

Blogs as a New Form of Public Participation in Mainland China

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The relationship between democracy and mass communication has long been one of the central themes in social studies. The tradition can be traced back to works in social theories long before communication studies became a separate academic field, works by French sociologist Gabriel de Tarde and American philosopher John Dewey in particular. More recently, the works by Jurgen Habermas emphasize the importance of political participation and the role of the public sphere in democracy. At present, development of Internet technology has brought about the rise of new forms of communication and public participation, such as BBS, virtual chatting rooms, blogs and so on. This has extended the study of the mass communication-democracy relationship into public participation in cyberspace.

The Rise of the Blogosphere

Many scholars in the fields of political studies and communication studies have been addressing the issue of implications of the innovative “blogosphere” and citizen journalism/grassroots journalism for democracy. This paper attempts to study this issue in the Chinese context. It will discuss, on the basis of examining the content of blogs on a few websites of different types in the mainland of China, the role of blogging in public discussion of issues of general concern and the features of public participation through blogging, and it will explore the interplay between these new, online media and the traditional mass media and analyze the merits and demerits of blogging in the democratic processes.

In social studies, researchers have long addressed the theme of connection between democracy and mass communication. With the development of Internet technologies, new forms of public discussion in cyberspace have attracted academic attention to the issue of connection between such new forms of public discussion and democracy. Building on theories of the public sphere, political democracy, social functions of mass media, and so on, many scholars have studied online forms of information and opinion dissemination and exchanges such as BBS, online chatting rooms, and blogs, in an attempt to examine this connection. This paper sets out to contribute to academic understanding of the issue in the Chinese context. At a time when the number of Internet users in Mainland China has reached 210 million, according to statistics given in the latest report issued by the China Internet Network Information Center, the high rates of Internet penetration demonstrate the significance of new online forms of communication. This calls for studies of such new forms.

Blogs on four different websites in China are chosen for study. These are: the website of the People’s Daily (www.people.com.cn), a well-known commercial portal site – www.sina.com.cn – a website with a blog channel (<http://blog.china.com>) claiming to be the “biggest portal for professionals,” and a blog website – www.blogcn.com. The writer decides on a two-time-span design for this study: from January 1 to December 31, 2007 as the first time span, and two weeks in late January 2008 (during the meetings of the local People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference). Owing to time constraints the writer faces in carrying out this research, she chooses to study a sample of the blogs rather

than the whole population of the blogs on these websites during the first time span. Sampling is done through the following steps: For each website, four bloggers are selected, two famous/prominent bloggers and two ordinary ones; for each week, two days are selected (i.e., weekends for 9 months and two week days a week for 3 months, because bloggers may have more time for writing and posting their messages during the weekends). Added to that is a study for the period of two weeks in late January 2008 when provincial/municipal People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) held meetings, as such a period naturally prompts more public discussion on issues of general concern. It is assumed that the blog content during such a period is likely to be somewhat different from routine blogging in terms of attention paid to public issues.

Theoretical Background

Mass Communication and Democracy

The tradition of studying the relationship between mass communication and democracy can be traced back to classical social theories. As early as the end of the 19th century, Gabriel de Tarde, in his study of modern Western society emphasized the importance of the public and public opinion. To Tarde, the forming of publics depends on shared experiences of their members, who may not be in the same or nearby physical places. According to Tarde, among various factors that exerted an impact on the emergence of modern publics, newspapers had a particularly essential role as newspapers helped to set the topics for public discussion and facilitated the formation of nation-wide public opinion. Meanwhile, he also touched upon the issue of interpersonal contacts playing a conjunctive role with the mass media in this aspect. In a series of articles, including "La Conversation," he explored the connections between the state, the government, the parliament, the venues of public conversations (such as pubs and coffee houses), public opinion, and social actions, particularly highlighting public opinion and its connection with the emerging medium of newspapers (Clark, 1969). The American philosopher John Dewey analyzed the link between mass communication and democracy about three decades before communication studies turned into a separate field. Dewey stressed the importance of discussion, consultation and debate on "social needs and troubles" to democracy (Dewey, 1927; Festenstein, 1997). Concerned about the decline of the factors that bound traditional communities, such as family ties, neighborhood connections and so on, Dewey explored the potential role of the rising medium of newspapers in filling the void left by the decline of such factors, for he observed that this medium brought about new forms of public discussion. Tarde and Dewey's works could be said to anticipate later studies into the role of the media in democratic processes.

