INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, PUBLIC SPACE, AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN CHINA

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The Internet has stimulated academic inquiries on the political implications of the Internet revolution. A great deal of attention has been focused on the following: Has the Internet altered the nature of interaction between the state and society? Will the Internet ultimately be able to promote the democratic transition of existing authoritarian political systems? This article attempts to address these two questions based on an empirical study of the situation in China. The article explores the democratic implications of the Internet in the context of the interplay between the state and society by setting up a three-layered analytical framework, that is, the Internet as a tool for communication, the Internet as public space, and the Internet as a means for collective action. In China, the impact of the Internet on democratic transition differs at each of these three layers, depending on the interaction strategies between the state and society.

Keywords: China; Internet; collective action; political democratization; political liberalization

With its origins in advanced democratic societies, the Internet has revolutionized almost every aspect of our daily lives in recent decades. It has stimulated academic inquiries on the political implications of the Internet revolution in general and on the impact of the Internet under various social, cultural, and political circumstances in particular. A great deal of attention has been focused on the questions Has the Internet altered the interaction pat-
tern between the state and society? Will the Internet ultimately be able to promote the democratic transition of existing authoritarian political systems?

This article attempts to explore the impact of the Internet on political development based on an empirical study of Internet development in China. Although China’s political system remains authoritarian, the rapid development of the Internet, along with a prosperous, market-oriented economy, has brought about drastic changes in the political sphere. Our main argument is threefold. First, the Internet has changed the interaction between the state and society. Second, the Internet enhances civic engagement and political participation. And third, the interaction strategies between the state and society decide whether Internet-based collective actions can lead to political changes.

The article proceeds in the following way. The first section provides a brief survey of the literature on the Internet and democratic development and sets forth a framework. The second section examines how the Internet is able to provide pluralistic information sources so a total control of free information flow is impossible on the part of the state. The third section explores how the Internet encourages civic engagement and political participation in China’s authoritarian political setting. The fourth section uses case studies to examine how different interaction strategies between the state and society lead to different collective actions, and how Internet-based collective actions can succeed in changing political and policy practices.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

The link between advances in information technology (IT) and the development of democracy has become an increasingly important research agenda among scholars and policy makers. Most studies are based on developed Western democracies, and their main concern is whether IT is capable of promoting and improving the functioning of the existing democracies. Optimistic scholars have argued that a positive link exists between IT and democratic improvement. Many new terms such as “digital democracy,” “electronic democracy,” and “cyberdemocracy” refer to the Internet and democracy as working closely together and mutually reinforcing each other. The arguments of the technological empowerment of democracy have been developed in three dimensions.

1. For example, Alexander and Pal (1998); Ferdinand (2000); Hague and Loader (1999); Hoff, Horrocks, and Tops (2000); Noveck (2000); Loader (1997); Schroeder (1997); and Tsagaroussianou, Tambini, and Bryan (1998).
First, scholars in the modernization theory, which was prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s when the Internet had yet to come into existence, contended that democracy needs certain economic, social, cultural, and technological prerequisites, as developed through economic growth, education, industrialization, and urbanization. The advancement of IT and its spread, among others, were so important to gauging social-economic conditions of society that the statistics concerning the ownership of radios and telephones in a country mattered greatly for the occurrence of democracy (Lipset, 1959). Robert Dahl (1971) regarded the development and spread of IT as helpful, and perhaps efficient, in providing an institutional guarantee of democracy. He even argued that democracy is threatened more by inequalities associated with information and knowledge than by inequalities in wealth or economic position. IT may provide important remedies for political inequality by making political information more universally accessible (Dahl, 1989).

Second, some scholars emphasize the social-political domains where the advances of IT serve as a powerful stimulant to the formation of civil society and the public sphere. In the studies on “third wave” democratization, the formation of civil society was regarded as an independent variable favorable to democratization, particularly in explaining the East European transitions from communism (Di Palma, 1991; Rau, 1991; Weigle & Butterfield, 1992), and in general improving the functions of the existing democracies (Putnam, 1993). It is argued that IT, especially the Internet, substantially promotes the formation, development, and growth of civil society and thus makes the genuine democratic performance of political institutions possible. Following Habermas (1989), scholars have emphasized the importance of the public sphere, especially communication, in civil society, and modern IT has obviously constituted the most effective means of communication. In short, the spontaneity and plurality of modern IT have given rise to the electronic public sphere and consequent independent pluralistic active civil society. Such a civil society will create a socially favorable setting that encourages modern democracy to overcome its somehow formalistic feature and be embedded in people’s political consciousness and their daily social practice.

Third, scholars on participatory democracy often argue that modern IT provides ordinary citizens with political resources and opportunities to expand their political participation in a democratic environment. Being

3. For example, Dahlgren (1995); Dahlgren and Sparks (1991); and Schuler (1996).
4. For example, Davis (1999); Grossman (1995); Hauben and Hauben (1997); Hague and Loader (1999); and Prins (2001).
interactive and reciprocal in its nature of communication, IT does not have
the inherent disadvantage evident in the old format of one-way communica-
tion between politicians and citizens. It makes the democratic government
more accountable to its people than otherwise when citizens only depend on
elections and representative mechanisms to exercise their sovereignty power.
The implications are taken further to support the argument that IT creates a
technological condition for the transition from Schumpeterian elitist democ-
"racy to direct mass democracy. Benjamin Barber (1984) believes that the use
of IT can enhance citizen engagement in democratic affairs by providing a
means for overcoming problems of scale in large democracies and by
creating communicative forums.

