

Chapter 9

Virtual Communities as Subaltern Public Spheres: A Theoretical Development and an Application to the Chinese Internet

Weiyu Zhang

National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to develop a theoretical framework to examine virtual community participation using the concept of subaltern public spheres. The theory of subaltern public spheres directs attention to the internal dynamics and external interaction of virtual communities. Internal dynamics first refers to the inclusiveness of participation by looking at the access to virtual communities and the profiles of their participants. The nature of participation, as another aspect of internal dynamics, is estimated through examining the styles of the discourses and the types of participatory acts. The external interaction becomes another major focus of this theoretical framework and urges researchers to study how virtual communities interact with government apparatuses, commercial entities, the dominant public sphere, and other subaltern public spheres through discursive engagement and other means. The theoretical framework is applied to analyze a case of Chinese online public spheres to illustrate the framework's utility.

INTRODUCTION

Since the term *virtual community* was forged by Howard Rheingold (Rheingold, 1993), technologies have evolved rapidly (e.g., from Usenet to e-mail lists to Web 2.0) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a common component of our everyday lives. The inquiry

into the virtual community has moved from the existence question (i.e., whether communities are able to exist virtually) to a range of research interests, including the psychological, social, political, and cultural dimensions of these mediated gatherings. This chapter centers on the political aspect of virtual communities and examines the democratic potential of the Internet through the lens of the public sphere. The initial efforts to

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study virtual communities often focused on the social relations formed in these mediated spaces and the psychological well-being resulting from participation in such spaces. Many studies also concerned one particular virtual community and how it fostered the formation of a subculture identity or a marginalized group. This chapter, in contrast, emphasizes the political dimension of virtual communities, which is the mechanism of representing the community's interest to the larger society. The Habermasian public sphere as a theoretical framework has been applied to evaluate the democratic potential of the Internet (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Poster, 1995). However, the diverse and fragmented cyberspace seems to indicate a sphere that is far from universal and integrated. I proposed to take the criticism of the Habermasian public sphere seriously when examining online spaces (Zhang, 2006). This chapter presents the critique in detail and lays out a framework that follows the theory of subaltern public spheres. The usefulness of this theoretical approach is tested against an empirical case of the Chinese Internet.

BACKGROUND

The metaphor of community has caught the imagination of academics since the early age of Internet research in the 1980s. A famous debate in the CMC field was whether CMC is able to support communities as face-to-face (F2F) interactions do. The cues-filtered-out perspective claims that since CMC lacks nonverbal cues, it is less personal or socioemotional than F2F interaction, and therefore less capable of supporting communities (Rice & Love, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler 1986; DeSanctis & Gallupe 1987; Spears & Lea, 1992). On the other hand, researchers claim that CMC is able to foster the feeling of relational development over time (Walther, 1992), and communicators can successfully achieve collective goals if they

are work-oriented (Walther & Burgoon, 1990). The latter camp suggests that virtual communities are probable. Now it seems clear that the debate on the superiority/inferiority of CMC vs. F2F is a false comparison. CMC does not compete with F2F for the same kind of communities. Rather, CMC and F2F are integrated to build new types of communities that emerge out of the postmodern conditions of social lives.

The concept of community has gone through significant changes through history and across social contexts. According to Bell and Newby (1976), the idea of community first appeared in preindustrial societies. Communities in this period bore characteristics such as rural, homogenous, and densely knitted (Wellman, 1999). These communities had a local economic basis and a hierarchical power system (Bell & Newby, 1976). In agricultural societies, ownership of land was the crucial resource for the possession of power; thus, people were linked to the local form of territoriality. Power was exercised personally by the landowning elites via F2F interaction. Communities emphasized a common adherence to territory and solidarity of place, to both the elites and the subordinates.

The idea of community encountered its first critical challenge when societies were changed by the Industrial Revolution. When societies became unstable, dispersed, and heterogeneous, the rural community in the agricultural era broke down, and so did the local and personalized modes of control (Bell & Newby, 1976). This breakdown was not the end of community, however. Communities still existed in neighborhoods and operated as a method of social integration. Neighborhood communities retain three features of rural communities: locale, common ties, and social interaction (Bernard, 1973).

Researchers who are interested in modern communities suggest that we should understand communities as networks. Without presuming that a community is confined to a local area, social

network analysis focuses on social relations and social structures (Wellman, 1999). This approach frees the conceptualization of community from a preoccupation with solidarity and neighborhood, and accommodates social changes. Social network researchers found that networked communities are specialized, sparsely knitted, and loosely bounded. However, these communities continue to be supportive and sociable, although social solidarity is not always necessary to them. The network approach to community suggests that the shared physical locality is not essential to communities. This reconceptualization of communities enables us to see virtual space such as the Internet as the locale of communities. Meanwhile, Anderson's imagined community (1991) provides another conceptual tool to study virtual communities. He defined the nation as an imagined community and explained that "it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, pp. 6–7). Furthermore, "communities are to be distinguished not by the falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." In this sense, communities exist as long as they are perceived to exist.

