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e-Participation in Government Decision-Making in China

Reflections on the Experience of Guangdong Province

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Keywords

Abstract

With the supreme political authority's endorsement, an e-participation movement, namely "online enquiry politics" is developing vigorously in China. Among the variety of local e-participation experimental practices in China, the study deals with the Guangdong e-participation system as a microcosm of this regime in China to explore what actually happens in e-participation practices and its dynamics. This system has developed an advanced online e-participation platform and a suite of official supporting mechanisms, e.g. the cyber-spokesman and the assignment conference. These mechanisms organically integrate the system's functions of voice, replies and handling. Citizens on this system do take full advantage of the flexibility and anonymity of the Internet to enjoy a free low-risk space. Besides the immediate functions above, e-participation fosters policy debate, plays a supervisory role for government agencies, and creates a variety of *ad hoc* virtual communities focusing on specific policy-making issues. As the state has to increasingly adopt a series of soft and proactive adaptive strategies to make the Internet serve its purpose, e-participation has a special survival status in China.

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"The Internet ... will probably not bring 'revolutionary'
political change to China, but instead will be a key pillar of
China's slower, evolutionary path toward increased pluralization
and possibly even nascent democratization"
(Chase 2002, 90).

1   Introduction

Since the early 1990s China has experienced an explosive growth in Internet infrastructure and users. According to a series of official surveys by the China Network Information Centre, the number of Internet users developed from 620 000 to 420 million in China in the period 1997–2010. Up to June 2010, Internet penetration in China has reached 31.8 per cent (China Internet Network Information Center 1997; CINIC 2010b). The Internet is becoming an "information commons" in China (Ji 2009, 128). For ordinary citizens, "the Internet is the relatively cheap and efficient tool to consolidate the bottom-up power" (Li 2008, 78). "Ordinary citizens are becoming ever more empowered to take advantage of the power and convenience of ICTs to address their concerns and engage in public affairs debate" (Hung 2010, 338). As for the state, "the threat of the Internet" is being intensively addressed (Pei 2006, 85). The general principle of Chinese government's treatment of the Internet is "developing it actively, strengthening its management, seeking advantages and avoiding harmfulness, making it serve our purpose" (Zhou 2000, 18; English translation Zhou 2006, 138).[1] "Through measures ranging from blunt punitive actions to the subtle manipulation of the private sector, the Chinese state has been largely successful to date in guiding the broad political impact of the Internet use" (Kalathil/Boas 2003, 40). Consequently, "no credible challenges to the regime exist despite the introduction of massive amounts of modern telecommunications infrastructure" (Chase 2002, 89).

In modern societies, the story of social change can be understood through the lens of online activism (Yang 2009, 3). There is a great deal of literature focusing on the special impact of the Internet on the party-state's rule and the state's reaction to it. Most of literature either explores how the state strictly controls accessibility to the Internet, blocks offensive websites and filters sensitive information, or examines how Internet users, especially the so-called "cyber-dissidents" resist those measures, or studies the explosive effect of the Internet against government regulations using certain influential social events, such as Sun Zhigang event, the SARS incident and the BMW case (Chase 2002; Zhou 2006; Hachigian 2002; Harwit/Clark 2001; Zheng 2008; Hung 2010; Peerenboom 2009; Pei 2006; Goldman 2005; Yang 2009; Baum 2008). In short, in most academic works, what happens in the interaction between the state and citizens on the Internet in China seem to be reducible to various stories and confrontations between state control and public resistance.

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[1] It is commonly accepted that the Internet use in China has its roots in the political authority's paradoxical attitude to the Internet. On the one hand, the state attempts to embrace the Internet's vast technical and commercial potential to maintain the considerable economic growth on which the popularity of China Communist Party is heavily dependent. On the other hand, it also tries to prevent this commercial gold mine from becoming political quicksand for its rule. As a result, a rare, subtle, but challenging balance between encouraging the Internet's growth and regulating its negative political impacts is found in China (Hachigian 2001, 118; Hachigian 2002, 47).

While it is true that the tension between the state and citizens on the Internet in certain politically sensitive issues exists, this is only a part of what takes place on the Internet in China. Besides the issue of dissidents-versus-the state, which has attracted most academic writing, there is also a constructive, electronically mediated communication between the state and citizens concerning people's daily lives and government organs' ordinary policy-making (Hughes 2003, 819-820). As K. Hartford explains:

> "In China at least a handful of city governments have taken a proactive stance in encouraging online citizen input, using the interactive potential of the information technologies: giving local residents a conduit for communicating with their representatives before and during the meeting of local and national People's Congresses, asking each other for help and information online, and interacting with government agencies via complaints, pats-on-backs, and requests for information in an environment that can be viewed by others" (2005, 220).

In these practices, e-participation is a typical institution of the constructive interaction between the state and citizens. "e-participation" means "the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives" (Macintosh 2006, 364).[2] Thus, in e-participation, the job of governments is not only to provide information to citizens but also, more significantly, to offer "the opportunity for interaction and the accountability that follows from such interaction" (Schlosberg et al. 2006, 210). In China e-participation is a hybrid conception, referring to citizens' spontaneous activities on the Internet aimed at influencing government decision-making while also pointing to a set of online and offline institutional structures that have been established by government organs or semiofficial agencies, e.g. the state-owned news media, in order to accommodate citizens' spontaneous activities on the Internet. Thus, e-participation is different from e-government. The latter is a pure product of top-down initiatives addressing government-centric concerns with the stability and order of the governing process and the control of the central government over other government entities, officials and individual citizens (Kluver 2005; Lollar 2006). But e-participation is an outcome of sociopolitical initiatives from below which are facilitated by the Internet. On certain ICT platforms, these grassroots initiatives may get a response from the state. Hence, in essence e-participation is a kind of computer-mediated communication. The "political significance of computer mediated communication lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communication media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen based democracy" (Rheingold 1994, 14).

In fact, citizens' spontaneous activities focusing on government decision-making on the Internet have existed for a long time and have increased in China. Official feedback to grassroots e-participation activities first took place in the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixteen Central Committee of China Communist Party (CCP) in 2004. The political report of this Session acknowledged the importance of the Internet in delivering public opinion. It stated that the CCP must "attach great importance to the influence of the Internet and other new media on public opinion" (China Communist Party 2004). Accordingly, the First Secretary Office of General Office of the State Council began to compile regular "Informative Abstract on the Internet" (*hulianwang xinxi zhaiyao* 互联网信息摘要) that serve as "Internal Confidential References" (*neican* 内参) to the leaders of the State Council (Tian 2009a; Chen 2005). Moreover, in 2008 and 2009, respectively, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao chatted online with netizens (*wangmin* 网民).[3] Both said that they often acquainted themselves with public opinion by personally surfing the Internet, which further stimulated the neti-

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[2] The definitions of e-participation can also be found in Cammaerts 2008, 78-84, 92-95 and Grönlund 2009, 14-18.

[3] The so-called "netizen" refers to "a user of the Internet, especially a habitual or keen one" (Stevenson 2010).

zens' enthusiasm in posting comments and appeals for government policies on the Internet (Zhang/ Hu 2008; Xie 2009). We can safely assume that the netizens' opinions and appeals exerted a significant impact on the political ecology and government decision-making in China (Zheng 2008, 147-164).

With the supreme political authority's endorsement, an e-participation movement, namely "online enquiry politics" (*wangluo wenzheng* 网络问政), is developing vigorously in China. Strong Country Forum (*qiangguo luntan* 强国论坛), the most popular and influential online discussion forum sponsored by the *People's Daily*, which is the official newspaper of the central committee of the CCP, can be regarded as an embryo of the wave of online enquiry politics (Hung 2003). In the forum netizens are allowed to post their outspoken opinions spontaneously on specific issues in China. It is believed that this forum makes "information relatively accessible from and among the grassroots" and netizens enjoy "the relative ease of (horizontal) communication" (Hung 2003, 31). Nevertheless, the online activities in the forum constituted a limited form of discussion among ordinary citizens, in the absence of the involvement of the state. Consequently, the *People's Daily* established another forum, entitled "Message Board for Local Leaders" (*difang lingdao liuyanban* 地方领导留言板) in its online presence, "*People's Daily Online*".[4] This forum can be regarded as the first formal national platform of "online enquiry politics". In the forum, netizens are not only allowed to send their messages to a provincial, or municipal or county leader but they also have a chance of their messages being replied to by these leaders. So far, 17 provincial governments, e.g. the Anhui, Henan and Yunnan provincial governments have produced special official documents explaining how to reply to and handle the netizens' messages posted in the forum (People's Daily Online 2011). In addition, other local governments have built their own local "online enquiry politics" platforms, e.g. Guangdong, Liaoning and Zhejiang provincial governments. The common format of these e-participation practices is that citizens can select certain government organs or leading cadres as the targets for their enquiries in certain online forums. And then the citizens can post their enquiries and appeals for certain government policies to be made or their grievances against certain government misconduct in these forums. The government organs or leading cadres respond directly to those messages via the Internet. Generally speaking, citizens have a positive attitude towards this new public participation channel. According to an on-line survey conducted by the *People's Daily* and two other academic institutions in 2009, 69 per cent of netizens believed that online enquiry politics was an effective way for government organs to solicit public opinion and 52 per cent of them thought that online enquiry politics would become a new style of ruling by the CCP.[5]

Among the variety of local e-participation experimental practices in China, the study deals with the Guangdong e-participation system as a microcosm of this regime in China to explore what actually happens in e-participation practices and its dynamics. Guangdong province has a variety of advantageous conditions for the development of e-participation. Up to the end of 2009 there were about 48.6 million netizens in Guangdong and its Internet penetration was about 50.9 per cent in 2009, compared with the national penetration rate of about 28.9 per cent (CINIC 2010a; CINIC 2010c). Besides its leading role on Internet use, Guangdong province is well-known for its advanced economic development, open-minded political culture, outspoken news media and mature civil society. All these advantages make Guangdong more likely than others in China to accommodate ac-

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[4] *See* website of the "Message Board for Local Leaders": http://liuyan.people.com.cn.

