they naturally contribute to the second-flow of rumour communication. Moreover, as there is no entrance restriction to using *Weibo*, a large number of grassroots members gain the right of speech in the virtual space without economic or technical cost. It further extends the space in which rumours are spread (Ding, 2012).

Psychological factors can be interpreted from two perspectives. From the standpoint of service providers, commercial companies may intentionally ignore the spread of rumours or even promote their dissemination for profit considerations. From the standpoint of the rumourmonger, creating and spreading rumours helps gain social attention, which gives a sense of satisfaction. Secondly, for the pursuit of profit, they are willing to make fake news to fulfil their personal goal. As for the audience, people tend to choose and receive the information that they care about. However, such negligence in selecting information may be taken advantage by rumourmongers. In the Yihuang incident, the initial statement was ‘*mother of the Zhong family burned herself and jumped off the building*’ (Kdnet, 2010). However, it turned out to be a quilt that had been burned. Many audiences on *Weibo* believed the initial rumour and forwarded the information.

The ‘grassroots’ feature of *Weibo* has changed the culture in content generation. Prior to the rise of *We Media*, ‘elite culture’ had the leading role in content generation and consumption. Only the ‘selected’ qualified ones could create, distribute and access information. *Weibo* became popular because it embraces the general public’s participation by creating a public culture – everyone is provided with a microphone. The public culture enables people to fight against the mainstream media, and to change the inequality in the rights of speech and information acquisition. They are eager to find the dark and opaque information when a social event takes place. Because of the layered censorship system in traditional media, *Weibo* gradually became the first source that disseminates information of a social event. Without the

investigation and validation procedure in traditional media, *Weibo* users have to rely on their own knowledge to judge the authenticity of distributed information, which leads to a common situation that lots of rumours are accepted by *Weibo* users (Yang and Zhang, 2010). Reposting and commenting of the rumours further promotes the spread of rumours, which increases the difficulty in making judgement for *Weibo* users.

7.5.5.2 The bandwagon effect and the group polarisation effect

Tai (2006) found that the internet has transformed the realm of public opinion in Chinese society in at least three ways. Firstly, it has generated a new communication platform on which the speed of information flow is determined by ‘aggregation of individual behaviours on the network or in the community’ (Zhang and Stening, 2010, p.57). Secondly, it has produced opinion leaders who constantly sway or direct the trend of public opinion (Tai, 2006, p.188). Finally, it has generated ‘the bandwagon effect’, which can influence the rationality and criticalness of public opinion (Zhang and Stening, 2010, p.57).

Content on *Weibo* is mostly fragmented, and unfiltered, malicious, fragmented information can have a negative influence on the society as a whole (Ji and Du, 2010). Because of the fragmented discourse style on *Weibo*, users have developed the habit of ‘fragmented reading’ and ‘fragmented reposting’. During the dissemination process, pieces of information are gradually equivocated and twisted, which takes it further from the fact. The anonymity of the disseminator has also loosened the rumourmonger from self-control and social responsibility. Xue (2011) pointed out that anonymity allows users to express irrational opinions unscrupulously, and people may use online expression as a channel for catharsis. Refutation of rumour usually takes much longer time and reaches far less audiences than the spread of rumour.

The bandwagon effect and group polarisation effect are the main movers of rumour dissemination on *Weibo*. Being exposed to the flood of diverse and complicated

information, incompetence in judging the authenticity of fragmented information makes individuals lean on the group side. People tend to follow how other people behave, and believe in the majority's argument. Such credulous and blind following intensifies the force of rumourmongers, rumour disseminators and rumour believers.

Sunstein (2002) used the term 'group polarisation' to demonstrate another negative influence. It refers to a phenomenon that individuals in a community may hold irrational views initially, but online discussion allows information to spread in the community, and then leads to irrational debate in the community and finally comes up with extreme public opinion. Because of conformity psychology, individuals may worry that their opinion to a social event is wrong, so they either remain silent or follow the majority's line to avoid virtual attack by others. Few of the netizens would stand up with counterviews. Conformity in believing 'common opinion' generates subjective assumption which can easily cause group polarisation effect and collective absurd behaviour, which makes *Weibo* the breeding ground of rumour and fake information.

7.6 Summary

In this chapter, I analysed the 'media-public' interrelationship via the *Weibo* platform through the investigation of the Yihuang case. The Yihuang self-immolation incident represents a typical case about the citizens' livelihood that the victims received an acceptable result by using the social media (i.e. *Weibo*) to safeguard their rights.

First of all, as discussed in my triangular system, from the media side, the internet companies need the traffic to generate profits to keep the business running. While it also provides the technical support for the public to express their opinion. In terms of the public, it represents a huge number of netizens with different intentions in consuming online content. Netizens are empowered by the new media services when attempting to participate in social events. It is also a commercial pattern of supply and demand: service provider and consumer. Thus, in my triangular system, the media

company represents the operator to offer technical support to the online or quasi-public sphere, while the public act as the main participants in the online public sphere.

This chapter focused on the *We Media* age, which provides more space and autonomy for public participation. As independent individuals, participants in *We Media* are less likely to be influenced by the organisational structure and external constraints such as the economic cost. Also, the main change in media communication is the switch from one-to-many to many-to-many interactive pattern. The arrival of *Weibo* promoted and expanded information dissemination in a fissured approach. *Weibo* enhanced the expression and dissemination of public opinion. It reflected a distinct feature of *Weibo* – ‘all-around’ communication mode. Through posting and reposting, it creates a constant range of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many user interactions.

Furthermore, in the data analysis section, I argued that social media could be treated as a vehicle for the instant and spontaneous dissemination of a social event. The dynamics of participating a social event include two reasons: useful and interesting. ‘Useful’ means to appeal for help in an effective way, e.g. safeguarding one’s rights. ‘Interesting’ refers to a psychological need of being existent: one wishes to find a sense of self-identification and self-achievement through participating online activities. I also summarised the common forms of online public participation: posting information via *BBS*/forums, using the advantages of social media and *We Media* by posting microblogs, giving a thumbs-up to a post, commenting and forwarding a post. My data demonstrated that, in an authoritarian country like China, many people choose online or offline public participation according to the degree of anonymity. It can also be understood as people do not want to get trouble with the government. Last but not the least, although *Weibo* has delivered many benefits and advantages for online public participation and for the government to collect public opinion, there are still some problems that worth attention, including irrational emotion among the public, intentional shifts of public opinion by celebrity influence, and the credibility of information on *Weibo*.

Moreover, in the discussion section, I argued that, based on the Yihuang case, *Weibo* plays an indispensable role on public participation in modern China. It served not only as the platform for information dissemination, but also the channel for the victims to appeal for their interests. It acted as a tool to call for help and the space that formed public opinion. In the eyes of the public, *Weibo* is seen as the information source, opinion space, and spectating centre for a sensitive social incident. It is an irresistible trend that *Weibo* will be continued to use as an effective channel in the interaction with the government. Meanwhile, being able to target the livelihoods of citizens, gathering public opinion, *Weibo* provides a platform for the government to learn more about its people.

Secondly, I argued that *Weibo* has already become an online public sphere with its own characteristics: the resonance of topics, the degree of participation, the intervention of traditional media, and the attention paid by opinion leaders. Moreover, I explained three dissemination features of user behaviour during the online public participation on *Weibo*, including the ‘soaring’ feature, the ‘fissionable’ feature and the ‘domino’ feature. These features showed the mutual beneficial relationship between the public and the media during social events.

I also argued that safeguarding citizens’ rights on *Weibo* is possible by avoiding the bottom line of Chinese central government. The first reason is that the power of safeguarding rights on *Weibo* originates from the characteristics and advantages of the microblogging platform in the *We Media* age. *Weibo*, as almost the highest developed form of internet communication so far, shows remarkable strength in transmitting information. The second reason is that *Weibo*, as the new technology representative of *We Media*, provides the possibility for breaking through the information block. However, there are still some problems of *Weibo* as the online public sphere, such as the increasing number of online rumours, the bandwagon effect and the group polarisation effect. Therefore, although *Weibo* could be work as the online public sphere in China, these problems need to be solved through suitable regulations issued

by the governmental departments, the reliable management approach from the media companies and the improving 'quality' of Chinese netizens.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This chapter summarises the findings of the study and addresses the research questions raised at the beginning of the thesis. It revisits the way that the findings reflect the nuanced relationship among the Chinese central government, the public and new media, through the triangular interaction framework developed for this study. It also presents the contributions and limitations of the research, and suggestions for future areas of study.

8.1 The triangular relationship

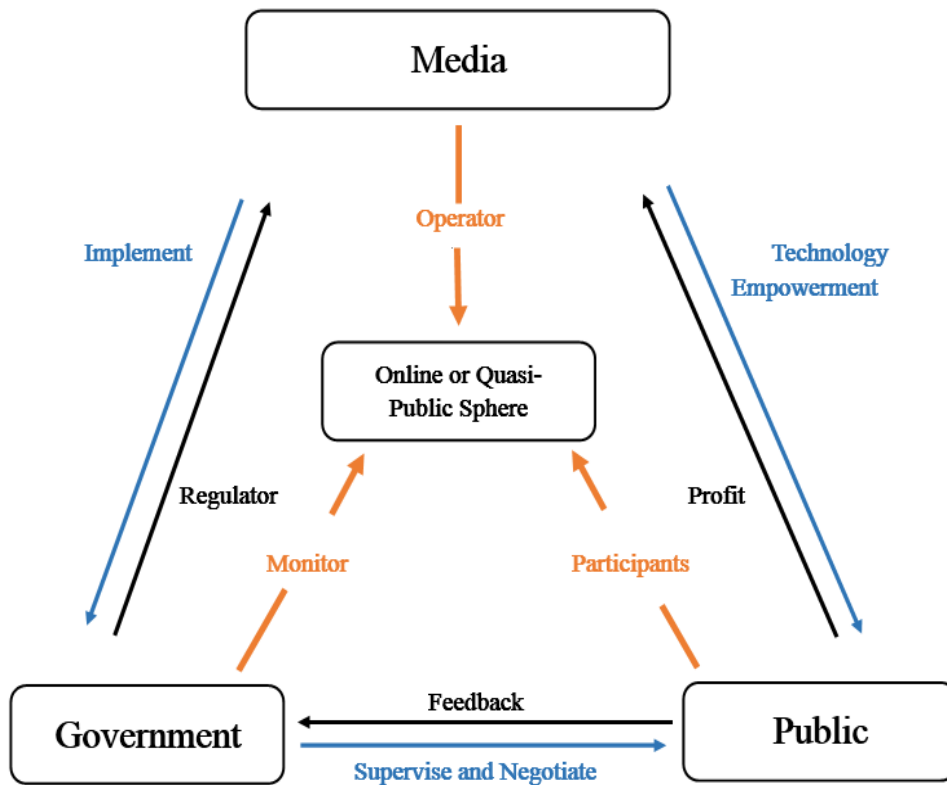


Figure 59. The new framework of 'government-media-public'.

A new framework of 'government-media-public' interaction has been developed in this research. It first examined the existence of the online or quasi-public sphere in China and found that the public sphere in Chinese cyberspace had similar characteristics to the traditional public sphere in western countries. First of all, the

open nature of the internet empowers all people, both elites and grassroots, in the content generation and dissemination process, which results in the popularisation of civic awareness. Secondly, online platforms act as an open medium with the characteristics of equality, directness, interactivity and efficiency. Thirdly, when confronted with socio-political issues people quickly assemble on online platforms to share information, discuss and debate, which suggests the possibility of fostering rational critical public opinion.

As discussed in the Sun Zhigang case (Chapter 5), collective power is vital in the success of a social campaign. This includes spontaneous participation by netizens and offline activities by practitioners such as lawyers and scholars who are able to file formal petitions or investigation proposals. In contrast to other channels of public participation, the anonymity of the internet offers protection for those netizens who were engaged in the campaign. It changes the authoritarian hierarchy government-public relationship to a more negotiable one. To examine the existence of the online public sphere in China's cyberspace, three main factors – public, public opinion, and public medium – were examined through the case studies. In the Sun Zhigang case, the extensive online activism and public participation demonstrated a form of online public sphere in China. This was reflected through the posts and debates on *BBS*/forums, online chatroom discussions, and comments on major media portals.

Although the concept of civil society in the western sense has not formed yet in China, this study has revealed the emergence of Chinese quasi-civil society. In the Sun Zhigang case, the legal experts and lawyers formed a small civil society group which filed a petition with the NPCSC and delivered the public voice to the authorities, whereas the netizens' discussion and participation during the incident can be considered as 'grassroots civil society' that was empowered by ICT. In the Xiamen PX plant event, Professor Zhao Yufen and other scholars represented civil society to negotiate with the local government about environmental issues; and they finally submitted a petition with other 105 CPPCC members' signatures to stop the plant.

