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Networked individualism in Chinese translator online communities: A case study of Facebook

ABSTRACT

Networked individualism in Chinese translator online communities:
A case study of Facebook

To find out how online social networking sites allow Chinese translators to develop their own networks, the experiences of ten Chinese translation-related Facebook page owners were studied. Based on a mixed-method design, the study shows that Facebook pages were opened to interact with the general public and readers to obtain feedback. Translation practitioners benefit by keeping a record of work, attracting people to their blogs, and establishing working relationships. However, indecent disclosure of clients' information may do more harm than good.

Keywords: translator network, networked individualism, Facebook, Chinese translators

1 Network of Translators

In the digital era, translators are no longer bound by geographic location like offices or countries. They are now able to monitor their work and maintain relationships with people anytime, anywhere. Therefore, they have attempted to develop their own networks via various online platforms. In the past, the relationship between clients and translators was constrained by physical space and time, both parties knowing each other (Abdallah/ Koskinen 2007). Due to the influx of translation outsourcing companies, the number of in-house translators fell and that of freelancers soared, resulting in the loss of direct contact between clients and translators (Wellman 2001; Abdallah/ Koskinen 2007). In this working dynamic, translators are usually unable to obtain feedback except formal

complaints; thus they assumed no feedback as good (Sakamoto/ Foedisch 2017). At the same time, translators attempted to tip the scales by making good use of online social networking sites. McDonough (2007) noted that translators posted articles, viewed other translators' articles, and wrote comments online to make themselves known, share experience, be involved in a community, increase visibility and help others. Such a computer-supported network was termed "networked individualism" by Wellman (2001), who proposed that support, information and belongingness are no longer from people of the same physical space but from other distanced areas through phone calls, video calls, or social networking sites. He defined individualism as follows:

People remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks. Each person separately operated his networks to obtain information, collaboration, orders, support, sociability, and a sense of belonging (Wellman 2001: 14).

Networked individualism refers to the dynamics of people connecting with each other. Although online social networking sites function as a form of networked individualism, the role of Facebook in Chinese translation communities has not been explored yet. In particular, the translators' perception and experiences of establishing their social network via Facebook remain obscure. It was suspected that Facebook may connect translation practitioners by forming networked individualism and provide benefits to them. In view of this, the objectives of the paper are threefold. First, it examines the agents and reasons Chinese translation-related pages on Facebook are opened. Second, it explores how the Facebook page owners establish communications on the platform. Third, it discovers the potential benefits and concerns of operating the pages. Guided by the research objectives, this paper asks the following research questions:

- 1) What are the purposes of establishing Chinese translation-related pages on Facebook? What is the background of these page owners?
- 2) What are the major interactions between the Facebook pages owners and other people on the platform?
- 3) Do the Facebook page owners benefit from operating the pages? If so, what are the benefits? Do the page owners have any concerns when operating their translation-related Facebook pages? If so, what are the major concerns?

Our findings can provide translators, clients, and Translation Studies scholars with insights into current and future communication patterns in online communities. Novice translators can also imbue themselves with knowledge and skills in establishing their networked individualism in this digital era. Of various online social networking sites, Facebook was chosen for the present study due to its popularity and functions. Other than establishing ties like finding experts, updating users and engaging in commercial transactions (Kleinberg 2008), Facebook has

remained the social networking site with the greatest number of users in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Statista 2017a; 2017b). Although WeChat, a Chinese multipurpose social media topped the list in Macau and mainland China (*Macau Daily Times* 2017; Maigoo 2018), private one-to-one or small-group communication was in most use. Thus, Facebook was chosen for the present study.

2 Methodology

This study employed a two-phase mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell 2007). It started with the collection and analysis of quantitative data via a questionnaire (first phase), followed by qualitative data via semi-structured interviews (second phase). First, a questionnaire was used to elicit the background information, purposes and experience of establishing Facebook pages, and contacts for interview. Participants who expressed willingness to be interviewed were reached via phone, Skype or face-to-face in the second phase. As the present study focuses on Chinese online translation communities, translation-related Facebook pages written in Chinese are the targets for analysis. In March 2018, keywords in Chinese including “翻譯” (translation); “譯” (translate) and “譯者” (translator) were inputted into Facebook to identify relevant public pages. Based on the results provided by the search engine of Facebook, 199 translation-related Facebook pages written in Chinese were identified. Pages which (1) include content directly related to translation and (2) are active in use (not closed or last updated more than three months earlier at the time of the search) were selected. Of the 199 pages, only 31 were selected for the present study, as other pages lacked maintenance (e.g. last update was years ago), were closed, or included content unrelated to translation.

