Visible and invisible: explore the impacts of differential political information sources on Chinese students' political trust

Abstract:

The advent of Internet makes various political information visible while Chinese government is making the unfavorable information invisible throng blocking and deleting. Although the monitoring of Chinese government permeates all kinds of media organizations, different media have different degree of supervision. This paper is trying to answer this question: whether differential political information has differential influences on citizens' political trust. To answer this question, first we need to know what kinds of political information visible on what certain media. Based on Thompson and Brighenti's interpretation of media visibility, the paper comes to the conclusion that only official political discourse can be visible on Chinese mainstream media while more diverse and negative political information is visible on social media and overseas media. Then, a questionnaire survey was conducted in a university in south China, through a regression analysis, the study shows that mainstream political information consumption has positive impacts on students' political trust while the others have the negative impacts.

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All the time, Chinese media are known as "mouthpieces" because they help Chinese Communist Party set political agenda, propagate official policies, control public opinion and rally regime support (Brady 2009; Hague & Harrop, 2010,p.156; Tang & Iyengar, 2011). However, the advent of Information and Communication Technologies, coupled with media commercialization, has changed this and forces the media to provide more complex information and meet the needs of people (Stockman & Gallagher, 2011).

On the one hand, digital media have brought overwhelming political information. On the other hand, "The party supervises the media" is still the primary principle of Chinese media management (Rui, 2011; Liu, 2012). In the age of great sailing, the feudal rulers adopted a policy of seclusion. In information era, Chinese government has invented the Great Firewall of China to block the outside information. The famous Firewall helps the government screen off massive overseas websites that are beyond the state's jurisdiction. Till now, Chinese people in Mainland China are still unable to connect the worldwide popular domains like Google, Twitter and Facebook. The invisible firewall built with the help of ICTs has a clear political purpose that is "foregrounding the regulatory power of the nation-state"(Goldsmith & Wu，2006). What is more, the practice of individuals' behavior of getting over the firewall to consume the outside information makes the firewall more meaningful and full of tension.

This situation arouses a question: whether the political information that are visible in the media and invisible in the other certain media influence citizens' political trust. To answer this question, first we need to differentiate media types and understand the features of the political information spread on them separately. "Media visibility" effectively reflects the interplay of political, social and technological factors. It is used to understand what kind of political information are visible in what certain media and for what purposes. Then, the study addresses the question with data from a questionnaire survey conducted in a university in south China. Through a regression analysis, the study shows that political information consumption on mainstream media has positive impacts on students' political trust while on social media and

overseas media has the negative ones.

Two media types in China

Currently, Chinese media management strategies are that the State Press and Publication Administration supervises print media; the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television controls broadcast media and the Ministry of Information Industry is responsible for digital media management. As we can see, "state agencies control the full spectrum of media programming, either through ownership or the power to regulate" (Tang & Iyengar, 2011).

Fuchs (2010) points out that "mainstream media" often refers to "the large and hierarchical media that are owned by nations or consortium". The definition, on the first place, points out the scale of mainstream media is large and organized；on the second place, points out the ownership of the mainstream media belongs to nations or consortium. In other words, the information sources of mainstream media are controlled by nations or consortium. Given Chinese media management strategies, it proposes that the information sources owned by the party are the essential condition to be the mainstream media.

As for the definition of "Chinese mainstream media", there are mainly two camps. Both of the two camps agree that the mainstream media need to have tremendous influence. The first camp highlights the function of propaganda and the authority. The second camp emphasizes that they have to be thoughtful and credible. Qi's (2011) study made up for the deficiency and combined these two camps' ideas. He believes that after thirty years of media reform, it has formed the situation that "traditional mainstream media" representing official authority and "new mainstream media" standing for social credibility coexists.

Hence, this article firstly classifies all the media into two types based on whether the information sources are controlled by the party. Among the media whose information sources are party control, it calls the media with great influence or social credibility "mainstream media". In regard to the media whose information sources are not party control, they are all "non-mainstream media", such as social media, overseas media, et al.

