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### **Propaganda, grassroots power, or online public sphere?**

**A study of the weblog for the NPC and the CPPCC session in China**

**Zheng Liu,**

MSc New Media, Information and Society

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# **Propaganda, Grassroots power, or Online Public Sphere?**

## **A study of the weblog for the NPC and the CPPCC session in China**

Zheng Liu

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate the impact of the Weblog for NPC (National People's Congress) and CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) in China since it was first set up in 2006. It is widely believed that the media in China is controlled by the state and has been criticized as propaganda. The establishment of the weblog for the two meetings (NPC and CPPCC) has created a paradox: as a new ICT application, it is argued to have the capacity to empower grassroots with the rights of free speech and political participation; on the other hand, this weblog is affiliated to the official media. To explain the new phenomenon in the communication field, a series of eight semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire survey were conducted. Two important theories, namely about the 'media power shift' and the 'public sphere' were referred to as the conceptual framework, providing criteria for the evaluation of this kind of blog.

Analysis of the results reveals that the weblog for the two meetings is still in an auxiliary position to the mainstream media in the information distribution. Similarly, it is still far from being the ideal model of public sphere, though in many aspects it appears closer than the traditional mass media. The blog for the two meetings is argued to have the technical potential to promote democracy and freedom of speech in the monolithically homogeneous communication environment in China; while at the same time, it is limited by several thorny issues like over-regulation, the digital divide, dependence on mass media, a low level of social morality and media literacy, etc. Nevertheless, most people hold an affirmative attitude towards its contribution to communication and democracy.

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## Introduction

As people have been ushered into the era of Web 2.0, the content of the Internet is increasing exponentially. According to *Time* magazine, the Person of the Year for 2006 was not a certain individual, but "You"—'For seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, *Time's* Person of the Year for 2006 is you.' The development of Web 2.0 applications in 2006 appears to indicate that it is an opportunity to build a new way of communication, not great man to great man, but citizen to citizen.

The weblog, sometimes simply known as "blog", has existed since 2002 in Chinese cyberspace. Compared with other Web 2.0 applications (e.g. SNS, RSS, Wiki), the blog has the longest history and greatest influence. Many Chinese citizens start to familiarize the concept of "Web 2.0" through blogs. According to a professional IT consulting organization in China named "CCID" (<http://www.ccidconsulting.com/>), the total number of Chinese bloggers in 2006 reached 60 million. In fact, some Chinese governmental officers have started blog writing for public affairs much earlier, but it was not until March 2006 that the weblogs with a clear political purpose appeared. The appearance of a weblog for the NPC and CPPCC during the session attracted many people's attention. As an offspring of the marriage between new media technology and politics, the influence of the weblog for the NPC and CPPCC has gone beyond cyberspace. Besides, these blogs are written by deputies of the NPC and CPPCC, and set up by some mainstream media like *Renmin Net* ([www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn)) and *Xinhua Net* (<http://www.xinhuanet.com>). Therefore, they can be regarded as quasi-official media. Along with the penetration of public opinion on the Internet, the quasi-official weblog during this special period was first set up for the guidance of public opinion on the Internet. At the same time, this new communication model established an effective and direct channel between the masses and decision-makers due to its technological advantages.

From a broader perspective, the weblog for the NPC and CPPCC should also include the blogs of journalists who report on the session, and the mass netizens who participate in the discussion of the session.

There are two major reasons why such weblogs are established: first as can be perceived, is to promote democracy by conferring the netizens the opportunity to communicate directly with the decision-makers. From the perspective of historical materialism, the masses are the creators of history. But for a long time, the mass media organizations (TV, radio and newspapers) were thought to be the stage of the ruling class or social elite. The articles in the mass media are mostly written by professional journalists or writers. The heroes and heroines in the news are politicians, sports stars and famous actors. The media is de facto controlled either by the state or big corporations. Even the Internet could not be seen as the media for grassroots in its early stage, because the traditional portal websites also require professional reporters, editors and technicians with relevant knowledge and experience. However, in the Web 2.0 era, the new ICT technology has facilitated the masses to communicate more conveniently. The boundaries between the three groups—public figures, reporters, and the audience—has been blurred.

Second, the weblog is also expected to guide public opinion on the Internet. Since 2003, public opinion generated from the Internet has exerted great influence over societal development in China. For instance, during the SARS epidemic, a doctor named Jiang Yanyong disclosed the severe situation of SARS in the Canton province in China on a BBS, and pointed out that the statistics from the Ministry of Health were false. Then the power of public opinion evolved dramatically, and finally the Minister was dismissed. This event is regarded as a victory for the grassroots. Similar affairs are now happening very frequently in China. The topics are concentrated on on-going heated issues, the dark sides of society, inequality, and the negative effects of some emergencies. And public opinion usually leans to one side. Though the new

ICT technology has facilitated democracy and free speech, it could also help the mob rule come into being because the netizens need not take responsibility for their speech. The spread of rumours on the Internet can result in quite bad effects, or lead to unnecessary costs. The weblog about the NPC and CPPCC is expected to act as a guide for the public opinion in Chinese cyberspace.

This dissertation aims to look at the characteristics and impacts of weblogs for the two meetings (NPC and CPPCC). It borrows several theories from media study, namely Public Sphere and Media Power Shift, to examine how this special kind of blog can contribute to societal development. Then the study draws on a series of qualitative interviews with different groups of people to gain their opinion on the impact of it. After that, self-administered questionnaires are conducted to investigate the grassroots attitudes towards this new kind of communication model, and to check the reliability of the interviewer's answers. The case is from the blog of *Renmin Net* ([http://blog.people.com.cn/blog/c/2c\\_2007](http://blog.people.com.cn/blog/c/2c_2007)).

## **Part One: The introduction of the “two meetings”—NPC and CPPCC**

### **NPC:**

National People's Congress (Quánguó Rénmín Dàibiǎo Dàhuì; literally "Pan-National Congress of the People's Representatives"), abbreviated to NPC, is the highest state body in the People's Republic of China. Although the membership of the NPC is still largely determined by the Communist Party of China, since the early 1990s it has moved away from its previous role as a symbolic but powerless rubber-stamp legislature, and has become a forum for mediating policy differences between different parts of the Party and the government. For the NPC to defeat a proposal put before them is a rare, but not non-existent event. Delegates to the NPC are elected for five-year terms via a multi-tiered representative electoral system. Delegates are elected by the provincial people's congresses, who in turn are elected by lower-level congresses, and so on through a series of tiers to the local people's congresses which are directly elected by the electorate. One such mechanism is the limit on the number of candidates in proportion to the number of seats available. This ratio increases for each lower level of people's congresses, until the village level, the lowest level, where there is no limit on the number of candidates for each seat. At the national level, about 3,000 delegates are elected to take part in the annual session in March.

### **CPPCC:**

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Zhōngguó Rénmín Zhèngzhì Xiéshāng Huìyì), abbreviated to CPPCC, is a political advisory body in the People's Republic of China. The organization consists of both Party members and non-Party members, who discuss Chinese political principles and occasionally create new government organizations. The members are chosen by the Communist Party of China, but are from a somewhat broader range of people than normally chosen for

government office. In particular, the CPPCC contains members from the United Front parties allied with the CPC and non-Party members. The CPPCC typically holds an annual meeting at the same time as the plenary sessions of the NPC. The NPC consists of about 3,000 delegates and meets for about two weeks each year at the same time as the [Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference](#), usually in the spring. The combined sessions have been known as the "two meetings".

### **The development of the weblog for the two meetings:**

The first weblog about the sessions was set up by a delegate of the NPC from Chongqing named Cheng Yiju. The blog ([cqchengyiju.blog.sohu.com](http://cqchengyiju.blog.sohu.com)) was set up in February 2006, several days before the conferences. It should be noted here that, though the blog is about the two meetings, it is a personal blog, which is different from the blogs particularly designed for the two meetings.

In March 2006, during the NPC and CPPCC session, *Renmin Net* started the blog for the two meetings, which was similar to a column in the newspaper. There were four delegates of the NPC and 12 delegates of the CPPCC writing the blog to introduce the issues discussed at the session, to explain their proposals, and to respond to netizens' feedbacks. The weblog has been praised and welcomed by the masses. During session time, over 100,000 people would read the web page every day. In the following year, 18 delegates of the NPC and 50 delegates of the CPPCC joined this group.

Blog in the mass communication context is the information game between personal discourse and public discourse. Different from traditional media, the blog is an open, dynamic text. Interactivity and hypertext is the dynamic feature of the blog. The blog for the two meetings has a clear purpose and expectations, thus the concerns of these blogs would be to lean to public discourse. But the delegates can express their



viewpoints from a subjective perspective, and the grassroots can communicate with them directly.

Internet links are the technical way to approach the hypertext of a blog. In some conditions, a blog is a process of a two-step flow of communication. The owner of the blog is made the opinion leader who shows the communication strategy of strong desired narration.

Another reason why the blogs for the two meetings received high praise could be attributed to the support of the official media. For instance, *Renmin Net* invited the delegates to write the articles for the blog. The design of the web page, editing work and updating speed were also satisfied. Every day, a delegate's article would be put as the headline, and he/she would be the guest for real-time online communication with the netizens. Another important factor is the reputation and reliability of the official media.

All in all, the success and popularity of the blogs for the two meetings is associated with the changing societal environment, and people's increasing will to participate in democratic politics. The blogs for the two meetings could be seen as the outcome of the development.

## **Part Two: Theoretical Background**

### **Internet and media power shift:**

It is usually believed that in the era of mass media, people are bombarded with huge amounts of information from a global media network; however, most of the information is finely meshed. But nowadays, the rapid development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has precipitated a momentum for revolutionary change in society and people's lives. The new media, especially the Internet, appears to be able to enable everyone to become the producer. The technological advantages that the Internet enables suggest that it may constitute a direct challenge to the mass media. As Pavlik (2001: 3) notes, "the Internet not only embraces all the capabilities of the older media (text, images, graphics, animation, audio, video, real-time delivery) but offers a broad spectrum of new capabilities, including interactivity, on-demand access, user control, and customization".

