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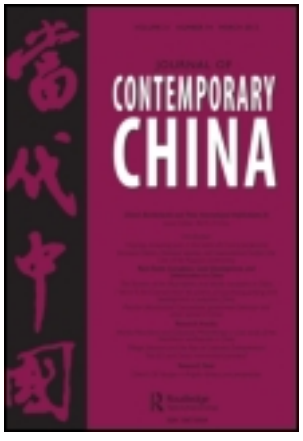

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Acquiring Political Information in Contemporary China: various media channels and their respective correlates

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Acquiring Political Information in Contemporary China: various media channels and their respective correlates

JIE LU*

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Using complementary information from two national surveys conducted in 2008, i.e. the China Survey and the ABS II Mainland China Survey, this paper presents a comprehensive picture of the media channels that Chinese citizens use for political information, as well as their relative importance as assessed by the Chinese people. Moreover, assisted by multiple regressions, this paper also identifies which groups of Chinese are more likely to use each of these channels for political information. This paper contributes to our understanding on (1) the relative significance of various media channels in contemporary China's political communication; and (2) how Chinese citizens select themselves into specific channels for political information, given their increasing autonomy in acquiring such information from China's changing media.

Research on political communication in contemporary China is booming. It attracts China observers who closely watch what is happening in China, and reflect over the possible future of the largest authoritarian society.[1] Such research also has serious implications for major theoretical debates in comparative politics and communication studies, like the state–media relationship in transition societies, as well as how new information technologies reshape political communication and even facilitate regime transition in non-democracies.

Contemporary research has extensively covered the increasing diversity in China's mass media, as well as its underlying institutional and structural reasons.[2] It has also accumulated rich information on the influence of Chinese citizens' engagement with

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1. For reviews on related research, see a special issue of *Political Communication* edited by Tang and Iyengar, as well as a special issue of the *International Journal of Communication* edited by Zhao. Wenfang Tang and Shanto Iyengar, 'The emerging media system in China: implications for regime change', *Political Communication* 28(3), (2011), pp. 263–267; Yuezhi Zhao, 'Directions for research on communication and China: an introductory and overview essay', *International Journal of Communication* 4, (2010), pp. 573–583.

2. See, among others, Susan L. Shirk, 'Changing media, changing China', in Susan L. Shirk, ed., *Changing Media, Changing China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1–3; Daniela Stockmann, 'Race to the bottom: media marketization and increasing negativity toward the United States in China', *Political Communication* 28(3), (2011), pp. 268–290.

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specific media channels, like the Internet, on their attitude, behavior and value.[3] Nevertheless, our understanding on how the Chinese people adjust their media consumption, in general, and political information acquisition, in particular, given their growing autonomy of media selection in this increasingly diversified media environment is still lacking.[4]

Building upon previous research and taking advantage of complimentary information from two national surveys in 2008, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture on how Chinese citizens acquire political information, given their growing autonomy of information seeking in China's changing media environment. More specifically, this paper examines a variety of channels through which Chinese citizens acquire political information, including traditional media, network media and word-of-mouth communication. Furthermore, applying multiple regression analysis, this paper also examines who are more likely to get political information with varying geographical implications, i.e. local vs. national vs. international, from each of these channels. The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, instead of focusing on one or two media channels, it presents the relative importance of all major channels used by Chinese citizens for political information. This systematic description with national survey data improves our current understanding on how Chinese citizens acquire political information based on either local samples or a few selected media channels. Second, it provides some critical information on how the Chinese people select themselves into specific media channels for different types of political information, which has not been sufficiently addressed in existing research. Once knowing who are more likely to use which media channels for what types of political information, students of political communication in China should be better equipped in (1) connecting macro-institutional/structural changes to micro dynamics; and (2) justifying and tailoring their respective case selections according to the distinct natures of their research. This should facilitate more productive dialogues among scholars and help synthesize conflicting findings in contemporary literature.

Contemporary research and the significance of media selection

One key issue of contemporary research on political communication in China is how its changing media has transformed the media/information environment wherein the

3. See, among others, Yi Mou, David Atkin and Hanlong Fu, 'Predicting political discussion in a censored virtual environment', *Political Communication* 28(3), (2011), pp. 341–345; T. Shi, J. Lu and J. Aldrich, 'Bifurcated images of the US in urban China and the impact of media environment', *Political Communication* 28(3), (2011), pp. 357–357; Daniela Stockmann and Mary Gallagher, 'Remote control: how the media sustain authoritarian rule in China', *Comparative Political Studies* 44(4), (2011), pp. 436–436; Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, 'War of position and microblogging in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(80), (2013), pp. 292–311.

4. There are a few exceptions. Ya-Wen Lei, 'The political consequences of the rise of the Internet: political beliefs and practices of Chinese netizens', *Political Communication* 28(3), (2011), pp. 291–232; Xin Wang, 'Seeking channels for engagement: media use and political communication by China's rising middle class', *China: An International Journal* 7(1), (2009), pp. 31–35; Daniela Stockmann, 'Who believes propaganda? Media effects during the anti-Japanese protests in Beijing', *China Quarterly* 202, (2010), pp. 269–289. Due to data limitations or their theoretical concerns, these studies do not cover all major media channels and their findings are not generalizable to most Chinese adults. More specifically, Lei treats all traditional media as the same and ignores word-of-mouth communication. Stockmann only focuses on newspapers. Wang does cover and differentiate among numerous media channels; however, he uses a local sample and exclusively focuses on the middle class.

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Chinese people are embedded.[5] Two major approaches have been adopted. One group of scholars focuses on the Chinese media system *per se*, as structural/institutional constraints for political communication. They industriously examine how commercialization and marketization, despite still sophisticated and effective control from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), have reshaped the orientations/incentive structures of the Chinese media. Empirically, they do find more critical reports and boundary-pushing/spinning activities in China's media due to the still ongoing commercialization and marketization.[6] The hidden assumption held by this approach is that, given this increasingly diversified media/information environment, Chinese citizens will actively pursue such information; and, thus, their attitude, behavior and value may change accordingly. Nevertheless, the widely discussed issue of self-selection in information seeking, which becomes even more salient in the 'post-broadcast era' when people have growing control over their media selection,[7] seriously challenges the validity of the assumed link between the changing media environment and transformed public attitude, behavior or value. As Liu cogently criticizes some research on the political implications of the Internet in China,

> Implicit in the Western narrative about the Chinese Internet is the assumption that Chinese users are either busy inventing ways to circumvent the government's censorship measures in pursuit of the 'forbidden truth' or are left at a loss in front of the Great Firewall. Empirical findings convincingly show that this assumption largely falls short of the realities of the everyday online lives of Chinese citizens.[8]

This critique equally applies to most research that exclusively focuses on structural and institutional changes in the Chinese media over the past decades, without sufficiently establishing necessary macro–micro connections. For instance, how do Chinese citizens respond to such structural and institutional changes in China's media by adjusting their ways of acquiring political information?

