The political blogosphere in China: A content analysis of the blogs regarding the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu

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The political blogosphere in China: A content analysis of the blogs regarding the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu

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Abstract
Despite the rapid growth of blogging in China, little is known about the communicative processes of blogs and their implications for China. This current study aims to bridge that gap by specifically looking at the political blogs posted on the NetEase, one of the largest portal websites in China, regarding the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu. Results from a content analysis indicate that bloggers, giving quick responses to the event, were actively engaged in discussions on politically sensitive topics, and expressed different opinions of the event and even criticism of the government.

Key words
Chen Liangyu • China • internet • political blogs • political communication • web

INTRODUCTION
Internet technologies make it possible for people to expose themselves to political conversations in a scope much wider than before. Specifically, web logs or 'blogs' – frequently updated web pages including stream-of-consciousness entries without editorial oversight of content – have provided a
new platform for the transformation of audience roles. The blogosphere, the cyberspace of blogs, is growing daily in readership and creators. According to statistics provided by Technorati, a blog search engine company, the number of bloggers – opinionated people posting their thoughts, experiences, and politics on blogs (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005) – increased to 50 million over the world by July 2006, which was 100 times as many as that three years previously (Lin, 2006). Blogging in China is growing even faster. When blog technology was first introduced into China in 2002, bloggers numbered fewer than 10,000. By July 2008 users with a blog space have reached 107 million, accounting for 42.3 percent of the total netizens in China (CNNIC, 2008).

The surge of attention to the blogosphere has triggered utopian predictions about the democratic potential of the internet in terms of its creating unprecedented opportunities for public discourse and political engagement. For instance, the influence of blogs on public issues and foreign affairs has been recognized in China (Zhang, 2005). Some researchers point out that blogs have become a powerful tool for political speech and activities (Wang, 2006a). Despite the fast development of blogs in China, much less is known about the state and implications of political blogs, a type with increasing prominence in public life. The present study aims to bridge that gap by conducting a content analysis of political blogs on NetEase regarding the dismissal of Shanghai party chief Chen Liangyu.

On 24 September 2006, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) made a decision to dismiss Chen Liangyu, secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the CPC, a Central Committee member and a Political Bureau member, for his involvement in appropriating Shanghai’s social security funds. He was also involved in other discipline violations, such as ‘helping further the economic interests of illegal business people, protecting staff who severely violated laws and discipline, furthering the interests of family members by taking advantage of his official posts’ (People’s Daily Online, 2006). On 26 July 2007, a CPC Central Committee Political Bureau meeting decided to expel Chen from the party, remove him from government posts, and submit his suspected criminal case to judicial organs for prosecution (Xinhua News Agency, 2007a). Chen, who was reported to have taken at least 2.6 million yuan and possibly more than 4 million yuan in bribes (South China Morning Post, 2007a), had been formally detained in jail waiting for trial (Xinhua News Agency, 2007b). After the investigation concluded, the scandal was found to be the biggest corruption case in China for a decade, involving more than 50 government officials and leaders of state-owned enterprises (BBC Monitoring International Reports, 2007; South China Morning Post, 2007b), drawing intensive attention from international media.
By considering the nature and impact of the Chen Liangyu event, the present study assesses the significance of the political potential of the internet and the political blogosphere in China. The content analysis should contribute to research on online political discourse in China by describing and analyzing how bloggers were involved in discussion about a politically sensitive event.

DEBATE ON INTERNET-BASED POLITICAL DISCUSSION
With the increasing use of the internet as a tool for gathering citizen input during the policymaking process in both developed and developing countries, much debate exists about the ideal democratic role for the internet and specifically the potential of internet-based discussion in promoting citizens’ political participation and democratic deliberation.

