

## **Research on public sphere in cyberspace:**

**Dominance, verbal conflict and interaction processes of China's online forum**

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## **Introduction**

Many studies demonstrated that use of Internet could profoundly affect the balance of liberty and democracy in Western society, which has high level of Internet penetration. For the developing countries, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have huge potential to influence societies. This study is set in the context of China, a country which is undergoing economic and political development. Using Habermas's theory of the public sphere as an analytical framework, this study identifies features of the public sphere and uses them as criterion to examine whether the sampled online forum can be viewed as public sphere. This research was conducted in a certain period of time when a new cultural policy was issued in China to ban online dissemination of unlicensed TV programs (especially overseas programs). The objectives of this research are to measure the real discussion process about a new policy and what are participants' main views about this policy. A lot of studies about public sphere focus on discussion about political issues. The study chooses another angle to look into the cultural public sphere (MuGuigan, 2005) and aims to stress the value of public opinions formed among cultural consumers. In order to answer research questions in this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to examine research questions, including content analysis, social network analysis and discourse analysis. A limited public sphere is found, which can provide a safe online space for participants to express voice freely, but at the same contains some potential challenges such as lack of rationality and speech responsibility. The implication for policy-makers is provided that participants of online forum are speaking to the power but in a one-way communication paradigm, and policy-makers should pay attention to their voice. This paper contributes to

the study about cultural public sphere and social network analysis for online forum.

### **Public Sphere and CMC**

The concept of “public sphere” was first introduced by Habermas into media analysis to analyze its political role, based on his early construction of bourgeois public sphere. Habermas (1989) defines the public sphere as ‘a network for communicating information and points of view’ about common good. A genuine public sphere should have the following common features (Calhoun, 1992):

- The focus of the discussion in the public sphere is on issues of common concern to the public.
- It is inclusive in principle and should be equally accessible to all who may be interested in those issues or may be influenced by those issues.
- The proceeding of this communicative action is based on rational-critical deliberation.
- The deliberation itself is subject to normative standard of evaluation, and should be solely judged on the validity and rationality of the communication, rather than on the identity of the speaker or the decision from an arbiter.

The theory of public sphere has provided a theoretical framework for scholars to interpret the function of Internet (Schules, 2005; Dahlberg, 2005; Fung, 2000; Kellner, 2004). It is stated the communication technology revolution not only rekindled Habermas’s ideal model of public sphere, but also extended its domain to a virtual public sphere (Han, 2007). ICTs are expected to act as a platform where people can freely discuss social and cultural issues and alleviate the ills of democracy, as it can facilitate information flow and instant

interaction (Dahl, 1989). However, some scholars doubt the democratizing function of Internet and state the ideal public sphere is hard to emerge (Sunstein, 2007; Benkler, 2006). In the cyber space, information overload makes the individuals fall into the fragmentation of attention, losing the common ground for political discourse or action (Benkler, 2006). There are some identified challenges to online public sphere, such as digital divide, fragmentation of netizens, the quality of online discourse, and possible erosion by commercialism (Dahlberg, 2001; Franko, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Katz, 1997; Luke 1998).

### **China's online public sphere**

The concept of public sphere, while is of western origin, can be modified into the context of the eastern world and especially Chinese cyberspace in this study. According to the latest China Internet Network Information Center's (CNNIC) national survey report, there were 2.98 billion netizens in late 2008, with a rise rate of 41.9% from last year. The penetration achieved 22.6%, a little higher than the global average 21.9%.

In China, more and more websites have developed independent on the state. Online forum is among this booming trend. Some forums are taking the role as deliberation space for political affairs, and some others focus on economic and cultural issues, while indirectly associated with political and democratic aims (Zheng & Wu, 2005). Due to the reality of regulation on media content, participants of online forum are cautious. However there are still some banned by the government for their possible contribution to erosion of national stability and public confidence.

Scholars have paid much attention to online forum and its social impacts, connecting it to

the notion of public sphere and civic society. Considering the power of public opinion in cyberspace, Luo (2005) proposes that the Internet is becoming social guiding media and could help to construct public sphere in China that approaches the ideal. Yu (2007) states that online forum is playing a major role in establishing online public sphere, as it has an open access to remarks on various topics and can facilitate interactivity of interpersonal deliberation.