Starting on 24th of April 2018, invitations to answer the questionnaire were sent to 29 of the 31 targeted Facebook page owners via the private message function in Facebook (two Facebook pages did not allow private message). Of the 29 invitations, 14 expressed interest in participating in the research. Of the ten page owners who returned the questionnaire survey, nine accepted the interview invitation. The time of interview ranged from 25 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese between June and July 2018 and transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The transcriptions were inputted into Nvivo 11 and coded into themes. The parts that are cited have been translated into English by the authors.

3 Results and Discussion

Data collected via the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed to answer the three research questions. The first research question aims to find out the backgrounds of the Facebook page owners and the objectives of establishing the pages.

Table 1 presents the information of the ten Facebook pages and their owners at the time of writing (22th of March 2019). Details including the pseudonym of the page owner, gender, occupation, the city/ country of residence, average time spent on managing the page daily, age of the page and the number of “fans” who liked the page are listed. Except for Emma, all page owners listed in Table 1 were interviewed for the second phase.

Table 1. Background of Chinese translation-related Facebook page owners.

Pseudonym	Gender	Occupation	Place of stay	Ave. time of managing FB page/ day	Age of page	No. of fans as at 22 Mar 2019
Apple	Female	Translator & interpreter	Taiwan	0.5 hour	5 years	576
Betty	Female	Translator & interpreter	Taiwan	< 0.5 hour	5 years	3,602
Cat	Female	Entrepreneur, part-time translator	Taiwan	0.5 hour	1.5 years	1071
Doris	Female	Translator	Taiwan	0.5 hour	5 months	982
Emma	Female	Translator	Taiwan	< 1 hour	3.5 years	808
Frank	Male	Part-time translator	Taiwan	0.5 hour	3 years	2,219
Gordon	Male	Full-time teacher, part-time translator	Hong Kong	< 0.5 hour	1 year	2631
Helen	Female	Full-time working in an International trading company, part-time language tutor, part-time translator	Taiwan	1–2 hours	2 years	367
Ivan	Male	Postgraduate translation student, freelance translator	Taiwan	2–4 hours	2 years	19,670
Jenny	Female	Translator	Germany	1 hour	2 years	254

Participants were asked the purposes of establishing a Chinese translation-related page on Facebook. The majority of the participants intended to interact with the general public (n=8). During the interviews, the participants explained that they want to educate the general public so that people can have a better understanding of the field of translation and interpreting and their roles. For example, Betty found that people did not understand translators and interpreters. She remembered when people kept talking to her when she was interpreting, ignoring the fact that she needed to stay focused when interpreting. She also recalled someone requested a free pdf file of her newly translated book. She believed translation-related Facebook pages can give people a better understanding of the field and the role of the practitioners. She said: "Someone who read my post may need to find a translator or an interpreter for help someday... Respect starts from understanding".

In addition to interacting with the general public, the participants aimed to interact with readers (n=7) and promote themselves (n=7). Half of the participants (n=5) intended to express personal feelings via Facebook. Other reasons include: to establish working relations (n=4), to speak for translators (n=4), to meet other translators (n=3) and to help those who would like to pursue translation as their future profession (n=3). To better understand the target audiences of the Facebook pages, the participants were asked to rate this statement in the questionnaire: The readers of my translation-related Facebook page are mostly from where I live/ I was born. They were provided with five choices from strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (=5). With an average mean of 4.2, most of the Facebook pages were read by people from the page owners' place of origin. This may also be due to the use of Chinese in almost all posts (in addition to instances of target text languages like Japanese and English). The findings align with those of Hampton and Wellman (2003), who proposed that information technology fosters place-based community rather than cross-border community at large. Other than operating a Facebook page, four participants have owned their respective blogs.

The second research question explores the major interactions between the Facebook page owners and other people on the platform. Findings suggest that the Facebook page owners are not interested in interacting with other translators via the platform (except Ivan). The reasons provided by Frank are worth mentioning: the real identities of the people on Facebook are not often known. Therefore, it is hard to verify whether the person is a real translator or is just an outsider who likes to comment on translation. It was found that there are two major types of interaction via the translation-related Facebook pages: establishing long-term relationships with clients and obtaining reader responses.

The interview data show that the participants have developed the habit of writing and posting reflections after a translation assignment was completed.