For many optimists, as a major source of information gathering and a useful tool for information releasing and disseminating, the internet provides a sphere for political expression, creates novel opportunities for widespread exchange of ideas and debate, and fosters a citizenry that is increasingly knowledgeable about public policy issues and collective problems and promotes civic participation and public deliberation (Browning, 1996; Dahlgren, 2000; Rheingold, 1993; White, 1997; Yang, 2003). Proponents argue that the unique features of the net, such as affordability, freely available information, anonymity, customizability, time- and distance-defying communication, interactivity, and decentralization, help encourage community and dialogue, attract marginal voices, and enhance participation in political affairs (Frederick, 1993; Mitra, 2001; Rheingold, 1993). Though still not a routine experience for citizens, online political discussion has been steadily growing in prevalence and importance. Since the 1990s, for instance, the number of modern discussion programs has mushroomed in the USA (Ryfe, 2002). China has also seen the growth of political writings in online discussion forums such as Qiangguo Luntan (Strengthening the Nation Forum), Huanxia Zhiqing Net (China Educated Youth Net) and Xici Hutong and deliberative practices within online environments (Yang, 2003; Zhou, 2005).

However, critiques from the perspectives of political economy and cultural analysis express pessimism, extending from ‘big brother’ fears to hyperrealist scenarios – from the development of a global surveillance society to the corporate ‘colonization’ of cyberspace and to concerns about digital divides (Dahlberg, 2002; Davis, 1999; McChesney, 2002; Napoli, 1998). Empirical examinations of online political discussion (e.g. Davis, 1999; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Johnson and Kaye, 2004) have also raised issues about exposure diversity and the anarchic and balkanized nature of much online discourse, which can be fragmented and confrontational.
Regardless of the debate, it would seem that the internet is at least a platform for bottom-up information and public debate. In mainland China, where recent years have witnessed the continuous internet boom with a reported number of 253 million internet users by June 2008 (CNNIC, 2008), scholars tend to hold an optimistic view on the internet, giving emphasis to the increasing impact of online public opinion on Chinese politics (e.g. Liu and Zhang, 2006; Peng, 2005; Tian, 2007). Most Chinese users consider the internet as a freer and more open space for public discussion about national affairs and expressions of public opinions (Yang, 2003). The survey by Guo and Bu (2001) shows that China’s internet users are more socially engaged, compared with non-internet users. They have more spaces for expressing personal views and exchanging views with others.

While politicians and pundits are aware of the gap between the potential and the reality of the internet due to concerns such as online censorship, nationalism in online forums, and the commercialization of the web (e.g. Hughes, 2000; Kluver, 2001; Kluver and Banerjee, 2005), academia outside China still acknowledges that the Chinese people, by and large, do have more political freedom than before. The internet as a tool for building a new forum for participatory democracy may after all have a positive impact on politics, pushing forward the incipient yet dynamic trends of civil society in China (He, 1997, 2006; MacKinnon, 2008; Yang, 2003). For example, Yang (2003) demonstrates how a socially active group intervenes in China’s public sphere with its own critique of contemporary society while at the same time it intensifies the use of the internet and the growth of the forum *Huaxia Zhiqing Net*.

No matter how different perspectives would be regarding the political potential of the internet in China, the author of this article argues that scholars of China’s political communication must attend to particular patterns of internet use, especially those encouraging political dialogue, to understand how new technologies exist alongside traditional modes of gaining information and expressing opinions. In addition to normative explorations, one step to enhance research could be systematically conducting empirical research on user-generated online content, which more or less reflects how internet users take advantage of new technologies to engage in political discussion and present their opinions. Therefore, the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu, a politically sensitive event, was chosen to see how citizens used blogs, which are known for ‘being highly opinionated and often political’ (Trammell et al., 2006), to express their political views and opinions regarding the event.

