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CAN WE SAY MORE NOW? A CLOSER LOOK AT ONLINE PUBLIC OPINION CHANGE IN CHINA

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CAN WE SAY MORE NOW?
A CLOSER LOOK AT ONLINE PUBLIC OPINION CHANGE IN CHINA

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Art in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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2013

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

CAN WE SAY MORE NOW? A CLOSER LOOK AT ONLINE PUBLIC OPINION CHANGE IN CHINA

This study examined the pattern of online public opinion change in China by investigating the top one hit blog and its following commentaries of every day from July 2009 to March 2012 on a famous Chinese website, and then discussed potential factors that affected the formation of online public opinion. The extent of freedom of online public opinion during this period presented regular fluctuations. Whether criticisms were registered by commentators was influenced by four factors. First and most important, the negative tone of bloggers increased criticism and the positive tone decreased criticism, which shows that the news that flows from the media to the public is amplified and interpreted by influential bloggers according to the two-step flow theory. Second, while national and local events had no effect, international news events decreased criticism because the public strongly supported the Chinese government. This was as important as the first factor. Third, the negative tone of events discussed in blogs increased criticism, which means that the mass media did have some direct influence through negative but not positive events. And fourth, when the government censored blogs and commentaries, the public shied away from criticism because their posts would probably be removed.

KEYWORDS: Online Public Opinion, Blogs, Government, Censorship, China

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CAN WE SAY MORE NOW?
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This thesis is dedicated to:

My mother,

netizens in China,

and people who are devout chasers of justice and freedom

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Chapter 1 Introduction

From a global perspective, there were only less than 50 blogs in the world when the blog was still a new-born technology in 1999 (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). However, Pyra Labs have greatly popularized the usage of blogs by developing user-friendly software and made it freely available to online users (Mead, 2000). The blogosphere was going through a quick growth on a global scale from 2000 to 2006. Blog tracking service Technorati estimated that there were approximately 70 million blogs in existence by May 2007 (Drezner & Farrell, 2008).

Blogs were brought into the Chinese people's lives in 2002. Within only 10 years, it has become one of the most popular communication tools on the internet in China. Along with an increasing number of internet-users, more and more Blog Service Providers (BSPs) have emerged, and more and more internet-users turned into blog-users. The trend of the popularity of internet and blogs can be seen even clearer from the bar chart in Figure 1.1¹. From 2004 to 2011, an increasing number of people had turned into internet-users; correspondingly, there was an increasing the number of blog-users. In addition, the proportion of blog-users among all internet-users was also increasing during this period. By December 2011, registered blog-users had broken through 319 million, meaning that 62.1% of all internet-users were also registered as blog-users (CNNIC, 2012).

With such a strongly increasing tendency, the answer to the question of “what blogs mean for Chinese people?” would be an interesting one. To answer this question in

¹ Data for the volume of internet users is not available for 2002 and 2003.

a practical way, we could look at the reasons why Chinese people use blogs. According to data published by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (Figure 1.2), people used blogs for six reasons: 64% of blog-users used blogs as cyberspace to record their personal emotions and feelings; 40% used blogs to back up their personal photos, journals and other important documents; 37% sharing information and messages with other people (including their friends and complete strangers) through blogs; 30% wanted to make more friends through this platform; more importantly, 37% of blog-users used blogs to express their personal opinions; and 23% commented on current social events and news in their personal blogs.

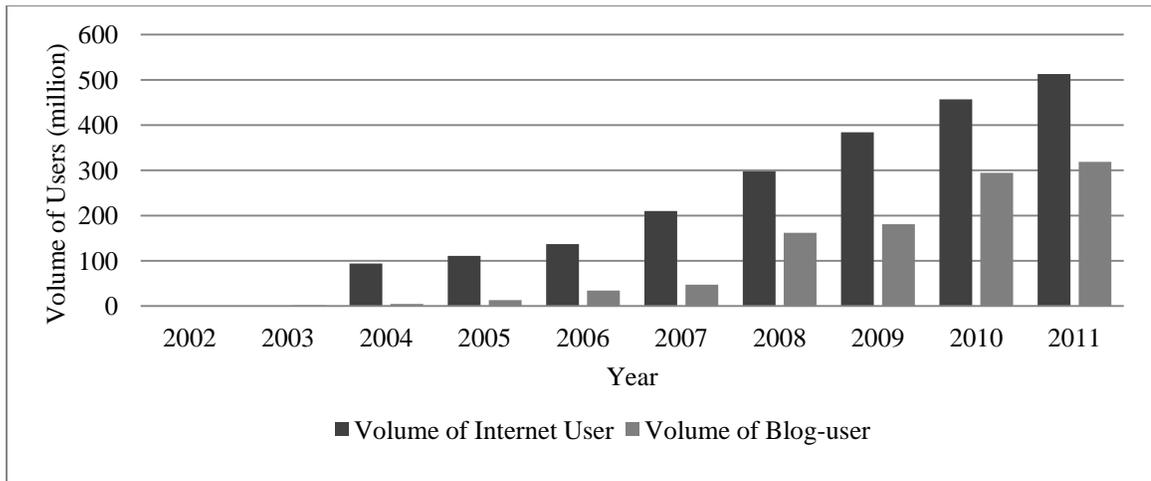
In conclusion, there are three basic functions of blogs for Chinese people: First of all, blogs are regarded as “personal cyberspace” for information storage. Secondly, blogs allow people to share information with a broader social circle. Finally, blogs give people opportunities to express opinions on a relatively safe and free platform. Therefore, rights to freedom of speech have improved in China after the introduction of the internet and blogs.

In order to know how much public opinion on internet has been impacted by the popularity of blogs, I would like to develop a series of relevant variables based on existing literature, and then perform proper a regression analysis to see if those variables are statistically significant in influencing the change of online public opinion. Significant variables should be the most important factors moving online public opinion.

Furthermore, textual data will be analyzed as a complement to explain how online public opinion could be moved in China. Accomplishment of this project will shed light on how

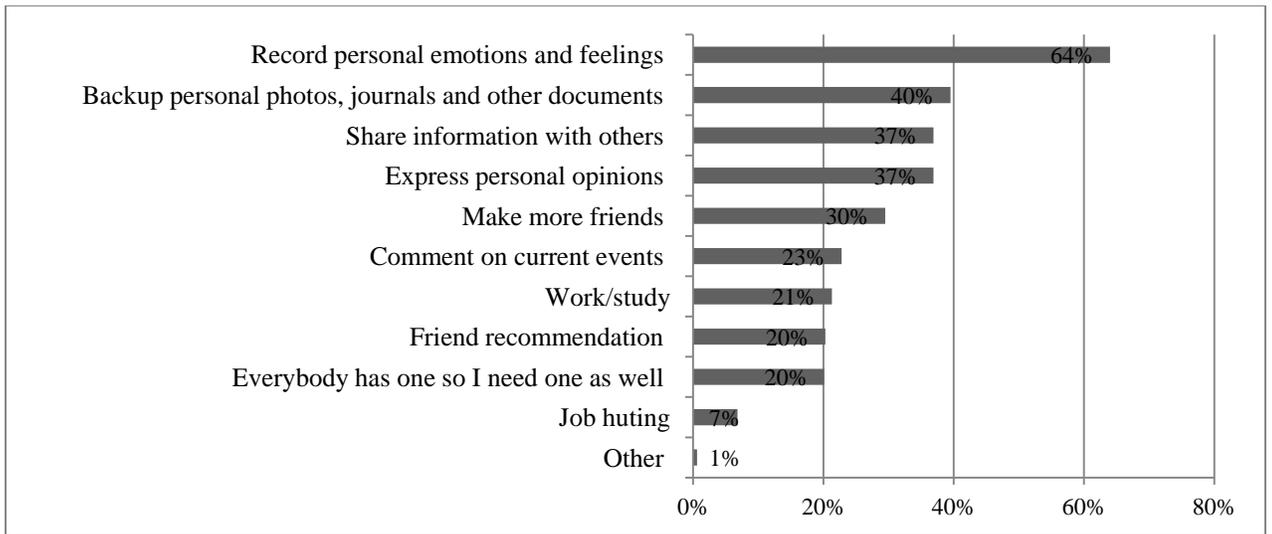
blogs have influenced the formation of online public opinion, and if so, in what ways
blogs have changed the online public opinion.

Figure 0.1: An Increasing Trend of Internet-users and Blog-users in China (2002-2011)



(CNNIC, 2011; CNNIC, 2009)

Figure 0.2: Why Chinese Use Blogs?



(CNNIC, 2009)

Chapter 2 Theory and Literature Review

Investigating blogs is a very big project to handle, therefore theories from all levels will be used to support and justify every move in my study. Generally speaking, the core theory will be used is the two-step flow theory. Besides, one-step flow theory will be used as a complement.

Blogs and Why they are Important

Even though blogs only emerged within the recent 15 years as a way of sharing information and ideas, blogs have become an essential way for people to share and communicate with others. According to western scholars Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell (2008, p. 2), a blog was defined as:

“A web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources.”

However, except for the traits of blogs defined by western scholars, in developing countries like China, blogs are serving different functions in comparison with the situation in developed countries such as the United States. Chinese scholars (CNNIC, 2009, p. 6) define blogs as:

“Cyberspace that provided by Blog Service Providers (BSP). Users are qualified for access to such cyberspace through registration;” and/or “cyberspace that used by internet users independently and that adopts blog settings on which users can post their writings or other types of postings; other people will be able to read and/or make comments on the postings².”

Summarizing the above two definitions, a blog should at least have the following three characteristics: First of all, it should be webpage or cyberspace based. Secondly, it

² The original Chinese version of this definition is from “2008-2009 China Blogosphere and Blogging Research Report” by the China Internet Network Information Center, 2009, Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center. Copyright [2009] by China Internet Network Information Center. Adapted with permission.

should be blogger's independent piece of work with no external editing. Thirdly, people should use blogs as a way to post writings and commentaries about their opinions or events.

From the introduction, it has been shown that there was an increasing volume of people using blogs. Thus it is expected that the existence of blogs should have changed the formation and pattern of public opinion on internet.

According to existing literature related to the formation and change of public opinion, individual's attitudes and choices should be altered if the following five conditions can be met to a sufficient extent: (1) if the information is actually received, (2) the message is understood, (3) it is clearly relevant for evaluation, (4) the information is new or different with past beliefs, and (5) the information is credible (Jaccard, 1981; Zaller, 1992; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). Furthermore, it is possible to change collective public opinion if the conditions are met in the same way for many individuals (Page et al., 1987, p. 24).