More recently, Jurgen Habermas in his works emphasizes the importance of political participation and the role of the public sphere in democracy. He was critical of the negative effects of the media when addressing the issue of the transformation of public sphere in Western societies from the liberal public sphere to a media-dominated one in the 20th century (Habermas, 1962,1989), but his later works' exploration of the critical conditions under which mediated political communication can play a positive role in deliberative democracies (Habermas, 2006) indicates his concern for the implications of the media for democracy.

Among Chinese scholars, the issue of the relationship between democracy and mass

communication has also been discussed in various works on journalism, social functions of mass communication, etc. Like their international counterparts, Chinese scholars have in recent years accorded much attention to the interplay between media development and development in ways of democratic participation by the public.

New Forms of Online Public Discussion and Democracy

As innovative things keep emerging along with the rapid development of new information technologies, the rise of new forms of public discussion based upon Internet technologies has brought a new phase in the study of the mass communication-democracy relationship. As various forms of open online dissemination and exchanges of information and opinions such as BBS, virtual forums, online chatting rooms and blogs have begun to be increasingly used in people's social-political lives, many scholars have started to study the implications of such new forms on democracy in the new setting. A search with Google (Scholar) by typing "Internet and democracy" leads to 155,000 results, and typing "blogs and democracy," leads to 4,300 results (January 2008). Dan Gillmor (2004) expounds the role of grassroots journalism/ citizen journalism in democracy. David Beers talks about "new forms of online journalism and their democratic potential and limitation" (Beers, 2006). Debra A. Adams holds that the Internet technologies "have enabled the creation of new publishing spaces where diverse voices engage in conversation about matters affecting daily lives" (Adams, 2006). Steve Outing, in his discussion of citizen journalism, summarizes it into 11 layers (Outing, 2005). Joichi Ito and others view the flourishing of blogs, open publishing online and so on as symbolizing an "emergent democracy," (i.e., a new form of democracy that indicates changes in flow of power not only in media industries, but also in society) (Ito, 2003). Stephen Coleman regards blogs as "democratic listening posts" enabling people to "pick up signals of subjective expression which might inform debate in these more reflexively democratic times" (Coleman, 2005, p. 276). Axel Bruns uses the term "produsage" to describe an "emergent user-led content creation environments," and holds that Web 2.0 environments have a profound impact "on social practices, the media, economic and legal frameworks and democratic society itself" (Bruns, 2007). M. Roberts et al. and Byoungkwan Lee et al. both examine the relationship between online discussion and the agenda of the traditional media, but their findings are markedly different. Based upon research carried out in the U.S., M. Roberts et al. hold that the traditional media agenda exerts an impact on the discussion through BBS (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). But Byoungkwan Lee et al. in a study in South Korea, observe that the online Bulletin Board Systems had an inter-media agenda-setting influence on newspapers with regards to newspaper coverage of the 2000 general election (Lee, Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005).

Chinese academics have in recent years also conducted research in this area. Similar searches with Google (Scholar) using the Chinese language, led to 16,900 and 5,220 results, respectively. Dahong Min, in summarizing Internet development in China examines, among other innovative phenomena, online public opinion and its channels such as BBS and blogs (Min, 2003, 2006). Guoming Yu observes the role of the Internet in providing a new public space for discussion (Yu, 2004). Jianjun Ding discusses the impact of online opinion on democratic politics in China (Ding, 2004). Bin Zhang explores the positive influence of the Internet in accelerating the process of open governance, in promoting citizens' participation in

politics, and in strengthening the effectiveness of social supervision over the use of power (Zhang, 2002). Shen Yong Chen and Jie Du address the issue of online forum boards' role in enhancing public participation (Chen & Du, 2005). Yanfang Jiang writes about blogging during the period of meetings of the local People's Congress and CPPCC in Zhejiang Province and the construction of the public sphere (Jiang, 2006).

