

CANVAS8

Report

Technology and trust in China: an interview with Tricia Wang

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Debbi Evans



Chinese internet users are finding ways to avoid the censors' gaze
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Scope

Tricia Wang is an ethnographer and sociologist who has spent over ten years observing the impact of technology on human interaction and behaviour. Her current ethnographic project (commenced in November 2011) focuses on how Chinese internet users disseminate information online, how they choose what to share and how trust builds up in the network. She spoke persuasively on the topic at Lift12, where we caught up with her for some more detailed insights.

How is trust in products modified by having a mobile in China?

I don't know if there can be a direct correlation between mobiles and trust, but a lot of the time people immediately take pictures of what they buy and post them online. I think it's powerful in that when there's a camera, you'll be able to quickly verify whether what you see online is what you actually receive. You can also crowdsource the verification of products. It's one thing to say "OK, my product looks different from the online picture", but when hundreds of people say that it becomes a real problem; the vendor has to be held accountable.

Shanzhai mobiles - copycat mobiles localised for Chinese needs - reveal some interesting differences in perceptions of trust. In the US and UK, brand authenticity plays such a big role in trusting products. But millions trust shanzhai phones. They trust them to work for a certain period. But trust is relative; shanzhai phones are authentic depending on who you talk to. Consumer brand loyalty to shanzhai phones does not revolve around a specific mobile hardware company, but rather a category of mobiles that have the features that consumers want. You don't trust a shanzhai phone to work forever, you trust it to work for a year, and you can drop it a few times and you know it will be durable. So you trust it for a few things: you trust it for battery life, for really loud music, and durability. And I wouldn't trust a regular phone for that – these new smartphones are really fragile. In a forthcoming blog post, I predict the death of shanzhai because affordable smartphones will already be on the market, so having durability, battery life and loud music won't be a priority any more. Preferences have switched over to these elite users' smartphones, but now they'll be affordable. Low-cost Android phones will be in, low-cost shanzhai phones will be out.

You use the phrase “lack of a common myth” as one of the reasons for low trust in China's computing industry. Could you explain that, and why it's important?

There's a common myth in the US which extends from European hacking culture. It comes back to the whole Rene Descartes thing: 'I think therefore I am'. So there's this myth that if you think and apply yourself, then you can figure something out. Extending that to computers, if you just put your mind to it, you can hack it apart. That's the myth in the US and Europe, that anyone can be a part of it – it's a very egalitarian approach. But it's powerful enough to get people to work and play together, and that myth builds these invisible layers of trust. If you think about it, as IP-crazy as Silicon Valley is, how does so much still get shared?

In China, there is no common myth to bring people from different companies together, nothing to bring regions or genders together. The closest myth I've been able to find is about young people who grew up in villages and learnt to code at university. They have this thing about being from the villages and needing to work much harder than urban kids to get where they are. They bond, but they all work for the same company. And it's the intangible lines (across companies) that make people create conferences like Lift. But we don't see these intangible lines in China, so there aren't strong bonds forming across industry - not yet, anyway. The Chinese computing industry is young; it is growing amidst a different set of pressures than those which faced the West's computing industry, so we can only compare to a certain extent.

To what extent does the regime affect levels of trust?

You have several things going on in China: a government that censors some information but doesn't warn people of what will be censored, and the largest voluntary censorship force in the world enforced by anonymous spies. This makes it difficult for people to verify who they are speaking to and who they can share their thoughts with.

This is all coupled with a history of people trying to rat each other out. Pre-reform in 1976, the whole Communist Party worked by creating fear of people telling on each other. You

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have 50 years of major mistrust, and the transition to a quasi-market takes time. You're not always sure where your information is coming from, and you want to be sure that when you pass on information, that person's not going to tell on you. That kind of fear makes you not want to pass anything on, even if it's not suspicious.

How do people get around 'the system', at an individual or consumer level?

