

Measuring the Effects of Online Public Opinion Expression in China: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines Chinese netizens' use of Electronic Bulletin Boards (BBS) for public opinion expression through a case study. It focuses on the dynamic interaction between online public opinion and official media discourse within the framework of agenda setting theory and framing theory. Time series cross-correlations and regression models are used to capture the transfer of issue salience from public discourse onto the media agenda during the agenda building phase, and from the media agenda into public during the agenda setting phase. A content analysis further demonstrates that the public differ from the media in its framing of the case. Interaction between online public opinion and the media in the agenda-setting process is accompanied and perhaps explained by the fragmented authoritarian system and the commercialization of the media industry in China.

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Introduction

Many politicians, social researchers and media practitioners alike have welcomed the Internet as a new form of public sphere that might further democratize and liberalize civil society. In an era when public trust and participation in politics in Western democratic societies have been steadily declining [1-3], the Internet and related technologies are reckoned to have the potential to promote information accessibility, individual expression, and citizen participation e.g. [4-8]. Skeptics, on the other hand, have argued against this utopian perspective by pointing out that cyberspace is subject to government and corporate interference [9], that access to information and communication on the Internet is being compromised by unequal access [10] and the fragmentation of online communities [11,12], and that online discourses are often lost in much irrationality [13].

Fortunately, the Internet research community has already come to realize the Internet's political potential is complex, multifaceted and contingent upon the political environment in which it exists [14, 12]. Tai [15, p:181] maintained that instead of asking "whether the Internet democratizes communication in general, we should ask in what areas certain Internet-based forms of communications are democratizing public communication under what circumstances..."

This study examines Chinese netizens' use of the Electronic Bulletin Boards (BBS) on the Internet for public opinion expression. It focuses on the dynamic interaction between online public opinion and official media discourse within the framework of agenda-setting theory. I believe that discussions of the Internet in a non-democratic society would provide us a fresh perspective in understanding that the realization of true democracy in cyberspace depends not so much on "the content of virtual communities," but on "the actual structure of social relations" [16, p: 42].

BBS in China's Cyberspace

With its 250 million Internet users, China boasts the world's largest online population. The most popular activities for Chinese netizens include seeking news and information, emailing, and socializing online [17]. Among the various forms of online communication popular in China's burgeoning cyberspace, BBS has become a primary vehicle for Chinese Internet users to get informed and entertained. BBS can be conceived as an online version of actual public bulletin

boards for information dissemination and threaded discussion. Users are free to initiate new topics and/or respond to existing threads. Posted messages are free and open to the public to view. A popular BBS portal may host many thematically organized BBS serving as many-to-many "mass media."

In 2008, there were some three billion BBS user accounts in China. 80% of Chinese websites run BBS. The total number of daily page views is over 1.6 billion, with 10 million posts published every day [18]. The most popular BBS portal in China, Tianya.cn, has more than six million registered users. Compared with other countries, China has many more Internet users who frequently visit BBS forums. BBS-based online activities are popular among 40% of Chinese netizens but only among 17% of U.S. Internet users and 17.1% of Japanese users [15]. Observers believe that the immense popularity of BBS in China is attributable to the fact that they have opened up fresh social space for freer information exchange than that which is encouraged by traditional Chinese media.

Indeed, popular BBS forums and online communities have become places where political and social information gets widely distributed and intensively debated. The significant aggregation of individual users' personal opinions often directly reflects public opinion. Researchers, such as Yang [19,20] and Xiao [21], believe that BBS represent an emerging "virtual public sphere" for China's Internet users. Xiao [21] further observed that online discourse on BBS often provide an alternative to the agenda set by the official press and even determine leading stories for the media. Researchers have documented many cases where social ills get exposed on BBS and online public opinion lead to media attention and government action e.g. [15,22,21,23]. This study was set to formally examine the interaction between the online public and the media in the theoretical framework of agenda setting and empirically assess the agenda-building and agenda-setting processes in China's cyberspace through a representative case study.