It has taken a long transformation from rural communities to today's networked and imagined communities. The original purpose of community somehow became lost in the rhetoric of virtual communities. A community is aimed at building the social unit that connects individuals and society (Friedland, 2001). Watson (1997, p. 102) stated the purpose of community in one question: "how does a group struggle for greater representation in the larger society?" While social network research merely measures the individual relational network and limits the function of community to social support, the political connotation of community, implied in Watson's question, remains unexamined. The imagined nature of modern

communities also fails to address the concern of political representation through existing institutions such as congresses and mass media. It is in this situation that a concept of public becomes necessary to understand the political aspect of communities.

"The ideal of community refers to a model of association patterned on family and kinship-relations, on an affective language of love and loyalty, on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity, and continuity, of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness" (Hansen, 1993, p. xxxvi). The notion of public, by contrast, refers to a specific social category that appears as a political actor (Splichal, 1999, p. 2). Community members become a public only if they engage in open contestations on issues that have consequences in their lives but are not under the members' full and direct control. The public sphere as the infrastructure that supports such contestations thus becomes a critical concept for understanding the political nature of communities, including virtual ones.

THE THEORY OF SUBALTERN PUBLIC SPHERES

Habermasian Public Sphere

In a central work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas "asks when and under what conditions the arguments of mixed companies could become authoritative bases for political action" (Calhoun, 1992, p. 1). More specifically, "what are the social conditions . . . for a rational-critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons willing to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions" (Calhoun, 1992, p. 1). The concept of public sphere indicates at least two social conditions. First, a liberal political culture that roots in motives and values. Second, an institutional system that supports rational-critical debates. The first

condition could be considered as a set of norms of the public sphere. The second is also important because the success or failure of these institutions decides whether the public sphere is a utopian or an obtainable goal (Habermas, 1992, p. 453).

Habermas argued that, as the discursive aspect of civil society, the public sphere should be autonomous from both the state power and the market economy. Habermas also made a separation within civil society, which is family as the private realm and public sphere as the public realm (Peters, 1993). Habermas proposed a distinction between the lifeworld and the system to explain the fourfold structure. Family and the public sphere belong to the lifeworld, which is the everyday realm of conversations, experience, traditions, understandings, norms, and solidarity. The state and economy are ruled by abstract quantities such as power and money and thus considered the system. Since money and power are nondiscursive modes of coordination, “they offer no intrinsic openings to the identification of reason and will, and they suffer from tendencies toward domination and reification” (Calhoun, 1992, p. 6).

This fourfold structure implies that civil society is opposed to or at least competes with the state and economy in shaping public discourses. Habermas argued that the public sphere should be the birthplace of public opinion. All legislation and state administration should be consistent with the consensus generated from public deliberation. Habermas’s opinion on the early-age relationship between the market economy and the public sphere is consistent with the understanding of civil society as the direct consequence of market economy. However, Habermas observed that, after years of transformation, the market economy is no longer a part of civil society. The market economy has become deeply involved with the state power, and the two systems are mingled together to control the whole society.

After discussing the structure that the public sphere exists in, it is time to specify the set of norms that the Habermasian public sphere advo-

cates. The first dimension of the norms is related to inclusiveness or universal access, which means all citizens have the opportunity to enter and discuss in the public sphere despite their social status and personal interest. Citizens participate in the public sphere as private individuals and do not represent anyone other than themselves. The private participation reflects Habermas’s distrust of representative democracy, which turns participants in democracy into viewers of democratic rituals. The second dimension regards the nature of discourses/speeches, which emphasizes rationality or reason. The concept of communicative rationality indicates several subsets of norms. First, the goal of the discussion is to reach mutual understanding instead of any dominant discourse. Second, the discussion is rational and critical, which means all the assertions are open to critique. Third, to ensure the goal of rationality, each participant must possess qualities such as reflexivity, ideal role-taking, and sincerity.

Even after all these norms are satisfied, the public sphere cannot be achieved without institutional support. From Habermas’s historical analysis of various public spheres, we can see that the bourgeois public sphere is just one category of public sphere in history. At least four institutions of the public sphere have emerged: the representative public sphere, the literary public sphere, the bourgeois public sphere, and the mass media public sphere. These four forms of public spheres correspond to different historical conditions. As the earliest public sphere, the representative public sphere existed in the feudal society of the High Middle Ages. However, it was a pseudo-public sphere because there was no basis for division between the public sphere and the private domain at that time. “This publicity of representation was not constituted as a social realm, that is, as a public sphere; rather, it was something like a status attribute” (Habermas, 1989, p. 7). The prince and the estates of his realm represented their lordship not “for” but “before” the people. Here the people functioned as the backdrop before which the ruling

estates displayed themselves and their status. The institutions of this public sphere were the great hall of court and the strict codes of noble conduct such as the famous Spanish ceremonial practices.

