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## **PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC HEALTH POLITICS: EVERYDAY POLITICAL TALK ABOUT PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES ON CHINESE BBS FORUMS**

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### **Extended abstract**

Unlike citizens in western countries where they could participate in civic organizations, voting and formal forums to engage in public health politics, it's difficult for ordinary Chinese citizens to articulate their concerns about health issues through civic organizations or other formal means of political participation. Before 2000s, Chinese health policies were made almost without public discussions. The outbreak of SARS in 2003 exposed a lot of flaws in public health sector. Until then, healthcare-related problems have become salient in Chinese public arena. In 2009, the public was invited to participate in the policy-making process of healthcare reform. In the making of national healthcare reform in 2009, the internet played a helpful role to engage the general publics. However, the online portals only provided citizens chances to offer feedback to the government's health policies without engaging them in broader process of citizen deliberation (Kornreich et al., 2012). Besides, those online consultation channels were limited to well-off citizens from urban areas, excluding those less privileged, such as rural population and unemployed urban residents (Balla, 2014).

Due to the lack of physical spaces and limited online spaces for participation, Chinese citizens tend to participate in politics through informal networks of relations formed in Sun, Y., Graham, T., Broersma, M. (2017, October 18-21). *Public Deliberation And Civic Engagement In Public Health Politics: Everyday Political Talk About Public Health Issues On Chinese Bbs Forums* . Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

arenas outside the official space. In informal spaces of everyday life, citizens may be able to circumvent heavy censorship of participatory activities in their everyday conversations. With the narrow space opened up for ordinary people to participate in health policy-making, the internet-based informal communications in the setting of everyday life may create a public space for ordinary citizens to discuss public health issues and to negotiate with the established order in public health politics on a broader scale. Moving beyond the formally political spaces, this paper zooms in the internet-enabled everyday life spaces to see how disorganized ordinary citizen actors in public health politics use internet to practice their individual agency as well as how they negotiate with the established power structure at the micro level in their everyday talk about public health issues. By focusing on everyday political talk about health issues, this paper not only examines the deliberative quality of those online political talk but also shed some light on other modes of civic engagement they trigger to explore what a kind of public sphere everyday political talk about health issues constitute on the internet in the Chinese context, is it of more deliberative values in Habermasian sense or demonstrating other possibilities of political engagement?

This study empirically explores how ordinary Chinese citizens engage in public health politics through everyday online political talk about health issues and whether it serves as a way to strengthen the public's position in health governance. Specifically, it attempts to address this question by examining the way average citizens talk about health issues online and how it is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life, providing us a glimpse, at the micro level, into the lifeworld (its informal associations and interpersonal communications) – a glimpse into the process of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization (Habermas, 1987, 138-139). In doing so, the research does not only focus on conventional patterns of online participation but also the social and private practices that enable the participants to act together more effectively, hence generating a more vibrant civic culture.

A comparative study of everyday political talk across three different Chinese online forums was conducted to better understand how ordinary Chinese citizens talk about public health issues in different contexts. The three forums were selected based on their distinct features, ranging from an explicitly political forum, through a forum mixing politics with private life matters to a non-political forum. Such an approach allows for a comparison of political talk in the realm of public health between and across political, non-political, and mixed forums, providing more insights into the nature of everyday political talk in the heterogeneous Chinese internet.

The analysis was guided by a two-level coding scheme which included: a normative assessment of the deliberativeness of such online political talk and an examination of other modes of civic practices. This coding scheme was created to answer: 1) what is the deliberative quality of the everyday political talk about public health issues? 2) what other modes of civic practices those talk triggers, enhancing ordinary citizens' civic agency and amplifying their civic life?

Through comparative content analysis, the research found, first, ordinary citizens were more capable of influencing the agenda of public discussion in the online spaces outside of the political realm. Second, the peripheral online space mixing politics with

private characteristics, not the explicitly political space nor the completely non-political space either, was the place where citizen deliberation about public health issues was arising in the current political context of China. Third, although the less formal political talk on the forums was far from being 'deliberative' as Habermas envisioned, it functioned as an extension of the formal public sphere, which engaged more fully with disorganized people in the society and facilitated empowering them in public health politics in multiple ways at the micro level. In general, the findings show the context or aim of the forums and their role in bridging the political with the personal jointly determined the nature of political talk on each forum. Meanwhile, under-organized ordinary Chinese citizens are offered more opportunities to practice their citizenship as serial citizens in the spaces more embedded in the context of everyday life.

Lastly, we argue such informal discussions about public health issues offered a negotiating space for the general public to engage in the politics of public health, incorporating the lay citizens including the socially less advantaged into the political process in the context of China. In the everyday space, newly capable serial civic groups were assembling online from the loosely organized ordinary citizens. They developed their own communicative power, civic skills and public agency via everyday political talk about public health issues on the internet, finding a way to engage in public health politics. These changes will, somehow, facilitate the cooperative and collective process of solving public health problems and strengthening the public's position in the broader deliberative system in the realm of public health.

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