

Youth Participation in the Age of Microblogging - A Survey of Shanghai Youth*

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At nightfall on February 18, 2012, a Shanghai »Netizen« bearing the screen name of »Molly Seeks Capricorns Born in the Year of the Goat« (»Molly« for short) recorded the suspicious behavior of a woman on the subway with her iPad. As soon as the latter put her hand into a wrong pocket, Molly cried out. Despite being physically attacked by the pickpocket, she held onto the latter until the police arrived. Later the same night, she uploaded the video onto her microblog page, attracting numerous visitors and comments. For days afterwards, Molly, a woman born in the 1980s, was the subject of heated online discussions. She became known as Subway Wonder Woman. Such an event was widely publicized thanks to microblogging. Nowadays, more and more young people participate in social and public affairs via microblogging and other forms of new media. The popularity of microblogging is influencing and changing the lifestyles of contemporary youth. Between May and July 2011 the Shanghai Youth Research Center did a study of microblog usage by young people in Shanghai.¹

1. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE MOST ACTIVE MICROBLOG USERS

Microblogging, a relationship-based platform for information sharing, dissemination and retrieval, allows users to access microblog services via web-enabled terminals, such as computers and smart phones, and to share with friends or followers in real time their whereabouts, ideas, news, and so on by means of text-based posts of up to 140 characters. Sina.com, China's largest portal website, launched the first microblog service – the close beta test version of weibo.com – in mainland China on August 28, 2009. Since then, microblogging has been developing by leaps and bounds: on April 28, 2010, microblog users at weibo.com exceeded 10 million; by August 28 of the same year, user numbers had grown to 30 million; and by the end of October, the figure topped 50 million. In other words, during the first half of 2010, there was an

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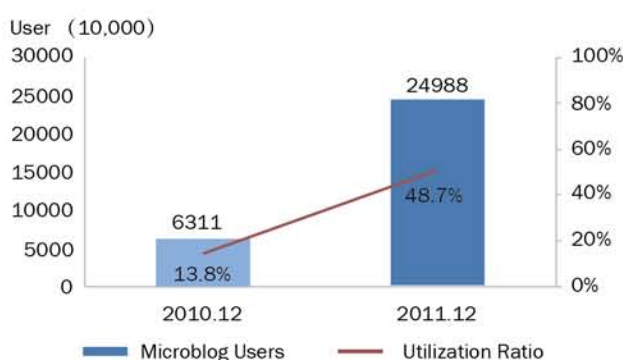
* The paper presents the latest activities up to June 2012.

¹ See *Innovation, Transformation and Shanghai Youth – Shanghai Youth Development Report 2011* (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2011). The report is based on a random sampling of 2,000 young persons. Of the 2,000 questionnaires distributed, 1,751 were completed and returned, amounting to a response rate of 87.6 per cent. The demographic of subjects is consistent with that of Shanghai youth overall. A multistage proportionate stratified sampling method was adopted. Having taken into consideration the geographic location and economic development status of different districts in Shanghai, researchers first identified Pudong New Area, Xuhui District, Putuo District, Hongkou District, Songjiang District, Jiading District and Chongming County as primary sampling units, and then identified youth groups within primary sampling units (for example, youth in employment, youth who are either registered or unregistered residents in Shanghai) as secondary sampling units. Finally, individual young people within secondary sampling units were identified as subjects.

average monthly growth of 5 million new users for the first four months and 10 million for each of the next two months. It took TV 13 years and the Internet four years to reach 50 million people: it took microblogging a mere 14 months (2010 China Microblogging Annual Report).

In fact, microblogging growth started to gain momentum in 2010, but truly explosive growth occurred in the first half of 2011. By the end of June 2011, Chinese microblog users had grown to 195 million from 63.11 million at the beginning of the year. Subsequently, growth slowed down, but even so, by the end of December, there were 250 million microblog users in China. The rapid rise of microblogging in China in only two years caught everyone by surprise. According to the *29th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* issued by CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center), only 13.8 percent of Chinese Netizens used microblogging in 2010, while in 2011 the figure shot up to 48.7 percent. Microblogging has become an important Internet application for Chinese Netizens, who upload about 90 million posts every day. About 50,000 Chinese companies have their own weibo.com accounts. And 2011 is irrefutably the year of the rise of microblogging.