The public sphere in the world of letters, which is called the literary public sphere, built a bridge between the old courtly public sphere and the new bourgeois public sphere. This public sphere preserved certain continuity with the publicity involved in the representation enacted at the prince's court. In this sphere, one sees the combination of the urban aristocracy with writers, artists, and scientists. The bourgeois avant-garde learned the art of rational-critical public debate, and critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was extended to economic and political disputes. In this sense, the bourgeois public sphere evolved from the literary public sphere. The institutions of the literary public sphere were the salons that replaced the great hall at court.

When literary critiques turned into political debates, the bourgeois public sphere came into being. The new institutions were coffeehouses in Britain and salons in France. In both countries, these institutions were centers of criticism, literary at first and then political. In Germany, similar elements existed, beginning with the learning table societies and the old literary societies. If coffeehouses mainly provided meeting places, journals of opinions "linked the thousands of smaller circles" (Calhoun, 1992, p. 12). The social relationships among the participants were relatively loose because the bourgeois public sphere "disregarded status altogether" (Habermas, 1989, p. 36).

Finally, mass media replaced all the coffeehouses, salons, and societies to become the institutions of today's public sphere. However, mass media function poorly in this regard. They provide passive culture consumption and apolitical sociability rather than serious involvement in critical debates (Habermas, 1989, p. 166). The culture-consuming public takes part in noncommittal group activities such as watching movies in theatres instead of convivial discussion. The

so-called debates in mass media are turned into a flourishing secondary business. The rational-critical discussions are lost in the mass media public sphere (Calhoun, 1992, pp. 21–22). If mass media once were able to reach the majority of society's members, the media segmentation made the media lose that ability (Katz, 1996). More and more media, such as MTV, are not for everybody but for a small, specific audience. Dispersed media spaces lead to the collapse of a shared public sphere.

Subaltern Public Spheres

The theory of subaltern public spheres criticizes the Habermasian public sphere on three different fronts: First, the historical exclusion of, namely women, proletariats, and racial minorities, in the bourgeois public sphere. The first critique of Habermas's public sphere is related to universal accessibility, which means all the social members could take part in one sphere in spite of their different social status. Habermas assumes that it is possible for a public sphere to bracket social inequalities. However, social inequalities themselves have determined who has permission to enter the sphere. At least the feminist counter-public (Fraser, 1992) and the oppositional public of the working class (Negt & Kluge, 1993) did not have access. In addition, Habermas assumed that a single and comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of subaltern public spheres. Fraser pointed out that a universal public sphere can work only for the advantage of dominant groups. Members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberative discussions among themselves.

Habermas noticed that the bourgeois public sphere was class-limited. However, he did not deny the norms of the bourgeois public sphere because he believed that this open and rational discursive space can absorb "the others" without colonizing them. According to Habermas, the proletariat or the "plebian" public sphere was just a variant of

the bourgeois public sphere. It was “a bourgeois public sphere whose social preconditions have been rendered null” (Habermas, 1992, p. 426). Although he admitted the exclusion of women has structural significance, he said that “this convincing consideration does not dismiss rights to unrestricted inclusion and equality, which are an integral part of the liberal public sphere’s self-interpretation” (Habermas, 1992, p. 429). In his eyes, the success of the feminist movement reflects the potential of the bourgeois public sphere for self-transformation. However, the critiques from feminists and leftists go beyond inclusiveness and land on the norms themselves. In fact, both female and proletariat public spheres are substantially different from the bourgeois one. They disagree with the norms of the bourgeois public sphere, and thus, their institutions demonstrate totally different characteristics.

The second critique is about the rationality of the discourse. In a single public sphere bracketing social inequalities, it is impossible to reach real rationality. Deliberation is used only to obliterate the voice of the subordinates when the oppressed have no say in defining what constitutes rationality. Moreover, Habermas assumed that discourse in the public sphere should be restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that the appearance of private interests is always undesirable. What accounts for a matter of common good is decided through discursive contestation. However, the bracketing of inequalities puts the subordinate in an inferior position in this contestation. Discursive contestation is governed by protocols of style and decorum that are themselves correlations and markers of status inequality. Although bracketing of social inequality prevents formal exclusions, it also brings informal impediments to participatory parity. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, the groups find that they are not heard.

