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The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens

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The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens

YA-WEN LEI

This article addresses a long-standing question: What are the political consequences of the rise of the Internet and the attendant emergence of netizens in China, particularly in terms of China's democratic prospects? Given the Chinese state's firm control in the realm of traditional media, the Internet has been expected to bring about political and social change in China since its introduction. Although scholars have had divergent views on what this change might look like, there has been no systematic effort to produce representative evidence to address the debate. Examining a nationwide representative survey data set, this study finds that Chinese netizens, as opposed to traditional media users and non-media users, are more politically opinionated. In addition, they are more likely to be simultaneously supportive of the norms of democracy and critical about the party-state and the political conditions in China, while also being potential and active participants in collective action. This article argues that, despite the competent authoritarian state, a more decentralized media system enabled by technology has contributed to a more critical and politicized citizenry in China's cyberspace. The Internet has made it possible for China's media system to undertake a new, albeit restricted and contingent role as a communication institution of the society. As critical citizenry, China's netizens constitute a new social force challenging authoritarian rule.

Keywords China, Internet, netizen, political consequence, political belief, collective action

This article addresses a long-standing question: What are the political consequences of the rise of the Internet and the attendant emergence of netizens (*wangmin*)¹ in China, particularly in terms of China's democratic prospects? The past 15 years have witnessed a great transformation in China's media system. The installation of the Internet in China has transformed China's media from a closed and centralized system to a *relatively* open and decentralized one. Along with the rise of the Internet, China has also seen the emergence of a new population actively engaged in using this technology—citizens popularly and officially referred to as netizens. With the growth of the online population, which hit 384

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million at the end of 2009, the potential political implications of this development cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the dynamics triggered by the evolution in China's media system became the subject of scholarly debate as soon as China was connected to the Internet. Optimists and pessimists have divergent assessments of whether the Internet could facilitate democratic change, but empirical appraisal based on nationally representative data has been lacking. As a result, commentaries are often made based on assumptions instead of sound evidence. Furthermore, the Chinese case tends to be neglected by mainstream studies, which focus on liberal democracies in the West, and has not been well integrated into current literature on the relations between media and politics.

Motivated by these lacunas, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it attempts to assess the political consequences of the rise of the Internet in China by examining nationwide representative data and describing the political beliefs and practices of Chinese netizens with reference to other social groups embedded in different media environments. My assumption is that if the Internet does have any political consequences, Chinese netizens' political beliefs and practices will reflect these consequences. If it turns out that there is no direct evidence pointing to differences between Chinese netizens and other groups in their political beliefs and practices, it will be difficult to argue for the significance of the Internet to China's political development. Second, there is a vast literature empirically studying the Internet's political implications in Western liberal democracies, but there are very few such studies researching authoritarian countries, where, ironically, political development is a more critical issue. Given that China's political development has critical importance globally in the 21st century, study of the Chinese case has broad impacts. This article thus uses the Chinese case to extend extant literature on the relation between media and politics to authoritarian contexts.

Dual Characteristics of the Media System

Literature on media and politics centers around the dual characteristics of the media system: *potency* and *vulnerability*. From a normative perspective, an autonomous media system, as an important institution of political communication, is one of the critical conditions indispensable for advancing and reproducing democracy. Political communication is theorized as key to achieving ideal democracy because of its role in providing adequate information, consolidating community, and generating legitimacy (Habermas, 2006). At the center of the network of political communication lie the mass media, which are enabled by technology to reach a large audience and are able to impact political communication and politics. The core position of mass media is said to create *media power*, a kind of power that can be influenced by but is not reducible to *social*, *political*, and *economic power* (Habermas, 2006). The exercise of media power manifests itself in the choice of information and format, in the effects of disseminating information (Habermas, 2006), in the roles of agenda setting and issue framing, in the provision of identity and aspiration (Mills, 1956, p. 314), and in the construction of reality (Bourdieu, 2001). Yet the independence of the media system is vulnerable to the encroachment of political and economic power (Habermas, 2006). Questions regarding the potency and vulnerability of the media system have prompted numerous studies on institutional design and empirical inquiries into how certain conditions could impact political outcomes such as civil engagement.

Previous literature has identified two parameters that could influence the dual characteristics of the media system, as well as the relation between media and political engagement. The first one is the state-market relation, which is the specific context in which a media system is embedded. The second one is the existing state of technology,

which may affect the magnitude of media power as well as the distribution of power between political, economic, and media systems and society. With regard to the first set of conditions, the state–market relation could configure in a variety of forms. It is generally theorized that overreaching political power and market forces threaten the autonomy of the media system. For the purposes of this article, I illustrate two specific configurations: advanced capitalist democracy and authoritarian capitalism. While the former is the context about which most literature is written, the latter is the context of the Chinese case after the reform era.

Although the Chinese case has its uniqueness, there are also similarities between the Chinese case and cases in advanced capitalist democracy that make theories developed in the latter context insightful for the Chinese case. The first commonality is the *vulnerability* of the media system to *encroachment by other modes of power*. Media systems in both contexts have been faced with problems of the encroachment of economic and political power. In advanced democracies, market forces are accused of leading to invisible censorship in the media system. From the Frankfurt School onward, many writings have pointed to the existence of a pathological media system and its negative impact on politics. Scholars have repeatedly argued that economic power has been entrenching media systems and contributing to depoliticized public communication (Habermas, 1989; Thompson, 1995, p. 240) and politically alienated citizens (Boggs, 1997). Even with market competition, market demand and profit maximization have led to invisible censorship and homogeneous products (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 313). Media is viewed as an important tool to exercise power, usually secretly, through manipulation by a few power elites in democratic societies. By comparison, media power in authoritarian countries is often exercised by authority explicitly (Mills, 1956, pp. 316–317). The combination of a capitalist economy and an authoritarian regime makes China's media system susceptible not only to the power of the state, but also to market forces (Zhao, 2008, pp. 10–11). In essence, political and economic power similarly imperils the autonomy of the media system in both contexts, but the scale of problems and the mode of power that dominates the system are different.

The second commonality is the impact of technological innovation. Precisely because media systems in advanced democracies and in China have encountered analogous problems of the encroachment of the market and/or the state, change in media systems due to technological innovation has led to similar excitement and assessment in both contexts. Before the advent of the Internet, mass media was an extremely centralized institution and a scarce resource, accessible only to an elite class composed of journalists, politicians, experts, and intellectuals (Habermas, 2006). The innovation and diffusion of the Internet has destabilized the situation by widening the population that can produce and disseminate information (Benkler, 2006, p. 10). This shift in technology has led to research in both contexts on whether the pathologies associated with traditional mass media could possibly be ameliorated under the new material conditions. Since the rationales of how technological change may impact the dual characteristics of media systems could hold true in both contexts, I will draw on the findings and arguments of research conducted in advanced capitalist democracies in order to analyze the Chinese case.

Contextualizing Institutions of Mass Media in China

Mass media in China has been a major state ideological apparatus, as controlling communication and ideology has been regarded by the Chinese government as a critical way to maintain the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Until now, the Chinese state

and the mass media have been explicit about the latter's function in disseminating state propaganda. The Xinhua News Agency, China's official state news service, evaluates its performance in terms of whether it effectively guides domestic public opinions and influences international public discourse. *People's Daily*, the largest newspaper in China and the ninth largest in the world, has exactly the same standard of self-appraisal. The national broadcast and TV systems stress their mission in shaping "correct" public opinions, as well as cultivating the art of propaganda (Xinhua News Agency, 2009). China's media system is thus far from the autonomous ideal in the normative theories.

Even though the commercialization of media since the 1990s is believed to have partly eroded the Chinese state's efficacy in exercising its power, the state is still argued to have the ultimate control over media power (Shambaugh, 2007). Whereas some scholars are sanguine about the commercialization of media to potentially loosen "thought work" and the control of the state (Baum, 2008, pp. 162–163; Lynch, 1999), evidence has been presented to support different stories. Tang (2005, p. 96) found that although consumption of traditional media encouraged pro-Western tendencies, it also mobilized support for a single-party system, nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, and Maoism. Kennedy (2009; cf. Chen & Shi, 2000) argues that media exposure, along with education, has a strong and consistent influence on regime support. Moreover, Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) contend that contrary to the expectation that commercialization of media would facilitate political liberalization, the commercialized Chinese media successfully helps authoritarian leaders to bolster legitimacy by using sophisticated propaganda techniques.

Studies based on qualitative analyses also show that Chinese leaders retain their nonnegotiable intention and capacity of controlling the media even confronted with momentous dissent inside the party. This is best illustrated by the CCP Central Publicity Department's closing of *Freezing Point*, a well-regarded weekly supplement to the party-run *China Youth Daily*, in 2006 because of *Freezing Point's* diffusion of an "incorrect" history and message (Shambaugh, 2007).² This decision encountered tremendous opposition from influential and respected senior party members, including Mao's secretary and biographer, one former editor of *People's Daily*, one former deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency, and one former Propaganda Department chief. These opponents collectively issued a letter to the government, criticizing the party-state's violation of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech. In spite of the vehement disagreement inside the party, however, the decision was not affected.

