

## WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS AND LIMITS OF E-ADVOCACY IN CHINA?

Minhua Lin  
Central European University  
Guangzhou Academy of Social Science

### ***Abstract***

*Before the widespread application of Internet, the Chinese government had been closely monitoring information accessed by the general public. This study points out that with either ownership or strong presence within communication and network service providers, the government has been able to censor an extensive amount of information before it reaches the public. Nonetheless, the government has not prevented people from raising their voice through the Internet. Is this tolerance forced by the growing civil society advocacy in China? What have been the impacts and constraints of e-advocacy in China? By analyzing three typical e-advocacy cases, this paper points out that e-advocacy could potentially have impacts on provincial and municipal government decisions toward certain events. It would also scrutinize the major Bullet Board Systems (BBS) and micro-blogs on Chinese websites and reveals that the constraints of e-advocacy have come from not only governmental control, but also unorganized and emotional behavior of citizens.*

**Keywords:** e-advocacy, China, Information and Communication Technology, restricted, limitation, impact

### **1. Introduction**

With increasing exposure to the World Wide Web since the 2000s, people in China have acquired more diversified channels to obtain information, especially regarding public affairs which were less accessible in the past. More importantly, the Internet provides an unprecedented channel for citizens to voice their own opinion. Various parties endeavor to explore this new sphere to influence government decision making. The Chinese government shows different attitudes in respect to bottom-up movements regarding

e-advocacy. It suppresses certain approaches but welcomes others. The seemingly *ad hoc* reactions of the government are the combined results of the multi-level governmental institutions, as well as the organizational structure of these advocacy groups. This paper analyzes e-advocacy with respect to the political situation in China and discusses limits and impacts of e-advocacy. Through three case studies, one may understand why e-advocacy could become influential in decision-making by provincial/municipal governments, but encounter a greater challenge with central government. E-advocacy is neither a panacea leading to a society thriving for more civil freedom nor a useless instrument manipulated by the government. Understanding the limits and impacts of e-advocacy will help advocates to use this tool more effectively in the future.

E-advocacy in this paper means using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a medium to draw public attention to certain policy/public issues, to shape public opinion on these issues and thus to influence government decision-making. E-advocacy is different from the traditional institutional advocacy, which is carried out by organizations and lobby groups<sup>1</sup>. It is also distinct from media advocacy, which is facilitated by mass media<sup>2</sup>. The uniqueness of e-advocacy is the possibility of direct participation of individual citizens enabled by ICT. This paper will focus only on Internet e-advocacy as it is a comprehensive technology which includes the functionalities of telephone, fax, video-conference and many other ICT tools. Participants in e-advocacy could be organized groups, like NGOs and interest groups<sup>3</sup>; yet, this is seldom the case in China. Chinese e-advocacy mostly bases on individual citizens and *ad hoc* coalitions of stakeholders<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Thomas Holyoke, Jeffrey Henig, Heath Brown, and Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, "Institution Advocacy and the Political Behavior of Charter Schools", *Political Research Quarterly* 60, (Jun. 2007): 202-214

2 David Jernigan and Patricia Wright, "Media Advocacy: Lessons from Community Experiences", *Journal of Public Health Policy* 17, (1996): 306-330

3 David Suárez, "Nonprofit Advocacy and Civic Engagement on the Internet", *Administration and Society* 41, (May 2009): 267-289; Mcnutt, John and Katherine Boland, "Electronic Advocacy by Nonprofit Organizations in Social Welfare Policy", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 28, (Dec. 1999): 432-451

4 Xin Wang, "Seeking Channels for Engagement: Media Use and Political Communication by China's Rising Middle Class", *China: An International Journal* 7, (Mar. 2009): 31-56; Xiang Zhou, "The political

## 2. The Social and Technological Background of E-Advocacy

E-advocacy is enabled by better education and economic development. Universal primary and junior high school education equipped people with the basic knowledge and ability to use modern ICT tools. The advanced level of education of the populace, especially elites, also stirs up rights consciousness and the desire to work within the framework of the rule of law. It is not unusual to see online debates surrounding freedom of speech, illegitimate governmental behavior, scandals within the civil service and other news which hitherto rarely have been reported in mainstream media. Meanwhile, rapid economic development ensures provision of critical Internet infrastructure and user end devices. By the end of 2009, the number of regular Internet users had reached 384 million and Internet coverage had reached 28.9%<sup>5</sup>. Among the 384 million Internet users, 145 million updated their blogger at least once during the second half of 2009 (the survey period) and 80.1% used the Internet as news source<sup>6</sup>. The Internet together with increasing popularity of mobile and digital devices has made it possible to have news reported by the citizens themselves round the clock. The public can now upload video and photos right at the spot where events occur, which may include unveiling wrongdoings by the government. Information provided by alternative channels empowers the civil society by reducing information asymmetry. The public are able to pressure the government into becoming more transparent and accountable. Yang calls it a "co-evolution of Internet and civil society" as technology offers new channels for citizen participation<sup>7</sup>.

