China's Authoritarian Regime in the Online Space: Reconsideration of the Concept of "Democratization via Social Media" in Academic Research on China

Ray Ting-Chun Wang

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media in political deliberation generated great excitement in media research, with much research dedicated toward assessing the role of social media in authoritarian regimes. Traditionally, the theory of democratization has dominated this area of research, with many claiming that new media technologies such as social media would lead not only to a more diverse range of viewpoints, better quality deliberation between politicians and constituents, but also to democratization. However, the emergence of "authoritarian deliberation" in the research on China has raised questions about whether democratization is really the only outcome as social media become a more integral part of the political deliberation process in authoritarian regimes. This study conducted a bibliometric review and VOSviewer visualization of the key research on "e-government," "authoritarian deliberation," and "social media" in China. The findings indicate that, according to the academic research on social media, China is resilient to the disruption of social media and that political deliberation may not depend upon "democratization." This study calls for a reconfiguration of the theoretical discussion around online political deliberation in authoritarian regimes, and a reconceptualization of important factors in the political deliberation of these authoritarian countries enabled by social media and of the definition of "quality" political discussion in these contexts.

KEYWORDS: China, Authoritarian deliberation, Social media, E-government, Civil society

Ray Ting-Chun Wang, Ph.D. (raywang1@tu.ac.th) is a lecturer at Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University.

Introduction

The rise of social media in political deliberation generated great excitement in media research, with much research dedicated toward assessing the role of social media in "democratizing" authoritarian regimes. Traditionally, the theory of democratization has dominated this area of research, with many claiming that new media technologies such as social media would lead to more diverse range of viewpoints, better quality deliberation between politicians and constituents, and democratization (Shirky, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005). However, the emergence of "authoritarian deliberation" in academic research on China has raised questions about whether democratization is really the only outcome as social media become a more integral part of the political deliberation process in authoritarian regimes (Morozov, 2009; Mackinnon, 2008; Mackinnon, 2011; He, 2014). To seek answers for these questions, this study conducted a bibliometric review and VOSviewer visualization of the key research on "e-government," "authoritarian deliberation," and "social media" in China.

Literature review

The topic of governance in China has caused much debate and controversy in recent memory. China has often been criticized for a government that routinely silences dissent and opinions that are openly critical of the ruling party (Corrales and Westhoff, 2006; Mackinnon, 2008; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013). With the rise of the internet, some scholars have speculated that the disruptive nature of the internet and social media could fundamentally change authoritarian regimes and lead to democratization (Shirky, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005). However, scholars such as Meng (2010) suggested this line of thinking implied China was an "inferior other" that must meet Western-centric ideals of governance. Jiang (2010) further noted that democracy does not need to be a precursor for a government to become more legitimate in the eyes of its people. Despite these clashing viewpoints on how the internet has disrupted the Chinese political deliberation space, there has been very little research done that has looked at the knowledge base on the role of social media in formulating government policies and regulations. Though there have been clear instances of government regulation, censorship, and deletion practices (Tsui, 2003; Haddow, 2008; MacKinnon, 2009; Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012; Fu, 2013), there have also been other instances where a public sphere has formed online to discuss important issues to the Chinese people and the government (Yang & Calhoun, 2003; Hassid, 2012; Sullivan, 2014).

Research reviews have been done in the past, as Herold and De Seta (2015) conducted a study on the past 20 years of China's internet research, and noted that though there had been quite a few research studies, there were still some gaps and unanswered questions. For example, they noted that Kluver and Yang (2005) stated that there was no systematic way of studying the internet in China, and that most research was preoccupied with the political transformation of China. Their findings informed the research design and analysis of

this study, as they noted that not much substantive research had been done to address the ongoing questions regarding the Chinese internet, and the same themes and hypotheses kept being repeated over and over. Therefore, this study explores this issue again to determine what progress has been made since 2015.

This research reviewed the most cited literature in the area of social media and Chinese governance, analyzing key findings from the literature about how social media has disrupted and changed Chinese governance, and if China has really stifled important collective expression that could impact the well-being of Chinese citizens. This review was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the key areas of interest on social media and political deliberation in China?
- RQ2: What has research concluded about the impact of social media on political deliberation in China?
- RQ3: What have been the key recommendations for further research?

Method

A variety of methods were used to find relevant data for this study. For this review of the research, a SCOPUS database was used to initially collect relevant citation information. Search terms such as “China,” “social media,” and “political deliberation,” were used to further refine and add relevant articles to the database. Research for relevant articles was also done on Google Scholar to determine if any relevant articles were left out.