[5] In contrast to the popular support for e-participation *per se*, netizens showed their habitual scepticism for government organs and cadres. To the question, "do you believe that your problem to which the cadres have responded on the Internet can be effectively solved in real life", 21 per cent of netizens did not believe this and 51 per cent of them said they didn't know. Furthermore, 69 per cent of them believed that there were some risks in expressing personal opinions in the Internet (Sheng & Ji 2009; Sheng 2009).

tive e-participation activities. In fact, the province has developed an advanced e-participation pattern, which has been regarded as a successful model for online enquiry politics throughout China (Fu 2009; He 2010).

This study starts by exploring the institutional structure of the Guangdong e-participation system by reviewing its institutionalization process using a political document analysis methodology. The empirical data consist mainly of local official documents concerning the design of the local e-participation system, the local top leaders' speeches revealing official incentives for establishing the system, newspapers disclosing insider stories of the institutionalization of the system, and the articles written by the system's operators introducing the running rules of the system. In the next section the study uses a collection of 500 messages posted by netizens in the online e-participation platform consisting of 250 unanswered messages and 250 that were answered from a total of about 33 000 messages.[6] Based on this sample, the netizens' and government organs' characteristic behaviours on the online e-participation platform are explored. Finally, based on the empirical findings, the characteristics and functions of the Guangdong e-participation system and the prospects of the e-participation regime in China are discussed.

[6] The number of samples in each year in the period 2007 to 2010 is dependent on the specific proportion of the amount of unanswered or answered netizens' messages in a year in the total messages in each category in the period 2007–2010. For example, there were about 11 414 unanswered netizens' messages in 2009, which amounts to approximately 36.01% of all unanswered messages in the period of 2007–2010. Thus 90 samples (250*36.01%) have been randomly selected among unanswered messages posted in 2009.

2 The Evolution and Institutional Structure of Guangdong e-Participation

2.1 Stage 1: Affirming Spontaneous Grassroots E-Participation

The origin of the experimental Guangdong e-participation system can be traced to an official open letter jointly issued by Wang Yang, the Secretary of the Guangdong provincial committee of the CCP, and Huang Huahua, the Governor of Guangdong provincial government in early February 2008. In this letter, the positive values of the Internet and citizens' spontaneous e-participation in government policy-making and the socioeconomic development of Guangdong province were affirmed. The writers said:

> "For the Party committees and governments at all levels, the Internet has become a significant platform maintaining close ties with the masses, and a significant channel for becoming informed of the social situation and the people's will ... In the process of dealing with the recent serious sleet and frost disaster, netizens' advice and suggestions provided a reference point for our policy-making ... We are learning about how to utilise the Internet, how to construct and manage the Internet with everyone to make it play a positive role in Guangdong's socioeconomic development ... we are pleased to '*guanshui*' (灌水) [netizens' opinions posted on the Internet] with all netizens together on common concerns. And regarding misconduct in our daily work and policy-making processes, *paizhuan* (拍砖) [netizens' criticisms posted on the Internet] are also welcome" (Tian/Lan 2008).

Whether or not netizens' opinions truly became a significant point of reference for government policy-making, as the open letter implies, it suggests that the role of netizens as a new, independent grassroots force and its important social impact have been acknowledged by the local authority. By making a positive gesture towards netizens' involvement in the policy-making process, the letter provided a supportive political context for subsequent e-participation activities. Nevertheless, the significance of the open letter *per se* lies in its declaration of intent. At this stage, the netizens' activities directing at policy-making issues was not regulated by any official institution. The way in which the government organs treated the netizens' opinions was not transparent to the public. In a word, the institutional level of interaction between government organs and netizens was still very low.

2.2 Stage 2: Establishing a Nascent e-Participation Platform

The local leaders' encouraging words in their open letter greatly stimulated netizens' eagerness to post their comments on local government policies on the Internet. In order to cater for the upsurge of mail on the Internet, a semi-official website, Aoyi (oeeee.com), established a special online forum, entitled "Messages Sent to Secretary Wang" ("*shaogei wangyang shuji de hua*" "捎给汪洋书记的话").[7] The forum attracted many netizens to leave messages for Secretary Wang. The Aoyi website and the online forum can thus be regarded as a nascent e-participation platform in Guangdong province.

As an offline result of the online upsurge, a special corpus of netizens' messages was compiled by the website authority and published in a local leading newspaper at the end of February 2008. The corpus actually consisted of 10 netizens' articles analysing in depth various important dilemmas in the socioeconomic reform of Guangdong province which had been more or less overlooked by the government. Moreover, by means of Secretary Wang's positive comments, the significance of the corpus exceeded purely grassroots activity enquiring about politics. In 29 February, the same day of the corpus was published in the newspaper, Wang cited it in a provincial working conference, and asked all leading cadres in the province to take full advantage of the Internet on the topic "emancipating the mind to further reform and opening up". He said:

> "This corpus deeply and pertinently concerns ten significant issues in Guangdong province. ... All the issues and questions reflected in those netizens' articles must be answered in the new round of investigation and study" (Pu 2008).

About 2 months later on April 17 a symposium was held on the scientific socioeconomic development of Guangdong province among provincial leaders, Wang and Huang and 26 netizens, including most of the authors of the corpus (Tian 2008b). The symposium may be regarded as the first open, direct contact between the local officials and netizens, in which the netizen participants were encouraged to express their opinions on government macro-policies on province's socioeconomic development. More significantly, Wang clarified in this symposium the local authority's fundamental strategy in dealing with the burgeoning grassroots cyber-political activities and gave political instructions on how to institutionalize them. By regarding the Internet as a new, double-edged sword for the local authority, Wang requested local CCP committees and government organs at all levels to proactively intervene in cyberspace rather than passively accommodate it and to promote the Internet's beneficial aspects and abolish its harmful ones. In its most positive aspect, the Internet can produce dual positive efficacies for the authority, i.e. it is an important channel for soliciting public opinion as well as a platform for disclosing official information, especially in public events. What Wang asked for became a *de facto* ideological guideline for the government' in subsequently constructing its e-participation system. In order to convey, covertly, government's anxiety about the potentially offensive character of cyber-politics, Wang asked the netizen representatives to work out a series of self-regulatory rules, to establish methods of nurturing a culture of self-discipline, and to improve the self-organization levels among netizens on the Internet. These issues were also the conundrums for the provincial leadership (Tian 2008b).

Turning to the institutionalization of cyber-politics, Wang said frankly that it was impossible for him to handle personally the 5000 netizens' messages that targeted him in their inquiries on the Aoyi website. It was only through a system rather, than any individuals, that netizens' messages

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[7] Aoyi (oeeee.com) is a shareholder controlled branch website of a provincial state-owned media firm, the South Press Media Group (*nanfang baoye chuanmei jituan* 南方报业传媒集团) in Guangdong province. The website is directly affiliated to the *South Metropolis Newspaper* (*nanfang dushibao* 南方都市报) which is a major subsidiary newspaper of the Group.

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could be processed efficiently and effectively. Good systems were more significant than good leaders. Besides promising that such kind of symposiums would be held once or twice a year, Wang asked the general office of the provincial CCP committee and that of the provincial government to collect netizens' messages on hot social issues weekly for informing provincial leaders' policy-making. He also suggested that the research office of the provincial government should make appointments with influential netizens at irregular intervals on certain policy issues. The propaganda department of the provincial CCP committee should set up a special office to keep in touch with netizens and it should establish a special e-mail box to collect public opinions on the Internet (Tian 2008a). In short, Wang's requests constituted a landmark by bringing the institutionalization of the e-participation system in Guangdong province onto the government's must-do agenda.

2.3 Stage 3: Expanding the Functions of the e-participation Platform

In this stage, two new functions of the developing e-participation system in Guangdong province i.e. e-complaints and e-appraisals, were instituted. In a provincial working conference on the issue of teachers' salaries in September 2008, Wang unexpectedly cited two netizens' complaints posted on the forum of the Aoyi website. He took these messages as evidence of the poor performance of local governments in paying the salaries of local teachers. In one of these messages, the netizens complained that the salaries of local public teachers were not equal to that of civil servants, although local policy documents stipulated that the two jobs should be treated equally in terms of wage levels. In another message, a netizen complained that local substitute teachers (*daike jiaoshi* 代课教师) suffered from severe arrears of wage payments by the county government.[8] Wang commented that the netizens problems were tragic, and ordered the relevant government organs to solve them immediately (Xie et al. 2008).