In the same vein, scholars have long argued that IT will be instrumental in
the transition of authoritarianism to democracy. Huntington (1991) referred
to the role of television in the demonstration effect or snowballing in Eastern
European transitions. More recently, scholars have argued that the Internet
played an important role in the collapse of the Suharto regime in Indonesia
(Hill & Sen, 2000). In the case of authoritarian China, scholars found that the
Internet can pose an insurmountable threat to the Chinese authoritarian
regime, and such a threat may arise from Internet use by the mass public, civil
society, the economy, and the international community (Chase & Mulvenon,
2002).

On the other hand, some scholars are rather pessimistic about the impact
of the Internet on democracy. Scholars such as Lawrence Lessig (1999) argue
that governments can most certainly regulate the Internet, both by controlling
its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it oper-
ates. It is believed that politically decentralizing capacities of IT can be over-
come by traditional organizational interests, and traditional media firms are
succeeding in colonizing new IT (Davis, 1999). Furthermore, intensive use
of IT may diminish social capital, counteracting any gains in participatory
equality. Concerns about the fragmentation and the loss of the common pub-
clic sphere compose an important undercurrent of critique of IT. Barber
(1998) changed his earlier optimistic views and argued that IT may under-
mine the quality of political deliberation and the nature of social interaction.
Sunstein (2001) believes that IT tends to lead to the decline of the “general
interest intermediary” and the failure of the public commons and the replace-
ment of these by a political communication system that fosters fragmentation
and polarization.

Such a view is also embedded in the literature on the impact of IT on
democratization. Scholars have cautioned that the impact of the Internet on
democratic development should not be overstated. In his study of 144 coun-
tries, Kedzie (1997) found a statistically significant correlation between net-
work connectivity and political freedom, though these results cannot conclusively determine causality. Similarly, according to Norris (2001), there is a significant correlation between democratization and Internet users per capita; nevertheless, she pointed out that political change is a determinant to Internet diffusion, not the other way around. Furthermore, there are even more pessimistic views about the impact of IT on democratic development in authoritarian states. Scholars have argued that many authoritarian regimes have never failed to exercise political control over newly developed IT. The Internet is no exception. It is found that authoritarian regimes such as China, Cuba, and Vietnam have translated a long and successful history of control over other information and communication technologies into strong control of Internet development within their border. Authoritarian regimes often seek to extend control through proactive strategies, guiding the development of the medium to promote their own interests and priorities. This is especially true in the case of China. Although Chinese dissidents within and without have utilized the Internet to expand their political influence, the regime seems to have effectively contained such influence (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). The capabilities of the state as a designer of Internet development makes it less likely for nonstate actors to exert political impact, because Internet users “may back away from politically sensitive material on the web, and entrepreneurs may find it more profitable to cooperate with authorities than to challenge their censorship policies” (Kalathil & Boas, 2003, p. 136).

In this article, we attempt to go beyond the arguments for and against a positive impact of the Internet on democratic development. Evidence exists to support both arguments. This is also true in China. Social forces have organized successful collective actions to expand their political influence, but in some cases, their action invited a crackdown by the state. Given that the exploration of the impact of the Internet on political changes is still in its infancy, more empirical work must be done before the link between the Internet and democratic transition can be theorized.

As a matter of fact, even if we reject the argument that IT is democratizing the Chinese state, we cannot deny that it has introduced changes to the state. Democratization is a process through which different elements of democracy develop, such as representation, participation, deliberation, transparency, accountability, and rights (Dahl, 1989). All these elements that are embedded in advance democracies have developed over a long historical period. The exploration of the impact of the Internet on democratic development in China requires an investigation into whether the Internet helps produce these ele-

5. For example, Harwit and Clark (2001); Hachigian (2001); and Kalathil and Boas (2003).
ments. It would be unrealistic to expect that the Internet alone can lead to a democratic system in such a short period.

To address this issue, it is useful to make a distinction between political liberalization and democratization. According to O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), political liberalization can be defined as “the process of making effective certain rights that protect both individuals and social groups from arbitrary or illegal acts committed by the state or third parties” (p. 7). It is a process and a movement that departs from the usual practice of authoritarian regimes. Such a movement has the effect of lowering the costs (real or anticipated) of individual expression and collective action. On the other hand, democratization

refers to the processes whereby the rules and procedures of citizenship are either applied to political institutions previously governed by other principles, or expanded to include persons not previously enjoying such rights and obligations, or extended to cover issues and institutions not previously subject to citizen participation. (p. 8)

Liberalization can take place within the existing political framework because authoritarian rulers may tolerate or even promote liberalization in the belief that by opening up certain spaces for individual and group action, they can relieve various pressures and obtain needed information and support without altering the structure of authority, that is, without becoming accountable to the citizenry for their actions or subjecting their claim to rule to fair and competitive elections. (p. 9)

Liberalization can exist without democratization, leading to a situation that O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) called “liberalized authoritarianism.” In this context, we argue that IT has promoted political liberalization in China. The impact of IT on political liberalization can be explored in different ways. This investigation attempts to explore democratic implications of the Internet by setting up a three-layered analytical framework under which the interplay between state and society unveils the political implications of the Internet. These three layers are the Internet as a tool for communication, the Internet as public space, and the Internet as a means for collective action. We find that the impact of the Internet on political liberalization differs at each of these three layers, depending on the interaction strategies between the state and society.

