

THE BLOG AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA

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The paper examines briefly the dynamics of the blog and the development of civil society in China. First, the paper introduces the basic features of the blog followed by a brief account of its penetration in China. Second, it discusses an indigenous concept of civil society and its relation with the Internet in general and the blog in particular. Third, it uses two blog examples to illustrate the possible development of civil society in China.

Keywords: blogs, blogging, civil society, China, Internet, uncoerced communication

The increasing popularity of the Internet in China has already had a significant impact on the mainstream media (MSM) which is controlled by the central government. As a consequence, people have access to more varied sources of information than before. Personal blogs and other news sources are easily available both on local and international websites. The emergence of weblog (blog) on a variety of topics and approaches best exemplifies this media impact. Briefly, blog is a new form of webpage. They are largely personal accounts with posts, links and commentary archived in reverse chronological order (O Baoill 2004). Its easy-to-use technology allows the bloggers to post whatever they like on their blogs with little effort and has led to a new form of online personal expression and communication. As the information is less filtered in blogs, the bloggers can enjoy relatively more freedom in circulating their ideas online (Jiang 2006). The traditional stranglehold of information in China has been seriously challenged

by the blog. This paper will examine briefly the dynamics of the blog and the development of civil society in China.

Buchstein (1997) and Fromkin (2003) suggest that the Internet has generated ideal conditions for the public sphere as argued by Habermas (1989). This cyber sphere provides a possible platform for equal, transparent, inclusive, and rational conditions of discourse. Buchstein argues that, "[The Internet] offers universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, and unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet looks like the most ideal speech situation." (1997:250) Following this line of thought, it is claimed that the emergence of the Internet will significantly facilitate the development of civil society in China. However, others point out that the Internet is unlikely to bring revolutionary change in China because the central government has implemented the most

powerful, sophisticated, and broad-reaching filtering system to curtail the circulation of politically sensitive information (Chase and Mulvenon 2002). But if this issue is put in a broader context of economic and social modernity, China has to compromise its authoritarian control of the Internet in order not to obstruct the economic reform and liberal policy to which China is unrelentingly committed (Harwit and Clark 2001). Liu, the well known dissident, claims that the Internet has given people in China more room for disseminating critical information and opinions (Liu 2006). The emergence of blogging in Mainland China has been one of the most influential means for disseminating critical information and views.

Although the blog is a new form of webpage, its importance was widely noted when it started in 1997. Many researchers have explored the social consequences of the blog with particular reference to journalism and media communication (Kim 2005; Walker 2003). In spite of the diversity of blogs, Krishnamurthy (2002) categorizes them into four types along two dimensions: individual vs. community and personal vs. topical. While blogs are largely written by individuals, some have a community of authors (Gill 2004). Personal blogs mainly record the bloggers' personal information, thoughts, and feelings. The topical blogs, in addition to their personal information, always focus on some interesting topics such as photography or relevant public issues found in the mainstream media (MSM).

In the case of topical blogs, the bloggers are mostly amateurs who express their views with passion rather than professional journalists writing news or commentary (Gill 2004). When their blogs deal with public issues, they are always capable of providing "new perspectives and new facts every minute" (Hewitt 2005). Blogging has made the grassroots or the netroots more participatory in public or political affairs (Kerbel and Bloom 2005), changing them from readers/observers to writers/commentators. Some studies show that the sources of information they input are often more credible than the MSM or other online information (Johnson and Kaye 2004; Hewitt 2005). In addition, the easily-to-use technology of the blog, a democratized media (Kim 2005), often triggers discussions between the bloggers and the readers. The blogrolling and trackback tools also allow the bloggers with the shared interests on specific issues to easily group themselves, forming an online community – blogosphere (Wei 2004). Some also attempt to attract and interact with the more general public, with the aim of fostering more open public debate (O Baoill 2004). Unlike other online communities which are usually lacking in structure or organization, topical bloggers can easily convert themselves from a virtual into real community, thereby facilitating the formation of social or political groups. The 'Blog for America' is an example showing how the virtual and the real have been connected and the community formed has survived after the presidential election (Kerl and Bloom 2005).