Compared with traditional mass media, the Internet has the very distinct technological property of decentralization that is often seen as politically revolutionary, but the Chinese government was not discouraged from using this new technology. Unlike traditional mass media, the Internet allows individuals to communicate with many others without need to access the resources or approval of media owners (Benkler, 2006, p. 11). Due to the way in which it undermines the power of gatekeepers in the traditional mass media system, the Internet is often perceived as potentially prodemocratic. This view is best exemplified by former U.S. President Bill Clinton's assessment. When he gave a speech in 2000, he said: "Now, there's no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet—good luck. That's sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. . . . In the knowledge economy, economic innovation and political empowerment, whether anyone likes it or not, will inevitably go hand in hand."³ Given the potential political influence of the Internet, the puzzling question is why the Chinese state decided to adopt this new technology in 1994. Scholars have suggested that the ideology and beliefs of Chinese political elites—neo-technonationalism—played an important role in shaping this decision despite the potential political risk. With a scientific mind-set that views information

technology infrastructure as one essential component of the state-building and modernization project, party elites believed that the Internet could be an engine for economic and technological development. Furthermore, they had very successful experiences in controlling the traditional mass media. Party elites thus decided to capitalize on the technological and commercial benefits of the Internet while minimizing the potential negative political consequences through comprehensive regulations and control (Tai, 2006, p. 129).

Three things have become salient in the 16 years after China was connected to the Internet. First, regulation and control of the Internet remains stringent. Notwithstanding the doubts over its technological and regulatory capability, the Chinese state has demonstrated both a strong will and a capacity to regulate Chinese netizens and market players, including multinational companies. Market forces, foreign capitals, international laws, and global norms have not won over authoritarian rule. In many settings, the Chinese state reiterates that international media and Internet companies shall follow the Chinese law in China's jurisdiction. In 2006, powerful U.S.-based corporations Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Cisco were accused of complicity in Chinese Internet censorship and infringement of human rights, arousing vehement discussions on the tension faced by corporations between compliance with international human rights norms and the obligation to follow Chinese laws (Thompson, 2006). Second, issues related to China's Internet have gained widespread attention both in China and the international arena. An example is Google's announcement of its withdrawal from China in the search engine business in 2010 (Stone & Xin, 2010). Third, despite (or perhaps even *because* of) their anonymity, Chinese netizens have become a social category and force worth examining. They seem to be among the very few groups who are particularly critical in their views and constantly voice them.

These facts suggest that by destabilizing the condition of political communication, the Internet has become an object of and venue for political struggle; nonetheless, what remain far from clear are the political consequences of the rise of the Internet and the birth of a new social category: netizens. On the one hand, it is argued that the Internet clearly has democratic consequences (Tai, 2006, p. 289; Tang, 2005, pp. 87, 98; Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2008). On the other hand, it is contended that the Internet does not have democratizing consequences as it remains primarily a playground for entertainment under the control of the state (Kluver et al., 2010; Peters, 2002; Yang, 2009, p. 10). There are also middle ground arguments that are more ambivalent about the development (Zhao, 2008; Zhou, 2006). The literature researching the political aspects of China's Internet has relied primarily on case studies with only qualitative analyses, making these debates difficult to adjudicate. As one researcher puts it, "What then does the future of the Internet hold for China? The deficiency of hard evidence pointing to an increase in mass demonstrations, public disillusionment, overt threats to the regime, or even the spread of democracy sympathies in China suggest that democratization in China, at least as instigated by the Internet, will not occur for some time" (Peters, 2002, p. 111). Judging from the level of debates and the lack of systematic empirical evidence, it is not surprising that Stanley Rosen (2010) remarked that the political role of the Internet is arguably the most contested area in Chinese communications research.

Theories on the Relationship Between the Internet and Political Engagement

Mobilization Theories

To facilitate theoretical discussion and empirical inquiry, I first present theories on the relationship between the Internet and political engagement. Mobilization theories focus on how

technological innovation decreases costs and promotes democratic citizenship. It is argued that the Internet, as a mobilizing agency, facilitates dissemination of information, lowering the costs of communication, association, and participation (Rheingold, 2000; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Mobilization theories tend to distinguish the Internet from the traditional forms of media based simply on the *quantity* of information circulated in the media system and the costs of communication, keeping silent on possible change in composition of producers and content of information.

Mobilization theories are mostly drawn upon in quantitative studies of the effects of the Internet on citizenship in advanced capitalist democracies. Mobilization theories expect to see a positive association between information richness in terms of quantity and level of political engagement. Dependent variables in the literature include level of efficacy, political knowledge, political interests, and traditional and nontraditional political participation (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Although most research pays more attention to individual political participation, some research also investigates whether Internet use mobilizes collective action (Norris, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002). It is also contended that the Internet may promote social interaction and civic engagement because it allows users to strengthen social bonds and coordinate their actions to address joint concerns (Shah et al., 2002). Mixed results are found in previous quantitative studies (Boulianne, 2009). Some found a very limited association between Internet use and political engagement (Bimber, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002), whereas others found the existence of a positive association (Drew & Weaver, 2006; Norris, 2009; Shah et al., 2002; Xenos & Moy, 2007). In the Chinese context, drawing upon results of qualitative analyses, scholars argue that the Internet has been reshaping social organizations and playing an increasingly important role in collective action (Tai, 2006, p. 289; Yang, 2003; Zheng, 2008, p. 90).

On the other hand, mobilization theories are criticized as empirically invalid. Scholarly critiques stem from a variety of frames, such as psychological approaches (Bimber, 2003; Xenos & Moy, 2007) and cognitive models of political information (Bimber, 2001), but common to all of these critiques is the claim that mobilization theories do not take into account the social characteristics of the online population. Putnam (2000, p. 170), for instance, argues that once educational levels and other demographic factors of Internet users are controlled, Internet users are indistinguishable from nonusers when it comes to civic engagement.

Theories of Diversity and Democratic Culture

Studies that apply mobilization theories are insightful, but their main focus on quantity of information distances them from normative social theories that criticize the abuse of media power and renders them ill equipped to thoroughly appraise how evolution of the media system may facilitate political change. This weakness is especially serious when evaluating the political consequences of the Internet in authoritarian countries where content of communication matters very much. The emergence of the Internet does not merely mean an increase in the quantity of information, but also suggests the possibility of having qualitatively different information and communication in terms of diversity, which could potentially enhance democracy and contribute to a democratic culture (Balkin, 2004; Benkler, 2006; Dahlgren, 2000; Taubman, 1998).

Distinct from the mobilization theorists, scholars focusing on diversity and democratic culture theorize the dynamics of the *production* side of communication and argue that the Internet enables the production and dissemination of information that is much less likely to

emerge and circulate without the Internet. In advanced capitalist democracies, the rise of the Internet could raise the difficulty for market players or power elites to dominate public spheres. With access to the Internet, ordinary citizens are not so restricted by gatekeepers, as is the case with traditional media outlets. Citizens can have more opportunities to speak out and be heard, so information, communication, and viewpoints become more diverse (Benkler, 2006).

Focusing on the cultural dimension, Castells (2010, p. 406) argues that the inclusion of most cultural expressions in digitized electronic production, distribution, and exchange of signals has considerably weakened the symbolic power of traditional senders. The possibility of introducing more diversity to political communication in authoritarian countries could have huge democratic impacts as the Internet could create conditions of ideational pluralism and lead to a loss of hegemony in authoritarian states (Taubman, 1998). Even scholars who are skeptical about the democratic effects of the Internet see this possibility. According to Habermas (2006), computer-mediated communication online can claim unequivocal democratic merits only in authoritarian regimes as it can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. Margolis and Resnick (2000, p. 210) also contend that the Internet could weaken the capacity of authoritarian regimes to monopolize sources of public information. Applying these theories to the Chinese context, the Internet may lead to the production and dissemination of more diverse information and communication, thus diminishing the symbolic power of the state. Through interaction with diverse points of view, citizens could become relatively free from manipulation of the state (Benkler, 2006, p. 11).

Theories of diversity and democratic culture are criticized for overlooking the adaptive ability of economic and political power. Scholars have argued that the Internet cannot really mitigate the negative consequences of the abuse of media power since the power structure in the nonvirtual world would be eventually extended to the virtual world. The new technologies could be adapted to the current status quo since it is very likely that power holders, such as global capitalists, would extend their power in the virtual world (Boggs, 1997; Papacharissi, 2002). The Chinese state has recognized potential challenges and adapted itself well. Online media is structured according to the design of the state. The government tightly scrutinizes the political news, but gives free rein to news related to sports, entertainment, and economic issues (Wu, 2005). Furthermore, the Chinese state proactively uses the Internet to disseminate official views and ideologies (Zhao, 2008, p. 40). As Zhou (2006) vividly puts it, “[t]he government is deliberately taking the initiative to occupy cyberspace” (p. 146). Comparing the diffusion of the telegraph and the Internet, Zhou argues that the Internet has not been as influential and effective in shaping politics as the telegram was a century ago because the Internet is facing a Chinese regime more competent and confident than the Qing court. According to the above critiques, the Internet probably has only limited democratic consequences.

