

Chapter 4

Research on the Function of Chinese NGOs in the Internet Mobilization

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Abstract With the changes in the government management system and market-oriented reforms in the field of China's economic, the separation between the State and the Society comes into being. During the fast development of kinds of NGOs, the state power begins to transfer to other poles that may promote social mobilization in China. Due to the administrative control and the legal constraint, the actual mobilization action transfers to mobilization on Internet, which need less political cost, spread faster but have more difficult governance problems. The NGOs are regarded as the important organizations in the citizen society, this paper would analyze the functions of NGOs in the occurrence and spread of social mobilization in cyberspace. According to analyzing the Chinese NGOs' Internet application ability and the relationship between Internet and citizen in contemporary China, this paper will put forward the function of NGOs in Internet mobilization; moreover, give some suggestions on how to react to the Internet mobilization for government.

Keywords Chinese NGO · Internet mobilization · Functions

4.1 Introduction

In January 2013, the data of 31th the state of Chinese Internet Network Development Statistic report which is released by China Internet network information center (CNNIC) [1], showed that The scale of the Internet users has gone up to 564 million in our country, the Internet penetration is further improved, reaching 42.1% at the end of December 2012. The popularity of the Internet not only expands the traditional social concept, but also results in an expansion of the public domain space.

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“The network society” became a public space, which is independent of real society outside and closely linked with the social reality.

This paper will analyze the functions of NGOs in Internet mobilization, which are regarded as the important organizations in the citizen society. On the base of the analysis about the relationship between Internet and the citizen society in contemporary China and the Internet application ability of Chinese NGOs, this paper will put forward a discussion on the function of NGOs in Internet mobilization, moreover, give some suggestions on how to react to the Internet mobilization for government.

4.2 Internet and Social Mobilization in Contemporary China

Along with the economic and political system reform, both theory study and social practice appeal to build “Civil Society” as soon as possible. In this context, our country’s NGOs, as the important part of civil society, develop rapidly. Accompanied by the various kinds of society organizations appear and develop, to some extent, the state power begins to change; it tends to transfer from a single bureaucratic governance of administration to democratic governance. This phenomenon contributes a basic condition to bottom-up social mobilization.

At recently decades, Western scholars have achieved rich results in the field of social mobilization. They generally believe that “social mobilization” is a sustained, organized activity for interest demand, the public express their views against target regime by a particular form of collective behavior [2]. This kind of social mobilization, which originates from civil society by bottom-up form with specific interest, is different from the top-down and administrative leading national political mobilization. In 1980s, western scholars put forward “Political Process Promotion Model”, which is a far-reaching theory [3]. When a country comes into a period of economic development and social transformation, it is believed that the increasing possibility of a citizen’s political opportunity is the root cause of frequent occurrences of bottom-up social mobilization. According to this theory, China has entered a critical period of social transformation, as further accelerate the process of change in the country’s political and social system, the growth of citizens’ awareness of democratic participation, our country will enter a relatively long period of frequent social mobilization [4]. Besides, owing to international financial crisis in 2009, economic situation is bad all over the world. Our country long-term economy development depends on the demographic and natural resources bonus. However, both of them are reducing now. Numerous economic and society structural contradictions, which were ever covered or delayed by high growth of economy in domestic society, are emerging. Moreover, natural disasters and public crisis are expected to occur frequently. Based on the above analysis, the bottom-up, cluster, with a clear interest demands social mobilization is predicted to occur frequently in Chinese society in the future.

Because of the administrative control and legal constraints, collective mobilization behavior will be faced with lager political and legal risk in the real society of

China. As a result, Internet became the breakthrough under the pressure of social mobilization. Internet space mobilization will be an important form of Chinese social mobilization for its low-cost, quickly spreading and difficult supervision [5]. Currently, China's Internet penetration rate has exceeded the world average. A huge number of Internet users and network transmission technology goes together, promoting the occurrence and the expansion of new forms social mobilization. In recent years, Chinese Internet mobilization happened frequently and had a huge impact on society. Chinese citizens have shown strong mobilization power which captured the world's attention in a series of events. These events include the Beijing Olympic torch overseas relay the activity of boycotting Carrefour earthquake relief work in Wenchuan, the "PX" event in Xiamen, "Fishing" law enforcement in Shanghai. From the above events, we can see NGO-organized Internet mobilizations behavior plays an important role. Therefore, NGOs' function in the Internet mobilization will be an important issue to study China's Internet social mobilization [6]. Owing to the complexity of Internet information diffusion mechanism, mutual interaction of online and offline mobilization behavior and the diversification main body of Internet mobilization, these factors raise the research difficulty in Internet mobilization research. In this case, we should analyze the network social mobilization participants, especially organization participates who have more influence than individual participates. By this way, it will be helpful to get a further identification about the development of China's network social mobilization.

