Are online discussions deliberate?

A case study of a Chinese online discussion board

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Abstract

The Internet has become one of the public spaces in which people discuss with each other about political issues. However, we know little about the quality of these discussions. Specifically, *are online discussions deliberate?* Deliberation is the core concept of Habermas' theory of public sphere. I examined the degree of deliberation of a Chinese online discussion board via content analysis of postings, an online survey of discussants, and in-depth interviews with key members and administrators. According to Habermasian deliberation, I evaluated the online discussion in terms of (1) the goal of the discussion, (2) the equality of the discussion, (3) the rationality of the discussion, and (4) the communicative rationality of the discussants. I found that the goal of the discussion was more oriented to mutual understanding than successful persuasion, and the discussants were equal during the online discussion in spite of various offline inequalities. However, the rationality of the discussion was not well achieved—disagreeing arguments which contained criticizable reasons were present while personal attacks were also salient. The communicative rationality of the participants was rather poorly satisfied since discussants were rarely self-reflexive or ideal role-taking although they were sincere most of time. I argue that the technological characteristics of the Internet do not support Habermasian deliberation in whole but encourage parts of them while discourage others. In addition, other factors such as the features of participants and the moderating management during the discussion can influence the degree of deliberation as well.

Introduction

The Internet has become one of the public spaces in which people discuss with each other about political issues (Brants, 2002; Staeheli, Ledwith, Ormand, Reed, Sumpter, & Trudeau, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1998). At the same time, many researchers have observed that online discussions lack political deliberation (Fishkin, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Sunstein, 2001). For example, flaming wars are quite popular on the Internet (Dery, 1994; Quitter 1997). However, we should notice that lack of deliberation is not a new problem that the Internet initiated. On the contrary, it is considered as an enduring incapability of human beings when they are involved in political discussions (Lippmann, 1922). I won't discuss whether human beings in nature are rational or irrational and instead, I will leave that question open in this article. What interests me is that how the Internet functions as a social environment, which encourages or discourages deliberation. Which aspects of the Internet are beneficial and which aspects are harmful in terms of the formation of deliberation?

In this article, I introduce the concept of deliberation in Habermas' theory of public sphere and summarize four sets of criteria which can be used to evaluate deliberation. After a brief review of research context and research methods, I analyze the texts of one debate which happened on a Chinese online discussion board. Both quantitative and qualitative data are used to examine how the Internet satisfies or disappoints the criteria of deliberation. At the end of this article, I propose a question about the internal consistency of the criteria of Habermasian deliberation in online settings.

Online deliberation and Habermasian public sphere

The Internet is probably both beneficial and harmful for achieving the norms required by public sphere. For example, in cyberspace, people are linked to a common virtual locale and they can interact with each other directly although not face-to-face. With this virtual co-presence, people can have discussions, which are the essential part of public sphere. In addition, cyberspace is a more open medium compared to other mass media, although it has its own limitations in providing a universal access. We also found that online interaction lacks the richness of face-to-face exchanges and sometime tends to be superficial. Furthermore, instead of boosting open discussions, the Internet seems to encourage communication among like-minded persons. Based on these observations, researchers asked whether the Internet could afford the concept of public sphere. The norm of rationality became one of the focuses: Does the Internet encourage or discourage the rational discussions among the users? The Internet research in Habermasian framework often compares the reality in cyberspace with the ideal model.

Habermas' public sphere requires a deliberative discourse (1989). Deliberation includes several sub-criteria. 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 voices are equally heard and assertions are open to critique in spite of participants' cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Third, to ensure the goal and the critical discussion, each participant must have the communicative rationality, which includes reflexivity, ideal role-taking, and sincerity.

Different researchers emphasized different aspects of the ideal public sphere. Fung & Kedl (2000) forwarded three groups of criteria of an ideal public sphere, which are (1) open access, participatory parity and social equality; (2) rational discourse and the representative publics; (3) communication for understanding. In their case study of a Chinese online community, in which participants discuss issues on China-Taiwan relations, they found that participants could not detach themselves from their identities and resulted in a discourse of "flamings, exclusions and persuasions", or communication actions oriented toward success. They concluded that the Internet's potentiality as a public sphere is not optimistic.