The success of online forums to China's democratic progress has been witnessed in many cases. A prominent one is "Sun Zhigang Event", which eventually prompted revising the law of population mobilization. It is labeled as a progress of China's legal system. Many studies conducted on China's cyberspace mentioned a forum named 'The Strengthening-China Forum' (SCF), which is initiated by People's Daily and has still been the most popular political BBSs in China (Zhan, 2002; Wang, 2004; Liu, 2005). Guo (2002) did a content analysis on SCF immediately after 9.11 terrorism attack in US and found that there were 12,210 messages within the following 24 hours. Zhou (2006) regards SCF's success in essence as a result of proactive policy the Chinese State has adopted in dealing with the Internet. He concludes that Internet could provide an important new avenue for making politics more public and potentially more democratic, however it has never been a utopian itself and could not convert China to democracy.

### **Youth participation in subaltern public sphere**

Fraser (1991) suggests it is hard for so many people to have effective and active discussion in a single public sphere. Set in the new media environment, cyberspace can be viewed as an

overarching public sphere and there are multiple subaltern public spheres which allow involvement of specific groups of members, such as youth. Various online platforms can be powerfully potential space for them to participate in civic issues. However there are some factors which will influence youth's participation and its effect. Even though they are well educated and progressive in spirit, youth has a limited amount of political and economic resources. Furthermore, youth is still experiencing socialization, and to some degree lack of political knowledge or motivation. The decline in the institutional structures within which young people are traditionally socialized into adult responsibilities is also adverse to youth civic engagement (Livingstone, 2007). Lesinski (2008) finds the absence of youth voices in policy-making, owing to closed access to public sphere. He also highlights that the greatest obstacle for them to overcome was identity, partly due to the fact that they haven't been fully developed human being and lack of speech responsibility which has a passive effect on civic participation.

In western society, netizens are represented by middle-class as a dominant public. While a typical Chinese 'netizen' could be described as a twenty-something urban unmarried male with an undergraduate degree, who surfs online for news and entertainment. "Raging youth" is a well-known nickname for Chinese young netizens. This large group is self-motivated, well-educated, and seems to detest anything orthodox, sequential, and restrictive. They pay attention to almost every aspect of life, political, economic and cultural, and are fond of aggressive debates. Youths are especially active in online forums, where they call for aggressive rhetoric, policy, and action. They are eager to devote themselves to what they regard momentous (Wu, 2006).

Since to some extent youth sets the tone and shapes the sentiment for China's cyber-culture, all these features of their online behaviors can significantly impact the online environment. Prior studies conducted in China's cyberspace find that this area is featured by online chase, collective attack and lack of rationality. Deliberation in public sphere is featured by rational-critical argument, which is labeled as "quality of public discourse" by Habermas (1989). Participants stand at the locus of reason and justice, and take on the task of challenging the state secrecy. During the deliberation, it doesn't necessarily aim to generate consensus or compromise, which means conflicts are inevitable. It is revealing truth through "pure reasoning", not just through dialogue. The mentioned characteristics in China's cyberspace have posed some possible challenges to the construction of public sphere.

### **Dominance in CMC**

Dominance can be understood both as a personality characteristic, a need or disposition to control (Allport, 1937; Wiggins & Broughton, 1985) and a product of interpersonal interaction and group behavior, established when participants exchange message and they mutually position themselves in dominance or submissive role (Rogers & Escudero, 2004; Rogers & Farace, 1975). It is related to attempts to lead, argue, persuade, influence, and make group decisions (Bales, 1970; Murray, 1938).

Generally speaking, there are two models which have been used to analyze the dominance issue in CMC. The first one is the model of social information processing (SIP). This model proposes that language choices in text messages should compensate for the lack of nonverbal behaviors and contribute to the development of initial social perceptions, such as

dominance. Although the transmission of social information takes more time through computers than in person, people eventually form more refined perceptions of one another's psychological and interpersonal orientation as a consequence of the accumulation of message exchanges (Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992).