4.3 Internet Application Ability of Chinese NGOs

Since the beginning of 20 century, some Non-profit organizations with modern characteristics have emerged in China. Our country's NGOs developed very quickly; its number has achieved 3million since the reform and opening up. According to the data provided by the civil affairs department, there were 386,900 registering social organizations by the end of 2007. If NGOs want to play important role in network mobilization at the age of Internet, they must depend on their capability of Internet application.

According to the survey, in terms of the popularity of Internet, 85.93% Chinese NGOs own their special computers and the majority of them use Internet at a percentage of 96.33%. Among those NGO who use Internet, 79.68% organizations access to the Internet by using ADSL broadband, 13.02% organizations by using LAN access to the Internet. There are 67.62% organizations own their official websites with own domain names, but the percentage of full-time computer management staff is only 31.11% [7].

In terms of the usage of Internet service projects, the rate of Chinese NGOs E-mail utilization is 90.79%, the rate of communication ratio through instant messaging tools is 87.30%, the ratio of imaging-making, video-making by software tools or digital camera is 85.71%, the rate of using network audio or video materials is 73.02%. They all have quite high using ratio. And more than half organizations

have their own BBS, communities or forums among those NGOs of using Internet. However, the utilization rates of blog, network-organization meeting and wiki are relatively low in 45.71%, 51%, and 14.29% respectively. When evaluate their own Internet application abilities, 41% of NGOs think they are very good at it, 51% says they are favorable facing it and the rest 8% believe they still need improvement. And then, 38% NGOs thinks providing training about comprehensive using of computers is the most important demand for themselves, 34% of NGOs regards the supply of web development service as a thing which they need most. By analyzing the data above, NGOs shows well application abilities in Internet hardware support and common function application. However, there still are some problems. NGO is poor at using new Internet technology and function. Even more, one third of NGOs don't have their own domain name website, nearly 70% of organizations do not have professional computer and Internet management staffs. It reflects the NGOs' sensitivity towards Internet technology is still relatively low in some degree. As a result, it limits our NGOs ability to spread ideas and advocated behavior by using Internet and new media [8]. But it doesn't mean our NGOs aren't playing their roles in Internet space. After all, they showed up and played a special role in several influential Internet mobilizations.

4.4 Chinese NGOs' Functions in Internet Mobilization

With the development of Internet information technology, NGOs in China gradually, frequently and thoroughly make use of the Internet as an important platform to promote the social interaction and social integration. In western scholars' opinions, mobilizing citizens to participate in political action, advocating interests' demands, as well as build social capital are the three most important function of NGO in civil society [9]. In the early stage of the construction of civil society in China, although the NGOs do not completely and effectively play a perfect role in making the three functions, they do play the special role in the frequent network social mobilizations in China at present. Summarized as follows:

(1) NGOs can make use of the internet to affect government policies

First of all, a government policy agenda can be established by NGOs' influence. NGOs release information, advocate interest demands, mobilize widely public discussions and expand the influence of the information through Internet. In this way, they guide the public opinion towards social problems. Then public opinions can catch government attention. At last, their interest demands can be added into policy agenda. Second, NGOs can affect the process of government choosing and deciding policies. NGOs reflect and represent the particular groups' demands, so that one of important functions of it is providing public policy decision, reference and consultation for the government. For example, in the earthquake relief effort of Wenchuan earthquake, many NGOs released reliable and real disaster information in time through Internet. In addition, by collecting information, guiding the public opinion, they attracted public attention to the disaster areas where had not been well

known yet. These measures are really very helpful for government making correct and effective decisions. Moreover, NGOs can offer powerful supervision in government policy execution by mobilization [10]. For example, after the Wenchuan earthquake, numerous non-governmental organizations, which were in the front line of disaster relief, released the government relief information via Internet platform, traced the disaster relief materials and money. They also advocated the citizens to supervise government behavior, which had eliminated the government corruption and illegal behavior to a large extent.

(2) NGOs can promote information interaction with public by internet

In order to promote the public to participate in mobilization, NGOs share information and interact with the public in cyberspace. In this way, they can guide the public opinion. As an important and quick-developing media, the Internet plays an important role in the formation of the public opinion. The reason why say so was that before the media formed, the public didn't know anything until the media told some related information to them, then the public could reflect on certain issues [11]. When NGOs promote public to participate in mobilizing action, they always release information through the Internet and even make use of blog, BBS, professional web's service function. By these means they can promote social public information interaction and strive to get public's support and concern about certain common interest demand. At last they can strengthen the public opinion and promote public participation in mobilizing action.