All these scholars' works enlighten the writer on a connection between the new, online forms of public discussion and democracy. Nevertheless, there have not been many studies of the issue in the Chinese context based upon systematic, empirical studies of the content of such new forms, except for research on some special cases that involved unusually heavy traffic on websites. This paper, therefore, attempts to study this issue through analyzing the content of blogs on four different types of websites in mainland China, examining the features of public participation in these new forms in the political life of the country, the interplay between these new comers of communication and the traditional mass media, and the merits and limitations of blogging when put to use in democratic processes.

Blogging in P. R. China: Development, Content, and Characteristics

Rise of BBS/online Forum Boards and Blogging in P.R. China

In China's mainland, BBS as a new form of public discussion emerged towards the middle of the 1990's after the Internet found its way into the country. Among the early players of the websites adopting Bulletin Board Systems, "Ying Hai Wei" (www.oihw.com) was once very popular among the early net users in P.R. China. After China's media organizations began to establish websites in 1995, the practice developed to a new stage. People's Daily's website took the lead among Chinese media websites to open an online forum board in May 1999. Through about nine years of development in the practice of running BBS, this media website has now formed an online community embracing about 30 online forum boards, including Strengthening the Nation Forum, International Affairs Forum, Theoretical Discussion Forum, Community Service Forum, Environmental Protection Forum, Fighting Against Corruption Forum, and so on. During the past few years, online forums have become common among media websites as well as portal sites in the country. Some studies have found an interactive relationship between communication activities through virtual forums and those of the traditional media in some cases. For example, Yonghua Zhang pointed out in 2007 that in such cases as the event of a big fire in Luo Yang in 2003, the new, online media provided a public space or platform for public discussion, and that the online media, with the capacity for quickly aggregating related information on the topic, had started to play the role of accelerating the process of social issues moving from the media agenda to the public agenda, thus aligning itself with the traditional media in exercising an impact on public agenda (Zhang, 2007). It was further argued that in some cases, public opinion on virtual forum boards and dissemination of news and opinions by the traditional news media resonated and reinforced each other (Zhang, 2007).

Blogging, which represents Web 2.0 technologies, was introduced in China's mainland in 2002. Xingdong Fand and Junxiu Wang opened up the blog website www.blogchina.com in August of 2002. The next year (2003), blogging was adopted by 200,000 Internet fans in China's mainland. Nanjing University opened a blog system on its website in 2003, and

Chinese University of Technologies experimented on the practice in the same year. Meanwhile, some scholars began to study weblog technology and its impact on ways of social interactions. The year 2004 witnessed the development of a commercial model of operating blog services in P. R. China. In that year, blogchina.com became the first choice of university bloggers as it opened Teachers' Blogs and Students' Blogs. In addition, at an academic conference focused on Internet communication held in Nanjing University that year, blogging became one of the hottest themes discussed. The year 2005 saw the spread of blogging beyond elites, as more and more ordinary net users became bloggers in P. R. China. It was then estimated that bloggers took up 10% of the Internet population in China's mainland (www.xinhuanet.com, March 6, 2006). The country's commercial portal sites www.sina.com.cn and www.sohu.com both opened blogging that year. Among media websites in the country, the People's Daily's website again took the lead in adopting this innovative practice. It started to provide blogging service in early 2006. During its experimental stage in late January 2006, within one week after its inauguration, it already attracted 2,000 registered bloggers, publishing over 6,000 articles, over 2,000 pictures and over 2,000 comments. (Zhang & Li, 2007). At present, other famous major websites of P.R. China such as www.qianglong.com and www.xinhuanet.com in Beijing, www.eastday.com in Shanghai, www.dayoo.com in Guangzhou, and www.enorth.com.cn in Tianjin have all adopted the practice.

