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User Behavior and the Impact of the Internet: A Study on Chinese Net Users in Beijing and Shanghai

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Jiang Wei

Introduction

The Internet, as a revolutionary information communication technology, has the ability to transcend conventional borders and boundaries, bringing us a global information flow as well as free discussion forums. In recent years, the Internet has penetrated China at a rapid speed. As an authoritarian country with strict limitations and controls on information flow and free speech, the Internet's future in China has attracted much scholastic attention.

China's first Internet connection service for the public started in 1995 in Beijing and Shanghai, through a dedicated circuit by Sprint Corporation with a rate of 64bps. In contrast to other authoritarian countries, the Chinese government spared no effort in promoting the infrastructure and use of the Internet. China now houses the world's most dynamic economy, with a strategic focus on the information technology industry. Within only eight years, the number of Chinese Internet users has expanded to 68 million, according to the 12th semi-annual survey report of CNNIC.

To the Chinese government, economic benefits are obviously the most appealing incentive for rolling out the Internet. Hachigan (2001) explained the thinking of the government in this way: "The CCP (Chinese Communist Party)'s popularity now so depends on economic growth that its leaders are safer with the Internet than without it." Such view is fairly representative of western scholars. However, in addition to economic dividends, some other important social and historical factors play into the Chinese government's motivations and cannot be neglected. The strong desire to rejuvenate the Chinese nation is one important impetus (Zhao, 1999). Influenced by the lesson deeply imbedded in modern Chinese history that "one who is lagging behind will be beaten", the idea that "science and technology is the first productivity" became popular in the early 1990s. Informatization is believed to be the key to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It has brought an opportunity for China to narrow the gap with advanced countries by introducing most recent and advanced technologies directly, thus saving the costs of the pitfalls that advanced countries experienced in the early period of informatization.

There is a consensus that the major Internet strategy of the Chinese government is to utilize the Internet as well as to control its usage by strict regulation. For example, a recent Harvard study found more than 19,000 sites to have been blocked (Zittrain & Edelman, 2003). The Chinese government's regulations of the Internet network and its online content are of roughly two types: content censorship among domestic websites and the blocking of selected foreign websites. This strategy, according to some researchers, is effective and will remain largely effective for some time in maintaining authority in a networked society.

However, most of the previous research did not go beyond the framework of Lessig (1999), which argued that market forces, laws and regulations and technical limitations hinder a totally free Internet. Empirical research into net users in mainland China is sparse. Existing literature in this vein includes the survey research by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2001, which aimed to explore the

social impact of the Internet in China, and Zhou and He's (2002) research into the impact of the Internet in mainland Chinese net users' value orientations. Other research, such as the national surveys of Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which focused on the macro picture and general usage patterns of the Chinese net users, also lays a foundation for future study. However, how Chinese net users take advantage of the Internet's function of accessing global information sources and participating in free discussion forums, and their perceptions towards those Internet information sources and forums, are still largely unexplored. This paper thus aims to explore Chinese net users' sophistication as audience, their selections and preferences among information sources, and their participation in online forums.

Methodology

A combination of two major approaches was adopted in this study. Specifically, a survey on Chinese university students and semi-structured online interviews on Chinese net users with various backgrounds were conducted. A major strength of survey methodology is its ability to measure variability in the target population and its generality. It is also suited to measuring behavioral indicators and attitudinal attributes (Chu & Ju, 1993). However, survey research is weak at establishing causal relationships. In addition, statistics generated from survey research reflects the micro situation while "providing little indication of the often contradictory, perceptions, values and experiences of actual people" (Gamble, 2002). Qualitative interviews, however, provide much richer insights that reflect diversified values and experiences or underlying motivations. Semi-structured interviews with relatively open and loose topic guides especially encourages two-way communication between the researcher and the interviewees. A combination and creative usage of these two approaches in this study aims to make the best of them.

The target population of this survey was currently-enrolled Chinese university students in Beijing and Shanghai. Using the convenient sampling method, 500 students from five universities in Beijing and Shanghai were selected as respondents. The justifications for focusing on university students in Beijing and Shanghai and using the convenience sampling method are as follows:

First, previous studies have shown that Chinese university students constitute a significant part of the Chinese online population. According to the 12th CNNIC Survey Report, the most significant group of Chinese online by industries/professions is the students (30.1 percent), and the most significant age group is the 18-24 year-olds (39.1 percent). This age range is similar to that of the overwhelming majority of Chinese university students. The report also showed that most Chinese net users have a college diploma and above (55.2 percent).

