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FAKE POPULARITY FOR REAL MONEY: ENLARGING DATA BUBBLE ON CHINESE DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Xiaofei HAN
Carleton University

Jiayi HOU
The University of Tokyo

Introduction

This on-going research delineates the constructing of an interlocking ecosystem around data metric based popularity magnification on popular Chinese digital platforms, which we refer as “data bubble”. Similar to the bubble in a stock market where the price of assets substantially exceeds its intrinsic value, we propose “data bubble” as a neologism to describe the phenomenon and ecosystem of manipulating data to aim for an inflated popularity on Chinese digital platforms, which ultimately pitch to higher commercial and financial values.

Data bubble widely exists across different types of popular Chinese platforms yet with distinctive manifestations. For example, on Weibo where the data bubble initially emerged and took off from, fans often organize large-scale “chart beating” activities on Weibo to magnify the visibility of their idols, especially through Weibo’s flagship products. Such data fans even organized “overseas expeditions” to inflate album downloads globally for their favorite celebrities (Zhang & Negus, 2020). While on Kuaishou, a video sharing and livestreaming platform which has gained prominence among rural and grassroots users, while the platform claimed one of its top streamers, Xiao Yiyi, achieved 105 million sales during one single online marketing campaign, a third-party agency indicated that the actual turnover was only about 8 million instead (Sina Tech, 2020). While such examples associated with data manufacturing and data optimization may seem like only scattered practices that signal a negative market externality of digital economy at first sight, we want to highlight and further investigate the underlying, shared logics that have underpinned such practices at a deeper level, which, remarkably, have deeply integrated and grown biometrically into the existing platform models and users’ established behavior patterns in China.

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Through an integral theoretical framework that brings together digital capitalism (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Mosco, 2018; Schiller, 2014), platform studies (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Helmond, 2018; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), this research examines both the political economy of the data bubbles on Chinese digital platforms and the critical roles of end users as participating actors into the larger ecosystem.

By combining digital ethnography and document analysis on two representative platforms, Weibo and Kuaishou, we first unpack the assemblage of the “data bubbles” in the contemporary Chinese digital sphere and map out key actors and practices that constitute the ecosystem of data bubble as well as the different drives behind respectively. Secondly, we sketch out the key value chains which “transform” inflated data metrics on platforms into commercial and financial values for different participants. Thirdly, we pay special attention to the complexity of users’ perceived agency and how end-users’ active participation has also become complicity in the process of consolidating the data bubble ecosystem.

Specifically, we argue that data bubble is laced with platform company’s commercial and financial imperatives, logics of datafication and popularity of platforms as data infrastructure, active participation from different user groups and complementors, and a deeply embedded mentality of “traffic is king” for all parties. With various actors and entities involved (platforms, individual end users, influencers, multi-channel networks and incubators, celebrities and agencies, marketing agencies, and advertisers), data bubble is characterized by the mutually beneficial, dialectic dynamics between inflated data metrics and the popularity they (mis)represent, the commercial and financial value that such inflated data metrics have brought about, and users’ experienced satisfaction derived from their perceived agency by either “playing along” or “playing against” the datafication rules on the platforms.

Preliminary Findings

Our analysis reveals that the data bubble is deeply integrated into the platform ecosystem in four dimensions.

commodification and value chains

The data bubble has clung onto platform’s business model and magnifies the underlying logics of datafication imperative for platform. Various data manufacturing practices are deeply integrated into the key products and the commodification means of digital platforms, like the Hot Searching on Weibo or the Livestreamer Toolkits on Kuaishou, conveying the importance of championing different charts and convincing users to believe that investing money and labor to achieve visibility on these platforms may bring future economic returns—all achieved through the algorithmic rules of platform’s key products, interfaces, and provided affordances. This further results in the emergence of value chains centred around data manufacturing that often fall into the informal sectors, such as farm clicks and bots with which MCNs and celebrity agencies and even the platforms themselves are engaged and live co-dependently.

financial returns

We argue that inflated data metrics and the fake popularity they misrepresent attract capital from investors and financiers, given that such data bubble exaggerates the financial prospect of the companies involved since the excessive traffic manufactured is often used as a proof for a platform's ability to attract more attention and generate revenues in the future and thereby raising investors' expectation. The logic of the data bubble and the transformation of excessive data into financial returns are, therefore, connected to, and largely resonates with, the logic of valuation in the stock market that is underpinned by investors' speculation of the company's future performance instead of its current profitability. This is particularly relevant for platform companies that are often able to drain large capital from the stock market while yet still running a deficit.

user participation

Instead of viewing individuals simply as "victims" of the data bubble, we find their complicity in creating and intensifying such an ecosystem. Rather than lacking knowledge and agency about datafication process and tactics, individual users actively adjust themselves to the (imagined) platform's data metrics and actively participate into enlarging the data bubble by sharing vernacular knowledge and utilizing multiple tactics to collectively optimize their data performance to achieve their own ends. Users also constantly press platforms to reshape their datafication mechanisms, answering their unexpected usages on the other. Nonetheless, the dialectic relationships between platforms and active users and their agency does not necessarily liberate or empower individual users, especially for the socioeconomically marginal ones. By intensifying the rivalry among different user groups, data bubble triggers excessive labor and monetary investments to win the various data competitions when everyone's popularity has been intentionally inflated.

governance

Data bubble's developments are a result of the so-called double-folded platform governance failure (Gillespie, 2018). On the one hand, the data bubble signals a rather neoliberal approach that the Chinese government has adopted in terms of the radical commodification of major platforms in the past decade, although the state's control over political content and activism has remained tight and rigid. On the other hand, it also reflects the failure of governance practiced by platforms over the users' activities and interactions on the platforms. Too often internet companies find themselves stuck between the rife fruits reaped from the inflated traffic on the platform and the potential loss resulting from worsened user experience when the data bubble has gone too far.

Ultimately, our research highlights how various entities and actors have been wired and interlocked into the data bubble to aggravate the inflation of popularity to achieve their own ends through complex, dialectic dynamics between platform's technical artifacts and affordances, users' online engagement, and the rapid commodification process of major platforms.