

BUILDING A GLOBAL BLOGGING COMMUNITY

BY REBECCA MACKINNON

A team leader of the Global Voices Web site describes what western groups and companies can do to change the prevailing dynamic in the Chinese blogosphere.

A growing number of bloggers around the world are emerging as “bridge bloggers”: people who are talking about their country or region to a global audience. Global Voices,¹ a non-profit global citizens’ media project sponsored by and launched from the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at the Harvard Law School,² provides a guide to the most interesting conversations, information and ideas appearing around the world on various forms of participatory media such as blogs, podcasts, photo sharing sites and videoblogs.

The global team of regional blogger-editors works to find, aggregate and track these conversations, each day linking five to ten of the most interesting blog posts from their regions in the “daily roundups” section. A larger group of contributing bloggers also post daily features that shed light on what blogging communities in their countries have been talking about recently.

Chinese blogging

Chinese bloggers now face a growing number of challenges. One is technical and political, related to Chinese Internet censorship and the outsourcing of censorship to private companies. Last year’s demonstrations against Japan were a wake-up call for the government about the potential for online chatter to turn into offline action. Many of the demonstrations that occurred were fueled by people organizing in chatrooms, blogs and online forums. The result was a set of regulations issued in May and June of last year, which required that all bloggers and non-profit Web sites register and obtain Internet Content Provider (ICP) licenses.

Most Chinese bloggers sign up to use blog hosting services such as BlogBus³ or Bokee,⁴ but there were also quite a number of more technically inclined Chinese bloggers who installed other blogging software onto their own computer server, effectively setting up their own independent sites. What happened when this registration requirement came into effect was that independent sites could no longer be anonymous—

the administrators’ names, addresses and contact details were directly connected to their Web sites, and they would be held accountable for anything they wrote on their blogs.

There was a lot of confusion initially over whether it was necessary to register blogs that were on a blog hosting service such as BlogBus and Bokee. Registration turned out to be unnecessary, because these blog hosting services are themselves all commercially registered, and are required to censor their user content. As a result, commercial blog hosting companies end up controlling content on the government’s behalf.

I’ve done some experiments with some of these blog hosting services. If you go to BlogBus and try to post “xizangduli,” (Chinese characters for “Tibetan independence”) you’ll see ellipsis marks instead of the Chinese characters. If you go onto BlogCN⁵ and try to post “Falun Gong,” you get an error message that says, “You’re using forbidden words, please try again without using banned words. Thank you very much.”

When the government initiated its registration regulations, it effectively outsourced censorship by driving people onto these commercial hosting services. This spares bloggers the unpleasant experience of direct contact with the authorities. If you set up an independent blog and register the ICP number, the police will go directly to you if you write something they don’t like. That’s very intimidating, and you have to be incredibly brave to willingly put yourself in that situation. However, if a user sets up a blog on BlogBus or Bokee and posts “controversial” content, the police will go to BlogBus and inform them that they are not censoring their Web site well enough, or that they should take the controversial Web site down. In this way, the company acts as a buffer between the user and the government.

In taking on this “outsourced” censorship as a condition of maintaining its its blog hosting business, the private company agrees to set up “keyword system” that detects the posting of forbidden content. For example, if a user posts views advocating democracy, the blog hosting service is obligated to censor the blog or take it down.

This restriction on free speech is one of the big challenges Chinese bloggers face. Most people do not want to get in trouble; while a very small number of people are willing to put themselves at great risk, the majority will only take on limited risk in expressing their views. Allowing their corporate service provider to make that call spares bloggers from having the

police call their home and speaking to their wife and children about what they are writing on their blogs.

At the same time, this dampens what people can discuss online, and makes it more difficult to talk about certain subjects. It also makes it more likely that discussion of certain subjects will be fairly elliptical. Bloggers typically resort to parallel historical references, intentional “typos,” and acronyms and codes for subjects they can’t refer to directly.

The role of foreign companies

When MSN Spaces set up their Chinese language blog hosting service, they were told that the law required them, like Chinese companies, to censor the blogs they were hosting.