Another analytical framework for dominance level is the Hyperpersonal model, which proposes that computer-mediated group members may form stereotyped and more extreme social perceptions of partners through a process of selective self-presentation, the reallocation of cognitive resources to message encoding and decoding, idealized perception by receivers, and the reciprocation of self-fulfilling partner impressions (Walther, 1996; Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001). In particular, under conditions of limited information the hyperpersonal model predicts that people may develop more extreme perceptions of partners (Walther, 1996).

However these two models can not settle down the dispute about whether the dominance is amplified in online context. Rains (2005) suggests that dominance and its influence are significantly diminished when using ICTs in the organizational context, due to lack of nonverbal cues, which are associated with status and control over others. Huang & Wei (2001) find through allowing for simultaneous contributions and dampening social cues, GSSs (Group Support Systems) environment can provide all team members the opportunity to influence a group's interaction and decision. This perspective is parallel to supportive statement of online public sphere. In contrast, some other scholars disagree with the notion that ICTs could encourage equality of participation and discourage dominance by an individual member or subgroup. It is found that dominance and status differences tend to

persist in mediated communication and in some instances, become even more exaggerated than in face-to-face interactions (Boucher, Hancock & Dunham, 2004; Pena, Walther, & Hancock, 2005; Spears & Lea, 1994; Weisband, Schneider, & Connolly, 1995).

Dominance issue is related to what Habermas called “quantity of participation”, which prompts continual expansion to more and more participation. In what we call subaltern public sphere with specific group of members, it means whether those people are willing to engage into discussion of common issues. Wang (2007) conducts a content analysis and finds that based on the nonofficial statistics from the Peking University Bulletin Boards (China), 30% of the users accounts for 80% of all comments, most users were just readers of online comments while not frequently posting their comments. This means that although access is open, not all Internet users are engaged online citizens, which is related to the issue of motivation in civic engagement.

#### **Case study on “*Lost Forum*” in Baidu Tieba**

Based on the distinction of three meta-areas of societal life, Nieminen (2007) makes a differentiation of cultural, political, and economic public sphere. Most studies focus on political public sphere, which directly involves political deliberation based on rational-critical discourse, and seldom take a look at other domains. This is possibly due to the emphasis on the political or democratizing function of public sphere and the critique on passive cultural consumption (Habermas, 1989). However, the formation of public opinion can take place through extended public deliberation in other societal areas as well. This study chooses to explore the division of cultural public sphere and focus on the public discussion of a cultural

policy. It was set under a specific time background, when a new policy was announced by the State Administration of Radio and Television at the end of March, 2009, aiming to emphasize regulation of online video programs. It banned the spread of unlicensed programs in cyberspace. The regulation policy is detrimental to some websites, which have a strong dependence on unlicensed video programs including oversea dramas, movies, and TV shows. All those contents are often uploaded by members of online communities, who can get access to overseas programs. Those uploaded programs are also the only resources which can help the website get some avenue from advertisers.

“Baidu Tieba” is a popular cultural community for Chinese youth, which consists of a lot of sub-communities or forums with different concerns. There is a ranking system within each forum, which can produce a list of “honored members” based on their contributions to community. This list can be engendered by the system automatically or by moderators of each forum. I have chosen one of the most active forums in “Baidu Tieba” to do a case study. This forum is named “*Lost*” (<http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=lost>), which gathers a lot of viewers for *Lost*, a popular American drama. Established at the beginning of 2006, “*Lost forum*” has already more than 550 official members.

The first reason to choose *Lost Forum* for analysis is due to its high liveness. From the daily visits rank in Baidu Tieba, this forum is always listed within top five. The active discussion there is indicating that people are not just passive consumers of cultural product, while they are interacting on some issues in this cultural sphere. The second reason lies in the structure of the forum which differentiates members’ status there. There are two communication areas in *Lost Forum*, one for discussion and interaction and another for uploading and downloading

videos. Videos are totally dominated by honored members, especially three moderators of this forum. Ordinary members are also able to upload videos following some instructions otherwise videos will be deleted by moderators. The IP participants cannot upload videos. The honored members are granted for contributions to upload videos. Thus the area for uploading and downloading has an evident hierarchical structure, which divides all participants into three categories. Based on the status level of participants, this study focuses on the discussion area and examines whether the dominance of honored members also exists there, in order to identify the real discourse process on the forum.

