The platform of spoof videos: The case of Tudou.com

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Abstract

This paper analyses the enabling and constraining role of platforms in the development of online video-spoofing culture in China. Using Tudou.com, one of China’s most popular video-sharing sites, as a case study, the paper discusses how video-sharing sites facilitate and curtail the self, and how they negotiate and balance among users, clients and the state, teasing out the complex politics of platforms in China. Particular reference is made to three “star users”, Jiaoshou, Hu Ge and Corndog, who gained fame for themselves via the popularity of their spoof videos on this platform.

Keywords: Platform, Tudou.com, Self, Curator, Censor, Mainstreaming

The Chinese Internet companies have gleaned a lesson from this:

entertainment trumps politics on the Web in China.

David Barboza (2010)

1. Introduction

As with other forms of participative culture, spoofing practices are subject to the regulative regimes of both the market and the state, and operate within a “dual economy of freedom and constraint”(Foucault, cited in Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 227). Spoofing culture offers an excellent case study not only for “the tension between the state and capital in the cultural realm”(Mayfair Yang, cited in Zhou, Chuang, Constable, Guo, & et al., 2005, p. 791), but also for the complicated relationship between Internet users and service providers. Capital challenges state regulations and empowers users by providing alternative channels for self-
performance and political expression, and at the same time regulates these channels for the best of its own interest, at times colluding with the state to make online practices and expressions less risky and more acceptable to the state. How then do these relations play out in spoofing culture? How do they condition the ways that spoof videos travel, and the ways in which spoof practices and ideas are shared, picked up, transmitted and boosted? In this paper I try to find answers to these questions through a close look at communicative channels—video sharing sites—where users meet and interact with capital and the state.

Video sharing sites in China can be broadly divided into four categories:

1. Internet portals, such as sina.com, sohu.com, and baidu.com. They are mostly public companies, with obvious government support. To appeal to and retain their users and stay ahead in the surge of user-created content, they have launched their video channels, with contributions from both professional and amateur creators.

2. Traditional media content providers, including Xinhua News Agency and SMG in Shanghai. These media outlets are state-owned and are regarded as the mouthpiece of the Party. However, with part or all of their subsidies scrapped, they have to follow the market logic to chase the fads of popular culture so as to keep their bottom line balanced.

3. Web sites as video sharing platforms. They are very young companies and relatively new to China, mostly modelled after YouTube, operating with venture capital money. These companies include Tudou, Youku, ku6, 6.cn, to name just a few.

4. Comprehensive entertainment companies, such as mop.com and qq.com. These companies started as providers of a single service, and after gaining a substantive users base diversified into other services.

The proliferation of video sharing platforms in China is proof of the popularity of Internet videos among users, it also the result of the reluctance of Chinese Internet companies to specialize (Barboza, 2010). In this paper I have chosen Tudou as a case study rather than going through each and every category of these websites. The reason for my choice lies in both the homogeneity of these websites and the obvious leading position of Tudou as a video hosting platform.

In what follows I will first give a brief introduction about Tudou. Then I discuss its role as both enabler and constraint of user creation and “vernacular creativity” (Burgess, 2007) with concrete examples from its evolving trajectory from a “community” website to a media company.

2. Tudou.com

Tudou means “potato” in Chinese and Tudou.com (hereafter Tudou) is a play on the idea of the TV-viewer as “couch potato” (Wang, cited in Balfour, 2006). When the website went live on April 15, 2005, two months after YouTube, it was known as Toodou.com, because the domain name — Tudou.com — was owned by a cuisine website (see Figure 36). Tudou changed to its current domain name in September 2006, when the cuisine website ceased to operate (Wang Wei, 2006a).
The success story of Tudou conforms to the trope of visionary, young and cool Internet entrepreneurs. The company started in a flat in Shanghai with a staff of seven in April 2005. The number of staff has since then doubled every 10 months, reaching over 1000 in 2011, in response to the rising popularity of the website (Blog, 2011).