VOSviewer was used to create a map of nodes that traced the connections among these nodes based on meta-data such as citations and co-citations. Van Eck and Waltmann (2009) noted a couple key features of VOSviewer that made it ideal for this kind of research. Firstly, the size of each node would be able to indicate how many times the document or author has been cited by other research. The more times a document or author has been cited, the larger the node appears in the visual graph, indicating their authority in the field. The proximity between the nodes of authors could also indicate how similar their research is based on the meta-data. A third element VOSviewer can visually display is the location of the nodes, as the more centrally located a node is in the graph, the more connected it is to the rest of the research, which is another indicator of the prominence of the document or author in the research area. Finally, the color of each cluster is one other key consideration to keep in mind, as the colors indicate similarities among different researchers and documents (Van Eck & Waltmann, 2009).

In summary, Zupic and Cater (2015) stated that bibliometric research methods utilize a quantitative approach to describing, evaluating and monitoring research, and that they are a useful tool for determining the influential research in a given research field without subjective bias. Therefore, a bibliometric review was used for this study, in which peer-reviewed research articles in English regarding authoritarian deliberation

and social media in China were selected. They included any articles about Chinese political deliberation and social media, as well as comparative studies between China and other countries. The search terms used are included below:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("China") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("media") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("politics")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2015) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2014) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2013) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2012) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2011) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2010) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2009) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2008) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2007) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2006) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2005) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2004) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2003) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2002)) (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("China") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("new media") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("politics")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("China") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("policy") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social media"))

After the initial search was completed, the articles added to the database were independently reviewed to ensure that the articles were relevant to China, social media or internet, and specifically referenced political deliberation. Any articles that were not related to all of these key areas were excluded from the database. The search included articles that may not have referenced China specifically, but did reference Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. Moreover, any comparative studies that mentioned China and also substantively discussed social media and the impact of the internet on political deliberation were included to see if there was any critique of China's authoritarian regime and the role of the internet within the political deliberation of the country.

In terms of exclusion, the search narrowed the timeframe to 2002 to the present when the internet and social media started to emerge in China. As the focus of the research was to specifically assess the research on the role of social media in political deliberation in China, it did not make much sense for the review to start from an earlier time period such as 1980s or 1990s as quite a bit of research has already been done on China's political tradition and authoritarian governance during these two decades. It was therefore concluded that the inclusion of such research could have possibly buried more relevant research about the role of the internet and social media in political deliberation, which was the primary objective of this research.

There was also an issue of what regions to include, as territories such as Hong Kong and Taiwan are technically under Mainland China's jurisdiction. For this research, Hong Kong was included as it is technically considered a part of China and is controlled by the mainland Chinese government as evidenced by the most recent Hong Kong elections (Bush & Whelan-Wuest, 2017). Taiwan, on the other hand, was not included because even though the territory is technically still a part of China, the Taiwan government operates independently of

mainland China, and does not answer to the mainland in terms of its policies or elections (Wong, 2018).

Due to the fact that SCOPUS filters are imperfect and do occasionally include articles that are not related to the topic, all article abstracts were further reviewed for relevance after it was noted that some of the article titles or abstracts did not seem relevant to the topic. For example, although there was one article on authoritarian regimes in the database, the researcher discovered that this research was focused on Laos (Creak & Barney, 2018), and therefore had to be excluded. Upon further review, it was discovered that about 75 articles were not relevant to search parameters previously outlined, so these articles were excluded from the final analysis. In all, 605 articles were included in the database.

Data extraction

Collection of records from SCOPUS was compiled into one database due to the relatively small number of articles found. One .csv (comma-separated) file was downloaded that included data such as affiliations, article titles, keywords, abstracts, and other citation data for further analysis. The csv file was later copied so that further analysis could be done using Tableau and Microsoft Excel, which generated both the charts and figures for this research from the initial SCOPUS database.

Data Analysis

The research first analyzed the number of publications per year as well as the general topic of the publications in each year. Rauchfleisch (2017) did a similar study on the co-citations of research on the public sphere, and as part of his analysis, was able to map out the key topics in public sphere research and the number of articles on each topic that had been published over a period of time. His method was slightly adapted for this research, because although the number of publications per year was important, it was also important to note the number of citations of each type of article per year. Within academic research, the number of publications published by an author is not necessarily as significant as the number of citations an article can receive (Zupic & Cater, 2015), and citations are considered the true indicator of research impact within the field. Therefore, the number of citations for articles in each area of interest was also added to the analysis to see which area of interest or topic was the most cited.

