

Postprint: Reflections on Self-Media Industry Reshuffling and Internet Normativity

Authors: XU Danrui

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Abstract

Self-media differs from mainstream media in that it lacks official organizational structures and serves as a collective term for information dissemination by unspecified masses or specific individuals. Characterized by independence, freedom, and grassroots nature, self-media enables people to access a greater diversity of perspectives; however, the absence of regulation and management can lead to significant negative consequences. This paper first elaborates on the characteristics and connotations of self-media, analyzes the industry reshuffling phenomenon within the self-media sector, and proposes specific measures for the normative governance of self-media networks.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: We-Media Industry Shakeout and Reflections on Network Regulation

Abstract: We-Media differs fundamentally from mainstream media in its absence of official organizational structures, representing a broad category of information dissemination by unspecified majorities or specific individuals. Characterized by independence, freedom, and a civilian nature, We-Media enables audiences to encounter diverse perspectives from myriad sources, freeing them from reliance on a single authoritative “voice” and fostering more rational judgment. However, this expanded discourse carries significant risks: without proper regulation and management, We-Media can generate substantial negative impacts. This paper first elaborates on the characteristics and connotation of We-Media, analyzes the ongoing industry shakeout phenomenon, and proposes specific measures for enhancing network regulation.

Keywords: We-Media; Network Regulation

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Author: Xu Danrui

1. Characteristics and Connotation of We-Media

We-Media serves as a platform for ordinary citizens to express their views, leveraging modern network communication methods to share their observations and experiences with the public through channels such as Weibo, WeChat, Tieba, Douban, and other online communities or forums. Unlike traditional media, We-Media possesses distinctive attributes—its independent, free, and civilian character allows people to hear “voices” from all directions, reducing susceptibility to single-source influence and promoting more rational evaluation of events. The low barrier to entry and ease of operation have democratized the right to speak, enabling anyone to act as a journalist or editor-in-chief of their own publication. “Media” is no longer the exclusive domain of mainstream or official institutions; it has permeated everyday life, liberating public discourse and thought. Individuals can speak freely on their personal platforms, whether sharing opinions on news, reporting discoveries, or simply expressing momentary feelings.

Modern information technology has created fertile ground for We-Media development. Previously, operating a personal media outlet was inconceivable for ordinary citizens, as traditional television and newspaper operations required substantial human and financial resources. The internet has transformed this impossibility into reality, not only lowering operational thresholds and technical difficulty but also accelerating information dissemination and expanding its reach. Content formats have evolved beyond simple text and images to incorporate video and integrated multimedia presentations. However, We-Media exhibits significant drawbacks compared to mainstream media. Its low barrier to entry and operational ease often result in compromised professionalism and fairness, undermining the credibility of its reporting. Most We-Media operations are run by individuals or small teams who struggle to sustain long-term original content production, leading to patchwork compilation and plagiarism that degrades content quality and tarnishes the platform’s reputation. With numerous We-Media accounts competing intensely, some resort to sensationalist headlines or publish vulgar, low-quality content to attract attention.

2. Analysis of We-Media Industry Shakeout

Early We-Media platforms enjoyed distinct advantages, including civilian participation, personalization, low barriers to entry, operational simplicity, strong interactivity, and rapid dissemination. WeChat has emerged as one of the fastest-growing We-Media platforms, with the number of official accounts exceeding 20 million in 2017. However, We-Media’s competitive edge has gradually diminished in recent years. As traffic becomes increasingly scarce, retaining and

attracting users now demands not only optimized content selection but also meticulous attention to operational execution, delivering more precise and personalized information aligned with individual interests.

