What are appropriate normative frameworks to analyze the political effects of the Internet in China?

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Abstract

The political effects of the Internet in China are one of the most important and oft studied topics in both communications and Asian studies. However, these efforts suffer from a lack of appropriate theoretical frameworks, due to a lack of geocentric theories and the dominance of theories generated in a Western context. This paper argues that normative frameworks should be grounded in their context of application and take into account how individuals participate in and think about politics. Based on these principles and drawing from relevant data and literature, this article puts forward three suggestions about how the currently dominant normative frameworks could be improved: welfare and economic progress should be recognized as important normative goals, facilitating the watchdog function of citizens under existing structures is a worthy objective, and building community, rather than striving for rationality, may result in more productive political speech in currently individualized online spaces.

Keywords: Internet; political theory; political change; Asian theories of communication

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Introduction

From gross domestic product to per capita income, resource extraction to manufacturing, exports, billionaires, university graduates, Internet users, and PM2.5 levels, China is rising in almost every way. Far from a sick man of the East, many now aspire to learn from China's successes in areas as diverse as parenting techniques[1], managing the economy,[2] and controlling cyber emergencies[3].

However, emulating the Chinese model is often seen as a dangerous bargain. China is an authoritarian country. Its citizens have little freedom of speech or human rights. Dissidents are jailed, minorities are repressed, and corruption is rife. To most commentators, China's governmental system, which stifles the voices of its populace and serves the interests of the few, is an impediment to its continued progress. In this context, China's adoption of the Internet was initially hailed with hope that the diversity of online information and newly empowered citizen voices would act as a wave that would wash away authoritarianism.

However, this initially hopeful technological determinism understated the ease with which the Internet could be used by established power holders as well as individuals. Far from collapsing under a wave of empowered netizens, the Chinese government has successfully caged Internet users in a virtual panopticon, surrounded by a firewall, unsure of what speech acts are permitted, and distracted by the myriad of entertainment and commerce options available online [4].

This shift from cyber optimism to cyber pessimism is in line with a global, more critical stance toward the Internet's political promise[5]. However in China's case, this narrative overlooks the fact that the government, seeking legitimacy and a way to maintain the power of the Party, listens to online public opinion, not just to censor it but to learn from it[6]. The government responds to incidents that manifest online to prevent unrest from spreading and private-websites, dependent on advertising revenue, vie to provide the most lively forums for citizen discussion[7]. Those who continue to look for all out revolution are disenchanted, but those who take a more practical approach, orientated toward examining what is actually happening on the Chinese Internet, often find reasons for guarded optimism.

The Chinese online sphere is a crucially important part of understanding China's present and theorizing its future. The effects of the Internet in China are one of the

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[1] Chua 2012
[2] Wooldridge 2012.
[3] MacKinnon 2012.
[4] Epstein 2013.
[5] Hindman 2009; Morozov 2012.
[6] Creemers 2014; Qiang 2009.
[7] Yang 2013.

most important and oft studied questions in both communications and Asian studies today, but (almost all) these efforts suffer from the lack of an overarching theoretical framework. In the opaque Chinese system, governmental priorities and policies must often be inferred from vague pronouncements, and the interests of citizens are similarly obscured by a lack of effective and transparent mechanisms for representing public opinion. China, rather than fitting the mold of any single political system is, in an opaque, non-linear and highly pragmatic fashion, forging a new path for itself, mixing Maoist rhetoric, ancient Chinese principles, Western ideas and, above all, practical solutions. This plethora of different strands of thought makes it extremely difficult to conduct theoretically informed research in the Chinese context. However, it is the conflict between these different strands of thought that typifies modern China[8] and understanding how these ideas are negotiated in the world's most populace country is key to understanding its present and future.

The Western dominance of academia presents a significant impediment to this effort. Not only are the vast majority of academic articles published in English but Chinese academics (often educated abroad) find themselves drawing from Western theories even when the basic assumptions of these theories conflict with their cultural ideals[9]. Despite a legacy of thousands of years of philosophy, modern China lacks strong "home-grown" theories[10]. Attempts to right this balance and take account of non-Western perspectives, particularly those attempts sponsored by the state, often are strongly anti-Western and take too uncritical a view of ancient Chinese philosophies[11].