Second, Chinese university students are the major constituents of the Chinese intellectual or elite class, making their online activities especially worthy of attention. It has been observed that Chinese intellectuals play a key role in political issues in China (Calhoun, 1994; English-Lueck, 1997; Goldman, 1994; Kluver, 1999). The emerging civic discourse in China tends to be dominated by the Chinese intellectual class, which plays a critical function in Chinese society (Kluver, 1999). The Chinese intellectual class identified as *zhishifenzi* is technically defined as people with above secondary education, but usually refers to a small group of people with advanced education and who care about cultural or social issues (English-Leuck, 1997). According to this definition, university students are the key members of the Chinese

intellectual class, since university students and people with higher degrees represent only a small percentage of the whole population. Chinese modern history has also shown that university students often stand at the front line of important social transitions such as the May 4th Movement. Thus, the use of the Internet among university students is important for understanding the Internet's role as an information source and discourse forum in China.

Third, university students are largely net users, and they usually reside on campuses. As seen from the pilot studies, university students are highly homogeneous in many aspects, especially in terms of online activities. Therefore, it is cost-effective to carry out a quantitative survey of university students and it would arguably produce meaningful data.

Finally, not only are Beijing and Shanghai the most developed Chinese metropolises, they also have the highest concentration of net users in China (Data source: 11th CNNIC Statistical Survey Report on the Development of Internet in China, Jan 2003). Beijing as the capital as well as political and cultural centre of China, and Shanghai as the economic centre of China, both have the traditions of taking the lead in social change in China. Arguably, the results from these two cities could indicate the trends in other parts of China in the near future.

Based on these justifications, 500 students from different departments at five Chinese universities in Beijing and Shanghai were selected as respondents for this study. These students were approached after class with the help of lecturers, using the method of convenient sampling. The eventual sample consisted of 429 students, which translates into a response rate of 85.8 percent, calculated using the RR1 formula of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

For the in-depth interviews, corpus construction was employed as the rationale for selecting interviewees. As a means of judgmental sampling, its power lies in selecting particular cases that fit with pre-set criteria and to obtain rich information for in-depth analysis related to the themes being studied (Patton, 1987). As the CNNIC survey has revealed, the typical Chinese net user is a male, young (between age 18-35), single and well educated (with a college diploma and above). This particular group of typical Chinese net users quite possibly offers complex views so it is fair to pay an overproportional attention to them in this research. As a consequence, efforts were made to ensure that half of the interviewees fit the typical profile of the Chinese net user, while the other half of the interviewees in this study fall out of the typical profile, with different attributes in sex, age or education level. In sum, the 20 interviewees selected constitute a broad cross-section of Chinese net users in terms of demographic factors and socio-economic status.

The snowball technique was used to pick interviewees. The researcher started from her own circle of friends to find some volunteers for the pilot studies. These people were then asked to suggest other people who suited the predefined profile in this study. Thus the researcher got a pool of possible respondents and contacted them directly. This snowball technique helps to develop reliable contacts effectively while reducing the risk of interviewing the wrong person, which is a pitfall of online interviewing (Mann & Stewart, 2002).

Survey Results

Access to Alternative and Official Information Sources

The survey showed that the Internet did provide the respondents with alternative information sources. Many foreign conventional media previously unavailable in China reached the respondents easily through the Internet. The respondents reported having visited a variety of foreign websites including the websites of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *London Times*.

However, the study also found that domestic websites and official media were still dominant online and off line information sources respectively, as shown in Table 1.1. The initial list of top ten most frequently visited news websites did not include any foreign websites. However, considering that three of the sites in this initial list are similar local university bulletin board systems, they were merged into a single category (“Local University BBS”), producing a new top ten list, which included Yahoo! (International) and the website of the New York Times (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Ten Most Frequently Visited News Websites List

Rank	Name of the Website	Address	Number of nomination
1	Sina	www.sina.com.cn	317
2*	Local University BBS	(News board)	307
3	Sohu	www.sohu.com.cn	220
4	Chinese Yahoo	www.cn.yahoo.com	152
5	263	www.263.net	106
6	Xinhuanet	www.xinhua.net	84
7	Renminnet	www.peopledaily.com.cn	68
8	Netease	www.netease.com.cn	55
9	New York Times	www.nytimes.com	54
10	Yahoo!	www.yahoo.com	50

* local university BBS here includes three bbs (belongs to Tsinghua University, Fudan University and Beijing University respectively) which were originally ranked in the top ten list. Other BBS nominated are not included.