THE RISE OF BLOGS IN CHINA AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

the first national symposium on the phenomenon of blogging in December 2002; and the Mu Zimei tempest in 2003, which unexpectedly made blogs popular among the masses (Zhou, 2004). More and more Chinese people are becoming involved in the blogosphere to search for information and to express personal opinions. According to the Annual Blue Book on Social Development, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in January 2008, over 50 million people read blogs regularly, making blogs ‘an important channel for people to voice their opinions about important events’ and reject Chinese mainstream talk (Xiao, 2008). Blogs such as *Douban 9 o’clock* or *Antiwave*, literally meant to be anti-tradition, anti-mainstream radio programs, and *Don’t Think*, frequented by users over 30 million times as of April 2008, are a few examples opposed to state or mainstream Chinese intelligentsia (Jiang, 2008).

Inspired by the rise of blogging in China, some Chinese scholars argue that blogs will break the discourse hegemony of social elites, thus changing the cultural domain in the future (e.g. Wang, 2006b). Individuals are empowered by blogging to generate and publish any kinds of messages, thus changing their social status and reshaping their relationships with the state and society (Yan, 2003). In particular, the attractiveness of blogs for voicing political messages has been recognized (e.g. Xiao, 2008). The combination of blogging and politics makes it possible for people to enjoy relatively more freedom of political speech. Zhang and Lou (2006) see the impact of political blogs in terms of their influence on the state’s politics, surveillance of the political behavior of officials and the government, and engagement of citizens in political discussion.

Thanks to the features of frequency, brevity, ease of use, and personality, blogs are a manifestation of one significant potential of the internet – to reach a large readership quickly without necessarily having to go through mediating and filtering processes, which appeals to readers who may not fully trust traditional mainstream media. The role of citizen blogs in stories such as the Xiamen PX event has encouraged scholars to hold a positive normative view that blogs with a ‘bottom–up’ pattern can serve as alternative sources for sensitive issues, set the agenda of the Chinese government on occasion, and force changes in the upper echelons of the world of politics (e.g. Liu and Zhang, 2006; Xiao, 2008; Zhang, 2005).

In China, political bloggers are categorized into citizen bloggers, official bloggers, and group bloggers. Among them, the first group, the object of the present study, dominates the Chinese political blogosphere (Zhang and Lou, 2006). Unlike in the USA, where blogs are increasingly used by politicians for campaigns to energize readers with immediate and seemingly unfiltered information (Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005), the phenomenon of officials being involved in blogging is just arising in China (Hu, 2006a; Zhang, 2006).
The main political value of blogging in China is not to be found in politician presentations, but in the network discussions on political events and public issues involving millions of bloggers, which must be attributed to the trend of Chinese bloggers becoming popularized and diversified (Hu, 2006b). In the earliest two years of blogs in China, most bloggers were social elites. The situation has changed greatly since the middle of the 2000s. According to figures issued in 2005 by SOHU.com, one of the three major portals in China, 70 percent of blog users reported that their monthly income was less than 2,000RMB (about US $230). Seventy-seven percent believed that blogs were a good online way to share information and express personal feelings and distinctive voices (Hu, 2006b).

Although Chinese observers have recognized the importance of blogs as a form of online political discussion in public life, challenging traditional mainstream media, few studies have been found to empirically investigate the blogosphere in China, especially political blogs. Initial speculations are mostly based on normative claims drawn from telling stories. There is a lack of empirical knowledge in the literature, especially in terms of whether Chinese blogs extend the narrow range of topics and sources featured in mainstream news media and their relationships with traditional media with regard to discussions on a sensitive political event.

To bridge the gap between normative claims and empirical knowledge, the current study, a content analysis of the blogs regarding to the dismissal of Chen Liangyu posted on the NetEase website, examined how Chinese bloggers responded to the event and what kinds of views and opinions were presented online. When the dismissal decision was initially released in September 2006, mainstream media in China were ordered to play down the event. As the South China Morning Post reported, any coverage should ‘strictly follow the Xinhua version’. Web portals were urged to ‘censor online discussions and especially rumors about power struggles within the party’ (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 2006). Yet intensive responses still flooded into the Chinese blogosphere, providing a great research opportunity to examine whether blogs would be different from traditional media, and, if so, how they differed.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS**

Three sets of research questions and one hypothesis are proposed in this article.

