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The use of Web2.0 style technologies among Chinese civil society organizations ☆

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ABSTRACT

Based on a nationwide survey of more than 500 CSOs in China conducted in 2009, the research presented herein provides the first set of data and the first quantitative analysis regarding the use of Web2.0 technologies among Chinese CSOs. First, it attempts to answer the basic but crucial questions: Whether, on the whole, China's CSOs use Web2.0 style technologies, and how widely different Web2.0 style technologies have been adopted among China's CSOs. Second, it attempts to answer whether there is a regional difference (East China/Central China/West China) in the adoption of Web2.0 technologies; whether there is a difference in Web2.0 technologies adoption by financial resource (of CSOs); if yes, which group of CSOs are disadvantaged. This research found that most of the chosen Web2.0 style technologies have been widely adopted by CSOs. The use of Web2.0 style technologies and social media is likely to become a widespread phenomenon among CSOs in China. We found CSOs with medium financial support are more likely to use Web2.0, whereas CSOs with high financial support are left behind in the use of some Web2.0 technologies. More importantly, we found there is a regional inequality in the adoption of Web2.0 style technologies. CSOs in western China are left behind in the adoption of Web2.0. And CSOs in eastern China are more likely to use blog and Forum/BBS; CSOs in central China are more likely to upload video materials.

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1. Introduction

By June 2011, the number of the Internet users in China had reached 485 million (China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2011)), 170 million more than the total population in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The social influence of the Internet on China has aroused increasing interest among scholars. According to the 2011 2nd quarter report from Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) of China, the number of officially registered Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)[1] has reached 448 thousand (MAC, 2011) while most researchers thought that the real number of CSOs in China, including the registered and those not officially registered grassroots CSOs, is much higher. According to the Congressional Executive Commission on China, 'Chinese sources estimate there are roughly 3 million CSOs in China' (2009). The huge number and the increasing social impacts of CSOs in China have become hot topics for researchers in different fields. The importance of the two fields, Chinese Internet studies and Chinese CSOs studies, highlights the significance of the research on the intersection of the Internet and Chinese

☆ For the purpose of this research, Web2.0 style technologies refer to technologies which have Web2.0 characteristics. Some of the Web2.0 style technologies discussed in this research such as forum/BBS (Bulletin Board System) existed before the word Web2.0 began to be used as terminology by researchers and practitioners. For more detailed discussion about Web2.0 and its characteristics please see pages 5 and 7.

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[1] In general, CSO refers to two kinds of organizations in different academic literature: non-governmental and non-profit. Some Chinese official regulations, however, use another term for CSO, civil association. In this article. I use the term CSO to refer to all the three categories mentioned above.

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CSOs. Moreover, Web2.0[2] technologies and social media[3] have widely been considered as effective tools to facilitate social changes by journalists and CSO practitioners in Arab Spring (e.g. Hauslohner, 2011; Hagen, 2011; World Bank, 2011). In Chinese studies, issues such as what is the potential of CSOs' use of social media in China and whether CSOs' use of social media will become a widespread phenomenon in China have attracted increasing attention among researchers from various fields. To inquire into these issues, we need first answer one basic question: Whether, on the whole, China's CSOs use Web2.0 technologies, the technological foundation of social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Based on the nationwide survey of more than 500 CSOs in China conducted by by MIT New Media Action Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Institute of Knowledge Management at the University of Science and Technology of China from January 2009 to March 2009, the research presented herein provides the first set of data and the first quantitative analysis regarding the use of Web2.0 style technologies among Chinese CSOs. First, it attempts to answer the basic but crucial question proposed above: whether, on the whole, China's CSOs use Web2.0 style technologies, and how widely different Web2.0 style technologies have been adopted among China's CSOs. Before this research, because of lack of large sample data, media researchers even did not know, on the whole, whether China's CSOs use Web2.0 technologies. Based on the data from our 2009 nationwide survey, this research found that the adoption rate of most Web2.0 style technologies is above or near 50%. For example, 84.1% of the CSOs have used IM (Instant Messaging) and 70.3% have used video sharing website.[4] It shows that the use of Web2.0 style technologies and social media is likely to become a widespread phenomenon among Chinese CSOs. These data and findings highlight the significance of future research on the social effects of CSOs' use of social media in China. Second, this research attempts to answer two questions regarding the inequality in the use of Web2.0 technologies and social media among China's CSOs: whether there is a regional difference (East China/Central China/West China) in the adoption of Web2.0 style technologies; whether there is a difference in Web2.0 technologies adoption by financial resource (of CSOs); if yes, which group of CSOs are disadvantaged in term of Web2.0 technologies adoption. It is widely agreed that CSOs' ICT use have significant impacts on CSOs' capacity to get information, increase public awareness, recruit and mobilize volunteers and raise funds. Moreover, as we will discuss later in this section, the adoption of Web2.0 technology is about CSOs' capacity to have their voices heard by the public online. Thus, the study of the inequality in Web2.0 technology adoption will be very helpful to achieve a balanced development among CSOs from different regions and CSOs with different amounts of financial support. It will also help policymakers, international aid agencies and IT industries to evaluate whether an intervention (for example project and policy) to remedy the inequality is needed. This research found that there is a regional inequality in the adoption of Web2.0 technologies. CSOs in western China left behind in the use of all Web2.0 technologies.[5] Intervention to remedy the inequality is needed. Development agencies, foundations, and practitioners who wish to enhance Chinese CSOs' Internet capacity should give western China CSOs more priority.