Another group of scholars takes a completely different approach. They concentrate on how individuals' specific media consumption affects their political attitude, behavior and value, using surveys,[9] semi-structured interviews[10] and even experiments.[11] Such research does provide valuable knowledge on how information from various sources affects the Chinese people's attitude, behavior and value; and, to some extent, flesh-out the possible macro–micro links that are missing in the first group of research. Nevertheless, existing empirical findings from this group of research are far from conclusive. There is evidence supporting both optimistic and pessimistic

5. There are other key issues like how Chinese citizens use new information technologies for coordination and mobilization. Yongnian Zheng and Guoguang Wu, 'Information technology, public space, and collective action in China', *Comparative Political Studies* 38(5), (2005), pp. 507–536.

6. Shirk, 'Changing media, changing China'; Stockmann, 'Race to the bottom'.

7. Natalie Jomini Stroud, 'Media use and political predispositions: revisiting the concept of selective media exposure', *Political Behavior* 30(3), (2008), pp. 341–366.

8. Fengshu Liu, *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 47.

9. Mou *et al.*, 'Predicting political discussion in a censored virtual environment'; John James Kennedy, 'Maintaining popular support for the Chinese Communist Party: the influence of education and the state-controlled media', *Political Studies* 57(3), (2009), pp. 517–536.

10. Daniela Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels: advertising as a means of campaigning on Chinese television', *China Quarterly* 208, (2011), pp. 851–869.

11. Daniela Stockmann, Ashley Esarey and Jie Zhang, 'Advertising Chinese politics: how public service advertising prime and alter political trust in China', *APSA 2011 Annual Meeting* (Seattle, WA: 2011).

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speculations on how the transforming Chinese media may affect its political future.[12] Besides methodological reasons, like different samples and data used, a critical issue can be that most scholars focus on one or two specific media channels for analysis, e.g. official vs. semi-official newspapers, newspapers vs. blogs, or network media only.[13] However, as the first group of scholars demonstrates, Chinese citizens are now embedded in a diversified media/information environment. Basically, they may simultaneously receive political information from TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, network media and even the grapevine (the century-old but still alive word-of-mouth communication among acquaintances, colleagues and relatives). Furthermore, people may be inclined to get specific types of political information from particular media channels, as a result of their increasing control over information seeking and the market differentiation strategies adopted by the changing Chinese media.[14] Without paying sufficient attention to possible competing media sources, as well as people's high autonomy in media selection, analysis based on one or two researcher-picked media channels is likely to bias or even mislead our conclusions.

It is beyond this paper's capacity to address all the aforementioned issues. In this paper, I specifically focus on various media channels which Chinese citizens use for political information in general, as well as how they select themselves into each of these channels. The empirical evidence presented and discussed in this paper is of great value-added for both groups of research just reviewed and may facilitate their more productive integration. For the first group of research on the structural and institutional features of China's changing media, such individual-level data on whether and how the Chinese people seek political information from various media channels contribute to the reification of some macro–micro links. For the second group of studies on the relationship between the Chinese people's media consumption and their attitude, behavior and value, the information on who are more likely to use which media channels for what types of political information also provides valuable references for justifying and tailoring their case selections following their respective research topics. With a deepened understanding on how the Chinese people choose among various media channels, these researchers can get methodologically more appropriate estimates of the so-called 'media effects' in today's China, after expunging the influence of self-selection in media consumption. Furthermore, with (1) better-established macro–micro links that efficiently bridge institutional/structural changes of China's media system and possible individual responses to their reshaped media environment; and (2) methodologically more appropriate case selections and research designs for examining how such responses, in turn, transform the Chinese people's political attitude, behavior and value, we should expect much more rewarding dialogues between the two groups of research and a deepened understanding on China's political communication.

12. For a similar comment, see Tang and Iyengar, 'The emerging media system in China'.

13. There are exceptions as previously mentioned. Lei, 'The political consequences of the rise of the Internet'; Wang, 'Seeking channels for engagement'.

14. Stockmann provides an interesting case on how the people in Beijing turned to newspapers vs. online news for information during the anti-Japanese protests in 2005. Daniela Stockmann, 'What kind of information does the public demand? Getting the news during the 2005 anti-Japanese protests', in Shirk, ed., *Changing Media, Changing China*, pp. 175–201.

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Different channels for political information in today's China

Chinese citizens have been exposed to political information (政治信息) through a variety of channels, either passively against their wills or actively following their voluntary choices.[15] During different historical periods, distinct channels dominate the ways in which people acquire political information.[16] Before the mid-1980s, radio and newspapers were two major channels for political information; and in many cases, such information was enforced upon Chinese citizens through newspaper-reading in study groups or radio programs delivered by high-volume speakers controlled by urban work-units or rural communes. When TV sets became increasingly affordable in the late 1980s, TV gradually emerged as the leading channel for most Chinese to acquire political information. Meanwhile, thanks to the collapse of the commune system in rural China and the reformed work-unit system in urban China, Chinese citizens had more control over when and how they were exposed to political information. Nevertheless, the information content then was still tightly controlled and rarely varied across different traditional media outlets. Since the mid-1990s, decentralization and commercialization in the Chinese media, as well as the introduction of new information technologies like satellite TVs, the Internet and cellular phones, have further expanded the channels available for political information. Moreover, the changing media and new information technologies have also empowered the Chinese people with even more autonomy in choosing from different channels, or even distinct outlets within one specific channel, for information with varying content.

Now, it is much more difficult, if not impossible to enforce some political information upon the Chinese people against their wills, since they can easily switch to a different TV channel with movies and music videos, a radio program presenting traffic/weather information and popular songs, a tabloid featuring celebrity gossip and entertainment news, or a website with whatever information that interests them. Or, they can even switch off all the aforementioned channels without being cut off from the outside world, by texting or chatting through QQ.[17] Given such a high level of autonomy in getting a variety of information, are Chinese citizens still interested in acquiring political information? If they are interested, which channels are used for such information? Which channels are more important for their acquisition of political information? Moreover, do Chinese citizens select themselves into specific channels for political information that meet their individual interests? As previously discussed, answers to these questions are not just crucial for understanding the nature of political communication in this largest authoritarian society, but also highly valuable for interpreting accumulated empirical evidence (in some cases conflicting ones) on the

15. This paper focuses on political information, rather than media consumption (媒体消费) or news (新闻) in general. News and political information overlaps to some extent, but they are different. In this paper, news is defined as any recent events or happenings reported in the mass media, while political information is defined as knowledge of activities or affairs engaged by governments, politicians or political parties.

16. For a comprehensive review on the evolution of political communication in China since the 1940s, see Xiaoling Zhang, *The Transformation of Political Communication in China: From Propaganda to Hegemony* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011).

17. QQ is a very popular software application for instant messages in China and can be used with cellular phones.

relationship between media usage, on the one hand, and political attitude, behavior and value, on the other hand.[18]

Most national surveys conducted in mainland China are omnibus surveys with limited questions devoted to political communication in particular.[19] Moreover, due to distinct research topics included, such national surveys either use very general questions tapping respondents' media consumption habit or adopt questions that are of specific value for their own research questions. Therefore, it is very difficult to get sufficient information from only one specific survey to comprehensively examine the aforementioned questions. Fortunately, two national surveys, i.e. the China Survey and the ABS II Mainland China Survey both implemented in 2008,[20] provide rich and complementary information that enables effective examination of these questions. More specifically, instead of asking for Chinese citizens' media consumption in general, the China Survey asked for Chinese citizens' possible experience of using each of the key media channels for political information in the week before the survey. Meanwhile, the ABS II Mainland China Survey specifically asked Chinese citizens' subjective evaluations of the relative importance of the key media channels for their acquisition of political information. Such information is not available in other national surveys like the CGSS and the WVS Mainland China Survey. Thus, the complementary information from the two surveys allows in-depth and more systematic examination on how Chinese citizens acquire political information, given their growing autonomy in information seeking from China's increasingly diversified media.

