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Who Are the Popular Bloggers in Mainland China?

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Abstract

A study was done of 165 of the most popular blogs from the 10 top blog servers on the three top online portals to find out the characteristics of the bloggers: who they were, where they lived and what subjects they are blogging on. Several special observations were made. First, many bloggers in China are not secretive but happy to identify themselves. Secondly, many are from an elite background and not grassroots, as might be deduced from writings on bloggers by outside organisations. Third, far from being the voices of opposition they are in close cooperatation with the mainstream media. Fourth, their blogging activities bear some resemblance to the work of devloping country journalists.

1. Background on mainland blogs

Blogs were first introduced into China in 2002 by Fang Xing Dong, the founder of Bokee.com, now the most popular blog server in China. The name comes from the Chinese characters '博客', which are the transliteration of "blog" and are pronounced "bokee". It means "knowledgeable persons"[1]. At that time, blogs were only known to a few people, mostly IT. They suddenly came to wide attention in June, 2003, when Lee Li, a 25-year-old woman with the net name "木子美" ("Mu Zi Mei"), began a blog in which she wrote in detail about her sex life and revealed the names of all her sexual partners. Both print and online media reported, in one way or another, feature stories of various types about "Mu Zi Mei" and her ground-breaking blog. This pushed blogs into the daily life of Chinese people.

In November 2004, FortuneAge.com, an Internet service consulting company, published the first non-blog-organised ranking list for all the Chinese blog servers, basing the data on the rankings by Alexa, Google, Baidu and Yahoo[2]. Since then, the FortuneAge.com list has been widely accepted as an important reference to evaluate the blog servers' influence and credibility.

Once they came to attention, blogs took off at a phenomenal rate. The 2005 annual report published by Qing Hua University found that by early that year there were around 16 million bloggers in Mainland China. With a total of 86 million netizens in the mainland, bloggers had developed into a 'mass' online group, said the report[3]. That number has grown even more since. According to an online survey by Baidu.com (the most popular Chinese search engine), there are now approximately 36.83 million blogs within Chinese-user world wide web: 9 per cent update their blogs every day, 35 per cent update their blogs 4--6 times a week and 29 per cent write blogs 1-3 times a week. Almost all these bloggers make use of the free services offered by blog servers, of which there are now 658 for Chinese users.

Since 2005, most blog servers have been publishing their own blogger ranking lists within their server according to the number of accumulated comments and click rates. Some of them even have several top ranking lists according to the accumulated number by month, by week or per 24 hours. They publish these ranking lists on the front page on their blog server sites. Bloggers who appear on the lists are held to be the hottest and most popular and are interviewed by many print media and invited to do off-line events organized or sponsored by the blog servers and online media. Such people have become "celebrity bloggers".

Taking the cue from this and working the other way round, Sina.com (the most popular Chinese online portal) and Bokee.com have begun to invite celebrities from different walks of life to become bloggers and established their blogs on their

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[1] http://oilia1106.blogchina.com/3772297.html
[2] http://www.anyp.cn/special/2005blog/index.aspx
[3] http://www.chinalabs.com/idea/20060118/index.htm

websites. In this way, a new trend, the "VIP blog", has come into being. Among these celebrities, Xu Jinglei, a Chinese movie star who talks mainly about her daily life, was at one point number one in California-based Technorati.com's "Top 100 Blogs" list of all blogs in the blogosphere sorted by the number of "unique links" or "most favorites" around the world.[4] China's "VIP blogs" not only receive very high click rates in the blogoshere but also enjoy huge influence beyond their blog readership through the VIPs' interaction with the national mainstream media. Since this set of blogs became established, it has become the hottest topic related to "blogs" in the Chinese mainstream media.

However, many other well-known bloggers dispute the view that these blogs are representative of the Chinese blogosphere. In these people's view, Xu Jinglei's blog is not in the normal image of Chinese bloggers. Though popular in China, Xu is by no means accepted by other popular bloggers in China such as "Meng Xiao She"[5] (the 2004 winner of best Chinese blog for "Dog Daily"),Wang Xiao Shan (the 2005 winner of best Chinese blog for "Massage Milk") and Anti,[6] a member of the Deutsche Welle International Weblog Awards committee.