Central to our investigation is how the Internet has made collective action possible. Political change, be it democratization or liberalization, can be understood as a process in which collective action and institutional change
interact (Rokkan, 1999, p. 23). Furthermore, whether a given collective action can succeed depends on what Russell Hardin (1990) called “interaction strategy” between the state and society. Our investigation is divided into three sequences. First, we explore why despite the tight control of information flow by the state, the Internet makes it possible for people in China to acquire information from multiple sources. Second, we examine the Internet as public space, namely, whether the Internet helps people understand politics and “voice” their opinions over governmental decision making. And third, we explore how different interaction strategies between the state and society affect collective action.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND PLURALISTIC INFORMATION SOURCES

Statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) survey\(^6\) show the rapid development of the Internet in China, as indicated in Figure 1, in terms of fast growth of Internet users. Due to the size of the Chinese population, the absolute number of Internet users is huge, and an Internet society is rapidly evolving, although the proportion of Internet users in the total population remains small.

The rapid development of the Internet has led to the fast expansion of information space, thus providing Internet users with more alternative sources of information than ever before. In this sense, the Internet has expanded the freedom of information access in China as in democratic countries. But there are differences between Chinese users’ online behavior and their counterparts in democratic political institutions. Table 1 shows the results of the CNNIC surveys regarding Internet users’ main purposes for accessing the Internet. It is worth noting that the categories in Table 1 are not mutually exclusive. Still, Table 1 indicates that most users go online to obtain information. It is remarkable that there has been no major change in the categories despite a dramatic increase in the number of online users.

Table 2 shows what kind of information Chinese Internet users search for. It is very clear that Chinese users went online chiefly to read news, followed by obtaining computer hardware and software knowledge. Why is gaining

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6. The CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center), a nonprofit organization, was founded in 1997. It is administered by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and provides a wide range of services such as domain names registration, Internet protocol (IP) address distribution, nationwide database, and so on. It also undertakes national scientific research related to the Internet and provides consultancy and offers services on the Internet to society. It is regarded as the most important organization that provides information related to the Internet in China.
Figure 1. Growth of Internet Users in China, October 1997-January 2004
information, particularly from reading news, the highest priority for online activities among Chinese users? One explanation lies in China’s political setting. In a political arrangement in which the state controls the media, free flow of information is difficult, and readers are not able to access the necessary information and news through traditional media such as newspapers and broadcasts that are still tightly controlled by the state. Although great changes have been made to China’s mass communications system since the reform and opening up policy in the late 1970s, information pluralization in traditional media still remains unrealized (Latham, 2000; Lee, 2000). Within such a political setting, cross-nation Web sites have enormous advantages over China’s mass communications system in providing alternative information and news sources. The Chinese users can gain information and news that they cannot get from traditional media or prohibited public access. The existence of alternative sources of information and news is an important factor for a free society. In this sense, the development and expansion of the Internet in China have contributed to an increase in information access, even though the political system still remains authoritarian.

It is worth noting that in China, the users’ efforts to access different sources of information, either online or through traditional ways, are under the supervision of the government. The government is highly vigilant over possible negative political influence arising from fast Internet development. It has paid much attention to political control over the development, as well as to its technological progress and administrative regulations. Through estab-

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Table 1

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<tr>
<td>Get information</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For work/business needs</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get free Internet resources</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock trading</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online shopping</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandwagoning</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>


Note: Dash = not available.
lishing various administrative provisions on the Internet and specifying
detailed rules for Internet operation, enormous efforts have been made to
politically as well administratively regulate the Internet by legal and adminis-
ttrative means. 7 With the Interim Provisions on the Administration of Interna-
table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Searched for in China (%)</th>
<th>2002-2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software and hardware</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living services</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural activities</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-book</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and technology</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance, insurance, and real estate</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprises</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather forecast</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and transportation</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laws, regulations, and policies</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-government</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games with prizes</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dash = not available.

7. Includes primarily the Leading Group of State Information Work (LGSIW), under the state council, which oversees many regular cabinet-level departments involved in watching Internet development, such as the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the State Secrecy Bureau (SSB). MII is the governing department of China Telecom and is vested with the power to regulate the telecommunications industry. The MPS and SSB are empowered with a wide range of administrative and quasi-judicial authorities on the Internet.
tional Wiring of Computer Information Networks, the Administrative Provisions on Secrecy of Computer Information Systems, the Rules for the Administration of International Wiring Gateway for Inbound and Outbound Computer Information, and the like, the government has set up a series of Internet rules to regulate the rights and duties of channel providers and Internet service providers and users, and to supervise and inspect the international wiring of networks by censoring Internet content, governing operations of the Internet service, and regulating Internet users. Though many of these measures might be necessary for Internet administration in general, they are bundled with the political goal of minimizing the “harmful” effects of Internet development on the regime in China.

The provisions ban individuals and institutions from discussing or disseminating any information that is considered “state secrets,” which are widely and unclearly defined. The administrative provisions also stipulate that state approval should be obtained from relevant authorities for the distribution of information on the Internet. It administers as tight a censorship on the Internet contents as on the traditional media materials. Meanwhile, the interim provisions target particularly the international wiring for online regulations. For example, the interim provisions require that all traffic to computer networks outside China be channeled via the gateway maintained by public telecommunication networks, that is, the Ministry of Information Industry, a cabinet-level governmental unit. Under these rules, no individual and institution can establish or use other gateways for Internet traffic without prior approval from the government; only those approved interwired networks can directly operate international wiring through the gateway. Moreover, the interim provisions require that any entity that intends to connect to the Internet has to file an application with the relevant government agencies for Internet wiring; an entity intending to operate business on the Internet has to procure a license. Individuals are excluded from the scope of Internet service providers (ISPs). These requirements are certainly working, as well as their administrative functions, to filter information offensive to the state.

