

Reframing the Controversy: Let's Talk about the Digital Medium

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Six years has lapsed since the Visualizing Culture's Controversy broke out at MIT in 2006. As the then Head of Foreign Languages and Literatures, I was deeply engaged in a peacemaking mission to help my colleagues Shigeru Miyagawa and John Dower reach out to the Chinese Students and Scholars Association at MIT and build an open and constructive dialogue with each other. That was *not* a difficult task. The professors were attentive and receptive, and the student representatives in turn censured online extremist behaviors targeted toward Miyagawa. The solution was simple and swift – the students' association made a concerted effort to calm down the US-based agitators, and the professors added a disclaimer to the controversial images displayed on their web site.

The tempest, however, kept roiling despite the reconciliation. It gained a second life as a media story that came to be marked by a double syndrome of the racialization of the incident and a concomitant reactivation of Cold War ideology against the 'rogue nation,' China. To make *that* discursive strategy work, US media journalists framed the protesting Chinese students not as individual actors imbued with their own flaws and idiosyncrasies but as victims manipulated by a repressive homeland regime notorious for its censorship rigor. That leap in logic dictated that the Chinese student community at MIT be infantilized and reduced, in representation, to the dummy instruments of a government whose evil scheme of censoring free content was said to have crossed the Pacific Ocean and infiltrated into the US academy! The resulting frame was summarized in a predictably dichotomous media discourse which pit Chinese communist youth patriots against the freedom fighters of American academy. The controversy was no

longer about cultural sensitivity or questions about the representation of violence. Nor was it anymore about China versus Japan, but rather, Red China versus Free America, authoritarianism versus democracy. What more can be said in the face of such stark binarism? You are either one of *us*, or one of *them*, friend or foe.

The airing of such a position would be a legitimate pursuit if it were balanced by other voices and other interpretations. Unfortunately, those who dared to speak out and analyze in the interest of what academia holds sacrosanct – making a critique – could not gain easy access to mainstream media outlets. Although the tone of discussion by frontline participants on academic forums such as H-Asia had turned from irrational ejaculations to a constructive debate about the controversy, the US-based media including the Chronicle of Higher Education persistently withheld coverage of alternative views on the incident.ⁱ The racialization of the controversy was ominously successful. It brewed a prevalent editorial bias against those submissions by Chinese commentators who opted to express viewpoints different from the mainstream interpretation of the controversy. I myself experienced that discrimination first hand although I was born and raised in Taiwan. Indeed, as this controversy evolved, the boundary between the censors and the censored went blurring, and a media onslaught in defense of free speech ended up violating its own principle.ⁱⁱ

Luckily, thanks to the Internet, nobody could muffle my voice or anybody's for long. I posted my views on H-Asia and on my MIT home page that enjoyed modest traffic from time to time.ⁱⁱⁱ This brings me to the theme of this reflective piece. Let's face it: this incident would not have occurred without the Internet. So why can't we shift our attention from a flawed, dichotomous ideological frame to the one that would be

more relevant to an *online* controversy, i.e., the digital medium itself. That was my viewpoint then and I will reiterate it now.

The educational opportunities provided by this controversy were too precious to let go not just because it posed a challenge to MIT's Open Course Ware (OCW) and other similar expertise-based online publishing platforms such as MOOCs. More importantly, the controversy opened our eyes to the destabilizing effect of knowledge production in the digital era and the public's role in producing and disseminating knowledge on the Net. By putting aside the familiar question about ideology a.k.a nationalism, we can better focus on that of digital media and the perils of participatory culture online. I quote what I said at the heat of the debate in 2006:

“The most important issue neglected in this debate is the question regarding public access to educational and research materials posted online. OCW is a global medium and a global classroom. But is there such a thing as a singular "global" or "universal" audience for digitally delivered open content?”

That question might sound outlandish six years ago but by now it has become a commonplace question that begs the answer. Knowledge has become unstable because it picks up the unstructured, unsettled, and unbounded properties of the digital medium.^{iv} *There is no such thing as a 'global' audience who shares the same history and the same value.* What the Visualizaing Culture Controversy ignited was in part a crisis about all forms of digital publishing: materials published online are *never* going to be completely acceptable to a 'global' audience who straddle across diverse ethnic, cultural, religious, national, and ideological borders. Open Course Ware, like all virtual classrooms, is

enabled by digital media. *To venture into the digital commons as authors necessarily entails taking a risk no matter who we are.*^v The more controversial a published image or a text is, the more likely it will provoke negative responses and random assaults.