Fraser criticized the exclusion of women and questioned the sincerity of rationality in the bourgeois public sphere when rationality is based on fictitious universalism. However, she did not deny the belief of rationality and wanted to recover the real “rationality” within subaltern public spheres. She adhered to norms of procedural rationality as the best institutionalized procedures for excluding violence from the social arena (McLaughlin, 1993). For example, Fraser thought that the participants in the female public spheres are relatively equal and benefit from their critical discussions. These activities reinforce the common good of this specific group. In addition, she also pursued universal accessibility within the subaltern group and ignored the variety and internal conflicts among the group members. That is why Habermas (1992) did not think that the female public sphere overthrows the norms of the bourgeois public sphere. He thought the only difference between Fraser and him was the subjects of their theories. Habermas believed that the rationality of the bourgeois could help them to extend their class public sphere to finally absorb the other classes. Fraser questioned this possibility and claimed that full participation and rationality exist only in certain social groups who consider their own interests.

Felski (1989) criticized Habermas’s public sphere from the perspectives of poststructuralism and feminism. In addition to asking the public sphere to account for gender differences, she continued Lyotard’s (1984) question, whether a rational and uniform subject is the foundation for democracy. In her analysis of feminist literature, she found that autobiography and self-discovery narratives are very popular in the female public sphere because women can share their life experiences through these books. Not only rationality but also the affective experience can contribute to the construction of the female public sphere.

Negt and Kluge (1993) proposed an alternative definition of the public sphere without referring to discursive participation. They defined the public sphere as a horizon for the organization of social experience. While Habermas's notion of public life relies on the institutions of rational-critical discussions, Negt and Kluge emphasized questions of constituency, concrete needs, interests, conflicts, protest, and power (Hansen, 1993, p. xxx). The proletarian public sphere involves three elements: the experience of re/production under capitalism, the separation of the experiencing subjects from the networks of public expression and representation, and resistance and imaginative strategies as a response to the separation. In this sense, any practices that bring the proletarian experience into the visible horizon of social experience could be the embodiment of the public sphere. This definition overthrows Habermas's belief in rational debate and gives prominence to everyday experience. Negt and Kluge also found that rudimentary and ephemeral instances of the proletarian public sphere have already emerged. Habermas admitted that he was too pessimistic about the resistance from a pluralistic mass public (Habermas, 1992, p. 438).

The third front of contestation is the institutions of public sphere(s). Habermas lamented the failure of mass media to function as a public sphere because he fixed his eyes on broadcasting channels that are aimed at the entire population. This empirical focus is understandable because he favored a single public sphere that is accessible to all societal members. However, if we took the plural approach to public sphere(s), we would look at different institutional spaces in which the public expression of social experiences is made possible. Felski (1989) tried to locate the spaces that are open to feminist discourses in a variety of institutions such as health clinics, political action groups, bookstores, filmmaking collectives, welfare agencies, as well as corporations and Hollywood media firms. Negt and Kluge (1993) claimed that "life context" is where the proletarian

public sphere emerges from, and therefore, they looked at historical moments when the alternative organization of experiences becomes visible (e.g., English Chartism, Italian Maximalism, and certain moments in the October Revolution). Authors (Brouwer, 2001; Hauser, 2001; Squires, 2001) of the book *Counterpublics and the State* turned to prison writing, congressional hearings, the Black press, and so on to look for counterpublicity and its formation. The theory of subaltern public spheres directs our attention to the vivid and diverse lifeworld for the possibility of public exchange of everyday experiences. Virtual communities become one of the spaces where we can trace the development of subaltern public spheres.

A Dual-Function Framework Embedded in a Fourfold Structure

Our analysis of virtual communities benefits from the theory of subaltern public spheres in terms of the research foci. As Felski (1989) pointed out, the feminist public sphere as a type of subaltern public sphere serves a dual function:

Internally, it generates a gender-specific identity grounded in a consciousness of community and solidarity among women; externally, it seeks to convince society as a whole of the validity of feminist claims, challenging existing structures of authority through political activity and theoretical critique. (p. 168)

Consistent with this line of thought, our examination of virtual communities should look at the internal dynamics and the external interaction. I propose that our empirical examination of the internal dynamics should include, first, the inclusiveness of the subaltern public sphere, in other words, who are the members of the community and whose identity is being forged; second, the nature of participation, which encompasses the discourse(s), the way the discourse(s) are made, and any other participatory acts in addition to

discursive engagement. Studies on virtual communities such as fans clubs (Baym, 2000), diasporas (Mallapragada, 2006), and extremist groups (Qiu, 2006) have done sufficient work on describing and signifying the internal dynamics but often lack a clear awareness of the external interaction these communities make (or do not make).