At the end of 2005, a blogger named Zhao Jing who used the name Michael Anti began writing controversial entries in his blog. Because he avoided direct keywords, he managed to advocate action without getting censored. But eventually someone in the government became aware of the situation and instructed Microsoft to take Michael Anti’s blog down. Microsoft complied in the same way that a Chinese blog hosting company would have done, but the resulting international outrage led the company’s top executives to ask themselves, “How can we comply with the laws, but not be quite as extreme? How can we be a bit better than Chinese companies, since we have some leeway as a multinational company?”

Based on advice from people such as myself and HRIC, Microsoft revised its censorship policy to require a legally binding request from the government before it will censor a Web site. It’s no longer possible for someone from the Public Security Bureau to make a phone call and have a Web site taken down; now, before taking action, a Microsoft employee has to obtain written “proof” that a law has been violated. As a result, we now have Wu Hao’s sister and Hu Jia’s wife blogging on MSN Spaces, and they have not been blocked.

Microsoft has also begun to use geo-filters as an alternative to taking Web sites down completely. This means that if Microsoft decides to comply with a legally binding request from a Chinese entity to take down a blog, the site will only be blocked to people using Chinese ISPs or through proxies. It will still be accessible to people who know how to access it. This is a big improvement, but there are still some problems. For instance, if you log on to Chinese-language MSN Spaces from the United States, the software will prevent you from posting the Chinese characters for “Tibetan independence.” This effectively extends censorship even to Chinese speakers outside of China.

But at the very least, Microsoft allows a bit more space for freedom of expression than domestic Chinese companies, and from what I can tell, the MSN Space blog tool is very popular—it has more Chinese language blogs than any of the other Chinese domestic blog hosting tools. While it is impossible to do a very scientific study of the reasons for this, anecdotal evidence suggests that people in China trust MSN Spaces more than they trust Chinese companies. The implication is that foreign companies that act more ethically enjoy a competitive advantage: if they provide more leeway for free expression, they will be rewarded with the loyalty of Chinese users.

It remains to be seen whether Google’s efforts to be more

transparent—by informing users when its search engine is being blocked—will similarly earn it greater trust from Chinese users. It is fair to assume, however, that if foreign companies push boundaries to gain user trust, they can move industry standards in a more transparent and ethical direction. For example, if their Chinese competition loses market share to MSN Spaces because of censorship, the Chinese companies may relax their censorship and gradually push industry standards in a certain direction. While it is still early days, we can hope that this is happening.

Even Michael Anti thinks that by compromising with censors, MSN Spaces has ultimately created a net benefit for Chinese users by providing space for conversation that might not have been available if they had totally refused to censor. At the same time, it may be possible to minimize censorship in a way that provides net benefit for Chinese users. The fact that Chinese companies, out of fear and for other reasons, may censor more than necessary doesn’t excuse a multinational company operating in China from finding ways to push boundaries while still abiding by Chinese laws.

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It’s difficult to lay down concrete rules for what companies should do in all future cases, but it’s fair to require executives of service providers to carefully consider what compromises they can make, to what extent they can make them, what is the most ethical way to provide their services, and how these companies can keep the best interests of Chinese users in mind.

Chinese users are picking up on which companies are making an effort to keep their interests in mind, and which companies, such as Yahoo, aren’t making that effort—and are in fact helping to put people in prison. When you read the blogs, you see people writing differently about Yahoo than about companies such as MSN and Google.

This suggests that foreign Internet companies would benefit from even greater transparency. Google, for instance, should publicize its block list and create an appeals process for blocked sites, providing users with a telephone number or e-mail address where they can request information on why a site is blocked and appeal for it to be made accessible.

Internet companies also need to clarify under what law and authority Web sites are being filtered. In France, for instance, people argue that it’s justifiable and desirable for Nazi hate speech to be filtered, or that certain types of content that might not offend people in the U.S. might offend people in the Middle East. There are also issues of pornography and terrorism. Rather than holding an absolute position that nothing should ever be censored or filtered, the conversation is increasingly moving toward how censorship can be imposed in a transparent and accountable way. If a democratic government in France

An individual case: Wu Hao

We set up our blog Freehaowu.org⁶ to advocate on behalf of our colleague Wu Hao, a blogger and filmmaker who has been held without charge since being detained on February 22 after visiting an underground church in Beijing. We also have a team of volunteers translating every posting on the Chinese blog of Hao's sister, Wu Na,⁷ and bloggers around the world are putting our "Free Hao Wu" badges on their sites.⁸ While we have to be realistic about how much any campaign can contribute to the release of a person the Chinese authorities are determined to hold, these blogs serve as rallying points for Hao's friends and supporters throughout China and around the world.