In its early days, the website attracted only about 5 clips a day. The number rose fast to about 250 in January 2006, with about 40,000 visitors a day (Balfour, 2006). By 2007 Tudou had become by far China’s most popular video sharing, multimedia podcasting and social network site. According to an OCED (2007, p. 104) report, in mid-2007 it had 4 million unique users a day, accounting for 47% of the time Chinese Internet users spent on all video sharing websites. With later comers catching up, Tudou’s lead has narrowed. However, it remains among China’s most popular video entertainment sites (Nielsen, 2010). According to statistics from Tudou itself, as of September 2010, it hosted over 40 million videos, and served around 200 million visitors per month (Tudou.com, n.d.-b) with 71.7 million registered users (Spears, 2010). By August 2011, the video clips in Tudou’s content library increased to over 50 million and registered users reached over 90 million (Tudou.com, n.d.-a). Starting as a sharing site for amateurs, Tudou has grown into a comprehensive video entertainment destination, hosting user-generated videos, licensed content, and in-house developed programs, available on the web as well as through mobile and portable devices. Tudou’s success has gone beyond the Chinese border. According to a report by Nielsen in February 2011, Tudou was second only to Netflix by time per viewer among online video brands in the USA (Nielsen Company, 2011).

Although recognized as synonym for video platform in China and hailed as “China’s YouTube” (Wang, 2009), Tudou and its investors have yet to embrace the moment of commercial success. By 2011 Tudou had raised at least $US135 million in venture capital investment through five rounds of funding, but was yet to make a profit (Spears, 2010). The financial viability of the website, and with it, the need to monetize its success as a media platform and social network, has been a dominant theme in the development of Tudou.

3. Facilitating the self

When analysing the strategies adopted by video-sharing sites for cultural purchase, political leverage and economic viability, Gillespie (2010) elaborates (with YouTube as a case) how
video platforms position themselves against the broad connotations of the term “platform”—“open, neutral, egalitarian and progressive support of activity” so as to appeal to users (p. 352). According to Gillespie, the claim of these video intermediaries to provide for and empower ordinary users to speak and be heard fits neatly with the rhetoric of the democratic potential of the internet and the enthusiasm for user creativity; it explains in part the fast rise of YouTube as a metaphor for video-sharing sites.

The rise of Tudou can be cast in similar light. From the very beginning Tudou knows that its success hinges on its ability to ride the tide of the times, which its founder Garry Wang defines as “the era of the individual and the visual” (Wang Wei, 2005c), an era when “the watchword is personality” and the young generations “have a strong desire to show themselves” (Wang Wei, cited in Fan Meijing, 2006). While YouTube invites you to “Broadcast yourself”, Tudou proclaims that it can “help you know yourself and set yourself free” (Chen Weijia, cited in Fan Meijing, 2006). Through its catch phrase, “Everyone is a director of life”, Tudou tries to present itself as a video destination where users can enjoy what they want to see, share what they create, connect with people they like, and in the process (re)define and perform individual as well as collective identities.

4. Nurturing literacy

Since its early days, Tudou has claimed to be “the stage of a theatre” (Schlaikjer, 2006) for grassroots creativity, for ordinary people to “show off themselves” and realize their celebrity dream. According to Garry Wang, co-founder of Tudou, quality of work is the least important concern on this platform of self-publication because each and every video has its own value, “even programs with no viewers are valuable because they have entertained the creators themselves” (Wang Wei, 2005a). His job is to let people realize the power of “the platform” and help them to make visible the creative ideas that were invisible because of the huge barrier—political, economic as well as legal—of publishing in the era of mass media (Wang Wei, 2005b).

However reality doesn’t always goes the way of the rhetoric. As Garry Wang suggested, “[i]nitially it’s all crap because no one knows how to use the medium” (Schlaikjer, 2006). Wang claimed that he expected to get crap before “high-quality stuff”; however, as a startup video-sharing site, Tudou did need good videos to attract users and could not afford to wait for their natural emergence. Thus, what Tudou has done is not only to launch massive media campaigns to drive home the message of Tudou as a synonym for user creation in the digital age, but also to promote digital literacy among media users.

