A Model Based on Normative Theories: How Internet Use and Skills in the Long Run Impact the Watchdog Role of the Web and Political Cynicism of Chinese Netizens

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Abstract:

This paper has two overarching goals: first, derive from both western and eastern political philosophies normatively desirable political outcomes applicable to the online environment in China characterized by stringent state-regulations; second, propose an empirically testable model to account for how Chinese netizens' Internet use in the long run impacts these normative ideals.

Regarding the first goal, at the core of this paper's arguments is the call for more elaboration on normative criteria that should guide scholarly discussions on political impacts of the Internet and online censorship policy in China. As an explorative attempt to answer this call, I elicited two crucial if not essential dimensions for normative consideration—–the power-checking function of the Internet and social integration—–from comparing and contrasting western models of democracy (artfully summarized in Baker's (2002) articulation of four modes of democracy) with eastern sociopolitical philosophies of the Confucian school (encapsulated by the doctrines of Li). Later in developing the empirically verifiable model, I used Chinese netizens' acquirement of a special kind of political knowledge—–awareness of government' improper or incompetent handling of sociopolitical issues—–as an index to the fulfillment of the watchdog role of the Internet, and the level of political cynicism as an assessment of social integration, mostly due to the limit of the advancement of the current literature.

As for the second goal, drawing from the literature on the sociology of news production, cognitive psychology of media effects, and a structural approach to ICTs use and knowledge gaining, I laid out a meditational model in which general Internet use, online news consumption, and web-use skills mediate the effects of netizens' socio-economic status on political knowledge gaining and level of political cynicism. Weaknesses and directions for future research of this model were addressed in the end of this paper.