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Mobile Communication, Public Participation and E-Governance in China - A Case Study of Xiamen Anti-PX Demonstration

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ABSTRACT

China has become the biggest mobile communication carrier in the world since 2001. Advanced technologies create a communication revolution, and the individual, through the advent of mobile media, has become an active participant in this process. This study investigates the mobile phone's impact upon the developments of public participation, social inclusion and citizenship through the case study of Xiamen PX demonstration. In terms of local environmental activism, the Xiamen residents shared information with the help of wireless communication about the alleged misdeeds of party officials and took various civic actions against them. A rare sense of participation in public affairs is fostered through the use of mobile communication technology. The government must figure out how to improve the effective and regular information exchange and feedback top down and bottom up to raise the awareness and understanding among higher decision making agencies, government and the public.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.1 [Computer and Society]: Public Policy Issues - Use/Abuse of Power

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Mobile Phone, China, E-Governance, Public Participation, Citizenship

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid progresses in the development of wireless communication and the widespread usage of mobile phone make people much easier and more convenient to communicate with

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each other [1]. The vibrant expanding of Chinese wireless telephony has also seen the number of mobile users skyrocket from 47,544 in 1991 to over 659 million in 2009, an average of almost one in two people [2]. The constant reduction of costs for information transfer and sharing becomes the biggest factor driving the continuous development of wireless telephony, making China the biggest mobile communication powerhouse in the world since 2001 [3].

Meantime, wireless telephony services affect the way we live and work, alter how we socialize and learn, while mobile phones have become indispensable as imparting an "infinite power" upon individuals and society [4]. Modern telecommunication has also expanded mobile phone's potential to be increasingly the channels for public participation, doing new things one had not even previously thought of. On one hand, the rapid popularization of wireless telephony backbone in China creates a communication revolution, and individual, through the advent of mobile phone, has become an active political participant in this process. Chinese youths in 2005 sent text messages and chain-letter e-mails exhorting citizens to boycott Japanese merchandise and take to the streets in over ten cities [5]. Short Message Service (SMS) and calls via mobile phones calling for boycotts of French Carrefour went rampant in China in 2008 in response to the disruptions of the Olympic torch relay in Paris [6]. On the other hand, in terms of local environmental activism, the residents in Xiamen shared information with the help of wireless communication about the alleged misdeeds of party officials and took various civic actions against them [7]. Forwarding and relaying the calls and text-messages on long complaints about the increased operating costs and traffic fines from taxi companies as well as government fees, thousands of taxi drivers in Chongqing went on strikes, followed quickly in Wuhan, Hainan, Guangdong and other provinces in 2008 and 2009 [8].

The aim of this paper is to think about the effects of mobile phone diffusion with regards to public participation, or how do Chinese people use mobile phone as an emerging channel for political participation in China? We first review the important features of the scholarships on democracy and media in China's context, with particular regards to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and elaborate what is significant about mobile communication for Chinese citizen under the current structural conditions of media censorship. Second, we turn to the case of the "mobile phone assisted popular protest" [9] in the 2006 Xiamen anti-Paraxylene demonstration (hereafter in short "the anti-PX event"). Mobile communication, as the anti-PX

event showed, grows from interpersonal talking devices to hands-down weapons of collective empowerment, as the use of mobile devices has now extended to new services over and above traditional voice and text telephony, such as Multimedia Message Service (MMS). Citizen journalists, giving quick responses to the event, actively engaged themselves in spreading politically sensitive topics, expressing different opinions of the anti-PX issue and forcing local authorities to tweak its ham-fisted responses. Third, we aim to shed light on the implications of mobile communication for public participation and social inclusion for both Chinese people and government.

2. MEDIA AND ICTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Many studies focus on the censorship in China's state-led media and its status quo, pointing out that the newspaper, television, radio, and other traditional media are controlled through a combination of laws, propaganda departments, self-censorship by editors, and internalized rules about what is and is not an acceptable topic for reporting in China [10]. The changes in the media sector after it plunged into an ocean of commercialization since the market-oriented media reforms from 1992 have resulted in the processes of de-centralization of media governance, specialization of media contents, and multiplication of media production and distribution [11]. However, the commercialization process in Chinese media system is rather an "economic liberalization without political democratization" [12]. The Communist Party of China (CPC) still struggles to compel the media to be loyal to the Party and to serve effectively as a guarantee of its political legitimacy and dominant role in nearly every aspect of life. Furthermore, the expression and participation rights of the groups of social exclusion, such as "the vulnerable groups" (*ruoshi qunti*) [13], which consist of peasants in rural areas, the urban laid-off and rural-to-urban migrant workers, are exacerbated when the contemporary Chinese media do not fight for, but sacrifice the class interests of the poor.