Research Questions

BBS and blogging share the characteristic of enabling netizens to post and read messages on websites, thus representing new forms of public sharing of information and public discussion online. As blogging relies on more recent Internet technologies, the writer chooses to focus on blogging in this study. Although blog services have been going on for 6 years in mainland China, during its early stage of development, prominent utilization of blogging seemed to lie in private chatting. In a few early cases of blogs attracting high rates of clicks such as Mu Zimei's blogs (on the blog website www.blogcn.com) revealing her private life in 2003, which caused a stir in Internet circles due to her expressions of personal feelings and affairs. In the past two or three years, however, blog services have begun to increasingly exhibit their social functions, their roles in public discussion, public debates and public participation. In these years, on special occasions of meetings of the People's Congress and CPPCC (at both local and national levels), many deputies and reporters opened special blogs and interacted with ordinary citizens. Ordinary net users also used blogging to discuss issues of public concern or raise questions. All this indicates that in P. R. China the "blogosphere" has in recent years become a new public space where social-political discussion can take place. It may share certain features with that of the old public space, but the blogosphere is set in cyberspace which is fundamentally different from physical space. This paper attempts to contribute to the academic understanding of the issue of blogging and democracy by asking the following research questions:

- (1) Does public discussion of general concern form a substantial part of the content of blogs in P.R. China?
- (2) What is the relationship between such public discussion in blogs and the agenda of the traditional media in the country?

(3) Blogosphere can also be used and, as in the case of Mu Zimei's blogs in 2003, have been used sometimes, by some net users for talking about privacy. This makes it different from the traditional media sphere where the communication activities of the institutionalized media tend to have a collective nature. The bloggers are private individuals entering the blogosphere to post and exchange messages. Is it then similar to old public places (of the 17th - and 18th-century West) of pubs and coffee houses where private individuals who came into conversations on matters of social concern could also chat about matters of personal concern?

(4) What are the distinctive features of blogs as a new form of public discussion, debates and participation? What are the merits and limitations of blogging in terms of its role in democracy?

As blog services are provided by different types of websites in P.R. China, a systematic study of the content of blogs should cover the different websites. The selection of blogging service on the website of People's Daily, on the famous commercial portal www.sina.com.cn, on <http://blog.china.com> and on the blog website www.blogcn.com serves this purpose.

Content of Blogs on the Selected Websites in 2007

Altogether, 442 blogs from the four selected websites are collected and studied. The following paragraphs summarize their content.

Blog Content of the Selected Bloggers on the Website of People's Daily

Two Famous Bloggers

One famous blogger on www.people.com, named Yongxin Zhu, is a famous university professor and a very active figure in the local CPPCC. During the days selected for this study, Zhu posted 20 blogs. While almost all were about cultural, educational, and social activities in which he participated, these blogs describing his experience ponder in particular on such issues as reform in the field of education, equity of education, and experiment on a new model of education with emphasis on cultivating childrens' interest in reading and on their contact with nature. The other famous blogger on this website is Fei Shi, an editor for the opinion page of a provincial newspaper, who posted 33 blogs during the days selected for this study. These blogs mostly use the form of fables/parables to comment on current affairs, involving such topics as the significance of unity, mutual help and harmony, condemnation against graft and corruption, criticism over some officials' lack of the spirit of making themselves accountable to the citizens, denouncement of cheating, discussion of major issues of people's well-being (housing, pension and so on), and criticism over the excessive use of vocational qualification testing and certifying mechanisms.

Two Ordinary Bloggers

Of the two ordinary bloggers whose blogs we studied in 2007 (choosing two days each week), the first one posted 37 blogs during the selected days. Among these blogs, 8 are expressions of personal emotions; all other blogs belong to social-political discussion in a broad sense, covering the themes of anti-corruption, improving people's lives, ethos of public

service, cultural taste and quality of cultural products, social harmony, the stock exchange and other economic issues, and discipline inspection. The other blogger posted 28 blogs in the selected days for research. They are mostly about the blogger's campus life and comments on events experienced by the blogger during the campus life.