Literature on media visibility

"Visibility" is an inescapable word in sociological research. More than several decades ago, there have been related descriptions and researches about "visibility" in academia (e.g., Simmel, 1969; Goffman, 1971; Foucault, 1972). When British sociologist John Brookshire Thompson connected "visibility" with new media and media technologies in 1999, the word aroused much attention of scholars in Communication Studies. In 2005, Thompson has published a new article *The new visibility* in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* and given a more detailed and comprehensive explanation. It is a little pity that Thompson does not place himself in the investigation of visibility later. Luckily, Italian sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti is committed to doing this. His book *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* published in 2010 have "analyzed a series of social phenomena from the perspective of a relational ontology of visibility"(2010,p 186) and proved "visibility" as a useful sociological category. Considering their descriptions of media visibility is the most influential for media study, this article first reviews their statement, and then use their opinions to analyze the characteristics of political information on different media types.

In Thompson's article (2005), two words are worth noting: visibility and uncontrolled, more specifically: the visibility of information and the uncontrolled procedure of information flow. He believes "the new visibility is inseparably linked to the new forms of action and interaction brought about by the media". The advent of Internet provides the technological support for sharing information by breaking through time and space limitations. He proposes that compared with traditional media, digital media are visible. In the whole paper, Thompson is trying to answer these two questions: what are the characteristics of this new form of visibility and what are its consequences? The answer he gives is that for political leaders, the Internet and other networked media help them create the favorable images and "acquire the capacity to present themselves as 'one of us'"(Thompson, 2005). Also, the media can create risks for politicians. He uses political scandals as examples to illustrate that those scandals were assumed to remain invisible are revealed to the public with the help of media technologies that will damage politicians' credibility. Due to the uncontrollable nature

of digital media, it is difficult to control the diffusion of information on them. The scandals can attract much attention and trigger heated discussions among the public. The public opinions and the consequences that are brought by the scandals are out of politicians' control. As for ordinary people, digital media, on the one hand, help them acquire more information about politics and politicians; on the other hand, as a weapon for them to make their demands visible to the world. The significant influence produced by the uncontrollable information flow may help ordinary people achieve their aims. He holds the idea that "it is also an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives"(2005).

Furthermore, there is another point worth noting: the relationship between power and visibility. Thompson points out that Foucault "developed a distinctive and influential argument about the changing relations between visibility and power in Western societies", such as in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), but he did not take media into consideration more carefully. Foucault states in the ancient world, a few were made visible to many and the few were who challenged the regime and used to exercise power. He uses "spectacle" to refer to the means of exercising power over the many, like a public execution. But from the 16th century on, this spectacular gradually disappeared and "new forms of discipline and surveillance, which increasingly infiltrated different spheres of life" appeared, like the army, the school, the prison and the hospital. The spread of these mechanisms resulted to a kind of 'disciplinary society' in which the visibility of the few by the many has been replaced by the visibility of the many by the few, and in which the spectacular display of sovereign power has been replaced by the normalizing power of the gaze (see Foucault, 1977, esp. 170 ff.). He uses the Panopticon to characterize this new relation between power and visibility: the few or a single one can observe the many or even the whole. Based on the features of the structure, the supervisors remain invisible while inmates feel they are visible and observed all the time. Thompson argues that currently, digital media make the few visible to the many again. Unlike the spectacle in the ancient times, people gather together to watch the spectacle; digital media break the constraints of time and space. Also, "the few" in the ancient time in Foucault's opinion were the people used to exercise power. In Thompson's opinion, main part of

the few is political leaders who want to exercise power through being visible to the many.

If Thompson shows the dynamic feature of power relationship in the game of media visibility, then we can say Brighenti stands on the shoulders of him. He elaborates "visibility" from two perspectives: socio-technical and bio-political and gives two dimensions: visual dimension and social dimension. He is so ambitious to prove "visibility" can be an important social category from many aspects so what we should focus on is his interpretation of media visibility. He agrees with scholars in visual cultural studies (e.g. Elkins 1999; Evans and Hall 1999; Mirzoeff 1999; Macphee 2002) on the extension of the visual world and believes "imaging includes not only visual arts but also signs, symbols, graphs, maps, plans, diagrams and scientific images of the human body as well as of invisible cells and stars."(p.4) The word "visual" he uses here represents the content that people can see through the media regardless of its representation form. It can be seen directly by the audience from the media, like texts and pictures or people can feel what is behind the direct visual content with their perception. In this dimension, visibility is visual interaction. Of course, Brighenti holds that visibility is more than that, is "an extension or prolongation of the visual"(p.32). He identifies with Foster's (1988) attempt to 'socialize vision' through the notion of "visuality" and leads to the second dimension: social dimension.

