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### **Hybridity within peer production: The power negotiation of Chinese fansub groups**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The technology breakthrough in the past few years has given birth to a series of online collaborative projects like Wikipedia and Linux. Scholars like Benkler (2006) term such projects 'common-based peer production model' to celebrate their radical potentials. Based on the collaborative possibilities offered by information technologies, these common-based peer production projects distinguish themselves from their industrial predecessors in terms of their flattened organizational structure, grassroots participants and non-market production orientation. Taking Free and Open Source software (FOSS) for example, unlike the traditional software production that is based on a market and proprietary system, FOSS projects depend on self-organizing communities from the general public to achieve common goals. Software produced by FOSS projects is characterized as a spirit of commons that is not only free for public use, but also permits revision and improvements based on released software codes (Stallman, 1999). The marvellous potentials of common-based peer production in economics, politics and culture make scholars suggest that it may become a



Through exploring Chinese fansub groups' current practices, this study intends to unveil the complex negotiation process shaping peer production. Previous debates on peer production will be critically discussed in the theoretical part of this dissertation; the conceptual framework and research questions will also be illustrated in the same part. The researcher



In a word, together with the flexibility of digital technologies and the intrinsic social-psychological motivations for individual participation, the possibility of massive, distributed coordination of effort makes peer production a powerful and attractive replacement for the industrial model. Scholars in this camp are confident that this new model of production has a transformational effect on information, society, and individuals alike. However, a common problem lying behind these celebratory arguments is their hasty and absolute description of technology and economics as determining the milieu (Berry, 2008). Scholars of the celebratory approach tend to declare a revolutionary new era of network production, presuming that those online collaborations have absolute affordance towards non-proprietary production, high-efficiency organization and political autonomy. Such tendency towards technological determinism is highly likely to overemphasize the short-term



The first strand of the critical approach challenges the key assumptions raised by the celebratory approach, arguing that the common-based peer production is not as utopian as scholars claim and that the industrial model is still beneficial to current society. For example, the liberating experiences that Jenkins and others have mentioned are considered by this trend as part of strategies for exploitation (Turow, 2005). Instead of criticizing the industrial

media and digital commons, Coleman and Dyer-Witheford (2007) also put forth a set of progressive positions from rejectionists to reformers and radicals to describe different strategies taken by corporate power towards participatory culture.

While the critical approach contributes to rebalance the excessive optimism of the celebratory approach, there is one problem in their discourses: authors in the critical camp seldom decide what kind of peer production at what form and in what scale they want to investigate. Instead of basing its criticism on concrete empirical cases, most of the criticism in this camp is built on existing theories of the celebratory approach (Berry, 2008; Kreiss et al., 2011). Such theory-to-theory strategy turns this camp into the metaphysics of peer production.

### **Tendenc to connect celebrator and critical approaches**



more, a nuanced analysis is absent in all of these trends, the complexity and heterogeneity within peer-production is overlooked.

However, there do exist literatures suggesting a more nuanced approach towards peer production. Denison (2011) suggests that as fansub groups increase in number and spread globally, it is their heterogeneity that seems to rest at the heart of discourses around the ethics of fansubbing. Meng and Wu also suggest that the Chinese fansub group is a hybrid of commons-based and commodity productions, which is negotiated through Chinese institutional power, community norms and individual subjectivity (Meng, 2012; Meng & Wu, 2013).

### **Conceptual framework and research question**

Generally speaking, this study follows two interconnected steps: first, the researcher will explore the specific form of Chinese fansub groups as peer production; second, the researcher will investigate the reason for such specific formation. These two steps utilize two different sets of frameworks.

First, in order to answer the 'what' question, this research is strongly framed by Benkler's (2002, 2006; Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Berdou, 2011) works on peer production in which he declares that the highly mediated network production is superior to traditional industrial production in terms of production, governing and ownership. However, although Benkler's analysis on peer production has already given out a clear and operable framework, the research does not exclusively depend on only one scholar. Analysis from other scholars on peer production, including both the celebratory and the critical approach, is also used as supplementary framework in this study. Consequently, assumptions from both sides will be tested in the case of Chinese fansub groups. By identifying the extreme ends occupied by two academic approaches and the spectrum within them, this study aims to confirm the accurate position of Chinese fansubs in different dimensions debated by the two camps such as ownership, productive autonomy and organization. Additionally, while these dimensions were only discussed on the individual level in previous peer production studies, this study will also include an organizational level. Questions like motivation for production and awareness of copyright will not only be investigated for individual Chinese fansub group participants, but also will be investigated for the whole group. Additionally, inspired by Latour (2005), the competition between different Chinese fansub groups will also be

Second, based on the 'what' question, the study takes one step further to investigate the 'how' question to explain the specific form of Chinese fansub group. Instead of applying an extreme realism approach that emphasizes the constraining power of technical capacities or a constructivism approach that emphasizes the shaping power of human agency, this study uses a framework suggested by Hutchby (2001) that offers reconciliation between these two opposing poles. Hutchby suggests that technology could be understood as "artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices human use in interaction with, around and through them" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). In this sense, the specific form of Chinese fansub groups would be understood as the result of both technology affordance and Chinese institutional power. Ultimately, the objective of this research is to answer a two-part question:

Q1: As a peer production project, what is the specific form of Chinese fansub groups?

Q2: What kind of power negotiation leads to this specific form?

While the first question tends to be descriptive, the second question tends to be exploratory.