In terms of areas of interest, there were three key areas that were noted in the initial analysis. First of all, the censorship and manipulation area of interest was defined as any research that descriptively discussed either the censorship practices of the Chinese government, or any attempts to manipulate public opinion as had been noted by previous research (Haddow, 2008; Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012; Fu, Chan, & Chau, 2013; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017). The second area of interest focused on the civil society of China. The main difference between this group and the censorship and manipulation area of interest was the fact that these studies focused mainly on either the power struggle between citizens and government, or the debate and discussion on

politics between the two sides. The third area of interest was the e-government implementation. In this area, the studies discussed the nature of e-government initiatives in China, such as government websites, as well as how governments used microblogs or other social media to engage with people online. This area of interest focused more on how government had been trying to utilize ICT's for their own governance.

After tracking general trends in the topic of the research and number of publications per year, the study analyzed the co-citations to trace its underlying theory. Co-citation analysis would tabulate the number of times two articles have been cited in the same article, and if two articles are cited numerous times in different research, it is safe to assume that they are on similar topic and have more influence upon other scholars in the field (Zupic & Cater, 2015). Zupic and Cater (2015) also noted that doing citation analysis in this way could mitigate research bias and provide a reliable empirical way of finding the most authoritative research in a field. However, they also noted that citation analysis usually required a given research paper to receive a few citations from other articles in order to gain weight in the analysis, which meant that older publications would have an advantage over newer un-cited publications (Zupic & Cater, 2015). Therefore, with many researchers concentrating on the theory of online political deliberation (Shirky, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002; Macintosh, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Yildiz, 2007) it was important to also use the co-citation analysis to identify who were the key researchers. One final note is that co-citation analysis in this study compiled all of the most co-cited works, regardless of whether they were journal articles, books, or official reports, to determine where the journal articles were citing their information, whether it was from the popular press or from other academic research.

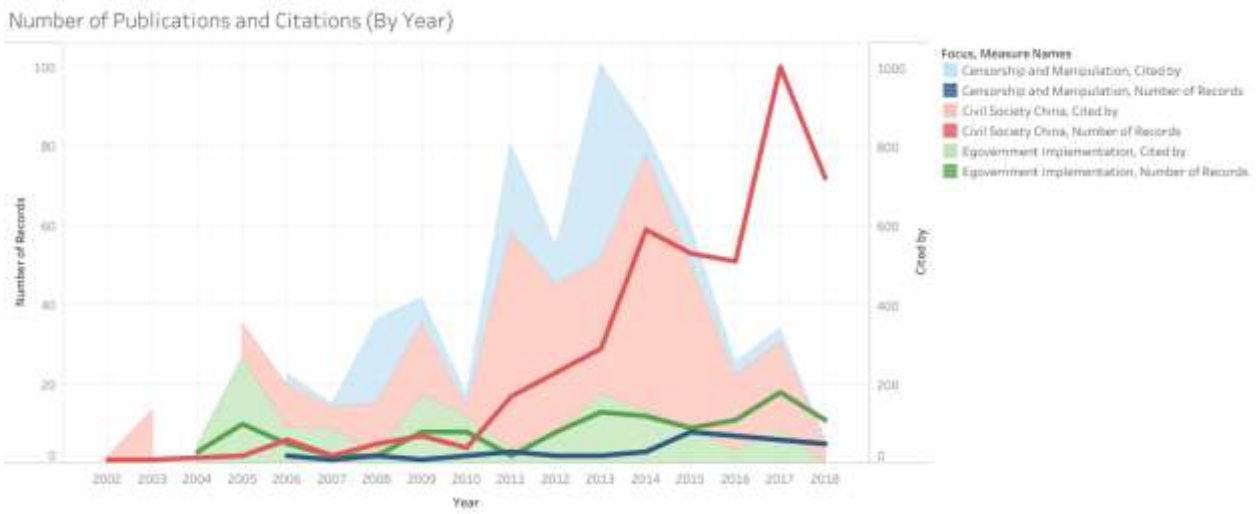
Within the co-citation analysis, document co-citation analysis (DCA) and author co-citation analysis (ACA) were used. Document co-citation analysis would show the prominent articles that were frequently cited by two articles. However, due to the fact that multiple authors could be the authors of one document that was highly cited, it could also mean that they were displayed more prominently than other authors who had published more research articles in the field over a longer period of time. Therefore, ACA was also utilized to see if there were other prominent authors. White and McCain (1998) had noted that ACA was an effective way of mapping out consensus among scholars in the field as to who are the influential authors. It is also believed that both DCA and ACA analysis would serve as a reliability test for the citation analysis because these methods would tabulate the number of times an article is found in the references page of all articles in the database, enabling any research that might have been accidentally excluded to still appear in the analysis.

