Chapter 15

Online Identity Formation and Digital Ethos Building in the Chinese Blogosphere

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ABSTRACT

Exponential growth in the past decade has turned the Chinese blogosphere into the largest blogging space in the world. Through studying some of the most popular blog sites and bloggers, this chapter critically examines a number of their key defining features such as rhetorical strategies and persuasive approaches in building popular ethos and unique online identities in order to attract a steady user base. It also discusses some of the personal, topical, social, cultural, and political factors of the emerging Chinese culture of blogs and blogging against the particular backdrop of China’s state-controlled media and communication environment.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet sector has registered dazzling growth in the past two decades in China, and Internet-based technologies and applications have increasingly integrated into various aspects of Chinese people’s everyday life. China now boasts the largest online population in the world, with 513 million people connected to the Internet as of December 2011 (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2012). As a result, such an ever-expanding online communicative space provides Chinese netizens with handy access to an exploding base of user-generated information and has created innovative ways of information production and dissemination in a highly controlled media environment. Similarly, a vigorous line of academic discussion has emerged to disentangle the dynamics and nature of the unprecedented path of socio-poli-cultural transformations triggered by the Internet in China (e.g., Tai, 2006; Yang, 2009).
Coexisting with the ongoing Internet revolution is the quick rise of the Chinese blogosphere and the mainstreaming of blogs as a socio-cultural phenomenon in China in the past decade (Tai, 2012). By December 2011, China’s blogging population reached 319 million (CNNIC, 2012), making it by far the largest blog community in the world. Meanwhile, compared with their counterparts in cross-national settings, Chinese netizens display a much higher propensity to both contribute to, and rely on, user-generated content (UGC) on the Internet (Tai, 2006). It has also been noted that Internet use and social network size positively contribute to an individual’s tendency to vent opinions in Chinese cyberspace (Shen, Wang, Guo, & Guo, 2009). The particular nature of the content expressed online among different user groups and in specific cyber territories, however, remains under-explored to a large extent, yet enlightenment in the particulars of blog content and interactive dynamics between bloggers and followers is critical in understanding China’s evolving Internet landscape.

Goldhaber (2006) argued that the Internet epitomizes what he terms, “attention economy”—an “all-encompassing system” that, “revolves primarily around paying, receiving, and seeking … the attention of other human beings.” It is an ecology in which attention is intrinsically limited and thus becomes the scarce resource, and new modalities of grabbing attention are the hallmarks of success. This premise certainly holds true for the ocean of Internet-based information in general and the vast blogosphere in particular. Through studying some of the most popular blogging sites and bloggers, this chapter offers a critical assessment of key features such as rhetorical strategies and persuasive approaches in building unique online ethos in communicating to a steady audience base. It also discusses some of the personal, topical, social, cultural, and political factors in the emerging Chinese culture of blogs and blogging against the particular backdrop of China’s media and communication environment.

**BACKGROUND**

User-generated content, including material originating from a variety of user bases encompassing Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), online chat rooms, Internet forums, blogs and microblogs, has been afforded an unusually prominent place in Chinese cyber life. This claim finds undisputable support from the results of six waves of cross-national surveys of global Internet use from 2006 to 2012 by Universal McCann, a New York-based global media-marketing consultancy firm and a subsidiary of the Interpublic Group of Companies Inc. (IPG). As the world’s largest and longest-running survey on the impact of social media on the global society, its findings consistently point to the pattern that Chinese netizens display a much higher propensity than their counterparts in other countries to consume (i.e., read blogs) and contribute to content (i.e., write blogs) in the blogosphere (Universal McCann, 2009; 2010; 2012). For example, in its Wave 5 study, Universal McCann (2010) found that 79.6% of Chinese netizens reported having used blogs in the past six months (compared to 46.7% in the United States and a global average of 64.5%), leading the rest of the countries surveyed. In its recently released Wave 6 report, Chinese Internet users are again leading the global trend in microblog use, with 71.5% reporting use in the past six months and 49% of Chinese individuals expressing a preference for using microblog services as a tool for self-expression (compared to a global mean of 32%) (Universal McCann, 2012).

Chinese netizens’ unmistakable penchant for user-generated content on the Internet can be best contextualized in a highly controlled media and information environment, both on- and offline. Although economic liberalization and market reform in the past three decades has led to a fundamental shift from ideological indoctrination to mass appeal in the conventional media sector, the state still maintains a formidable presence and exercises tight control over what the media can and cannot publish. Likewise, in the online