Moreover, that the two surveys with distinct sampling frames and sampling techniques were implemented by the same high-quality survey research institute in the same year offers unique advantages for this research.[21] First, if relevant information from the two surveys presents a similar story, the validity of empirical findings, as well as their generalizability, should be greatly enhanced. Second, given their comparable national samples and the same measures of quality control enforced, we are much less concerned about various errors and even mistakes that might jeopardize the validity of using complementary information from the two surveys.

Different media channels for political information

To understand how Chinese citizens acquire political information in general, the China Survey asked respondents whether they used specific media channels,

18. Without taking self-selection in media consumption into consideration, any analysis on the impact of the transforming media on people's attitude, behavior or value is likely to be biased. Only a few China scholars publicly acknowledge and consciously address this issue in their research. See Shi *et al.*, 'Bifurcated images of the US in urban China and the impact of media environment'.

19. There are several omnibus national surveys continuously conducted in mainland China, like the China General Social Survey (CGSS), the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) Mainland China Survey and the World Values Survey (WVS) Mainland China Survey.

20. The China Survey was funded by the Texas A&M University and implemented by the Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University in 2008. For more information on this project, visit its website at: http://thechinasurvey.tamu.edu/html/home.html. The ABS II Mainland China Survey was also implemented by the RCCC. For more information on this project, visit its website at http://www.asianbarometer.org. Sampling and other technical information of the two surveys are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B.

21. The China Survey used a GIS-assisted multi-stage stratified sampling, while the ABS II Mainland China Survey used a conventional multi-state stratified sampling.

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including TV, radio, newspapers,[22] magazines[23] and the Internet,[24] for such information in the week before the survey. It is also important to emphasize that in many societies, particularly those with significant media control, word-of-mouth communication, i.e. the grapevine (小道消息), plays a big role in spreading political information.[25] Fortunately, the China Survey also asked questions taping the respondents' accessing the grapevine for such information.[26] Summarized details (i.e. weighted frequencies) on how widely the media channels are used by Chinese citizens for political information are presented in Figure 1(a).

As illustrated in Figure 1(a), TV is the most popular channel through which Chinese citizens acquire political information: around 73.1% watch TV at least once a week for such information. Newspapers come as the second most widely used channel for political information: around 26.8% read newspapers for such information on a weekly basis.[27] It is surprising to see that the grapevine, rather than network media, comes after TV and newspapers as the third most widely used channel for political information: around 19.6% are exposed to the grapevine for such information, either passively or actively. Despite an increasing number of Internet users in China, only around 15.4% get political information through various network platforms.[28] Though radio and magazines nowadays are much less likely to be used by the Chinese people, they still provide political information for a significant number of Chinese: around 13.2% listen to radio programs at least once a week for related information, while around 9.8% read magazines for such information.

Despite the rich information revealed in Figure 1a, it actually hides some nuanced but critical distinctions within some media channels boasting a hierarchical structure, i.e. the difference between central and local outlets. Due to China's multilevel but unitary administrative system, its traditional media, particularly TV, radio and newspapers, has been organized following a similar hierarchical structure. There are TV and radio stations, as well as newspapers, associated with the central government and its various agencies, and the rest associated with local governments and their agencies. As communication scholars show, central and local outlets within a specific media channel are assigned with distinct tasks in terms of news coverage and are regulated with different administrative and financial leverages.[29] It is interesting and

22. Questions for TV, radio and newspapers: 'Over the past week, how many days did you receive political information (政治信息) from each of the following sources?'. The number of days is recoded into a dummy, 0 vs. 1 + .

23. Question for magazines: 'Have you ever received political information (政治信息) from magazines?'. This is a dummy with 1 for positive answers.

24. Questions for the Internet: 'Have you ever read about political or national issues (政治问题或国家大事) on (1) domestic websites; (2) international websites; (3) Hong Kong/Macao/Taiwan websites; (4) blogs; (5) chat rooms; or (6) BBS?'. This is a dummy with 1 for at least one positive answer from the respondents.

25. Jiangnan Zhu, J. Lu and T. Shi, 'When grapevine news meets mass media: different information sources and perceptions of government corruption in mainland China', *Comparative Political Studies*, (Forthcoming).

26. Questions for grapevine: (1) 'In the last week, did you hear about political affairs (政治时事) through the "grapevine" (小道消息)?'. (2) 'During the last week, did you discuss any political affairs (政治时事) through the grapevine with other people?'. This is a dummy with 1 for at least one positive answer from the respondents.

27. The difference between the percentages of respondents using TV and newspapers is significant at the 0.01 level.

28. The difference between the percentages of respondents using the grapevine and the Internet is significant at the 0.01 level. According to the CINIC survey in 2008, around 16.3% of Chinese acquired news through the network media. This confirms the findings here. See CINIC, *Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China* (Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center, 2008).

29. Zhang, *The Transformation of Political Communication in China*.

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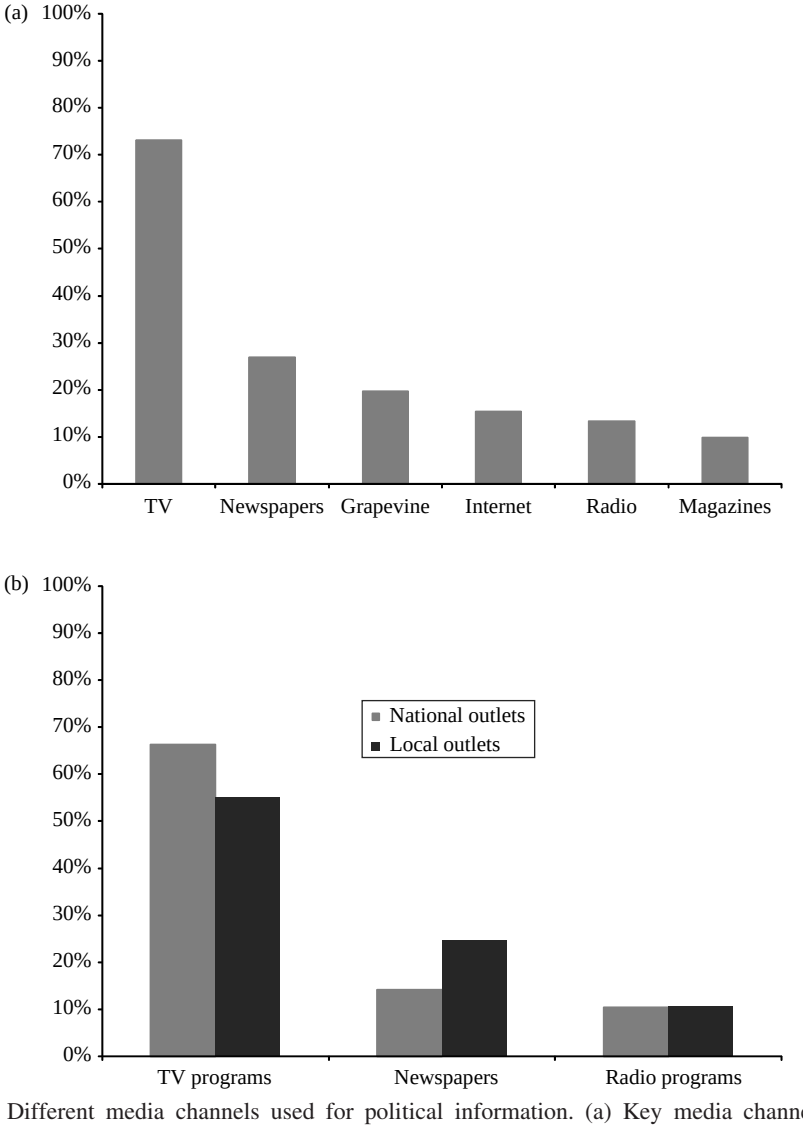

