EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF SOFT NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON POLITICAL
KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHINESE YOUNGER GENERATION

by

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, much discussion about the rise of the Internet within the People's Republic of China has focused on the political consequences of the technology on China's Communist Party. The popularization of Internet access was once regarded as a sign of significant progress in Chinese political democratization.

Especially when considering the impact of Internet use on the Chinese younger generation, the importance of political issues spread through Internet should be more amplified.

One interesting phenomenon that needs attention is the emergence of political soft news in recent years on the Chinese national social network that never arose before in the history of the People's Republic of China. Different from any type of solemn formal political news that appeared in Chinese media, the soft news tends to emphasize entertaining aspects of political issues more and engages with high readability. It pays more attention to the gender, personality, and appearance--even the daily life of the leaders who were once the most mysterious and paramount group in Chinese political system.

One important trait of this kind of news is that most news items emerged in social networks and websites that young adults are frequently exposed to. Along with the rapid rise of Chinese social media, will the major participants, Chinese young adults be strongly influenced by political soft news spread through the Internet? Will the young adults be attracted by the soft news initially and then try to know some further information about the government's policies? Or, will they only dwell on the soft news?

This research tries to explore and provide answers to these questions and focus on the impact of the soft news on Chinese young adults' understanding of politics.

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Dedication

The thesis is dedicated to my dear mother, Yi Zhang. Without her patience, understanding, support and most of all love, the completion of this work would never be possible.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Along with the development of new communication technology, especially user-controlled technologies such as social media, the atmosphere of politics communication has changed from the end of last century. McMahan & Chesbro(2003) found noticeable changes in both media use and political systems. Specifically, with the increasing use of more participatory communication technologies, the number of nation-states "exercising a liberal democratic political system has dramatically increased"(McMahan & Chesebro, 2003, p. 135). USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia are specific examples of how changed technologies influenced the political system and cultural stability of a nation-state. (McMahan & Chesebro, 2003). The mass media have "been utilized as a fourm from democratic thought and a mechanism for the transfer of democratic ideals"(Rogerson, 1997, P.331). A recent example is the revelation movement in Libya and Egypt: social media plays a crucial role in how audiences expressed their opinions, communicate with others and organized the protest. New media brings a great new platform for the masses to enjoy their privilege to get the political information to satisfy their needs and even shape their ideas about democracy. Different from traditional media, the Internet was born with a number of progressive characteristics--decentralized, borderless, and the most important trait is to allow the audience access to the information on a global scale. (Yuan, 2010) Under the background of global communication technology change, will China be an exception? This study is right to focus on how technology change may influence on Chinese audience attitude towards political issues and even their idea about democracy.

Soft news, as an innovative news format (2003, Prior), has attracted several scholars. Tom Patterson (2000, p. 4) called soft news "typically more sensational, more personality-centered,

less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news." Actually, most soft news involved in politics is usually engaged with the leaders' gender, personality, appearance, even daily life; it is especially highly employed with entertaining elements compared with hard news (Prior, 2003). Due to these traits, numerous previous studies provided convincing evidence to indicate that soft news demonstrated more attractiveness to audiences than other news formats. In the most important analysis to date, Matt Baum (2002b) showed that some people, who would otherwise not watch any news at all, pay attention to soft news coverage of wars and foreign crises. According to Baum, some people do not watch hard news programs because the opportunity costs from forfeiting payoffs from entertainment are too high. As mentioned by Baum in another article (2003), if hard and soft news programs cover the same aspect of a story at about the same time, and a viewer consumes both types of programming, hard news use will tend to be incidental for politically unengaged individuals. And the result may probably be because soft news outlets are in the business of making information highly accessible (Baum, 2003). This makes such information easier for politically unsophisticated consumers to understand (Hamilton, 2003), and, presumably, also more appealing to them. What's more, people's appreciation of entertainment is one of the factors determining news exposure and, by extension, attention to politics (Baum 2002a). That is, by focusing on the more entertaining, shocking, or scandalous aspects of politics, soft news offers these people an alternative that maximizes their utility because it combines entertainment and information (Prior, 2003).

Political Soft News and Entertaining Appealing

In terms of the entertaining aspect of soft news, several previous studies (e.g. Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002b) demonstrate a number of factual examples in their studies through the method of content analysis. Among the eight formats in Prior's (2003) study, two were classified as soft

news: talk shows and so-called "infotainment" programs which primarily report on lifestyle, wardrobe, and scandals of Hollywood stars and the more glamorous politicians. Some more concrete samples were also given. The news topics talked about in *"Hardcopy," "Entertainment Tonight"* (Prior, 2003) and *"Oprah Winfrey"* (Baum, 2002b) are defined as "infotainment" news, which refers to soft news that combines information and entertainment. Soft news obviously appeals to people unwilling to give up on entertainment, even while they are watching news since it informs and entertains at the same time. Baum (2002b), for example, writes *"Entertainment Tonight* and *Oprah Winfrey* are watched by about as many households as the evening newscasts of the major networks." And, according to his findings, soft news attracts millions of viewers and ranks among the top three news formats for about a third of the population in the United States.