For example, in mobilization of Wenchuan earthquake relief effort, Chinese NGOs made full use of online payment service and other technologies to manage and carry donations. China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation cooperated with China Siyuan Foundation for Poverty Alleviation on a platform named "we and you together - Donations" [12]. Thanks to their effective and convenient platform, the majority of Internet users could participate in disaster relief mobilization actions. In the recruitment of online volunteers, NGOs, such as the Red Cross society of China, opened up a volunteer recruitment column through the portal. Chinese volunteers net even integrated the volunteers' demands information in earthquake disaster area and establish volunteer database for Internet users. These NGOs provide a key information platform for volunteers participating in the disaster relief mobilization.

(3) NGOs can communicate and cooperate with other organizations in social mobilization

NGOs can communicate and cooperate with other organizations in social mobilization through Internet. "Any organization operating activities is connected with surrounding environment, and its survival and performance usually rely on relationship with other organizations" [13]. Among well-known social mobilization actions, a NGO mobilization's influence effect is limited. However, if NGOs can cooperate with other entities organization, their influence will no doubt become huge. By this way, they can expand the influence of the mobilization action, and improve the efficiency of the mobilization action. In the Internet space, NGOs can be more convenient to use Internet platform to form alliance with other NGOs or the government, enterprises and organizations which share the common interest demands. Other organizations' support is very helpful for the NGOs [14]. Take Internet mobilization

of Wenchuan earthquake relief effort for example, “5.12 folk rescue center” is a website which is ran by government and non-governmental organizations. It plays an important role in collecting every organization’s resources, integrating disaster relief supplies and organizing volunteers.

The Internet no doubt provides a more convenient platform for NGOs participate in social mobilization. It also provides a more convenient information transmission channels. At the same time, by influencing government policies, interacting with public, constructing the coalition, NGOs play a very important roles in the Internet mobilization. They can’t be replaced.

4.5 How to Evaluate and Deal with NGOs’ Role in Internet Mobilization

On the one hand, Network social mobilization speeds up the civil society construction in China. On the other hand, malignant network mobilization may greatly threat social stability. Therefore, we should have a correct understanding and reasonable measures towards Chinese NGOs’ effect in Internet mobilization.

(1) We should objectively evaluate the role of Chinese NGOs in the internet mobilization

As the above analysis, Internet mobilization has become an important way of expanding influence, achieving organization goals, or even influencing government decision-making. Although NGO has so many advantages, its function of social mobilization cannot be exaggerated in practice. There are many reasons. On the one hand, the government carries on strict supervision with administrative power towards NGOs. On the other hand, NGOs themselves have weakness in the management [15].

At present, if you use Baidu search engine to search the web pages containing NGO, there will be more than millions terms associated with it. It illustrates that Internet users are very concerned about it in China. There are about 168,000 Internet users pay close attention in NGOs’ role in society by their blogs. This data reveals that these bloggers can be mobilized by NGO. However, from the perspective of the NGO in China, most of them ignore this potential power [16]. Chinese NGOs few release information through the Internet platform to mobilize citizen fight for their political right. They even less concerned about whether these Internet users’ political demands relate to their organization mission. For example, it is hard to find the first-hand material about Chinese environment on the Internet, which is provided by Environmental Protection Organization. At the same time, in order to obtain organizational development resources, compared with striving Internet users’ support, they prefer to communicate with the mass media or government [17]. In a word, compared with open cyberspace, the NGO in China is more willing to close the administrative system in their development. Therefore, we should have the correct and reasonable evaluation about NGOs’ role in network social mobilization.

(2) Chinese NGOs should strengthen self-construction for further development

Under the guidance of “civil society”, Chinese NGOs should strengthen self-construction for playing more important role in Internet mobilization. In order to get and share information, hardware is the most basic technical equipment for NGO. But compared with foreign countries, our country’s NGOs haven’t full used of Internet, so they should broaden the financing channels, keep pace with the time, and build the Internet hardware facilities to broaden their network influence. In addition, Chinese NGOs should also request their full-time staff and volunteer with higher quality. Their staff should have professional Internet application ability, including setting up and maintaining web. They also should be sensitive with information so that they can mobilize the public well. In addition, the public lack of trust in NGOs. This factor will restrict NGO’s development. So NGOs in China should devote to getting public’s trust. There are many measures can be taken, including making information public actively, or establishing a good organization image.

(3) Government should explore new governance mode towards NGO

The government should explore the management strategies about how to govern NGO under the guidance of “common governance mode”. Based on the consideration of keeping society stability, the government faces many difficulties. For example, the governance policy is either “too strict” or “too passive”. In view of the complexity of social mobilization and double-sided influence, the government should fully analyze NGOs’ role and function in network mobilization. In addition, government also should devote to achieve “multi-subject governance mode”. The policies’ target should be “using”, “guiding”, not only “controlling”. Policy tools shouldn’t be just control information transmission, they also should analyze all kinds of organizations’ characteristics, behavior process, behavior effectiveness, and even their motivation in social mobilization. Policy tools’ target should be Multi-objective, multi-dimensional in the future. Take these factors into consideration, NGOs can develop better.

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