This "co-evolution" of the Internet and civil society, unfortunately, is closely monitored by the Chinese government. Using e-

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blogosphere in China: A content analysis of the blogs regarding the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu", *New Media Society* 11, (Sep. 2009): 1003 – 1022

5 China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2010), "The 25th Statistical Report of Internet Development in China", available on line:

<http://www.cnnic.cn/html/Dir/2010/01/15/5767.htm>, accessed on Feb 23rd 2010

6 CNNIC, "The 25th Statistical Report of Internet Development in China", 32

7 Guobin Yang, "The Co-Evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China", *Asian Survey* 43, (May/Jun. 2003): 405-422

advocacy to influence government decision making and political changes has both tug and pull factors in China. On the one hand, as discussed above, modern ICT technology empowers civil society by providing channels for low-cost and relatively free-flowing information. An increasing number of Internet users are actively using the new platform to express their opinions and form their advocacy groups to influence policymaking<sup>8</sup>. This bottom-up participation changes the government-citizen relationship profoundly. The possibility of citizens uploading information at any time and within any of the e-platforms breaks the government monopoly of information dissemination. On the other hand, with the single party government maintaining its absolute authority in governance, civil involvement in policy-making initiated by the government seems almost impossible, not to mention the development of civic activities through the Internet being closely monitored and controlled<sup>9</sup>.

The Internet has emerged with the absolute control of the government, thus ICT in China has never been neutral. Chinese governmental intervention in Internet development is comprehensive and has existed ever since the advent of the Internet era. There are basically four levels of Internet control from service providers to individual users. First, at the national level, only government approved agencies are allowed to set up critical Internet infrastructure. Secondly, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) must obtain licenses issued by the government<sup>10</sup>. These services are required to go through international gateways located in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou and are subject to governmental control and regulation. Thirdly, web portal providers have to register with one of these ISPs and install filters to block undesirable content. Last but not least, individual users need to register with ISPs in order to obtain Internet access<sup>11</sup>. In addition to the technical

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8 Yongming Zhou, "Living on the Cyber Border: Minjian Political Writers in Chinese Cyberspace", *Current Anthropology* 46, (Dec. 2005): 779 – 803; Xin, "Seeking Channels for Engagement", 56; Yang, "The Co-Evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China", 422

9 Nina Hachigian, "China's Cyber-Strategy", *Foreign Affairs* 80, (Mar. /Apr. 2001): 118-133

10 Bin Liang and Hong Lu, "Internet Development, Censorship, and Cyber Crimes in China", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 26, (Feb. 2010): 103-120

11 Bin and Lu, "Internet Development, Censorship, and Cyber Crimes in China", 106

control, the government has implicit influence by employing anonymous commentators and bloggers to promote government ideologies on the Internet.

Considering the positive and negative conditions analyzed above, it is not surprising that scholars came up with very different conclusions on the impact of e-advocacy when they focused on specific factors. Evaluation of ICT's impact on China's public affairs fell into two extremes. Scholars like Hachigian and Yang are optimistic and have stated that the Internet can lead to the democratization of China and be a potential challenge to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)<sup>12</sup>. Nonetheless, others have appeared less positive; for example, Tsui even describes the Chinese Internet environment as a Panopticon<sup>13</sup>. Regardless of the various attitudes, these researchers have focused more on the regulatory framework and government behavior. There is a significant gap in analyzing different types of advocacy events and the behavior of the advocates themselves. In agreement with MacKinnon, activists who employ the Internet as advocacy tools are strictly regulated by the government<sup>14</sup>. However, my research will show that e-advocacy is allowed and even supported by the government on certain issues at provincial/municipal level. Moreover, one should realize that the limitations of advocacy have come not only from government suppression, but also from the lack of rational organization and the absence of leadership within advocacy groups. Advocates have somehow restricted themselves from having greater impacts of e-advocacy even within allowed territories. The following section will analyze outcomes of different types of e-advocacies through three specific cases and understand their impacts and restraints.