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[8] A substitute teacher is a special job with Chinese characteristics. They were traditionally called citizen-managed teachers (*minban jiaoshi* 民办教师) and did not count as formal members of staff of public institutions. Because there were not enough formally qualified teachers for the compulsory education system in China, citizen-managed teachers were very common, especially in poor rural regions before the mid-1980s. In 1985, the Ministry of Education (hereinafter referred to as MOE) decided that citizen-managed teachers would no longer be allowed in order to 'improve the quality of elementary education teachers'. However, in many remote and poor areas, local governments were unable to hire formally qualified teachers or these teachers were unwilling to be posted to such places. Consequently, local governments had to still hire those citizen-managed teachers. Since then, these teachers have been called "substitute teachers". It is commonly believed that substitute teachers have made a great contribution to the development of education in China. They work as hard as qualified teachers, but receive much lower wages. "In 2006, the MOE proposed that in a relatively short period of time, all the 448 000 remaining substitute teachers in China would be laid off, and that the last substitute teachers would be laid off in 2010". This policy and its harsh implementation by many local governments meant substitute teachers were struggling, and gradually became outraged. In Guangdong Province, according to the statistics, at least in Shenzhen Municipality, a special economic zone in the province, there were at least about 10 000 substitute teachers. Wang Yang's sympathetic comment that the plight of substitute teachers was "tragic" led local substitute teachers to struggle proactively for fair treatment. The local governments in the province, taking the Shenzhen municipal government as a typical example, were trying to "convert its substitute teachers to regular status by giving them the opportunity to take qualifying examinations". But government misconduct in the implementation of the conversion policy meant that substitute teachers are still complaining (CC/Key 2010; Ma 2008a; Ma 2008b).

Of course, this intervention was still an incidental one that was brought about by a local leader's personal interest rather than the necessary outcome of a standing system. Nevertheless, the case made the developing e-participation system more directly concerned with people's daily lives. Since this incident, besides its initial function of policy consultation, the e-participation system has developed the new function of e-complaints. Hoping that local leading cadres would attend to their individual grievances, more and more netizens lodged descriptions of experiences caused by government misconduct or omissions on the online forum. To a certain extent, this increasing number of e-complaints on the online forum impelled the local government to establish a standing functional e-participation system.

In the end of 2008 the Guangdong provincial government launched a special online campaign on the Aoyi website. This was an anonymous e-appraisal questionnaire on the job performance of 122 provincial departments and the representatives of central government in Guangdong province.[9] This permitted netizens to complete a well-designed questionnaire that set out an overall ranking system and specific items of evaluation for the job performance of government officials. It was reported that about 70 000 netizens participated in this appraisal (Fang/Yan 2010). Additionally, during the period of e-appraisal, some leading government cadres, such as the vice head of the provincial industrial and commercial bureau and the vice head of the provincial public health bureau, conducted online chats for the first time with netizens (Fang/Yan 2010). Thus, a new function, i.e. e-appraisal or e-polling was developed on the e-participation platform. This was the first time that virtual opinions on the Internet exerted a systematic impact on the offline performance of government officials.

2.4 Stage 4: Achieving an Institutionalized e-Participation System

In 2009 the institutionalization of the e-participation system in Guangdong province made a noticeable breakthrough when a structured e-participation system was shaped. In May the first public official document regulating e-participation activity in Guangdong province, entitled the "Working Programme of Building a Positive Interactive Mechanism with Netizens of 'People.com', 'Southcn.com' and 'Oeeee.com'" (*guanyu jianli yu renminwang nanfangwang aoyiwang wangyou liangxing hudong jizhi de gongzuo fang'an* 关于建立与人民网、南方网、奥一网网友良性互动机制的工作方案), was promulgated by the general office of the Guangdong provincial CCP committee (Ren/Lan 2010). This document could be regarded as the normative outcome of Wang's instructions on the government contribution to e-participation issued in 2008. According to the programme, the network information resources department of the general office was obliged to assign full-time officials to regularly read, analyse, collate and categorize netizens' messages on the three websites, and compile valuable messages weekly into a corpus, i.e. the "*Netizens' Messages Weekly*" (*wangyou liuyan zhoubao* 网友留言周报) for provincial leaders (Ren/Lan 2010).

In order to make netizens' postings more convenient and officers handling them more efficiently, a new, advanced e-participation platform, namely "cyber-politics 2.1", was established on the Aoyi website by the Aoyi website authority and the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报), which is a local liberal news outlet well-known for its outspoken editorial policy. The cyber-politics 2.1 platform was an upgraded version of the original e-participation forum on

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[9] See website of the e-appraisal platform: http://news.oeeee.com/zuofeng.

the Aoyi website. On the cyber-politics 2.1 platform a variety of message channels were set up. Besides the standing channels for Secretary Wang and Governor Huang, message channels also covered 30 provincial Party, government and judicial organs, the secretaries of the 22 municipal Party committees which were directly affiliated to the provincial Party committees, the mayors of Guangzhou and Shenzhen municipal governments and the secretaries of 10 county and district Party committees (up to 31 December 2010). Apart from these standing channels, *ad hoc* channels could be opened if any significant government policies and social issues needed to be extensively discussed by the public.[10] Netizens could choose one or multiple government organs or cadres as their targets. The content of messages could include complaints, compliments, policy comments and suggestions and even accusations. And netizens can choose either to post their messages publicly on the web pages of the platform, or hide their messages on the platform and send them covertly to the targeted government organs/cadres. Correspondingly, government replies to the messages, if any, could either be publicly posted on the web pages of the platform or transmitted to the netizens in a point-to-point manner. Since then, cyber-politics 2.1 has become the online infrastructure for the Guangdong e-participation system. It was on the basis of this functional online platform that important e-participation institutions, e.g. the official cyber-spokesman and assignment conferences, could be subsequently established.[11]

This online e-participation platform set up several institutions to deal with the identity of netizens who are engaged in the platform. One is the so-called "soft real name" institution. According to the provisions of this institution, it was not mandatory for netizens to post their messages using their real names but they were encouraged by the website authority to provide their real name and contact information so their messages could be handled more efficiently and effectively. Another institution is a user registration system. According to the manual of the platform, the website authority and government organs could give priority to a message posted by a registered user of the platform. The registration form did not ask for the netizens' real name and information on their real lives, but was restricted to such matters as their username, password, nickname, gender and email. Furthermore, there was a so-called cyber observer system in the cyber-politics platform. Cyber observers are the pro-government activists on the Internet appointed by the website authority. In normal times, there is not much obvious difference between cyber observers and ordinary netizen participants. Some cyber observers even took the initiative to criticize certain government policies. But when a social emergency occurred or a politically sensitive issue was widely discussed on the Internet, the primary job of these observers was to steer public opinion in the platform according

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[10] For example, the "Outline of the Plan for the Reform and Development of the Pearl River Delta (2008–2020)" (*zhujiang sanjiaozhou gaige fazhan guihua gangyao (2008-2020nian)*)) was promulgated by the National Development and Reform Commission at the end of 2008. As Guangdong was the most important province in the Pearl River Delta, the local authority pondered about how to take full advantage of the outline to promote local socioeconomic development. In February 2009 a special message channel on the topic of how to comprehend and carry out the outline was set up on the e-participation platform. Within a month, the number of visits to the channel was about 3.2 million and about 3000 messages were posted on it. Another case occurred in early 2010. When a government policy to construct a waste incineration power project aroused serious social controversy, an *ad hoc* message channel to discuss which method of garbage disposal was the most feasible and suitable in Guangzhou city, the capital of the Guangdong province, was opened on the Aoyi e-participation platform and three other leading local websites from 14 January to 31 March 2010. It was reported that the number of visits to this site was more than 11.463 million, and 2696 netizens' messages were posted on these websites over that period (Lan 2010; Hu 2009; Qiu/Li 2010; Zeng/Yu 2010).

[11] See website of "cyber-politics" platform: http://wen.oeeee.com.

to the government's wishes.[12] In addition, local leaders and government organs were also users of the platform. They could either reply to ordinary netizens' messages or proactively release information. And unlike the ordinary netizen participants, official users and cyber-observers had special IDs, and were subject to an *ex post facto* censorship. This special arrangement permitted the government organs and cyber-observers to steer public opinion on the Internet more efficiently, especially in public emergencies (Ren/Lan 2010).

With regard to the censorship of the cyber-politics platform, the only express requirement made by the website owner for citizens posting messages on the platform was to "abide by the laws and regulations, advocate network civilization". Nevertheless, by reading an article written by two senior managers of the Aoyi website, we find there are four censorship principles, i.e. truthfulness (*shenshi* 真实), legality (*hefa* 合法), humanity (*renxing* 人性) and conformity to the overall interests of the society (*fucong daju* 服从大局). A netizen's message cannot be publicly posted in the platform until it has passed the censorship. If a message either concerned "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jiandu* 舆论监督) or was suspected of aggrieving certain personal, property, or intellectual property rights, or if it concerned a specific person, organ, or region, it could not be posted until relevant facts and appeals were verified by the website owner. Furthermore, if a netizen's message might impair the positive image of a senior official or a region, it was not allowed to be publicly posted on the cyber-politics platform, but would be reported to relevant government organs in the form of "Internal Confidential References of Items on the Internet" (*wangluo neican* 网络内参) (Ren/Lan 2010).

