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The Impact of Social Media on Civic Engagement in China: The Moderating Role of Citizenship Norms in the Citizen Communication Mediation Model

Lei Guo[1] (ID) and Hsuan-Ting Chen[2] (ID)

Abstract

This study incorporates the examination of citizenship norms in testing the Citizen Communication Mediation Model (CCMM) in China, exploring to what extent online political expression mediates the impact of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement and how beliefs in citizenship norms moderate the CCMM. Results based on a two-wave panel survey among a national sample of 1,199 Chinese adults provide strong support for the CCMM in the Chinese context. In addition, embracing the democratic citizenship norm significantly enhances the CCMM effect, whereas embracing the pro-government citizenship norm that encourages pro-government speech does not show the same effect.

Keywords

social media, Citizen Communication Mediation Model, civic engagement, political expression, citizenship norms, China

A large number of studies have demonstrated that social media use has a positive impact on civic engagement. Rather than "bowling alone" as Putnam (2001) warned, it appears that people in countries all over the world have become more involved in

[1]Boston University, MA, USA
[2]The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong

Corresponding Author:
Lei Guo, Associate Professor, Division of Emerging Media Studies, Boston University, 704 Commonwealth Ave. 304D, Boston, MA 02215, USA.
Email: guolei@bu.edu

public life because of social media (American Press Institute, 2015). As the Citizen Communication Mediation Model (CCMM; Shah et al., 2005) suggests, using social media for news provides a resource for political expression, which in turn raises awareness about collective problems and leads to civic behavior for social change. The CCMM may be able to explain the impact of social media not only in Western democracies, but also in authoritarian countries, where social media have also facilitated the development of civil society (Jiang, 2016). However, theoretical development that links social media use and civic engagement in contexts outside of Western democracies is relatively thin. Mainland China, well known for its Party-State political system and internet surveillance, provides a compelling case for this examination.

The goal of this study is to contextualize the CCMM in Mainland China. Specifically, we explore the extent to which online political expression mediates the impact of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement. To further advance the model, this study addresses a key assumption underlying political communication research in democratic societies, which is the belief that citizens *should* freely express their political opinions in the public. Arguably, this assumption about democratic citizenship norms (Dalton, 2008) does not necessarily hold true in China. In the country's authoritarian context, Chinese citizens may or may not believe a good citizen should openly voice his or her political opinions, especially those critical of the government. On the contrary, a recent development in China is that the Xi administration has successfully advanced the notion of "positive energy" (*zheng neng liang*), which refers to thoughts and attitudes that are aligned with the Party-State's ideological systems (P. Yang & Tang, 2018). This notion is used to encourage Chinese citizens to engage in online political expression in ways consistent with the official discourse. As such, social media in China has become a battlefield, not only offering a space for grassroots citizen democracy of the type previous research has focused on (e.g., Chan et al., 2012; Guo, 2017), but also providing a new media outlet the government can use to maintain the status quo (Jiang, 2016). To what extent do Chinese citizens embrace democratic citizenship norms or citizenship norms with Chinese characteristics? How will these beliefs moderate the effect of social media use on online political expression and ultimately lead to offline civic engagement? This study examines these questions, hoping to further our understanding of how social media contribute to an informed and engaged public in China.

Of the relatively few survey studies that have examined political communication in China, most were cross-sectional and based on a student sample. This study conducted a two-wave panel survey among a national sample of 1,199 respondents in China and is thus able to generate more solid causal inference and generalizable results. Overall, the findings provide strong empirical support for the CCMM in the Chinese context and explicate the roles of different citizenship norms in the model. In particular, the results reveal that embracing the democratic citizenship norm related to political expression significantly enhances the effect of informational use of social media on online political expression, which in turn leads to offline civic engagement. Embracing the pro-government citizenship norm that encourages the promotion of "positive energy" does not show the same significant effect.

The CCMM in China

The CCMM belongs to the Communication Mediation Model (CMM) framework, which refers to a group of theoretical models that emphasize the critical role of communication activities, such as media use and political discussions, in channeling the effects of individual characteristics (e.g., demographics, motivations for media use) on political participation (e.g., Shah et al., 2005, 2007; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). These models are drawn from the O-S-O-R perspective from the field of psychology (Markus & Zajonc, 1985): individuals' preexisting orientations (first O) influence stimuli of media use (S), which in turn influence their subsequent political orientations (second O; e.g., political knowledge); this process ultimately leads to an outcome response variable (R) such as political participation. The Cognitive Mediation Model (Eveland, 2001, 2002) suggests that information processing behaviors including attention to and elaboration on news content present an additional step between media stimuli and outcome orientations (i.e., the S-O portion of the model). Similarly, the CCMM (Shah et al., 2005) recognizes that political talk can be a site of deliberation that mediates news exposure (S) and behavioral responses (R). More recently, the O-S-R-O-R model adds reasoning (the first R) into the framework, acknowledging the mediating role of various cognitive processes in this sequence (Cho et al., 2009).

Most studies within the CMM framework were conducted in Western democracies. Recent research has begun to test the models in other political contexts. In particular, Gil de Zúñiga et al., (2019) found that the CCMM holds true across 19 countries, although the relationship is moderated by country characteristics such as the level of press freedom. The authors emphasize the importance of considering country variances in applying the model, recommending that more research needs to be done to explicate the nuances in closed societies.

This study follows previous scholars' work (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2005) and extends a specific line of the CMM research—the CCMM—to Mainland China. The model includes three key variables in the CMM framework (i.e., S-R-R) and highlights the significance of online political talk in mediating the media effects in this digital world. Specifically, we start by examining the relationship among informational use of social media, online political expression, and offline civic engagement.

Informational Use of Social Media

In the CCMM, the theoretical rationale behind the link between news consumption and online political expression is that news media expose citizens to diverse and conflicting viewpoints, providing a basis for political discussions that might not otherwise occur (Mutz, 2001). In other words, the consumption of news media prompts individuals to engage in elaborative processing of news and make connections between the new information and existing beliefs (Eveland, 2001, 2002). This processing can be manifested as the interpersonal discussion of news content (Cho et al., 2009) and, more recently, the political expression on social media as one has to articulate,

elaborate, and reflect on one's thinking to the self and others on the platform (Chan, 2016).