People are usually unwilling to invest much time and effort on learning all the details about an event or a government policy (Downs, 1957), so most people choose to rely heavily upon the cheapest and most accessible sources (Page et al., 1987). This situation is true in China. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, newspaper were the cheapest, easiest and most trusted information source for most Chinese, so the newspaper was the most popular way of gaining information then. When it came to the 1980s and 1990s, television became the dominant information source for the same reason—most families watched their own televisions. In the last two decades, newspaper and television still function well, but the internet has been exerting a strong influence on changing most

people's way of receiving information on a daily basis. Since the early 2000s, there have been an increasing number of Chinese turning to the internet for information acquisition. By the end of 2011, this number had exceeded 500 million (CNNIC, 2012 and see Figure 1.1), meaning that nearly half of the Chinese population had access to internet. The proportion of blog users in all internet users had reached 62.1% (CNNIC, 2012), and this number does not include people who only read blogs online but never bothered to register one. When information in the media reaches a large audience and meets the above mentioned five conditions for many individuals, changes in public opinion can be expected (Page & Shapiro, 1982).

Obviously, with so many users, information on the internet should have met the condition of exposing new information to its audiences. Most urban families and a substantial portion of rural families own their personal computers. Even for people who live in distant areas, public internet cafes can be found. Although most people use internet mainly for entertainment purposes, they do browse online news and articles from time to time. Therefore, the most popular blogs, which are usually promoted to the top of a website page, are especially eye-catching.

Due to the wide range of online users or netizens, online information is supposed to meet the demands of blog-users from all social levels. This is even truer for blogs that have been pushed to the front page. These more prominent blogs should allow most people to read and understand its content. Furthermore, websites usually need to guarantee the credibility of a recommended blog in order to maintain their good reputation and to avoid legal issues like libel or plagiarism. In addition, authors' real names are used for the most popular blogs, which further enhances the credibility of the

bloggers. In other words, the websites should fulfill their duties to guarantee that the information posted on their webs is true and accurate. However, guarantee of the credibility of bloggers does not indicate that netizens would really believe their writings and opinions conveyed in their blogs. Netizens usually generate their own opinions based on what they read.

Furthermore, blogs are usually written in order to comment on one certain event or some government policy. Authors try their best to shorten, sharpen and simplify their writings to ensure that their personal attitudes and beliefs would be included in their blogs. Therefore, these conditions are clearly relevant for their evaluation and acceptance in the top blogs.

Finally, the information conveyed in blogs may vary greatly in terms of being familiar or quite discrepant with past beliefs. The past situation in China was that press and publications were trying hard to stay in accordance with the government. This situation has been changing since the 1979 Economic Reform. People began to criticize the government. Especially after the internet was introduced into China, the extent of the freedom of speech has been growing. Thus, many blogs and their authors are trying to be critical when commenting on issues that are related to authority and politics (which will be the target of analysis in this project). In this way, these blogs frequently diverge from a person's past beliefs which most generally have been propagated by the authorities.

Thus, it is safe to draw the conclusion that the five conditions for moving public opinion have been fulfilled by Chinese people frequently reading blogs: Information conveyed in a popular blog is received by a large number of internet users; the content of a blog is usually understandable, readers can make their own judgments; most bloggers'

voices are heard, therefore they are expected to convey personal beliefs and attitudes; and lastly, the information conveyed in a popular blog is most often credible. Having met these five conditions, one may expect changes of public opinion.

In this thesis, my first research question will be: What is the general pattern of public opinion on internet? In other words, how does the pattern of public opinion on internet change over the 33 months? Has the extent of freedom of speech expanded, contracted, or fluctuated regularly over this time period?

Since the introduction and the above discussed literature have shown that there was an increasing tendency for the volume of blog users in the past ten years, and blogs are expected to move public opinion on internet, it is reasonable to hypothesize that there should be an increasing tendency of citizens' willingness to participate in online civil discussion. In addition, because bloggers were trying to diverge from past beliefs and ideas encouraged by the government, an increasing number of them are turning from praising to criticizing the government. Thus, my first hypothesis is: there is more criticism than praise in blogs over the 33 month time period as citizens' increase their willingness to participate in online civil discussion.

The Two-Step and One-Step Flow Theories of Public Opinion

In the 1940s and 1950s, Paul Lazarsfeld, Elihu Katz and some other scholars formulated the two-step flow of communication theory which sheds light on one possible explanation of the formation of public opinion (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2006). This theory was first elaborated in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948) as follows: The influence stemming from the mass media first reaches a small minority of "opinion leaders" who act as intermediaries

between the mass media and the majority of population in society who are less active (Watts and Dodds, 2007, p. 441). Then these “opinion leaders” who are “influential” pass on what they read and hear to those who are “non-influential” (Katz, 1957, p. 61).

The idea of two-step flow occupied a central place in the literature of the communication research (Weimann 1994; Watts and Dodds, 2007) for decades after Lazarsfeld’s discovery. By the late 1960s, two-step flow paradigm had become one of the most important paradigms in the area of behavioral sciences (Arndt, 1967), and by the late 1970s, this paradigm had been regarded as the “dominant paradigm” of media sociology (Gitlin, 1978, p. 207). Through 1980s and 1990s the two-step flow model continued to be the center of mass media research. Thousands of studies involving influentials, opinion leaders and personal influence were conducted in the decades after Katz and Lazarsfeld’s seminal Decatur study (Weimann, 1994). Brosius (1996, p. 561) explains the strengths of the idea of opinion leaders as: “The opinion leaders should not be regarded as replacing the role of interpersonal networks but, in fact, as reemphasizing the role of the group and interpersonal contacts”.

In 1949, a study conducted by Robert Merton (1957) showed that the concept of opinion leader should not be considered as a general characteristic of a person. Instead, opinion leaders are individuals who have an influence on very specific issues. Similarly, a later study conducted by Lazarsfeld and Katz (2006) revealed that influential individuals seem constrained in their opinion leading to particular topics, non-overlapping among the individuals. According to Lazarsfeld et al. (2006), opinion leaders should have the following traits in common: First, opinion leaders should have the strongest interest in their particular areas. They hold positions within their community

in which they have special competence. Usually they are gregarious and sociable individuals, and they have credible information resources external to their immediate circle. Furthermore, a study conducted by Glock and Nicosia (1964) indicated that opinion leaders among a group of people will influence others on making a particular choice by exerting social pressure on them, and once the choice has been made, opinion leaders will reinforce that choice by providing social support.

Some recent studies based on the original two-step flow model from the 1940s have pointed out the direction for further studies on this topic. In Weimann's (1991) study, he tried to identify opinion leaders by using a Strength of Personality Scale. Even though they are closely related, a clear distinction between opinion leaders and influentials was made, thus the two concepts are not interchangeable. Influentials are elites who do not spread throughout the community as the old theory suggested (Weimann, 1991). An influential should have three attributes: First, influentials usually clustered in "higher SES levels" (Weimann, 1991, p. 276). Secondly, influentials could have competence within several overlapping areas (see Noelle-Neumann 1985). Thirdly, influentials have "special pattern of media consumption" (Weimann, 1991, p. 276), and merely higher media exposure is not necessary.³

In spite of the dominant position of two-step flow model and its related concepts such as influentials and opinion leaders in the second half of 20th century, there was much criticism and other theoretical paradigms emerged which could be used as alternatives to explain the formation of public opinion.

³ From "The Influentials: Back to the Concept of Opinion Leaders?" by Gabriel Weimann, 1991, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55, p. 267-279. Copyright [1991] by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Adapted with permission.

Some scholars believe that the one-step flow model should be the right theory. According to supporters of this “magic bullet” theory, initial mass media information flows directly to people on the whole and is not relayed by opinion leaders (Deutschmann and Danielson 1960; Troidahl, 1966). In addition, it is argued that the two-step flow Model does not pay enough attention to people’s active learning ability when being exposed to particular information (Rogers and Cartano, 1962); instead, the two-step flow model counts too much on the influence of opinion leaders.

However, the notion that the content of the media have only limited effects leads back to the group approach to the formation of public opinion (Chaffee 1975; Klapper 1960; McGuire 1969). Supporters of this paradigm argue that the effects of the media are:

“mitigated by the processes of selectivity in attention, perception, and recall, and that these, in turn, are a function of predispositional and situational variables such as age, family history, political affiliation, and so on. If there is a hero in these stories it is not the newspaper or the radio but the primary group, which is represented both as a network of information and a source of social pressure (Katz, 1987, p. 26).”⁴

This notion clearly indicates the essential position of social networking in the process of communication—the effects that mass media directly exert on individuals are mitigated by networks.

On the other hand however, the limited effects model does not explain much in terms of individuals’ attitudes and preferences, which would be essential variables in this project. First of all, researchers holding this paradigm failed to examine collective opinion over substantial periods of time in “natural settings” and to distinguish among information resources (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987, p. 25). Secondly cross-sectional

⁴ From “Communication Research Since Lazarsfeld,” by Elihu Katz, 1987, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51, p. 25-45. Copyright [1987] by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Adapted with permission.

studies seek contrasts between media attenders and media “non-attenders” that hardly exist: Nearly everyone is exposed either directly or indirectly to information from the media. Thus a more appropriate research design would yield different results (Page et al., 1987).

In this thesis, the two-step flow model can be used to build a theoretical framework. Instead of using the concept of opinion leaders, the concept used to develop my research design is influentials. In order to do so, the question that should be asked is “who are the influentials in this case?” Based on the above literature related, it is reasonable to conclude that “bloggers”, especially those whose articles are popular and were pushed to the front page of a website, would fall into the category of “influentials.” First of all, these bloggers were the few intellectual elites who were experts on certain fields and topics. They have interests in the areas which they are concerned about. They are usually concentrated in universities, academic institutions and government departments; thus, they are from a relatively higher SES level. In addition, Chinese society is stratified into many social strata, and these bloggers are from a relatively higher social stratum because they usually have a decent occupation.

In the process of communication, famous bloggers were supposed to play a role in influencing the flow of information. After some event happened, bloggers reacted to this event by writing an article and then posting it. Once the article was posted, people would read it, think about it, learn something from it and then react to it. Some people would leave their commentaries and responses while others would not. Borrowing the idea from two-step flow model, I would like to know if the attitudes and opinions of commentators were affected by the attitudes and opinions of bloggers. In addition, since the one-step

flow model has its own logic, besides testing the influence mediated by bloggers, I also want to test the direct influence of information sources on blog commentators and their commentaries (Figure 2.1).

To sum up, according to the above discussed literature, the second research question will be: “What were influential factors that moved the pattern of public opinion on internet?” There are two sub-questions under this research question. The first one is: “did the public react directly to objective events discussed in blogs, so that opinion is effectively autonomous (Page et al., 1987)?” The second question is: “Did the public react to bloggers’ attitudes, so that influentials have more direct influence on the change of public opinion?” In other words, events and bloggers, which one was more powerful in influencing the formation of online public opinion?

