

On the Building of the Maintenance Mechanism for the Expression of Chinese Netizens' Opinions in a New Media Environment

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Abstract

Internet plays an irreplaceable role in the expression of public opinions and in the building of a new channel for democracy. The free expression of netizens' opinions, having a positive influence on social stability, is a window through which public opinions and ideas can be clearly observed. We need to, on the basis of further broadening the channels and platforms for public opinion expression, make rational judgment on the effect of network public opinion expression, and step up efforts in supervision and in the safeguard to legal system. Because, in the new media environment, netizen opinion expression has many problems in China, such as irrational expression, the uncertainty of netizens' political identity, and the neglect to public expression online by some officers. Only by constantly establishing and improving the mechanism for the expression of netizens' public opinion, the channel through which the masses express public opinion will become more and more open. It's not just a kind of promotion towards good governance, but also a big step toward the building a harmonious socialist society.

Key words: New media; Netizens' opinions; Maintenance mechanism; Building

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INTRODUCTION

Public opinion means "the broadly similar opinions, emotions and behaviors that the social public hold or act towards some certain public affairs or phenomena" (Xuan, 2010). Network is a new public opinion expression channel; there is no essential difference between the network public opinion and the traditional opinion, except the way to contact government and the masses. No matter how the way to reflect changes, the public opinion itself is unchanged, reflecting the masses' advice and hope for the work of governmental officers. In the context of new media, internet or network has become the prominently important approach to spread information. The speed and scope of expressing public opinions continue to accelerate and expand. In such situation, "netizens' opinions" have become dispensable force, reshaping China's political environment in an invisible way, which provides new opportunities and resources to the development of China politics, economy, and society. Such direct dialogue and communication between governmental leaders and ordinary people which is not easy to achieve undoubtedly means that internet has brought new direction to the development of China politics.

1. OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE MAINTENANCE WORK OF CHINESE CITIZENS' OPINIONS

Netizens' attention, discussion, question and advices on national political, economic and social hot issues have become a new way to express public opinion, and tremendously influence the settlement of issues in these fields. Even national leaders set themselves as examples to concern online advices and involve in many discussions of such online issues, forming a good interactive relationship with netizens.

1.1 The Party and Government Value Understanding Public Opinion Through Internet

Chinese government has always been underlining the development of the internet, especially since President Hu Jintao communicated with netizens on Country Prosperous Forum. The sense of utilizing internet as a way to know public opinions has been strengthened among all levels of leaders. With the rapid development and expansion of internet, people's production, work, study and life is going through a deep change. Today, China has become a country with the largest population of netizens. The State Council Information Office published a white book, "China Internet Condition", introducing the basic information about the current development of Chinese internet. The influence of internet in political, economic and social life has become increasingly obvious. More and more officials have access to the Internet to collect public opinion, which means that the government attaches great importance to the network public opinion; the network has become a new channel for the construction of democracy.

1.2 The Internet Stimulates People's Zeal to Participate in Public Management

Blog, post and online chatting have become an important way for people to concern about the society, voice appeals, reflect public opinions and participate in political lives. Compared with traditional official field to voice public opinion, "the public can express their demands at any time, in any places through internet, providing a convenient condition for more people to express opinions (Zhu, 2011)." In network communication, the media resource controllers have comparatively less intervention in the speech, and internet anonymity can give publishers strong sense of safety. Therefore, social life, ideas and culture are much more diversified in the internet public opinion field. Compared to the traditional media, audiences prefer network media more.

1.3 The Expression of Netizens' Opinion Promotes Social Harmony and Stability

To solve problems, giving a ear to them is where it starts. Internet, to some degree, serves as a outlet to express opinions and release pressures. Only if the bad emotions of the masses are vented timely, the unstable social factors could be alleviated. Even though questions raised by netizens cannot be answered temporally, their pressures are partly released through talking with others and expressing their views on the net.

2. CHALLENGES FOR THE MAINTENANCE WORK OF CHINESE CITIZENS' OPINIONS

Undeniably, internet has become an important channel for government to hear from and take in public opinions,

which forces government to pay attention to domestic and foreign exchanges, to correct the mistakes in policies and thus to make scientific and reasonable decisions so as to make them accepted by public. But meanwhile we should recognize that public opinion expression is a double-edged sword, "It becomes a low-cost and rapid-growth product on internet platform; what's more, it has characters of high degree of freedom, high information capacity, posing serious challenges to the current social management work (Sun, 2011)."