With the establishment of the advanced e-participation platform, the number of netizens' messages increased exponentially. As a result, in May 2009 Wang gave instruction on how to intensively handle important netizens' messages. He said:

> "We can sort out certain problems that are intensively complained [by netizens] about on the Internet, especially those that can be solved under the current conditions. And a kind of assignment conference can be held in the proper time to ask competent government organs to resolve those problems and reply to related netizens" (Xu 2009b).

One positive result of Wang's instruction was a distinctive institution of the Guangdong e-participation system, i.e. the *"Assignment Conference for Resolving the Problems Intensively Complained by Netizens"* (*wangyou jizhong fanying wenti jiaobanhui* 网友集中反映问题交办会), was established. The operational format of the assignment conference closely followed Wang's idea. The first session of assignment conference was held by the general office of Guangdong provincial CCP committee at the end of June 2009. During the conference, 17 policy problems that netizens had intensively complained about on the e-participation platform were examined by the office. Government organs in related policy fields, either in departments of the provincial government or local governments at a lower level were assigned to resolve these problems. The provincial authority asked all assigned agencies to solve the policy problems completely or provide satisfactory explanations for these problems within 3 months. Under the office's supervision, all 17 problems were finally solved by the respective government agencies before the deadline (Xu 2009c). The subsequent sessions of assignment conferences were held by the general office in September 2009, May and August 2010, respectively, which followed the operational format of the first session and also obtained satisfactory outcomes (Tian 2009b; Zhang 2010b). More significantly, in the third session, the local au-

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[12] For example, in August 2009, hundreds of substitute teachers plotted taking a collective petition to Shenzhen municipal government. When the government failed to impede the street petition by using all traditional measures, a cyber-observer, Yang Yiping, who was a member of the local political consultation conference, posted an article entitled "Urgent Notice Asking Substitute Teachers not to Petition to the Municipal Educational Bureau" on the Aoyi platform. The clicking rate of the article went up immediately to 16766, which effectively helped the government to solve the public protest (Ren/Lan 2010).

thority formally confirmed that the assignment conferences had become a standing institution in the e-participation system, and would be held regularly, at least twice a year (Zhang 2010b).

There is little doubt that the assignment conferences made a positive impact on the effectiveness of the e-participation system in Guangdong province. It is through the assignment conferences that a systematic link between online citizen participation and offline government regulation was first established. Nevertheless, the messages that were resolved in the assignment conferences actually represented only a fraction of all such messages on the e-participation platform and many messages were still waiting for feedback from government. Consequently, parallel to the assignment conferences, another standing mechanism started systematically handling these messages. This was the *Cyber Spokesman* (*wangluo fayanren* 网络发言人), established by the local authority. After the first session of the assignment conference, 15 departments in the provincial government that were most closely related to people's daily lives set up their own cyber spokesman systems under the command of the provincial authority.[13] In April 2010, seven more provincial departments established their own cyber spokesman systems.[14] In fact the so-called cyber spokesman was not only a special government position, but it substantially represented a set of duties, systems and work norms for how government organs should regularly respond to netizens' messages and release official information in their own field of competence via the e-participation platform. According to the design of the cyber spokesman mechanism, cyber spokesmen must disclose their contact information, including their email and QQ address (a popular, free instant messaging computer programme in mainland China), and even their mobile phone number, so that the netizens could more conveniently convey their messages to government. In addition, the cyber spokesman was required to provide regular official feedbacks to the messages posted on the e-participation platform and other authorized channels (Xu 2009a). To a certain extent, it is through this system that the institutionalized regular interaction between netizens and government organs on the e-participation platform was eventually established.

All in all, in a development spanning three years, an institutionalized e-participation system came into being in Guangdong province. This e-participation system consists of three subsystems, i.e. voice, reply, and handle (Ren/Lan 2010). Regarding their voice, netizens can post their messages including policy advice, complaints and appraisals on the standing e-participation platform, i.e. cyber-politics 2.1 on the Aoyi website. According to the target(s) that netizens choose for their enquiry, their messages are being addressed to relevant leading cadres or government organs. With regard to replies, in an ideal situation, the cyber-spokesman of the government organs reply to most of these messages. In addition to this institutionalized pattern, local leading cadres may also make *ad hoc* replies to certain netizens' messages either on the online platform or offline. The task of handling the e-participation system is mainly undertaken by two institutions: the assignment conference, which regularly deals with certain policy problems that netizens complain about intensively; and the offline work routines of the cyber spokesman mechanism. According to the design of the mechanism, government organs must handle netizens' messages which were addressed to them in a timely fashion and inform the netizens of the handling process and results in the e-participation platform in the name of the cyber-spokesmen

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[13] These provincial departments included the Provincial Bureau of Education, Provincial Bureau of Public Security, Provincial Bureau of Supervision, Provincial Bureau of Labour And Social Security, Provincial Bureau of Land and Resources, Provincial Bureau of Construction, Provincial Bureau of Transportation, Provincial Bureau of Public Health, Provincial Bureau of Audit, Provincial Bureau of Environmental Protection, Provincial Bureau of Industry and Commerce, Provincial Bureau of Quality and Technology Supervision, Provincial Bureau of Food and Drug Surveillance, Provincial Bureau of Safety Production Surveillance, and Provincial Bureau of Letters and Calls (Yin 2009).

[14] These provincial departments included Provincial Bureau of Civil Affairs, Provincial Bureau of Justice, Provincial Bureau of Finance, Provincial Bureau of Culture, Provincial Commission of Family Plan, Provincial Bureau of Local Tax, and Provincial Bureau of Travel (Tian 2010).

3 The Operational Format of the Guangdong e-Participation System

In the operational routine of the Guangdong e-participation system netizens post their messages on the cyber-politics platform on the Aoyi website and relevant government organs post their online replies in return.[15] Hence, by analysing the features of those online messages and replies, the operational format of the e-participation system can be clarified. The following section studies three aspects of this: the overall running of the e-participation system, netizens' characteristic behaviour in posting their messages, and government organs' characteristic behaviour in making replies. The latter two aspects are based on 500 samples of netizens messages publicly posted in the cyber-politics platform in the period 2007 to 2010, which are composed of 250 netizens' messages that received no reply and 250 that were answered.

3.1 The Overall Situation

In the period 2007 to 2010, about 33,182 netizens' messages in total were publicly posted on the cyber-politics platform on the Aoyi website (up to 31 December 2010).[16] The number of messages posted in this period generally maintained a rising trend, which became much sharper after 2009. As shown in Table 1, the monthly average numbers of messages posted in the platform in the period 2007 to 2010 were 167, 635, 1013 and 951, respectively. Since the Guangdong e-participation system was only institutionalized after 2009, the trend indicates that the institutionalization of a system makes a positive impact on the activity of netizens' engaging in the e-participation platform.

On the platform, the netizens' messages are grouped into two categories, i.e. unanswered and answered messages. In the period 2007 to 2010, there were about 31 694 unanswered messages, while only 1488 were answered. The overall answer rate, i.e., the ratio of answered messages to the total number of netizen messages on the platform was only about 4.48 per cent. This extreme low answer rate, together with the huge contrast between the absolute amount of unanswered and answered messages indicates that the exponential increase in netizens' messages overwhelmed the government organs. The resources that had been invested in e-participation by the government were insufficient to process the massive numbers of netizens' messages on the platform. What they were doing was picking a tiny sample of all messages to reply to.

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[15] On the Aoyi website, when netizens want to publicly post their messages on the cyber-politics platform, the messages are listed on the platform including the netizens' name, posting date and time, and the targeted government organ (s) or leader (s), their content, and the replies of the government organs, if any. Such online databases make an empirical study of the characteristics of netizens and government organs' online behaviour feasible. See website of netizens' messages: http://wen.oeeee.com/channel/3067.html.

[16] According to the operational norm of the cyber-politics platform of the Aoyi website, netizens can choose either to post their messages publicly on the website or to send the message exclusively to the government organs addressed in a point-to-point way. Hence, the actually total amount of netizens' messages processed by the cyber-politics platform ought to be larger than the statistics show. Some senior executives of the Aoyi website even asserted that the website had processed about 300 000 netizens' messages from mid-2006 to the end of 2009 (Ren/Lan 2010).

Nevertheless, another group of data showed another side of the coin. Although the absolute number of answered messages was small, a sharp rising trend was seen in the period 2007 to 2010, as shown in Table 16, the monthly average amount of answered messages rose from 0.25 in 2007 to 60.5 in 2010, a growth of about 242 times. The corresponding monthly average amount of all netizens' messages and of unanswered messages, respectively, grew approximately 5.71-fold and 5.35-fold in this period. The rates of answers in the period of 2007 to 2010 grew to 0.15 per cent, 0.26 per cent, 6.08 per cent and 6.36 per cent, respectively, growing by approximately 35.33 times. The faster growth of the answered messages indicated that the performance of the government organs on the cyber-politics platform had improved. The stably increasing answer rate implies that the e-participation system was becoming more and more active and responsive, especially after 2009 when the institutionalization of the system was basically completed.

