New Media and the New(s) Civil Society: A Multimethod Approach to Understanding China’s Growing Online Public Sphere

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In the three and a half decades since the beginning of reform and opening up (gaige kaifang), Chinese society has gone from periodic, turbulent upheaval to relative stability under China’s one-party political system. Parallel to this development are the steady growth of civil society organizations and increased state reliance on formal and informal citizen input on policy decisions. Looking beyond the traditional neo-Tocquevillian links between formal civil society and democracy, this thesis builds a case for the role of informal, digital civil society in building a public sphere. Research is driven by a two-part question: how large and how politically influential is the digital domain of China’s civil society compared with its physical counterpart? Through survey methods, analysis of publicized social media and NGO data, qualitative reading of political microblogs over six months, and a social network analysis of microbloggers, it is shown that participation in several Chinese social media platforms has surpassed participation in traditional civil society organizations and that digital communities on these platforms are highly political. Given the realities of censorship and legal reprisal, much political speech occurs through selected retransmission of news stories. Additionally, the social network analysis approach developed in this thesis proves useful for identifying members and leaders of ill-defined activist communities. The role of these informal digital communities in advancing government accountability in China cannot be ignored.

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