In addition to these formal rules and regulations, the government has also tried to exercise its political control over cyberspace in order to ensure that it

8. Article 2, the Rules for the Administration of International Wiring Gateway for Inbound and Outbound Computer Information.
9. Article 6, the Administrative Provisions on Secrecy of Computer Information Systems.
10. Article 9, the Administrative Provisions on Secrecy of Computer Information Systems.
11. Article 6(1), the Interim Provisions on the Administration of International Wiring of Computer Information Networks.
does not become an avenue for disgruntled elements to mount an offensive against the government. Many measures have been taken to achieve this goal.

First of all, the government has frequently tightened Web site management. To a great degree, cyberspace has been monopolized by the state. This is especially true in the area of news Web sites. The government has tried to upgrade media organizations that it sponsors, such as People’s Daily, the New China News Agency, China International Broadcast, China Daily, and the News Center of China International Internet, to “national-level Web sites.” Second, the authorities have tried to close so-called illegal Web sites and politically incorrect ones. This is exemplified lately by the closure of two Web sites, Field of Ideas (sixiang de jingjie) and New Civilization Forum (xin wenming luntan). The former provided a forum for free academic discussion, whereas the latter was aimed at promoting democracy in China. Third, the authorities have arrested and even prosecuted Web site owners and users for their sponsorship or their expression of ideas that the government dislikes. In early 2000, the Chinese government began to detain or arrest Internet-based individual protestors or organizers of collective action. There were five cases reported in that year. But the number of cases increased to 23 in the following year (Attacks on the Internet in China, 2002). For instance, Wang Yi and his wife Zeng Li, the owners of the Web site Heaven (tian wang), were arrested for “subverting the state.” A private Internet service provider was prosecuted for allegedly endangering national security by disclosing the e-mail addresses of his clients to an overseas institution identified as an antigovernment organization. Before the 16th Party Congress in the fall of 2002, a new wave of arrests was launched, resulting in a longer list of Internet users and Web site owners being arrested for their political views. They include Liu Di, an undergraduate student at Beijing Normal University, Li Yibin, a professional in Beijing who operates a Website titled Democracy and Liberty (minzhu yu ziyou), and Liao Yiwu, a poet based in Chongqing who regularly publishes online his criticism of the government.

Broader measures have also been taken to exercise control over Internet users. The government has established the net police organization. Various tight measures of approval and supervision are applied to Internet cafes. New IT has enabled the government to filter and block the flow of information. The government has succeeded in blocking many Web site magazines maintained by political dissidents in exile and others such as Amnesty International, China Human Rights, Tibetans in exile, and Falun Gong followers. It is also able to block reputable online international papers such as The Wash-

12. There have been piles of reports in the international media about how the Chinese state does control, filter, censor, and block the Internet. For systematic surveys, see Hachigian (2001).
The New York Times, and publications based in Hong Kong and Taiwan in accordance with its political needs. For instance, in September 2002, deemed to be a politically sensitive month due to the anticipated power transition at the Communist Party’s 16th National Congress, even the well-known online search Web sites such as Google and AltaVista were blocked temporarily. The regime feared that Internet users would have access to online information about leadership issues that are also viewed as state secrets. Such a situation was confirmed by a recent study conducted by Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society in which researchers found that more than 50,000 of some 204,012 distinct Web sites tested were inaccessible from at least one point in China on at least one occasion (Zittrain & Edelman, 2003).

Nevertheless, tight political control over the Internet does not mean that collective action becomes an impossible enterprise for social groups. State control certainly makes collective action more difficult but does not eliminate its possibility. Although IT enables the authorities to filter and block the flow of information, it also enables Internet users to counteract the efforts by the authorities. When Chinese users exchange information on how to work with IT, one common interest is about “proxy” technologies to overcome the firewall established by the regime. As Table 3 shows, “search engine” and “downloading and uploading software” are among the most demanded services among Chinese Internet users. An essential portion of the users have learned to circumvent official blockages to access overseas Web sites. Such technological capabilities do not exist among users in a free society because they do not need to possess them. Internet technology has created a new game altogether in that the government is unable to use traditional methods to control information access.

Furthermore, it is not in the interest of the state to have total control over Internet activities. The operation of the new socioeconomic system requires free flow of information. The state’s arbitrary intervention of information flow often causes serious damages to the existing system. A market economy in this globalization age is based on free flow of information. Crude methods used by the regime, such as shutting down search engines, only cause greater internal and external dissatisfaction. As Marcus Franda (2002) observed, “With more than 200,000 different routes around the major nodes of the Internet, attempts by Chinese authorities to program blockages in large numbers of routes would render Internet service almost unusable” (p. 94). Indeed, the government has had great difficulties achieving the twin goals—a free flow of information and a tight control of sensitive political information.