This study will address the following research questions and specific hypotheses.

**RQ1:** Can online forum be viewed as public sphere in cyberspace? What is the quantity of participation and the quality of discourse there? Is the social network of online forum indicating dominance of honored members?

*H1: The status of the poster is positively associated with the degree of dominance in discussion part.*

*H2: The rationality of discussion is negatively associated with the degree of verbal conflict.*

**RQ2:** Are the participants in the online forum just passive consumers of cultural product?

**RQ3:** Are they forming public opinions about the new issued policy? What are their main statements about the policy?

Internet arose in the mid of 1990s, when China was experiencing a tremendous reform. This country is changing and Internet is part of those changes. As there is limited offline space for people to participant into public dissemination, online forum can provide more opportunities for the right to express voice. From the perspective of political and social aspect

of online forum, the most benefit Internet brings to China is broadening the space for civic engagement and thus taking an important role in shaping democracy (Zhou, 2008). A lot of studies have showed that use of Internet could profoundly affect the balance of liberty and democracy in Western society. While there are still some defects embedded in the cyberspace, which can produce side effects. China's online forum is famous for online chase, collective attack and lack of rationality. It's of significance to examine the real situation of China's cyberspace and whether it can be viewed as public sphere, which can facilitate public participation and thus the formation of civic society.

### **Method**

In order to discover the complexity of online public sphere, this study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the research questions For RQ1, content analysis is used to collect data and regression is adopted to test hypotheses. Specifically for the dominance degree of honored members, numbers of related replies between two nodes (participants) are counted as links or tie attributes between them and then the graph reflecting their social network is created. For RQ2 and RQ3, content analysis is used to find out main topics discussed in the forum and discourse analysis is used to describe their real interaction process and their main views.

Using random sample by computer generator, 90 postings were retrieved from *Lost Forum*, which dated from March 31st to April 11th. Five of these postings failed to take into analysis due to no reply and thus totally 85 postings are included.

**Measure***Status of the initial poster*

The status of discussion participants is classified into three ranks, IP address participants, ordinary member and honored member of this forum. Three moderators are also honored members and I didn't classify this status. Only status of the initial poster of a topic is taken into account when coding.

*Dominance*

The total reply numbers of IP participants, ordinary members and honored members are counted separately with a topic. Then by calculating the proportion of non-honored (IP address participants and ordinary members) and honored members' reply numbers, the dominance of honored members during the interaction is acquired.

*Rationality*

This variable is used to measure to what degree participants are aware of using logic, intellect, and role-taking during interaction, not just relying their discussion on emotions. As the drama 'lost' concerns of complexity of some professional knowledge in the area of physics, chemistry and psychology and so on, and some participants use their specialty to give explanation and express opinions. I counted number of sentences containing following and similar words like 'your perspective is...while from other perspectives', and 'on one hand...and on the other hand', and professional intellections to code. At last the total number of such sentences is divided by this topic's total reply number and the proportion is calculated to

indicate the variable of rationality degree.

### *Verbal conflict degree*

Verbal conflict is a kind of personal attack by means of verbal cues like insulting words and symbol sighs. It can be pointed to a named participant I use the number of reply containing direct conflict words and sighs to divide the total reply number. The proportion is used to measure the conflict degree in discussion

### **Dominance degree of honored members**

It is found that 28% of postings were from IP address participants, 40% from ordinary members and 27.1% from honored members. The average value of honored members' dominance in discussion is .25, meaning that honored members only dominated about 1/4 of the discussion part. The mean value of verbal conflict and rationality of discussion is both .11 (See table1), showing that verbal conflict is not so intense in the discussion course and members do not use the logic of rationality frequently.

Regression analysis was adopted to test hypotheses. In order to examine the H1, dominance level is regarded as dependent variable and status of poster as independent variable. The dominance degree is positively associated with the status level of the initial poster (beta=.17,  $p < .0001$ ). This means if the poster is an honored member, there will be more repliers who are honored members and the discussion will be dominant by them. However, they are less likely to reply to postings initiated by ordinary members or IP participants. H1 was supported ( $F=6.74$ , adj. R square=.12, see Table2).