Nevertheless, as Benkler (2006, p. 10) correctly points out, any consideration of the democratizing impacts of the Internet must be measured against the situations in which the Internet is absent, rather than a theoretical ideal. Even though the Chinese state is regarded as one of the 12 “Enemies of the Internet” in the world due to its high level of censorship⁴ and its firm control over online news, it is much more difficult for the state to monitor the content of communication in bulletin board systems (BBS) and online forums where scholars often find diverse and fresh information produced and circulated by citizens. It has been pointed out that Chinese Internet users have very different Internet use patterns compared with their counterparts in other countries. A relatively high proportion of Chinese netizens visit BBS, online forums, online chat rooms, and newsgroups (Tai, 2006, p. 174).

According to official statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (2009), 36.9%, 30.7%, and 30.5% of Chinese netizens visited BBS or online forums in 2007, 2008, and 2009, respectively. Judging from this circumstantial evidence and the relative diversity of speech in BBS, online forums, chat rooms, and blogs, the argument that the Internet diminishes the power of the state could be valid in the Chinese context, even taking into account regulation and censorship.⁵

Operationalization

Before deriving hypotheses, I first operationalize political beliefs, political practices, and the key independent variable, media embeddedness, in order to formulate hypotheses more precisely. I conceptualize political belief as a *categorical* construct manifested by three elements: normative standards of politics, appraisal of the status quo, and willingness to participate in collective action. Normative standards refer to the normative political principles to which citizens agree. By appraisal of the status quo, I refer to how citizens evaluate political conditions and institutions. Willingness to participate in collective action concerns whether respondents feel that they are willing to take part in collective action. These elements are selected according to political attitudes and public opinion research, in which democratic values, institutional confidence, regime performance, and protest politics are identified as important aspects of citizens' political beliefs. Political practice is operationalized as the *actual behavior* of participating in collective action. The reason why this article only examines collective action is that ordinary citizens have limited opportunities to engage in formal politics. As a result, collective action becomes a relatively visible form of political participation.

Since the way in which I operationalize political beliefs is not conventional, I elaborate the rationales to justify my decision. In quantitative study of similar subject matters, an ordinary practice is to identify dimensions (factors) in political attitudes from selected items and treat each factor as a continuous variable (Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Wang et al., 2006). Usually several items are combined to probe an underlying dimension. This practice relies on the assumption that each dimension is a continuous variable and that the items are measured in an interval or ratio scale (Jöreskog & Moustaki, 2000). Its advantage is that measurement contains richer information, allowing more precise analysis and comparison.

The main problem with the ordinary practice results from the considerable proportion of "don't know" (DK) responses that are common in political attitudes surveys in China. Although the difficulty in dealing with DK responses is not unique in the Chinese context, it is an especially salient issue in China judging from the comparison of DK response rates in surveys conducted in multiple countries and considering how China's political regime and history could impact people's response to politically related questions (Ren, 2009, p. 75). The most common practice to deal with this problem is pairwise deletion of missing data (e.g., Wang et al., 2006, p. 139). Alternatively, it can be assumed that DK responses represent a middle option in a range of responses, having an ordinal or interval relationship with other categories of response.

Since the above practices are questionable both methodologically and theoretically, I operationalize political belief as a categorical variable. Methodologically, it has been repeatedly pointed out that survey researchers should be careful about not excluding DK responses from analyses or combining them with other response categories because of the nonrandomness of DK responses and thus the problem of introducing bias (Bogart, 1967; Francis & Busch, 1975). Social theorists also accentuate the importance of examining

DK responses. In his analysis of public opinion in France, Bourdieu (1984, pp. 399–400) found that a fair proportion of French people were not able to form specific judgments on political issues, especially issues that were more remote from experience or more abstract and detached from ordinary realities. He thus argued that the assumption in liberal democracies that citizens could produce political judgments was questionable. Similar problems are also raised in the context of postcommunist societies, where DK responses are thought of as an indicator of political apathy and depoliticization (Carnaghan, 1996). But when taking DK responses and their ambiguous meanings into consideration, the common practice of detecting dimensions in political beliefs and operationalizing each dimension as a continuous variable would be extremely problematic because of the problem of scaling. By comparison, a categorical operationalization of political beliefs that simultaneously integrates indicators of the three elements can overcome the problem and provide a parsimonious political profile of the citizen.

Now I turn to the operationalization of media embeddedness. By media embeddedness, I refer to the kind of media environment in which citizens are situated. Although the media system in China has become more decentralized due to the introduction of the Internet, not all Chinese people have experienced this change equally. I classify the Chinese population into three mutually exclusive groups according to media use, as shown in Table 1. The first group is *netizens*, defined as those who use the Internet to obtain information, regardless of their traditional media use. The second group is *traditional media users*, defined as those who only use TV, broadcast, or newspapers to obtain information and who do not use the Internet. And the third group is *non-media users*, those who use neither the Internet nor traditional media to obtain information. The purpose is to compare the political beliefs and practices of Chinese netizens against those of traditional media users and non-media users since the three groups are embedded in different information and communication environments in which *quantity* and *diversity* of information vary across environments.

In general, netizens tend to be situated in an environment where the amount of information is the most abundant among the three groups. Despite the state's efforts at censorship, the dispersed and unruly nature of the Internet means that netizens are more likely to interact with diverse information, interpretations, and viewpoints. In comparison, traditional media users tend to be situated in an environment where information is more homogenous; meanwhile, non-media users receive the least amount of information. This operationalization is different from the traditional ways in which scholars study media effects. In media effects literature, exposures to different types of media, such as TV, newspapers, and the Internet, are treated as different independent variables (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Since theories on the relationship between the Internet and political engagement, especially theories of diversity and democratic culture,

Table 1
Classification of population according to media embeddedness

	Internet use	
Yes (1)	No	
	Traditional media use	
	Yes (2)	No (3)
Netizens	Traditional media users	Non-media users

focus more on the kind of information and communication environment in which citizens are embedded than on the specific source of information, a holistic classification of information and communication environments is needed.

Hypotheses on the Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens

Drawing on the above theories and operationalization, I formulate two hypotheses on political beliefs: One is on whether citizens have *substantive* opinions about normative standards, status quo, and willingness to participate in collective action instead of giving DK responses; the other is on the substantive pattern of political beliefs. According to mobilization theories, access to information creates more informed citizens. Since netizens are embedded in environments with more abundant information, they are more likely to be politically opinionated and thus less likely to give DK responses than the other two groups. Accordingly, I postulate the following:

H1: Chinese netizens tend to give fewer DK responses compared with traditional media users and non-media users, holding other factors constant.

According to theories of diversity and democratic culture, the Internet is not simply associated with whether people can come up with substantive political opinion, but also related to the kind of political beliefs they hold. Since Chinese netizens are embedded in an information and communication environment that is less manipulated by the state and more politically vibrant, this article makes the following prediction:

H2: Chinese netizens, with reference to traditional media users and non-media users, are more likely to have the kind of political beliefs that are *simultaneously* more supportive of the norms of democracy and critical of power holders and political conditions, and they are more willing to participate in collective action, holding other factors constant.

H2 concerns types of political beliefs rather than actual behavior. Now I apply mobilization theories to *actual participation* in collective action with the third hypothesis.

H3: Chinese netizens are more likely to take part in collective action, as measured by actual such participation, than traditional media users and non-media users, holding other factors constant.

Data and Methods

To test the three hypotheses, this study uses a cross-sectional nationally representative data set: the 2007 China World Value Survey (2007 WVS). In the 2007 WVS data set, the target population included adults between the ages of 18 and 70. Subjects who responded using the Internet to obtain information in the week prior to taking the survey were coded as netizens. Subjects who did not constitute netizens but reported using newspapers, news broadcasts on radio or TV, printed magazines, or in-depth reports on radio or TV to obtain information were coded as traditional media users. Subjects who were neither netizens nor traditional media users were coded as non-media users. As mentioned, the three groups are mutually exclusive. It should be noted that *all* of the netizens also obtained information from traditional media as well. Descriptive statistics on the basic demographic variables of netizens, traditional media users, and non-media users are presented in Table 2.⁶

This article examines three dependent variables: two pertinent to political beliefs and one pertinent to collective action. To examine political beliefs, 18 items, listed in the

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for basic demographic variables by media embeddedness

	Netizens (11.93%): Mean (<i>SD</i>) or %	Traditional media users (71.57%): Mean (<i>SD</i>) or %	Non-media users (16.50%): Mean (<i>SD</i>) or %
Female	0.48 (0.50)	0.51 (0.50)	0.64 (0.48)
Age	34.98 (11.47)	45.38 (12.96)	48.07 (13.02)
Education			
No formal school	2.13	22.16	54.23
Complete primary school	6.91	28.37	25.77
Complete secondary school/ technical, vocational	25.53	13.30	4.62
Complete secondary school/ university preparation	21.28	33.24	15.38
College degree and above	44.15	2.93	0.00

Appendix (Table A1), were selected to probe opinions on normative standards, evaluation of the status quo, and willingness to participate in collective action. The responses to each item are coded into three categories, as shown in the Appendix (Table A2). DK responses are coded as a separate category (coded as 2). Remaining responses are classified into those that are supportive of the norms of democracy, satisfied with the status quo, or willing to participate in collective action (coded as 3) and those that are not (coded as 1).