Figure 1. Different media channels used for political information. (a) Key media channels used. (b) Central vs. local traditional media outlets used.

important to differentiate between central and local outlets when examining the Chinese people's use of TV, radio and newspapers for political information. Therefore, a more refined differentiation of the traditional media channels is presented in Figure 1(b).[30]

Similar to the messages revealed in Figure 1(a), TV is the most popular channel: around 66.3% of the Chinese people watch national TV programs weekly for political

30. This central–local division is of little relevance for magazines, grapevine and network media.

information and around 55.2% acquire such information from local TV programs.[31] Newspapers are still ranked as the second most widely used channel for political information. Nevertheless, when it comes to people's use of central vs. local newspapers for such information, the pattern contradicts that regarding TV programs: around 14.1% read national newspapers, while around 24.6% read local newspapers.[32] More interestingly, this national–local discrepancy disappears when it comes to people's use of radio programs for political information: around 10.4% listen to national radio programs and the number for local radio programs is 10.5%.[33] It seems that different dynamics are involved in the national–local division for distinct channels with China's traditional media. Therefore, to ensure more effective analysis, later regression analysis maintains this differentiation between national and local outlets within China's traditional media.

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Relative importance of different media channels

Clearly, Chinese citizens do actively acquire political information from a variety of media channels, despite the overwhelming and easily accessible entertainment and business information in the media. Moreover, traditional media like TV and newspapers are much more widely used by Chinese citizens for political information; and such information is also more widely disseminated through the grapevine than the Internet.[34] Radio and magazines are much less widely used for political information in today's China. Nevertheless, as previously discussed, thanks to their increasing autonomy in media selection, Chinese citizens may simultaneously acquire political information from different medial channels. In other words, the information from the China Survey only tells us how widely each of the media channels is used by the Chinese people for political information, but provides little information on the relative importance of these media channels in China's political communication. Fortunately, the ABS II Mainland China Survey specifically asked respondents to identify the most important media channel, through which they regularly acquired information regarding political or national issues.[35] Moreover, this subjective evaluation effectively addresses some concerns regarding possible inflated answers to the China Survey's questions on Chinese citizens' use of various media channels for political information.[36] When approached for their evaluations of the relative importance of the media channels, the respondents are expected to more seriously engage their previous experiences and identify the media channel that really matters for their acquisition of political information. The relative importance of key

31. This difference is significant at the 0.01 level.
32. This difference is significant at the 0.01 level.
33. This difference is not significant at the 0.1 level.
34. Some may argue for the functional equivalence between the grapevine and online chat-room rumors. Nevertheless, due to their distinct features, the grapevine and network media are used by different groups of Chinese citizens, as later regression analyses show.
35. Question wording: 'Among the following channels, which one is the most important one for you to receive information on political or national issues (政治问题或国家大事)? TV, Newspapers, Radio/Broadcast, the Internet, Cellular phone messages, Personal conversation, and Others (specified by respondents)'.
36. For instance, some Chinese citizens may simply have TV news on in the background while doing other chores, and they may count this in their answers. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

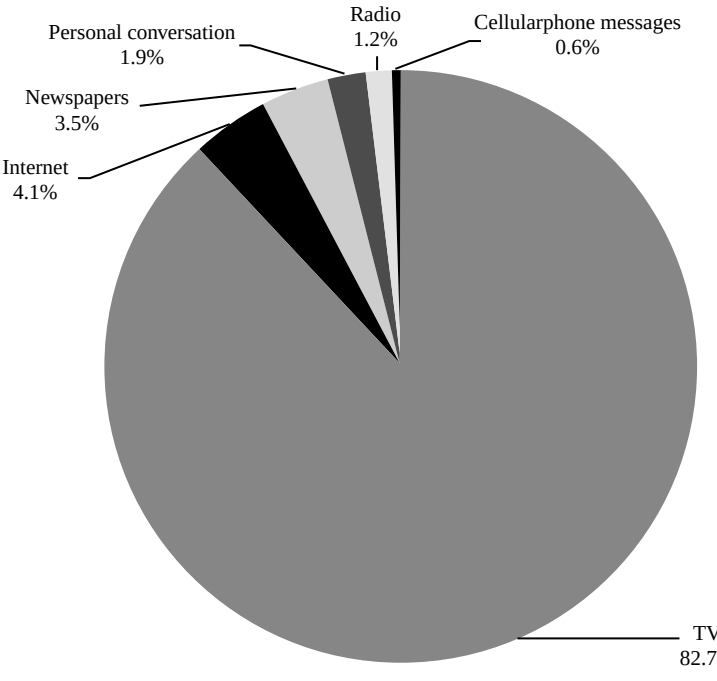

Figure 2. Relative importance of key media channels used for political information.

media channels, as assessed by Chinese citizens, in China's political communication (i.e. weighted frequencies) is presented in Figure 2.

Confirming the previous finding on the popularity of TV among Chinese citizens as a key medial channel for political information, Figure 2 shows that around 82.7% of the Chinese people identify TV as the most important medial channel for their acquisition of political information.[37] Thus, the predominant role of TV in contemporary China's political communication is established not only by its broadest audience but also by its perceived unrivaled importance by the Chinese people for their acquisition of political information. Although newspapers and the grapevine are more widely accessed by Chinese citizens for political information, their relative importance, i.e. 3.5% for newspapers and 2.5% for the grapevine,[38] in delivering political information is outranked by the Internet (4.1%). Given its smaller size of users [as shown in Figure 1(a)], the Internet's outranking newspapers and the grapevine as the second most important medial channel among the Chinese people for political information clearly reflects its increasing salience among Chinese netizens, as vividly demonstrated by the role of blogs (博客) in disseminating critical information during major political events, like the most-recent Bo Xilai scandal.

37. The difference between this figure and the number in Figure 1(a) (71.3%) might be driven by the different questions used. The China Survey asked for respondents' use of different media channels in the week before the survey, while the ABS II Mainland China survey did not specify the time frame.

38. The grapevine is primarily circulated through individual interactions; thus, it is valid to assume that personal conversation (1.9%) and cellular phone messages (0.6%) are the key platforms for the grapevine.

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In today's China, radio's role in delivering political information is significantly marginalized, with a smaller audience and much less perceived importance (1.2%).