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Agenda Setting and Agenda Building in China's Cyberspace

The mass media serve as fundamental vehicles for presenting, reflecting, and/or creating public opinion in modern democratic society [24]. The classic model of agenda-setting process—the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda—emphasizes the power of the mass media to bring important issues to the public's attention [25-27]. Furthermore, the media can also affect how audiences comprehend an issue through a second-level agenda-setting process by which the media spotlight certain aspects of the issue, or cover it in a particular frame. In essence, agenda-setting theory focuses on the role of the media in affecting public awareness of and opinions towards important sociopolitical issues. A comprehensive agenda-setting model accentuates three components of the agenda-setting process in modern society, namely the public agenda, the media agenda, and the policy agenda [28]. Finally the model inspires further investigation into the dynamics playing out among the three components in light of newest developments in the media landscape.

Often appearing at the receiving end of the agenda-setting process, the public agenda refers to the set of issues that have obtained a high degree of public awareness and interest in society [22]. Traditional agenda-setting studies frequently rely on public opinion polls to gauge the public's awareness of a number of issues or to track the rise and fall of public opinion on a single issue across time [26]. This study used BBS posts, a form of user-generated content, to represent the online public agenda. The number of postings on a certain issue represents an aggregate measure of the public salience of an issue. It is a more powerful measure that goes beyond the cognitive effects of agenda-setting emphasized in previous studies to reflect a behavioral effect, i.e., users actively discuss issues they perceive important with others online. The measure implies that public reasoning and discussion are the essence of deliberation democracy [29].

A majority of existing agenda-setting studies have emphasized the effects of the mass media on the public agenda and paid considerably less attention to the formation of the media agenda [28]. This reflected the influence of the dominant effects tradition in mass communication research. Not until recently did researchers begin to explore the agenda-building process, by which an issue gets on the media agenda [28,30]. In his review of this particular line of inquiry, McCombs [26] outlined a three-layer model of the media agenda-building process with news norms as the fundamental element at the core, inter-media influences in the middle, and external news sources at the outside. He maintains that in the agenda-building process, the potential of external sources, such as public opinion polls and government officials, to set the media agenda are often filtered through the basic rules of journalistic norms and further affected by the interactions among news organizations [26].

In contrast with the libertarian press systems in western society in which the press is economically and institutionally independent of the state, the news media in the authoritarian regime of China are controlled by the ruling Chinese Communist Party [31,32]. While the media agenda is generally decided by various social political sources in a democratic society, the CCP used to set its political agenda directly through a highly centralized media system [33]. However, the recent commercialization of media organizations and the rapid growth of local media outlets have greatly decentralized the overall structure of the media system. Pushed into a market facing increased competition, the media in China have become increasingly audience-oriented and have moved to focus on providing news and entertainment for

audiences instead of propagating party ideology [34-36,32,37]. These changes have opened channels of influence for public opinion on the news and political communication agenda in China.

As the Internet rapidly develops in China, the state media have been keen to grow online. As of 2002, 4,000 of some 100,000 Chinese media organizations, including magazines, newspapers, radio, and television stations, have gone online [21]. Commercial news portals have also emerged as major news sources for Chinese netizens. Unlike their print counterparts, online news media can directly interact with readers. For instance, major online news media routinely provide BBS following major news stories to attract readers to respond and post their comments. This audience orientation has created new dynamics that have transcended boundaries of the traditional censorship mechanism that dwelled much on the linear sender-receiver model in China [15].

In their study of the interplay between online public opinion and media coverage, Zhou and Moy [23] observed that the two parties influenced each other in framing an issue of concern as it developed. Many other existing case studies also seemed to detect a two-phase process in the interaction between online media and public discourse. At the early stage of the process, it is usually the netizens who initiate agenda building. They do so by focusing increased attention on an incident, which is usually exposed online by someone with first-hand knowledge of the situation, before it receives any adequate coverage from the news media. Rigorous online discussion then attracts the mainstream media to report the event to a larger extent than before. This study sets to examine the effect of user-generated content on BBS, i.e. the public agenda, on the media agenda during the agenda-building process through a representative case.