Entertaining Appealing of Soft News in Chinese Youth

Numerous studies have been conducted on this issue in the United States. However, little attention has been paid to international cases. How about the popularity of soft news when comparing it with hard news among Chinese audiences, especially young Chinese audiences? As mentioned previously, the soft news, especially news covering politics, emerged during recent years among the Chinese mainland media and is entirely new to Chinese audiences.

This study looks at Chinese audiences' feelings towards political soft news, which differs from any type of solemn political news that has traditionally appeared in Chinese media. The particular target is to focus on the audience in the Chinese young generation, a group which can more probably represent Chinese contemporary culture and public opinion. There are some terms and definitions about the Chinese "young generation." The most typical one is X-generation (China: X-Gen Study 1996). It is easy to tell that their values represent Chinese

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modern culture from the description in Time Asia (2000). "Strolling down Shanghai's boulevards, one sees well-dressed young Chinese constantly talking on their mobile phones, switching easily between English and Chinese. They jam the city's Western-style bars and discos, even on weekday nights. They work at Internet startups or at Western firms. They are ambitious and confident. They are the models for Generation Yellow (equivalent to the X-Generation)--the rising middle-class in China, aged 18 to 35--and they are the future" (Time Asia 2000). Due to the special social political environment and relaxed policy of government, the Chinese young generation is experiencing a different life compared with their parents. Most of them are highly educated and exposed to an international and influential environment, which may imply that their opinion will be regarded as mainstream among Chinese society and also have a powerful impact on others. Their attitude towards political soft news and the influence of soft news on their factual political knowledge are extremely significant to any Chinese political communication study.

As mentioned above, political soft news involves political content presented with more attractiveness to the audience than other news formats. Will this finding also be shown in effects on the Chinese young generation, especially when they initially experienced political soft news? Thus, the first hypothesis:

H_1: Soft news covering politics will appear more attractive to the Chinese young generation than hard news does.

Impact of Soft News on Political Knowledge

The previous studies indicated that soft news involved in politics is usually engaged with the leaders' gender, personality, appearance, and even daily life. Prior (2003) noted that soft news leads people to pay more attention to the "entertaining" aspect of politics, but does not

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actually produce any learning effects. According to his research, people's preferences on news formats certainly have some effect on their political knowledge. The result showed that people who prefer hard news tend to be more knowledgeable in the first place. Zaller (1992) also found that readers of *People* magazine were more likely to recall details about a story on Zsa Zsa Gabor story. Entertainment talk shows, however, usually present politics in less political, less partisan terms (Baum, 2002a). According to Baum, a limited positive effect of liking the talk show format is evident. People's ranking of soft news consumption did not produce any significant effects in terms of increasing their political knowledge.

Different from the United States, China has a special political system and social ideology background. Any information about Chinese political leaders or the central government was regarded as confidential a few decades ago. After Deng Xiao Ping declared his open-door policy in 1979, the reform of the Chinese economic system has achieved enormous success. Along with the development of the economy and the improvement of political system, the process of democracy has also taken its step on an arduous but meaningful journey. To most of the overall Chinese audience in the last generation, a brief message with several pictures broadcast through CCTV was the typical regular political news (Ma & Guo, 2006). Chinese hard news is defined as a format focused on serious topics in politics, technology, and economics with ideological, orientation and informational content. (Gan, 1993) CCTV firstly broadcast typical Chinese political hard news in January 1, 1978 to more than 10 provinces during prime time daily. For around ten years, it was the only resource for Chinese audiences to receive information from the central government and nationwide. However, its solemn, oversimplified and plain content aggravate Chinese audiences aversion and apathy on public affairs and political issues (Li, 2003). For the consideration of portraying a dignified country image, most political hard news is

formatted with cliché and eulogies, which even made the audience question how authentic and reliable the news is. (Wan, 2005) During recent years, however, political soft news has generally emerged in Chinese media, which tends to explore more entertaining elements compared to the serious political issues (Ma & Guo, 2006). Examples include, "Romantic stories of Chairman Jingtao Hu and his wife," and "The most pretty female member of the CPPCC national consultative Conference." Similar to the format in the U.S., Chinese political soft news emphasizes more the personality, appearance, and daily life of Chinese politicians, who were once the most mysterious and paramount group in the Chinese central government. Thus, Chinese soft news also highly stresses the entertaining aspects more than the instructive. One essential propose of this study is to examine whether the Chinese soft news on political topics shows learning effect on the Chinese young generation's political knowledge, similar to what was found in the U.S., even given a situation where little hard political news can be obtained.