Similarly, in the top ten list of most frequently used conventional news media, official information sources also took eight places, leaving only two vacancies for overseas information sources, which were occupied by Hong Kong’s Phoenix TV channel and the Voice of America (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Ten Most Frequently Used Conventional News Media

Rank	Name of the Media	Notes	Number of nomination
1	China Central TV Station	The national TV station of China	294
2	Nanfang Weekly	A newspaper based in Guangzhou	129
3	Phoenix Satellite TV	A TV station based in Hongkong	109
4	Beijing Youth Daily	A newspaper based in Beijing	73
5	China Radio International	A English broadcasting station in Beijing	60
6	Global Times	A newspaper based in Beijing	59
7	Titan Weekly	A newspaper majored in sports news	59
8	Cankao Xiaoxi	A newspaper affiliated to Xinhua News Agency	54
9	Voice of America	A radio station based in the USA	56
10	Shanghai TV Station	A TV station based in Shanghai	56

Language is apparently a major barrier that hinders Chinese users from accessing online information sources, as most of web resources are in English. The majority of the respondents (74.6 percent) reported that they prefer to read Chinese. Only when the foreign news websites that they desired to visit had no Chinese versions would 39.6 percent of the respondents then read in English (or other foreign languages), while 36.9 percent of the respondents reported that they would simply give up in such circumstances.

Perceived Credibility of Different Information Sources

In the four categories of (a) domestic websites; (b) domestic conventional media; (c) overseas Internet sources; and (d) overseas conventional media that this study tried to compare, domestic conventional media were perceived as most trustworthy, receiving the highest scores on a 5-point Likert scale.

As shown in Tables 1.3-1.7, the online news resources were generally perceived by the respondents to be not as trustworthy as conventional media. Websites run by conventional media were perceived as more credible than other websites. This tendency applies to both international and domestic information sources. However, there was no significant difference in perceived credibility between domestic websites and overseas websites.

It is worth mentioning that although overseas conventional media as a category received the second highest score only after domestic conventional media, there were very significant differences in credibility within the category: VOA received the lowest score in all the online and offline sources here, while Phoenix TV received the highest score overall.

Table 1.3. Perceived Credibility of Domestic Websites

Nature of the websites	Commercial Websites					Non-Commercial Websites	Websites run by conventional media	
Name of Websites	Sina	Sohu	263	Netease	Chinese Yahoo	BBS	Xinhuanet	Renminnet
Perceived Credibility	3.64	3.49	3.36	3.43	3.6	3.48	4.23	4.23
Average Credibility (weighed)	3.599							

Table 1.4. Perceived Credibility of the Domestic Conventional Media

Name of Media	CC TV	Nanfang Weekly	Beijing Youth Daily	China Radio International	Global Times	Titan Weekly	Cankao Xiaoxi	S TV
Perceived Credibility	3.93	4.22	3.8	3.86	4	4.4	3.4	3.83
Average Credibility (weighed)	3.95							

Table 1.5. Perceived Credibility of the Overseas Websites

Nature of the websites	Commercial Website	Website of Conventional Media
Name of websites	Yahoo!	New York Times Website
Perceived Credibility	3.61	4.1
Average Credibility (weighed)	3.8	

Table 1.6. Perceived Credibility of Overseas Conventional Media

Name of Media	VOA	Phoenix TV
Perceived Credibility	2.83	4.48
Average Credibility (weighed)	3.92	

Online Forum/Chat Room Participation

The results showed that the majority of the respondents (89.3 percent) did take advantage of online forums by reading news or essays relating to current affairs posted by others. However, most of the respondents read passively and kept silent on net forums: 62.4 percent reported that they never engaged in cross-posting in online forums; 64.8 percent reported that they never discussed current affairs in chat rooms; and 47 percent reported that they never posted any comments or opinions in online forums. In conclusion, the active participants of online forums and chat rooms were obviously the absolute minority as shown in Table 1.7.

Table 1.7. Online Forum Participation

Activities Frequency	Cross-post Articles	Post Opinions or Comments	Discuss Current Affairs in Chat Rooms
Often	2.6%	5.0%	1.6%
Sometimes	6.8%	10.4%	5.0%
Occasionally	28.2%	37.6%	28.7%
Never	62.4%	47.0%	64.8%

Net users' Perception about the Internet's Impact

The survey found that the respondents had a positive attitude towards the Internet's provision of information sources and free speech forums. An overwhelming majority (82.6 percent) of them agreed or somewhat agreed that the Internet is a free space for expressing opinions. The majority (77.7 percent) of them agreed or somewhat agreed that the Internet provides alternative information resources that make them more open-minded. In addition, most of them (64.6 percent) agreed or somewhat agreed that the discussions and debates on the web forums help them to find out the truth or to have new ideas about current affairs.