Complementary information in Figures 1 and 2 shows that, against some China observers' high expectation of network media in thwarting the CCP's information control, Chinese citizens still primarily rely on traditional media like TV and newspapers for political information, which are much more effectively regulated by the CCP. Despite its perceived significance in delivering political information, the Internet's relatively lower and more uneven penetration rate clearly impedes its performance in contemporary China's political communication. Comparatively speaking, the century-old word-of-mouth communication still plays a non-ignorable role in China's political communication, which is more widely accessed for political information than the Internet and outranks radio in its perceived relative importance. Though radio and magazines are still used by some Chinese for political information, nowadays their relative significance in China's political communication is appreciably weakened.

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Who are more likely to acquire political information from specific media channels?

The previous sections clearly demonstrate the diverse means through which Chinese citizens acquire political information, as well as the still dominant role of TV and the ascending role of the Internet in contemporary China's political communication. Given this diversity and the autonomy in Chinese citizens' media selection, a question naturally arises: who are more likely to acquire political information from specific media channels?[39]

Answers to this question are crucial for understanding China's political communication for the following reasons. First, contemporary research recognizes that people differ in terms of how they engage with political communication. Ideological differences, cognitive and psychological features, and socioeconomic backgrounds, *inter alia*, all have significant influence over people's involvement in political communication. In democracies, this self-selection in information seeking has serious implications for possible attitude polarization that may damage the deliberative nature of democratic governance. In non-democracies, this self-selection in information acquisition, reinforced by people's increasing autonomy in media selection, complicates the situation that authoritarian leaders have to confront. This also raises the hurdle that non-democratic regimes have to overcome to shape public opinion in their favor. It is no wonder that since the early 2000s, the CCP has been working very hard to improve its image and boost its perceived legitimacy through continuous media campaigns—not just in its traditional media like TV, radio and newspapers, but also in the network media by recruiting the fifty-cent-party (五毛党) and most recently establishing rumor-clarification groups (辟谣小组). All these attest

39. Ideally, both Chinese citizens' use of different media channels and their subjective evaluations of the relative importance of these channels should be used as dependent variables for analysis. Unfortunately, one group of key independent variables, i.e. people's interest in different types of political information, was not included in the ABS II Mainland China Survey. Thus, I focus on the correlates of Chinese citizens' use of different media channels.

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to the significance of the Chinese people's increasing autonomy in acquiring political information from an increasingly diversified media environment.

Second, without a systematic understanding of what subgroups of the Chinese people prefer which media channels for what types of information, some research on public opinion in contemporary China cannot be effectively implemented. Ideally, researchers would like to have all information channels covered for examination; unfortunately, in most cases, limited resources prevent them from doing so and force them to focus on one or two specific channels. Then, the validity of the conclusions from such empirical research is highly contingent upon whether the most pertinent information channels are included. For example, there are an increasing number of studies using both subjective information collected through surveys and objective information based on the content analysis of newspapers to examine public opinion in China.[40] This is a very promising approach and has generated thought-provoking findings. Unfortunately, few of them provide justifications on why they choose specific types of newspapers, or why newspapers rather than TV or news websites should be included. If different Chinese citizens go to distinct channels for specific types of political information, the objective information environment actually varies for the Chinese people. Then the lack of justifications on which medial channels to examine is no longer a minor issue. As an initial step toward securing better measures and research designs to examine the varying objective information environment, we need some systematic evidence on the factors associated with the Chinese people's use of specific media channels for political information.[41] This paper focuses on two groups of factors that are crucial for pinpointing the objective media/information environment for Chinese citizens' engagement in political communication: (1) individual preferences for different types of political information; and (2) demographic characteristics, including age, gender, educational attainment, income and location of residence.[42]

It is kind of obvious arguing that people's varying interest in different types of political information matters in their choosing specific media channels. Given the Chinese media's market differentiation strategies, as well as the hierarchical setting within its traditional sector, Chinese citizens may rationally allocate their limited attention and resources among various media channels for the political information that matches their preferences. Nevertheless, there is little research on questions like whether the Chinese people read local morning/evening newspapers primarily for local, national or international political affairs, as well as whether Chinese netizens are more interested in some particular types of political information over the others. Knowing what types of political information are more likely to be acquired from which media channels is important for effectively evaluating the CCP's media control and propaganda. For instance, to examine how the CCP manipulates its public opinion

40. See Zhu *et al.*, 'When grapevine news meets mass media'; Stockmann and Gallagher, 'Remote control'.

41. This paper is simply interested in establishing correlates, rather than providing any causal arguments.

42. 'Age' is a continuous variable recording respondents' real age. 'Gender' is a dummy with 1 coded for males. 'Education' is a seven-point ordinal variable, ranging from '0: Less than elementary school' to '6: Post-graduate studies'. 'Income' is a ten-point ordinal variable of family annual income, ranging from '1: Less than 3,000 RMB' to '10: 200,000 RMB and above'. 'Location of residence' is a dummy with 1 coded for urban residents. Moreover, the quadratic terms of age, education and income are also included when appropriate to capture possible curvilinear relationships.

to serve its foreign policies, should scholars focus on the CCTV news, national newspapers like the *People's Daily*, or local morning/evening newspapers like the *Beijing Evening News*? To comprehensively examine this issue, very refined measures of all types of political information that Chinese citizens are interested in should be used, which, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this paper and most omnibus surveys. Given the data's limitations, this paper focuses on political information with different geographical implications: local vs. national vs. international. I use people's interest in news (新闻) with distinct geographical implications as proxies.[43] Four variables are created based on the China Survey respondents' self-reported interest in local, national and international news: (1) general interest in political information;[44] (2) high interest in local political information;[45] (3) high interest in national political information;[46] and (4) high interest in international political information.[47]

As suggested in the literature, socioeconomic resources, psychological and cognitive capabilities, and socialization processes associated with people's demographic features also have serious implications for how people acquire relevant information, which, in turn, shapes their political attitudes and behavior. An obvious example is that literacy is a pre-condition for reading newspapers, but not necessarily for watching TV. The so-called 'digital gap' between the rich and the poor also attests to the implications of demographic characteristics for how people get political information. Theoretically, that people with distinct demographic features acquire political information from different channels may not be a big issue, if the content of such information does *not* vary significantly across these channels. However, as contemporary research suggests, varying levels of commercialization and distinctive technical natures of different media channels in China do affect their respective information content.[48] Though the diversity, e.g. different headlines or pictures used,[49] might appear trivial for those living in a free media environment, once the power of agenda setting, priming and framing is taken into consideration, even such minor diversity in a controlled media environment can send very important political information and cues to its audience.[50]

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43. Given the overlapping between news and political information, it should not be an exaggeration to argue that those who are interested in news with different geographical implications are also interested in political information with similar geographical implications. I do recognize all the limitations; however, this exercise still provides valuable information for future research on how Chinese citizens seek pertinent information and respond to political issues with varying geographical implications.

44. These variables are measured on an 11-ponit scale, from '0: Not interested at all' to '10: Very interested'. This general interest is an average index of respondents' interest in all types of news. It ranges from 0 to 10, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84.

