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AI-Driven Media Agenda Setting and Public Policy Response: Cases from Chinese Grassroots Governance

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence is reorganising media agenda setting, which is, in turn, shaping public policy response in China. This paper examines how existing response mechanisms adapt as public issues are increasingly shaped by algorithmic recommendation, short-video circulation, and AI-assisted communication. Using official documents, policy materials and examples from grassroots governance, it argues that AI has the potential to facilitate early issue detection, aggregate widely dispersed public concerns, and thus make response processes more data-sensitive. However, it is capable of splintering information, raising emotional content, directing attention to topics the platform traffic logic prefers, rather than public importance. The author contends that the fundamental constraints to the state of the policy response currently are not technical, but structural, with weak precision, incoherent interdepartmental cooperation, and inadequate follow-up and longer-term correction as the main limitations. What is, then, important is not just the use of AI, but how it is integrated into institutional practice. A more effective response relies on a framework linking monitoring, differentiated handling, coordination, and accountability.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI; Media Agenda Setting; Policy Responsiveness; Digital Governance; Grassroots Governance; China

1. INTRODUCTION

Algorithmic recommendation and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) systems, too, have recently started to redefine the media landscape in ways we couldn't be as easy to turn a blind eye to. They are reshaping not just the way information is shared, but the way public agendas are formulated and shared. Public discourse today is racing forward with new kind of quickening, reaching far broader and less stable audiences in different ways than before because short video platforms are so rapidly growing. The public sphere has at the same time been atomized even more, and this in turn has been less stable. We see the change around this data in recent years. The 57th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China illustrates that by the end of 2022 China had 1.125 billion Internet users and 42.8% plus of the total users are using the generative AI [1]. This suggests AI is now no longer a marginal technology. It has become something of a permanent structural element in the ways public attention is organized and expressed. Therefore, conventional policy response mechanisms are coming under increasing constraint, and the underpinnings of many of the older models of governance are increasingly tenuous.

At the same time, academic research in this area has not completely kept up with these shifts. Most prior research considered media agenda-setting and digital governance as separate domains, indicating a general lack of understanding about how AI-driven communication may connect with policy response. We know far more about these two fields separately than about their interaction in

practice. This vacuum is especially significant for the governance of grassroots sectors in which policy adaptation may be constrained by institutional malaise, communication breakdown between departments, as well as limited ability to respond to rapidly changing public issues. When public opinion changes rapidly and is transmitted across platforms in pieces, such weaknesses are more readily apparent.

In this paper, the Effect of AI-based Media Agenda of Policymaking in China is studied. It's grounded in official documents, policy materials, as well as multiple examples of grassroots governance. What the paper tries to demonstrate is rather straightforward: AI could have the effect of guiding governments to spot issues sooner, and acting on public concerns more quickly, while also making the policy environment noisier, more fragmented and more difficult to manage. Taking these trends in relation to one another, the paper seeks to elucidate how AI is altering the environment for policy response as it looks to locate directions for institutional adaptation to modern Chinese governance [2].

2. CORE FEATURES OF AI-DRIVEN MEDIA AGENDA SETTING

Media agendas do not occur and propagate the way they did several years ago. With the rise of artificial intelligence, more actors can participate in shaping public attention, livelihood issues are more visible than before, and public discussion proceeds at a much more rapid pace, while also becoming increasingly fragmented. Not only has this altered the process of media interaction but also the manner in which public issues receive attention and legitimacy.

2.1. Decentralization: From Media Monopoly to Distributed Agency

The agenda-setting was then all in the hands of professional news media. They chose how to discuss it, what to say about it and how news would travel far and wide. But this method has faced the threat of new, pervasive AI-driven platforms and recommendation systems. A hybrid media model like Chadwick's shows that agenda-setting is more currently situated within a far more layered environment—dominant traditional media, digital intermediaries, institutional actors, and networked publics [3].