After co-citation analysis was completed, the co-cited authors and documents were then compared with the most cited documents and authors to assess which authors had the most authority in terms of

number of citations and references. As previous research has noted that prior scholarship has had a tendency to be very critical of the censorship practices and to discount the vibrant deliberation among Chinese netizens (Jiang, 2010; Meng, 2011; Qiang, 2011), it was important for this study to identify the research focus of the key authors and documents.

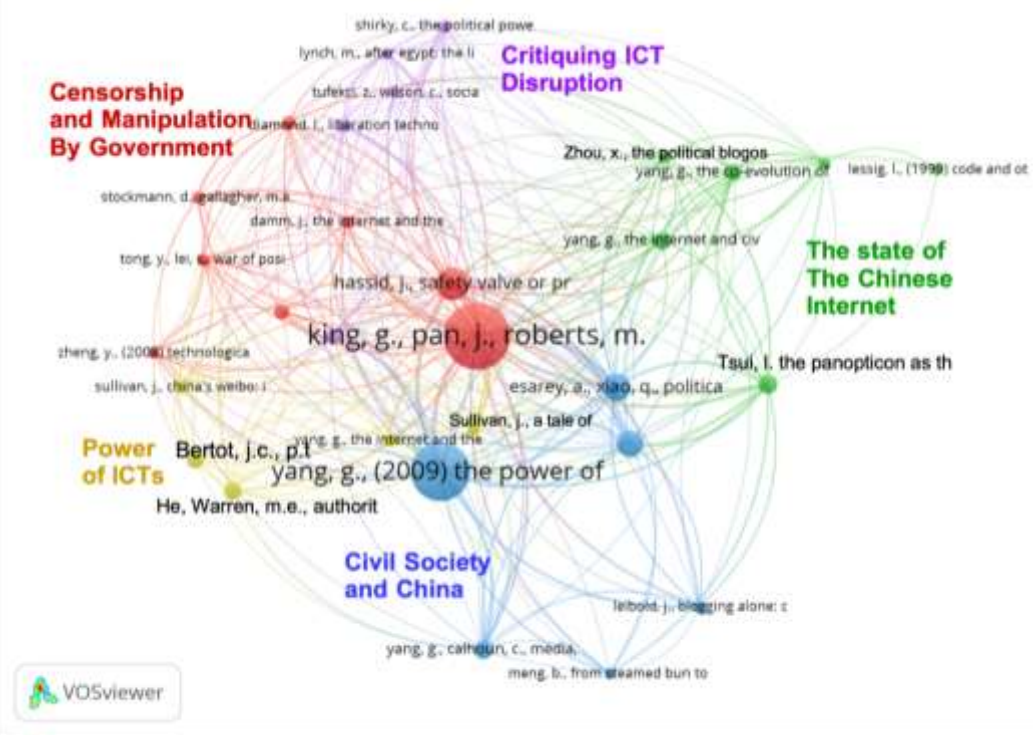
Results and Findings

Figure 1: Number of Publications and Citations (By Year)



An initial analysis of publication trends indicated the development of three key areas of interest (Figure 1). In terms of publications, the number of publications that substantively discussed civil society in China had been increasing per year, while the number of publications on censorship and manipulation or e-government implementation had stayed relatively flat. This did not mean necessarily that issues such as censorship or manipulation were not considered important, but could have indicated that only so much research could be done on censorship practices in China. What is more significant however, was the fact that there was a huge spike in the number of citations within the censorship and manipulation area around 2013, which indicates that some notable findings within that area of the research in the field were well-received by the academic community. In contrast, although the number of articles in civil society went up, the number of citations of this civil society research actually decreased. To better understand these findings, citation and co-citation analysis were then conducted to gain more insights from the data. VOSviewer mapping yielded some interesting results.

