Media Use and Political Participation in China: Taking Three National Large-N Surveys as Examples[1]

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Abstract

In the age of continuous media change and the coexistence of multiple forms of media, the relationship between the public's media use and political participation is an urgent area of study. This paper makes use of large national sample surveys from 2002, 2011, and 2015, summarizes the change of the public's media use by descriptive statistics analysis, and finds that while the Internet has become an important communication channel, the use of Internet for political information and political participation is still overestimated. Compared to the weak impact of different media channels for political information on political participation, the frequency of media exposure and Internet use play a significant role in political participation. Because of the negative effect of the frequency of Internet use on political participation, the democratization function of the Internet needs to be treated with caution. This paper describes media use and its roles in contemporary China, analyzes the impact of media use on political participation, and extends the cross-cultural application of the theory of political communication.

Keywords: media use, Internet, political participation, survey data

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As a fundamental channel of political mobilization and the dissemination of political information and attitudes, the mass media and its correlation with political participation have gathered a lot of attention among political scientists and communication researchers. Most research has been one-time cross-section studies and discusses the correlation or causal relationship between political participation and media use in a certain time. While a battery of empirical studies outside China illustrates the close association between mass media use and political participation, the counterpart studies in China are rare and need more empirical work. This paper therefore analyzes the change of the Chinese public's media use habits by using data from three large national sample surveys and the resultant impact on civic participation.

This paper first provides an overview of existing theories and empirical research about mass media use and political participation. In the next section, I put forward a hypothesis about mass media use and political participation. In the third section, the measures of the dependent and independent variables are described. Data from 2015 are used to test the hypotheses via OLS regression analysis. This paper concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of this study and raises questions for follow-up studies.

Literature Review: Correlation Between Mass Media Use and Political Participation

The theory about the relationship between media (public postings) and political participation can be traced back to Plato in Ancient Greece. Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out the impact of newspapers on civic participation in his famous book *Democracy in America* in 1835. In their pioneering work on civic cultures in five countries, Almond and Verba (1963) were the first to conduct cross-national empirical studies in political science. Robert Putnam (2000) took this practice further in his work *Bowling Alone*. With the third wave of democratization in the third world and the development of mass media, studies on the relationship between mass media use and political participation spread rapidly. Although some scholars consider media use to be a form of political participation (Bucy & Gregson, 2001), most researchers tend to see actual political participation behavior and access to political information through media as two independent concepts and explore the relationship between these two separate variables.

Many studies demonstrate that the political predisposition and standards of political values judgment transmitted by mass media influence people's political ideas and attitudes,

and even political participation (Boulianne, 2015). In their opinion, mass media like TV and radio can diffuse political knowledge, guide political consensus (Norris, 1996), raise social capital and the skills for participation (Shah, 1998), provide a basis for political discussion and negotiation (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), enable media users to interact with their information environment (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli, 2009), and eventually arouse political participation. Meanwhile, studies of media use have also pointed out public indifference and cynicism to politics because of media prejudices (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), "media malaise" (Robinson, 1976) and its time extrusion effect, that is, entertainment content will occupy the limited time engaged in public affairs (Basley, 2006). In their study of Chinese political democratization and mass media, researchers found that contact with mass media, especially newspapers, can increase users' political awareness and strengthen their values of political participation (Liao, Zhang & Li, 2005), and can raise political empowerment (Wang, 2012). An empirical study also proved that traditional mass media had a positive influence on political discussion and on Internet opinion expression, but had no significant influence on participation in public spheres (Chan & Zhou, 2011).

With the rapid development of Information and Communication Technology, the role of the Internet in political participation has attracted great attention, but there is no consensus on its impact. Nisbet and Scheufele (2004) divided propositions and studies into three schools: mobilization, reinforcement and skepticism. For scholars who stress the mobilization function of the Internet, the convenience and interactivity of the Internet is crucial for direct democracy. The Internet cannot only provide much more information than traditional media, arouse the public's discussions and participation, elevate political interest, and encourage expression of opinion, but also can be used as an instrument for voting (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Boulianne, 2015), as well as other forms of civic participation such as contacting a politician, attending a rally or signing a petition (Broockman & Green 2014), or even undermining the support basis of authoritarian regime (Tang & Huhe, 2014). As a reinforcement factor, the function of the Internet is mainly to reinforce political reality. The Internet may widen the gap for political information access and at best maintain but not change the existent power structure (Feezell, 2017; Willnat & Aw, 2014). Thus, the Internet may only reinforce the political predisposition of active participants and may have no ability to influence or change the public's predispositions.