My second proposition regarding this theoretical framework is, thus, to bring the analysis of the external interaction into our routine examination of virtual communities. After defining what is internal to the virtual community in question, we need to specify what is external to it as well. Despite the critical take on the Habermasian public sphere, I argue that the theory of subaltern public sphere shares with Habermas its basic understanding of the fourfold structure, namely, state, economy, family, and civil society. Although feminist critiques questioned the division between family and civil society as disguising the oppression of women, there is still a difference between the two as empirical entities. By taking the fourfold structure as our basic understanding of the social conditions in which public spheres exist, our analysis of the external reach has clear targets now. Subaltern public spheres have to interact with the state apparatuses, the commercial entities, the dominant public sphere (often realized in the format of mass media), and other subaltern public spheres. The interaction can be found in discursive engagement in most times. However, interpersonal contacts, financial transfers, and even violent conflicts across the four arenas should be considered as the means of reaching as well.

As we can see now, the theoretical framework radically differs from the Habermasian approach in rejecting the two basic norms of his model of the liberal public sphere. The norm of universalism is rejected as both empirically impossible and conceptually undesirable. Instead, the fact that multiple publics coexist in our postmodern societies is fully admitted, and a model of multiculturalism guides our research. The norm of

rationality is also denied, and the vision of the public sphere is broadened to any practices that bring the social experiences of the oppressed into the visible horizon of the entire society. Although discursive engagement is still the main method of reaching wider publics, this framework does not pre-exclude other types of practices. However, the significance and influence of the different types of practices are evaluated instead of being assumed.

When the internal-external framework of subaltern public spheres is used, a variety of social groupings can be clearly organized and understood. Squires (2002) suggested that, since subaltern public spheres emerge out of various political and cultural contexts, not all could successfully achieve internal and external functions at the same time. Depending upon the resources the subaltern publics have and their strategies to engage wider publics, three types of subaltern public spheres can be distinguished. *Enclaved public spheres* enclave themselves, hiding counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid violence and disrespect from the state and the dominant public, while internally producing lively debate and planning. They have few material, political, legal, or media resources. These public spheres may have some contacts with the dominant public sphere but rarely with other public spheres. *Counterpublic spheres* usually emerge in response to a decrease in oppression or an increase in resources. Counterpublic discourses travel outside the safe and enclaved spaces to argue against the dominant conceptions of the group. Counterpublicity is facilitated by independent media resources and distribution channels. Some such spheres gain legal and political resources. *Satellite publics* seek separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but are involved in the wider public sphere discourse from time to time. These publics rely on the group media only to support internal discussions. Satellite publics can emerge from both dominant and marginalized groups.

A similar classification can be used when analyzing virtual communities. This classification not only helps us to draw a clear picture of the chaotic cyberspace but also enables us to have a comprehensive evaluation of the complicated role of the Internet in public life. The following analyses focus on a specific social, political, and cultural context of the People's Republic of China and utilize the framework to examine the various online spaces that are available for public contestations.

A CASE OF CHINESE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERES

A research approach of case study is adopted in this chapter. The author has been an observer as well as a participant of the Chinese Internet for over ten years. A close participant observation of almost all aspects of the Chinese online public spheres was conducted with a longitudinal perspective. The empirical evidence is drawn from multiple sources including both quantitative (e.g., survey data) and qualitative (e.g., event analysis) ones. Key cases that are rich in providing insights regarding the theoretical framework are selected and reported.

If the public sphere has to be open to all publics, it is clear that the cyberspace in China does not hold to this standard. By the end of 2010, there were 457 million Internet users in China (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2011). In contrast to the total population of 1.3 billion, the majority of the Chinese public (more than 70%) does not have access to this technology. The infrastructure of a Habermasian virtual public sphere is absent in China¹. In addition, the heavy government control of online content (Qiu, 2000) limits the topics and issues that are allowed to be publicly debated. Understanding that the Chinese Internet is not completely open and free, I argue that subaltern public spheres flourish to provide limited yet viable spaces for public discussions.

Before describing the virtual spheres we can find in China, we have to answer the question of where the dominant public sphere is. Assessing from the reach and the influence of their content, traditional mass media still serve as the dominant channel through which the majority of Chinese get news and opinions. Although the government has toned down its repressive measures, it exerts passive yet powerful control over traditional mass media (Zhao, 2008). From a discursive perspective, the dominant public discourse conforms to the ideology of capitalist development led by an authoritarian government. It is against this backdrop that the Chinese Internet can be seen as an infrastructure supporting subaltern public spheres.

