

Historiographical Writing in the Internet Perspective

Jianqiu Yu

School of History & Culture, Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610044 Sichuan, China

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Abstract: The development of Internet technology has changed the life of modern society. This change has also profoundly affected historiography and historians. The writing of history under the Internet has its own characteristics, and more non-specialist writers are involved in writing history, presenting various aspects of social life in a timely manner. The content tends to be diversified and fragmented. The Internet has changed the shape of historical sources, which in turn has had more complex effects in historiographical conceptions. How these historiographical changes have shaped the direction of historiography. Scholars should therefore pay more attention to discipline-based training when writing history, pay attention to improving theoretical thinking in history, and embark on a methodology applicable to the Internet. The combination of the Internet and history writing is promoting a repositioning of historiographical writing.

1. Introduction

Today, the Internet is an important space for people's survival and development. On September 20, 1987, the Institute of Computer Application Technology of China's Armament Industry sent the first e-mail with the content "Crossing the Great Wall to the World" via Internet routing nodes in Italy and Germany, starting the history of the Internet in China [1]. China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released *The 48th Statistical Report on the Development Status of the Internet in China* in August 2021. As of June 2021, the size of China's Internet users reached 1.011 billion, the size of cell phone users reached 1.007 billion, the size of Internet video (including short video) users reached 944 million, and the per capita weekly Internet access time of Internet users was 26.9 hours (see Figure 1) [2].

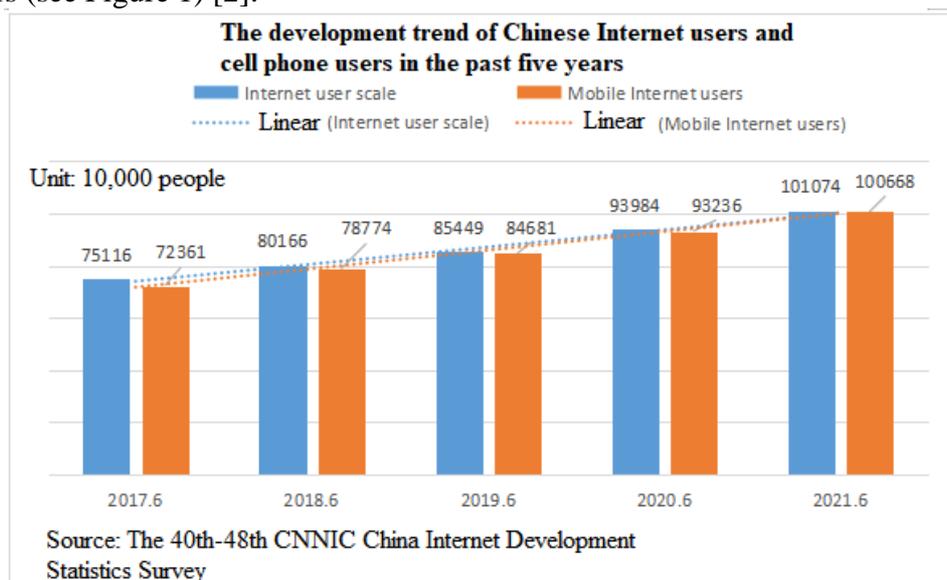


Fig.1 The Development Trend of Chinese Internet Users and Cell Phone Users in the Past Five Years

Internet applications are deeply embedded in modern life, whether for knowledge or for leisure and entertainment. History is no exception. From the perspective of history, the Internet has already influenced the development of the discipline today and perhaps even more so in the future of

history.

2. Pluralistic Historiographical Expression

The development of the Internet has been accompanied by new ways of writing and disseminating history. It changed the original interaction between historiography and society. Marshall McLuhan, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, pointed out that the historical significance of the Internet may surpass that of the printing press [3]. As of June 2021, Internet users and cell phone users accounted for 70% and 69.7% of China's total population, respectively [4]. Technological changes such as these have profoundly changed human productive life, influenced social relations and social structures, and given rise to new social spaces and social practices [5]. Nowadays, the Internet has been changed from a social novelty to the underlying structure of social operation and applied by the public. Historiographical expression has broken through the traditional production and dissemination methods of paper, streaming media, or oral narratives, and the Internet has become a new medium for carrying it. New terms such as “Internet historiography,” “network historiography,” “grassroots historiography,” and “electronic historiography” have emerged in academic circles. New terms have emerged. Even the future of historiography cannot be isolated from the influence of the Internet.

First of all, Internet historiography is timely. In traditional media, the dissemination of historical research usually takes place after the dust has settled. People's perception of history has a certain lag, which can be described as writing the history of “the dead”. The history of “living people” lacks timely channels of expression. The current Internet historiography has changed this situation. John Nesbitt said in 1982 that the Internet has shortened the distance between sender and receiver and accelerated the flow of information [6]. The public can easily express their views on history through the Internet. History scholars or ordinary people can turn what happened into history and speak in time. Taking the oral history of the Third-Front Movement as an example, a number of research results were born in 2019, such as *Good People Good Horse on the Third-Front* [7], *The Oral History of the Music of the Third-Front Movement in Liupanshui* [8], *The Third-Front Movement in a Multidimensional Perspective for Those Who Experienced it*, etc. [9]. These oral works record for the first time the life history of different groups such as workers, farmers, artists and model workers, and vividly present various aspects of the Third-Front Movement in contemporary China, which are disseminated in social contexts through the Internet.