This media effect may not apply to China's traditional media landscape because China features a Party-State media system in which the government has tight control over news production. In other words, Chinese citizens may not be able to receive information from diverse perspectives through the government-controlled news media, leaving them with little to "elaborate" on. However, the emergence of the internet and social media, in particular, has largely changed China's information environment. On the one hand, social media are utilized by the government as a tool to reinforce the state's power; on the contrary, the media also provide a liberating force for grassroots democracy (Jiang, 2016). Theoretically, this ongoing tension between authoritarianism and digital activism on social media provides the prerequisite for the media effect to happen, as detailed below.

As the internet, especially social media, became a major platform where Chinese citizens can consume news (China internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2017), the government's grip soon extended online. Foreign social media services such as Facebook and Twitter are blocked because of their potential threat to the country's social stability. Instead, China's homegrown Weibo and WeChat have emerged as the two main social networking sites in the country, serving 431 million and 1 billion monthly active users, respectively (CIW Team, 2018; Hollander, 2018). Although they are privately owned, these internet companies voluntarily accept the duties and obligations of China's internet regulations and work closely with the government to self-censor politically sensitive information on their sites (Creemers, 2017a).

The control of online content has been strengthened under the Xi administration, which considers the internet to be the most important battlefield for a new "public opinion struggle" (M. Liu & Wang, 2017, p. 180). During the past few years, several new government notices have been issued to directly target individual behavior online. More notably, rather than seeing the internet as a source of risk, internet authorities in China have sought to harness the potential of the internet as a new propaganda platform (Creemers, 2017a). For example, China's mainstream media are encouraged to take advantage of social media to promote the official discourse. Since 2014, media convergence has been proposed and reinforced by the central government as a national strategic plan (Li & Zhao, 2014). In response, most traditional media organizations, including many Party organs, have set up accounts on Weibo and WeChat with the goal of better connecting with their audiences. The Chinese government has also recruited internet commentators, labeled the "fifty-cent army" because of the allegation that they are paid a fifty-cent fee for every post, who not only spread official discourse but also distract dissident voices online (King et al., 2017).

Despite the heightened control, social media in China also serve as a public space where a variety of nonofficial, alternative sources of information can be found. The dissemination of counter-information is possible on Chinese social media for at least three reasons. First, thanks to social media's affordances such as their large user base and networked features, controversial information can spread more quickly than online censors can keep up with (Sullivan, 2014). Second, Chinese internet users constantly

learn about and exploit loopholes in the operation of censorship; for example, they have developed a series of creative strategies such as coded terms and spoofs to expose social injustices (Han, 2018). Third, the Chinese government tolerates online discussion critical of the official discourse as long as the discussion does not speak to any actual political action (King et al., 2013). Social media thus becomes a "safety valve," allowing expressions of discontent or even anger to mitigate the possibility of any real political change on the ground (Creemers, 2017a). This "tolerance" also reflects a sophisticated media control strategy that Chinese political leaders have utilized to detect social problems based on a certain degree of independent reporting (Lorentzen, 2014).

When it comes to specific platforms, Weibo once hosted a large number of *Big Vs*—that is, online celebrities and public intellectuals whose Weibo accounts are designated with a *V*—who became highly influential in shaping public opinion. With millions of followers, these Weibo celebrities could easily bring stories, including politically contentious ones, to the public's attention before the government would be ready to respond. However, well-known *Big Vs* have largely disappeared from Weibo since the government's campaign in 2013 to regulate online speech. Many of them turned to WeChat, a mobile-based social networking site, where individuals and organizations can create user-generated *self-media* (*zi mei ti*) through its "Public Account" feature. Unlike traditional media, self-media manage to provide more in-depth reporting and more diverse viewpoints of political and social issues, using a combination of the platform's functions that allow circumvention of internet censorship (Olesen, 2014). In this light, Hu (2014) commented that "the grassroots media sensation really took off with the advent of mobile web technology . . . It reached its culmination in WeChat."

It is important to note that alternative information sources on social media do not always provide pro-liberal information and opinion. For example, a group of Chinese internet users, called "the voluntary fifty-cent army," have emerged to make online comments to defend the authoritarian regime on an unpaid basis. Unlike the state-sponsored "fifty-cent army," these online commentators are sincere in their beliefs and more engaged in online debates, thus playing a significant role in maintaining the state's stability from the bottom (Han, 2018). Cyber-nationalism in China also illustrates the complexity of China's internet. In particular, popular nationalism involves autonomous political expression, which, on the one hand, conveys patriotism and, on the contrary, challenges the state's monopoly over the nationalist discourse (S. D. Liu, 2006). It should also be mentioned that many influential users and self-media on these platforms are motivated by financial gain and tend to produce content that is sensational and even misleading (Ng, 2015).

Taken together, various information sources co-exist on Chinese social media, which means Chinese citizens are likely to be exposed to diverse viewpoints. Consequently, they should be able to elaborate on social and political topics through political expression themselves. We hypothesize:

> **H1:** Informational use of social media will be positively associated with online political expression.

To be clear, we do not consider information exposure selectivity nor do we distinguish different types of online political expression, both of which can be fruitful areas for future research. This hypothesis simply expects that the more one uses social media for news and information, the more often one will talk politics online.

Online Political Expression and Offline Civic Engagement

Civic engagement refers to "the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 236). It is a very broad concept and can take many forms. Keeter and colleagues (2002, as cited in Adler & Goggin, 2005) helpfully categorized civic engagement into three main categories: (a) community-focused activities, including volunteering and raising funds for charitable causes; (b) participation in the electoral process; and (c) activities to express political voices such as protesting. Many offline activities in the latter two categories are common in Western democracies but are either completely absent or highly restricted in China (Zheng & Pan, 2016). Nevertheless, online political expression is permitted in China to some extent for reasons specified above, and it is vital for the country given the lack of offline political participation.