‘Civil society’ is often translated as ‘公民社会’ (*gongmin shehui*) in Chinese. However, according to its cultural and contextual meaning in the western world, its Chinese equivalence should be ‘公民组织’ (civic organisation) or ‘公民团体’ (civic community). The main reason why civil society in China is regarded as quasi-civil society is because it refers to small civic groups which are mainly formed by specialists in certain domains, such as the law or academia. They are non-profit or non-governmental communities which represent some of the public’s views. Their activities are mostly spontaneous and individual. Large scale western-style civil society has not yet formed.

Under the legal system in authoritarian states, ‘individual’ behaviour is dangerous for members of civic groups. These groups usually form on an *ad-hoc* basis when a significant incident occurs, and they cannot escape the government’s control; for example, the temporary civic group of lawyers in the Sun Zhigang case did not grow into independent organisations working long-term for civil rights. Although advanced ICT has promoted the establishment of Chinese-style quasi-civil society, its form and implications are very different from western civil society, and due to the strict internet censorship in China, the western concept of civil society can hardly be formed in the real world of China.

The special pattern of ‘civil society’ in modern China differs from the initial localised forms of ‘civil society’ before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (details see section 2.2.3). In the ages pre-1949, local elite families and commerce communities were the major force of civil society. They concerned mostly for the long-term development of local areas and the provision of public services. However, as discussed in the three case studies, civil society tends to be a ‘disposable’ group, which appears occasionally when large social events take place. The long-term development of the whole country or local region is not the priority of their concern. The modern civil society focuses on helping solve a specific social problem and it usually disperse into individuals after the event ends. Therefore, civil society in

contemporary China tends to be a one-time phenomenon which is very different from the initial civil society in the ages pre-1949 or Anglo civil society.

Provided the government's bottom line is kept, online public sphere is friendly to talkative and opinionated people when social events break out. However, in accord with the modern pattern of 'civil society', events that are amplified through new media tend to be 'one-issue', as well. It is necessary to point out that not all social events exposed on the internet can draw long-term attention or gain an acceptable solution.

The three cases selected in this research are notable landmarks in ICT-mediated public participation and represent the historical significance of public events against the backdrop of China's rapid economic development. They each demonstrate the interactive relationships in this triangular framework.

As the Sun Zhigang incident shows, since China is an authoritarian country, people do not have many ways to express themselves, especially to criticise the government or to comment on official policies. But the emergence of social media has changed the communication pattern from the old top-down approach to a new bottom-up approach. This has changed the public's position on interaction with the government from passive message receivers to active message providers and disseminators. The government's attitude to public participation has also changed from strict control to supervision and a willingness to negotiate. It has become common for officials to collect public opinion through the internet.

The second case study focused on the Xiamen PX plant controversy to examine the relationship between the government and the media companies. Here, the media represents the internet companies who provide social networking services and platforms for information flow. I found that there has been no significant change in the relationship between the government and new media since the beginning of the digital age in China: the government continues to regulate the internet companies, and

the internet companies usually obey the government's regulations.

In the third case study – the Yihuang self-immolation incident – the relationship between the media companies and the public was examined. It demonstrated a symbiosis between internet companies and the public. The widely developed ICTs empowered netizens to express their opinions through social media in safer and more effective ways, especially in the context of controversial and sensitive public events, while the media companies gained more profits by attracting more users to provide the huge volume of network flow while fulfilling their media obligations. Here, the precondition of the satisfied relationship between media companies and internet users is that they must not challenge the CCP and the central government.

For the Chinese central government, the 'media' is an implement that can help to consolidate its regime and supervise public opinion. The governmental departments act as regulators and represent the official power of law enforcement in the media industry. At the same time, in China's online/quasi-public sphere, media companies merely play the role of operators by providing technical products such as social networking platforms for netizens to exchange information and to form public opinion. They rely on user activity to survive in the market, and the level of information traffic from their users is directly associated with how much profit the media companies make. Yet, the problem is that, following a sensitive public event, the high volume of traffic on a website draws the government's attention. The government either uses it as a tool to collect public opinion or uses it to suppress social campaign. For example, the Sun Zhigang incident represents the transition from bottom-up communication between the government and its citizens. Media companies provided the alternative approach of government-public interaction through the technological empowerment. Citizens, especially for the grassroots, they have grasped the opportunity to determine the content of information that they wish to consume. However, the Chinese government still takes the leading role because it can adjust policy and regulation to constrain media companies and thereby control public

activity, so that social stability and the continuity of the government operation is ensured. Whether it is the interaction with the government or the public, media companies are passively influenced by the two parties. Therefore, in China's online public sphere, the 'media' is seen as the operator, the central 'government' is the monitor and the 'public' represents the main participants.

8.2 Research findings

The major purpose of my research is to investigate the role of ICT-mediated public participation in China's social and political development given the ubiquity of internet in today's society. As discussed in this research, I found that the ICT-mediated public participation has played a vital and indispensable role in China's social and political development. On the one hand, under the current online environment in China, massive online public participation influences the process and the result of exposed social events in dynamic and vibrant ways. It disseminates the public cases effectively, more importantly, it aggregates a wide range of public opinions within a short period time. On the other hand, the ICT-mediated public participation has fundamentally changed the communication mode between the public and the government in China. The nature of the internet eases people's concern regarding the negative consequence of getting involved in a mass event (i.e. punishment imposed by the government), which guarantees the involvement of the 'public' perspective in online public sphere. For the Chinese central government, they are more willing to collect the public opinion by 'moderate' forms of online public participation, instead of the real-world protests. Overall, my research found that ICT-mediated public participation is a very effective and feasible way to promote a democratic society and to improve the political system in China.

This section present the conclusions to the issues raised in the research questions.

8.2.1 Social media's contribution to public participation in China

My findings indicated that the ICT-mediated social media service has substantially

contributed to public participation in public affairs. From *BBS*/forums to *Weibo*, the number of internet users has increased dramatically. With the features of *We Media* penetrating into people's daily lives, public participation has become much easier and more convenient. If there was no internet – *BBS*/forums, blog, or *Weibo*, the gap between government and the public would have remained distant and social events would rarely be noticed by the authorities. It was easy for local governments to conceal and suppress a social event in the past, but online public participation now makes a social event highly visible, which exerts pressure to all levels of authority and forces the problem to be addressed. It is a development that represents progress in fairness and justice in an authoritarian state.

8.2.1.1 The era of web portals and *BBS*/forums

During this period, both web portals and *BBS*/forums carried more coverage of sensitive public events than traditional media platforms. They attracted the attention of a large number of internet users to public events and enabled them to comment. However, in 2003, online media platforms did not play a dominant role in China's online public sphere. The solution to the Sun Zhigang case was mainly a result of the exposure of traditional media platforms and the primary content of news coverage and relevant first-hand information of this case were all derived from the traditional media platforms. Web portals and *BBS*/forums acted as communication channels and carriers of information. The role of new media was simple - further boosting the developing process of the case. If the *Southern Metropolis Daily* had not made the first post, the news would probably only have been noticed by very few people; if *People.cn* had not published the article criticising the CCP's mouthpiece, many other media platforms would not have had the courage to provide further news coverage. The influence of new media was not fully displayed in the Sun Zhigang case. However, the easily accessible technology changed the situation of the almost zero communication between the government and the public to at least a minimum of

indirect communication via online channels. This was the prime contribution of the new media during the early phase of the internet age. An increasing number of victims gained an alternative approach to make a personal or public appeal: using social media to release the information with the hope to achieve a satisfied solution by gathering large-scale social campaign. Hence, easily accessible ICT is the fundamental support for the diverse channels of social media, as well as the source that makes the alternative approaches of civic engagement possible.

8.2.1.2 The era of blogs and QQ

Blogs represent a new stage of public participation centralised by opinion leaders, while the instant messaging service involved more general citizens to the form of public opinion. Opinion leaders mastered the blog technology early, and they often posted detailed articles which were filled with personal emotions and views. As can be seen from the articles published by Lian Yue in the Xiamen PX plant case, blog articles regarding social events quickly gathered a large audience and these followers shared the article by forwarding it to other blog sites and *BBS*/forums. Lian's posts were also forwarded by some influential web portals, such as *Sina* and *Xinhua*.

QQ is the largest Chinese instant messaging service, and it gathers individuals who share common interests and concerns. Each *QQ* group can be seen as an online community. It is the most straightforward online public sphere, as its primary function is to allow people to talk to each other timely. Information and opinions regarding public events are exchanged directly. Such discussion facilitates online public participation to its widest extent, and public opinion can thus be formed. *QQ* also enables thematic groups to organise online or sometimes offline public participation activities conveniently and securely, as can be seen with the *QQ* group named *Return My Clear Water and Blue Sky in Xiamen*, which generated heated discussion on environmental issues in Xiamen and led to offline demonstration.

8.2.1.3 The era of the microblog (*Weibo*)

Everyone can be involved as the *We Media* in the microblog (*Weibo*) era. All users can post information on their own *Weibo* accounts as citizen news at the first time when a social event takes place. First-hand information is directly disseminated by the victim or by a citizen mouthpiece authorised by the victim, such as Deng Fei in the Yihuang case. A sphere of public opinion is quickly formed through the accumulated comments, forwards, promotions (in the form of ‘thumbs up’), and new discussion posts made by *Weibo* users. In contrast to *BBS*/forums, blogs and *QQ* which mainly gather people with common interests and concerns, the user base of *Weibo* is much more diverse. However, opinion leaders, i.e. popular *Weibo* accounts with large number of followers, still play a dominant role in guiding public opinion. The contribution of *Weibo* is that everyone can implement their right of freedom of speech whenever and wherever possible, including the stakeholders of social events, ordinary internet users, opinion leaders and government officials. It gathers different parties on one platform so that information is much more centralised in the sense that facts can be revealed more accurately at a faster speed. For example, victims of social events can describe the entire process and voice demands from their own perspectives, while media accounts and government official accounts can publish their perspectives of the causes and effects of events as well. Public opinion formed on *Weibo* is the result of multifaceted information, which promotes more effective and extensive public participation in return.

Weibo thus has great potential for affecting both the individual and society. As a social networking platform in the virtual environment, *Weibo* enables communication in various levels, including individual-to-individual, individual-to-organisation and individual-to-public, which consolidates the collaborative effect between different parties during public events. In the Yihuang case, *Weibo* served as not only the platform for information dissemination, but also the channel for the victims to appeal

for their interests. It manifests a new form of public supervision: it works as a valid channel for vulnerable groups to speak out and to fight for their civil rights; while numerous *Weibo* users oversee a social event that draws the attention of powerful major traditional media. The joint effort of these two media forms increases the pressure of public opinion. Consequently, *Weibo* is seen as the information source, opinion space, and spectator venue for such an incident. It is likely that *Weibo* will continue to be used as an effective channel for citizens to interact with the government. Because it is a centralised sphere that contains multifaceted public opinion, *Weibo* is also a platform for the government to learn more about the people.

Weibo provides a macro virtual space for information exchange. It originates from the social networking activities in the physical space, and it also reacts to the physical world depending on the result of public participation. As Yan (2014) indicated, recent years have witnessed a leap in the development of internet users and a diverse trend in netizens' activities. *Weibo* is the preferred space for people to unburden personal feelings. The scale of *Weibo* as a media market has already surpassed that of the traditional media.

With the popularisation of more and more instant messaging services, *SMS* offered by mobile service providers has almost withdrawn from the communication stage in China. The main reason is that the state-owned *SMS* is not free, while the instant messaging service through network connection is not only always free, but also accessible. Secondly, the instant messaging service is much more fashionable to large numbers of users, and has the features of convenient operation, low technical requirement and the effective communication process.

With the emergence of social media and highly-developed ICT, there has been a transition process in which the public has transferred from initial message receivers to message producers and disseminators, which indicates the technological empowerment and has led to the establishment of a bottom-up communication

approach between the public and government officials. The public's messages have been delivered to the central government through social campaigns which has fostered the launch of online activism and public participation. This also indicates that the negotiation space between government and public has changed from the almost zero interaction to possible enlarged interaction. Individual civil participation has also been gradually improved and has become more and more obvious, as can be seen from the three case studies. In the Sun Zhigang case, internet users were guided by professional media and famous intellectuals, but in the Xiamen and Yihuang cases, the individual internet user carried more weight in promoting the events.

Overall, the three case studies have demonstrated that, alongside the development of ICT, it appeared a general trend that Chinese people gained more opportunities to speak, to debate, and to criticise social events. As aforementioned, from web portals and *BBS*/forum era to blog and QQ era to the final *Weibo* era, the use of media platforms in social events evolved from mainly 'releasing information' to 'discussing and organising offline campaign' to 'involving different stakeholders in the same platform to form more comprehensive public opinion'. In the former two eras, the netizens are the main participants, but in the latter *Weibo* era, people from different perspectives are involved. It is a giant step forward from the pre-*BBS*/forum age in which little negotiation between the government and public occur. ICT advancement greatly enhanced the possibility of interaction. However, it is necessary to declare that, *Weibo* era represents a relatively developed pattern of ICT-mediated public participation, it will continue to contribute to the process of democracy in China. But the future development of *Weibo* as an online public sphere will remain steady and slow as it has already grown into the most acceptable form in the Chinese social and political environment.