Q₁: Can the public agenda expressed as online BBS user-generated postings transfer issue salience to the official media agenda at the agenda building stage?

As the event further develops, the mainstream news media start to play a leading role in the agenda-setting process. Because netizens rely mainly on the media to learn about the latest developments of the event, the extent of online discussion of the issue is subject to the fluctuation of the news reports. The majority of previous case studies, most of which set out to demonstrate the liberalizing effect of the Internet, tend to stop at the agenda-building process and neglect the fact that the media will still play an important role in the agenda-setting process. Robert et al. [29] have confirmed that conventional media are able to extend their agenda-setting function into cyberspace. Thus, my second research hypothesis posits that the media agenda influences the public agenda during the agenda-setting phase.

H₂: The media agenda leads the public agenda during the agenda-setting phase.

As the comprehensive model of agenda setting indicates, the mass media have the power to influence not only the public awareness of certain issues but also how the public perceives the issues by way of framing. A frame is a dominant perspective on the issue under consideration - "a pervasive description and characterization of the issue" [27, p: 546]. By employing a particular frame that promotes a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation of the issue, the media may effectively influence how the public understands the issues [38]. McCombs [26,27] and many others considered the framing process second-level agenda setting.

Much like the agenda-setting process, the framing process is also subject to both internal factors such as professional values and journalistic routines [39,40] and external factors such as the political system and social values [41]. Although the press has ceased to explicitly promote political doctrines as a result of the recent reforms, it does not indicate an end to press control by the ruling party in China [32]. Journalists still find little room to step outside fixed news reporting structures and rhetoric laid down in accordance with Party ideologies [42]. Internal journalistic values often succumb to external pressure from the government in news framing [43,23]. However, as an active party in a three-player loop of the framing process (i.e., sources, journalists, and audience members [44], audiences are free to actively interpret and comprehend news stories from media [45]. Therefore we would expect discrepancies between the frames used by the official media and that of the online public directly expressed on BBS especially when it comes to “counter issues” as opposed to “routine issues” that are usually placed on the public agenda by the established media [30].

RQ₁: Do the media differ from the public in their way of framing a controversial issue?

The Case

This study employed a longitudinal single-issue approach that allows a more in-depth study of the agenda-setting process than a cross-sectional study of a set of issues [15,23]. It chose to focus on the Shanxi slave labor scandal, among the most discussed issues online in 2007 [46].

On June 5th, 2008, a post appeared on a popular local BBS forum in eastern China Henan province, claiming that thousands of people from the countryside in Henan and other provinces were abducted and later forced into slave labor to work on illegal brick kilns in neighboring Shanxi province. According to the post, these workers, many of them children, were suffering brutal working conditions, poorly fed, often beaten and forcibly forbidden from leaving. The post, supposedly written by the father of one of the victims, immediately attracted great attention from forum visitors and got redistributed onto Tianya.cn and other influential national BBS forums. The post drew some 580,000 page views in its first few days on Tianya.cn alone, and it quickly stirred up strong public sentiments over the alleged incident.

In fact, the story about the forced labor in Shanxi first came to light in an investigative report by a Henan Television reporter one month earlier, but the news did not effectively attract much public attention or any response from the local government. A couple of weeks after the first BBS post, the story began appearing on the front page of virtually every online news portal nationwide. Mainstream state media such as People's Daily and China Central Television also joined the growing list of media outlets following the story.

As the gravity of the scandal unfolded online and in mainstream media, it caught the attention of the central government. The government soon ordered the Shanxi provincial government to launch a thorough investigation of the issue. A joint working group consisting of members from the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security was dispatched to Shanxi to supervise the investigation.

As a result, the local police raided more than 8,000 kilns and small coal mines and freed some 600 workers, including 51 children. Police also arrested about 200 suspects involved in the case. Later, the victims were compensated and the criminals were prosecuted and tried in court by the Shanxi government.