According to the two-step flow model, bloggers can intermediate the information flow between events and blog commentators. Thus, one hypothesis can be made that influential bloggers exert a direct influence on the formation of online public opinion. Furthermore, according to the definition of influentials, the public usually trusts these bloggers’ knowledge and expertise. Thus, an influential blogger’s positive attitude should encourage netizens to praise the government, and an influential blogger’s negative attitude should encourage netizens to criticize the government. In addition, according to the one-step flow model, initial mass media information flows directly to people on the whole and is not relayed by opinion leaders (Deutschmann and Danielson 1960; Troidahl, 1966), so events discussed in blogs are expected to affect formation of public opinion on the internet.

If we want to study public opinion of China in relatively “natural” social settings, it is necessary to take censorship into consideration. From results of a preliminary study, I am convinced that the influence of censorship practiced by the Chinese government should not be ignored. For example, there is one remarkable situation that needs a reasonable explanation. Since only the most popular blog would be selected from thousands of blogs of every day, all sampled articles are supposed to be followed by a large volume of commentaries. However, many “headline blogs” appeared on the front page are followed by only very few commentaries—sometimes even less than ten commentaries. Obviously this should not be the case for the most popular blogs. Thus I have very good reason to believe that a certain extent of censorship has intervened into the online postings.

Although there is not much literature about the practicing of censorship in China, Ai Weiwei, a Chinese contemporary artist and political critic, made an effort to learn details about how censorship has been practiced by the Chinese government. In February 2011, Ai conducted an interview (2012) with someone who was actually censoring internet posts. The interviewee was an “online commentator” who was hired by the Chinese government to post commentaries favorable towards party policies and to shape public opinion on the internet. It was mentioned in the interview that there is a difference between the extent of censorship for events involved with central government and with local governments. If so, then the formation of public opinion on internet must have been affected by this difference. Is it true that public opinion differs according to different levels of government, just like it had been addressed in Ai’s interview? If events involved with local governments encountered stricter censorship, then it should be expected that

there was smaller volume of criticism for local government while there was larger volume of criticism for central government. In next section, literature review on censorship will be elaborated.

Theory of Public Intellectuals

Habermas (Hauser, 1998) define “public opinion” as an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. It is “a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment.” Internet was functioning as such a public sphere in China. It is inevitable that there is a group of intellectuals making use of this platform to impact public opinion in that area.

As heatedly debated, there were many sayings about the status and significance of public intellectuals in China. However, I would argue that public intellectuals play important role in democracies by fulfilling their responsibilities for the society.

According to a research conducted by Dahlgren (2012), public intellectuals are divided as “generalist” and “specialist” according to their knowledge background. Furthermore, some intellectuals “interact with, or at least have access to, power holders” while others are situated outside the center of power. Traditional public intellectuals try to impact on society usually by influencing public opinion, but they generally are not interested in holding power. However, there are intellectuals who are hired by government, and their independence and intellectual of course would be eroded by the temptation of power.

From another perspective, given the celebrity culture that permeates the mass media, in order to enhance their own position, public intellectuals can engage in self-promotion at the expense of engaging in ideas, as Habermas (2008) recently pointed out, “echoing one point of his classic critique of the modern mediated public sphere” (Habermas 1989). In addition, there are distinctions between the so-called “national public intellectuals” and “cosmopolitan public intellectuals” (Dahlgren, 2012). National public intellectuals focus on the public sphere of their own country while cosmopolitan public intellectuals are active in global contexts.

Public intellectuals who are active on the internet play extremely important role in Chinese internet atmosphere because they are the media functioning between information source and netizens who browse online messages from time to time. One example would be Ai Weiwei, whose research was used in my project to investigate the censorship practiced by the Chinese government.

The Impact of Censorship on Public Opinion

The internet makes the principle of free speech and self-governance possible, and it effectively breaks the Communist Party’s monopoly on public information (Martinsons & Ng, 2005). Nevertheless, state authorities never give up on monitoring online information and censoring undesirable content and usage (such as criticism of the Communist Party and calls for political reform) (MacKinnon, 2008). Thus, it is necessary to take into account the role played by censorship into consideration when investigating public participation on the internet.

First of all, there is critique of the state paradigm (King, Pan and Roberts, 2012). Literature supporting this paradigm argues that internet postings that criticize the state

will be censored by the Chinese government (Chen, 2012). The goal of the Chinese government is “to suppress dissent, and to prune human expression” (King et al., 2012, p. 3) which is unfavorable to the state and the Party. As a result, the sum of available public expression would be expected to be more favorable to those who are in power. However, King and his colleagues criticized this type of paradigm by advocating a collective action potential paradigm. They argue that the target of censorship is people who “join together to express themselves collectively, stimulated by someone other than the government, and seem to have the potential to generate collective action.” (King et al., 2012, p. 3)⁵ In addition, according to their research (King et al., 2012), the extent of the influence of censorship varies slightly between different levels of topics, which means the censorship is not about the topic. Furthermore, he and his colleagues point out that instead of suppressing criticism of the state or the Party, the purpose of the censorship is to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any localized social movements are in evidence or expected.

On the other hand, uncertainty theory could be used to explain why the Chinese government employs such strong censorship. Uncertainty theory has long been recognized in the literature of organization theory. French sociologist Michel Crozier argues that “the power of A over B depends on A’s ability to predict B’s behavior and on the uncertainty of B about A’s behavior.” In addition, “as long as the requirements of action create situations of uncertainty, the individuals who have to face them have power

⁵ From “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, 2012, forthcoming: *American Political Science Review*,. Copyright [2012] by American Political Science Review. Used with permission

over those who are affected by the results of their choice” (1964, p. 158).⁶ Crozier explains that this applies to relevant uncertainty only, that is, to uncertainty about actions that actually affect other groups (Hassid, 2008). Therefore, people who ultimately have the power are those with the ability of making unpredictable decisions. This paradigm corresponds very well to King’s research.

In terms of censorship practiced by the Chinese government, there are a lot of tales, but it is undeniable that the size and the sophistication are “unprecedented in recorded world history” (King et al., 2012, p. 1). Literatures have shown that there are two main types of censorship: official censorship and self-censorship (Martinsons and Ng, 2005; Hassid, 2008; Lee, 1998). They work simultaneously to secure the regime of censorship by the Chinese government.

Official censorship refers to the firm limit set by the Chinese government and it exists in the form of laws. Different agencies are employed by the government to fulfill official censorship. The most famous and comprehensive one should be the so called Great Firewall of China (Martinsons and Ng, 2005). In addition, in the study conducted by King (2012), he discovered that there are hundreds of local media sites across the whole country with each individual site employing up to 1,000 censors. Furthermore, he estimated that 20,000-50,000 internet police and 250,000-300,000 “50 cent party members” (*wumao dang*) are working for the central government. In comparison to the great firewall which is a digital network, “50 cent party members” are real people who manufacture online public opinion which is favorable to the government (Ai, 2012).

However, the 50-cent party members’ job focuses mostly on local events. Their works is

⁶ From *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (p.158), by Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, 2009, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers. Copyright [2010] by Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey. Used with permission.

60-70 percent locally related—for example, people who are filing complaints or petitioning against local government (Ai, 2012).

In addition to the strategies practiced by the Chinese government and relevant agencies, self-censorship is another effective and powerful method to control information on the internet (Hassid, 2008). Self-censorship refers to “a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure (Lee, 1998, p. 57).”⁷ The power of self-censorship in the Chinese media is strong and has been recognized by many scholars and researchers for a long time (Hassid, 2008). Compared to official censorship, self-censorship has more direct influence on people’s everyday cyber life (Chen Yali, 2003) because it is the censorship practiced by the website companies, magazine presses, newspapers presses and TV stations which people have directly access every day.

For example, I registered a username to test the type and efficiency of censorship practiced by *sina.com.cn*. It turned out that not only would sensitive words such as “freedom” and “democracy” be monitored, but the entire contents of my messages and posts were being monitored. When a post is about to take effect, the public cannot see it immediately. Instead, a notification that “your post is being reviewed, please be patient” would be sent to commentators. If the post conveyed anything unfavorable to the government, state or the Party, it would not be posted at all. If the post does not convey anything unfavorable, it would be posted within 24 hours. What groups are monitoring all

⁷ From “Press Self-censorship an Political Transition in Hong Kong”, by Chin-Chuan Lee, 1998, *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 3, p.55-73. Copyright [1998] by the President and the Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Adapted with permission.

this information? Organizations creating websites want make sure that their web stays within the acceptable limits set by the government. Most media companies employ self-censorship to avoid potential coercive pressure from the Chinese government (Lee, 1998).

According to Hassid (2008), the Chinese Central Publicity Department determines what is acceptable and unacceptable information, and they apply rules that media companies try to learn in order to self-censor. This is the heart of China's effective regime of self-censorship. The Chinese government holds the authority to determine the boundaries of acceptable information coverage. However, this regime of uncertainty does more than just constrain the media's external behavior. Supporters of this approach continue arguing that an uncertain environment may change the power dynamics within organizations as well. Scholars Pfeffer and Salancik (2003, p. 230), argue that because "the source of the most important organizational uncertainty determines power within the organization, those submits most able to cope with the organization's critical problems acquire power within the organization."⁸ In other words, those media editors or other employees who know what the Central Publicity Department is likely to do become powerful within the organization (Hassid, 2008). Therefore, it can be understood why most media units in China are willing to employ self-censorship. In other words, it is not just compliance with the censors; it is also what happens with the power structure of the media organization. It is important to distinguish the two different types of censorship because they are changing public opinion in different ways.

⁸ From *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective* (p.230), by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik, 2003, Stanford University Press. Copyright [2010] by Stanford University Library. Adapted with permission.