Wilhelm (2000: 35) proposed the topography of the virtual political public sphere, which includes four components—antecedent resources, inclusiveness, deliberation, design. In this framework, Wilhelm was aware that the inequality of antecedent resources limits access to and participation in online public sphere. Using content analysis to study the deliberation, he found that there is insufficient evidence to support an optimistic picture of political public debates in cyberspace. He also demonstrated that the design of the Internet affects the nature and scope of online activity, including the political activity.

Slevin (2000) thought that the Internet might create a deliberatively mediated publicness, even though there are limitations of this publicness. There are three criteria of deliberation: (1) keeping controversial questions open; (2) criticizable rationality; (3) overall goals, principles and rights. Slevin found that the Internet has the potential to create all the three conditions. However, the transformative capacity of the Internet is dependent on the characteristics of the participants, their location in time-space, the institutional arrangement, and so on.

The most recent work which systematically examined public sphere on the Internet is from Dahlberg (2001a). He compared online deliberative practices with a normative model of public sphere. This model involves six conditions:

1. Autonomy from state and economic power: Discourse must be based on the concerns of citizens as a public rather than driven by the power of market and state.
2. Exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims: Rational-critical discourse is open to critique rather than dogmatically asserted.
3. Reflexivity: Participants must critically examine their own values, assumptions and interests.
4. Ideal role-taking: Participants must attempt to understand the arguments from the other's perspective.
5. Sincerity: Each participant must make a sincere effort to make all information known.
6. Discursive inclusion and equality: Every participant is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion.

Based on his collection of various studies, Dehlberg tried to undertake a general analysis of all the six dimensions. He found that although the autonomy of online public sphere is threatened by state censorship and commercialization, a diverse array of non-commercial, non-state controlled interaction continues to exist, and even multiplies. The exchange of validity claims with reason is taking place within many Internet forums and a deliberative structure exists online. However, the deliberative quality of online exchanges is not so good considering reflexivity, ideal role-taking and sincerity. Inequalities from outside of and

within discourse continue to occur during online interaction. However, these inequalities may dissipate as time goes on.

In sum, the Internet facilitates an expansion of public sphere, but the quality of the rational-critical discourse falls short of the requirements of the deliberative model. Dahlberg thought these shortcomings could be overcome by using three mechanisms: the technology employed, the rules of discourse constituted, and the type of forum management undertaken. He evaluated an Internet-based initiative that attempted to develop online public discourse satisfying the above criteria, which is called Minnesota E-Democracy (Dahlberg, 2001b). He found that with some artificial control such as the positive management of postings, the discourse could solve many of the problems which presently limit online political deliberation.

Since there is not much evidence of the optimistic view of online deliberation, it is still not clear that to what extent, the Internet favors or destroys the political deliberation. I want to answer this question by examining a debate about politics and movies on a Chinese online discussion board. My main research question is: Is the discourse within the discussion board deliberative? According to the criteria I mentioned before, I have four minor research questions.
1. Is the goal of discussion oriented to success or mutual understanding?
2. Are the participants in the discussion equal?
3. Is the discussion rational?
4. Do the participants in the discussion have communicative rationality?

Research context and research methods

The Chinese online discussion board I am discussing is called "RearWindow to Movies" and often called "RearWindow" for short. RearWindow is one of the 110,005 (updated on October 10, 2003) discussion groups on the website named Xicihutong (xici.net) in Mainland China (http://b2467.xici.net). It is one of the biggest discussion groups on xici.net, which has more than 5,000 booking users. In addition, xici.net permits non-registered Internet users to read their open discussion group without the right to post articles. The exact extension RearWindow has reached is hard to estimate. Xici.net itself was initiated as a non-profit folk website on April 14, 1998. Now it has 3,000,000 user IDs approximately. About one year after its birth, the website was bought by elong.com, a profit-oriented company.