Figure 1: The number of microblog users and the frequency of usage, 2010-2011



Source: CNNIC, 29th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China.

The popularity and rapid growth of microblogging are evident from surveys among Shanghai youth. A

survey of young people in Shanghai by the Shanghai Youth Research Center between May and July 2011 showed that 53.1 percent had their own microblog accounts, 44.5 percent knew of microblogging but had no account yet, and only 2.5 percent had never heard of microblogging. Such evidence proves that microblogging, although only two years' old in China, has become a household phenomenon.

Table 1: Microblog accounts

Choices	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	908	53.1
No	761	44.5
Never heard of it	42	2.4

Microbloggers are young. As a rule, of course, young people are the first to adopt new things. According to *Microblogging-led Social Business Development and Changes in China*, a white paper published jointly by CIC and Sina.com, users aged 19–30 are the most active among all weibo.com users, accounting for 76 percent. Similarly in our survey, 52.7 percent of people born in the 1990s are microblog users, and 55.3 percent of people born in the 1980s. Both figures are about 20 percentage points higher than the 35.8 percent of people born in the 1970s: apparently the younger generations are more receptive to microblogging than those born earlier.

Table 2: A generational analysis of microblog registration (%)

Choices		Years of birth			Total
		1990s	1980s	1970s	
Yes	Respondents	280	534	49	863
	Percentage	52.7	55.3	35.8	52.8
No	Respondents	233	414	82	729
	Percentage	43.9	42.9	59.9	44.6
Never heard of it	Respondents	18	17	6	41
	Percentage	3.4	1.8	4.4	2.5

The numbers of followers as well as other microbloggers followed demonstrate not only the social networking strength of a blogger, but also the diversity

of information sources. According to our survey, 60.9 percent of Shanghai youth follow fewer than 50 microbloggers, 26.6 percent follow between 50 to 100 microbloggers, 10.3 percent follow between 100 and 500 microbloggers and a handful follow over 500 microbloggers. Such data show that there are limits to young people's social networks and attention.

The number of fans determines how far information can spread across the microblogging ecosphere. According to our survey, a majority – or 68.9 percent – of young microbloggers have no more than 50 fans, 19 percent have 50–100 fans, 8.7 percent have 100–500 fans, while only few have more than 500 fans. Statistically speaking, most young people follow fewer than 100 microbloggers and most young microbloggers are followed by fewer than 100 others. Both constrain the dissemination and influence of their messages. For one thing, the microblogging ecosphere is too young for young bloggers to have built up extensive networks. However, their influence may explode in response to emergencies or breaking news. For example, Molly the Subway Wonder Woman saw her fans suddenly grew to approximately 9,000 after February 18, 2012.

Table 3: The number of microbloggers followed and the number of followers (%)

Items	Under 50	50-100	100-500	500-1000	Above 1,000
Microbloggers followed	60.9	26.6	10.3	0.5	1.7
Fans	68.9	19.0	8.7	0.9	2.5

The fondness for microblogging could be illustrated by time spent on microblogging sites and frequency of refreshing. On average, 80.9 percent of Shanghai youth spent no more than 30 minutes a day on microblogging. Most access microblogs when they have a bit of free time, just enough to maintain their microblog sites, which indicates the convenience and flexibility of microblogging.