And already we witness a clear shift — the difference among ordinary users is palpable. They no longer just consumers of information; they mediate around issues, influence the exchange of ideas and place individual issues into the larger public debate. Which means that agenda-making is more spread than it's ever been. The trend is verified by the 2025 Weibo Hot Search Trend Report, which notes social issues make up 39% of trending topics. But it is also an indicator of the number of people who are raising their voices, an indication that grassroots participation indeed does matter to whose voices get heard and how widely they are spread.

2.2. The Rise of Livelihood Issues in Media Agendas

On algorithmic platforms, immediacy, familiarity and emotional content travels farther than less engaging content. This is one reason livelihood issues have surfaced a lot more in recent years. Issues, including public services, education, health and social welfare are more easily picked up, and consumed and spread when they only would in the old days of the media when they were typically less immediate, and were often less of a partisan fight. Put another way: media agendas have increasingly come up close and personal to everyday concerns. The Top Ten Domestic Media Buzzwords of 2025 show a similar pattern: 40% of the identified high frequency terms were tied to citizen welfare.

There are deeper motives behind that uptick in visibility, however. What draws attention to a platform isn't always what matters most in the terms of policy. Traffic and engagement determine the volume

of amplification far more than social importance, so prominence online or real policy priorities don't necessarily align. Some issues surface because they conform to platform logic, not because they're the most pressing or urgent. If so, public perception of priority becomes distorted which makes policy making very difficult [4].

2.3. Acceleration and Fragmentation: Faster Opinion Cycles in the AI Era

Public concerns in the traditional days of the media platform have taken much longer to move across platforms than they do now. Mobile internet, short-video platforms, and algorithmic distribution have all contributed to this shift. Problems that previously remained smaller in size in a country can now expand greatly in a short period of time. That's closely tied to the scale of platform use in China. By the end of 2023, China had 1.074 billion online audio-visual users (98.3 percent of all internet users), according to the 2024 China Internet Audio-Visual Development Research Report. In late 2024, 1.091 billion online audio-visual users were recorded, and 1.04 billion were reported by short-video users [5]. Together, these statistics demonstrate that short-video platforms have effectively risen to become one of the principal platforms for disseminating public agendas.

But speed is only part of the story. And rapid circulation also tends toward greater fragmentation. An issue can immediately prompt concurrent discussions, numerous subtopics and competing readings. This pattern is exacerbated by recommendation systems that tailor and direct users to similar information bubbles, pushing selective exposure and polarization to new and greater levels of activation and noise [6]. Agenda setting powered by AI is not just a matter of speeding up communication. It also more deeply disrupts and destabilizes the public sphere. And while it could open up another channel for public expression on more avenues, it also puts pressure on institutions to respond more swiftly and accurately.

3. AI AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN MEDIA AGENDAS AND POLICY RESPONSE

The role of "AI" has been a key to a fundamental transformation in the relationship between media agendas and policy responses. It is letting public institutions identify changes in attention earlier, merge signals from various platforms more easily, and process a lot of data more efficiently. However, technology alone does not guide policy responses. Its effectiveness is still contingent on institutional capacity, interdepartmental coordination, and the governance practices within which these tools are embedded.

3.1. Augmentation vs. Agency: The Functional Boundaries of AI

Beyond decision-making, AI is functioning — in effect — as an information engine: that is, doing most of the heavy lifting (or at least processing) of raw information. It can parse and sort signals sourced from social media, digital platforms, and government channels, making it easier to detect and track public concerns. It could also enable institutions to respond faster to changes in public opinion. But the role of AI is only restricted to that. It senses patterns and trends, but it can't define policy objectives, weigh competing priorities, or carry out substantive intervention.

However, Alon-Barkat and Busuioc (2023) point out that algorithmic recommendations can bring automation bias and selective compliance with algorithms among humans. For example, public officials might be overly attached to the output of an algorithm and accordingly become more likely to heed the advice presented. What's more, it's conceivable to exploit the algorithm to merely explain why officials prefer to take decisions they do. In other words, AI can sway policy, but it can't replace policy. Efficient policy response continues to rely on administrative capacity, institutional interpretation, and coordination across departments. That is, the stronger technology does not solve the governance problem [3, 7].