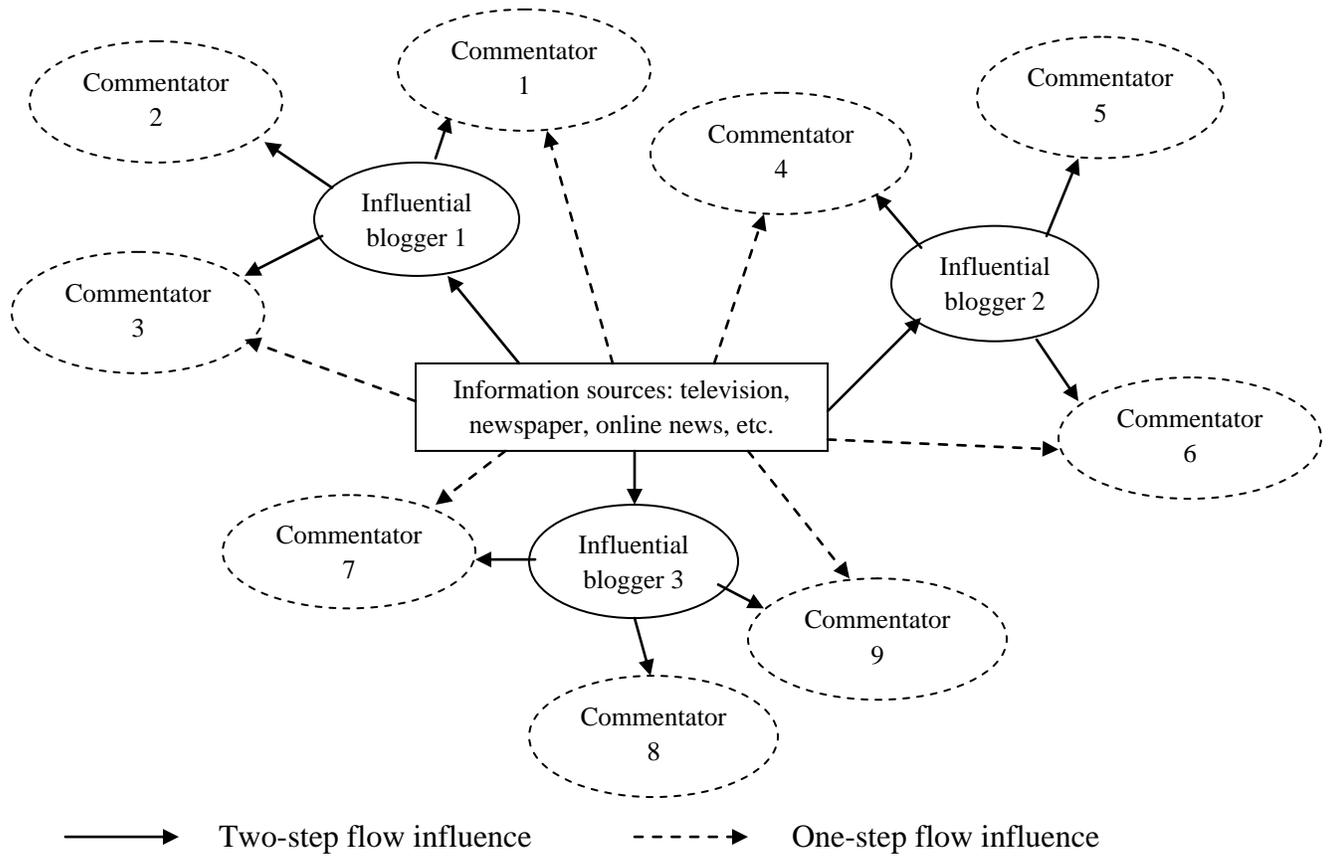
To sum up, there is good reason to believe that censorship affects the formation of public opinion on the internet. Thus the third research question is: “What is the pattern of censorship employed by the Chinese government, and how does censorship affect the formation of online public opinion?” Furthermore, it is also valuable to know if major social events affect the pattern of censorship. Since censorship in China is deleting unfavorable messages and manufacturing favorable messages, it should be expected that if the extent of censorship gets stronger, there should be less criticism; if the extent of censorship gets weaker, there should be more criticism.

Potential Measures

According to the literature discussed above, collective public opinion can be moved by blogs from the following four perspectives. First, the objective events and policies described in the blogs which happened prior to blogs are the news source from where people gain the information. Second, attitudes and beliefs expressed by influential bloggers would be used as another measure (Weimann, 1994). Third, the level of government discussed in blogs resulted in different results of censorship and thus different shape of public opinions (Ai, 2012). Fourth, censorship played an important role in shaping the formation of online public opinion in China.

Hence, the following four variables can be developed to measure the relationship between influential blogs and collective public opinion: tones of events, tones of influential bloggers, level of involved government, and the extent of censorship.

Figure 0.1: Adjusted Two-step Flow of Communication Model



Chapter 3 Research Questions and Hypothesis

In this study I have three research questions and five hypotheses based on existing literature. First, I need to know what the general pattern of online public opinion in China is. Second, I would like to explore influential factors that explain the pattern of online public opinion. In order to answer the second research question, we should know if the public react directly to objective events discussed in blogs so that opinion is effectively autonomous (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987), or do bloggers have more direct influence on the formation of public opinion on internet. In addition, we also need to know if the level of involved government make any difference in the formation of public opinion on internet. Third, I want to know what the pattern of censorship is, and how it affects the formation of online public opinion.

From these research questions, the following five hypotheses can be developed:

Hypothesis 1: There is more criticism than praise over a 33 month period of time.

It is expected that there is an increasing tendency of citizens' willingness to participate in online civil discussion.

Hypothesis two is a bit more complex. First, the general statement says that there should be three influential factors working together to shape the status quo of public opinion on internet. Then two sub-hypothesis were developed to further answer the second research question.

Hypothesis 2: There are three influential factors that contribute to the pattern of

online public opinion: the tone of social events, the tone of a few influential bloggers, and the level of involved government.

Hypothesis 2a: Events discussed in blogs are expected to affect formation of public opinion on the internet. However, influential bloggers will exert a more direct influence on the formation of public opinion on internet in comparison to events. An influential blogger's positive attitude will encourage netizens to praise; an influential blogger's negative attitude will encourage netizens to criticize.

Hypothesis 2b: Netizens are more critical on central government and events involved with central government; netizens are less critical on local government and events involved with local governments.

Apart from the above mentioned influential factors, hypothesis three discussed the role played by censorship usage in China.

Hypothesis 3: The volume of criticism is negatively associated with the extent of censorship. If the extent of censorship gets stronger, there should be less criticism; if the extent of censorship gets weaker, there should be more criticism.

Hypothesis two concerning the two step flow represents the strongest theoretical statement in my thesis. If it proves to be strong, then this evidence supports the two-step flow theory of public opinion, which is a strongly sociological theory. The one-step flow alternative theory is more akin to a psychological theory. If the factor of objective events proves to be strong as well, then the one-step flow theory can be confirmed as well.

Chapter 4 Data and Methods

In China, the internet is serving as an alternative platform for political discussion, because the central government is effectively controlling the traditional media by applying censorship and other regulatory practices. Therefore, criticism and sensitive topics are usually seen in internet news forums instead of newspapers or the television (Lagerkvist, 2005). On the other hand, individual citizens have very limited influence on traditional media. With traditional media, people can only receive information passively and they can barely make any contribution to it. However, when people use the internet, interaction among the media, users and information becomes possible. Bloggers post articles and readers comment on the articles by replying to the bloggers and appearing directly under their blog posts. Thus, more and more people choose the blog commentary format as a way of civil participation.

As mentioned above, an increasing number of people were turning into blog-users in the past 10 years. By December 2011, 62.1 percent of internet-users had registered their own blogs (CNNIC, 2009). In addition, as shown in Figure 4.1, the main way to disseminate a blog is to link it to another already known blog (CNNIC, 2009). Thus, looking at a blog aggregator should be an effective way to investigate how online public opinion changes over a fixed period of time.

There are three major websites functioning as “portals” in China. They are NetEase, Sohu and Sina. NetEase focuses on picking information which is regarded as “valuable” by its editors, and then it has relatively higher socioeconomic status users. Sohu puts its emphasis on entertainment news and sports news. Sohu users are clustered in youth group and people who are “less-political-orientation”. Differing from the above

two mentioned websites, Sina provide a larger volume of information in all areas including politics, entertainment, sports and so on. Meanwhile Sina users are from all levels in society. Even though Sina is “messier” than NetEase and Sohu, it covers larger volume of information and more users in comparison to the other two websites.

In this project, I analyzed a column called *Sina Opinion* on the well-known Chinese website *sina.com.cn*. Sina Opinion is one of the three biggest portals in China. By the end of 2011, there had been over 500 million internet users in China, and Sina blog service alone had more than 250 million registered users. Furthermore, beyond these official users, the Sina blog service attracts more than 800 million visitors every day. Thus, the Sina blog service represents a wide range of voices from all levels of netizens in China.

Sampling

The most popular blog, referred to in this site as the “top one-hit blog”, and the comments that are attached to it each day from July 2008 to March 2011 have been sampled for this project. Thus, a total 1,005 blogs and approximately 900,000 commentaries were gleaned for coding and analysis. However, not all articles were included in the data for the regression models. Only topics dealt with government policies, political discussion, social events and other civil discussion involving government and relevant departments were included into the model. Topics such as movies, music, fashion and traveling were excluded from data entered into my models.

Measures & Coding

A chart of definitions of all original measures (without recoding) has been shown in Table 4.1. Some of the variables included in my data are recoded variables. Another chart explaining the final variables that were included in my models are displayed in the results section.

First, blogs were categorized into “positive (1)”, “negative (-1)” and “neutral (0)” according to bloggers’ attitudes toward Chinese government. Second, the events discussed in each blog were categorized into “positive (1)”, “negative (-1)” and “neutral (0)” according to the nature of that event. For example, if the event is favorable to the government then it is positive (1); if the event is unfavorable to the government then it is negative (-1); if the event is irrelevant relative to government then it is neutral (0). Third, every single commentary was coded into “positive (1)” or “negative (-1)” according to blog readers’ attitude toward the government. Fourth, irrelevant topics are coded as missing values.

Thus, every blog, commentary and event was categorized properly relative to its evaluation of the Chinese government. As for variables in the format of numbers, they were counted by hand. A generalized linear model was run in SPSS 20 and results are displayed in the results section.

Reliability

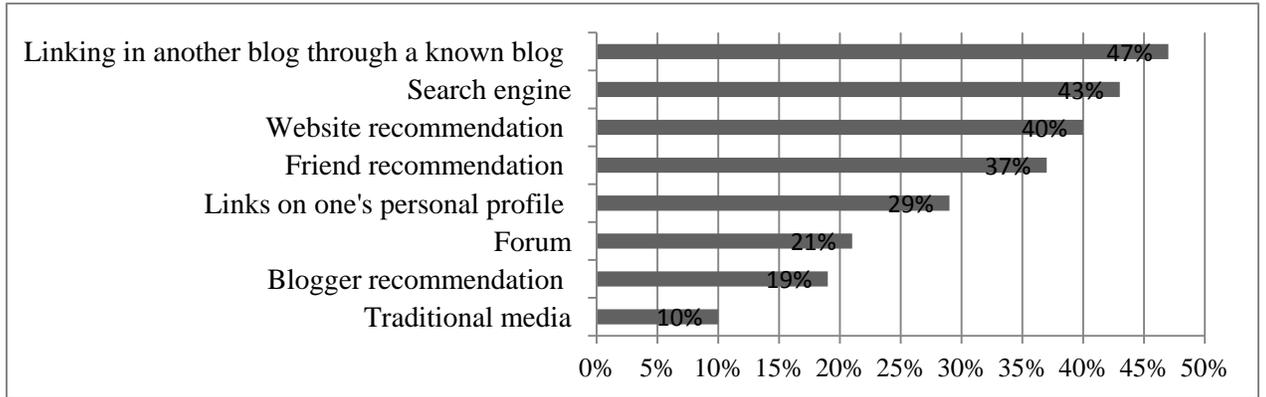
In order to test the reliability of the data in this thesis, intercoder reliability tests were performed. Due to my limited budget and needed requirement for knowledge of Chinese language and culture, I completed the whole process of intercoder reliability test by myself. I made efforts to minimize the possibility of error caused by the only coder

has been made. First of all, there was a long time gap between the first coding and the second coding. Secondly, the data volume was extremely large—more than one thousand blogs and nearly 900 thousand commentaries. Thus there would be very small chance that the second coding will be influenced by the first coding.

