

# Parsing the effect of the internet on regime support in China

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**Parsing the Effect of the Internet on Regime Support in China****Abstract:**

Although the Internet is severely censored in China, the negative reporting and critical deliberations of political institutions and policy issues, especially those low-profile ones, have been abundant in the cyberspace. Given such a mixed pattern of online information, this study aims to investigate the complex effect of the Internet on regime support in China by parsing it into direct effect and indirect effect. It argues that the Internet erodes its viewers' overall support for the authoritarian regime indirectly by decreasing their evaluation of government performance. The findings from a mediation analysis of a Beijing sample support this argument. The result of one analysis also indicates that the direct effect of the Internet use on regime support can be positive. Such findings about the complex effect of the Internet help advance our understanding of both political and theoretical implications of the diffusion of the Internet in authoritarian countries.

*Keywords:* The Internet, Political support, Performance evaluation, Government censorship, Mediation analysis

## **Parsing the Effect of the Internet on Regime Support in China**

### **Introduction**

Scholars of Chinese politics have observed two patterns with regard to the state of the Internet in China. First, the Chinese government has imposed a tight control over the Internet (Boas, 2006; Kalathil and Taylor, 2003; Hassid, 2008; MacKinnon, 2008; Rodan, 1998; Taubman, 1998). Particularly, top officials and key political institutions that directly represent the regime have rarely been under the criticism on the Internet or its associated social media. Nor has the legitimacy of the party-state system been allowed to be openly challenged. Second, however, there is an increasing amount of negative information about the government accompanied with the fast diffusion of the Internet use (King et al., 2013; Lorentzen, 2014; Shirk, 2010; Tang and Huhe, 2014; Yang et al., 2014). Low-profile officials and institutions and various policy issues, especially those at the local levels, have become the frequent targets of negative reporting and critical deliberation on the Internet (e.g., Han, 2015).

Given such mixed information on the Internet, we are motivated to investigate how the exposure to the Internet shapes one's support for the regime. Is the censorship on high-profile politics or government proactive strategies effective in boosting regime support? To what extent and in what ways the online negative information of the government undermines regime support? What is the net effect of the Internet use in contemporary China? To answer these questions, we explore the complex effect of the Internet in an integrated way. We do so by parsing the political consequence of the Internet and analyzing the direct and indirect effect of the Internet use on regime support, defined as the general support for the political system. Specifically, we argue that while the Internet use may directly boost viewers' support for the

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regime as a whole due to the state control and intervention, every day's exposure to negative information of rank-and-file officials and institutions decreases their evaluation of government performance in specific policy areas. More importantly, the decreased evaluation of government performance in turn can erode the general support for the regime as a whole.

We test these hypothesized effects of the Internet through a mediation analysis of a newly collected data in greater Beijing area. The results of our analysis indicate that the direct effect of the political use of the Internet on the support for the political system is positive. However, at the same time, the use of the Internet indirectly decreases regime support through decreasing the public's evaluations of government performance. The total effect of the Internet on regime support is positive. These findings imply that, in the cyberspace of contemporary China, the challenges of the Internet and the responses of the government are in a race for the heart and soul of Chinese citizens. The government is getting the upper hand at the moment since its censorship strategies effectively help the regime win the support of the Internet viewers. Nevertheless, at the same time, the ever mounting challenges from the Internet to the daily operations of government and the limit of the state control indicate the detrimental influence of the Internet for the regime in the long run.

This study contributes to the extant literature in the following ways. First, our research extends the studies of the Internet in China, the largest authoritarian country. Different from previous studies, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Internet effect. In our study, different effects of the Internet use are presented in an integrated framework: the direct effect on regime support, the effect on evaluations of government performance, the indirect effect on regime support through changing performance evaluations, and the total

effect on regime support as the sum of the direct and indirect effect. In this framework, we specifically explore one mechanism through which the use of the Internet influences diffuse support for the authoritarian regime. We treat the evaluation of government performance as a mediating variable and explicitly submit this causal relationship to an empirical test.

Second, our study also contributes to the broader literature of the democratic potentials of the Internet in authoritarian environments. Recent years have witnessed a heated debate among optimists and pessimists. While the former believe that the diffusion of the Internet and its associated new media is able to undermine authoritarian rule through democratizing public sphere (Howard and Hussain 2011; Diamond 2010; Shirky 2011), the latter, disappointed by the failure of the Internet to promote political changes in such countries as China, Singapore, Iran, Russia, and Cuba, contend that the Internet can serve as another instrument for the government and help consolidate the authoritarian regime (Lorentzen 2014; MacKinnon 2011; Gunitsky 2015). Despite their disagreements, both camps focus mainly on large-scale events such as protests (Farrell 2012; Tang and Huhe 2014). Less frequently considered is how everyday use of the Internet changes people's attitude. As indicated in our study, the Internet may not have directly triggered political upheavals, but it can exacerbate people's "dissatisfaction with matters of economics or day-to-day governance" of the state (Lynch, 2011:5) and thus prepare the public for the future collective actions. Our research thus joins an emerging enterprise of exploring the more nuanced, but not less important, effects of the Internet (Lei, 2011; Tang et al., 2012; Tang and Huhe, 2014). Through a theoretical explication and an empirical test of the micro-process of the Internet, our study help identify the causal effects of the Internet that can support the argument about the effect the Internet on

political changes in authoritarian countries.

