Rhetorical Activism in China: The Power of Grassroots Criticism of Government on the Internet
修辭行動主義在中國：批評政府的網民留言對政治態度影響力的實證研究

Submitted to
Department of Media and Communication
媒體與傳播系
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
哲學博士學位

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January 2016
二零一六年一月
Abstract

The Internet facilitates the widespread dissemination of grassroots comments on socio-political issues. On the Internet, people talk about public officials, criticize the government, and form attitudes towards political systems. While some are warned not to read online comments as anonymous voices tend to be aggressive and uncivilized, others call attention to a better understanding of grassroots expressions. In his new book, Reading the Comments, Reagle (2015) argues that online grassroots comments are the wisdom of crowds that inform readers, shape people’s minds, and manipulate recipients’ attitudes. Yet, the impact of online grassroots comments is under-investigated.

Against this background, the key question to be asked in this study is what are the impacts of exposure to online grassroots criticism of the government on readers’ political attitudes? Among possible impacts, this study focuses on two of them: a) the impact on readers’ attitudes towards the government (e.g., citizen satisfaction with the government), and b) the impact on readers’ sense of self-efficacy in political engagement. An investigation on the two issues is believed to widen human knowledge of the influence of online grassroots criticism of the government in general, and to gain a better understanding of grassroots power in repressive countries, such as China.

Note that people voice their opinions on the Internet with everyday language, which is rich in rhetorical skills and flexible in expression. Among the expressive techniques, political satire gains popularity as it allows users to question politics rather than to take it as true information from authoritative sources (Jones, Gray & Thompson, 2009). An increasing body of research suggests a positive relationship between exposure to political satire and sense of political self-efficacy, but not without criticism. The current research makes an attempt to
identify problems in past studies and clarifies mechanisms with a test of the rhetorical power of online grassroots political satire. Thus, the two questions posed in this study are specified as follows,

a) Does exposure to online grassroots criticism of the government influence citizen satisfaction with the government?

b) Does exposure to online grassroots satirical comments on political issues influence political self-efficacy?

Recent studies on censorship highlight the particular relevance of this study to the situation in China. Researches by King et al. (2013, 2014) suggest an existence of a large body of grassroots criticism of the government on the Internet in China, indicating that the government tolerates scathing political criticism if it has no potential to spark collective actions offline. Their findings resonate with the “safety valve” view that deems the tolerance of online grassroots dissenting voices as a regulatory tactic of repressive countries to release steam and prevent uprisings. Yet, the fact that several offline collective actions have been catalyzed by online grassroots posts (Yin, 2013) raises questions regarding the power of uncensored grassroots political criticism.

This study begins with developments of theoretical models, elaborating mechanisms that help to answer the two questions in general, and then contextualizes them with an experiment conducted in mainland China. Since it is impractical to set up an online experiment with “sensitive” questions regarding political attitudes, a paper-and-pencil survey was adopted instead. A total of 754 undergraduates were recruited from a college town in southern China. The experiment adopts a 2 (negative news vs. positive news) x 3 (news only, news and satirical criticism, news and literal criticism) between-subjects design.
The results show that exposure to grassroots criticism leads to higher levels of freedom of speech perception, and subsequently, citizen satisfaction with the government. Furthermore, exposure to grassroots satirical criticism enhances readers’ political self-efficacy, a relationship that is mediated by perceived enjoyment of grassroots criticism. News genres differ in the identified patterns.

The findings shed light on the “safety valve” view, lending support for the anecdotal accounts of uncensored grassroots political criticism in a censored environment. It may help justify the censorship practice from an administrative perspective. The act of keeping some extremely negative criticism of the government on the Internet not only expresses citizens’ grievances, but also impresses citizens with an increased perception of freedom of speech, leading to the subsequent heightened satisfaction with the government. It suggests a clear causal path from perceived freedom of speech to other political evaluations of a repressive regime.

Furthermore, the findings regarding grassroots satirical criticism of the government decompose the underlying mechanisms, and suggest the rhetorical power in swaying people’s political attitudes. This study tests the effects of only one of the rhetorical devices; many other tropes, such as metaphor, hyperbole, and sarcasm, are also prevalent in grassroots online expressions and then have the potential to influence readers’ perceptions and attitudes. Moreover, the impacts on political attitudes toward the government and the individual’s self lead to future investigations of related political attitudes, and on behavioral outcomes that might result from affected attitudes.

This study raises questions about the role of the news genre in the effect of the media. The proposed patterns are only supported by the group of participants who are exposed to
grassroots criticism of the government and negative political news. When it comes to the experimental group viewing positive news, the data fail to concur with the general theoretical models. Particularly, the perceived levels of freedom of speech do not relate to levels of citizen satisfaction with the government, and the enjoyment of grassroots criticism fails to increase political self-efficacy, in the group of positive news. The possible explanations are provided, but the mechanism still calls for future investigations.