When total control becomes counterproductive, the government has to turn to other strategies. The government has appealed to more realistic and
Table 3
Services That Were Used Most Frequently (multiple choices, %), 2002-2004

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<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>88.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engine</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software downloading and uploading</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information acquiring</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online chatting, pager</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin board services, newsgroup</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free personal/Web site hosting</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-government</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online game</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stock trading</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<td>Online shopping and trading</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
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<td>Short message</td>
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<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online education</td>
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<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-journal</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.3</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td>22.6</td>
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<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information broadcasting</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online selling</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information system (ERP, CRM, SCM)</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
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<td>15.7</td>
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<td>Other services</td>
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Note: Dash = not available. ERP = enterprise resource planning; CRM = customer relation management; SCM = supply chain management.
feasible measures to govern cyberspace. What Hardin (1990) called “coordination” strategy becomes relevant here. Hardin contended that the state does not need to be a “gunman” state in order to solicit social obedience. An Orwellian vision of society does not mean effective and efficient governance. The state can keep its citizens under control without going to Orwellian extremes, because it can develop “conventions” to keep citizens from transgressing the boundaries and punish those who attempt to transgress the boundaries.

This is the strategy that the Chinese government has adopted in governing cyberspace. Two tactics have been used. First, the government only exercises selective control over information flow, that is, information with political sensitivity that can undermine regime legitimacy and is perceived as violating national security. Second, the government also uses selective penal measures to constrain those who have attempted to transgress the boundaries that the government has established for Internet users. The government allows limited information liberalization, but once Internet users exceed that limit, governmental intervention will come to “correct” online behavior. Indeed, once Internet users transgress the boundaries, the nature of the interactions between the government and Internet users changes. It tends to become what Hardin (1990) called a “conflict interaction,” in which “one party gains only if another loses” (p. 359). As will be discussed later, under such a situation Internet users often turn to a more effective and efficient strategy, that is, cooperation interaction.

THE INTERNET AS THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Politics is public by its very nature. There is a huge gap between free flow of information promoted by IT progress and the shaping of public discussions on political issues, a result of the successful transition from the private to the public sphere. Though the Internet promotes free flow of information in the private sphere, the question remains, Can the Internet further promote the transition from private action of information acquisition to collective

13. Hardin (1990) divided what he called “strategic interaction” into three categories, namely, conflict, coordination, and cooperation.

In a pure conflict one party can gain only if another loses. Coordination interactions are the virtual opposite of this. In such interactions each party can gain only if others also gain. . . Cooperation interactions involve elements of both conflict and coordination. I have something you want and you have something I want. . . There is conflict because each of us has to give up something in order for the other to gain. And there is coordination because we can both be made better off at once by exchanging. (pp. 359-360)
action of political participation? If collective action is to take place, the collective action problem has to be overcome first (Olson, 1965).

As collective actions take place frequently, collective action problems must be dealt with. There are different strategies to overcome the collective action problem such as conditional cooperation, convention, selective incentives, the state, community, political entrepreneurs, property rights, and norms. Although scholars in different schools emphasize different factors, some have found that forming identity politics or class consciousness, using the Marxist term, could become an effective and efficient strategy in doing so. As Sidney Tarrow (1998, p. 21) writes, overcoming collective action problems requires “shared understandings and identities” because these are the foundation of trust and cooperation.

Dennis Chong (1991, 2000) has tried to show that identity politics can be built into a rational model to explain collective action. He found that “social interaction promotes not only the development of mutual obligations and commitments but also the formation of other-regarding interests” (Chong, 1991, p. 9). In this context, we argue that the Internet promotes collective action by promoting social interaction and developing identity politics over the cyber-public sphere.

As discussed above, the technological nature of the Internet makes it very difficult for an authoritarian state to intervene and control the free flow of information. It is also true that the Chinese state has encountered increasing difficulties in controlling cyberspace discussions that promote public consciousness, and consequently collective action. The Internet has indeed constituted a public space for free discussions in many ways.

In China recently, more and more Web sites have been developed independently of the government, from the examples cited above to the Field of Ideas that aims at becoming an intellectual forum for discussing political affairs. The efforts by the state to close such Web sites are not the end of the story. The decentralized effects of Internet development mean that the battle between the state and society is an enduring one. When existing Web sites are closed, new ones are likely to emerge. This cyberspace “guerrilla warfare” is similar to what happened to the relations between the nationalist government and liberal intellectuals in China in the 1930s. Where dissident intellectuals in the 1930s relied on printed materials to voice their grievances and thoughts, now they have progressed to using IT. Needless to say, the Internet has enormous advantages for intellectuals to use as a platform for public discussions that the government dislikes and to work around the government’s tight control to completely eliminate such free discussion space. It is fair to say that the development of the Internet has at least provided a new public field for social groups to jostle for space vis-à-vis the authoritarian state.
New strategies have also been developed to conduct public discussions. Many liberal social groups have used nonpolitical Web sites, which normally focus on nonpolitical public issues, to conduct public or political discussions. Some of such Web sites, for example, *Jin Yong Martial Arts Novels*, are “private,” nonpolitical, or based on a common hobby. They have been gradually developed to cover almost all kinds of political topics, such as democratic elections in Taiwan and the 1989 prodemocratic movements.

Another way the social groups have frequently discussed public issues online is to utilize Web sites run by the governmental authorities. This is exemplified by the *Strong Nation Forum* (*qiangguo luntan*) in the *People’s Net*, a Web site managed by the Communist Party’s central organ, *People’s Daily*. It is found that the forum is much more liberal in content than the *People’s Daily*, as more liberal political discussions are allowed in the electronic forum than in its parent newspaper. This can be attributed to “the nature of freedom of the Internet, its spontaneity and its unlimited-ness, which decide jointly its popularity and capability to resist control” (Yi, 2000). Another important factor is the liberal orientation of the forum editors. Since the reform and open-door policy, Chinese democratic elites have been searching for every opportunity to voice their opinions and exchange ideas freely. This is especially true for newspaper editors of more prominent newspapers such as *People’s Daily* and *Guangming Daily*. In the 1980s, liberal newspaper editors played an important role in promoting the so-called bourgeois liberalization (Goldman, 1994), the legacy of which continues today. These editors were able to turn their liberal views into reality by allowing and encouraging liberal political discussions via the Internet.