At the other extreme, some people are suffering from so-called »microblog syndrome«, spending perhaps a dozen hours on end on microblogging. They check microblogs the first thing after booting up their

computers, refresh repeatedly during the day, upload scores of posts daily and keep close tabs on the number of fans. They microblog at work, off work, over meals and in the bathroom, sometimes even forgo sleep. Such symptoms are quite similar to those of Internet addiction and game addiction. However, this syndrome differs from addiction in that the former not only illustrates young people's thirst for and dependency on the Internet, but also their need to be cared for, to access information ahead of others or mainstream media, to arouse resonance among others by posting messages, and to obtain a pleasant sensation and a sense of achievement by accumulating fans and interacting with others. Our survey among Shanghai youth shows that 10.1 percent of young people spend 30–60 minutes daily on microblogging, and 9 percent spend over one hour every day. Some among the 9 percent are most likely to suffer from »microblog syndrome«. And the figure is likely to rise as microblogging expands in functionality and popularity. Data show that the younger the person, the more willing they are to accept microblogging, the higher the ownership rate of smart phones and other devices, and the more welcoming they are to the presence of microblogging in their lives. Consequently, young people born in the 1980s and 1990s are more engaged with microblogging.

Table 4: Daily time spent on microblogging (%)

Time	Respondents	Percentage
Less than 10 minutes	509	54.9
10–30 minutes	241	26.0
30–60 minutes	94	10.1
Above 60 minutes	83	9.0

Microblog posts can be uploaded via mobile phones, SMS and Internet client site. Convenient access makes it possible to issue and receive information anytime, anywhere. Any odd bit of spare time can be used for microblogging, so that users are kept constantly updated. Responses to our multiple-choice question »when do you microblog?« show that users most often microblog when they are waiting or on their way somewhere (for example, travelling).

2. YOUNG PEOPLE SHOW A STRONG DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE AGE OF MICROBLOGGING

With the rapid development of science and technology, the popularity of smart phones and other terminal devices and the maturing of software, microblogging has become all the rage around the world. Hundreds of millions of microblog users constantly share real-time news and experiences from every corner. A simple text may generate a Butterfly Effect. The humblest person may be able to rally multitudes. All this heralds the arrival of the Age of Microblogging.

Thanks to hologram technology, microblogs can be updated constantly. Microblogging is user friendly and highly efficient in transmission. The 140-character-per-post limit lowers the entry level for content generation and readership. Instead of lengthy discourses, a few words or sentences suffice, which caters to the general public preference for light reading and fragmentary information as they live their busy lives. In the microblogging environment, everyone can generate content and share with others in real time. Compared to other media, microblogging stands out for its real-time presence. Such functionalities as »Post,« »Repost,« »Follow« and »Comment« facilitate information sharing as well as interaction between bloggers and visitors.

Microblogging service providers are constantly introducing new features. In addition to text content, images and videos can also be attached. Besides, some microblog sites have integrated the social networking functionalities of the usual BBS² and SNS sites. Moreover, today's mobile devices are so convenient and multi-media-enabled that microblogging sites enjoy higher and higher user retention rates. Consequently, habitual users of traditional online communities and forums have gradually migrated towards microblogging sites, leaving a scene of desolation behind.

In response to our survey question on why they register microblog accounts, most young people indicate that they strongly favor the social networking feature. Microblogging provides an excellent platform

for them to share what they see, feel, experience and think anywhere, anytime.

Table 5: Major drivers of microblog account registration (%)

Choices	Respondents	Percentage
Follow friends and acquaintances	364	45.0
A convenient means of self-expression	317	39.2
Discussion of hot topics with others	275	34.0
Follow celebrities and stars in the hope of interacting with them	200	24.8
Hands-on experience with something new	172	21.3
Access the latest information	141	17.5
Hear expert views	119	14.7
»If I'm not in, I'm out«	87	10.8
Make new friends	48	5.9
Brief, convenient, accessible by mobile phones	39	4.8
Kill time	28	3.5
See what others think about oneself or a third person	6	0.7
Others	6	0.7
Product or service promotion	2	0.2

Our inter-generational cross-analysis shows that young people born in the 1990s and 1980s very much want to express themselves through microblogs, with 42.7 percent and 39.1 percent, respectively, choosing »A convenient means of self-expression«; whereas only 19.0 percent of those born in the 1970s tick this option. Most people born in the 1990s are still students; 33.3 percent of them choose »Follow celebrities and stars in the hope of interacting with them«, a much higher percentage than that of people born in the 1980s (20.8 percent) and 1970s (19.0 percent). This indicates that idol worship is inversely related to age. On the other hand, people born in the 1970s care more about expert views than those born in the 1980s and 1990s. This indicates that this older and maturer group