This was done first online through the website itself with “how-to” videos. As Wang Wei recalls, the major purpose of these videos is to “dispel people’s fear” by driving home the central message that podcasting is not that complicated. A typical example was a program on the first page of Tudou called “Teach you how to make DV in five minutes” (Fan Meijing, 2006). The video itself is now nowhere to be found on Tudou, and in its place is a comprehensive toolkit covering the whole process from recording, dubbing, editing, splitting, and transcoding to uploading.¹ However, the practice of sharing skills and know-how remains. Famous video bloggers such as Hu Ge, Jiaoshou and Corndog have all posted

¹ The toolkit is available at www.tudou.com/my/soft/toolkit.php#edit
similar programs online (Corndog, 2010; Hu Ge, 2009; Jiaoshou, 2010). After the success of his machinima War on Internet Addiction, Corndog uploaded a video series on how to make machinima videos, which was well received in both his game community (where he is webmaster now) and on Tudou. Apart from online know-how videos, Tudou has organized training workshops to promote digital literacy. One such training session was held in July 2009. The session, themed on “creativity and realization” and covering topics such as subtitles and the use of editing software, attracted more than 30 Tudou bloggers who came to learn how to turn creative ideas into engaging videos (Tudou Blog, 2009).

4.1 Creating as connecting

While training does seed and foster literacy among video users, a more efficient and cost-effective means to cultivate literacy is to facilitate connection and knowledge-sharing among video users and creators themselves. To this end Tudou has utilized its own website as well as other platforms of social media to create online interest groups and organized offline get-togethers. Tudou’s BBS, or, as Tudou calls it, Tudou Community, is organized around topic groups. Each thread-starter is identified with a group. Users can join these groups, or create their own, and invite their friends in, where they can discuss whatever topics they like, or send private messages using Tudou’s on-site mailing tool. Bloggers’ homepages are another channel for users to connect and converse with each other. Jiaoshou is a skillful user of this channel to develop and maintain his fan base. It is also a good platform for Jiaoshou’s users to troubleshoot video-creating and sharing problems, where they raise questions and ask for help from Jiaoshou, or chat, debate, and share knowledge with each other. Outside the website Tudou has created QQ messaging groups for active video creators to get connected with each other. Both Jiaoshou and Corndog have joined groups sponsored by Tudou, friended and maintained links with like-minded video creators in these groups. Jiaoshou contributed his voice to Corndog’s War on Internet Addiction and dubbed the video for 2 minutes. They even co-created remotely a spoof song You know too much.

Another way of fostering literacy and maintaining connection is offline get-togethers. From earlier on, Tudou has been organizing various bloggers’ parties all over China, alone or in partnership with other businesses. Among the most famous partners is Intel, which sponsored a series of gatherings and workshops on the fringe of its joint events with Tudou, “Intel Centrino Creative Videos Competition” (Digital Weekly, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). For video enthusiasts, the appeal of these events is obvious. They get free training sessions. They meet peers, show (off) and share their skills with them, and put their creative ideas to test among like-minded people. To make it even more appealing winners of these events are offered opportunities to work together with professional teams to produce video commercials (Xie & Zheng, 2007). Tudou’s Video Festival—the commercial campaigns to promote it, and the

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2 He Ge is an amateur director and video creator, who helped to popularize spoof videos in China. Jiaoshou literally means Shouting Beast, is a popular video creator in China’s cyberspace. He was voted to be the Most Popular Video Blogger in Tudou.com’s annual Video Festival in 2009. Corndog won the same title in 2010 for his machinima video War on Internet Addiction.