While much of the current research into the political effects of the Internet in China appears atheoretical due to this lack of appropriate theories, research cannot avoid normative judgments[12]. While it would certainly not be desirable for all academic research to become bogged down in theoretical questions, the lack of interrogation of what might be an appropriate normative framework to use to analyze the Chinese Internet is problematic. Without a normative framework, one cannot critique the conditions that one finds against an established ideal nor suggest how conditions could be improved. Furthermore, (implicit) normative ideals underpin how research is approached, what questions are asked, and what variables and cases are included. As such, a lack of appropriate normative frameworks or, indeed, any discussion of normative ideals, in relation to the political effects of the Internet in China generally leads either to an unspoken dominance of the democratic ideal or an atheoretical void in which the strong voice of the Party can become ideologically dominant. Neither of these outcomes is desirable and, thus, this paper begins to fill this gap by discussing what appropriate normative goals for the political effects of the Internet in China might be and how these normative frameworks might be derived.

The Role of the State

[8] Mitter 2012.
[9] Shao and Zhang 2013.
[10] Dissanayake 2009; Gunaratne 2009.
[11] Dissanayake 2009.
[12] Althaus 2012.

In establishing an appropriate normative framework to analyze the political effects of the Internet in China, the first question that must be asked is how the role of the state should be conceptualized. It should be noted that some commentators have argued that the concept of a state is not relevant in China[13]. However, a common language must be found to engage in comparative research. As such, the word state in this paper should be understood in its grounded context rather than based on a textbook definition.

Any discussion of Chinese political philosophy must start with Confucianism. Confucius' works laid down principles for building a harmonious society through individual daily lives and do not see a separation between politics and daily life. In Confucian China, the family was the basic unit of society and the Emperor was seen as the father to a multitude of children. A father's responsibility is not one that is codified but rather emerges from virtue and kindness, based on the principle that man is inherently good[14]. Thus in Confucian China, the primary role of the state was to ensure the welfare of its citizens and provide socioeconomic security grounded in these fatherly virtues[15].

This fore fronting of socioeconomic development and welfare and the patriarchal relationship between the state and its citizens has persisted throughout Republican, Maoist, and contemporary China. However, the theoretical role of the state under Confucianism and Communism is very different. In Communist philosophy, the state is an instrument of oppression that developed when society was cleaved into classes; it will wither away after Communism is realized but in a socialist society the state provides the authority and structure from which the transition to Communism is enacted[16]. During the Republican period the state was seen as having a similar transitory role, with Sun Yat-sen outlining three stages of revolution: military unification, political tutelage, and constitutional democracy. However, the short-lived republican government had little time to begin to build a system that would facilitate the transition to democracy before the military takeover.

In Communist China (and Soviet Russia), the state and Party were maintained as linked but not identical entities, with the state representing the formal structures from which command flowed and the Party representing the will of society[17]. However, the Communist state, lacking any mechanism for interacting with citizens, is necessarily distanciated from the people and the responsibility of the Communist Party to crystalize the will of the people was seen as requiring a certain degree of filtering and refinement. As Mao said in a 1965 interview, "we must teach the masses clearly what we have received from them confusedly"[18].

However, it is important to note that in practice the economic and welfare responsibilities that are the cornerstone of Confucian perspectives remained a

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[13] Chen 2012.
[14] Pott 1981.
[15] Perry 2008.
[16] Medalie 1959.
[17] Schurmann 1966.
[18] Malraux 1967, 362.

primary goal of the Party (and thus the state as an instrument of Party will) in Communist China[19], as indeed they had been to Republican leaders, with livelihood one of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People, along with democracy and nationalism.

In post-Mao China, these economic and welfare responsibilities have persisted as a major role of the state, with ideological and revolutionary elements put on the backburner.[20] Shue problematizes the welfare narrative by arguing that the legitimacy of the modern Chinese state does not rest on economic achievements, but rather in providing stable conditions under which the economy can grow[21]. However regardless of whether welfare is seen as a direct or indirect responsibility, socioeconomic progress and the maintenance of stable, harmonious conditions to facilitate this progress have been seen as one of the most important responsibilities of the Chinese state throughout its different historical periods.