Moreover, by explicitly relating government performance evaluation to regime support, this study also advances the theoretical studies of political support in authoritarian countries. Scholars based in democratic countries tend to stress the distinction between object-specific support and general support for the political system (Easton, 1975; Gibson and Caldeira, 1992; Seligson and Muller, 1987). Our treatment and analysis of these two types of political support indicate that they are closely related in authoritarian countries. Due to the lack of separation of power and office alternation between competing parties, the dissatisfaction with specific government agencies can readily lead to the perception of the regime's overall incompetence and illegitimacy (Egorov et al., 2009). Our study, therefore, calls more attention to contextualizing political support in authoritarian countries.

### **Challenges of the Internet to Chinese Government**

In parallel with its fast economic growth, China has made a great progress toward a country with the largest Internet population in the past several decades. The number of the Internet users reached 618 million in total (i.e., 45.8% of the total population) by the end of 2013 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2014). In spite of a digital divide among different segments of the population (Guo and Chen, 2011; Tang et al., 2012), the access to the Internet and the importance of the Internet for obtaining information have increased tremendously for ordinary Chinese citizens. An important consequence of the fast diffusion of the Internet is the ever-increasing amount of negative reporting and criticism of the government.

The challenges of the Internet are two folded. First, the Internet expands the citizens'

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accesses to alternative information that would be unavailable otherwise. Due to the anonymity, fast speed, and low cost of communication of the Internet, the public are exposed to negative information about the government on an unprecedented scale. In the era of the new media in China, it is often the case that negative stories of the government such as the corruption scandals of officials, the brutality of law enforcement forces, and the injustice in judicial cases break out first on the Internet. The market competition for audience has driven the traditional media, especially the commercialized ones, to follow the critical reporting on the Internet (Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009). Online news stories and topics of the Internet discussions therefore are often quickly picked up by the traditional media and get national prominence (Zhou and Moy, 2007).

The second and more subtle challenge of the Internet is that it enables the critical deliberation of news events. The content of online discussion in China often quickly moves from specific events to general problems in the political, economic, and legal systems (Herold and Marolt, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; Tang and Yang, 2011; Yang 2009; Zhou, 2009), and many social and political events can lead to intensive online deliberation that is not to the benefit of the state. For instance, a case of official corruption can invoke a discussion of the authoritarian nature of the regime such as the lack of checks and balance in the political system. A tragic accident of a school bus can cause widespread criticism of the neglect of safety and well-being of ordinary citizens by the state. Even the success of a grand project of the government that is supposed to boost public support can be framed as negative on the Internet. For example, Tang and Huhe (2014) show that the recent success of recent China's space programs has been interpreted by many netizens as a mere "face project" of the regime

or even as a waste of precious resources that should have been used to improve the well-being of ordinary citizens.

### **Government's Responses to Challenges**

Authoritarian regimes around the world have tried to avoid the destabilizing effects of the Internet through sophisticated regulation and censorship (Boas, 2006; Harwit and Clark, 2001; Kalathil and Boas, 2001; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Rod and Weidmann, forthcoming; Rodan, 1998; Taubman, 1998). The Chinese government is particularly successful in this regard. The methods of censorship and control include requiring registration of real names, deleting unfavorable posts, blocking websites that contain sensitive information, and organizing an army of pro-government Internet commentators (e.g., "50 Cent Party"). Through employing such technological and institutional means, the authoritarian state of China has managed to make the growth of the Internet to promote economic development, technology innovation, and globalization and, at the same time, to reduce its harmful political effects.

A major characteristic of state control of the Internet in China is its selectivity. Most notably, King et al. (2013) contend that the state distinguishes between two kinds of information on the Internet, depending on whether it has a mobilizing potential for collective action. Relying on data collected from Chinese social media, King et al. (2013) show that posts related to political mobilization are more likely to be censored than posts of mere public criticisms. While King et al. (2013) treat all online criticisms without a potential for collective action indifferently<sup>1</sup>, an increasing body of literature suggests that the censorship strategy of the regime can be more sophisticated and tend to evolve over time (Liebman, 2011;

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<sup>1</sup> King et al. (2013), for instance, treat "Chinese government, its officials, and its policies" indifferently (p. 3) when discussing the public criticism on the new media.