3 The video series is available at www.tudou.com/playlist/p/8046545.html

4 Tudou’s BBS is at www.tudou.com/groups/index.html.

5 Jiaoshou’s dubbing for War in Internet Addiction is available at www.tudou.com/programs/view/3Dhh-aZ1LBE/. His is the second voice. The co-created song is available here at www.tudou.com/programs/view/pFgySW9p18Y/.
fringe activities around it — to which I will turn in the next section, is another series of events that provide opportunities for video users to meet and befriend, to learn and share in the offline world.

While some of the learning and sharing are predominantly online or offline, most of them are both. Jiaoshou engages his Tudou peers on the Tudou website and through messaging tools; he also meets them on offline occasions organized by Tudou. “Creative Workshop”, a Tudou-based group of amateur video creators, works and grows mostly online. However they also meet constantly offline to shoot videos together, and to take part, as a group, in Tudou-organized events. Through these meetings, the group gets to know and team up with other creators in video production (Ding, 2007; Yuan, 2007).

5. Intermediating for the self

In 2007, Jiaoshou was a part-time net jockey known by the name of “Silly Dad” on mop.com, a popular entertainment portal, and his signature mask was still to be designed. When Jiaoshou created his first video and wanted to find a streaming site to host it, he turned to Tudou (Jiaoshou, 2010). In the video, Jiaoshou (or Professor)-class Commentating of Game Videos (jiaoshou ji youxi shipin jiangjie), Silly Dad mimics football analysts to commentate video games. The video was a big hit. Boosted by its popularity, Silly Dad decided to make more videos of similar kind. The single video developed into a series, and the name Jiaoshou became more well-known than Silly Dad. Tudou began to feature him on its home page, which gained him more hits and fans. In 2008, Jiaoshou decided to adopt his current name (Jiaoshou, 2010). A year later in the 2009 Tudou Video Festival he won the title of “the Most Popular Blogger”.

A stage to perform the self, a forum to exchange and share ideas, and a space to producing new sociality and forge new connections: Jiaoshou’s rise to fame shows the use and “power of the platform”. I have referred briefly to connections made possible between video creators and Tudou’s business partners when discussing how links among users are encouraged and facilitated by Tudou. In this section I expand on the discussion of these connections and their implications for video creators like Jiaoshou, with a view to casting light on the role of the platform as an enabler of the self. The focus will be on how Tudou helps users with better access to audience and businesses, thus serving not only as a stage that invites and hosts user performance, but also as an intermediary through which users can reach out to and link with other platforms and networks.

5.1 The creativity business

When Jiaoshou decided to use Tudou as his outlet of choice for his videos, he was looking for access to a large user base, but wasn’t expecting access to advertising money and business opportunity. In 2006 Tudou launched an initiative called “Tudou Ad”, inviting creators to embed ads in their videos to make money and promising to give the lion’s share of its profit to users (Wang Wei, 2006b; Yang, 2006). There is no way to know the details about the

6 In Chinese, 《教授级游戏视频讲解》， the series of videos is available at www.tudou.com/playlist/p/129651016975058.html.
division of profit between Tudou and video creators. What is told is that on average popular creators or groups could make up to ten thousand RMB yuan a month (Tudou Blog, 2010a).

For Jiaoshou, a civil engineer and project manager by trade, ad money from videos might not be the most appealing factor in the arrangement. More important is the fame he gained through Tudou Ad among advertising agents and thus the indirect access to the business world, which turned into a direct one after the success of his videos, when he was invited to shoot together with Tudou an ad series of 12 videos for Master Kong, a popular Taiwan-owned brand for noodles, bottled beverages and pastries. The more recent series, An Alternative Version of the Duke of Mount Deer, was sponsored by Tudou and Changyou.com, the online games platform of the internet portal Sohu. It entered season two and generated more than 20 videos, and Jiaoshou got to work with other famous creators recommended by Tudou such as Hank and Panda Lin. These videos generate revenue for Jiaoshou, incentivise him to work harder, put him among creative yet critical peers, and in the process constantly build up his skills and creative capacity. Tudou has also changed his career path. Jiaoshou is now being commissioned to shoot more videos for many more businesses and is contemplating starting up his production companies to serve the market for internet video ads (Jiaoshou, 2010).