This, however, does not mean that social media in China only serve as a tool to facilitate slacktivism (Morozov, 2009), without leading to any civic engagement in reality. Due to the restrictions on manifest political actions, many Chinese citizens have turned to community-focused activities, that is, the first category in Keeter et al.'s (2002) conceptualization. This type of civic engagement is considered "latent" political participation, which is nonpolitical or semi-political but entails active involvement in society and current affairs (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Indeed, even civic engagement in this "latent" sense should be understood contextually in China. For example, Dai and Spires (2018, p. 62) found that many Chinese grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the environmental field are not the ideal-typical voluntary associations of democratic societies, but their leaders and staff "teach themselves how to engage as citizens in a democracy might" and consciously mobilize residents and volunteers to participate in environmental protection activities. The authors concluded that this type of advocacy work constitutes increased civic engagement in China. Similarly, a growing number of Chinese citizens engage in neighborhood affairs through homeowners associations, which have a certain degree of financial and institutional autonomy from the government (Fu, 2019).

Previous studies show empirically that social media use among Chinese people prompts civic engagement (Cheng et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2017). This is because exposure to information from diverse sources online will increase awareness of public issues in the community, which can encourage civic actions in the real world. Both studies (Cheng et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2017) operationalize offline civic engagement mostly from the perspective of community-focused activities such as donations, volunteerism, and participation in community events. Based on the previous literature, we anticipate the following:

H2: Informational use of social media will be positively associated with offline civic engagement.

According to the CCMM, social media use should influence civic engagement *through* increasing political expression (Shah et al., 2005). When individuals engage in political expression on social media, they are more likely to encounter opportunities for involvement in the debated issues and can more easily coordinate their actions to address common concerns. Online communication also enables people to be better connected with each other because of shared interests and values, thus forming a sense of belonging, which will in turn encourage participation in public life offline. To extend the CCMM in China, we hypothesize the following:

H3: Online political expression will mediate the impact of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement.

Citizenship Norms as a Moderator

In addition to examining various components of the CCMM (and CMM in general), some recent studies have also considered moderating relationships in the media effect sequence. For example, Reichert and Print (2017) suggest that political discussion can also be theorized as a moderating variable, instead of a mediating variable, and found that news exposure influences the civic participation contingent of individuals' engagement in online political discussions. Ji et al. (2017) demonstrated that social identity and geographic origin should moderate the mediation process. Situated in Hong Kong, their study reveals that the positive impact of social media use on participation mediated by offline discussion is stronger for people with higher Hong Kong identity and for people from Hong Kong.

Drawing upon these studies, we argue that more nuances about the CCMM should be specified, especially for political contexts different from the ones the model originally examined. As Gil de Zúñiga et al., (2019) discovered, macro indicators of democratic expression play a significant role in the CCMM. While they tested the moderating relationship at the macro, country level, this study focuses on a micro-level indicator—how individuals *perceive* political expression. Specifically, we explore the extent to which citizenship norms influence the CCMM.

Dalton (2008, p. 78) defines citizenship norms as "a shared set of expectations about the citizen's role in politics." Considered as a type of political participation, political expression is an essential element of citizenship norms in democratic societies (Dalton, 2008). In other words, citizens in democratic societies generally believe that expressing one's autonomous political views to the public is what a good citizen should do. Researchers have also found that citizenship norms change over time and vary across political contexts and that the link between different norms and political behavior is not always straightforward. For example, the United States and many other advanced industrial democracies have experienced a significant shift from a pattern of duty-based citizenship to "engaged citizenship" (Dalton, 2008) or "actualizing

citizenship" (Bennett et al., 2011). The latter form of citizenship norms is rooted in self-actualization through social expression and has been found to stimulate more direct forms of political participation, such as online activism rather than electoral participation (Dalton, 2008; Feezell et al., 2016). In newer democracies such as those in Eastern Europe, citizens need to (re)learn democratic political attitudes and behaviors after several decades under the communistic rule, when all forms of autonomous non-state activity were prohibited (Coffé & van der Lippe, 2010). As a result, the level of political participation in Eastern Europe is lower compared with that in Western Europe (Curtis et al., 2001).

With more than 3,000 years of civilization and an authoritarian political system, China presents a completely different context from Western democracies and should follow a different set of citizenship norms. Citizenship norms in the Chinese context are not formally defined in the existing literature. Based on a review of recent research, this study focuses on the conceptualization of one set of Chinese mainstream citizenship norms according to what the government expects citizens to perform in terms of political expression.

Rooted in Confucianism, Chinese people have always been taught to embrace harmony and avoid contention (Creemers, 2017b). This aspect of Chinese culture has been greatly emphasized in contemporary Chinese politics. In its newest form under the Xi administration, the promotion of "positive energy" is at the very center of the official political discourse (P. Yang & Tang, 2018). That is, a good Chinese citizen should spread "positive energy" to help maintain social harmony and stability while avoiding distributing "negative energy" that might harm society (Creemers, 2017a). It is important to note that, unlike other catchphrases promoted by the government, "positive energy" is not an officially coined term. Before Xi became president of China in 2012, Chinese people had already been using the term in their daily talks to refer to optimistic attitudes without any political connotation. The Xi administration appropriated the term to encourage people to talk about positive and hopeful aspects of Chinese society and politics, that is, speech that expresses nationalism, patriotism, and core socialist values. (See P. Yang & Tang, 2018 for a detailed account of the term's history.) This strategy is different from the previous administrations, which focused on censoring contentious online speech. The Xi administration encourages Chinese citizens to proactively spread positive messages online, thus distracting the public attention from the negative side of the government. Since 2012, distributing "positive energy" online has been highly encouraged through news coverage and a series of national activities, such as competitions to select model citizens and projects to recruit "Internet civility volunteers" (G. Yang, 2018).