Figure 2: Co-Cited Documents (n=605, Threshold 10 citations, 30 documents)



Five areas of interest from the DCA analysis were plotted through VOSviewer as evidenced by Figure 2. The red cluster featured articles discussing how the Chinese government was attempting to manipulate and control political discourse in China. King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) had the most prominent article in this graph. Their research discussed how the Chinese government allowed for criticism but also selectively censored certain posts to silence collective action. Damm (2007) noted a similar trend in that the Chinese government shut down many critical websites, but left many others untouched. Hassid (2012) further discussed that this manipulation was in a highly contested space in that the Chinese government did try to selectively control the discourse, and Chinese netizens did have opportunities to drive issues into the political discussion. The prominent authors in this cluster noted that manipulation of political discourse by the Chinese government did occur, but did not prevail in every instance.

The yellow cluster featured documents that focused on the power of the internet in forming civil society within China, such as the power that citizens had with ICT's, and how authoritarian deliberation could be used to create a deliberative political environment in China (He & Warren, 2011). The blue cluster further elaborated on this by showing specifically how Chinese netizens could debate issues online through clever use of political spoofs to open up civic discussion (Meng, 2011), and that netizens had found

ways to express criticisms of the government without repression (Esarey & Qiang, 2008).

The green cluster featured interesting clashing viewpoints and could be defined as research on the overall state of civil society discussion online in China. Lessig's (1999) article on codes of cyberspace was a part of this cluster, which also featured specific case studies of political deliberation online in China (Zhou, 2009). Tsui (2003) article on the role of the internet actually summarized the state of disruptive nature of ICT's in China in that:

> "*Whether the internet turns out to be a technology of freedom or a technology of control, will be up to the people themselves, first and foremost. This will be no different for China than it will be for anywhere else*," (Tsui, 2003, p. 77).

The last interesting finding that actually reflected Tsui's comment on the nature of ICT's was the purple area of interest, which featured articles that were not specifically about China. Due to the fact that co-citation analysis extracts meta-data from relevant articles in the database on China's internet, it is significant that two of the articles in the purple area of interest were not about China, but actually about authoritarian countries impacted by the Arab Spring (Lynch, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Both articles criticized the idea that ICT's and social media had disrupted these regimes. In fact, the articles further concluded that the authoritarian regimes had some resilience to the disruption caused by ICT's. The purple cluster did also feature one western scholar, Clay Shirky (2011), who questioned the disruptive nature of ICT's and how the disruption had not necessarily improved political deliberation in democracies such as the United States.

From these findings, it was clear that the purple area of interest focused on critiquing the disruption of technology in political environments around the world. It is evident from the document co-citation analysis that the disruptive nature of ICT's was not absolute, but ICTs did, at times, have a significant influence on the nature of political deliberations. However, most of the co-cited documents criticized the assumptions that technology will lead to democratization or better, more deliberative, societies (Tsui, 2003; Meng, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). It is interesting to note that out of all of the clusters from Figure 2, none of the most co-cited articles discussed e-government implementation in great detail, which could explain the very low number of publications and citations in Figure 1. The final finding was that the areas of interest from the DCA analysis seemed to overlap in certain key areas, such as the rise of civil society and the censorship practices of the Chinese government. This overlap indicated that the DCA was not enough to clearly define the key areas of interest. Therefore, ACA analysis was then conducted to better define the key areas of interest.

Figure 3: Co-Cited Authors (n=605, Threshold 50 citations, 60 Authors)

