

Stepping into the blogosphere

Isaac Mao, one of the speakers at this conference, talks about his six years of blogging in China and of his struggle with the country's «Great Firewall».

By Isaac Mao

I had no idea, when I went online to make my first blog post just six years ago, how proud I would come to feel about being a blogger. Initially, I didn't even tell old friends and family my blog address. The reason was that I was afraid to come across as sticking my neck out to be very different from the mainstream: traditionally in Chinese culture, it's better to keep new ventures low-key to avoid losing face if they fail.

That first post, on August 5, 2002, was little more than a simple announcement saying "From today, I'm stepping into the blogosphere". What then happened was impossible to imagine: just like in a fairy story, you planted some seeds and woke up one morning to find they had grown into a forest.

Blogexplosion

By the end of 2007, there were 47 million bloggers in China, the whole blogosphere having expanded itself exponentially by what you could call online word of mouth. Now China may well be, in absolute numbers, the largest blogging country in the world.

From that you can picture what an explosion of Chinese bloggers there was during 2003-2007. Whether I was, as people have sometimes said, mainland China's "first blogger", is hard to track - though I can't find any other bloggers in Google on that August day when I published my first blog post. What I know is that I feel very lucky to have been the one witnessing the whole

process from the very beginning.

These days, the sheer number of people blogging in China is having an impact in itself. First, many traditional media in China now quote frequently from blogs. Some of them also discover news sources in the blogosphere - otherwise, they risk losing valuable first-hand information. Second, blogs are always linking to each other and weaving a trust-based social media fabric. And as people increasingly use search engines to get important information, these engine-friendly social media are easily discovered by users.

Bloggers as celebrity

At the same time, this shift of media power has transformed many bloggers into a new generation of celebrity in the past six years. China has a long tradition of people trying to fit into the group, moderating their behaviour to avoid standing out. Blogs have leapfrogged this tradition, acting as a catalyst to encourage young people to become more individual.

So this and other grassroots media are now emerging strongly to challenge China's social legacy.

Even so, it's not entirely easy to blog freely, especially in a country with media controls like China. In 2005, my blog was blocked because I posted an article relating to the Chinese censorship system - probably the most complicated in the world.

This "Great Firewall" or "Kung Fu Net", as China's internet users call it can effectively block any web pages including keywords considered sensitive by the authorities (such as "Tian'an Men", "Censorship", etc).

If you try to access such a page, the system will return a "reset" message and temporarily render the whole site inaccessible. There are also whole sites that are permanently blacklisted, including those of certain human rights groups or dissident blogs. As social problems have emerged in the past six years, the blacklist has become longer and longer.

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About Isaac Mao

Isaac Mao is a blogger, social entrepreneur and social media researcher in China. He is the co-founder of CNBlog.org and Social Brain Foundation, which supports a pool of grassroots initiatives in China (including Chinese Blogger Conference, Creative Commons, Wikipedia, OpenID, Open Education, Memedia and Tor Project, etc.)

