

Exploring China's Internet Real-Name System and Privacy Issues

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In the 21st century, society has gradually entered an Internet era. With the rapid development of technology and digital media, people's lives have become more inseparable from digital platforms. Think about your daily life, whether it is on work, study, entertainment or some essential needs, all of them can be completed on different digital platforms. There is no doubt that the development of digital platforms has helped people break through the limitations of space, and strongly improved convenience and effectiveness. It could be said that people now almost can't live without Internet and digital media. To better regulate the digital platform and create a harmonious online environment, different countries have formulated some relevant constraints and regulations for different platforms. Among them, the Internet real-name system has been widely used in China.

But have you noticed that your personal information is still being leaked and spread when you use the Internet. I think you must have received text messages which you don't know who they are calling from but they can accurately call your name. They can even accurately know your current situations. That can sometimes make you feel confused. And even for the people who are not cautious and distinguishable enough, especially the elderly, may easily fall into such online scams. When information leakage and online scam become the norm, people would be doubtful and scared about why the situations of personal privacy disclosure would always happen while they followed the platform's rules? This situation also is one of the reasons why China has been questioned in its implementation of the Internet real-name system. In order to better understand whether the Internet real-name system in China can effectively regulate the platform, and whether users' individual privacy, security and digital rights can be protected, the following will explore the Internet real-name system in depth, and study its effectiveness and feasibility of governance on Weibo.

Internet Real-Name System in China

The Internet real-name system was originally proposed to protect copyrights and intellectual property rights. Experts suggested that people should be responsible for publishing articles and opinions on the Internet. At that moment, that was the first time that proposed the ban on online anonymity in mainland China. And it caused a huge discussion among society. Since then, the governance methods for the Internet real-name system have been frequently discussed by the mass, and have been continuously modified and improved through practice on different platforms by the government. In 2016, Article 24 of the "**Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China**" officially passed and promulgated by China stipulates that "*network operators handle network access and domain name registration services for users, and handle network access procedures such as fixed telephone and mobile phone calls.*" , or provide users with information release, instant messaging and other services. When signing an agreement with the user or confirming the provision of services, the user should be required to provide real identity information. If the user does not provide the real identity information, the network operator shall not provide relevant services(Xinhua News Agency, 2017). This is the first time that China has formally formulated a law to regulate the real-name system on digital platforms. And it is one of the few countries in the world

that still uses this regulation to this day.

After the promulgation of that law in 2016, government has been continuously adjusted it according to different platform characteristics. And the range of platforms that were used has gradually become wider. For those more commonly used and famous digital platforms in China were all applied the real-name system, especially for those user-generated content platforms such as Weibo, wechat and Bilibili. Users are required to upload their real names, ID card numbers, etc. when registering the platform, and some also need to bind user mobile phone for SMS verification. Compared with digital platform registration in the United States and European countries, which can only provide email addresses, China is more strict about the collection of private information. In addition, this rules is not mandatory for every user to follow. The platform allows users to choose whether to complete real-name authentication, and has taken special treatments for those who do not choose real-name authentication. For example, they would not provided with targeted news push and personalized content for those users. And those users also be restricted from freely using functions of platform such as commenting and content publishing.

The development of the Internet Real-Name System are always be questioned by the public. Many users still believe that this regulation violates users' personal privacy and affects their freedom of speech. For better discussing the Internet Real-Name System and user privacy and security issues, I would choose Weibo which is one of the biggest digital platforms and also is a popular used social media platform as sample to get into deeper analyze.

Privacy Issues and Digital Rights of Weibo's Governance

Weibo as an early and widely used social media platform in China, has implemented the real-name system in 2012. New users who registered an account must complete the real-name authentication. For those original users who have not performed real-name authentication within the specified time, they will be restricted in functions such as speaking, commenting, and forwarding. They can only browse other people's posts. The real-name authentication completed on Weibo on that time is not displayed to the public. In other words, users cannot see the real personal information of other users. The Weibo community remains anonymous on the surface. However, the personal information of each user has been saved and recorded by the platform. Therefore, once the user makes inappropriate speech, they will be immediately found through the recorded personal information. Compared with the original online environment of liberty, some users feel that their freedom of speech has been affected. And the opaque speaking environment would also inhibit people's innovative and active thinking. Based on the research consequences conducted by Siyuan Zhou, it found that people are worried that their identity will be exposed and are unwilling to post comments as freely as before on Weibo. Not only are they afraid of being held accountable, but also don't want their virtual identities to be discovered by acquaintances. And those virtual identities may be totally different from them building and acting in the real life. From those people's perspective, digital platform no longer be a place where they feel save and comfortable.

