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Note: At the time of this publication, author Guobin Yang was affiliated with the Columbia University. Currently, he is a faculty member at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Chinese Internet? History, practice, and globalization

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Keywords: Internet; China; history; practice; globalization

In studying the impact of television on American journalism and the presidency, Michael Schudson (1995) writes that the question is not about television as an abstract technology, but about American television as a cultural institution and form. The ways in which a new technology is used depend on preexisting conventions and social relations. Thus television in the United States both absorbs conventions of news reporting from the past and develops new conventions. It influences American journalism and politics by providing forms of narration and representation. In this sense, there is no television as such, but only “this television, our television” (Schudson, 1995, p. 54). Can we speak of the Chinese Internet in the same way that Schudson speaks of American television?

There are obvious differences between television and the Internet. Television channels are limited in any region of the world, while the Internet is arguably the most global of contemporary media technologies. I will argue, however, that the Internet in China has become domesticated to the extent that it is now possible, even necessary, to talk about the Chinese Internet, as opposed to the Internet in China. “Domesticated” here means “localized” more than “tamed”. “Localized”, however, does not mean that the Chinese Internet is not global or that it has become an intranet. It still has global features, and yet it has assumed distinctly Chinese characteristics.

The Chinese Internet is a cultural form much like American television, or British television for that matter. Internet as a cultural form refers to the various types of network services, user practices, and genres of writing, such as YouTube videos and blogs. These are used differently in different societies and necessarily

carry the imprints of their users.

The forms of the Chinese Internet

The Chinese Internet comprises network services associated with specific technologies, genres, and practices common among Chinese users. In the late 1990s, when the Internet was just catching on in China, bulletin board systems (BBS) and personal home pages were the fashion. Then personal home pages gave way to blogs, while BBS forums have remained vibrant to the present day. Meanwhile, numerous other forms have appeared, such as chat rooms, shockwave flash videos, instant messaging, and most recently, microblogs. Among the most popular genres and practices are Internet literature (Hochx, 2004; Yang, 2010), the practice of spoofing known as *egao* (Meng, 2011; Voci, 2010), Internet events or new media events (Jiang, 2010; Qiu & Chan, 2011; Yang, 2011), and Internet and cell phone jokes (Yu, 2007).

Sina's microblog service Weibo, the Chinese acronym for microblog, is a network service with Chinese features. Launched in August 2009 as a copycat of Twitter, it had registered over 100 million users by early 2011. In the meantime, user habits, Sina's management practices, as well as the contingencies of political control, jointly gave Weibo a unique character, both in a positive and negative sense.

Like users of other Chinese network services, Weibo users do all sorts of things. Most people are engaged in chitchat, sharing even the most intimate details about personal life. Others talk about current affairs and politics. Still others use it for civic organizing and mobilization for online and offline action. In March 2011, when news came that the city of Nanjing planned to fell the lush French plane trees lining its avenues, a campaign to stop the plan was organized through Sina Weibo. Activists set up a "Weibo group" (*weibo qun*) to coordinate action and gather and disseminate information. Another campaign, this time to save dogs, happened in April 2011 through Sina Weibo. On 15 April, animal rights activists in Beijing spotted a truckload of dogs reportedly being shipped to the slaughterhouse in a northern city. They stopped the truck on a highway outside Beijing and negotiated a deal to purchase the dogs and send

them to various animal shelters.

In both cases, activists posted videos and images directly on Weibo, functions which Twitter does not have. These videos and images were circulated numerous times along with text messages using Weibo's forward function, another of Sina Weibo's innovative functions. In comparison, Twitter's retweeting function does not yet allow users to add comments to their retweets. Sina Weibo has many other minor functions that encourage user interaction and community-building. These have contributed to the rapid growth of its user base.¹

Sina Weibo is thus a lively and dynamic sphere. Yet like other domestic websites, it is censored for subversive content. Tweets that directly challenge the legitimacy of the party-state are filtered. In times of social crises or critical events, such as the awarding of the Nobel peace prize to the dissident Liu Xiaobo or the calls for a Chinese jasmine revolution, Sina Weibo has closed its search function to prevent it from being used for mobilization. Users, however, have creative ways of negotiating and bypassing keyword filtering by inventing an Aesopian language combining linguistic with non-linguistic symbols.