Blog Content of the Selected Bloggers on the Commercial Portal Website www.sina.com.cn

Two Famous Bloggers

One of the famous bloggers, called Acosta on the Internet, can be described as a "grassroots celebrity." The 20 blogs posted by Acosta during the selected days for study are mainly expressions of personal emotion and reflections on life, yet some blogs comment on TV entertainment and on public service activities. The other famous blogger, Han Han, a young writer very popular among high school and university students, posted 34 blogs during the selected days for study. Most of his blogs narrate his activities, such as his participation in motorcycle races. But some blogs give his remarks on such hot issues as transportation facilities, prices of petroleum, and problems of exam-oriented education, in a sharp (satirical at certain points) style characteristic of the celebrity.

Two Ordinary Bloggers

Of the two ordinary bloggers, one posted 18 blogs during the selected days of study. These blogs are mostly records/logs of the blogger's daily-life activities and experiences, and expressions of her emotions. The other ordinary blogger on this website posted 27 blogs, which fall mainly into the following types: travels, comments on songs and singers, and thoughts on daily experiences.

Blog Content of the Selected Bloggers on <http://blog.china.com>

Two Famous/Prominent Bloggers

Guoping Lu, a newspaper reporter, and Ifeng, who is a registered blogger on several websites and a columnist on the website of Rongzi Corporation (Rongzi in Chinese means financing in English), are the two famous/prominent bloggers selected from the blog channel on the website www.china.com. The 38 blogs posted by Guoping Lu during the selected days of study can be said to be social comments on various issues, especially on moral values, on problems in media communication and in entertainment, and on housing. Ifeng's blogs during the selected days of study, amounting to 25, are also mainly social comments. They touch upon such issues as problems related to state monopoly in telecommunications, rights of villagers, anti-corruption, undesirable behavior in the arts circles, and so on.

Two Ordinary Bloggers

The two ordinary bloggers selected from this website both posted 37 blogs during the days selected for study. The first ordinary blogger mostly gives his/her views on some hot

issues of general public concern, such as people's well-being, anti-corruption, problems caused by commercialism, social values, equity of education, "overflow" of exams, and communication for the coming Beijing Olympic Games. The other ordinary blogger also makes social comments in his/her blogs. A comparison of the content of their blogs shows that the second blogger pays more attention to the economic situation and financing, and also to foreign affairs and international events. The other issues covered in the blogs of the second one include: anti-corruption, education, governance abilities, and government accountability.

Blog Content of the Selected Bloggers on the Blog Website www.blogcn.com

Two Famous/Prominent Bloggers

One of the prominent bloggers selected, Songluo Han, writes regularly for a column in *Jinghua Daily*, *Beijing Youth Weekly* and some other periodicals. During the days selected for study, he posted 24 blogs at www.blogcn.com. They fall into the following types: discussion and comments on the life of stars (7 blogs), thoughts triggered by TV dramas and films (5 blogs), articles with a literary coloring, personal expression of emotions, reflections on life, and comments on a Western novelist. The other one is a "grassroots celebrity." With the blogging name "Suoyi Shuo" (meaning "therefore we say"), this one posted 24 blogs on the website during the days selected for study. Blogs giving accounts of daily experiences constitute a major part (11 blogs). Thoughts on life along with expression of personal emotions are the content of 5 blogs. The remaining blogs cover: warm wishes for friends, thoughts caused by a trip to Beijing, comments on popular culture and on a historical figure, and an account of a dialogue between the blogger and a friend.

Two Ordinary Bloggers

The two ordinary bloggers selected from this website posted 18 and 22 blogs, respectively, during the selected days for study. The first one, with 18 blogs posted, gives accounts of his daily experiences (9 blogs) and of his work, and expresses personal emotions and reflections on life. Of the 22 blogs posted by the other ordinary blogger, 5 deal with the hot social issues of the prices of gas, online cheating, Chinese medicine (along with criticism directed toward a famous member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences regarding his view on Chinese medicine), and popular culture. About half of the other blogs are just accounts of daily experiences; 5 blogs express personal emotions; a couple of the blogs discuss sports. The remaining blogs discuss a film, an online video, and predictions about development in science and technology.