The information on the blogs has also helped to fuel press stories bringing attention to his case. It is incredibly powerful to hear about the situation directly from his sister in her own words, completely unmediated by any organization. Many Chinese people I know from my nine years living and working in China are quite skeptical of U.S.-based human rights organizations, thanks to the Chinese government's nationalistic propaganda. But to hear directly from Wu Na about her experiences, and how she never imagined that something like this could happen to her family, has a powerful impact on many Chinese who encounter her blog. This is an example of how the Internet enables new forms of human rights advocacy in which victims of human rights abuses can speak to international audiences directly or through networks of friends and family, and less dependent than in the past on foreigners they've never met to craft their message and get it out.⁹

passes a law that blocks Nazi Web sites, at the very least, French citizens know who can be held accountable.

A responsible Internet information provider should also have a global process, in every country, to indicate what is being blocked, why, under whose authority, how to get it unblocked, and to whom users should appeal if they feel it has been wrongfully and unlawfully blocked. If Internet companies were to push for more of this kind of transparency and accountability in China, I believe they would be rewarded by user loyalty and trust. Given that these multinationals have no technical advantage over Chinese companies, trust is the greatest commodity they have to sell to the Chinese user, and they need to leverage this competitive advantage more than they are doing now.

Digital divide, expanding access

Global Voices aims to present voices that are not heard in the English-language press. At the same time, we don't claim to aggregate the voices of everyone around the world; we're aggregating the voices of people who are online and know how to use these tools, which is not a representative sample of any population. If you look at Venezuela, for example most

bloggers are anti-Chavez, yet most Venezuelans are pro-Chavez. This is just one of the many examples of how the opinions of bloggers do not necessarily represent the majority.

Likewise, most people online in China today are the elites who have grown up as beneficiaries of economic reform, and are sheltered from China's most pressing problems. If these Chinese bloggers were introduced to the lives of peasants in Gansu, they'd be truly appalled, and even more appalled by the trouble resulting from their efforts to blog about these problems. I think there is also a feeling among China's wired elite that they have tremendous freedom of speech. Compared with a lot of other people who are not online, this freedom of speech is enjoyed by people who are fairly happy with the status quo.

The next step of Global Voices is to help develop outreach materials that will assist bloggers in various countries to go to disadvantaged neighborhoods and teach people to go to cybercafés to set up blogs. People in more advantaged segments of the public are more likely to know that if they are angry about something, they can go online and talk about it, and their views might make a difference. It might not occur to a peasant woman in Shandong that by starting a blog and linking up with the right people, she could really create some kind of a movement.

Blogging tools were developed for usages predominant in the West. More tools need to be developed that cater to the ways in which rural people use technology such as cell phones. How about training people to use these tools for more than exchanging photographs? Ethan Zuckerman, who works with me at Global Voices, is developing a set of guides on how to communicate securely and anonymously online. We need to also be thinking about how to send SMS and pictures securely through a cell phone network. There's a tremendous amount of "hactivism" needed on cell phone communications that no one has really focused on yet because all the geeks are sitting at their computers and accessing information through broadband.

With only one full-time employee, Global Voices can't solve all the world's problems, but we amplify otherwise unheard voices in various communities, and we help create loose federations of groups such as HRIC that are doing "drill-down" work in various countries. We need to look at what different tools are being used and figure out how to aggregate, amplify and facilitate more spontaneous interaction.

NOTES

1. Global Voices Online's Web site can be found at: <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org>.
2. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society's Web site can be found at: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu>.
3. <http://www.blogbus.com>.
4. <http://www.bokee.com>.
5. <http://www.blogcn.com>.
6. Also available at <http://ethanzuckerman.com/haowu>
7. Wu Na's blog can be found at: <http://spaces.msn.com/wuhaofamily/>
8. The "Free Hao Wu" badges can be copied from <http://ethanzuckerman.com/haowu/?p=5>.
9. We are seeing this phenomenon also with the Free Alaa campaign in support of the jailed Egyptian blogger Alaa. For more information, see <http://freealaa.blogspot.com>.