Blog Influence on China’s Mainstream Media

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After Weblog emerged in the mid-1990s, the development of blog has been unprecedented since the turning of the new century. According to the Technorati statistics released in July 2007, from March 2003 to March 2007, the growth of blogosphere remained strong with over 120,000 blogs being created every day and over 70 million blogs were tracked.

Hugh Hewitt (2005) describes the blog phenomenon, “Millions of people are changing their habit when it comes to information acquisition. Now the blogosphere has appeared, and it has come so suddenly as to surprise even the most sophisticated of analysts.”

The blog phenomenon and figures in the information age came into the spotlight. “You” was the catchword on the front cover of Time magazine on January 1, 2007. The issue was devoted to “Time’s Person of the Year 2006,” paying tribute to “power of the people” and “individuals who are changing the nature of the information age.” The power of people in the information age was described as “You control the media now, and the world will never be the same.”
Chinese blog intrigues the world

Wang Xiaofeng, a Chinese blogger, is among the “15 citizens of the new digital democracy” on Time magazine’s January 1, 2007 issue. He is a journalist of China’s well-known Sanlian Lifeweek Magazine, a current affairs mainstream periodical based in Beijing since 1995. Wang runs his blog http://www.wangxiaofeng.net/ separately from his job at Sanlian and wins fame by commenting on social problems and political issues which would not accord to his job role at the mainstream media.

Wang Xiaofeng’s success reflects in a way why blogs are becoming popular in China. Bloggers can have more freedom in speech and generate interactivity among readers. They are a new generation of writers on the Internet who report and comment on a wide range of issues with many more different voices and viewpoints than heard in the traditional and mainstream media. Michael Keane (2007), an East Asia media studies expert, attributes the popularity of grassroots media forms in China to “the diminishing gap between high and low culture and between high politics and everyday life.”

Development of blogs in China is gaining momentum with the ever-enlarging number of netizens. The research firm BDA confirmed this March China has surpassed the United States in terms of Internet users. It was revealed Internet users in China reached 210 million by the end of last year, very close to the 216 million users in the United States and according to BDA’s latest calculations, China has already replaced the United States as the country with most Internet users by the end of this February.

The success of celebrity actress and director Xu Jinglei’s blog pushed blogging popularity in China to a climax. In mid 2006, Xu Jinglei’s blog had the greatest number of incoming links of any blog in any language on the Internet, according to Technorati (2006). On July 12, 2007, 620 days after the debut of her blog, Xu received blog traffic of over 100 million, which triggered international attention and heated discussion in China on how big the blogosphere can be.

Mainstream vs. grassroots media

The research on blogs in China has aroused wide interest among academics in the world because the study of China’s new communication model is unique and not to be found in other countries.

The Internet and blog as a means of new media inevitably has a bearing with the
traditional media. As early as in 1994, Michael Hauben proposed in his book *The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media* that the press would change its content in order to accommodate the form of media that would be brought about by the Internet. In South Korea, the popular online newspaper OhMyNews is operated under the slogan “Every citizen is a reporter.”

In the Amateur Computerist’s spring 2005 edition “Netizenship around the World,” the editor pointed out “Those who have power set the standards, and in this way are able to maintain their power. In the media market, they say ‘this is the standard, follow me.’ The standards of 20th century journalism have been created and controlled by professional newspaper journalists. But these standards are challenged by new Internet journalists: the netizens or citizen reporters. They challenge the traditional media logic of who is a reporter, what is news, what is the best news style, and what is newsworthy.”

In the 21st century, the popular notion seems to be that the netizens are beginning to set the news agenda. Though it is still not the exact case in China, the Internet is helping fan the flames of citizen journalism and online news. John Herbert (2001, p.160) says, “The online revolution is spreading so fast in China that neither government nor industry seem yet to have grasped its implications.”

In recent years, blogs have been playing a role in providing better information access to the people in China. More and more news is tracked or broken on blogs instead of mainstream media channels. The amount of traffic online is huge and a person can post articles or comments online anonymously.

**Is the mainstream media a “devil”?**

The previous research on China’s new media has focused a lot on the democratic consequences of the new medium on China’s news arena.

Some scholars highlight the power of the new information technology in freeing people’s minds. Others are suspicious of such influence, stressing the limitation of the blog impact, given the country is exercising media control. A heated debate is still under way. However, in many cases, the mainstream media in China are portrayed as the devil’s advocate and the state mouthpiece channels.

However, the function of mainstream media in modern China can hardly be judged easily. Noam Chomsky said in his book *Media Control* (2002) the first definition of a democratic society is “the ideal state in which the public has the means to participate in some meaningful way in the management of their own
affairs and the means of information are open and free.” He continued, “An alternative conception of democracy is that the public must be barred from managing their own affairs and the means of information must be kept narrowly and rigidly controlled.” Referring to China’s circumstance, the statement can be interpreted that media control is not only practiced in China, but also other countries. The difference is to what degree the information is “narrowly and rigidly controlled.”

