

Media Consumption and Production in a Networked Society: Mixed Media and NGOs in China

Silvia Lindtner
PhD Candidate
Department of Informatics
School of Information and Computer Sciences
University of California, Irvine

Today, we live in a “networked society.” At least those of us, who are - as Castells described in his seminal work (Castells 2006) – connected to a conglomerate of global cities and mobile across nation states and cultures. Political, social and economic relations that enable and disable these global connections are embedded in new processes of mediation. As the term itself already suggests, what gives a *networked society* its shape is the ability to reach beyond a single locality. What it requires is the technical infrastructures and resources that grant these networks to evolve across time and space, a process I term here: *networked media*.

By networked media I refer to the heterogeneous links that journalists, bloggers, and media users alike establish between various media sites, ranging from traditional news media outlets all the way to social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. No longer are we confronted with a single general public (linked to a single geographic site), instead we are – no matter if we consider ourselves situated at one or the other end of the media use-production spectrum – engaged in multiple publics mediated by a range of tools and systems, mobile, offline and online.

The notion of “public” here is not the opposite of “private” nor is it an indicator of all people as in “the public at large.” A networked public is formed not simply in the

imagination of the author, but rather, is a product of the imagination of the audience members themselves (Warner 2001). In other words, publics are formed when media consumers collectively recognize themselves as members of potential imagined audiences.

While the notion of multiple publics is certainly not new, the diversity of media imbricated in the emergence of new publics has dramatically increased over the last 20 years. As media users not only consume, but modify and produce content on their own, the dichotomy of media users and producers does not hold. As people respond to and engage with a variety of opinions and create new content across the heterogeneous linkages they assemblage, new collectives and collaborations emerge. Varnelis (2008), for example, uses the notion of “networked publics” to describe these increasingly complex networks through which people are interacting amongst close friends and family members, but also to mobilize larger collectives to accomplish a shared goal. The term “networked publics” is introduced as an alternative to notions such as audience to acknowledge media engagement as being active rather than passive or consumptive.

A range of individuals and institutions has been invested in the creation of networked publics, ranging from activist groups and NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) to political leaders using a mix of traditional and new media for their political campaigns¹.

¹ See for example a 2008 New York Times article on the social media use during the Obama campaign: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/technology/07hughes.html> and the guardian reports that the Obama campaigns claims two Cannes Lion Ad awards for their use of mixed media: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/jun/29/barack-obama-cannes-lions>.

For this essay, we were encouraged to debate the question of collaboration between mainstream media and NGOs. What I would like to suggest, here, is to take this a step further and explore how NGOs, as well as other activist collectives, act across a range of media. The questions I would like to tackle here, then, are 1) what are the kinds of relations collectives like the NGO establish across and with diverse media sites? And 2) once we speak of networked media sites and publics, how do local politics and issues at stake shape global relations and vice versa?

I will explore these questions through a discussion of the role of mixed media for NGOs located in China. China continues to receive heightened attention in broader debates of the impact of new media and technologies on social and economic change. For example, while the number of Chinese Internet users continues to increase, Internet policies and legislation, ranging from mass closings of public media and Internet access to the installation of control mechanisms on computer terminals, have impacted media practice and information sharing. Such changes have led to numerous debates over the impact of free press and the Internet in China and the nation's image on a global stage. New media, in particular, are considered by the Chinese government as a site of potential social unrest and of the formation of larger collectives whose opinions diverge from the one advertised through the tightly controlled mainstream media.

Setting up an NGO in China is a difficult and regulated process that often requires close relations to the government or the maintenance of informal networks. In light of China's context of media and Internet control, the question of the potentially beneficial

relationship between media and NGO worlds takes on a new meaning. China's NGO system is based on principles of civil law and separates nonprofit NGOs into three categories: foundations, social organizations and civil non-enterprise institutions. While these three categories of NGOs are technically not government agencies, the Chinese government still has an influence over them through various establishment and oversight mechanisms inherent in the national legislation². What might a tight collaboration between an NGO and the media in China entail?