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12 Nina, "China's Cyber-Strategy", 127; Yang, "The Co-Evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China", 405

13 Lokman Tsui, "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom: Control and Regulation of the Internet in China", *China Information* 17, (Oct. 2003): 65-82

14 Rebecca MacKinnon, "Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China", *Public Choice* 134, (Jan. 2008): 31-46

### 3. Case Study: Significant Impacts of E-advocacy on the Restricted Issues

A few researchers are aware of both the capacity of the government in controlling the Internet and the civil society's ability to organize influential e-advocacy<sup>15</sup>. MacKinnon and Zhang explained that the government's ambiguous Internet policy is due to its priority regarding economic prosperity, which supports leadership of the government<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, official data shows that in 2009, the most frequently visited websites were those related to entertainment and news reports. Likewise, websites for online shopping have experienced the fastest growth in visiting frequency<sup>17</sup>. It would not conflict with economic interests that even if the government exercises harsh censorship on all forums, Bulletin Board System (BBS), NGO websites and blogs where e-advocacy normally takes place. Moreover, one might have noticed contradicting governmental behavior in handling e-advocacy events. At collective level, the government allows certain e-advocacy group to carry out their campaign, and revises governmental policy/behavior accordingly; while it suppresses many others and even condemn their advocacy as unlawful act. At the individual level, despite the harsh sentencing of many activists, the government occasionally tolerates certain civic activists' continuously advocating for political changes with only mild caution<sup>18</sup>.

How can we reconcile the seemingly indeterminate government attitude and the rising e-advocacy? By scrutinizing a few influential e-advocacy events in 2009, it is possible to understand the key factors determining the government's attitude towards e-advocacy. Three typical cases are selected from more general e-advocacy activities in order to understand government's attitude. The three cases are representative due to the following reasons. First of all, they all tackled unconstitutional or illegality behavior

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15 Zhou, "Living on the Cyber Border", 780; MacKinnon, "Flatter world and thicker walls?", 31

16 Lena Zhang, "Behind the 'Great Firewall': Decoding China's Internet Media Policies from the Inside", *Convergence* 12, (Aug. 2006): 271-291; MacKinnon, "Flatter world and thicker walls?", 31

17 CNNIC, "The 25th Statistical Report of Internet Development in China", 31

18 Zhou, "Living on the Cyber Border", 799

of government or civil servants. In China's single-party political background, e-advocacy is a civilian effort to introduce checks and balance on state power. These cases reflect the main theme of current e-advocacy, which is to promote the democratization process in China. Secondly, the three cases are all influential cases which have successfully drawn attention nationwide. The first case is recorded in the first annual report of the Supreme Court as a representative case to improve rule of law. Despite unsuccessful outcomes, the second and third cases have profound and long-lasting impacts on Chinese institutional arrangements. Thirdly, the three cases comprise certain diversity. Two of them are successful examples while the last one is suppressed by the government. The three cases tackled specific targets as well as general issues. They are related to county, municipal and national level governmental issues respectively.

*The three selected cases are presented briefly as follows:*

*Case One*<sup>19</sup>: In a small town in Hunan Province, a body massage specialist accidentally killed a government officer and hurt two when the later attempted to sexually harass and rape her. At first the local government wanted to cover the initial assault. The news spokesman distorted the facts of the crime. The police locked up the woman by tying her to a hospital bed. They had decided to charge her with intentional murder. Nonetheless, the public tried to find out what actually happened at the massage center. People posted online about the unlawful treatment towards the massage therapist in the hospital. Additionally, they advocated and provided necessary legal support for the young woman. The local government then shut down broadcasts and Internet in the town for several days to suppress e-advocacy. However, a nation wide advocacy group was formed beyond the control of local government. Higher level government finally stepped in. The body massage specialist was found guilty for undue defense and the two injured officers were sentenced for their attempted rape.

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19      Detail course of the incident was recorded in many news reports, including three self-conflicting description from the policy during the press meeting. Available on line in Chinese: <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/邓玉娇事件>, accessed on March 15, 2010.