Content of Blogs on these Websites in Late January 2008 (During Meetings of the Local People's Congress and the CPPCC)

In late January 2008, meetings of the local People's Congress and the CPPCC were held. As the period for these meetings is an important period for social-political discussion and decision-making and thus naturally inspires greater enthusiasm by the public for political participation, a study of the content of blogs during this period will lead to findings that can

be compared with the routine content of the blogs. Such a comparison will help us in our efforts to obtain a deep understanding of the content and role of blogging practice in the country.

Forty blogs during that period were collected from the above-mentioned websites. A careful reading of these blogs leads to the following findings:

(1) Most of the 10 blogs from the website of the People's Daily (www.people.com.cn) mainly express expectations regarding the meetings, especially expectations for the meetings to have ample and in-depth discussion of various issues of people's well-being, for the deputies of the local People's Congress and CPPCC to offer straightforward remarks and sharp criticism, for the leaders to listen to criticism with an open mind and discuss various issues of public concern with ordinary participants of these meetings on an equal footing. One blog expresses the opinion that the performance/behavior of the deputies participating in these meetings should be made known to the public. One blog lists a number of current social problems. One blog posts the news about Shanghai's preparations for holding the meetings of the municipal People's Congress and the CPPCC. One blog airs the view that fighting against blitz significantly out-weighed the meetings.

(2) The 10 blogs from the website www.sina.com.cn express expectations for the meetings of local People's Congress and the CPPCC to bring more well-being to the public, for different voices to be heard at the meetings, and discuss such social-political issues as the reform in the structure of the government bodies, the problem of abuse of power (for example, by some urban management officials), and so on.

(3) The 10 blogs from the blog channel of www.china.com are mostly comments of different sorts more or less related to the meetings, such as comments on certain motions/proposals (in one case on a hearsay motion) by the deputies of the local People's Congress and members of the local CPPCC, comments on some members of the local CPPCC (in one case about an ex-member), comments on power supply and electricity fees. The remaining small numbers of blogs are miscellaneous, ranging from discussion of the possible effects of the meetings on solving housing and price problems, to anecdotes about some participants of the meetings.

(4) Of the 10 blogs on the blog website www.blogcn.com, half were clearly posted by journalists, giving accounts about their news gathering and reporting work during the period of these meetings, with some complaints about their fatigue caused by long hours of work. The remaining blogs range from comments on the phenomenon of officials, the rich, and celebrities forming a large proportion of the local People's Congress and members of the local CPPCC (offering views on having a more balanced composition of these organizations), comments on the procedures of the meetings, to thoughts on family planning, to best wishes for friends and colleagues.

Discussion

From the above paragraphs, it can be seen that all four websites selected for the study contain a certain amount of blogs of a public discussion nature. However, the websites differ in the proportion of blog content devoted to public discussion of issues of general concern. While social-political discussion constitutes a considerable proportion of the blog content in 2007 on the media website www.people.com.cn and the blog channel of the website

www.china.com, such discussion only forms a tiny proportion of the blog content in that year on the other two websites, the commercial portal site www.sina.com.cn and the blog website www.blogcn.com.

As the two websites in each of these two groups are different in type, we do not have grounds for drawing a simple conclusion regarding the connection between the type of a website and the degree to which its blogs serve as a new form for public discussion and public participation. Given the nature of the *People's Daily* that runs the website www.people.com.cn, however, we may speculate on the possibility that those who have registered blogs on this website of the most prominent party paper in the country pay relatively more attention to issues of current affairs. With regards to findings about the content of the blog channel of www.china.com, a possible explanation might lie in the demographic features of the users: since this channel aggregates a lot of professionals with high levels of education, a relatively high sense of public participation is perhaps somewhat natural for the bloggers.