The same regression was conducted in order to test the H2, which was also supported ( $F=7.16$ , adj. R square=.13, see Table3). Rationality degree is negatively associated with the conflict degree, meaning that more use of logic and intellect will be more likely to engender less verbal conflicts and personal verbal attacks between participants ( $\beta=-.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Status of the initial poster is also negatively associated with verbal conflict degree ( $\beta=-.05$ ,  $p<.01$ ). If the initial poster is an honored member of this forum, there will be lower conflict degree during the discussion. While the lower the status of poster, the higher level of conflict degree. The possible explanation is that for posters with higher status, they will more aware of presence and potential risks for improper words, such as being removed from honor list. Considering the low rationality degree, the effect of status of initial poster contributes more to conflict degree and that is why the mean value of conflict is not high as expected.

### **Discussion topics and main claims on common issues**

Content analysis showed that reviews of plots are the most popular topics on this forum, which achieved 60%. Policy issue regarding culture industry is also an important portion, 21.2%. 10.6% is about actors/actresses in *Lost* and their real life activities. Other topics are about drama industry (4.7%) and voting (3.5%) (See table4). Below are their main statements, to some degree which can be regarded as opinions about common good.

### **Statement1: censorship is meaningless, evil and detrimental.**

Due to the issue of new regulation policy about online drama, participants are more likely to focus on this policy topic. However, most of these postings are expressing protestation and state that banning policy is evil and weak. The main motivation for participants to this forum

is the access to oversea drama, which they could not watch by mass media. It is the voluntary sharing of some members that make this forum operate regularly. Therefore this new policy is detrimental both to this forum and to its audience.

*rangefan 'I still could not understand this stupid policy. One day Internet will become useless.'*

*Shangshandaye 'Don't worry. This so called regulation is temporary. Remember the ban policy about online cartoon? We can still watch it online. Did the regulation work?'*

A few participants are optimistic that the regulation is only applicable to online video and downloading is still permitted. While some participants expected that situation was not so bright.

*Zhuangjiqiu007 'We could not become optimistic, as this is only the first step to ban online video. More measure will come out and at last it will expand to all the cyber space.'*

**Statement2: The new regulation policy is criticized because of its wrong emphasis.**

More participants suggested some passive dealing measure, which is to some extent resisting the policy, such as using the resources from the overseas website which the authority could not regulate. While a few members opposed passive opinions and provided vehement opinions about this regulation policy.

*Lengxuedongwu2008 'I feel confused by this regulation notice. Why use the word license? They should pay more attention to copyright, not the low level of license.'*

*Chem\_Market 'I think the authority should aim at the commercial use of online drama, not our sharing behaviors. Some producers use our resources to make pirated version for*

*profit.... I find that many people regarded this banning policy as a joke. This attitude is not advisable as a citizen. In a word, the authority should differentiate commercial and non-commercial conduct and focus on piracy and infringing.'*

**Statement3: Overseas drama is helpful to enlighten local drama industry.**

Although a few participants admit there are some good local dramas and not all overseas dramas are popular. Majority of the participants in this forum are American drama fans and consider that Chinese drama is not worthy of watching. That is why they express objection to the new regulation policy. Some of them did comparisons and gave suggestions to develop China's drama industry.

*116.228.160.\* 'Due to lack of talented person, invest, competitive environment and sense of quality, local drama is under development. The popularity of online oversea drama can afford some stimulus and local drama industry should learn the innovation spirit and try different styles.'*

The interesting finding of this forum is voting, which is the most common model of citizen involvement in public sphere. In this forum, voting is to assess a member's contributions. It stands for democracy to some degree, as the grading of evaluation is related to whether this person can be granted into the honor list. For example, wallwoods has posted a lot of popular commentaries. One moderator initiated a voting to evaluate wallwoods's contribution. According to the voting result, wallwoods entered the list of honored member and continued to post newest reviews on plots.

In general, participants in *Lost Forum* talked about common interests related to drama, policy and industry. Their opinions are somewhat self-related, such as paying more attention to self-benefits gained from the forum as motivation to participant.

### **Dynamics of interaction**

***Dominance of honored members*** was mentioned by IP address participants, expressing objection to dominance in reviews.

