

**THE LIMITATION OF THE INTERNET
IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN CHINA**

TANG Wenfang

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Executive Summary

1. The internet has created high hopes in the West of bringing down the authoritarian regimes. There are even proposals to nominate the social media tool Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize. In recent years, the U.S. government has also increased its funding for dissident groups in China and Iran to fight internet censorship in these countries.
2. Others are more pessimistic and argue that while the internet enables information flow, the new technologies also strengthen the control and censorship by the government. The internet makes people spend more time at home and less likely to take political action. It also encourages people to take justice into their own hands through the “human flesh search engines” (人肉搜索).
3. However, Chinese public opinion survey data show that the internet only attracts a small percentage of people even though China has the largest number of internet users in the world.
4. Only about 10% of survey respondents who are mostly the young and educated report learning political news through the internet. The overwhelming majority of Chinese (73%) respondents still rely heavily on television for political news.
5. Media consumption in China also has a clear social and economic class distinction. The urban educated and economically well-off consume all types of media (internet, TV, newspaper) more than the less educated rural population and the poor.
6. Internet news consumers seem to benefit from the less controlled flow of information online. They become less nationalistic, more trusting and tolerant, possess more pro-democratic values, show more willingness to participate in politics and feel more politically empowered.

7. Netizens who participate in online discussions consist of only about 8% of the survey respondents. The under-30s group is the most active participants in online discussions, together with the urban and educated respondents with higher family income.
8. In contrast, TV news viewers tend to be politically conservative. They are more satisfied with the government, more nationalistic, less tolerant and less pro-democratic. For them, the officially controlled TV news is attractive because it validates their pre-conceived conservative political beliefs.
9. The internet plays a limited role in promoting political change in China not because it fails to make people become more liberal. The problems lie in the internet's limited reach to the Chinese population, and in the continued domination of the state-controlled television news distribution.
10. Future research needs to pay more attention to the age divide between internet and television users. If today's young internet users switch to TV for news as they become older, the liberal impact of the internet will stay limited. The reverse will be true if the young people continue to rely on the internet when they grow older.