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Lorentzen, 2014; Shirk, 2010; Shirk, 2011; Zhao, 2000; Zhao, 2012; Yang et al. 2014; Creemers, forthcoming). Particularly, these studies have shown that government differentiates between criticism against institutions and officials of different political significance and imposes censorship accordingly. Generally speaking, negative information on the Internet is mostly allowed to target at institutions and officials of lower political significance or solvable problems, and the direct criticism of the broader political system is censored to a greater extent, albeit not totally banned (Brady, 2008, p. 80; Lorentzen, 2014, p. 411). This selective strategy is metaphorically expressed as “swat flies but don’t beat tigers.” (Zhao, 2012; cf., Lorentzen, 2014, p. 411)

Following this censorship strategy, the government sets the limit of both critical reporting and negative framing. It thus protects some individuals and institutions while leaves others being exposed and criticized. As a result, top political leaders and key political institutions like the key apparatus of the center in Beijing and the Communist Party (CCP) itself are not subject to either negative reporting on facts or critical discussions. Information on leadership politics and internal deliberations within the party remain blacked out in the media and the Internet (Shirk, 2010). With few exceptions, no Internet outlets dare to reveal alternative information that would be deemed as subversive for the reign of the communist party or freely discuss top leaders and key institutions. Factual information and public deliberation of sensitive topics such as Tiananmen Incident are totally banned from the Internet; Individuals who openly challenges the fundamentals of CCP’s political leadership are subject to punishment.

Chinese government does not only set the boundaries for the Internet. It also takes

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proactive actions to portray a positive image of the regime and nurture public support for the system (Sullivan, 2014; Creemers, forthcoming). Like in the traditional media, on the Internet, CCP as an institution and the central government in Beijing are praised for their upright leadership in all aspects of social, economic, and political affairs. Whenever Internet users in China open a major website or a news application, they will see a portrait of top leaders up front, positive reporting of their leadership, and flattery comments posted by fifty cents party. For key news events at the national level such as a national party meeting and an important political decision, the government either hires commentators to post comments favorable towards party policies to shape public opinions or simply prohibits commenting on those events. As a result, both the news fact and the discussion about regime itself are largely positive in the cyberspace of China.

Politicians and institutions of lower political significance such as local governments and officials and agencies in charge of specific policy affairs, however, do not have such government protection on the Internet. Allowing negative reporting and public criticism against certain government agencies helps the Center monitor those agencies. With the increasing scope and intensity of social economic activities, it becomes increasingly difficult for the Center to assure its intentions, plans, and policies to be carried out rightfully through regular bureaucratic channels. The Internet, along with other media outlets, offers another channel through which the Center monitors the operation of government agencies, presses them to follow the directions of the Center, exposes rogue officials and institutions, and identifies the sources of potential public discontent. Through critical reporting, the Center gains alternative and mostly true information on the ground and thus acts timely in response to

exposed problems. In this sense, the Internet can improve governance and reduce social discontent (Sullivan, 2014; Tang and Yang, 2011; Yang et al., 2014).

Whatever the reasons, the Internet becomes the frontline of critical reporting in the Chinese media. In recent years, negative stories of the government agencies and officials have been usually reported and discussed first on the Internet and later caught national prominence. Among the numerous cases exposed and debated on the Internet, many are targeted at the performance of government agencies that are in charge of specific policy areas. These cases include the corruption of officials, the increasing income inequality, the mismanagement of housing market, the inadequacy of provision of social security, the expensiveness of public health care, and the deterioration of air quality. As noted by various studies, in the cyberspace of China, the tones of discussion tend to be negative and even cynical (King et al., 2012; O'Brien and Stern, 2008; Tong and Lei, 2013; Yang, 2009). Such "hegemony" of critical online media is largely a reaction of disfranchised netizens to government's ban on high-profile political issues (Tong and Lei, 2013). They take every opportunity to vent their anger and dissatisfaction with the government agencies that are permitted to criticize and connect them to the broader system as a whole whenever possible.

### **Hypothesizing the Effects of the Internet**

Given the selective nature of government control and the resultant mixed online information about the government and politics in China, we do not limit our attention to the direct effect of the Internet use on various political attitudes. Instead, we investigate both the direct effect of the Internet on viewers' regime support and the indirect effect of the Internet on regime support that works through influencing the viewers' evaluation of government performance in various

policy areas. The causal relationship between the Internet use and regime support in our analytic framework is shown in Figure 1.

*Insert Figure 1 here*

Based on the discussion of the challenges of the Internet and the government control in the previous section, we develop following hypotheses with regard to the effect of the Internet use in China. First, we hypothesize that the direct effect of the Internet use on regime support is positive (*Hypothesis 1*). This is so because key political institutions and figures that constitute the core of the party-state regime in China are largely insulated from both negative reporting and critical discussions. Moreover, the state has been proactively promoting a positive image of the regime through various means. Second, we expect that the exposure to the Internet decreases the viewers' evaluation of government performance (*Hypothesis 2*). Due to the relaxed censorship related to government agencies in charge of specific affairs, the Internet in contemporary China is filled with negative reporting and critical deliberations about government in policy areas.