2.1 Comparatively Radical and Unreasonable Expression of Citizens' Opinions Are

The shortage of the traditional media supervision and government-merchants collusions lead to some public opinion expression channel not unobstructed; "petitions" are often refused and suppressed; demonstrations and rallies petition are forbidden in most cases, in another word, "though there is a door, it is always shut".

In this case, Chinese citizens fear offending authorities, for the authorities grasp the power to destroy their lives. But on the internet, people found a public place where they can get rid of fear and avoid limitations. Hence their emotions and fierce criticisms turn into floods.

2.2 Uncertainty of Netizens' Political Identity

The natural people active on the internet are called netizens. In fact, they entirety consists of all kinds of groups. Netizens are like invisible men on the internet who can express their own views on the net without revealing their own personal information. In some sense, a netizen does not represent the interest of a certain class, or a certain industry; he or she only represent himself or herself to voice opinions on the net. Gradually, he or she will weaken social identity, abandon duties and obligations in real life, and cause many new social problems.

2.3 Neglect of the Power of Netizens' Opinions by Some Officers

With the popularity of the Internet, internet opinion expression and internet public supervision will become normal. Netizen opinions now are an important lesson, causing much attention from party committees and governments of all level. But, some local officers did not face up it properly, thinking quiet it down will solve all problems. As a result, all problems raised by the people on internet were lay aside, causing a wide gap between the reality and government declarations. On the internet, the government solves problems with a skillful and clever method, making people believe that the government is really excellent and the problems must have been solved perfectly. While the reality is quite opposite with the appearance.

If the internet questioning turns into internet deceiving, it will not only make netizen opinion expression abandoned by the people, but it will also seriously damage the credibility and image of the Party and governments

of all levels. In reality, the Party and governments should pragmatically study and solve the problems; what's more, they should recognize the importance of efficiency in work and improve their work.

3. COUNTERMEASURE AND SUGGESTION ON THE BUILDING OF THE MAINTENANCE MECHANISM OF THE EXPRESSION OF CHINESE CITIZENS' OPINIONS

From the perspective of public affairs manager, the Internet is becoming another effective means to understand public opinions except for Party newspapers and internal reference. It is the new "clairvoyance" and "clairaudient"; From the perspective of the general public opinion, it is a possible channel of free expression, which has gained recognition and respect of China's top leaders. But, it is a long and complicated process including the expression, the recognition of public opinion, the gain of due respect, the formation of countermeasures and the practice, each of which could result in an unexpected consequence. The expression of netizen opinions need care from all parts.

3.1 Make Rational Judgment on the Effectiveness of Netizens' Opinions

The 18th CPC National Congress Report notes, "All policies that are in the vital interests of the public should listen from the public; all decisions that will damage the public's interests should be prevented and corrected (Marching on the Socialist Path with Chinese Characteristics, 2012)." Though netizen opinions are established on a wide population base, it does not represent the whole public opinion. The main part of netizen opinions expression is beneficial. Most netizens want to participate in this progress, expressing and reflecting appeals for different social groups. To some extent, it provides important basis for value trade-off and benefit-risk weighing while making public policy decisions. But, at the same time, we should make objective judgment on its effectiveness.

First, the government should have an objective knowledge on the influence of netizen opinions. Although the number of Internet users is numerous, but they covers only a small part of the citizens. While attaching due importance on it, the government should also pay attention to the opinions of the "silent majority". Second, government should have an objective knowledge about the influence of netizen opinions on the whole society. The reason why Netizens' opinion are valued, to a large extent, is that they cater to the demands of some groups in society. Probably they represent only part of people or part of group's opinions and views. Besides, the

government should also have an objective knowledge about the influence of netizen opinions on government decision-making. Netizens' opinion is a concentrated reflection of public's views, ideas and advices in real life whose influence on economic development and social stability is becoming gradually important. When making decisions, governments must take it in consideration. But, the majority of this group is not policy makers. Therefore, some of their ideas and analysis maybe right, but we cannot ensure there is no bad emotions. Given this, the government can only take their ideas as references, but can't depend on it.