² BBS (Bulletin Board System) is alternatively known as online forum in China.

are more interested in using microblogs, for example, to keep abreast of the industry they are in with a view of furthering career development. Further analysis reveals content differences in microblogs posted by people born in the 1990s, 1980s and 1970s. Those born in the 1990s are more self-centered and more prone to share personal thoughts or feelings: 70.8 percent choose »personal thoughts or feelings«, a much higher figure than the 59.4 percent of those born in the 1980s or the 55.1 percent of those born in the 1970s. The younger the individual is, the more willing they are to express themselves. By contrast, those born in the 1980s and 1970s are more active in making comments on social events and public affairs.

Since microblogging is well on the way to becoming a major platform for information dissemination and a new Internet portal, major portal websites are investing heavily in microblogging services. One major promotional strategy is to invite celebrities to register accounts and post messages. Celebrities attracting massive fans are highly influential. Public events reposted by them are amplified multiple times. For example, Ms. Yao Chen, whose microblogs top the weibo.com ranking, has over 17 million fans. Her no-more-than-140-character posts are read synchronously by millions of people who may repost or comment anytime. Traditional media are competing in a losing game for instant reach.

Trend-spotters need only take a look at which microbloggers young people follow, because who you

Table 6: An inter-generational cross-analysis of microblog account registration (%)

Choices		Decade of birth		
		1990s	1980s	1970s
A convenient means of self-expression	Respondents	96	195	8
	Percentage	42.7	39.1	19.0
Discussion of hot topics with others	Respondents	75	167	15
	Percentage	33.3	33.5	35.7
Follow friends and acquaintances	Respondents	83	239	24
	Percentage	36.9	47.9	57.1
Follow celebrities and stars in the hope of interacting with them	Respondents	75	104	0.8
	Percentage	33.3	20.8	19.0
Hear about expert views	Respondents	22	84	0.8
	Percentage	9.8	16.8	19.0
Kill time	Respondents	9	18	0.1
	Percentage	4.0	3.6	2.4
»If I'm not in, I'm out«	Respondents	24	56	0.5
	Percentage	10.7	11.2	11.9
Make new friends	Respondents	21	23	0.1
	Percentage	9.3	4.6	2.4
Product or service promotion	Respondents	0.0	1	0.1
	Percentage	0.0	0.2	2.4
Get hands-on experience with something new	Respondents	47	109	0.8
	Percentage	20.9	21.8	19.0
Access latest information	Respondents	34	95	7
	Percentage	15.1	19.0	16.7
See what others think about oneself or a third person	Respondents	0.1	0.5	0.0
	Percentage	0.4	1.0	0.0
Brief, convenient, accessible by mobile phone	Respondents	0.8	24	0.4
	Percentage	3.6	4.8	9.5
Other	Respondents	3	0.2	0.1
	Percentage	1.3	0.4	2.4

follow decides where you obtain information and what you get. Our survey shows that as many as 82.8 percent of Shanghai youth follow »Friends, classmates and colleagues in real life«. This is their major source of information. It also shows that microblogging is a good socializing platform for young people, where information newly obtained can be shared instantly with friends. In addition, 53.1 percent of Shanghai youth follow celebrities and stars, which has always been the case: celebrities breed topical news and paparazzi, while microblogging spreads the words much faster and satisfies people's curiosity better. The majority of Top-10 microbloggers at weibo.com are stars boasting a large number of active young fans, who are early adopters of microblogging with a view to following their favorite stars and interacting with the latter constantly. Some young fans register microblog accounts for the exclusive purpose of star worship. Everything that appears in their microblogs is related to their favorite stars. Microblogging makes stars more accessible to young people and therefore more influential in cyberspace. Of course, stars enjoy this and make the most of it. Fans of the same star also follow each other.