Finally, we expect that the decreased evaluation of government performance caused by the Internet exposure leads to the decline of support for the regime as a whole (*Hypothesis 3*). This hypothesis is of primary interest to us. The literature of political support has often differentiated between "specific support" and "diffuse support." In this traditional framework, citizens' evaluation of government performance is a measure of specific support, that is, support for specific authorities and institutions at a given moment. Support for the regime as a whole, in contrast, is diffuse support that is directed at the underlying order of the political system. In democratic countries, the difference between the two types of support is

meaningful and necessary. People who are discontented with the policies, actions, and performance of specific government institutions or officials do not necessarily despise the fundamental values, rules, and order of the political system in which political authorities reside (Easton, 1975; Gibson and Caldeira, 1992; Seligson and Muller, 1987). This is so partly because democratic countries have installed institutions that enable citizens to attribute policy consequences to specific parties and individuals, but not to the political system as a whole. However, scholars have also noted that object-specific attitudes can exert influence on the support for the regime. Easton, for instance, pointed out that “[I]f discontent with perceived performance continues over a long enough time, it may gradually erode even the strongest underlying bonds of attachment.” (Easton, 1975: 445)

We believe in authoritarian regimes such as China, the decline of specific support can erode diffuse support, more so than in democratic countries. The authoritarian system is characterized by a natural fusion between ruling authorities and the regime due to the lack of office alternation and power-sharing. The alternation of the ruling party in China, for instance, would in fact be equivalent to the replacement of the authoritarian regime. The party can change the particular leadership of the government for its poor performance and thus remains in power. But one-party rule and the inseparability between the party and the government make citizens less likely to attribute the responsibility to one specific government institution or leader and more likely to the political system itself. The close connection between a specific government and the regime leads to a strong linkage between citizens’ evaluation of government performance and their general support for the regime.

The relationship between government performance evaluation and regime support is

further reinforced by the fact government performance in authoritarian China has become a key source of legitimacy. Public opinion studies have consistently shown that Chinese citizens support their political system far more than what would be expected in an authoritarian regime (Chen, 2004; Chen and Dickson, 2008; Chen et al., 1997; Gilley, 2006; Shi, 2001). Among various reasons for this high level of regime support, the most important one is that Chinese state has been able to outperform the expectation of what an authoritarian regime can usually achieve (Chen and Zhong, 1998; Shi, 2001; Wang, 2005; Yang and Tang, 2010). This performance-based support, however, is sensitive to the fluctuation of government output. When performance fails to meet the expectation of the public or is framed so by the critical reporting and discussion on the Internet, the basis of political support and regime legitimacy will be shaky.

### **Data, Variables, Measurement, and Estimation Method**

To investigate the effect of the Internet on political support in China, we conducted a survey in the greater Beijing region between November 2011 and February 2012. This survey covered both urban and rural population in the area. We carried the survey in cooperation with the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences (BASS). We selected the samples with a combination of probability proportional to size (PPS) and multistage sampling techniques. We first chose street-level units (*jiedao*, or township equivalence in Beijing) within each of ten surveyed district units (*qu*, or county equivalence in Beijing) using the PPS technique. A total of 36 street-level units were thus randomly chosen. From each of these street-level units, we randomly selected four residential communities (or villages). Finally, we randomly chose ten

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individuals from each of the sampled communities. The response rate of this survey is 92 percent and the total number of respondents in our sample is 1318. Given that the survey is conducted only in Beijing area, we are cautious not to generalize our findings to regions other than metropolitan areas in China.

A legitimate concern for survey-based research in China is whether survey responses are reliable. The interviewees might give politically acceptable answers out of fear of retribution. We believe that, in our sample, the responses are reliable. First, the questionnaires were collected by an academic agency, and the survey was conducted in a confidential way so that individual respondents should have no reasons to worry about political persecution. Second, our confidence in the reliability of our survey is further reinforced by the distributional pattern of the variables we use. For instance, for the evaluation of government performance, the distribution of the raw data indicates that Beijing residents do show a large variation in their attitudes. For various policies areas, they responded with very low levels of performance evaluation. Even for the three variables that we use to gauge general regime support, only a moderate percentage of respondents expressed the highest level of support (30%, 22%, and 18% respectively). All these patterns indicate weak influence of fear factor in our survey.

### **Internet use**

We measure the Internet use by the respondents' indication of the importance of the Internet for obtaining political information. The question reads: "When obtaining the information about politics, which of the following ways is the most important?" We recoded the choice of the Internet as 1 and other choices as 0. We prefer to this measurement because it focuses on the

political use of the Internet. Most Internet users in China, like in other countries, browse the Internet for others purposes such as entertainment and social networking. We check the robustness of our findings in an analysis using the frequency of general Internet use. The question reads: “How frequently you use the Internet?” The answers range on a four-point scale from “never” to “most frequently.” The sample distribution is highly skewed. More than half of the respondents use the Internet every day. We therefore recoded this variable into a dichotomous one with 1 for those who use the Internet every day and 0 for otherwise. The summary statistics of this variable and others used in this study is reported in Table 1.