8.2.2 Dynamics and forms of public participation in China's cyberspace

8.2.2.1 Dynamics

Three levels of motivations in public participation were found in this research and are linked according to the progressive emotion of the public.

Primary level: The initial motivation is to satisfy people's curiosity. It can be summarised as the bystander effect ('*weiguan*' effect⁶²). Participants are seen as bystanders to public events who only want to learn more about popular topics by observing online content. They usually hold a discreet attitude towards sensitive affairs in order to protect themselves from trouble.

Intermediate level: The higher level of motivation is caused by the sense of empathy. When netizens come across a social event that they might have similar experience of or are afraid it may happen to them in the future, they naturally develop a sense of compassion and justice towards the victims. Therefore, they are willing to pay more attention to the development of the events. And they are more motivated to contribute to the formation of public opinion.

Senior level: As modern China is in a transitional period in terms of political, economic and social areas, it is inevitable that all kinds of atypical and appalling social events have taken place one after another. Take the three cases in this research as examples, they covered issues regarding human rights, environmental safety, and people's livelihoods. These are fundamental problems that cause social conflicts and people's widespread resistance towards the government in China. In the advanced level of motivation, furious, dissatisfying and antagonistic emotions toward the government's performance take a major place. New media platforms have become an

⁶² '*Weiguan* effect' in Chinese is '围观效应'.

express option for a large number of people to assemble, questioning the government and calling for justice. At this level, netizens are eager to achieve a satisfying solution to the issue, rather than just merely observing the development of such social events.

For example, ‘safeguarding rights on *Weibo*’ has become a very significant and indispensable way for Chinese netizens to protect their civil rights in the modern information society. Safeguarding rights on *Weibo* means to disclose information and influence public opinion, which is based on citizens’ expression rights and the right to information.

Weibo has been successful in pushing citizens to defend their own rights for a number of reasons. Firstly, as seen in the Yihuang case, the nature of the forced demolition is a common social problem in contemporary China, which strongly influences people’s livelihoods. Compared with so-called politically sensitive issues, more people are likely to be affected by incidents like house demolitions. Secondly, the power of safeguarding rights on *Weibo* comes from the special characteristics and advantages of the microblogging platform in the new media age. *Weibo*, as almost the highest developed form of internet communication so far, shows a great strength in transmitting information. Compared with the traditional media, *BBS*/forums and blogs, *Weibo* depends on its mesh transmission, real-time searches, ease of use and other powerful functions which make the former platforms obsolete. Finally, *Weibo*, as the new technology representative of ‘*We Media*’, provides the opportunity for breaking through the unreasonable information block.

However, in some cases, the internet has become a channel for people to vent resistance and hatred towards the officials and the wealthy group, which can lead to irrational civic engagement.

8.2.2.2 Forms

Primary level: Like the primary level of motivation, the primary form of public

participation refers the simple act of reading or browsing related website and information. Although no practical action is taken at this level, these behaviours could increase the click-through rate, thereby technically enhancing the dissemination of the social event. For example, when the click-through rate of a microblog reaches a certain level, this microblog would be promoted to the hotspot position of the website's homepage.

Intermediate level: This refers to actions towards online information about social events, including 'thumbs up', forwarding and commenting. The function of the intermediate level is to express support, opposition or neutrality. People's views and attitudes are clear from these actions. Some netizens may just forward the relevant web links or comments, which would achieve the dissemination effect and thereby increase influence.

Senior level: Apart from the forms of participation in the intermediate level, the public are actively involved in the debate of social events. More importantly, they are publishing posts closely related to the facts of the events, such as Lian Yue in the Xiamen case and Deng Fei in the Yihuang case. They are seen as the activists of public participation, and real name accounts are usually used. What makes these forms of public participation significant is that people make pragmatic proposals regarding the events and switch from online public participation to offline social campaigning. For example, in the Sun Zhigang case, three legal scholars submitted a formal review petition to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress; in the Xiamen case, thousands of the local citizens participated in the offline demonstration called the 'leisure walk'. The senior forms represent the most courageous, the most direct, the most effective but at the same time the riskiest means of public participation because it is embedded with great social, political or legal risk in an authoritarian country like China.

8.2.3 Public events that draw long-term attention in China's cyberspace

All kinds of dramatic news, atypical, or appalling social events have an eye-catching effect on the internet. From stimulating people's curiosity, these events could arouse a sense of empathy among the majority of internet users and a particular group is introduced into the events because of shared interests. During the development of such public events, the power between the government and victims is not equal, and under most conditions the citizens have the inferior position, and so, such public events usually trigger a sharp contradiction.

For example, the Sun Zhigang case exposed human rights issues in China with the cost of the death of a college graduate. It was very atypical and revealed the unequal confrontation situation between the ordinary college citizens and the police, and the case gained long-term attention both in China's cyberspace and in the physical society. The environmental issues in the Xiamen PX plant case concerned the fundamental interest of millions of citizens in Xiamen. It led to a large demonstration and generated a dramatic effect within society. The Yihuang demolition case brought the people's livelihood issue to all netizens on *Weibo* under the context that the demolition problem is a severe issue faced by the Chinese government after the reform and opening-up policy. With horrifying and eye-catching keywords on *Weibo* posts such as 'self-immolation', 'seize the corpse' and 'the battle in the ladies' room', the Yihuang case not only awakened the emotions of internet users who have suffered or will be facing the same demolition situation, but also attracted significant attention from ordinary netizens.

Generally, public issues that are similar to these cases would achieve solutions acceptable to all parties, including the government, the victims, activists and also the general public. One important reason is that the CCP's ruling principle is to maintain its sovereignty and social stability. If social events are amplified by online public participation and upgraded to an intense stage, some risks will arise regarding social

stability, and even affect the legitimacy of the CCP's one-party rule. However, if social events are expected to be negotiable, and victims and participants are willing to achieve a solution, the fundamental premise is that their behaviour do not challenge the bottom line of the CCP and the central government. Today's online public sphere in China is already relatively developed. Together with the growing education level of Chinese netizens and the government's prompt and mature responding scheme, a tacit understanding has been reached between the parties in the majority of sensitive social events.

In terms of the government's bottom line in online public participation, the interviewees agreed that information relating to illegal activities such as pornography, gambling and drugs; information that contains sensitive words or topics, such as the Tiananmen Square event, Falun Gong, or ethnic and religion-related problems; and extreme opinions that question the legitimacy of the CCP and its governing capacity, are beyond the acceptance and tolerance of the government.

8.2.4 Chinese government's reaction to public participation

Overall, in China's socio-political environment, there has been a lack of mature self-regulation from the bottom of the online public sphere. Therefore, when public events take place, the attitude of the government becomes the key influencing element.

However, because of the continuously evolving attitudes of the government, there is always uncertainty embedded in China's cyberspace. Under most circumstances, such uncertainty is a result of unpredictable censorship and risks for the non-government actors involved in both online and offline public participation. Yet, the case studies showed that there are promising flexibilities and opportunities for activists.

How government departments react to public participation depends on two conditions. First of all, public participation, no matter if it is in the form of online or offline activities, will be suppressed once it has crossed the CCP's and the government's bottom lines. Netizens who cross the boundary may be forbidden to post, or their web

account may be blocked. The responsible person may even be interrogated if found to have broken the government's regulations and policy, punishments such as fines and detention will be implemented. As for offline public participation, activities that cross the boundary will be suppressed by the police department. Sometimes the organisers and the participants are arrested; for example, the owner of online chat group in *QQ* in the Xiamen case, who organised the protest and the public assembly, was detained by the local police for 15 days. Therefore, when the ICT-mediated public participation crosses the CCP's and government's bottom lines, the response will always be suppression.

The second condition refers to public participation that does not cross these bottom lines. If a certain degree of social concern has already been aggregated in the virtual space, the central government has to respond to the events directly. In order to maintain social stability, the government might sacrifice the interests of local government to respond to public opinion and the demands of the online participants in a proactive and prompt manner. The Sun Zhigang case forced the central government to abolish the obsolete laws and regulations which were found to be a violation of the human rights, and it also censured the local government officials, which made the local court bring the case to trial quickly. Hence a solution could be achieved in order to comfort the public, as well as the victim family. The Xiamen PX plant case caused a demonstration which compelled the central government to censure the Xiamen local government. It eventually resulted in the relocation of the PX plant, and the investors' losses being paid by the local government. It was the local government that first calmed the emotions of both local residents and netizens; for example, the Xiamen Association of Science and Technology and the *Xiamen Daily* co-edited a propaganda brochure with an initial print run of 250,000 copies and distributed it. Then a basic satisfactory compromise was negotiated, and a public hearing was convened to offer an opportunity for Xiamen citizens to voice their opinions on the PX project.

The government's reaction to the controversial effects brought by ICT-mediated

public participation is more prominently reflected in the Yihuang case. Public issues regarding house demolition and relocation are controversial. It is difficult to judge who is responsible for the tragedy in the Yihuang case as the facts in such cases cannot be fully revealed, and neither can a line of right and wrong be drawn. However, due to the massive debates on *Weibo*, online public participation has already caused a social impact. The central government had no choice but to sacrifice the local government officials by immediately dismissing the local leaders and demanding that local institutions meet the victim's medical expenses. Yet several months later, these two dismissed local leaders were relocated to the government departments in other cities. This suggests a decision of the Chinese central government. It demonstrates that during the Yihuang incident, the central government used a 'stalling tactics' to comfort the emotional netizens. The primary principle of such a coping mechanism is to quell social campaigns peacefully and reduce their influence with the aim of maintaining social stability.

The rapid development of ICT has gradually formed a relatively mature online public sphere. The relationship among the government, media companies and the public has reached a balanced status in which mutual understanding, interdependency and mutual restriction are established. It is a growing trend that the government uses social media to make statements in response to social events. The modern generation Chinese internet users are also significantly more knowledgeable, and they are aware of the CCP and the central government's bottom lines. Hence, most of them choose to participate in social events in a much cleverer way to avoid negative consequences, and media companies have adapted to cope with government officials while 'entertaining' the internet users to make profits.

8.2.5 Summary

The introduction of the internet has broken the long-term information monopoly in China. The public are now exposed to diverse types of information, which has

gradually cultivated an awareness of democracy and civil rights in Chinese society. The government has changed its attitudes to public participation from a strict prohibition to tolerance. This has allowed opportunities for the public to debate and comment on social events.

With the development of ICT and the media industry, the relationship between the Chinese government and media companies has changed. A media company must comply with government policy and regulation as long as it is in the Chinese market, no matter how large the company is, who the stakeholders are, or whether it is registered in China or abroad. They have to bear in mind the government's bottom lines during operation, meanwhile they need to have the 'political consciousness' when sensitive social event takes place. The government allows autonomy of operation for media companies at the business level, but on the condition that restrictions should be followed when needed at the political level. The Cyberspace Administration and other departments have also established a mature management mechanism for the media market, and with the breaking of a public event, the final decision will be made by the government and the media company cannot challenge the official decision or instruction.

8.3 Contributions and Limitations

8.3.1 Contributions

This research has largely drawn on Zheng's theory of technological empowerment. Through the analysis of three case studies, a triangular 'government-media-public' interaction framework was developed to explain the form of the online public sphere and public participation in China. It also shed light on how online public participation works in authoritarian countries like China. The difference between Zheng's work and my triangular framework is that the internet or the ICT is regarded as an independent entity, which demonstrates the significant progress of the media market in China and its influence on government-public relationship. Hence, this study offers a more

thorough and updated theoretical and analytical framework in Chinese studies.

Existing Chinese studies on the interaction between the public and the government have mostly underestimated the role of the media and there has been a lack of in-depth empirical analysis. Instead of the initial introductory and communicative aspects of Chinese social media, this research highlighted its empowerment in public participation with empirical data. It also broke the western stereotype of the intense government-public relationship because of the censorship and information control in China. It reviewed a dynamic and negotiable government-public relationship mediated by ICTs and found that the relationship is not always a zero-sum game. The findings facilitated a better understanding of the modern Chinese society and its cyberspaces.

The study highlighted the diverse forms of public participation via the internet and traced the history of online platforms, which could benefit further research in the realm of Chinese internet studies. In addition, the contextual background in Chapter 3 illustrated the evolution of the internet industry and ICT development.

