The Chinese Government’s Responses to Use of the Internet

Eunju Chi

This article examines the effect of the Internet on politics in China. Specifically, it suggests that the relationship between the Internet and political change in China is conditioned by the government’s strategic responses based on the national interest. Research regarding the effect of the Internet on politics in China needs to take into account the government’s responses to diverse types of online issues, here categorized under politics, society, and nationalism. The article examines how the Chinese government’s responses vary by issue type. The two existing theories—mobilization theory and reinforcement theory—do not offer sufficient explanation of the Chinese government’s responses to specific issues. Keywords: Internet in China, online participation, mobilization theory, reinforcement theory, nationalism in China.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) has brought about a change in politics. The proliferation of Internet services in particular provides a new arena for political participation. Because the Internet enables people to access a wide range of political information, ICT leads to more political participation; informed people are more participatory, and Internet features reduce obstacles to gathering information and holding discussions. On this topic, Rheingold (2002) asserts that the Internet stimulates the development of democracy by providing opportunities for public participation and citizen engagement in politics. Arterton argues that the Internet enables direct democracy, exploring the development of public issues through technology (Arterton 1987). During the period 2010–2011, some countries in the Middle East have experienced regime changes collectively called the Arab Spring. Citizens who were disappointed with their political leaders expressed their opinions on the Web and assembled protests. These revolutions are good examples
that ICT has led to political participation. Some scholars, however, offer different explanations for the Internet’s impact on democracy, suggesting that the development of the Internet not only gives people a new chance to access political information but also gives the government a new method for governing. Along this line, Bimber (1998) and Davis (1999) empirically find that only attentive people and traditionally influential groups are powerful in cyberspace. In other words, the Internet does not cause power changes from the power holder to the people. In addition, ICT enables the political authority to screen the information flow and censor the contents of the Web. If a government has the intent to control information, the Internet enables that control. An authoritarian regime like China’s has a strong motivation to control information and censor the activities of the people. After the Arab Spring began in 2010, some dissidents in China posted their opinions on the Internet, urging people to ask the government for democracy and human rights. However, the Chinese government censored the information and quickly detained some dissidents. In the 1980s China faced a new information era. Following Deng Xiaoping’s determination to develop a “socialist market economy,” the government promoted ICT as a strategic industry and tried to increase the deployment of Internet services to facilitate economic development. Because of China’s size and population, Internet penetration was comparatively low, but the number of users grew rapidly. In 2009 China became the country with the largest number of Internet users, about 338 million (CNNIC 2010).

Some changes have accompanied expanded provision of the Internet in China, suggesting the following two perspectives regarding the Internet and Chinese political change. First, scholars have cautiously predicted a gradual transition to democracy through increased Internet participation in China (Hung 2006; Lee 2004). Some have argued that the Chinese government has shown diverse responses to citizens’ online demands. Government responses include not only regulations, but also acceptance and accommodation of online demands (Yang 2003; Zheng 2008). This explanation comes from mobilization theory. Second, some scholars have suggested that because the Chinese government controls online participation and restricts Internet activities, the Internet will not result in any political change toward democracy (Hachigian 2002; Hughes