The dependent variable in H1 is the number of DK responses in the selected 18 items on political beliefs. Theoretically, for each respondent the minimum of DK responses is 0 and the maximum is 18. I apply negative binomial regression because of the nature of count data. Since the distribution of DK responses is highly skewed to the right, the normality assumption of ordinary least square regression is not satisfied. Moreover, Poisson regression is inappropriate due to the violation of the independent observation assumption and the consequent problem of overdispersion (i.e., variance much larger than the mean). Negative binomial regression is thus considered a preferred model to address these problems (Long, 1997, pp. 218–221).

The dependent variable of H2 is the type of political beliefs. It is a categorical variable indicated by 18 items, each of which has three categories of response (see Table A2). These items are *not* combined into indices. As mentioned, the ordinary practice of excluding cases with DK responses to identify factors or constructing indices as dependent variables introduces serious bias when the proportion of DK responses is high. Instead of adopting the ordinary practice, I keep cases with DK responses in the selected items and apply latent class analysis,⁷ which is able to analyze categorical responses in the items. The purpose of latent class analysis is to detect the underlying *discrete* patterns of political beliefs (i.e., the latent class), to estimate the most probable latent class membership for each respondent, and to analyze the relationship between independent variables and latent class membership. This approach has been employed to study the belief system of Islamic women and the gender-role attitudes of Japanese women (Blaydes & Linzer, 2008; Yamaguchi, 2000). Natural grouping is identified according to similarities and differences between response patterns. Respondents with similar response patterns are grouped together and assigned the same latent class membership. It should also be noted that latent class modeling does not dictate the actual number of latent classes; decisions are made in light of both

statistical criteria and substantive concerns. After deciding on the number of latent classes, researchers describe the characteristics of each latent class by observing the patterns of responses to *each* item. The latent class models differ from the conventional multinomial logit model only in that, instead of a polytomous variable, a latent class variable with a set of indicators is used as the dependent variable (Yamaguchi, 2000).

In H3, the dependent variable is actual participation in collective action. Respondents who either joined boycotts or signed a petition in the 5 years prior to taking the survey are coded as 1 and otherwise as 0. Logistic regression is employed to test this hypothesis. As stated, the main independent variable of interest is media embeddedness. To avoid omitted variable bias and to address criticism of mobilization theories, I control for demographic variables, geographical differences, social class, and other variables noted to be related to political attitudes and behavior.⁸ The descriptive statistics for variables can be found in the Appendix (Table A3).

Results

H1: Number of DK Responses

The results of the negative binomial regression are presented in Table 3.⁹ As expected, netizens have fewer DK responses than traditional media users and non-media users. Specifically, being a netizen, with reference to a traditional media user, decreases the expected number of DK responses by a factor of .7298 ($e^{-.246}$), or 27%, holding other variables constant. In addition, being a netizen, compared with a non-media user, lowers the expected number of DK responses by a factor of .6243 ($e^{-.409}$), or 37.6%, holding other factors constant. Evidence thus suggests that netizens are indeed more politically opinionated than the other two groups. Accordingly, H1 is supported.

Table 3
Negative binomial regression model of DK responses

	Model 1: Counts of DK responses
Media embeddedness	
Netizens vs. Traditional media users	-0.246* (0.130)
Netizens vs. Non-media users	-0.409*** (0.155)
Traditional media users vs. Non-media users	-0.164* (0.087)
Demographic factors	
Female	0.247*** (0.068)
Age	0.008** (0.003)
Education	-0.060*** (0.009)
Income	-0.030 (0.021)

(Continued)

Table 3
(Continued)

	Model 1: Counts of DK responses
Unemployment	-0.112 (0.177)
Professional worker	-0.143 (0.164)
Agriculture worker	-0.016 (0.104)
Manual worker	-0.235* (0.111)
Subjective class (vs. Lowest class)	
Working class	-0.200* (0.088)
Lower middle class	-0.156 (0.093)
Upper middle class	-0.038 (0.167)
Party member	-0.617*** (0.117)
Importance of politics	-0.012 (0.032)
Interest in politics	-0.122*** (0.026)
Life satisfaction	-0.094** (0.029)
Happiness	-0.035 (0.033)
Geographic areas (vs. West)	
East	(0.110) 0.211
Middle	0.017 -0.069
_cons	(0.112) 1.225***
<i>N</i>	1,576

Note. _cons = constant. Standard errors are in parentheses. The significance of media embeddedness is decided according to a one-tailed test. It is noteworthy that traditional media users versus non-media users are less likely to give DK responses, controlling for other factors. This is consistent with mobilization theories as non-media users receive a lesser amount of information. Moreover, female and older respondents tend to give more DK responses. People who have more education, who are manual workers or belong to the working class (versus the lowest class), and who are party members or have more interest in politics are more likely to give fewer DK responses.

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

H2: Type of Political Beliefs

Latent class analysis is applied to detect the type of political beliefs from responses to the 18 items. According to the statistical results and standards that I present in Table A4, a three-class model statistically suffices for capturing the heterogeneity of the data. Substantively, a less complicated model is also more interpretable and thus is preferred. Based on these criteria, I find a latent class model with three classes provides an accurate and useful fit to the observed data. To show the difference between the three latent classes and facilitate describing the characteristics of each type of political beliefs, I plot the estimated conditional probabilities in Figures 1 and 2 to visualize the differences.

The patterns of responses reveal the differences between the three types of political beliefs. According to their characteristics, I label the three distinct types of political beliefs “the politicized,” “the conformists,” and “the apathetic.” Table A1 presents the conditional probabilities of responses on the 18 items for each type of political belief. The apathetic consist of 33.1% of the survey sample. People who belong to this group tend to be less opinionated on the norms of democracy and unwilling to participate in collective action, whereas they highly evaluate the government and the media. The apathetic have a very high percentage of DK responses for Items 1 to 8, having very few comments on the norms of democracy. In terms of the evaluation of the status quo, their responses have two characteristics: They gave fairly positive evaluations on concrete institutions, including TV, police, courts, the central government, and the party; on the other hand, their substantive response rates remained low when they were asked to evaluate abstract concepts such as democracy and human rights protection in China. Yet a large proportion of the apathetic explicitly reject participation in collective action. As Figure 2 shows, the conditional probabilities of willingness to participate in collective action for the apathetic are the lowest among the three groups. The above characteristics indicate that, akin to subjects in Bourdieu’s (1984) study, the apathetic are politically indifferent and lacking cognitive capacity for abstract thinking.

The conformists and the politicized consist of 42.4% and 24.5% of the survey sample, respectively. Figure 1 illustrates that, unlike the apathetic, the conformists and the

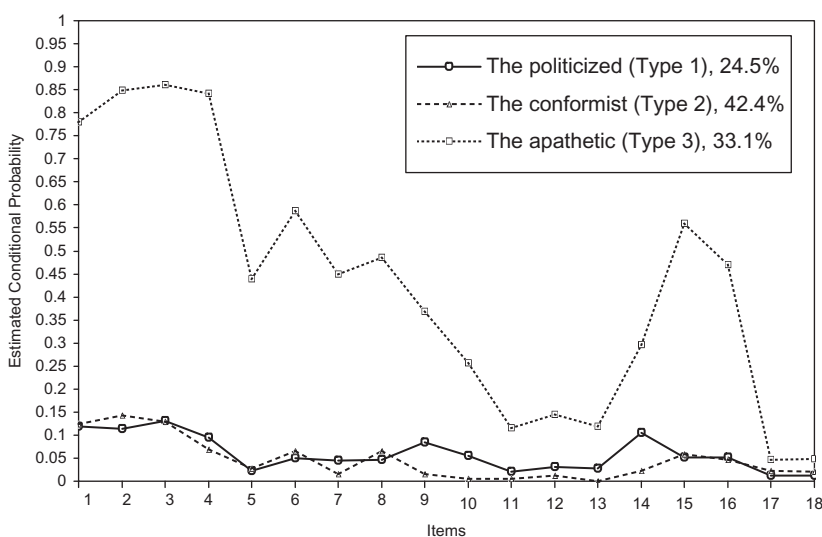


Figure 1. Estimated conditional probability of DK responses by political beliefs.