Kimberly Abbott describes how a tight collaboration between ABC's Nightline and an international NGO called Crisis Groups constituted a win-win situation for both: nightline got stories nobody had; Crisis Groups got a platform on which to discuss ongoing regional conflicts³. An alliance of such sorts might have quite different consequences in a climate of tight control, and political and economic change as is the case in China. Some activist collectives⁴ and NGOs⁵, for example, have chosen alternate routes, building informal networks across multiple media publics. Exploiting a range of media such as international news media, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, these collectives act on multiple scales: engagement in local issues of inequality and raising international awareness of local conditions. What grants their current success is at

² for more details see for example: <http://www.china-briefing.com/news/2009/04/11/establishing-ngos-in-china.html>

³ <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/kimberly-abbott-working-together-ngos-and-journalists-can-create-stronger-international-reporting/>

⁴ see for example politically engaged artists such as Ai WeiWei (<http://www.aiweiwei.com/>)

⁵ e.g. <http://ngochina.blogspot.com/>

times their anonymity – social media often allow the creation of virtual identities that can remain detached from people’s real life identity.

What makes some of these practices work, however, is not the reliance on anonymity alone, but the ways in which diverse stakeholders imagine themselves as participants in a broader collective of media consumers and producers. While not necessarily directly interacting, participants in these webs of networked connections think of themselves as linked through an ideal, a shared philosophy or passion that spans beyond a single site or cultural context. To use a well-worn example, the television broadcasts of Star Trek in the late 1960s elicited a wide variety of fan responses. One of these was amongst those who saw, in the plotting and acting, hints of a homoerotic relationship between two of the principal characters. What became known as “slash” fiction – so named for the punctuation mark in the common abbreviation “K/S” for Kirk and Spock – is a form of fan fiction in which this alternative reading of the canonical material is explored. Slash fiction is an imaginative repurposing of media materials – in this case, the characters, settings, and framework of a television show – and draws attention to the active role that media “consumers” play in creating meaning. Slash fans did not argue that slash represented a transformation of the source material, but rather that they were bringing out potentials and meanings that it already carried. Thus, in this example, Star Trek brings into being many publics – not just one that includes those who recognize themselves as united by a common vision of interstellar travel, racial harmony and universal federation, but also one made up of those who see different messages in the programs.

I suggest, then, that the role of new media alongside more traditional media outlets for informal and formal collectives such as NGO’s and political activism is better understood

as layered and contingent than determined by technological innovation, or as Ito (2008) describes:

...now publics are communicating more and more through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side-to-side. Publics can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception... but these interpersonal networks have been radically augmented by sharing between relative strangers mediated by new socio-technical systems. People provide content free and anonymously to others via P2P systems such as BitTorrent or Kazaa, muddying the boundaries between what some see as sharing and others have labeled piracy... the result is new configurations of media markets characterized by proliferating special-interest groups that dwarf what was previously considered the mainstream.

What are the kinds of publics that emerge at the intersection of activism and new media? How are these publics bridging across different localities and local politics? What we see in China, for example, is that the relationship between media, new media and NGOs and other activist collectives is an ambivalent one, and one that is clearly not limited to a single media site. For example, as much as social activists and NGOs exploit anonymity

to circumvent restriction, so do large anonymous collectives of patriotic cyber-hackers that undertake attacks on international cyber-infrastructures⁶.

What this suggests, then, is perhaps an alternate route towards exploring the many possible relationships between media and NGOs. This entails moving beyond seeing the value of media in their consumption practices alone, but situating it at the intersection of a range of practices and motivations. Media practices are diverse forms of participation that include both creation *and* consumption, and a mix of old and new technologies. This means neither idealizing new media systems as the guarantees for counter-action and resistance, nor viewing them as determining social practice. Rather what is required is a careful engagement with the local yet global dimensions of these new forms of media productions and usages as they play an increasingly central role at the intersection of conflicting political values, international relations and formations of new collaborations.

References

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⁶ see for example Mara Hvistendahl, a Shanghai-based correspondent who writes for *Science*, *Scientific American*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and her carefully reported story on the Chinese hacking community: “Hackers; the China Syndrome.”