Second, the Internet historiography expression space is diversified. The traditional form of historical dissemination of historiography is relatively single. As of December 2020, the total number of domain names in China was 41.98 million, with 18.97 million “CN” domain names, and the number of historiographic websites was endless; Weibo, WeChat, Tik Tok, Kuaishou, Bilibili The new media platforms such as Weibo, We Chat, Jitterbug, B-site (bilibili) and Xiaohongshu have accelerated the writing and dissemination of historiography. These have allowed historiographical expression to become more integrated into popular life. Take We Chat as an example, the various public numbers and groups that exist in it have brought historiographical researchers of different levels together. We Chat has become an important path and source of information for the study of history. We Chat has become an important path and information source for historical research studies. The latest research developments, research information, and scarce materials in history are available on We Chat. Student sections of different universities share and learn various academic lectures and various exciting courses through We Chat across the traditional geographical restrictions. Historical expression in We Chat integrates text, audio, and images in a more three-dimensional and diverse form [10]. These expansions have provided an adequate communication platform for a variety of historical content that was previously ignored by the grand narrative of history.

In addition, the Internet has changed people's reading habits. This depends on the fact that the Internet historiographical expression has broken through some of the original shackles of the historiography. The scientific principle and standardization of history writing has relatively weakened readability [11]. Along with the development of the Internet, historiography has

inevitably gone to the masses. With today's fast-paced life, people are less and less likely to read immersively, and more readers prefer to get the gist of the content quickly. More and more academic journals, on We Chat, introduce abstracts and keywords to each paper published, not for the purpose of making readers ponder over and over again to appreciate the scholars' discourse, but to attract readers' interest in the information explosion and guide them to get the expresser's point of view faster.

In addition, the content of historiographical expression on the Internet is more diverse. It can be said that historiographical expression on the Internet is determined by interests. On the one hand, in the pluralistic discursive space of the Internet, history writers have the right to master the discourse of expression and writing, and to choose their narratives based on their interests. There is no threshold that requires one to be a trained historian to write history on the Internet, i.e., the Internet has reduced the cost of writing historiography and has become “decentered” [12]. In the era when books, newspapers, radio, and television were the main stream media, historiographical expression was a single communication from a few elites to the majority of the population. The Internet has built a platform for two-way communication between the people and the elite, making it possible to communicate without the constraints of gender, race, color, age, occupation, or status. A 2009 questionnaire survey revealed the preference of Internet users for writers of history: writers with good historical skills (42.9%), history professionals (33.6%), authors who are irrelevant as long as their books' content is good (32.3%), and independent history enthusiasts (27.3%) [13]. On the other hand, in the algorithmic and “human-phone-human” or “human-computer-human” mode of interaction, readers' interests determine the writing of history. In the survey, the public's preferences for the purpose of historical reading materials are: increasing knowledge and humanistic literacy (79.2%), enlightening wisdom (32.3%), entertainment (20.1%), inspirational (19%), and nostalgia (16.5%); preferences for content are: biographies (62.1%), the rise and fall of nations (37.6%), anecdotes (32.1%), ideology and culture (31.6%), political struggles (30.6%), social customs (28.6%), wars (28.3%), and ethnic relations (22.8%). (31.6%), political struggle (30.6%), social customs (28.6%), war (28.3%), and ethnic relations (22.8%) [13].

However, historiographical expression on the Internet tends to be fragmented, challenging the grand narrative of history. The historiographical line of sight sinks to the masses and everyday life. The writing content focuses on villages, communities, specific people, events, and scenes, which is not very systematic and contradicts the grand narrative that is coherent and concerned with laws. The communication process of the Internet is also characterized by visualization, immediacy, fragmentation and commercialization, and with the addition of smartphones, ipads, Internet TVs, personal computers and other terminals, historical knowledge has to be fragmented in the communication. Historical knowledge is disseminated in a way that is through short, fragmented, storytelling, entertaining, lifelike and ultra-convenient links. The holistic history has been cut into small fragments and left in the reader's mind. This narrative intensifies the “de-macro-narrativization” of historiographical writing [14].