Table 7: Microbloggers followed (%)

Items	Respondents	Percentage
Friends, classmates and colleagues in real life	773	82.8
Celebrities, stars	496	53.1
Senior industry experts	284	30.4
Strangers	78	8.4
Others	40	4.3

Our survey among Shanghai youth shows that young people are most interested in news and social comment (70.1 percent), which is about 30 percentage points higher than their interest in lifestyle information (43.8 percent) and anecdotes (41.8 percent); 35.9 percent are interested in philosophy of everyday life, 34.3 percent in humor, 33.5 percent in art and literature, 32.0 percent in the lives of celebrities and stars, 30.4 percent in economic information and 15.9 percent in science and education. It can be concluded that young people are mainly concerned with all kinds

of information. Microblogging has become the best vehicle for news. At the same time, young people regard microblogging more as a tool of entertainment than a tool of education.

Table 8: Microblogging topics of interest (%)

Items	Respondents	Percentage
News, social comments	599	70.1
Lifestyle information	374	43.8
Anecdotes	357	41.8
Philosophy of everyday life	307	35.9
Humor	293	34.3
Art and literature	286	33.5
Life of celebrities and stars	273	32.0
Economic information	260	30.4
Science and education	136	15.9
Others	17	2.0

3. FEWER OBSTACLES TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE AGE OF MICROBLOGGING

The rapid development of microblogging has changed how information is disseminated. No other media can match its speed and reach. There are two forms of real-time information dissemination via microblogging: posting and reposting. Microbloggers follow others as others follow them. By and by, a giant invisible network is being built, with each microblogging page acting as a node that receives and sends out information. Thanks to this network, information is duplicated and resent on a large scale in a short time, just like a virus. Both form and content contribute to the rapid growth of microblogging.

New media are increasingly the first to arouse and reflect public sentiment. According to a *Report on Chinese Public Opinion and Crisis Management* published in July 2011, new media were the first to expose 89 out of 138 hot issues in 2010, accounting for 65 percent, 9 percent higher than in 2009. Traditional media were the first to report 47 hot issues, or 34 percent, 10 percent lower than in 2009. Together, the two now constitute mainstream media. Microblog-

ging is extraordinarily powerful in communicating public events and emergencies. Microblog users, the majority of whom are young people, take an active part in social and public affairs, which is revolutionizing the social ecosystem in China. Microblogs are increasingly becoming news sources. According to the *Annual Chinese Microblogging Report 2010* published by Public Opinion Research Laboratory at Shanghai Jiaotong University on December 28, 2010, eleven out of the top-50 cases that aroused public sentiment in 2010 were first made known to the world through microblogs, accounting for 11 percent. The first such case that year was house demolition in Yihuang,³ followed by a car driven by the son of Li Gang running over two students at Hebei University,⁴ the dispute between Tencent and 360,⁵ the physical attack on Fang Zhouzi,⁶ and the fake degree of Tang Jun.⁷ These cases were heatedly debated among microbloggers,

which led to a media revolution.

Online media not only shapes public opinion, but also facilitates positive resolution of hot issues. This kind of influence gained importance in 2011 as the number of microbloggers grew. Examples include: »cracking down on the abduction of children by microblogging«, initiated by Yu Jianrong⁸ earlier in the year; a local administrator flirting with his mistress through microblogs without realizing that he was being followed;⁹ public distrust of charitable organizations triggered by Guo Meimei's showing off her luxury possessions;¹⁰ homicides committed by Yao Jiaxin¹¹ and Li Changkui¹² which gave rise to a public rethink on the judicial system; and doubts cast on the handling of a train derailment on July 23¹³ by the Ministry of Railways.

Microblogs on such topics have been so influential that they have become the focus of attention of

³ The self-immolation of three residents of Yihuang County, Jiangxi Province, on September 10, 2010 in protest against the demolition of their house did not attract public attention until microbloggers intervened. Microbloggers also helped them to claim their rights.

