Online Identity Politics

the observation of resistance identity of networked users

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Outline

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1. Concept: Networked Users

- The concept of “audience” is historical, dynamic and constructed
- Audience activity (Biocca, 1998; McQuail, 1997)
- Shift from audience to user (Livingstone, 2004)
- “Networked Users” as a new perspective on audience research
1. Concept: Networked Users

- “networked society” (Castells, 2000)
- “networked users”
  - It refers to the open, extensive and interactive social network which takes ICT as the agent, and regards individual user as the node.
  - It is built on certain identity, “fandom” or common interests/topics, strengthened and expanded by information interflow and interactions among the users.
1. Concept: Networked Users

- “networked users”
  - An individual user belongs to multiple networks. Different networks interrelate because of the overlap of node/user, with information and meaning circulate among them.
  - Different nodes/users have different functions and status in the network. Those nodes which have more connections and perform more actively in the information flow are usually in the center or of great importance.
1. Concept: Networked Users

- Difference between the "networked users" and the audience as a group in previous theories
  - "rediscovery of the group": primary group, obstinate audience, opinion leader, interpretative group …
  - the “networks” are generated during the process of the exposure and usage of the media, and changes with the behavior of the users
2. Literature: BBS, user and Identity

- BBS
  - Few about the regulation issue: in “ideology education” field
  - Rich and colorful perspectives

- Users
  - Networked Users as the key factor of BBS
  - BBS legacy in Web2.0 movement
2. Literature: BBS, user and Identity

Identity

- Castells (1997): "the source of meaning and experience of human"; legitimizing identity, resistance identity, and project identity
- **Resistance identity**: "those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and or/stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society"
- "life on the screen may be play, but it is very serious play" (Turkle, 1995)
- Zapatista movement (Castells, 1997; Russell, 2005)
3. Case: SMTH BBS in regulation issue

- Analyze the behavior of the networked users and the effects
- Extreme but well exhibits the difference…
- Methodology:
  - Interpretive paradigm;
  - Case study;
  - Ethnography methods: field observation, face-to-face/online interview, experience
  - Text analysis.
What is SMTH BBS

- BBS is one of the most active Internet applications in China during the last ten years. In early 2007, more than 50 million people, approximately 36.9% of Chinese Internet users, are constantly using BBS.

- SMTH BBS (http://www.smth.edu.cn)
  - One of the biggest and most famous BBS in CERNET (China Education and Research Network), based in Tsinghua Univ.
  - Set up in 1995, more than 500 discussion boards, 300,000 registered users.
  - The users resisted the regulation in lots of ways.
  - Most of them denied the use of SMTH and continued their virtual life in NewSMTH.
欢迎光临 BBS 水木清华站

telnet:166.111.8.238  http://smth.edu.cn

欢迎您运行IPv6服务

北京通信管理局ICP备案号（京ICP备020002号）

欢迎光临 ◆ BBS 水木清华站 ◆ 上线人数 3973 [最高: 23674] (3286 WWW GUEST)
试用请输入 `guest'，注册请输入 `new', add '.' after your ID for BIG5
请输入代号:
Campus BBS Regulation Issue in 2005

- With more and more college students using BBS, the Ministry of Education of China issued a mandate in March 2005 towards all campus BBS:
  - denying the access of the users whose IP is out of campus
  - establishing real-name policy and shutting down several BBSes directly.
  - Almost one million BBSers were involved in this issue.
4. Background of the regulation

- Rapid development of Internet, booming of e-economy and more people participation.
- Chinese government leaders showed their attention and support to online expression of public opinion.
- The government also enhanced the control over Internet
- “enhance and improve the ideological education of college students”
4. Process of the regulation

The ownership of SMTH?

- Tradition and history of autonomy
- SMTH Administrative Committee (SAC): operator of SMTH from volunteer users
- the Network Research Center of Tsinghua University (NRCOTU): the “legal” operator of SMTH
4. Process of the regulation

- **four steps**
  - Mar.16, 2005: NRCOTU implemented **router-block**, users outside the campus found them could not access SMTH.
  - Mar.18, 2005: three people working for NRCOTU got the SYSOP power.
  - Apr.14, 2005: the real physical “take-over” (NRCOTU workers entered the room that hosted SMTH server machine, and removed the cables connecting the data hard drive stand. The hard drive stand was then reconnected to another machine where they had absolute root privileges).
  - Apr.15, 2005: SAC made **resignation** and statement; NRCOTU took over their work.
从即日起，BBS水木清华站由开放型转为校内型，限制校外IP访问。
清华大学    2005.3.16

欢迎光临 ◆BBS 水木清华站◆ 上线人数 6069[最高: 23674](936 WWW GUEST)
请输入代号(试用请输入`guest`, 暂停注册新帐号,add `.` after your ID for BIG5)
请输入代号:
从即日起，BBS水木清华站由开放型转为校内型，限制校外IP访问。清华大学 2005年3月16日
5. The Fight: reactions by the users

- **82.3%** (more than 200,000) of SMTH users are from the outside of Tsinghua campus