Thus there is a dispute over who the "real" bloggers in China are. These produce the questions: Who are the most popular bloggers in China? What are their occupations? Where do they live and what are the content of their blogs? This preliminary study seeks to answer these questions to find out who most Chinese blog readers are reading.

2. Method

In order to get a representative view of the most popular blogs in China, the author conducted two tasks: searching from four different but well recognized sources in the Chinese blogosphere to find the popular bloggers and generate a reliable blogger list; and then examining the bloggers to classify them by occupation, location and blog content.

2.1 Searching for the popular bloggers
The ranking lists from the top 10 blog servers in China according to FortuneAge.com's 2005 report (See Table 1.1) were downloaded[7]. It was noted that two blog servers mentioned, Yculblog.com and blogdriver.com, had no ranking lists. Yculblog.com does not produce one because it considers ranking unfair to new bloggers.[8] In Blogdriver.com's case, it had merged with Bokee.com and so shared its new partners same ranking list.[9] In total, from these listings, 160 blog URLs were gathered. The list was weeded so that bloggers running two or even three blogs on

[4] http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs/
[5] http://news.xinhuanet.com/it/2006-04-30/content_4494409.htm
[6] http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2006-04-20/1516911780.shtml
[7] http://top.anyp.cn/content/2005-08-23/83438.aspx
[8] http://www.yculblog.com/faq.php#about_rank
[9] http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2005-01/07/content_2428048.htm

different servers were counted only once. This reduced the number, but more were added because, besides click-rate ranking, there were RRS lists, that is, subscriber lists. The blogs with the most RRS subscribers in China were found through the most popular RRS server, China Gougou.com[10] (see Table 1.2). Bloggers were also added from the winners of the first Chinese weblog Awards organized by Sina.com[11] and from a ranking list published by Sohu.com[12] (another of the three most popular online portals in China) which claimed has included all the Chinese most popular bloggers, including msn space users. Thus, the blogger lists in question has contained 165 bloggers.

2.2 Classifying and identifying the bloggers

According to the Blue Paper on Media Industry, written by the research center of media management at Qinghua University, most people blog about "their personal life, love, angst and inspirations. The pioneer blogger "Mu Zi Mei", who was so open about her life, also set a trend for releasing personal information in blogs so that people within a certain circle can recognize the blogger's identity. A pre-test of 80 bloggers randomly selected from the blog lists showed that nearly half – 37 bloggers – had personal profiles or contents showing their occupation and location off-line. Using the Google and Baidu search engines, the author also found out 12 bloggers who had been interviewed by print or online media. Their pictures were published along with the articles. With those who identities and details appeared, the author was able to set up an initial set of classifications: occupation, location and content. Within each, a set of sub-categories was identified. Within the category of occupation there were seven: IT, journalist, student/teacher, freelance writer, VIP, company staff (other than IT companies), and others. For location there were six categories: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou/Shenzhen, other cities in China, cities overseas, and others. Content was sorted into five aspects: personal life, body exposure, pornography, opinion exchange, and translation/updated information. In some cases, two or more categories may overlap in some way. For example, opinion exchanging may overlap with updated information but focus more on rumors, professional opinions and industry news, hot news gathered from websites and comments on daily news. Finally, the author comments on whether the blogs give personal contact information like cell phone number or email address.

3. Result

In examining the full sample, it was found that 62 per cent of bloggers could be identified by occupation. Of the total, 27 per cent are working in IT companies or IT-related industries, 16 per cent are journalists or doing media-related jobs, 11 per cent are college students or teachers, 8 per cent celebrities (most of whom became bloggers in the trend of "VIP blog"), and 5 per cent earn their living as freelance writers. The remaining 5 per cent who were identified turn out to be company staff, or to be more exact, mostly white collar workers (see Table 1.3)

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[10] http://www.gougou.com/
[11] http://tech.sina.com.cn/focus/blog_05/index.shtml
[12] http://bloghoo.sohu.com/blogcenter.html