The discourse revolving around "positive energy" not only cultivates a group of dedicated practitioners (e.g., the aforementioned "voluntary fifty-cent army") but also influences ordinary citizens. Cheng and Wang (2020) argued that the official promotion around "positive energy" has been effective by making citizens internalize the interests of the state. Empirically, Guo (2017) found that Chinese older adults do talk politics online following the state's expectations. They tend to promote "positive energy" on social media by posting nationalist and patriotic comments as well as any

news and information that is favorable to the government and society. This belief in promoting "positive energy" is considered a part of Chinese mainstream citizenship norms in this article, termed as *pro-government citizenship norm*.

Nevertheless, as in other societies, not all Chinese people define good citizenship in line with mainstream expectations. Political resistance and rebellion have a long history in China, coexisting with Confucian notions of harmony and hierarchical obedience (Creemers, 2017b). In this age of globalization, Chinese citizens' attitudes toward politics, especially those of educated youth, have been largely influenced by Western culture (Rosen, 2010). Furthermore, as discussed above, the internet and especially social media bring a more critical and politicized citizenry. As Lei (2011) found, internet users are more likely to be supportive of democratic norms than traditional media users and non-media users. In other words, some Chinese citizens are likely to embrace democratic citizenship norms.

To clarify, although citizenship norms have various dimensions, this study focuses on the ones related to political expression. Specifically, we examine the democratic citizenship norm that encourages autonomous political expression and the pro-government citizenship norm that prioritizes pro-government expression. In practice, some people may hold both values. Theoretically, we consider that the democratic and pro-government norms construct two different versions of "appropriate" political expression and treat them as two distinct theoretical concepts.

When it comes to the CCMM, we expect that the democratic citizenship norm will intervene in the process by moderating the impact of informational use of social media on online political expression, which would ultimately lead to offline civic engagement. Again, according to the CCMM, exposure to diverse news and information on social media will stimulate elaboration on the received messages. As such, people who embrace the democratic citizenship norm to a greater extent will be more likely to engage in elaboration in the form of articulating their political thoughts online, which in turn will prompt offline civic engagement. On the contrary, those who do not believe that a good citizen should talk about their political thoughts publicly would elaborate on the received information through other means. We propose the following:

H4: The democratic citizenship norm will moderate the indirect effect of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement through online political expression. More specifically, the effect of informational use of social media on online political expression is stronger for individuals who embrace the democratic citizenship norm to a greater extent, which will, in turn, lead to offline civic engagement.

On the contrary, the potential role the pro-government citizenship norm plays in influencing the CCMM is more complicated. When informational use of social media stimulates elaboration, individuals who largely embrace the pro-government citizenship norm would supposedly react in the following way: their belief in avoiding the distribution of "negative energy" online would result in a self-censorship behavior, preventing them from sharing political views potentially critical of the
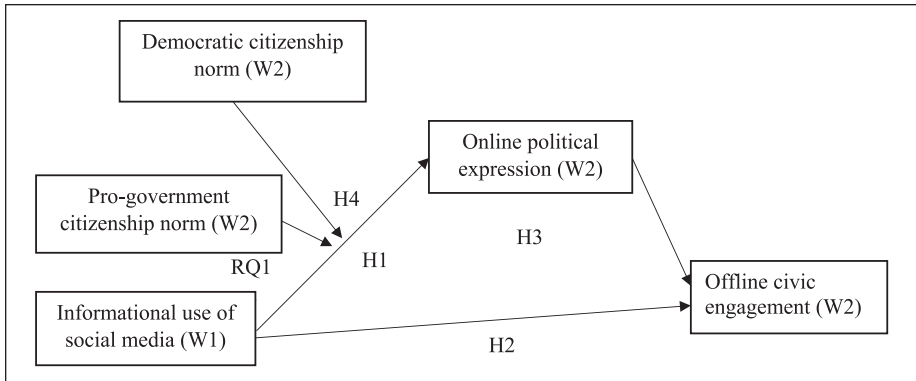
Figure 1. Proposed lagged and autoregressive moderated mediation model: The indirect effect of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement through online political expression is contingent upon the level of embracing the democratic and pro-government citizenship norms. In addition to the control variables, we controlled the W1 measure of offline civic engagement.

official discourse. Such self-censorship behavior online might ultimately decrease the likelihood of engaging in civic activities offline. Alternatively, it could be that some people who internalize the pro-government citizenship norm would engage in spreading "positive energy" on social media regardless of their informational use of the platforms. In other words, online political expression can be both an outcome of informational use of social media and of one's value system in believing the pro-government citizenship norm, and these two effects are independent of each other. In this second scenario, the pro-government citizenship norm would not moderate the mediating effect of online political expression in the CCMM. Given that the moderating role of the pro-government citizenship norm is unclear, we propose a research question:

RQ1: Will the pro-government norm moderate the effect of informational use of social media and online political expression, which in turn leads to offline civic engagement? If so, in what ways?

Taken together, we propose a moderated CCMM (see Figure 1).

Method

A two-wave national panel study was conducted during China's 2018 *Two Sessions*, the annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress and the national committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. This is the most important political event in China, held annually in March, when both state officers and representatives of various social groups gather in Beijing, the capital of China, to

discuss important issues facing the country. The *Two Sessions* provides a somewhat similar political setting to presidential elections in Western democracies (Luo, 2014). Compared with other times, the *Two Sessions* period usually sees more discussions of political and public affairs issues in the public discourse, thus providing a more suitable environment for this analysis. The practice of selecting an election period or the equivalent for examining political communication is common in this type of research (e.g., Halpern et al., 2017).

Both waves of the survey were conducted by an international survey firm, Survey Sample International (SSI, now Dynata), and administered online using Qualtrics, a web survey software program. Respondents of the initial survey were drawn from SSI's online panel in China. Instead of using an invitation-based approach, which may cause the bias of self-selection, SSI employs a routing environment and uses a variety of communication methods to alert participants that a survey is available. To make the sample as representative as possible, quotas on gender and age were specified so that the sample would match the distribution of these two demographic variables among the Chinese online population, reported by CNNIC (2018). The first wave (W1) of data collection took place between February 22 and March 2 before the *Two Sessions*, when 2,882 Chinese adults completed the survey questionnaire. The second wave (W2) was conducted between March 28 and April 24 after the *Two Sessions*, when 1,626 returned and completed the survey, a return rate of 56.4%. The data were further cleaned by removing unreliable responses (e.g., progress <10%, time spent <120 s, gibberish answers) and duplicates. The final analysis of the combined two-wave dataset included a sample of 1,199 responses.