The global reach and high speed of interpersonal communication favoured by the Internet have also attracted many researchers' attention. Several scholars have suggested that the Internet could help groups internally and coordinate their work (Castells 2001, Rheingold 2000). And it is also argued that the Internet offers self-empowerment possibilities for the masses (Atton 2001).

Furthermore, the new ICT applications have been seen as the carriers of social change, and the improvement of democracy. It is also optimistically predicted by someone that the Internet would almost undoubtedly boost the political participation in repressed nations, and therefore pave the way to the democracy. Coleman (2003) considers the Internet as possessing the potential to set up a platform for democratic engagement and deliberation that is more accessible, more interactive, socially inclusive and unconstrained by time and space.

Media are seen as the key element in sustaining a dominant order under the dominant model. Media organizations are likely to be owned or controlled by a small number of powerful interests and to be similar in type and purpose. The social elites use propaganda to reinforce and legitimate the prevailing structure of power. Thus, a limited and undifferentiated view of the world is usually disseminated. (McQuail, 2005) With the increasing application of Internet, new ICT technology, especially Internet, is hoped to limit the capability of the dominant ideology to dominate. And it may act as the driving force for transferring the dominant media model to the pluralist model. Some researchers have argued that if the potential of the Internet is realized, it would be promising to create an efficient and participative space for democratic politics. (Toffler, 1980) Several scholars also argue that the advanced technological properties of the Internet may lead to a paradigm shift in media power which contributes to the development of society, especially in democracy terms. (Garry 1994; Park 2001; Rappaport 2002).

By contrast to the "cyber-optimists", some "cyber-sceptics" have always been doubted whether the Internet is able to measurably improve the health of mass media and democracy by encouraging citizen engagement, participation in public affairs. They argue that those optimistic envisions amount to technological determinism. The optimistic vision is problematic because it simplifies the relationship between technology and society. Thus, from this perspective, to explore whether the Internet would lead to the media power shift, it is necessary to take into account not only the technological feasibility but also the social context around it, because technology cannot "escape the operation of various laws of social life. (McQuail 2000: 138) "According to the advocates of SCOT (Social Construction of Technology), technologies are the result of social practices, and technology innovation and diffusion are complex social processes resulting from the negotiation and struggles among different actors: industries, designers, policy makers and users, among others (Winner, 1993; Wyatt et al, 2000: 10). Focusing on the communication area, it is understandable that the power shift from mass media to

new media depend on the new media's penetration, social settings, people's adoption of technology, and their patterns of use, etc.

From a historical perspective, the hopes aroused by new media are based on a fantasy constructed around new ICTs. It is hoped that the communication innovation will place a powerful means of mass communication in the hands of the people and lead to the democratization of the media (Curran, 2003). But this hope has always been disappointed for the reason that new technology has not fundamentally changed the underlying economic factors that enable large media organizations to maintain their dominance (Garnham, 1990; Graham and Davies, 1998; Curran and Seaton, 2003).

### **Weblogs:**

Weblog, or simpler as Blog, is a form of personal journalism that is self published. Blogs are characterized by the communicative tone. Drezner and Farrell (2004) regard the blog as "an effective and decentralized website which many oppositionists have discovered as platforms for registering their dissent, their existence, or general malcontent". Similarly, according to Technorati, the power of blog is that "they allow millions of people to easily publish their ideas, and millions more to comment on them. Blogs are a fluid, dynamic medium, more akin to a conversation rather than library." Through turning the passive consumers to active participators, the weblog let everyone have a voice.

As a new ICT application, weblog has demonstrated its capacity to help people self-express and share information in recent years. Besides, the blogs are relatively easy to set up and maintain for ordinary Internet users (not only for skilled users). Therefore, the power to distribute information becomes more democratic. For instance, in 1998, the scandal of President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky was first disclosed by Matt Drudge who bypassed the mainstream mass media via his blog

(*Drudge Report Online*). Kahn and Kellner (2004: 91) illustrate the relationship between mainstream media and personal blogs, and they draw the conclusion that the emergence of news-related blogs has revolutionized journalism. They claim that blogs "represent the next evolution of web-based experience", and therefore go beyond what the Internet has meant for people to date.

Apart from being a challenge, the blogs also demonstrated that they could be the information resource for the mainstream media. Rosenberg (2003) claims that many journalists "consider blogs a trustworthy source of information and story ideas."

There are also some critiques towards blogs: Hiler (2002) explains that "most bloggers are more like Columnists than capital-J Journalists.". Macdonald (2003) also underscores that it is inappropriate to equate blogging with journalism for the reason that "journalism involves actually interviewing people, doing thorough background research on a subject, presenting a rounded and dispassionate overview, and reasoning through substantive arguments. These activities are not characteristic of weblog.". Andrews (2003) holds same opinion: "Bloggers, in general, know little about independent verification of information and data. They lack the tools and experience for in-depth research. They don't know fact check." Individual weblogs may attract large audiences briefly, but there is no obvious evidence to date that they are totally able to challenge well-resourced news outlets in the long run. They do, at least today, merely act as a source of alternative views for the mainstream media as other alternative media do. However, it should be noted that most researchers do admit the blogs' influence on mass media, as Blankenhorn (2005) claimed that "weblog is not journalism but they are changing it."

Most blogs are usually grassroots-oriented. According to Gillmor (2004) , blogs are a form of democratic grass roots journalism, integrating producers, readers, listeners and viewers, into a multi-way process. The mass people can use the blogs to express incomplete thoughts, to seek confirmation, refutation or critique of them. (Coleman,

2005) Especially under the dominant media model, the “monolithic” media cannot provide the same competition and pluralism of ideas as can be found in grassroots journalism of blogs. (Ito, 2004)

### **Public Sphere:**

The public sphere is a notion that has been created and theorized by the German Scholar, Jürgen Habermas, in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989; originally published in 1962). The book provides both the normative model of the public sphere and the historical account of its alleged realization by the bourgeois public sphere as developed in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th century, and its subsequent degradation in the 20th century.

For Habermas (1974) ‘the public sphere is a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as a bearer of public opinion’. Independent of other spheres, such as the state and the market, it enables citizens to counter intrusion of the market and influence of the state. It holds the authorities accountable for public opinion which differs from mere opinion. It requires free, critical, and open debate on matters of public rather than private interest where rational arguments win over social status depending on both “quality of discourse” and “quantity of participation” (Calhoun 1992).

The concept of public sphere as expressed by Habermas (1989) existed in its true sense in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th century. The coffee houses in London and the salons in France became the centres of art and literary criticism at this time, which gradually widened to include the political and societal disputes as matters of discussion. It not only paved a forum for self-expression, but also became a platform for airing one’s opinions and agendas for public discussion.

The development of a capitalistic economy paved the way for a new kind of public sphere with its changed institutional forms of political power. With the emergence of civil society and modern government, privatized economic relations were brought under the area of public authority. The private realm comprised both public economic relations and private intimate relations, and to negotiate between these two there emerged a new bourgeois public sphere. It comprised groups of individuals who would debate and discuss and regulate civil society through constructive criticism. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere is 'a realm of private individuals assembled into a public body who as citizens transmit the needs of bourgeois society to the state, in order to, ideally, transform political into "rational" authority within the medium of this public sphere'.

As Habermas argues, in due course, this sphere of rational and universalistic politics, free from both the economy and the state, was demolished by the same force that initially established it. The growth of a capitalistic economy had largely transformed the social preconditions of the bourgeois public sphere. The public sphere has become more inclusive, and thus lost the bourgeois coherence and a relatively high standard of education, which is described by Habermas as "refeudalisation" by the state and market. In the welfare state, where the concentration increasingly focused on capital and the big media conglomerates increasingly control public opinion and manipulate the state, the public sphere has become the place for bargaining over private interests, rather than a rational consensus in the public interest. Political parties and social organizations now act in the "political public sphere" with weaker critical function, plebiscitary support from the masses, and thus create a climate of "non-public opinion".

Habermas has always been critical of mass media controlled by corporate conglomerates, which is consistent with his Frankfurt school background and work with Adorno and Horkheimer. As Habermas (1974) claimed, 'In the transition from the literary journalism of private individuals to the public services of mass media the

public sphere was transformed by the influx of private interests'; 'from the journalism of conviction to one of commerce'. The modern means of mass communication through their transnational agents has brought the range of the public sphere to the international arena. For the modern media corporations like CNN and the BBC, issues range from the most local culture-specific contexts to the global political arena transcending national boundaries. But the true spirit of the public sphere in the era of the mass media is debatable due to the obvious political and economic stakes behind them. In addition, powerful elites control the means of mass communication and this leads to an engineered consent rather than rational consensus; which citizen is reduced to a spectator or passive consumer without the ability of critical thinking. Mass-media consumption generates a public sphere "in appearance only" and serves as "tranquillizing substitute for action" (Habermas 1989). Along Habermasian lines, several researchers like Tuchman, Lang, Thompson and Rutherford hold similar views.

Now the media extends to the Internet, and this new extension challenges thoughts in the public sphere. The Habermasian ideal of the public sphere can be linked to the early utopian visions of Internet technology as a solution for contemporary crises of declining citizens' participation and democratic legitimacy (Rheingold 1993).

Some scholars have provided arguments supporting the online public sphere potential. Sparks (2001) analyses the online anonymity and thus the removal of social exclusions based on age, gender, race, etc., low entry barriers and thus universal access, interactivity, and the Internet's searchable architecture that ensures more and more diverse information. Thornton (2002) adds the online possibility for collective production of content by the users, and the longevity of such content that creates a "repository of the evolving discussion". And Chadwick (2006) analyses the e-democracy potential (the development of online political community networks, attempts by governments to involve citizens in online policy-making) and the e-



mobilization potential (use of the Internet by interest groups and social movements for recruitment, organization and campaigning).