In short, the blog technology has brought considerable changes in the informational landscape. Topical blogs (Krishnamurthy 2002) are online platforms for grassroots or netroots discussion of public or political issues. They form democratically constituted blogospheres. When the partisanship of the members of these blogospheres is sufficiently high, a basis for transforming virtual to real communities is established. The participants are initially observers; after blogging they might become commentators or sometimes actors. It is in this context that this paper explores the relationship between blogging and the development of civil society in China Mainland.

The blog has indeed penetrated China significantly. The first instance of a blog in China was in 2002. Fang Xingdong, a developer of *blogchina*, wanted to develop a personal webpage to post his personal opinions on the Internet. He was extremely annoyed when his articles on the internet media in China were removed by the authorities. He found out about blogging, a technology becoming popular abroad, particularly in the U.S. Fang developed *blogchina* in August 2002, the first blog in China. By 2005 there were 16 million blog sites and by 2007 about 72.8 million. Most blogs are mainly personal, others are topical while yet others deal with public issues such as MSM or social networks. I argue that this phenomenon of blogging enables an expanded scope for public discussion and hence the development of civil society in China.

The concept of civil society is problematic when applied to Chinese society (White, Howell, and Shang 1996; Ding 2000). There are three kinds of popular definitions of civil society: It is an intermediate associational activity situated between the state and different sections of society (individuals, families and firms); it consists of social organizations separate from the state, enjoying a level of autonomy from the state; it is organized voluntarily by people to defend, protect, or advance their goals, interests, and values. Unlike the western one, the Chinese conception of civil society is not a confrontational state-civil society relations but a passive one, as the state exercises enormous control on social organization in China (Schwartz 2004).

Yang Guobin (2003a) suggests only an incipient nature of Chinese civil society since social organizations in China have emerged only for a couple of decades and their developments are weak compared to the West. Yang conducted a study of the relationship between the Internet and civil society in China (Yang 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Yang integrates Habermas' and Calhoun's suggestions and explored Internet use in three key areas of Chinese civil society namely: public sphere, social organizations, and popular protest. His project tentatively concludes that the social uses of the Internet in China have fostered discussion in the public sphere and has changed social organizations through their incorporation of the online communities. These online communities have also introduced new elements in igniting

social protest (2003a). Yang also points out that the development of the Internet and civil society should be co-evolutionary, since the urge for public discussion, the dynamics of social organizations and active social movements are likely to lead to considerable diffusion of the Internet in China (2003b).

Yang's research has set an important landmark for understanding the Internet and civil society in China. His studies have been mostly issue-based since the research mainly relies on the content analysis of BBS forums, chatrooms, or the materials on the websites. With the emergence of the blog, it is easier to follow the development of the individual Internet users (bloggers) and their blog communities participating in the discussion of public forums. Thus examining the blog would certainly provide a broader picture than the previous studies have done on understanding the development of civil society in China.

When studying the blog in relation to the public sphere, the focus can be put on: whether the bloggers argue according to the norms of a free discussion rather than "bullying" the participants; whether the better argument prevails over social hierarchy such as gender or social position; whether new areas of questioning and criticism are introduced; and whether anyone is allowed to participate in the discussion. It is important to assess whether bloggers change their attitudes on the basis of argumentation concerning the issues they

are interested after going through debates or discussions on the net. Thus one of the aspects is the understanding of identity transformation.

We do not assume that identity on the Internet is fixed or unitary but instead consider that it may be fragmented or fluid. At one level, blogs easily reveal the online identity of authors. Thus, identity change is relatively easy to recognize. This change can be recognized by the ways of discussing issues in the Internet public sphere or whether bloggers' switch from passive participation online to involvement in the physical world.

In addition to the study of the identity transformation, the concepts of social organization and social movement are also central to understanding civil society. However, we have to specify and refine these concepts as they apply in China.

Societal organization (rather than NGO) is considered one of the key components of Chinese civil society. Organizations which enjoy relative autonomy from the state is central to the discussion of civil society and non-governmental organization (NGO) is a key component in the western world. In China (Yang 2003a; Schwartz 2004) incipient and nonconfrontational models of civil society, are more appropriate than the western NGO model. The latter barely exist in China. Instead, societal organizations in China may include: organizations under the control of the government and the communist party (some are very influential for government policy); quasi-governmental and quasi-

people or governmental as well as people (this category does not depend solely on government funding and have relatively more freedom); local organizations (they are entirely independent and have emerged in recent years), and finally web-based organizations.