Based on this, the second hypothesis was developed:

H_2: The more Chinese young adults consume political soft news, the less political knowledge they obtain.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and gratifications theory mainly addresses that audiences actively search out media messages to satisfy their certain needs, thus the audience is active and goal directed. Which means, people are not only impacted by the message sent from media, they also actively seek for certain media and media content to satisfy particular needs. (Kaye & Johnson, 2004) The uses and gratifications theory assumes that people are self-aware to know, and to articulate, their reasons for using the media and that they view the media as at least one avenue to gratify their needs. (McLeod and Becker, 1981; Palmgreen, 1984)

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Previous studies suggest that functionally similar media may serve similar needs. (Kang and Atkin, 1999; Lin, 1994, 2002). No matter television or the Internet, one may gratify similar needs because they are structurally similar. (Kaye and Medoff, 2001). Many studies (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004; Morris & Ogan, 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Charney & Creenberg, 2001; Chou & Hsiao, 2000;Dimmick, Kline & Stafford, 2000; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Ferguson & Perse,2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Kaye, 1998; Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999; LaRose, Mastro & Eastin, 2001; Lin, 1999; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Parker & Plank, 2000;Perse & Greenberg-Dunn, 1998; Song, LaRose, Fastin & Lin, 2004; Stafford &Stafford, 2001) have adopted the uses and gratifications perspective to examine how individuals use the Internet in general. They believe that uses and gratification approach is well suited for studying the world wide web. (Kaye & Johnson, 2002) At some level, new media brings them more chance to filter the information they dislike and seek for the news they interested in.

People's perceptions about the ability of different media to gratify their needs are affected by the characteristics of the media themselves, such as particular content and their mode of transmission (Perse and Courtright, 1993; Perse and Dunn, 1998). Several studies suggest that Web users are more politically interested (Bimber, 1997; Bucy et al., 1999; Johnson and Kaye, 1998a,b, 2000) and are more likely to vote (Bimber, 1997; Hilland Hughes, 1998) than the general public. The situation not only present in web information searching, but some web network utilizations. Garramone et al. (1986) examined that political bulletin board users mentioned surveillance and curiosity as their main motives for using bulletin boards. James et al. (1995) discovered that electronic bulletin board use in general serves information/learning and socialization needs. Then how will this concept apply in an international background, such as under Chinese political atmosphere? Kaye & Johnson (2002) mentioned in their study that

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entertainment is one of the four crucial motivations that individuals seek for political information online. The research is an attempt to predict that will Chinese young generation who mostly exposure to Internet and social media seeking out political soft news for its entertaining aspect.

Numerous studies note that the Web tends to satisfy entertainment, escape and social interaction needs.(Charney and Greenberg, 2001; Eighmey, 1997; Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Kang and Atkin, 1999; Kaye, 1998;Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Lin, 2001). LaRose and Eastin(2004) indicated that Internet self-efficacy will be directly related to Internet usage. Collectively, these studies upheld that uses and gratifications sought to explain individual's interesting determined their exposure to media. However, those Internet-related studies paid few attentions in how the exposure and seeking behavior will impact on their interest. This studies also trying to discover the correlation between social media usage and the Chinese young adults' interest in political soft news.

Social Media Usage in China

As mentioned before, the soft news in China has more frequently emerged in social networks and websites such as blogs. Since social media is a fairly recent communication tool based on the Internet, only a slight amount of literature exists on the subject. Nevertheless, the enormous influence and extremely rapid rise and speed of the social networks have been emerged as an innovative channel for the public to obtain and share information. By 2007 – after a short three years of existence – Facebook had more than 21 million registered Chinese members, who generated 1.6 billion page views each day (Needham & Company, 2007, as cited in Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Two-thirds of Facebook users log in at least once a day; the typical user spends about 20 minutes a day on the site (Needham & Company, 2007, as cited in Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The similar social media tool also rapidly budding based

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on the Chinese Internet, Renren Network (Chinese:人人网; literally "everyone network"), formerly known as Xiaonei Network (Chinese:校内网; literally "on-campus network") is a typically Chinese social media entity with an interface similar to that of Facebook. According to data provided by Xiaonei, as of July 2008, Xiaonei was the "Chinese largest online community website among universities" with more than 22 million active users and an estimated 40 million who have registered using their real names.

Social media can be an excellent avenue for Chinese users selecting certain types of information they would like to obtain, since one decides specifically what they would like to see from the Internet. In this case, the Chinese young generation is the most likely target for the information and news spread through Internet. The young adult who more frequently participates in social networks will tend to be more influenced by the information released though the Internet, especially when the issue or information seems appealing to him or her. Since the soft news is attractive and initially emerged through Internet due to less pressure of censorship on the Internet, young adults will have a higher opportunity to experience the political soft news, or they will be impacted more by soft news. As previous discussed, their personal interest corresponds to the certain information they will seek out or select to exposure to. Will the exposure to news involve political content while browse in social media foster their interesting in political soft news? Thus the third hypothesis will be:

H$_3$: The young adults who frequently participate in a social network or browse the websites involved in political content will tend to find political soft news more appealing.