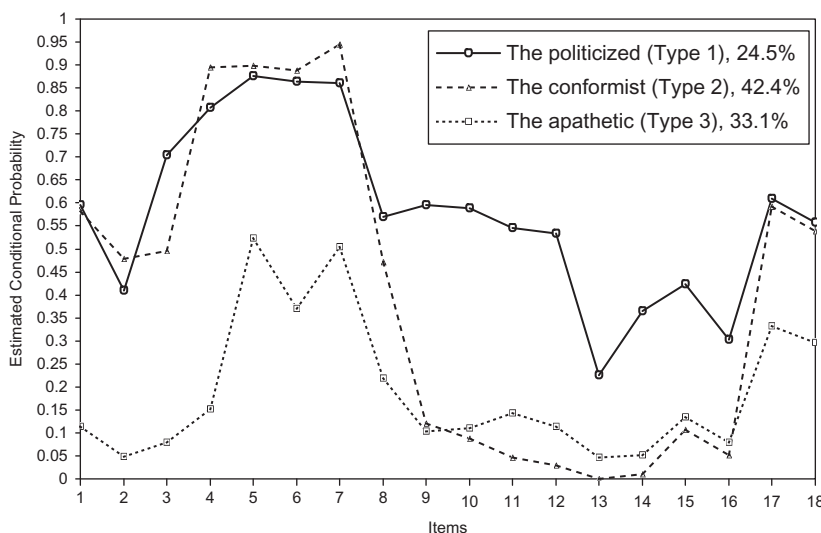


Figure 2. Estimated conditional probability of supporting the norms of democracy, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and willingness to participate in collective action by political beliefs.

politicized are politically opinionated, having extremely low probabilities of giving DK responses. Both the conformists and the politicized tend to support the norms of democracy and express higher willingness to participate in collective action.

Despite their similarity, however, the conformists and the politicized differ strikingly in their assessment of the political reality. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the lines of the conformists and the politicized are the top two lines from Items 1 to 8 and on Items 17 and 18, which indicate support for the norms of democracy and willingness to participate in collective action. The line of the politicized in Figure 2 remains at the top from Items 9 to 16, demonstrating the highest probabilities of evaluating political reality negatively. Conversely, the line of the conformists in Figure 2 sinks to the bottom in Items 9 to 16, showing extremely positive appraisals of the reality. Essentially, the politicized support the norms of democracy, have relatively negative evaluations of the party-state and political conditions, and are willing to join collective action. By contrast, the conformists think highly of the party-state and do not see many problems with human rights protection or democratic conditions in China, although they also support democracy and would like to participate in collective action. I label this group “conformists” precisely because of their conforming attitudes toward the party-state. The evidence demonstrates that even though the politicized and the conformists are both supportive of the norms of democracy and politically active, they have very different understandings of democracy. The politicized are the group that is more likely to demand from the government liberalization or democratization, whereas the conformists are the group that is more likely to support the status quo, regard the CCP as representative of democracy, and be mobilized by the state.

After identifying types of political beliefs, I explore whether media embeddedness is predictive of these beliefs. In H2, I posit that netizens, with reference to traditional media users and non-media users, are more likely to be simultaneously supportive of the norms of democracy, critical about the political status quo, and willing to participate in collective action. Since these characteristics can be found in the politicized group, the task is to examine whether netizens are more likely to belong to the politicized group versus the conformist group and the apathetic group. I tabulate types of political beliefs by media

Table 4
Types of political beliefs by media embeddedness

Type of political belief	Media embeddedness			Total
	Netizens	Traditional media users	Non-media users	
Politicized	59.57	20.83	14.62	24.43
Conformist	32.98	47.25	30.00	42.70
Apathetic	7.45	31.91	55.38	32.87

Note. Values are percentages.

embeddedness in Table 4. At first glance, netizens, traditional media users, and non-media users have notably different patterns of political beliefs. Strikingly, a majority of netizens (59.57%) fall into the category of the politicized, while only 20.83% of traditional media users and 14.62% of non-media users belong to this group. These patterns are subjected to further analysis to validate H2.

The results of the multinomial logit latent class regression are presented in Table 5 (Model 2). They suggest a statistically significant association between being a netizen and type of political beliefs. Compared with traditional media users and non-media users, netizens are generally more likely to belong to the politicized versus the conformist and the apathetic groups, controlling for other covariates. Specifically, the odds of belonging to the politicized group relative to the conformist group are 2.33 ($e^{.847}$) times greater for netizens than for traditional media users, holding all other variables constant. The odds of belonging to the politicized group versus the apathetic group are 3.11 ($e^{1.134}$) and 3.41 ($e^{1.227}$) times larger for netizens than for traditional media users and non-media users, respectively, controlling for other factors. According to these results, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Table 5
Multinomial logit latent class regression model of political beliefs (Model 2)

Contrast of political beliefs	Politicized vs. Conformists	Politicized vs. Apathetic	Conformists vs. Apathetic
Media embeddedness			
Netizens vs. Traditional media users	0.847*** (0.302)	1.134*** (0.379)	0.286 (0.412)
Netizens vs. Non-media users	0.626 (0.435)	1.227*** (0.435)	0.602 (0.437)
Traditional media users vs. Non-media users	-0.222 (0.289)	0.094 (0.337)	0.315 (0.192)
Demographic factors			
Female	-0.513* (0.235)	-0.835*** (0.237)	-0.322* (0.156)
Age	-0.017* (0.007)	-0.019** (0.007)	-0.002 (0.007)
Education	0.081* (0.033)	0.185*** (0.029)	0.104*** (0.024)
Income	0.105 (0.055)	0.150** (0.058)	0.045 (0.048)

(Continued)

Table 5
(Continued)

Contrast of political beliefs	Politicized vs. Conformists		Politicized vs. Apathetic		Conformists vs. Apathetic	
Unemployment	0.668	(0.526)	0.855	(0.454)	0.187	(0.510)
Professional worker	-0.091	(0.347)	-0.008	(0.435)	0.082	(0.422)
Agriculture worker	0.266	(0.286)	-0.189	(0.272)	0.077	(0.229)
Manual worker	-0.587	(0.439)	0.296	(0.376)	0.883**	(0.285)
Subjective class (vs. Lowest class)						
Working class	-0.689**	(0.242)	-0.182	(0.239)	0.507*	(0.204)
Lower middle class	-0.823**	(0.288)	-0.256	(0.285)	0.567**	(0.214)
Upper middle class	-1.254**	(0.475)	-0.797	(0.490)	0.457	(0.375)
Party member	-0.258	(0.320)	0.685	(0.387)	0.943***	(0.296)
Importance of politics	-0.274***	(0.084)	-0.151	(0.091)	0.123	(0.074)
Interest in politics	-0.372***	(0.074)	-0.039	(0.085)	0.332***	(0.069)
Life satisfaction	-0.262**	(0.085)	-0.028	(0.083)	0.234***	(0.072)
Happiness	-0.199*	(0.101)	-0.064	(0.098)	0.136	(0.076)
Geographic area (vs. West)						
East	1.695***	(0.429)	1.000*	(0.455)	-0.695**	(0.257)
Middle	1.368***	(0.424)	1.402***	(0.406)	0.034	(0.276)
<i>N</i>	1,576		1,576		1,576	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses. The significance of media embeddedness is decided according to a one-tailed test. It should be noted that being female, increasing age, and lower educational levels decrease the probability of belonging to the politicized versus the conformist and the apathetic groups. Although this article does not aim to test theories of democratization, the statistical results show that a rising middle- or working-class thesis is not well supported. The findings show that being an upper-middle-class member, a lower-middle-class member, or a working-class member versus a lowest-class member decreases the odds of belonging to the politicized as opposed to the conformist group.

