

The use of Official and Unofficial Channels in Government-Citizen Communication in China

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Abstract: The objective of this research is to examine Chinese citizens' attitudes towards official and unofficial channels in both government-to-citizen (G2C) and citizen-to-government (C2G) communication. It investigates citizens' preferred channel choices for receiving public information and for expressing their personal opinions. Analysis of an online survey shows that respondents have no obvious preference of official or unofficial channels for receiving public information. Yet most respondents prefer unofficial channels for C2G communications because these channels have less language restrictions, allow respondents to hide their identities, and facilitate respondents to obtain a sense of support from people who have similar opinions.

Keywords: government-citizen communication; official communication channels; unofficial communication channels; government-to-citizen (G2C); citizen-to-government (C2G); China

1. Introduction

Communication between governments and citizens is important for any country politically, economically, and socially. In extreme cases, government-citizen communication breakdowns can lead to instability in a society. With the increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICT) such as chats and weblogs (blog), the relationship between government and citizens has been transformed and sometimes improved (Griffiths, 2004; Kumar and Vragov, 2009; Parks and Schelling, 2005; United Nations, 2008). Nonetheless, communication between governments and citizens especially in countries with large geographical areas, large population or a large gap between rich and poor is a challenge (United Nations, 2008). The application of ICT, especially the Internet, to government-citizen communication is often described as e-participation.

The OECD (2001) classified government-citizen communication in policy making by three levels: information, consultation, and active participation. The first level represents a one-way communication channel from governments to their citizens and is often referred as government-to-citizen (G2C) communication. Except for countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, many governments in the world provide government-related information such as government policies on their national websites (La Porte et al., 2001).

The second level represents an interactive communication channel that allows citizens to send their comments and feedback on government policy or administration to their governments. This form of communication is often described as citizen-to-government (C2G) communication. Some governments provide much information on their official websites but are not keen on hearing from their citizens (La Porte et al., 2001). A study of 51 official government website portals at the state level in the US showed that 85 percent of them provided information to citizens but only 17 percent facilitated C2G communication (Kumar and Vragov, 2009).

The third level represents active participation by citizens in government policy making process even though the responsibility for the final decision still rests with the government. It requires specific tool to facilitate discussion and engage citizens. As this form of communication is based on partnership between government and citizen, it is uncommon and rarer than C2G communication (OECD, 2001). Most research in e-participation has been centered on developed countries such as United States and European countries (Carter and Bélanger, 2005; Grundén, 2009; Oates, 2003; Reddick, 2009). For example, Furuli and Kongsrud (2007) evaluated and compared national portals of Denmark and Norway. Moreover, the emphasis of prior research is on official communication channels such as how governments provide information and receive comments via government websites or how citizens perceive government websites (Hamner and Al-Qahtani, 2009; Meijer et al., 2009). Nonetheless, with the proliferation of unofficial channels such as discussion boards and blogging facilities established by

non-governmental entities, it is important for both researchers and government officials to understand citizens' patterns of communication with governments and their preferred choice of communication channels. The objective of this research is, hence, to examine citizens' attitudes towards official and unofficial communication channels in both G2C and C2G communication. It investigates citizens' preferred channel choices in receiving public information and expressing their personal opinions. Because of a lack of research in developing countries, this study focuses on the communication patterns and preferences of citizens in the most populated developing country in the world – China. In short, this research examines the following two research questions:

- Which official and unofficial communication channels do Chinese citizens use in G2C communication and why?
- Which official and unofficial communication channels do Chinese citizens use in C2G communication and why?

Citizens' choice of communication channels is affected by their social and psychological needs (Coleman et al., 2008). The results of this research are useful to both researchers and practitioners by providing empirical evidence of how Chinese citizens choose between official and unofficial channels in both ways of communication with their government. Such information could help Chinese government officials develop strategies to improve government-citizen communication. The results can also help media operators understand how their channels are used by citizens.

2. Literature review

The importance of promoting government-citizen communication is evidenced by research programs such as the EU eParticipation programme which itself is comprehensively researched (European Commission, 2009) and practitioner networks such as PEP-Net (<http://pep-net.eu/>). Research has shown that different channel characteristics could cause citizens to react differently in the process of government-citizen communication (Docter and Dutton, 1998; Musso and Weare, 2005; Schmidtke, 1998). Prior research on government-citizen communication is summarized and described below according to three aspects: initiation of communication channel, use of communication channel, and monitoring of communication channel.