*Insert Table 1 here*

### **Government Performance Evaluation**

In our survey, respondents were asked to evaluate government performance in ten policy areas: controlling inflation, promoting employment, decreasing income equality, managing housing market, maintaining social order, providing medical care, ensuring fairness of taxation, providing social security, improving environment, and controlling corruption<sup>2</sup>. They rank the government performance in each area on a scale from 1 to 5. Their evaluations demonstrate high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha: 0.85). The evaluation of these ten areas together provides a good indication of one’s overall evaluation of government performance. We thus generate a composite index of performance evaluation by summing their responses and rescaling it to range from 0 (the lowest evaluation) to 10 (the highest evaluation).

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<sup>2</sup> The wording reads: In the following issues, how do you think the government performs? In Chinese: 在下列社会问题中, 您认为政府做的如何?: 控制通货膨胀; 提供就业保证; 缩小贫富差距; 改善住房条件; 维护社会秩序; 提供医疗保障; 税收政策; 提供社会救济; 治理环境污染; 打击贪污腐败.



**Regime Support**

We measure respondents' general support for the political system based on the extent of their agreement with the following three statements: "I believe the communist party represents my interest;" "I support the existing political system;" and "my political opinions are in agreement with the values promoted by the party and the state." The respondents indicate their agreement on a scale from 1 to 5. The responses were recoded such that a higher score indicates a higher level of agreement. We created an index of regime support by summing the responses to the three statements and rescaling it from 0 (the lowest level of regime support) to 10 (the highest level).

**Other Variables**

To control for the effect of other factors, we first include a variable that measures the extent to which the respondents follow political news (1 to 4). The inclusion of this variable controls for the effect of the general use of the media, especially the traditional media. In addition, we control two sets of factors. The first one is about social economic background, including age (in years), gender (0, female; 1, male), education levels (four levels), urban residence (0, rural Hukou; 1 urban Hukou), household income (12 levels: 1-12), self-perceived social status (four levels: 1-4), and membership of the communist party (0, no; 1, a party member). The second set includes two attitudinal factors, interpersonal trust and political efficacy, which are supposed to be associated with political support (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Mishler and Rose, 2001).

### **Mediation Analysis**

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Internet exposure has a direct effect on regime support; it also has an indirect effect via influencing the mediating variable, performance evaluation. The most appropriate method at our disposal is mediation analysis. Mediation analysis does not only calculate the average effect of treatment as in conventional methods. It also quantifies the effect of a treatment that operates through a particular mechanism. We adopt a method of mediation analysis recently developed by Imai et al (2011). This method calculates the average mediation causal effect (ACME), average direct effect (ADE, i.e. the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable through other unidentified mechanisms), and average total effect (ATE, i.e., the sum of ACME and ADE) through simulating the predicted values of unobserved mediating and outcome variables from the observed variables based on sampling distribution of model parameters. The calculation is based on quasi-Bayesian Monte Carlo approximation<sup>3</sup>.

### **Analyses and Results**

Table 2 presents the results of the two analyses of OLS models for the observed mediator variable (government performance evaluation) and outcome variable (regime support), respectively. In Model 1 and Model 2, we use the political use of the Internet as the treatment variable. From the observed data, Model 1 estimates the effect of the Internet use on government performance evaluation, and Model 2 estimates the effect of both the Internet use and government performance on regime support.

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<sup>3</sup> We conducted analysis in STATA using medeff program with 1000 simulations for a sample of 1314.

*Insert Table 2 here*

From the regression results, we can tell that the Internet use is negatively associated with government performance evaluation (Model 1) and positively associated with regime support (Model 2). Moreover, government performance evaluation is positively associated with regime support (Model 2). All these associations are statistically significant. With one unit increase of the Internet use (i.e., changing from not using the Internet as the major source of political information to using it as the major information source), there is 0.30 unit decrease of evaluation of government performance and 0.22 increase of regime support, confirming Hypothesis 1 and 2 respectively. And one unit increase of government evaluation is associated with 0.15 unit increase of regime support<sup>4</sup>. Taking these results together, we can further suspect that the indirect effect of the Internet use on regime support through influencing performance evaluation is negative. We resort to mediation analysis for a formal test of these different effects.

Specifically, based on the two regressions over the observed data, we simulate model parameters. For each draw of parameters, we first simulate the values for the mediator and then the values for outcome variable given the simulated values of the mediator. Next, we compute ACME, ADE, and ATE from each draw of the simulated data. Finally, we obtain the point estimate (i.e., mean) and their confidence intervals from the computation of all the simulated data. Figure 2 presents the summary statistics of different types of effects from the

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<sup>4</sup> The substantive meaning of regression coefficients is not useful for interpretation at this stage in mediation analysis.

simulated results. The black dots are point estimates. The spike lines represent confidence intervals.

*Insert Figure 2 here*

Figure 2 shows that, first, ACME is negative and its 95% confidence intervals are below 0. This finding indicates that the indirect effect of the Internet on regime support that is mediated by government performance evaluation is negative and statistically significant, thus confirming Hypothesis 3. The exposure to the political information on the Internet use, therefore, does undermine regime support by decreasing Internet users' evaluation of government performance. Second, ADE is positive and statistically significant at 5% level. This indicates that the direct effect of the Internet use on regime support is to the benefit of the regime. It therefore proves that the government control on negative reporting and critical deliberation of high-profile political institutions is effective through mechanisms other than influencing performance evaluation. The overall favorable tone of the information about the regime does help the state to nurture political support from the Internet users.