⁴ A car accident on the campus of Hebei University on the evening of October 16, 2010 caused the death of one girl student and the injury of another. When stopped, the driver shouted arrogantly, »Sue me. I don't care. My father is Li Gang!« Later he was confirmed to be Li Qiming, son of Li Gang, Deputy Director of a police substation in Baoding. The incident aroused so much discussion online and offline that »my father is Li Gang« became the most frequently quoted catch phrase online.

⁵ Between November 2010 and April 2011, Tencent QQ and Qihoo 360 Antivirus, the two biggest Chinese client side applications operators, sabotaged each other online in order to grab more market share.

⁶ On the night of August 29, 2010, Fang Zhouzi, a famous Netizen known for exposing fraudulent practices, announced through his weibo.com account that he had been attacked and injured by some thugs near his home. On September 21, Xiao Chuanguo was arrested as a suspect. Investigations proved that Xiao had hired others to hurt Fang because the latter had prevented him from being elected as Academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences by exposing his academic finagling.

⁷ Tang Jun is the most famous business executive in China. He studied in Japan and the United States. After retiring as President Emeritus of Microsoft China in 2004, he was first appointed President of Shanda Interactive Entertainment and then President of Newhuadu Industrial Group. In 2010, Fang Zhouzi, a popular science writer, broke the news that Tang had faked his degree.

⁸ During the 2011 Spring Festival, Professor Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences initiated a microblog post entitled »Take a Picture of Child Beggars You See.« This microblog was reposted by numerous Netizens, influencing public opinion and attracting traditional media follow-up. Microblogging and »cracking down on the abduction of children« became the most searched phrases online during the Chinese New Year. This incident is regarded as a milestone in microblog communication.

⁹ At 3 pm on June 20, 2011, users of groups.tianya.cn spotted some weird goings-on between two microbloggers who followed each other exclusively. The two were apparently having an affair, and they posted several microblogs planning a hotel room rendezvous without realizing that all posts were public. They thought microblogging was just another online chatting tool. Later, the male blogger was confirmed to be Director of a Public Health Bureau in Liyang, Changzhou.

¹⁰ On June 21, 2011, a Netizen with the screen name »Guo Meimei Baby« attracted attention for claiming to be a 20-year-old girl »living in a big house and driving a Maserati« and ID-ed as »General Manager of Chinese Red Cross Commerce.« As a result, people challenged the charitable nature of the Red Cross Society China. Later, the Red Cross Society China denied any connection with »Guo Meimei.« Sina.com apologized for approving such a fake ID.

¹¹ Yao Jiaxin was a junior student at Xi'an Conservatory of Music in 2010. Late at night on October 20, his car knocked down a pedestrian. Instead of getting the injured person to hospital, he stabbed her eight times, killing her, and then fled the scene. On October 23, he surrendered himself to the police accompanied by both parents. On January 11, 2011, Xi'an Procuratorate instituted a public prosecution accusing Yao of intentional homicide. On April 22 the same year, Yao was sentenced to death and lifelong deprivation of political rights. On the morning of June 7, Yao was executed. His depravity attracted considerable attention among microbloggers.

¹² On May 16, 2009, Li Changkui, a resident of Qiaojia County, Yunnan Province, raped and then killed 18-year-old Wang Jiafei, a girl living next door. Not only that, he also killed Wang's three-year-old brother Wang Jiahong. At his first trial, he was sentenced to death by Zhaotong Intermediate Court of Yunnan Province on July 15, 2010. In March 2011, Yunnan High People's Court overturned the ruling and handed out a death sentence with a reprieve. Media exposure led to extensive questioning and challenges, resulting in a retrial on August 22 by Yunan High People's Court and subsequently a death sentence for Li.