To pursue this line of logic, I may add that those who accused the MIT students' of 'willfully' separating those violent images from the professors' carefully crafted 'context' were themselves ignorant of the fundamental nature of digital texts *and* digital reading. In cyberspace, contextualization is never enough. The digital medium has changed our habit of reading and context has become increasingly irrelevant. *Web surfing enables and encourages decontextualization.* We click on a link, linger there for less than a minute, and then move on to the next link, merrily. With each click, we risk taking pictures and words out of context, and *the illustration of expertise knowledge is in constant jeopardy.* All it takes is a tap on the hyperlink. Surfing means just that - skipping around from article to article, from image to image, from the textual to the visual and even the auditory, back and forth and across mediums, and in this case, from MIT's home page to the controversial images embedded within the OCW site.

According to some, since those disturbing images didn't appear on the front page of MIT's website, their 'harmfulness' was greatly exaggerated by the contending students. This cognitive error should be redressed immediately. It doesn't matter if those 'offensive' images are embedded in the text because they are within the reach of a single click. Only if we read the Visualizing Cultures site like a traditional book would the savage images appear to be secluded from the viewer. But who would have read the

Internet *linearly* in today's media environment? Young digital navigators do not decipher a beckoning image *until after* they finish reading a long, explanatory text.

Whether we should endorse or lament our changing reading habit is a different debate altogether. But those who insist that navigators on the Internet should function no less differently than the readers of print media simply failed to understand how the Net works. The speed and immediacy of our access to what is posted online can never be underestimated.

The implications of digital teaching in a space that we professors cannot control, monitor, or guide are a topic that requires a full-length article to do justice to. For me at least, a serious discussion about media and audience in the digital era is as important as those inquiries about the low threshold of Chinese patriots in dealing with violent images revolving around unresolved historical trauma between two rival nations.

To complicate things, new media provide each and every individual the means not only to transmit information instantaneously (as the Chinese students did) but also to talk back to us and protest just as fast. Here I saw several cultural misunderstandings on the students' part which turned their actions against themselves. The protest culture in the US is a complex one to say the least, in which citizens from "rogue nations" can only partake at their own peril. Perhaps more importantly, they had misgauged the American appetite for antagonistic discourses. Learning how to disagree in calculated politeness is often a lesson difficult to master for digital natives who grew up with blatantly contentious discourses prevalent on the Chinese Internet. Young students from China often suffer from conflicting identities – quiet and passive in the classroom, but

loquacious and seditious online. The anonymity of the Internet turned the digital space into a no man's land where protocols for civil exchanges are nonexistent whenever a polarizing controversy arises.

There is no shortage of media reports on China's cyber vigilantism, particularly its offline consequences, set in motion by human-flesh search engines. These are voluntary human-powered witch hunts orchestrated by morally righteous netizens who targeted lawless and venal officials as well as cheating spouses and other types of transgressors. While being a controversial topic in itself, cyber violence is given a new twist in China since the Web is seen by many as the only venue for citizens to enforce moral sanctions against social injustice. Whether this type of 'cyber-populism'^{vi} is harmful or conducive to the growth of democracy in China is being debated. But the hate mails Professor Miyagawa received in 2006 brought to my attention the haunting logic of cyber justice in the MIT controversy. There is definitely a tangible link between netizens participating in vigilante searches to oust the public enemy and the Chinese overseas students setting out to expose what they believed to be transgressive behaviors committed by the two professors. Luckily, the storm was quelled before it attracted wide attention on the Chinese Net in the mainland.^{vii} (Yes, there are many different internets, not just the global English net). And I found it miraculous that the looming danger of a massive human-flesh hunt was nipped in the bud, thanks to the collaborative endeavors of the two professors and the MIT student community.