Method

The objective of this study is to examine the agenda-building and agenda-setting processes affected by the interplay between online public opinion and the media agenda in China's cyberspace. I selected two popular online news outlets to represent the media agenda: Xinhua.com and QQ.com. The former is a leading news website launched by China's only official news wire, the Xinhua News Agency. The latter, according to Alexa.com, is the largest commercial online news portal in China. Because commercial news portals are not allowed to engage in news collection, QQ.com relies on officially sanctioned news media as its sources. Both Xinhua and QQ serve as online centers disseminating news from various online and offline news sources across the nation.

This study chose Tianya.cn, the largest BBS social portal in China, as the venue for collecting user-generated data to represent the public agenda. According to Alexa.com, the site is ranked the 29th among the most popular websites in China. Partnered with Google Inc., Tianya.cn attracts some 200,000 users posting millions of commentaries daily. Many previous case studies have used user-generated content on Tianya.cn to illustrate the emergence of public opinion in China e.g. [21,23].

The Shanxi slave labor scandal evolved in two phases during the course of its development. The first phase started when the first BBS post attracted public attention. The second phase began when the mainstream media started to focus on the issue about three weeks into the scandal. Time series cross-correlation and regression models were used to test the transfer of issue salience from the public agenda onto the media agenda during Phase I (H1), and from the media agenda onto the public agenda during Phase II (H2). Issue salience was operationalized by the number of online BBS threads on the public agenda and the number of news stories on the media agenda. The data, running a two-month time span, were retrieved by doing multiple keyword searches on the three websites using Baidu.com, China's largest domestic search engine. The data, including 297 news items on Xinhua.com, 469 on QQ.com, and 1,065 threads on Tianya.cn, were recorded chronologically in a SPSS dataset.

Traditional agenda-setting studies have demonstrated that the transfer of the issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda is a gradual and cumulative process. It will take certain amount of media coverage for the issue to get the public's attention. The span of this time lag ranges from a few weeks to several months, depending on factors such as the nature of the issue and the intensity of media coverage [2826]. As a medium that is capable of disseminating news and reflecting response instantly, the Internet may conceivably shorten the time lag in the agenda-setting process. Robert et al. [29] demonstrated that it took just a matter of a few days for traditional news media to get the online users to discuss certain issues. Given the explosive nature of the case in the current study, I test lags lasting from one to seven days in a time series analysis.

Two sets of analyses were carried out to test each of the two hypotheses. For H1, only the data collected during Phase I of the case were used to assess if the number of BBS posts on a certain day or a few days earlier (the time lags) had an effect on the number of news items on that day. First, time series cross-correlation was performed to detect the optimum time lags for the effect of BBS posts on the media to take hold. Second, the numbers of Tianya BBS posts on these lagged days were entered as the explanatory variables in a regression model, and the numbers of news reports on Xinhua and QQ were entered as outcome variables. For H2, the data in Phase II were used and the same two analyses were performed with the number of news reports on Xinhua and QQ as the explanatory variables and the number of BBS posts as outcome variables.

A content analysis was carried out to answer RQ1, whether the media differ from the public in their framing of an issue. The units of analysis were individual main posts (excluding responding posts) and news stories. The date of publication and the primary thematic frame were recorded for each post and new story. Instead of using specific frames that only apply to individual posts or news items, Entman's [38] four functions of frames, i.e., problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, served as a guideline to classify the frames. This guideline helped compare frames between the public agenda and the media agenda. To test for intercoder reliability, two coders separately coded a random sample of 50 Tianya posts and 50 news items from Xinhua.com and QQ.com, respectively. The resulting intercoder reliability α was .71 for Tianya posts, .82 for Xinhua and .79 for QQ.

Results

A preliminary examination of the data showed that the number of news stories that appeared on Xinhua, the official news website, and QQ.com, the largest commercial website, were highly correlated ($r = .93, p < .001$) through the course of the case. This result confirmed previous empirical findings e.g. [47,48] and suggested that the news agenda may have indeed gotten further homogenized across media in cyberspace as competitive journalistic practices adapt to the online environment. The finding also challenges speculation that the audience will necessarily be fragmented by increasingly diverse content on the Internet, a condition that would end the agenda-setting effect of the media [27].