Measurements

Measures of political communication constructed and tested in the U.S. and other Western democracies may not fare well in nondemocratic countries (Mou et al., 2011). Therefore, the key variables in this study were based on previous literature but revised to fit the Chinese context.

Informational use of social media. Using the 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *always*), respondents were asked about how often they consumed news from five different information sources on Weibo and WeChat, respectively (i.e., news media, governmental bodies, self-media/*Big Vs*, alternative information sources, other sources), and an index was created by averaging the 10 items (W1: $M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.83$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Online political expression. Based on previous literature (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Zheng & Pan, 2016), this variable was operationalized by asking about the respondents' political expression on Weibo and WeChat. The dominant majority of the respondents in the sample used the two social media platforms (Weibo = 91.7%; WeChat = 99.3%).[1] Specifically, the respondents were asked about their frequency of "commenting on political news and public affairs" and "replying to others' comments

on political news and public affairs" on Weibo and WeChat, respectively, on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). An index was created by averaging responses to the four items (W1: $M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.02$, Cronbach's α = .88; W2: $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.05$, Cronbach's α = .90).

Offline civic engagement. This study focuses on one type of offline civic engagement: community-focused activities. Drawing upon previous literature (Cheng et al., 2015; Ekman & Amnå, 2012), an index of civic engagement was created by averaging three items measuring the frequency of respondents' voluntary work for nonpolitical groups, raising money for charity, and attending meetings to discuss community problems. Items were ranked on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*; W1: $M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.94$, Cronbach's α = .85; W2: $M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.93$, Cronbach's α = .85).

Citizenship norms. This study examined two types of citizenship norms: the democratic citizenship norm and the pro-government citizenship norm regarding political expression. Each variable was measured by asking respondents whether they agreed with a list of statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). In terms of the *democratic citizenship norm*, this study constructed a 2-item index by tapping into the respondents' thoughts on whether a citizen *should* "actively participate in the discussion of political news and public affairs through social media," and "develop critical thinking when processing the official perspectives and put forward one's own opinion" (W1: $M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.70$, Spearman-Brown Coefficient = 0.61; W2: $M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.72$, Spearman–Brown Coefficient = 0.61).

To explore the *pro-government citizen norm*, a concept not established in the literature, survey questions were developed based on G. Yang's (2018) study on the Chinese government's official discourse about what constitutes a good citizen in terms of political expression. Respondents were asked about their thoughts on whether a citizen *should* post or repost content on social media such as Weibo and WeChat that is "critical of the official perspectives" (reverse coded), "in line with the official perspectives," "considered 'positive energy' to society," and "considered 'negative energy' to society" (reverse coded). The 4 items were averaged to create an index of the pro-government citizenship norm (W1: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.68$, Cronbach's α = .68; W2: $M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.67$, Cronbach's α = .68).

We note that the reliability scores for both citizenship norms are relatively low, but they are all within an acceptable range (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2015; Taber, 2018). Future researchers should further examine the operationalization of citizenship norms in the Chinese context for more reliable measures.[2]

Control variables. A list of demographic variables was used as controls. *Age* ($M = 36.12$, $SD = 10.46$) and *gender* (Female = 48.3%) were straightforward. Education asked the highest level of education completed (*Mdn* = college education). *Monthly household income* was measured using nine categories (*Mdn* = 10,000 to 20,000 *yuan*). See Supplementary Appendix B for more information about the demographic

profile of the survey respondents in this study and general internet users specified in the CNNIC (2018).

Based on previous research (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kaufhold et al., 2010), variables about political antecedents and traditional media use were also controlled, all of which were measured based on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The index of *political interest* was an average of 3 items asking the respondents' level of interest in politics and current affairs, political news, and news about the *Two Sessions* in particular (W1: $M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.79$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). *Internal political efficacy* was measured by asking the extent to which the respondents agreed with each of three statements (e.g., "people like me can influence government policies"); their answers were averaged (W1: $M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.83$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). To tap into respondents' political orientation, they were asked to report whether they were members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP member = 23.8%). *Traditional media use* asked how often the respondents consumed news from printed newspapers, magazines, television, and radio (W1: $M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.78$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). See Supplementary Appendix C for more information about the variables included in the analysis.

Statistical Analysis

The hypotheses were tested with two-wave panel data, which allow for an assessment of changes in the variables of interest over time. We first conducted the analysis with only the first-wave data to understand the relationship. Then, we took advantage of the two-wave panel design and incorporated a panel lagged and autoregressive analytic approach for the analyses. For example, in testing **H1** and **H2**, we examined the impact of social media use in W1 on online political expression and offline civic engagement in W2, while controlling for their prior levels in W1. This analytic approach helps to provide a stronger causal inference on the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, which is widely used in communication research (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2015; Kwak et al., 2018).

The mediating model was analyzed using Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 4 to test **H1** to **H3**. Then, the moderated mediation model was examined using PROCESS macro model 9 (**H4** and **RQ1**). The regression results from the PROCESS output are reported in Table 1 (the cross-sectional model) and Table 2 (the lagged and autoregressive model). In both tables, Model 1A and Model 2 demonstrate the regression coefficients from PROCESS's mediation analysis, whereas Model 1B and Model 2 show the regression coefficients from PROCESS's moderated mediation analysis. The model templates from PROCESS were adopted with 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Statistical significance ($p < .05$) is achieved when lower bound (LL) and upper bound (UL) CI do not include zero.

Results

This study first sought to examine the CCMM in the Chinese context. The results in Model 1A in Tables 1 and 2 show that informational use of social media is

Table 1. Prediction of Online Political Expression and Offline Civic Engagement: The Cross-Sectional Model.