Soft News Consumption and Opinion about Democracy Level

The case studied in this paper is based on a country with a special political background, China, which is under control of the central government run by China's Communist Party. The

Chinese central government is restrictive in content control and suppression of political speech(Xueping Du, 1999). Under this situation, the emergence of political soft news may easily send a misleading message to the Chinese young adults that they obtain more freedom in political speech since they know more about their paramount leaders. Many scholars have argued that a knowledgeable electorate is normatively good for democracy and that a woefully ignorant public may be incapable of fulfilling its democratic responsibilities (e.g., Almond, 1950;Lippmann, 1955; Key, 1961; Cohen, 1973; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). If soft news has no factual effects on the Chinese younger generation's political knowledge, it's hard to conclude that the Chinese political system reform has been accomplished. Something even worse, the soft news consuming may bring Chinese young adults a misconception that they know more about Chinese politics than in the past, which may aggravate their ignorance on concrete political knowledge learning and further weaken their ability to fulfilling their democratic responsibilities.

Thus, one research question raised in this paper is that:

R_1: Will soft news consumption impact on Chinese young adults' opinion about Chinese democracy level?

Chapter 2 - Methodology

200 Chinese college students were selected from the top universities in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Si Chuan, ensuring a diverse of demographic background. These four cities were chosen not only for their important geographic position, but also for their highly developed economies. Meanwhile, as elite students in the top schools, they are not representative of Chinese college students as a whole, but of students who will be opinion leasers and influence in the future. If the future political and business leaders of China are engaging news differently, it is likely to spread. All 200 students were invited to answer a survey questionnaire sent by e-mail, with a short description of the study, information about confidentiality and incentives, and information about the survey conductor. The survey was conducted in January 4th and January10th, 2011. Different from the U.S., the age level of college students is quite concentrated on the spectrum from 18 to 25. Since the target is to figure out the impact of political soft news on the Chinese X-generation, the sample distribution designed above definitely supports the research. The male (51.0%) and female (49.0%) students are approximately equal. The major dependent variables of the study were: political soft news consumption and opinions about the democracy level of the Chinese political system. The major independent variable was social media use of political information. Additional control variables included prior interest in politics, age, political affiliation, and generd demographic variables.

Measurements

Political Soft/Hard News Consumption

The selection of political soft and hard news consumption dimensions for the study was based on the following two criteria: quantity of soft/hard news reading and degree of preference

for soft/hard news. In each category, three questions were employed to measure political news

consumption: 1) "Please estimate the quantity of political soft news you have read this

semester." ("Hard news" replaced "soft news" in following question), 2) "How much do you like

the political soft news?" (Again, "Hard news" replaced "soft news" in the following question)

Two categories were separately combined into two measurements which were denoted as "Soft

news consumption" and "Hard news consumption." To ensure the reliability of the soft new

consumption scale that is the most crucial variable in the studies, an additional question

"Compared with other types of news, how frequently do you obtain by "share" or "link" through

social media is political soft news?" were set for examine the source of soft new. A seven-point

response scale was adopted (1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Very much") to indicate the participant's

degree of interest, quantity of political news consumption. In addition, before all these

questions, some concrete examples were provided to interpret the term "soft" and "hard" news.

(e.g. "The most pretty female member of the CPPCC national consultative Conference" in soft

news category)

Political Knowledge Scale

There are no previous studies that constructed a measurement to gauge Chinese citizens

political knowledge level. In this paper, a political knowledge scale employed in the

questionnaire consisted of five items and was modified from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993).

They created a five-item scale: "Party control of the House", "Veto override percent", "Party

ideological location", "Judicial review" and "Quayle (identifying the vice president)" to evaluate

U.S. voters' political knowledge and provided sample questions for each category (See Appendix

B). Based on the reality of the Chinese political system, the five evaluation questions that were

designed in the questionnaire followed parts of the criteria in their study and the understanding

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level to these questions was reported on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Very much"). Two parts are quite similar with the measurement in U.S., which are the questions about political figures and judicial review. However, the other three items should be modified due to the different political system. Chinese citizens do not have the right to vote for chairman but they do have a chance to vote on deputy of the national people's congress. Therefore, the item "Veto override percent" was modified to a question as "How much do you know about the election process of the people's representatives for National People's Congress?" Meanwhile, the Chinese government is only under the control of communist party, thus, for "Party control of the House" and "Party ideological location" item, a question about top issues in China and the information about ministry of supervision (e.g. location, functions) were adapted to the scale.

Social Media Usage

To examine the influence of political soft news consumption on social media usage, three questions were designed to climactically inquire about the quantity of political news participants seek out through social networks and their interest in them. The questions asked included the following: 1) "How many news on any/all topics you obtained by referrals, sharing, post, etc via social media last week?" 2) "How frequently are they political soft news?" 3) "How much do you like the political news emerged on those social medias?" The option range from "None", "1—5", "6—10", "11—15" to "More than 15" were provided for first question. A seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Very much") was provided for the rest two questions. Two questions that involve active participant engagement in online organized communities that reflected interests in political content were also added to tap the students' social media usage status. One question was addressed as "How frequently do you participate in online organized communities that reflect your interest in political news?" and a seven-point Likert scale (1 =

"Not at all" to 7 = "Very much") was provided. The rest asked as "What kind of online organized communities, groups or pages with political news you have participated or liked?" and the answers are including "Renren Group", "Renren Public Page", "Douban Group", "QQ Group", "Baidu BBS" and "Weibo Blog" which are the most prevalent social networks in China.