*125.77.171.\* 'I think these commentaries of drama by members are of a sense of personal worship. Some reviews seem logical, fascinating and entertaining, and dominate in this forum. However it is nonsense actually... I think the popularity of davidtea's posting is due to lack of competitors, not its quality.'*

*Verbal conflict* in this forum is not as serious as expected and a few conflicts even can be solved within discussion, like the below motioned example. This is a conflict between an ordinary member and an honored member. However there is no fixed model to solve conflicts, as moderators (all in the honored members list) in the forum just choose to delete some

*lingeiguandian. 'I apologize for the subjective criticize....In my view, lost fans of this forum have two common features. They hope their opinions can be agreed by others, while also hope to find others' flaws. I really appreciated you spending so much time and energy on drama commentary... We should keep a calm state and control our mood...'*

*davidtea 'Hi, friend lingeiguandian. I can see you are a person of incisive view and I also appreciate your passion. I will consider your suggestions.'*

**Access** to this forum is open to all, no matter whether you have a Baidu account. There is no specific restriction related to educational level, gender, age and so on. Even if you are a lurker, access to all the resources is available. However there is a barrier for people to be a member of this forum. You need to have posted at least 10 postings during the last six months. This is a quite low threshold considering the rate of daily postings and numbers of registered members in Baidu Tieba.

**Norms** exist in this forum and are supervised by three moderators. There is an explicit norm in this forum, never referring to politics during the discussion. Other rules are no use of dirty words and no personal attack. If one member violated these norms or standards, his or her posting will be deleted by moderators or will be criticized by other members. During coding procedure, I found that from the homepage of this forum, it shows there are 30 replies for one specific topic. There were actually less, a few deleted by moderators. Prohibition norm of dirty words is not so well complied to and directed verbal attacks can be seen from their online text.

**Rationality** is related to speech responsibility and role-taking. There are some postings containing logic inference. A person adopted the physical law to analyze the concept of space and time, which is helpful to understand this drama. While more often, participants in discussion just simply agree or disagree with a certain opinion. Even sometimes a person put forward own opinions, he could not be a role-taker and give commentaries from others'

perspectives.

Dominance, verbal conflict, rationality degree and their relationship were used to analyze the dynamics of the interaction processes in *Lost Forum*. From the above analysis covering several features of this forum, it can be regarded as a limited public sphere in cyberspace, which pays more attention to cultural topic. Rationality is related to speech responsibility and the degree of it is low in *Lost Forum*. Lack of rationality and respect on other's perspectives is the most serious challenge embedded.

#### **Description of participants' network**

This online community has more than 550 members, and there are still a lot of anonymous participants since there is no restriction for posting. When I did the social network analysis, totally 420 nodes (discussion participants) are counted, including 239 ordinary members, 31 honored members granted by this community, and 150 'IP address participants'. The participants' network is retrieved from their postings in this forum and reflected by reply number between each of two participants. In the network (See figure1), the nodes with green are in the group of ordinary members, the nodes with purple are honored members, and the yellow nodes are IP anonymous participants.

The IP participants and ordinary members are quite active in discussion process and they are quite connected with honored members. As we can see from the figure, the three types of participants are closely related within some topics and some of them seem to organize several cliques. There are some cores in this graph, which means participants are more likely to reply to them. From the content analysis, people are more likely to reply directly to the

initial poster, thus it makes sense that the initial posters are more likely to be the core. From the graph, we can see that the role of core is not only displayed by the honored members, also by the ordinary and IP participants. This can be evidence for the above finding that the dominance level of honored members is not high. Participants can express their voice as they want, not restricted by their status in this forum. Some participants are willing to take initiatives to put forward a topic and start an interaction within the community.

In the peripheral of this graph, some ordinary members and IP participants are distributed sparsely. These participants share only one tie with others, mainly ordinary one or an IP participant. Five honored members are not active, three of which are connected with one peer by a reply. The other two members are at the same time linked to peer and participant from IP group. Only one honored member is at the same time both connected to one ordinary member and one IP participant. The finding from regression that honored members is more like to response to participants from their group or their peers, is also reflected from the network within honored group (See figure2). The honored members are forming a somewhat close clique.