- **RQ1a**: How did Chinese bloggers respond to the Chen Liangyu event in terms of the pace and duration with which they followed the event?

- **RQ1b**: Did the angles from which Chinese bloggers made comments on the event or the emphasis of their discussion change over the two months after the event was reported?
RQ2a: To what extent did Chinese bloggers present criticism of the government and officials and offer opinions different from the government position?

RQ2b: Were Chinese bloggers’ views of the Chen Liangyu event correlated to their attitude toward the government?

RQ3a: To what extent did Chinese bloggers rely on other sources? Would the reliance change over the two-month period?

RQ3b: What kind of source, if any, would be the one on which Chinese bloggers most relied?

RQ3c: Would original entries written by bloggers be significantly different from posts reproduced from other sources in terms of their views of the Chen Liangyu event and their attitude toward the government reflected in blogs?

H1: Chinese bloggers would be unwilling to be only passive messengers. Among all the sample posts regarding the Chen Liangyu event and related issues, original entries written by bloggers would be more than posts reproduced from other sources.

METHOD
To address the research questions and the hypothesis, this study used the quantitative content analysis method to analyze the political blogs posted on the website of NetEase regarding the dismissal of Chen Liangyu. NetEase – famous for its grassroots nature – was selected because it was the first among the three largest portal sites in China to offer blog services. The market size of its blog services ranked first among all portal sites in China, only falling behind QQ Space, a blog space provided by an instant messaging company QQ. The traffic rate and the number of users of the NetEase blog space, with its excellent overall performance and good interactivity, have been increasing fast (Baidu.com, 2007).

The timeframe for the study was a two-month period from 25 September 2006, when the news of the dismissal was released, to 25 November 2006. Related blogs posted during the period were collected. A research team led by the author, using the search engine on the blog site of NetEase and typing in Chen Liangyu, conducted a search for the data during the two-week period from the end of November to early December 2006, resulting in a list of links to each post. Each link was checked to ensure the existence of a given post. Duplicated posts were deleted. As a result, a total of 633 posts posted during the two-month period were found. Fifty percent of the total posts were randomly drawn as the sample for this study. The sample size was 316 articles. The unit of analysis was each post.

A coding form was developed with a focus on the intensiveness and orientation of discussion, which was measured by looking at the number of
blogs each single day, the angles from which bloggers discussed the event, and
the degree of dissent from the government’s accounts. Bloggers’ posts were
categorized into three primary types: exclusively original posts; posts mixed
with original writing and materials from other sources; and posts exclusively
reproduced from other sources. Because of the exploratory nature of this
study, the coding scheme included an ‘other’ category that allowed for coding
of unexpected types. Following this procedure, an item was designed as a
watershed to separate the posts primarily discussing the Chen Liangyu event
or the issues related to it from those mentioning the event with no substantial
content about it, which were excluded from coding and word count.

A series of questions were developed for the posts with a focus on the
event or the issues related to it. The questions primarily included:

1. Did a given post specifically express any opinion of the event? If so,
   was it overall favorable, neutral, or unfavorable?
2. How did a given post perceive the nature of the event (e.g. would
   the dismissal of Chen Liangyu be purely assessed as a result of the
   government’s move to punish corrupt officials? Or would it be purely
   viewed as a concrete representation of internal political disputes?)
3. Did a given post express an attitude towards the government,
   regardless of the Chen Liangyu event? If so, was it overall favorable,
   neutral, or unfavorable?
4. Primarily from what angle (e.g. political disputes and inside stories
   about power struggles, individual quality of officials, anti-corruption,
   institutions and systems) did a given post discuss the event? Was
   (were) there any other angle(s) other than the primary one?

These four sets of questions were coded for all three primary types of posts.
In coding the mixed posts with a blogger’s original writing and materials
from other sources, the original writing was separated from the part copied
from other sources. Both parts were coded in order to obtain more detailed
information regarding whether original writing would be different from
reproduced posts. The questions above were separately coded for the two
parts. Words were also counted separately. The reproduced part was also
coded for the types of sources to see to what extent bloggers relied on other
sources for their online discussion. The procedure of identifying different
sources was also applied to posts exclusively reproduced from other sources.