Opinion about Democracy

Two attitudinal questions were employed to gauge the impact of soft news consumption on the young generation's opinion about the democracy level of the Chinese political system. 1) "Do you agree that you could know more about the Chinese current political situation and political figures through soft news?" 2) "Do you agree that soft news is a sign of democracy for the Chinese political system?" A seven-point response scale was used (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree") to indicate the participants' opinion on Chinese political democracy.

In addition to political news consumption, political knowledge and social media use, further demographic information and interest level in political issues were collected. Since the major dependent variables – political soft news consumption and opinion about democracy – are social behaviors and concepts, the potential for multiple hidden variables to threaten the internal validity of the research could increase. To address this concern, gender, year in college, political affiliation and interest in political issues were used as control variables. For the political interest measure, the student was asked to rate how much he or she likes the political journals or newspapers ("television programs" replaced "journal or newspapers" in following questions) and how frequently they utilize a political journal or newspaper to get political information (again, "television programs" replaced "journal or newspapers" in following questions) on seven-point response scales (1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Very much"). Some concrete examples, such as "Sanlian Life Weekly" and "Reference News," which are Chinese mainstream political journals,

were provided to illustrate the term "political journal or newspapers". To ensure reliability, another measure question asked was, "How many political television programs have you watched in this semester?", which was added with the four items mentioned above to composite the political interest scale.

Control Variables

Political affiliation measurement was comprised of Communist Party, communist league (organizations that serve as a recruitment ground for Communist Party membership and the officialdom with the mission to galvanize support for state policies.) (Oksenberg, 2001), democratic parties and other categories according to Chinese political reality. Freshman, sophomore, junior, senior and graduate categories comprised the year in college dimension.

Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 51.0 percent male students and 49.0 percent female students, and the average year in college was concentrated in the sophomore and junior years. In addition, 66.5 percent of the students aligned themselves with the communist league political affiliation, which was the largest part of the sample, compared with 21.5 percent and 3.0 percent of students who reported as member of communist party and democratic parties, respectively.

In terms of the political news consumption measurements, two composite scores were created for soft news and hard news, three items for the former and two for the later categories (Cronbach's alpha= .90 for soft news measure and .91 for hard news). For the political knowledge scale, five items were averaged. The reliability for Cronbach's alpha (.89) was in a highly acceptable range. To examine the social media usage involving political content, five questions were combined (Cronbach's alpha= .84). In term of the measurement of the young generation's opinion about the democracy level of the Chinese political system, two attitudinal

questions were composited (Cronbach's alpha= .85). Lastly, the measurement created for

interest in political issues was composed of scales of favorite level and frequency of reading

political journal or newspapers and watching television programs (Cronbach's alpha= .93). Each

measurement and the correlation among all measurements, as well as the survey descriptive

statistics, are summarized in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Variables

Variables	Mean	S.D.	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h
a. Soft news Consuming	10.84	3.66	-							
b. Hard news Consuming	6.17	2.76	.275**	-						
c. Social Media Usage	15.05	4.72	.703**	.374**	-					
d. Political Knowledge	12.62	5.04	.136	.812**	.311**	-				
e. Opinion About Democracy	8.43	2.80	.414**	-.243**	.195**	-.334**	-			
f. Interesting in politics	17.64	6.38	.403**	.490**	.477**	.480**	.083	-		
g. Political affiliation	3.05	.71	.033	.052	.078	.108	.162*	-.003	-	
h. Gender	1.48	.50	-.077	-.203**	-.125	-.106	.094	-.127	.052	-

Note: *<. 05, **<. 001

According to the correlations test, there are significant positive relationships between

political knowledge and soft news consumption, hard news consumption, and social media

usage. A strong positive relationship ($r = .703$, $p < .001$) between social media usage and

political soft news consumption among participants was also observed. In terms of the

correlation between opinion about democracy and political news consumption, a positive

significant relationship was found in soft news consumption ($r = .414$, $p < .001$), while negative

significant relationship ($r = -.243$, $p < .001$) observed for hard news consumption. Meanwhile, a

strong significant relationship also existed between social media usage and opinion about democracy (r = .195, p < .001).

Compelling correlations arose from control variables, including gender, interest in political issues, and political affiliation. Interest in political issues (r = .430, p < .001) was positively associated with soft news consumption, while political affiliation and gender have no significant relationship. According to these results, only the student who consumes more hard news tends to have higher political knowledge. (r = .812, p < .001) Meanwhile, the students who participate more in social media groups involved in political issues have a propensity to consume more political soft news.

Chapter 3 - Findings and Discussion

Data Analysis

The final sample consisted of 200 college students. Three separate multiple regressions were run for political knowledge, soft news consumption and opinion about democracy. The Wilcoxon signed ranks test was adopted to examine the difference between students' preference level for soft news and hard news. The analysis procedure was the same for each dependent variable. The Wilcoxon signed ranks test showed a strong significance (P = 0.000, Table 3.1) on the difference between Chinese college students' partiality to soft news and hard news. Based on the observation from table 3.1, the predilection toward soft news is much higher than for hard news.