45. This is a dummy with 1 for respondents showing high interest (7 +) in local/provincial news.

46. This is a dummy with 1 for respondents showing high interest (7 +) in national news.

47. This is a dummy with 1 for respondents showing high interest (7 +) in international news.

48. See, among others, Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, 'Digital communication and political change in China', *International Journal of Communication* 5, (2011), pp. 298–319.

49. Qian Gang and David Bandurski, 'China's emerging public sphere: the impact of media commercialization, professionalism, and the Internet in an era of transition', in Shirk, ed., *Changing Media, Changing China*, pp. 38–76.

50. See, among others, Shanto Iyengar, 'Framing responsibility for political issues', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546, (1996), pp. 59–70.

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Some critical controls are also included, such as CCP membership,[51] general interest in politics,[52] internal political efficacy[53] and general social trust,[54] as well as critical opinions over the political liberty and media freedom in China.[55] Some of these variables, besides serving their statistical role as controls, also provide valuable information to gauge some critical aspects of China's political communication. For instance, how do CCP members differ from average Chinese citizens when acquiring political information, especially after the CCP began intentionally recruiting private entrepreneurs and businessmen from the early 2000s? Do the Chinese people who are very critical of their political liberty and media freedom intentionally consult or avoid some specific media channels when acquiring political information?

Since the China Survey asked whether respondents used each of the key media channels for political information and many respondents did consult a number of them simultaneously, their responses should be statistically more appropriately modeled as a series of dichotomous choices regarding each specific media channel. Hence, a number of Logit models are run with the same specification for a meaningful examination on which groups of the Chinese people are more likely to acquire political information from each of the media channels.[56] Table 1 displays the patterns of political information acquisition among the Chinese people from nine distinct channels: TV (national vs. local), radio (national vs. local), newspapers (national vs. local), magazines, the grapevine, and network media.

Impacts of political information preferences

Not surprisingly, the Chinese people with a higher level of general interest in political information are more likely to seek such information from all traditional media and the grapevine (M1–M8). Hypothetically, if most Chinese citizens simply, for instance, have TV news on in the background while doing other chores and report this in the survey as their acquisition of political information from TV, then their general interest in political information is unlikely to come out as a statistically significant predictor of their use of TV for such information. Thus, I argue that this non-surprising finding actually confirms the validity of the self-reported behavior measures used by the China Survey in capturing some meaningful phenomenon in China's political communication. The lack of significance of

51. This is a dummy with 1 for current CCP members.

52. 'How interested would you say you are in political matters?' This is a four-point ordinal variable, ranging from '1: Not interested at all' to '4: Very interested'.

53. 'I think I am better informed about politics than most people.' This is a five-point ordinal variable, ranging from '1: Strongly disagree' to '5: Strongly agree'.

54. 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or you cannot be too careful in dealing with them?' This is a dummy with 0 for the lack of general social trust.

55. 'On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating this is not a problem at all in China and 10 indicating this is an extremely serious problem, how serious do you think these problems are in China today?' This is a continuous average index of respondents' evaluations of China's political liberty, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of is 0.77.

56. Missing values due to item non-response have been filled with multiple imputations. Five complete datasets are generated, and regression results are averaged over the five datasets using Rubin's rule. Donald B. Rubin, *Multiple Imputation for Nonresponse in Surveys* (New York: Wiley, 1987).

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Table 1. Logit regressions for acquiring political information from specific media channels

	TV		Radio		Newspapers				
	National (M1)	Local (M2)	National (M3)	Local (M4)	National (M5)	Local (M6)	Magazine (M7)	Grapevine (M8)	Internet (M9)
Political information preference									
High interest in local political information	−0.711 (0.143)***	0.114 (0.126)	0.136 (0.231)	0.445 (0.233)*	−0.682 (0.190)***	−0.030 (0.205)	−0.629 (0.315)**	0.190 (0.177)	−0.245 (0.286)
High interest in national political information	0.500 (0.154)***	−0.348 (0.138)**	−0.167 (0.232)	−0.372 (0.186)**	−0.195 (0.292)	−0.505 (0.176)***	0.115 (0.319)	−0.113 (0.176)	0.030 (0.312)
High interest in international political information	−0.412 (0.143)***	−0.638 (0.117)***	0.053 (0.212)	−0.157 (0.231)	−0.107 (0.203)	−0.349 (0.157)**	−0.163 (0.234)	−0.144 (0.145)	−0.059 (0.248)
General interest in political information	0.289 (0.038)***	0.330 (0.036)***	0.131 (0.053)**	0.176 (0.063)***	0.286 (0.063)***	0.264 (0.054)***	0.272 (0.076)***	0.093 (0.050)*	0.083 (0.066)
Demographic features									
Age	0.043 (0.021)**	0.043 (0.016)***	−0.065 (0.020)***	−0.063 (0.023)***	−0.020 (0.007)***	−0.010 (0.005)*	−0.032 (0.008)***	−0.049 (0.018)***	−0.097 (0.009)***
Age squared	−0.0004 (0.0002)**	−0.0004 (0.0002)***	0.0007 (.0002)***	0.0006 (0.0002)***	–	–	–	0.0004 (0.0002)**	–
Male	0.286 (0.107)***	−0.027 (0.089)	0.177 (0.152)	0.104 (0.145)	0.283 (0.129)**	0.154 (0.112)	−0.048 (0.173)	−0.128 (0.136)	0.276 (0.223)
Education	0.348 (0.069)***	0.162 (0.078)**	0.279 (0.079)***	0.267 (0.076)***	0.555 (0.062)***	0.727 (0.075)***	0.503 (0.093)***	0.151 (0.063)**	0.887 (0.099)***
Education squared	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Income	0.067 (0.038)*	0.042 (0.036)	−0.255 (0.145)*	−0.295 (0.158)*	0.135 (0.054)**	0.176 (0.052)***	0.039 (0.059)	0.060 (0.036)*	0.289 (0.053)***
Income squared	–	–	0.025 (0.014)*	0.029 (0.015)*	–	–	–	–	–
Urban	−0.082 (0.156)	0.110 (0.129)	0.350 (0.172)**	0.275 (0.141)*	0.371 (0.233)	0.860 (0.198)***	0.569 (0.277)**	0.155 (0.162)	1.001 (0.225)***

(*continued*)

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Other controls									
CCP membership	0.024	−0.421	−0.397	−0.158	0.200	0.183	−0.175	−0.206	0.340
	(0.201)	(0.148)***	(0.247)	(0.269)	(0.221)	(0.244)	(0.245)	(0.211)	(0.290)
General interest in politics	0.297	0.141	0.248	0.141	0.347	0.219	0.466	0.449	0.194
	(0.066)***	(0.076)*	(0.092)***	(0.084)*	(0.100)***	(0.088)**	(0.135)***	(0.084)***	(0.139)
Internal political efficacy	0.182	0.223	0.090	0.075	0.179	0.174	0.130	0.169	0.052
	(0.057)***	(0.063)***	(0.071)	(0.072)	(0.071)**	(0.061)***	(0.078)*	(0.060)***	(0.098)
General social trust	0.031	−0.023	0.296	0.321	0.237	0.238	0.198	0.191	0.506
	(0.111)	(0.108)	(0.141)**	(0.141)**	(0.132)*	(0.140)*	(0.154)	(0.138)	(0.229)**
Critical of China's liberty/freedom	−0.004	−0.012	0.060	0.093	0.037	0.029	−0.039	0.104	0.082
	(0.031)	(0.025)	(0.034)*	(0.037)**	(0.032)	(0.030)	(0.051)	(0.026)***	(0.039)**
Intercept	−3.596	−3.382	−3.116	−3.009	−5.867	−5.588	−5.401	−3.229	−3.982
	(0.593)***	(0.506)***	(0.664)***	(0.688)***	(0.411)***	(0.498)***	(0.554)***	(0.517)***	(0.593)***