By looking at the case of Chinese fansub groups, the researcher hopes to contribute a

nuanced empirical study to bridge the extreme poles of peer production study and



## **Sampling**

Snowball sampling was used in this study. As a frequently used strategy for investigating closed and hard-to-reach communities, snowball sampling begins with several individual samples and then develops into a larger sample which is sufficient for analysis (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002). As a former fansub group member, the researcher is aware that the legal ambiguity makes Chinese fansub members to be cautious and low-profile. Worrying about too much exposure may harm their fansub group, participants may choose to reject a stranger's interview. Thus, since snowball sampling requires friend's recommendations, interviewees will have a better trust in the researcher and talk more.

In order to avoid the similarity of the sample and to broaden the social context (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011), the researcher started the snowball sampling with 3 disparate respondents and asked them to recommend more fansub group participants that meet the criteria of this study. In order to reveal "the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue" (Gaskell, 2000, p. 41), the researcher carefully filtered the respondents to guarantee the diversity of sample. Finally, 15 interviewees covering different indicators like group scale, position, years of experience were selected for this Chinese fansub group study.

## **Interview schedule**

All of the interviews were conducted online through the software QQ (a popular instant messaging service in China) and Skype. There are reasons for online interviews instead of face-to-face interviews: first, the geographical dispersion of fansub participants makes face-to-face interview highly inefficient; second, online interview may protect participants' privacy as the legal ambiguity of fansub groups is quite sensitive. Before each interview, a consent form was emailed to the interviewee to ensure that respondents could decide whether and how to engage in my research based on a comprehensive understanding of the risks and benefits of the study (Endacott, 2004). After interviewees signed the consent form and emailed them back, an interview would be scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher would remind the interviewee of recording and asked for permission to record the interview. At the end of each interview, the researcher would thank the interviewee for the cooperation and asked for oral permissions for follow-up interviews.

### **Interview guide**

An interview guide was used as reminder of the discussion topics. In the pilot study, the interview guide was exclusively constructed on Benkler's (2002, 2006; Benkler &kler's





different from private property or public property (Bauwens, 2005). However, in the case of Chinese fansub groups, the picture is much more complicated.

On an individual participant level, none of the respondents felt that they had the ownership for the subtitles they produced. Every respondent were happy that their works could be downloaded by thousands of users for free. However, when it comes to the organizational level, there is a strong sense of proprietorship between different fansub groups. Words like 'steal' and 'rob' were frequently used when respondents described the occasional subtitle misappropriation behaviours between fansub groups.

In 2011, our group was the first to finish transcribing the first series of 'Black Mirror'. To our surprise, we found that RenRen (one of the biggest fansub groups in China) fansuu ET6m/.08 (ri(in)3 0 n) 4.10 (p

(Bauwens, 2005), it is the logic of private property that dominates the competition between fansub groups.

*Motivation for production*

Similar to fansub groups' attitudes towards proprietorship, their motivation for production also differs between individual level and organizational level.

The analysis of the interviews suggests that though motivations for participating in a fansub group differ from each other, none of them refers to monetary incentives. The motivations of sharing, mutual leaning and personal interest were frequently mentioned in interviews.

The reason I want to participate in a fansub group is that I love American TV series. After







Third, Chinese fansub groups apply different levels of promotion systems to ensure stability and efficiency of production. For instance, a very rigid promotion system exists in Renren fansub group in order to preserve its stability and competitiveness.

Even though you have passed the access examination, you are only considered as an 'apprentice'. In order to become a formal member, you have to translate at least 300 minutes' of movie and get permission from four of your directors. You will be kicked out if you receive more than two complaints from your director. For a member who wants to promote to a director or a group leader, there are also implicit requirements regarding number and qualities for his work.  
(Respondent 1)

Like commercial companies, holding a high position in a fansub group's promotion system means that you need to contribute a huge amount of time and energy. Such arrangements not only help to eliminate those unqualified and disloyal participants, but also help to build strong emotional connections between individuals their group. Considering the high brain drain of Chinese fansub groups, such loyalty and emotional connection is crucial to make the production sustainable.

Consequently, these three strategies are considered as important strategies for maintaining

members. It is also interesting to notice that this feature of hierarchy is more obvious in those 'big groups' that are much more productive in translating subtitles, while the organization structure of 'small groups' tends to be more of a non-hierarchy. Generally, although the technology affordance of Internet technology brings a non-hierarchy structure to a fansub group, a hierarchy structure is also applied as a complementary organi







autonomy. It is clear that the current form of Chinese fansub groups is shaped by the negotiation between technology affordance and institutional power.

The bottom-up shaping process reveals how technology impacts the current form of Chinese fansub group in three dimensions. First, in the dimension of proprietorship and motivation, the innovations in information communication technologies dramatically reduce the production cost for fansub group production. Chinese fansub group participants are willing to give up property rights and 'gift' their knowledge and informational labour to the public in return for 'psychological well-being and gratification' and 'social connectedness' (Benkler, 2006; Deuze, 2007). Second, in the dimension of production efficiency, technology functions two-fold: first, advanced communication technology provides individuals with a virtual platform to turn their passion into dramatic production efficiency; second, technology makes it possible for fansub groups to base their production on a high degree of flexibility and

The form of Chinese fansub groups is largely determined by the negotiation between technology and institutional power. However, individual subjectivity also plays an important role in shaping the form of Chinese fansub groups. Chinese fansub groups differ from each other in terms of production and organization. Individual subjectivity was considered as an explanation for such inner complexity of fansub gro

The analysis of the formation of Chinese fansub groups illustrates that though the arguments from both celebratory and critical camps towards peer production provide us with robust analytical frameworks, it is important to base the peer production study in a concrete institutional context to avoid both extreme realism and constructivism. Different equations between technology affordance and institutional power lead to the diversity and complexity of peer production.

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