Can social media calm the waters between Japan and China?

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Does social media help start wars or stop them? This has lately become a topical question, not least as China and Japan face off over the contested islands and resources of the East China Sea.

For these two nations are not only major economic and military powers, they are also giants in the new world of social media, with large proportions of their populations relying increasingly on large online networks of microblogs to produce and consume information.

At first glance, one might assume that social media is no friend to peace. After all, it provides a vast and virtual coward's castle, where millions of angry nationalist individuals can vent their meanest thoughts, saying things from a distance and in aggregate that many of them would never dare say individually to a foreigner's face.

It also works as a toxic echo chamber, allowing hotheads to read each other's rants, including those emanating from the other side. And the 140-character limit of Twitter and its ilk is not exactly ideal for conveying nuance and putting international differences into conciliatory context.

In these circumstances, a language barrier is sometimes a blessing. This view is borne out by a reading of the often bitter and adversarial comment streams of some English language online publications about security issues in Asia. It makes one wonder what sort of inflammatory drivel German and French microblogs would have carried in the first few decades of the 20th century, had they existed.

On the other hand, social media is allowing large numbers of individuals to circumvent the filters, rigidity, and staged hostility of official state media and official rhetoric. Indeed, social media has played something of an ameliorative function as a forum for people's diplomacy during the latest tensions in North Asian waters.

No amount of tweeting can conjure up fellow-feeling if little commonality exists to build upon. But social media can do more than traditional channels in reflecting the true diversity of opinion in both societies—and to give cooler heads a hearing.

For it is not as if all or even most of China's 300 million Weibo users are hardline anti-Japanese jingoists. And in North Asia, the microblog may even bring a diplomatic advantage absent elsewhere in the world: it can say more. A considerable deal more substance can be conveyed in 140 characters in Chinese than in the same number in the Roman alphabet—basically a paragraph as opposed to a sentence.

The aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster revealed the first signs that social media might actually advance Sino- Japanese coexistence and understanding. To be sure, some of the least savoury denizens of China's netizen community began by applauding the catastrophe that had befallen Japan. But these voices were soon overmatched by words of sympathy for the ordinary Japanese, respect for the relative orderliness of their response to crisis, and rumblings about how poorly Beijing would likely have coped with a similar shock.

Fast-forward to late 2012, and it is striking how complex and reflective have been the Chinese social media narratives about the maritime confrontation with Japan.

Admittedly, the Weibo conversation is a monologue when it comes to the territorial question—nobody in China is prominently questioning whether it is right or wise to be prosecuting claims to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, even at the risk of conflict.

But beyond this, many flowers have bloomed. When in September thousands of Chinese took to the streets to smash Japanese shops and cars and intimidate Japanese nationals, many others took to the internet to express outrage and dismay at this behaviour. Some warned that China's international reputation was being wrecked by mobs reminiscent of the Boxer Rebellion or the Cultural Revolution. A few even urged vigilante crowd-sourcing of photographic evidence to identify the hooligans and help shame the police into cracking down.

Some observers have detected a class divide here—with a new sense of middle class embarrassment at the thuggish and counterproductive ways their working class compatriots vent anti-Japanese anger.

But it may be too soon to chalk up a victory for peace, love, and Weibo. When Japanese celebrity and sometime porn actress Sola Aoi tried to turn her enormous popularity in China into an asset for diplomacy, by urging her millions of Weibo fans to embrace peace, the response was immediate and mixed. Her plea for friendship between Chinese and Japanese people drew plenty of re-tweets, but also a vicious nationalist backlash. Social media alone is not going to make the difference whether Asia's giants make love rather than war.