Among other costs, a decline in privacy is a central concern surrounding efforts to

implement China's real-name registration scheme (HU,2014). The first is about the theft and illegal transactions of personal privacy. Just like I mentioned at the beginning, some criminals or advertisers will steal people's personal data from the platform's database. And it could cause harassment to the public and even threatening personal and property security. Some platforms may even collect user privacy data and making profits from transactions with third parties. Since the real-name system be widely implemented, there have been a lot of news about platforms leaking user privacy. That's easy for the public to due to personal privacy security, and reject the real-name system governance.

Secondly, there still has some questions about mandatory real-name management. Starting in 2022, Weibo released all users' IP addresses as public and it cannot be turned off by users themselves. The platform directly disclosed users' personal privacy through announcements and on the grounds of "*presenting the real situation to the majority of users more truthfully*". Without more stronger reasons and declarations, some users feel very disturbed and confused when their IP address exposed. And the disclosure of IP address would also bring some inconvenience to the people, such as social celebrities. It is easy to cause some problems involving personal safety.

Last but no least, the real-name system sometimes not only fails to restrict users' speech and deeds, but also promotes the further spread of cyberbullying. Anonymity is a form of privacy protection that may facilitate privacy violations (L,ee J.A. & Liu C.Y.2015). Under the platform's real-name system, it is also easy to obtain relevant personnel information of some popular social cases. The identity of the victim or perpetrator can easily be found and published on the Internet, then cause secondary harm to them. It may even result in more extreme hate speech or even physical harm to them. The speed of information through online media is uncontrollable, which also means that some unconfirmed events may accidentally injure innocent people.

Therefore, when implementing the Internet Real-Name System to regulate, the platform needs to pay great attention to controlling the user's personal information and privacy security. If user privacy cannot be protected, it will be difficult for the Internet Real-Name System to continue. Therefore, Weibo has been constantly adjusting and improving this governance regulation.

Weibo's New Regulation on Self-Media Management

In July 2023, in order to strengthen the management and control of the rapidly growing self-media industry, *China's Cyberspace Administration* issued a "*Strictly verify the 'self-media' engaged in the production of information content in the fields of finance, education, medical and health, justice and other fields, and display the names of their service qualifications, professional qualifications, professional background and other certification materials on the account homepage, and add the label of their field*" (Southern Weekly,2023). It means for those social media influencers who has more than 100,000 followers should show their real individual information on their account profile, especially for those experts in the finance, medical health and legal areas and so on. They need to show the professional certifications they have obtained and qualification certificates and other materials, and indicate their respective areas of expertise. For those influencers who are unwilling to complete real name authentication, they will also

be subject to some restrictions. For example, income limits, traffic allocation limits and account recommendation reductions and so on.

Regarding the Weibo platform adding the above-mentioned regulations on real name governance, I think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Because in the current rapid development trend of the self-media industry, the influence of social celebrities also get wider and wider. Their behavior and speech would affect their fans group, which would contain some minors. The minors are too young to identify the truth and very easy to be influence by the celebrities. So in order to ensure that these celebrities can be responsible for their speech and deeds and generate positive guidance for their fans, the disclosure of some necessary personal information is helpful to constraint. And if you think about it from the perspective of those social celebrities, disclosing their professional identity certification will also help celebrities themselves become more authoritative and credible. This is good for them to attract more attention and like

Suggestion and Countermeasure

In order to better regulate user behavior and manage the platform, China has been constantly adjusting the formulation and use of the Internet Real-Name System. However, regarding user privacy and security issues, there is still no good balance method found. Regarding how to protect user information and gain users' trust in the platform, I think the first step is to fully inform users before collecting their personal information. For example, before completing the real-name system, the platform must clearly inform users of the personal information that needs to be collected and the essential reasons. And also provide a statement on the protection of user personal privacy. If necessary, it can also plan in advance what responsibilities the platform will bear and what measures it will take if information is leaked. With clear explanations, users can develop more trust and support for the platform.

In addition, regarding some controversial personal information, such as the IP address mentioned above, it should be disclosed to the public. The platform needs to fully communicate with users before making a decision. For example, the reasons are explained in detail through announcements, and use a mass voting system to decide whether to make it public. If it is forcefully disclosed without any communication, it will cause resistance among users. Such issues raise broader questions around trust and ethics in the digital age and around the appropriate balance between corporate self-regulation and the regulation of digital platforms by the nation state. (Flew, 2021) And platform regulation and user feedback should also be mutual balance.

As a long-term topic of platform management, privacy protection requires the joint efforts of the country, society and the public to maintain it. Because this is not only related to the stable development of the digital society, but also related to the information security of the country and individuals. This is an important issue that requires long-term efforts. As for the existing unresolved problems caused by the Internet real-name system, rule makers may need to consider and solve them from more aspects.

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