3. The Transformation of Historiography Spawned by the Internet

In terms of the impact of the development of the Internet on historiography, on the one hand, there is an unlimited expansion and change in the shape of historical materials. It can be said that the Internet breaks the monopoly of historical scholars on historical sources. By 2025, the annual data generated globally will grow from 33 ZB in 2018 to 175 ZB, which is equivalent to producing 491 EB of data per day [15]. Before the Internet era, a great deal of information about people lacked means of expression and preservation and mostly disappeared in space and time. Thanks to digital technologies, they now exist in the form of data. “The creation and development of the Internet established its own unique system of symbols and discourse Multiple media such as text, symbols, graphics, sound, graphics, animation, etc. can together constitute a new hypertext through digitization.” [16]

Prior to the 1990s, historians spent their lives transcribing documentary cards and accumulating information by hand. Since the mid-1990s, a number of information resource websites and

databases have been established, such as the Library of Congress' American Memory project, the California Digital Library, the JStor back issues database, and the Lexis/Nexis documentary database. By the period of 2000-2010, Internet intelligent search engines such as Google developed rapidly, creating a system of online databases that are difficult for outsiders to glimpse. In addition, personal histories are abundant, and social platforms such as WeChat exist and continue to give birth to a rich quantity of personal histories. The public uploads and saves memoirs, documentary literature, and oral interviews to the online platforms.

While historical scholars are still looking at and celebrating big data with the old mindset of seeking to possess as much historical material as possible, the overwhelming amount of historical data has become apparent [17].

The authenticity of Internet historical materials needs to be carefully identified. Internet historical materials have their own characteristics based on traditional historical materials. Most of the Internet historical materials are not paper-based, and their publication is subject to much simpler scrutiny. In addition, it is difficult to identify the authenticity of Internet historical materials because they are easy to revise. In 2010, Sina launched a disinformation campaign, which takes the form of continuous monitoring, active monitoring, and reporting by netizens to “investigate and disprove malicious and harmful disinformation in a timely manner”. When using the Internet, historical materials can be used as a source of information, and can be cross-validated with other forms of information; as much as possible, “authoritative” website materials are used, such as the National Bureau of Statistics, official media (Xinhua, People's Daily, and Guangming.com), etc.

Another important aspect of the Internet's influence on historiography is its impact on historical knowledge.

Can Internet historiographical writing based on massive amounts of data increase historical knowledge? Edward Waefie Said notes that “the growth of knowledge, and especially of expertise, is a very slow process. It is a process of selective agglomeration, displacement, filtering, rearrangement, and entrenchment within a so-called research stereotype.” The dissemination of historiographical writing on the Internet, fluid and unstable, is rather more useful for spreading historical knowledge as opposed to growing it. In the United States, where historiography is highly networked, scholars often publish their research findings on top of professional historiography websites. However, they are usually not original research results, but pre-versions or excerpts of paper printed treatises. The interaction between writers and readers is more polemical than learned. The situation is roughly similar for platforms such as the China History Network and the History Review Network.

The impact of Internet technology and big data on the transformation of historiography should perhaps be viewed more cautiously. To a certain extent, electronic “historical materials” have an end, and the historical materials in big data only reflect the renewal of technical means, but do not bring about a revolution in academic thinking in the ultimate sense. “The geometric growth of historiographical treatises in the digital age is overwhelming, and scholars have either become 'experts' who are confined to talking about themselves in a particular field or have been reduced to craftsmen who generate 'case studies' in bulk. Those research results with a refreshing pattern of interest and shining light of wisdom are as few as stars. [18]” Scholars have different understandings of this inevitable change in historiography. Can the impact of the Internet on historiography breakthrough in terms of historical concepts, ways of thinking, and research paradigms? With every revolutionary change in science and technology, social lifestyles, mindsets, and historical processes change. The question of whether the Internet can be a motivating factor for changes in the development of historiography requires more thought.

4. The Requirements of Historiographical Writing in the New Era

Change in the Internet demands new responses from the academy. Writers need to pay more attention than ever to their training in the discipline of historiography. The Internet has become so rich in historical material that the problem faced in writing historiography is no longer the dilemma of no historical material, but rather a surplus of historical material and a richness of historical

material that is difficult to manage. The test is the ability of the writer to discern the authenticity of historical material, the ability to judge the value of historical material, the ability to manage the macroscopic nature of complex historical material, and the ability to judge the individuality of historical material. These abilities depend on the professionalism of the discipline.

Everyone is equal in front of the historical materials on the Internet. It is now difficult to achieve academic results by monopolizing historical materials. The training of thinking in historical theory is extremely important. The ability to remove the weeds and find the problems in historical materials tests the thinking skills and theoretical level of the writers. Having a historical perspective is what distinguishes an excellent historical work from an average or mediocre one.

However, in the specific writing process, the characteristics of the Internet cannot be ignored. The significance of keyword setting is gradually amplified. Obtaining information or retrieving the latest scholarship relies on data classification. Whether the keyword setting is reasonable may influence the scope of historical data and even sway the reliability of conclusions. In particular, it is important to note that the selection of keywords requires a good understanding of the historical context of the research topic. Otherwise, based on contemporary norms of terminology, a lot of documentary information may be missed. It is necessary to return to the historical background in the search and become familiar with the terminological conventions of the research period, otherwise it will be difficult to conduct a thorough and accurate search.

The Internet is perhaps more than a tool for historiography. The new phenomenon of the informatization process of contemporary society, marked by the Internet, has brought about various changes in the methodology of historiography. It is bound to trigger us to rethink certain propositions of historical epistemology or historical-philosophical categories in historiographical theory [19]. A new historiographical writing is waving at us.

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