2.1 Initiation of communication channel

Government-citizen communication can be initiated by either party (Bryan et al., 1998). Research has shown that success of government-citizen communication process is affected by who initiates the communication. A pair of contrasting examples is Amsterdam's Digital City and Berlin's City Information System. Amsterdam's Digital City was a virtual city with different theme-based squares. It was initiated by citizens and established by an independent "political-culture centre" and a group of "former computer activists" (Francissen and Brants, 1998, p. 22). The objective of Digital City was to create a non-hierarchical platform that promotes freedom of expression and citizens' online participation. The project was considered to be a success because of the number of citizens it attracted (Francissen and Brants, 1998). Berlin's City Information System followed the model of Amsterdam's Digital City but the channel was initiated by the government. The local government stated that the objective of the initiative was to improve public services and provide more interactions between the government and the citizens. Nonetheless, as the channel was used by the government only for publishing information rather than as a space for citizen participation, it failed to attract the Berlin citizens (Schmidtke, 1998). These two examples show that initiators of communication affect applications of the communication channels and in turn influence how citizens perceive and respond to the opportunity provided.

2.2 Use of communication channel

Every government-citizens communication channel can be used in different ways. Researchers argue that improper use of communication channels might bring more harm than good to government-citizen relationship. Governments might over-control the channels to enhance their own influence; conversely a small group of citizens might over-post their opinions and interests so as to influence the government's decision-making process (Parks and Schelin, 2005; Scavo, 2005).

From a government perspective, the objective of encouraging citizen participation is to "improve the efficiency, acceptance, and legitimacy of political processes" (Sanford and Rose, 2007 p. 406). By providing interactive features such as discussion boards or email facilities, governments would be

able to have two-way symmetrical communication with their citizens. Yet studies show that governments prefer to use their websites to distribute information rather than having interactive communication with citizens (Coleman, 2005). Government channels with interactive potential are often used only for a one-way asymmetrical communication. For example, governments use bulletin board systems (BBS) or websites to inform citizens what new decisions have been made instead of listening to citizens regarding their opinions on pending decisions.

Why are governments reluctant to provide a two-way symmetrical communication with citizens? One major reason is that governments want to avoid challenges caused by public pressure (Scavo, 2005). A problem of such a passive attitude of governments toward two-way communication with citizens is that it may lead to citizens' apathy towards e-participation via communication channels provided by government (Ainsworth, et al., 2005; Francissen and Brants, 1998).

Unlike governments' passive and conservative use of communication channels, citizens' use of online communication channels is often more enthusiastic and innovative. For example, an Internet political news channel in London has attracted over 200,000 viewers in a week (Mayer, 2007). With the help of blogs, BBS, and forums, citizens have developed a variety of experiments on public discussion such as e-petitioning, e-lobbying and online discussion groups (Chadwick, 2006). Research shows that online campaigning is a powerful tool for citizens to influence government. In South Korea, supporters of a political party, the Millennium Democratic Party, gathered in virtual political clubs, posted comments on BBS and had debates via e-forums. These activities remarkably affected the result of the 16th National Assembly Election (Yun, 2008). Similarly, in 2007, Chinese citizens in Xiamen (a Chinese city on the southeast coast) launched an online public campaign to show their dissatisfaction with the "real-name online" Bill, which requires people to use their real personal information online. The campaign was soon disseminated via unofficial BBS, forums, and virtual communities. People posted negative comments on popular websites, such as Yahoo!, and gained a strong support countrywide. As a result of citizens' reactions, the Bill was suspended (Martinsen, 2007).

Despite the examples above, citizen participation is not without problems. Many citizen-initiated forums and virtual communities have vague aims and are hence unfocused (Tsagarousianou, 1998). Moreover, although communication channels such as virtual communities allow citizens to meet people who share their opinions easily, such self-selected like-minded circles may result in non-objective opinions (Chadwick, 2006; Yun, 2008).

2.3 Monitoring of communication channel

Governments often consider virtual public spaces to be similar to the physical public spaces where a regulation is needed (Scavo, 2005). Hence, government-operated communication channels usually have more limitations than non-government channels. An investigation of UK local government websites showed that discussions on government BBSs were moderated to different degrees. Moderation activities varied from removal of offensive language to removal of political comments (Hands, 2005). A comparison of two e-forums that focused on the same subject showed that the total number of postings in the official-monitored forum was half of that in another forum that was spontaneously organized (Ainsworth et al., 2005). Yet monitoring by the government is not the only reason that citizens become reluctant to use government communication channels. Citizens do not trust government channels because they feel their privacy being threatened by government surveillance (Dinev, 2008).