Cyber discussions have had an important impact on people’s perception of politics in China. Whether IT encourages civic engagement in a democratic political setting is a controversial issue (Bimber, 2003; Norris, 2001; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). Some researchers found that IT tends to encourage individuals to isolate themselves from society (Putnam, 2000). The spread of IT, especially the Internet, more often than not, creates barriers for civic engagement; instead of encouraging collective action, the Internet is more likely to make it difficult to take place.

Nonetheless, survey data from China present a rather different picture. They confirm a positive relationship between the use of the Internet and group identity. Figure 2 shows the results of a 2003 survey among urban Internet users in 12 Chinese cities by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and University of California Los Angeles Center for Communication Policy. We can see that the overwhelming majority of people do not think that the use of the Internet has a negative impact on their contact with other people. On the contrary, more than 47% of the respondents believe that the use of
Figure 2. The Internet and Interpersonal Interaction in China (2003)

Source: Adapted from University of California Los Angeles Center for Communication Policy and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2003, pp. 27, 29, 30, 31).

Note: A = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share your hobbies/recreational activities? B = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share your political interests? C = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share your religion? D = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with people who share your profession? E = Has the use of Internet increased or decreased your contact with your family and friends?
the Internet has increased their contact with people who share their hobbies
and recreational activities, and 31% believe that it has increased their contact
with people who share their profession. The same survey also shows that the
average number of online friends met in person is two, but the average num-
ber of online friends never met in person is 7.7 (Chinese Academy of Social
Sciences, 2003, pp. 33-34). This simply implies that Internet users do engage
in social interaction, and on average the Internet-based community is larger
in size than a face-to-face community.

More important, the Internet seems to have made a more substantial politi-
cal impact in China than in democratic countries. In China, nearly 80% of the
people think that by using the Internet they can better understand politics,
compared to 43% in the United States, 31% in Japan, and 48% in South
Korea (see Figure 3). Also, nearly 61% of Internet users in China think that
by using the Internet, they can have more say about what the government
does compared to 20% in the United States, 24% in Japan, and 26% in South
Korea (see Figure 4). This is largely because in democratic countries, besides
the Internet people have other channels to express their opinions and to par-
ticipate in politics, whereas in China the Internet is perhaps the single most
important avenue for people to criticize government policies and to
participate in politics.

**INTERACTION STRATEGIES AND COLLECTIVE ACTION**

This article so far has demonstrated the impossibility of a total control of
free flow of information over the Internet by the government. It also shows a
positive impact of the Internet on civic engagement. Although the former cre-
ates possibilities of collective actions, the latter helps promote collective
actions. Nevertheless, there is a gap between information acquisition and col-
lective action. With the development of IT, people are now able, despite
authoritarian control, to have more opportunities to access alternative
sources of information than before. But if an individual’s private action can-
not be transformed into collective action aimed at public political participa-
tion, political liberalization and then democratization will be less likely to
take off. Thus the central question now is how collective action actually takes
place in China.

It is not a question of whether Internet-based collective action is possible,
because such collective actions tend to become increasingly popular in
China. The question is whether Internet-based collective action can succeed
in challenging the state. As discussed earlier, the Chinese state has adopted a
harsh policy toward Internet users who pose a direct challenge to the state.
Figure 3. Do You Think by Using the Internet People Like You Can Better Understand Politics? (all respondents, 18 and above)

Source: Adapted from University of California Los Angeles Center for Communication Policy and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2003, p. 45).
Figure 4. Do You Think by Using the Internet People Like You Can Have More Say About What the Government Does? (all respondents, 18 and above)

Source: Adapted from University of California Los Angeles Center for Communication Policy and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2003, p. 44).
Many Internet-based collective challenges were cracked down on by the state. Among others, the most cited two are the Falun Gong movement and the China Democracy Party movement in the late 1990s. As analyzed by Chase and Mulvenon (2002), almost all Web sites that challenge the Chinese state directly are based overseas, especially in the United States and Europe, such as Beijing Spring, China Democracy Party, Falun Gong, and Free Tibet campaign. All these developments have led scholars to conclude that the Internet is not able to pose a serious challenge to the communist state; instead, the Internet tends to empower the authoritarian regime (Kalathil & Boas, 2003).

Apparently, such a conclusion is rather simplistic. In recent years, there have been many Internet-based collective actions that succeeded in challenging the state. When major events occurred, very intensive Web site discussions would suddenly arise, and intense political pressure was created for the authorities. Two of the earliest examples occurred in 1998 and 2000. In the summer of 1998, not long after the emergence of the Internet in China, massive riots occurred in Indonesia, where hundreds of ethnic Chinese were killed. When the news reached China, the Internet became a main forum for the public to express their condolences and support for the Indonesian Chinese. Despite its initial reluctance, the government was eventually pressured to condemn human rights violations in Indonesia (Qiu, 1999). The following year, in May 2000, Qiu Qingfeng, a female undergraduate at Beijing University, was killed by gangsters. Students tried to collectively mourn her death, but such an action was prohibited by the university. Consequently, students organized intensive discussions on how to organize collective action against the university’s decision on a Web site called Beijing University On Line (beida zaixian) and a bulletin board system called yitahutu (In a Muddled State), instead of organizing public demonstrations and posting “bid character posters” in the Triangle Area, a traditional way of collective action of students at the university. The university eventually reversed its decision and allowed public mourning services to be held.