Two coders were trained in coding. Agreement was reached on the overall
structure and content of the coding form, thus assuring validity. Twenty
posts were randomly drawn from the pool of posts other than the sample
and coded to establish intercoder reliability figures. Scott’s $\pi$ was used for
calculating the reliability figures for the main variables, generating coefficients
ranging from 0.70 to 0.83, which were beyond the generally accepted level.6
FINDINGS

RQ1a–1b: Patterns in which Chinese bloggers responded to the event

Chinese bloggers intensively responded to the event of dismissing Chen Liangyu in the first four days, and especially the first two days, after the news was released. As indicated in Figure 1, the first two days were the peak time of blogging, with 27.8 percent (88 of 316) of total articles sampled, 45 articles on 25 September and 43 on 26 September. The third day saw a sharp drop to 19 articles, and next day a further drop to 13. From then on, the number of posts went up and down from one to nine, suggesting that bloggers’ interest significantly decreased, yet kept on a relatively steady level over the two months, October and November.

In order to test whether the angles from which the event was discussed changed over the time, the researcher divided the examined period into four
time intervals, 25 to 30 September, 1 to 15 October, 16 to 31 October, and 1 to 25 November. Differences in the discussion angles were found between the intervals ($\chi^2 = 47.57$, $df = 12$, $p < .0001$, see Table 1). The anti-corruption angle (58.7%, 74 of 126) dominated the discussion in the first time interval with others much less addressed. By contrast, the diversity of angles from which bloggers’ comments were made could be seen during the time interval from 1 to 15 October. The percentages of posts were quite equal on two categories, from the angle of political disputes and inside stories about power struggles (22.9%, 8 of 35) and from the angle of institutions and systems (including policy and legislation) (20.0%, 7 of 35), followed by posts from the angles of anti-corruption (17.1%, 6 of 35) and individual qualities of officials (14.3%, 5 of 35).

During the second half of October, bloggers’ top interest returned to anti-corruption (28.6%, 10 of 35), followed by political disputes and inside stories (20.0%, 7 of 35) and individual qualities of officials (20.0%). In the last time period, 1–25 November, bloggers were most likely to discuss the event from the perspectives of problems of institutions and systems (35.5%, 11 of 31) and political disputes and inside stories (32.3%, 10 of 31) than from the other perspectives.

RQ2a–2b: Bloggers’ opinion of the event and attitude toward the government
Among those 170 posts specifically mentioning the dismissal of Chen Liangyu, only two (1.2%) were found to disagree with the government’s
decision. Together with those holding a neutral attitude, the percentage of these two groups of posts was 16.5 percent, whereas the majority of posts (83.5%, 142 of 170) supported the dismissal.

As far as the nature of the event is concerned, 80.8 percent of posts (135 of 167 related posts) assessed the dismissal of Chen Liangyu purely as a result of the government’s move to punish corrupt officials. Only 6.6 percent viewed it purely as a concrete representation of internal political disputes. There were 11.4 percent of posts mixed with both kinds of opinions. The remaining two posts (1.2%) were grouped into the unspecified ‘other’ category. This was quite different from mainstream news media, government-controlled news media, which exclusively followed the Xinhua version, an order from the central government, applauding the event as a sign indicating the great determination of the central government to eliminate corruption (e.g. People’s Daily, Guangming Daily, Jiefang Daily, Legal Evening, Xinhua News Agency, and China News Agency). 7

It is worth noting that the percentage of posts with a critical attitude toward the government, compared to that of the posts against the government’s decision to dismiss Chen Liangyu (1.39%, 2 of 144), was relatively high (13.19%, 19 of 144).