Content analysis shows that film reviews were the most popular postings which reached 67.3%. Informational postings occupied a significant portion, 21.9 percent. Other postings were all less than 5%, which include relational postings, task and advice, management and intrusion. 74.2% of the film reviews got replies with discussions. 77.3% of the respondents of my survey have participated or observed the discussions on the board. From these numbers, we can see that although there are diverse discourses on RearWindow, discussions about movies have a significant position.

Why did I choose a discussion board on movies to answer my question about political deliberation on the Internet? First of all, movies are considered as cultural products rather than political tools and get less surveillance than political activities in China. It is not a

coincidence that cultural products become the focus of early public spheres. Habermas used the concept of literary public sphere when he described an early form of the political publicity (Habermas 1991, 29). In the institution of art criticism, including literary, theater, and music criticism, the lay judgment of a public attained enlightenment and became organized. In addition, the cultural aspect of the public sphere did not lose its significance even after a political public sphere emerged. The concept of cultural public sphere was first suggested by Frands Mortensen, who claimed it to be spatially situated in museums, churches, exhibitions, concert halls, cinemas, libraries, sports grounds and theaters (Mortensen 1977). Thus discussions on movies could be a type of public debates and have the enlightening implications in China, which is in its early age of the development of a civil society.

Furthermore, Chinese movies hold a problematical status, which manifests the relationships among the state, the economy and the emerging civil society. The film industry in China is in the process of marketization and the government must release their pan-political sensitivity. A relatively free discursive space has opened for the movies since they are considered as commodities or entertainment information. At the same time, a strict film censorship remains intact. These rules and laws have become more generous to commercial films than before, but they rarely loosen their clamp on independent movies. The discourse on Chinese movies reflects the power relations in a broad sense. State-controlled discourse propagandizes its best films and prohibits the dissemination of uncensored films. Commercial films get their reputations and box office ratings in the mass market. The critical publics struggle with these two discourses and promote their favorite films. A simple question — what is a good Chinese film — became the core of the debate among the three parties.

To discover the complexity of the online deliberation, this study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data.
1. Content analysis of postings on RearWindow (January 20 – February 19, 1999; February 20 – March 19, 2000; March 20 – April 19, 2001; April 20 – May 19, 2002; April 13 – 19, 2003)[i];
2. An online survey of RearWindow users (April 21, 2003 - April 27, 2003, 185 valid responses);[ii]
3. Discourse analysis of all the postings during the debate "whether Chinese movies are a kind of politics" (July 9-21, 2002);
4. In-depth interviews with 14 interviewees (12 face-to-face and 2 email interviews);

Analyses of online deliberation

In the following pages, I will briefly review the development of the debate about "whether Chinese movies are a kind of politics" and then analyze to what extent the discourse fulfilled the requirements proposed by Habermas, which are the goal of the discussion, the equality of the discussion, the rationality of the discussion, and the communicative rationality of the participants.

This debate began on July 9, 2002 and lasted for about two weeks. After *Lvyao* posted a summary on July 16, the debate began to step into decline. The debate completely ceased on July 21. The debate was ignited by a posting written by *Liar*, who interviewed *Jia Zhangke*, one of the young directors in China who are usually called the sixth generation. In this

interview, *Liar* harshly criticized another sixth-generation director *Wang Chao* and his movie "An'yang Baby". He also criticized a book "My Camera Doesn't Lie", which introduces eight young directors including *Jia Zhangke* and *Wang Chao*. Only two hours after *Liar* posted his interview, another posting called "I Only Believe in Baby's Eyes" counterattacked *Liar*'s critiques. The author used an ID same with his posting's title, *Baby's Eyes* for short and finally, it was revealed that the ID owner is one of the authors of the book "My Camera Doesn't Lie".