Non-governmental communication channels have their problems regarding monitoring and moderation. Without proper moderation discussions on citizen-operated BBS, virtual communities and e-forums can be subjective, biased or thoughtless (Coleman, 2005; Thurman, 2008) because postings tend to be "gossipy, ruleless, and conflictual" (Chadwick, 2006, p. 108). For example, a group of users of a public information system in a Californian city, Santa Monica, attacked other users with abusive words. Such flaming behaviors led to decline in use of the system (Docter and Dutton, 1998). Because of the negative impact of such abusive behavior, the need to maintain professional publication standards, and possible legal liability, some researchers argue that monitoring and moderation of communication channels are sometimes necessary (Coleman, 2005; Scavo, 2005; Thurman, 2008). This probably explains why most British News websites filter users' blogs before publication (Thurman, 2008).

3. Government-citizen communication matrix

Research shows that different types of communication channel are used depending on the direction of communication (Chadwick, 2006; Musso and Weare, 2005; Schmidtke, 1998). However, no prior research has investigated citizens' attitude towards the two-way communication between governments and citizens by distinguishing between different types of channel. Figure 1 shows a two-by-two matrix that classifies G2C and C2G communication based on the type of communication channels – official and unofficial. One dimension of the model is defined by the communication directions and the other by types of communication channel.

Communication Direction	Types of Communication Channel	
	Official	Unofficial
G2C	Official Information	Unofficial Information
C2G	Official Consultation	Unofficial Consultation

Figure 1: Government-citizen communication matrix

Official communication channels are defined as such that are under the control of government officials. The term 'official' instead of 'government' is used to describe such channels because some channels are neither initiated nor owned nor operated by governments even though the channels are used by the governments for communication purposes. For example, traditional print and broadcast media such as radio or television may not be government-run. But when these channels are used by the governments for official communication purposes, such as president or prime minister's addresses to the nation, they are considered to be official channels. Unofficial channels are such that are under the control of non-governmental entities. When traditional mass media are used by non-governmental entities to facilitate government-citizen communication, they are considered to be unofficial channels.

3.1 G2C communication using official channels

Citizens use **official information** channels to obtain government information, latest policies or relevant news. These channels include government websites and official news websites such as the China Internet News Office (CINO). Launched in 2000, CINO is a one-stop information portal established by the Chinese government to match the growing number of non-official information portals (Dai, 2002). Channels in this quadrant include traditional mass media that have been used by governments to transmit important national information or message to the general public. In a study of 51 official websites in the US, 80 percent of websites provided information in the form of video or audio clips (Kumar and Vragov, 2009). With the increasing use of Facebook and MySpace by government officials, channels in this quadrant include also social network websites. Although the networks per se are unofficial, when the information is prepared by the government officials, such channels are considered to be official.

3.2 G2C communication using unofficial channels

Citizens use these **unofficial information** channels such as commercial news websites or virtual communities to collect government information, latest policies or other relevant news. In this form of communication, the information provided to citizens comes from unofficial sources. For example, because of a lack of information from official channels during the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in Asia in 2003, millions of Chinese citizens gathered information about the crisis via unofficial websites (Zhu and Wang, 2005). Channels in this quadrant also include social networks such as Facebook and MySpace where information is provided by non-governmental entities.

3.3 C2G communication using official channels

Citizens use **official consultation** channels to send their suggestions, complaints, comments, and requirements to the government through emails or discussion board facilities provided on government websites or official news websites. For example, the French National Commission of Public Debate

(CNDP) website (<http://www.debatpublic.fr/index.html>) allows French citizens to post opinions regarding infrastructure projects through blogs (United Nations, 2008). Official consultation channels facilitate government officials to collect feedback from citizens but such channels are typically not that well-established as the official information channels. For example, while 85 percent of state government websites in the US provided government-related information, only eight percent supported discussion boards (Kumar and Vragov, 2009). The national portal of China (www.gov.cn) has an online polling feature to gather citizen opinion (United Nations, 2008) but it is unclear how many other Chinese government websites have a similar feature.

3.4 C2G communication using unofficial channels

Citizens use **unofficial consultation** channels to publish their suggestions, complaints, comments, and requirements through unofficial channels. For example, citizens write emails to newspapers or new channels or post messages on unofficial discussion boards. For example, citizens in the UK can send a letter to their local MP via an independent website called FaxYourMP.com. Similarly, anti-Iraq-war campaigners in the US organized a virtual march via an unofficial website (Oates, 2003). Some blogs focus around wasteful spending by the government (Kumar and Vragov, 2009). A study on blogs estimated that 50 percent of blogs were about public affairs (Matheson, 2004).