As for the location, 56 per cent of the bloggers had information. Of the total, 27 per cent are living in Beijing, which is significantly high compared with those in other cities. 5% are residing in Shanghai, and 9% are dwelling in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. 10% are found staying in cities of other parts within China Mainland. And the last 15% are located overseas. (See Table 1.4)

On content, 48 per cent of the bloggers in Mainland China are opinion-exchange oriented. Some 24 per cent are observed to be   more willing to show their personal daily life online, while 17 per cent are keen on translation and information updating. Another 7 per cent are involved in using sexy pictures and videos of naked beautiful women, along with articles about sex to appeal eyeballs. Another 4 per cent are expose their privacy and body. Mu Mu, Mu Zi Mei and Liu Mang Yan all fall into this category (see Table 1.5). Also, 24 per cent of these popular bloggers put their contact information on the front page of their blog.

4. Analysis

The results above not only outline the picture of the most popular bloggers in China but also fins five special characteristics different from those of western bloggers.

4.1 Not anonymous
Over 50 per cent of China's most popular bloggers can be identified by their occupation and location, 24 per cent provide their contact information, and another 24 per cent are personal daily life oriented whose blogs show photos of their personal or private life and the real names of their colleagues and friends. Many bloggers proclaim that their family relatives are regular visitors to their blogs.

There are at least two reasons to account for this lack of anonymity. One is what can be called "the peacock effect". According to Xinhua net[13], approximately 50 per cent of Chinese netizens consider blogging a short cut to getting well-known soon or overnight. That's why blogger "Mu Mu" demonstrates a sexy dance regularly on her blog, and that's how "Liu Mang Yan" and "Sister Lotus", who are otherwise very ordinary people, have become entertainment stars through their blog activities within a short period of time. Another reason is the rapid development of columns in both online and print media in China since 2005. This development means thousands of part-time writers are needed to fill the space. Famous bloggers have been hired by mainstream media to be journalists or editors and to write their own columns. In order to be easily contacted by the media for such opportunities, many bloggers leave their contact information including cell-phone numbers, online message addresses (mostly msn and OICQ) and email addresses. Some bloggers who are good at flowery wording have become writers and published best sellers.

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[13] http://news.xinhuanet.com/it/2006-04/30/content_4494409.htm

4.2 Indifferent to politics

It seems rather contradictory that, although 27 per cent of the bloggers live in Beijing, the political centre of China, and 16 per cent are journalists, no one touches upon any topics about political news. Among the 167 ??? 175??? bloggers on the list, not a single one is considered a political blogger. Even some famous journalist bloggers who are considered highly professional in the circle never talk about ???social ?/? politicial??? news. They are also careful to use metaphors when expressing their opinions. Massage Milk and Dog Daily, both winners of the Deutsche Welle International Weblog Awards for Chinese journalist bloggers, show examples. Massage Milk's blogger is called "Dai San Ge Biao", which literally means "wearing three watches", but its pronunciation is close to "San Ge Dai Biao", whose literal meaning refers to "Three Represents", Chairman Jiang Ze Ming's contribution to the list of communist ideological buzzwords. Dog Daily focuses on gathering worldwide news about dogs, but this is an unstated reference to humans. This seems to be due to self-censorship by bloggers and blog servers. Journalist bloggers in particular have long been trained to be politically sensitive in news reporting. So there exists self-consciousness when talking about political issues. Political blogging activities may be considered harmful to bloggers' off-line career. Most servers' publishing systems have the function of proof-reading articles with certain sensitive words to be screened before being published automatically. Many bloggers say in their blogs that they have failed to update their blog at first and had to try several times, screening out what they thought might be "bothersome words". Webmasters have the right to inform the bloggers of that and ask them to moderate their blogs if their articles are considered to be sensitive or "harmful" to the blog server.

4.3 Opinion exchange and translation/updated information

About 48 per cent of the bloggers fall into the group of opinion exchangers. These are largely professional or industry-orientated. About 17 per cent have focused on translation and updated information. The perspective here looks very similar to the "developmental journalism", which is not very much interested in political issues but in news on science, technology, health, agriculture and other fields. It is most significant in the field of IT, and this is probably for two main reasons which can well account for the tradition of open discussion on the IT industry, self-consciousness of PR and advertising influence to the present industry news.