In contrast, there are also some contradicting arguments: the digital divide between the e-literate and the masses has not been solved; further, the Internet is restricted to "the motivated" few (Dahlgren 2005); and most of the Internet is taken up by commercial projects, the top-down structures of e-government, the online version of mainstream media, and entertainment.

Different from traditional media, the political weblogs, specifically, the weblog for the two meetings, appear to be closer to the ideal public sphere. It encourages the masses to participate in public affairs, and it has escaped the control of the big media conglomerates to some extent. The weblog has created a new form of online public sphere. Compared with the bourgeois public sphere, the new online public sphere comprises both the social elite and the masses. Power could come into being in a bottom-up manner, not only top-down. Facing the fact that the public sphere in the mass-media era has been weakened by the mass media itself, the blog has provided a conducive complement.

### **Conceptual framework:**

Why study the weblog of the CPC and NPPCC? In a country such as China where the political communication environment is relatively monolithically homogeneous, weblog as a decentralized, interactive, free and low-entry-level medium has been hailed as the impetus to foster a pluralist media model and promote the democracy. Weblogs offer a platform for communication and deliberation between different social groups.

The relevant literature brings two theories: "power shift from mass media to new media", and "public sphere". It should be noted that both of the two theories are

under contest and not fulfilled in practice yet. The blog for the two meetings is in some ways relevant to the two issues. And people have high expectations for its future development. Thus, these two theories were employed as the conceptual framework for this research, to figure out the properties and impact of the blog for the two meetings. The literature provides a theoretical orientation that is helpful for understanding the significance of the blog for the two meetings in terms of media power shift and public sphere; and reveals the criteria that the blog has or has not achieved. In order to gain insight into the new communication model, empirical study into its origin, influence and characteristics was conducted.

### **Research Questions :**

This dissertation therefore asks:

- 1) What are people's viewpoints regarding the significance of the weblog for the two meetings, in terms of communication and democratic politics?
- 2) Do the blogs for the two meetings influence the mainstream media in China? Is this kind of blog still the platform for the grassroots?
- 3) In what aspects is this kind of weblog close to the ideal public sphere?

### **Methodology:**

#### a) Research strategy

The research strategy for the relevant study is oriented by the several theories that have been reviewed in the last chapter. This purpose justifies the selection of research methods. Several approaches—interview, questionnaire and content analysis—were considered at the beginning of the study. However, the method of content analysis is considered to be impractical. Though the content of weblog is

text-based and the interactions that take place are mediated by text entries, content analysis does not necessarily explore in-depth information, and some situational variables might be easily neglected. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight people from different groups, and then online questionnaires were created and delivered to a sample of 400 people.

#### b) Semi-structured interview

##### *Why semi-structured interview?:*

Generally speaking, the semi-structured interview is the most commonly used interview technique to probe respondents' opinions (Flick 1998). It provides more information than the surveyor might otherwise collect. This approach is employed for the following reasons:

First and foremost, through interviewing, the researcher can confirm what is already known. And it is also an opportunity for learning. The information gained from semi-structured interviews will provide not only the answers, but also the reasons for the answers. The interviewees are given the opportunity to make arguments, rather than answer the questions routinely. In particular, the weblog for the two meetings is a new kind of communication model in which many details need to be examined, and many surprising findings could come out. Furthermore, in a semi-structured interview, the respondents' responses and behaviour can be observed. Last but not least, the individual interview is considered to be more suitable than a focus group discussion because this allowed for a more free, open and informal discussion as it encourages the interviewees to discuss topics which are of particular relevance to them personally. Thus, they are probably more willing to talk from their standpoints and in their own terms.

##### *Sampling:*

The weblog is a set of many sub-blogs of three major categories: deputies, journalists and netizens. As different roles can be found in this kind of weblog, several groups of people are identified. Interviewees included the chief editor of the blog ([http://blog.people.com.cn/blog/c/2c\\_2007](http://blog.people.com.cn/blog/c/2c_2007)) who is in charge of it, four journalists and three ordinary netizens who have individual sub-blogs (seen as the link on the webpage). The journalists were chosen from the list based on a random process. As for the netizens, a group of people were chosen randomly, but three of them who lived in Beijing were finally selected due to the geographical distance.

The reason for choosing the chief editor who is in charge is that he is the very person who knows this blog best (e.g. the motive and process for establishing this blog, the maintaining work, and the extent of its popularity). Journalists were chosen for their perspectives as traditional media professionals. And the netizens' viewpoints are also a crucial part for examining the issue.

#### *Topic Guide:*

Because there were three groups of people, three versions of the topic guide were made, with different focuses. For the chief editor, there are some particular questions in the topic guide focusing on the purpose of the establishment, how it works, its influence, etc; for the journalists, the comparison between old and new media was asked; and for the Internet users, the questions were more related to their practical lives. But the major parts of these three versions are same.

To make the respondents comfortable, the questions were arranged from easy to hard. As Gaskell said, a good topic guide should 'create an easy and comfortable framework for a discussion, providing a logical and plausible progression through the issues in focus' (2000:40). In practice, the respondents were inclined to improvise, give examples from their own experience and correlate different issues. Therefore, the topic guide had to be adjusted frequently.

*Interview Process:*

All the interviews were face-to-face and private. They all took place in Beijing during July 2007. The conversations were recorded with their permission, and later transcribed into Chinese. Some relevant segments were translated into English (Appendix 2). Notes were also taken during the interview. As mentioned, the interviews were semi-structured, thus a topic guide was prepared but the question order was not strictly followed. Sometimes when issues were worth further exploration, some follow-up questions were improvised. The duration of the interviews varied from 40 to 60 minutes except one interviewee for whom the interview only lasted 26 minutes.

c) Self-administered questionnaire

*Why questionnaire?*

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, self-administered questionnaires were made and delivered to complement and further explore the analysis of the interviews. Questionnaires are a good complement to face-to-face interviews because they are less intrusive and they deal better with interviewer bias (Russell 2000:232). As mentioned, one of the aims of this study is to acquire basic information of the Internet users' viewpoints about the blogs for the two meetings and the status of their usage. For such a big group, questionnaires have some advantages over personal interviews in that they are cheap, do not require as much effort, and have standardized answers which make it simple for compiling and analysis of data. Another function of this questionnaire is to check the reliability of the interviewees' answers.

*In designing the questionnaire:*

The questionnaire adopts a grading method to figure out the respondents' attitudes towards different aspects of the weblog for the two meetings. For the questions, the marking scale is from one to five, reflecting the extent to which the netizens agree or

disagree with the statements. As the survey is focused on a group of people regarding their thinking and attitudes, a cross-sectional questionnaire survey is adopted.

Inevitably, the self-administered questionnaire itself had some intrinsic weak points. Compared to qualitative interviews, the questionnaire survey 'cannot get in-depth information and probe people's view' (Fink and Kosecoff 1985:13).

There are two types of question in designing the questionnaire: the closed-ended and the open-ended question. The closed-ended question is usually a forced-choice one in which several alternative answers are provided, while an open-ended question is one for which respondents can formulate and organize their own answers. In this questionnaire, taking into account the response rate, most questions are closed-ended. The major problem is that 'on some issues they can create false opinions either by giving an insufficient range of alternatives from which to choose or by promoting people with "acceptable" answers. Further, the forced-choice approach is not very good at taking into account people's qualifiers to the answers they tick' (Vaus de 1985). Therefore, three qualitative interviews for the netizens were conducted as a supplement to get in-depth information.

*In delivering the questionnaire:*

After designing the questionnaire, how to deliver the questionnaire and gather the data becomes a major concern. Because this survey is for netizens, an online questionnaire is available. Thus, an online questionnaire is made on a website ([www.my3q.com](http://www.my3q.com)) which is able to generate a link for the free online questionnaire, and help people gather the data. The link of the made questionnaire and the survey results is as follows: <http://www.my3q.com/go.php?url=tousan/38258>.

The questionnaires are delivered via a short-messages service in the online forum. (Usually, the user of these online forums would have a small-size message inbox

which can receive the short message.) In consideration of respondent's worrying about the safety issue, the link to the online questionnaire is included in the message, not as an attachment.

*Sampling:*

In the survey, a sample of 400 Chinese Internet users was randomly selected, who have a user name in several of the most famous online forums where public opinion in Chinese cyberspace usually generates and evolves. The forums are: [www.tianya.cn](http://www.tianya.cn), [www.mop.com](http://www.mop.com), [www.xici.net](http://www.xici.net), and [club.china.com](http://club.china.com). These websites are famous because their online forums are the places where hot topics are discussed and public opinions are formed; not because they are good at news reporting. Besides, these online forums or BBS have no official media background.

Admittedly, the people who have user names in the online forum do not qualify for the concept of "Netizens". However, these users are closer to the expected people by whom the "power of grassroots" is formed. Thus, the sample is expected to be more representative than for general netizens.

During the selection, a table of random numbers was referenced. The process is as follows: 1. Go the web page for user name list; 2. Select respondents according to the random number. Here is a sequence of random numbers: 09 42 47 64 85 79 34 23...

In the sample selection, the difference of gender, education level, vocation, etc. are not taken into account. The advantage of systematic sampling is that it can generalize the findings to the whole group. But it is crucial to 'ensure that there is no inherent ordering of the sampling frame, since this may bias the resulting sample' (Bryman 2001:92).