### **Conclusion and implications for policy-makers**

Participation in public sphere requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue and rational-critical interaction with others in a deliberative environment. In this study, this online forum has certain degree of dominance and verbal conflict during interaction. And the dominance degree is positively associated with status of the poster, indicating that honored member is more likely to dominate the discussion initiated by peers. Overall, through this

case study a limited public sphere is found in China's cyber space, which could provide netizens opportunity to express their voice.

Considering the norm implementation in this forum, bounds of constraints on expression is weakened in online public sphere, facilitating flaming and attack. The low level of rationality degree was reflected by abusing postings and replies in this forum and moderators just take passive action to delete these postings. All these can hold back productive opinions and healthy interaction. Loss of grounded identity is a typical feature of this forum as its main audience is youth. This forum contains a lot of IP address participants, which can also produce side-effect on interaction and could explain for the existence of conflict degree and lack of rationality. Establishing the awareness of speech responsibility to control over self-presentation during online interaction will be helpful to construct online public sphere.

The interesting finding from this study is participants' view about the new issued policy. During this specific period, they focus on discussions about how to deal with the regulation policy which would cause lack of access to oversea drama. Most of participants express objection to this policy from the perspective of self-loss and came into conclusion that it is useless, as netizens can figure out the countermeasure collectively.

However some participants don't narrow their discussion in this sense, not just expressing their resentment. By comparing the development plans of drama industry in P. R. China, US, and South Korea, they do provide some valued suggestions and criticize that regulation, which is a passive approach, is not healthy for the industry. They also state that the authorities or the policy-makers concern the 'license' but they make the ordinary audience to bear the consequences, not these people who exploit online drama resources for

commercial profit. More attentions should be paid to copyright infringing. From these perspectives, forum participants are speaking to the power, although from their own and the forum's standings.

Another point about their participation is that to some extent this is one-way communication. They are expressing their views about cultural policy and they can provide some meaningful suggestions for the development of China's cultural industry. However the only audience is their peers in the same community. Their voice is not heard by policy-maker, who should be targeted on.

With the advent and rapid development of web 2.0 and ICTs, the whole world is taking a new look and undergoing a tremendous transform. In order to response the new technology, the authority in each country is making their effort to make good use of ICTs, in order to better serve for the state. For other countries in south area, there are similarities with China in terms of ICTs application and effect on the society. New forms of online participation, which can be regarded as a promising space for civic participation, can function as a limited public space for expressing different voices to the power and suggesting how to improve policy making. Thus, ICTs to some extent can emerge as potential impetus for democracy. However for the authority, it is still not enough to encourage citizens to adopt new technologies as platforms to participate into public issues. The government and policy-maker also need to adopt ICTs and become user to communicate with citizens. Only through this way, ICTs can function for democratic purpose.

The study makes contributions to highlight the importance of public opinion formed through cultural public sphere. The audience of drama is not just passive mass-culture

consumers. They are forming a certain public opinion through deliberation on a new issued policy. Although their discourse cannot be valued as purely rational-critical, they can provide policy-makers some suggestions about how to develop cultural industry and what aspects should be focused on.

Compared with prior studies in online community and civic participation, this study combines qualitative and quantitative data about the sampled forum, thus could better describe the discussion process and relationships between participants. By social network analysis, relationship between different groups of participants is portrayed in a direct way. There are still some limitations in this paper. This study is conducted in a specific period of time, which can produce bias on main discussion topics and the prospect of participants' interest in discussing policy is uncertain. Longitudinal perspective should be considered. Dominance of honored members, and rationality degree are measured in terms of reply numbers, by calculating related proportions. In the future research, survey will be helpful for measuring these variables. The demographic information of participants is not so accurate, and profile analysis should be added. Further more, future study will go deeply with the social network analysis and attempts to find out incentives for participants.