On the other hand, many studies emerge and argue that the internet has increasingly become the prime gate for the public into government bureaucracies and their services in the information age [14]. What the above studies did not mention is that there are a whopping 652 million rural inhabitants yet to be connected by the internet in the world's most populous country [15]. China's internet penetration is still low at just 22.6 percent while the internet has to face technological and demographic challenges at first [16]. In addition to the lack of adequate telecommunication infrastructure and sustainable financial means for internet technology in rural China, more importantly, as Zhao, Hao and Banerjee's ethnographic research stresses [17], the motivation of Chinese farmers towards the use of internet handicaps the adoption of internet access. More precisely, "the adoption of the internet in China's rural west does not rest with the will of individual farmers, who have neither the financial means nor the immediate needs to drive them to the internet" [18]. Therefore, the connections to the internet themselves in rural China, which are results of either government initiatives or private investor companies, do not accomplish the task of adoption, let alone the empowerment and social inclusion of rural population.

Studies note that the mode of mobile phone-mediated communications utilized by individuals and civil network groups

could shape and facilitate grassroots democracy, bring ordinary people, opposition parties and dissent groups into the democratic participatory processes, and cure to some extent the flaws of democratic government [19]. Chinese mobile communication research first put much attention to micro-level issues of mobile technology diffusion, adoption and usage relating to everyday life [20]. Macro-level studies later focused on telecommunication development and policy research [21]. Meso-level studies on the relation between mobile technologies and specific communities as well have grown in recent years, including, for example, the emergent political, cultural, and organizational potentials of a new working class characterized as "the Information Have-less" [22]. This interest also features in particular in the studies of how mobile phones facilitate alternative political discourses as new avenues for civic expression and political participation [23]. The renewed interest in how mobile technologies affect Chinese people's everyday life and non-official discourses leads naturally to another question: What is the influence of mobile communication on public participation for political engagement beyond daily communication in contemporary China? Despite the ubiquity of mobile devices in Chinese society, this question has received surprisingly little attention. As this study argues, the multi-function mobile phone as a medium affords a good model to find out how the digital wireless telephony and ordinary Chinese people interact, and furthermore to explain the specific context of the socio-techno-cultural repercussion and information ecologies of China [24]. Moreover, as the current mobile information revolution sweeping across China has widened the ordinary citizen's access to information and communication, it also impels us to ponder whether mobile revolution, beyond its interpersonal repercussion, may pose any impact upon other arenas such as politics and society in China. This paper yields a number of contributions related to the wider themes of political participation, social inclusion and public service in China.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study explores the relation between mobile communication and public participation through the case study of the anti-PX event. The Xiamen case functions as a "typical" and "classic" mobile phone-assisted demonstration which not just influences government actions and policies but also duplicates its model in events hereafter¹. In other words, the selected case presents a variety of principles that have been echoed in the other cases, avoiding the criticisms claiming that the findings are unique to the particular case.

We conduct 45 in-depth interviews for a detailed snapshot of how local citizens, from journalists and university students to rural residents and civil servants, use wireless services to explore their identities and create new ones during popular protests. The interviewees look back upon and discuss their concerns freely, including feelings, attitudes and understandings with regard to a wide variety of aspects of the mobile phone, public participation and popular protests. Data generated from the interviews also gives an overall view of how participants view the role of mobile

¹ Learning from Xiamen case, for example, citizen in Chengdu organized via mobile phone and the internet the "200-people's group walk" to express their concerns over the environmental impact the construction of two plants may have on their city.

media and show the varying degree of expression and participation via mobile device.