This contrasts with classic Western political thought that posits conflict over scarce resources as inevitable and sees the state's role as mediating between these competing interests. Rather than human beings being inherently good and virtuous as Confucian philosophy construes them or able to live without competition when relieved of oppressive economic conditions as Marxism would have them, human life outside the state is seen as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short"[22]. This natural competition means that the major roles of the state are to monopolize force within its boundaries (to prevent these conflicts from turning violent), allocate scarce resources, and provide a neutral space in which the competing interests of different individuals can be adjudicated between. The pluralist notion of democracy sees this adjudication carried out, in line with the interests of the governed, based on leaders selected via elections[23].

In contrast to the Chinese state, ensuring the welfare of its citizens did not arise as a responsibility of Western states till the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with these new responsibilities based on newly emerged rights discourses that focused on the concept of need and the principle of equality[24].

Understanding the role of the state is the first step to constructing an appropriate normative framework with which to analyze the political effects of the Internet in China. However, this is only the first step. Political participation is a two-way process and thus the next step is to analyze how appropriate state-citizen interactions are understood in relevant theoretical traditions.

State-citizen interactions

Despite taking a paternalistic approach and placing great stock in deference to authority, Confucian philosophy includes both theoretical and practical traditions of

[19] Solomon 1971.
[20] Shue 2004.
[21] Shue 2004.
[22] Hobbes 2009, 186.
[23] Vincent 1992.
[24] White 2010.

citizen input into governmental processes. The concept of Minben (民本) represents the idea that citizens are the root of the state's authority. There was a long tradition of people's petitions in Confucian China and of traveling to the capital to make ones case to the Emperor. However while Confucian philosophy recognized that the will of the people ought to be respected, it did not provide structures that could help realize this ideal[25].

This lack of formal mechanisms forced discontentment into extra-institutional channels[26]. Indeed, the political philosophy of Confucian China justified extra-institutional actions under the concept of the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming 天命). Rebellion was seen as "heaven's way of removing the mantle of leadership from immoral rulers and bestowing it instead upon those who were virtuous enough to replace them"[27].

In Confucian China, the distanciation of the general public from the political process contrasts with that of the intellectual class who occupied a privileged position in society and had an opportunity to influence social change. However, the position of the intellectual class, who were also extremely influential during the short-lived Republican period, changed dramatically after the Communist revolution

Communist philosophies see the interests of the common people as inevitably in conflict with that of the landowners and bourgeoisie. However, given the difficulty of establishing methods that would allow Chinese peasants to feed their opinions into government policy, Maoist policies "emphasized learning from the people through direct engagement with their conditions and struggles"[28]. Following this model of state-citizen interaction, peasants did not need to do anything in order for their input to be realized, they simply had to continue with their daily lives and this would (re-)educate the elite as to what the government needed to do.

However, many initiatives during the Maoist period encouraged political speech in order to create an ideological consciousness among Chinese peasants and to mobilize and "give voice to those who by tradition had shown submissive obedience"[29]. These practices included that of speaking bitterness (Suku 诉苦), which was used during the Civil War and later adapted into the process of land reform, and writing big character posters (Dazibao 大字报), which were particularly encouraged during the Cultural Revolution as a tool to motivate young people into revolutionary political involvement.

Despite these outlets for citizen opinion, the majority of state-citizen interactions in Maoist China remained top-down and for the people rather than by the people. The state's interpretation of the will of the people still took precedence, with political communication characterized by ideological indoctrination, centralized state

[25] He 2010.
[26] Hung 2011.
[27] Perry 2008, 39.
[28] He and Warren 2011, 279.
[29] Solomon 1971, 195.

control, Party pronouncements broadcast by loudspeaker in public places, and policies communicated via editorials in party publications. Citizens were afforded a greater opportunity to exercise their political voice in Communist China than in Confucian China, with highly formalized and structured channels for engagement; however, acceptable speech was highly prescribed and allowed only within the confines of Party dominance of both political power and the political agenda. While speech has certainly become freer post-Mao, with criticism (but not mobilization) allowed, even sometimes encouraged, political structures and overall philosophies remain relatively unchanged.

In contrast to both Confucian and Communist philosophies which prescribe a role for the state independent of the will of citizens, in a democratic state ultimate sovereignty rests with the governed. In representative democracies individuals are elected to represent the interests of citizens and a variety of formal channels exist to allow citizens interests to feed into governmental policies, including referenda, petitions, and public meetings.