4. Research method

4.1 The case of China

Most prior research on citizen participation focuses on Western developed countries and often examines the issue from the perspective of government (Chadwick, 2006; Mayer, 2007). This study aims to fill the gap and provides information on how the Internet has influenced the day-to-day communications between governments and citizens in developing countries from the citizens' perspective. It focuses on China for two reasons.

First, as a developing country, China has the largest population in the world (CIA, 2009b). The growth of the Chinese economy has made it one of the most influential countries in the world (CIA, 2009a). Yet Chinese government is often described as nondemocratic and is criticized as exerting too much control over public media and imposing censorship on mass media (Martinsons, 2005a; Perritt and Clarke, 1998). The Internet was introduced in China in 1992 (Guo and Chen, 2005). By the end of 2008, 22 percent of the Chinese population (298 million) was Internet users (CNNIC, 2009). The widespread use of Internet causes "subtle but enduring changes throughout Chinese society" (Zhu and Wang, 2005, p. 49) and makes the Chinese government's surveillance of online communication channels more difficult as compared to traditional mass media (Hague and Harrop, 2007). Therefore, it would be interesting to collect empirical evidence about how Chinese citizens communicate with their government over the Internet.

Second, China has an e-participation index of 0.477 (the average for 189 countries is 0.191) in the 2008 United Nations E-Government Survey. The index measures "the extent to which governments proactively solicit citizen input" (United Nations, 2008 p. 58). Since the Chinese government launched 'Government Online' project in 1999, there has been considerable development of government websites (Dai, 2002). According to the report of China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of government websites reached 45,555 (.gov.cn) by the end of 2008 (CNNIC, 2009). With the increased number and versatility of communication channels via the Internet, Chinese citizens have become "more independent thinkers" (Martinson, 2005b p. 60) and have the willingness to contact government online and discuss political issues (Wei and Zhao, 2005; Zhang, 2002). Prior research on e-government in China focuses on government website features and how much citizens use government websites (Holliday and Yep, 2005; Zhang, 2002) even though the number of unofficial websites has proliferated. Hence there is a need to investigate Chinese citizens' communication behavior patterns beyond government websites.

4.2 Questionnaire development

An online questionnaire was used to collect the opinions of Chinese citizens on communication channels with the Chinese government. With no prior research in the area, the questionnaire was developed by the authors. The questionnaire was first drafted in English and then translated into Chinese. Both versions of the questionnaire was verified and pretested by 10 people. As a result,

unnecessary questions were removed and wording of individual questions was improved. The revised questionnaire was then pilot tested by seven Chinese students who completed both versions of the questionnaire. The final version of the questionnaire used in the survey was in Chinese to allow respondents to freely express their opinions (Efendioglu and Yip, 2004). The final questionnaire comprises 18 closed-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions.

4.3 Data collection

The final Chinese questionnaire was posted on a free survey website, Web Monkey, from March 15th 2008 to April 10th 2008. The study was advertised by posting a link to the questionnaire on four of the most popular Chinese websites - Tianya Virtual Community, Yahoo!China, SINA, and SOHO. A total of 151 people responded. Nonetheless, because of technical problems, 44 respondents could not complete all the questions. With the incomplete questionnaires eliminated, 107 responses were used in the data analysis.

5. Results and analysis

5.1 Demographics

Respondents to the survey were from 35 regions in China. Most respondents came from Shanghai (26%). It was followed by Beijing, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Hebei. Responses from the top five regions together represented 62 percent of the respondents. Fifty-nine percent of respondents were male and 41 percent were female. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents were between the age of 26 and 35. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents worked in private organizations, whereas 26 percent of the respondents worked in the government or other public institutions. The fact that three quarters of the respondents accessed the Internet at home or at their working/studying place suggests that the respondents can use the Internet in a private environment. The results show that the respondents exhibited two distinct Internet use patterns. The first group of respondents was light Internet users who used the Internet 1-10 hours per week (36%). The second group of respondents was heavy Internet users who used the Internet more than 30 hours per week (41%).

5.2 Government-to-citizen communication

Table 1 summarizes the results for the respondents' attitude towards official and unofficial channels in G2C communication. Traditional mass media such as state-owned TV and radio stations and official news website such as the Xinhua News Agency (www.xinhua.com) rank the top two of both the most prevailing and the most frequently used official information channels. Eighty percent of the 107 respondents chose to use traditional mass media to obtain government information and among them three-quarter chose the media as their first choice. Sixty percent used this channel most frequently. While 51 percent of respondents used official news websites, only half of these (24%) used these websites as their first choice to receive government information. In short, results indicate that official channels, particularly traditional mass media, are the main channel for G2C communication.