Tudou Ad might be the first and important step to get Jiaoshou close to businesses and generate for him business opportunities. A more critical and powerful link the process is power of the Tudou platform that might be called the Tudou machine, including its curating practice (to which I turn in the next section) and its business promotion schemes, the best example of which is the annual Tudou Festival, a signature video streaming industry event held every spring.

5.2 Tudou Video Festival

The original idea of the Tudou Festival was, as Wang Wei (Wang Wei, 2008) outlined with a grain of idealism, to create a regular and continuous occasion for grass-root creativity where:

- Creators and distributors or sponsors can find each other;
- People can talk face-to-face in the real rather than virtual world;
- It is beautiful and rarely frequented by tourists so that participants can stay quietly with peace of mind

That was the how the first festival, then called Moganshan Movie Festival, happened on April 15, 2008. The festival was housed at an old church, attended mostly by video enthusiasts who travelled long distance to a mountainous and hard-to-reach scenery resort that is the Monganshan Mountain. There were no build-up events before the event and little media coverage afterwards.

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7 The ad series is available at www.tudou.com/programs/view/zePGKI5bCOc/
8 The video series is available at www.tudou.com/programs/view/vNgMsNNDpY/; and Panda Lin’s home page at Tudou.com is www.tudou.com/home/linxiongmao/#comment_area
In 2009, the festival changed its name and moved to Shanghai, where it could get better attention from both the media and ordinary users. To promote the festival, shortlisted videos were shown offline in Beijing and commented on by Chairman of the festival, Lu Chuan, a famous film director in China, with wide media coverage by popular as well as traditional media. Five million users took part in online voting. In 2010, the event moved to be permanently based in Beijing. Screening events of shortlisted videos were held in more cities to include Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. Countdown events and news conferences were organized to build momentum for the festival. Celebrities were invited to attend these events to maximize fan participation and media fanfare. Jiaoshou and Corndog became household names among video enthusiasts before they appeared on the podium of the festival to claim the title for “the most popular video blogger” and smiled proudly in front the audience online and offline, “It’s our turn to get famous!”

The festival is more than a video streaming event. It doesn’t only win Jiaoshou fame, but also career opportunities. On the fringe of the event, Tudou has organized project promotion activities for creators to seek potential cooperation with media companies. Starting in 2009, China Film Group, China’s most influential movie company, has put a module in the festival to identify and recruit movie talent. Winners of the module are given project and funds to experiment and grow. Beginning in 2010, Tudou launched Orange Box to make its own “made-for-Internet” drama series. With it Tudou started a project called Warehouse No.6, a talent recruitment program for its in-house content production, including actors, directors, screenwriters, editors and producers (Tudou.com, n.d.-a). These initiatives, like Tudou Ad and Tudou Festival, are meant to help with Tudou’s business viability. However, they also help more people like Jiaoshou to connect with each other and with businesses, and open up new possibilities for their creation, even for their career. In this sense Tudou is not only a platform but also an intermediary for the increasingly creative and loud self of the tech-savvy young growing up with the internet.

6. Curating Tudou: Negotiating users, clients, and the state

Online content providers are generally regarded as “curators of public discourse” (Gillespie, 2010). However, this role of curatorial authority is up for grabs and there is competition between users, advertisers and the platform itself (Gehl, 2009). The latter in China’s case acts also as the proxy of the state in censorship. There is an inherent tension between users and the platform about the ownership and autonomy of the space. In the case of Tudou, curating display has not only to do with user preference (to display the content in a way that appeals to users and gets more traffic) and financial viability (to cater to the needs of advertisers as they help pay the bills), but also political survival (non-compliance with or insensitivity to political rules may lead to shutdown of the website). Curating Tudou means to maximize and monetize the success of the website by keeping the users, advertisers and the government happy at the same time. The rhetoric of user experience and sense of community is all about increasing the exchange value of website as indicated by the selling price of its advertising slots. At times of conflicts of interest between these stakeholders, users are always the first to be dropped.