The debate reached its first turning point when *Zhang Dawei* posted his article on July 10. *Zhang Dawei* is a professor in Beijing Film Academy and very active in promoting Chinese independent movies. He pointed out that the critique on "An'yang Baby" reflected the apathy on Chinese independent movies which strive to exist in the tough political environment. In this phase, the focus of the debate was that which criterion should be applied to evaluate a movie, its art value or its political significance. The second turning point appeared after *Jiangbeimangliu* joined the discussion. He wrote that even considering the political significance, *Wang Chao* only made use of politics to achieve his personal goals. *Wang Chao* was not trying to manifest the real life of the lowest class in his movie. In the response to *Jiangbeimangliu*, *Zhang Dawei* proposed the final topic of this debate, whether movies are a kind of politics.

The goal of the discussion

The first criterion of deliberation is that the goal of the discussion should be achieving mutual understanding instead of the success of one party. Discourse oriented to success is strategic, which only emphasizes its efficiency in influencing the decisions of other social actors. Meanwhile, discourse oriented to understanding is able to facilitate an open debate. I measured the goal of discussion by asking the participants directly (interviews and survey) and interpreting the texts of discussion. The complexity of the goal is that different participants have different goals. It is difficult to decide what the goal of the whole discussion was.

The first kind of participants like *Baby's Eyes*, *Movie Forest* and *Movie Mole* aimed at putting shame on their opponents.

> *Baby's Eyes*: Mr. Liar is the cheekiest person I have met in 2002. … Too absurd! You criticized a movie that you never watched and the critique was only based on your dog nose. What is your intention? … It looks like you are the spy sent by the Film Bureau.
> (http://www.xici.net/board/doc.asp?id=17841508&sub=2&doc_old=1 July 9, 2002)

These people did not use critical-rational discourse to argue their opinions. In their eyes, opponents are opponents forever. Debate is not a communication but a battle. Their final goal is to destroy the enemies and win the battle. Although other participants criticized them for this attitude, they did not change their initial goal. For example, at the end of the debate, *Movie Mole* said that: "I can fight back their hypocrisy only with my tomfoolery. I can rip their masks only with my impudicity."

However, the boardmasters tried to pilot the debate to mutual understanding by deleting postings which made personal attacks and requesting the participants to transcend the

success/failure mode of debate.

> *VCD*: Debaters have expressed their opinions and clarified their positions.
> Thus the debate has reached the essential level. I think there is not a true
> answer.
> (http://www.xici.net/board/doc.asp?id=17911019&sub=24&doc_old=1 July
> 11, 2002)

As the boardmaster mentioned, I did find that efforts which tried to understand others existed. *Zhang Dawei*, one of the core debaters, replied that he would like to meet his opponents including *Liar* and *Gu Xiaobai* face-to-face after the debate. At the end of the debate, most of the participants agreed that Chinese movies couldn't escape from the intervention of politics. If there is any consensus achieved, it is the recognition of the tough environment for Chinese independent movies. Meanwhile, most participants still kept their ideas, e.g., the political significance is not the most important criterion in evaluating a movie. I asked the survey respondents to choose from totally agree to totally disagree with "the goal of discussion is to achieve mutual understanding". The result is that 67.2% of respondents agreed, including totally agree (19.1%) and basically agree (48.1%).

Although I did not find many people who changed their opinions after the debate, canons about public opinion told us public opinion doesn't equal to agreements (Bryce, 1888; Lowell, 1914). In other words, it does not mean that two parties of people could not communicate with each other without total agreements. As I know, participants are still active on RearWindow after the debate, including *Zhang Dawei, Liar*, *Gu Xiaobai* and even some personal attackers like *Movie Mole*. Thus I will conclude that the goal of the discussion is more oriented to mutual understanding than successful persuasion.

The equality of the discussion

Equality means that all voices are heard equally and there is not a monopolization of attention. The Internet has its advantages in facilitating the equality among users. "A common theme within the Internet literature is that social hierarchies and power relations are leveled by the 'blindness' of cyberspace to bodily identity, thus allowing people to interact as if they were equals. Arguments are said to be assessed by the value of the claims themselves and not the social position of the poster" (Dahlberg, 2001a). However, it is not easy to achieve equality due to two reasons. First, users enter the online public spheres with their social inequalities, such as information they have, knowledge they master, and debating skill they could use. An online social hierarchy develops based on these inequalities. Second, it is very hard to live online while totally concealing one's offline identity. Especially in a small social group like RearWindow, there is a lot of overlapping between online and offline relationships. The offline affiliations with or disgusts towards some persons will greatly influence one's attitude towards the persons' online discourse.

