Mingling Politics with Play
The Virtual Chinese Public Sphere

The internet is a virtual public sphere, but not the kind envisioned by Habermas. He considered the coffee shop and the English pub of eighteenth-century Europe as its exemplars, where equals meet to reason on issues of common concern, and ultimately, produce public opinion. It seems doubtful, though, that people patronized coffee shops mainly to reason with their peers. While politics may command serious attention, coffee shops, pubs and today, the internet, are venues for socializing, joking, bantering, having a good time. The fun part lures people back, while politics gets its fair share of attention along the way. In other words, one reason why the internet seems to be producing some very interesting politics in China is that it is a fun place to go. If it is a public sphere, it is one that mingles politics with play.

By Guobin YANG

The most likely places to find political action in the virtual sphere are bulletin boards and community forums, although weblogging is gaining ground. Today, close to one fifth of Chinese *netizens* make use of bulletin boards and community forums (CNNIC 2004). Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) may be run by individuals, small voluntary groups, commercial entities, or government agencies. A few years ago, many were simple, unsophisticated home pages. Now many BBS are portal sites complete with news, online magazines, newsletters, bulletin boards, virtual communities, and other network services.

A critical mass of users is essential for the web to thrive. China now has such a critical mass – about 80 million internet users as of December 2003 (CNNIC 2004). According to the CNNIC report, 32.2 per cent of respondents access the web primarily to 'get entertained.' The only goal that surpasses this one is to 'get information' (46.2 per cent).

Bulletin boards and community forums are fun places. There is a great deal of socializing as well as exchanging of information. To attract attention (internet users relish public notice as much as anyone else), *netizens* compete to post humorous, clever, and sensational messages. All the vicissitudes of life are on offer, from romantic tales and political jokes to intellectual debate, gossip, rumour, and photographs of street scenes. As in 'real' life, the virtual sphere never fails to surprise.

A specific kind of surprise that constantly pops up is protest and some wonder at its frequency in China's highly monitored and controlled networks. One crucial feature of the virtual sphere might explain the frequency of online protest: at any given time, thousands of people are online, perhaps for political purposes, but most likely for fun. These *netizens* (or *wangmin* in Chinese) can slip into action as occasions arise, over a campus murder cover-up, a school house fire, a deadly accident at a coal mine, a corrupt official newly exposed. The more outrageous the incident, the more likely it is to arouse the virtual crowd, always lurking and always alert. Once aroused, the networked crowd can rapidly fill the web with queries, information exchanges, debate, protest, and organized activity, at times even achieving the power of public opinion. Large-scale social movements such as the one in 1989 excepted, there has rarely been such a constant stream of public talk in China as is found in the virtual realm. Let me mention only three of the more politicized cases.

Politics in the virtual sphere

The first is the SUN Zhigang case. A college graduate, Sun died of a police beating on 20 March 2003 while in custody in Guangzhou. Lacking a temporary resident permit, Sun had been taken into custody three days earlier. News of his death, however, did not become public until 25 April, in a local newspaper. An outraged public quickly filled the web with debate and protest. As often happens, the protest went beyond Sun Zhigang's death. Discussion ranged from curbing police brutality to calls for press freedom and legal reform. One widely circulated essay posted to www.wtyzy.com made a frontal attack on China's political system, as is clear from its title 'The Death of Sun Zhigang and the Evils of the System'. Several legal scholars wrote to the National People's Congress to demand a review of the two-decades old 'Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars', the legal basis for taking Sun into custody. In an unprecedented turn of events, the State Council invalidated the 'measures' in June 2003. The example shows that a personal story can gain a wide audience on the net, become a political topic, and ultimately lead to an observable political outcome.

The second case concerns the February 2003 death of a young teacher named HUANG Jing, found dead in her school dorm in Xiangtan, Hunan province. Despite evidence to the contrary, public authorities initially ruled out murder. To push

for further police investigation, Huang's mother published descriptions of her death on the internet. Two months later, a young man who had met Huang in a chat room set up a virtual memorial for her on www.netor.com. The virtual memorial gripped the public. Within five months, there were more than 210,000 visits to the memorial. An online petition was launched to request the Ministry of Public Security to investigate the case. A feminist scholar published an essay on a bulletin board arguing that Huang's death was a typical case of date rape. Since 'date rape' is a new topic in China, the essay was an instant hit. Under public pressure, further police investigations and medical examinations were performed. While the case remains unresolved, online debates and petitions transformed it into an issue much greater than the initial catalyst. Again, a personal horror story gripped a wide audience, leading to the formation of a virtual community that pressured a government body into action.