4. MOBILE COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE ANTI-PX EVENT

4.1 The PX Plant in “China’s Cleanest City”

Located on the southeastern coast of China, Xiamen is well-known as “China’s cleanest city”². However, just in Xiamen, the construction of a chemical plant had been in progress since 2004. The chemical plant was to make paraxylene (well-known by its abbreviation “PX” later), which is used in productions of plastics, polyester and other synthetic. Short-term exposure to paraxylene can cause eye, ear, nose and throat irritations and, with prolonged exposure, damage to the nervous system in humans [25].

The PX project was sanctioned by the State Council in 2004 and underwent an environmental assessment by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) which gave it the go-ahead in July 2005 [26]. But all these assessments and ratifications haven’t come into under the public eye until Zhao Yufen, a U.S.-trained professor in Xiamen University, started the campaign against the PX project during the “Two Congresses” (*liang hui*) in March 2007. Together with a number of scientists and professors, Zhao enumerated the possible safety consequences and pollution risks of the project and tried to persuade both the local and national authorities to relocate it. But their concerns were handled in a low-keyed manner and returned no result.

4.2 SMS and Calls Circulated, Mobile Phone-Mediated Protests Continue

Although local authorities censored all the information related to the PX project and Xiamen media ran no story about it³, some messages related to the PX project started to spread the alert via the mobile phones as SMS and callings, later the internet, arguing it would be detrimental to environment and public health. One of the most renowned messages related the PX project to the chemical plant explosion in Jilin Province [27]. It read:

“The Xianglu Group has invested in the project in the Haicang district. When this massive toxic chemical product goes into production, that will mean an atomic bomb has been released over all Xiamen island. The people of Xiamen will live with leukemia and deformed babies. We want to live and we want to be healthy! International organizations require these types of projects to be developed at least 100 kilometers away from cities. Xiamen will be only 16 kilometers away ...”

“For the sake of future generations, pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!” said one version of the text message, calling people to spread such information as soon as possible. These kinds of messages were communicating to an

unprecedented degree to not only the people in Xiamen and their relatives, but also those who once lived or studied in Xiamen⁴.

At the same time, that “did you receive the SMS?” became the opening remark when Xiamen citizens meet each other in the following three months⁵. The SMS refers to the one about the PX project. There was a great stir among the citizens after this information spread. The sentiments of fear aroused by this information have affected the normal life of Xiamen citizen. Public opposition began to build through the internet. “Protect Xiamen” and “Give me back my blue sky” appeared frequently in the titles of internet posts⁶. However, local authority quickly closed down these online forums and censored key words, including PX and leukemia, on websites⁷.

Up until now, the press in Xiamen just involved in the report of PX plant. Nevertheless, local press only has positive news about the PX project. That result was fanning public anger and provoked heated protest against the PX plant by local residents. Again, some text messages and calls began ricocheting around Xiamen and urging residents to join a street protest. It read:

“For the sake of our future generations, take actions! Participate among 10,000 people, June 1 at 8am, opposite the municipal government building! Hand ties yellow ribbons! Pass this message on to all your Xiamen friends!”

Taking note of this circumstance, the Xiamen city government held a press conference on the morning of May 30 and announced the decision to “halt construction temporarily” pending further environmental review. But citizens continued to leave comments voicing their skepticism and anger, voicing great suspicion that it was a delaying tactic, in the hopes that people would forget and move on. Meantime, local authority asked various departments to prepare to work to stabilize the masses.

However, on June 1, 2007, over 20,000 people still took to the streets and staged a peaceful “walk” from 8am to 5pm, to signal their unhappiness with the government decision that they feared would ruin their health in the long run. Protesters gathered at the municipal government buildings for several hours, holding up banners which included the words such as “resist PX, protect Xiamen” and “resist the PX project, protect city residents’ health, protect Xiamen’s environment”⁸. People kept joining in along the way, more and more can be seen wearing yellow ribbons.

As the march went on, many people, including passersby, pulled out their mobile phones and took pictures and video. Some of them immediately sent live updates from their mobiles straightly to their friends, the web page, blogs and video sites. In addition, many videos of demonstration have been uploaded to YouTube.

² Interviews, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

³ During our interviews, none of the interviewees got the information about the PX plant from local media as the first source.

⁴ Interview, students in Fuzhou, Guangzhou and Shanghai who once spent years study in Xiamen, 2007, 2009.