The skeptics propose that the link between Internet access and political engagement is very weak (Chan & Zhou, 2011; Green & Gerber 2015). Even though the Internet has the characteristics of being bidirectional and widespread, this does not mean the Internet can be used as a means of powerful political sharing or exerting political influence. There is no

doubt that negative and agitating information can be shared online, which can impair political participation and cause political indifference (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). Therefore, excluding the portion of the public with a high level of participation in political affairs and strong political interest, the impact of the Internet on political propaganda and civic participation is tiny (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). Eveland and Dunwoody (2003) found that the reason why online information cannot influence political participation is that the great abundance of information available online actually increases the cognitive effort required for orienting to the content and structure of the web, produces disorientation, and consequently reduces the amount of processing devoted to meaningful learning. According to all these studies, it seems that the Internet's huge dissemination powers cannot promote political learning or even influence people's political predispositions, and the net effect of media use on political participation needs deep exploration. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the impact of different media on political participation after controlling other important variables.

Mass media studies can be divided by categories to analyze the different levels of government regulation for various media and their different implications. It is common and even taken for granted that authoritarian governments control information sources to shape and form public opinion and mobilize political support. In China, the government controls the content of media and the propaganda departments of the China Communist Party (CCP) select and censor the news directly (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). However, a mass of unofficial or semi-official media have emerged with the commercialization of media in China. Though these media are still under the censorship of the CCP, they enjoy a somewhat greater degree of autonomy with respect to content than the official ones. Literature about the positive impact of traditional media and new media on political participation in China sprung up in the past several years (Tang, 2008; Chan, 2014; Kim & Chen, 2015; Wang & Ji, 2017).

Some researchers also believe that Internet use may form different interpretations of individual and collective activities, and propel the users to take action in the form of participation (Lei, 2011). Those involved in Internet have more opportunity to access the information criticizing the government and to form new types of contentious participation (Lee & Chan, 2016). From existing research, the impact of media use on political participation seems to vary in different scenarios. The media does provide political knowledge, train political skills, and become the main political socializer, but at the same time, other non-political messages it delivers may attract more attention from the public and thus weaken the willingness for political participation. In this paper, I use large-sample survey data to present the changes in Internet use in China from 2002 to 2015, and further

discuss the influence of different media channels on political participation with the intention to provide information for comparative studies on political participation.

Research Hypotheses

Given the aforementioned theoretical/empirical reflections, I derive the following hypotheses regarding the effects of media use on political participation.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The frequency of political news exposure, an important indicator of political information obtained, has a positive effect on political participation experience.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Based on the social capital theory, interpersonal communication could enhance political participation.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Internet use has an influence on political participation experience, but the direction of the impact need to be tested.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The media channels of access to political news affect the political participation experience.

Statistical Models and Results

To test these hypotheses, I use individual-level data from three national surveys conducted in 2002, 2011, and 2015. Using a census household list and a multistage area approach in 2002 and 2011 and a GPS/GIS-assisted area sampling method in 2015, the surveys selected the samples randomly and represent the totality of the population over 18 years old in 25 provinces and districts of mainland China. The samples are stratified to ensure adequate and proportional coverage of rural areas and minority populations. The respondents in the households that were drawn were based on PPS (Probability Proportional to Size) sampling methods and the respondent in each household was chosen according to the Kish table. The basic information of the respondents in the three surveys are in 2002 (N=3183; Male=1616, Female=1567; Urban=1181; Rural=1998), 2011 (N=3473; Male=1699, Female=1774; Urban=1113, Rural=2352) and 2015 (N=4068; Male=2047, Female=2004; Urban=1362, Rural=2657). The face-to-face interviews were conducted in respondents' homes or workplaces in the language of the respondent's choice. The three surveys use a standard questionnaire instrument containing a core module of identical or functionally equivalent questions about respondents' participation behavior, media use, political values, etc. The short versions of these survey data are available in the website of Asian Barometer Survey.