According to academic convention, 10% to 20% of the sample is usually taken to test reliability, thus 100 out of 1,006 articles were randomly selected for an intercoder reliability test. Krippendorff's alpha was computed for each original variable. Results for bloggers' tone ($\alpha=0.953$), events' tone ($\alpha=0.825$), level of involved government ($\alpha=0.843$) and the volume of participating people ($\alpha=0.960$) indicated good reliability. The results for the volume of positive commentaries ($\alpha=0.644$) and volume of negative commentaries ($\alpha=0.656$) indicate fair reliabilities. Overall, the data can be relied according to the Krippendorff's alpha.⁹

⁹ For publication purpose, the reliability tests need to be improved by hiring two coders, and then they need to finish the recoding process independently. Krippendorff's alpha needs to reach the level of .65 or higher.

Figure 0.1: How Do Chinese People Find Blogs that Interest Them?



(CNNIC, 2009)

Table 0.1: Definition of Original Measures

Measure	Definition
Blogger's tone	Tone of blogger in relative to government position ranging from positive to negative
Event's tone	Tone of event in relative to government position ranging from positive to negative
Government level	Level of government discussed in the blog ranging from social, to local, to national and to international
Volume of positive commentaries	Volume of positive commentaries under one blog in absolute numbers
Volume of negative commentaries	Volume of negative commentaries under one blog in absolute numbers
Volume of commentaries	Total volume of commentaries under one blog (censored commentaries excluded) in absolute numbers
Volume of participating netizens	Total volume of participated netizens under one blog (censored commentaries included) in absolute numbers
Volume of censored commentaries	Volume of censored commentaries under one blog in absolute numbers

Chapter 5 Results

After a process of coding and recoding, the final data set containing 741 observations was run in SPSS 20. The following results use regression equations to evaluate the independent effects of my variables according to the hypothesis.

General Pattern of Online Public Opinion

The relationships among percent of negative events, volume of participated people and percent of criticism are shown in Figure 5.1. As we can see, from July 2009 to May 2011, a negative correlation of $-.092$ ($p < .01$) can be found between the percent of negative event and the percent of criticism, indicating that higher percent of negative event resulted in lower percent of criticism. However, a positive correlation of $.171$ ($p < .05$) between the percent of negative event and the percent of criticism could be observed after May 2011. The volume of participated netizens and the percent of criticism remained a negative correlation of $-.403$ ($p < .05$) within the 33 month time period, indicating that larger volumes of participating netizens result in a lower percent of criticism.

In terms of the tendency of online public opinion, Table 5.1 shows that during this 33-month period, there were more negative events covered by *sina.com.cn* in comparison to positive events. Correspondingly, more negative blogs and negative commentaries were produced in comparison to positive blogs and positive commentaries. In addition, it is shown that there was a higher percent of negative commentaries (32%) in comparison to the percent of negative blogs (25%), indicating that commentators turned out to be more critical than bloggers.

Influential Factors that Explain the Pattern of Online Public Opinion

In order to determine the influential factors which might be relevant in moving public opinion on internet, a generalized linear model was applied and results were displayed in Table 5.3. From July 2009 to March 2012, 1,005 articles were sampled. In the 1,005 articles, there were 741 articles involved with bloggers and commentators' attitudes toward the Chinese government, so these 741 articles were kept for analysis. The other 264 articles discussing irrelevant topics were not included into the model. There were 6 variables including in the model (Table 5.2). As has been discussed in the methods section, the variables included in the model differed from the original variables, because a series of standardization processes were applied. First, the percent of negative commentaries was computed. It has been regarded as the indicator of the extent of freedom of speech. Secondly, the tone of each blogger and event was dummy coded, thus four new variables were generated. Thirdly, the percent of censored commentaries was computed.

From the above results, we can see that four factors were influencing the pattern of online public opinion (percent of criticism by commentators): the tone of events discussed in blogs, the tone of bloggers, the level of government discussed in blogs, and the percent of censored commentaries.

(1) Tone of Events Discussed in Blogs

According to the regression results in Table 5.3, the tone of events exerts statistically significant influence on the percent of criticism, but not in both positive and negative ways. Surprisingly, positive events did not have the expected negative statistical significance in affecting the percent of criticism. On the other hand, negative events

exerted statistically positive significant influence on the percent of criticism ($p < .05$). The occurrence of a negative event will increase the percent of criticism of that day by 7.9%. Thus, negative events produce criticism as one would expect.

(2) Tones of Influential Bloggers

Influential bloggers also played an important role in shaping the pattern of public opinion on the internet. According to Table 5.3, in comparison to being negative and neutral, the percent of criticism decreased by 18.7% when the tone of blogger is positive, holding all the other independent variables constant ($p < .001$). On the other hand, just as had been hypothesized, in comparison to being positive and neutral, the percent of criticism increased by 16.5% when the tone of blogger is negative, holding all the other independent variables constant ($p < .001$). These coefficients strongly support my hypotheses.

(3) Level of Involved Government

According to the regression results, people's attitudes have statistical difference between international events and social events. In comparison to being a social event, being an international event decreases the percent of criticism by 32.4% ($p < .001$). However, the generalized linear model sets the category of "social events" as a baseline. All the other three categories were compared with "social events" by default, thus we cannot see a potential difference among social events, local events and national events. But, from the tabulation of the four categories, we will be able to see some changes.

As shown in Table 5.5, the percent of negative events for "social events" was 79.3%; the percent of negative events for "local events" was 70.8%; the percent of negative events for "national events" was 35.1%, and the percent of negative events for

“international events” was 61.9%. On the other hand, in terms of the percent of negative blogs, there was not much difference between social events and local events, but national events bear a lower percent which was 58.2%. The percent of international events which was 12.7% was even much lower than that of national events. Finally, social events bear the highest percent of criticism which was 83.7% while international events bear the lowest percent of criticism which was 41.6%.

There are three interesting facts that can be seen. First of all, national events have a lower percent of negative events in comparison to other levels of events. Secondly, bloggers have substantially lower percent of negative tone in terms of international events in comparison to other levels of events. This is because people turn out to be very supportive of the Chinese government when there was another state involved in an event.

Censorship

Censorship is another factor that needs to be considered when investigating public opinion in China. The regression results in Table 5.3 show that with every one unit increase in censored commentaries, the percent of criticism will decrease by 9.3% ($p < .001$), indicating a negative correlation between the percent of censored messages and the percent of criticism. In order to know more details, a line chart was displayed. Figure 5.2 illustrates the change of extent of censorship from July 2009 to March 2012. It is obvious that the extent of censorship from 2011 May to 2011 November was stronger than it was at other times, because the distance between volume of comment and volume of participating netizens during this short period was larger than it was at other time. Furthermore, there were two peaks of the extent of censorship. The first peak was May 2011 and another one was September 2011. In addition, Figure 5.3 shows a negative

coefficient (P-value<.01) for the relationship between the percent of criticism and the percent of censored messages. In other words, a higher percent of criticism is accompanied by a lower percent of censored messages, and a lower percent of criticism is accompanied by a higher percent of censored messages. These results corresponded to what was hypothesized. The more content was censored, the less criticism that resulted. In other words, government censorship achieves one of its goods—it reduces criticism by directly removing it and then by lessening the criticism as mentioned in my statistical model.

Table 0.1: Summary of the Tone of Bloggers and Tone of Events (2009.7-2012.3)

	Tone			Total
	Positive	Negative	Irrelevant/Missing	
Events	283 (28%)	501(50%)	221(22%)	1005 (100%)
Blogs	250 (25%)	532 (53%)	223 (22%)	1005 (100%)
Comments	284,214 (32%)	614,803 (68%)	--	899,017 (100%)

Figure 0.1: Changes of Negative Events, Percent of Criticism and the Volume of Commentaries

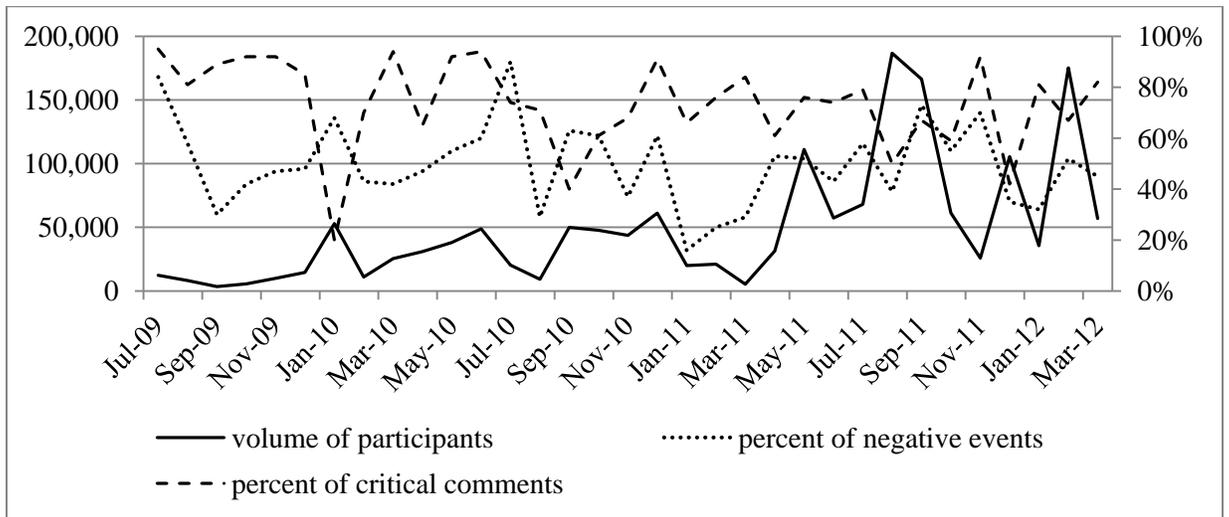


Table 0.2: Summary of Response and Predictors

Role	Variables	Measure	Explanation
Dependent variable	Percent of negative commentaries	Continuous	the number of negative commentaries divided by the number of total commentaries of the day
Independent variables	Positive events	Categorical	Events discussed in the article is positive toward the government
	Negative events	Categorical	Events discussed in the article is negative toward the government
	Positive blogs	Categorical	Article's tone is positive toward the government
	Negative blogs	Categorical	Article's tone is negative toward the government
	Government level	Categorical	The level of government discussed in the article is social issue, local government issue, national government issue or international issue
	Percent of censored commentaries	Continuous	The number of censored commentaries divided by the number of participated people

The model was run in SPSS 20 and the results were shown in Table 5.3.