Table 1: The Overall State of the Cyber-Politics Platform on the Aoyi Website (up to 31 December 2010)

Year	The Amount of Netizens' Messages	The Amount of Unanswered Netizens' Messages	The Amount of Answered Netizens' Messages	The Monthly Average Amount of Netizens' Messages	The Monthly Average Amount of Unanswered Netizens' Messages	The Monthly Average Amount of Answered Netizens' Messages	Answer Rate
2010	11411	10685	726	950.92	890.42	60.5	6.36%
2009	12153	11414	739	1012.75	951.17	61.58	6.08%
2008	7620	7600	20	635	633.33	1.67	0.26%
2007	1998	1995	3	166.5	166.25	0.25	0.15%
Total	**33182**	**31694**	**1488**	–	–	–	–

3.2 Characteristics of Netizens' Behaviour on the Cyber-Politics Platform

3.2.1 The Identity of Netizen Participants

Among the 500 samples of netizens' messages, at least 77.6 per cent of the messages were posted by netizens using their virtual cyber-name.[17] The fact that most of netizens disguise their real identities when they engage on the cyber-politics platform indicates that citizens are inclined to take advantage of the anonymity of the Internet to reduce the risk of being involved in any trouble in their real life. Nevertheless, if the major purpose of netizens' to engage on a cyber-politics plat-

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[17] It can be confirmed that 77.6 per cent of the netizens' messages were posted using the netizens' virtual cyber-name because these cyber-name were totally different from the conventional style of Chinese names. But among the messages with conventional Chinese names, we still cannot be sure that they were the real names of the netizens who post their messages on the cyber-politics platform. Hence, we can only state that at least 77.6% of netizens' messages were posted using the netizens' virtual cyber-name on the platform.

form is to air their grievances about the misconduct of governments and others, it would be appropriate for them both to use their real names and also to attach their detailed personal information to their message. For example, in a sample message, a citizen complained that his farmland had been illegally expropriated by the local township government. In the message, this complainant provided his real name, address and mobile number (Aoyi wangyou [User of Aoyi (oeeee.com)] (ID: Li Yunming) 2009). In another message complaining about medical malpractice, besides using his normal personal information, the complainant even attached his ID number (Aoyi wangyou (ID: wdhxcr) 2010). In such cases citizens utilise the cyber-politics platform as a special channel for airing their experiences to government organs and the public. And there is little doubt that the credibility of such complaints could be promoted if they used their real names, correspondingly, enhancing their chance of their grievances being resolved by the government organs.

In addition, by examining the content of netizens' messages, it was found that netizens who engage in the platform fall into a variety of socioeconomic statuses, including the disadvantaged social groups in China, e.g. peasants, laid-off workers and migrant rural workers. The openness that is the ideal characteristic of e-participation is relatively well realized on the cyber-politics platform on the Aoyi website. Nevertheless, the intensity of the voice of different netizen groups on the platform is indeed related to some extent to their socioeconomic status. Many of the messages in the sample are posted by different netizens on a same policy issue. For example, among the 500 netizens' messages, there are 27 concerning the problem of substitute teachers' jobs and salaries in Guangdong Province. Among the top 10 netizens' messages with highest amount of e-participation visits (up to 31 December), there are six messages concerning the substitute teachers issues. A similar phenomenon was found concerning the incident of the Panyu waste incineration project in Guangzhou municipality. During this incident, numerous messages opposing the project were intensively posted by those urban residents potentially affected by it.[18] This indicates that citizens who have a relative high capacity of accessing the Internet and share an identical position towards a policy issue in real life are likely to form an *ad hoc* virtual grassroots community on the cyber-politics platform. The virtual community can intensify their appeals and social influence by producing a great number of messages concerning a government policy as well as supportive follow-up comments on the platform.

3.2.2   Targets of Netizens' Messages

As noted above, the available targets of enquiries on the cyber-politics platform include top provincial leaders, all provincial Party, government and judicial organs, all municipal Party committees and certain county Party committees. A netizen could target one or multiple recipients. An examination of the sample messages found that there are two features of the netizens' choice of targets. The first is that among the sample messages in the period 2009–2010, more than half of the messages

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[18] In the Guangzhou-Panyu waste incineration power project case in October 2009, the Panyu district government in the Guangzhou municipality announced that the construction of a 930-million Yuan waste incinerator power plant would be established in the district. The site selection of the project had been approved by the Municipal Planning Bureau and relevant housing demolition works had been completed. But local residents expressed strong opposition to the project. Facing strong grassroots opposition, the local authority held an informal public hearing with at least 56 resident representatives at the end of December. In the public hearing, the top local official announced the project had been stopped, and any future new garbage disposal project would get agreement from more than 75 percent of local residents (Lai 2009; Qiu 2009a; Qiu 2009b).

(52.62 per cent) have plural targets.[19] A typical package of plural targets may include local municipal/county Party committee(s), competent provincial government departments(s), and top provincial leader(s). For example, in one message, a netizen complained that his farmland was being encroached by a real estate enterprise and the local township government. He targeted five recipients, including Wang Menghui, the secretary of local municipal Party committee, the provincial bureau of land resources, the provincial supervision bureau, Huang Huahua, the governor of provincial government and Wang Yang, the secretary of provincial Party committee (Aoyi wangyou (ID:Nuoyan8abc) 2009).

The second feature is that approximately 211 of the sample messages from 2007 to 2010, target top provincial leaders, Wang Yang or Huang Huahua, as either the sole recipient or as one of the recipients. In other words, about 42.2 per cent of netizens expect messages posted on this platform to attract the personal attention of top provincial leaders. The content of these messages is diverse. But the matters that most of these messages are concerned with are not directly within the remit of the provincial CCP committee and government. In contrast, in most of these messages netizens complained about the misconduct of lower level CCP committees and governments, and even civil disputes. For example, in two messages Wang Yang was chosen by netizens as the sole recipient. In the first message, the writer complained that his village was heavily polluted by a local factory (Aoyi wangyou 2009c). In the other, the writer complained that his daily life was negatively influenced by a nearby restaurant (Aoyi Wangyou (ID: 6566) 2008). These features indicate that netizens regard this platform as a distinctive channel for bypassing the traditional bureaucratic routes that they have to follow in daily life. By appealing to multiple state organs or conducting skip-level appeals through the platform, citizens try to make their voice and appeals more highly valued and more efficiently processed by the state. In resolving complicated policy problems and intractable social disputes, the e-participation platform is undoubtedly more cost effective for citizens.

3.2.3 The Content of Netizens' Messages

Prior to studying what netizens said in the platform, it is necessary to explore what they are actually allowed to say under the censorship of the platform. This question can be answered only by exploring the bottom line of the censorship system in practice. As noted above, the principles of the cyber-politics platform include truthfulness, legality, humanity, and conformity to the overall interests of the society. In reading the sample messages, we find that this platform has been relatively tolerant of netizens' speech. Of course, no message was found that dealt with the most politically sensitive issues, such as requests for a comprehensive democratic reform, criticism of state leaders or comments on politically sensitive disturbances. But it is not very hard to find messages that reveal misconduct in government organs and corruption in specific local cadres on the platform. The following three messages illustrate the tolerance of the website authority and the government. In the first sample, a netizen asked for more freedom of speech in China (Aoyi wangyou 2009d). In the second, a netizen enquired of Wang Yang when restrictions to newspaper licensing would be lifted in the province (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Wei) 2008). And in the third, a netizen complained that government organs did not take into account the voice of the local people, asserting that this was caused by that the local people had no vote, and asked where the "people's democracy" was to be found (Aoyi wangyou 2008). All the topics addressed in these messages are sensitive on all websites in China, not to mention a semi-official website. Hence, compared with political ecology offline, and

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[19] Before 2009, the current advanced cyber-politics platform covering multiple enquiry targets had not been established. It was therefore impossible for netizens to choose multiple targets for their enquiries in the period 2007–2008. Hence, only samples from 2009 to 2010 are available for the study on the netizens' characteristic conduct in choosing a target.

based on the fact that these outspoken messages are still posted on the platform, it can be said that netizens do enjoy relatively free space for expression in the Guangdong e-participation system.

With regard to what the netizens actually said in their messages on the platform, since their contents are extremely diverse, it is necessary to classify it. In this classification system, all netizens' messages on this platform can be grouped into five types: complaints and requests for measures to be taken; complaints and policy requests; policy suggestions; policy and service enquiries and social comments. In the first category, netizens complain of misconduct by either government organs and officials or social subjects, and ask agencies or leaders to take *ad hoc* measures to rectify the misconduct and redress the netizens' grievances.[20] In the second category, netizens grumble about certain social problems arising as a result of poor government policies or the inaction of government organs, as a result of which they are among the victims, and ask the competent agencies or leaders to make (or cancel) the policy to solve these social problems.[21] In the third category, policy suggestions, netizens play a role of grassroots think tanks. They provide in-depth analyses on certain socioeconomic issues and policy proposals for references of government organs.[22] In the fourth category, netizens are confused about certain government policies or services, and ask agencies or officials to interpret them.[23] And in the final category of messages, they just express their views on certain government actions, policies and social phenomena.[24]

Among the 500 samples of netizens' messages, the first category, "complaints and requests for measures to be taken" constitutes 52.2 per cent of all messages, broken down into 12.4 per cent complaining of misconduct in government organs and officials and 39.8 per cent complaining of the misconduct of other social subjects. The second, third and fourth categories constitute approximately 9.4, 10.6 and 7 per cent of all messages, respectively. The final category constitutes about 20.8 per cent, divided into 15.4 per cent commenting on government policies and 5.4 per cent commenting on social phenomena. According to these statistics, the incentive of more than half of all citizens who engaged on the cyber-politics platform was to seek *ad hoc* measures for redress of their individual or collective grievances from government organs or local leaders. In other words, seeking redress for aggrieved individual or collective interests constitutes the most prominent incentive for citizens to engage in cyber-politics. Relatively fewer people try to obtain redress from the authorities to rectify government officials' misconduct, while many more netizens resort to state power to solve their disputes with other citizens or non-state subjects. Nevertheless, a large number of netizens pay attention to profound social problems and related government policies. In aggregate the proportions of the categories of complaints and policy requests and policy suggestions, and the subcategory of social comments concerned with government policies, constitute 35.4 per cent of all netizens' messages focusing on government policy-making issues, which influence the netizens' individual or collective interests, and are concerned with a segment of social, even public interest.