There was a significant correlation between bloggers’ attitudes toward the government and toward the Chen Liangyu event ($\chi^2 = 23.464, df = 2, p < .0001$, see Table 2). Among the posts in favor of the dismissal, the majority (78%, 99 of 127) showed a favorable attitude toward the government, whereas only 9.4 percent held a neutral attitude. This was exactly the reverse of those with a neutral attitude toward the dismissal, who were mostly neutral to the government as well (60%, 9 of 15). The percentages of the posts unfavorable to the government were fairly equivalent, no matter whether bloggers supported the dismissal or held a neutral attitude.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTITUDE TOWARD THE DISMISSAL OF CHEN LIANGYU</th>
<th>ATTITUDE TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UNFAVORABLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable (n = 127)</td>
<td>16 (12.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral (n = 15)</td>
<td>3 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 23.464, p < 0.0001$. The likelihood ratio was used, since the number of cells with a count less than 5 was 33.3%.
RQ3a–3c: Bloggers’ use of other sources
Thirty-two percent of the sample posts (101 of 316) were found to be exclusively reproduced from other sources. Another 8.9 percent (28 of 316) were the mixed posts with both bloggers’ original writing and materials reposted from other sources. These figures suggest that Chinese bloggers more or less relied on other sources for their discussion on the political event.

Furthermore, the reliance changed over the time period ($\chi^2 = 36.263, df = 9, p < .0001$, see Table 3). In the first time interval, from September 25 to September 30, the difference of the percentages between the original posts (45.1%, 60 of 133) and those exclusively reposted from other sources (37.6%, 50 of 133) was small. The difference widened in the first half of October. The large percentage of original posts (74.6%, 53 of 71) overwhelmingly dominated the discussion on the Chen Liangyu event. The posts exclusively reproduced from other sources only accounted for 19.7 percent (14 of 71). The domination of the original posts continued over the following time intervals, while the exclusively reproduced posts slightly increased from 30.6 percent (19 of 62) in the second half of October to 36.0 percent (18 of 50) in November.

As to the types of sources for blogging, articles from websites affiliated with traditional media were used most (40.16%, 49 of the 122 valid sourced posts), followed by sources with no references (18.85%, 23). Other specified sources included posts from other blog sites (13.93%, 17), articles from websites other than blog sites (10.66%, 13), wire services (8.20%, 10), local newspapers or magazines (2.46%, 3), national newspapers or magazines (1.64%, 2), and others (4.1%, 5).

Bloggers’ original writing significantly differed from the sourced posts in terms of Chinese bloggers’ views of the Chen Liangyu event ($\chi^2 = 21.697$, $p < .0001$).

*Table 3  Correlation between time interval and type of post*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME INTERVAL</th>
<th>TYPE OF POST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ORIGINAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–30 September</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 133)</td>
<td>(45.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–15 October</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 71)</td>
<td>(74.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–31 October</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 62)</td>
<td>(64.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–25 November</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 50)</td>
<td>(60.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 36.26, p < 0.0001$. The likelihood ratio was used, since the number of cells with a count less than 5 was 31.3%.
HYPOTHESIS
Although bloggers used other sources for posts, the chi-square test found a significant difference between the two types of posts, original writing and those purely reproduced from other sources, in terms of whether they were equally distributed ($\chi^2 = 23.676$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Original posts accounted for the majority of the total posts (57.9%, 183 of 316), which was almost twice that of the posts purely reproduced from other sources (32%, 101 of 316). Of the total posts, 8.9 percent (28 of 316) were mixed with original writing and content reposted from other sources. In general, although Chinese bloggers took advantage of sourced posts to search information and make comments on the Chen Liangyu event, they were more likely to act as active writers. Therefore, the hypothesis is supported.

DISCUSSION
The current study set out to examine the content on blogs regarding an event involving official corruption. It is meaningful to look at what political content bloggers present on the internet and how they present it, which is the first
step to see how citizens use the internet for political purposes and evaluate the potential of the internet in promoting political participation.