Apple said that her clients read her reflections: “In the past, we (I and the clients) wouldn’t be friends anymore after the job was done, but now we can send a message of ‘thank you for hiring me!’ via Facebook”. Operating a translation-related Facebook page allows the owner to establish and maintain the tie of cooperation even after the job was done. Apple explained how her network of former clients was formed:

Facebook is like a platform offering customer service instead of sales at the front-line... after my clients have paid (for my translation service), a customer hotline is given to them... I want to reinforce the connection with my clients and enhance my professional image after their use of my services (Apple).

According to Sakamoto and Foedisch (2017), translators seldom receive feedback. Most of the time translators only work by imagining a group of implied readers. Due to company regulations and policies, clients are anonymous and feedback is kept private unless detrimental. Slowly and gradually, translators began to regard no feedback as positive feedback. Yet, in all the interviewees, no feedback seems to be the worst scenario. The participants regarded interaction as worthwhile despite negative feedback in some instances. Both positive and negative comments have been received by all interviewees. Yet, as Frank and Betty mentioned, negative feedback was still regarded as a good thing for translators because they can understand more about the clients and readers. Apple emphasized that her Facebook page helped to increase her visibility to clients, readers and the general public. Thus, she realized that she should take extra care about everything she wrote: “even if the number of ‘Likes’ (of my post) is not many; it does not mean that nobody has read it. It is just that they did not leave comments on the post or press the ‘Like’ button”. In the digital era, an interactive relationship between translators and other stakeholders is developed. Synthesizing the interviews, an increasing number of translators go online to develop their own networked individualism, forming dynamics of relationships as follows:

- 1) Translators and readers: Translators connect to readers so that they can receive readers’ feedback. Helen’s experience explains the importance of the relationship between translators and readers. A reader who was a secondary school student told Helen that if it was not for of her, he/she would not have chosen Russian as his/her university major. Helen was so touched when she knew that her translation had influenced other people. She said: “I could not imagine that I can influence people like this”.
- 2) Translators and clients/ agencies: The two parties maintain a long-term working relationship even after a job has been done.
- 3) Translators and the general public: Translators inform the public about the role, needs and working conditions of translators so that the public understands and respects them.

By operating translation-related Facebook pages, translators can re-establish ties with readers, clients and the general public.

The third research question seeks to discover the benefits of operating translation-related pages on Facebook. As Facebook page owners use about thirty minutes to four hours daily to manage their page (Table 1), there must be some motivation. Three kinds of benefit were identified: (1) keeping a record of work and attracting people to one's blog, (2) establishing working relationships, and (3) establishing rapport. First, half of the translators (n=5) mentioned that they love writing in addition to translating; thus, they would like to keep a record of what they have done so far. Facebook is not only used as a platform to keep a record of work, but it is also strategically used by the four Facebook page owners who also have their respective blogs as a means to attract people to access their blogs. Facebook has been more popular and widely used than blogs have in recent years. Therefore, as Helen explained, some translation-related Facebook pages like hers were established to also direct people to the blog. As a result, more people would access her blog. Second, interviewees emphasized that a working relationship was established and strengthened via operating a translation-related page. For example, Betty shared how she became friends with another translator, Ms. A (pseudonym), via her Facebook page: Originally, a translation agency approached Ms. A and asked her to render a book about interpreting. However, Ms. A was not specialized in interpreting. As she had been reading Betty's Facebook page, she thought Betty would be a better person to handle the translation assignment. Thus, she referred the job to Betty. Later, they became real friends.

The translation industry is "highly competitive" (Olohan 2007: 59). Doris mentioned that some clients found and reached her through her translation-related Facebook page. Because of the page, she has more job opportunities. She further shared a story: When she was among a pool of interpreters that a client was choosing, the client searched online and found her Facebook page. She explained: "The client first asked for many nominations. They wanted to select one from the pool, after which, they found my page and started talking to me. They chose me right away. Thus, I consider the page has its use". A translation-related Facebook page informs potential clients about the personality and expertise of the page owner because the person can market him or herself by choosing photos and sharing content that reflect personal style and ways of thinking. Apple, who has over ten years' translation and interpreting experience and runs her own translation agency, shared how clients can better understand translators via Facebook. Apple hopes that her Facebook page can help her attract clients who respect her and share similar values:

I always think that different personal characteristics (of the translation practitioners) will attract different clients. Sometimes it is like making friends... I want to

be my own agency (via Facebook). I hope that potential clients who are interested in cooperating with me/my agency can understand what kind of person I am via my Facebook page (Apple).