Political participation experience

Our dependent variable is political participation experience. According to the classical definition of political participation by Huntington and Nelson (1976), "political participation is the activity of citizens trying to influence government decision-making," so it should include the lawful or not activities of ordinary people individually or collectively to influence political decisions or behavior.

There are 14 questions asked to measure the political participation experience of respondents: (1) voted or not ever since you became eligible to vote; (2) voted in unit/village election; (3) participated unit/village campaign meetings or rally; (4) mobilized others vote for a certain candidate; (5) assisted a candidate's campaign in other ways; (6) expressed an opinion to local government leaders; (7) reported to People's Congress delegate; (8) contacted other influential people outside the government; (9) contacted news media; (10) expressed opinions to relevant departments; (11) went to court; (12) got together with others to try to resolve local problems; (13) got together with others to raise an issue or sign a petition; (14) attended a demonstration or protest march. [3]

I collapsed responses to these questions into dichotomous variables. Answers of no were coded as 0; answers of yes were coded as 1. I added these scores together to create a political participation experience scale. The higher scores indicate the more frequent and active political participation. Using the value of political participation experience as the dependent variable, I tested whether media use makes the public active or indifferent citizens or in between (Sindney & Nie, 1967). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of political participation experience in the three surveys.

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[3]The questions in the questionnaire are expressed as follows: "In the past three years, have you never, once, or more than once done the following because of personal, family or neighborhood problems, or problems with government officials and policies? Contacted elected officials or legislative representatives at any level; Contacted officials at higher level; Contacted traditional leaders/community leaders; contacted other influential people outside the government; contacted news media."

Table 1. Political Participation Experience

Number of Participation experiences	2002		2011		2015	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
0	726	**22.8**	473	**13.6**	1137	**28.0**
1	603	**18.9**	509	**14.7**	1138	**28.0**
2	596	**18.7**	686	**19.8**	758	**18.6**
3	405	12.7	685	19.7	450	11.1
4	306	9.6	469	13.5	248	6.1
5	189	5.9	284	8.2	154	3.8
6	110	3.5	168	4.8	87	2.2
7	85	2.7	96	2.8	46	1.1
8	50	1.6	57	1.6	24	.6
9	37	1.2	21	.6	12	.3
10 and more	75	2.5	25	.8	11	.2
Total	3183	100.0	3473	100.0	4068	100.0

Table 1 shows the change of the political experience from 2002 to 2015. In 2001, 39.6% respondents took part in three or more kinds of political activities, compared with 51.9% in 2011 and 25.4% in 2015. The enthusiasm and variety of participation dropped greatly in the past 15 years.

Table 2. Political Activities in China

	2002		2011		2015	
(Min=0; Max=1)	N	Mean(S.D)	N	Mean(S.D)	N	Mean(S.D)
voted in unit/village election	2137	**.80(.40)**	**2428**	**.72(.45)**	**2715**	**.67(.47)**
voted in above unit/village election	**2701**	**.49(50)**	**3384**	**.77(.42)**	**1968**	**.44(.50)**
participated in unit/village campaign meetings or rally	2032	**.42(.49)**	**2527**	**.43(.50)**	**2366**	**.30(.46)**
got together with others to try to resolve local problems	3055	.03(.17)	3414	.13(.34)	3811	.17(.37)
expressed opinions to local government leaders	3055	.32(.47)	3411	.39(.49)	3747	.14(.35)
contacted other influential people outside the government	3053	.10(.30)	3400	.27(.45)	3718	.14(.35)
expressed opinions to relevant departments	3060	.03(.17)	3412	.05(.2)	3766	.13(.34)
mobilized others to vote for a certain candidate	2042	.04(.20)	2527	.16(.37)	2375	.11(.31)
got together with others to raise an issue or sign a petition	-	-	-	-	3775	.09(.29)
assisted a candidate's campaign in other ways	-	-	-	-	2351	.08(.28)
Reported to People's Congress delegate	3057	.03(.17)	3396	.09(.29)	3675	.06(.24)
contacted news media	3059	.01(.11)	3415	.03(.17)	3722	.05(.21)
went to court	3060	.02(.13)	-	-	3755	.04(.20)
attended a demonstration or protest march	3059	.003(.05)	3405	.03(.17)	3817	.02(.15)

Table 2 indicates that the most common form of political participation in China is voting in unit/village elections and then voting above that level. It should be recognized that, although the electoral participation in China is mostly mobilized by the government and has differences between that of western society, Chinese people still have some other channels to express their opinion and attitude, to influence political decisions and safeguard their rights and interests.