The hot issues touched upon in the blogs, such as anti-corruption, housing prices, equity of education and so on are also hot issues covered in the traditional Chinese media. This indicates a connection between the agenda of public discussion in blogging as a new form of media communication and the agenda of the traditional media. Such a connection suggests an interplay or interactive relationship between the two, but the present study does not produce findings for drawing a causal link between the two. To generalize on the nature of the connection, further studies are needed.

Comparing the blog content from the four websites in the year 2007 with the content of the same websites in late January 2008 when meetings of the local People's Congress and the CPPCC were being held, the writer observes that discussions of social, political, economic and cultural issues are the focal concern of blogs on these websites during the period of the meetings of the local People's Congress and the CPPCC, yet they just form either a considerable part (in the case of www.people.com.cn and the blog channel of www.china.com) or a tiny part (in the case of www.sina.com.cn and www.blogcn.com) of the routine blog content. This conforms with the assumption that on special occasions such as the periods for the meetings of the People's Congress and the CPPCC, the capacity of blogs for serving as a new channel of public discussion and participation is brought to greater use than usual.

The fact that the greater part of the blogs posted by the selected bloggers in the research period of 2007 on www.sina.com.cn and www.blogcn.com cover matters of individual concern indicates that so far, blogging activities are still often private in nature. In this aspect, the blogosphere bears a similarity to the public sphere of the 17th- and 18th-century West represented by pubs and coffee houses where conversations between individuals did not always have to be of a social nature. As for those blogs that discuss matters of public concern, however, they differ markedly from conversations of similar nature in old-time coffee houses and salons as blogging is characterized by global and instantaneous spread of messages and is of a mediated nature, and these lead to difficulties of maintaining rationality in public discussion through blogs. When compared with the public discussion in the traditional media, public discussion through blogging also distinguishes itself in a few ways. In public discussion through blogs, the tones, stances/positions and foci are basically a matter of individual choice of the private netizens, whereas in public discussions in the traditional media, media organizations and their professional journalists act as gatekeepers. Moreover, in

blogging, the duration of issue prominence is basically in the hands of the participating bloggers, while in traditional media communication, this mirrors the media agenda-setting function. This being the case, blogging seems to have the merits of airing and hearing diverse voices, especially grassroots voices in their natural style. Admittedly, blogging practice so far has also shown its limitations in its role in democratic processes. The blogosphere more often than not contains messages with idiosyncratic views of a strong emotional coloring which is not conducive to rational deliberation. And the above-mentioned global and instantaneous spread of messages and the mediated nature in blogging may further aggravate this problem, affecting the role of blogging in the democratic processes.

The present study has some limitations. Lack of a parallel content analysis of the traditional media makes it impossible to address, on the basis of basic empirical data, the nature of the connection between the issues of public discussion through blogs and the agenda of the traditional media in the mainland of China. The depth of the paper's brief discussion of the interplay between these issues and the traditional media agenda is also affected by the absence of such a parallel content analysis. In addition, since this is not a longitudinal study, it fails to provide data for historical comparison and for examining trends in the development of blogging in the country.

Conclusion

The present study shows that blogging has more or less found its way into public discussion of social, political, economic and cultural issues in mainland China. Blogging has started to exhibit a public discourse function. This means that to a greater or lesser degree blogs are put to use as a new way of participation in democratic processes. Meanwhile, the present study also reveals that communication activities of a private nature are perhaps still the main use of blogging in the country. The prosperity of the blogging practice serving a democratic function depends on the active involvement in social-political processes on the part of the bloggers.

Being a new means of public discourse, blogging has the potential to push democracy forward. It opens up new opportunities of hearing diverse voices, especially grassroots voices. Keeping communication channels open to diverse voices is generally thought to bear greatly on democratic processes. Although blogging has its limitations in serving the democratic function, especially in terms of the difficulties in maintaining rationality in public debate through blogs, the innovative blogosphere holds out possibilities of improvement in this aspect when bloggers gradually mature in the blogging practice, just as all innovations hold out possibilities of changes and improvements.

Comments

(Ms. Haiang Zeng has contributed to this article by collecting the blogs from the four websites selected for study. The writer wishes to extend her sincere thanks to Ms. Zeng.)

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