This negotiated creativity, so to speak, is just as evident in the genres and practices of the Chinese Internet. An example is the phenomenon known as *wangluo shijian*, or Internet incidents or online events.² Many of these events involve online verbal and symbolic protests about social and political injustices, but others are about issues of social morality, such as publishing sex diaries in one's personal blogs. An Internet incident has the following features: large numbers of messages and responses posted in major online communities consisting of blogs, forums, and increasingly, microblogs; the rapid diffusion of these messages through the popular practice of cross-posting and the forwarding function on microblogs; the mixture of text messages with digital photos and sometimes videos with sensational or playful emotional expressions; and in many cases, spill-over into the mass media, including international media. These features both resemble and differ from those of a viral YouTube video in the United States (US), a main difference being the focus on critical social issues in the Chinese case.

The so-called "black kiln" incident is an example. On 19 May 2007, the Henan

Television station reported the kidnapping of young boys into slave labour in the illegally operating brick kilns in Shanxi province. The program came to public attention in Henan province and follow-up stories were aired in the following weeks. Newspapers in Shanxi province covered the story too. Yet it was not until early June that the issue gained national publicity, leading to the direct intervention of the central government. The transformation of this story from local to national news happened because of an open letter a woman posted online anonymously. The letter appeared on 6 June in the Big River Net (*dahe wang*), the official web hub of Henan province. By 18 June it had attracted 300,000 hits. As soon as it appeared, the letter was cross-posted to the popular online community Tianya. In numerous responses to the letter, netizens expressed outrage and sympathy. They demanded the punishment of the local kiln owners as well as the police and government personnel who helped them to cover up the case. Many people proposed specific avenues of action, such as building QQ-based mass mailing lists to keep the communication going and establishing emergency citizen organizations to raise funds for the parents and their abducted children. These online protests spilled over into national newspapers and television, which began to cover the case extensively. The wave of online protest ended in early July with the prosecution of the key suspects.³

History and practice

State and market actors play an essential role in developing China's information technology sector. The neo-liberal economic policies of the Chinese government prioritize the IT sector, viewing it as a key driver of China's modernization (State Council, 2010; Zhao, 2007). The introduction of a network service, such as microblogging, is usually a business decision at the firm level. Websites with such services are run by both private firms and state-owned media agencies. They operate in a commercially competitive and politically regulated environment. Government regulatory policies and business practices channel user behavior in specific directions, such as more toward entertainment and less toward political dissension.

Yet the formation of a Chinese Internet is also the outcome of users' practices and habits in their daily production, circulation, and consumption of online content. In the early days of the Internet, the Chinese official media created an image of the Internet as an information superhighway leapfrogging to a modern China. Users experienced the Internet differently, however. Finding a new sense of freedom and new forms of belonging online, they were the first to see the Internet as a space for personal expression, social networking, and political participation.

The everyday practices of Chinese netizens combine elements of existing forms with creative adaptations of old forms or new inventions. They carry the burdens of historical memories and present concerns. To many, bulletin board postings were electronic versions of big-character wall posters, an important form of public expression in modern Chinese history. This historical memory influenced the way people used BBS and partly explains why BBS was used for airing grievances from early on. On the campus of Peking University, an area called the "Triangle" had long been the centre of campus wall posters in political campaigns and social protests. Not surprisingly, "Triangle" became the name of a university-affiliated BBS forum, one of the most active of its kind in its heyday.

A main part of the early Chinese Internet culture was the university BBS. Even when commercial websites like Netease and Sohu came on the scene, they first attracted users and built their customer base through their BBS forums (in Netease's case, their free home page space was another attraction). Thus many early adopters were first exposed to the Internet through the use of BBS. This experience shaped their understanding of the Internet as a whole. For the younger cohorts who grew up in the age of the Internet, it deeply shaped their personal identities (Liu, 2011). In March 2005, the famous Tsinghua University BBS SMTH (*Shuimu Qinghua*) was forced to change from an open forum into an internal, real-name BBS. This created quite an uproar among Chinese netizens. A BBS posting lamenting what the author called the death of SMTH spread online. The posting was written in the form of a condolence letter. The author recalled with deep passion the time he spent on SMTH. He remembered his friends there and the fellowship they shared and enjoyed, as well as how he met a girl who later became his wife. As he put it, his experiences

on SMTH became an important part of his identity:

Shuimu Qinghua BBS played a role in my life that my teachers and even my parents could not compare to. Here, there was never an unresolvable problem. There were always people ready to help, there were always people who needed your help ... I developed a habit that I would never have changed in my life: That is, whenever I had some thoughts, learned something new, or had questions, suggestions, or resources, the first thing I did was to post it in the *Shuimu Qinghua* BBS to share with the many friends there, to discuss, and even to quarrel over ... Now that it is dead, what am I to do?⁴

The moral of this personal story applies to the Chinese Internet as a whole. It highlights the sociability, liveliness, and resourcefulness of Chinese Internet culture, as well as its vulnerability to political control.