The Change of Media Use Habits

In this part, I focus on the rapid growth of Internet use and its role in political participation, comparing the data in the surveys of 2002, 2011 and 2015, and discuss the changing trends during the past 15 years.

Based on the survey data, the Internet had become the main media for people to communicate and learn by 2015. For the 4048 respondents: 53.4% have Internet access on their cell phones, and only 4% of respondents had no cell phone. Besides cell phone Internet access, 48% of the respondents have some other means for Internet access at home, such as telephone modems, broadband, or fiber. Among the people who have Internet access, 84.6% use social networking sites such as Weibo, QQ, WeChat, and Taobao Wangwang. For the frequency of Internet use (Table 3), the respondents who use the Internet every day was 19.8% in 2013, and 43.7% in 2015. Considering that in 2002, only 12.4% answered "yes" to the question "Can you use a computer", the increase in Internet use is substantial.

Table 3. The Frequency of Internet Use

2002 Can you use computer?							
Yes	12.4%	**No**	**80.5%**	No answer	7.1%	Total N	3183
How often do you use Internet?							
Year	Never	Seldom	A few times a year	A few time a month	Several times a week	Everyday	N
2011	59.8	10.5	.9	1.6	7.4	19.8	3464
2015	44.2	8.4	.5	.7	2.5	**43.7**	4048

In the surveys, respondents' exposure to mass media was measured by their self-reported media exposure frequencies and the media channels used to access political news (Table 4). For the media exposure frequencies, the people who read, listened to, or watched political news every day ("once a day" and "several times a day") decreased from 51.9% in 2002 to 48.8% in 2011 and then to 42.6% in 2015. The increase in Internet use for political information has not compensated for the decreased use of traditional media, thereby the respondents appear to have decreased their access to political information.

Table 4. How often do you read, listen to or watch political news? (%)

Year	never	Less than once per week	Once or twice per week	Several times a week	Once a day	Several times a day	No answer	Total N
2002	4.9	-	28.4	12.2	41.1	10.8	2.6	3183
2011	10.2	9.5	11.6	19.9	32.5	16.3	0.1	3473
2015	**19.7**	9.5	14.2	13.1	28.2	14.4	.8	4068

To measure the media channels, I collapsed the responses into a dichotomous variable. Answers of no were coded as 0, answers of yes were coded as 1. Table 5 summarizes the sources of political information in China.

Table 5. Where do you acquire information about political affairs?[4]

2002			2011			2015		
Media	N	Mean(S.D.)	Media	N	Mean(S.D.)	Media	N	Mean(S.D.)
TV	3148	.85 (.352)	TV	3335	.798(.264)	TV	3794	.678(.471)
Newspaper	3147	.30(.457)	Newspaper	3335	.029(.454)	Newspaper	3749	.021(.145)
Other people	3138	.16(.364)	Personal contact	3335	.035(.466)	Personal contact	3749	.034(.182)
Radio	3148	.14(.346)	Radio/ Broadcast	3335	.008(.348)	Rradio	3749	.019(.135)
Magazine	3148	.08(.265)	Text message	3335	.011(.398)	Text message	3749	.074(.262)
Internet	3145	.05(.208)	Internet	3335	.116(.427)	Internet	3749	.123(.325)
Documents	3146	.02(.151)						

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[4] As for the question "Which channel do you use to obtain political information?", the survey in 2002 allowed for multiple responses, while 2011 and 2015 were both single-choice items, so the total of the means in 2002 is larger than one.

