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# **Citizen protest in the online networks: the case of the China's bloody map**

## **Research purpose**

In the last few years, cyber-activism has become a very hot topic. In countries with authoritarian regimes, the Internet has offered new spaces of expression (Benkler, 2006). The recent emergence of social media and the Web 2.0 has increased this phenomenon. Social media offer innovative terrains of expression, less standardized and controlled. Particularly where public venues are too dangerous to express one's opinions, the blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts may give voice to citizen's needs and ideas in a safer way.

But what makes the Internet a powerful and dreaded tool in censorship environments is his potential in disseminating information. Thanks to its vast and interconnected nature (Barabasi, 2002), the Web immediately connects local protests in a global network promoting local issues to a worldwide visibility (Beutz Land, 2009). Once the protest is published in a webpage, what makes it interesting and relevant are the connections from and toward this webpage. The passage from a personal to a public contestation, from a punctual to a global issue is not just the result of being published on the Web, but of being included in a network of links.

This paper aims at investigating the dynamics of the dissemination of information concerning citizen contestations through the Web. How is dissent information coming from countries where the use of Internet is subject to censorship transmitted around the world? Which network is created by protesting website and by their hyper-links? Which network is created by the links received by such websites? Which types of actors are involved? How the network of actors is developing in time and in space?

These issues will be investigated through the analysis of the Bloody Map of violent evictions in China (Douay, 2011). Such case constitutes an excellent example of citizen contestation about urban planning made possible by Web 2.0 technologies (Haski, 2008; Yang, 2009) and disseminated around the whole World through the Internet. Special attention will be paid to the networks of actors generated by this map.

## **Methodology**

Our analysis will be performed through an innovative methodology based on digital methods (Rogers, 2010). By 'digital methods' we refer to a series of methods designed to explore the landscapes drawn by the digital traces left by online interactions around a given topic. Among digital methods we chose the cartography of the Web.<sup>1</sup> This method helps designing a network of relationships among entities such as institutions, associations, media and individuals based on hypertext connections among their websites.

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<sup>1</sup> The web networks have been retrieved with the Navicrawler, an assisted navigation tool, and the Issue Crawler, an automatic tool crawling the web. The resulting networks have been visualised and analysed by a software for exploring graphs (Gephi).

The idea is that the decision of adding a hyperlink to a website reveals the presence of a relationship, at least of knowledge, between the two entities represented by the websites.

By identifying the key actors and relations and labelling them according to an 'ad hoc' codebook, digital methods help tracing the interactions between the actors concerned by a given phenomenon. In our case, websites have been categorized according to their type (journal, community, news portal etc.) and their country (identified on the basis of the content of the website). Although digital methods cannot provide an exhaustive description of social networks, they may suggest interesting research directions to be investigated through further interpretative work. In investigating recent, vast and ever-changing phenomena such as cyber-citizenry in China, these methods have the advantage of offering a global overview, drawing a tentative map of actors and partially overcoming the linguistic diversity that hinders the study of such field.

In our presentation, we will use digital methods to explore the hyperlinks networks around the Bloody map of violent evictions in China and in particular the network of actors involved in the dissemination of the information published on the map. The analysis will concentrate on two main aspects: (1) the network of 'sources', that is to say the websites that are mentioned in the map as sources of information;<sup>2</sup> (2) the network of 'opinion leaders', that is to say the websites that talk about the map around the world.<sup>3</sup> By analysing the linking strategies of actors, we hope to identify the specific topology of both networks, showing which actors are central and peripheral, whether clusters or cliques are formed and who plays the role of authority and hub.

Finally, a crucial originality in our approach is the attention paid to the geography of online networks. As for the network of 'sources', we identified the geographical region where each accident took place and we related the website to it. As for the network of 'opinion leaders', we tried to identify their location. By georeferencing the data retrieved by digital methods, we make it possible to analyze them also through the techniques of geographical investigation. Our objective is to explore how the analysis of the non-geographical space of the Web may contribute to the understanding of territorial issues such as the one related by urban planning policies.

## Findings

In 2010, an anonymous Internet contributor using the pseudonym Xuefangditu, or "real estate blood map", compiled a list of all the violent evictions linked to property development projects in China and promoted it in his blog (<http://t.sina.com.cn/bloodymap>). This blogger's motive was to denounce the rapid pace of Chinese urbanisation, which is destroying the lives of many citizens, and to create a movement to boycott those new developments where there had been bloodshed.

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<sup>2</sup> The source websites have been identified and labelled by two Chinese students Li Jishen & Wang Yuanyuan of the Master of Geography of the Université Paris Diderot in the context of the graduation thesis "Cyber-activism in Chinese urban planning".

<sup>3</sup> These websites have been identified thanks to the combined use of several online tools: Yahoo site explorer and SEO Open explorer (that retrieve links toward a url) and Tineye (that retrieves occurrences of an image over the Web).

The project consists of two maps (both based on Google Maps): an “open” version<sup>4</sup> that anyone can add to or edit and a “revised” version<sup>5</sup> edited by the blogger that shows only verified cases. Little volcanoes represent sites where people were evicted violently, with water canons or Molotov cocktails. Beds indicate incidents that resulted in at least one death. Flames indicate immolations. Every accident has to be supported by the link to an online sources document the event. After the verification of such sources, the blogger publishes the accident in the revised map. All maps and sources are in Chinese.



The “open” version of the Bloody Map of violent evictions in China (retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> April 2011)

In the revised map, on the basis of about a hundred pages-sources (belonging to 46 different websites), a total of 85 accidents have been identified. A dozen cases of riots and demonstrations, 25 cases of illegal evictions or demolitions (sometimes several buildings) and 30 deaths (including 15 immolations) are represented across 24 different provinces. The websites, mentioned as sources of information, generate an interconnected network dominated by 70 news portals, a dozen of community websites and so many journals. In our communication we will describe the topology of the network and we will show how the credibility of the citizen protest is based on such a network that is constituted mainly by media.

The Bloody map was published on October 8th 2010, and on October 20th the *New China news* agency published an article about it, and this led to a further ten Chinese publications taking up the story a month later. By late December 2010, typing in "bloody map" (in Chinese) on Google China, more than 1,640,000 hits was showed. In the same days, the news went around the globe. We identified 139 websites (from 19 countries) mentioning the map. In our communication, we will discuss how citizen protest is amplified by the connection to the worldwide network of media and may consequently become part of the public agendas.

<sup>4</sup> <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=111560301092049321699.0004921f02f43f6c4f07e>

<sup>5</sup> <http://ditu.google.com/maps/ms?brcurrent=3,0x31508e64e5c642c1:0x951daa7c349f366f,0%3B5,0,0&ie=UTF8&hl=zh-CN&msa=0&msid=111560301092049321699.000492290963f3883a9c6&ll=31.466154,121.992188&spsn=25.282473,36.035156&z=5>

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