Finally, we are interested in the total effect (ATE) of the Internet on regime support, that is, the sum of positive direct effect and negative indirect effect. Mediation analysis shows that ATE is positive and statistically significant. This finding indicates that the positive direct effect of the Internet is greater than the negative effect that is mediated by decreased government performance evaluation. The government's efforts to control information, especially those related to key political institutions and figures, and to boost regime support are so effective that they are able to offset the harms brought out by the negative reporting and

critical discussion of low-profile government agencies and their policies.

*Insert Figure 4 here*

In causal mediation analysis, an important assumption, sequential ignorability, is required for identification (Imai et al. 2011). This assumption cannot be tested by the observed data, but Imai et al. (2011) proposed a sensitivity analysis to quantify the exact condition where ACME equals to zero. This condition is based on the correlation ( $\rho$ ) between the error for the mediation model and that for the outcome model. Figure 4 presents the graph result of this sensitivity analysis. It shows that for the estimated ACME to be zero, there must be an unobserved confounding factor that affects both performance evaluation and regime support in the same direction and makes the correlation between the two error terms greater than 0.17.

We now switch to general use of the Internet as the independent variable. In Model 3 and Model 4 of Table 2, we conduct the same set of analyses over the observed data. The results show that the general use of the Internet, like the political use, is negatively associated with the evaluation of government performance (Model 3); and performance evaluation is positively associated with regime support (Model 4). However, different from the previous analysis in Model 2, the general use of the Internet is not directly associated with regime support with statistical significance (Model 4).

To provide a more rigorous test, we again resort to a mediation analysis. Figure 3 presents the results. The results show that, first, the indirect effect (ACME) that is of primary interest of this study is statistically significant and negative. It confirms that the decrease of evaluation of government performance caused by the Internet exposure can erode regime support. Second, however, different from the previous analysis presented in Figure 2, both

the direct effect (ADE) and the total effect (ATE) are not significant. This indicates that, first, due to the fact that the focus of government control is largely limited to political information of political significance, the general use of the Internet that often is not directly related to politics does not promote political support. Second, the efforts of the government to portray a positive regime on the Internet are not powerful enough to offset the negative influence of the general use of the Internet. In short, the analysis using general Internet use indicates relatively weaker influence of the state control, on the one hand, and the more robust indirect effect of the Internet use, on the other hand.

*Insert Figure 3 here*

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

With the absence of visible political changes in many authoritarian countries, many scholars suggest a censored Internet can help consolidate the authoritarian rule. Gunitsky (2015), for example, argues that using Internet-based strategies such as counter-mobilization, authoritarian regimes can transform the Internet “from an engine of protest to another potential mechanism of regime resilience” (p. 42). Using China as a critical case, we in this study have argued and shown otherwise. Even with the tightest government control in place, the information on the Internet still can contribute to democratic changes. A consistent finding of this study is that via decreasing Internet users’ evaluation of government performance in policy areas, the Internet indirectly undermines their support for the regime. We also found that the direct effect of the Internet use on regime support is positive, and this support-boosting effect of the Internet overwhelms its negative effect on government performance evaluation. The

overwhelmingly positive direct effect, however, fails to stand when we use a broader measurement of the Internet use, that is, the regular use of the Internet. This discrepancy indicates that while the state is effective and successful in censoring political domains, it fails to forestall the detrimental effect of the Internet in other spheres that are less politically relevant. Therefore, in contemporary China, the political implication of the diffusion of the Internet proves to be more complex than usually assumed.

Among various findings of this study, it is the negative mediating effect of the Internet that entails important implications. Politically, while it might be true that the state's control of the Internet and the direct support-promoting effect of the Internet are "politics as usual" as in the broader political communication in China, the Internet still poses a fundamental challenge to the basis of public support for the regime. The government can effectively identify a few high-profile issues and events to either filter the information or frame the direction of online discussions. The alternative information and deviant frames of low-profile issues or seemingly politically safe ones, however, are ubiquitous and are more difficult to control. Using those issues as platforms, dissident netizens take full advantage of the Internet to express their views. The government thus becomes liable for many issues or problems that are not directly related to politics. Given the indispensable role of the digital media in China's economy and social lives, it becomes nearly impossible for the state to totally block all the information of the government and politics. As a result, the legitimacy basis of the regime can be eroded gradually.