Third, the interviews reveal that translators attach great importance to respect and moral support. Living in Germany, Jenny, an experienced translator who renders films and financial documents, said: “life as a full-time translator is quite isolated. I hope I can keep contact with the world through my words”. Another participant, Betty, who goes to Japan every month to do interpreting, shared similar feelings. She explained that translators are willing to spend time managing their translation-related Facebook pages because they need to feel connected. They thus use Facebook pages as a channel of establishing rapport and seeking emotional support. Jenny shared her experience: “Sometimes I felt emotionally down with my job and my life... but when I read the comments (from the netizens)... my mood was changed”. Translators, despite their busy and individualized work schedule and personality, would like to connect to people. Facebook thus serves as a platform for translators to seek moral support anytime, anywhere. Another participant, Ivan, also had a similar experience:

Last year I had a series of translated videos stolen online... it made me want to quit... I was so discouraged. But what surprised me was that my fans started to speak for me online; even Liu Xian (a Taiwanese celebrity) said words of encouragement to me and supported me to continue translating. Finally, the hijacker was tracked down (Ivan).

Despite the benefits, ethical issues are worth noting upon participation of online social media like Facebook. Operating a translation-related Facebook page does not guarantee success or positive returns. Apple said: “If you do not run it well and nobody presses ‘Like’, then the help of Facebook remains minimal. You’d better create an online CV elsewhere than running a Facebook page”. While marketing strategies may be important, indulging too much or getting too obsessed in building an iconic image on Facebook may do more harm than good. For instance, Betty and Doris criticized some translators portraying themselves as idols on Facebook pages. Betty told us some “secrets within the insiders”:

Some translators are really problematic... they love to take pictures about work, like the conference setting, then write... “how difficult the job was but I managed to accomplish it”. But you know what really happened? The person worked for 30 minutes only and the client found the person really sucked... before the person started interpreting, everything seemed great, brilliant, and seamless, but as soon as he/she interpreted, things went wrong (Betty).

Therefore, what a person writes on Facebook may not represent the truth. Some people use their fame instead of professional translation/ interpreting skills

to lure clients. “Clients who were attracted because of your Facebook page”, as Betty and Doris emphasized, “will leave for the same reason sooner or later”. It is hard to tell whether one is a good translator just by browsing Facebook. Virtual popularity and fame may not be as reliable as the real work. In addition, photos taken with celebrities may sound appealing, but translators may be guilty of misconduct when uploading photos of work (such as translating or interpreting for celebrities) online:

A translator attended an event and posted photos that he was not allowed to... You know, Japanese idols are very sensitive about their portrait rights... This was discovered by the client. The client was furious and demanded the photo be removed immediately (from the translator’s Facebook page). And the client told the agency in Taiwan that the translator would never be used again (Betty).

Apple agreed with Betty and said she never posted personal particulars or photos of clients due to ethical concerns. She also criticized some translators who uploaded photos on their Facebook pages to attract people’s attention. To them, betting on one’s future by disclosing clients’ information is dangerous and unethical.

4 Conclusion and Perspectives

Despite the insights offered, there are some limitations of the study. First, the generalizability of the present study is relatively low, with ten Facebook page owners being the participants and the majority from Taiwan. Given that the Chinese translation communities were the scope of our study, the networked individualism of translators in Hong Kong and mainland China might not be revealed in Facebook. It is suggested that other social networking sites could be studied alongside Facebook (e.g. WeChat), so that a fuller picture of networked individualism in Chinese online translator communities could be sketched. Nonetheless, because the present study has adopted mixed-methods approach, the present study offers more holistic, in-depth and reliable answers to the research questions.

Translators and interpreters have often been depicted as invisible (Liu 2013; Torikai 2009). Yet by examining research question one, translators attempt to change the stereotype by establishing networks and having their voices heard via Facebook. From the interactions addressed by research question two, the mass were either able to understand why a translator translated a book in a certain way, to be inspired as future translators, to be motivated to study new languages, or to help the translator on a new book version by pointing out mistakes. Answering research question three on the potential advantages, some of the translators were able to get new jobs and establish long-term working relationships with clients by investing their time in running Facebook pages. All of them were able to

obtain moral support from audiences who view their pages. Through the online platform, translators were able to reach out and establish ties with their readers, the general public and clients. By utilizing online social platforms like Facebook, new working environments of translators need to be further explored. Despite the advantages of establishing a translation-related Facebook page, possible disadvantages of excessive engagement in online social networks should not be neglected. For example, Wellman et al. (2001) found that, as the number of people going online increased, the sense of belonging of the participants diminished. Thus, despite the rapport and moral support gained by running social networking sites, disadvantages may come with unethical use. Marketing skills are essential but should not be used at the expense of exposing clients' details or posting false information. After all, improving one's profession is the key.

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