I disagree that equality only refers to the numerical equality of postings by all the users. I disagree that if there are some posters who post many more articles than others, these posters dominate the discussion. I do not think infrequent posters or lurkers are unengaged, passive, or non-participating. Theoretically, all subscribers to a group have equal opportunities to post. They choose not to speak due to various reasons. It does not mean that they are discriminated against. Thus what I am interested in are the reasons that cause some users not to speak. Is

there any discursive domination that excludes others' discursive rights? Does the inequality of social economic status among users directly lead to any domination?

There are in total 56 pieces of relative postings left and among which 39 were posted by different nicknames. It shows that the debate was not dominated by a few people. Then I will examine inequalities in terms of offline resources and online hierarchy. Although the participants are in the same underdeveloped middle class in China, their ownerships of offline resources are different. The group which is represented by *Zhang Dawei* is made up of professors in universities and professionals within the independent movie industry, which is often called academicians. They have advantages in information about Chinese independent movies, which could be the powerful proofs for their arguments and theoretical training, which strengthens their ability of debating. In comparison, other users only have their personal experience and do not have any inside stories. It is easy for debaters who owned the information to blame the others as ignorant. At the same time, without any accessibility to the hidden facts, other users cannot examine the authenticity of the information.

However, the oppositional group of debaters has their resources as well. They are often called folk movie reviewers, who are much more popular on RearWindow than the academicians. Counting the number of supporters of both parties, I found that there are more than twenty IDs that expressed publicly their support for the folks and only less than ten IDs did so to support the academicians. We can see that the voices from the folks are also loud in spite of the "lower" quality of their discussions compared to the academicians.

In addition, this group of participants is younger and more familiar with the netiquette than the academicians. They know how to use the Internet effectively to express their opinions. The most significant case of folks' advantages in netiquette is the self-revelation of *Zhang Dawei*. Although he intended to ask the participants to be responsible for their discourse, his se-revelation of his offline identity received fierce critiques. In my interview with two boardmasters, *Lvzi* and *X-Camoufleur*, both of them said that his self-revelation destroyed the netiquette and he should not have done that. Another participant described this self-revelation as a "hijack" in his posting.

> *Yinghehonghe*: This action is heroic but violent. It destroyed the happiness of anonymity that the Internet brings to us. Here is a free public space at first. We do not have much discursive rights and have been very satisfied that we can speak here. Anonymity is very important here, with which we can speak out in spite of the burden of personal relationships, without which we will hesitate to speak out due to self-doubts of the immaturity of our opinions. (http://www.xici.net/board/doc.asp?id=17961151&sub=10&doc_old=1 July 13, 2002)

In contrast to *Zhang Dawei*'s unintentional destruction of the netiquette, the folks are more skillful in using the Internet. An example is the resignation of *Gu Xiaobai*. At that time, *Gu Xiaobai* was one of the boardmasters. A debater questioned him: "As a boardmaster, you kept attacking others. This is not good." *Gu Xiaobai* abdicated the position of boardmaster immediately and gained a lot of compliments.

My survey shows that 77.2% of respondents agreed that debaters were equal. From these analyses, I claim that although the offline inequalities are necessarily involved with online

activities, the offline advantages do not necessarily facilitate online domination. The Internet has become a new social resource. The folk movie reviewers have less offline resources than the academicians but they have gained attention on the Internet. The attention and favors from other Internet users supported them to debate against the academicians. Their familiarity with netiquette helped them to keep their online attention and reputation.

The rationality of the discussion

The requirement of rationality could be examined through three questions. First, were there conversations among debaters or just a lot of monologues? Second, did the debaters provide reasons to support their opinions? Or did they assume that their opinions need no justification? If they did provide reasons, were these reasons subject to criticisms? Third, which kind of critiques did they make? Were the critiques rational or just some personal attacks?