3.2 Broaden the Channel and Platform for the Expression of Public Opinions

Under the current political, economic and social pattern, some advices are crucially important to social stability and harmony. They are stated as follows: the effective safeguard of speech freedom entitled by the Constitution, the maintenance of an unblocked, efficient channel for expressions, the building of a new passageway for democracy, all of which can help resolving contradictions, conflicts and violence existing in current China. One of an important criterion whether officials regard network opinion as a part of democracy is their attitude toward it. All levels of government can open interactive BBS, enabling people to freely express on the official platform, and to participate in public affairs or to make recommendations to the government; government and its functional departments should arrange the specialist for online reply work whose job is carefully answering or resolving problems of public demands to improve the quality of public participation. Thankfully, many local government leaders have realized the importance of network public opinion. Some places opened "online complaints office platform about the people's livelihood". But there some local officials regard network as a scourge, neglecting the public opinion, or even increasing the intensity of monitoring to block network public opinion expression.

3.3 Supervision Is Needed for the Expression of Netizens' Opinions

3.3.1 Supervision of the Internet Environment

First, we should supervise and manage the main net medias. Some mainstream media websites never update new contents, conflicting with the original purpose of the website. Mainstream news sites should pay close attention to the netizen opinions and views, and using government officials, professionals or the parties to carry out discussions and make comments, so as to strengthen the guidance of network public opinion. Second, we should strengthen the network legislation, and perfect the executable program. At present, there are a lot of loopholes in the network legislation in our country. The network illegal events emerge in endlessly; Internet

rumors run wild, and the legislation of network has become an appeal of the general public.

3.3.2 Supervise the Internet Population

First, the best way to strengthen netizens' sense of responsibility is to adopt internet registered system. The internet is a relatively open and free place for public opinions. Since netizens' qualities are very different, it is natural that different voices and rumors will be heard. Governments should pay attention to the false information which can bring damage to society. And, some Internet users are easily influenced by views on net. Their enthusiasm is also very easy to be used. Some netizens like speculating rumors. The practical and effective implementation of network real-name system is a necessary condition of orderly and healthy development of "network public opinion". Second, in the face of vast information, the broad masses of netizens should enhance the ability of identification of authenticity, focus on information released by the mainstream media, and strengthen self-discipline. By doing so, they will not be used by some ill-disposed people, which is good for the maintenance of social stability.

3.3.4 Strengthen the Legal System of Public Participation in Government Affairs

In the new media era, information management ability, and the ability to identify, digest, distribute, disseminate information are becoming the indispensable new contemporary citizen qualities. Under this background, netizens should have their own clear principles and rules for publishing and disseminating information. But "the network is a huge fancy dress party where people conceal their true identities, and their behaviors may also go beyond limitations (Mao, 2003)." At the same time, some people ignore the law and moral constraints, regarding the network as an original "jungle world" without the limitation of human laws and morality, and spreading harmful information, damaging not only the credibility of the network, but also destroying the development of network itself.

As everyone knows, "freedom" is a relative word. the Internet world and the real society are same. There is no absolute freedom of the expression of public opinions. Therefore, strengthening the network legislation is the effective guarantee to control negative function of network public opinions. To strengthen the network information protection, not only need we restrict the users in the field of ethics, but also we need prohibit illegal network public opinion expression in law. Government should also accelerate the process of legislation of network, intensify

the network rumor case investigation efforts, and use legal means to give them a heavy blow. Network companies should undertake the responsibility of the maintenance of the network environment to give rumor monger no playing ground and eliminate illegal behaviors from the source network. Managing the "freedom" of network with legal methods, which will effectively overcome the drawbacks of the previous "free jungle world". By doing so, not only the network world will be more healthy and orderly, but also the netizen "expression" will also get more guarantees.

CONCLUSION

In short, with the popularization of Internet and the continuous expansion of the scale of Internet users, the Internet, with the macross, high speed, large capacity and interactivity as its features, has become a new platform for the public to express their wishes. On the network platform, the anonymous identity and convenient communication make the expression of public opinion have more freedom and more space. The internet has unique advantages in listening and adopting public opinions, pooling their wisdoms, serving the people, tightening up relations between government and the masses, encouraging the people's participation in public affairs, promoting democratic decision-making, and strengthening supervisions. We should promote the popularization and institutionalization of network public opinion expression from various aspects, and make it a consensus of the public to realize the healthy functioning of the social order and the improvement of the social civilization .

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