Table 5 reveals that, from most to least important: the channels that respondents use to access political information are television (TV), newspapers, other people, radio/broadcasts, magazines, Internet, and documents in 2002. In 2011, however, the use of the Internet rises from the sixth channel to the second channel for political information. In 2015, TV was still the strongest media for citizens to get political information, meanwhile the role of cell phone text messaging rose, and became the third most popular political information source, even more important than newspapers, personal contact, and radio. It should be noted that although Internet use has grown rapidly in the past year, the percentage of people using the Internet for political information has not increased much, from 11.6% in 2011 to 12.3 % in 2015.

Table 6. The frequency of Internet use for political information and expression

	Practically never	A few times a year	A few times a month	Once or twice a week	Several times a week	Everyday	N
Find political information	33.9	3.1	8.2	10.3	14.7	29.8	2207
Express political opinion	82.2	3.6	4.9	3.7	3.0	2.6	2207

Meanwhile, table 6 shows that the people who use the Internet or social media networks, such as official websites, BBS, chatrooms, blogs, Weibo, WeChat, and other platforms to find information about politics and government every day is only 29.8%, while 33.9% never use any of the Internet channels or social media networks to get political information. The situation is even worse when it comes to political opinions expression via the Internet or social media networks. The percentage of respondents who never use the Internet or social media networks to express their opinions about politics or government through the various platforms including retweeting, endorsing, or disapproving of others' comments was 82.2%.

According to the above data, the rapid development of the Internet has not improved China's democratization development, and the traditional media, such as government-controlled TV, is still the main channel for most people to obtain political information. It is undeniable that with the popularization of mobile phones and the gradual use of social media such as WeChat and app platforms for the dissemination of political information, the

government is facing greater challenges in information control. However, the Supreme People's Court of China proposed in 2013, "If the same defamation information has been clicked on or viewed more than 5,000 times or forwarded more than 500 times, it shall be deemed as a serious defamation and shall be criminalized." The promulgation of the law also limits the public's political participation to the controllable scope of the government. At the same time, the ratio of people who read, listen to, or watch political news is decreasing. More people in China now are much more indifferent about political issues than 15 years ago.

Control Variables

According to existing studies about the influence factors of political participation, I include the following control variables in our OLS models.

Political efficacy. The political efficacy is measured in this paper by the following three questions: (1) I think I have the ability to participate in politics (strongly disagree=1, strongly agree=4); (2) Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on. (Strongly agree=1, strongly disagree=4); (3) People like me don't have any influence over what the government does (strongly agree=1, strongly disagree=4). The arithmetic mean of these three questions is the value of political efficacy (M=2.22, SD=.43).

Political trust. Political trust reflects the cognition, emotion and attitudes of the public toward the political system and authority, and all these political psychology variables determine whether citizens take part in political participation and what form of actions they choose (Orum & Dale, 2009; Huang, Ao, Lu, Ip, & Kao , 2017). The measurement for political trust is to ask respondents the extent to which they trust various institutions, including national government, local government, the courts, CCP, National Congress, the police, government officers, and the People's Liberality Army. I recoded their answers with completely untrustworthy=1, completely trustworthy=6, and then got the arithmetic value of these scores, the higher value meaning the higher trust (M=4.55, SD=.81).

Political discussion. Although some researchers advocate political discussion as an important form of political participation (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000), political discussions between family members or friends in our model are considered as a channel for political information not political participation, because it is not a method to influence politician's decision-making directly. I assume that political discussions between family or friends can increase the utility and existence of the effect of political communication, which

can make people better understand political information, help generate their political predisposition after comparing different views, and even help put it into action accordingly (by, for example, participating in political meetings and voting). To measure political discussion, I use the question "When you get together with your family members or friends, how often do you discuss political matters?" (Never=1, Frequently=3; M=1.55, SD=.61).

As an information source, the grapevine is also put in the OLS model. I test the grapevine by the question: "In the past month, have you heard anyone talk through the grapevine about economics, politics or society?" (No=0, Yes=1; M=.36, SD=.48).

Political interest. "How interested would you say you are in politics?" (Not at all interested=1; Very interested=4, M=2.17, SD=.85)

Frequency of political news: "How often do you follow news about politics and government? (Never=1; Everyday=6; M=3.64, SD=1.75).

