Digital Governance as Institutional Adaptation and Development: Social Media Strategies between Hong Kong and Shenzhen*

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Abstract

Using Hong Kong and Shenzhen in a comparative case study, this article addresses two important questions about digital governance: what its development sequence is, and the governance role of social media in the Chinese context. A content analysis is performed of social media communication by four sets of comparable agencies in the two cities, using the framework of e-government interconnectivity. Contrary to general expectations, our findings show that Shenzhen was more active than Hong Kong in the governmental use of social media. The results also suggest that, against the normative and sequential models, there is no strict sequence or particular order of development that must be followed in digital governance, thus rejecting the stage-by-stage "walk before you run" hypothesis. A government can "leapfrog" or "run before it walks" in its digital governance, bypassing earlier stages of development. Furthermore, the study shows that digital governance is

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an important tool of institutional adaptation and development to enhance a government's ability to respond to a dynamic environment of raising citizen expectations. State-led digitalization complements and compensates for the traditional and formal citizen–government interaction mechanisms, making offline and online institutions interchangeable and substitutable, and therefore also more interrelated and indistinguishable.

This study examines how social media and Government 2.0 are used for digital governance in the Chinese context as a tool for institutional adaptation and development within a dynamic political environment of rising citizen expectations, using Hong Kong and Shenzhen as sites for a comparative case study. Comparing the cases of Hong Kong and Shenzhen provides a timely and informative account of government use of social media in major cities in China with advanced economies. Furthermore, the comparative case study research design takes the scope of this study beyond a survey of the social media strategy of Chinese cities, allowing it to accomplish some important objectives of theory testing and building. In this regard, the study also addresses two key questions in research into digital governance: what its development sequence is, and what role social media plays in political and institutional development, including the interchangeability and substitutability of online and offline infrastructure.

With respect to the first question, there is a gap in studies of digital governance. Many major models of digital governance suggest that it develops in a stage-by-stage or step-by-step process, proceeding from primary stages, such as establishing an e-presence and information sharing by building a website, to more advanced and interactive modes, and finally reaching the mature stage of citizen engagement and partnership, including social media and Government 2.0.[1] The perspective that a preliminary stage must be attained first before a more advanced stage can be launched can be conveniently labeled as the "walk before you run" hypothesis. Although these models are widely discussed in the literature because they are useful for illustration purposes, organizing each level of digital governance in a progressive and systematic order according to its technological capacity and complexity, they are mostly normative in nature. There are also counterarguments in studies of economics and technological development suggesting that developing countries possess