Table 1: G2C communication channels

Channels	Options	Communication Channel Used (multiple choices)		Most Frequently Used Communication Channel	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Official	Official news websites	55	51%	26	24%
	Official traditional mass media	86	80%	64	60%
	Government agency websites	24	22%	3	3%
	Government BBS	9	8%	1	1%
	Others	15	14%	9	8%
Unofficial	Virtual communities with discussion groups/columns	34	32%	13	12%
	Personal blogs	15	14%	10	9%
	Unofficial BBS	26	24%	10	9%
	Unofficial traditional mass media	68	64%	34	32%
	Commercial news websites	64	60%	36	34%
	Others	4	4%	3	3%

Regarding unofficial information channels, respondents appeared to use more than one channel. Over half of the respondents (64%) used traditional mass media to obtain government information. Nonetheless, with 60 percent of respondents also using commercial news websites such as Yahoo! China and Sina, the importance of traditional mass media was less prominent in unofficial information channels than official ones. The other unofficial information channels used by respondents, in descending importance, were virtual communities (32%), unofficial BBS (24%), and personal blogs (14%). Among unofficial information channels, the most frequently used channel was commercial news websites (34%) which was followed closely by traditional unofficial mass media (32%).

Analysis results of the most frequently used official and unofficial information channels showed that respondents were regular users of both types of channel. Around 90 percent used them at least several times a week.

5.3 Citizen-to-government communication

Table 2 summarizes the results regarding attitudes towards official and unofficial channels for C2G communication. Unlike G2C communication, the respondents did not seem to use many official channels. The three most commonly used official consultation channels were each used by about one-third of the respondents. Thirty-seven percent wrote letters to or called government officials. Thirty-eight percent posted comments on government BBS and thirty-three percent used emails to voice their opinions. Among these three official consultation channels, the traditional approach of using letters and phone calls was the most frequently used (37%). Among those who used emails, less than half used this approach as their number one choice.

Table 2: C2G communication channels

Channels	Options	Communication Channel Used (multiple choices)		Most Frequently Used Communication Channel	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Official	Using traditional ways, such as letters, telephone calls	40	37%	40	37%
	Posting comments on government BBS	41	38%	29	27%
	Sending emails to the related departments	35	33%	14	13%
	Others	26	24%	23	21%
Unofficial	Joining virtual communities	51	48%	29	27%
	Writing personal blogs	20	19%	12	11%
	Posting comments on unofficial BBS	53	49%	39	36%
	Contacting traditional mass media				
	Sending views to the family and friends by emails	29	27%	16	15%
	Others	12	11%	3	3%
		10	9%	8	7%

Regarding unofficial C2G communication, the respondents have used more unofficial consultation channels than official ones. About half of the respondents had the experience of posting comments on unofficial BBS (49%) or joining a virtual community's discussion (48%) to express their opinions. The unofficial consultation channel most frequently used by respondents was unofficial BBS posting (36%), followed by virtual communities (27%) and traditional mass media (15%).

Analysis results of the most frequently used official and unofficial consultation channels showed that while more respondents used unofficial channels instead of official channels to express their opinions on a more regular basis, most did it only a few times a year.