Table 3.1 The comparison between soft news and hard news preference

	Prefer Soft News	Prefer Hard News
Median	11.00	6.00
P-value	.000**	

Note: N=189, **<. 001

Hypothesis 1

As is evident in previous studies, the political soft news definitely demonstrated its appeal to Chinese young audiences; the median value of soft news preference significantly tends to higher. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

According to the findings, the demographic characteristics of political affiliation and interest in political issues were significantly related to political knowledge. The students who reported more interest in political issues presented higher levels of political knowledge (b = .117, p < .05).

As predicted, a positive statistically significant relationship was found between hard news consumption and students' political knowledge, while a negative significant relationship existed with soft news consumption. (See Table 3.2)

Table 3.2 Effects of Soft and Hard News Consuming on Political Knowledge

Predictor Variable	Political Knowledge		
	B and Beta Coefficients	t	p
Soft news Consumption	-.304 (-.221)	-3.797	.000**
Hard news Consumption	1.425 (.777)	16.224	.000**
Interest in politics	.117 (.149)	2.892	.004*
Social Media Usage	.115 (.107)	1.770	.078
Year in school	-.007 (-.002)	-.044	.965
Political affiliation	.377 (.054)	1.315	.190
Gender	.682 (.068)	1.627	.105

Note: *<. 05, **<. 001

Hypothesis 2

According to Table 3.2 ($F = 60.632$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .703$), hard news consumption was significantly related to the political knowledge level with a positive association ($b =1.425$, $p < .001$). Although no significant relationship were observed in Table 2.1, strong negative significant ($b = -.304$, $p < .001$) relationship existed between soft news consumption and political knowledge when hard news consumption and other factors are used as control variables.

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Therefore, there is strong evidence to suggest that soft news consumption has no influence and, even worse, it encumbers the political knowledge growth. Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Moreover, powerful evidence, illustrated in Table 3.3, indicated that social media usage has a significant positive relationship with soft news consumption.

Table 3.3 Effects of Social Media Use on Soft News Consuming

Predictor Variable	Soft News Consumption		
	B and Beta Coefficients	t	p
Social Media Usage	.451 (.580)	10.471	.000**
Interest in politics	.080 (.140)	2.540	.012*
Opinion About Democracy	.402 (.309)	6.297	.000**
Year in school	-.148 (-.053)	-1.112	.268
Political affiliation	-.315 (-.062)	-1.291	.198
Gender	-.079 (-.011)	-.226	.822

Note: *<. 05, **<. 001

Hypothesis 3

Based on the results displayed in Table 3.3 (F = 45.053, p < .001, r^2 = .600), the frequency of participation in social media groups involved in political content is significantly related with soft news consumption (b = .451, p< 0.001). What's more, the control variable of interest in political issues (b = .080, P<0.05) and opinion about Chinese democracy level (b = .402, P<0.001) shows significant associations with soft news consumption, while no statistically significant relationship exists between others. In this case, hypothesis 3 is supported.

Finally, results in Table 3.4 (F = 15.410, p < .001, r^2 = .409) demonstrate that the students who consumed more political soft news have a higher tendency to believe that the Chinese political system is more democratic than before (See Table 3.4).

Table 3.4 Effects of Soft on Opinion about Democracy

Predictor Variable	Opinion About Democracy		
	B and Beta Coefficients	t	p
Soft news Consumption	.394 (.512)	5.973	.000**
Hard news Consumption	-.204 (-.198)	-1.861	.064
Interest in politics	.060 (.138)	1.845	.067
Political Knowledge	-.172 (-.307)	-2.907	.004*
Social Media Usage	-.042 (-.070)	-.813	.417
Year in school	.010 (.005)	.077	.938
Political affiliation	.741(.191)	3.249	.001*
Gender	.412 (.073)	1.231	.220

Note: *<. 05, **<. 001

Research Question

More so than any of the respondents' demographic characteristics, the soft news consumption variable was significantly related to opinion about the democracy level of the Chinese political system in a positive direction (b = .394, p < .001). Therefore, the research question was answered "yes", as political soft news does have influence on the Chinese young

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generations' opinion about the democracy level of the Chinese political system in a positive slant.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to find connections between Chinese young adults' political knowledge and political soft news consumption, together with exploring the impact of social media usage on soft news consumption. Moreover, the study also attempted to analyze whether political soft news consumption affected college students' ideas on the democracy level of the Chinese political system.