Table 0.3: Summary of Generalized Linear Model for the Percent of Criticism by Commentators (N = 741)

Variable	B	95% CI	
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Tones of event			
Positive events 0 vs. 1	.056	-.017	.130
Negative events 0 vs. 1	.079*	.008	-.150
Tones of blog			
Positive blogs 0 vs. 1	-.187***	-.263	-.111
Negative blogs 0 vs. 1	.165***	.092	.238
Government Level			
Local events vs. social events	-.015	-.057	.027
National events vs. social events	.008	-.037	.053
International events vs. social events	-.324***	-.391	-.258
Percent of Censored Commentaries	-.093**	-.157	-.028

Note. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table 0.4: Definitions for Government Levels

Term	Explanation	Example
Social event	No government administration was involved in the event, but people still have judgments and attitudes toward government by commenting on the event	Earthquake; air crash; murder; etc.
Local event	Local government administration was involved, and people have judgments and attitudes toward government by commenting on the event	Corruption of local government officers; miscarriage of a local court; etc
National event	Central government administration was involved, and people have judgments and attitudes toward government by commenting on the event	New economic policy enforced by the central government; meetings of National People's Congress; etc.
International event	Chinese government and another country's government were involved in the event, and people have judgments and attitudes toward Chinese government by commenting on the event	Territorial sea dispute between Chinese government and Japanese government; American president visits China; etc.

Table 0.5: Summary of Percent of Negative events, Percent of Negative Blogs and Percent of Criticism by the Level of Involved Government (N=741)

	Social events	Local events	National events	International events
Percent of negative event	79.3%	70.8%	35.1%	61.9%
Percent of negative blogs	77.5%	79.4%	58.2%	12.7%
Percent of criticism	83.7%	74.0%	66.3%	41.6%

Figure 0.2: Interactive Relationship between Volume of Commentaries and Volume of Participating Netizens

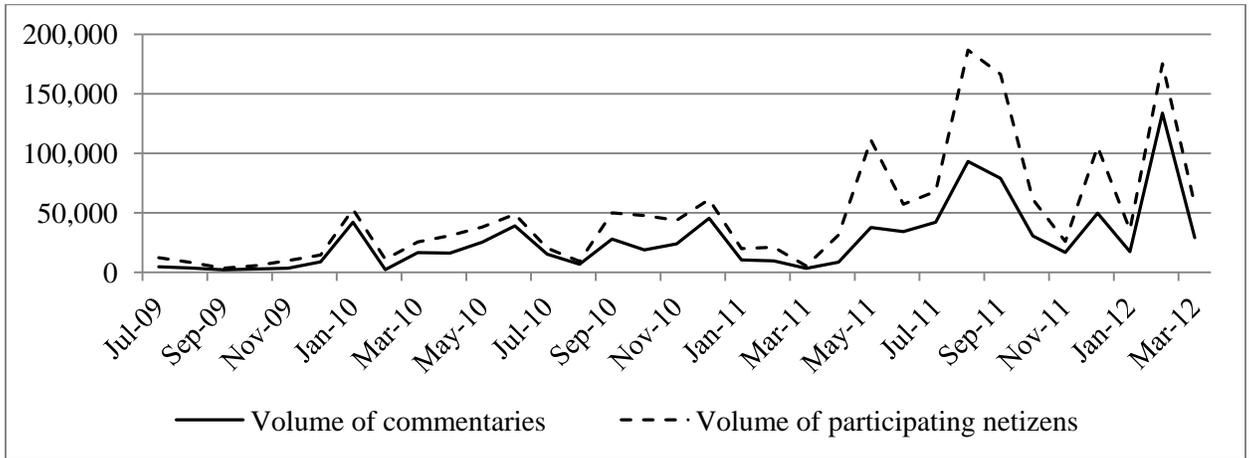
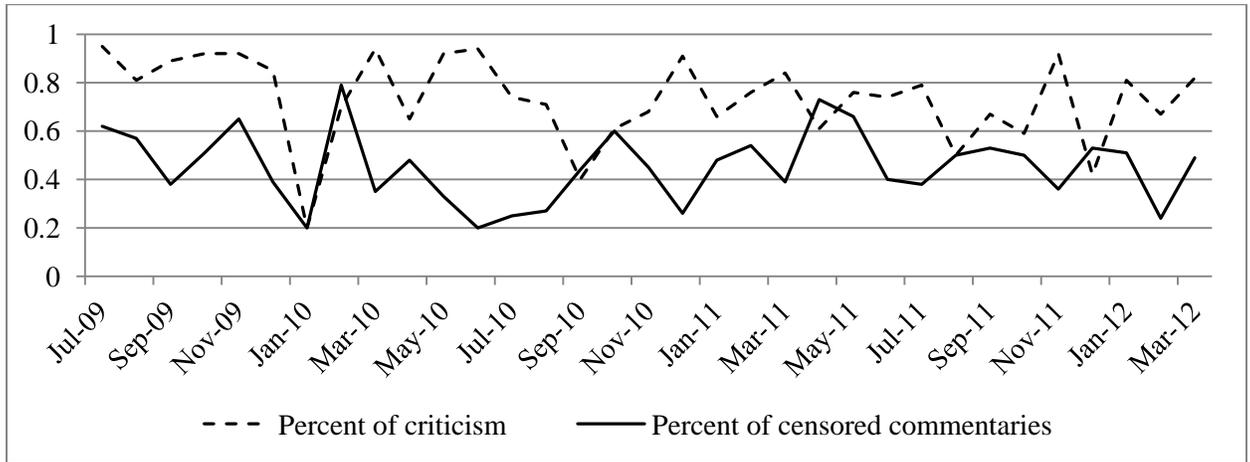


Figure 0.3: Interactive Relationship between Percent of Criticism and Percent of Censored Commentaries



Chapter 6 Discussion

From the result section, we get to know that the tones of bloggers have very strong influence on affecting public opinion on internet. Negative events will produce criticism while positive events will not. Level of the government is another significant factor. Censorship exerted strong influence as well. Thus, in this section, I will discuss why those factors are significantly strong influential factors by exploring historical reasons and related textual data.

The Influence of Occurrence of Major Social Events

Celebrating holidays and anniversaries of significant events is a tradition for most nations in the world. For example, some of the most important holidays in the United States are July 4th, Christmas, Thanksgiving and Halloween. Some holidays have origins related to religion such as Christmas and Easter. Some holidays are related to the founding history of America, for example the Independence Day and Thanksgiving Day. Through my research on the public holidays of the United States, it is not difficult to find out one characteristic of American holidays: None of the holidays emphasize contested elites. In other words, none of these holidays are related to the two major parties of today's United States.

In comparison to public holidays in the United States, there are some traditional holidays, but most major celebrations and holidays in China are closely related to the dominant party in power. In other words, many of the major holidays in China actually celebrate the regime of the Communist Party of China (CPC). For example, the International Workers' Day originated from the Proletarian Revolution Wave when the CPC was established; the CPC Founding Day is another significant celebration to

commemorate the founding of Communist Party of China. It has been a tradition since 1949 that there will be nation-wide celebrations on these holidays (Figure 6.1).

Since events should happen prior to blogs, and blogs should happen prior to commentaries, the order of events should be: the pattern of events influence the pattern of participating netizens, and then the pattern of criticism (Figure 6.2). The whole country take breaks on major holidays, so netizens should have more time to browse news and information. Social media like news papers, televisions and websites join the celebration by publishing and broadcasting favorable content toward the CPC. The tone of these major social media communications will influence the tone of public opinion. More importantly, the government might exert increased censorship on these significant dates to prevent netizens from speaking too freely on “big days”. In other words, major social events and holidays will affect the formation of public opinion on internet.

As we have known from the results section, the general pattern of online public opinion before the spring of 2011 was quite different from the pattern after the spring of 2011. Before the spring of 2011, there was a negative correlation between the percent of negative events and the percent of criticism; however, after the spring of 2011 the correlation between them became positive. It has been noticed that censorship practiced by the government reached peaks in May, June, September and October of 2011. It seemed that 2011 was a turning point. Thus, it is necessary to find a reasonable explanation for this phenomenon.

There was one event occurred in the spring of 2011 that might have changed the world—the Arab Spring. The revolutionary wave requesting democracy, free elections and human rights from authorities starts at the end of 2010 and reached its peak in the

spring of 2011. China was influenced by this wave in late February, and then a series of movements were launched afterwards. Traditional schemes such as strikes, demonstrations and rallies were adopted by activists in China. However, another prominent characteristic about this wave of activism was that social movement leaders effectively used social media to organize activities, communicate with each other, attract attention, and spread their advocacy. For example, the very first appeal to an assembly in Mainland China was a post on Twitter. The first activists never revealed their identities, and many of them were not physically living in Mainland China, so it was hard for the authorities to locate, stop or arrest them. In March 2011, an official announcement, *Forbidding Any Illegal Activities Based on Internet*¹⁰ (*jinzhi liyong hulianwang congshi weifa huodong de tongzhi*), was issued by the Central Chinese government to prevent larger scale democratic activities. This was not a law but it was a harsh warning. It addressed several sections of the Constitution of People's Republic of China. The original text is translated and quoted as follows:

According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and related regulations and laws, People's Republic of China protects citizens' freedom of speech. However, using internet, communication tools, social media and other methods to take any of the following actions will be forbidden:

- a) Organizing, instigating any activities that violate the Constitution, laws and regulations;
- b) Fabricating or twisting the truth, spreading rumors, or obstructing the order of Chinese society;
- c) Organizing, instigating any form of illegal assembly, march or demonstration that will obstruct the order of China society;
- d) Any other forms of actions that violate the rights and interests of the state, society and collectives.

Relevant departments should fulfill their duties to monitor, discover and forbid the above mentioned actions; violators will be prosecuted.

¹⁰ The original Chinese announcement was retrieved from: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqcj/2011-03/01/content_12097118.htm.

This announcement was issued in March 2011. According to Figure 5.2, March 2011 was one of the troughs from July 2009 to March 2012. At that point, both the volume of comment and the volume of participating people were very close to zero, indicating a low volume of online messages and communication. Even though the volume of participating netizens tended to grow afterwards, the censorship seemed to remain very strong, even stronger than any other time.

In addition, just as discussed above, Chinese society puts much emphasis on celebrations of significant holidays and events. In 2011 there happened to be many anniversaries for significant political events in Chinese history which profoundly affected the direction of contemporary China. Therefore, the Central government needed to do extra work to guide public opinion in a direction which was more favorable to government interests.