Variables	Political expression (mediator)	Political expression (mediator)	Civic engagement (criterion)
	Model 1A	Model 1B	Model 2
Predictor and mediator			
Informational use of social media	.596 (.028)***	.124 (.120)	.195 (.034)***
Online political expression	—	—	.213 (.030)***
Moderator			
Democratic citizenship norm	—	−.143 (.092)	—
Pro-government citizenship norm	—	−.096 (.104)*	—
Interaction			
Informational Use of Social Media × Democratic Citizenship Norms	—	.080 (.029)**	—
Informational use of Social Media × Pro-Government Citizenship Norm	—	.046 (.029)	—
Control variables			
Age	−.007 (.002)***	−.007 (.002)***	−.007 (.002)***
Gender	.073 (.035)*	.089 (.035)*	−.015 (.037)
Education	.012 (.029)	.025 (.029)	.060 (.030)*
Income	.015 (.012)	.015 (.012)	.007 (.013)
Political interest	−.088 (.030)**	−.101 (.030)***	.016 (.031)
Political efficacy	.493 (.029)***	.451 (.030)***	.339 (.034)***
CCP membership	.088 (.042)*	.068 (.042)	.041 (.044)
News media use	.134 (.028)***	.127 (.028)***	.291 (.039)***
Constant	−.840 (.147)***	.178 (.409)	−.143 (.175)
R^2	.670***	.680***	.575***

Note. Entries are final unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. CCP = Chinese Communist Party.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

significantly related to online political expression (cross-sectional: $B = .596$, $SE = .028$, $p < .001$; autoregressive: $B = .125$, $SE = .039$, $p < .01$), supporting **H1**. The results in Model 2 in both tables also demonstrate that informational use of social media is significantly related to civic engagement (cross-sectional: $B = .195$, $SE = .034$, $p < .001$; autoregressive: $B = .083$, $SE = .034$, $p < .05$), supporting **H2**. Results from the mediation analysis show the indirect effect of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement through increasing online political expression

Table 2. Prediction of Online Political Expression and Offline Civic Engagement: The Lagged and Autoregressive Model.

	Political expression (W2) (mediator)	Political expression (W2) (mediator)	Civic engagement (W2) (criterion)
	Model 1A	Model 1B	Model 2
Predictor and mediator			
Informational use of social media (W1)	.125 (.039) **	−.206 (.138)	.083 (.034)*
Online political expression (W2)	—	—	.341 (.026)***
Moderator			
Democratic citizenship norm (W2)	—	.015 (.111)	—
Pro-government citizenship norm (W2)	—	.084 (.119)	—
Interaction			
Informational Use of Social Media (W1) × Democratic Citizenship Norm (W2)	—	.071 (.033)*	—
Informational use of Social Media (W1) × Pro-Government Citizenship Norm (W2)	—	.019 (.034)	—
Control variables			
Age (W1)	−.006 (.002)**	−.006 (.002)**	−.003 (.002)
Gender (W1)	.048 (.041)	.085 (.040)*	−.071 (.036)*
Education (W1)	.051 (.034)	.051 (.033)	.037 (.030)
Income (W1)	.008 (.014)	.009 (.014)	−.001 (.012)
Political interest (W1)	−.036 (.036)	−.064 (.035)	.021 (.029)
Political efficacy (W1)	.169 (.040)***	.135 (.039)***	−.002 (.035)
CCP membership (W1)	−.052 (049)	−.050 (.048)	.073 (.043)
News media use (W1)	.109 (.034)**	.090 (.033)**	.086 (.029)**
Democratic citizenship norm (W1)	.036 (.034)	−.030 (.035)	−.004 (.029)
Pro-government citizenship norm (W1)	.032 (.034)	−.010 (.036)	.011 (.030)
Political Expression (W1)	.500 (.035)***	.478 (.033)***	−.088 (.033)**
Civic engagement (W1)	.045 (.033)**	.055 (.032)*	.433 (.029)***
Constant	−.223 (.226)	.092 (.491)	.256 (.195)
R^2	.586***	.620***	.611***

Note. Entries are final unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. CCP = Chinese Communist Party.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3. The Cross-Sectional Moderated Mediation Model: Indirect Effect of Informational Use of Social Media on Offline Civic Engagement Through Online Political Expression Moderated by the Democratic Citizenship and Pro-Government Citizenship Norms.

Mediator: Online political expression		DV: Offline civic engagement			
Moderator:				Bootstrap 95%CI	
Democratic citizenship norm	Pro-government citizenship norm	Effect	Bootstrap SE	LL	UL
Low	Low	.104	.017	.071	.140
Low	Medium	.111	.018	.077	.146
Low	High	.117	.019	.082	.156
Medium	Low	.116	.020	.078	.157
Medium	Medium	.123	.020	.085	.163
Medium	High	.129	.020	.090	.171
High	Low	.128	.024	.084	.177
High	Medium	.135	.023	.091	.181
High	High	.141	.023	.097	.188
				Bootstrap 95%CI	
Indices of partial moderated mediation:		Index	Bootstrap SE	LL	UL
Democratic Citizenship Norm		.017	.007	.004	.033
Pro-government Citizenships Norm		.010	.006	−.002	.022

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Bootstrap resample = 10,000. Conditions for moderators (the democratic citizenship and pro-government citizenship norms) are the mean and ±1 *SD* from the mean. Estimates were calculated using the PROCESS macro (Model 9). DV = dependent variable; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

(cross-sectional: $B = .127$, $SE = .020$, 95% $CI = .088$ to .168; autoregressive: $B = .042$, $SE = .016$, 95%CI = [.013, .075]). **H3**, the CCMM, is supported.

H4 and **RQ1** address the moderating role of the two types of citizenship norms in the CCMM. Results from the cross-sectional data show that the democratic citizenship norm (Table 1 Model 1B: $B = .080$, $SE = .029$, $p < .01$) significantly interacts with informational use of social media in influencing political expression, which in turn affects civic engagement (Table 3: the moderated mediation index = .017, $SE = .007$, 95%CI = [.004, .033]). As shown in Table 3, the indirect effect of informational use of social media on offline civic engagement through political expression is significant at different levels of the democratic citizenship norm, and the effect becomes stronger when the level of the norm increases. In other words, when people embrace the democratic citizenship norm to a larger extent, the CCMM effect becomes stronger.