The diffusion of innovation literature offers insights into the second hypothesis about how Chinese young adults use a new technology, to what extent, and with what impact on soft news performance. The uses and gratification theory puts most focus on content and how it satisfies the audiences' certain needs and the studies give a specific examination about how the Chinese younger generation is influenced by this formula. The diffusion of innovation literature suggests that adoption decisions depend not only on the characteristics of the adopter, but also on characteristics of the innovation or technology (e.g., ease of use, cost, etc.) and of the environment. (Gulati and Williams, 2010) Internet diffusion has followed a very steep upward trajectory, which can be attributed to characteristics such as the technology's relative advantage, compatibility, and versatility (Rogers, 2003). Social networks evidence many of these same externalities and characteristics. (Gulati and Williams, 2010) Thus, the studies put another essential focus on how Chinese young adults adopt social media for the soft news consumption in Chinese political environment.

This research revealed that Chinese students exhibit significantly higher partiality for political soft news. Meanwhile, strong evidence was provided to demonstrate that political soft

news provide no assistance on increasing Chinese college students' political knowledge. The results are meaningful in relation to current Chinese political news standards, including target audiences. The more students participate in social media oriented towards political content, the more they are influenced by political soft news. This result indicates that social media use reinforces political soft news consumption and participation.

The final component of this research involved attempting to identify a correlation between soft news consumption and students' opinion about Chinese political democracy. Similar to the hypotheses, the research question was answered with a strong significant relationship observed between these two variables. More specifically, soft news consumption is the only effective factor among others to influence students' opinion about democracy, which means, the more they consume soft news, the more positive their opinion about Chinese democracy level is.

The studies provide a contribution in applying uses and gratification theory in international scope. The result shows that there is no big difference with the audience in American. The Chinese younger generation shows a similar seeking behavior for certain content to fulfill their need for entertainment. Especially, the study in adoption of social media extended the field of how online media leads to uses and gratification theory in contemporary China.

Meanwhile, the result shown that social media brings a new use pattern to the Chinese younger generation. They not only seek out soft news through social networks actively, but also obtain the information by "share" or "links", which are the unique functions of social media, from friends or the network they belong to, which will reinforce their attention and interest in certain information. In this study, the result revealed that frequently participants in social media will strongly influence the Chinese younger generations' interest in political soft news, which give significant evidence to this pattern of communication mode.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion and Limitations

Conclusion

This study presents important contributions and implications for research and international cultural understanding. Even though prior research identified relationships between political soft news and political knowledge in the U.S. (2003, Prior), none existed that analyzed the impact of soft news within the People's Republic of China since it is still new to most Chinese. The study examined the influence of soft news on Chinese young college students' political knowledge as well as social media practices. Furthermore, as social media is considered new and rapidly evolving, few studies exist concerning social media practices in general. The research gives evidence about the impact of media's ability to influence opinions and knowledge. The political soft news' attractiveness directly reaches the Chinese young generation, with a null effect on their political knowledge escalating.

Another essential finding indicates that soft news consumption certainly sent the Chinese young generation a message that they are embraced in a more democratic political system in China while they are absent of concrete political knowledge. As demonstrated in the literature review, this roseate viewpoint may mislead them to neglect some crucial information about the Chinese political system, aggravate their ignorance on concrete political knowledge learning, and further weaken the ability to fulfill democratic responsibilities.

These results imply that it is difficult for political soft news in China to be considered as a preferred method for the young generation to obtain political knowledge. These results further imply that this misinterpretation of soft news not only exists in Chinese contemporary society,

but that social media and networks reinforce the impact and continue to shape students' opinion about the democracy level in an over-optimistic direction while the reality is still hard to gauge.

Limitations

The study has limitations that must be addressed. A major limitation is the sample population. With restricted resources, I attempted to survey a broad population; however, all of the individuals were students from first-rate universities in China, with the majority between 20 and 24 years of age. Thus, the surveyed student sample could have skewed results with a narrow ideology range. Meanwhile, the sample only involves 200 students and could also lead a partiality in the results.

The method of the research must be considered for potential limitations as well; while *correlation* can be identified with the cross-sectional survey method, *causality* does not exist. The research provides data proving that soft news consumption and opinions about democracy are correlated, but it cannot be concluded that soft news consumption *causes* certain beliefs about Chinese democracy. In addition, the result shows that the users who favor soft news believe that democratization in China has gone further than it has. However, since the regression test did not control the direction, the conclusion can be interpreted in the opposite way. Perhaps using a panel data analysis with a reversed hypothesis (the higher level of democracy opinion maintained, the more political soft news consumed) could show different correlations, illuminating the relationship between soft news and opinion about democracy in the Chinese political system.

Moreover, the study only focused on Chinese students and the result shows that there is no great difference with the American audiences in previous studies. Thus, the similarities and differences of Chinese younger generations could be studied in future research. The potential

effects of different cultures and different cognitive traditions should also be take into consideration when conducting the comparison study. Also, the link between preference of Chinese students in soft news and the their adoption in new communication technologies could be examined in an international scope in future studies to see how it related to global developments.

The last limitation that should be addressed here is that the whole study relied on the mass communication theory from the United States, which may not apply well in Chinese media environment as it did in American.

Notes:

1. Soft news refers to both news stories and entire programs. Using Patterson's definition, any given news story can be classified as hard or soft, regardless of the news program in which it appears. Alternatively, several new news formats, blends of information and entertainment, that have emerged in the past two decades, are labeled "soft news" and thereby contrasted to more traditional hard news formats, most notably the national network news (e.g., Baum, 2002b).