If visual dimension answers the question of "what we see", then social dimension answers: "why we can see the certain content". The answer is based on "contextual social, technical and political complexes or regimes"(2010,p.186). Brighenti receives all the opinions given by Thompson in his articles and enriches them. Firstly, subjects manipulate what content is visible or invisible based on what real effects they want to attain. He does not point out that the subjects of traditional media are people in power, but he does state that public is the domain of visible media, such as digital media. Secondly, he also gets inspirations from Foucault and points that authorities can take advantage of visible media in practicing surveillance on their people. The openness of visible media may produce more surveillance. As we can seen, Thomson points that visible media makes the situation that the few visible to the many shown again and

the visible few are totally different from what Foucault described in his first power model while Brighenti develops Foucault's second power model: the few can still obverse the many with the help of ICTs. ICTs have produced traceable identities that makes the whole society like a superpanopticon(Poster,1990). Digital media makes every person who uses them visible because of the digital trace and tracing digital data flows is crucial in contemporary surveillance(Whitaker 1999; Lyon 2001; 2003; Marx 2005). Moreover, Brighenti considers visibility boundaries and presents that every regime of surveillant visibility exists an axis that shows the power effects. In other words, from the perspective of supervisors, the boundary of their surveillance in lines with their political purposes and serves for them.

Thompson and Brighenti are acutely aware of the power struggles behind the visible and the invisible content. Their contribution to media visibility will help us better understand Chinese media and the characteristics of the political information spread on them.

Political information on mainstream media：
In the above, this paper has already defines "mainstream media" that are the information sources are controlled by the party and have great influence or social credibility. The study follows Qi's (2011) classification that "traditional mainstream media" representing the function of propaganda and the "new mainstream media" representing social credibility.

As for traditional mainstream media, they are official spokesperson, stress the interests of the state and not market-oriented. Their fundamental task is to publicize the party's line, principles and policies, guide and promote the core task and the core work of the party (Wei, 1999). Applying visibility to analyze them is that Chinese political leaders use the media to release official political discourse in which way they exercise power. They make political information that promote their policies visible and all the negative information invisible. Thus, the political information in them is almost positive propaganda, vindicating images of the party.

When it comes to "new mainstream media", taking urban papers as an example, they

were created by the party to help occupy the market and relieve party papers' market pressure (Wei, 1999). They focus on public interests and only when they satisfy the requirements of citizens can they survive in the fierce market competition. Therefore, they make the political information that can meet citizens' needs and are consistent with policies visible. The political information distribution from them still accord with the states censorship requirements. It is hard to find negative information about the party or the information that may destroy the party's credibility on them.

Political information on non-mainstream media：

This paper focuses on two kinds of non-mainstream media: social media and overseas media. Social media are characterized by Web 2.0 online applications, user-generated content, and allow individuals or groups to create user profiles that can share with others (Obar & Wildman, 2015). They give every individual the sphere to speak their own voice and share with others instantaneously. Based on China Internet Network Information Center's (CNNIC) report (2017), WeChat and Sina Weibo hold the biggest share of the social media market.

Taking Sina Weibo as an example, Yin (2013) compared the different political information spread on the mainstream media and Sina Weibo about the news conference of 2011.7.23 Wenzhou Accident. The former spokesman of Ministry of Railways answered journalists' questions and said, "Chinese high-speed train is advanced and qualified and this is my explanation for the accident". At the end, the spokesman seemed feel it was unnecessary to explain more to the public, he said, "Whether you believe it or not, I believe". This sentence sparked intense debate on Weibo while it was invisible in the mainstream media. Netizens were very dissatisfied with his response; they showed their anger by leaving numerous messages on Weibo and followed his sentence' form to make new sentences in a playing way to express their disappointment to the authorities. Finally, the spokesman was discharged from office.