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9 A collection of the report is available at Tudou at www.tudou.com/about/moreinfo.php. Scroll down to media report to find coverage from April-June 2008.
6.1 Users as curators

In the early days, when the intermediate task for Tudou was to expand the user base rather than to figure out a revenue model, it adopted rather liberal way of curating the display of its video content. The fundamental way to organize the content was through tabbing (Pacific Epoch, 2005). The prime section of Tudou’s home page was reserved for user-created videos (Yang Yang, 2007). However, there were no special sections, such as “featured videos”, which were reserved for staff favourites or recommendations. Some videos are ahead of others on the “most” lists purely because users have clicked on them. Users speak with their mouse about what they like (A Yu, 2007), and if there were enough clicks, the video ended up on the home page and brought fame, passing or permanent, to its creator.

However, this utopian users-as-curators mode of content organization didn’t last long. It burns money to operate a website like of Tudou, and there is a permanent urge for it to generate revenue to offset the operation costs and make a profit for investors. Starting in 2005, Tudou experimented with a virtual currency called Potato Skin, which users could earn through uploading content or gain by purchasing with real money, and with which users can auction the opportunity to be featured on the home page (Xue Tong, 2005). This was a blatant statement of “money talks” and was a far cry from the democratic rhetoric that Tudou tried to get users to believe in in its publicity campaigns. The idea never took off and the virtual currency was scrapped shortly afterwards. In June 2007, when Jiaoshou for the first time uploaded his video to Tudou, it was already a different website. A contingent of web editors was put in place to choose videos that are “healthy” in nature and put them on its home page (Yang Yang, 2007). It was through recommendations by these editors that Jiaoshou came to be known by a large number of users in a relatively short period of time. And star users like Jiaoshou, Hu Ge and Corndog are thus jointly manufactured by users and video-streaming sites like Tudou.

6.2 Platform as curator

The need for Tudou to create star users like Jiaoshou has in part to do with the need to generate revenue through commercial advertising. Obviously famous creators like Jiaoshou attract many more clicks and thus their advertising time can be sold more easily to businesses, with a high price tag. The role of Tudou editors is more than that of facilitators or hosts. They are also similar to sports scouts, or “A&R men” in the music business, trying to find the next stars among a huge crowd of videos and their users. However, finding emerging stars doesn’t necessarily mean that stable advertising revenues are assured. As Gillespie (2010) says about YouTube videos, most user-created content on Tudou could not be paired with advertising. This was not simply because the average videos attracted few clicks, but also because user-created videos were not categorized in a way that made it comfortable for advertisers to pair ads with them; partly from fear of being associated with the wrong content, partly out of uncertainty about the target audience of their ads, and partly because of potential copyright issues with user-created content (UCC) containing movie or music extracts.
When Tudou was founded in 2005, it was very upbeat about its future as a UCC community website. As its founder Wang Wei said, “I think there will be a big enough market for us to succeed as a pure multimedia user-generated content website” (Pacific Epoch, 2005). However, his hope has bumped against reality. May’s (2010) research on YouTube videos suggests that large sustained YouTube audiences are built by corporate media. Gillespie (2010) holds a similar view, stating that commercial media “dominate the lists of the most popular and most viewed”. A survey by China Internet Information Centre (China Internet Information Center, 2010) shows that watching online videos is among the most popular applications for internet users in China, and movies and TV drama, instead of user-created content, are the videos of choice for most users. Teaming up with professional content providers seems a logical move under these circumstances. Tudou’s cooperation with traditional media content providers started with SETV, a local satellite channel in the southeast Fujian Province. In January 2007 the two parties jointly launched a television program broadcasting popular user-created videos from Tudou (Sheng, 2007). That was a rare exception in the direction of flow of content between traditional media and Tudou. In most cases we see it the other way around: traditional media, including television and music labels, find their way into the content library of Tudou, and attract most of the traffic, as is the case for YouTube (China Internet Information Center, 2010; May, 2010). In September 2008, Tudou set up a special HD channel for copyrighted movies and television drama purchased from traditional content providers. Apart from getting out of copyright trouble associated with user-uploaded content, the purpose of the channel, Black Beans, is to attract more users and internet traffic so as to generate better advertising revenue (Niu, 2009; Zhang, 2008).