⁵ Interview, residents in Xiamen, 2007.

⁶ Interview, student in Xiamen University, 2007.

⁷ Interviews, residents in Xiamen, 2007 and 2009.

⁸ Interview. civil servant who works in the Xiamen municipal government building and local residents, Xiamen, 2007 & 2008.

When public feeling was aroused by the anti-PX event, Xiamen authorities accused the marchers of violating the law and on the following days branded the marchers as “individual lawbreakers” committed to a “highly inflammatory cause” [28].

4.3 Project Scrapped

Such concern from Xiamen’s government, however, found no echo in Beijing. People’s Daily [29], the organ of the Central Committee of the CPC, ran a front-page editorial condemning local officials who had disregarded President Hu Jintao’s admonitions to preserve the environment. Then turnabout had occurred. Xiamen government agreed that the project might have to be shelved [30]. The most eye-catching event happens when the government chooses to use mobile communication channel to announce the halting decision during and after the demonstration. The text-messages sent in the following days went like this:

“The PX plant had already been halted and close. We are doing an environmental assessment and it takes more than half year. So if you have any ideas or suggestions, please go through the proper channels to give the government feedback. We will make sure to share your opinions and suggestions with the government.”

On June 2, the information sent through mobile channels said:

“For two days, spontaneous parades have demonstrated our attitude. Production must continue, life must go on. There is no need to be impetuous and give unlawful elements eager for chaos an opportunity. Let us turn our eyes toward how the government handles the critical issue of the PX project.”

Meantime, the government’s channel to communicate with the general public was open, including the local newspapers, broadcast on TV, the internet, and in particular, mobile phone services, as convenient information platforms people can submit their advice or opinions to the government, while the government can collect, process and feedback these information in time. After a series of public hearings and debates, the construction in the densely populated coastal city was put on hold in December 2007.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Should the masses in Xiamen win the struggle it sets an important precedent of public participation in China compelling a change of policy by local government. More importantly, this event, relying on public participation, establishes a new type of activism, which focuses on a single issue to change the conventional public participation and opinion expression channels. The powers of mobile communication perform the following three tasks.

First, mobile technology is poised to breach of digital divide and to reshape the people’s views and knowledge on the critical events from local government. The capacity for citizens “to communicate with each other” and “to gain access to information they need”, as Calhoun [31] points out, “...both are crucial to enabling citizens to make democratic choices”. In anti-PX event, it wasn’t until the PX issue was picked up by alarmed Xiamen mobile users that it exploded into real public view. Within hours, the message made its way to the internet, while millions of SMS messages were circulated even more widely and quickly via mobile phones as part of the mass campaign against the plant [32]. Specially, mobile phone makes sure that even the carriers

without access to the internet can be informed about the government’s decision on the PX plant.

Second, we also can see from the case that besides the possibility of free flow of information and viewpoints, mobile phone functions in a sense like neighborhood salons that help aggregate individual preferences into a collective choice. Acting as an extension of the range of individual communication, the public participation in the decision-making process that is facilitated via mobile phone has on one hand effectively widen the channels for influencing the government, whether local and central, to gather public opinions when initiating public policies, on the other hand, encouraged and protected those haven’t right.

Third, with low-end, handy phones gain popularity, there are now new competing models of citizen journalism with more outlets delivering information. The paradox of professionalizing the new medium to preserve its integrity as an independent citizen platform and efficient public participation channel is the start of a complicated new era within the mobile media creating sphere.

As it has been widely perceived in China’s society, mobile phone represents a serious and effective form of public participation and social inclusion. Except responsibility, service, dedication and honesty, a government should enjoy no any other privilege as Premier Wen Jiabao states [33]. Public participation and social inclusion means breaking government’s monopoly on power while the public should not be left out of the decision-making process. With regards to the introduction of wireless handset, things have already been changing because of rising public opinion and mobile phone-enhanced public participation. All this is based on using mobile phone’s most basic and inexpensive features: voice, text messaging and MMS. The lessons, saying people involved in the deal, have been evident in the other popular demonstrations in China.

6. CONCLUSION

Instead of focusing on the macro, exceptional or exterior features of mobile phone which have framed much of the academic and media discussions about ICTs in the world, our primary concern is the broad development path of political participation process in China that have underpinned this democratic process with the help of mobile phone.