5.4 Preferred communication channels

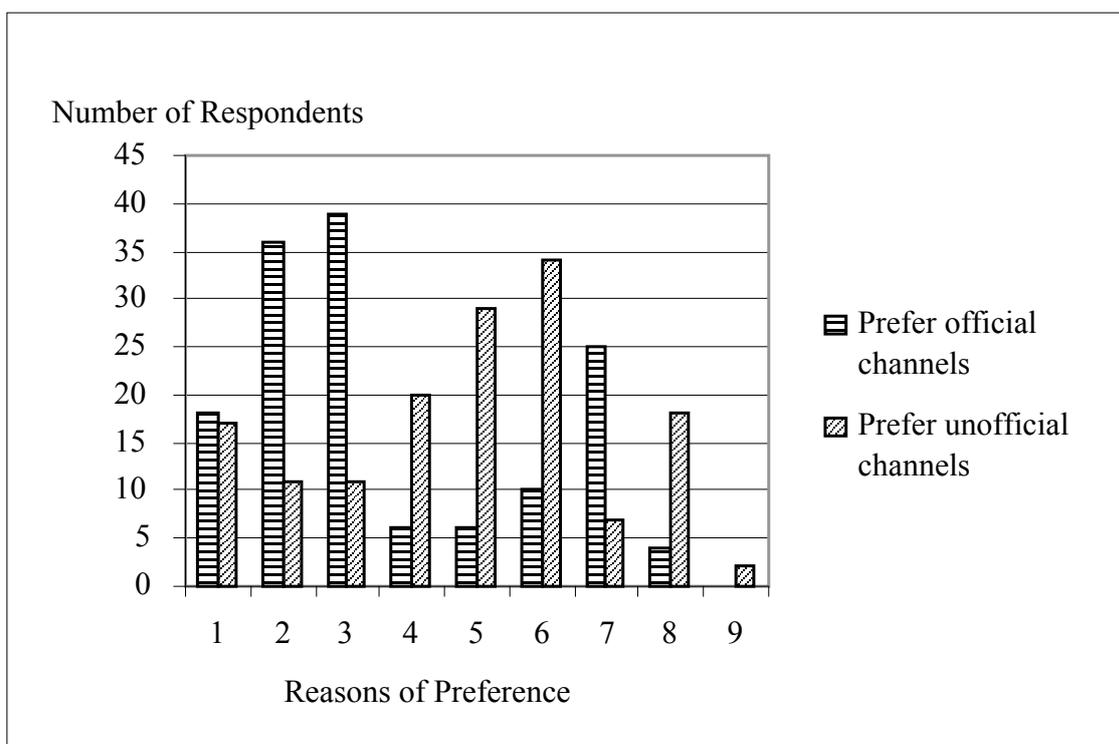
Table 3 summarizes the respondents' preferred choice of channels in G2C and C2G communication respectively. With 54 percent of respondents preferring to use official information channels, there was a slight preference of official channels over unofficial channels in G2C communication but the difference was statistically insignificant ($\chi^2=0.757$, $p=0.384$ in a chi-square goodness-of-fit test). Nonetheless, respondents' preference shifted to unofficial channels in C2G communication. Only 25

percent of respondents preferred to use official consultation channels to voice their opinions while the remaining 75 percent preferred unofficial channels. The preference of unofficial channels in C2G communication was remarkable and statistically significant ($\chi^2=26.3, p=0.00$). McNemar's chi-square test was used to examine the relation between the choices of channels in both directions of communication. The result was significant ($\chi^2=25.7, p=0.00$).

Table 3: Preferred communication channels

Respondents' Preference	G2C Communication	C2G Communication
Official Channels	54% (58)	25% (27)
Unofficial Channels	46% (49)	75% (80)
Total	100% (107)	100% (107)

The reasons behind the respondents' preferred choice of communication channels are summarized in Figures 2 and 3. In G2C communication (Figure 2), respondents who preferred official information channels believed information provided by such channels was more accurate, more reliable and more authoritative. On the other hand, respondents preferred unofficial information channels because they provided more resources and information provided by the channels was more objective, more frequently updated, and could be accessed more easily.

