How to motivate rural communities in China to utilize ICTs for positive social change

Introduction:

China has recently emerged as a rapidly expanding network society. In December 2010, there were 457 million internet users, an astonishing increase of 73.3 million compared with 2009. Together with the rapid growth of mobile internet users, currently at 303 million, mobile net citizens have become a prominent feature of China's changing society and culture.

Rapid economic development and industrialization in China has been accompanied by environmental degradation and serious social costs on society. Soil erosion, water contamination, air pollution, and ecological disruption have become a major concern. Rising environmental awareness in China has generated collective action in various communities to deal with environmental issues. ICT mediated environmentalism is a relatively recent phenomenon that has gained momentum. But in what ways has ICTs transformed the way in which people communicate and mobilize for social action? What are the attitudes among rural residents towards using ICTs to communicate with the authority for environmental issues and organize environmental collective action? And how do local state agencies respond to rural residents' initiatives in raising environmental collective issues and organizing social action? How is ICT-mediated environmental collective action in rural China influencing the state-society relations?

Policy Recommendations:

- Disseminating environmental protection policies and laws to local communities in rural areas and offering free courses to villagers on how to use mobile phones and computer with Internet access to search for information should be promoted by the government, together with continuous investment in promoting ICT access and connectivity in rural China.
- The local government should develop a strategy of educating representatives from villages with environmentalism and ICT skills, who can become a critical mass in their separate communities and are able to mobilize more villagers to be engaged in protecting their local environment as collective goods.
- The local government should take the responsibility to coordinate all the interest parties including rural residents, polluting factory representatives, local Environmental Protection Bureau staff, media, and also environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to create a joint network for the cause of environmental protection, and eventually construct an effective mechanism for solving environmental pollution. ICTs should be utilized to create a platform for all the stakeholders to interact.
- The state should ensure that the information transparency is implemented by governments at the grassroots levels, and keep rural residents or at least local representatives informed that the government is concerned about and has been engaged in environmental protection in rural areas.
- Researchers need to re-evaluate their approach of analyzing state-society relations, as they are not dichotomous. With ICTs providing a more interactive platform, certain dimensions of state power has more to do with the capability of the state to work through and with other social actors. The state and society are able to mutually define each other. Even within an authoritarian country, there are more engagement and negotiations than control from the government.

Key Findings and Justification for Policy Recommendations:

How rural residents engage with ICTs needs to be interpreted with reference to the economic, social and cultural background, and also with reference to their interaction with other social forces such as the government, and environmental NGOs. In-depth interviews were conducted with rural residents, government officials, members from villager self-governance committees, local NGO staff, and a Chinese scholar. Based on two case studies in Anhui Province, central China, this study has the following main findings, which justify the policy

recommendations proposed in the previous section.

- At both field sites, channels to communicate with the government were available (such as calling nationwide environmental protection hotline, sending mayor emails, and posting to government websites); while the challenge is that rural residents had low motive to utilize ICTs to engage with the government and its agencies. Villagers tended to choose face-to-face meetings with local officials if they want to report pollution. Generally the awareness of ICTs' role in organizing collaborators, gathering information, and documenting evidence was low among the respondents. However, evidence was found that ICTs were chiefly instrumental in disseminating knowledge and information about environmental policies and laws among rural residents, based on a successful case of environmental movement at one village. Mobile phone was found to be the most frequently used.

- Level of ICT development did not correlate to the utilization of ICTs for environmental movement on a collective basis, as factors such as affordability of ICTs, awareness of ICT's role in organization, documentation and information gathering, level of knowledge about related policies and laws, existence of leadership and solidarity in the community, perceived political will of the local government to support rural residents, and literacy would function as barriers to prevent villagers from uniting as a collective to work towards public goods.

- ICTs were most effective in facilitating environmental collective action when they were supported by social mobilizers, who in turn could mediate the information gathered from ICTs, and to communicate more widely, thus enhancing rural residents bargaining power with the state. Given the low Internet penetration in rural China, villagers had strategically got access to the Internet for information searching through third parties such as environmental NGO staff and other environmentalists. These social forces also assisted villagers with digital video recorders and voice recorders to save evidence of pollution. Among these social mobilizers, environmental NGOs are identified as the most supportive force that has contributed to the rising environmentalism in rural China. It is defined by the state law that the local government is responsible for environmental protection in its administrative region. The local government should engage all the stakeholders into environmental protection, through utilizing ICTs to construct a collaborative platform.

- There was an urgent need for information transparency, especially the information on major polluting chemical plants which are monitored by the environmental protection bureau on a regular basis. The respondents from the village where the environment movement was successful also suggested that the local government should take a more active role in environmental protection.

- Generally the respondents from the village where the environmental protection was still an ongoing process held a relatively lower trust in local government's credibility. The respondents from the village where villagers had succeeded in fighting against three polluting factories had a more balanced view about their relations with the government. This indicates that self-organized environment collective action can be constructive, with the potential to improve participants' perception on the local government's accountability. However, it is not clear if the political trust at this village was lower before the environmental movement. This project also found that successful ICT-mediated environmental movement in rural China could help improve state-society relations and provide new opportunities for liberalization in China, which is characterized by openness, transparency, and political accountability, by facilitating interaction and mutual engagement of rural residents and the local government and thus enhancing villagers' political confidence in the government. It also contributes to liberalization through engaging all other social forces into a common goal of protecting citizen's living rights.

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