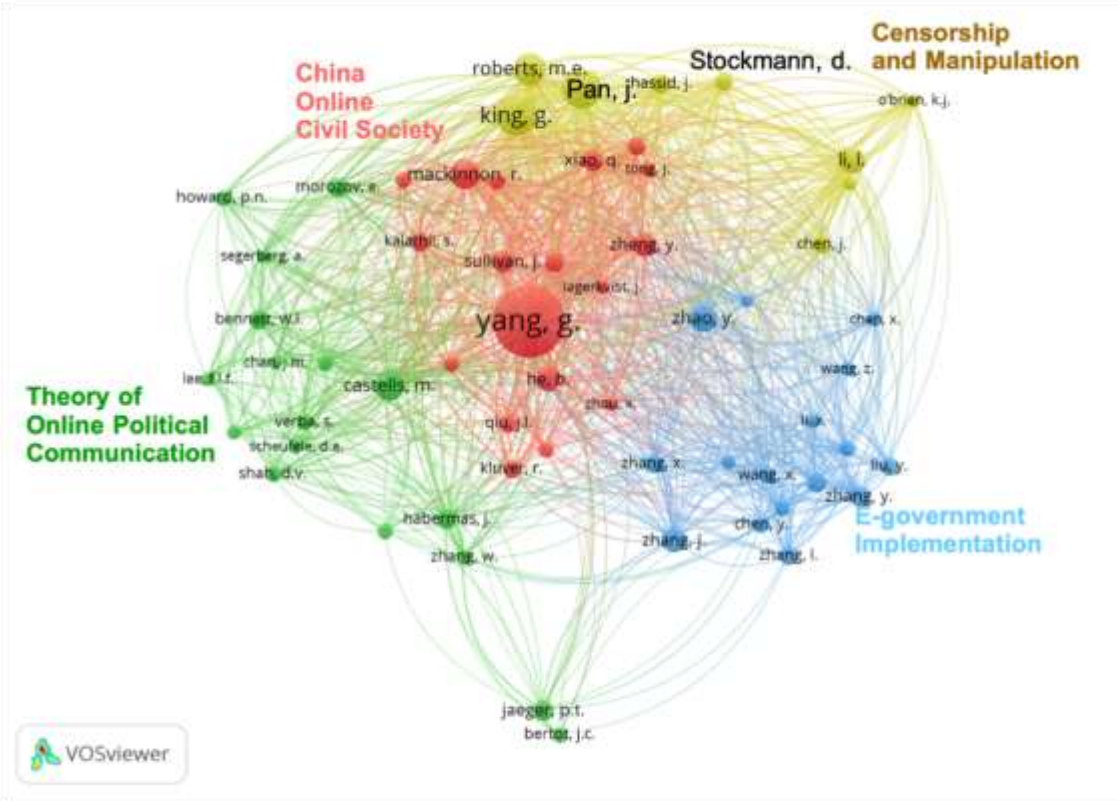


Table 1: Top 15 Co-Cited Authors

Rank	Author	Affiliation	Country	Citations	Total Link Strength	Topic
1	Guobin Yang	UPENN	China	423	4956	China Civil Society
2	Gary King	Harvard	USA	208	2731	Censorship and Manipulation
3	Jennifer Pan	Stanford U.	USA	204	2940	Censorship and Manipulation
4	Margaret E. Roberts	UC San Diego	USA	152	2183	Censorship and Manipulation
5	Rebecca MacKinnon,	Digital Rights Project	USA	142	1817	Censorship and Manipulation
6	Manuel Castells	USC	USA	137	1315	Networked Power
7	Yuezhi Zhao.	Simon Fraser University	China	120	1211	China Civil Society
8	li, l.	Chinese University of Hong Kong	China	114	1741	China Civil Society
9	Junhua Zhang	Shanghai Jiaotong University	China	110	930	E-government Implementation
10	Baogang He	Deakin University	China	107	854	China Civil Society
11	Yongnian Sheng	University of Singapore	China	105	1504	China Civil Society
12	Jonathan Sullivan	University of Nottingham	UK	95	1274	China Civil Society
13	Paul T. Jaeger	University of Maryland	USA	91	530	E-government Implementation
14	Xiao Qiang	UC Berkeley	China	85	1147	China Civil Society
15	Yipeng Zhang	Beijing Normal University	China	85	1051	China Civil Society

To add another element to the co-citation analysis, the key authors were studied to see if there were any other prominent authors that may not have had a highly co-cited article, but were still frequently mentioned in the research area (Figure 3). Authors were categorized not just by university affiliation, but also by country as it was presumed that the Chinese scholars would not only be prominent, but may also have a different focus than some of the western scholars. The top 15 co-cited authors (Table 1) were also compiled to better understand the size of the nodes in Figure 3. The green cluster featured

a number of western authors who had written about networked power online (Castells), the public sphere (Habermas) and e-government implementation around the world (Jaeger & Thompson, 2003), and was defined as the theory of online political communication area of interest that inspired the discussions on civil society and public sphere in China. The red cluster revealed that Guobin Yang was a key scholar, and with his position in the graph located closer to the center, it was clear that he had clear connections to the rest of the areas of interest in the graph. The red cluster also featured many authors whose work focused on the nature of internet disruption in the Chinese civil society, with one notable different focus (MacKinnon) as part of this area of interest. MacKinnon's attention was on the failure of the internet to democratize China (MacKinnon, 2008, 2009, 2011), and she happened to also be very closely located to the yellow cluster, which mainly featured articles on censorship and manipulation.