Despite the media control over the mainstream channels, the way of news reporting is changing in many ways in the new century. Besides the “positive” news on building a “harmonious society,” news about problems brought about by the economic reforms, the gap between the rich and the poor, and the social tension and corruption scandals are delivered to the public. Chinese people are now getting deeper and more transparent reports in the mainstream media. “One of the most significant developments in Chinese journalism during the 1990s has been the rise of investigative reporting – news that exposes official corruption and social problems.” (He, 2000) There have been popular TV programs such as the Oriental Horizon and the Focus Interview, and newspapers like The Nanfang Weekend, which are committed to investigative journalism.

The use of the Internet is bringing multiple ways for people to get news. Yet the reality in China is that most of its vast rural population still do not have access to the Internet, and even if they do, due to the low educational level, they are not making good use of news online or blogs. According to the 2007 Survey Report on the Internet Usage in Chinese Rural Areas published by the China Internet Network Information Center, by June of 2006, the percentage of Internet users in rural regions was only 5.1%, which meant 37.41 million out of a total population of 737 million. The rural Internet development is lagging far behind the urban cities. The Internet infrastructure in countryside is underdeveloped and young males with low educational level are the majority of Internet users. In this case, the traditional mainstream media remain the major way for rural residents to be informed and entertained.

**Blogs in relation to mainstream media**

The relationship between blogs and mainstream media in news reporting in China is regarded as paradoxical.

On one hand, the use of blogs wins over many readers from mainstream news,
posing a threat to the mainstream media. Some leading journalists and researchers have renewed warnings that newspapers are dying. Blogs are simply more colorful than newspapers with the application of multi-media methods such as audio-video players and space for readers to post comments. People are turning to the Internet not only for news and information, but also for opportunities to publicize their opinions and share what they believe to be news. In an Agence France-Presse news article “Adapt To New Technology Or Die,” the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch was quoted as saying, “A new generation of media consumers has risen, demanding content delivered when they want it, how they want it, and very much as they want it.”

On the other hand, more mainstream media are beginning to provide a blogging service and source news on blogs. The success of Sina, Netease, Tianya, Hexun and Sohu blogs proves the advantage of mainstream media in popularizing new media technology. The Sina blog is claimed to be one of the most successful blog services in China. More and more people turn to blogs for news and comments, and the use of blogs also boosts people’s attention to key issues derived from mainstream media.

The interrelation between the mainstream media and blogs is evident. But the questions to be answered are: To what extent do blogs demonstrate a complementary role to the mainstream media in China? To what extent do blogs affect the reporting of the mainstream media in China?

Blog and citizen journalism in China

The potential of the Internet as a news source was recognized after the reportage of September 11 attack in the US. Reports on the Internet were huge and widely read due to its immediacy and interactivity. Photos and videos can be uploaded online. There is basically no limit on the cyberspace compared to traditional newspapers. Readers can participate actively in posting comments and uploading their witness stories and photos. What happened in the information age is that during the "frozen moments of every culture," "something else, something profound, was happening: news was being produced by regular people who had something to say and show, and not solely by the ‘official’ news organizations that had traditionally decided how the first draft of history would look. The first draft of history was being written, in part, by the former audience. It was possible – it was inevitable – because of the Internet." (Dan, 2006)

In China, readers are no longer satisfied with the traditional types of reporting.
There have been voices challenging the domination of mainstream media and those voices are mostly heard on the blogosphere. In events that the people brought news updates from grassroots level, such as the Chongqing Nail House and the Shaanxi brick kiln slave scandal, the circumstance is that “it is quicker to update the information in a blog than other types of news reporting and blog affords people a place to connect emotionally with the events.” (Stuart, 2006, p.152) On Wes Nisker’s book cover, the words are “If You Don't Like the News...Go Out and Make Some of Your Own.” The generation of “digital citizen (Stuart, 2006, p.144)” was born, facilitated by the Internet technology and popularity of blogs.

In China, “citizen journalism” (also known as “grassroots journalism” or “participatory journalism”) is gaining popularity. Benefited from the government’s endeavor to develop information technology industry and a knowledge-driven economy, the Internet becomes not only a tool of accelerating the economy, but one type of powerful mass communication media in China. Different from state-owned traditional media, some scholars call the online media the “special zone” of Chinese mass media (Wu, 2005). The “special zone” is boosted by the popularity of blog, which is a key representation for citizen journalism in China.

Dan Gillmor (2004) argued in his book “We the Media” big media organization had lost its monopoly on the news.