*Case Two*<sup>20</sup>: In October 2009, Li DeTao, a volunteer of the NGO Public Budget Observer, requested free access to the budgets of the municipal governments of Guangzhou and Shanghai. According to the Regulation on the Disclosure of Government Information enforced in 2008, citizens have the right to access such information. Seven days later, the Guangzhou government informed Li that 114 departmental budgets would be available to download on the government website. On the same day, the Shanghai government replied that governmental budget was considered a state secret and would not be publicized. The different responses by the two local governments induced prevalent advocacy for free access to government information on line. Citizens questioned the reasoning of Shanghai authorities and advocated for transparent governance. Shanghai was criticized by citizens, commenter, scholars, and later in main mainstream media. In March 2010, the Shanghai government finally made the 2010 municipal budget publicly available.

*Case three*: Liu, Xiaobo, a human rights activist, drafted "08 Charter" to advocate for freedom, democracy, and constitutionalism in China. Dissemination and advocacy of the Charter was mainly carried out via the Internet. A few activists openly supported the Charter and carried out Internet campaign. Liu was then arrested and harshly sentenced with 11 years in jail under the charge of inciting subversion of state power.

The three cases above have shown that e-advocacy can be influential when it is pointing to specific events and related to local government. First, thanks to the relatively boundlessness nature of the Internet, local governments are less technically or legally able to effectively control news reports relating to local issues. E-advocates can disseminate information with almost no time lag and out of local government jurisdiction. Therefore, it becomes harder for local governments to cover up or censor their own misbehavior. Meanwhile, provincial and even central governments are willing tolerate and sympathize with e-advocacy

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20 The news is available on line: <http://news.eco.gov.cn/2009/1026/92372.html>, accessed on March 20, 2010

on local issues. The central government wants to show that public administration is transparent and accountable to public supervision, which could elevate government credibility at a national level. Furthermore, it also allows the central government to shift blame to individual local officers. Punishment of a local officer delivers the message that lawlessness is a personal behavior and does not represent the government. In addition, the highly centralized government structure gives incentive for local governments to compete with each other, so that they may receive more funding and investment from the central government or the public. ICT provides an effective platform for comparing different local governments' behavior. E-advocacy benefits from such exhibited competition among peer governments. Lastly, if e-advocacy is campaigning for change in institutional arrangements or questioning general issues of the CCP's governance, it would be suppressed without exception as demonstrated in the third case mentioned previously. The central government's capacity in suppressing e-advocacy is ensured by the centralized administration of the Internet as discussed above.

#### **4. Limitations of E-advocacy from within the Advocacy Groups**

As analyzed in the previous section, e-advocacy could be effective in local affairs due to local limitations in suppressing national e-advocacy, central government support and competition between local governments. Unfortunately, it is not common to have well-organized e-advocacy which is underpinned by sufficient legal knowledge, as outlined in case two. Limitations of e-advocacy not only come from government restrictions, but also advocacy groups themselves.

The individuals applying e-advocacy reflect the digital division in China and thus many successful e-advocacies only represent a rather small portion of the population. Although Internet coverage in China is growing rapidly, many people use it merely for entertainment, or obtaining information. The rising advocacy groups are from mainly the "propertied, educated and digitally

well-off" middle class<sup>21</sup>. They represent only small portions of the stratified Chinese population<sup>22</sup>. This proposition can be supported by examining the background of a few famous activists. Li Detao (in case one), Liu Xiaobo (in case three), Feng Zhenghu (a human rights activist), Tan zuoren (an environmentalist, investigating building quality after the Sichuan earthquake), and many other well-known e-advocates mostly share similar backgrounds, including being educated overseas, and occupations such as university professors, lawyers or editors. Besides that, the digital divide is also reflected among e-advocates due to geographic and educational disparities. Geographic digital divides in China comprise of the division between rural and urban, higher income coastal China and less developed inland China<sup>23</sup>. Educational divide is mainly reflected in the field of higher education and elite groups. According to official data, among a 1.1 billion sample population over 6 years old, there were only 0.074 billion people (6.7%) who had college degrees in 2008<sup>24</sup>. Such a digital divide indicates that advocates who are able to use the ICT as a tool for advocacy are only the few well educated middle class.