This study has concluded that the online public sphere has already formed and developed to a high level in China's cyberspace. By revealing how ICT products have gradually become the main platform for debate, it has pointed out the major channels that were used for public participation at different periods of Chinese society. It demonstrated the switch of traditional media and new media in terms of content generation and dissemination. For media service providers, the traditional media have already found their value in the integration with new media platforms. Here the online public sphere can be reinforced, while an offline quasi-public sphere can be achieved in the future. For government departments, the new media platforms such as *Weibo* can be used to improve governance and social management, and also provide clues in enhancing the interaction with the public. Ultimately, a relationship with mutual trust will be established between the public and the government, which further improves

the strength and the power of ICT-mediated public participation. For internet users, this research has already seen an increasing awareness of public participation, with a better understanding of the online public sphere, and it will facilitate more effective use of ICT applications during the social events.

Technological empowerment has cultivated the public's growing awareness of civic rights. It has revealed Chinese people's appeal to be heard and their demand that the government should respond to their needs. Intense public participation in the study indicated that the silent majority, who were accustomed to being passive information receivers and being represented, now have begun to voice their own opinions. It is a big step towards a democratic society. This study has documented the factors contributing to such a societal revolution through the analysis of online public participation in three major events. In a broad sense, the outcome of this research is valuable in predicting how Chinese society may develop and how the government may operate in the future. As China is one of the largest economies with the largest number of internet users, this research draws attention to internet activities for global business, as well as academics.

Moreover, the government's evolving attitudes toward public participation and social campaigns suggest a political change in China. It may shed light on research in similar authoritarian settings, and extend the theme of political and social transformation to a global scale. For example, the Arab Spring, also known as the 'Twitter Revolution', in which social media contributed to the political debate and the spread of movements' message across the world (Cottle, 2011; Howard et al., 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Yet, as Lynch (2011, p.302) concluded that although social media is an important instrument used by the protestors in their struggles, there is few rigorous evident that can demonstrate that any of the outcomes in Arab Spring are caused by the new media. Whereas, my study has demonstrated the functions of new media in shaping public opinion and in mobilising social campaign which actually resulted in social and political change in China. Such contrast helps

future researchers to better understand social movements in countries with different cultural and social environments.

Finally, the study contributes to the comparative analysis with similar Media studies beyond China. Taking Russia for example, since blunt censorship and tight information control is unavailable, the Russian government adopted ‘digital bonapartism’, or using ‘populist rhetoric, combined with control over private enterprise and the legal system, to marginalise the opposition and manipulate public opinion much more subtly than in the old days’ (MacKinnon, 2012, p.xxii). The domestic ‘Runet’ has its own popular blogs, search engines and social media which remain largely isolated from the world cyberspace. While, as indicated in my study, the Chinese-specific online resources that operate largely within the country and rarely interact with the global web is similar to that of Russia. Other countries such as Iran and Kazakhstan are building their own national cyber sphere as a substitute for western alternatives, as well. Hence, this study not only contributes to a more thorough understanding of the internet environment in China, it is also useful for other researchers who wish to compare the control of web content and the management of internet media across the world. More importantly, due to the special characteristics of the media industry in China, this study enriched the collection of media researches and helps complete the larger picture of Media studies in authoritarian countries.

8.3.2 Limitations

Despite the findings of this research, I am aware of its limitations. First of all, the scope of this research is limited within the period between the *BBS* and the *Weibo* age. The events of the three case studies took place from 2003 to 2010, and coincide with the leadership of President Hu Jintao (2003 – 2012). It did not cover the latest development of new media platforms in China, such as *WeChat*, which is an extremely popular social networking application. The number of monthly active users

of *WeChat* has reached one billion during the spring festival of 2018 (Liu and Hu, 2018), and it represents the new ‘upgraded’ channel of communication. The reason why *WeChat* was not investigated was partly due to the constraints of the research plan. But a more important reason was that the main function of *WeChat* was assumed merely as an instant messaging service. People tend to use *WeChat* for acquaintance connection which is formed mainly by friends and family members, and it may not generate mass public participation and online debates. However, other academics may include *WeChat* when considering public participation in Media studies or Chinese studies, and my assumption needs to be examined in future research.

Limitation can also be found from the empirical side. Data collected from the questionnaire surveys and interviews were based on the respondents’ perceptions and experiences. It did not include sufficient data specifically for those who directly participated in the events of the case studies. This was partly because the events were still considered as sensitive in China. When the invitations to participate in the research were sent, respondents expressed concern regarding their personal safety and other negative consequences, even though the privacy and anonymity were informed and guaranteed. Thus, many netizens declined to participate because of political sensitivity. Future studies may consider finding a thorough research method to improve the response rate and to gain more data from the direct participants of these sensitive public events.

8.4 Suggestions for future research

To begin with, my study has revealed the situation of China’s online public participation and online public sphere from the period between 2003 – 2010 covering the BBS/forum age, blog age and *Weibo* age. During the online activities, the interactive relationship among the three factors (government-media-public) demonstrates a steady trend, and a unique tacit understanding has been established among them. Both the public and internet companies are aware of the sensitive topics, government’s bottom line, as well as the negative consequences if one goes beyond

the government's tolerance. On the one hand, it is because the online public sphere in China has grown to a much higher and maturer level than the initial stage of media commercialisation and information digitalisation. On the other hand, the Chinese government also tends to respond promptly to mass event, propose and update corresponding internet regulations timely. The three cases analysed in this research are representative public events during the development of China's online public sphere. However, due to the rapid development of ICTs in China, more recent and highly debated cases need to be addressed. Future studies may pay more attention to the emerging forms of online activism or public events under the background of a mature online public sphere in China. I plan to examine my triangular framework in the context of more recent mass incidents, and to come up with an updated and a more generalised theoretical and analytical model.

The patterns of online behaviour on different social media platforms are also worth investigating. For example, the possible consequences of the challenges and opportunities posed by *Weibo* in comparison with other new platforms. With the development of new technologies, the dominance of *Weibo* in China's online public sphere may gradually diminish because of other emergent social media platforms. Thus, new academic inquiry into the most recent development of ICT tools such as *WeChat* are needed.

Further research is also needed to expand the scope of the study, and extend it to a global range. I plan to transfer the theoretical and methodological approaches in my study to a different cultural environment to examine the validity of my triangular framework. For example, future research may investigate public participation in different authoritarian regimes. Patterns of citizens' public discourse in a different regime can be compared with those of China and different governments' regulations and coping mechanisms can be analysed. Findings in the deficiencies and nuances of such comparison can be used to re-adjust my theoretical and analytical framework to address a more comprehensive concept of evolutionary public participation in

authoritarian states. Such a strand of research could enrich the collection of public participation practices in Social, Media and Cultural studies, which may promote the generalisation of the ‘government-media-public’ framework.

Overall, I have put a lot of work to shape this thesis. I hope it can serve as a starting point in promoting more in-depth future studies and in informing a comprehensive image of ICT products’ role in constructing an online public sphere, as well as in negotiating government-public relations in contemporary China. I look forward to learning from further studies and to contributing more to Chinese internet studies.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire Survey for the 2003 ‘Sun Zhigang Incident’

2003 年“孙志刚事件”问卷调查

2003 年，在广州某公司任职的大学生孙志刚被警察当作“三无人员”遣送至收容站，最后被工作人员和收容人员殴打致死。这一事件通过各类媒介的报道，引发了全社会的广泛关注和参与，最终使《城市流浪乞讨人员收容遣送办法》废止并颁布更合理的新制度。本次问卷仅用于英国杜伦大学博士学术研究，所有数据将会被严格保密，请放心作答。

研究人员：王羲（杜伦大学现代语言文化学院）

如果您有任何问题，请联系邮箱：xi.wang3@durham.ac.uk

In 2003, Sun Zhigang, a newly graduated college student who just started working in a company in Guangzhou, was regarded as a ‘Sanwu’ (an illegal migrant without a valid identification certificate, a Temporary Residence Permit or a valid employment certificate) by the police. Sun was then taken to the custody centre and was beaten to death by the employees and other stayers in the custody centre. Information about the incident spread widely through various media reports. It aroused extensive attention and public participation in the Chinese society, which eventually led to the abolition of the ‘Custody and Repatriation’ system, as well as the establishment of the new regulations. This questionnaire survey aims at collecting data regarding this incident. It is used only for academic research in Durham University. All data will be kept confidential and completely anonymous, please feel free to answer it. Please be aware that, by completing the survey, you give consent for using data in this research.

Thanks so much for your contribution!

Researcher: Xi Wang (School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Durham University)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact. Email: xi.wang3@durham.ac.uk

1、您的性别？（单选题）

男

女

What is your gender? (Single Choice)

A. Male

B. Female

2、您的年龄？（单选题）

小于 18 岁

18 到 25 岁

26 到 35 岁

35 岁以上

How old are you? (Single Choice)

A. Below 18 years' old

B. 18-25

C. 26-35

D. Above 35 years' old

3、您的教育背景是什么？（单选题）

小学

初中

高中

- 大学
- 研究生
- 博士研究生

What is your education background? (Single Choice)

- A. Primary school
- B. Junior high school
- C. Senior high school
- D. Bachelor's degree
- E. Master
- F. PhD

4、您的职业是什么？（单选题）

- 学生
- 工人
- 农民
- 公务员
- 专业人士（例如律师、医生、记者、建筑师等等）
- 自主职业
- 其他 _____

What is your current occupation? (Single Choice)

- A. Student
- B. Worker

- C. Farmer
- D. Civil servant
- E. Professional (e.g. lawyer, doctor, journalist, architect, etc.)
- F. Freelance
- G. Other (Please specify_____)

5、您的年收入是多少？（单选题）

- 少于 21000 元
- 21000 元到 24000 元
- 24000 元到 30000 元
- 30000 元到 48000 元
- 多于 48000 元
- 不愿透露

What is your annual income level? (Single Choice)

- A. Less than 21000 Yuan per year
- B. 21000-24000 Yuan per year
- C. 24000-30000 Yuan per year
- D. 30000-48000 Yuan per year
- E. More than 48000 Yuan per year
- F. I'd rather not tell.

6、请写出您所在的地区和城市名（填空题）

Where do you currently live? (Area or city name)

7、您每天用来上网的时间是多少？（单选题）

- 少于 1 小时
- 1 到 2 个小时
- 2 到 4 个小时
- 超过 4 个小时

How much time do you spend on the internet per day? (Single Choice)

- A. Less than 1 hour
- B. 1-2 hours
- C. 2-4 hours
- D. More than 4 hours

8、您曾经注册或使用过哪些社交网络平台？（多选题）

- BBS/论坛
- 博客
- 微博
- 人人网
- QQ 空间
- 微信朋友圈
- 豆瓣
- 其他 _____

Which of the following social networking sites that you are currently using, or you have used before?

(Multiple Choice)

- A. BBS/Forum
- B. Blog
- C. Weibo
- D. RenRen
- E. Q-zone
- F. WeChat Moments
- G. Douban
- H. Others (Please specify_____)

9、在上网时，您会对什么主题的事件给与关注和参与？（多选题）

- 民生
- 人权
- 环境
- 政治
- 娱乐
- 法律
- 财经
- 其他 _____

When surfing the internet, what kind of events or topics that you are willing to pay attention to or participate in? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Events concerning peoples' livelihood

- B. Events concerning human rights
- C. Events concerning environmental protection
- D. Politics events
- E. Entertainment events
- F. Law events
- G. Financial events
- H. Others (Please specify_____)

10、在网上关注和参与您感兴趣的主体事件的中，您的动机是什么？（多选题）

- 希望让更多人知道
- 获得相应利益
- 在虚拟世界得到关注和认同
- 改善自身环境
- 满足好奇心
- 娱乐消遣
- 其他 _____

Why do you pay attention to the events you chose and actively participate in them? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I wish more and more people know about the event.
- B. To gain benefits from it.
- C. To gain attention and recognition on the internet.
- D. To change and improve the environment where I live in.
- E. To satisfy my curiosity,

F. For fun and entertainment.

G. Others (Please specify_____)

11、您是如何参与其中的？（多选题）

关注并且评论

转发传播

在网上或线下参与讨论

参加现实生活行动

只是浏览

How do you get involved in these online public events that you chose? (Multiple Choice)

A. Follow and comment on the events.

B. Forward and disseminate the events.

C. Participate in the online or offline discussions about the events.

D. Take part in the real-life activities about the events.

E. Just browsing information about the events.

12、您在进行互联网活动时，是否经过审核后被禁言或者屏蔽？（单选题）

是

否

During your participation on the internet, have you ever been censored, forbidden to speak or have your comments been shielded? (Single Choice)

A. Yes

B. No

13、从互联网 BBS/论坛时代发展到如今的微博、微信时代，您觉得政府相关部门对互联网的管控态度有何改变？（单选题）

- 更加严格
- 更加宽松
- 不清楚

Considering the internet development, from BBS age to today's Weibo age, how do you think of the government's control of the content on the internet? Is there any change in the authority's attitude towards internet development? (Single Choice)

- A. The government's control is stricter than before.
- B. The government's control is looser than before.
- C. I have no idea about this.