However the simple representation of individual interests is often seen as inadequate for good governance. The recent deliberative turn in democratic theory, that occurred around 1990 but is associated with earlier works by Rawls[30] and Habermas[31], emphasizes that democratic legitimacy should be based not just on representation but on rational deliberation by citizens[32].

Ideas of rational deliberation and an (online) public sphere have been very popular among Chinese academics and intellectuals[33]. However, it is questionable whether this quest for an independent, rational public sphere is relevant in China and several efforts have been made to reconcile deliberatively dominated communications scholarship with China's political realities.

Political speech, the public sphere, and authoritarian deliberation

Early (Western) communication scholarship examining the Internet's effects on politics was dominated by the idea that a new public sphere could emerge online but this optimism has largely been discredited as unrealistic based on empirical studies in a Western context[34].

However, this discourse has traveled abroad with the technology and seems particularly powerful for those who live in contexts where freedom of speech is more controlled[35]. In China, this is indicative of a profound hope about the freedom-bringing potential of the Internet but it is often applied without a consideration of the effects of government censorship, monitoring, and interference in online spaces[36]. Other scholars have got around this problem by arguing that the concept

[30] Rawls 1971.
[31] Habermas 1962.
[32] Dryzek 2002.
[33] Yang and Calhoun 2007.
[34] Dahlberg 2001.
[35] Dutton et al. 2014.
[36] Zhou, Chan, and Peng 2008.

of the public sphere is applicable because "Chinese intellectuals themselves have come to embrace it"[37].

However, it may not be appropriate to apply a theory developed from a nostalgic reflection on the lifestyles of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe in the early 1800s to modern China. Huang[38] argues that concept of the public sphere is too specific to a particular historical context and too value laden to be usefully applied. Wang and Hong[39] argue that the Chinese have little experience in the skills that would be necessary for public sphere deliberation and Rosenberg[40] hypothesizes that Chinese normative ideals of consensus and deference to authority would hamper the deliberative process.

Practically, there is little mechanism for the results of deliberation to feed back into government policy, Internet penetration in China has barley reached half the population and the Internet is dominated by commerce and entertainment. Attempting to reconcile the popularity and allure of the public sphere ideal with these theoretical and practical criticisms, recent efforts have formulated the concept of authoritarian deliberation.

He[41] argued that deliberation and democracy were not necessarily linked and that the Chinese government was driving a democratization process based on authoritarian deliberation because, as He and Warren[42] argue in a later article, deliberation serves to provide information to the government, to prevent policy errors and increase governmental authority and legitimacy. Jiang[43] argues that the concept of authoritarian deliberation can be extended to the Chinese Internet.

However, if as He[44] argues, deliberation should be decoupled from democracy, it is hard to argue that the Chinese government's experimentation with geographically and topically limited deliberation should be seen as part of a process of democratization. Much more than simply deliberation would be necessary to embark upon a path toward democratization, including a freeing of the deliberative agenda, the creation of impartial spaces, and a transparent mechanism for responding to the results of deliberation.

However from the perspective of this paper, the greatest problem with the concept of authoritarian deliberation is that, while taking democracy (in its Western sense) as both the desirable and likely goal of Chinese political change, it looks only at the practices of the government in constructing, facilitating or, sometimes just, permitting both the spaces for deliberation and the structure and agenda of deliberation itself. Democracy is, by definition, rule by the people and needs, for its establishment and success, at least a certain measure of, if not complete,

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[37] Yang and Calhoun 2007, 214.
[38] Huang 1993.
[39] Wang and Hong 2012.
[40] Rosenberg 2006.
[41] He 2006.
[42] He and Warren 2011.
[43] Jiang 2009.
[44] He 2006.

independence and initiative on the part of the citizens. Democratization, even if we want to seek this in China, cannot be controlled solely by the government.

Parallels can be seen between current authoritarian deliberative practices in China and the Maoist initiatives of speaking bitterness, letting 100 flowers bloom, and writing big-character posters during the Cultural Revolution. Chinese citizens were encouraged to participate in political speech acts in a way that consolidated support for the regime's prior agenda. While the concept of authoritarian deliberation is important in explaining the current policies of the Chinese government, the search for appropriate normative theories from which to evaluate the political effects of the Internet in China should not start from and incorporate only the actions and agendas of the Party.