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[20] For example, in a message, a netizen complained that some factories seriously polluted local environments, and endangered residents' health. He asked the provincial bureau of environmental protection and the secretary of Guangzhou municipal Party committee to make special measures to curb the pollution caused by those factories (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Liu wei) 2009).

[21] For example, in a message, a netizen complained that he had to pay a special school fee for his child because he did not have a locally registered residence permit. He asked Wang Yang to make a policy to abolish this unreasonable system in the Guangzhou municipality (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Shiming) 2008).

[22] For example, a netizen posted a 3600-word article analysing how to accelerate the development of tourist industry in Guangdong province (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Sun Hongbo) 2008).

[23] For example, in a message, a netizen enquired the provincial bureau of civil affairs of whether or not the traffic salvation fund was established in Shenzhen municipality (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Waidiren) 2008).

[24] For example, in a message, a netizen expressed his optimistic view of the impact of "cyber-politics" on the development of civil society in Guangdong province (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Zhang Renhan) 2010a).

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3.3 Characteristics of Government Organs' Behaviour on the Cyber-Politics Platform

3.3.1 The Duty System for Government Organs' to Reply to Netizens' Messages

The duty system refers to the responsibility of government organs to be in charge of processing netizens' messages on the cyber-politics platform and their division of labour. The system has evolved from being the responsibility of an exclusive single agency to take on this overall duty to multiple agencies that are responsible respectively for answering certain kinds of messages. A review of the samples of netizens' messages answered found that all government replies posted before August 2009 were made by the network information resources department of the general office of Guangdong provincial CCP committee. This department played a role of the centrum of the duty system. It was exclusively in charge of collecting the messages, allocating relevant messages to government organs, coordinating the government organs in resolving the problems conveyed in the messages and posting the official replies on the cyber-politics platform. This system had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage was that the department had relatively high political authority. Under its supervision, netizens' opinions could be processed by relevant government organs in a very efficient and effective way. But the department was, after all, just a single agency, which was incapable of handling a large volume of messages. Consequently, only a very small proportion of these messages were processed and replied to during that time.

After August 2009, as the cyber-spokesman institution was established, the duty system was decentralized. In the new system, although the functions and powers of the network information resources department are still maintained, the department is no longer the sole agency in charge of handling and replying to messages. The agencies that are targeted by the enquiry may also directly handle and reply to it. As a positive result of this decentralized duty system, the amount of answered netizens' messages has increased remarkably. Nevertheless, because government organs have different standards and procedures for handling these messages, the chance of receiving a reply and the quality of the replies received different agencies are uneven. For example, in two sample messages netizens complained about a local hospital arbitrarily collecting fee in Shaoguan municipality and a local factory polluting the environment in Dongguan municipality. These were addressed to the provincial bureau of public health and the provincial bureau of environmental protection, respectively. The similarity of these two messages lies in the fact that the problems complained about fall under the jurisdiction of lower level local government organs, not directly within the remit of the two provincial bureaus. In their reply the provincial bureau of public health cited a legal principle stipulated in the "Regulations on Letters and Visits" (*xinfang tiaoli* 信访条例) as the legal basis for their handling procedure[25] and informed the netizen that his message had been transferred to the local government department, asking him to contact this body directly (Aoyi wangyou (ID: jenny99) 2009). In the reply from the bureau of environmental protection, the bureau informed the netizen that the message had been transferred to the local government organ, and guaranteed that the bureau would urge the local organ to solve the problem and report on the final handling result. About two months later, the bureau did report on the problem-solving process and the final result to the netizen (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Lisheng) 2009; Aoyi wangyou (ID: Zhang Xiaoxuan) 2009).

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[25] The Regulation prescribes that "With regard to a letter-or-visit matter which involves an administrative organ at a lower level or its staff members, directly transfer such matter to the administrative organ which has the power to handle it according to the principles of territorial jurisdiction, responsibilities assumed at different levels, and the department in charge being the department responsible, ..." (The State Council 2005).

As noted above, more than half the message samples target multiple government organs or leaders in their enquiry. How do such bodies divide up the labour involved in replying these messages? There is no explicit normative rule for the division of this duty that regulates how messages with multiple targets should be dealt with on this platform. Nevertheless, some government organs have established conventional practices for replying to such messages, as can be found by a review of the sample of messages answered. First, most of these messages are handled by single government organs, even if multiple government organs or leaders have been targeted. Among the 165 samples of answered messages with multiple targets, most have been addressed in this way. There are only two exceptions which were replied to by two of their targets (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Zhu Yanping), 2010). The existence of sporadic exceptional cases further confirms that there is no universal normative rule on the division of this duty.

Second, when an enquiry's targets included a provincial government organ(s), this organ usually played the leading role by handling the message. Among 154 answered messages which targeted provincial government organs among others, 134 were replied to by the provincial organ, accounting for about 87.01 per cent of all answered messages. Third, among these samples with multiple targets, 17 were replied to by the network information resources department. All these messages targeted Wang Yang among others. But this does not mean that the messages targeting Wang Yang among others are usually replied to by the department. In fact, among 75 messages targeting Wang Yang among others, only 17 messages received a reply from the department. The remaining 50 messages and eight messages, respectively, received a reply from the provincial government and the local (municipal/county) governments.

3.3.2 Government Organs' Practice in Selective Replies

As mentioned above, although the answer rate on the cyber-politics platform has grown in recent years, there are still a large number of netizens' messages that have not received a reply. That is to say, government organs carry out a selective policy in replying. Is there any rule regulating this practice? What kind of messages do government organs prefer to handle? These questions are important in judging the efficacy of the cyber-politics platform. By reviewing all samples of netizens' messages, it was found that this practice of selective replies was not consistent. Similar netizens' messages that substantially concerned an identical policy issue are treated by different government organs in totally different ways. For example, in three sample messages, netizens living in different municipalities, Shaoguan, Shenzhen and Maoming, complained that local television stations frequently screened awful medical advertisements, and called for stricter regulation by authorities. The grumble about the problem in Shaoguan targeted Wang Yang, Huang Huahua, the provincial bureau of industry and commerce and the secretary of the Shaoguan municipal Party committee, Xu Jianhua. The cyber-spokesman of Shaoguan municipal Party committee and Shaoguan municipal television station replied to the message (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Chen Min) 2010). But the other two messages, which respectively addressed the secretary of Yantian district Party committee, Yuan Baocheng, and the provincial bureau of culture and the secretary of Maoming municipal Party committee, Luo Yinguo, received no response (Aoyi wangyou 2007; Aoyi wangyou 2010). Moreover, a government organ could make a totally different response to messages concerning similar policy issues and addressing the same government organ. For example, in two messages, the netizens complained about local criminal gangs in their cities, i.e. Maoming and Yangjiang. Both messages addressed the provincial bureau of public security. At last, the complaint about the problem in Maoming Municipality received an official reply, which explained the work of local public security organs in getting rid of underworld gangs (Aoyi wangyou 2009a). But the latter message received no official response (Aoyi wangyou (ID: jbjd1111) 2009).

Based on this empirical study, it can thus be said that all replies are based on *ad hoc* considerations, rather than being a systematic outcome of a normative rule. Nevertheless, it is still necessary and worthwhile to explore whether or not there are any factors influencing government organs' selective replies in practice. The probable factors influencing government organs' selective practices may include the authenticity of the netizens' identity in the platform, the number of targets, and the content type of the messages.

Regarding the influence of the authenticity of the netizens' identity on the platform, the proportion of unanswered netizens' messages using a virtual cyber-name is about 79.6 per cent, while that of answered netizens' messages is about 75.6 per cent. The two values are not inconsistent. Hence, we can conclude that the authenticity of a netizen's identity does not obviously influence the practice of selective responses. In other words, government organs have no preference for replying to messages using netizens' real names or those using their virtual cyber-names. Regarding the influence of the number of enquiry targets, messages with multiple targets make up about 22.4 per cent of all samples of unanswered netizens' messages, while such kind of messages occupy 66 per cent of all samples of answered messages. The gap between these two values indicates that a message addressed to multiple targets has more chance of receiving an official reply.