Internet censorship and globalization

The domestication of the Chinese Internet is not all about local appropriation of the global. Rather, it is a multi-directional process involving multiple social actors, complex flows and interactions, and polyvalent and ambivalent outcomes. This is nowhere clearer than in the complex tango between Chinese Internet control authorities and online activists.

Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has built a system of Internet control and monitoring, blocking or filtering information from outside China and censoring information inside. A system popularly dubbed as the “Great Firewall” was erected as a virtual boundary, selectively separating Chinese cyberspace from the outside. Using both human power and software technologies, the “Great Firewall” filters keywords and blocks selected foreign websites. These censorship practices reflect government anxieties about the potentially destabilizing consequences of open information flows. The global discourse about the role of the Internet in large-scale revolutionary movements, however

inflated it may be, appears only too real to Chinese leaders. Censoring the Chinese Internet has thus evolved into an integral part of the national strategy of *weiwen*, or “maintaining stability”.

Chinese netizens negotiate Internet control in creative ways. Savvy users may access blocked websites through circumvention technologies. Twitter is a case in point. Although blocked in China, it still has many Chinese users. According to *Twitbase.com*, a website that tracked Chinese-language Twitter activity, there were 85,541 Chinese-language users as of 11 November 2010, many of them in the PRC. They generate a constant slew of oppositional discourse that is only occasionally seen on microblogging services inside China.

In their attempts to transgress the virtual borders, Chinese online activists are aided by more than new technologies. Globalization itself is a favorable condition. The global circulation and consumption of entertainment content via online and multimedia channels (Curtin, 2007) not only create latent platforms for communicating activism, but perhaps more importantly, hone users’ skills in navigating the global Internet networks, skills that may be used for activism. Transnational online advocacy networks and an online transnational Chinese cultural sphere (Yang, 2003) provide an audience and a support network for domestic activists. The global human rights discourse is a source of legitimacy (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010), while global media expand the influence of small groups of domestic activists by putting them in the international spotlight. Finally, recent discourse on Internet freedom, fueled in part by Google’s decision in March 2010 to reroute search requests for *Google.cn* to its *Google.com.hk* site, seems to align powerful transnational corporations like Google with domestic Internet activists, giving activists a new boost of energy.

Thus as state power builds new boundaries to curb information flows, local activists may transgress them. Online boundaries are as porous as territorial borders. These interactions entail attempts to break down borders, but the outcome is the appearance of new boundaries. In this sense, the Internet is a fitting metaphor for a China caught between national anxieties and global aspirations. Its *sinicization* epitomizes China’s ambivalent responses to globalization in its quest for indigenous forms of modernity. A challenge for global media scholars is to understand the complex processes and outcomes of

the efforts to both build and transgress boundaries.

Notes

1. At a public event held on 15 March 2010, which I attended, Twitter's co-founder and chairman Jack Dorsey said that many of Twitter's innovations, such as the adoption of hashtags, were based on user experiences and input. In China, major websites have job positions for analysing user experience. Thus it is likely that Sina Weibo has similar mechanisms as Twitter for absorbing user input.
2. In recent years, these incidents have been named "Internet mass incidents" (*wangluo qunti shijian*) by Chinese government authorities, a sort of online version of "mass incidents" (*qunti xin shijian*). Some scholars in China and Hong Kong view them as "new media events". See Qiu and Chan (2011).
3. Increasingly, the dynamism of Internet incidents takes the form of complex interactions among multiple media channels – television and newspapers, as well as blogs and microblogs. It is worth emphasizing, however, that in many cases, the initial momentum is built through online interaction and online information dissemination. The popularity of microblogs heightens these functions due to their feature as an "awareness system" that enables users to maintain perpetual mental awareness of news and events (Hermida, 2010).
4. The complete essay is available at <http://www.xys.org/xys/netters/others/net/smith2.txt>. Accessed 12 May 2011. My translation

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