Tudou didn’t stop there with movies and television drama. Its cooperation with traditional media covers areas ranging from news, sports and entertainment to animation and lifestyle. To better align and categorize its diversified content, Tudou launch a major strategic reshuffling of its content on 30 June 2009. In the move, 14 content channels were set up, with names similar to those of a television network. Explaining the rationale for the reshuffle, Ms Jiang Weimin, chief content officer of Tudou, admits, “We are funded by advertisers, and they like to see clearly the target audience of their video ads. The reshuffle makes it easier for them to pair their ads and thus serves that end. We are a business and our first task is to survive” (Jiang, 2009).

6.3 Tudou as censor

In 2005, when Tudou was still a nascent platform, with traffic incomparable to its scale today, the need for censors was minimal. On different occasions, Wang Wei talked about a contingent of five to a dozen censors, composed of both volunteers and Tudou’s own staff (Balfour, 2006). At that time most of the questions were not about politics but about sex, and Wang Wei regarded censorship as “one of the minor things” that he worried about (Einhorn, 2006). Wang Wei was obviously either too upbeat or too evasive about the complexity of censorship on Tudou and in China.

China has a plethora of directives and guidelines issued by different ministries to establish and maintain order in cyberspace (Li, 2010). Thus in China when we talk about state censorship, we have to think there are different government agencies representing the state. These agencies, which oftentimes don’t agree with each other, can all issue orders to shut up,
or to shut down. These ministries and agencies don’t police the net by themselves. Rather, the responsibility is delegated to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs) (Li, 2010). To comply with these directives and regulations and protect its content diversity at the same time, Tudou has developed a sophisticated procedure of censorship. It takes three steps to take down a video from its website, each step being reviewed by more than one censor (Jiang, 2009).

However, when it comes to political stuff, the process can be very fast and easy. When it finds anything it regards as risky, it blocks it and sends the users involved the following message:

Dear user: Thank you very much for supporting Tudou.com. As a provider of internet storage services, Tudou advocates legal and civil internet speech, and cannot take any legal and/or other responsibilities for illegal, vulgar or other inappropriate content by users. Since the content you have published is incompliant with current laws, social customs or other relevant regulations and policies, it has been automatically blocked by the system. We are sorry for this. If you still want to publish your work, your will need to make adjustment to the blocked content as of its appropriateness and legal compliance. Thank you. (Jiaoshou, 2009)

In the message, Tudou states that it is the automatic decision of the system rather than Tudou’s own choice to block the risky content, thus it should not take the blame. In most cases users do understand the need for Tudou to protect itself. For example when Jiaoshou’s videos got blocked, he posted the above message on his video log and blamed relevant state agencies rather than Tudou (Jiaoshou, 2009). His fans take a similar stand on this issue. In May 2010, when Jiaoshou’s homepage was blocked by Tudou, users all over China showed their support by posting on the comment area of the page messages like “Beijing people can’t access Jiaoshou’s homepage; Jiangsu people can’t access; Fujian people can’t either… (See Fig. 2). However, none of these users blamed Tudou for the shutdown.