Moreover, in exploring whether government organs prefer to reply to messages with certain types of content, we use the classification system of the content of netizens' messages described above. The proportions in the first category, "complaints and requests for measures to be taken" of all unanswered and answered messages was, respectively, 34 and 70.4 per cent. For category two, "complaints and policy requests" it was 12.8 and 6 per cent, respectively. For category three, "policy suggestions" it was 14 and 7.2 per cent, respectively. For category four, "policy and service enquiries" it was 7.6 and 6.4 per cent, respectively and for category five, "social comments" the proportion was 31.6 and 10 per cent, respectively. This analysis shows that government organs much preferred to reply to messages in first category and were apt to neglect the messages in the second, third and fifth types, to varying degrees. Furthermore, government organs do not show any special preference, either positive or negative, for netizens' messages in the fourth category. The reason for these preferences may be that the first category of messages is directly concerned with the daily work of the government organs so it is thus easy for them to reply. To handle and reply to this kind of message could make real and prompt contributions to promoting government's regulations and improving citizens' daily lives. By contrast, category types two, three and five are concerned with complex policy issues and social problems. It is hard for a government organ to provide a satisfactory explanation for these issues in a short reply on the virtual platform. Even if they could do so, it would make little actual contribution to regulations and life offline. Hence, when government organs have only limited resources to process a small portion of netizens' messages, responses to practical issues are preferred by the government.

3.3.3   Interval between a Request and a Reply

The interval refers to the time interval between posting a message and receiving a reply. This analysis is meaningful only for messages that have been answered. In all messages that received a reply the overall average time waiting for a response was 71 days. In chronological terms, the efficiency in replying to such messages has improved markedly. The average duration between request and reply in 2007 and 2008 was 922 days and 607 days, respectively. In 2009 and 2010, the response rate declined sharply to 97 days and 24 days, respectively. The negative situation in the period 2007–2008 may have been caused by two factors. To start with, as mentioned above, the network information resources department was exclusively in charge of replying to messages in that period. The highly centralized duty system and the resource limitations of the department led

to inefficiency in replying to netizens' messages. The other cause of the long duration between request and response is the retrospective effect of the cyber-spokesman system. Cyber-spokesmen of government organs, which were established after October 2009, not only handle netizens' messages posted after this institution was set up, but also have to handle retrospectively messages that had been posted before their establishment. For example, a netizen's message, addressed to the provincial bureau of civil affairs, was posted on the cyber-politics platform on July 1 2008. But the cyber-spokesman of the bureau was not set up until April 2010. After 19 months, the message at last received a reply from the cyber-spokesman of the bureau on April 8 2010 (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Waidiren) 2008).

The encouraging situation after 2009 is rooted in the institutionalization of the e-participation system, especially the establishment of cyber-spokesmen. If we take the time when the first group of cyber-spokesman was established in October 2009 to divide the period between 2007 and 2010, we find that this system made a salient contribution to improving the efficiency of government organs in handling netizens' messages. It took on average 153 days for messages posted before October 2009 to be answered by government organs, while it took only 30 days on average for messages posted after that time to receive a response. In other words, after the cyber-spokesman system was introduced, the average duration between request and response was reduced from approximately 6 months to about 1 month.

3.3.4 The Content of Government Organs' Replies

As what the government organ said in their replies varied considerably, we have classified their responses into a typological system in order to effectively analyse their content. This study has divided all such replies into two categories, i.e. procedural and substantial replies. In the procedural replies, government organs only fulfil their procedural obligations, such as informing netizens that their messages have been accepted, asking netizens to provide more material, and asking them to address their enquiries to other government organs. This kind of reply does not deal at all with the substantial matters conveyed in the netizens' messages. This category can be further divided into three subcategories, i.e. pure acceptance notices, requests for more material, and instructions to transfer their query together with a notice of rejection. In contrast, substantial replies deal with the matter of the enquiry, such as regulation problems, individual grievances, social comments and policy suggestions. These substantial replies can also be further divided into three subcategories, i.e. reports of special measures or policies particularly made upon netizens' requests, statements of official standpoints on a social issue or a netizen's opinion, and instructions about routine government work and existing regulatory documents.

Procedural replies address about 37.2 per cent of all the messages answered, consisting of 13.2 per cent of pure acceptance notices, 7.6 per cent of requests for material, and 16.4 per cent with transfer instructions and a notice of rejection. Substantial replies constitute about 62.8 per cent of all responses, consisting of 36.8 per cent that explain particular measures and policies reports, 6 per cent that explain official standpoints and 20 per cent with routine work and document instructions. As the substantial replies constitute a larger proportion of all replies than the procedural responses, we may say that in general government organs' responses in terms of content is basically satisfying. Nevertheless, within this basically positive overall situation, two potentially negative situations need to be addressed. Firstly, although substantial replies on special measures and policies particularly made upon relevant netizens' requests make up the largest proportion (36.8 per cent) of all replies, compared with the proportion of responses to "complaints and measure requests" and "complaints and policy requests", which is approximately 61.6 per cent, the proportion of this subcategory of substantial replies is still small. In other words, only about a half of netizens' messages in these two content types got pertinent replies.

Secondly, within the procedural replies, the subcategories of pure acceptance notices and transfer instructions with a notice of rejection make up approximately about 29.6 per cent (13.2 per cent plus 16.4 per cent) of such replies. These two kinds of procedural replies should be perceived as negative practices, because, in the former, although the government organs have accepted the messages, they no longer make any further substantial response to the queries. The latter is a result of the government organs copying traditional bureaucratic procedures in their responses on the cyber-politics platform. In these two situations, although a netizen receives a *pro forma* reply from a government organ, this reply is actually meaningless. Thus, approximately one-third of interactions between citizens and government organs on this platform make no sense. In addition, all the replies in these two content types are made by the cyber-spokesman of provincial government organs and municipal local leaders. None is made by the network information resources department. This phenomenon further confirms the inference made above. Compared with the original, highly centralized duty system of government organs' replies that was dominated by the department, the current decentralized duty system has led to a certain decline in the quality of official replies.

Furthermore, no matter what the content of these responses, all government organs give only one response on the cyber-politics platform, if they reply at all. Although the netizens are allowed to make follow-up comments on these issues, the government organ makes no further response. Thus, the interaction between netizens and government organs in the cyber-politics platform, if any, is typically set in a once-off question and answer mode rather than being a reciprocal engagement in deliberation.

This once-off interaction format has at least two negative consequences. Firstly, in the case of a netizen's message concerned with a specific social problem or a policy failure, even if an *ad hoc* measure or special policy is made by a relevant government organ to address the netizen's appeal, in the absence of any continuous communication mechanism, the effectiveness of the new measure or policy is not guaranteed. For example, when a netizen complained that local environment was heavily polluted by local factories, the provincial bureau of environmental protection replied that a major polluting factory had been ordered to relocate by the local department of environment protection, and other local factories had measured up to the required standards of environment protection. However, according to netizen's subsequent posts, the local factories were still polluting the environment. But since the message had been answered, these subsequent complaints on the same issue were not addressed by the government organ. Consequently, the effects of the netizen's e-participation and the government organ's positive measures were largely irrelevant (Aoyi wangyou (ID: Xiaohu) 2009).

Secondly, when a complicated government policy-making issue is at stake, in the absence of any reciprocal discourse mechanism, it is hard for related government organs and citizens to get a solid consensus on the issue by taking full advantage of cyberspace. For example, when the Guangzhou municipal government planned to establish a waste incineration power project in Guangzhou municipality, many netizens posted messages on the cyber-politics platform to express their opinions on the project. Most of them were opposed to the project. But the government organ response was a standard official statement about the government's standpoint on the issue and the proposed works. In other words, netizens and the government mouthed their own policy preferences, but no authentic deliberation was conducted on the cyber-politics platform. Consequently, the conflict between the local government and the affected citizens was not effectively resolved in the cyber-politics platform, which finally resulted in a social protest against the project (Aoyi wangyou 2009b).

4 Conclusion

The general characteristics of the Guangdong e-participation system as a typical advanced case of e-participation in China are as follows. In the developing dynamic of the system, the establishment and development of the e-participation system was a result of "strongman politics" or a "project champion" in which the provincial Party boss Wang, played a vital role in nearly all the critical links of the system's evolution. With the strong supports and explicit instructions of top local leaders, the institutional evolution and the daily operation of the e-participation system go along smoothly.[26] Correspondingly, it is the local CCP rather than the local government executive that is directly in charge of the institutionalization and operation of e-participation. The provincial leader directly in charge of the cyber-politics issue is a member of the standing provincial committee of CCP rather than a government administrative official. And the agency directly in charge of managing the e-participation platform is the general office of the provincial committee of CCP rather than a government administrator. This leadership system indicates the special significance of the Internet and its political applications, e.g. the cyber-politics platform, in China. In the state's perspective, the significance of e-participation has exceeded ordinary regulation policies and touched a politically sensitive nerve. Only the CCP system has a competent authority to make innovative adaptive strategies to cope with the political influence of the Internet and mobilize the state's resources to implement these strategies efficiently.

In terms of the structure of the system, it has developed an advanced online e-participation platform and a suite of official supporting mechanisms, e.g. the cyber-spokesman and the assignment conference. These mechanisms organically integrate the system's functions of voice, replies and handling. Using these mechanisms, an institutionalized connection between netizens' virtual participation on the cyber-politics platform and government organs' offline regulations has been established. Based on the increasingly encouraging data, such as the increasing amount of netizens' messages that are answered and the reduction in the average duration between requests and responses, these supporting mechanisms seem to be generally effective. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the establishment and operation of these mechanisms are largely based on the instructions of top local leaders, the government's informal working rules and internal routines rather than any formal statutory norm. Thus, the e-participation system has not been institutionalized into a formal legal system, but exists substantially on the margin of the political system as an *ad hoc* experimental project by the local authority. In the absence of any formal legal rule, although the local authority now displays a positive attitude towards the e-participation issue, it actually avoids any mandatory formal duty of maintaining and promoting this system. Consequently, the existence and activity of the e-participation system depend largely on the pragmatic considerations by the local authority, based on varying sociopolitical circumstances.