¹³ On July 23, 2011, a rear-end collision occurred between Train D301 and Train D3115. Microblogs aroused considerable public attention with regard to the rescue and clean-up operations.

traditional media and society in general. The »Xiao Yueyue« incident, pictures of which were broadcast by microblogs, gripped China. On October 13, 2011, Xiao Yueyue (whose full name was Wang Yue), a two-year-old girl in Foshan, was run over by a delivery van. At least 18 people walked past her body without so much as a glance. Eventually, Chen Xianmei, a 58-year-old scrap peddler, came to her rescue. On October 21, Xiao Yueyue died in hospital. This incident was widely covered in and outside China. The public called into question the prevailing value system and condemned those who simply folded their arms and watched a toddler die. There was a call for people to »wake up«. Guangdong Provincial Party Committee's Subcommittee on Political and Legislative Affairs solicited suggestions from people through its official microblog account on how to better punish cold-heartedness while rewarding »good Samaritans«.

While the Xiao Yueyue incident brought about a stern questioning of moral standards and consciences, microbloggers spread the heroic deeds of someone dubbed the »Most Beautiful Teacher«¹⁴ from Jiamusi, Heilongjiang Province, and the »Most Beautiful Driver«¹⁵ from Hangzhou to demonstrate people's aspirations with regard to altruism and the positive side of human nature.

Microblogging facilitates public participation. It promotes transparency while eliminating information asymmetry and »black box« operations. It has become a powerful tool of public supervision. As the saying goes, »onlookers are transforming China.« A signed article in *People's Daily* stated,

China has entered an age in which everybody has a microphone. When there are multiple channels of communication, if you don't release objective information in time through authoritative vehicles, others may release distorted or false information through other vehicles, thereby manipulating public opinion. Public consultation, a major approach and mechanism of democratic decision-making, costs little,

reaches the masses, and encourages truth telling. Acknowledgement of such an approach shows respect for citizen power.

People's Daily, China's official political organ, exhorts officials to update their administration by adapting to the age of Internet. It even goes on to propose the »institutionalization of microblog interaction to make it a must for political communication.« Such a statement by such a high-profile official medium reflects the impact of microblogging on China's political ecosystem (see: www.people.com.cn, accessed at 07:26, September 14, 2011).

It is important to note that since the majority of users of microblogging and other new media are young people, the most heated microblog discussions are also initiated by young people. Microblogging is an important means of participation for the youth of the new generation. According to *A Study of Microblogging Opinion Leaders in China* recently published by the Public Opinion and Communications Research Laboratory at Fudan University,¹⁶ young and middle-aged people born in the 1960s and 1970s account for over 70 percent (72 percent, to be exact) of opinion leaders in the microblogging sphere. Active and influential, they are increasingly taking on the role of net citizens. It's true that, as illustrated by the *Shanghai Youth Development Report*, young people born in the 1980s and 1990s are also active microbloggers, but their overall influence is still relatively limited. In general, they respond to and follow opinion leaders.

Our survey among young people concerning their willingness to comment on social events, public affairs or emergencies shows the following: 25 percent are willing to comment and believe that microblogs represent true popular will; 53.9 percent are willing to participate in discussions but are not entirely sure of the authenticity of others' views; 21.1 percent will not participate in discussions. We see that most young people are willing to take part in online discussions,

¹⁴ Zhang Lili, a Chinese teacher at the No. 19 Middle School in Jiamusi, Heilongjiang Province, sustained serious injuries after saving two students from being hit by an oncoming bus on May 8, 2012. Later her legs had to be amputated above the knee. People named her the »Most Beautiful Teacher«.

¹⁵ Wu Bing, a bus driver in Hangzhou, was smashed by an iron block while driving a bus with 24 passengers. In the subsequent one minute and 16 seconds, Mr. Wu continued to apply the brake and shift gears, not to mention warning passengers not to wander out onto the busy highway despite being in tremendous pain. He died on June 1. People named him the »Most Beautiful Driver.«

¹⁶ Oriental Morning Post, March 10, 2012.

and hope to facilitate the resolution of issues through continued attention. They look for truth in microblogs. Inter-generational cross analysis shows that people born in the 1970s are the most enthusiastic participants: 84.9 percent of them indicated that they express their views and join discussions. The percentage of those participating falls with age: 80.2 percent for those born in the 1980s, and 73.9 percent for those born in the 1990s.

