Online community facilitates village governance

COMMUNICATION

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With the accelerated development of rural communities, the internal structure of villages has quietly started to change, and kinship networks have become vastly different from those in the past.

Supported by media technologies, online communication has arrived in rural communities, where individual villagers now strengthen their sense of community by sharing their feelings, developing their own groups, and having their communication needs satisfied in cyberspace. The virtual community gives each member an equal voice, enhancing their enthusiasm for participation.

Based on the relationship between new media and village governance, this article studies the case of Zhongbei Village in northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. This research offers social governance experiences specific to the central and western parts of the country, and explores new possibilities for uniting villages in a digital environment.

Background

Connected through physical living spaces, rural communities play a fundamental role in the development of villages. Renowned German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies defines community as human associations and describes three basic forms of community: kinship, geographic, and religious communities. In Ningxia's Zhongbei Village, neighborly relations were the primary bond which linked villagers. Through the course of their daily lives, villagers contacted each other in a limited space. Thus a mutual help system took shape among the community of neighbors, and largely guaranteed their stable lives.

Recently, changes in urban-rural relations have undermined the neighborhood's stability due to population exodus. China's upgraded economic structure and production models have opened traditional villages to the outside world. Capitalizing on convenient transportation, villagers have spatially expanded their labor cooperation.

Meanwhile, the massive population outflow has invited various problems and challenges into villages. After the young workforce, a crucial link in interpersonal relations, migrate outwards, fewer and fewer villagers stay in the village, resulting in weakening relations among remaining villagers, who are less willing to participate in public affairs and rituals. Particularly since 1978, when rural reforms started, societies in the countryside have shown increased social atomization. Unfortunately, the solidarity of rural societies is now in question.

A villager shows a WeChat group which was built to monitor village affairs, such as financial revenues and expenditures, and other information concerning farmers' interests. Photo: FILE

With the popularization of the internet and smart devices, the development of new media has helped villagers realize a state of co-presence across time and space, while the function of social media in village governance is evolving. Rural communities have been reconstructed in a digital form.

As a social network-based platform for chatting, WeChat groups formed by villagers' own initiatives have partially alleviated rural areas' isolation. In the virtual WeChat community, individuals can associate and communicate further with anyone in the online group. In addition, communication between individuals is close, so an online community has been built in the interactive and sharing virtual network.

Online co-presence

Interpersonal communication is grounded in a certain spatial foundation, namely co-presence. Although co-presence indicates clear geographical boundaries in the real-world space, it carries the attributes of information exchange and affective interaction.

The body-building square across from the Zhongbei Village Committee is a venue where villagers often meet. Over time they have become accustomed to sharing local news and personal stories, enriching the community memory in this square.

The WeChat group has provided villagers a new alternative to exchange and disseminate information. Their co-presence in cyberspace has contributed to more effective information sharing.

As public life has moved online from the real world, the space where members of the community can interact has broken temporal and spatial limitations. Villagers no longer depend on certain rituals or areas to communicate. The Zhongbei Village WeChat group gathers villagers in a common virtual community, and gradually has come to serve as a hub for the collection and diffusion of information. Whether they have left the village or are working in the fields, villagers in different times and spaces are reunited by the group-based communication on WeChat, realizing a shared presence in virtual space.

Moreover, the community has gained solidary due to this strong digital presence. As a virtual network, the WeChat group makes it more convenient for villagers in different spaces to participate in village affairs. Their virtual presence restores such activities as communication regarding village matters, discussion of local issues and democratic voting, which previously took place in a physical public space, and reproduces the organization process of the community.

Sharing private affairs

A strong community is capable of building close ties, so that people will try their best to meet others' needs while satisfying their own. Emotional ties are important guarantees for commitments and build trust among members. These ties, along with shared experiences and daily life, reflect the sense of community.

Sharing private affairs draws public attention. As an online platform, the Zhongbei Village WeChat group sets the stage for the discussion of neighborhood affairs.

For example, there are often messages shared in the group about one household preparing for a happy event, or the child of another family receiving a university admission letter. Some groups even offer rideshare services to deliver goods and materials between urban and rural areas for fellow villagers.

Private matters shared in the WeChat group are a common concern for many villagers. This shared concern in virtual communities divides members into communities of interest, and eventually becomes a necessary component of an emotionally bonded community.

Although shared neighborhood news may seem trivial to outsiders, the private matters villagers care about make them more connected and strengthen their identification with the community. Through conversations about children, villagers themselves, and their daily lives, members of the community draw closer.

The public sharing of private matters have gone beyond the scope of information transmission. While receiving and forwarding messages, the villagers have constructed their own model for community identity.

Discussing public issues

With the development of the internet, online communities have provided a microcosmic public space for villagers, in which they can raise their voice, participate in public affairs and exchange information. Due to its wide coverage, high diversity and strong interactivity, the online public space has significant advantages.

Through WeChat networks, villagers are mobilized and organized to take part in public matters and take a common action. Different from the simple public sphere based on rational discourse, as defined by famed German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the online public space (bolstered by social media) features more democracy and furnishes a new platform for minority and marginalized groups to challenge the mainstream discourse in the public domain. In a virtual community, the WeChat group of Zhongbei Village takes into account interests of a wider segment of society.

Featuring everyone's participation, the village's shared online presence has created a new model for village governance. The WeChat group is empowering individuals to air their views and take action. Multiple subjects now have voices, whereas previously in local governance, they were nominal and abstract existences. Due to the villagers' proactive participation, opinions on public affairs are more fully and diversely expressed. This also helps the sense of community to grow.

Village governance has gradually become characterized as polycentric governance, which facilitates the effective dissemination of policies, enhancing the efficiency of village governance. Finally, all of the multiple subjects gain the benefits they expect. The consultative model has made this village's social governance less administrative and has made virtual cooperation more efficient.

Reproducing physical community

Our research shows that virtual communities have somewhat reversed the decline of real-world village communities, as dominant WeChat group have reunited the originally fragmented Zhongbei Village. The online village community has endowed villagers with a sense of identity and belonging.

First, a public statute is tacitly in place for the virtual group. The public nature of the online community covertly regulates villagers. They might discipline themselves, voluntarily abiding by pertinent rules to post messages related to themes of group chats and trying to stay calm and rational when discussing public issues.

The public nature of the group also motivates villagers to discipline each other. The group chat function of WeChat lays a solid and practical foundation for an online relocation and reshaping of the real community, and provides more ways to maintain online public order and protect community members' interests.

Furthermore, the extension of online communication enables villagers to build new connections. Through long-term online communication and public participation, villagers have a clear identity consciousness as community members, regardless of where they are. When some villagers who work outside the village seek help in the WeChat group, community members will actively offer solutions. As they reinforce their member identities through online information communication and sharing, their identification as a part of the village community increases as well. The "mutual help" interaction model gradually restores the daily life network building common to acquaintance societies.

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