6.1 The Emerging Mobile Citizen

Technologically and functionally, mobile phone was born and developed around the core issue of how to communicate with each other and spread information more quickly. The development of China’s “multi-centric” telecommunications network [34] is shattering this decades-old (even centuries-old) pattern of local isolation and establishing conditions for the development of cross-hatching “social *xitong* (system)” linking individuals, organizations, and groups throughout the country with each other and with people abroad.

Meantime, people want technology that is easy to use and serve a definite purpose. With farmers accounting for nearly 57 percent of the population, the digital divide issue has become a priority obstacle to the goal of participatory communications and public engagement. Many critics say that development agencies have focused too much on the information aspect of technology rather than the communication aspect. That’s not to say technology isn’t

the answer. Technology may be part of the answer - and not a very big part, just as that the technical features of mobile phone do not automatically promote democracy and public service. Other factors play a big role such as education and an understanding that the new technologies will provide democracy.

Communication in modern democracies can be broadly divided into two main notions: a democratized media, or participatory and alternative media; and populace and groups using these media actively for social change [35]. As communication technology - led primarily by mobile phone - seeps deeper into China's society, an information-technology sphere is starting to emerge. Mobile phone's mobilization blurs the boundary between the public and the private. Telephony is redefining the role of the citizen and endowing the individual with more responsibility and command over how he/she consumes information. Social events educate the public and as well send signals to government administrations. For the government, its competence and decisions are now being questioned by a population that has more channels of communication than ever. That also means all the old methods used to monitor public opinions, not only the traditional media but also the internet, are losing relevance.

6.2 Mobile Communication and Public Participation

In the case of China, wireless telephony toward potential public opinion indeed sheds lights on further enquiry into whether mobile phone-mediated sphere could possible influence the trajectory of future China's political socioeconomic development. Using the mobile device as an information source will increase the magnitude of social participation on local issues between groups higher and lower in education. A unique participatory paradigm is increasingly characterized by the widespread application of advanced ICTs in present-day's democratic theory and practice. "Strong democracy" [36], a new form of participatory politics for a new age, requires unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry and institutions that will involve individuals at both the neighborhood and the national level in common talk, common decision-making and political judgment, and common action. As we see in the anti-PX case, the idea of the mobile phone-mediated sphere can enhance "direct" public participation and citizen-powered decision-making process [37]. In this regard, the mobile phone-enhanced democratic revival could foster the democratic potential to become a more open and deliberative platform particularly for periphery groups or politics indifference to engage in public discourses those of traditional media like newspaper and TV, as well as the internet.

This study focuses on the power of mobile technology to transmit messages as an independent citizen platform, and the possibility for China's subaltern social class not just of altering identities but of planning actions or engaging in government's public service. While the potential for people-to-people exchanges may insidiously change mutual perceptions among the users, there are currently less structural avenues for these mobile communities to percolate upwards to intervene in the political processes today in China. People want to participate but they are coming up against systematic obstruction in the past. Now a series of unprecedented victories in Xiamen, however, mean that the public is no longer helpless because they are empowered to take part in governance with the help from modern wireless telecommunication. While

delivering a keynote report to the 17th National Congress of the CPC, Chinese President Hu Jintao stressed the necessity to expand orderly participation in politics through every level and in every field. The role of mobile media to foster social interconnectivity and make citizen an independent decision-maker in the construction of Chinese political subjectivity therefore can be viewed structurally as the diminution of the effects of the established vertical model of ideological communication and political control through the introduction of more interpersonal, horizontal possibilities.

Moreover, Chinese political system is in transition under the influences of economic development, new generations of leaders, the reform and opening up, and increasing pluralism of sources of information. There has been a new turn now in the debates over the media and democracy as the control over regime for mobile phone in China is still in its initial phase. Acknowledging the structural conditions is critical because it alerts us to series of concrete scenarios in which mobiles can be used to strengthen social control for the purpose of pre-empting risk and guarding against some "manipulators" to control public opinion via online communications. Thus, the government must have gradually take public opinions more into consideration when initiating and implementing public policies. The government and its journalists also need to learn how to help shape the new regulatory direction and educate government officials about which rules will work and which will not based upon the new era of information distribution.

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