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

H3: Actual Participation in Collective Action

The results of the logistic regression are reported in Table 6. In Model 3, participation in collective action is regressed on all of the covariates except for political beliefs. As predicted, netizens have a higher probability than traditional media users or non-media users of joining in boycotts or signing a petition, controlling for other factors. Since political beliefs are expected to be related to political action, they are incorporated into the analysis in Model 4. The significance and the magnitude of coefficients remain fairly stable after political beliefs are added to the model. Since Model 4 is slightly superior to Model 3 in terms of model fit, Model 4 is adopted as the final model. Being a netizen versus a traditional media user and a non-media user increases the odds of participating in collective action by a factor of 1.67 ($e^{.511}$) and 3.11 ($e^{1.135}$), or increases the odds by 66.7% and 211.2%, respectively, holding all other variables constant. In light of these results, Hypothesis 3 stands up to the test. Accordingly, being a netizen is not only associated with political beliefs, it increases the likelihood of *actual* participation in collective action as well. It is noteworthy that belonging to the apathetic versus the politicized or the conformist

Table 6
Logistic regression model of collective action

	Model 3	Model 4
Media embeddedness		
Netizens vs. Traditional media users	0.517* (0.259)	0.511* (0.263)
Netizens vs. Non-media users	1.215** (0.508)	1.135** (0.511)
Traditional media users vs. Non-media users	0.697 (0.449)	0.624 (0.450)
Demographic factors		
Female	0.075 (0.200)	0.113 (0.202)
Age	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.008)
Education	0.140*** (0.032)	0.128*** (0.033)
Income	0.125 (0.067)	0.116 (0.067)
Unemployment	0.968* (0.400)	0.932* (0.402)
Professional worker	0.032 (0.313)	0.048 (0.313)
Agriculture worker	-0.043 (0.307)	-0.047 (0.307)
Manual worker	0.011 (0.290)	-0.046 (0.291)
Subjective class (vs. Lower class)		
Working class	0.135 (0.326)	0.109 (0.328)
Lower middle class	0.122 (0.334)	0.099 (0.337)
Upper middle class	0.210 (0.471)	0.209 (0.475)
Party member	0.743** (0.230)	0.698** (0.230)
Importance of politics	-0.128 (0.091)	-0.137 (0.092)
Interest in politics	0.113 (0.088)	0.010 (0.090)
Life satisfaction	0.016 (0.099)	-0.010 (0.100)
Happiness	0.031 (0.117)	0.033 (0.118)
Geographic area (vs. West)		
East	-0.791*	-0.757*

(Continued)

Table 6
(Continued)

	Model 3	Model 4
	(0.337)	(0.342)
Middle	-0.837*	-0.852*
	(0.335)	(0.338)
Political belief (vs. Politicized)		
Conformist		0.042 (0.246)
Apathetic		-0.733* (0.354)
_cons	-3.585*** (0.685)	-3.339*** (0.715)
<i>N</i>	1,576	1,576

Note. _cons = Constant. Standard errors are in parentheses. The significance of media embeddedness is decided according to a one-tailed test. It is noteworthy that occupation, subjective social class, interest in politics, and life satisfaction do not have significant relations with participation in collective action. Moreover, being a party member, having higher education, and being unemployed are associated with a higher probability of participating in boycotts or petitions. The size of the effect of unemployment is large.

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

group lowers the likelihood of having experience in collective action. However, there is no significant difference between the politicized and conformist groups in terms of their probabilities of participating in collective action.

Discussion

Extant literature on political impacts of the Internet in China debates the political consequences of the rise of the Internet and netizens. Although previous studies do attempt to depict the political characteristics of Chinese netizens, mostly based on interviews and online observation, the arguments they infer from evidence are often critiqued as lacking baselines of comparison and representativeness. This article provides new evidence based on nationally representative data and comparisons between Chinese netizens and Chinese people embedded in other communication environments. The evidence suggests that Chinese netizens tend to be a politically salient group with reference to traditional users and non-media users in China. Compared with the other two groups, netizens are more likely to be politically opinionated. Moreover, they are more probable to belong to the politicized as opposed to the conformist or the apathetic group. Specifically, they are more likely to simultaneously embrace the norms of democracy, be more critical of the political conditions and the party-state, and be willing to engage in politics. Lastly, Chinese netizens are also more likely to have experience in collective action.

The above-mentioned facts are directly backed up by evidence; a more arguable issue is what political consequences can be imputed from these facts and why Chinese netizens tend to have these political beliefs and practices. In other words, what kind of story about the relation between the Internet and politics in China can be told from the evidence? Some versions can be ruled out by the evidence relatively easily, including stories of irrelevance and ambivalence of the Internet to the democratic development in China. Clearly,

the image of the Chinese Internet as mainly a playground for entertainment does not correspond to reality. The political beliefs and practices of Chinese netizens with respect to traditional media users and non-media users explain why the Chinese state is so concerned with this rising social category and remains nonnegotiable about regulation and control of the Internet, as illustrated by the Google case and the decision to block Twitter. As I have mentioned, the mission of mass media in China is to direct public opinion, but it turns out that it is very difficult for the Chinese state to guide and tame Chinese netizens. Not only are Chinese netizens more autonomous from the state in terms of political beliefs, they also participate in collective action to express their views. Showing evidence of critical thinking and a willingness to take political action, netizens constitute a formidable social force in China's politically restricted environment. Arguably, the Chinese state can, and in fact does, counteract the development of the Internet, but the difficulty and cost in governance increases with the emergence of independent-minded people in cyberspace whose speech and behavior could spread to the offline world. Indeed, it is easy for the government to suppress rebellious actors, but the unavoidable spread of information about suppression will only lead to more disillusionment with the regime.

After ruling out some possibilities, the task of interpretation becomes more challenging. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, it is difficult to adjudicate between different explanations of *why* Chinese netizens tend to have such political beliefs and practices. Three answers can be located along a continuum. One extreme answer is that the Internet attracts people with certain preexisting political orientations. For instance, political dissidents would want to use the Internet to communicate and disseminate information. At the other extreme, one could narrate a story purely about the transformative effects of the Internet. The middle ground perspective offers a mixture of both and is the argument this article advances. On the one hand, the Internet attracts users with preexisting political orientations; on the other hand, it reinforces or transforms political beliefs and action. Despite the restriction of data, this article uses two methods to facilitate interpretation while also mitigating potential problems of omitted variable bias and simultaneous causality. The first way is to eliminate as many alternative explanations as possible, in order to see if there is a genuine association between being a netizen and specific political beliefs and practices. The most common and persuasive alternative explanation relates Internet use to interests in politics and predisposition (Norris, 2009). As mentioned earlier, I incorporate into models a set of covariates to exclude these alternative explanations. After controlling for these factors, statistically significant associations remain.

The second way is to examine simultaneous causation in a more exploratory manner by estimating reverse regressions in which being a netizen is viewed as endogenous to the other variables in the models. This reverse regression of the main specification can reveal whether reverse causality is likely to be an issue or not. If strong reverse causality is not found, then this would lend additional support to a causal interpretation of results (Chhaochharia & Laeven, 2009). Through logistic regression, I gauge the possibility of reverse causality by using the 18 items, participation in collective action, and other covariates to predict being a netizen.¹⁰ The results are presented in Table A5. It turns out that only age, educational level, being an agriculture worker or manual worker, evaluations of how human rights are protected in China, and willingness to participate in collective action can predict the probability of being a netizen. Specifically, older people, less educated people, agriculture workers, and manual workers have a lower probability of being a netizen, controlling for other factors. People who give DK responses to questions about willingness to sign petitions, with respect to people who are not willing to participate, are more likely to be netizens, holding other covariates constant. This association is not indicative

of self-selection problems because people who are willing to sign a petition are not more likely to be a netizen. The only problem regarding self-selection is that, compared with people who positively assess human rights protection in China, people who have negative appraisals of such protection are more likely to be netizens, holding all other variables constant (Item 16).

Despite this issue, however, overall there is no indication of serious problems. Out of 18 items used in dependent variables, only the item on human rights protection is predictive of Internet use. None of the negative evaluations of TV, police, the courts, the central government, the party, and the democratic condition in China proved to be associated with a higher chance of being a netizen. Neither can participation in collective action, perception of the importance of politics, and interest in politics predict Internet use. Although the reverse regression results cannot completely preclude the possibility that some of the netizens are attracted to the Internet because of their political orientation, they do support a middle ground story in which the Internet is not just a venue for people who have certain political dispositions to produce and distribute information, communicate, and organize themselves; with its relatively decentralized properties, the Internet also serves as a medium and space that allows people to encounter different points of view and information in a politically restricted setting. Because of their experiences on the Internet, some Chinese netizens become more critical of the authoritarian state. Even though there is no direct evidence here showing the mechanism, based on the indirect evidence and previous theories, this article argues that the Internet does play an empowering role in China.

As stated earlier, media systems in advanced capitalist democracies and China have similar problems of the encroachment of the market and/or the state, and the technological innovations have introduced similar dynamics into the media systems in both contexts. This article suggests that even though the political forces controlling the media system remain strong in China, a more decentralized media system enabled by technological advancement has weakened the power of the authoritarian state in monopolizing the production and dissemination of information and meaning. The Internet, although set up by the authoritarian state to build a modernized China, actually diminishes the efficacy of China's media system as the state ideological apparatus while also empowering and politicizing Chinese citizens. The pathologies usually associated with mass media are thus ameliorated under the new conditions. Before the advent of the Internet, Chinese citizens did not play a particularly participatory role in the media system, but now their role cannot be overlooked. With the Internet, China's media system has taken on a new, albeit limited and imperfect role as a communication institution that locates citizens as no longer merely compliant receivers of official discourse. In sum, this development suggests that the Internet has contributed to a more critical and politicized citizenry in China's cyberspace and shifted the power relationship between the state and the society. The size, political beliefs, and actions of the Chinese netizen population unequivocally indicate that it constitutes an important social force that imposes much pressure on the authoritarian state. The statistical findings correspond well to many recent Internet incidents in China in which netizens' counterdiscourse and collective action have contributed to the dismissal of government officials and changes in policy and regulation.