14、您对 2003 年发生在广州的孙志刚案的了解程度是什么？（单选题）

- 清楚了解
- 清楚了解并曾参与讨论
- 有所耳闻
- 不知道

How much do you know about the 2003 'Sun Zhigang Incident' in Guangzhou? (Single Choice)

- A. I know it clearly.
- B. I know it clearly and I have participated in the discussions about the incident.
- C. I have heard about it.
- D. I have no idea about it.

15、您当时是通过哪种方式知道并了解孙志刚案的？（多选题）

- 报纸
- 电视广播
- 网站新闻报道
- BBS/论坛
- 即时通讯聊天（如 QQ、MSN、手机短信）

In what ways do you get to know about the ‘Sun Zhigang Incident’? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Through newspaper reports
- B. Through television and radio reports
- C. Through internet reports
- D. Through BBS/Forum
- E. Through instant messaging service (e.g. QQ, MSN, Mobile SMS)

16、对于孙志刚案的消息来源，您更倾向于相信哪种媒介？（单选题）

- 报纸
- 电视广播
- 网站新闻网站
- BBS/论坛

Regarding the information resources about the Sun Zhigang incident, which medium do you prefer to believe? (Single Choice)

- A. Newspaper reports
- B. Television and radio reports
- C. internet media reports
- D. BBS/Forum

17、您通过网络关注、讨论、参与孙志刚案的动机有哪些？（多选题）

- 想帮助受害者
- 想让他人更全面的了解事件动向
- 通过评论转发传播等获取利益
- 想通过参与得到虚拟世界他人关注和认同
- 此类事件关乎自身利益，有代入感
- 满足好奇心，跟风关注参与
- 娱乐消遣
- 其他 _____

Why do you follow, discuss and participate in the Sun Zhigang case? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I want to help the victim
- B. I want help others to know about the incident.
- C. I want to gain benefits through commenting, reposting and disseminating the case.
- D. I want to gain attention and recognition in the virtual world.
- E. Because such case is related to citizen's self-interest, I feel like I am part of the case.
- F. Because it is a hot topic and I participated to satisfy my personal curiosity.
- G. For fun and entertainment.
- H. Others (Please specify _____)

18、您曾经以那种形式参与过孙志刚案？（多选题）

- BBS/论坛发帖、转发，作为事件的传播者
- 利用 QQ、MSN、手机短信等即时通讯，传播讨论此事件

- 在网络新闻评论区评论，或者在 BBS/论坛相关帖子评论区评论
- 参与相关网站的请愿、签名等活动
- 只是浏览相关新闻信息，没有主动参与
- 其他 _____

In what ways did you get involved in the Sun Zhigang case? (Multiple Choice)

- A. As a disseminator, I posted and reposted reports of the incident in BBS and forums.
- B. As a disseminator, I spread information and discussed the incident with others through instant messaging services (using QQ, MSN, mobile SMS, etc.).
- C. I commented and discussed with others about the incident on the internet media reports commenting section, BBS and forums.
- D. I participated in the online petition and signature activities about the incident.
- E. I just browsed relevant news information and I did not have any direct participations.
- F. Others (Please specify _____)

19、您觉得当时互联网有没有给你提供可以自由讨论孙志刚案的公共空间？对此类网络公共空间响应、参与的人多吗？（单选题）

- 有足够的空间，并且一起讨论的人很多
- 有足够的空间，但是参与进来一起讨论回应的人不多
- 空间不够充足，但是响应参与的人很多，尽管一些言论会被审核删除
- 没多少空间，并且也没人积极参与

How do you think of the online public sphere for the Sun Zhigang case at that time? Was there enough space for people to freely discuss about the case? In response to the online public sphere, were there plenty of people participating in the case? (Single Choice)

- A. There was enough public sphere on the internet and a lot of people engaged in the discussion about the case.
- B. There was enough public sphere on the internet, but few people responded and participated in the discussion.
- C. Public sphere on the internet was not sufficient at the time, though lots of people engaged in the case, comments were censored and deleted.
- D. There was no public sphere on the internet and few people actively participated in the case.

20、您觉得在孙志刚案中，传统媒体与网络新兴媒体（例如网页新闻、论坛贴吧）的合作呼应对案件的影响是？（单选题）

- 非常有帮助
- 比较有帮助
- 没有明显帮助
- 不清楚

In the Sun Zhigang case, traditional media and new media cooperated to disseminate information about the case, how do you think of the influence about such a collaboration? (Single Choice)

- A. I think the collaboration between traditional media and new media was very helpful in the development of the case.
- B. I think it somewhat helped.
- C. There was no clear help.
- D. I have no idea.

21、传统媒体和新兴媒体都或多或少对孙志刚案发展、传播、解决起到了积极作用，请根据您的想法对其作用大小进行由大至小排序。（排序题 请填 1-5 数字排序）

_____报纸

_____电视广播

_____网站新闻报道

_____BBS/论坛

_____即时通讯聊天（如 QQ、MSN、手机短信）

It is said that traditional media and new media more or less had positively influenced the dissemination, development and settlement of the case. Please rank the media below according to their influence on the Sun Zhigang case on a scale of 1-5 starting from the most important one to the least important one.

_____Newspaper

_____Television and radio

_____internet media reports

_____BBS/forum

_____Instant messaging services (e.g. QQ, MSN, Mobile SMS)

22、您觉得地方政府在孙志刚案中应该对网络报道传播进行管控吗？（单选题）

应该

不应该

不置可否

What is your opinion on whether the local government should take control of the media reports on the Sun Zhigang case? (Single Choice)

A. I think the local government should control the media reports on the Sun Zhigang case.

B. I do not think the local government should control the media reports on the Sun Zhigang case.

C. I have no idea and I do not care whether the government control it or not.

23、中央政府最终废除了《收容遣送制度》，您对这样处理办法的态度是？（单选题）

非常赞同

赞同

勉强接受

不能接受

In the end of Sun Zhigang case, the central government abolished the C&R system, what do you think of this settlement? (Single Choice)

A. I totally agree with the government's decision.

B. I agree with the government's decision.

C. I grudgingly accept the government's decision.

D. I cannot accept the government's decision.

24、您觉得孙志刚的大学生身份对案件最终解决有影响吗？（单选题）

有积极影响，因为大学生被施暴致死能吸引公众强烈关注

有一定影响，因为关乎人权的问题容易引起共鸣

没有显著影响，因为这类事件发生在任何人身上都会受到关注

Do you think Sun Zhigang's identification as a newly graduated has some influence on the final settlement of the case? (Single Choice)

A. Yes, I think Sun's identification has a positive influence on the development of the case.

Because the fact that an undergraduate student was beaten to death can arouse extensive attention among the public.

B. Yes, I think Sun's identification influenced the development of the case to some extent.

Because cases relating to human rights can arouse sympathetic reaction.

C. No, I do not think Sun's identification has any influence on the case. Because such incident can happen to anyone and it can attract attention anyway.

25、您觉得孙志刚案对中国法制、人权的进步有推动作用吗？（单选题）

- 有
- 没有
- 不清楚

Do you think the Sun Zhigang case can promote the improvement of the legal system and human rights in China? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I think so.
- B. No, I do not think so.
- C. I have no idea.

26、您是否会对孙志刚事件这种涉及人权的事件给予持续关注？（单选题）

- 会持续关注，并且会自己搜索相关信息
- 会关注，但是被动接受传统或网络媒体的相关信息传播
- 没有特殊感情，只是当作普通新闻来看
- 不会关注，并且会跳过相关信息

Will you continue to pay attention to cases like Sun Zhigang that concern human rights in China? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I would like to follow similar cases and I will search relevant information by myself.
- B. Yes, I would like to receive relevant information through traditional media or internet media.
- C. I do not have a special feeling about such cases. I take them as normal news.

D. I will not pay attention to such cases and I tend to skip relevant information.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire Survey for the 2007 ‘Xiamen PX Plant Case’

2007 年厦门“PX”事件问卷调查

2007 年，福建省厦门市计划在海沧区兴建二甲苯（PX）化工厂，由于担心化工厂建成后危及民众安全与健康，该项目遭到集体抵制，直到厦门市政府宣布暂停工程，并且将该项目迁址漳州古雷。厦门“PX”事件的进展牵动着公众眼球，该事件从博弈到妥协，再到充分合作，成为了政府和民众互动的经典范例。本次问卷仅用于英国杜伦大学博士学术研究，所有数据将会被严格保密，请放心作答。

研究人员：王羲（杜伦大学现代语言文化学院）

如果您有任何问题，请联系邮箱：xi.wang3@durham.ac.uk

In 2007, there was a proposal of building a paraxylene (PX) chemical plant in Haicang district in Xiamen, Fujian province. It raised people's concern regarding the dangers of chemical plant to safety and health. A series of mass protests were carried out until the Xiamen government announced to stop the project and to relocate the plant site to Zhangzhou. The development of this case attracted extensive attention in the society. It becomes a classic example for the interaction between the public and the government in China. This questionnaire survey aims at collecting data regarding this case. It is used only for academic research in Durham University. All data will be kept confidential and completely anonymous, please feel free to answer it. Please be aware that, by completing the survey, you give consent for using data in this research. Thanks so much for your contribution!

Researcher: Xi Wang (School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Durham University)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact. Email: xi.wang3@durham.ac.uk

1、您的性别？（单选题）

男

女

What is your gender? (Single Choice)

A. Male

B. Female

2、您的年龄？（单选题）

小于 18 岁

18 到 25 岁

26 到 35 岁

35 岁以上

How old are you? (Single Choice)

A. Below 18 years' old

B. 18-25

C. 26-35

D. Above 35 years' old

3、您的教育背景是什么？（单选题）

小学

初中

高中

大学

- 研究生
- 博士研究生

What is your education background? (Single Choice)

- A. Primary school
- B. Junior high school
- C. Senior high school
- D. Bachelor's degree
- E. Master
- F. PhD

4、您的职业是什么？（单选题）

- 学生
- 工人
- 农民
- 公务员
- 专业人士（例如律师、医生、记者、建筑师等等）
- 自主职业
- 其他 _____

What is your current occupation? (Single Choice)

- A. Student
- B. Worker
- C. Farmer

- D. Civil servant
- E. Professional (e.g. lawyer, doctor, journalist, architect, etc.)
- F. Freelance
- G. Other (Please specify_____)

5、您的年收入是多少？（单选题）

- 少于 21000 元
- 21000 元到 24000 元
- 24000 元到 30000 元
- 30000 元到 48000 元
- 多于 48000 元
- 不愿透露

What is your annual income level? (Single Choice)

- A. Less than 21000 Yuan per year
- B. 21000-24000 Yuan per year
- C. 24000-30000 Yuan per year
- D. 30000-48000 Yuan per year
- E. More than 48000 Yuan per year
- F. I'd rather not tell.

6、请写出您所在的地区和城市名（填空题）

Where do you currently live? (Area or city name)

7、您每天用来上网的时间是多少？（单选题）

- 少于 1 小时
- 1 到 2 个小时
- 2 到 4 个小时
- 超过 4 个小时

How much time do you spend on the internet per day? (Single Choice)

- A. Less than 1 hour
- B. 1-2 hours
- C. 2-4 hours
- D. More than 4 hours

8、您曾经注册或使用过哪些社交网络平台？（多选题）

- BBS/论坛
- 博客
- 微博
- 人人网
- QQ 空间
- 微信朋友圈
- 豆瓣
- 其他 _____

Which of the following social networking sites that you are currently using, or you have used before?

(Multiple Choice)

- A. BBS/Forum
- B. Blog
- C. Weibo
- D. RenRen
- E. Q-zone
- F. WeChat Moments
- G. Douban
- H. Others (Please specify _____)

9、在上网时，您会对什么主题的事件给与关注和参与？（多选题）

- 民生
- 人权
- 环境
- 政治
- 娱乐
- 法律
- 财经
- 其他 _____

When surfing the internet, what kind of events or topics that you are willing to pay attention to or participate in? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Events concerning peoples' livelihood
- B. Events concerning human rights
- C. Events concerning environmental protection

- D. Politics events
- E. Entertainment events
- F. Law events
- G. Financial events
- H. Others (Please specify_____)

10、在网上关注和参与您感兴趣的主体事件的中，您的动机是什么？（多选题）

- 希望让更多人知道
- 获得相应利益
- 在虚拟世界得到关注和认同
- 改善自身环境
- 满足好奇心
- 娱乐消遣
- 其他 _____

Why do you pay attention to the events you chose and actively participate in them? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I wish more and more people know about the event.
- B. To gain benefits from it.
- C. To gain attention and recognition on the internet.
- D. To change and improve the environment where I live in.
- E. To satisfy my curiosity,
- F. For fun and entertainment.
- G. Others (Please specify_____)

11、您是如何参与其中的？（多选题）

- 关注并且评论
- 转发传播
- 在网上或线下参与讨论
- 参加现实生活行动
- 只是浏览

How do you get involved in these online public events that you chose? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Follow and comment on the events.
- B. Forward and disseminate the events.
- C. Participate in the online or offline discussions about the events.
- D. Take part in the real-life activities about the events.
- E. Just browsing information about the events.