From this example, we can see Weibo gives all kinds of information the sphere to be visible because individuals become the information sources. Althogy Weibo is also under surveillance, once netizens have expressed something that the government is

unfavorable to hear; the content will be deleted (Bamman & O'Connor & Smith, 2012). Yet, thanks to the uncontrollable information diffusion procedure of digital media, once the information is visible, the impacts it results to are out of control. Supervisors can delete the content that may harm their interests, but they cannot eliminate the impacts. Consequently, Weibo has the "uncontrolled visibility" (Thompson, 1995:147) potential. All kinds of political affaires that happened to citizens and public opinions can be visible on it. Other social media may not have that huge influence as Weibo does; they still have the uncontrollable visibility potential because of their media nature in which the political information is diverse and may not be in line with the main ideology.

Compared with mainstream media, social media does not have the checkup before the information spreads because individuals control the sources while it still has the checkup after the diffusion. These two checkups all disappear on overseas media. As for the content on overseas media, the party can do nothing but to block them depending on the Firewall. ICTs are the double sword. Also, depending on the advent of ICTs, Chinese users have developed a series of tools and strategies based on VPNs （virtual private network）and proxy servers which can help them get over the Firewall and browse the blocked content. In 2014, there are 93 million Chinese VPN users, which accounts for 20 percent of total Internet users in China(Globalwebindex, 2014). The party uses the firewall to set the boundary that within the boundary is the scope that it can conduct Internet censorship and surveillance while out of the boundary, it can do nothing except letting the information spreads. Overseas media stays in the safe place therefore it is full of all kinds information.

Media use and political trust
Political trust is mainly defined as citizens' belief or confidence about the government or political system will produce their preferred outcomes (e.g., Easton, 1965; Miller, 1974; Hetherington, 1998; Shi, 2001; Li, 2004).

The relationship between media exposure and political trust has drawn lots of attention. "Media malaise" may be the most influential theory to explain the relationship. It comes from the term "video malaise" that was firstly proposed by

Robinson in 1975. In 1970s, television was the main source of political information and negative reports dominated for a long time. Based on a quasi-experimental study, Robinson(1976) found that people who acquired information mainly from TV had the lower political trust and more insufficiency of political efficacy. Inspired by his research, Miller et al. (1979) studied the impact of negative newspaper reports. The results showed that the more people read negative reports, the less they trusted the governments or the politicians. Pfau et al. (2003) also found people who listened more broadcasting political talk shows had the lower political trust. As negative reports from various media have led to a decline in political trust, researchers described this phenomenon as "media malaise"(Newton, 1999;Carpini, 2004).

From the above studies，it can be seen that whether political information positive or negative have a direct impact on individual's political trust. In previous studies, Chinese people showed high political trust, higher than most countries' citizens' in the world (eg. World Value Surveys, China, 2001;Li, 2004;et al.). One explanation is that because of Chinese governments' strict censorship, getting positive information from the mainstream media is the main way for people to acquire political information in which leads to the high trust (Wang & White, 2005). The Internet has changed it. A questionnaire survey conducted by Wang (2009) has shown that the overall use of Internet has the negative impact on college students' political trust in China while the overall use of newspapers has a positive one. As for the overseas media, Zhou & Lu (2008) from the perspective of media literacy find that people who tend to use overseas media have higher information processing ability and this kind of behavior has the potential possibility to break the mainstream political ideology.

Thus, combine the characteristics of political information spread on certain media as it has discussed above, it comes to the hypothesis:

H1a: Political information on mainstream media has the positive impact on political trust.

H1b: Political information on non-mainstream media has the negative impact on political trust.

Research Method

Sample

The data analyzed came from a questionnaire survey conducted between June and July of 2016 in a university in south China. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling method based on an online questionnaire are used here. Convenience sampling is the least costly to the researcher, in terms of time, effort and money (Marshall, 1996) and web survey is the best way to investigate Internet users (Couper, 2000). These non-probability sampling can provide samples that researchers cannot obtain by other sampling methods (Reinard, 1998). On the one side, author placed the designed questionnaire on Qualtrics, a web survey software to which the author have a university-wide subscription account and placed the link on this university's the campus forum. On the other hand, links were sent directly to the known eligible students through social media, and they also helped sent the links to eligible respondents they know.

It finally received 339 valid samples, including 50.7% male samples and 49.3% female samples, which is approximately the same as the male and female students in this school (52.5%: 47.5%). Undergraduate and graduate students account for respectively 78.5% and 21.5%. As for major, humanities and social science account for 65.5%, nature science, engineer and medicine account for 34.5%.