Subaltern public spheres on the Chinese Internet are most visible in various discussion forums. One of the unique features of the Chinese Internet is the popularity of discussion forums. When the Net (intra-net or LAN) was introduced to Chinese universities as an educational tool, the young students immediately turned it into a shared space to exchange feelings and thoughts regarding their everyday lives. During the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) supported by the campus Net led the evolution of online public discussions. Commercial websites (e.g., xici.net) soon picked up this momentum and cultivated many discussion forums that attract millions of users. Discussion forums have become a default component of Chinese websites since then. Now we can find discussion forums on government portals, mass media sites, search engines, social networking sites, blogs, professional communities, video sites, and many more.

Although discussion forums as a collective category have been influential in the Chinese cyberspace, they function more like subaltern public spheres than a well-integrated discursive space. Users often visit only a few forums that they are interested in, and the number of forums that users really participate in is even smaller. Forums that users consistently visit and actively participate in often have clear boundaries and

limited membership. A good example is the fan forum genre. Recently, successful TV shows such as *Supergirl* have created a group of very popular local celebrities. Their fans formed large-scale groups through forums. The fans express their affection, exchange information, and organize gatherings to extend their online relationship to offline. The fans are also involved in discussions such as drafting strategies to support their celebrity, and to help him or her to fight his or her competitors. Occasionally, the discussions go beyond the celebrity himself or herself and address broader issues such as cultural industry. In spite of the impressive number of members, these spheres mainly serve an internal function, which is to build and reinforce a fan's identity. Anyone who does not share this identity is excluded from the spheres. The connection between this kind of sphere and other subaltern public spheres is weak, and the external reach is made only when the internal integrity is threatened. Fan forums on the Chinese Internet thus stay close to the satellite public spheres, which keep their lively discussions inside the sphere and do not actively seek discursive engagement with other spheres unless under extreme conditions. One example is that, during the Shanghai Expo, a group of Chinese fans of a South Korean popular star caused turmoil due to their uncivil behavior when trying to get free tickets. Chinese netizens thought this was a "loss of face" that humiliated all Chinese and organized a virtual invasion of the home spaces belonging to these fans in June 2010. This incident was later on referred to as "the June 9th Conqueror." Fan groups had to react to the wider public(s) in this case.

Most users visit portal sites, mass media sites, and government portals to seek information and entertainment. For instance, 77% of Internet users read online news (CNNIC, 2011). I argue that these sites provide spaces that approach the model of counterpublic spheres. When discussions are initiated in these spheres, we tend to hear voices that are not just internal to one particular group.

Discourses flow between these sites and form a dynamic and interactive procedure of opinion exchange. In China, four portal sites have survived the fierce competition and become the leading online news portals. They are sina, sohu, netease, and tencent². The first three sites were modeled after AOL or MSN to provide a combination of several basic services such as e-mail, searching, news, and forums. Tencent was founded as an instant messenger tool (i.e., QQ, similar to ICQ), but after conquering the market, tencent developed into a portal website. In addition to forums hosted on these sites, two things are unique: one is the comment function following all news items, and the other is the publication of news stories written by netizens themselves. Portal sites do not have a legal permit to collect their own news so the sites have to repost news from mass media or other websites. When news is reposted to these sites, a comment function is opened for users to discuss the news with each other. News, especially stories that involve government officials and their wrongdoings, often receive a great amount of attention and trigger vivid discussions. Emotional expressions such as outrageous replies are often seen side by side with rational reasoning. Commentators who hold contradictory views engage in flame wars against each other. Editors are responsible for deleting personal attack posts and those that are thought to have crossed the line set by the governmental rules and policies. Portal sites are also relatively open to citizen journalism, which refers to events and incidents reported by netizens. Driven by commercial interests, portal sites attempt to attract average Internet users through reposting such news. This mechanism enables portal websites to provide an alternative channel for different voices from the public(s).

Traditional mass media have a similar online presence. They host discussion forums, offer a commenting function, and report news. In addition to publishing news produced by their own staff, mass media sites also repost news from other mass media. However, mass media sites are strict with

citizen journalists' work and re-post only those with the authors' real identities revealed (CNNIC, 2009). Users often rely on these sites to catch up with mainstream and high-profile events such as the Beijing Olympics. However, due to the restrictions imposed on mass media by the government, these sites are not often seen breaking citizen-initiated news. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the influence of traditional mass media in amplifying the effect of online opinions. Although traditional mass media are reluctant to break news from nonofficial sources, these sites are quick to follow up if the news has been publicized by other official media (e.g., a commercial site). What is even more important is that the offline versions of these mass media are also involved in following up, and therefore, a handful of *online collective incidents* (in Chinese: *wangluo qunti shijian*, referring to incidents that trigger large-scale online responses) has successfully entered the dominant public sphere, triggering discussions among citizens who do not have access to the Internet.