The yellow cluster featured King, Pan, and Roberts very prominently as the key co-cited authors (Table 1) in this cluster, and also featured Hassid (2012), who had written extensively about the rise of the blogosphere in China. Hassid (2012) did note that blogs in China had a different impact depending on the topic of debate, with the government trying to control discourse, and bloggers trying to "get ahead" of the government and start debates about various social issues. Hassid (2012) seemed to focus more on the general contestation of power between citizens and government online as opposed to focus exclusively on the government censorship issues. Stockmann was another author who discussed how commercial liberalization of the Chinese media did not necessarily mean that China was becoming more democratic, with the government still manipulating the Chinese people through the news reports messages that look impartial (Stockmann, 2010; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). It was clear that this cluster focused heavily on the censorship and manipulation tactics of Chinese government online, though there were a few scholars that discussed citizens' protest (O'Brien, Li, Chen), signifying some clashing views regarding manipulation and censorship of the Chinese government, with some implying this manipulation had a clear impact on Chinese people, while others stating that the Chinese people did have some agency.

The blue cluster mainly featured scholars who did actual case studies of either e-government implementation in China or citizen protests (Chen, 2012), and it was clear that the proximity of the author nodes to the yellow cluster (Chen, 2009) or green cluster (Zhang, 2012) of the authors indicated the different focus within this cluster. It should also be noted that this e-government implementation area of interest was a small but significant part of the research on online governance initiatives, but one that was not as well cited as the other clusters.

The research further proceeded to the analyze the most cited documents. The citation analysis also confirmed three focus areas: the civil society area of interest, the censorship area of interest, and the implementation area of interest. The civil

society area of interest described the rise of political deliberation in China's internet. It could have been pessimistic or optimistic, but it generally discussed the potential for civic discussion with the rise of ICT's in China. The censorship area of interest focused exclusively on how the Chinese government has been trying to use ICT's for their own benefit and legitimacy. Since many suggested that the networked authoritarianism was used to create a "mirage" of ruling party legitimacy (MacKinnon, 2008), they were pessimistic about the formation of civil society in China. A third but very small area of interest was the implementation area of interest discussing how China had been implementing e-government initiatives thanks to ICT's. It is interesting to note that out of the top-15 most cited documents, only two of the most cited documents focused on the implementation of ICT's in politics.

In terms of the most cited authors, King, Pan, and Roberts had the most citations of all authors. It is important to note however, that a majority of these citations came from two co-authored documents by these three scholars. One document analyzed how the government allowed diverse viewpoints but selectively censored posts to prevent collective expression (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013), and a more recent article described how the Chinese government had an "army" of Chinese netizens, named the "50-cent army," who were paid 50 cents per post to "flood" social media with nationalistic or patriotic postings to confuse and distract online discussions (King, Pan, Roberts, 2017). MacKinnon had also been very critical of the censorship practices in China, and discussed the need for China to allow for more freedom of expression (MacKinnon, 2008, 2009, 2011). Other scholars such as Fu, Chan, and Chau (2013) did research on how the Chinese government used registration systems to censor users. However, there were also authors that looked at the rise of civil society in the age of the internet (Yang) and had noted a deliberative turn in Chinese politics (He & Warren, 2011). Scholars such as Schäfer had also done research on multiple public spheres forming in China (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015).

These findings indicated that the censorship and manipulation research seemed to be a noteworthy topic within the field., However, it should not be discounted that there were numerous scholars that discussed the rise of an online civil society in China that was highly contested between the government and netizens. As was noted in the other analyses, authors who focused on the e-government or implementation area of interest made up a very small part of the highly cited research.

Discussion

Firstly, in addressing the first research question on the key areas within the academic research, it was evident from the study that there were three main areas of interest: censorship/manipulation by the government, civil society, and e-government implementation. They indicate that the impacts of social media on political deliberation in China are complicated. It is neither simply a story of government censorship, nor a story of democratization.

The government censorship area received quite a few citations, and many scholars (Jiang, 2010; He, 2011; He & Warren, 2014) noted the resilience of the Chinese authoritarian regime despite the fact that technology has "disrupted" other authoritarian regimes around the world. Much of the research in the censorship/manipulation area of interest presented a critical view of authoritarian deliberation in China, and did rightfully question the nature of the disruption of ICT technologies such as social media on the country, focusing on government controls and censorship practices (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012; Fu, Chan, & Chau, 2013; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017). However, research has not yet proved any causality or correlation between these controls and censorship practices and the behavior of the Chinese netizens in terms of their ability to debate and discuss issues. Nor did they definitively prove that the Chinese government had, in all cases, stifled expression of dissenting viewpoints or discounted the opinions of Chinese netizens. It is evident that there is growing number of research in the area of an online civil society in China, but the conclusions of this research are not necessarily clear yet. ICT implementation in government continues to be a distant third in terms of the research focus.