Another branch of scholarship that deserves mention is the efforts to use Confucian political philosophy to provide normative guidelines for politics in modern China. For instance, Yang, Xu, and Qi[45] basing their argument on the doctrine of Li (礼), argue that normatively the Internet should assist citizens in their role of checking the government's power (but not necessarily questioning the boundaries of that power). This is a useful effort to reconcile Eastern and Western political philosophies in the Chinese context, but it is also limited in several ways. If focuses on only one aspect of traditional philosophy and on only one aspect of state-citizen relations, without questioning what these relations should be. It also does not consider whether the principle of Li should apply in modern China nor whether there is any evidence that netizens are concerned with acting as watchdogs of government power in accordance with their Li-governed responsibilities. These are some of the considerations that this paper aims to address.

How Should Theories be Evaluated?

The preceding three sections have outlined how some of the different political theories that might be applicable in modern China have conceptualized and executed the role of the state, state-citizen interactions, and political speech. This has laid the groundwork for this paper, which asks what are appropriate normative frameworks through which to analyze the political effects of the Internet in China. However before this can be done, it is important to establish what criteria should be used to select between and evaluate these theories.

While normative theories lay out ideal conditions that do not necessarily need to be rooted in the present in order to derive their utility, they should neither be formulated nor applied without respect to their historical and current context of application. Furthermore, they should take into account the current positions of all relevant groups, looking not just at a distant utopia but also at the smaller changes necessary to move toward ultimate ideals.

This idea that political theories should be derived from an understanding of their context was laid out by Freeden[46], who describes three ways of constructing

[45] Yang, Xu, and Qi 2013.
[46] Freeden 2008.

political theory. The first two are working from normative ideals and charting the history of political ideas. Freeden criticizes both these approaches as taking "insufficient account of the ordinary and normal manifestations of political thought in any given society"[47]. The third way of constructing political theory is to work from an understanding of how political ideas are actually produced, transmitted and received in society, and what individuals actually do and think about politics.

Based on this perspective, there are three major considerations that should be taken into account in the effort to construct appropriate normative frameworks from which to analyze the political effects of the Internet in China.

Firstly, Western ideas about ideal governance should not be imported without critical reflection as to the appropriateness of both their eventual goals and the steps proposed to reach these goals. A normative framework should take into account the context of its application. Even if the ultimate goals remain the same, the steps taken to reach them will be different in different contexts.

Secondly, normative theories should take into account all relevant groups. Particularly due to the current dominance of Western and government-backed normative frameworks, it is important to examine what Chinese citizens want out of the Internet in order to construct more appropriate normative frameworks. It should be remembered that few individuals subscribe to a clearly articulated political framework and that what individuals want from the Internet may have nothing to do with what theorists recognize as political. Nevertheless, it is important to examine individual Chinese netizens' Internet usage practices in order to attempt to understand what they wish the technology will achieve for them rather than foisting on them pre-established notions about desirable political outcomes generated without respect to their context of application.

Lastly normative frameworks should be grounded in the conditions of the present. Rather than utilizing an idea, such as electoral democracy, that is far from the current context without outlining and respecting the stages and steps that would progress toward this goal or employing a theory, such as the public sphere, whose premises are the antithesis of the political and social conditions in modern China, scholarship will be more useful in drawing towards more ideal outcomes if the normative frameworks applied are practical and grounded.

Based on these three premises for evaluating normative frameworks, the next section will draw from existing data and research into Internet use in China to make concrete suggestions about how the normative frameworks used (or neglected) by Chinese Internet researchers could be improved.

Welfare and Economic Progress are Important Normative Goals

A survey of more than 10,000 Internet users worldwide found that Chinese netizens were the world's most frequent users of the Internet for entertainment and commerce[48]. Chinese microblog users also share more entertainment content,

[47] Ibid, 197.
[48] Bolsover et al. 2014.

compared to a greater popularity of news topics on Twitter[49]. This use of the Internet is in line with the government's priorities and the rhetoric under which the technology was first introduced in China, as well as the historic prioritization of the welfare and economic roles of the state over civic rights, such as freedom of speech.