*Data:*

The data were gathered through direct submission to the website. Until 13 July (three weeks after delivery), 102 copies of effective responses had been received. The simple data analysis can also be conducted in the website. The results for the questionnaire can be found in the following links:

- <http://www.my3q.com/view/viewSummary.phtml?questid=181509>
- <http://www.my3q.com/view/viewSummary.phtml?intStart=20&questid=181509>

The first link is for the results of the first 20 questions, and the second is for the last 12 questions. The results can be seen by pie chart, bar chart and line chart. The original questionnaire was Chinese, and an English translation has been included in the appendices.



## **Part Four: Results and Interpretation**

In the study, the analysis of the interviews helped to design the questionnaire, and the analysis of the questionnaire has in turn helped to confirm and examine what the interviewees claimed. In the study, eight people were deliberately chosen to represent three groups of people. Therefore, some qualitative conclusions had to be made on the basis of the statements of three or four interviewees. But the questionnaire to some extent has broadened the basis.

### **Profiles of interviewees:**

- Interviewee A, aged 39, is the chief editor of the “Blog for the two meetings” of *Renmin Net*. He is one of the creators and maintainers of this blog. He is probably the person who knows this blog best.
- Interviewee B, aged 37, is a journalist from *People’s Daily*, the most influential newspaper with an official background. He has his own sub-blog in the mentioned blog, and keeps writing articles about public affairs almost on a daily basis.
- Interviewee C and D, aged 34 and 29, are both female journalists from the Xinhua News Agency, the official media organization of the Chinese government. They both have their own sub-blogs.
- Interviewee E, aged 40, is a journalist from *The Beijing News* which is a newly established influential newspaper, with no official background. He also has the sub-blog.

- Interviewee F, aged 45, is an active user in the mentioned blog, who likes to make comments or participate in the discussion, as can be detected by the discussion board. He is a civil servant and works in the medical sector.
- Interviewee G, aged 24, is a female graduate student who is keen on reading this blog, but never makes response or write articles in the blog.
- Interviewee H, aged 31, is an IT practitioner who has made comments, but rather sporadically.

As it stands, the interviewees for this study have something in common: they are familiar with this blog. And, surprisingly, they are all found to have a high education level and relatively high social status.

### **Why establish this blog? And what is peoples' attitude?**

Interviewee A, as the chief editor of this blog, has indicated that this blog was the response of mainstream media when they were facing the challenge of the rapid spread of new media applications. By and large, the blog is one of the new media applications. But there is particularity of the blog for the two meetings. As interviewee A said: "Each organization or person can utilize the new media technology, so it is with the mass media. I think the blog is the amalgamation of the mainstream media's brand effect and the new media's technological advantages."

In the questionnaire survey, 60 out of the 102 (58.8%) respondents thought it similar to the mainstream media, while 18 respondents (17.6%) thought it as different. Correspondingly, only 15 respondents (14.7%) supported that it was a challenge to the traditional mass media. However, most respondents (68.6%) believed the blog could be a very conducive complement to the mainstream media. Interviewee A claimed the blog for the two meetings a big success because it

attracted at least 100,000 netizens everyday. Interviewee C and E hold quite similar viewpoints with interviewee A, and applauded the blog as well.

Interestingly, Interviewee F held a different opinion with interviewee A. He was convinced that the establishment of this blog is not a "top-down" decision made by officials, but the only choice when they were confronted with the "bottom-up" power of the fast growing blogosphere in China. What they had done was merely not "turning back the trend" but "dancing with it", no matter willing or not.

Interviewee B also tried to explain the popularity of the blog, but his major concern was on democratic politics, rather than its impact in mass communication. He was critical of the media model in China, and pointed out that was "a big disadvantage in developing democracy." As a professional journalist for the official newspaper, he said he was tired of the "only one voice": "It is quite natural that China is problematic as it is that big. I am not saying the decision by most people is the right one, but the point is that different voices can be heard."

### **Is there a media power shift?**

a) Pro's:

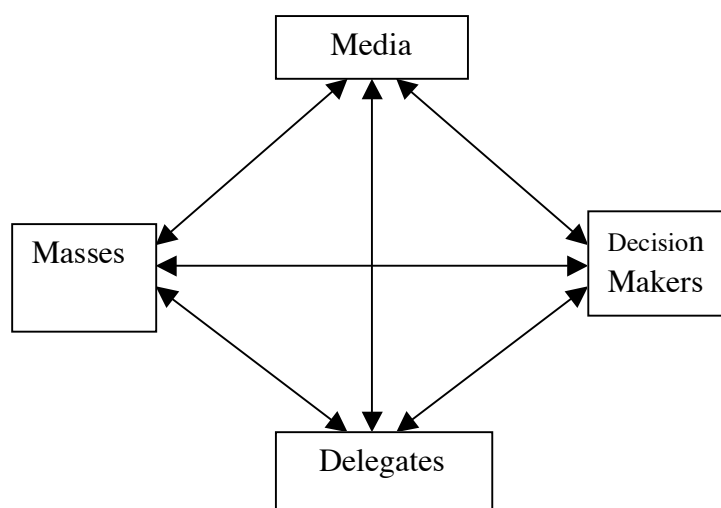
From the perspective of political communication, there are four participators in the information distribution of the two meetings: decision-makers, delegates, the masses and media professionals. Thus, the model of the past information distribution during the NPC and CPPCC sessions is as follows:

- 1) masses→media→decision-makers
- 2) masses→media→delegates→decision-makers

Mark Poster claims in his book *The Second Media Age* that, in the new media era, the new communication relationship would be 'bidirectional, decentralized and heterogeneous' (Poster 1995). Thus, in the new model, free communication and decentralization are its most distinct character.

Therefore, the four participators can communicate with each other directly, as claimed by interviewee A. The new model can be seen as:

**Figure 1**



In this model, there are two additional ways:

3) masses→decision-makers

4) masses→delegates→decision-makers

Decentralization has weakened the control of the “gatekeeper” in traditional mass media, and all the interviewees favour the fact that it is positive for the transition process from the dominant media model to the pluralism model. Interviewee B compared the “agenda-setting” in different eras. In the past, the agenda-setting of the media and government would go first, and form a dominant opinion. The agenda-setting of the masses would be strongly affected by the media or

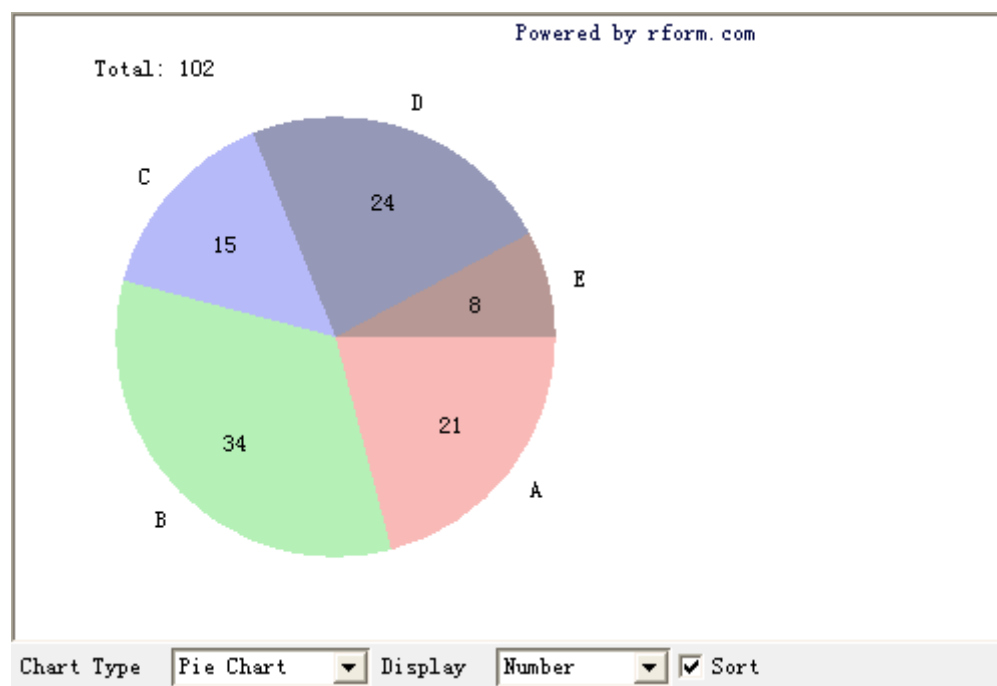
government. The phenomenon of the “spiral of silence” could be seen widely. In the new model, the process has turned bottom-up: public opinions are formed among the masses, and what the mass media should do is to try to guide the opinion and convey it to the decision-makers. Thus, nowadays the agenda-setting of the media and government is heavily affected by the agenda-setting of the masses.

In recent years, the power of blogs has increased dramatically, compared with traditional mass media. The birth of the blog, at least in terms of techniques, creates three conflicts—commercial monopolization and non-commercial, standard media production and personalized expressions, one-way distribution and mutual interaction. The blogosphere is exerting a great influence on the agenda-setting of the media, government and the masses, both positively and negatively.

Interviewee D also mentioned the concept of “gatekeeper”. As a kind of “we media”, blog is distinct for the absence of a gatekeeper. She describes the absence as “a double-edged sword”. On the one hand, the new communication model does not have the restrictions that other media do. The right to publish or delete articles belongs to the bloggers themselves. Therefore, some front-page news is first issued in some blogs (e.g. the sexual scandal of Bill Clinton), and ‘blogs are becoming the information source of traditional media’. On the other hand, she pointed out that the lack of a gatekeeper make blogs less authoritative than the traditional media. She is prone to support the regulation in the blogosphere because ‘the blog is like the free market for exchanging information. The distribution and communication of information relies on the self-regulation of bloggers and all the Internet users’. But the anonymity in cyberspace makes self-regulation utopian. As can be seen from many blogs, the articles or replies are usually full of irrational emotions and superficial perceptions. But she also worried about the over-regulation, which would, according to her, “jeopardize the freedom created by blogs”. Interviewee E shared similar viewpoint with D in terms of over-regulation. He said: ‘If the regulation to blogosphere is as strong as to the TV or newspaper, I would rather support no

regulation. Otherwise, this new medium will degenerate to be the online version of a newspaper’.