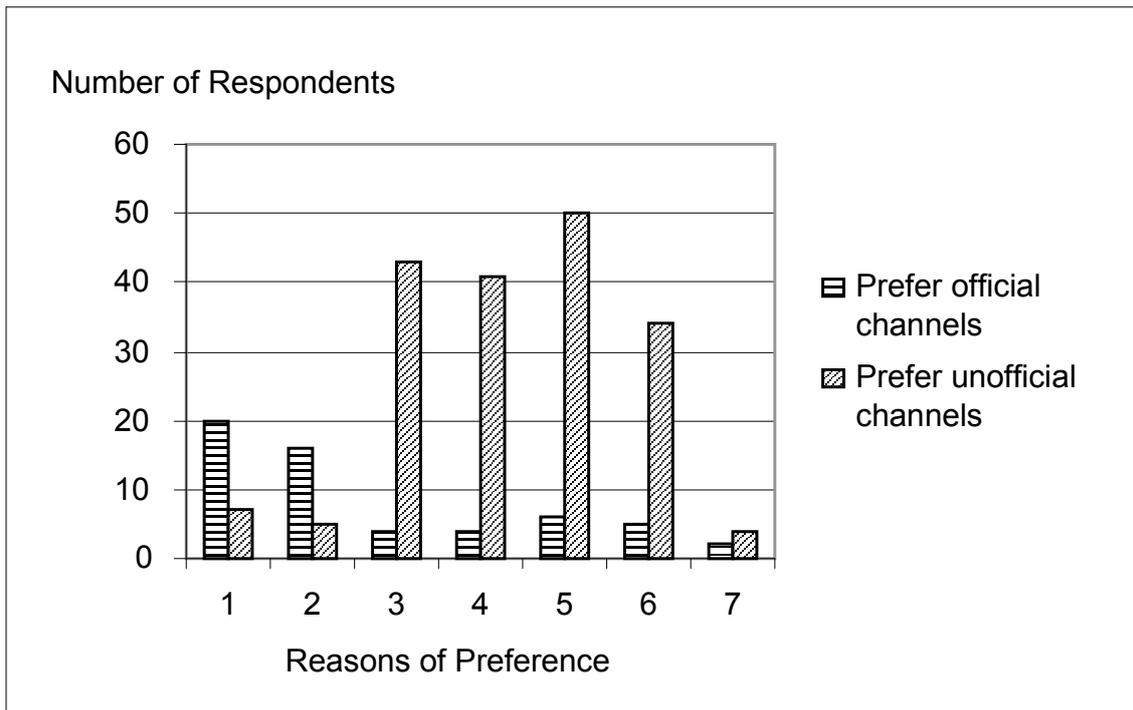


Code of reasons: 1. More detailed; 2. More accurate; 3. More reliable; 4. Quicker to get the latest information; 5. More information resources; 6. More objective; 7. More authoritative comments; 8. Less time and place limitation; 9. Others.

Figure 2: Reasons of preference for G2C communication channels

Figure 3 summarizes the reasons behind respondents' preferred channels in C2G communication. Respondents preferred official consultation channels because they could obtain feedback from the government more quickly. Some found it easier to talk with the government through official channels and believed that they were likely to obtain support or concerns from government via such channels. Most respondents preferred unofficial consultation channels in voicing their opinions to the government because the channels had less language restrictions and allowed users to access them anytime, anywhere. Moreover, such channels offered a higher level of confidentiality and facilitated users to obtain support from others who share similar opinions. The most common reason behind the

choice of unofficial consultation channels was the ability to change or hide users' identity. This indicated that respondents were worried that their opinions would be traced back to them.



Code of reasons: 1. Faster to get feedback from government; 2. Easier to talk with the government and more possible to get supports; 3. Less language limitation; 4. Easier to get support from those who have similar opinions; 5. Easier to change or hide real ID; 6. Less time an place limitation; 7. Others.

Figure 3: Reasons of preference for C2G communication channels

5.5 Impact of demographic characteristics on preferred communication channels

The effect of gender on respondents' choice of preferred channel was analyzed. Female respondents (61%) had a slightly more positive attitude toward official information channels than male respondents (49%). Nonetheless, there was no big difference between male and female respondents because about 75 percent of both groups preferred to use unofficial consultation channels in C2G communication.

Apart from gender, we analyzed the effects of respondents' occupation on their preferred choice of communication channels. Official information channels were more preferred by respondents working in government or other public institutions than by respondents with other occupations. Respondents who work in private companies had a slight preference of unofficial information channels over official information channels but the difference is minimal. As for C2G communication, although respondents who work in government or public institutions preferred unofficial consultation channels just as the others, they showed a higher level of confidence in the official channels.

We also examined the relation between the amount of time respondents spent online and their preferred choice of communication channels. The results showed that light Internet users preferred unofficial information channels but heavy Internet users preferred official information channels. One possible explanation is that it is easier to obtain information from unofficial channels than from official ones. That is why respondents who spend limited time online prefer to use unofficial channels. On the other hand, official information channels probably provide more detailed information and hence attract the heavy Internet user group. For C2G communication, both light and heavy Internet users preferred unofficial consultation channels.

5.6 Other comments from respondents

Two open-ended questions were included at the end of the questionnaire. Forty-six respondents provided their comments. The first open-ended question focused on how one can improve official consultation channels. Forty-one respondents answered this question. Most respondents would like the government to be more open and provide instant feedback to citizens. One commented that “the key issue is not communication but implementation of what has been promised.” Another stressed the importance of “equality and respect” in the communication process. Other recommendations included removing language restriction on official channels, allowing citizens to provide anonymous feedback, and establishing a specific mailbox to collect citizens’ opinions.

The second open-ended question focused on how to promote citizens’ online participation. Twenty-nine respondents answered this question. Most responses were centered on official channels. One respondent suggested government to have regular open discussion with citizens on the Internet, whereas another provided a practical suggestion – “reduce monthly fees and increase the speed of Internet access.” One stated that existing communication channels were enough but government should make better use of the channels. Another suggested the publication of unofficial newspapers. Some respondents did not provide specific suggestions but stressed that the government’s attitude to C2G communication was more important than communication tools. Respondent did not care about the type of channels “as long as the government would honestly communicate with the citizens.”