Table 1 summarizes the time series cross correlation results between the number of BBS posts on Tianya and the number of new stories on Xinhua and QQ during the agenda-building process. The number of posts of Tianya significantly correlated with the number of news stories on Xinhua on the current day and with five days lags. The number of posts of Tianya significantly correlated with the number of news stories on QQ on the current day and with four days lags.

Table 2 presents the regression models that looked at the issue salience transferred from the BBS posts to the online media in the agenda-building process. The number of posts on Tianya on the current day and the day before explained 44% of the total variance in the number of news items on Xinhua ($F = 8.68, P < .01$), and 65% in the number of news items on QQ ($F = 23.11, P < .01$). The numbers of Tianya posts on other days were not significant in the models, and therefore, were excluded from the model. The result provided evidence that BBS posts on Tianya on the current day and the day before did affect the number of posts on Xinhua and QQ during the beginning phase of the scandal.

Therefore H1, that the public agenda transfers issue salience to the official media agenda at the agenda building stage, is supported.

Lag	Cross correlation between Tianya and Xinhua	Cross correlation between Tianya and QQ
-7	.170	-.044
-6	.344	.162
-5	.488(*)	.334
-4	.645(*)	.518(*)
-3	.681(*)	.623(*)
-2	.670(*)	.734(*)
-1	.641(*)	.796(*)
0	.561(*)	.787(*)

Table 1: Time series cross correlations between the number of BBS posts on Tianya and the new stories Xinhua and QQ during the agenda-building process.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

	Number of news stories on Xinhua	Number of news stories on QQ
	$R^2 = .44$ $F = 8.68$ $P < .01$	$R^2 = .65$ $F = 23.11$ $P < .01$
	Estimate	
Number of Posts on Tianya on the same day	1.33(**)	1.31(**)
Number of Posts on Tianya the previous day	.84(*)	.57(*)

Table 2: Regression Models of the number of news items on the online news media during the agenda-building process.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3 are time series cross correlation results between the number of BBS posts on Tianya and the new stories on Xinhua and QQ during Phase II, the agenda-setting process. The number of posts on Tianya significantly correlated with the number of news stories on Xinhua on the current day and with a two-day lag. Similarly, the number of posts on Tianya significantly correlated with the number of news stories on QQ on the current day and with two days' lag. Shorter lags in the agenda-setting phase indicated that the online media were quicker in setting the public agenda than vice versa.

Table 4 lists the regression models that looked at the issue salience transfer from the online media to the online public in the agenda-setting process. The number of news items on Xinhua on the current day and the day before explained 67% of the total variance in the number of posts on Tianya ($F = 36.70, P < .01$). The number of news items on QQ on the current day and the day before explained 51% of the variance in the number of posts on Tianya ($F = 19.72, P < .01$). The number of posts on the online news media two days before did not turn out to be significant and thus was excluded from the models. The above findings supported H2, that the media agenda leads the public agenda during the agenda-setting phase.

The findings above clearly suggest that the public and the media interacted in placing the particular issue on the agenda. However, a closer look at how the issue was discussed by the public and in the media revealed a more nuanced relationship between the two. Table

5 summarizes the main frames detected in the BBS posts and in the news stories. The frames were ranked by the number of online posts and the number of news stories in the media in which the frames were employed.

Lag	Cross correlation between Tianya and Xinhua	Cross correlation between Tianya and QQ
-7	.056	.061
-6	.055	.012
-5	.037	.097
-4	-.056	.023
-3	-.064	-.068
-2	.356(*)	.345(*)
-1	.835(*)	.849(*)
0	.571(*)	.511(*)

Table 3: Time series cross correlation between the number of BBS posts on Tianya and the new stories Xinhua and QQ during the agenda-setting process.