Beyond the issue of limited representation, the Internet community is highly emotional and usually lacks the skills to develop a proposition into e-advocacy. For example, Tianya BBS (<http://www.tianya.cn/bbs/index.shtml>) is one of the most famous portal sites for civil society activities. It is also the first website to initiate many famous national e-advocacies, including case one mentioned above. Compared to the US based Huffington Post (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>), which is a commentary outlet for liberal/progressive ideas, general participants in Tianya BBS also consider themselves alternative information providers to the main stream media. However, when I selected twenty topical subjects, which are against government malfunction or appealing for collective social action, and with

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21 Robert Tian and Yan Wu, "Crafting self identity in a virtual community: Chinese internet users and their political sense form", *Multicultural Education and Technology Journal* 1, (2007): 238-258

22 Xin, "Seeking Channels for Engagement", 32

23 Eric Harwit, "Spreading Telecommunications to Developing Areas in China: Telephones, the Internet and the Digital Divide", *The China Quarterly* 180, (Dec. 2004): 1010-1030

24 National Bureau of Statistics of China (2009), *China Statistical Yearbook*, Beijing

more than 100,000 clicks and over 1,000 responses during May 2010, I discovered that over 90% of the responses are emotional expression rather than serious debate. Instead of posting arguments or statements with complete sentences, follow up messages to a main topic are flooded by words or phrases expressing nothing but personal feelings. These emotional responses are mostly negative, such as anger and fury, and sometimes sadness and helplessness. Negative feelings would then be amplified by hundreds of repeated grumblings, without much logical reasoning or argument. What may be worse is that the large number of these messages makes it more difficult to search for the useful and valuable information. Another sign of emotion dominated e-advocacy is the lack of tolerance. A dominating argument at one topic shows limited respect towards opposite views. Debates normally develop into labeling and personal attacks within one or two posts. Similar events like case one are reported in Tianya from time to time. However, due to the disorganized emotional response of Internet users, most of them did not develop into successful e-advocacy which may help address government misconduct.

Another constraint which negatively impacts e-advocacy is the entertainment focus of ICT users. ICT users tend to utilize these appliances as entertainment and commercial means for making profit rather than to deliberate and communicate. Despite the rapid growing Internet user group in China, the majority of the population uses Internet as a source of entertainment and e-business<sup>25</sup>. This might not be an obstacle for e-advocacy in other countries, but is crucial in China due to government censorship. Unlike the situation in Europe or the United States, where ICT could perform an influential role despite its overwhelming entertainment function, advocates in China are facing a tougher political environment. E-advocacy in China requires extensive participation and attention from the public in order to avoid suppression by the government. Unfortunately, at Tianya BBS, the most frequently visited posts are usually related to

entertainment<sup>26</sup>. Among all of the hot topics with most clicks, there are always advertisements and unrelated gossip inserted as comments or follow up messages because that information could be more visible by more people without cost. Micro-blogging is another frequently used platform of e-advocacy; for example, Twitter was heavily used during the disputed Iranian presidential

**Table 1. Ranking of SINA micro-blog topics by clicking frequency**

Ranking by Clicking	Category of topic		
	Week One	Week Two	Week Three
1	Entertainment	Earthquake	Earthquake
2	Food Safety	Celebrity	Celebrity
3	Blessing for traditional festival	Celebrity	Celebrity
4	Celebrity	Entertainment	Winter Olympics
5	Earthquake	Festival	Environment concern
6	International news	Student life	Winter Olympics
7	Student life	Celebrity	Blessing for traditional festival
8	Celebrity	Celebrity	Celebrity
9	Celebrity	Celebrity	International news
10	Blessing for traditional festival	Celebrity	Winter Olympics
11	Environment concern	Celebrity	Winter Olympics

(Source: Summarized from the website's own rankings, based on participant activities online:

[http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/hottopic&date=2010-03-21&type=oneweek;](http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/hottopic&date=2010-03-21&type=oneweek)

[http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/hottopic&date=2010-03-13&type=oneweek;](http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/hottopic&date=2010-03-13&type=oneweek)

[http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/hottopic&date=2010-02-27&type=oneweek;](http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/hottopic&date=2010-02-27&type=oneweek)

accessed on March 21, 2010)

election.

In the Table 1, I summarize the most popular topics in three consecutive weeks between February and March 2010 on SINA

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<sup>26</sup> Statistics provided by the website itself, available online (in Chinese): <http://www.tianya.cn/bbs/index.shtml>, accessed on March 20, 2010

micro-blog (<http://t.sina.com.cn/>), one of the most popular Chinese micro-blogs. Unlike Twitter, which is becoming an important tool for journalists and other professionals to obtain valuable information, micro-blogs in China are mainly utilized as a tabloid for entertainment. This entertainment factor is also observed in Chinese blogging behavior<sup>27</sup>.