Source: 2008 China Survey ($N = 3989$).
Notes: Missing values imputed, using the MI command in STATA 11 for five complete datasets.
Averaged linearized standard errors corrected for complex sampling in parentheses, using SVY commands in STATA 11.
– indicates insignificant coefficients that are dropped from the final model.
* $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$ for two-tailed tests.

general interest in political information (M9) in telling who are more likely to surf the Internet for such information might be attributed to the features of most portal sites in China, like Baidu, Sina and Sohu—a significant amount of political news is presented saliently in the very first webpage. Thus, when surfing the Internet even for something non-political, Chinese netizens may easily access some political information.

Meanwhile, Chinese citizens are quite rational in using specific media channels for the information that matches their preferences, or intentionally avoiding some channels to optimize the allocation of their attention and resources for what they are interested in. Those who are highly interested in local political affairs are more likely to listen to local radio programs (M4), and intentionally stay away from national TV programs (M1), national newspapers (M5) and magazines (M7). And those who are particularly interested in national political issues are more inclined to watch national TV programs (M1), and deliberately avoid local TV programs (M2), local radio programs (M4) and local newspapers (M6). Chinese citizens' choice/avoidance of specific media channels following their own preferred types of domestic political information, to some extent, suggests a recognizable market differentiation between national and local outlets within the traditional media in terms of covering political affairs. This division of labor seems to have been well received by their audience. Interestingly, Chinese citizens who are highly interested in international political issues are not significantly more attracted to any specific media channels. Nevertheless, they are much more likely to stay away from TV programs (M1 and M2), whether national or local, and local newspapers (M6). Furthermore, there is no significant evidence showing that Chinese citizens intentionally consult/avoid the grapevine (M8) or network media (M9) for their preferred types of political information. It is understandable that due to the lack of an internal hierarchical structure, various types of political information are likely to be simultaneously transmitted through the grapevine and the Internet; and this may nullify the power of Chinese citizens' political information preferences in predicting their use/avoidance of the two channels.

Impacts of demographic characteristics

As shown in M1 and M2, there is an inverted-U-shaped relationship between age and people's propensity in acquiring political information from TV: the middle-aged, i.e. those around their fifties given the estimation, are most inclined to watch TV for such information from both national and local outlets. However, as shown in M3, M4 and M8, this relationship is reversed, i.e. an U-shaped relationship, when it comes to acquiring political information from radio or the grapevine: the young and the old are more likely to listen to radio for such information from both national and local outlets; meanwhile, these two groups are also more likely, compared to their middle-aged counterparts, to acquire political information from the grapevine. Different from the situation in accessing TV, radio and the grapevine, the relationship between age and people's propensity in getting political information from newspapers, magazines and the Internet is not curvilinear. On average, as shown in M5, M6, M7 and M9, younger people are more likely to read newspapers

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(both national and local ones) and magazines or surf the Internet for such information. Such varying relationships between age and Chinese citizens' propensity in using different media channels for political information clearly demonstrate the imprints of the transforming ways of life in contemporary China on its political communication. For instance, China's prosperous automobile industry, primarily supported by the younger generation with better economic endowments, helps make radio a widely accessed channel for political information among the younger generation. The Internet also boasts a much larger audience from this generation.

The influence of people's family income on their propensity in using different media channels for political information also varies dramatically. As shown in M1, M5, M6, M8 and M9, the Chinese people with a higher level of family income are more likely to watch national TV programs, read national and local newspapers, engage the grapevine and surf the Internet for political information. When it comes to listening to national and local radio programs for such information, as shown in M3 and M4, the relationship is no long linear but U-shaped: Chinese citizens with a medium-level family income, i.e. around 30,000 RMB per year given the estimation, compared to their poorer or richer counterparts, are least likely to listen to national and local radio programs. This seemingly strange relationship can also be attributed to the changes brought about by the increasing number of privately owned cars in China: families with a very high level of income can afford private cars, which makes radio a convenient channel for political information. On the contrary, very poor families may not even be able to afford TV sets, and, thus, radio may be their key channel for such information. The influence of family income is insignificant when local TV programs and magazines are examined.

The well-documented rural–urban division in contemporary China also affects its political communication, but this division only significantly favors Chinese urbanites in terms of acquiring political information from national and local radio programs (M3 and M4), local newspapers (M6), magazines (M7) and the Internet (M9). Again, China's booming automobile industry contributes to this urban advantage in acquiring political information from radio programs. Distinct penetration rates of the Internet in rural and urban China explain why urban residents are more likely to surf the Internet for such information.[57] The popularity of local evening/morning newspapers also seems to be primarily an urban phenomenon. Although magazines are not widely read in China for political information, they are much easier to get from newsstands in its urban areas.

Except for being more likely to watch national TV programs (M1) and read national newspapers (M5) for political information, males are not statistically different from females with respect to using other media channels for such information. It seems that the gender-gap in political communication has dramatically shrunk in China, and it is not surprising to see that better educated people are more likely to acquire political information from all the aforementioned media channels.[58]

57. Around 72% of Chinese netizens are urban residents. CINIC, *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center, 2010).

58. I have tested the quadratic terms of education in each model; however, none of them is statistically significant.

Impacts of important controls

CCP members are not significantly different from average Chinese in seeking political information from various media channels, except for their significantly lower inclination toward watching local TV programs. In other words, CCP members are not more active than average Chinese citizens in acquiring political information.

As expected, people who are generally more interested in politics or think they are better informed about politics than most people, are more likely to acquire political information from TV, radio, newspapers, magazines and the grapevine. Again, this finding confirms the political significance of Chinese citizens' use of different media channels for political information, as measured in the China Survey, a behavior that is driven by their general interest in politics and internal political efficacy.

It is surprising to find that Chinese citizens who are more critical of China's political democracy, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not necessarily significantly more likely to deliberately avoid their domestic media.[59] On the contrary, they are more likely to listen to radio (both national and local programs) (M3 and M4), engage the grapevine (M8) and surf the Internet (M9) for political information. The almost lack of control over the grapevine, as well as the Internet's technical advantage in thwarting the CCP's information regulation and control, shed some light on this empirical pattern. Nevertheless, it is puzzling to see that this group of critical citizens is significantly more attracted to radio programs for political information. More detailed analysis on the role of radio in contemporary China's political communication is needed to understand this puzzling phenomenon.[60]

Conclusions and suggestions

This paper focuses on various media channels that the Chinese people use for political information, their relative importance in contemporary China's political communication (as evaluated by Chinese citizens), and who are more likely to use specific media channels for such information. It contributes to contemporary research on political communication in China in two ways. First, instead of focusing on one or two media channels or relying on local samples, this paper, using complementary information from two national surveys both implemented in 2008, provides a more comprehensive picture of the medial channels used by Chinese citizens for political information. Moreover, in addition to showing how widely specific media channels are accessed, this paper also establishes the relative significance of different channels in China's political communication, based on Chinese citizens' subjective evaluations. Second, this paper systematically examines who are more likely to consult specific media channels for political information, given the Chinese people's growing autonomy in seeking information from China's diversified media environment. This paper's findings not only offer valuable information on the patterns of Chinese citizens' use of various media channels for political information,

59. All negative coefficients of this variable are statistically insignificant.

60. Some may argue that this group of Chinese acquires political information from radio to learn about the official policies of Chinese central and local governments, even with a satirical nature. However, this argument cannot explain why they are only more likely to listen to radio, rather than watching TV or reading newspapers, for such information.