Interviewee H showed a slightly different attitude with D and E. His perspective was that the regulation did not make any sense positively. He believed that, even without regulation, he has the ability to judge what information is valuable and what is not. He supported a mix of different roles. While reliable and reputed blogs act as opinion leaders, other blogs still work in their own ways. He used an example to bolster his viewpoint: ‘Reading blogs is like reading a newspaper. You will not only read the serious official newspaper, but also the tabloid. But it doesn’t bother you, because you are able to select the really authentic and valuable information’. What he claimed has been confirmed by the statistic result from the following questionnaire. Among 102 respondents, 75 people (73.5%) do not think irresponsible information has bothered them, though they dislike it. And for the regulation, 55 people are against the regulation of blogosphere, while only 24 people agree and 8 people strongly agree the regulation (See figure 2). Besides, 83 (81.4%) respondents do not support that the blogosphere requires a “gatekeeper”.

**Figure 2:**

A. Strongly disagree; B. Disagree; C. Neutral; D. Agree; E. Strongly agree

However, most people contend that it is necessary to establish a series of reliable and trustable blogs, and confirm the contribution of the blog for two meetings in terms of democracy and free speech. The blog for the two meetings derive from the mainstream media (e.g. *Renmin Net*, *Xinhua Net*, *Dongfang Net*), and therefore inherits the reputation and brand effects. They gradually become opinion leaders, which paves the way for guiding public opinion in the long term. The officials, journalists and netizens are all keen to utilize this new communication tool to participate in public affairs. The blog for the two meetings is the integration of mass communication and interpersonal communication. Interviewee A is convinced that the blog for the two meetings in *Renmin Net* can become a paragon for guiding online opinion, though he believes many netizens would misunderstand “guiding” as “regulating” in the early stage. He explained that the motive for creating such a blog is ‘not solely to convey the voice of the masses to the decision-makers and provide a place for online discussion, but also to guide the opinion’. He stressed that ‘to guide is not to inhibit free speech, but to provide a reliable, civilized and functional place

for rational discussion', because in cyberspace the individual sometimes does not need to take responsibility for his/her irresponsible speech. He gave an example: 'The pipe is not for inhibiting the water flow, but for guiding the water flow'. Interviewee B and C also agreed that the blogosphere needs guidance.

Apart from those, all the interviewees admitted that the feedbacks from netizens were good ways in promoting the interaction between the government and the masses. The feedbacks are also an important resource for decision-making. On the web page of the blog for the two meetings of *Renmin Net*, there is a well-designed column for feedback. Interviewee A explained that the feedback can be categorized into three types: to support the author of the article; to argue to the contrary; and to use it as a platform to show their points of view or advice. He indicated that the last two types are of greater value. Through interaction and participation, netizens' problems could be solved, or their feelings could be expressed. For instance, in 2007, two delegates of the NPC who are from entertainment circles were criticized for their low-quality proposals, which seldom happened in traditional media in China. Another example from Interviewee A is an investigation into the working conditions of mining workers in Hunan Province. The investigation is made by five college students and posted on the column on 12 March. A week later, a delegate from the CPPCC named Hao Yuru issued an article as a reply to the students, which was recommended as the headline on that day, and then reported by mass media. From another perspective, this example also demonstrates the blog's influence over media-agenda setting.

b) Cons:

*Limited influence:*

Despite rapid development, the power of blogs is still in a disadvantageous position. Interviewee A cited the result of a survey: during the session, 85% people in Beijing knew of the NPC and CPPCC meetings. In the survey, TV was found to be the most

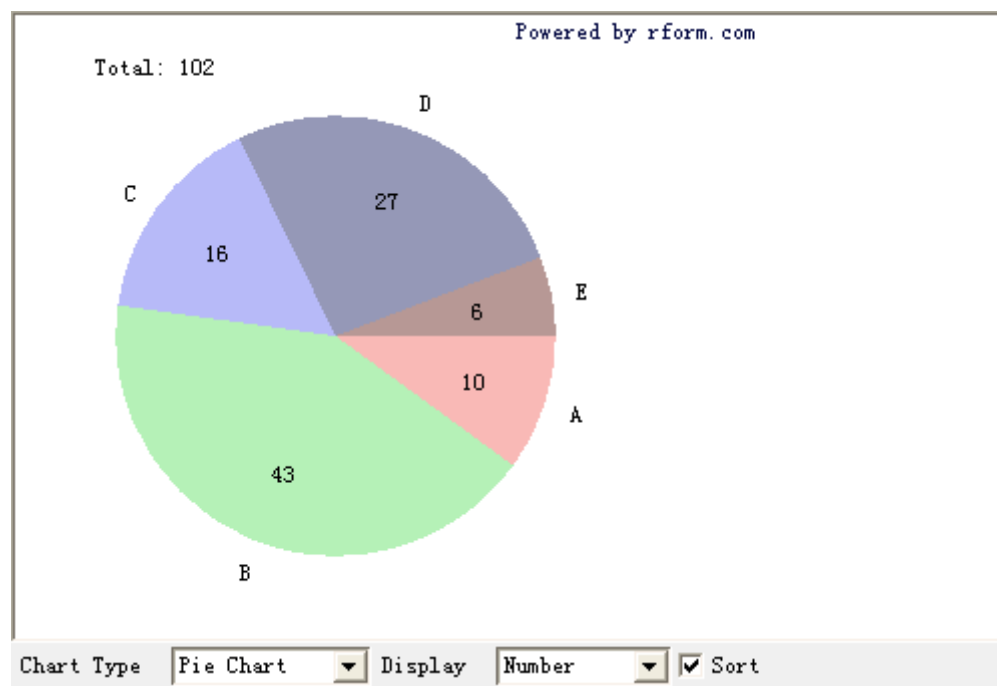


important media (66.1%), followed by newspapers (17.9%), the Internet (9.7%) and broadcasting (3.7%). The usage of Internet is far from being ubiquitous. And 'even in the Internet communication, the blog is not the most influential information source yet'. By contrast, American blogs are much more mature. They can play important roles in the elections, and also provide useful information for the masses due to their high speed and trust (Hugh Hewitt 2005).

*Dependence on mainstream media:*

When talking about the power relationship between traditional mass media and blogs, both interviewees C and D indicated that it is reciprocal rather than competitive. Though the blog can challenge the mass media in some aspects, it has to rely on the mass media. Basic knowledge about public affairs is mostly from the mass media, and the voice from the blogosphere has to be enlarged by the mass media if it wants more attention. Interviewee C said: 'Even the reason why my blog is popular is that I am a professional journalist from the mass media'. The statistic result from the questionnaire indicates that a large part of the respondents are inclined to refer to other channels to confirm what they have seen from the blogs (see Figure 3)

**Figure 3:** What is your attitude towards the public opinion formed in the blogosphere?



A. I don't believe it; B. I won't believe it until get the confirmation from other channels; C. Neutral; D. I would rather believe it, but I still wish to get confirmation from other channels; E. I believe it.

#### *Power for grassroots?*

A paradox has been frequently mentioned by the interviewees when they were asked about the "power of grassroots". On the one hand, people have equal rights to give their points of view. On the other hand, issues of hierarchy and power still apply. The online is connected with the offline. Interviewee E pointed out that the opinion leaders in the blogs for the two meetings are all social elites: 'Actually the background of the blogger is of utmost importance in attracting the readers ... The sparking point of this blog is the participation of delegates. They are mostly intellectuals, government officials, business leaders, etc., and they will easily become opinion leaders. However, I think their reputation and high-class identity have undermined its grassroots property'. Even ordinary users who have their own sub-

blogs are also a group people with insights into public affairs. The result from the questionnaire demonstrated it as well: 73 of 102 (71.6%) respondents claimed that such blogs cannot be categorized as the platform for grassroots. Interviewee C cited a survey result from the CNNIC (China Information Network Information Center): until June 2007, the amount of Chinese Internet users had reached 162 million (CNNIC), but the ratio to the whole population is only 12.3%. 'Maybe most grassroots in China cannot even go to the Internet at all. How can this blog be thought as a platform for grassroots?'

Interestingly, Interviewee F had a quite different viewpoint from interviewee E. He held the opinion that he is from the grassroots class, and the point is rather that 'the political elites do not spend a long time on the Internet, and the IT elites do not care about public affairs that much. The majority of Internet users are grassroots'. But even he admitted that, though such blogs might be helpful for the grassroots, it was not controlled by the grassroots. He illustrated that 'such blogs were set up in a top-down, not a bottom-up way, and that is the difference between this kind of blog and other individual blogs'.

Turning to the issues about the differences between the people who make use of blogs and the ones who do not, and who are in control of blogs and those who are not, the term of "digital divide" was referred to. However, it appears that the interviewees were prone to adopt an eclectic standpoint: the gap is not simply the digital divide, but also the divide between "motivated groups" and politics-nonchalant people. However, no matter what the criterion is for judging the "grassroots" in China, no one in the interview was in support of the opinion that the blog was particularly for "grassroots".

### **Is the “blog for the two meetings” a sort of public sphere?**

#### a) Pro’s:

Since the birth of the Internet, one of peoples’ ideals is to build up the online public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere is ‘a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion’. It is independent of other spheres such as the state and the market, enables citizens to counter intrusion of the market and influence of the state and holds the authorities accountable. The “bourgeois public sphere” is the core concept of the Habermasian theory. He is critical of the mass media because it replaced critical journals and rational consensus and became the place for bargaining private political and commercial interests.