The first reason is that in today's China, as the significant percentage of journalists in the mainstream media is the group composed of arts degree holders, they lack systematic training in science, maths or statistics. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations frequently happen in stories on IT and finance. Many editors are now aware of this problem and have begun to invite experts in the relevant fields to write in-depth reports. For open discussion, IT experts simply copy their articles to blog so as to get feedbacks. The second reason is that PR and advertising activities are very much part of the media industry today. With a view to cutting the budget for

author's remuneration, some industry media use free-of-charge articles written by PR companies. This has caused great concern about the objectivity and impartiality inherent in the reporting. In order to reduce PR influence, some experts start to blog.

4.4 Lack of original news or of blog journalist behavior
Totally, 65 per cent of the blogs are information-oriented. but in practice most news gathered by the bloggers comes from the mainstream media. Many of them focus on interpreting current news. Few are able to produce original news or to provide exclusive information sources different from the mainstream media. There are hardly any blog journalist activities like breaking stories first or fact-checking news stories. For example, bloggers questioned CBS news' credibility over the memos purportedly alleging [what?] on September 9th.[14] All most bloggers do is forward or re-organize the mainstream media's reporting. This may be easily associated with the bloggers' occupation and location. As mentioned above, 41 per cent of the bloggers whose place of residence is known inhabit the three big cities: Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou/Shenzhen, where almost all the top leading mainstream media in China are located. Moreover, 16 per cent are working journalists.

It goes without saying that the competition among media in the above cities is extremely intense. For the sake of personal fame, the bloggers, especially journalist bloggers, no longer use blogs as thire first choice for first-hand exclusive news. More likely, they will choose to report the news source or write the news stories for the mainstream media for money or for better working opportunities. Many know what Massage Milk wrote on his blog: "I write 800 words on my blog; I get nothing! But if I give the same 800 words to a newspaper editor, I can get several hundred RMB. As the saying goes, nobody writes anything for nothing!"

5. Conclusion

In this article, the author gathered and analyzed the most popular bloggers in Mainland China and sought explanations for phenomena that are not found in blogging in the west. To explore further on this topic, the author suggests correlation research in this area be conducted to get more inferential results. And to get more accurate categorization on the blogs and to minimize any possible bias, the author suggests inviting a panel to evaluate each blog presented herein.

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[14] http://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/007760.php

Table 1.1. 2005 Top 10 ranking list of China's most popular and influence blog servers

名次	网站	网址
1	博客网	http://www.bokee.com/
2	DoNews	http://www.donews.com/
3	博易AnyP	http://www.anyp.cn/
4	中国博客	http://www.blogcn.com/
5	博客动力	http://www.blogdriver.com/
6	天涯博客	http://www.tianyablog.com/
7	博客大巴	http://www.blogbus.com/
8	中国软件	http://blog.csdn.net/
9	歪酷网	http://www.yculblog.com/
10	你的博客网	http://www.yourblog.org/