12、您在进行互联网活动时，是否经过审核后被禁言或者屏蔽？（单选题）

- 是
- 否

During your participation on the internet, have you ever been censored, forbidden to speak or have your comments been shielded? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes
- B. No

13、从互联网 BBS/论坛时代发展到如今的微博、微信时代，您觉得政府相关部门对互联网的管控态度有何改变？（单选题）

- 更加严格

- 更加宽松
- 不清楚

Considering the internet development, from BBS age to today's Weibo age, how do you think of the government's control of the content on the internet? Is there any change in the authority's attitude towards internet development? (Single Choice)

- A. The government's control is stricter than before.
- B. The government's control is looser than before.
- C. I have no idea about this.

14、您对 2007 年发生在厦门的“PX”事件的了解程度是什么？（单选题）

- 清楚了解
- 清楚了解并曾参与讨论
- 有所耳闻
- 不知道

How much do you know about the 2007 'Xiamen PX Plant Case'? (Single Choice)

- A. I know it clearly.
- B. I know it clearly and I have participated in the discussions about the incident.
- C. I have heard about it.
- D. I have no idea about it.

15、您当时是通过什么方式知道并了解厦门“PX”事件的？（多选题）

- 报纸
- 电视广播
- 网站新闻报道

- BBS/论坛
- 即时通讯聊天（如 QQ、MSN、手机短信）
- 博客
- 社交网络网站
- 政府的介绍与宣传

In what ways do you get to know about the ‘Xiamen PX Plant Case’? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Through newspaper reports
- B. Through television and radio reports
- C. Through internet reports
- D. Through BBS/Forum
- E. Through instant messaging services (e.g. QQ, MSN, Mobile SMS)
- F. Blog
- G. Through social networking sites
- H. Government’s introductory brochure

16、关于“PX”，您认同下列哪种说法？（单选题）

- 有剧毒，且能够通过水体、空气传播
- 有剧毒，但不溶于水，不会通过空气、水体传播，只要不接触，就不会有影响
- 低毒，且不溶于水，不会通过空气、水体传播
- 完全没有毒性

Regarding ‘PX’ (paraxylene), which of the following statements do you believe? (Single Choice)

- A. It is highly toxic and can transmit through water and air.

- B. It is highly toxic, but it is insoluble in water. It cannot transmit through water or air. As long as I do not make direct contact with it, there will be no effect.
- C. It is of low toxicity. It is insoluble in water. It cannot transmit through water or air.
- D. It is safe, and it is not toxic.

17、您更相信从哪种途径看到的关于“PX”的言论？（单选题）

- 电视广播报纸等媒体的新闻报道
- 网络传播的消息言论
- 政府发布的声明和报告
- 通过身边朋友叙说
- 其他途径（请说明） _____

Regarding the information resources about 'PX', which medium do you prefer to believe? (Single Choice)

- A. Newspaper, television and radio reports
- B. internet media reports and internet information
- C. Government's statement and reports
- D. Acquaintances' words
- E. Others (Please specify _____)

18、您最关心“PX”项目的哪些方面？（多选题）

- 项目运营方的污染监控计划
- 项目设立前的安全评估
- 生产流程中的具体风险控制措施
- 项目筹划及建设过程中“信息公开”

- 政府监管
- 民众参与和监督
- 其他 _____

What aspects do you concern the most about the 'PX' plant? (Multiple Choice)

- A. The pollution monitoring plan for the project
- B. Safety assessment prior to the setup of the project
- C. Risk control measures during production
- D. 'Information disclosure' during the project plan and prepare process
- E. Government supervision
- F. Public participation and supervision
- G. Others (Please specify _____)

19、您当时是否会关注有关厦门“PX”事件的相关博客和论坛贴吧？（单选题）

- 是
- 否

Did you pay attention to the information on 'Xiamen PX Plant Case' in blogs and BBS/Forums at the time? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes
- B. No

20、您通过网络关注、讨论、参与厦门“PX”事件的动机有哪些？（多选题）

- 想帮助他人更全面地了解事件动向
- 通过评论转发传播等获取利益
- 想通过参与得到虚拟世界他人的关注和认同

- 此类事件关乎自身利益，有代入感
- 满足好奇心，跟风关注参与
- 娱乐消遣
- 其他 _____

Why do you follow, discuss and participate in the 'Xiamen PX' case? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I want help others to know about the case.
- B. I want to gain benefits through commenting, reposting and disseminating the case.
- C. I want to gain attention and recognition in the virtual world.
- D. Because such case is related to citizen's self-interest, I feel like I am part of the case.
- E. Because it is a hot topic and I participated to satisfy my personal curiosity.
- F. For fun and entertainment.
- G. Others (Please specify_____)

21、您当时是否收到过厦门“PX”事件抗议活动组织者的短信或者电子邮件？（单选题）

- 是
- 否

Did you receive any mobile SMS or emails about the protest against the 'Xiamen PX Plant' at the time? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes
- B. No

22、您是否参加过 2007 年发生在厦门的“PX”项目群体事件（“集体散步”）？（单选题）

- 我组织并领导了有关“PX”项目的环境运动
- 我关注并参与过有关“PX”项目的环境运动

- 我对整个事件进程密切关注，但并未采取过行动
- 不关我事

Did you participate in the protest events (e.g. ‘the collective stroll’) against the ‘Xiamen PX Plant’ at the time? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I organised the protest events.
- B. Yes, I followed and participated the protest events.
- C. No, I paid attention to the protest events, but I never participated.
- D. No, it is none of my business.

23、您怎样参与厦门“PX”项目的环境运动？（多选题）

- 在网络或论坛上发表评论及看法
- 参与相关网站的请愿、签名等活动
- 通过电话、短信、聊天工具、电子邮件传播讨论此事件
- 面对面与人讨论传递信息
- 通过民间环保团体反映意见或建议
- 通过信件(包括电子邮件)或电话热线等方式向有关政府部门反映意见或建议
- 参加市民游行
- 其他 _____

In what ways, did you get involved in the ‘Xiamen PX Plant’ movement? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I commented and discussed with others about the case in BBS and online forums.
- B. I participated in the online petition and signature activities about the case.
- C. I spread information and discussed the case with others through telephone, SMS, instant messaging services, emails, etc.

- D. I talked about this event through face-to-face communication with others.
- E. I submitted my opinion and suggestions to civic environmental protection groups.
- F. I sent out my opinion and suggestions to the government department through mail, email or hotline.
- G. I participated in the real-life citizen protest events.
- H. Others. (Please specify_____)

24、您参与厦门“PX”项目环境运动的动机是什么？（多选题）

- 我认为“PX”项目将对厦门的生态环境及居民的身体健康产生消极影响
- 我坚信个人的行动会影响到政府决策
- “PX”项目是否上马与我的经济利益直接相关
- 有鉴于其他地区的PX项目事件
- 出于义愤
- 其他 _____

Why did you participate in the ‘Xiamen PX plant’ movement? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I think ‘PX’ have bad influence on the ecosystem and the citizens’ health in Xiamen.
- B. I believe that citizen’s act can influence the government’s decision.
- C. Because the PX plant is closely related to my financial benefits.
- D. I made my decision to participate based on the past ‘PX’ projects in other places.
- E. Because of my righteous indignation.
- F. Others (Please specify_____)

25、未参与有关“PX”项目的环境运动的原因是什么？（多选题）

- 出于单位群发短信、思想工作等形式的相关压力

- 在工业生产大环境下，我并不认为“PX”项目将对厦门的生态环境产生决定性影响
- 我不认为个人的行动对政府的决策会产生决定性作用
- “PX”项目是否上马与我的经济利益并不直接相关
- 对群体性事件的性质抱有疑虑
- 其他 _____

Why did you decide not to participate in the protest events against the ‘Xiamen PX Plant’? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Because of the pressure made by my work unit.
- B. I do not think ‘PX’ can have severe influence on the ecosystem in Xiamen.
- C. I do not think that citizen’s acts can change the government’s decision.
- D. Because the PX plant has nothing to do with my financial benefits.
- E. I was sceptical about mass protest events.
- F. Others (Please specify _____)

26、对厦门“PX”项目事件中的群体运动您持有什么看法？（单选题）

- 公民知情权、参与权的理性表达
- 公民虽然有知情权、参与权，但是表达方式不够理性
- 公民不应该参与群体运动
- 这是唯一能够让政府听到人民声音、推动决策的方式，别无选择
- 其他 _____

How do you think of the mass protest events against ‘Xiamen PX Plant’? (Single Choice)

- A. I think it is a rational expression of the citizens’ rights to know and to participate.

- B. I think that citizens have the rights to know and to participate. However, their protesting behaviour is not rational.
- C. I think citizens should not take part in mass movements like this.
- D. I think it is the only way for the government to hear public opinion, and therefore to influence the government's decision.
- E. Others (Please specify_____)

27、您是否会对厦门“PX”事件这种涉及环境问题的事件给予持续关注？（单选题）

- 会持续关注，并且会自己搜索相关信息
- 会关注，但是被动接受传统或网络媒体的相关信息传播
- 没有特殊感情，只是当作普通新闻来看
- 不会关注，并且会跳过相关信息

Will you continue to pay attention to cases like 'Xiamen PX Plant' that concerning the environmental issues in China? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I would like to follow similar cases and I will search relevant information by myself.
- B. Yes, I would like to receive relevant information through traditional media or internet media.
- C. I do not have a special feeling about such cases. I take them as normal news.
- D. I will not pay attention to such cases and I tend to skip relevant information.

28、邻避效应，是指居民或在地单位因担心邻避设施对身体健康、环境质量和资产价值等带来诸多负面影响，从而激发人们的嫌恶情结，滋生“不要建在我家后院”的心理现象。您认为，邻避效应对于政府执行政策有什么影响？（单选题）

- 会阻碍政策的正常执行
- 对于政策执行没有影响

- 会从某些方面促进政策的执行
- 很不关心

NIMBY (Not in my backyard) effect refers to a psychological phenomenon that residents oppose a proposal for a new development because it is close to their neighbourhood and people believe that it may have negative influence on their health, living environment and property value. Residents usually believe that the new developments are needed in the society, however, they should be further away from the neighbourhood. In your opinion, what are the possible influences of the ‘NIMBY effect’ on government’s decision? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I think it can be an obstruction for the execution of government’s decision.
- B. No, I do not think it will have any influence on the government’s decision.
- C. Yes, I think it can promote the execution of the government’s decision to some extent.
- D. I have no idea.

29、您对于PX项目的态度是什么呢？（单选题）

- 惧怕污染而反对。
- 大家都说危险,跟着一起反对。
- PX项目带来的经济利益是别人的,但风险却需要自己承担。如果建在我家附近的话,我一定反对。
- PX没有传说中的那么可怕,就是一种普通的化工原料。我支持建厂。
- PX应用最大的领域是纺织业,80%以上的PX最终产物是各类化纤,中国人的生活已经离不开PX了。
- PX工厂选址好了就不会有什么很大的影响。
- 其他 _____

What is your attitudes toward the PX plant? (Single Choice)

- A. I am against it, because I am afraid of pollution.
- B. Because some people say that PX is dangerous, I am against PX together with others.
- C. I think benefits of the PX plant only belong to businessman or other people. However, I have to bear the risks on my own. I cannot accept a PX plant being built in my neighbourhood.
- D. PX is a very common chemical material. It is not as dangerous as the rumours say, so I support the building of a PX plant.
- E. PX is mostly used in the textile industry. More than 80% of end product resulted from PX is synthetic fibre, which is very necessary in our daily life. So, I support it.
- F. I support the building of a PX plant as long as the site selection is reasonable.
- G. Others (Please specify_____)

30、厦门政府通过听证会、座谈会等一系列举措与公民互动,最终同意厦门“PX”项目迁址,您对政府做法的态度是? (单选题)

- 非常赞同
- 赞同
- 勉强接受
- 不能接受

The Xiamen government organised a series of public hearing and symposiums to communicate with the citizens and finally agreed to change the site for the PX plant. How do you think of the government's decision? (Single Choice)

- A. I totally agree with the government's decision.
- B. I agree with the government's decision.
- C. I grudgingly accept the government's decision.

D. I cannot accept the government's decision.

31、您认为政府应该对此类事件的网络舆论进行引导吗？（单选题）

- 民众言论自由，不应该进行引导
- 政府应该在一定程度上进行引导，以确保自己的公信力
- 政府应该严格控制网络舆论方向
- 我没有特别的想法

Do you think that the government should guide public opinion for cases like 'Xiamen PX Plant'?

(Single Choice)

- A. I think citizens have the freedom of speech. Public opinion should not be guided by the government.
- B. I think the government can guide public opinion for cases like Xiamen PX Plant to some extent, in order to ensure its credibility.
- C. I think the government should take strict control of public opinion on the internet.
- D. I have no idea.