The final example demonstrates that beyond providing space for debate, exposure, and protest, the virtual public sphere can support communities and citizen activism. Since the late 1990s, numerous environmental websites and green forums have appeared; many of these have evolved into informal web-based environmental organizations. With members across China, these groups use the web to communicate, publicizing environmental issues and organizing offline activities. One such group is Han Hai Sha (lit. 'Ocean of Sand'), which focuses on desertification issues. Its website www.desert.org.cn was launched in June 2002 complete with an electronic newsletter, a bulletin board, archives of documents on desertification issues, and current events. During the SARS crisis, its volunteers did a most remarkable thing. On 5 May 2003, they produced a special-issue electronic newsletter on SARS. Over the next month, they published 25 special issues on SARS, with essays by volunteers and other sources providing information, analyzing its causes, and offering strategies and solutions. An essay published in the tenth special issue, published on 18 May, was entitled 'The Shortcomings of the System in the Shadow of SARS'. The outbreak, the essay argued, exposed the shortcomings of China's political system; it proposed institutional changes to increase government transparency, public trust, and better information delivery to the public. In contrast to the two earlier examples, where a story of personal loss gained a wide net audience and broadened into criticisms of the state, this web action was initiated by a community site that was organized around a specific issue to start with. How did a community site come to voice such open criticism? Might criticism and debate spread to more mainstream venues?

The virtual public sphere is both segmented and linked, a reflection of the basic contradiction of our times. Bulletin boards, for example, are segmented into issues and topics and may evolve into semi-closed communities with informal hierarchies and barriers to newcomers. The result is the creation of multiple and partial virtual publics, a far cry from the Habermasian vision of the undivided and open public sphere. At the same time, however, these segmented spaces are often linked. A message posted to *Qiangguo Luntan* (Strong Nation Forum), run by *People's Daily*, may be cross-posted to forums in www.cnd.org, a portal site run in North America with its own Chinese-language bulletin boards, and vice versa. As readers of bulletin board postings know, some messages are so widely circulated that they take on a life of their own. There are even specialized Chinese-language websites (such as www.zwlt.com, www.kdnet.net) that publish daily selections of popular postings collected from BBSs worldwide.

Courtesy of www.china.org.cn

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Qiangguo Luntan was set up hastily as a modest bulletin board in May 1999; it has since evolved into a part of an empire known as People's Net, the expanded web presence of the *People's Daily*. While *Qiangguo Luntan* is frequently sanitized of politically sensitive discussion, its daily postings often number in the thousands. Political debate is the staple of this forum, and it seems that its *banzhu* (host) finds it hard to keep up with deleting unwelcome postings. The existence of *Qiangguo Luntan* attests to a paradox of the internet. Unless a government wants to deny its citizens the web, it has to tolerate complaints and protest alongside more benign communication.

Surviving in multiple fields of force

Will the virtual Chinese public sphere flourish or vanish? Modern societies consist of multiple social fields, some more powerful, independent, and institutionalized than others, but all related as if in a magnetic field of force (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). One way to understand the virtual Chinese public sphere – its current status as well as future fate – is to position it where it belongs, in relation to other fields of force, including those of politics and the economy. According to Habermas, states and markets together created, and then 'colonized', the European public sphere. The public sphere was originally created to meet real social and cultural needs; over time, political and cultural hegemony undermined its political dimension, transforming the culture-debating public into a culture-consuming one.
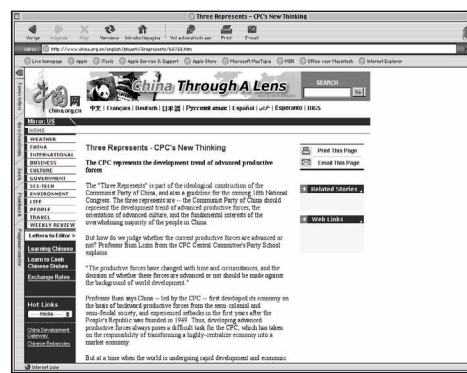
In China, as elsewhere, state and corporate behaviour influence the dynamics of the virtual public sphere. The state exerts political control; corporations manipulate the architecture of the technology, by, for example, installing filters on computer networks. Against these odds, hope remains for those publics intent on having their own virtual space. One reason for hope lies in the complexity of the relations between the state, business, and the virtual public sphere, characterized by shared interests as well as conflicts. Perhaps the primary common interest lies in the development of the internet as a technological field, whatever its end purpose. Without technological development, China cannot realize its century-long dream of joining the world society as a strong player.

The web inhabits a world with dynamic fields other than states and business corporations. Academia is turning to the web for educational purposes; journalists are experimenting with online journalism; aspiring authors have found new channels for publishing their works. These social groups, and many others, are now linked to their counterparts around the world and these ties have spawned their own internal dynamics. As has often happened in the history of modern societies, weaker parties tend to enter coalitions to resist or negotiate with dominant political and economic actors. In the final analysis, then, the condition and fate of the Chinese virtual public sphere depends as much on its internal dynamics of private pleasures and public concerns as on the changing political, social, and technological environment. ◄

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