Some researchers such as Fung & Kedl (2000) found that their research subjects did not argue with their opponents about the feasibility and practicality of the oppositional ideas. Rather, they simply did not conceive of the existence of others' opinions and repeated their own opinions time and time again. Challenges were not answered and ideas never collided with each other. In a word, there were no conversations at all. In contrast, more than half (58.5%) of the postings in my case were written as a reply to statements made by other users, no matter whether supporting or opposing. 73.6% of the postings got opposite replies. We can see that open dialogue or reciprocal conversation is the mainstream during the debate. It is also reflected on the titles of the postings.

> *Liar*: "About the Interview with *Jia Zhangke* (Answers for *Baby's Eyes*, Movie *Forest*, and *Qilianshanren*)"
> *Zhang Dawei*: "About An'yang Baby, *Liar*, Director Jia (*Jia Zhangke*), *CINE* and the Other Things"

A great majority (81.1%) of the postings demonstrated the reasons why they supported or opposed one opinion. Even the personal attacks provided reasons. "Criticizable" (Dahlberg, 2001a) is judged by two steps. One is to see whether the poster talked about his reasons as the only truth that everyone should agree with. If not, I examined whether there are critiques on the reasons. Both "with the reasons as only truth" and "without critiques" are sorted as "not criticizable". As a result, 75.5% of the postings provided valid claims that are criticizable.

Considering the personal attacks, I think there are two types. As the first type, the posters inveigh against others with dirty words. As the second type, posters may not be obviously rude but they attribute the shortcomings of others' arguments to their personalities. For example, *Zhang Yaxuan* criticized *Liar* and *Gu Xiaobai* as this: "I consider *Liar* as a youth loving literature and I am impressed by *Gu Xiaobai*'s immaturity. I want to say that tricks cannot be played on all things in the world. And not all tricks could be forgiven because of juvenility." Here the age of the opponents was used as the proofs for the incredibility of their discourse. Finally I found that there are in total 50.9% of the postings containing this kind of soft personal attacks.

In summary, the criterion of rationality is not very well satisfied. My survey data show that only a little more than half of the respondents (56.3%) agreed that the discussion is rational. Since one is free to speak on the Internet, personal attacks could not be forbidden. Personal attacks made the discussion very noisy and detracted users' attentions from the serious discussions. Fortunately, most of the users were aware of the damages personal attacks may bring. In this discussion, attackers were labeled as ones whose opinions are not worth listening to. In *Lvyao*'s summary, she wrote that "Postings by *Movie Mole* only bring himself shame". The boardmaster, *Lvzi* said that "The most significant result of this discussion is that the reputation of *Baby's Eye*s was totally destroyed". Through these two examples, I notice that whether one will rationally discuss things is related to his personal characters. If he/she does not have any reflexivity and sincerity during the discussion, it is impossible for him/her to act rationally. That is why I must analyze the communicative rationality of the participants of online discussions.

The communicative rationality of the participants

Reflexivity, ideal-role taking and sincerity are the three sub-criteria of communicative rationality. Reflexivity means the process of standing back from, critically reflecting upon, and changing one's position when faced by "the better argument" (Dahlberg, 2001a). "Unfortunately, reflexivity is difficult to detect given that it is largely an internal process and changes in people's positions take place over long periods of time." The form of Internet exchange may be seen as facilitating reflexivity since arguments are in written form which encourages participants to be thoughtful and the asynchronous rhythm could provide participants time for reflection. However, the bandwidth limitation discourages posting long articles. The non-linear structure of conversations and the rapidity of exchanges would disturb the process of reflection. My measurement of reflexivity is to ask whether the participants understand criticisms against them and whether their positions are softened or even changed.