Tudou complies with state directives to protect itself as a way to maximize its own business interests. An example cited by Wang Wei to explain the relativity of censorship also shows how Tudou can take advantage of loopholes in the state censorship system and ignore censorship for its own benefit:

A TV reporter in Hunan did a story for his local station about a middle-aged woman who adopted 20 homeless kids in a poor county, but his boss wouldn’t run the story. So the reporter put it on Toodou. Then a producer in Shanghai saw it, got in touch with the reporter, and sent a team to Hunan to do detailed reporting. The broadcast was extremely popular. (Balfour, 2006)

10 Original in Chinese. My translation.
Tudou censors on behalf of the state, but there are also many occasions where Tudou censors for itself. In the build-up to the 2010 Tudou Video Festival, Corndog was the amateur blogger favoured by Tudou. Obviously it didn’t want the same person to win the title of the most popular video blogger two years in a row. Jiaoshou found that he disappeared from Tudou’s home page, literally censored. And a lot of his votes didn’t get counted. Jiaoshou called the editors and complained about foul play. “They were very embarrassed when I called. But they didn’t stop it. It was obvious that they didn’t want me to win” (Jiaoshou, 2010).

In other cases Tudou censors for its clients. An anecdote told in my interview with Jiang Weimin, chief content officer of Tudou, shows that at times Tudou needs to bow to business pressure when curating its content. In early 2009, a video about the spat between Nokia China and its distributors was posted on Tudou and attracted attention immediately. The editors noticed it and featured it on the homepage. Nokia was furious to see the video and threatened to withdraw its sponsorship and ads from Tudou. Tudou decided to cave in and take the video off its homepage despite protest from its editors (Jiang, 2009). In times of conflicts of interest between revenue-generation and editorial independence, Tudou is always ready to accept an offer for the latter. What matters is the price tag.
7. The mainstreaming of Toudou and the future of UCC

Although the founders of Toudou promise to remain a community website and a video-streaming platform rather than a media company (Zhou Ting, 2009), the mainstreaming of Toudou seems inevitable, as is also the case for its Western counterpart YouTube (May, 2010). The mainstreaming of Toudou started with the introduction of professional content made by traditional media companies into its offerings. It was strengthened when a special HD channel called “Black Beans” launched in 2008. Through these moves, by 2009, the percentage of UCC decreased to account for only 30 percent of Toudou’s content (Zhou Yiyi, 2009). In 2010, Toudou launched an initiative called “Orange Box” to produce its own “made for the internet” movies, and recruited more than 40 people for the initiative (Si Han, 2010). Before that, on January 18, 2011, Toudou’s own news channel had already got online (Tudou Blog, 2010b). Toudou finally found its own voice and became a media company hosting user-created content, self-produced programming and professional copyrighted content.

Facing competition from both professional content creators and the content of platforms like Toudou that are tamed and driven by the financial demands of the market, how can we assess the future of user-created content?

User-created content was picked up and supported by Toudou because it wanted to generate revenues out of it. In 2008, when faced with pressure from traditional content providers about copyright issues, Wang Wei called the traffic brought about by UCC using copyrighted content as “industrial waste water”, useless because it wouldn’t make any money (Zhang, 2008). Starting in 2009, Toudou started to encourage original content by amateur users because it realized that it couldn’t compete financially with established internet portals such as Sohu in purchasing premium copyrighted content, and user-created content might be a way to differentiate itself from competitors (Xu Jieyun, 2011). Thus the importance and future of UCC depends on its ability to make money for its hosting platforms and on its potential to be turned into a competitive advantage. In 2011, Wang Wei, who invented the “waste water theory”, reiterated the importance of user-created content as one of the “entry barriers” into the video streaming industry (Xu Jieyun, 2011).

On 17 August 2011, Toudou went public and was listed on the NASDAQ Stock Market (Nasdaq, 2011), finally bringing profits for its investors. However, their happiness didn’t last too long. The performance of its shares has been lacklustre and 7 months later, it was acquired by and merged with Youku, its biggest competitor in China (Takada, 2012). Video-sharing platforms are still evolving. Thus, to borrow from Hartley (2009), the future of UCC remains “an open future”.

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