In addition, I controlled for selected demographic variables as follows: type of household registration (Rural=0, Urban=1; M=.25, SD=.43); gender (Female=0, Male=1; M=.51, SD=.50); age (M=42.84;SD=15.98; range=18-94); political affiliation (CCP=1, others=0; M=.09, SD=.29); and education by level (Primary school and below=1, University and above=5; M=2.81, SD=1.30).

Models of Correlation Between Media Use and Political Participation Experience

Table 7. Models of Correlation Between Media Use and Political Participation

	Model I	**Model II**	**Model III**	**Model IV**	**Model V**
Constant	.297(.345)	.533(.331)	.540(.347)	.526(.331)	.576(.332)†
Channels for Acquiring Political News					
Domestic TV news	.091(.084)				
Foreign TV news	.191(.400)				
Radio/Broadcast		.568(.269)*			
Newspaper/Magazine			.423(.236)†		
Domestic Internet				-.181(.109)†	
Oversea Internet				-.498(.530)	
Text message/WeChat/ Weibo					-.217(.126)†
Political discussion	.159(.037)***	.155(.037)***	.153(.039)***	.155(.037)***	.157(.037)***
Grapevine	.266(.077)***	.258(.076)***	.258(.079)***	.254(.076)***	.260(.076)***
Frequency of political news	.072(.027)**	.074(.027)**	.070(.028)*	.075(.027)**	.074(.027)**
Frequency of Internet use	-.050(.016)**	-.055(.016)***	-.047(.016)**	-.048(.016)**	-.050(.016)**
Political interest	.125(.048)**	.124(.048)**	.128(.050)*	.127(.048)*	.124(.048)**
Political trust	-.154(.091)	-.119(.086)	-.062(.095)	-.118(.086)	-.123(.086)
Political efficacy	.297(.084)***	.283(.083)***	.257(.087)**	.279(.083)***	.274(.083)***
Type of household registration	-.355(.088)***	-.354(.087)***	-.364(.090)***	-.354(.087)***	-.362(.087)***
Gender	.289(.071)***	.284(.070)***	.290(.073)***	.290(.070)***	.283(.070)***
Age	.013(.003)***	.013(.003)***	.015(.003)***	.012(.003)***	.012(.003)***
Educational level	-.035(.045)	-.041(.044)	-.068(.046)	-.032(.044)	-.041(.044)
Political affiliation	.160(.048)***	.152(.046)***	.171(.048)***	.149(.046)***	.150(.046)***
N	2315	2377	2231	2377	2377
Max VIF	2.205	2.075	2.040	2.205	2.136
R-square	.115	.111	.114	.111	.110

Note: *†p<.10.*p<.05.**p<.01.***p<.001*

Discussion

Relationship Between the Channels for Acquiring Political Information and Participation

Based on the variables in the OLS model, the channels Chinese people get political information from have a very weak influence on their political participation. Thus, the validity of H4, the media channels of access to political news affect the political participation experience, was not supported by the data. From the model, there is no statistical significance for domestic TV news, foreign TV news, overseas Internet, or personal contact; and a very weak significance ($p<0.1$) in newspapers, cell phone text messages and domestic Internet. Among other variables, radio and newspaper have a positive influence on political participation; and Internet and social networks such as text message, WeChat, and Weibo play a negative role in political participation. That is perhaps because the main form of political participation in China now is voting and most of the elections are mobilized by officials, who have a close relationship with the government controlled media, such as newspapers and radio.

Usually interpersonal communication (such as interpersonal political discussion and grapevine) lead to the highest level of participation, followed by organizational communication; the least important predictor of participation is mass media (Shao, 2005). This research also shows the positive statistical significance of political discussion between families or friends and grapevine to political participation (H2). Compared to traditional mass media whose audiences are not distinct, interpersonal communication is based on an actual interpersonal interaction network without government supervision. Further, the information can be spread and make political mobilization easier through face-to-face communication. Political discussions between families or friends and grapevine as unofficial channels for the dissemination of political information are effective methods to get information and raise political interest. The data support H2, and is consistent with the analysis of the data collected by the China General Social Survey (CGSS), which proposed that interpersonal communication could enhance social capital which is related to political participation (Zeng, 2018).