Today, the Internet is argued by some researchers to have the potential to become an ideal model of a public sphere because it has some similarities with the ideal “bourgeois public sphere”. In particular, as mentioned, the blog for the two meetings in *Renmin Net* is argued to be the blog for social elites, rather than for grassroots. Habermas believes the ideal public sphere requires rational, civilized, and well-informed participators. Therefore a question has been raised: Is that the kind of “bourgeois public sphere” that Habermas claimed?

According to Habermas, the public sphere is an ideal communicative environment for critical discussion, rational consensus and deliberation. But he thinks of deliberation and discussion of public interests in practice as the bargaining of political and commercial interests. It is also heavily affected by hierarchical regime.

Referred by the interviewees, the standards for an ideal communicative environment could be summarized as: 1) everyone can take part in the discussion; 2) everyone can make any proposal on the discussion topic; 3) everyone can express his/her

opinion, desire and demands; 4) everyone's right. (as mentioned as 1, 2, and 3) cannot be jeopardized by any power inside or outside the discussion.

In the interview, all the interviewees agreed that the blog for the two meetings was better communicative environment. Corresponding to the standards, the distinctions can be seen as: 1) new roles can be brought into the discussion; and 2) in a sense, the anonymity of the netizens could flatten the hierarchy and eliminate the difference between age, gender, income and social classes.

Relatively speaking, the blog for the two meetings is closer to the "bourgeois public sphere" in some aspects. The following table is the comparison between the three models, namely the bourgeois public sphere, the mass media, and the blogs for the two meetings.

	Bourgeois public sphere	Mass media	Blog for the two meetings
<b>Participation:</b>			
1. participant	Well-educated bourgeois	Opinion leaders; limited by political, social and economical status	Netizens who are interested in public affairs, limited by IT literacy
2. openness	Ordinary	Low	High
3. communication model	No medium, face-to-face interaction	Lack of individual interaction	Both point-to-multipoint and individual communication
4. scope	Small	Large	Large
<b>Information:</b>			
1. amount and variety	few	abundant	maximum
2. opinions	pluralistic	unitary	pluralistic

3. content	Unprompted viewpoints	Filtrated by gatekeepers	Unprompted viewpoints & information filtrated by gatekeepers
4. storage	No storage	There is storage, but hard to search	Vast storage, and easy to search
5. interactivity	High	Low	High
6. the right in selection	Passive	Passive	Active
7. anonymity	No	No	Yes
8. inclination for discussion	High	Low	High
9. geographical limitation	High	Middle	Low

As can be seen from the table, compared with mass media, the blog for the two meetings allows for new, previously excluded discussants. It focuses on public affairs and encourages individual interactions. As interviewee B said: 'the former report to the conferences has been routinized. Now under the new model, more people are getting familiar with public affairs via a personal angle, and they are able to air their opinions and desires'. The blog enables the masses to participate in democratic politics and supervise the political agenda. Moreover, the ideas in the blog are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the discussant. From these perspectives, the blog for the two meetings is quite close to the public sphere.

#### b) Cons:

On the contrary, however, the blog for the two meetings also in some ways does not accord with the public sphere:

First, based on the Habermasian theory, the public sphere is independent from the state and the mass which counterposes the power of the two sides. But the official

background of the blog means that this platform is by no means independent from the government. The media organization which manipulates the work of the blog has a strong sense of the officials. Interviewee A thought the official background as having brought both pros and cons. On the one hand, as mentioned, it has borrowed the brand effects of the mainstream media; on the other hand, it would give the netizens the wrong impression that this online forum is conducted or even regulated by the government.

Second, the participators in the blog are not representative enough. Less than 100 delegates have taken part in the discussion, and they cannot represent the other delegates' (more than 5,000) points of view. And for the netizens, the digital divide has indeed affected the distribution of discourse power. Interviewee G has noticed that the hot issues in the blog were concentrated on the medical system, education, social security etc., which mostly concerned people living in cities. By contrast, the issues of the country are marginalized, with very rare articles and replies in the blog. In addition, Interviewee B noted that the daily headline in the blog was not altered in a comprehensive and balanced way.

Third, the social morality of the netizens in practice cannot achieve Habermasian standards. In Chinese cyberspace, there are some activists called the "Internet mob". When they face the large amount of information, they lack the ability of critical thinking. Some of them 'easily express their strong feeling or superficial understanding on some issues' (Interviewee C). Interviewee G explained the reason why she rarely writes or replies to articles about public affairs is that she is afraid of the "shit and brick" (abusive and aggressive words). Interviewee A also confessed that even the blog for the two meetings, which is oriented towards well-informed people, suffered from irresponsible and dirty words all the time. In addition, while the anonymity flattens the hierarchy to some extent, it also leads to the decrease of social responsibility, which is supported by the survey result (57 advocates, 22 dissenters, and 23 neutrals).

Besides, the media literacy of Chinese netizens is also criticized by interviewee A: 'Media literacy—I mean the ability of people in selecting information sources, understanding the content, and critical thinking—aims to enable people to be skilful creators and producers of media messages, both to facilitate an understanding as to the strengths and limitations of each media, and to create independent media. However, the media literacy in China is not satisfied'. According to him, the headline article usually would be read approximately 15,000 person-times in a week after publishing in the blog, while the amount of replies was expected to be only 100. Moreover, those replies are mostly composed of superficial and subjective thinking, rather than constructive suggestions. That is to say, by and large, the Chinese netizens have not fully made use of it to participate in democratic politics. The survey in some ways bolsters what interviewee A claims. Among the 102 respondents, only 6 (5.9%) of them claim that they would love to take part in the discussion unconditionally. Besides, only 10 respondents (9.8%) are inclined to air their opinions that are different from most other people. Arguably, opinion leaders in the blog still exercise the power, though the platform appears to offer equal opportunity for discussion; and the "spiral of silence" still exists.

Last but not least, the discussion in the blog actually appeared to exert very limited influence on decision-making in public affairs. Interviewee C argued that: 'More frequently, the discussion is to disclose the dark side, or to criticize imperfections. I don't think it can affect decision-making directly. Basically, it is still a complement, not a determinant'. Therefore, it is not yet appropriate to regard the blog for the two meetings as an ideal public sphere model. Her point of view got support from interviewee D and E.

As Thompson (1995) says, the public sphere in its true sense existed only in the idealistic conception of Habermas. Even in the ideal model, the public sphere was used more to make power visible but the real decisions were invisible. With the



emergence of a new communication model in the modern world, the nature of the public sphere has widened its scope to such an extent that events and acts are made public even to those who are far away from the places where they occur.

### **Conclusion:**

This project attempted to investigate three objectives: 1. to examine people's attitudes towards the blog for the NPC and CPPCC conferences; 2. to explore whether this new communication model would have grassroots influence on the traditional mainstream media in China; and 3. to assess whether the blog accords with conceptions of the public sphere.

The research has indicated that the blog for the two meetings has been favoured by most Internet users. The establishment of the blog is the response from the mainstream media to the challenge of increasing new media applications. Its original intention was an attempt to set up a platform for direct communication and deliberation in which information distribution and discussion would be more rational and reliable; and to guide public opinion in the blogosphere. The chief editor of this blog explained the nuance between regulation and guidance, stressing that it is different from previous regulation in Chinese mass media.

It is argued that the blog does enable considerable media power. The decentralization effect of the blog has weakened the control of "gatekeeper" in traditional mass media and is conducive to the transition process from the dominant media model to the pluralism model. Besides, it could also influence the agenda-setting of the media, government and the masses, both positively and negatively. Most people dislike irrational expression and irresponsible information in the blogosphere, but many of them worry about the over-regulation. Therefore, setting up a trustworthy and reputed blog (such as the blog for the two meetings) was thought to be a good way of overcoming the disordered public opinion in the blogosphere.

However, the blog for the two meetings examined here did not appear to challenge the mainstream media. Firstly, it relies on the mass media. Secondly, most people still use the traditional mass media as the primary information source. Last, but not least, the power of the blogosphere is usually from grassroots, but the blogs for the two meetings were not regarded as the blogs for the grassroots due to their official background and high-class orientation.

The study also reveals the relationships between the blog for the two meetings and the concept “public sphere”. The blog is indeed congruent with some key points about the ideal public sphere. For instance, it has more rational, civilized, well-informed participants than ordinary personal blogs; it allows for new, previously excluded discussants and encourages interaction. Compared to the traditional mass media, it is regarded as a better communicative environment for critical discussion, rational consensus and deliberation. On the other hand, the blog also has some incongruent characteristics: 1) it is not independent from the government; 2) the participants are not representative enough; 3) the social morality and media literacy of the participants still cannot achieve high standards; and 4) it has limited influence on the decision making in the two meetings.

A point to note is that most interviewees and respondents agreed that the driving force of the development of the blog for the two meetings is the grassroots power enabled by new ICT technologies.

To sum up, the blog for the two meetings is thought to be an improvement in the media and communication field in China and also was expected by many people to act as the impetus for the promotion of democracy. As this research was based on a limited number of interviewees and questionnaire respondents, the results cannot be generalised to the population to measure the influence or to draw broad conclusions. It is also inappropriate to regard the aim of this research as being to

testify to the applicability of certain theories in Chinese cyberspace. Rather, it would be better to say that several theories have been employed to explain a new phenomenon in China.

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## **Appendix I: Interview Topic Guide (translation)**

### **Part One: Preliminary (less than 5 minutes)**

Introduce myself and my research topic briefly:

Thank you so much for your time. I am so glad that I got the opportunity to conduct this interview with you. Let me introduce what I am doing research on. It is about the weblog for the two meetings, including the reason why it is established, its impact, potential and so on. I am also interested in your thoughts and attitudes towards this new communication model. This interview is going to be recorded, and I promised that this interview would be only used in my research work. Is there any question that you would like to ask before we start?