However, just because Internet use for entertainment and commerce is high in China doesn't mean netizens would not want to use the Internet for more political functions if these functions were facilitated and permitted. Separating the extent to which the prevalence of entertainment and economic uses of the Internet in China are due to state discouragement of certain political actions versus a reflection of the individuals' needs for this tool are an important venue for further research.

Nevertheless, given the long history of economic progress and welfare as the primarily responsibilities of the Chinese state more credence should be given to the normative goal of using the Internet to further economic progress than it currently receives in scholarship. However good the intentions are of those who seek to find a shining path toward democracy on the Chinese Internet, in accordance with Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, securing economic subsistence and progress, and facilitating individual social connections may necessary come before "so-called" higher level needs.

Big data analysis of how rights are spoken about by US and Chinese citizens of different classes supports, with some caveats, the conclusion that welfare and economic progress should be taken more seriously as normative goals in China. Zhou, Gallagher, Jackson, Mei, and Resnick [50] examined words that co-occurred with "rights" in textual corpuses that were associated with working class, middle class, students/intellectuals, the government and dissidents in both China and the US, categorizing the tendency of these groups to characterize rights as welfare or civic. They found that in all of the groups, except the dissidents, Chinese individuals spoke more about welfare rights than the comparable US group.

However, Zhou et al.'s[51] research also showed that Chinese government officials spoke much more of welfare rights than the middle class, students and intellectuals, and dissidents, suggesting that the high prioritization of welfare rights in China, may be due to dominant, government discourses. The researchers also found evidence that recognition of civic rights were growing among the Chinese working class. These results suggest that while we should definitely take more seriously welfare as a normative goal, we should also be aware about how individuals' normative ideals are shaped by dominant discourses and recognize that these normative goals may change over time, particularly as goals associated with the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy are satisfied.

Chinese opinions about the role of the state and the meaning of human rights are changing, indeed having access to online information and spaces for self-expression may be catalyzing rather than just reflecting this change. Chinese people want their Internet to be free, but they also want their Internet to be safe and useful. Returning

[49] Yu, Asur, and Huberman 2013.
[50] Zhou et al. 2010.
[51] Ibid.

to the survey that was mentioned at the start of this section, 70 percent of Chinese respondents thought that the Internet was free; however, 52 percent agreed that the government should monitor online information and 27 percent believed that the government should censor political content posted online (with 22 percent neutral as to whether the government should censor political content). These opinions evidence a great split in terms of what kind of Internet space Chinese citizens want.

While remaining cognizant of the power of government structures and socialization to guide and shape individual actions and opinions, we should not discount the importance of the state's role in creating the conditions for economic progress in the Chinese context. When the interests of Internet freedom and economic progress apparently conflict, we should think critically about how they can be reconciled and realize that economic stability and sufficient welfare can often be seen as prerequisites for "so-called" higher level need.

A Watchdog Approach to State-Citizen Relations

Acting as watchdogs to ensure the state is performing virtuously and in accordance with its required responsibilities has historically been an important responsibility of Chinese citizens. This watchdog function does not involve a criticism of the standards to which the government is held but is nevertheless a valuable normative outcome that the Internet can facilitate. This function is both tolerated and encouraged by the government, particularly in relation to fighting corruption and discouraging inappropriate social behavior.

The role of the Internet in allowing citizens to provide a check on government power and on undesirable actions, which would be difficult to prosecute through China's tortuous court system, should not be discounted, even if this function does not extend to questioning what the government's role should be or what is right or wrong in society. The Chinese constitution technically guarantees freedom of speech; laws protect peasants from uncompensated land grabs, workers from working more than six days a week, and the urban poor from extortion by unscrupulous officials. However, the gap between law and reality in China is a large one. Just as the previous section argued that it was important to take seriously economic progress and improved welfare as appropriate normative goals for the Internet in China (while continuing to recognize the desirability of civic and political goals), I argue that enabling and strengthening preexisting notions of the watchdog function of citizens in their relation to the state is an important normative goal and that pursuing the realization of existing legal and social frameworks would likely lead to a more critical evaluation of what these frameworks are and how they came into being.