It is noticeable that the online forums of some mainstream media have formed a different agenda from the dominant mainstream voice. For example, the People’s Daily and the China Daily carry online forums with more relaxed freedom of speech. Stories and opinions that would not appear on newspapers, TV or radios would be discussed in the forums.

Bloggers post or quote news, which are reported by themselves or official media or western media, and they express opinions on the news regarding political, economic, social and cultural issues. If the stories and opinions attract much attention among other bloggers or blog readers, the articles/posts will be copied and spread to the wider cyberspace and then reach more netizens. When netizens know the issue from the Internet and are engaged in the discussion, the chances are that certain topics would spread beyond the cyberspace by ways of interpersonal communication, such as talking in person and by telephone or mobile message. This is the blog chain that expands the influence of blogs and bloggers. As Hugh Hwewitt (2005, p.130) put it, “Dedication to blogging will establish a reputation on
the Internet much more quickly than you can imagine, especially if supported by
genuine reciprocity and other media.”

The first citizen journalist in China is considered to be Zola (Zhou Shuguang) who followed up news of a couple in the southwestern China’s Chongqing Municipality who became known as the “Stubborn Nails” in April 2007 because they refused to leave their home until receiving adequate compensation from the property developer. The couple quickly became household names in China, mainly thanks to blog postings and mainstream media reports.

In another case in June last year, the Internet was the major contributor for breaking open a slave scandal in two Chinese provinces that some local authorities had been complicit in.

A letter posted on the Tianya blog community by 400 parents of children working as slaves in brickyards was the trigger for the national press to finally report on the scandal that some rights groups say had been going on for years. The parents’ Internet posting was part of a growing phenomenon for marginalized people in China who can not otherwise have their complaints addressed by the traditional press. Among the reports of the slave scandal, the online communities respond vigorously. Blogs were flooded with various story recounting and emotional comments in just a few days.

Besides, the information flow across the boundaries of traditional media and new media and blogs is discernable. Many bloggers borrowed raw materials from reports in traditional media (mostly newspaper articles). The slave scandal is resolved positively that the government responded quickly to rule out those illegal brick factories and hold accountable officials and factory owners involved. From the detection of the issue to the solving of the problem, what used to take a few months only takes a few days.

This is the power of the media when mainstream work alongside the online community to bring about the potential of grassroots journalism.

**Controversy toward citizen journalist Zola**

Zola’s reports and motives behind his citizen journalism reporting on the Chongqing Nail House are highly controversial. The reports from his blog are still superficial and repetitive. During the period, among his postings, some were devoted to recounting of how mainstream media contacted him and praised him and how several mainstream media published articles on him. A blogger commented, “I
don’t like the whole nail house stuff. The focus of the event was shifted later to this so-called citizen journalist Zhou Shuguang. I don’t see in any way he deserves that title.”

But Zola is also an idol in many people’s eyes because of his directness. After the settlement of the nail house dispute, Zola wrote in his blog (translated and quoted from Global Voices website):

“My mission is complete, the building has finally been torn down, and I was happy to see a peaceful resolution to the built-up conflicts between the developer and the evicted. I can sleep peacefully without worrying about any newsworthy details having been missed. I use my photos and video to supply readers with on-the-scene information, easing the curiosity some people have regarding this incident, even successfully embodying the role that individual media can have in society, pushing the words citizen media before the eyes of Chinese media workers, making it impossible for them to continue overlooking the role that citizen blog journalism plays. This proves that as technology brings new means and markets for communication and gives average citizens new opportunities to spread their own voices. Given technological development, the appearance of Chinese bloggers such as myself is inevitable, as is individual media’s participation in social events and their right to act as watchdogs.”

Zola stressed the importance of blogs, “What is a sense of social responsibility? Speaking for other people, that’s what! We can do no good by withdrawing from the world, being overly cautious. We can’t be apathetic. But we can pay attention. We can also make comments, if you have a blog.”

Conclusion

From the analyses above, it is suggested the mainstream media covers some major news stories only after their exposure in the blogosphere. Mainstream media take blogs as a way of sourcing news. Bloggers and blog readers boost the attention given to mainstream media reports by quoting, commenting on and following up reporting of certain news. Mainstream media reports provide readers a more objective view on an event while blog articles are more emotional. This leaves space for the readers to form their own judgment. Mainstream media are more authoritative and able to interview high-profile people related to the news. Bloggers are more at the grassroots level, hardly getting access to the elite level, but showing more concerns to the ideas of the common people – pedestrians, workers and farmers.
China’s social, cultural and political scene is to be continuously changed with the economic development. The media and blogs are means to facilitate the changes. Though it is still early to judge how much influence blog can have on Chinese media, the changes brought about by popularity of blog are taking place. The key is that readers now get what they need about news from both ways and the judgment and decision are up to the readers to make.

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