For example, the Capitalist Revolution of China, also known as the Hsin-hai Revolution, happened in 1911. Through the Revolution of 1911, the last feudal dynasty was overthrown. A new capitalist government was founded, but the spirit of capitalism was very different from that of communism. Also the Communist Party of China was afraid that capitalists would snatch political power from their hands. A large amount of political activities were initiated since the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949 to prevent capitalism from regaining political power. The Central Government has always been sensitive to movements and activities related to spreading the ideas of capitalism and the spirit of freedom. One example is the suppression of the Democracy Movement of 1989. The centennial of the Capitalist Revolution of 1911 was in 2011, and according to the research of Gary King and colleagues (2012), the possibility of

protesting and other types of collective movements were among the last things that the Chinese government wanted to see. Therefore the central government appeared to have adopted different censorship policies to prevent people from initiating any form of collective movements and actions to celebrate the centennial of the Revolution of 1911. Thus, as we can see, online messages experienced a low tide during that time period.

In addition, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was founded in 1921, so 2011 was the 90th anniversary of the founding of CPC. The original purpose of CPC was to bring positive social changes to Chinese society through a series of socialist revolutions. Political promises were made to the people such as socialism would improve Chinese society greater than a capitalist society, and everyone would be equal in a socialist society. However, the revolutionary road proved to be tougher than imagined, especially in a country with a very large population and long history like China. Political traditions such as the monarchy and autocracy, which had been inherited for thousands of years, were hard to reform within only a few decades. Ninety years had passed and today's China is still a totalitarian country with a single-party system. Furthermore, social inequality has become a more severe social problem since the Economic Reform in 1979. Since 2011 was the 90th birthday of CPC, there was a major opportunity for some activists to raise discussions and debates about the original political purpose of the CPC.

Another social event might be people's 35th celebration of the ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Set into motion by Mao, then chairman of the CPC, the goal of Cultural Revolution was to remove capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from Chinese society in order to enforce the type of communism that was advocated by the authorities. This was a classic case of exterminating all opposing political views and

making the CPC's dictatorship over this country legitimate. Hundreds of thousands of people died in this movement because they held different points of view from the official Party. Today the Cultural Revolution has been recognized as a mistake and much criticism has been directed at this movement. On its 35th anniversary, many people were willing to readdress the influence of this event on contemporary Chinese society. However, it is still a very sensitive topic in today's China, so the central government might have taken steps to censor relevant discussion and disputes about this movement.

The occurrence of Arab Spring was an influential factor for the formation of online public opinion of 2011 and afterward period because it caused the announcement that was quoted earlier, which aimed to constrain the volume of and direction of public opinion. The influence of the Announcement might have lasted throughout the year of 2011 because of the above mentioned anniversaries of this year. They are sensitive to the government because discussions and debates on these events might make people question the legitimacy of the CPC.

The Influence of Tones of Events Discussed in Blogs

The original hypothesis was that influential bloggers would positively affect the direction of public opinion in either a positive or negative way. In other words, positive events should produce positive commentaries while negative events would produce negative commentaries. According to the regression results, the tone of events discussed in blogs did influence the percent of criticism. However, positive events did not exert a statistically significant influence on the percent of criticism; negative events are statistically significant in affecting the percent of criticism in a positive way. In other

words, the occurrence of a negative event increases the percent of criticism of that day by 7.9%.

It has been expected that the occurrence of a negative event will increase the percent of criticism of that day. When something unfavorable happened, it is natural for people to blame the authority by criticizing the policies or actions of the authority. But, the question why positive events do not have statistically significant influence on the formation of online criticism needs a reasonable explanation. In order to answer this question, an overview of social change in Chinese society in the past decades is necessary. So when were people willing to praise the authority?

The Stalinist centrally planned system was introduced into China in the early 1950s (Tang, 2005). Under the Stalinist Model, instead of making profits, the goal of production is to satisfy the needs of society. Means of production were owned by the state rather than individuals. Production is administratively carried out according to need-based central plans. In addition, citizens' income was distributed by the central government based on the needs of people. Every family was guaranteed for a job, thus there was no social problem like unemployment. In other words, in the period of central planning, the Chinese people's daily lives completely depended on the central government. Officially there was no social inequality. Everyone was given the same amount of living materials based on their needs. Thus, at that time, people were willing to praise the authorities in power.

In the late 1970s, China introduced another different economic model—a market model. A series of reforms were launched (Tang, 2005). These reform programs included the retreat of the state from planning, and the liberalizing of economic activities such as

those in the labor market. Performance-based labor contracts replaced the life tenure system. Private property rights, joint stock companies and foreign subsidiary firms were allowed to coexist with the state-owned firms. After the reforms, the purpose of the economy turned to focusing on making profits instead of satisfying people's needs. No one could be guaranteed for a job. Much welfare was cut by firms due to an intention to make profits. One received a higher income based on investing more money or more labor power. Under these circumstances, inequality was generated. The role of the government was no longer to be the provider; instead, the government became a coordinator, or even a bystander. The Chinese people's understanding of legitimate authority was about to change. When people have to make a living on their own, they realize that they need to depend on themselves. It is human nature that when they were able to live a life better than their expectations, they attributed it to their own efforts. However, when they were living a life lower than their expectations, they blamed the authorities for bringing negative changes to their lives.

Since today's China has passed the era when everyone was feeling grateful and respectful toward the government, more and more people have been aware that they have the right to criticize their government. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that people have switched their attention from praising the authorities to criticizing them.

The Influence of Tones of Influential Bloggers

According to the regression results, influential bloggers play an important role in shaping the pattern of online public opinion. In comparison to being negative and neutral, the percent of criticism was expected to decrease by 18.7% when the tone of blogger was positive, holding all the other independent variables constant. In comparison to being

positive and neutral, the percent of criticism was expected to increase by 16.5% when the tone of blogger was negative, holding all the other independent variables constant. These results correspond to the original hypothesis that there was a negative correlation between influential bloggers' tone and the percent of criticism.

It is undeniable that authors of the “top-one hit” blogs of each day are intellectuals of Chinese society. The history of intellectual criticism in China is a complicated one. From ancient times, intellectuals whose political ideas were different from the authority would be persecuted; intellectuals whose political ideas were in accordance with the authority would be put onto important positions. In Mao's regime, intellectuals were persecuted even more severely, especially during the 10-year long Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). They were not treated decently and fair by the authorities. However, they were necessary for the authorities, because they had knowledge, and they clearly knew where the country was going.

The traditional role of Chinese intellectuals was “resolutely to take responsibility for the well-being of the world” (*yi tian xia wei ji ren*) (Tang, 2005, p. 166). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, this traditional role has been intertwined with the Marxian idea that “society's true physical, psychological, and social needs can be discovered by those who are wise and informed, who then go on to guide society.”(Tang, 2005, p. 166) Therefore, Chinese intellectuals believe that it is their responsibility to educate people and to improve the whole society.

Especially after the internet became popular in China, a group of intellectuals adopted the internet as a tool for spreading their ideas and thoughts. These intellectuals are usually famous, but they usually reside abroad since they are studying or working in

higher education institutions in the west. On one hand, they enjoy the free atmosphere of western world; on the other hand, they want to achieve higher accomplishments in academia. The term for these intellectuals is “public intellectuals”. Recent examples of such “public intellectuals” include Fang Zhouzi, Li Kaifu, and Xue Manzi, etc. For example, Fang Zhouzi graduated from Michigan State University with a Ph.D. degree in biochemistry, and he is famous for his campaign against academic fraud. In 1994, Fang co-founded *The New Threads* which was a magazine had physical hardcopy but soon only published on the internet. In 1996 he co-founded the *New Threads* website. Since 2000, Fang has worked on writing for his website, campaigning against alleged academic corruption, and publishing popular science books. Fang's aggressive campaign against alleged academic fraud has been under hot debate. Fang has even earned the Chinese government's support. Fang registered his blog on *sina.com.cn* in 2004 and since then 2,738 blogs were posted. By now, nearly 70 million people have visited his blogs and nearly 5 million people became his “fans” on *Weibo* (a twitter-like platform).

Why has Fang become so popular? First of all, he meets all the conditions required for being an influential in society. According to the characteristics of influentials, Fang is elite in popular science and internet writing, and he is also a well known scholar who dedicates himself to campaign against academic fraud. He is highly esteemed for his reputation for his work. Therefore, Fang has qualified as an influential. In addition, Fang actually gives normal people an expectation of having their own authority (not political authority but authority in other fields like academia). This allows them to be outsiders who can criticize and challenge the system.

This explanation can be used to account for why “public intellectuals”, or using the theoretical term, influentials could have an impact on the opinion of the public. On one hand, these intellectuals master more knowledge in certain areas than most people; therefore, they are more powerful than others and people choose to trust them. On the other hand, like Fang’s example, people have been aware that they could criticize, or judge, “authorities” through these public intellectuals. They are not passively accepting government’s actions and policies anymore. Regression results confirmed the soundness of the two-step flow model (i.e. the tone of the influentials’ blog influences the commentators’ tone of criticism). People are indeed influenced by the opinion leaders even though they have direct access to information source.

The Influence of Level of Involved Government

Regression results indicate that people’s attitudes have statistical difference between international events and social events. In other words, in comparison to being a social event, being an international event decreases the percent of criticism by 32.4%. Furthermore, there was a decreasing tendency for the percent of criticism in the following sequence: social events, local events, national events and international events. It seemed that the higher the level of involved government, the lower the percent of criticism. When there was another country involved in an event, instead of being criticizing, people would show the most support to the Chinese government.

This situation was very different from the situation in the United States. Americans value person-to-person interactions within a local circle, or a “community” in which they can actually play a part. For example, many Americans claim that they “buy local”, “think local first,” and “support local economies”, etc. For another example, the

federal government has laws, but each State, or even every city, has its own legal system. It does not necessarily mean that Americans do not value the States as a whole, but Americans' concept of the "local" seems to be very strong. And this situation is greatly different from Chinese people's "central" concept.

This difference might originate from the different philosophy hold by Americans and Chinese. Americans value individualism more while Chinese people put much emphasis on collectivism. Chinese are more willing to suppress their personal feelings and needs for the good of the collective. When there is a conflict between personal interests and collective interests, Chinese are encouraged to sacrifice personal interests in order to save collective interests. This value has been passed down the Chinese culture from very ancient times. For example, old saying has it: "sacrifice small families for the goodness of the big family" (*she xiao jia, bao da jia*). The "big family" here represents the state. Even though in recent years individualism becomes more popular, the traditional philosophy still influences most Chinese people. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the Chinese people would criticize the central government less but criticize local governments more.