Government portals, or e-government sites, played a significant role in recent online collective incidents. The commonly held idea is that government portals must be completely restricted, and we cannot see any meaningful discussions. However, studies (Jiang & Xu, 2009) have shown that government networks opened up spaces for public input in order to deflate social tension and remain the legitimacy of their governance. Government portals have become a popular space for citizens to report grievances and plead for support from the larger public. The reasons citizens do so should be understood in the context of the Chinese political system. China is a large country, and its political system relies on a strict hierarchy. Higher-tier officials have the power to appoint and fire lower-tier officials. Reciprocally, higher-tier officials are called to be responsible for lower-tier officials' wrongdoings. Chinese citizens are used to the mentality that, if they can catch the attention of higher-tier officials,

the citizens' grievances could be addressed and their problems solved. Posting a local event on a government portal that belongs to a higher-level administration is considered a convenient way to reach such a goal. In addition, breaking the news on a governmental portal softens the tone of challenging the government. It could be understood as an attempt to solve the problem within the official system. Thus, we have seen quite a few collective events first reported on government portals. A study (Yu, 2010) shows that among all the 2009 online collective incidents, 37.5% were first reported on government portals at the city level and another 1.7% on governmental portals at the province level. However, we have to be aware that only those incidents that are picked up and followed by portal sites and mass media sites eventually become influential.

I argue that the online spaces discussed above work together to function as counterpublic spheres. The discourses found there travel outside the spheres and reach the wider public. The events reported on government portals³ reach portal sites and become known to the majority of the online public. If the events are further followed by mass media sites or even their offline versions, the events reach the dominant public, who are accessible only through traditional mass media. The theory of subaltern public spheres suggests that counterpublic spheres are able to influence the wider public because of an increase in their resources. The three types of spheres each have their own unique resources. Portal sites are commercial entities that enjoy the financial resources to mobilize the market. Mass media sites have their symbolic power to influence the opinion climate. Government portals are associated with political power and thus equipped with political capital that other spheres do not have direct access to. Whether these counterpublic spheres can persuade the majority of the public depends on their own efforts and the acceptance from the dominant public sphere. That is why we have seen the dynamics vary considerably across cases. The influence

from the counterpublic spheres is far from being institutionalized, and the counterpublics always have to struggle to get their voices heard.

In between the counterpublic and satellite public spheres, numerous virtual spaces that engage in public discussions but lack the resources to push their discourses out of their own circle exist. We can see these spaces in BBS forums that focus on public issues (Zhang, 2006), blogs in which opinion leaders voice their concerns (Esarey & Xiao, 2008), and international virtual communities that pay attention to China (Yang, 2009). I call these spaces enclaved public spheres. Different from Squires's (2002) definition, these spaces are enclaved by others as well as enclaving themselves. International virtual communities include diasporic communities and bridge websites that are run by foreigners who are either based in China or interested in Chinese issues. One can find the most critical views from these spaces, but unsurprisingly, these sites are often blocked within mainland China. In this case, the Chinese government enclaves these spheres from accessing the public spheres in China, including the dominant and subaltern ones. Blogging in China has recently become a popular usage of the Internet. About 58% of Internet users either visit blogs or blog themselves (CNNIC, 2010). The most-visited blogs often belong to well-known individuals such as celebrities, professional experts, and famous scholars. Users visit these blogs due to interest in the individuals rather than engaging in a discussion with the bloggers. Most popular bloggers had to either close the comment function or never reply to the comments due to the large number of visitors. These blogs enclave themselves from two-way communications and cannot afford public discussions. Nevertheless, the blogs contribute to public discussions by providing sophisticated arguments and opinions that can be used in discursive contestations. However, opinion leaders cannot replace public engagement, and in this sense, blogs are at best enclaved public

spheres. BBS forums as a category involve a large variety in terms of the number of users, the diversity of users and opinions, and the degree of openness. I argue that, except for a few top forums (e.g., tianya.cn, xici.net, mop.com) that attract users who have the resources to influence the dominant public sphere, most are enclaved due to their limited membership. Different from the satellite public spheres, users of these forums intend to make them heard as widely as possible. However, the forums are simply not popular enough to reach a large audience. In other cases, the users are not influential enough to transform their discussions into a public debate. These enclaved public spheres hold the biggest potential to bring in social changes because of the spheres' openness to ideas. These spheres are also the most flexible in adapting to the sociopolitical environment by changing the degree to which they keep their discourses within themselves.

