Berkshire Encyclopedia on New Media

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Berkshire Publishing has recently published its Encyclopedia of China with contributions by China scholars like Sherman Cochran, Kerry Brown, Judy Polumbaum and many others and featuring one thousand entries on a diverse range of historical, social and cultural topics.

A few of the entries caught our attention as a little unusual for a print encyclopedia—including entries on “internet use,” “online social networking,” and “blogging.” As these topics are of particular interest to us (and we’re guessing to many of you, too), we were curious how Berkshire would cover them in the encyclopedia format. Here are a few relevant excerpts (selected from much longer entries), reprinted with Berkshire’s permission.

**Internet Use**

Internet use is regulated and monitored by the government. Watchers scan website content for hot political issues, such as Falun Gong and the situation in Tibet, and content deemed socially unhealthy, such as pornography and violence. Webmasters also monitor online discussions in chat rooms, a method of self-censoring. Generally speaking, Chinese Internet users accept government intervention much more readily than users in Western countries would do. In CNIP surveys conducted in 2003, 2005, and 2007, more than 80 percent of respondents in China said that the Internet should be controlled (mainly on pornography and violence) and that the government should be the controlling agent.

**Social Networking**

China’s online youth are finding friendship and solace, as well as information and entertainment, in cyberspace. They are searching for others who can relate to their experiences and who may share their mind-set. Online social networking is also becoming functional and a way to adjust to real-world relationships. Online dating sites, such as lotus.com and love21cn.com (or Jiayuan.com), are increasingly chosen for meeting potential marriage partners. Web portals, such as MSN, Skype, and QQ (which boasts more than 220 million users), are accessed by many merchants as customer-service and marketing tools to reach out to real-world customers...

For many Chinese, online communities offer an alternative to traditional sources of information, an alternative that is often viewed as more trustworthy than corporate or government sources and more relevant than received wisdom handed down from elders with assurances that it is true because they say so.
Social and entertainment infrastructures in China are more limited than they are in the West. The Internet, however, provides easy access to entertainment. Its interactive nature seems to fit particularly well with Chinese culture.

Educational opportunities are still uneven in China, with most major universities and information centers still clustered in and around Beijing and Shanghai, but the Internet allows students anywhere to make use of online databases and other global information sources. Online initiatives are seen as crucial to solving the East-West educational divide...

BBS, relationship management media (sites such as MySpace or Cyworld), massively multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPGs), file-sharing systems, and wikis are examples of social media in which many people interact with many other people—from the many to the many. Cyworld is an interesting example. Originating in South Korea, it currently has some 17 million users. It combines the features of MySpace, Flickr, and virtual worlds; its many users upload approximately 6.2 million photos daily. (Flickr, by contrast, uploads approximately 500,000 photos daily.)...

Another interesting phenomenon is the race to be the first to respond to a post. Being the first to respond demonstrates respect; therefore, it has special importance. The first-response slot is given a special name: the “sofa.” People routinely compete to “grab the sofa” 抢沙发, that is, to try to be the first reader to respond.

Blogs

The year 2003 was important for the development of blogs in China; the number of users reached 200,000. In 2004 came the commercialization of the blog. In 2005 blogging spread from the elites to all netizens and non-netizens. In July 2005 the first Chinese blog movie was made. Since 2006 the number of Chinese bloggers has grown rapidly. According to the Survey Report of Chinese Internet, by the end of November 2007 the number of Chinese blogs had reached 72.82 million, whereas the number of Chinese bloggers had reached 47 million—30 million more than in August 2006. Among those bloggers 17 million were active.

The statistics of CNNIC show that only 3 percent of blogs are visited more than one hundred times per day, and 8 percent are visited more than fifty times per day. It is difficult to exploit the advertisement value of blogs if one only operates a single blog as a media forum.

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