Apart from lacking sufficient organizational back up, e-advocacy in China has an evident deficit in leadership and responsibility. E-advocacy in China is rarely led by NGOs, interest groups, or religious groups. Thus, it is atypical to have e-advocacy as in case two, with legal and organizational support. Moreover, the e-advocacy described in case two mainly occurred after the off-line actions of Li Detao and the NGO to which he belonged. E-advocacy mainly occurred in the later stage of the event, in criticizing different responses of the two local governments and advocating for a more standardized transparency policy. Most of the e-advocacy cases in recent years are similar to case one. The typical model of e-advocacy in China is as follows:

Information is first disseminated by individuals affected by certain policy or government action, or activists seeking change. Then people interested in the information voluntarily explore and contribute with more facts, data, and professional opinions through the Internet. The abundant information and knowledge shapes the attitude of the public. Due to the extensive public attention online, mainstream media finally steps in, signaling intervention from higher level governments. Under the strict information control system, this model of e-advocacy could circumvent potential government suppression at the early stage because the action is largely unorganized. However, in the long run, such unorganized e-advocacy could also restrict its own influence. Because of the lack of leadership, different opinions could easily divide the advocacy group. Participants involved in e-advocacy in a purely virtual community do not feel the same connection and obligation as they would in a real world organization. They would be likely to retreat when conflicts within the advocacy group cannot be resolved in the absence of

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<sup>27</sup> MacKinnon, "Flatter world and thicker walls?", 35

leadership; not to mention unorganized advocacy is more susceptible to deadlocks. Due to the public's use of the Internet as an emotional and entertainment forum, passing advocacy would be quickly replaced by new events and focuses. There is hardly any case of large scale long-term e-advocacy in China.

## 5. Conclusion

The ever growing number of Internet users and the increasing phenomena of e-advocacy will not automatically lead to a more open, tolerated and democratic society in China. E-advocacy has demonstrated its potential in promoting more accountable local governments. However, it also has its own limitations, which are not only imposed from government restrictions, but also created by the constitution and characteristics of the advocacy groups. On one hand, the state-owned nature and licensing process of the communication and information technology infrastructure ensures effective monitoring and censoring of information. The government would desperately suppress any *ad hoc* mobilization of the society. On the other hand, e-advocacy could hardly move further due to the narrow representation of the advocacy group, users' emotional behavior, entertainment-oriented focus, and lack of organization.

It is important to understand the logic behind government reaction and address advocates' own challenges to help them organize more effective e-advocacy. Based on the research above, advocates could take the following points into consideration in future e-advocacy. Firstly, e-advocates should target specific problems rather than general issues. Considering the relatively stable social and political environment in China, sudden political or institutional change from the top-down is a remote possibility. Therefore, e-advocacy focus on fundamental government structure or constitution is more likely to attract suppression before the information spreads. On the contrary, e-advocacy dealing with specific issues can expect more solid outcomes as seen in cases one and two. Secondly, advocates should improve their advocacy skills and learn to better control the overly emotional discussion. Advocates need to mobilize as many participants as possible in order to influence government

decision making. In case one, for example, a nationwide support successfully stopped local government's intention to suppress the advocacy. To encourage more participants, advocates have tried to tolerate different opinions within the group and learn from each other. Thirdly, advocates may seek professional support rather than relying on pure passion. Many e-advocacies failed to reach positive results because they developed from merely interest or passion. Lack of sufficient professional knowledge makes the advocacy group seemingly *ad hoc* and unorganized. In case two, for instance, Li Detao did not succeed until after several attempts. More importantly, he is a member of a professional volunteer group that started this advocacy since 2006. Without their ongoing backing and expertise on how the law and public budget work, Li would not have been successful.

China's examples could be illuminating for democratization in other socialist states like Vietnam, Cuba and North Korea, as well as totalitarian regimes like Iran. All these states are under strict control of very strong governments where Internet use is under rigid control and censorship. The Chinese case shows that a manipulated ICT tool could still contribute to the democratization process if used skillfully. The paper also reveals that ICT is a tool in itself. ICT will not naturally lead to a thriving open society; neither will it be completely useless because of government manipulation. The influence of ICT tools has to be understood within specific political background and by knowing who is using it and how it is used.

Although the unorganized behavior of e-advocacy groups prohibits them from making more fundamental changes in government institutions, it also has the unexpected advantage of circumventing government suppression. Future studies on e-advocacy may need to refer to the research on civil society and NGO development in China. Those studies may provide valuable lessons on how civil society is shaped under the strict government control and may thus offer hints on how e-advocacy groups can strengthen their organization without encouraging suppression.

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