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but also provide useful references for the design of future relevant research, case selections, and other empirical and methodological considerations.

With self-reported behavior measures from the China Survey, this paper finds that TV and newspapers are the two most widely used channels for political information in today's China, despite the increasingly discussed significance of new information technologies. The Internet does outperform radio and magazines in this regard; nevertheless, it is still ranked fourth behind the century-old word-of-mouth communication, e.g. the grapevine, in terms of its audience size. Moreover, Chinese citizens' subjective evaluations of the relative importance of the media channels in their acquisition of political information, provided by the ABS II Mainland China Survey, confirm the predominant status of TV in China's political communication. Such subjective assessment also reveals the ascending role of the Internet, i.e. ranked as the second most important channel, among the Chinese people, particularly Chinese netiziens, for their acquisition of political information, despite its much smaller audience size. Moreover, newspapers and the grapevine still play non-ignorable roles in China's political communication, in terms of both their audience size and relative importance. Though the roles of radio and magazines are marginalized in China's political communication, they still attract a significant number of listeners and readers.

Further regression analyses reveal very dynamic and interesting pictures on who are more likely to acquire political information from specific media channels. Above all, Chinese citizens do intentionally consult/avoid specific media channels for political information, following their general interest in politics and personally preferred types of political information. Thus, their high autonomy in getting political information through various media channels is of significant implications for China's political communication. More specifically, Chinese citizens are quite responsive to the division of labor among the national and local outlets of the traditional media in their coverage of political affairs. Those who are highly interested in local political issues are more likely to listen to local radio programs and avoid national TV programs/newspapers. While, those who are highly interested in national political affairs are more likely to watch national TV programs and stay away from local TV programs/radio/newspapers.

Meanwhile, people with different ages, educational attainment and incomes do show distinct propensity in using these channels. As expected, the Internet, magazines and newspapers seem to be more widely adopted by the younger and better educated in China. While middle-aged Chinese are more likely to watch TV for political information, their younger and older counterparts are more likely to get that information from radio and the grapevine. More income also facilitates people's use of the Internet, newspapers, national TV programs and the grapevine for political information. The rich and poor are also much more likely to acquire such information from radio, compared to their counterparts with a medium-level income. Furthermore, the widely reported urban–rural division also shows up in China's political communication: urban residents are much more likely to listen to radio programs, read local newspapers and magazines, and surf the Internet for such information. Some of the registered impacts of demographic features on how Chinese citizens acquire political information clearly show the imprints of the dramatic

socioeconomic transformations in China over the past few decades on its political communication, e.g. growing privately owned cars among the young and rich in urban areas, and the unequal geographical distribution of China's expanding information infrastructure. Another interesting finding is that Chinese citizens who are more critical of their political liberty and rights are not necessarily more likely to opt out of China's domestic media. On the contrary, they are more likely to listen to radio programs, engage the grapevine and surf the Internet for political information.

The aforementioned findings send very clear messages to future research on China's political communication. First, to fully understand the dynamics of China's political communication, a genuine comparative perspective is indispensable. In other words, besides in-depth examinations on how specific media channels work, researchers should also pay close attention to such channels' relative significance compared to other competing sources. This is especially crucial given the uneven commercialization, decentralization, regulation and control among various media channels in China. In particular, TV's dominant and unique role in contemporary China's political communication—boasting the largest audience, ranked by Chinese citizens as the most important channel for political information, but mostly heavily regulated and controlled by the CCP—is not appropriately matched by its small share in existing empirical research that primarily focuses on newspapers and the Internet.[61]

Second, given Chinese citizens' growing autonomy in acquiring political information that matches their interests and preferences, researchers should carefully tailor their case selections and craft their empirical instruments following the nature of their research topics. For instance, whether TV, network media, newspapers or radio is more relevant for a specific topic/issue is closely related to the changing reality of China's political communication. Many of the empirical puzzles, like why radio attracts Chinese citizens who are more critical of their political liberty and rights, cannot be effectively addressed without moving beyond conventional general instruments adopted in most omnibus surveys. Here, qualitative case studies and systematic content analysis should be of great value for more efficient large-scale quantitative exercise.

Appendix A. Sampling information of the 2008 China Survey

The China Survey is based on a stratified multi-stage probability sample of all Chinese adults. The sample uses county units as PSUs allocated in 16 strata. This survey devised seven geographical regions, not including the four centrally administered municipalities (CAMs) that were treated as a separate stratum.[62] Each geographical region (including the central municipalities) was split between an urban and a rural stratum based on the share of rural residents in a given PSU. A total of 75 PSUs were selected according to the principle of probability proportional to the measure of population size (PPS). SSUs consist of townships (or urban street

61. There are a few exceptions, like Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels'; and Stockmann *et al.*, 'Advertising Chinese politics'.

62. The China Survey excludes the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao. The four CAMs are Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing.

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committees), and two SSUs were selected in each county, also by PPS. The third stage consists of half-square minutes of latitude and longitude, drawn from a geographical grid of each SSU, excluding patently empty spaces identified *ex-ante* from high-resolution satellite imagery. The fourth stage consists of square seconds, the number of which is inversely proportional to the expected population density of each TSU. Trained surveyors equipped with GPS receivers were dispatched to systematically enumerate the final spatial units. Finally, teams of trained interviewers were sent to interview all residents (one per household, randomly selected using the Kish grid method) of each spatial square second (SSS). This procedure yielded a national sample of 3,989 respondents.

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Appendix B: Sampling information of the 2008 ABS II Mainland China Survey

The sample of ABS II Mainland China survey represents the adult population over 18 years of age residing in family households at the time of the survey, excluding those living in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The sampling frame was based on the information collected by the Sociological Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for a 2006 national survey. A stratified multistage area sampling procedure with probabilities proportional to size measures (PPS) was employed to select the sample. The Primary Sampling Units (PSUs) were districts in metropolitan areas and counties in other areas. All PSUs were stratified according to their population and economic features. Altogether, 37 strata were identified and 212 PSUs were selected. The Secondary Sampling Units (SSPs) were street councils in urban areas and townships in rural areas, and the third stage of sampling was geared to resident committees in urban areas and administrative villages in rural areas. A total of 424 SSUs and 848 TSUs were selected. Within each selected family household, a Kish table was used to select an eligible respondent. The survey scheduled interviews with 7,293 people. For various reasons, 5,098 of the prospective respondents completed the questionnaires and the response rate was 75.98%. Post-stratification techniques were used to adjust sampling errors.