However, the survey also found that the respondents were generally skeptical of the impact of the Internet on the government. 62.4 percent of the respondents said that they disagreed or somewhat disagreed with the statement that "the opinions expressed by the net users on the web forums will have some impact on the government's policy making". Only 24.1 percent of the respondents agreed or

somewhat agreed with the above statement and 13.5 percent of the respondents were undecided.

Findings and Discussions

Dominance of Local Information

The study finds that the Internet significantly diversified the information channels and sources for net users in Chinese universities. However, local information sources, both online and off line, dominated their information sources. This is the result of social and cultural factors, and some technical barriers such as language. Local information sources provide the most recent news and information relevant to Chinese net users' daily life or long-term interests, and in their own language.

The study also suggests that Chinese net users form a sophisticated audience. Although they did use the Internet to access alternative information sources, they do not automatically believe alternative information. Their acceptance of alternative information was actually very inconsistent. The interviews showed that at some special periods, Chinese net users were hungry for alternative information. The recent outbreak of SARS is a typical example. During this period, conventional domestic media tended to follow the Party or the government's rule strictly, keeping silent even while the general public was desperate for life-and-death information. Uncertainty and anxiety thus became driving forces pushing people to access alternative information via any possible means. For example, one interviewee dreamy (net name) put it,

“As there was little mentioned in the newspaper or TV, I hooked on the Internet everyday to read the posts in some BBS. And I had learned more news about the SARS, mostly were cross-posted from foreign news sources. You know, I soon became an information center in my family since my parents who don't know how to use the Internet are also so anxious and hungry for news!”

However, during most other periods, they deemed the alternative information to be non-credible.

There are many possible reasons for Chinese net users' inconsistent attitude and low degree of trust to alternative information as shown by the interviews. Living in a socialist country where propaganda is an institutionalised and open practice, people are not only accustomed to propaganda from the Party and the government, but are also aware of the propaganda they are receiving from the outside world. As a result, many Chinese people have acquired a certain degree of political sensitivity and have developed a sophisticated attitude towards news media. They have a tendency to question whether there are any underlying political motivations behind the production of news and information about China, especially negative reports. The following quote from Julia (net name) is a shared feeling among many interviewees.

“When I was a student residing in school, I once spent a lot of time listening to radio programs such as VOA, Radio Free Asia etc, just feeling curious about their content and to improve my English. But soon I found that it always dwells on the negative side of China as if the general public is living a miserable life. When I turned off the radio and turned to our CCTV, however, you would see what a happy life our people lead and how bright our futures are. Maybe they both lack balance and are not completely reliable. But I do

know my life is getting better and better. So I think they (foreign media) are just demonizing our country for their own sake.” (Julia)

Poor or unacceptable content from alternative information sources is also an important factor that harms Chinese net user’s reliance and trust of them. Due to language factors (as the survey results reported, the majority of Chinese net users prefer to read in Chinese, even those who are English-literate), online information sources that Chinese net users seek are mostly overseas Chinese websites or foreign media websites with Chinese versions. Many overseas Chinese websites mentioned by the respondents in this study are run by overseas Chinese through small companies or non-official organizations. Without sufficient financial support and other resources, these websites are largely copying and reediting second-hand news and information. Poor-quality news and unreliable information are often included, which greatly hurts their credibility. Some western media with big names, however, also succumb to stereotypes in reporting China issues, tending to depict China in a negative light or from a western perspective that is unpalatable to Chinese net users.

“They (foreign media) really like to criticize us in this and that as if they are in a more prestigious status. Without deep understanding of our society and history, most of their severe criticism of issues in China serves their own interests. For example, their frequent coverage on the Tibet issue which is usually full of ungrounded assertion is one thing that is unbearable...” (Perry)

Domestic news websites, however, are perceived as largely reliable. Many Chinese net users even believe that major news websites and portals can actually replace the conventional official media as reliable and effective information sources. Criticisms toward domestic websites generally focused on their commercial orientation and poor taste.

To sum up, although the Internet provides a comparatively free information flow, people tend to perceive those websites with an offline “conventional” presence as more credible. Local information generally dominated the information sources, and foreign sites are much less relevant because they have less content on China. However, things might be much different during a crisis with little official information. In that case, people would be hungry for alternative information sources and might be more accepting of websites that they ordinarily consider non-credible.

Awareness and Identification with the Censorship

The study shows that most Chinese net users are aware of the censorship policy. While the majority of them feel that domestic websites enjoy more freedom than official media - “a signal of the progress of the society” as one interviewee put it - they also find that there are still too many limitations on topics that can be reported and discussed on the websites. In addition to the content censorship by the government, many of them also realize the existence of self-censorship by the websites.