Although the definition of Web2.0 is still open to discussion, some technologies or services have been widely accepted as typical Web2.0 style technologies including blogs (Blogger for example), video sharing sites (Youtube), social-networking sites (Facebook), and Wiki (Wikipedia). (e.g. Fine, 2007; Pascu, 2008; wikipedia, 2009) Many researchers and IT practitioners have argued that the use of Web2.0 technologies or Web2.0 services have great significance from different perspectives. (e.g. O'Reilly, 2005; Lessig, 2005; Richardson, 2006; West and West, 2009; Fine, 2007; Bruns, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) Kaplan and Haenlein argued that Web2.0 is a new way for users to utilize the Internet. In Web1.0 era, contents are published by content providers such as Encyclopedia Britannica Online; in Web2.0 era, contents are constantly created and modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative way. They argued that Web2.0 is the technology and ideology platform for the evolution of social media. (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) Richardson, among many other (e.g. Lessig, 2005; West and West, 2009; Thompson, 2008; Cifuentes et al., 2010) argued that the wide use of Web2.0 technologies represents a shift of the Internet from a read-only medium to a read/write Web for common users without IT expertise. (Richardson, 2006) They thought that because in the pre-Web2.0 era (or Web1.0 era), only users with IT expertise like coding can create web contents, for most common users (end-users), the Internet was a read-only medium. With the wide use of Web2.0 technologies such as blog, wiki and SNS, common users gained the capacity to create web contents (to write). Thus, the Internet became a read–write web for common users, which represents a change in the structure of the cyberspace that has significant impacts on online interactions among people. This research builds upon both Kaplan and Haenlein's and Richardson's understandings of Web2.0.

In the past two decades, many researchers have stressed the study of the development of Chinese CSOs and their social, political and cultural impacts on contemporary China. (e.g. Saich, 2000; Yang, 2003; Yu, 2002) Most of the researchers thought that, although facing political and regulation challenges and difficulties in fundraising, Chinese CSOs emerged in late 1980s and made rapid development in the past two decades. (e.g. Howell, 2007; Pei, 1998) The accurate number of Chinese CSOs, as mentioned earlier, is open to discussion, but the number should be quite large, from the officially reported 449 thousand to the rough estimate of 3 million. The political and regulation challenges Chinese CSOs face are mainly about the reg-

[2] Web2.0 refers to the second generation of the Internet that facilitates collaboration and sharing among users. Although the accurate definition of Web2.0 is open to discussion, some technologies or services have been widely accepted as typical Web2.0 technologies or Web2.0 services including blogs, video sharing sites, social-networking sites (Facebook for example), and wiki website (Wikipedia for example).

[3] Social media refers to "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

[4] For more detailed data of the adoption rate of different Web2.0 style technologies, please see Table 1 in the result section.

[5] For more detailed data of the regional inequality in the adoption of Web2.0 technologies, please see Table 8 in the Discussion Section.

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