6. Discussion

The findings showed that respondents had different preferences of channels for G2C and C2G communication. Slightly more than half of the respondents preferred to use official information channels such as traditional mass media and official news websites because they perceived the information to be more reliable, accurate or authoritative. Among unofficial information channels, respondents preferred to use unofficial traditional mass media and commercial news website because they perceived the information to be more updated and objective.

While the difference between official and unofficial channels was insignificant in G2C communication, the difference between the two in C2G communication was significant. Only 25 percent of the respondents preferred to use official consultation channels because they believed they were more likely to obtain support from government officials and could get quicker feedback. These people typically wrote letters to or called government officials, posted comments on government BBS or sent emails to voice their opinions. Nonetheless, official consultation channels typically imply more restriction, more moderation, and higher risk of revealing identity. Three quarters of the respondents in this study preferred to post comments on unofficial BBS or join discussions in virtual community in C2G communication because such channels allowed them to hide their identity and had less restriction. In any form of citizen participation, citizens want to have privacy and assurance that their comments will not have any repercussions (MacNaughton, 2004). The results of this study clearly show that respondents doubted the ability of official communication channels in offering such protection. The worry of respondents in revealing their identity is understandable because 49 citizen journalists who posed messages on the Internet that criticize the Chinese government were imprisoned in China as at March 30, 2009 (Reporters without Border, 2009). Nevertheless, moderation of messages on communication channels is not unique in China. The Downing Street website in the UK was also accused of political censorship (Wright, 2006).

Gender and age distribution of respondents to this research is comparable to the national statistics (Fang and Yen, 2006). Gender does not seem to have any influence on the respondents’ preferred choice of communication channels. Occupation and number of hours respondents spend online are factors that do have an impact on preferences.

Despite the dissatisfaction expressed in the two open-ended questions, the respondents showed a rather positive attitude towards the government-citizen communication process. Understandably respondents’ attitude was affected by their prior experience. One respondent who had tried to contact the government by email but received no replies wrote, “I don’t trust any official channels from then on.” Nonetheless, another respondent who did get a feedback email from the government thought the government had done a pretty good job in responding to citizens online. Most respondents had high expectations for the future government-citizen relationship. They believed that the Internet is a good medium for improving the relationship between government and citizens, and they hoped the

government could make full use of the various kinds of online communication channels. Three respondents indicated that government attitude was vital - "The biggest obstacle is not which channels to use but how to use them."

With the objective of providing more and better information to citizens as well as obtaining useful comments from citizens on government policies, the Chinese government needs to improve the official channels to attract citizens and pay more attention to unofficial channels. The results of this study show that respondents were concerned with their privacy while they communicated with the government. Government regulation, surveillance and language control discourage citizens from communication. The balance between the need of personal information and privacy protection should be considered in future development in e-participation.

7. Conclusions and limitations

This paper provided a four-part model that distinguishes between official and unofficial channels for G2C and C2G communication. The objective of distinguishing between different types of communication channel was not to judge which channels are better but to highlight citizens' preferences regarding communication channels so that researchers and government officials can better understand the behavior and attitude of citizens in the process of government-citizen communication.

The results of an online survey of Chinese citizens showed that the objective of communication affected citizens' choice of channels. In G2C communication respondents were indifferent between official and unofficial channels. In C2G communication most respondents preferred unofficial channels to official channels. The findings can help Chinese government officials understand what communication channels citizens prefer to use, and why. This research shows that citizen participation exists in China. Although China is often considered to be non-democratic, development of citizen participation in China is not much different from that in developed countries where governments provide official communication channels to communicate with citizens but some citizens prefer to use other channels for different reasons. Because citizens have many choices of communication these days, the Chinese government should not restrict themselves to government websites to distribute information or collect comments (Ahmed, 2006). The government-citizen relationship can be improved if the government is more aware of citizens' rationale of using different channels.

This study has a number of limitations. First, the respondents were limited to Internet users who use the four popular Chinese portals and who were interested in government-citizen communication issues. The sampling was not random and respondents were self-selected. Nonetheless, because of the large population of China and the digital divide between big cities and rural areas, random sampling was impossible. The objective of this research was not to generalize the results for the Chinese population but to provide first-hand empirical evidence of attitudes among Chinese citizens who are interested in communicating with the government. Second, this research did not distinguish between issues involved in government-citizen communication. Citizens probably react differently in day-to-day community issues than in important political issues. Third, factors such as website usability may have an impact on citizens' willingness to use official and unofficial websites but they were not considered in this study.

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