However, perhaps the most significant finding of this research is that most of the Chinese net users seem to understand and even sympathise with this censorship policy. This identification with the censorship policy seems to be positively correlated with people’s socio-economic status, i.e., people with better education and higher

income tend to agree more with the censorship policy, although this correlation is not absolute.

“It is beneficial for the government to have strict control over the content on the Internet in some sense, as at present the priority of our country is to achieve economic success, and too much uncontrolled information may cause the country and the society to become unstable and thus do harm to all.”
(Wang)

Such a point of view is shared by many of the interviewees. This is largely decided by their socio-economic status. Although the population of Chinese net users now includes people from more diverse backgrounds than before, the composition of Chinese net users still tends to be dominated by people with good education and high income. As in this study, even though the 20 interviewees are of different backgrounds in terms of age, education level as well as profession, they all identify themselves as “middle class” Chinese. In addition, as urban residents of Beijing or Shanghai, where the economy is developing at a higher rate than most other places in China, these interviewees would tend to have good prospects for the future. Not surprisingly, these “middle-class” Chinese want “a stable country and society” most.

However, Chinese net users also make a claim for moderate reforms of the current censorship policy. While generally identifying with the censorship policy, many also believe that the current policy is too stringent in some aspects, and that it would be beneficial for the society and economic development if censorship were eased. But again, the debate is over the “proper extent” to which the censorship policy should be lifted, further reflecting their attitude of identifying with the censorship policy in general.

Apathetic Political Attitudes and Passive Response to Government Regulations

The study finds that most Chinese net users are passive towards government regulation over the Internet. Almost all of the interviewees had the experience of not being able to visit their desired websites because of the blocks placed by the government. However, few would take the trouble to search for means to bypass the barriers. Although the government has no means to eliminate every avenue for Chinese net users to reach those forbidden areas, it does successfully hinder most net users from doing so. If the information cannot reach the majority, the political impact may be insignificant.

The study also finds that only a minority of Chinese net users are active on forums. Only a very small portion of Chinese net users would cross-post articles, post comments or initiate discussions on Internet forums, among which even less are concerned with political or public affairs content.

The passive attitude to government regulation and poor forum participation may be due to apathetic attitudes that seem to be prevalent among Chinese net users, including those very frequent or active users. In an atmosphere where economic development is the top priority, many people have become practical-minded and self-centered. They are eager to make money for themselves instead of concerning themselves with politics. The Internet may not have the ability to reverse these trends, and increase people’s interest in politics or current affairs. The Internet is thus part of a wider environment that may influence net users’ perceptions or ideas on politics and current affairs. Its political impact may be limited to only the most motivated people.

The study also shows that the Chinese net users generally hold a positive attitude toward the Internet as an alternative information source and a free speech forum, even though the majority of them are also aware of government surveillance of the medium. Even with strict control and regulation, the Internet still allows much more space for information and free discussion than was previously available. Ironically, although the Chinese net users perceive the Internet as a free space for the exchange of ideas and information, they have little expectation that such activity will have impact on government policy. It seems that for Chinese net users, the Internet is more like an autonomous space where discussions can take place but without practical effects in the real world of politics.

Conclusions

This paper has explored Chinese net users' usage patterns and perceptions toward various information sources and online forum participation. The empirical findings have shed some light on the social and political impacts of the Internet in China. The impacts are too large, complex and multi-causal to be handled fully in a single research paper. However, some hints can be offered.

First of all, the study has revealed that, even with strict control by the Chinese government, the Internet has diversified information resources to an extent previously unavailable. It also provides some comparatively free space for online civic discourse.

However, from the analysis of usage patterns of Chinese net users and their perceptions in this study, it may be fair to conclude that the Internet's reputation as an effective alternative information source and free civic discourse forum is something of a false image. Putting the government control and regulation issue aside, there are cultural and linguistic gaps and social psychological factors that hinder Chinese net users from venturing into the global information flow. Most stay within the "local space" instead for information seeking. Many of them are self-centred and care much more about personal economic interest than public affairs. The discussion forums for political and public issues are taken advantage of mostly by very few active users, and their ideas hardly reach the government and the general public.

Finally, the study finds weak evidence for the impact of the Internet in political motivation. Again, as shown in the study, the Internet's advantages in providing free global information flow and free forums are more for the already-motivated people who constitute only a minority of the whole Chinese net user population.

However, the Internet is still new to the general public. Even with seven years' history of public usage and one of the largest online populations in the world, the overwhelming majority of Chinese people, especially at the grassroots, have not yet adopted the Internet. The long-term impact of the Internet remains to be seen, and the present situation may yet change.

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