When examining the moderated mediation model with an autoregressive analysis, the results are similar. As shown in Table 2 Model 1B, the democratic citizenship norm significantly interacts with informational use of social media ($B = .071$, $SE = .033$,

Table 4. The Lagged and Autoregressive Moderated Mediation Model: Indirect Effect of Informational Use of Social Media on Offline Civic Engagement Through Online Political Expression Moderated by the Democratic Citizenship and Pro-Government Citizenship Norms.

Mediator: Online political expression		DV: Offline civic engagement			
Moderator:				Bootstrap 95% CI	
Democratic citizenship norm	Pro-government citizenship norm	Effect	Bootstrap SE	LL	UL
Low	Low	.019	.017	−.013	.054
Low	Medium	.023	.017	−.009	.058
Low	High	.028	.020	−.011	.067
Medium	Low	.036	.017	.003	.070
Medium	Medium	.041	.016	.010	.072
Medium	High	.045	.018	.010	.081
High	Low	.054	.021	.014	.095
High	Medium	.058	.019	.021	.094
High	High	.062	.020	.023	.102
				Bootstrap 95% CI	
Indices of partial moderated mediation:	Index	Bootstrap SE	LL	UL
Democratic citizenship norm	.024	.011	.002	.046
Pro-government citizenship norm	.007	.012	−.018	.029

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Bootstrap resample = 10,000. Conditions for moderators (the democratic citizenship and pro-government citizenship norms) are the mean and ±1SD from the mean. Estimates were calculated using the PROCESS macro (Model 9). DV = dependent variable; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

$p < .05$) in influencing political expression, which in turn affects offline civic engagement (Table 4: the moderated mediation index = .026, SE = .012, 95% CI = [.003, .048]). The indirect effect is only significant when the democratic citizenship norm is at the medium or high level, and the indirect effect becomes stronger when the level of the norm increases. **H4** is supported.

Finally, in addressing **RQ1**, the interaction between the pro-government citizenship norm and informational use of social media is not significant in both the cross-sectional and the lagged, autoregressive models (see Model 1b in Tables 1 and 2). Accordingly, this type of citizenship norm would not moderate the CCMM in China.

Discussion

Based on the CCMM, this study examines the relationships between informational use of social media, online political expression, and offline civic engagement in China. To

advance the model, this study explores the moderating impact of two types of citizenship norms on the CCMM based on panel data. Overall, the study provides strong evidence for the CCMM: Informational use of social media has a significant, indirect impact on offline civic engagement through increasing online political expression. More importantly, embracing the democratic citizenship norm significantly moderates the relationship between informational use of social media and online political expression in the CCMM, whereas embracing the pro-government citizenship norm does not exhibit the same significant impact. These results add more nuances to our understanding of the transformation and control of the digital environment in China.

Much evidence about the CCMM has been collected in democratic societies that consistently demonstrates that political discussion mediates the impact of news consumption on civic engagement. We contextualize the model in China to understand the influence of social media in an authoritarian state. The results showcase that Chinese citizens who use social media for news more often are indeed more likely to express their political views online, which in turn encourages their engagement in civic activities offline. This finding indicates that, similar to what happens in Western democracies, social media contribute to not only political expression in the online sphere but also civic actions on the ground. King et al. (2013) found that the Chinese government is oriented toward curbing collective actions as well as censoring online speech that represents, reinforces, or spurs collective actions. Our findings show that while collective actions in the form of manifest political participation are constrained, the use of social media at least fosters nonpolitical or semi-political civic actions such as volunteering and philanthropy, a type of "latent" political participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

In interpreting these results, we must note that the two key variables—online political expression and offline civic engagement—were measured broadly without specifying what the respondents talked about and what they did. Online political expression in China is pluralized (Han, 2018). Offline civic engagement should also be understood differently from that in Western democracies. Regardless, it is safe to conclude that the emergence and popularity of social media contribute to a more engaged and active public in China. In fact, additional analyses show that informational use of social media also increased the respondents' political efficacy ($B = .134$, $SE = .029$, $p < .001$) and even their satisfaction with the government ($B = .061$, $SE = .025$, $p < .05$; see Supplementary Appendix D). In this light, we call for more research to examine the influence of social media on political communication in Chinese society.

In addition to replicating the CCMM in China, this study extends the model by explicating an important assumption underlying political communication research in democratic societies, that is, that citizens *should* participate in politics to express any thought they might have on the internet. This is not necessarily true in China. In our sample, more than one-third of the respondents did not embrace the democratic citizenship norm. This belief, as our research shows, affects their civic behavior online and offline. Specifically, the impact of informational use of social media on online political expression is significantly stronger among Chinese citizens who embraced the democratic citizenship norm to a greater extent, ultimately increasing their

likelihood to engage in civic activities offline. Based on the results, we argue that it is important to empirically examine—rather than assume—various democratic citizenship norms, especially in a non-democratic context, and that the belief in democratic citizenship norms should be considered an important component in the CCMM (and CMM in general).

On the contrary, the study also examines the pro-government citizenship norm that expects Chinese citizens to promote "positive energy," that is, political speech that is consistent with the official discourse while avoiding the opposite "negative energy." As this research reveals, Chinese people have generally welcomed these ideas; for example, about 73% of our survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "citizens should use social media such as Weibo and WeChat to distribute 'positive energy' to society." The belief in the pro-government citizenship norm, however, does not moderate the CCMM as the democratic citizenship norm does. It is noteworthy that, according to the additional analysis, embracing the pro-government citizenship norm is significantly correlated with online political expression ($B = .147$, $SE = .035$, $p < .001$). This means that people who internalize the pro-government citizenship norm engage in online political expression as a direct outcome of their beliefs, and this belief-driven effect does not interact with the effect of informational use of social media, which may involve the elaborative processing of diverse viewpoints. In other words, promoting the pro-government citizenship norm to express "positive energy" represents an alternative but equally effective mechanism in stimulating citizens' online and offline behaviors in the Chinese context, and these behaviors are very likely supportive of the government agenda.