### **Part Two: Introduction (15 minutes)**

**2.1.** Tell me a little about yourself and your familiarity about the blog for the two meetings.

**2.2. A** (For Interviewee A only, the chief editor)

- i. Can you tell me the reason why the blog is established?
- ii. How long does it take to build the blog? And could you talk about the process?
- iii. Do you think the blog functions well?
- iv. Who are the target audiences? Is this weblog welcomed? Has the impact achieved your expectation?
- v. Apart from the blog of Renmin Net, there are several similar blogs in other websites. Can you make a comparison between them?

**2. 2.B** (For Interviewee B, C, D, E only, the journalists)

- i. Can you talk about the reason why the blog is established?
- ii. Do you think the blog has made contribution positively? If yes, in what aspects? And to what extents?
- iii. Do you think the blog functions well?
- iv. Who do you think are the main audience of the blog? Is this blog popular?
- v. Could you compare the blogs in Renmin Net and others?

**2. 2.C** (For Interviewee F, G, H only, the netizens)

- i. How do you know this blog?
- ii. Do you think the blog has made contribution positively? If yes, in what aspects? And to what extent?
- iii. How do you use the blog?

- iv. Do you think the blog functions well?
- v. Who are the major users of this blog, as far as you concerned.

**Part Three: Discussion (30 minutes)**

- 3.1** What is the major difference between the blog for the two meetings and an ordinary blog? And what is the difference between the blog for the two meetings and other media for distributing the information about the two meetings?
- 3.2** As we know, blogs are sometimes thought as the voice for grassroots. Is this blog still the voice for them?
- 3.3** Can you talk about the relationship between this blog and the mainstream media? Do you think the public opinions from blogosphere can influence the mainstream media? Do you think there is a power shift?
- 3.4** Do you think the blog for the two meetings can act as the guidance on the Internet?
- 3.5** Do you think the public opinion on the Internet need guidance? Do you think the blogosphere would need a gatekeeper? (Question 3.4 and 3.5 are added after the interview with A.)
- 3.6** Do you think this blog creates a good communicative environment? Can everyone air his (her) voice freely? Are their opinions easy to be influenced by others? Is everyone performing responsibly and decently in the new environment?
- 3.7** Do you think the new information and communication technology would bring the blog to a brighter future?

**Part Four: End (less than 5 minutes)**

Thanks for your time! I am so glad to conduct the interview to you. Your comments are of great significance to my research! Do you have any other things to add on this topic? Or do you any questions for me?

Your help is appreciated. I promise that your comments would only be used in my study.



## **Appendix II: Interview Transcript (translation)**

Transcript of Interviewee A (the chief editor of the blog for the two meetings in *Renmin Net*)

Q: Thank you so much for your time. I am so glad that I got the opportunity to conduct this interview with you. I am a student from London School of Economics and Political Science, majoring in MSc New Media, Information and Society. Let me introduce what I am doing research on. It is about the weblog for the two meetings, including the reason why it is established, its impact, potential and so on. I am also interested in your thoughts and attitudes towards this new communication model. This interview is going to be recorded, and I promised that this interview would be only used in my research work. Is there any question that you would like to ask before we start?

A: There is no question. I think we can move on.

Q: Great. First, would you mind telling me your name and age?

A: My name is "A". I am 39.

Q: Could you please tell me about your work?

A: I am the chief editor of the blog for the two meetings in *Renmin Net*. I have been at this position for one year and a half. Before, I was an editor in charge of the societal new in *Renmin Net*. I am not doing any designing or coding job here. What I am doing is leading the team to work smoothly. Namely, I am the manager of this team. The only practical thing I do is organizing the articles in a proper way. But I gotta say I am familiar with everything about this blog. Maybe I am the person who knows it best. (Laughing)

Q: Wow, that's perfect. Well, can you tell me the reason why the blog is established?

A: Maybe you know, in recent years, the new ICT applications have increased so fast. They have changed people's lives in many ways—politics, culture, economy, lifestyle—everything. At least in China it is. This blog was the response of Renmin Net when facing the rapid spread of new media applications.

Q: So you think the new ICT applications like blog have posed a challenge to the mainstream media?

A: I am not saying that. Let's think about it from another perspective. Nowadays each organization or person can utilize the new media technology, so it is with

the mass media. I think the blog is the amalgamation of the mainstream media's brand effect and the new media's technological advantages.

Q: I am sorry to interrupt, what do you mean by "the amalgamation of the mainstream media's brand effect and the new media's technological advantages"?

A: OK, let me explain. Which media, I mean traditional media or blog, from your opinion, is more authoritative and trustable? I think you would choose traditional media, right? But for the mass, they cannot do anything but passively receive the information. The traditional media is the platform for the great men. As for the blog, if you have access to the Internet and master some basic skills, you can set up the media for your own and let your voice heard. However, its low entry level also leads to low reliability. Thus, building a blog with authority can not solely to convey the voice of the masses to the decision-makers and provide a place for online discussion, but also to guide the opinion.

Q: To guide the opinion? Do you think the guidance would deteriorate the free speech that the blog has created?

A: Of course no. To guide is not to inhibit free speech, but to provide a reliable, civilized and functional place for rational discussion. Maybe you know, in the Chinese blogosphere the individual sometimes does not need to take responsibility for his/her irresponsible speech, and that has messed the online world up. It is necessary to set up an authoritative blog to act as the guidance. But please, please never equate guidance to inhibition. You see the pipe? The pipe is not for inhibiting the water flow, but for guiding the water flow.

Q: Very interesting. Could you tell me how long the establishing process is?

A: Actually it is very short. In February 2006 when the first personal blog about the two meetings was set up by the delegate named Cheng Yiju, and welcomed by many people, we knew, it is time for us to step up. We decided to found a special blog. It is not a personal blog, but a collection of many personal blogs, focusing on public affairs. Technically, it was not time-consuming to set it up. One day is more than enough. The hardest work, as we expected, was inviting the delegates to set up their sub-blogs in this blog. Surprisingly, many delegates show high interests in it. In two weeks, 16 delegates had set up their sub-blogs.

Q: Do you think the blog functions well?

A: Pretty good, I think. There are six major modules on the webpage: news reporting, recommended articles, the column for delegates, the column for journalists, the column for the mass, and discussion area. Everyday, one of the articles of the delegates would be recommended as the headline. Everyone can

discuss any topic he is interested in. They can communicate with the delegates directly. Especially during the session period, every evening there would be a delegate as the guest speaker to answer questions from netizens at real time.

Q: What are the target audiences at first?

A: Ordinary netizens, especially who are enthusiastic in public affairs. But in practice, we found most participators are of higher social status than the average level.

Q: Is this blog popular? Do you think it has achieved your expectation?

A: I think it is quite popular, at least compared to other political blogs. During the session time, the blog was browsed over 100,000 person-times everyday. But in China, the most popular blogs belong to those film stars or singers. Have you heard that Xu Jinglei became the world's most widely read blogger this month when her blog logged 100 million page views within about 600 days? Compared to her, we have a long way to go. (Laughing)

Q: Well, that's funny. Eh, I have noticed that now there are some other blogs for the two meetings in other websites like *Xinhua Net*, *Qianlong Net*, etc. Can you compare those blogs and the blog in *Renmin Net*?

A: No big difference, as far as I know. *Xinhua Net* and *Qianlong Net* are both official media, just as *Renmin Net*. In fact, even *Sohu* has set up the blog for the two meetings either. The point is, all these websites have very good reputation. Therefore, the blog can take advantage of the brand effects, as I mentioned.

Q: OK. So what is the difference between the blog for the two meetings and an ordinary blog?

A: Most blogs are private blogs, but this is a public blog, more serious. You have to try to avoid irresponsible speech. You can express your feelings, but not too much. In fact, there are so many differences between the two types, but I think this point is the most important.

Q: And what is the major difference between this blog and other media for reporting the two meetings?

A: I think the biggest difference is that other media, like TV, radio and newspaper, they are solely "reporting" it. It is a one-way information distribution though there does exist limited interaction. But in the blog, people can freely make comments on the agenda, or discuss the newly issued law on time. They can use their feedbacks to support of the author of the article, to argue to the contrary, and to use it as a platform to show their points of view or advice. Especially the

last two points, I think they are of greater value. I will give you an example: before the session in 2007, an investigation into the working conditions of mining workers in Hunan Province is made by five college students and posted on the column on 12 March. A week later, a delegate from the CPPCC named Hao Yuru issued an article as a reply to the students, which was recommended as the headline on that day and drew attention from the related governmental sector.

Q: As we know, blogs are sometimes thought as the voice for grassroots. Is this blog still the voice for them?

A: Well, it is so hard to tell...I believe, compared with other media for the two meetings, this blog really empower the grassroots in some ways. It is an improvement. But the power, I believe, is still not controlled them. And, I admit this blog is becoming more and more high-class oriented, though the target audiences at first are ordinary Internet users.

Q: Can you talk about the relationship between this blog and mainstream media?

A: As mentioned, the success of this blog is because that it has borrowed the brand effects of *Renmin Net*. Even in the Internet communication, the blog is not the most influential information source yet. It has to rely on the mainstream media to gain people's trust. It is a conducive complement to the mainstream media, in terms of free speech and democracy. On the other hand, the mainstream media background also brings some cons: some netizens would think this online forum is conducted or even regulated by the government.

Q: Do you think the public opinions from this blog can influence the mainstream media?

A: Of course. In the example I have just talked about, the investigation into the working conditions of mining workers in Hunan Province is first issued in the blog. After several days, it had been reported by mass media and got more attention. I think the public opinions can influence the mainstream media, most time positively.

Q: Do you think there is a power shift from mass media to this kind of new media?

A: I think, at this stage, the relationship between the two is reciprocal rather than competitive. There might be a power shift, but very limited. Especially under Chinese communication environment, the power shift is still in the control of the government. At best it is amelioration, not revolution. Perhaps we are on the process of power shifting. But no one knows what the final status it will be.