The evidence provided in this article complements and extends extant literature in several ways. First, the article supplements previous literature on the media system in China that does not take into account the role of the Internet by providing a more complete picture. For instance, Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) argue that, due to the lack of conflicting sources of information, the commercialized media help authoritarian leaders to sustain regime legitimacy and stability through propaganda. Kennedy (2009) also argues

for the propaganda effects of the media on regime support. Despite their contributions, these arguments do not consider that, in reality, people could be embedded in different kinds of media environments in which information is more diverse due to the rise of the Internet. The evidence that this article provides shows that the efficacy of the media system as a tool for propaganda has declined in a more decentralized media system. Although *all* of the netizens obtained information from traditional media in the 2007 WVS data set, they were still less likely to be influenced by the state and traditional media compared with traditional media users and non-media users.

Second, this article provides evidence to adjudicate the debates over the democratic prospects of the rise of the Internet in the Chinese context. The results lend support to those who have more optimistic views on the democratic potential of the Internet (Tai, 2006; Tang, 2005; Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2008). Addressing the criticism of the absence of “hard evidence” (e.g., Peters, 2002), this article demonstrates that the Internet is related to the spread of political disillusionment and collective action. Responding to the criticism based on the regulative capacity of the state (e.g., Zhou, 2006), the article shows that, despite the powerful authoritarian state as well as stringent regulation and censorship, a more decentralized media system still makes a political difference.

Third, this research illustrates that although the Chinese case is unique in many ways, it still benefits from theories developed in the context of advanced capitalist democracy and can, in turn, contribute to literature on media and politics in general. The evidence supports mobilization theories, which have been drawn and validated by many quantitative studies in the context of liberal democracy but seldom tested in authoritarian contexts. The statistical results also lend support to theories of diversity and democratic culture, which are less often cited and tested in quantitative studies of similar topics. This article shows that a more decentralized media system has diminished the capacity of the state in exercising symbolic power. It is also noteworthy that, in terms of explaining variation in political beliefs and collective action, media embeddedness—and, more specifically, being a netizen—turns out to be a more powerful predictor than variables related to social class, even though the latter are among the most important predictors in various versions of the theory of democratization.¹¹ This demonstrates the critical importance of political communication in predicting democratic development in China. Finally, the research results of the Chinese case can also shed light on the relationship between media and politics in other authoritarian countries.¹²

Conclusion

This article has attempted to address a more than decade-long debate on the democratic consequences of the rise of the Internet and netizens in China by providing new evidence based on nationwide representative data. The persistence of this debate is not surprising. After all, in the face of one of the strongest and most capable states in the contemporary world that is armed with both physical power and wealth, the political influence of netizens seems to be intangible, unreal, and simply trivial. Such perceptions underpinned recent reviews of Guobin Yang’s (2009) book *The Power of the Internet in China*; critics insisted on the limited power of the Internet and criticized Yang as overlooking state power (Kluver et al., 2010). As similar concerns about state power could still be haunting the discussion even with the new evidence provided in this article, I would like to comment on those critiques.

Concerns about the level and implications of state power in China are absolutely correct, but what should not be forgotten is the fact that forcing compliance to maintain a

desired order is not without costs. As Althusser (1971, pp. 170–186) argues, even though a state can use the repressive state apparatus (e.g., army and policy) to force compliance, it still needs to rely on the ideological state apparatus, in particular the educational, legal, and media institutions, to produce willing compliance. China is no exception in this respect. It is warned that the alarming cost of China's social stability is sapping other public expenditures. According to estimates from Tsinghua University, China's total spending on domestic security rose to 514 billion yuan (\$76.7 billion) in 2009, almost reaching the military budget of 532 billion yuan.¹³ Some netizens thus ridicule that China's enemies are, in fact, from within. If most Chinese people fell into the categories of conformist or apathetic, as outlined in this article, the cost of maintaining stability would have been much lower. Given that around 60% of Chinese netizens belong to the politicized group and that they were present in many incidents perceived as causing social instability, it is difficult to deny their importance in China's political development.

To conclude, I would like to state the limitation of this study and suggest avenues for future research. The main limitation of this study is its focus on the consequences of the rise of the Internet and netizens, instead of the mechanisms producing the consequences. Consequently, these mechanisms, especially the microprocess of politicization among netizens, as well as the institutional conditions and social foundation that have facilitated this process should be further investigated.

Notes

1. This article uses Chinese netizens to refer to Chinese Internet users in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In Chinese language, the term *wangmin* (网民) is used to designate these users and was officially approved by PRC's China National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies in 1998.

2. The CCP Central Publicity Department (also known as the Propaganda Department) is the most important organization in China's propaganda system.

3. President Clinton's address can be found at <http://www.techlawjournal.com/cong106/pntr/20000308sp.html>.

4. See "Web 2.0 vs. Control 2.0" at <http://en.rsf.org/web-2-0-versus-control-2-0-18-03-2010,36697.html>.

5. There is a separate argument claiming that the Internet does not necessarily enhance democracy in China as it may serve as a tool to promote Chinese nationalism. Since I have empirically questioned the argument of cybernationalism in another article, the current article does not respond to this criticism.

6. The total number of observations is 2,015 in the 2007 WVS data set, but the number of observation is 1,576 in this article. The reason for this discrepancy is that information about income level is missing in 416 observations and information about educational level is also missing in a few observations. To control for income and educational level, I dropped observations with missing data on income or educational level. The statistical conclusions remain the same when those cases are included in the analysis without controlling for income or educational level, and the coefficients for netizens versus traditional media users and non-media users are, in fact, larger for all of the models. I also analyzed a data set with imputed values of missing data on income level and found that the statistical conclusions did not change. It should also be noted that the exclusion of cases was not related to the value of dependent variables. In other words, I did not drop a case because of a DK response in the selected 18 items.

7. The model assumes that (a) the sample comprises a mixture of different types of respondents, with different probabilities of giving each response to each survey question, depending on their patterns of the underlying construct, and (b) conditional on belonging to each latent group, individuals' survey responses are statistically independent (Blaydes & Linzer, 2008; Yamaguchi, 2000).

8. The controlling variables include gender, education, income, unemployment status, subjective social class, occupation, geographical area, party membership, interest in politics, perception of the importance of politics, and life satisfaction.

9. I used different ways to parametrize education and age. Since other model specifications that consume more degrees of freedom are not significantly superior to Model 1 in terms of model fit, Model 1 is preferred. The same rationales apply to Models 2 to 4. In addition, interaction effects, including interactions between education and media embeddedness as well as between interest in politics and media embeddedness, were tested, but no significant results were found for the dependent variables.

10. There is no indication of multicollinearity. The mean of the variance inflation factor is only 1.21.

11. See the notes under Tables 5 and 6.

12. Analyzing crossnational data, I argue in another article that the Chinese case can be generalized to other authoritarian countries, and that the relationships between Internet use, on the one hand, and political attitudes and behavior, on the other, are stronger in authoritarian contexts than in non-authoritarian contexts.

13. See “Cost of China’s Stability Alarming,” *The China Post*, 15 October 2010 at <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/commentary/reuters/2010/10/15/276235/Cost-of.htm>.

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Appendix: Item Selection, Coding Scheme, and Supplementary Analysis**Table A1**

Selected survey items for political beliefs and proportions and conditional probabilities of responses for each latent class

		Total (100%)	Type 1: The politicized (24.5%)	Type 2: The conformists (42.4%)	Type 3: The apathetic (33.1%)
Item 1: Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	1. Good	0.231	0.287	0.295	0.107
	2. DK	0.339	0.118	0.124	0.779
	3. Bad	0.430	0.595	0.581	0.114
Item 2: Having experts, not government, to make decisions	1. Good	0.312	0.478	0.379	0.103
	2. DK	0.369	0.113	0.143	0.848
	3. Bad	0.319	0.409	0.478	0.049
Item 3: Having the army rule	1. Good	0.220	0.165	0.376	0.061
	2. DK	0.371	0.131	0.129	0.860
	3. Bad	0.409	0.704	0.495	0.080
Item 4: Having a democratic political system	1. Bad	0.041	0.096	0.037	0.007
	2. DK	0.331	0.095	0.069	0.842
	3. Good	0.628	0.808	0.895	0.151
Item 5: Is choosing leaders in free elections an essential characteristic of democracy?	1. No	0.069	0.102	0.073	0.038
	2. DK	0.162	0.023	0.028	0.439
	3. Yes	0.769	0.876	0.899	0.523
Item 6: Is civil rights protection against oppression an essential characteristic of democracy?	1. No	0.055	0.085	0.047	0.044
	2. DK	0.234	0.050	0.065	0.587
	3. Yes	0.711	0.864	0.888	0.370
Item 7: How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?	1. Not important	0.055	0.095	0.040	0.046
	2. DK	0.166	0.045	0.016	0.449
	3. Important	0.779	0.860	0.945	0.505