The findings show that Chinese bloggers quickly responded to the Chen Liangyu event, with intensive activity in the first few days after the news was released. Although the intensiveness decreased after the peak days of posts, bloggers retained their interest over the two months, suggesting that their political sensitivity was relatively high. Furthermore, Chinese bloggers demonstrated a strong tendency for self-expression in that original postings dominated the posts. With many more exclusively original posts than those reproduced from other sources, we may claim that bloggers intended to act as message producers rather than passive receivers, despite their more or less using sourced posts. In addition, posts with criticism of the government and officials accounted for a certain proportion of the sample (about one post in each single unit of analysis on the average). Although the group was small, the critical attitude toward the government is assumed to be very meaningful to Chinese people, considering the heavy censorship imposed on mainstream news media and the common journalistic practice of ensuring a coherent account whenever a sensitive political event happens in China.

Compared to mainstream Chinese newspapers, which unanimously treated the dismissal as a strong move taken by the government against official corruption, bloggers on NetEase made comments on the event from more diverse perspectives, such as political disputes and inside stories about power struggles (one of the taboo subjects rarely seen in Chinese party organs), problems of institutions and systems, individual quality of officials, and others. The diversity of blog perspectives was particularly evident after the first few days when both bloggers and mainstream media emphasized the primary anti-corruption angle. The change over time suggests that mainstream news media might have had limited effect on the content of blogs only in the first stage of discussion.

In general, the findings seem to paint a relatively promising picture of the blogosphere as a platform for personal expression in political discussion and online civic messaging from diverse perspectives, relatively independent of official media. This may be taken as positive evidence by net enthusiasts who believe that the internet provides an ideal place to encourage the different points of view and independent opinions that are critical to public deliberation and help to form a civil society (e.g. Frederick, 1993; Rheingold, 1993; Yang, 2003).

As some scholars suggest, transitional societies like China where a civil society is incipient and dynamic may not have to achieve democracy first in order to practice public deliberation (Brook and Frolic, 1997; He, 2006; Moore, 2001; Yang, 2003). Playing a crucial role in the process of public deliberation either by limiting the scope of deliberative spaces or by
channeling civic discourses in ways to support the government’s policies and agendas, the Chinese government may also view public deliberation as a valve allowing people to let off steam so as to reduce social confrontation and harmonize social frictions, thus maintaining its legitimacy (Jiang, 2008). In this context, there is more of an urgent need to understand the usefulness of online features such as blogging for deliberation, as many deliberative practices nowadays have moved online. The current study provides a microcosmic view of the much larger picture of China’s expanding online deliberative spaces, which allow discussion of social, political, environmental and other kinds of issues (Zhou, 2005). A combination of online participatory observation and discourse analysis is suggested for future studies, to systematically examine the quality of political discussion in the Chinese blogosphere in terms of deliberativeness primarily characterized by rationality (Chambers, 2003).

From a broader view, the institutional and human factors that ultimately sustain the design and use of technical elements of online political discussion and public deliberation should be considered for evaluating the political potential of blogs. As suggested by Kluver and Banerjee (2005), mediating factors such as political culture, defined as a symbolic environment for political practices, regulatory regimes, and unequal levels of digital access may constrain the political potential of the internet. For instance, inequalities from both inside and outside of blogs – by formal or informal restriction to access and political orientation – may seriously influence the diversity of groups participating in political discussion and the content of their messages. This raises a serious concern about the principle of inclusiveness, one of the key measures of the public sphere for a civil society. In the case of this study, although it is hard to tell exactly who contributed to blogs about the Chen Liangyu event because of the use of pseudonyms, a preliminary observation of those who disclosed their identity showed that most of bloggers were males aged from 20 to 40 with higher education. The hits of the examined blogs ranged from 20 to 400, much lower than those of personal blogs,\textsuperscript{11} suggesting that the reach of the discussion in the blogosphere is relatively limited. To have a better understanding of the inclusiveness and diversity of the Chinese blogosphere, a nationwide online survey would be helpful to identify people who use the internet for political purposes and who are actually blogging their political opinions and what characteristics they share. It would also make more sense to look at the interconnections of individual blogs in the blogosphere by taking a new approach such as a blog crawler tool (see Bruns, 2007) so that the networks and the scope of political blogs both inside and outside China might be discovered.

