

Petitioning through cyberspace: an effective platform for homeowner protests

As a virtual social space, the internet offers a new public sphere for political discussion and participation in the grassroots politics of China. It has also become an important protest platform for homeowners and is helping to enhance the effect of traditional demonstrations, sit-ins and petitions, says *Ying Wu*.

In recent years, China has witnessed rapid internet development. The 32nd statistical report on internet development set the Chinese 'netizens' at 591 million by the end of June 2013. Due to the extensive use of mobile phones as an internet terminal, more people were able to access the internet. As a virtual social space, the internet offers a new public sphere for political discussion and participation. Since internet interaction is low in risk and cost, collective activities on the internet are easier to spread and to amplify.

The housing commercialisation reform in China was accompanied by protests from homeowners, and this became an important phenomenon of Chinese urban life. Compared with the protests by peasants or labourers, the strategies and tactics of homeowners were more diversified.

One of the most prevalent strategies was the use of the internet for information sharing, consensus building, network construction and resource mobilisation. The internet homeowner forums facilitated the expression of concerns over neighbourhood affairs, promoted the self-identification of community members and created enthusiasm over collective actions.

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However, social participation on the internet is also deeply influenced by the social context and political institution. In China, the state is still the most powerful authority and has the ability to affect the result of online mobilisation. So, the regulation and management of the internet must also be considered when discussing the role of the internet for collective actions.

By analysing two cases, this article describes the functional mechanism of the internet for homeowners' protests and how the state-society relation in China affects internet functions.

Two case studies

Anti-pollution action of Fangya Garden

Fangya Garden is a commercial residential community built in 2003 in the north-eastern suburb of Beijing. According to the construction plan, the developer would buy a plot of land to build a lawn from the nearby factory, BP Electronic Motor Company (BP). But BP cancelled the sale of the land and the residents of Fangya Garden had to endure the noise and air pollution emitted by the BP workshops.

By sharing the information online, more and more homeowners noticed the pollution issue. One homeowner tried to send a petition letter to the Environment Protection Bureau (EPB) but got no response. By following the protest logic in China, Fangya residents decided to create a bigger disturbance so as to achieve a bigger result. Using the internet as a mobilisation tool, around 30 homeowners signed three complaint letters to relevant government departments. As a result, the section chief of the local EPB and the chief of BP came to meet Fangya residents, and BP agreed to move one of the polluted workshops to a suburb.

However, by 2006, many of the promises made in this meeting had not been fulfilled. The anti-pollution team decided to continue its protest by using the opportunity of the Beijing Olympics. With the approach of the 2008 Olympics, environmental protection was a sensitive issue for the Chinese government. By using the government's concerns over the green image of Beijing, Fangya Garden residents implemented a schedule of anti-pollution actions and posted it on their online forum. The schedule also included a public consultation forum, a questionnaire survey, an anti-pollution meeting and a 'clean and environmental health action'.

This continued collective resistance brought strain to the Beijing EPB with the approaching Olympics, and resulted in EPB officials once again meeting with Fangya Garden residents. After this round of negotiations, efforts to find a solution to the pollution of the neighbourhood finally moved forward.



Silent protest: A banner calling estate owners to join the forces in their protest against industrial pollution.

Opposition to a garbage incineration project

In September 2009, the local government announced that a garbage incineration plant would be built in Dashi Street, Panyu, a district in southern Guangzhou. The news caused great panic among residents, especially the homeowners in the 13 neighbourhoods located within a 10 kilometre range of the supposed project site.

Immediately after the news was announced, a special discussion forum about the garbage incineration plant was set up online. It included a status report, event progress, mass media concern, garbage separation and recycling, and treatment.

Residents affected by this project exchanged information, shared knowledge about garbage processing and summarised the successful experiences of other environmental protests. With some online education under their belts, the residents became environmental experts overnight.

In addition to the discussion, practical actions were soon put on the agenda. An indictment against the Guangzhou municipal government and Garden Administration Bureau of Panyu District was posted on the online forum on 3 October 2009. This post was viewed 2 514 times and evoked widespread reaction. Meanwhile, 49 518 people joined the online signature petition to oppose this project. The protests continued until 23 November 2009, the open day of the committee of city administration.

On that day, thousands of homeowners gathered outside the meeting venue with supporting banners to request that plans for the incineration plant be terminated. The public assembly was then broadcast live online via cell phones and the internet, and subsequently covered by media agencies like the *Southern Metropolis Daily* of China and Britain's *The Guardian*.

To avoid the issue being turned into a confidence crisis, the Panyu district government was forced to openly declare a suspension of the project, pending a meeting with the residents and media to further discuss the long-term solutions of garbage processing.

The internet as a channel for protests

The two cases happened in different cities and at different times, but shared some similarities. Most of the actions of the homeowners' protests were operated within the approved

boundaries. In addition to traditional protest tactics, such as demonstrations and petitions, homeowners continually used the internet to make their demands.

On the one hand, the use of the internet facilitated the collective actions of homeowners and helped to build connections between individuals. This was followed by the virtual interactions being transferred to face-to-face relations, which brought about the offline collective actions.

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In both cases, the interactions in the virtual community were followed by many collective activities in the real world. The overlap and mutual promotion of virtual and real interaction was the key for forming collective actions.

On the other hand, the effect of the internet depended on how much government attention it could attract. The core strategy of using the internet was to attract the focus of government.

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So in these instances, the use of the internet relieved the collective actions of the restrictions of physical distance and population size, and was successful in attracting the attention of the government. ■

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