3.2. Institutionalizing the Feedback Loop: The People's Daily Online Leadership Message Board

The Leadership Message Board of People's Daily Online is a helpful exemplar of how AI might help support policy response. Its importance has little to do with technology, as it concerns the way that digital tools are part of an institutional process. Citizens send in problems via the platform, AI-assisted systems process them and prioritize their cases, and the relevant departments handle the cases.

This opens a clearer window for scattered public concerns into the policy process. In the 14th Five-Year Plan period, the platform fielded over 3.8 million valid messages, 178.8 percent more than in the previous period. Its reply rate reached 94.3 percent, and the satisfaction level of the public was 83.3 percent [8]. These figures indicate that the platform does not operate mainly through the utilization of AI, but through integration of AI into a working response landscape. Indeed, AI provides the best support for an existing governance framework instead of functioning as a separate tool.

3.3. Monitoring, Response, and Agenda Evolution

AI monitoring enables institutions to track changes in public opinion more easily as they happen and identify potential risks earlier. But detection is only the first step. Equally important is how the government acts afterward. As significant as this may be—as much as government response to the issue reflects public sentiment—it could also influence how the issue is seen and maintained during the agenda-setting process.

A timely and persuasive response from the government will help calm expectations and contain the issue geographically to the local level. On the other hand, a delayed response or one that is merely symbolic in nature is likely to worsen the situation, fuel more debate, and prolong the life of the issue. Therefore, the interaction operates in both directions: the media agendas affect government responses, and vice versa [9].

3.4. Governance Risks in AI-Mediated Policy Response

AI can make policy response faster, but it also creates new problems. This becomes easier to see once platform visibility starts to shape what governments notice and what they respond to first.

3.4.1. Emotional Amplification and Algorithmic Distortion

Content that has an opportunity to gain popularity is content that can be taken easily by the audience. In many cases this means that emotionally charged or controversial content can spread much easier than more peaceful or less controversial content. Because of this, some issues are so visible on social media not because they are the most important, but because the platform logic fits better. This is one problem for policymakers. What gets most attention doesn't always mean that what most urgently requires response should get more attention. Studies of digital news consumption indicate that algorithmic filtering may accelerate the process of selective consumption and enhance emotional polarization through reinforcement of selective exposure [6, 10].

3.4.2. Algorithmic Opacity and the Legitimacy Gap

Also, there is a problem of opacity. Algorithms tend to function in such a manner that even the regular user may struggle to understand, and sometimes even the administrator may not be able to provide explanations. When it is not clear how and why some things are given priority over others, evaluation of whether or not any reaction that occurs with the policy becomes more difficult. According to research related to AI in the public sector [7], when algorithmic influence is difficult to discern or challenge, questions about accountability, legitimacy, and public oversight become more serious.

3.4.3. Algorithmic Dependency and the Attention–Significance Bias

Another problem arises when governments depend too much on AI algorithms to screen and identify problematic issues. Algorithms look for what is already there, data abundant, and widely discussed. The implication at the end of the day is that policy response might be too wedded to online popularity. Some of the problems may be easily identified simply because they're online, and others can easily go under the radar. This is especially the case for vulnerable groups, having no clear digital footprints. In such a case, what governments notice first is not necessarily what is most important. What results is attention bias in which platform visibility shapes policy response much more strongly than true social need [4, 7].

4. PRACTICAL DILEMMAS OF AI-MEDIATED POLICY RESPONSE

As AI finds its way into more and more elements of public administration, the relationship between media agendas and policy response draws increasingly closer. But, this has also made some older problems more transparent. When public opinion moves quickly and debate becomes fragmented, the usual means of responding don't always stay ahead. These challenges make the ability to respond to issues on an individual level less effective, and the capacity of institutions to handle a changing public opinion environment diminished. Four problems stand out.

4.1. Temporal Lag: Gaps Between Detection and Response

The first problem is delay. Among many grassroots departments, policy reaction continues to be slower than online public opinion. That can often result from uneven resources and a lack of technical capacity. Many cities and states rely on manual searches, keyword checks, or even delayed reports to track online public opinion, instead of automated search algorithms. Therefore, the process of identifying issues is slower than their emergence and dissemination via social media.