	Number of posts on Tianya
	R ² = .67 F = 36.70 P < .01
	β
Number of news items on Xinhua on the same day	.33(**)
Number of news items on Xinhua media the previous day	.60(**)
	R ² = .51 F = 19.72 P < .01
	β
Number of news items on QQ on the same day	.35(**)
Number of news items on QQ media the previous day	.53(**)

Table 4: The regression model of number of posts on Tianya during the agenda-setting process.
 ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).
 * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

	Tianya posts (1,065)	Online news items (766)
Problem definition	Latest developments of the event in the media (137)	Actions taken by the central and local governments to solve the case (119)
	Similar cases in other provinces and in the past (56)	Prosecution and trials of the criminals (76)
	Inside stories of the plight of the victims (39)	Accounts of the plight of the victims (42)
	Other: (33)	Current situations of the victims rescued (30)
	Total: (265)	Other: (24)
Causal interpretation	Challenging and questioning government responses and actions (167)	Total: (291)
	Corruption in local governments and officials (95)	Illegal kilns' owners and organized crime (48)
	Deficiencies in the judicial and law enforcement system (37)	Lack of peasant labor regulation (22)
	Other: (13)	Malfesance of local labor officials (20)
	Total: (312)	Deficiencies in local economic development (13)
Moral evaluation	Poems, satires, and other literary and expressive works (133)	Other: (9)
	Materialism in today's China (15)	Total: (112)
	Sins of capitalism (6)	Deficiencies in local governance in general (35)
	Other: (29)	Spiritual vacuum in economic development (31)
	Total: (183)	Other: (21)
Treatment recommendation	Calls for eradicating local corruption and improving local governance (121)	Total: (87)
	General appeals for and suggestions of measures to find and rescue missing kids (83)	Measures taken to stop illegal kilns, penalize criminals and compensate victims (156)
	Calls for greater freedom in information dissemination (43)	Laws and regulations to protect peasant worker rights (58)
	Other: (58)	Measures taken to improve the efficiency and ethics of local party organs and local governance (39)
	Total: (305)	Other: (23)
	Total: (276)	

Table 5: Frames used in Tianya posts and online news stories.

There was evidence of online public frames affecting media frames during the agenda-building process early on when the nature of the case was being defined. For instance, during the initial investigation, the local government set to treat the case simply as a dispute between employers and employees, a common incident of labor law infringement. The media reportage of this government standpoint triggered a new round of rigorous criticisms on the Internet. Dozens threads and thousands of posts questioned the failure to press criminal or corruption charges and denounced it as a way to alleviate liability of local officials. Under the pressure of public sentiment and support from the central government, the nature of the charges soon changed to criminal abduction and detention, forced labor, underage worker employment and murder, in addition to other grave illegal employment practices. The investigation also started to focus on corruption and malfeasance of local officials.

However, media frames were not found to have much influence on how the public discussed the case later on in the media-led agenda-setting process. One of the reasons may be government intervention in the media's coverage of the event. A few weeks into the event, the central propaganda department ordered the media to report the event from a "positive perspective" to "encourage the public's faith in the government in handling the case". Media coverage was directed to focus on "the determination of the government to save the victims, punish the culprits, and discipline the derelict officials" [17].

The public frames differed greatly from the media frames in analyzing the causes and commenting on the social implications of the case. While official media discourse tended to attribute the causes to malfeasant individuals and the deficiency in the local labor department, the public mostly directed its dissatisfaction and distrust toward the system of local governance. Although nearly one-fourth of the posts in Phase II quoted media reports, a majority of such posts stood to question and challenge the official interpretations and viewpoints of the case in the media. Netizens related the current case to many other cases of social illness and conveyed their strong concerns towards social injustice and official corruption. Many such posts were in the form of poems, satires, and other literary works, expressing strong emotions toward the case.

Discussion

In envisioning the power of the Internet to "revolutionize" the democratic process, Savigny [24], among others, have commented that "the internet represents a countervailing power against the traditional media's agenda-setting ability, and the attempts by the states, political parties and the traditional media to define and defend the status quo". Enthusiastic propositions such as this, however, are often premised on the utopian prerequisite that the Internet inherently lays "outside of state, government and political party control...Both the medium and the messages are free from the distortions that characterize the traditional channels of political communication" [24, p: 5]. These idealistic viewpoints seem to exclude any sociopolitical environment where these expectations are not met.