Unlike social movements in the West, China does not presently tolerate confrontational and organized protest against the state. Therefore the concept of social movements in China should be expanded to include online debates on public issues, online protests, as well participation in physical events. In this context, we discuss two blog examples to illustrate the possible development of indigenous civil society in China.

The first blog is about a child who contracted leukemia and while a matched bone marrow was available, the family could not afford the needed operation. The child's father (with assistance from a friend) set up a blog to request donations and to spread the news regarding their plight. Using other bloggers, BBS, QQ (ICQ), SMS and email were used to spread their appeal. The blog posted pictures of the child as well as his diagnosis and prognosis. News spread fast on the net. Many bloggers posted the link on their blogs and some very popular bloggers helped the donation campaign. A blogger philanthropic group was formed with branches in many cities. The blogging group planed the 4th of February of 2007 as the donation date throughout the country.

As a consequence of all this activity,



the campaign attracted the mainstream media's attention. Beijing TV carried out live broadcasts of the day's donation event. The Beijing branch received 4,206 yuan as donation. By the 4th of March 2007, 358,400 yuan had been collected, of which bloggers and other internet users donated 241,100 yuan. The bone marrow transplant took place on March 26. A second operation was done in April because the first transplant was not successful. A wealthy donor gave 100,000 yuan on April 19 for the child's second operation. The blog continued posting the condition of the child, how the donated money had been used, including the receipts issued by the hospital.

This example did not involve complex or heated debates online.

Instead it resulted in the voluntary formation of a virtual group that subsequently led to societal organizations throughout China. A social movement in raising the money involved was also generated.

The power of the blog is also reflected in the example concerning the demolition of old houses and building of new high-rise apartments in Chongqing. One of the original residents refused to move out unless the developer agreed to resettle their family on the original place with the same house size. The developers initially refused and all the houses (except the protestor's) were demolished, while electricity and water were cut off. But the household was determined and insisted on staying. Many people posted their opinion on the chatrooms or forum but

their posts were quickly removed. The case then spread to the blogs where many posted their opinions. This led to a vigorous discussion of the case in the cyber world. Soon after, the case also attracted the mainstream media and spread globally. Because of the publicity, the developer feared forcing the household out of their premises. When the local government's deadline requiring the household to move out arrived, many local people surrounded the construction site and supported the family, including news reporters. Consequently, the local government and the developer relented and gave generous conditions for the family concerned. The later agreed to move out and received a large compensation.

In this example, we can also see the



power of the blog in handling this social incident. The case attracted a young blogger who traveled from his hometown Hunan Province to Chongqing city to be able to report on the case and pass on valuable information for other bloggers. They in turn circulated the information globally. The mainstream media also interviewed the young blogger who was referred to afterwards as the first "citizen" reporter of the cyber world. This case illustrates the influence of the virtual on the real world and their ineffable commingling. This case did not generate well organized social groups or movements but it nevertheless succeeded in its purpose. It has since become an important precedent in defense of the weak and powerless in Chinese society.

Concerning the discussion on the bet, at the initial stage, many posts on the website and on the blogs discussed this issue and the opinions were about how the rich people and those with power oppressed the poor. A month later, the discussion had become more mature and focused on the issue of property rights. This is a new concept for most Chinese because during the imperial period all property belonged to the emperor. After

the communist revolution, it belonged to the state. Only after the open door policy in 1979, was the concept of private property discussed and even encouraged by the Communist Party. However, the Internet and particularly the blog, has initiated fuller discussions about property rights in China. It is too early to conclude that these discussions of private property mark definite stages in the development of civil consciousness and civil rights. But at least there is now a space (for now mainly cyber) for initiating such discussions.

While the two examples discussed may not be typical in illustrating the link between blogging and the development of civil society in Mainland China, they at least provide material for further theoretical and empirical investigation. There is little doubt that blogs have introduced a new element of civil discourse hitherto restricted in China. Further research and corresponding political and social changes will determine how significant CMICT is for the development of civil consciousness and democratic processes. The evidence seems to indicate there is ground for hope that the new media will open more spaces for an ideal public sphere where ordinary people can participate freely.

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