Table 9: Willingness to comment on social events, public affairs or emergencies (%)

Choices	Respondents	Percentage
Yes, microblogs represent true popular will	231	25.0
Yes, but not entirely sure of the authenticity of others' views	499	53.9
No, microblogs do not represent true popular will	195	21.1

In order to tidy up the microblogging environment, put a stop to the circulation of false information, rumors, gossips, invective, fraud, and verbal assaults targeting individuals, as well as to remove threats to social stability, Sina.com, Sohu.com, Netease.com, and Tencent now require real-name registration (since March 16, 2012). Any microblog, however short it is within the 140-character limit, must bear authentic personal information. The reactions of microbloggers have been extremely varied.

More than 80 percent of respondents in a mini-survey conducted by Sina.com support real-name registration.¹⁷ Their comments include: »I'll go on microblogging as usual. Real-name registration doesn't affect me«; »microblogging just offers a free source of information, a convenient platform for interaction among Netizens ... There is nothing to worry about as long as we avoid slander and observe the law.« Some industry insiders believe that real-name registration helps cyberspace credibility and information authenticity. In the long run, individual bloggers are more receptive to a

microblogging platform that offers authentic instead of false or unhealthy information. Likewise, institutional bloggers look forward to a stably growing social media platform that reflects true market value. In fact, many foreign SNS sites also require real-name registration.

However, many microbloggers are concerned with possible leaks of personal information after real-name registration came into being. For example, in 2011, hackers hacked into some South Korean SNS sites, leaking information on about 35 million users. Quite a number of similar cases took place in China. Such leaks cause immeasurable damage to users. Administration over the Internet is a focal issue as well as a major challenge in social administration. Since microblogging is growing rapidly in influence and spreading information in leaps and bounds, real-name registration for microbloggers is an effective way to strengthen the administration of the Internet and to regulate Internet public opinion. However, some people are worried that it may hamper free expression and public supervision.

How to do administer the Internet properly, including microblogging, is therefore very much a hot research topic.

4. CONCLUSION

According to *The 29th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, there are 513 million Netizens in China. In other words, over one-third of Chinese people have experience with the Internet. The rapid development of microblogging started a new era in which »everyone operates a news agency and everyone has a microphone«. The vast bulk of Chinese Netizens are no longer content with obtaining information online. They are now generating and disseminating information. Netizens, seemingly inhabiting a virtual world, have gradually become a »weather vane« of the real world. Young microbloggers have become a force that cannot be ignored. In their own way, they are contributing to the progress of civilization, prosperity, justice and democracy in China. Our analysis shows that youth participation in the Age of Microblogging has

¹⁷ See: http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2012_03/17/13258625_0.shtml »Four Major Portal Sites Started Real-name Registration Yesterday, Giving Out Handsome Rewards to Real-name Users.«

the following characteristics :

1. Young microbloggers participate more rationally than previously. Through microblogs they access all kinds of information and perspectives, make comments or repost messages, seek to air their views through standard channels, and protect the interests of themselves and the general public.
2. Authorities are more responsive than before. When issues become hot social issues thanks to microblogs, authorities respond (either actively or passively), which is a fundamental change in attitude and mindset.
3. Forms of participation are now more formalized and professional than before. Many of the microblogs that have had such a strong impact on society in recent years are not just a matter of young people getting something off their chests. Instead, there are often in-depth analyses by opinion leaders, clashes of views among experts, constant agenda-setting by media, and even institutional reforms resulting from all this.

Microblogging maintains its leading position among Internet applications in 2012. Data show that on the first day of the Year of the Dragon, microblogs containing new year greetings flooded cyberspace. Weibo.com recorded the highest number of posts, about three times that of the previous year (Wenhui Daily, February 7, 2012). After the Age of the Internet, we are now seeing the Age of Microblogging, with millions of fingers touching screens or moving around keypads. Microblogs look set to push society forward immeasurably.

Note: All data, unless otherwise noted, are quoted from the survey report of the Shanghai Youth Research Center. For details, please refer to Innovation, Transformation and *Shanghai Youth – Shanghai Youth Development Report 2011* (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2011).

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