Compare it to formal obligations that must be fully adhered to and the issue takes an even more severe turn. The Guidelines of the General Office of the State Council on Improving Public Opinion Response state that for major emergencies a press briefing takes place within 24 hours and for more general government-related public discussion, within 48 hours. On the local level, policies emphasize active surveillance and rapid cooperation. Practically, these standards are difficult to follow precisely due to poor supervision and a low early-warning system that sometimes gives rise to more serious disputes that build on small ones [11].

4.2. Substantive Decoupling: Procedural Response vs. Public Needs

A second problem is that administrative solutions don't always serve public needs. A complaint may be officially accepted, but the core problem remains unaddressed. Which is to say: A quicker response does not always translate into a better policy response. People's Daily Online Leadership Message Board illustrates this emphatically. The response rate was 94.3% for the 14th Five-Year Plan period and 83.3% for public satisfaction rate [8]. Put differently, a relatively good reply rate is not proof of overall resolution. It is not about whether a response is given; it is whether or not it solves the issue.

4.3. Structural Compartmentalization: The Persistence of Institutional Silos

Policy response is based on whether problems can be identified, but also on whether related data can travel easily across departments. That is still a problem in a lot of local settings. In particular, departmental silos, fractured streams of information, and unclear lines of responsibility can affect public opinion management. When AI systems can spot signs of new problems, however, those signals frequently do not spread outside of the department in which they initially emerge. The

consequence is that early signals may not be able to lead to joint action at all, across agencies. Such issue is also reflected in official policy statements.

In the policy agenda submitted in China, the 12345 Government Service Hotline had repeatedly stressed the importance of inter-departmental coordination, the use of shared knowledge bases, real-time data integration, and work-order transfer. Fujian Province, for instance, mandates real-time incorporation of government service data into the 12345 platform, and provides transfer and dispatch mechanisms for complex complaints. Central wisdom on public opinion management also emphasizes coordination between departments, including — publicity, public security, and emergency management, especially in a crisis. Cross-level and cross-domain data sharing has also been emphasized in recent policy papers. Together, these requirements suggest that the issue isn't "information deficit" but rather that institutional mechanisms have yet to be fully adapted to collaborative governance [11].

4.4. Hotspot Orientation: Short-Termism and Agenda Distortion

The second issue is that AI-mediated governance can focus too much on high-visibility "hotspot" issues. The platform's logic often rewards quick dissemination and strong emotional response content. One consequence of this is that policy attention is focused on what is most visible online, rather than what really matters in the longer term. Under such conditions, digital attention might not convey real social urgency. Nowhere is this more obvious than with today's public problems. As seen in China, national policy documents still continue to be based on educational equity, county-level distribution of public resources, and equal access to medical care [12].

The problem is more structural—deeper-set ones in this environment. If policymakers let visibility on platforms play in too easily, it can be more difficult to gauge whether what is given much of the most attention really matters. Governance can run in negative directions with insufficient mechanisms for review, policy learning and follow-up: an issue becomes a hotspot; emergency action orders are issued; media attention ebbs and flows; and the issue resurfaces. Here's where the hotspot orientation is much more than just agenda distortion; it is also something called short-termism. The big-ticket high-profile issues are appearing more and more and the low-visibility but still important issues go unaddressed.

5. CASE STUDIES OF AI-MEDIATED POLICY RESPONSE IN CHINA

Such recent practices in China are some cases illustrating how AI is being applied within the context of policy response. These cases demonstrate that the usefulness of AI is not purely technology-related. To its proper extent, more relevant is its integration with existing institutional mechanisms and procedures for issue detection, classification, coordination, and feedback. The following are examples of how AI-assisted policy response unfolds at local and provincial level.

5.1. The People's Daily Online Leadership Message Board: Institutionalizing a Feedback Loop

The Leadership Message Board on People's Daily Online can serve as an example of how AI can be integrated into policy response. And here, that influence is not simply about using algorithmic tools, but in the incorporation of those tools into an institutional process. The citizen-generated data in the platform is compiled as citizen complaints, AI-assisted sorting, AI-assisted organizing and classification, and the responsible department is responsible for cases. Thus public concern is bound up with an already-established response procedure.