Little data is available that could be used to assess the overall nature, prevalence and success of watchdog activities on the Chinese Internet. Although their methods and dataset are opaque, the Annual Report on Chinese Social Opinion is one of the few available datasets and its figures support the conclusion that the Internet is used by networked individuals to perform a watchdog function. The 2012 report found that the largest category of public opinion incidents on Sina Weibo between 2007 and 2011 were related to inappropriate conduct, followed by policing and law problems, and society and lifestyle problems, then political problems, ethical

questions, product and service quality problems, and accident victims. This distribution supports the idea that the Internet is important in seeking justice under existing legal (and social) frameworks, and in specific and discrete cases, rather than challenging or discussing existing frameworks.

It is important to note, however, the problems associated with individuals pursuing these watchdog functions on the Internet. Human flesh searches can easily target the wrong individuals or turn violent. Sina Weibo is full of pictures of individuals acting in ways that are deemed inappropriate, such as allowing their children to urinate on the subway, but there is little conversation about how these practices could be changed nor of what appropriate expectations of privacy in public places might be. Rumors are also a major problem on the Chinese Internet. However, these problems have been used as an excuse to crack down on online expression and prevent online opinion leaders from building power. An important avenue for further exploration is how the ability to publish information freely online should be balanced against potential harms caused by the publication of this information in the Chinese context.

This balance is currently set by the Chinese government, with a recent Supreme Court announcement that individuals who post rumors that are read by more than 5,000 people or forwarded by more than 500 on social media are liable for up to three years in prison. However, the boundaries of acceptable state-citizen interaction are in constant negotiation and flux. In their analysis of the daily behaviors of Chinese journalists and lawyers, Stern and Hassid[52] found that the rules for daily behavior "are not handed down from the pinnacle of the state but jointly written (and rewritten) by Chinese public professionals and their government overseers"[53]. These small negotiations may not be aimed at changing the overall governmental framework in China but this does not detract from the political importance of the Internet in facilitating the watchdog function of citizens underneath existing legal and social frameworks. Enhancing this watchdog function should be seen as an important normative goal.

Rational, Independent Deliberation Should Not Be An Immediate Goal

Communications scholarship concerning online political participation both in the West and in China has been for the past decade, perhaps unhelpfully, dominated by the ideals of the public sphere. This concept, laid out originally by Habermas[54] calls for (or laments a time in which there was supposed to have been) a public sphere, independent of the state and of private concerns in which individuals participated in rational, equal deliberations. The idea of a public sphere has been subject to a great deal of criticism[55]. However, the rational ideal is still what most Internet theorists look for in online political speech[56].

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[52] Stern and Hassid 2012, 1230.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Habermas 1989.
[55] See, for instance, Fraser 1995.
[56] e.g. Dahlberg 2001; Dahlgren 2005; Papacharissi 2004.

Whether or not these ideas are relevant or useful, they have spilled over into and have great power in relation to Chinese Internet research. They have directly led into the concept of authoritarian deliberation and have spawned a "search for deliberative democracy in China"[57].

Among those searching for a public sphere with Chinese characteristics, Chen[58] hypothesized that deliberation might be smoother in China because of the tradition of harmony and He[59] similarly argued that this harmonious tradition might help avoid polarization in discussion. In contrast, Rosenberg[60] posited that the traditions of consensus and deference to authority might undermine the benefits of constructive disagreement.

However given the large differences between modern China and the historical and social context in which public sphere theory was formed, this search for independent, rational deliberation on the Chinese Internet may not only be futile but it may also obscure a more productive line of analysis that could establish how individuals actually communicate online, the utility of these communications, and how these efforts could be made more productive. In a recent piece of research, I compared comments on similar news stories on Weibo and Facebook, finding that individual comments on Weibo were much further from the public sphere ideal than those on Facebook; however, this was not due to Chinese commentators' drive to create a harmonious environment, if anything comments on Weibo were more divisive, less likely to be talking with others, less likely to attempt to see others' points of view and less likely to attempt to propose solutions[61].

Despite the popularity of ideas of rational discussion among Chinese intellectuals, netizens showed no evidence of ascribing to these normative ideals. Instead, the types of political speech that was evidenced on Weibo was highly individualistic, despite the fact that Weibo's structure is just as, if not more, conducive to interpersonal deliberation than those on Facebook.