With the rapid development of the Internet, more and more Internet-based collective actions are possible. Among others, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) event, the death of Sun Zhigang, and the Sun Dawu incidents are best known. This is not the place to make a detailed analysis of these events, but a simple summary is useful to highlight the role of the Internet in the unfolding of these events.

The SARS epidemic. The first SARS case was in China’s Guangdong province in November 2003, which then spread to many parts of the world in a matter of a few weeks. When this happened, related Chinese authorities
failed to report on the extent of the outbreak in the country. Consequently, when SARS spread to different parts of the world, the international community, especially those in Asia, were angry with China. What broke China’s information control was IT. Though all newspaper reports on SARS were suppressed, information on SARS was circulating among people, regions, and even countries via e-mails, short message service, and other Internet-based communications. And there was no stopping this information chain, even after those who circulated such information were punished by the Chinese authorities. The bravest act was by Dr. Jiang Yanyong, a retired military doctor in Beijing. On April 4, after he watched on television the claim by China’s minister of health that SARS was not serious and that everything was under control, he wrote an open letter to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership about the real situation of SARS in the country. Dr. Jiang first e-mailed a TV station in China and a pro-China TV station in Hong Kong but received no response from either. Later, he e-mailed the letter to The New York Times, which published Jiang’s letter immediately. The whole world was then informed of the actual situation of SARS in China, particularly what was happening in the military hospitals. Once the matter was publicized, the Chinese leadership suddenly faced mounting pressure from within and outside China to act. The new leadership began to take decisive measures to contain the spread of SARS. Both minister Zhang Wenkang and Beijing mayor Meng Xuenong, who were held responsible for concealing the facts about SARS, were removed office. Within a short time, hundreds of officials at different levels of government were removed for their negligence during the SARS outbreak. The Internet forced the government to respond to SARS in a more transparent and accountable way.

The death of Sun Zhigang. On March 20, 2003, Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old young man, was beaten to death by eight inmates in the infirmary of a custody and repatriation center in Guangzhou. After the case was disclosed, the whole country rallied against the “measures for custody and repatriation [C&R] of vagrant and beggars in cities,” which was passed in 1982 to provide shelter for homeless people in cities. In reality, the C&R system became a means for local governments to protect their own residents against outsiders (i.e., migrants from other localities). Millions of people were detained, including the poor, migrant workers, women who were kidnapped for sale in the underground market, and petitioners who sought justice from the government. The death of Sun Zhigang aroused people’s sense of outrage against the C&R system. People from different parts of the country posted their stories on the Internet or among each other via e-mails, telling their nightmarish experience at C&R centers. More important, educated citizens began to ques-
tion the constitutionality of the C&R system. It became the hottest topic among students as well as professors in all major universities. On May 16, 2003, three Ph.D. candidates in Beijing’s universities submitted a petition to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress to reexamine the constitutionality of the 1982 C&R. Meanwhile, they also posted the letter on the Internet. With increasing public pressure, the new leadership began to show its support of popular sentiments against human rights abuses. On June 20, Premier Wen Jiabao declared that the C&R would be abolished from August 1, 2003 and replaced by the “Measures of Management of Urban Vagrant Baggers.” It was the first time in the history of People’s Republic of China that one civilian death caused the repeal of a state regulation. The abolition of the C&R marks an improvement in human rights, and thus an important step toward China’s political progress.

The Sun Dawu event. Sun Dawu is a prestigious Chinese private entrepreneur and a political activist in Hebei. He was critical of government policies, especially those toward private enterprises, and even China’s political system. He created his own Web site, circulating his papers and speeches on political reforms and farmers’ rights via the Internet. Disappointed with China’s policies, Sun began to challenge them. Although the Chinese government has legalized the private sector since the early 1990s, private enterprises are often denied loans from state banks. Frustrated by this policy, Sun established a financial corporation that operated very much like a small private bank. It accepted deposits from residents and paid interest rates two or three times higher than those offered by state-owned banks. On May 27, 2003, Sun was detained by the local public security bureau for illegally taking deposits of millions of yuan. Like the death of Sun Zhigang, the arrest of Sun Dawu immediately stirred up national sentiment against relevant authorities. Chinese intellectuals and private entrepreneurs showed their strong support for Sun. Extensive discussions were carried out via the Internet. The criticisms were leveled at government regulations that prohibited private enterprises, namely, the small- and medium-sized ones, from securing loans from state banks. Liberal legal scholars argued that Sun should not have been detained, but rather the relevant government regulations should have been abolished. With growing popular pressure, the central leadership had to step in. On October 30, 2003, Sun was sentenced to 3 years in jail with a 4-year reprieve. In January 2004, the Hebei provincial government issued a new policy to liberalize the previously rigid regulations of prohibiting loan access to private entrepreneurs. Like the death of Sun Zhigang, the Sun Dawu event also led to a major political concession on the part of the Hebei provincial government.
How have all these collective actions led to some positive results? The Internet played an important role in the processes. Without the Internet, it would be impossible for social forces to bring their influence to bear in such a short time. The Internet enabled social forces to react to events more quickly and efficiently. So the question is why some collective actions failed while other succeeded.