(Continued)

Table A1
(Continued)

		Total (100%)	Type 1: The politicized (24.5%)	Type 2: The conformists (42.4%)	Type 3: The apathetic (33.1%)
Item 8: Should protecting freedom of speech be among the top aims of this country?	1.No	0.388	0.383	0.463	0.296
	2. DK	0.200	0.047	0.065	0.486
	3. Yes	0.412	0.570	0.472	0.218
Item 9: Do you trust in the press?	1. Yes	0.619	0.319	0.864	0.528
	2. DK	0.150	0.085	0.016	0.368
	3. No	0.231	0.596	0.120	0.104
Item 10: Do you trust in TV?	1. Yes	0.681	0.356	0.907	0.632
	2. DK	0.101	0.055	0.006	0.256
	3. No	0.218	0.589	0.087	0.111
Item 11: Do you trust in police?	1. Yes	0.754	0.434	0.948	0.741
	2. DK	0.046	0.020	0.006	0.116
	3. No	0.201	0.546	0.046	0.143
Item 12: Do you trust in the courts?	1. Yes	0.759	0.435	0.959	0.742
	2. DK	0.006	0.031	0.010	0.144
	3. No	0.181	0.534	0.029	0.114
Item 13: Do you trust in your central government?	1. Yes	0.883	0.747	1.000	0.834
	2. DK	0.046	0.028	0.000	0.119
	3. No	0.070	0.225	0.000	0.047
Item 14: Do you trust in political parties?	1. Yes	0.756	0.529	0.967	0.652
	2. DK	0.133	0.105	0.023	0.296
	3. No	0.111	0.365	0.010	0.052
Item 15: Is China governed democratically today?	1. Yes	0.584	0.525	0.834	0.307
	2. DK	0.223	0.051	0.059	0.559
	3. No	0.194	0.424	0.107	0.134
Item 16: Are human rights respected in China?	1. Yes	0.690	0.645	0.903	0.450
	2. DK	0.188	0.052	0.046	0.470
	3. No	0.122	0.303	0.051	0.080
Item 17: Are you willing to sign a petition?	1. No	0.462	0.379	0.385	0.621
	2. DK	0.028	0.012	0.023	0.046
	3. Yes	0.510	0.609	0.592	0.332
Item 18: Are you willing to join in boycotts?	1. No	0.510	0.430	0.443	0.656
	2. DK	0.027	0.012	0.020	0.048
	3. Yes	0.463	0.558	0.538	0.296

Table A2
Coding scheme

Coding	1	2	3
Normative standards (Items 1–8)	Support the norms of democracy	DK	Not support the norms of democracy
Evaluation of the status quo (Items 9–16)	Positive evaluation	DK	Negative evaluation
Willingness to participate in collective action (Items 17–18)	Lack of willingness	DK	Demonstrate willingness ^a

^aRespondents who had experience in actual participation and who did not have experience but expressed a willingness to participate were coded as exhibiting willingness to participate in collective action.

Table A3
Descriptive statistics for variables

Variable	Definition	Mean	Min	Max	<i>SD</i>
DK	Count of DK responses	2.90	0	17	3.53
Collective action	1 = with experience	0.09	0	1	0.28
Age	Respondent's age in years	44.58	18	70	13.31
Female	1 = female	0.34	0	1	0.50
Unemployment	1 = unemployment	0.04	0	1	0.19
Income	1 = lowest, 10 = highest	3.96	1	10	1.88
Professional worker	1 = professional worker	0.07	0	1	0.26
Agriculture worker	1 = agriculture worker	0.54	0	1	0.50
Manual worker	1 = manual worker	0.20	0	1	0.40
Working class	1 = working class	0.29	0	1	0.45
Lower middle class	1 = lower middle class	0.40	0	1	0.49
Upper middle class	1 = upper middle class	0.06	0	1	0.23
Party member	1 = party member	0.13	0	1	0.34
Importance of politics	2 = very important, 1 = rather important, 0 = no answer or don't know, -1 = not very important, -2 = not at all important	0.17	-2	2	1.16
Interest in politics	2 = very interested, 1 = somewhat interested, 0 = no answer or don't know, -1 = not very interested, -2 = not at all interested	0.47	-2	2	1.36

(Continued)

Table A3
(Continued)

Variable	Definition	Mean	Min	Max	<i>SD</i>
Life satisfaction	2 = completely satisfied, 1 = satisfied, 0 = no answer or don't know, -1 = not very satisfied, -2 = completely dissatisfied	0.63	-2	2	1.24
Happiness	2 = very happy, 1 = rather happy, 0 = no answer or don't know, -1 = not very happy, -2 = not at all happy	0.71	-2	2	1.12
East	1 = east part of China	0.48	0	1	0.50
Middle	1 = middle part of China	0.39	0	1	0.49

Table A4
Comparisons of models with different numbers of latent classes

	BIC	Sample size adjusted BIC	AIC	Vuong-Lo-Mendell- Rubin test (p)	Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted LRT test (p)	Parametric bootstrapped likelihood ratio test: Approximate (p)	Entropy
2 classes	41,750.509	41,518.604	41,359.036	0.000 (Ho: 1 class)	0.000 (Ho: 1 class)	0.000 (Ho: 1 class)	0.921
3 classes	40,733.479	40,384.033	40,143.588	0.000 (Ho: 2 classes)	0.000 (Ho: 2 classes)	0.000 (Ho: 2 classes)	0.886
4 classes	40,227.517	39,760.529	39,439.208	0.117 (Ho: 3 classes)	0.118 (Ho: 3 classes)	0.000 (Ho: 3 classes)	0.875

Note. As lower BIC, sample size adjusted BIC, and AIC indicate better fit, a four-class model seems to be a good choice. Nonetheless, in light of the p values of the Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin test and Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted LRT test, a four-class model is not significantly superior to a three-class model.

Table A5
Logistic regression of being a netizen ($N = 1,576$)

Netizen		Netizen		Netizen	
Collective action	0.489 (0.290)	Item 10: 2 vs. 1	0.100 (0.645)	Female	-0.093 (0.219)
Item 1: 2 vs. 1	0.413 (0.386)	3 vs. 1	0.223 (0.309)	Age	-0.042*** (0.009)
3 vs. 1	-0.437 (0.251)	Item 11: 2 vs. 1	0.779 (0.975)	Education	0.240*** (0.038)
Item 2: 2 vs. 1	0.159 (0.410)	3 vs. 1	-0.311 (0.339)	Income	0.069 (0.073)
3 vs. 1	-0.216 (0.232)	Item 12: 2 vs. 1	-0.891 (0.986)	Unemployment	-0.725 (0.584)
Item 3: 2 vs. 1	-0.725 (0.445)	3 vs. 1	0.486 (0.346)	Professional worker	-0.074 (0.308)
3 vs. 1	0.030 (0.272)	Item 13: 2 vs. 1	0.442 (0.873)	Agriculture worker	-1.578*** (0.351)
Item 4: 2 vs. 1	-0.406 (0.621)	3 vs. 1	-0.005 (0.428)	Manual worker	-0.762** (0.281)
3 vs. 1	-0.325 (0.456)	Item 14: 2 vs. 1	0.179 (0.453)	Working class (vs. Lower class)	0.061 (0.366)
Item 5: 2 vs. 1	-0.258 (0.611)	3 vs. 1	0.204 (0.340)	Lower middle class (vs. lower class)	0.093 (0.376)
3 vs. 1	-0.406 (0.345)	Item 15: 2 vs. 1	-0.784 (0.565)	Upper class (vs. Lower class)	0.370 (0.522)
Item 6: 2 vs. 1	-0.533 (0.563)	3 vs. 1	-0.450 (0.275)	Party member	0.307 (0.261)
3 vs. 1	-0.697 (0.376)	Item 16: 2 vs. 1	-0.024 (0.517)	Importance of politics	-0.015 (0.095)
Item 7: 2 vs. 1	0.197 (0.823)	3 vs. 1	0.868** (0.296)	Interest in politics	0.022 (0.096)
3 vs. 1	0.813 (0.568)	Item 17: 2 vs. 1	-1.782 (1.495)	Life satisfaction	-0.054 (0.110)
Item 8: 2 vs. 1	-0.980 (0.557)	3 vs. 1	-0.033 (0.318)	Happiness	0.085 (0.132)
3 vs. 1	-0.060 (0.221)	Item 18: 2 vs. 1	2.998* (1.307)	East vs. west	0.233 (0.471)
Item 9: 2 vs. 1	-0.136 (0.573)	3 vs. 1	0.168 (0.304)	Middle vs. west	0.632 (0.469)
3 vs. 1	0.202 (0.302)			_cons	-2.168* (1.062)

Note. _cons = constant. Standard errors are in parentheses.

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