This is demonstrated by the platform's performance during the 14th Five-Year Plan period. Its response rate was 94.3%, it had 83.3% public satisfaction. These numbers imply that the platform is

not simply an AI platform, but rather an embodiment and embedding of AI into the relatively stable processes of collection, classification, response, and feedback of issues. In other words, we all know that AI will work best if it supports an existing governance arrangement — rather than acting as an alternative, independent form of governance.

5.2. Zhejiang's "Zheliban": Interdepartmental Coordination and Smart Governance

Zheliban presents an additional sample of AI-assisted policy response. Under the governance principle "People's Calls, My Actions," the platform uses AI-based public opinion monitoring to interconnect governmental–citizen dialogue across different departments. In 2024, it reacted to hundreds of thousands of public complaints; its AI assistant kept a 24/7 consultation according to a vast service knowledge repository.

This relates less to the digital interface itself than to how well integrated the digital interface becomes into a wider governance process. The platform integrates the issues management, departmental collaboration, service delivery and public feedback. This would mean that, in terms of cooperative institutional environments, employing AI would contribute to a better policy response. Otherwise, digital tools are in danger of becoming nothing more than embedded conduits to consultation, rather than fundamental features of a meaningful administrative response.

5.3. Guiren Zhiban: Precision and Its Limits in the Use of Large Language Models

The Guiren Zhiban AI assistant in Guizhou Province is also considered to be an example with big language models for government. A large-model system (a provincial knowledge base upon which it bases its work) connecting citizens' popular questions to official government systems. This service is built to work on recurring types of services, especially if you expect to make thorough recommendations for requests that are occurring more frequently than before and should be somewhat predictable.

The platform has managed to sort and achieve fair quality matching accuracy on the platform (official accounts have it). Now, the language models would help spread information out and preserve a recurring pattern of consultations. But at the same time it is a sobering reminder of the shortcomings of those systems. They are best for structured, rule-based applications; less effective in the face of ambiguous or contested issues or politically charged challenges. In this sense, Guiren Zhiban also illustrates the challenges and limits of a large language model at local level of governance and where it may make things tedious like consultation; on the other hand, it should give humans the part of the process if certain cases are really difficult questions.

5.4. The Taizhou 12345 Hotline: Operational Speed and Substantive Resolution

The Taizhou 12345 hotline is indicative of this practical, AI-powered administrative response. The system's daily usage in identifying requisites and generating requisites and also in applying requisites and collecting feedback improved the daily usage for everyday service by introducing a large-model tool. Official accounts also reported that it simplified manual sorting and increased public satisfaction.

But this case also shows a real limit, very clearly at the same time. Faster is better. Faster handling doesn't mean faster problem solving. That simply is not the case. Administrative speed matters only if the same improvements translate into better implementation and follow-up. From that perspective, the Taizhou AI doesn't simply run fast to support its data processing but so that the speed can become a more powerful tool in the decision making of policy. If not, that would be simply procedural rather than substantive reward.

6. PATHWAYS FOR OPTIMIZING AI-MEDIATED POLICY RESPONSE

A more immediate approach to improving policy response to the AI era, in this case, would be more than implementing new technology. It also requires changes to the institutional context in which the technology is used. These issues underscore that access to faster processing of information alone is no longer enough. What matters is whether the AI is linked to workable response procedures, clear responsibilities, and effective accountability. Hence, it must be strengthened in four ways: monitoring, differentiated response, collaboration, and accountability [13].

6.1. Building Accountable and Multi-Dimensional Monitoring Systems

The first goal is developing a monitoring mechanism capable of discovering problems at an earlier stage without infringing the law and ethical boundaries. AI will allow integrating data from various online platforms, finding clusters, identifying changes in public opinion, and discovering potential threats at an early stage. It will decrease the period from the formation of a particular problem until the corresponding policy is developed.