In terms of underlying political conditions, the attitude of the Chinese government towards blogs has been very careful (Zeng, 2005). Although the
Ministry of Information Industry (MII) has not officially made any policies specifically addressing blogs, the Internet Society of China, an organization affiliated to the MII and a coordinator between the industry and the government, is working on a blog real name system under which users who create their own blog may be required to input their ID card number and real name. Although a netizen can still write under a pseudonym, the system, which may ‘water down speech liberty and flexibility of bloggers’ (China Daily, 2006), has led to a nationwide debate and has been strongly opposed by many internet users (Zhao, 2006). The uncertainty surrounding how the government would implement supervision on blogs and the government’s practice of censorship on the internet (see Note 5) make it difficult to predict the future of the political blogosphere in China.

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Notes
1 Refer in particular to Chapter 5 and Chapter 9 in Peng (2005) for dozens of cases well known in China to see how online public opinion is remaking the public agenda. For instance, in the case of Sun Zhigang in 2003, there was a popular online outcry which changed government policy in China. A 27-year-old employee working with a garment company in Guangzhou, was detained by police and sent to a holding center as a vagrant for not carrying identification. He died at the clinic after being brutally beaten by inmates. Within days of the initial news article in Guangzhou’s Southern Metropolitan Daily, thousands of internet users had posted it on bulletin boards. Hundreds of thousands of protest messages appeared on popular websites such as Sina, NetEase and Sohu, decrying Sun’s death, leading to a substantial public debate on the validity of the holding system and the related regulations. Some of these reforms were enacted, making the case a breakthrough in China.
2 Mu Zimei, a young blogger, published her diaries on the website BlogChina, boldly exposing her sexual experience, which had drawn volumes of responses from both traditional media and internet users.
3 Lian Yue, a citizen blogger in Xiamen, Fujian province, started in March 2007 to post a series of articles warning people that a paraxylene (PX) chemical factory being built in the city could have a disastrous environment. Although Xiamen authorities deleted anti-PX factory messages on any services within their governing territory, Lian’s blogs hosted on a server in another province remained intact. The messages spread throughout Xiamen via email, instant messaging, and SMS on mobile phones, which caused a protest with thousands of citizens. Other examples to show how Chinese bloggers leaked information before mainstream media and offered eye-witness accounts include the anti-Japan protests in Shanghai, Ningbo, and Hangzhou in April 2005 and the big earthquake in Jiu Jiang, Jiangxi province, in November 2005.
4 The other two are Sina and Sohu.
5 When this article was being revised in September 2007, at the request of the editors of the journal, the author did an online search on the same website, leading to a warning, saying ‘Sorry. The content you are searching may not conform to related laws. The results cannot be shown.’ Another search on the search engine website, Google (Chinese version), found that all the 33 pages of results were from the links of mainstream media or government websites.
6 For example, the coefficients for the two key variables (angle of event for discussion and attitude toward the government) were respectively 0.81 and 0.72. The coding form in Chinese is available on request from the author.
7 A database search was conducted to see how these mainstream news media reported the dismissal decision in the examined two months.
8 This included posts purely reproduced from other sources and posts mixed with original writing and materials or information reposted from other sources. Seven posts that only mentioned the event without taking it as the focus of discussion were not coded and thus were excluded.
9 This included original posts fully written by posters and those partly written by bloggers with materials from other sources.
10 This included the part reposted from other sources in the mixed posts and the posts purely reproduced from other sources.
11 According to a BlogChina survey, 56 percent of users are blogging as a personal diary and 83 percent for sending messages to friends. The blogs of Xu Jinglei, a famous movie star, on the Sina website attracted a total of 45,857 links from 29,181 sites, ranking first on the list of the most popular blogs in China (Tian, 2007).

References


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