It's hard to be aware of 'the system' when you are already in it – you don't have the perspective of other systems. And plus, you don't see a lot of people trying to get around things like Facebook blocking because most of them don't care about Facebook for the most part, or Twitter. In the large scale of things, most people are not trying to cross the firewall, because they don't really have a reason to. I'm really fascinated by the ones that do cross the firewall, because it reflects that people are becoming aware of 'the system' and trying to get around it. You see really interesting things like people changing the names of places; they know they're explicitly messing with the censors. They know not to use the word or character that the censors are looking for, so they'll use a different one - a different character but with the same sound. Or they embed their messages in a picture. So for example, instead of typing out an essay into Weibo, people just embed it into a service which turns your words into a jpeg, which you can embed to Weibo. That means it evades any kind of text search. But there's a gender split around the reasons people first try to get online. For males, I find for the most part that the first time they become aware of information censorship is really when they're looking for porn. And if it's not porn, it's through games, and if it's not through games, it's through movies – pretty much all having to do with entertainment and leisure. So they're aware much earlier than women.

China has around 497 million people under the age of 30.⁽¹⁾ There's a much perpetuated truism in the West that young people are more trusting, more open; do you think that's a stereotype? What's the reality in China?

I don't know if it's young people are more trusting. I think any group of people who aren't exposed to an environment of fear will be more trusting. In China young people have been exposed to fear, with their parents' and grandparents' history of cultural revolution. And then they're always being warned to not go online – to the older generations the internet is this horrible place, and they don't associate it with being educational, not one bit. It's not like here, where you first encounter the internet as an amazing place of discovery and learning; teachers and schools not only encourage you to go online, but make it mandatory. Even if parents have a broadband connection in the home in China they don't allow their kids to just get on. But what I find fascinating is that even with this rhetoric of fear, teenagers and students will still go online and share as much as they do. That's interesting – why are they willing to share so much? I see it happening on multiple levels, but they are very careful about what they share.

Because of how it makes them look (Brand Me), or outside pressure?

First there are the repercussions from outside - what professors, teachers or potential employers might think. But what's most fascinating is the way we think of sharing with our social network - not having to worry about what we say on Facebook – is not the case in China. There is so much emotion management that happens with information, it's not just information that they share. They have these really complex categories of what they can put up online, and it's all justified by this surprising rationale, because you don't want your friends to feel obligated or burdened by your problems. So if you have a bad day, you don't put that on Renren – you create an anonymous account on a different site. There are all these other social networks where people participate in these anonymous groups. And everyone knows that you don't ask someone what their anonymous name is.

So the anonymous account is the pressure valve, the release.

If you have a bad day - there's a test you didn't prepare for, or your girlfriend broke up with you - you go on there and you just bitch. It's not even complaining, it's about very raw emotions that would never be revealed in a public space or associated with real names. It's always expressed with tonnes of exclamation marks. I always think, "Why wouldn't you just write, 'I had a bad day'?" They just don't want to burden their friends with that stuff. They share things they want people to be happy about, that will make them feel good. It's interesting, because when you look at Renren and you don't have this context, you'd think they were doing pretty well. But that's only one side of the story.

It's sad to us because, for example, we're so used to being able complain on Facebook and getting messages of support. But this generation of Chinese – the 90s generation – didn't grow up with brothers or sisters. It's not that they don't want to talk about their emotions, they just didn't have anyone to talk about them with when they were growing up. So now, they don't know any better. If anything, I see it as a really positive thing, because before there just weren't any private spaces to express these things; you just had to get on with it. Now there are these spaces where people can let off steam.

I suppose a lot of that has to do with face-saving culture as well?

It's face-saving, but I think it's also that they just don't know how to share their feelings. If no one else around you shares things, or you never do it growing up, why would you all of a sudden start doing it? It's that whole collective pressure - when everyone else is wearing red, why would you all of sudden wear yellow?

Tricia Wang's website is available [here](#)

Interview conducted by Debbi Evans

Sources

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