The Influence of Censorship

According to the regression results, with every one unit increase in censored commentaries, the percent of criticism decreases by 9.3%. In other words, there was a negative correlation between the percent of censored message and the percent of criticism. It is common sense that stronger censorship would be accompanied by a lower percent of criticism. Also, as shown in Figure 5.2, the extent of censorship from May 2011 to November 2011 was much stronger than it was in any other time. There were two

peaks of censorship during this period. One was May 2011 and another one was September of the same year. This phenomenon should be a result of the combined outcome of the occurrence of Arab Spring and significant anniversaries. However, beyond all these phenomena, how censorship was actually practiced and how does that influence the formation of public opinion on internet?

From the content of the interview conducted by Ai (2012) in the spring of 2012, we know that except for simply deleting online messages, the government was also “manufacturing” messages to sculpt the tone and nature of public opinion on the internet. According to the interviewee, usually after an event has happened, and sometimes even before the news has come out, these online commentators would “receive an email telling us (the online commentators) what the event is, then instructions on which direction to guide the netizens’ thoughts, to blur their focus, or to fan their enthusiasm for certain ideas (Ai, 2012, p. 42)”. Once relevant articles or news was found on the internet, online commentators would start to write articles, post or reply to commentaries according to the overall direction given by their supervisors (Ai, 2012). Thus there are three roles for these online commentators to play: the leader, the follower, and the onlooker or unsuspecting member of the public.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out by this censor that the events they’ve received were mainly local events. Local event related instructions covered over 60 to 70 percent of all the instructions they have received from the supervisor. This corresponds to the result that local events have a much higher percent of negative events (70.8%) in comparison to the percent of national events (35.1%) (Table 5.5).

According to the censor being interviewed, the principle of doing censorship is: do not directly praise the government, or directly criticize negative news. The tone and the stance of the comments they manufactured and the identity of the commentators should look as if it is an unsuspecting member of public. Only then will the true netizens resonate with them. They want to guide netizens obliquely and let them change their focus without realizing it. Here is a specific example of a typical process of “guiding public opinion” that is quoted from Ai’s interview:

“For example, each time the oil price is about to go up, we’ll receive a notification to ‘stabilize the emotions of netizens and divert public attention’. The next day, when news of the rise comes out, netizens will definitely be condemning the state, CNPC and Sinopec (two major oil companies in China). At this point, I register an ID and post a comment: ‘rise, rise however you want, I don’t care. Best if it rises to 50 yuan (approximately 8 USD) per liter: it serves you right if you are too poor to drive. Only those with money should be allowed to drive on the roads...’it sounds like I am inviting attacks but the aim is to anger netizens and divert the anger and attention on oil price to me. I would then change my identity several times and start to condemn myself. This will attract more attention. After many people have seen it, they start to attack me directly. Slowly, the content of the whole page has also changed from oil price to what I’ve said. It is every effective (Ai, 2012, p. 43).”¹¹

There is double-sided consequence of strong censorship. On one hand, a very effective censorship system will guide public opinion onto the direction that the authorities want, thus they can easily control the public. On the other hand, since censorship is not a secret in China and the Chinese people are aware that their speech will be monitored or even deleted, the trust between people and the authority has been destroyed. People do not completely believe the official speech of the Chinese government, even though it might be true. This explains from another perspective why blogs are so popular in China. Bloggers do not represent the authorities—they represent

¹¹ From “China’s Paid Trolls: Meet the 50-cent Party,” by Ai Weiwei, 2012, *The New Statesman*, p. 43. Copyright by the New Statesman Ltd.. Adapted with permission.

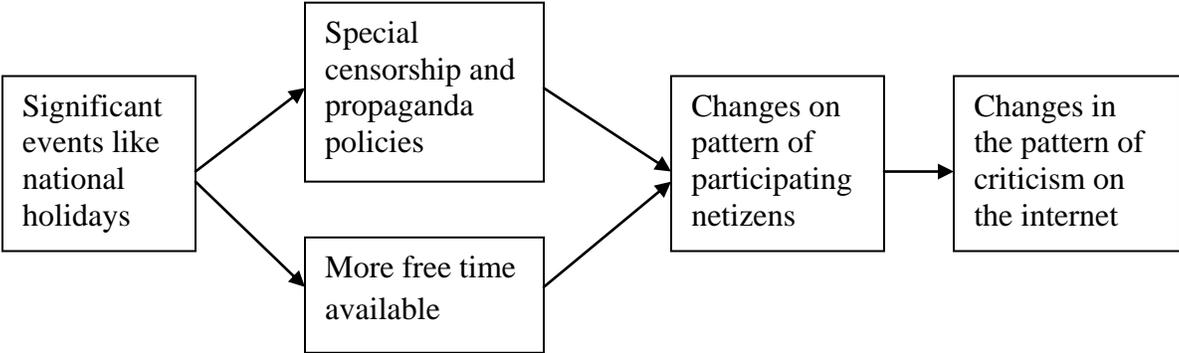
themselves—so people are expecting to vent their resentment, to find a way to challenge the authority, or even to find out the truth from these public intellectuals. However, if more censors engage in the behavior described by Ai, netizens may develop a more cautious view of a manipulated web.

Figure 0.1: Headlines of Some Major Publication on National Holidays



(Images by *China Youth Daily*, *People's Daily*, *Global People* and *People's weekly* from their official websites)

Figure 0.2: How Significant Dates Changed the Pattern of Public Opinion on Internet



Chapter 7 Conclusion

In this project, after reviewing related literature and theories, a combination of quantitative methods and qualitative methods were used, and the following findings have been revealed.

The general pattern of public opinion on internet from July 2009 to March 2012

From July 2009 to May 2011, a negative correlation can be found between the percent of negative event and the percent of criticism; a positive correlation between the percent of negative event and the percent of criticism could be observed after May 2011. In addition, there were more negative events covered by *sina.com.cn* in comparison to positive events. Correspondingly, more negative blogs and negative commentaries were produced in comparison to positive blogs and positive commentaries.

The occurrence of Arab Spring might be a possible explanation for the formation of online public opinion during this period because it caused the issue of the Announcement which aimed to constrain the volume of and direction of public opinion. The influence of the Announcement might have lasted throughout the year of 2011 and even afterwards. Furthermore, other than the occurrence of Arab Spring, the year of 2011 was a very special year on many levels. It was the anniversary of the Revolution of 1911, the founding of the CPC for 90 years, and the commemoration of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, in this year, special censorship policies might have been taken to prevent political discussions and debates which might potentially make people question the justice of the regime of the CPC.

The influence of the tone of events discussed in blogs

Positive events did not exert statistically significant influence on the percent of criticism; negative events are statistically significant in affecting the percent of criticism in a positive way. Chinese netizens did not react to positive events but react actively to negative events might be a result of the transmission from Stalinist central planned system to market economy system. Once people need to rely on themselves to make a living, their passion and appreciation toward the authority would be extinguished. In addition, more and more people have been aware that they have the right to criticize the authorities.

The influence of the tone of influential bloggers

In comparison to being negative and neutral, the percent of criticism was expected to decrease when the tone of the blogger was positive. In comparison to being positive and neutral, the percent of criticism was expected to increase when the tone of the blogger was negative. In other words, negative blogs produce criticism. When an influential bloggers' tone is negative, the percent of criticism will grow.

Influential bloggers were actually the so called “public intellectuals” in China. These intellectuals took it as their responsibility to guide the public onto the “right” path; meanwhile netizens chose to trust these intellectuals because they have mastered knowledge in specific and important areas. More significantly, people have been aware that they can criticize, or judge, “authorities” through the websites used by these public intellectuals.

The influence of the level of government

There was a decreasing tendency for the percent of criticism in the following sequence: social events, local events, national events and international events. A higher level of the involved government would result in a lower percent of criticism. When there was another country involved in an event, instead of criticizing, people would show more support for the Chinese government.

This differs from Americans' individualism, because the dominant Chinese philosophy is collectivism. When there is a conflict between personal interests and collective interests, the Chinese people are encouraged to sacrifice personal interests in order to save collective interests. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the Chinese people would criticize their central government less but criticize local governments more.

The influence of censorship

There was a negative relationship between the percent of censored message and the percent of criticism. The extent of censorship from May 2011 to November 2011 was much stronger than it was in any other time. There were two peaks of censorship during this period. One was May 2011 and another one was September 2011.

Except for massive deleting of blog posts through censorship, the government was also "manufacturing" public opinion on internet by hiring actual "online commentators" to post misinformation and favorable messages toward the government on internet. There are three roles for these online commentators to play: the leader, the follower, the onlooker or unsuspecting member of the public. Furthermore, it has been pointed out by the online commentator involved that the events they have received were mainly local events. Local event related instructions covered over 60 to 70 percent of all the

instructions they have received from their government supervisor. This corresponds to the result that local events have a much higher percent of negative event (70.8%). By using censorship, the Chinese authorities will be able to effectively guide public opinion into the direction that they want. However, the trust between people and the authorities may be destroyed as well. Thus, censorship has been a double-sided sword which can be protective but also generate backlash.

Answer the “So-what” Question

After doing this project, there is a question needs to be answered: Can Chinese people say more now? We need to admit that there is still a firm limitation set by the Chinese government in the form of laws and regulations. Furthermore, information on the internet has been monitored by either official or unofficial censorship system. Compared with the situation in the past, government is able to monitor the public opinion on the internet more easily and more directly by using technical methods, which indicates a wider range of censorship. However, even though the government is getting into censoring information, there will not be any fierce action when netizens are just discussing verbally on the internet.

From another point of view, information on the internet is influenced by opinions of influential bloggers, some of whom are recognized as public intellectuals by the public. These influential bloggers might be a member of the Party which means they speak for the good of the Party. In this sense, public opinion on the internet will still be affected by the power of the Party which means the government in China.

Future research orientation

For future research, the following three perspectives will need further exploration. First of all, there are three major blog aggregators in China except for Sina. the other two aggregators are Sohu and NetEase. Since this project focuses on political blogs and the general public opinion appeared on the internet, Sina was chosen as the sampling frame due to its wide-range users and topics. However, for research which will focus on groups with higher level of SES status, researchers can choose NetEase. For research which will focus on youth in China or topics covering entertainment or sports, researchers should choose Sohu.

In addition, this project studied public opinion from July 2009 to March 2012. Public opinion on the internet during this period had been influenced by many haphazard events such as Arab Spring. If the time periods are different, the pattern of online public opinion might be different as well. Therefore other research dealing with other time periods is encouraged.

Finally, comparison studies will be appropriate if there are some specific cases such as Tiananmen Square Movement of 1989 and Jasmine Revolution of 2011. Through comparison of public opinion pattern on the internet and the strategy of censorship employed by the government, some interesting findings might be discovered.

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01/2011-05/2012
Teaching Assistant

Grants & Awards

Outstanding Student, 09/2006-06/2007, Zhengzhou University
Outstanding Student Scholarship, 09/2006-06/2007, Funded: ¥ 1800.00, Zhengzhou University
Gillis Graduate School Scholarship, 09/2010, Funded: \$ 5000.00, University of Kentucky