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Appendix A - Survey Questionnaire

Ruochen Qiu is a graduate student in mass communications, conducting research on consumption of political soft news and social media use. You were selected to participate in this survey based on random sampling. Your participation is *voluntary*, and your responses will remain *anonymous* and *confidential*. Your responses are important to us to determine accurate findings.

Political Soft News Consumption

1. What is your favorite genre of News?

   1.) Entertainment   2.) Politics   3.) Business   4.) Daily Life

   5.) Technology   6.) Other_____

2. How much do you like the political Journal or Newspaper? (" Sanlian Life Weekly", "Reference News")

   (Not at all)   (Very much)

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3. How much do you like the political television programs?

   (Not at all)   (Very much)

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4. How often do you utilize political Journal or Newspaper to get political information?

   (Not at all)   (Very much)

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5. How often do you utilize political television programs to get political information?

   (Not at all)   (Very much)

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

6. How many political television programs have you watched in this semester?

0   1-3   4-6   7-9   10 or more

7. How familiar with Chinese current politics you are?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Social Media Use

8. What sources do you seek out for news and information on subjects other than political issues?

1.) Social Media (etc. Renren)   2.) Magazines   3) News Paper

4.) TV news (etc. CCTV) 5.) Online News (etc. Xinhua Net)6.) Other_____

9. What type of news and information do you seek out first when using online or social media?

1.) Entertainment   2.) Financial   3.) Politics   4.) Daily Life

5.) Romantic   6.) Zodiac 7.) Sports 8.) Technology   9.) Other_____

10. How many news on any/all topics you obtained by referrals, sharing, post, etc via social media last week?

1.) None 2.) 1—5 3.) 6—10 4.) 11—15 5.) More than 15

11. How frequently are they political soft news?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

12. How much do you like the political news emerged on those social medias?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

13. What kind of online organized communities, groups or pages involves political news you have participated or liked?

1.) Renren Group   2.) Renren Public Page   3.) Douban Group

4.) QQ Group   5.) Baidu BBS   6.) Weibo Blog   7.)Other_____

14. How frequently do you participate in online organized communities that reflect your interest in political news?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Political Soft News

Soft News: According to a definition by Tom Patterson (2000, p. 4), soft news is "typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news." (The news like " The most pretty female member of the CPPCC national consultative Conference", "Premier Jiabao Wen opened blog" and "The youngest mayor")

Hard News: Hard new generally refers to up-to-the-minute news and events that are reported immediately while the tone of the reports are more seriously compare with soft news.

15. Have you read or watched political soft news?

1.) Yes   2.) No

16. Please estimate the quantity of political soft news you have read through social media(etc. Renren) this semester.

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

17. How much do you like the political soft news?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

18. Compared with other types of news, how frequently do you obtain by "share" or "link" through social media is political soft news?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

     1   2   3   4   5   6   7

19. How often do you read or watched the political hard news?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

     1   2   3   4   5   6   7

20. How much do you like the political hard news?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

     1   2   3   4   5   6   7

21. Please circle the names of political figures you familiar with. (The "familiar" means that you know about his/her background, occupation and responsibility for the government.)

     1.)Jiabao Wen   2.) Jinping Xi   3.) Changchun Li

     4.) Yongkang Zhou   5.) Guiren Yuan   6.) Weixin Jiang

22. How much do you know about the agenda and latest policies passed in the third session of the eleventh National People's Congress in 2010?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

     1   2   3   4   5   6   7

23. How much do you know about the election process of the people's representatives for National People's Congress?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

     1   2   3   4   5   6   7

24. How much do you know about the policies in controlling the rapid increase of the housing price announced by central government?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

     1   2   3   4   5   6   7

25. How much do you know about the ministry of supervision of PRC and its function?

(Not at all)   (Very much)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Demographics

26. What is your year in college?

1.) Freshman 2.) Sophomore   3.) Junior 4.) Senior   5.) Graduate   6.) Other

27. What is your gender?

1.) Male   2.) Female

28. What is your college major(s)?

_____

29. What is your political background?

1.) Communist Party   2.) The communist league   3.) Democratic Parties

4.) Other_____

30. Do you agree with that you can know more about Chinese current political situation and political figures through soft news?

(Strongly disagree)   (Strongly agree)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

31. Do you agree with that soft news is a sign of democracy for Chinese political system?

(Strongly disagree)   (Strongly agree)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Thank you for your compliance in taking this survey to further research in this area. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Ruochen Qiu by e-mail at queena@ksu.edu.

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Appendix B - Sample Question For Five-Item Political Knowledge Measurement

Recommended introduction: Last, here are a few questions about the government in Washington. Many people don't know the answers to these questions so if there are some you don't know just tell me and we'll go on.

1. Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by (insert name of current vice president)?

2. Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not... is it the president, the Congress or the Supreme Court?

3. How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

4. Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the election this/last month?

5. Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?

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