My survey found that few people changed their positions completely. The level of reflexivity is different among different participants. The most reflexive debater during the discussion was *Zhang Dawei*. He often thought about others' criticisms on him and answered with the acknowledgement of his own shortcomings. However, people with high reflexivity were very rare. Other participants mentioned others' criticisms but never admitted they were wrong. Personal attackers like *Baby's Eyes* and *Movie Mole* realized that their actions induced public anger. However, their reflexivity was low-level—they just provided more reasons to support their former discourse and did not really want to change their positions.

Ideal role-taking is that participants attempt to put themselves in the position of the others so as to come to an understanding of the others' perspective. Although there are many examples of ideal role-taking in this debate, I found that most of them are pseudo ideal role-takings. In other words, the participants took others' positions for granted and conjectured their reactions, which fell short of full understanding. For example, *Yinghehonghe* wrote about *Zhang Dawei*:

> You have very strong consciousness of politics and discuss it based on the
> theory of classes immediately. It is because this kind of discussion touched
> your anxiety in emotion. … When you had such anxiety, you put yourself
> away from the class of the jobless and artificially enlarged the difference.

(http://www.xici.net/board/doc.asp?id=17961151&sub=10&doc_old=1 July 13, 2002)

In the first sentence, it seems that *Yinghehonghe* tried to understand *Zhang Dawei*'s position. But the later sentences imply that this understanding is just used to make his critiques more reasonable. However, nobody knows whether *Zhang Dawei* really has any anxiety in emotion except himself. It is only an imagination or at best, a deduction by *Yinghehonghe*. Therefore, this kind of ideal role-taking is just a pseudo one and the participant did not sincerely try to understand others' positions.

Sincerity includes (1) the sincerity of participants' goals: Do the participants sincerely want to understand each other? (2) the sincerity of the information the participants provide: Is the information which is used as proofs all true? (3) the sincerity of the opinions of the participants: Do the participants sincerely express their opinions instead of flattering or assaulting? I have discussed the goals before and I concluded that the goal of the discussion in whole is more oriented to mutual understanding than successful persuasion. 89.7% of the respondents agreed that participants wanted to communicate with each other sincerely. Most of the information is true since dishonesties are easily recognized while others could access the same information source without difficulties. However, when the information is about personal lives or inside stories, it is hard to judge whether they are true. 74.7% of the respondents agreed that in the discussion, participants provided true information. The only way to know the answer of the third question is to ask the participants directly. I wrote that "Participants in the discussion sincerely expressed their opinions" in the survey. The percentage of agreement is extraordinarily high, which is 92.9%, including totally agree (41.5%) and basically agree (51.4%)

To sum up, the overall communicative rationality of participants is basically unsatisfactory although sincerity is more optimistic than reflexivity and ideal role-taking. The three measurements of sincerity, namely, sincerity of participants' goals, sincerity of the information, and the sincerity of the opinions, got high agreements which are 89.7%, 74.7% and 92.9%. In comparison, only 58.2% of the respondents supported the suggestion that the participants were reflexive and 51.5% agreed with ideal role-taking. I attribute this imbalance of communicative rationality to the characteristics of the Internet. Anonymity and lack of physical cues encourage the users to speak out what they think. However, the lack of physical interaction also leads to the emotional apartness which makes reflexivity and ideal role-taking rather difficult. I am not saying that there is no emotional caring in cyberspace at all. What I address here is that in a setting of discussion like RearWindow, debaters' attentions are more on the discourse than on the people. Without a sufficient understanding of others' positions and a sincere feeling of sympathy, reflexivity and ideal role-taking are nearly impossible.

Discussions and Conclusions

In order to judge whether the discussion on RearWindow is deliberative, I chose the case of movie-politics debate to evaluate its extent to satisfy the requirements of deliberation. The goal of the discussion was more oriented to mutual understanding than successful persuasion, although I cannot assert that every participant has the same goal. Participants in the debate were unequal in terms of the online and offline resources. Academicians had advantages in offline information and the ability to debate while folk movie reviewers took the benefits of

their familiarity with netiquettes and their reputation on the Internet. With such a balance, offline inequalities did not lead to online discursive domination. However, this general equality is found within a specific social group and should not be generalized to the whole population.