In a broader sense, therefore, our study indicates the imperative to explore the more nuanced political effect of the Internet in authoritarian countries. With the seemingly evident role played

by the Internet and social media in the mass movement of the Arab Spring, the potential of the Internet to end authoritarian rule has been the focus of the scholar's debate. We, however, believe that the same, if not more, the amount of attention should be paid to how the diffusion of the Internet can reshape the attitudinal landscape of the population. While attitudinal change itself is not sufficient for collection actions (and we do not so based on this research), Internet use contributes to potential political changes in that it alienates the citizens from the regime by eroding the ability of states to monopolize information and arguments. The Internet produces "change over years and decades, not weeks or months" (Shirky, 2011: 30). Without the identification and explication of such a long-term gradual attitudinal makeover caused by the Internet as exemplified in this study, it would be difficult to tell how much the Internet actually contributes to the final political drama, which requires a large range of other factors. In short, to fully understand the role of the Internet in authoritarian countries, we should study both the behavioral and attitudinal outcomes at the individual level and dedicate greater efforts to exploring the complexity of the causal effect of the internet diffusion.

We are also cautious not to overstate the implications of our analytical results. First, the data were collected at one time point and in only one area of China. Therefore, we do not intend to generalize our findings to non-metropolitan areas. Second, the measurement of the mediating variable can be inadequate. Although we intend to comprehensively capture one's evaluation of government performance, it can be suspected that not all policy areas can be equally connected with the government. Moreover, while we have tried to address the reliability of the survey responses following the practice of the field, it still poses a big challenge to our study, like to any others that rely on surveys in the authoritarian environment.



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Particularly, if the respondents are more likely to use self-censorship when answering questions of regime support and feel freer to openly criticize government policies, the estimated effect of the Internet use would be biased. To further address this problem, other methods, such as list survey experiment (references), can be used in combination of survey-based research.

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Table 1. Summary statistics

Variable name	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Regime support	1318	7.64	1.33	0	10
Performance evaluation	1318	5.35	1.37	0	10
Political use of Internet	1318	0.26	0.44	0	1
General use of Internet	1318	0.52	0.50	0	1
Media use	1318	2.83	0.86	1	4
Age	1318	39.49	12.89	18	72
Gender	1318	0.50	0.50	0	1
Education	1318	2.53	1.08	1	4
Urban	1318	0.84	0.36	0	1
Income	1318	6.46	2.64	1	12
Social class	1315	2.43	0.71	1	4
CCP member	1317	0.13	0.33	0	1
Social trust	1318	2.25	0.91	1	3
Political efficacy	1318	2.48	1.04	1	5



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Table 2. The Effect of the Internet on Performance Evaluation and Regime Support

	Political use of the Internet		General use of the Internet	
	Govt. evaluation (Model 1)	Regime support (Model 2)	Govt. evaluation (Model 3)	Regime support (Model 4)
Govt. evaluation		0.15*** (0.025)		0.15*** (0.025)
Internet	-0.30*** (0.097)	0.22** (0.088)	-0.22** (0.10)	0.11 (0.093)
Media use	0.072 (0.048)	0.19*** (0.043)	0.081* (0.048)	0.18*** (0.043)
Age	0.0019 (0.0038)	0.0025 (0.0034)	0.0021 (0.0039)	0.0017 (0.0035)
Gender	-0.017 (0.077)	-0.10 (0.069)	-0.025 (0.077)	-0.097 (0.069)
Education	-0.065 (0.049)	-0.033 (0.044)	-0.051 (0.051)	-0.035 (0.046)
Urban	0.099 (0.12)	-0.85*** (0.11)	0.078 (0.12)	-0.83*** (0.11)
Income	-0.043** (0.017)	-0.047*** (0.016)	-0.040** (0.018)	-0.049*** (0.016)
Social class	0.15*** (0.057)	0.057 (0.051)	0.17*** (0.057)	0.047 (0.052)
CCP member	0.20* (0.12)	0.37*** (0.11)	0.22* (0.12)	0.36*** (0.11)
Social trust	-0.011 (0.043)	0.054 (0.039)	-0.025 (0.043)	0.064* (0.039)
Efficacy	0.029 (0.037)	-0.17*** (0.034)	0.027 (0.037)	-0.17*** (0.034)
Constant	5.08*** (0.35)	7.41*** (0.34)	5.05*** (0.35)	7.48*** (0.34)
N	1314	1314	1314	1314
R <sup>2</sup>	0.033	0.17	0.029	0.17

Source: Authors' collection

Reported are the regression coefficient (b); numbers in parentheses are standard errors  
 \*\*\*, p<0.01; \*\*, p<0.05; \*, p<0.1.

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Figure 1. Causal relationship between the Internet use and regime support

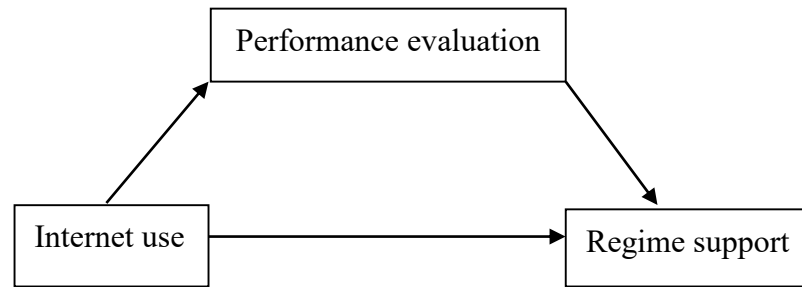


Figure 2. Causal Mediation Analysis of the Effect of Political Use of the Internet

