

# Bullet Screens (*Danmu*): Texting, Online Streaming, and the Spectacle of Social Inequality on Chinese Social Networks

Xuenan Cao 

Duke University

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## Abstract

For theorists interested in screen cultures and the digital economy, looking beyond Facebook and YouTube prompts a more refined conceptualization of participation and monetization on social networks. This paper examines YY as representative of Chinese platforms that monetize spectacles of social inequality. I first discuss why these financially successful platforms have eluded the attention of media and cultural critics, and then explain how these social network platforms blend subversive texting with streaming through a format called ‘bullet screen’. This format collapses social inequality into a spectacle of money flowing and vanishing on screen. This investigation contributes to the theoretical discussion of mixed-semiotics, reorients several Marxian neologisms and explains what texting means on screen in both semiotic and economic terms.

## Keywords

Chinese streaming sites, *danmu/danmaku*, gift, labour, platform, social media

## Introduction

Imagine: after a long day of work, you find yourself in front of a computer once again. You are on an interactive streaming platform. You consume everything from videos of online gaming to amateur soft porn, but the porn and the gaming are not the central attraction. You are being carried away by something more spectacular. Staring into the abyss of the screen, you witness a seemingly endless flow of money. As you watch an orgy of low-budget videos, thousands of messages shoot like bullets

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**Corresponding author:** Xuenan Cao. Email: [xuenan.cao@duke.edu](mailto:xuenan.cao@duke.edu)

**TCS Online Forum:** <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/>

across the screen. You know that some messages contain monetary gifts for the content creator – indicated by icons – easily convertible into Chinese currency (RMB). Some of the titbits whipping by and disappearing from your view may be small. But they could also represent amounts greater than your monthly salary. You are aware that the temptation of participating in that flow can lead to ruinous ends.

In 2017, a lawsuit brought attention to a 28-year-old man with a stable accounting job who embezzled around US\$1,400,000 worth of Chinese currency in order to send monetary messages on streaming platforms.<sup>1</sup> Several other cases followed. A 16-year-old boy stole US\$70,000 worth of Chinese currency from his mother's online payment account to send monetary texts on several streaming sites and buy virtual gifts for his favourite emcee.<sup>2</sup> It is not just men who use these sites. Women are also prominent users. They account for close to one-third of all active users on these platforms (iResearch, 2017).<sup>3</sup> In fact, billions of users have signed up and millions are giving away money on these interactive sites and apps, at a rate that can be alarming. That's especially so because the vast majority of paying users are under the age of 40 and 86.5 per cent of them earn less than the equivalent of US\$1,400 per month (iResearch, 2017). Why do young working-class people risk financial ruin by participating in online messaging? And what kinds of messages are being bought and sold through such streaming platforms?

It is tempting to try to understand Chinese interactive streaming platforms by comparing them to established North American media. But unlike YouTube, Facebook and Twitch, the financial well-being of these Chinese interactive streaming platforms is not dependent on reducing users to 'derivatives' (Arvidsson, 2016) or selling them as 'data commodities' (Fuchs, 2012). As economic ventures these platforms work differently. They aggregate live mini-reality TV shows as well as music and game streaming channels curated by amateurs to attract users who offer monetary gifts to their favourite emcees. Gifts flash on screen. If emcees are satisfied with the publicity and the value of these gifts, they gratify the donors by expressing admirations through their performances. Users call these transactions '*dashang*', meaning donating money to reward pleasing performances. Emcees can redeem up to 70 per cent of the donation, while the remaining amount goes to the platform and intermediaries. Payments from these gifting activities generate up to 78.9 per cent of the total income for platforms (iResearch, 2018). The profitability of a platform is dependent on 'internet value-adding services' (YY Inc., 2015: 6), a term that euphemizes these transactions. Platforms use a text-over-screen technology – referred to as 'bullet screen' – to visualize these monetary transactions during streaming, turning the gift culture into a spectacle.

While YouTube, Facebook and Twitch commodify user data while marketing their services as mostly unpaid communal spaces, these

Debord (2014: 49) says that ‘spectacle is the flip side of money’. To bear witness to YY.com is to marvel at the accuracy of Debord’s statement that seems all the more applicable for describing economic relationships half a century after the publication of his *Society of the Spectacle*. But money-texting on bullet screens also reveals a mechanism that capitalizes on the type of pleasure that can only be attained by not taking economic inequality seriously. It ironically upholds the ‘virtues’ of self-actualization in the socialist sense – *from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs*.

## Conclusion

When I began research for this paper in 2010, reality TV still prevailed in audio-visual markets. In China, reality TV resolved the contradictions of social inequality through inspiring, life-changing stories. In less than a decade, this ideological function shifted to burgeoning online streaming sites. To understand what drives the socially influential and financially successful streaming platforms, I have searched widely and found studies that have identified a parallel to the migration of the social from rural to urban in the shift from offline to online (Wallis, 2013; Wang, 2016). The online platforms function even more efficiently than reality TV, borrowing the widespread appeal of online communities and social media.

In 2017, YouTube launched its copycat version of the paid texting service Super Chat to catch up with the new development of gifting on social media. Just like bullet screens on streaming sites, Super Chat allows viewers to pin their comments if they pay any amount between \$1 and \$500 (Garun, 2017). As the contagious format of text-over-screen proliferates into various platforms, viewing, texting and the economic spectacles on screens configure more than a single political position.

However, indeterminacy does not promise liberation – it obscures possibilities of liberation, enabling users to watch social inequality on the screen without taking seriously the spectacle in which they are participating. What is dystopian is that bullet screen is actually hard to censor and thus could be transgressive. But the importance of its transgressive charge must not be taken too seriously by its practitioners for them to enjoy their practices. YY, as a platform of going astray, distinguishes itself as a tool of making social inequality a spectacle not to be taken too seriously. Viewing and texting exemplify not only the new business models of tech firms but also the experience of being submerged in a culture of insignificant content that nonetheless carries significance, both semiotic and socioeconomic.

## ORCID iD

Xuenan Cao  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7830-8708>