Appendix 3: Questionnaire Survey for the 2010 ‘Yihuang Self-immolation Case’

2010年“宜黄拆迁事件”问卷调查

2010年9月10日，江西省宜黄县发生了一起因拆迁引发的自我伤害事件，两人被烧成重伤，一人经抢救无效后去世。此次事件受到了传统媒体和网络媒介的共同关注，并且引发了公众舆论的广泛讨论和参与。因此，像“县政府人员抢夺钟家大伯遗体”、“钟家姐妹机场遭政府人员围堵”等事件也通过微博等网络媒介让大家熟知并且参与讨论。最终，江西省委宣传部发布新闻称，宜黄县委书记和县长等相关责任人均被免职。本次问卷仅用于英国杜伦大学博士学研究，所有数据均会被严格保密，请放心作答。

研究人员：王羲（杜伦大学现代语言文化学院）

如果您有任何问题，请联系邮箱：xi.wang3@durham.ac.uk

On 10/09/2010, a self-immolation incident took place in Yihuang County Jiangxi Province because of house demolition and relocation. Two local residences were severely injured and one of them died in hospital. This incident aroused common concern among traditional media and the new internet media. It also attracted extensive discussions and participation among the public. Topics such as ‘the local government seizing the corpse of the Zhong Uncle’ and ‘the Zhong Sisters’ battle in the ladies’ room’ have been disseminated through Weibo and other internet medium. In the end, the Jiangxi provincial party committee announced the dismissals of the Yihuang county party secretary and county major. This questionnaire survey aims at collecting data regarding this case. It is used only for academic research in Durham University. All data will be kept confidential and completely anonymous, please feel free to answer it. Please be aware that, by completing the survey, you give consent for using data in this research. Thanks so much for your contribution!

Researcher: Xi Wang (School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Durham University)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact. Email: xi.wang3@durham.ac.uk

1、您的性别？（单选题）

男

女

What is your gender? (Single Choice)

A. Male

B. Female

2、您的年龄？（单选题）

小于 18 岁

18 到 25 岁

26 到 35 岁

35 岁以上

How old are you? (Single Choice)

A. Below 18 years' old

B. 18-25

C. 26-35

D. Above 35 years' old

3、您的教育背景是什么？（单选题）

小学

初中

- 高中
- 大学
- 研究生
- 博士研究生

What is your education background? (Single Choice)

- A. Primary school
- B. Junior high school
- C. Senior high school
- D. Bachelor's degree
- E. Master
- F. PhD

4、您的职业是什么？（单选题）

- 学生
- 工人
- 农民
- 公务员
- 专业人士（例如律师、医生、记者、建筑师等等）
- 自主职业
- 其他 _____

What is your current occupation? (Single Choice)

- A. Student

- B. Worker
- C. Farmer
- D. Civil servant
- E. Professional (e.g. lawyer, doctor, journalist, architect, etc.)
- F. Freelance
- G. Other (Please specify_____)

5、您的年收入是多少？（单选题）

- 少于 21000 元
- 21000 元到 24000 元
- 24000 元到 30000 元
- 30000 元到 48000 元
- 多于 48000 元
- 不愿透露

What is your annual income level? (Single Choice)

- A. Less than 21000 Yuan per year
- B. 21000-24000 Yuan per year
- C. 24000-30000 Yuan per year
- D. 30000-48000 Yuan per year
- E. More than 48000 Yuan per year
- F. I'd rather not tell.

6、请写出您所在的地区和城市名（填空题）

Where do you currently live? (Area or city name)

7、您每天用来上网的时间是多少？（单选题）

- 少于 1 小时
- 1 到 2 个小时
- 2 到 4 个小时
- 超过 4 个小时

How much time do you spend on the internet per day? (Single Choice)

- A. Less than 1 hour
- B. 1-2 hours
- C. 2-4 hours
- D. More than 4 hours

8、您曾经注册或使用过哪些社交网络平台？（多选题）

- BBS/论坛
- 博客
- 微博
- 人人网
- QQ 空间
- 微信朋友圈
- 豆瓣

其他 _____

Which of the following social networking sites that you are currently using, or you have used before?

(Multiple Choice)

- A. BBS/Forum
- B. Blog
- C. Weibo
- D. RenRen
- E. Q-zone
- F. WeChat Moments
- G. Douban
- H. Others (Please specify _____)

9、在上网时，您会对什么主题的事件给与关注和参与？（多选题）

- 民生
- 人权
- 环境
- 政治
- 娱乐
- 法律
- 财经
- 其他 _____

When surfing the internet, what kind of events or topics that you are willing to pay attention to or participate in? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Events concerning peoples' livelihood
- B. Events concerning human rights
- C. Events concerning environmental protection
- D. Politics events
- E. Entertainment events
- F. Law events
- G. Financial events
- H. Others (Please specify_____)

10、在网上关注和参与您感兴趣的主体事件的中，您的动机是什么？（多选题）

- 希望让更多人知道
- 获得相应利益
- 在虚拟世界得到关注和认同
- 改善自身环境
- 满足好奇心
- 娱乐消遣
- 其他 _____

Why do you pay attention to the events you chose and actively participate in them? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I wish more and more people know about the event.
- B. To gain benefits from it.
- C. To gain attention and recognition on the internet.
- D. To change and improve the environment where I live in.

- E. To satisfy my curiosity,
- F. For fun and entertainment.
- G. Others (Please specify_____)

11、您是如何参与其中的？（多选题）

- 关注并且评论
- 转发传播
- 在网上或线下参与讨论
- 参加现实生活行动
- 只是浏览

How do you get involved in these online public events that you chose? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Follow and comment on the events.
- B. Forward and disseminate the events.
- C. Participate in the online or offline discussions about the events.
- D. Take part in the real-life activities about the events.
- E. Just browsing information about the events.

12、您在进行互联网活动时，是否经过审核后被禁言或者屏蔽？（单选题）

- 是
- 否

During your participation on the internet, have you ever been censored, forbidden to speak or have your comments been shielded? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes
- B. No

13、从互联网 BBS/论坛时代发展到如今的微博、微信时代，您觉得政府相关部门对互联网的管控态度有何改变？（单选题）

- 更加严格
- 更加宽松
- 不清楚

Considering the internet development, from BBS age to today's Weibo age, how do you think of the government's control of the content on the internet? Is there any change in the authority's attitude towards internet development? (Single Choice)

- A. The government's control is stricter than before.
- B. The government's control is looser than before.
- C. I have no idea about this.

14、您对 2010 年发生在江西宜黄的“拆迁自焚”事件了解程度是什么？（单选题）

- 清楚了解
- 清楚了解并曾参与讨论
- 有所耳闻
- 不知道

How much do you know about the 'Yihuang self-immolation incident' during house demolition and relocation? (Single Choice)

- A. I know it clearly.
- B. I know it clearly and I have participated in the discussions about the incident.
- C. I have heard about it.
- D. I have no idea about it.

15、您当时是通过什么方式知道并了解宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件的？（多选题）

- 报纸
- 电视广播
- 网站新闻报道
- BBS/论坛
- 即时通讯聊天（如 QQ、MSN、手机短信）
- 博客
- 微博等社交网络网站
- 政府的介绍与宣传

In what ways do you get to know about the ‘Yihuang self-immolation incident’? (Multiple Choice)

- A. Through newspaper reports
- B. Through television and radio reports
- C. Through internet reports
- D. Through BBS/Forum
- E. Through instant messaging service (e.g. QQ, MSN, Mobile SMS)
- F. Blog
- G. Through Weibo and other social networking sites
- H. Government report

16、您知道《国有土地上房屋征收与补偿条例》吗？（单选题）

- 非常了解
- 比较熟悉

- 有所耳闻
- 完全不知道

Do you know about the 'House Acquisition from State-owned Land and Compensation Ordinance'?

(Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I know very well about the ordinance.
- B. Yes, I know a little bit about the ordinance.
- C. Yes, I only heard about the ordinance.
- D. No, I do not know anything about it.

17、请问您对当前的拆迁政策看法如何？（单选题）

- 非常好，妥善安置了拆迁
- 非常好，但下属部门没有完全按照好的政策实施
- 比较好，拆迁待遇等问题还需提高
- 非常不好

How do you think of the current house demolition and relocation policy? (Single Choice)

- A. I think the current policy is very good. Residences are properly settled.
- B. I think the policy itself is very good. However, the local government and subordinate departments did not perform well in carrying out the policy.
- C. I think the policy is fine. However, there are still some problems such as the compensation arrangements which need to be improved.
- D. The current policy is not good at all.

18、对于政府拆迁，您会持什么态度？（单选题）

- 积极响应政府号召，应该主动拆迁

- 只要赔偿合理，就应该拆迁
- 拆迁大势已趋，不得不拆
- 留恋祖祖辈辈生活的家园，不应该拆迁
- 其他_____

What is your attitude towards the government's house demolition and relocation action? (Single Choice)

- A. I think we should response positively to the government's call and take the initiative of house demolition and relocation.
- B. I think we should agree the house demolition and relocation as long as the compensation arrangements are reasonable.
- C. House demolition and relocation is a trend; we have no other choice to agree with the decision.
- D. I am emotionally attached to the place where my family has lived for years, and I do not want to demolish my home and move to another place.
- E. Others (Please specify_____)

19、如果拆迁赔偿没有让您满意，您会不会坚持不拆迁？（单选题）

- 如果补偿不满意，绝不同意拆迁
- 视周围邻居而定，大多数人拆了，我就拆
- 争取到基本的生活保障就拆
- 拆迁之后找当地政府上诉

If you are not satisfied with the compensation arrangement for house demolition and relocation, will you insist on not moving? (Single Choice)

- A. If the compensation arrangements are not reasonable, I definitely will not agree to move.

- B. It depends on how my neighbours react. If a majority of them have agreed, I will do as what they do.
- C. I will agree to move as long as I get a basic living guarantee.
- D. I will make an appeal to the government when I am forced to demolish my house.

20、若在拆迁过程中发生纠纷，您家更倾向与哪种解决方式？（单选题）

- 接受相关部门调解
- 诉诸法律
- 上访
- 暴力阻挠拆迁进程
- 其他_____

If there are some disputes during the house demolition and relocation process, which approach do you prefer to solve the problem? (Single Choice)

- A. Accept the mediation through government departments.
- B. Take legal action.
- C. Appeal to the higher authorities for help.
- D. Use violence to obstruct and stop the demolition process.
- E. Others (Please specify_____)

21、您觉得暴力抗拆能影响政府决策或者法院裁决吗？（单选题）

- 一定会
- 可能会
- 不会
- 不清楚

Do you think using violence against the house demolition can influence the government's decision or the court's decision? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, it will certainly influence their decision.
- B. Yes, it can somewhat influence their decision.
- C. No, it certainly will not make any difference.
- D. I do not know.

22、您对宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件中当事人持什么态度？(单选题)

- 同情且理解
- 同情但不理解
- 中立不便评论
- 无理取闹、不可理喻

How do you think of the victims in the 'Yihuang self-immolation incident'? (Single Choice)

- A. I understand their behaviour and I feel sympathetic to them.
- B. I feel sympathetic to them, but I do not understand their behaviour.
- C. Neutral, I do not want to make any judgements about them.
- D. I think what they did was unreasonable.

23、您是否会对宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件这种涉及民生问题的事件给予持续关注？(单选题)

- 会持续关注民生问题，并且会自己搜索相关信息
- 会关注，但是被动接受传统或网络媒体的相关信息传播
- 没有特殊感情，只是当作普通新闻来看
- 不会关注，并且会跳过相关信息

Will you continue to pay attention to cases like the ‘Yihuang self-immolation incident’ that concerning people’s livelihood in China? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I would like to follow cases regarding people’s livelihood and I will search relevant information by myself.
- B. Yes, I would like to receive relevant information through traditional media or internet media.
- C. I do not have a special feeling about such cases. I take them as normal news.
- D. I will not pay attention to such cases and I tend to skip relevant information.

24、您通过网络关注、讨论、参与宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件的动机有哪些(多选题)

- 同情当事人，想给与帮助
- 想帮助他人更全面地了解事件动向
- 通过评论转发传播等获取利益
- 想通过参与得到虚拟世界他人关注和认同
- 此类事件关乎自身利益，有代入感
- 满足好奇心，跟风关注参与
- 对政府做法有抵触情绪
- 娱乐消遣
- 其他 _____

Why do you follow, discuss and participate in the ‘Yihuang self-immolation’ case? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I feel sympathetic to the victims and I want to offer help.
- B. I want others to know about the incident.
- C. I want to gain benefits through commenting, reposting and disseminating the case.
- D. I want to gain attention and recognition in the virtual world.