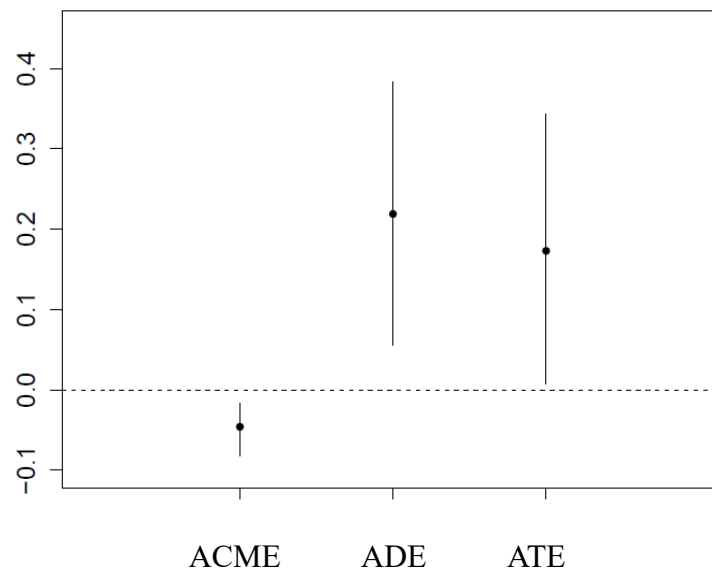
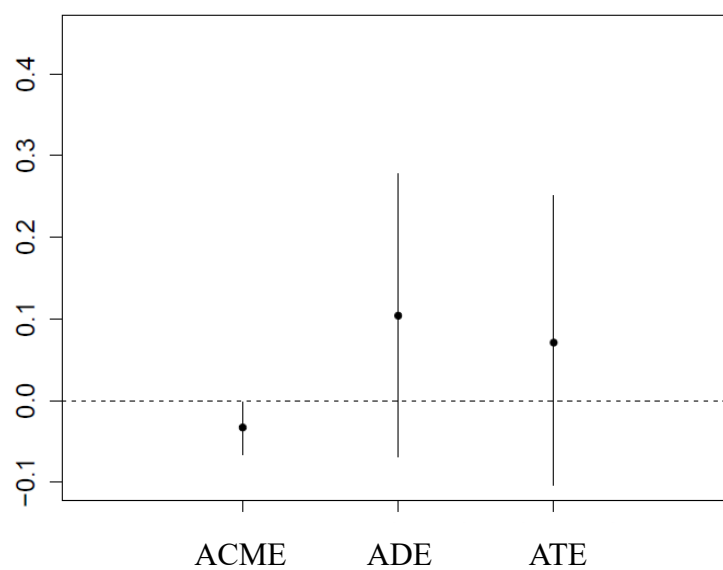


Figure 3. Causal Mediation Analysis of the Effect of General Use of the Internet



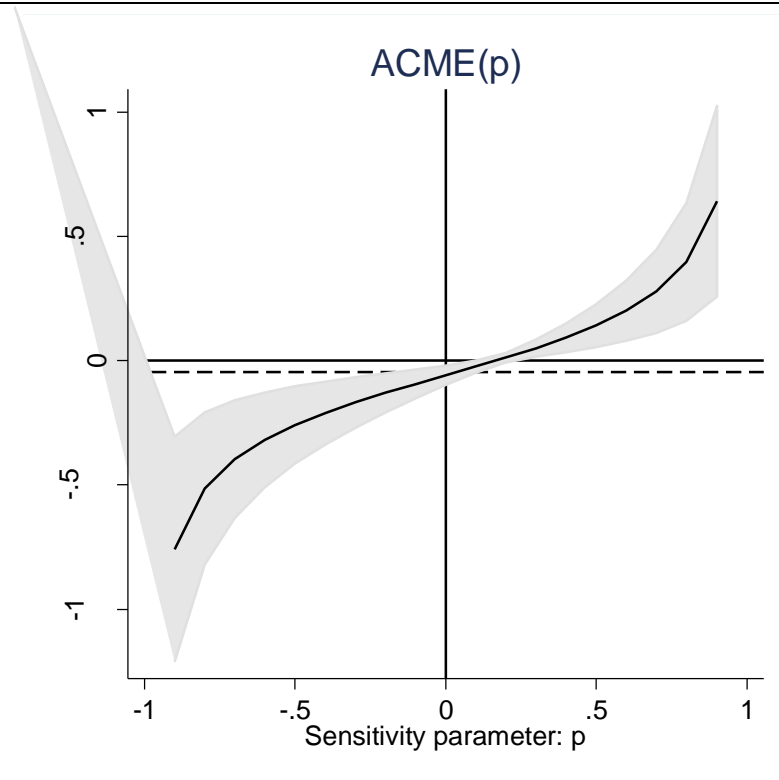


Figure 4. Sensitivity Analysis

Note: Solid line is ACME, plotted against sensitivity parameter. The shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line is the estimated ACME when the sequential ignorability assumption is made.