This study explored the effect of the Internet in the political process in China, a country hosting the world's largest online population, the activities of which remain under the supervision of an authoritarian regime. The study empirically assessed two interrelated processes within the paradigmatic framework of agenda setting: the transfer of issue salience from online public to the media in the agenda-building process, and from the media to online public in the agenda-setting process.

As the findings have shown, intensive online public attention and discussion at the beginning of the incident was the key that had led to media's involvement in it. Once fully engaged, the media started to lead the agenda setting process by providing information of the newest development of the event for the public. The dynamic interactions between the public and the media demonstrated that the Internet has become an effective forum for Chinese netizens to express themselves. It has also become a proving ground for the formation of public opinion that finally found its voice in Chinese society.

However, this significant change is due not so much to the inherent openness of the Internet as a medium, as speculated by many optimistic advocates, as it is to the changing sociopolitical environment in Chinese society. The socioeconomic reforms in the past two decades have changed Chinese politics from a unitary totalitarian system to a fragmented authoritarian system. Local and divisional compliance with the central control has given way to the increased autonomy and independence of local authorities [15]. As reflected in the media system, the change has loosened control on the national media in covering local affairs and resulted in greater freedom for the media from one province to report sensitive stories in another. Driven by the increasingly competitive market, the major media are highly motivated to pursue hot social issues of great public concern. As this case study has shown, the national media and the media from other provinces, rather than the local media in Shanxi, played a leading role in covering the slavery case. Administrative fragmentation in China's political system has resulted in gaps in control that have opened a space for significant press freedom and public opinion. Such space is tolerated and sometimes even encouraged by the central government to keep local authorities in check and to curtail rampant corruption at the local level, which has already severely threatened the legitimacy of the Party's regime [15].

The interaction between the public and the media, however, was limited when it came to the frames used by the two parties to interpret and analyze the scandal. The findings illustrated that while the public played a significant role in helping define the case at the early stage in the agenda-building process, the media frames differed much from that of the online discourse in the media-led agenda setting process. This seems to echo findings of previous news framing studies that the effect of the public opinion is often limited to new emerging issues when there are no established lines to follow [49]. The power of public opinion tends to diminish later on as the journalists succumb to dominant political values in reporting the issue [41,50,23].

Content analysis of the BBS posts on the scandal showed that the public was highly antagonistic toward the government throughout the scandal. After exposing the scandal, netizens closely monitored the development of the case in the media and expressed their strong emotions in challenging some of the official stances and actions in the incident. Although effective at times in checking the governments, the public used the online platform more to vent emotions and make hasty judgments than to participate in rational discussions about important issues. An examination of the most discussed events online, based on the list compiled by CSSA in 2007, showed that issues that were entertaining and sensational in nature were more likely to catch the public attention than issues of serious social importance. This indicates that greater participation does not automatically result in meaningful participation promoting democratic ideals. Predicaments of collective action often prevail [12,24].

In conclusion, the dynamic information flow across the boundaries of official media and online communities in China's cyberspace support a view of the Internet and related technologies as erecting a new public platform for politically oriented conversation. It even prompted observers to argue that "if the public is seriously involved in the agenda- setting process, and if the public agenda has a direct influence on the policy agenda, then the political system in question should not be simplistically labeled 'undemocratic,' even though its officials are not popularly elected" [22, P: 59]. However, the full realization of the Internet's democratic potential cannot be detached from the sociopolitical environment in which it is embedded. The Internet is not capable of producing new political culture, but instead is more likely to adapt to the existing one [11,15,12]. Interaction between online public opinion and the media in the agenda-setting process is accompanied and perhaps explained by the fragmented authoritarian system and the commercialization of the media industry in China. In this regard, China's cyberspace stands as a grave counterargument to any utopian claim of the Internet as an agent of total emancipation and empowerment [15].

Some of the findings from this study, which focused on a specific case in a particular media system, might not be generalized to other settings. However, the study took the effort to empirically assess the interaction between online public opinion and the media in the agenda-building and agenda-setting processes. It expanded the classic agenda setting theory into cyberspace and provided an elaborate example of contextualized understanding of the sociopolitical implications of the Internet.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interest exists.

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