Interaction strategies matter. As discussed earlier, if a given collective action is perceived as undermining the legitimacy of the state, it is likely to invite a crackdown by the state. In such a situation, the interaction between the state and society becomes a zero-sum game, or a conflict interaction in Hardin’s (1990) term, and such a collective action is doomed to fail. In other words, direct challenges often lead to coordinated action on the part of the state. As in the case of the Falun Gong, the siege of Zhongnanhai (the communist leadership compound) in 1999 led to a concerted crackdown by the state in the following years, essentially forcing the Falun Gong into exile.

The failure of direct challenges has led Chinese Internet users to turn to another important interaction strategy with the state, that is, what Hardin called “cooperation interaction” (p. 360). Such an interaction strategy was embedded in all the above-mentioned cases of successful challenges.

This strategy is similar to what Hirschman (1970) referred to as the “voice.” According to Hirschman, when an organization’s members express their dissatisfaction directly to some authority or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen, they have chosen a voice option. As a result, relevant authorities have to be engaged in a search for the causes and possible solutions to members’ dissatisfaction (p. 4). The use of the voice option is an attempt by members to change in a constructive manner the practices, policies, and outputs of an organization which they identify with. The voice is used to change, not escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the authority directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in practice, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion (p. 30).

In this context, we can say that voice activities refer to those Internet-facilitated collective actions that do not pose a direct challenge to the state. The voice is acceptable to both the state and society. On the part of the state, the voice does not aim to undermine or overthrow the state. Instead, through a voice mechanism, the state can receive feedback from social groups to respond to state decline and improve its legitimacy.

On the part of the social groups, the voice option is acceptable mainly for two reasons. First, it is a tactic with low risk and cost. As Hirschman (1970, p. 33) pointed out, the voice option is the only way through which dissatisfied
members can react whenever the exit option is unavailable. As discussed earlier, a conflict interaction or an exit option, in Hirschman’s term, is likely to invite a crackdown by the state, and thus contains high political risks. Once challengers choose a conflict interaction or are identified as opposition to the state, the confrontation between them and the state becomes inevitable. Frequently, protesters are arrested, detained, and punished.

Second, the voice option can effectively introduce changes into political and policy practices on the part of the state and thus lead to incremental political changes. It seems that all the aforementioned three cases posed serious challenges to the government. But a challenge does not necessarily amount to a threat. All these cases exposed all kinds of malpractice and mismanagement in China’s political system. They thus provided the reformist leadership with the opportunities to correct the system. Measures taken in dealing with the SARS epidemic, for instance, greatly promoted China’s political transparency and political accountability on the part of the state. The death of Sun Zhigang pushed the government to abolish an old regulation which had led to serious human rights violation. The Sun Dawu case helped the government to correct its old practice of discriminating against private entrepreneurs. It is in this sense that Chinese Internet users believe that the Internet has enabled them to participate in politics and have a say in what the government does.

CONCLUSION

When examining the impact of IT, especially the Internet, on democratic development in China, we have, in detail, singled out three tiers of analytical framework upon which the Internet works to promote information flow, expand public space, and organize collective action. We have found that the Internet links differently to the various elements that critically promote political changes. At the first tier we have found that the Internet is capable of facilitating free flow of information, providing alternative information sources, and thus increasing an individual’s freedom to information access. In this sense, the Internet promotes political liberalization, defined as an expansion of individual freedom.

At the second tier, where it has been argued that the Internet helps to shape the public sphere and civil society that are critical for successful democratic transition, a positive conclusion is also reached. The Internet can lead to the formation of public cyberspace and thus promotes the development of civil society. In China, the Internet serves as a new battlefield where the state and social groups fight for power and interest. Despite China’s authoritarian rule,
social groups are able to use the Internet to influence state politics and policy practices.

The third link between the Internet and democratization refers to the limitations and potential that Internet technology poses to collective action, as the latter is regarded as the necessary process that causes democratic political change. When there is substantial development in civil society and autonomous organizations, the Internet can be used as an effective tool to organize collective action against authoritarian rule. In China, due to its authoritarian rule, the Internet has not led to the development of a politically autonomous civic society. Nevertheless, as we have shown, there are successful collective actions via the Internet that social groups used to change old state politics and policy practices. Whether collective actions will succeed largely depends on the interaction strategies between the state and society.

The Internet has introduced drastic changes to relations between the state and society. Who will be the winner in the battle conducted over the Internet? This is probably the most frequently asked question among scholars. More often than not, this battle is regarded as a zero-sum game. Of course, there are many examples of such cases. The successful overthrow of the Suharto government in Indonesia is perhaps the most dramatic and clear-cut case. Another example is the “Zapatista effect” in Mexico. Since 1994, revolutionaries opposing the Mexican government in the state of Chiapas have benefited substantially from the decentralized, inexpensive, and self-organizing nature of communication facilitated through the new IT.

Nevertheless, the Chinese case shows that the battle conducted over the Internet is not necessarily a zero-sum game. Internet development can be mutually empowering for both the state and society. The state has used the Internet to increase its legitimacy, as in the case of Internet nationalism (Li, Xuan, & Kluver, 2003), but social groups are also using it to change state politics and policy practices. Although the Internet so far has not been able to bring about democracy to China, it has certainly promoted incremental political liberalization. With the expansion of Internet use and development, the political effects of the Internet will continue to unfold. When political liberalization continues, democratization may not necessarily be an impossible enterprise.

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