Impacts of Frequency of Access to Political Information and Internet Use on Participation

Exposure to political news has a statistically significant relationship with political participation no matter what kind of channel the respondents choose, which supports H1, which stated that the frequency of political news exposure, an important indicator of

political information obtained, has a positive effect on political participation experience. According to empowerment theory, political news exposure promotes the acquisition of political knowledge and provides a basic resource for participation, to follow the news about politics and government, the sense of immersion (involvement), and on the whole advances political participation. Compared to where one gets political information, how often one gets it plays a much more important role in political participation.

The frequency of Internet use has a negative impact on the political participation experience, despite a large number of other studies that indicate the Internet has become an agent for expressing political pressure and political mobilization (Tang & Huhe, 2014; Wang & Ji, 2017). This further clarifies the relationship between Internet use and political participation (H3). Because the use of the Internet in China mainly focuses on nonpolitical information, not political knowledge, it has little impact on political awareness or political participation. In contrast, Internet use verified the time extrusion effect. Because of the limits of one's time and effort, the more people were involved in using the Internet, the less possibility for their political participation.

The control variables in the statistical models show that political interest and political efficacy positively influence the political participation experience, while there is no statistical relationship between political trust and participation experience. As for the demographic variables, rural people, males, and elderly people have a high participation rate. Because the two most prominent types of political participation experience (voted in unit/village election and participated unit/village campaign meeting or rally) measured in this study were related to voting in unit/village election in which only local residents who live in the rural places get involved. Thus, the higher participation rate of rural people found in this study might be related to the measurement of political participation experience; and whether the urbanization in China nowadays may decrease the political participation deserves more observation. For the positive relationship between age and participation, on the one hand, we can say the older generation in China is more active than the younger; and the older people have much more time to have a political participation experience. In addition, CCP members tend to engage in political issues.

Conclusion

Political participation in China is quite different from the Western countries where voting is the most important participation activity. In China, multiple forms of participation coexist, though most members of the public have only participated in fewer than three types, and

they show obvious structural characteristics, such as high level of contact participation, low levels of communication and contentious participation (Xiao & Yi, 2016).

This research does not show that the new media has replaced traditional media, but it supports the integrative development of mass media. Even though the Internet and text messages have become important sources for political news, the traditional media, such as TV, still play a crucial role in political learning and participation. More and more traditional media have begun to issue electronic editions and go hand-in-hand with the Internet. In addition, the impact of the Internet on political participation is not very positive. Although the Internet can connect the whole world, the social contexts and ideology lived by the netizens vary, so the Internet's influence on politics depends on society and culture.

Mobile phone communication is a favorable tool for accessing abundant information and for safeguarding personal rights. Censorship and control from authority is harder than it is for TV and broadcast. The new media have the potential to change political behavior to a certain extent, but the initial outcome of information integration is to intensify social tensions (Meyrowitz, 1985). Mass media are not democratic or anti-democratic by nature; their contribution to political life depends on the laws and the users' socioeconomic background.

Special attention is needed for the study of correlations between media use and political participation where existing political predispositions and awareness are key intermediate variables. As a main form of mass communication and a principle role in political socialization, media facilitates political participation not only by diffusing political information, political knowledge, and political attitude and values; social media enables ordinary people to express their own opinions and attitudes on political affairs, as a means of political participation. However, the practical effect of Internet use on political participation within the Chinese society is still controversial. The uniqueness of media use and political participation in China explains the complex relationship between media use and political participation. It is important to notice that after controlling for variables including political interest, political trust, political efficacy, and other variables, the impact of the frequency of political news exposure on political participation is much more stable than the channel for political news. In addition, notions about the dangers of Internet-driven empowerment and revolution in China should be seriously rethought.

It should be noted that this study did not analyze the specific kinds of political participation, such as electoral and non-electoral participation (Wang, 2013; Xiao & Yi, 2016). This does not mean that the complexity of political participation in China can be ignored. In fact, the diversity of news and political information from traditional media such

as newspapers, TV, and radio, and the new social media, such as text messaging and social networks, may shape different kinds of political participation, which should be detailed in follow-up research.

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