Q : Do you think the new information and communication technology would favour the media power shift?

A: Sorry, I got a bit confused. What do you mean by "media power shift?" If you mean the technology would promote the new media, and make it more influential than the traditional media. The answer is yes. But if you mean the new technology would flatten the inequality between different social classes, I don't see that happening in short term. Well, I am not saying the grassroots power is not great. It is really impressive. It helps the mass air their voices. But, for example, in the blog for the two meetings, the power relation in the real world still applies in the blogosphere. If an Internet user hides his identity in the real world, he actually has little power in the blog.

Q: But I think the anonymity is an important factor in creating a good communicative environment, isn't it? It helps the discussants get rid of the hierarchy.

A: You are right. But we can't neglect its negative effects as well. The anonymity can be double-edged sword. Now, even this blog in which most discussants are civilized and well-informed, had to suffer from irresponsible speech and dirty words.

Q: Apparently, no one likes the aggressive and dirty words. But from another perspective, do you think it is a kind of improvement? They don't follow or receive the information passively. They have the right to tell what they do feel. And their ability of critical thinking can be promoted.

A: Yes, it is a kind of improvement. Everyone should have the right to express his or her feelings. But remember, it is a public blog. They have to perform rationally and decently. Especially, most participators are of higher social class. The social responsibility of most Chinese netizens, including the civilized people, is still at a relatively low level. As for the critical thinking ability, I have no idea whether you have heard the word "media literacy". The media literacy—I mean the ability of people in selecting information sources, understanding the content, and critical thinking—aims to enable people to be skilful creators and producers of media messages, both to facilitate an understanding as to the strengths and limitations of each media, and to create independent media. However, the media literacy in China is not satisfied.

Q: Not satisfied?

A: Definitely not. For instance, the headline article usually would be browsed for approximately 15,000 person-times in a week after publishing in the blog, while the amount of replies were expected to be only 100. Moreover, those replies are mostly composed of superficial and subjective thinking, rather than constructive

suggestions. That is to say, by and large, the Chinese netizens have not fully made use of it to participate in democratic politics. And that is why we think the online world needs guidance. People have to be guided to the right way in utilizing the new communication technology to participate in democratic politics.

Q: OK. So here is my last question: do you think the blog for the two meetings in *Renmin Net* can guide the online opinion?

A: I am confident about it. I think this blog can become a paragon for guiding online opinion. There is only one thing I am afraid of: I think many netizens would misunderstand "guiding" as "regulating" in the early stage.

Q: Thanks for your time! I am so glad to conduct the interview to you. Your comments are of great significance to my research! Do you have any other things to add on this topic? Or do you any questions for me?

A: I guess no question.

Q: Your help is appreciated. I promise that your comments would only be used in my study.

A: That's fine.

Q: I guess that's it. Thank you again for your help! Wish you a good day!

A: You are welcome. Bye.

### **Appendix III: Email (Translation)**

Email to respondents of the questionnaire.

Dear [insert name],

My name is Zheng Liu. I am a student at the London School of Economics, majoring in MSc New Media, Information and Society. I am currently working on a research project on the Weblog for the two meetings (NPC and CPPCC). The project will focus particularly on the influence and potentials of this kind of blog in terms of communication and democracy. In completing this research, I have made an online questionnaire survey. Please follow the link:

<http://www.my3q.com/go.php?url=tousan/38258>

I promise that the result of the survey will be used only for research purposes and will not be published in the news media. I would be delighted if you can help me finish the online questionnaire.

Thank you for your time!

Best wishes

#### **Appendix IV: Questionnaire (translation)**

1. Your gender is\_\_\_\_?  
A. male            B. female
2. Your education level is\_\_\_\_?  
A. primary school   B. junior middle school   C. high school   D. undergraduate  
E. postgraduate
3. Do you have your own blog?  
A. Yes            B. No
4. Do you often read other people's blog?  
A. Yes            B. No
5. Some websites usually set up a series of weblogs that have specific concerns, have you read these blogs?  
A. never            B. seldom    C. sometimes    D. often        E. frequently
6. In 2006, some websites set up the weblog for the two meetings (NPC and CPPCC), do you think it is creative?  
A. Yes            B. No
7. Is this kind of blog your first choice to gain information about the two meetings?  
A. Yes            B. No
8. Do you think the blog for the two meetings is similar to the mainstream media?  
(Please tick the score: 1 means totally disagree, 5 means totally agree.)  
A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5
9. Do you think it is the complement of the mainstream media?  
A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5
10. Do you think it is a challenge to the mainstream media?  
A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5
11. Do you think it is an effective channel for communication between different social groups?  
A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5
12. Do you think it has improved the freedom of speech?  
A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5
13. Do you think it has promoted the democracy?



A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

14. Do you think the blog for the two meetings is the outcome of development of information and communication technology?

15. Do you think the content in the blog is well organized?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

16. Do you think the weblog is similar to the mainstream media?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

17. Do you think the weblog has novelty in terms of content and form?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

18. Do you think the content in the weblog is more authentic?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

19. Apart from the delegates, in the weblog there are the columns for the netizens, and the journalists who report the two meetings. Do you think it is an ideal communicative environment?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

20. As mentioned in Q 19, do you think it can offer more perspectives for analyzing the public issues?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

21. Do you think the anonymity of netizens can eliminate their worries on their speech in the blog for the two meetings?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

22. Do you think the anonymity of netizens would lead to the decline of their sense of responsibility when they write articles or make comments in that blog?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

23. Do you think your viewpoint would be influenced by other people's comments?

A. 1            B. 2            C. 3            D.4            E.5

24. Are you willing to participate in the discussion in the blog voluntarily?

A. Yes        B. I only make comments that I am familiar or interested.    C. No

25. If you disagree with most people, are you prone to air your own opinion?

A. I will do that anyway.

B. If I think my viewpoint is reasonable, then I will do that.

C. Seldom or never.

26. Do you think the irresponsible speech on the Internet has bothered you?  
A. Yes                      B. No
27. Do you think the speech in the blogosphere needs regulation? (Please tick the score: 1 means totally disagree, 5 means totally agree.)  
A. 1              B. 2              C. 3              D.4              E.5
28. What is your attitude towards the public opinion formed in the blogosphere?  
A. I don't believe it.  
B. I won't believe it until get the confirmation from other channels.  
C. Neutral  
D. I would rather believe it, but I still wish to get confirmation from other channels.  
E. I believe it.
29. Do you think the participators have equal discourse power in the blog for the two meetings?  
A. Not equal                      B. Relatively equal              C. Equal
30. The major participators in the blog for the two meetings are social elites like delegates and journalists. Do you think such a blog is still the platform for the grassroots?  
A. Yes                      B. No
31. Do you think the blogosphere needs a "gatekeeper?"  
A. Yes                      B. No
32. Do you think the blog for the two meetings can guide the public opinion on the Internet to some extent?  
A. Yes                      B. No

**Appendix V: Summary Table of interviewees**

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Occupation	What is the reason for the establishment of this blog?	Media Power shift		Public Sphere	
					pros	cons	pros	cons
<b>A</b>	M	39	Chief editor of the blog	Response from mainstream media; Guidance of the online public opinion; Facilitating direct communication between mass and decision makers, and online discussion.	Feedbacks are beneficial; Mainstream media has brought brand effects and high reliability.	Mainstream media would give the netizens the wrong impression	A more equal, open and free communicative environment.	The low social responsibility and media literacy of participators.
<b>B</b>	M	37	Journalist from <i>People's Daily</i>	For more voices to be heard.	It has influenced the mass media in terms of agenda-setting.		People can select the information actively.	

							It encourages personal interactions.	
<b>C</b>	F	34	Journalist from <i>Xinhua News Agency</i>	Guidance of the online public opinion;		The relationship between mainstream media and this blog is reciprocal rather than competitive.		Most people lack the ability of critical thinking;
<b>D</b>	F	29	Journalist from <i>Xinhua News Agency</i>	Guidance of the online public opinion;	The absence of gatekeeper would enable the mass the right to air their own voice freely.	The absence of gatekeeper would also result in lower authority and trust; The influence of this blog is limited; Over	Unprompted viewpoints from mass and trustable information from officials coexist.	The influence of this blog is limited. The anonymity in cyberspace makes self-regulation utopian.

						regulation.		
<b>E</b>	M	40	Journalist from <i>The Beijing News</i>	Utilizing the new ICTs to complete the traditional media.		The potential of over regulation in the future; This blog is not for grassroots.	It allows for new, previously excluded discussants.	The influence of this blog is limited. Hierarchy still applies.
<b>F</b>	M	45	Civil servant in medical sector	Not a top-down decision, but the only choice when facing the growing grassroots power.	This blog can still work for grassroots.	It relies heavily on the mass media.	This blog has high openness and equality. Everything is almost judged by rationality. The difference in social status, age, gender etc has been flattened in some ways.	It is not independent from mass media.
<b>G</b>	F	24	Graduate student	To promote the communication	The dominant model of	This blog is not for		The low social responsibility

				between the mass and decision makers.	communication has been challenged. People have the ability to choose the way they like.	grassroots, but for social elites.		and media literacy of participators would stop many people from airing their viewpoints
<b>H</b>	M	32	IT practitioner	"	Reliable and reputed blogs can act as opinion leaders.	The regulation does not make any sense positively.	It can overcome the limitation of time and space. The interactivity is high.	The inequality in the real world still matters in the blog.

**NB. All the interviewees agree that:**

- 1. Setting up such a trustable and authoritative blog for information distribution and online discussion is necessary and conducive.**
- 2. It does promote the democracy, and the freedom of speech. (though the interviewees differ in varying degrees)**
- 3. The blog for the two meeting is better communicative environment than the mainstream media.**

**The content in the table are the key points or distinctive points of different interviewees. The three general points are not listed in the table to save space, but they are discussed in the dissertation.**

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