Encouraging individualistic, rather than communitarian or deliberative, speech benefits the Party's divide and rule strategy. The Party manufactures consent using a variety of local level mechanisms in order to contain dissent[62] and even when deliberative forums are introduced in China their agenda, structure, and outcomes are still heavily controlled by the government [63]. While Chinese intellectuals and netizens look to Western democracy and ideas of free speech and rational debate as ideals, these ideals are neither enacted nor immediately possible on the contemporary Chinese Internet.

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[57] Leib and He 2006.
[58] Chen 2006.
[59] He 2006.
[60] Rosenberg 2006.
[61] Bolsover forthcoming.
[62] Zhang and Li 2012.
[63] He and Warren 2011.

Yet there are other models of political speech that may provide more constructive frameworks. Mouffe's[64] model of agonistic pluralism argues that it is impossible to come to a fully inclusive rational consensus and that conflict is inevitable and should be accounted for. This theory is, of course, even further from Confucian ideas than it is from the idea of the public sphere, yet (particularly given the empirical evidence suggesting higher levels of divisiveness on Chinese microblogs) it may be a more productive perspective from which to analyze the political effects of the Internet in China.

If we accept that facilitating the provision of a watchdog function of networked citizens on the state and other power holders as an appropriate normative goal for the Internet in China, we should ask whether rational deliberation is necessary for this goal to be achieved. Similarly the functions of self-expression, experimentation, and identity building do not need to be rational in order to have a positive effect. The public sphere ideal also prescribes acceptable and unacceptable topics, forms, and modes of political speech in a way that is unhelpful to the analysis of the Internet's political effects in China.

Rather, we need to examine what netizens actually say and do online, which types of speech and actions are effective, and how this effectiveness can be improved. For instance, one research effort compared the campaigns of two farmers experiencing illegal land grabs and trying to use the Internet to leverage their rights under existing laws[65]. The authors concluded that one was unsuccessful in his campaign, even though his case was even more egregious, because he made the issue an individual problem, whereas the other was successful because he framed his case as a collective problem that could affect other farmers and succeeded in appealing to the mainstream media.

This idea of collectivity is an important one for further investigation. Rosenberg[66] argues that, particularly in the Chinese context where individuals more readily submit to established social identities, it would be important to emphasize the common social bonds and interests of participants in political discussions. Current Internet platforms individualize users and increase incidences of conflictual interactions, perhaps what is needed is not the search for deliberative democracy in China but rather the search for community building and consciousness raising of a political class who could then contribute more productively to political progress. Taking into account both China's philosophical and social traditions and empirical evidence about how people actually communicate and are successful in online political campaigns, it seems as if it would be more productive to focus on fostering a communitarian rather than rational, deliberative style of discussion as a normative goal for the political effects of the Interest in China.

Conclusion

The paper began by arguing that current scholarship in relation to the political effects of the Internet in China is limited due to its lack of appropriate theoretical

[64] Mouffe 1999.
[65] Pu and Scanlan 2012.
[66] Rosenberg 2006.

frameworks. Modern China is a complicated mix of different theoretical perspectives that one strategy cannot fully explain. Government processes remain highly influenced by both Confucian and Communist perspectives, in addition to raw pragmatism, while individuals and intellectuals increasingly aspire to Western political ideals that are difficult to adapt and apply.

In moving toward more appropriate normative frameworks for analyzing the political effects of the Internet in China, this paper argued that based on China's modern and historical context we need to take greater account of welfare and economic goals, value the Internet's ability to facilitate a watchdog role, and strive for community rather than rationality in online discussions. This is not to argue that the goals of democracy, freedom of speech, and rational deliberation are wholly inappropriate in China, but rather we must seek to build a modified theory that can incorporate globally prevailing democratic ideals with the social, cultural, historical, and political context of their application. These three suggestions are put forward based on the argument that normative frameworks should take into account what individual people actually think, say and do; what normative goals they aspire to; and what productive changes can be made given current constraints.

However, we cannot in these efforts forget the effects of socialization in setting the agenda for what individuals think, want, and aspire to. Many would argue that in censored, authoritarian China, individuals are strongly socialized to hold opinions that are contradictory to their own interests. But too closely following this line of thinking removes agency from individual participants and affords others the power to decide what is in their interests. We should not shy away from these difficult questions about what are desirable political effects of the Internet in China, simultaneously respecting the opinions of Chinese netizens and China's long history of political theory while critically interrogating how and why these ideas came into being and their current utility to established power holders.

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