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**Table1 descriptive information for dynamics process**

<b>Descriptive data</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S. D.</b>
dominance of honored member	.25	.34
Verbal conflict degree	.11	.14
Rationality degree	.11	.15

**Table2 dominance degree in discussion**

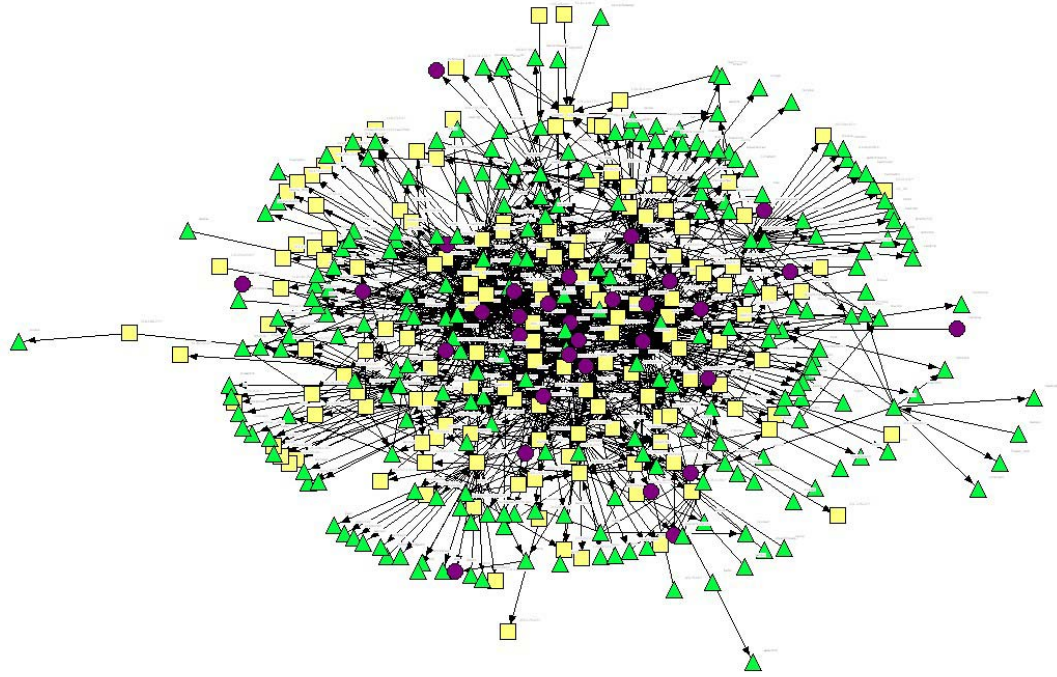
<b>Dependent variable: dominance degree in discussion</b>			
	Beta	t	p
Status of the poster	.167	3.658	.000
Rationality degree	-.009	-.038	.969

**Table3 verbal conflict degree in discussion**

<b>Dependent Variable: conflict degree in discussion</b>			
	Beta	t	p
Status of the poster	-.053	5.985	.006
Rationality degree	-.214	-2.208	.030

**Table 4 topic in the forum**

	Frequency	Percent
about actors/actresses	9	10.6
reviews and discussions about plot	51	60.0
policy issue	18	21.2
voting	3	3.5
about drama industry	4	4.7
Total	85	100.0



**Figure 1 network of all participants in the forum**

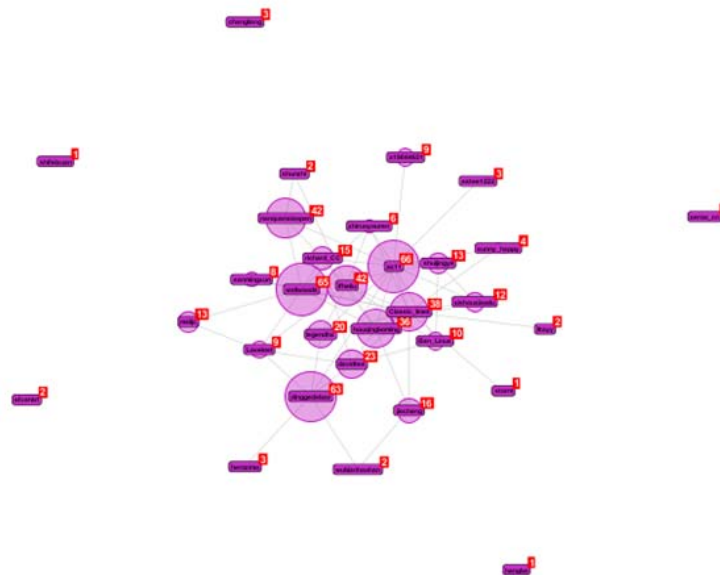


Figure 2 network within honored group