

INTERNET AND GOVERNANCE IN CHINA

By Tian Zhihui

The Internet is influencing governance in China - in most cases for the better. The impact the Internet is having on governance can be gauged from an event on Tuesday, small in scale but huge in significance. The media center of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China organized online discussions between CPC delegates and netizens, which showed how important a channel the Internet has become for the Party to solicit people's opinions.



LUO JIE / CHINA DAILY

In 1997, only 1,500 websites were operating on the Chinese mainland. Today, there are about 2.5 million. More than 388 million Chinese surf the Internet on their mobile phones, accounting for 72.2 percent of the total netizens' population in China. And on average an Internet user stays online for 2.8 hours a day.

Few people could have foretold the Internet's influence on governance in China 15 years ago. Almost all governments, from the central to county levels, across China now have their own websites and regard the Internet as the most efficient medium to disseminate information and seek feedbacks from the people.

President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, too, communicate with the people through the Internet and think government officials should listen to netizens' voices and keep on improving governance.

Some departments in the fields of public security, charity, transport and healthcare now mainly depend on the Internet to provide public services.

The number of Internet users in China increased from 620,000 in 1997 to 87 million in 2005. Since 2005, when blogs and social networks became popular, the Internet has not only raised people's awareness about freedom of expression and the right to know, but also created the conditions for them to exercise these rights. That the number of Chinese netizens increased to 538 million in June 2012 shows how powerful and effective the Internet has been in improving governance. Surprisingly, about one-fifth of Chinese netizens are farmers.

Today, opinions can be formed quickly in public spheres such as forums and social networks, increasing the pressure on the authorities to meet the public demand for transparent governance and timely disclosure of information.

Responding timely to the changing situation, the State Council passed China's first Government Information Disclosure Rules in January 2007. Since May 2008, when the rules were enforced, governments at all levels have made stable progress in making governance more transparent. For instance, disclosures of detailed fiscal budgets, government expenditures and enrollment of civil servants have given the public the opportunity to supervise and scrutinize the exercise of power by many departments.

More importantly, the authorities have been very responsive to public opinion. Let's take one example. On the website of the Nanjing housing administration department in Jiangsu province, netizens in 2008 found a photograph of an official smoking exorbitantly expensive cigarettes. Immediately, they began questioning how an official in his position could afford to smoke such expensive cigarettes and whether he was involved in corruption.

In response, the authorities launched an investigation, found the official was indeed corrupt and sentenced him to 11 years in prison in 2009.

So netizens not only dig information, but also positively influence decisions.

Netizens get their power not from individual Internet users but from the network mechanism that lowers the cost of communication to such a degree that a hierarchical or scattered society can be quickly mobilized and united on a particular topic. Sometimes, netizens' reactions can even influence the country's foreign policies.

This integrating power of the Internet has become, in many ways, the fundamental driving force behind effective interactions between the people and the authorities, with timely and active response by officials making the interactions constructively meaningful.

A recent case is the law against child abuse. A kindergarten teacher posted a series of photographs showing her mistreating children. The photographs evoked widespread criticism and anger on the Internet. Yielding to netizens' pressure, local authorities investigated into the incident. Though there is no specific law against child abuse in China, some lawmakers are considering enacting one at the earliest to better protect children's rights.

The Internet has filled the emptiness left by an underdeveloped society on its march toward industrialization. That social organizations in China are not fully developed is well known. So when some social problems transform into conflicts between individuals and governments, the Internet provides an ideal and flexible cushion in between.

As long as the authorities earnestly heed public concern, are open to suggestions and dispel people's suspicions by disclosing the right information at the right time, they can solve many problems before they snowball into major incidents.

But the Internet also has its drawbacks. Netizens can easily fabricate and/or spread rumors for personal gains. Since there are no special laws on Internet users in China, judicial authorities do not have the legal basis to punish rumormongers. So China needs to pass relevant laws to regulate the information network and deter potential troublemakers. But such laws should not compromise people's freedom of expression and right to know.

China was connected to the World Wide Web on April 20, 1994. But today tools or applications for linking to the Internet are so easily available that the online and offline worlds have become deeply intertwined. Online rumors, arguments or dialogues could easily lead to offline protests and actions. As the number of social media users increases at a blistering pace in China, personal microphones are becoming louder. Now it is hard to believe how governments in China can function without the Internet, which has become

a coherent network reconstructing Chinese society and an indispensable link between governments and citizens.

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