To answer the second research question about the conclusions, the research review indicated that social media has not led to democratization of China (Tsui, 2003; Jiang, 2010; Stockmann, 2010; He, 2011; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; He & Warren, 2014, King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Moreover, it was once believed that political deliberation was highly dependent on the freedom of expression and access to information, and that such freedom could lead to positive social change (Skirky, 2011). However, Shirky pointed out this instrumental approach is fundamentally wrong. Furthermore, Chadwick and May (2003) noted that freedom of speech and information do not automatically lead to effective political deliberation and policy proposals. Their research on e-government websites of democracies such as the USA and the United Kingdom noted these governments adopted a managerial approach in which they simply "efficiently delivered the information" to citizens rather than enabled citizens to participate or consult on political issues (Chadwick & May, 2003). Consequently, we should reassess our initial notions of what helps "stimulate" productive political deliberation that leads to effective policies. Does democratization really lead to better political outcomes? It should also be noted that research at this point must now be longitudinal in nature, and trace the deliberations online and the outcomes (if any) as policies are not always created and implemented "overnight," nor can the impact of these policies be effectively evaluated within a short period of time.

With regards to the third research question about the recommendations for further research, the work of King, Pan, and Roberts in particular, has presented some interesting theories to be tested further. For example, that the government allows criticism but prevents collective expression against the party (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013), and the

government uses a "50-cent army," in which online users are paid to distract discourse with a flood of positive pro-government postings (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017). Certainly, it needs to be determined whether or not these practices impact the nature of political discourse in the country. How has the government been so resilient with the rise of these potentially disruptive technologies? Does China's e-government implementation help ameliorate the disruption of the social media? These questions are very interesting and should be studied further.

Moreover, it is evident that more research should be done on more specific incidents and events in which government and citizens come together to debate and discuss issues (Yang & Calhoun, 2003; Zhou, 2009; Meng, 2011; Qiang, 2011; Sullivan, 2014) as opposed to looking at general political deliberation in China. A majority of the research within this review in fact noted the deliberativeness of Chinese netizens and their political critiques online (Esarey & Qiang, 2008, Jiang, 2010). Furthermore, research reviews in the field have called for further research on the Chinese internet (Herold & De Seta, 2015; Kluver & Yang, 2005). Herold and De Seta (2015) noted in their updated research review that the same themes and hypotheses continue to be repeated since Kluver and Yang's study back in 2005, and current research still has similar issues. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be more specific in analysis of political deliberation related to individual cases of political significance and must be more nuanced.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First of all, this research only focused on political deliberation in China in peer-reviewed English journals. It was possible there were a few reputable articles written in Chinese that were excluded, and it would be interesting for future research to include these articles. Secondly, due to the fact that this was a bibliometric review that emphasized on research citations, this meant that some of the more recent research might have been discounted. It may be fruitful for future research to conduct a similar study to see if they receive more citations and co-citations in the future. This research did not attempt to make any value judgments on the social media practices or e-government implementation of the Chinese government, and was only meant to serve as a guide to the knowledge base of authoritarian deliberation in China since 2002.

Finally, while it is entirely possible that some relevant articles were left out, it is believed that this research not only has presented some of the key research results and that co-citation analysis was able to highlight key authors and works not included in the database. It also pointed out the gaps in the research that should be addressed, and help scholars better understand the nature of academic research of political deliberation in China so that future research will be stimulated to analyze how governments, even in authoritarian regimes, can nurture and foster political deliberation that leads to effective policies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that academic research on online political deliberation in China has focused on how Chinese regime has responded to the disruption of social media, and that substantive political deliberation may not depend upon "democratization." This study calls for a reconfiguration of the theoretical discussion around online political deliberation in authoritarian regimes, and a reconceptualization of the definition of "quality" political discussion in these contexts.

With the current controversies in Hong Kong (Schwartz, 2019), and new protests over a proposed extradition law of fugitives (Zhang, Choi & Lum, 2019), there are numerous opportunities to more deeply analyze online political discourse about specific events in China. Future research should reconsider political deliberation and link deliberation with substantive offline actions through policies within societies under authoritarian rule. It is also recommended that future research focus on studying political deliberation on a more "micro-level" rather than a "macro-level," as this research will be able to help us better understand the complexities of the online political deliberation in China and how it may impact offline events.

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