- Three categories of reactions by SMTH users
  - Online reactions within SMTH
    - 3/16~3/18
    - 3/18~4/14
    - Post 4/14
  - Online reactions outside SMTH
  - Offline reactions

- They were Intervening and inter-determined
5.1 Online reactions within SMTH

- By in-campus users
- Once fragmental and diverse groups with niche interests and hobbies became united
- Three phases:
  - 3/16~3/18: emotional but reasonable
  - 3/18~4/14: follow media agenda
  - Post-4/14: carnival-like destruction
5.1 **Online reactions within SMTH**

- 3/16~3/18: Expressed their views with great emotion, still reasonable
  - Original well-written essays;
  - New nickname, new signing message and new “about-me” information.
  - Several hundreds new **greeting pages** in ASCII art;
    - Call users’ attention
    - Frame their thoughts
    - Decide the key of their behaviors
我离开这片土地
因为我爱她爱的深沉

DPIM祝SMTH早日康复
SMTH “ASCIIstudio”
SMTH “basketball”

You Can Block IP, BUT
Can't Block the Love of the Game

by masterzhang@smth
SMTH “beautifier”

蝴蝶飞啊飞断了一只翅膀
明天还该怎么飞翔……

Beautifier/妆点水木版
WILLIAM WALLACE:

Aye, Fight and you may die.
Run and you will live, at least a while.
And dying in your beds many years from now,
Would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that,
For one chance, just one chance,
To come back here and tell our enemies that:
They may take our lives, but they will never take our

FREEDOM

Forever and ever Braveheart
Solange mir eine Möglichkeit offen steht, werde ich mich nur in einem Lande aufhalten, in dem politische Freiheit, Toleranz und Gleichheit aller Bürger vor dem Gesetz herrschen. Zur politischen Freiheit gehört die Freiheit der mündlichen und schriftlichen Äußerung politischer Überzeugung, zur Toleranz die Achtung vor jeglicher Überzeugung eines Individuums. Diese Bedingungen sind gegenwärtig in Deutschland nicht erfüllt.

-----A.Einstein
1933.3.10

As long as I have the opportunity I will reside in a country ruled by political freedom, tolerance and equality of all citizens before the law. Political freedom consists of the freedom to articulate one’s political opinion, in speech as well as writing. Tolerance means respect towards all forms of opinion of the individual. At present these conditions are not met in Germany.

-----A.Einstein
1933.3.10
水流花败春临时
木枯枝折雀难栖
清明未至泪已尽
华发早生欲断魂
被衾虽暖心难温
强弩已折空余矢
奸臣当道奈若何
了却身前身身后事
5.1 Online reactions within SMTH

- 3/18: media began to report; agenda within SMTH began to follow the media.
- “Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong” and “Quotation Machine”
  - Satire or nonsense
  - Post-mordenism style
水木BBS调整为校内访问

北京大学BBS水木清华站已对校内用户进行了调整，限制校外IP访问。

限制校外IP访问

3月16日，打开了BBS水木清华站，浏览网页显示一条红色字：“从即时起，BBS水木清华站将由原来的对外开放转变为校内使用，限制校外IP访问。”

下午3时40分，BBS水木清华站的工作人员发出《致水木清华站全体用户的一封公开信》，信中说，水木清华站计划对校内IP进行暂时的调整，校外用户将无法访问水木清华站。

信中还说，水木清华十年发展的经验，校外用户对于水木清华站的贡献和贡献，对于今后清华大学的学术声誉，都有着巨大的贡献。

两个半小时后，一名ID为KCN的用户在系统管理员的发帖下，给出了BBS水木清华站的调整通知，KCN表示，BBS水木清华站是按照教育部有关文件要求进行的调整。该文件要求高校BBS必须向自律制度内交流平台转变，水木清华站作为典型实施。为此，清华大学将从3月16日起，BBS将对校内使用。

无法匿名浏览网页

3月4日11时30分左右，BBS中大校名站的工作人员发出公告，由于无法访问，BBS中大校名站暂停使用。

据BBS中大校名站相关人士透露，从3月5日起，BBS中大校名站将恢复正常。

北京大学、武汉大学等高校的BBS也已在近日作出类似调整。其中，有些BBS站已经停止了校外用户注册，有些则将站内“只读状态”。

除了“系统维护”的原因之外，各家高校均未对此事作出进一步的解释。
五月二十二日网罗天下 清华学生自发送会。今日 "SMTH BBS"
5.1 Online reactions within SMTH

- 4/14: after the physical “take-over” of SMTH, SAC announced that SMTH were no longer under their control and they could not secure any user’s data. SMTH began to be called as “pseudo-SMTH”

- many users gave up the patience for reasonable dialogue, and chose the carnival-like destruction to the “homeland” they built in the last ten years.
5.1 Online reactions within SMTH

- **Erase discussion board data**: 50+ boards had been totally erased in 24 hours
- **“Irrigation Machine”**: 100+ posts/second
- **Flash mob**: 300+ IDs appeared in given time and posted nearly 400 posts with the same title of “SYS03 is abolished the right to post” in “sysop” board.
- **“Prime number list”**: a file of prime number list less than $10^9$. It is about 56Mb. Users used it as the attachment when posting or sending local email. It caused the system of SMTH slow and unstable, even cracked.
- **ID suicide**: totally gives up his/her identity here.
5.1 Online reactions within SMTH

- **Authorization and disclamation**: Some users made *Statement of Authorization and Disclamation* that was drafted out by juristic professionals, in which the users stated that they authorized the BMs and former SAC to delete any post they posted before, and authorized their copyrighted data to be copied or backed up in order to be used in a new SMTH.