As for the rationality of the discussion, I found that conversations were pervasive during the debate. Most of the postings provided reasons and most of the reasons were criticizable. However, quite a few postings contained obvious or unobvious personal attacks. The flaming war discounted the rationality of discussion and it cannot be totally avoided. Thus the rationality of discussion is not very well achieved. The communicative rationality of participants is most difficult to achieve in the online discursive space. There were few people who were reflexive on their own ideas and discourse. The institution of the Internet does not encourage reflexivity, too. It is doubtful that ideal role-taking is directed to mutual understanding when it is used to criticize others. Sincerity is very well satisfied—the information and the opinions are sincerely provided. It is hard to say that participants have communicative rationality since reflexivity and ideal role-taking are poorly met.

My research findings show that the technological characteristics of the Internet, such as anonymity, fluidity, and text-based interaction, do not support Habermasian communication rationality in whole but support parts of them (sincerity) while discourage others (reflexivity and role-taking). We also need to notice that the requirements of deliberation may be satisfied differently in different online discussion spaces. In my study, both the parties of the debate, which are academicians and folk movie reviewers, master some resources and thus could maintain a general equality during the discussion. However, we can imagine that in an online space where participants have a wide gap in terms of resources, the equality is hard to achieve. In addition, I found that mediators, boardmasters in this case, have the ability to adjust the degree of deliberation. For instance, they can encourage mutual understanding by deleting personal attack postings. Boardmasters' influence is especially obvious when they have established authority in the discussion space. Further studies should examine various online discussion spaces, including small scale ones like RearWindow and popular ones like discussion groups on Yahoo!. In addition, researchers need to pay more attention to the mediating roles of moderators.

Another reason that the sub-criteria of Habermasian deliberation were not consistently satisfied or violated is that deliberation itself is a very complicated concept which contains multi-dimensional components and these components might actually contradict with each other in the reality. However, deliberation as an ideal model is still meaningful in telling us how to evaluate emerging forms of public sphere. But there is an urgent need to think carefully about the habermasian deliberation—does deliberation involve components which are conflicting in the real world and how to balance the inner struggles among components while keeping the validity of the concept of deliberation?

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ⁱ After the survey period, I selected postings to do content analysis. The first posting on the board appeared on December 20, 1998. There were in total 16,595 postings till April 19, 2003. During these 52 months, I decided to choose four months as the sample, one month per 13-month section. Since I wanted to examine the evolution of the bulletin board and compare postings through the time, I used the random digits method to choose one number from 1 to 13. The online random digits generator (http://www.random.org) generated "2" as the number and I found out the second month in the four 13-month sections. Finally I got January 20 – February 19, 1999; February 20 – March 19, 2000; March 20 – April 19, 2001; and April 20 – May 19, 2002. To make the analysis more sensitive to the latest changes of the board, I selected one additional week from April 13 to 19, 2003. During these periods, there were in total 1,255 postings, including 47 for 1999, 154 for 2000, 501 for 2001, 463 for 2002, and 90 for 2003. The second content analysis was on a smaller scope which focused on the postings during the debate of "whether movies are a kind of politics". In total are 53 postings were analyzed, which were posted during July 9 – 15, 2002.

ⁱⁱ On April 21, 2003, I posted a message about my survey on RearWindow to invite responses to the questionnaire (See Appendix). This questionnaire was on an online survey website, which provided free spaces for questionnaires. They did not ask for any registration for answering the questionnaire and everyone could reach the results without any limitations. After I had posted the message, I asked the board administrators to put this message on the head of the board and mark it as "Jian" (recommendation) or "Gao" (announcement). Thus the postings could be kept on the top of the board for one week. During the survey period, I responded to questions and discussion that arose on the board about the survey. I also followed up those respondents who left their contacts to clarify inconsistent or missing answers provided to the questionnaire. One week later, there were 255 responses to the questionnaire and the "Jian" mark was cancelled. I posted a message on the board on April 27, 2003 announcing that the survey had finished. One hundred and eighty-five valid responses were received.