Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

de Kloet, J.

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It is tempting to celebrate the emergence of the Internet as the dawn of a new era, promising possibilities for political change, civic participation, and obliteration of traditional geographical confines. More specifically, the rise of new technologies is often heralded as breaking open regimes that do not live up to the hegemonic ideologies of democracy and capitalism. Jeroen de Kloet reveals the two interlocking narratives which continue to preoccupy Western academic and popular discourse on the Internet in China.

King Kong in China

The first of these narratives regards stories related to online protest, which at times triggers offline protests. For example, the protest in the summer of 2007 against the building of a chemical factory in Xiamen was generally perceived as a consequence of protest postings by blogger Zuola. The second is stories related to issues of censorship and digital human rights. The discourse of the former has become the most popular, if not worn out, metaphor mobilised to point to the assumed omnipotence of the government. Lokman Tsui has rightly observed that such a metaphor builds on a cold war rhetoric in which China is positioned as the constitutive outside of ‘the free, open and democratic West.’ His observation resonates with what literary critic Rey Chow refers to as the King Kong syndrome, ‘producing China as a spectatorial primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders.’

Indeed, the motif running through the two interlocking narratives concerning Internet in China is precisely the urgent need to expose, discipline and punish this monster, to tame, if it is to help, the world of ‘liberal’ and ‘democratic’ societies. Not surprisingly, what is being played out in the Cyberospace is more messy, and thus more ambivalent than such narratives want us to believe. Rather than taking a clear position, I want to explore this messy digital domain called ‘the Chinese Internet,’ drawing on my research – online and offline – among bloggers (in 2008) and hackers (in 2004), before returning to deliberate on the destiny of our giant monster.

Citizen voices?

When I met Wang Xiaofeng in 1997, he was a rock journalist; 10 years later, he has become one of the most popular bloggers of the mainland. As many fellow bloggers, he combines his job as a journalist with his blogging, while the latter has become a commercial enterprise in China: the more readers you have, as a journalist with his blogging, while the latter has become a commercial enterprise in China: the more readers you have, the more advertisements and money you can attract. Wang’s style is ironic and cynical, poking fun at everything around him. To him, blogging offers a way to play with language, to experiment online with words and phrases that would not easily pass censorship. During the wave of pro-Tibet protests and corresponding pro-Beijing nationalism surrounding the Olympic torch relay in April 2008, Wang ridiculed the popular ‘I Love China’ T-shirts as well as the ‘I Love China’ sign used by millions of MSN users in their name tag. His response to the boycott of French products (called for in protest against the Olympic torch relay in April 2008) was simple: if there is one thing that I boycott, it is stupid things. At the same time, he also points his critique towards Western journalists; he writes on his blog: ‘Western journalists always hope that the Chinese people they interview will touch upon sensitive issues and give sensational remarks. They try their best to make their interviewee look like a disaster.’ One of his best known stunts took place in March 2006, when Wang posted on his blog that ‘due to unavoidable reasons with which everyone is familiar, this blog is temporarily closed.’ As he expected, it was only a matter of hours before the news became known worldwide through global news channels. Subsequently, he revealed it was a hoax, to put up a show to the Western media that is so obsessively searching for cases of censorship.

Informed by such complexity as demonstrated by bloggers like Wang Xiaofeng, any study of the Chinese blogosphere must try to be alert of metanarratives and stay close to the specifics. The outspoken blog by Michael Anti, for instance, was removed by Microsoft after he voiced his critique on the dismissal of critical journalists at the Beijing News. This shows how global capitalism is deeply complex with censorship practices in China. At the same time, to avoid foreclosing the potential political potentials of digital technologies, I have to be reminded of yet another specific incident. Last October, blogger Zuola went with a number of activists to one of the ‘black prisons’ in Beijing, where political activists were illegally detained. This group of activists, through their mobile devices, immediately uploaded their story to Twitter and their blogs, complete with pictures and sound recording of the harassment that took place when policemen started to fight with two of the visiting activists. In this case, new technologies did open up immediately to citizen politics as we know it.

Again, I must hasten to add: such examples are not only rare, but also risk reducing China to the conventional understanding and expectation of politics. The definition one gives of China’s blogosphere is likely to be very much informed by a specific political agenda – if one likes to see politics, one can find politics, just as it is one looking for seedy sex blogs, one can also find precisely that. The examples I have cited point to the impossibility of speaking of the Chinese blogosphere – there are many spheres, which are as complex as the prefix ‘Chinese’ is problematic in its privileging of the nation-state – make two appeals from this brief account of Internet in China.

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Blogs

Blogger (from left to right): Michael Anti, Zuola and Wang Xiaofeng

References

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On the black prison story, see: http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/10/17/china-co-operation-20-on-beijing’s-black-prisons/

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Jeroen de Kloet
University of Amsterdam
b.j.dekloet@uu.nl

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Blogs

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