- **Resignation of BM**: During the first month after “3/16”, 32 BMs resigned. After 4/14, 119 BMs resigned in five days.

- **Vote with feet**: If the situation could not be changed, users could just leave with feet. Many users begin to continue their virtue life in NewSMTH.
Table 1: The sum of login each month in 2005.

(sum of login)
5.2 Online reactions outside SMTH

- Two communication circuits: for information flow
- QQ groups and Other BBSes: maintain the previous social network and discussion
- Overseas users established a website in which an open letter to President Hu Jintao, the alumni of Tsinghua University, was posted, with 8,500 reply and signature within a month
- Avoid content censorship
  - Adding space or dash between each character.
  - “Fake Ancient Prose” : a software transform the horizontal paragraph to vertical paragraph, which could be recognized by human being, but not identified by censorship mechanism.
“Fake Ancient Prose”
5.3 Offline reactions

- “3/18”: hundreds of SMTH users gathered, presented the flowers and origami crane;
- User “dear110” knelt down and bowed to get the chance to speak in a symposium;
- Be interviewed by media; “public journalist”; real media reporter;
- Thinking and discussing in daily life.
3/18 peaceful gathering
6. So what: lose/lose situation

- The failure of the regulation:
  - The real name policy and so called “on-campus network platform” don’t really actualized
  - The users of SMTH are much less than the users of NewSMTH, with much less participation
  - It blemished the image of the government in some students’ mind and provoked repulsive feeling

- data analysis
Table 4: the comparison of the number of visits to the top-10 boards in both BBSes.
Table 5: the comparison of the average number of participators of the top-10 most popular topics in a week
Table 6: the comparison of the number of updated Blog recently in both BBSes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within…</th>
<th>1 month</th>
<th>3 months</th>
<th>6 months</th>
<th>12 months</th>
<th>24 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMTH</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NewSMTH</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1425</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3626</td>
<td>5985</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. So what: lose/lose situation

- The failure of the resistance:
  - Users in NewSMTH do not have much more speech freedom than before;
  - NewSMTH might become commercialized and privatized step by step after departing from Tsinghua campus. “Public sphere” is weakened.
  - User’s social network and personal history were smashed. Their frustration and wound in mind are difficult to measure but exist.
  - They might become indifferent to politics as well as distrust policies and institutions. They might incline to adopt more extreme way or more “post-modernism” way to deal with important public issues.
7. Analysis: behaviors of networked users

how could we understand their social behavior as a group? They were networked and socialized users/participants. Four aspects:

- Information flow and interpersonal interactions
- Power of networked users
- Resistance Identity
- Quotation from the authoritative text
Table 2: Information flow model in the regulation

Users’ Online Life
- Blogs
- Independent Sites
- Other BBSes
- Online Forums
- Portal Sites
- News Sites

News Media

PUBLIC
(Not SMTH User)

Users’ Offline Daily Life
Table 3: interpersonal interaction model of the users during the regulation
7. Analysis: behaviors of networked users

- **Power of networked users**
  - Different users have different powers, which lead to different effects of their reaction;
  - Those users with strong power are both opinion leaders and action leaders;
  - Three factors might influence the power of users:
    - Position
    - Ability
    - Initiative
7. Analysis: behaviors of networked users

- **Resistance Identity**
  - It drives the users from different niche groups beginning to react in union;
  - Users feel they are devalued or “stigmatized”;
  - The group is lack of consistent plan. Their purpose and measures are changing with the change of the outside world.
  - However, their identity doesn’t disappear quickly.
NewSMTH's first welcoming page in May 2005
You are my Sun.
You are my Moon.
I give you all my Time,
& love you with all my Heart.
8. Conclusion

Systematic factors special in China of this regulation:

- universities are not institutions of autonomy but subordinate units of certain administrative department;
- sophisticated and effective Internet control system;
- Lots of government departments endowed by lots of administration rules about Internet management: “power without responsibility” ;
- ideology hegemony.
8. Conclusion

- However, internet regulation in China is not a fresh topic. The fresh thing is: people empowered by ICTs are driven by the “resistance identity” and react in union as networked users.

- Networked users are not only living in the media-space. Their behaviors are affected by all the factors.

- Networked users is changing the landscape of China society through the online politics and engagements, while the changes are in a gentle and mild way like the drizzle falls into the earth.
Thank you

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