

Chapter 7

The Rise of the Chinese Blogosphere

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ABSTRACT

In comparison with the USA and Europe, the Chinese blogosphere was off to a later start; however, it has experienced phenomenal growth since its formal birth in 2002. Now China boasts by far the largest blogging community in the world, surpassing the blogger population in the United States and Europe combined. Chinese bloggers are among the first globally to both actively engage in blog writing and reading. Although the Chinese blogosphere has closely followed the global path of technological innovation and ingenuity, it has taken many of its own unique twists and turns in terms of its creative uses and impact on the social, political and cultural contexts of Chinese society. Focusing on the popularization of blogs, mainstreaming, and commercialization of the global cyber culture in China, this chapter paints a portrait of a Chinese blogger. Due to the omnipresent state control of cyberspace and heavy-handed state censoring of online information, most Chinese bloggers have shied away from politically sensitive and subversive issues and topics. The most popular blogging topics include the documentation of personal experiences and the expression of individual viewpoints on a wide range of topics; these topics are followed by hobbies, entertainment, and amusement.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 China's Internet users made up less than 1% of the world's Internet population; in 2007 they comprised about 16% of the global Internet total (Stanley, 2008). Against this backdrop of an

explosive growth of the Internet in China (Fanning, 2008; MacLeod, 2008) and amidst the global ballyhoo of blogs, the blogosphere has captured the imagination of millions of Chinese netizens with blogging as one of the top ten Internet applications (China Internet Network Information Center, 2008). The first blog-like type of online content appeared in the United States in 1994 (Barlow, 2007). The

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mainstreaming and popularization of blogs as a web phenomenon and as a social, political, and cultural force occurred at the turn of the new century: that is, years earlier than Jorn Barger first introduced a “weblog” and Peter Merholz coined the term “blog” (Barlow, 2007; Blood, 2002).

The history of the blog in China’s cyberspace, however, began much later. While a handful of users already used a few blogging sites at the beginning of the new century, the Chinese blogosphere was not officially born until the publication of Blog China¹ in August 2002. Blog China introduced the term “*Boke*” (Mandarin Chinese for both “blogs” and “bloggers”) to the Chinese blogosphere and became the first website in China dedicated to blogging (Fang & Wang, 2003).

Since 2002, the Chinese blogosphere has experienced a remarkable growth. By November 2007, China registered about 47 million bloggers (about one fourth of China’s Internet population), with 16.9 million being active contributors (updating blog entries weekly or more often); there were 72.8 million blog “spaces” (sites) published in China, of which 28.8 million were active ones (being updated at least monthly) (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007). The rapid popularity of blogs in China brought a new dynamic to the multiple dimensions of the Chinese cyberspace. Although the blogosphere in China has closely followed the global path of technological innovation and ingenuity, it has taken many of its own unique twists and turns with respect to its creative uses and impact on the social, political and cultural scenes of Chinese society.

BACKGROUND

User Generated Content holds a special place among Chinese netizens. Blogs, together with a variety of other social media technologies, fulfill a niche need for diverse users (Bruns, 2008). Universal McCann, a global media communications agency, has conducted three waves

of world surveys of Internet users in over twenty countries from September 2006 through March 2008. Its latest survey estimates that, as of March 2008, China has over 42 million bloggers (cf. 47 million estimated by the China Internet Network Information Center as of November 2007, as mentioned earlier)² out of a worldwide total of 184 million. China’s blogging community is by far the largest in the world, larger than that in the U.S. and Western Europe combined (Universal McCann, 2008).

The prominence of blogs in the cyber culture of a particular nation can be demonstrated by the percentage of Internet users who regularly read and write blogs. Of the 29 nations surveyed by Universal McCann in its Third Wave study in interviewing active Internet users (i.e., using the Internet every day or every other day), China is ranked third (88.1% of Chinese netizens reported ever reading blogs), slightly trailing South Korea (92.1%) and the Philippines (90.3%). By comparison, only 60.3% Internet users in the United States reported ever reading blogs, putting the U.S. close to the bottom on the list (Universal McCann, 2008).

However, using a different measure, which calculates the percentage of users who reported reading the blogs on a daily or weekly basis among all blog readers, China leads the rest of the nations with 89% of its users saying they do it, trailed closely by South Korea and Brazil (tied at 84%), Japan (82%), and India (81%). The United States again is found close to the bottom of the list, with only 65% of blog readers reporting doing this weekly or more often. This higher level of dependence on blogs, as a particular type of User Generated Content (UGC) in Chinese cyberspace used more than anywhere else, is quintessentially consistent with previous findings that Chinese netizens are more likely to access other types of similar content, such as BBS and chat rooms, than their counterparts elsewhere (Tai, 2006).

Likewise, there is also a strong tendency among Chinese Internet users to contribute content to

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