All of us involved in this controversy gained a few lessons in the end. For us professors in elite institutions, this Internet incident surely taught us to be more vigilant

about teaching in the virtual space, and it surely punctuated the coming of the democratization of knowledge making whether we like it or not. For Chinese students inside and outside MIT who started this controversy, they should be impressed with the urgency of learning those protocols that can teach them how to manufacture dissent in a framework understandable and acceptable to this part of the world. For me, another takeaway lesson is what I learned forty years ago when I first landed in the USA: mainstream Western media will never let go of any opportunity of China bashing because we have not left behind the Cold War politics after all.

ⁱ I sent [a short commentary](#) to The Chronicle of Higher Education immediately after they published a piece that reduced the controversy to a single point of view (i.e. Chinese students threatening the academic freedom of America). I met total silence. After a few weeks, I took action to write them and found their explanation of not publishing my piece a lame one. There were at least two other colleagues that I knew of who critiqued the Chronicle's interpretation of the controversy and met the same silent treatment. Several other incidents also drove home my point about the racialization of the MIT controversy. Shortly after the controversy broke out, a Japanese editor working for 朝日新闻 came to Boston to interview Dower, Miyagawa, and myself. I was interviewed because my point of view was taken to be 'antagonistic' to the 'American' point of view, and because of that, I was identified by him as a mainland Chinese citizen who could represent the "mainland China perspective." After an hour long conversation, he found out that I grew up in Taiwan and that I am an American citizen. He appeared a bit distraught and apologized to me. In hind sight, that apology itself was also riddled with problems.

Throughout the months of April and May of 2006, I encountered various instances of what I would call the “racialization of point of view.” Right after the incident, MIT authorities, together with some colleagues, requested that I hold teach-ins on campus with the expectation that I would publicly criticize the MIT’s Chinese students’ community. It might be a very effective strategy if a ‘Chinese’ professor could stand up and condemn the ‘barbarous behavior’ of Chinese students. The requests were also made because I imagine that in their perception I am an American and therefore would undoubtedly stand by the ‘American’ point of view on this controversy. There were other layers of identity politics that played into the request that I would not enumerate here. When I refused to take sides and withheld the pressure of joining teach-ins that were to be framed in that limited and partial context, more oppressive tensions piled on. For the majority of the spectators of this controversy at that time, the choice I made - taking a position that was neither ‘Chinese’ nor ‘American’ - was incomprehensible and unacceptable.

ⁱⁱ This was hardly a surprising dynamic since it was not the first time when those uphold the freedom of expression ended up suppressing views that they did not like.

ⁱⁱⁱ Please see my three commentaries on the Visualizing Cultures Controversy at <http://web.mit.edu/fl/www/people/JingWang.shtml>, published in May 2006.

^{iv} I am referring to the thesis of David Weinberger’s Too Big To Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren't the Facts, Experts Are Everywhere, and the Smartest Person in the Room Is the Room by David Weinberger, Basic Books, 2012.

^v One of the chief officers at the CSSA insisted in an email addressing Jing Wang and Shigeru Miyagawa on April 26, 2006 that “to be frank, if it is Prof. Dower’s name, or Prof. Jing Wang’s name, or even my name that appears in the contact information section [of the OCW site], Prof. Dower/Wang/or I will be flooded with protesting emails and even life-threat. People are not offended by the person who prepared these material, rather, it is the material themselves that offend people.”

In an open letter to the MIT community “On the ‘Visualizing Cultures’ Controversy and Its Implications” written by MIT Chinese Student and Scholar Association, it was said “The opening paragraph of *The Tech*’s initial reporting of the issue (April 28th [2006]) misleadingly cast the issue as one of censorship versus sensitivity. It also conveniently excluded Chinese students from any of its dozen or so quotes, and decided not to place the official letter or statement from CSSA alongside those from the two professors and the Institute.” See <http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/cssa.html>, accessed in October, 2010.

^{vi} Rebecca MacKinnon, “From Red Guards to Cyber-vigilantism to where next?” <http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2009/02/from-red-guards-to-cyber-vigilantism-to-where-next.html>, accessed in January 2012.

^{vii} See Michael Zhou’s article “The misplaced ‘apology’: Rethinking VC Controversy and China’s internet patriotism” in this special issue.