These findings suggest, consistent with previous research (Guo, 2017; P. Yang & Tang, 2018), that Xi's use of political propaganda in controlling the internet has been quite effective. Rather than just silencing dissenting voices as China's previous political administrations focused on, the current government proactively encourages Chinese citizens to engage in online expression in the way it intends, and the call has been well received. Such voluntary user-generated "positive energy" indicates that what is happening in China is more complicated than the typical control versus resistance narrative emphasized in the scholarship about China's internet.

Here, we should also note that some Chinese citizens might conceptualize a good citizen differently from the citizenship norms examined in this study. For example, some members of the "voluntary fifty-cent army" distribute pro-government discourse not necessarily to spread "positive energy" per se but rather to engage in political debates with regime challengers using facts and rationality (Han, 2018). That is, they are neither pro-democracy nor "pro-government" as defined in this study. The concept and implications of citizenship norms should be further explicated in China's unique context.

We must also acknowledge that while this study demonstrates the positive impact of social media on citizen participation online and offline, a large portion of Chinese citizens remains politically inactive. The average scores of all participation-related variables are below three (i.e., "sometimes") on a 5-point scale. Future researchers should delve further into systematic traits that distinguish different types of citizens (e.g., commentators vs. lurkers) in the current Chinese media landscape.

To conclude, our study makes several important contributions to the literature on political communication and China's internet. Theoretically, the study contributes to the development of the CCMM by applying it in a non-Western, authoritarian political context. Incorporating the examination of two types of citizenship norms clarifies an important assumption rooted in political communication research about democratic countries, thus revealing the uniqueness and complexities of China's changing political and media environment. In particular, our theorization and empirical findings of the mediated effect moderated by the democratic citizenship norm systematically explicates how CCMM operates in a closed society, adding more nuances to the existing literature (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019). Future researchers could consider using our proposed model (see Figure 1) to explore the variations of citizenship norms and their effects on the CCMM and the CMM framework in general in countries with different political systems. Methodologically, the use of panel data based on a nationally representative sample of Chinese adults makes it possible to assess the causal relationships between key variables of political communication in China. In doing so, our research contributes solid empirical evidence to the existing literature about China's emerging media and political landscape.

The following limitations must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The survey data were collected during the *Two Sessions*. This timing may have an impact on how the respondents perceived politics and what they did on social media. Some findings, especially the descriptive statistics, might be different in other, less politically sensitive times.[3] Nevertheless, following Luo (2014), we contend that if social media can influence individuals' behavior online and offline during this politically sensitive time, the same media effect should take place in more relaxed times as well. Second, like any other survey research, the results of the study may be affected by social desirability bias, especially when it came to the response to the pro-government norms given the research context. It should also be pointed out that China's media and political environments are rapidly changing as well as the government's policy on the internet. A larger scaled, longitudinal analysis would be better at capturing the societal changes. The limitations notwithstanding, the use of panel data serves to control the behavioral shift and thus is able to provide a stronger causal link between social media use, online political expression, and offline civic engagement in China.[4]

ORCID iDs

Lei Guo (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9971-8634
Hsuan-Ting Chen (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3140-5169

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The Weibo and WeChat adoption rates in our example are higher than the official statistics, which may be explained by the fact that our respondents were more educated and thus social media savvy than general online users. This should be noted when interpreting the results of the study.
2. A partial correlation (controlling for demographics, political orientations, and media use) found that the correlation between the two norms during W1 of the survey is not significant ($r = .044$, $p = .141$). The pro-government citizenship norm in W1 even negatively predicts the democratic citizenship norm in W2 ($B = -.078$, $p < .5$). However, the two norms are significantly correlated in W2 ($r = .132$, $p < .001$), but the relationship is weak. These contradictory results suggest that the two types of citizenship norms are different but potentially related concepts and that their respective levels and correlation vary by time and context. Given that the mean of the pro-government citizenship norm increased in W2, it may indicate that some participants who embraced the democratic citizenship norm became more cautious of their speech after the *Two Sessions* and therefore exhibited a higher level of pro-government citizenship norm in W2. We reiterate the importance of examining citizenship norms in the Chinese context and suggest that the relationship between different citizenship norms should be further explicated in future research. See more analyses of the two types of citizenship norms in Supplementary Appendix A.
3. We examined the mean differences of the key variables between W1 (pre-*Two Sessions*) and W2 (after *Two Sessions*): (a) online political expression: $M = .019$, $SD = .745$, range $= -3.5$ to 3; (b) offline civic engagement: $M = .013$, $SD = .718$, $range = -3$ to 2.67; (c) the democratic citizenship norm: $M = .002$, $SD = .735$, $range = -4$ to 2.5; and (d) the pro-government citizenship norm: $M = .005$, $SD = .660$, $range = -3$ to 3.25.
4. We conducted some post hoc analyses to investigate a potential reverse mediating relationship to check the causality. First, we examined the pattern—W1 offline civic engagement → W1 online political expression → W2 informational use of social media (W1 informational use of social media is controlled)—and found that the mediating relationship is not supported ($B = .009$, $SE = .006$, 95%CI = [$-.002$, .021]). W1 online political expression does not significantly predict W2 informational use of social media ($B = .046$, $SE = .026$). Second, we examined the pattern—W1 offline civic engagement → W2 online political expression (W1 online opinion expression is controlled) → W2 informational use of social media (W1 informational use of social media is controlled). The mediating relationship is not significant either ($B = .016$, $SE = .014$, 95%CI = p$-.013$, .045]). W1 offline civic engagement does not significantly predict W2 online political expression ($B = .042$, $SE = .198$).

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Author Biographies

Lei Guo earned her PhD from the University of Texas at Austin in 2014. She is currently an associate professor of emerging media studies at Boston University's College of Communication. Her research focuses mainly on the development of media effects theories, emerging media and democracy, and computational social science methodologies.

Hsuan-Ting Chen (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is an associate professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on the use of emerging media and its impact on individuals and society.