WeChat represents an effective content distribution model with precise fan targeting and strong user stickiness, leveraging social relationships and operator management for content dissemination. Yet social relationship-based propagation is not inherently efficient, as maintaining consistent interests across networks remains challenging. Despite the vast number of WeChat official accounts, few achieve regular updates and sustained activity. Research indicates that over half of internet users will unfollow accounts due to low update frequency or unremarkable content, underscoring the industry-wide shakeout phenomenon. For an excellent WeChat platform to achieve longevity, it must optimize overall content strategy, focus on operational details, and provide users with more accurate, interest-aligned information—yet high-quality, high-output accounts like Dayuhao and Liu Shenleilei remain rare. While We-Media offers clear advantages over mainstream media, its defects are equally prominent. Most operations are small-scale, lacking professionalism and impartiality, which compromises report authenticity. Furthermore, weak copyright protection consciousness and inadequate regulatory frameworks in China's We-Media landscape, combined with the internet's inherent "uncontrollability," make standardized management exceptionally difficult.

3. Reflections on We-Media Network Regulation

How to circumvent We-Media's defects while maximizing its advantages represents the primary challenge in network regulation. Since most We-Media operators are small teams or individuals, "grassroots culture" is highly celebrated, yet civilian discourse often lacks professionalism, resulting in inferior content authenticity and richness compared to mainstream media. China's weak copyright protection awareness and inadequate regulatory systems, coupled with the internet's uncontrollable propagation characteristics, render standardized management extremely challenging.

3.1 Strengthening Institutional Norms: Regulating Online Behavior

Enhancing internet management requires a two-pronged approach: improving regulatory systems while correctly guiding information dissemination. As We-Media's influence expands, the state has grown increasingly attentive, recognizing that harnessing its potential necessitates strengthened internet governance and improved infrastructure. First, the government has issued a series of regulations and management provisions, such as the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Internet Management* and the *Regulations on Internet Access Service Business Premises*, establishing new requirements for We-Media development. Second, implementing real-name registration for We-Media accounts constitutes a key policy focus. Due to the internet's unique characteristics, tracking individuals who publish illegal information is notoriously difficult;

however, real-name systems for Weibo, Tieba, and other platforms can anchor accountability, provide legal recourse, and remind We-Media operators to exercise caution in their speech. In 2012, Beijing pioneered this system, requiring major platforms including Sina, NetEase, Phoenix, and Sohu to verify users' real information, stipulating that unverified users could only browse content without posting. Third, relevant departments must actively respond to government policies and strictly implement management regulations to ensure effectiveness, treating all operators—whether small teams or individuals—with fairness and impartiality.

3.2 Enhancing Network Management and Amplifying Positive Online Propaganda

The internet constitutes a vast environment where positive and negative content propagate at equal speed. Therefore, strengthening positive promotion while eliminating illegal information leakage represents the core of environmental construction. Like weather, a clear and pleasant online climate enhances people's well-being, whereas a toxic environment harms fundamental public interests. Both government officials and ordinary citizens must accept social responsibility and practice self-discipline, achieving freedom of expression within legal and ethical boundaries. Relevant departments should strengthen network management in accordance with laws and regulations, intensify positive propaganda, and foster a healthy online public opinion environment.

The state has already initiated comprehensive internet environment rectification, aiming to standardize online content, control information dissemination order, and establish a We-Media network environment with correct guidance. In the entertainment sector, multiple television series and web dramas such as *The Empress of China* and *Addiction* were removed from platforms; streaming sites Douyu and Longzhu were “named and shamed”; and even popular personality Papi 酱 was required to remove content for rectification. Authorities have also intensified penalties for plagiarism and “draft washing,” strictly prohibiting websites from publishing articles with crude content and obvious plagiarism.

3.3 Increasing Official and Social Institution Presence to Strengthen Positive Opinion Guidance

We-Media's rapid and efficient dissemination far surpasses traditional television and newspaper media. In recent years, its swift development and expanding influence have created new challenges: information lacking objectivity and fairness can easily mislead the public, trigger disputes, or even incite more severe incidents. Governments and relevant departments must attach great importance to We-Media, strengthening management and standardizing regulatory systems. Government leaders and cadres can also leverage We-Media by opening official Weibo or WeChat accounts, providing platforms for public expression. For instance, the Beijing Public Security Bureau's Weibo account “Peaceful Beijing” has received widespread acclaim, while “Peaceful China,” launched only a year

ago, has conducted numerous public welfare activities deeply integrated into daily life while collecting extensive public feedback and suggestions.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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