Measures

The analyses in this study included five groups of variables: *demographics, mainstream media use, non-mainstream media use, political trust* and *political expression*. The study also takes *political interest* into measurement.

Mainstream media use. Respondents are asked to answer their degree of engagement (never=0, every day=5) in the following activities: "acquire political information from central media, such as People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, Central People's Broadcasting Station, Guangming Daily and other central media"; "acquire political information from provincial media or local media, such as Shenzhen TV, Hunan TV, Jiangsu TV, Eastern TV et al," "acquire political information from market oriented media that are still belong to the governments, such as The Paper, Southern Weekend, Southern Metropolis Daily, Chinese news weekly, Sanlian Life Weekly, Chinese

Youth Daily, News Probe, Phoenix TV, Phoenix Weekly et al," (3 items averaged scale, Cronbach's α = .50, M = 1.10, SD = .16).

Non-mainstream media use. Respondents are asked to answer their degree of engagement (never=0, every day=5) in the following activities: "acquire political information from forums/QQ/Weibo/microblogs"; "acquire political information from overseas media, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook et al" (2 items averaged scale, Cronbach's α = .63, M = 2.20, SD = .95).

Political trust. Respondents are required to answer how much (1=very little, 5=a great deal of confidence) confidence they have for the following institutions: the Party, the National People's Congress and the National Government (3 items averaged scale, Cronbach's α = .96, M = 3.63, SD = .003).

Political interest. Respondents are asked to report how much (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) they agree on each of the following statements: "I'm very interested in politics and public affairs," and "I spend much time considering national issues" (3 items averaged scale, Cronbach's α = .74, M = 2.83, SD = .19).

Results

It used the demographic variables, mainstream media use, non-mainstream media use and political interest as independent variables, political trust and political expression respectively as the dependent variable through SPSS 24.0 software, conducted the multiple regression model.

As shown in Table 1, the model has explained 0.06% of the variable variance (adjusted R^2 = 0.06). Individuals who consume more political information from mainstream media tend to have more political trust (β =. 255, p < .05), while individuals who consume more political information from non-mainstream media tend to have lower political trust (β = -.238, p < .05). H1a and H1b are supported. It is also worth noting that gender (β = −.282, p < .05) and background (β =. 281, p < .05) hold statistically significant relationship with political trust, which may elicit some bright picture for the future. This study also shows that students are inclined to consume political information from social media and overseas media.

Table1: Regression of Political Trust Variables with Independent Variables

	political trust	
	unstandarded coefficient	standard error
Demographics Variables		
gender	-.282*	.113
background	.281*	.123
major	-.124	.112
Mainstream media use Variables	.255**	.096
Non-mainstream media use Variables	-.238***	.068
Political interest Variables	-.032	.068
Intercept	3.993	
Adjusted R²	.060	

Note:* P≤.05, ** P≤.01， *** P≤.001

Conclusion and discussion:

The Great Firewall of China and the stringent censorship system make Chinese media typology rather different from Western countries. This research actually includes two parts. The first part is applying media visibility to analyze what political information visible in what media and for what purposes considering technical, social and political factors at the same time. The paper based on information sources classifies media into two types: one is controlled by the party; the other is out of the party's control. The author focuses on three certain media: mainstream media which belongs to the party's control; social media that individuals can be the source of political information and overseas media that are beyond the party's jurisdiction. Behind visibility are the power and the challenges brought by technology. Communication scholars have paid much attention on the relationship between media and power (Fishman, 1998;Curran, 2002). From the perspective of power, it can be see that social media has the potential to become the "alternative discourse"(Hartley, 1982,p.192) and open new space in the power game. Social media and overseas media all empower citizens to free out from the monopoly of the party's ideology.

The second part is an empirical study on college students. The study finds that mainstream political information has positive impacts on students' political trust while political information from social media and overseas media has the negative impacts. Research on the media's influence on political trust almost has two stripes, endorsing either the video malaise thesis (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) or the virtuous circle thesis (Norris 2000). The current study focuses on the impacts of differential political information on political trust; therefore the classification is different from these studies. Yet, the findings add to the prior research by demonstrating that mainstream media information consumption leads to higher political trust because in the measurement of mainstream political information consumption only includes Television and newspaper that belongs to traditional media. There are also research showing the relationship between students' characteristics and political trust. The author will investigate this later.

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