- E. Because such case is related to citizen's self-interest, I feel like I am part of the case.
- F. Because it is a hot topic and I participated to satisfy my personal curiosity.
- G. Because I have resistance emotion towards the government's action.
- H. For fun and entertainment.
- I. Others (Please specify_____)

25、您曾经以哪种形式参与宜黄“强拆自焚”事件？(多选题)

- 在 BBS 或论坛上发表评论及看法
- 微博等社交网络网站转发、评论
- 参与相关网站的请愿、签名等活动
- 通过电话、短信、聊天工具、电子邮件传播讨论此事件
- 当面与亲友讨论传递信息
- 通过向民间维权组织反映意见或建议
- 通过信件(包括电子邮件)或电话热线等方式向有关政府部门反映意见或建议
- 只是浏览相关新闻信息，没有主动参与
- 其他 _____

In what ways, did you get involved in the Yihuang case? (Multiple Choice)

- A. I commented and discussed with others about the incident in BBS and online forums.
- B. As a disseminator, I spread information and discussed the incident with others using social networking sites, such as Weibo.
- C. I participated in the online petition and signature activities about the incident.
- D. I spread information and discussed the incident with others through telephone, SMS, instant messaging services, emails, etc.

- E. I talked about this incident through face-to-face communication with my friends and family.
- F. I sent out my opinion and suggestions to the government department through mail, email or hotline.
- G. I just browsed relevant news information and I did not have any direct participations.
- H. Others (Please specify_____).

26、您是否对当时关于钟家姐妹被政府官员困在女厕的相关微博进行过评论或转发？（单选题）

- 是
- 否

Have you ever commented or reposted the information regarding the Zhong Sisters' situation of being stranded in the ladies' room on Weibo? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, I have.
- B. No, I have not.

27、您对微博直播“钟家姐妹在机场与政府人员的厕所攻防战”这种行为的態度是？（单选题）

- 支持，希望更多事件借助这种办法
- 持怀疑态度，媒体炒作嫌疑很大
- 只是看热闹，没有评论和看法

How do you think of the Weibo 'live broadcast' of the Zhong Sisters' battle in the ladies' room against the local government? (Single choice)

- A. I support the Zhong Sisters' behaviour and I think similar events can use this method to gain public attention.

B. I am sceptical about the Zhong Sisters' behaviour. There is a great chance of media hype in it.

C. I do not have any feeling or opinion about this.

28、您觉得名人明星在微博传播此类拆迁案例时对事件的发展及结果影响如何？（单选题）

- 积极影响，促进事件发展进程，使最终得到满意解决
- 消极影响，名人明星在没搞清楚真实状况时的转发评论可能会使事件偏离轨道
- 影响不明显，因为名人明星的微博“粉丝”不会关注此类事件
- 不清楚

Many celebrities and popular accounts on Weibo reposted and disseminated information about such house demolition and relocation cases. How do you think about their acts in influencing the development and final result of the case? (Single Choice)

A. I think the celebrities' dissemination has a positive influence. It can promote the development of such cases and lead to a satisfying result.

B. I think the celebrities' dissemination has a negative influence. Because they may not know clearly about the case. And any dissemination of the unauthentic information can lead to the wrong development direction of the case.

C. I do not think there is any influence about the celebrities' dissemination. Because their followers may not care about such events.

D. I have no idea.

29、不同媒体对宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件起因、经过、结果的报道，您都会如何看待？（单选题）

- 传统媒体和新兴媒体的相关报道和信息都会相信
- 会自行分辨不同媒体对事件的报道是否冲突、矛盾

- 会通过调查、询问并且参考更多消息来源，进而还原事件真相
- 对相关报道只是看看而已，没有看法

There appeared different versions about the Yihuang case. Media reports regarding the cause, process and result of the case differ greatly, how do you think of it? (Single Choice)

- A. I believe the reports and information provided by the traditional media, as well as the new internet media.
- B. I can distinguish whether there are any contradictions between different media reports.
- C. I did some investigation and searched information about the case by myself and I can make my own judgment.
- D. I do not care about this. I am just browsing media reports.

30、在微博等社交网络网站上看到关于宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件的相关评论和转发时，您的态度是？（单选题）

- 跟风评论和转发，表达对政府行为的不满
- 会对消息来源持怀疑态度，辨别真伪后再做出举动
- 只是看看，并不会评论或转发
- 从来不相信微博等社交网络网站发布的信息
- 其他 _____

About the comments and discussions about the Yihuang case on Weibo and other social networking sites, what is your attitude? (Single Choice)

- A. I made comments and reposted information to express my dissatisfaction towards the government.
- B. I hold a sceptical attitude about online information and I only take action after I distinguished the authenticity of the information.

- C. I just browsed related information and I never repost or make comments about such case.
- D. I never believe in information on Weibo or other social networking sites.
- E. Others (Please specify_____).

31、宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件始末，你认为仇富仇官心理是否会对媒体报道、网络评论产生影响？（单选题）

- 会产生影响
- 影响不大
- 完全没有影响
- 不清楚

In the Yihuang case, do you think the people's hatred towards the rich and the officials have any influence on media reports and public opinion? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, it has great influence.
- B. It may have some influence.
- C. No, it has no influence at all.
- D. I have no idea.

32、您觉得通过微博维权这种方式有效吗？（单选题）

- 非常有效
- 比较有效
- 效果不明显
- 无效

Do you think Weibo is a useful platform to safeguard one's rights? (Single Choice)

- A. Yes, it is very useful.
- B. Yes, it can help a little.

C. It has no clear influence.

D. It cannot help at all.

33、宜黄“拆迁自焚”事件后期，江西省政府将宜黄县委书记、县长免职，您对政府做法的态度是？（单选题）

赞同

勉强接受

不能接受

At the end of the Yihuang case, the Jiangxi provincial government made a decision to dismiss the county party secretary and the county mayor from their positions. How do you think of this decision?

(Single Choice)

A. I agree with this decision.

B. I grudgingly agree with this decision.

C. I cannot accept this decision.

34、您认为此类强拆自焚事件还会发生吗？（单选题）

会

不会

不清楚

Do you think such violent house demolition and relocation case will continue to happen? (Single Choice)

A. Yes, it will continue to happen.

B. No, it will not.

C. I have no idea.

Appendix 4: Questions in Semi-structured interviews

您好，我是英国杜伦大学的博士研究生。我的研究方向是新兴媒体、公众参与和国家政府在中国：从论坛贴吧时代到微博时代。我想了解互联网公司和公共参与对国家政策的影响，所以希望对您进行半小时左右的电话采访或者腾讯 QQ 文字采访。请注意，本次采访会采取完全匿名的方式，所以您的所有相关信息都不会出现在论文中；采访数据也只用于本人学术研究，请放心回答。以下是采访大纲。

Hi, I am a postgraduate research student at School of Modern Languages and Cultures in Durham University. My research topic is 'New Media, Public Participation and the Government in China: from the *BBS* to *Weibo* age.' My study investigates the impact of internet media and public participation on government's policy. I would like to invite you to take part in a 30-minutes semi-structured interview in the form of online-message chat through *Tencent QQ* or voice chat through telephone according to your preference. Please be assured that all data collected will be kept confidential and anonymised and please feel free to participate. The data will only be used for academic research. Below is the outline of the semi-structured interview.

1. 从 BBS 论坛时代到微博时代，中国的信息科技发展有了长足的进步，请您谈谈自己的看法。例如社交媒体给您自己的生活和工作带来了什么改变？社交媒体能促进中国公民公众参与吗？

From the *BBS*/forums to the *Weibo* age, Chinese information technology has progressed greatly, could you please comment on it? For example, did the technology advancement bring any changes to your work or daily life? Can you evaluate these changes? Can social media promote public participation in China?

2. 据您所了解，中国互联网空间里，公众参与的动机和方法大概有哪些？

From your perspective, what are the dynamics and forms of public participation in China's cyberspace?

3. 以您的从业经验来看，什么样的网络公共事件可以得到长远关注并且最终获得有效稳妥的解决方案？

Based on your professional experience, what kind of public events can draw long-term focus in China's cyberspace and gain an effective solution in the end?

4. 2003 年的广州孙志刚事件，2007 年的厦门“PX”事件，2010 年的江西宜黄强拆自焚事件，这三件事您听说过吗？是否从纸媒电视或者互联网、社交网络上，关注过相关报道和舆论？您觉得纸媒电视对事件的报道和您从网络上获得的信息有差别吗？您更倾向于相信哪一方？对这三个事件中新兴媒体起到的作用您有什么看法？

Have you heard about these three cases – ‘the death of Sun Zhigang incident’, ‘the Xiamen PX plant case’ and ‘the Yihuang self-immolation incident’? Did you pay attention to related news reports or public opinion from the paper media, television, internet and social media? Have you observed any differences in terms of the information accessed on paper media and internet? Which information source do you prefer? What is your view towards the influence of new media in the development of these three cases?

5. 互联网公司在运营时，发布的信息是否会影响网民行为？是否会对公共意见进行舆论引导？互联网公司这些行为有哪些目的和期望达到的效果？

During the operation of internet media, can the media influence internet users' behaviour or guide public opinion by manipulating information? What are their intentions and what outcome do they expect?

6. 在国内信息管控的背景下，互联网公司在运营时是如何做到兼顾“保证自身利益、对网民进行监管引导、遵守国家互联网政策法规、坚持媒体职业操守”这四点的？参考您的日常工作经验，请试着根据重要性对此四点排序。另外，对此四点您觉得还有哪些需要补充？也就是运营时还会兼顾哪几点？

Under the context of information control in China, how does the internet media company balance its own financial benefits and professional ethics while considering the state's regulations and policies, guiding and supervising internet users' activities? Could you please rank the aforementioned four factors in the order of importance according to your experience in the media industry? Is there any other factors worth consideration when operating new media companies?

7. 您对当今时代公众和政府通过互联网媒介、社交网络的博弈有什么看法？互动中双赢或者失败的模式都有哪些？

How do you think about the ICT-mediated government-public interaction? What are the possible patterns of interaction: win-win or failure for both parties?

8. 我认为“政府-公众-互联网媒体公司”之间，是一个技术赋权的三角互动的关系。对此，您能简单评价一下吗？您觉得这三者之间，谁更重要？也就是在中国，哪一个角占得比重更大？分量更足？能不能从您的角度形容一下这种三角关系？您认为这三角关系从00年初到现在十几年间变化了吗？

I proposed a triangular government-media-public interactive framework, which demonstrated the technological empowerment. Could you please comment on this interactive relationship? Based on your perception and experience, among the three elements, who takes the dominant role in the power relationship? Could you please interpret the triangular interactive framework? Are there any changes in the power relationship along with the development of ICT in the recent decades?

9. 在互联网运营中，出现政府管控和公众诉求相对立时，一边是上级的监管压力，一边是公众消费者对公司利益会有影响，你们是如何“生存”的？在网站商业运营时，互联网公司和政府是什么样的关系？政府相关部门是如何规范你们的？你们是怎样在政府规范甚至可能有些束缚的环境下，追求利益最大化的？

During the operation of internet media company, how do you ‘survive’ under the government control and consumer pressure? As a practitioner, how do you think of the relationship between the government and new media? How do related official departments regulate internet media companies? And how do you pursue profits under constrains?

10. 互联网公司目前归政府哪个部门管理？是地方网监处、国家安全局、信息产业部、广电总局、国家互联网信息办公室，还是多方合作管理？互联网公司要经常跟那些部门打交道？如何打交道？

Which government department is responsible for the administration and monitoring of internet media companies – local Cyberspace Administration Office, the State Administration of National Security, Ministry of Information and Communication Industry, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television, or the State internet Information Office? Or is there a joint administration system? Which government department do you usually need to confront? And how do you interact with them?

11. 如果运营出现“问题”，政府有什么处理办法或者惩罚手段？哪些是政府的底线，也就是政府对哪一类事件尤其敏感？如果底线被打破，公司会受到什么样的惩罚？谁来惩罚？如何惩罚？公司的应对机制是什么？

If something went ‘wrong’ when operating internet media, how do government react to it and is there any official punishment mechanism? What is the state’s bottom line in the control of internet media? In other words, what kind of public events is particularly sensitive to the government? If media companies went across the state’s bottom line, what are the consequences? Who will be responsible in employing the punishment? Do media companies have any countermeasures to deal with such scenario?

12. 从媒体获得信息难易度和发布信息内容审核两方面，政府对互联网公司的态度是管控更加严格还是更加开放？另外对公众来说，互联网环境是更加宽松还

是更加收紧了？就目前形势来看，随着互联网相关科技更快发展和更广普及，中国社会可以变得更加民主吗？

From the media perspective, regarding the difficulty of collecting and publishing information, could you please evaluate the government's evolving attitudes: is it becoming more liberal or more rigid? For the public, is the Chinese cyberspace more open or stricter? In terms of the current situation, with the rapid development of ICT and the popularisation of internet, do you see a trend towards a democratic society?