In short, the landscape of the Chinese Internet is highly diverse. Different components of this landscape are involved in dynamic and complicated interactions. Instead of looking for a universal public sphere, we should consider cyberspace in China as contentious virtual spheres that are open to many kinds of public discussions. Subaltern public spheres are found on the Chinese Net, and they serve different internal and external functions based on their membership, the resources they can mobilize, their relations to the government and the market economy, and the perceptions and reactions from the wider public(s). The internal and external functions also influence each other depending on the conditions. A virtual community that primarily serves an internal function (e.g., the online fans groups) may be forced to strengthen their external function when their internal activities caught attention from other publics. As another example, a community that once has extensive outreach (e.g., a popular online forum) may also have to close itself up in order to comply with the order from the state.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The case of Chinese online public spheres illustrates the utility of the framework that the theory of subaltern public spheres suggests. Future research should keep testing this framework against more empirical evidence. One way to expand the empirical test is to look at different contexts. These contexts may refer to different countries or even different regions when the idea of cross-national public spheres emerges out of regional alliances such as the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). When the framework is tested against alternative evidence, I believe that new theoretical developments will come into being. Three types of subaltern public spheres have been identified in the Chinese cyberspace, but there must be more as the contexts change. Nevertheless, the emphasis on internal dynamics and external interaction serves as the first steps toward understanding how virtual communities become political entities through creating different subaltern public spheres.

CONCLUSION

The political significance of virtual communities should be understood in a structure of the state, economy, civil society, and family. Communities are seen as a social unit that is bigger than family but smaller than society. Communities are involved in politics when they try to clarify their interests and represent those interests to society through institutions such as policy-making procedures or media exposure. Information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, allow communities to be formed and provide limited yet viable discursive spaces for community members to engage in public discussions over concerns that are shared by the members. By taking a plural approach to virtual communities and the spheres they establish, this chapter shows that the theory

of subaltern public spheres offers a more appropriate and comprehensive scheme that we can use to examine the Internet and its democratic potential.

I conclude that the Internet and the virtual communities it affords have shown and will continue showing to be highly relevant to politics. However, how much democratic progress they bring into the political procedure would have to be contingent on the political systems, cultures, and psychologies in the contexts. The case of Chinese online public spheres clearly demonstrates the diversity of virtual communities and their different strategies and practices in terms of representing their interests (or making their political claims) in front of state apparatuses, commercial entities, the dominant public, and other subaltern publics. However, due to the state-society structure in China (i.e., state overpowers society in most cases), virtual communities are still far from being an institutionalized representative mechanism that serves the democratic purpose as voting does. The same would be applicable to any other countries that clearly lack democratic components in their political systems (e.g., Vietnam). With regards to the well-developed liberal democracies (e.g., those in Europe and North America), the potential of the Internet to further their democratic progress would not be revolutionary. The reason is simply because the political system and culture there are already pro-democracy. What the Internet offers is only another tool, powerful indeed, to participate in an established democratic procedure that has already offered other means for participation (e.g., a free press). The democratic potential, I argue, is most promising in countries that have hybrid systems such as authoritarian democracies (e.g., Egypt), especially when they are facing fundamental unrests. These countries have the basic layout of a democratic setting (e.g., popular voting of parliament members and presidents) but have successfully suppressed these democratic mechanisms through other authoritarian means such as close control of mass media. The Internet

fuels the oppositions that have been carried out by the political minorities for years and helps to change the balance between the ruling authorities and the opposing forces. It is at the moment of balance-breaking that the Internet releases its highest energy to democratize.

The theory of subaltern public spheres challenges the tendency to look at the Internet as one single entity without carefully examining the dynamics within the cyberspace. Instead of answering whether the Internet, as a whole, would facilitate democratization or not, we should study how different spheres within one particular cyberspace each function and how they interact with each other to influence the political procedure in one context. This theoretical framework, for instance, has led to empirical findings that complement previous studies on the Internet and politics in China. Previous research has exclusively focused on the struggle between the state and the so-called civil society, assuming that they are the only two players in the game. This chapter, by taking the approach of plural public spheres, introduces a four-player structure and provides an analysis that digs into the complexity of society (e.g., dominant public and multiple subaltern publics).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The same criterion could be applied to other countries. If the Internet penetration rate does not reach a majority of the population, it is hard to say that a virtual public sphere exists. The infrastructure seems to be possible in countries that have almost a universal Internet access (e.g., Norway).
- ² See top sites in China, Alexa.com.
- ³ The discourse that occurs on governmental portals is generally consistent with the dominant ideology. However, due to the complexity of political hierarchy, the actual practice of ideology control varies across

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different spheres. Some meaningful discussions are seen in such official virtual spaces as Strengthen the Nation forum hosted by the leading party organ newspaper People Daily (Yang, 2009). In addition, governmental portals are often used as a channel to report/

release news or grievances, which become the trigger of large-scale online discussions. In these two senses, governmental portals have significant contribution to constructing counterpublic discourses.