Table 1.2 ranking list of blogs with the most RRS subscribers in China

优秀种子排行

对牛乱弹琴 [4747]订阅 刘韧Blog [1588]订阅 王建硕 [1218]订阅

搜索引擎研究 [1191]订阅 思维的乐趣 [1068]订阅 新浪新闻 [1032]订阅

豆瓣最近评论 [939]订阅 华尔街日报 [921]订阅 按摩乳 [867]订阅

Post Show [783]订阅 抓拍城市 [768]订阅 老徐 [709]订阅

老白说真话|LaoBai's [706]订阅 横戈．home [568]订阅

Engadget Chinese [409]订阅 闾丘露薇 [249]订阅 犯贱报 [151]订阅

互联网，请记住我！[113]订阅 变态家族 [111]订阅 李承鹏体育评论

[90] 订阅
　　糗事百科 [70] 订阅　方舟子的BLOG [52] 订阅　bloghoo博粹中心 [45] 订阅
　　傻逼老愤青罗永浩 [40] 订阅　中学生"性家教"手记 [37] 订阅　吃心望想 [25] 订阅
　　梅子的写食日记 [20] 订阅　股票操盘手日志 [18] 订阅　如何活到 100 岁？ [13] 订阅
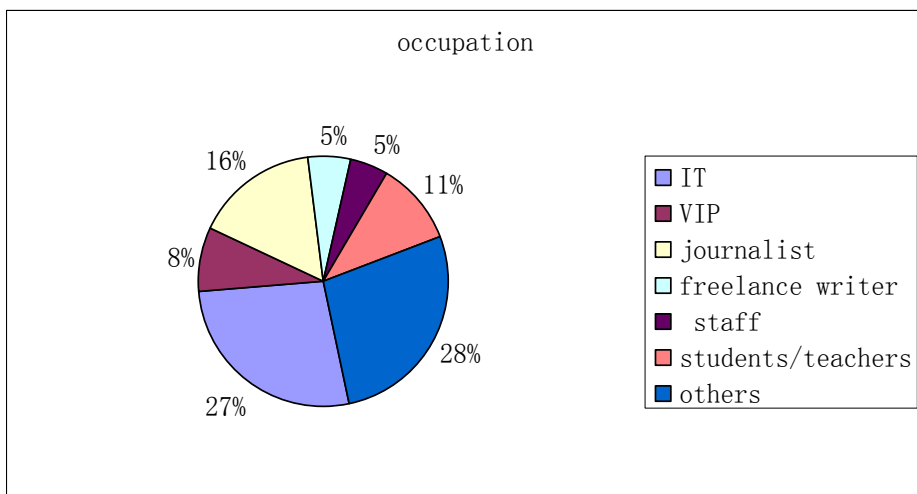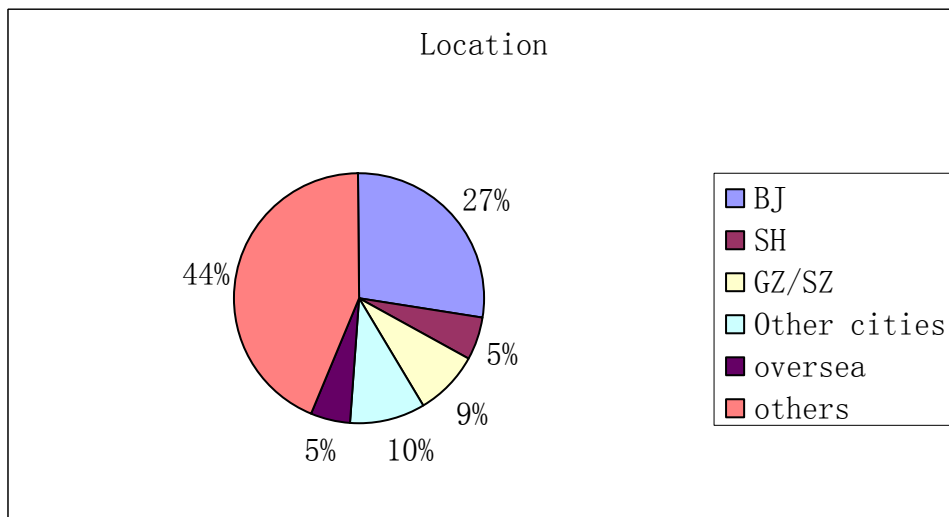　　TechWeb-IT社区 [9] 订阅　我是法医 [6] 订阅　关注三峡大坝新闻订阅 [5] 订阅

Table 1.3

occupation

- IT — 27%
- VIP — 8%
- journalist — 16%
- freelance writer — 5%
- staff — 5%
- students/teachers — 11%
- others — 28%

Table 1.4

Location

- BJ — 27%
- SH — 5%
- GZ/SZ — 9%
- Other cities — 10%
- oversea — 5%
- others — 44%

Table 1.5

content

- personal life
- body exposure
- pornography
- opinion exchanging
- translation/updated information

24%
4%
7%
48%
17%