However, increased monitoring efforts should not affect the legality and legitimacy of the process. At present, the monitoring mechanism of public opinion based on the use of AI has to comply with a certain regulatory framework established in China, which includes the Cybersecurity Law, the Data Security Law, and the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) [14]. Additionally, new standards related to the safety of network data have been introduced. They have specified the legal collection, processing, and protection of personal data [14]. It means that the implementation of artificial intelligence technologies in the monitoring process should be seen as the part of good governance rather than a mere tool to expand the scope of government control.

6.2. Differentiated Response and Priority Setting

Second, problems should not be approached the same way. They must be prioritized by urgency, likely social impact, and policy relevance. Some topics (e.g., public safety, healthcare, education) would require a much faster and stronger response than others. But there are limitations to this method, too. Online attention is shaped more by the logic of the platform and by the type of user participation and circulation that occur than by actual social importance. If governments react to what gets seen (or at least is visible) online, they may unintentionally forget communities who are of great concern but hardly visible on digital platforms. The differentiated response cannot be based only on "online heat." That requires institutional channels that can flag issues that are low in visibility but high significance. Indeed, AI can support not only efficiency, but also fairness and inclusion in policy response [4, 7].

6.3. Strengthening Government–Media–Public Collaboration

Better response would be achieved with enhanced cooperation between the government, media and public [15]. An important task of the government should be to build up data sharing and coordination mechanisms for issue signals exchange between agencies. This trend is already evident in the design of Chinese policy, particularly the reform of the 12345 government service hotline. National policy documents advocate for shared knowledge bases, real-time integration of departmental service data, and transfer or dispatch approaches to specialized complaints [16, 17]. These measures demonstrate that digital governance is optimally placed where information does not remain secluded in isolated departments, but can be mobilized into collaborative action.

In this context, mainstream media still has an influential place. It serves not only as a means for releasing information, but also as a strategy for managing public dialogue and ensuring the articulation of public concerns in a systematic form. Whereas, the public does not serve just the

function of being a source of information, but rather it also becomes an element of the feedback mechanism. Thus, increased cooperation among all three institutions involved in policy making would enhance the response to issues, since it will ensure closer coordination between issue identification, communication, and implementation stages. Nevertheless, such an approach remains dependent on clear guidelines as to platform operations.

6.4. From Crisis Response to Reflexive Governance: Closing the Accountability Loop

AI-based policy response also needs a stronger accountability system. The point is not only to check whether a response was fast, but also whether it actually solved the problem, whether similar problems appear again, and whether institutions learn from the process. Accountability, in this sense, should not be understood only as retrospective blame. It should also function as a way of reviewing performance and improving later responses.

It fits well into the public policy cycle model in that setting the agenda, implementation, and assessment have been viewed as interrelated rather than distinct steps. The implication here, within the realm of AI-supported governance, is that there is a need for greater traceability and institutional memory when it comes to response systems. This would be facilitated through AI in that it will be possible to trace the handling of an issue from time to time and to compare one case against another regionally. If used in this way, accountability is not only about correcting failure after the fact. It also becomes part of a broader shift from short-term crisis response toward longer-term institutional learning and resilience [2].

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the change process that generative AI is bringing to media agenda setting and what that means for policy response in China's grassroots governance. The research indicates that AI could enhance issue detection and make public worries easier to notice and consolidate. However, at the same time, it generates new problems such as fragmentation, emotional amplification, and bias in issue visibility. The problems with policy response today are thus not only technological ones. They are also institutional – particularly as they relate to response precision, cooperation at the departmental level and long-term learning.

The paper's point is also that AI can't simply be reduced to a mechanical efficiency device or some reductionist model. The connection between the media agendas and the policy response is also re-shaped. As the China cases show, the piece reminds us that AI will produce value-rich processes in many institutional contexts. Technology is crucial, but so are processes, coordination and accountability. But the study has its limitations, too. Mostly based on public documents and specific examples, it cannot encompass the variety of local practice. Hidden but no less genuine issues will still seem to be underrepresented, apparently. In future studies, such as more interviews, analyzing the data of the platforms, and comparison with other jurisdictions, this might help in better understanding better ways to improve AI-enhanced governance and develop institutions that are more reflective and responsive to social needs.

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