In terms of the operation of the e-participation system and the authenticity of the interaction between the state and citizens the cyber-politics platform is generally satisfactory. Based on the soft identity authentication system and the loose censorship of the cyber-politics platform, and what was actually posted on this platform, we can be sure that citizens on this platform do take full advantage of the flexibility and anonymity of the Internet to enjoy a free low-risk space. The local authority also shows an enlightened, tolerant attitude to grassroots opinions released in the platform. In this space for outspoken voices, the amount of netizens' messages has undergone an ex-

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[26] The "strongman politics" also occurred in other local online interactive institutions between government agencies and citizens, e.g. Hangzhou and Nanjing. In these two municipalities the establishment and development of local online interactive platforms relied greatly on the two local governors (Harford 2005).

plosive increase. There are still large numbers of netizens' messages that do not receive replies from government organs. But this negative situation is a result of a marked contrast between the huge amount of netizens who want to engage on the platform and the limited resources of government organs that are in charge of handling netizens' messages. The climbing rate of replies and the falling length of time between requests and replies indicate that government organs are making an increasingly encouraging performance in handling netizens' messages. Furthermore, the increase of the amount of government organs' replies does not simply result from perfunctory responses by government organs. The quality of official replies is basically satisfying. More than half of the sample replies contained substantial content. This indicates that, generally speaking, government organs take the messages posted on the cyber-politics platform seriously.

Based on the empirical findings above, the Guangdong e-participation system has the following immediate functions, i.e. consultation of government decision-making, appraisal of government performance, and raising individual appeals or grievance and receiving redress. Besides these immediate functions, a profound impact of the Internet on interactions between the state and citizens has been made by the Guangdong e-participation system. The system fosters policy debate and the articulation of problems, and plays a supervisory role for the conduct of government agencies. The system creates a variety of *ad hoc* virtual communities focusing on specific policy-making issues. Online protests did occur in the e-participation system, through which social tension was relieved (Yang 2003b). This evidence confirms the current understanding of the impacts of the Internet in China. That is, it would be unrealistic to rely on the Internet alone to achieve a democratic system immediately, but the Internet is serving to bring about political changes in China (Hong/ Li 2005).

Nevertheless, three potential drawbacks to this system in Guangdong need to be noted. First, the system places excessive emphasis on individual grievances and redressing them, which has now become its primary function. Both the netizens' messages and the government organs' replies on these topics make up the largest proportions of all types of content. This is a result of the distinctiveness of the e-participation system. By taking advantage of the Internet, citizens can bypass the traditional relief regime which regularly malfunctions, and make much lower costs and risks in voicing their grievances. Some of the supportive replies from officials lead citizens to believe that the e-participation system could be a new credible institution for addressing their rights. On the other hand, the local authority increasingly values the e-participation system as a valve to relieve the pressures of social tension and conflicts in citizens' offline lives. The e-participation system as an extra channel allowing citizens to vent their grievances can undoubtedly ease state–society tensions and pressure endured by the traditional redress institutions for redressing rights, such as the "letters and visits" institution, administrative litigation, and the People's Congress system, and is undoubtedly preferable to such grievances being raised on the streets (Pei 2006, 201-203). Just as a senior manager of the Aoyi website said, one ideal effect of the cyber-politics platform is to make people "surf the Internet more, make fewer offline petitions and eliminate street protests" (*duoshangwang, shaoshangfang, bushanglu* 多上网 少上访 不上路) (Ren/Lan 2010). The e-participation system cannot be blamed for containing the function of grievances, voice and redress. But if the redress function is excessively stressed, the e-participation system may deviate from its intended function of promoting a democratic level in government decision-making processes. In other words, the function of the e-participation system in allowing citizens to proactively influence government organs' decision-making will inevitably get weaker.

The second potential drawback is that traditional bureaucratic structures and working routines are increasingly being transplanted into the e-participation system. The duty system of cyber-spokesmen's replies to netizens' messages on the cyber-politics platform is becoming more and more like the division of labour to be found among government departments in offices offline. Government organs are also inclined to adopt offline rules, such as the legal principle for dealing with letter-or-visit cases, in handling and replying to online messages. This phenomenon may be a necessary re-

sult of the institutionalization of the Guangdong e-participation system. When a system is institutionalized it is necessary to introduce a suit of well-designed substantial and procedural rules to make it efficient. Ready-made offline bureaucratic structure and rules are undoubtedly the most easily available resources for doing this. However, if traditional bureaucratic structure and working routines are transplanted wholesale, or even if the e-participation system become a *de facto* e-government system, the distinctiveness of the e-participation system, which is fundamentally rooted in the low-risk, low-cost, direct interactive format between the state and citizens, will lose their lustre. Consequently, the e-participation system could lose its own special value.

Thirdly, all the interactions between the state and citizens in the cyber-politics platform are once-off interactions. A Habermasian deliberative public sphere has not been developed in this e-participation system.[27] The effectiveness of this once-off interactive format is dependent on whether the policy problem or other issues that a netizen's message concerns can be completely solved by a government organ in a single action. This is hard for any government organ to achieve. Consequently, with the current once-off interactive format, the e-participation system is liable to fall in a dilemma in which, although the activeness of the cyber-politics platform keeps rising, it does not exert any substantive influence on the issues that concern the netizens or on the relationship between the state and citizens.

With regard to its prospects, the study is optimistic about the existence of the e-participation regime in China, but relatively conservative of its actual operation and effects. On the one hand, the necessity for the existence of Guangdong-style e-participation systems in China lies in the fact that

> "Chinese citizens, instead of blindly accepting the government's agendas, are now being awakened and empowered to set their own policy agendas both in cyberspace and physical life. Popular interests and agendas cannot be easily overlooked because ICTs are allowing ordinary people a wider policy platform than through the state or traditional media, not only to vent their grievance/feelings, but also to organize themselves to (re)assert their rights in ways that were unavailable to past generations" (Hung 2010, 337).

That is to say, with the bottom-up rising expectations and public demands for "an improved quality of life and protection of social, economic and political rights", citizens increasingly require adequate channels to proactively articulate their demands in the first place (Hung 2003, 31-32). An emerging consciousness of citizens' rights, an increasingly active civil society, and the diffusion of the Internet may facilitate and reinforce e-participation practices (Yang 2003a, 414-417).

Furthermore, compared with the traditional state-controlled media, the Internet truly acts as a mouthpiece of the people (Hung 2003, 24-25). Meanwhile, the state also proclaims itself to be the spokesman of the people. Thus, in order to maintain the rhetoric political legitimacy of the regime, the state cannot completely block out cyberspace:

> "As long as the postings continue to flow and the movements keep occurring, the government cannot effectively prevent a specific event from becoming a focus of public opinion. The Internet keeps a potential for users to struggle for their rights anytime and anywhere because it is beyond the governmental capacity to completely police cyberspace" (Li 2008, 20).

The state has to increasingly adopt a series of soft and proactive adaptive strategies to make the Internet serve its purpose. As one of these strategies, the state establishes a variety of forts on the Internet. Within these forts, the state artfully steers rather than harshly controls citizens' activities to serve state-defined priorities (Kalathil/Boas 2003). And, in a top-down perspective, the infrastruc-

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[27] Habermas defines the so-called "public sphere" as that "citizens act as a public when they deal with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely" (Habermas 1989, 231).

ture of the Guangdong e-participation system, i.e. the advanced e-participation platform, can be counted as one of such forts. Accordingly, this regime has a special survival status in China.

On the other hand, whether the e-participation regime can fully promote authentic interaction between the state and citizens in China is largely dependent on the following variables. The first of these is whether or not it will be absorbed into the formal statutory system. If it is, it could become a self-contained system, rather than being dependent on the pragmatic calculations of government organs. The interaction between the state and citizens in the e-participation system could also be conducted in the pattern of rights and obligations, rather than being completely dependent on the state's will. Second, it depends on whether or not the variety of functions of the e-participation regime can be well balanced, and take proactive participation in government decision-making as its primary function. If the e-participation system excessively stresses its function in giving individual grievances a voice and seeking redress, regardless of how many citizens' petitions can actually be satisfactorily solved by government organs in the system, the e-participation will become a pool of grievances making little contribution to the promotion of democratic decision-making by government. Third, it depends on whether the distinctiveness of e-participation as a virtual interactive space can be preserved by avoiding the excessive use of traditional bureaucratic structures and working routines to institutionalize it. If the institutionalization of the e-participation takes the route of complete bureaucratization, its value in bypassing the offline bureaucratization system would be greatly reduced. Thus, it is vital to develop a suite of practical rules exclusively based on the features of the Internet for the effective operation of this system. Finally, it depends on whether or not this system can develop a format for continuous deliberative communication from its existing once-off format. Compared with the existing once-off format, a deliberative structure will prevent the e-participation system from becoming hollow and futile. It will also contribute to more effectively solving the specific matters raised by netizens on the Internet. Moreover, with a deliberative communicative format, the depth of the interaction between the state and citizens in the system and the substantial democratic degree of the system will be greatly enhanced.

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