Leping Supplement
Seeking Common Ground
By Le Geng, Yulin Li & Yang Wang
Seeking Common Ground

Through cross-sector partnerships and identifying ways to meet the needs of the community, China-based Blued is a business success story that also proves to be an asset for LGBTQ rights, ensuring that members’ voices are both heard and visible.

BY LE GENG, YULIN LI & YONG WANG

With 40 million registered users around the world (30 percent of which live outside of China) and valued at $600 million, the Beijing-based app Blued has become a global business empire. In February 2018, Blued—a social platform for gay communities—raised $100 million in a Series D funding round—its seventh round of fundraising since its establishment in 2012.

Before Blued was founded, it started as a personal website in 2000 that was known as danlan.org (danlan means “light blue” in Chinese), which served as an online discussion forum for the gay community. Today, besides being China’s largest gay dating app, Blued is a pillar for the LGBTQ community, offering online and offline services ranging from fertility care to HIV/AIDS prevention education to information about HIV screenings. Users can share updates and photos, watch live broadcasts, play games, and even shop through the app.

While Blued’s business success is impressive, its story shows that even in China, where homosexuality was considered a mental illness until only a handful of years ago (though the situation has vastly improved thanks to globalized thinking that has resulted from access to the Internet), an organization can strengthen the LGBTQ community and advocate for LGBTQ rights while simultaneously being profitable.

CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

Blued’s story begins in the mid-1990s when gay sex was considered a crime and homosexuality was classified as a mental illness in China. At the time, Le Geng, a former police officer, was grappling with an identity he thought was abnormal and different from other people. By the time Geng graduated from the police academy in 1996, the Internet was more accessible in China, and he found solace and support through online gay communities.

Online activism in China played a big role in uniting ostracized people and reassuring them that they were not alone through the establishment of online communities that shared information and knowledge with one another—essential to physical and mental health and well-being. Online groups, like Boya, Albai, and Pengyou Bieku (Don’t Cry My Friends) gave people in the LGBTQ community a sense of belonging through shared marginalized identities. As a result of joining these early digital communities, Geng was eager to share his story. He purchased a manual guide on website design, and his personal blog, Blued Memory, was launched shortly after, in 2000.

Because of his profession and China’s complicated cultural stance on homosexuality, Geng—like many gay Chinese men—lived a double life. By day, he was a police officer chasing burglars in Qinhuangdao, a coastal city in the Hebei province. By night, he was a gay man operating a popular website, Blued Memory, for the LGBTQ community. For six years, Geng ran Blued Memory on his own, relying on his police wages and donations and technical support from Chinese netizens to keep the site up and running.

As readers began to demand more interactions on Blued Memory, Geng put together a team of website owners and friends who ran online gay communities. In 2006, Blued Memory was renamed Blued and rebranded itself as a discussion forum for news and information relevant to the LGBTQ community.

With the support of a new team, Blued quickly became a well-known gay Web portal in China. However, as a gay site, it was repeatedly shut down by regulators and service providers who categorized it as “illegal” or “pornographic.”

Access to the Internet and information began to change the social climate and public attitudes in China. In 1997, consensual gay sex was decriminalized, and in 2001, homosexuality was removed from the country’s list of diseases. When the 2008 Summer Olympic Games were held in Beijing, Xinhua, a state-run media platform published a report on Blued in July to showcase China’s openness to LGBTQ groups and lifestyles.

GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

In 2009, Geng and his team moved to a rented residential building in Beijing known to be home to a centralized gay community, as well as people who are more tolerant of alternative lifestyles. In general, Beijing has more talent and resources to support the growth of its specialized and community-focused network.

Around this time, after learning that some of his friends had contracted HIV and that infection rates were climbing among men who have sex with men (MSM) in China, Geng founded Blued for Good, to offer assistance and services on HIV/AIDS prevention.

At the time, the HIV endemic affecting MSM raised concerns among Chinese health departments, which found it difficult to identify the community in need of intervention services. Blued for Good, which consisted of a few staffers and volunteers, partnered with the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Beijing’s Changping District to offer services that included information on HIV/AIDS prevention, HIV screenings, and antidiscrimination education.

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**Le Geng** is the founder and CEO of Blued. **Yulin Li** is the founder of Philanthropy Watch Lab. **Yong Wang** is a journalist, based in Beijing.
The story of Blued shows that there is always a chance to seek common ground by recognizing and meeting the needs of the LGBTQ community in China. Blued gives its members much-needed visibility.

PROFIT WITH A CONSCIENCE
Blued’s profitability does not jeopardize its social mission to provide information and services for HIV/AIDS prevention, acceptance of sexual diversity, and antidiscrimination advocacy. Blued shares information vital to the LGBTQ community through its app and online platform.

HIV/AIDS prevention education, free screenings, an online portal that connects users with local labs, and consulting are its priorities. And a large number of resources have been secured to ensure that these priorities are met and made easily available to the community. Additionally, ten percent of the organization’s advertising revenue is donated to a campaign for charity purposes.

Today, Blued has a dedicated team of eight full-time staffers and more than 150 volunteers in Beijing working in its HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives.

In Beijing, Blued developed four Blued Happy Testing offices with the CDC to offer free HIV testing and health and medical consulting services for MSM. In 2016, more than 22,000 people in Beijing accessed these free services. Through partnerships with local grassroots organizations, Blued established 15 more testing offices in the cities of Qingdao, Chengdu, and Shenzhen.

In addition, Blued has developed an online system, or online testing lab, that connects users with more than 200 HIV testing centers nationwide. Through its online data bank, Blued developed a digital platform for 46 HIV/AIDS organizations across the nation to provide education and intervention programs and services. The Internet has enabled Blued to extend its HIV/AIDS prevention activities to Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Blued also contributed to research programs for Tsinghua University, Sun Yat-Sen University, Beijing CDC and the national CDC. Blued is currently applying, alongside North Dakota State University and Emory University, for a research grant on Internet-based innovation funded by the National Institutes of Health in the United States.

The story of Blued shows that there is always a chance to seek common ground, despite people’s differences. By actively responding to the government’s need for HIV/AIDS prevention, Blued was able to build partnerships with agencies at the local and national levels. By tapping into marketing opportunities targeted at gay and lesbian consumers, Blued became sustainable and profitable. More important, by recognizing and meeting the needs of the LGBTQ community in China, from health care to entertainment to culture, Blued gives its members much-needed visibility.

Editor’s Note: In January 2019, Blued (among other social networking apps) was accused by Chinese media of failing to prevent minors from misusing the app, resulting in the spread of cases of HIV/AIDS. In response, Blued released an official statement that repeated its longstanding policy of zero tolerance of users under 18 years of age, and added that it will review its internal governance and technological capability to ensure that such incidents won’t happen again. This problem is not unique to Blued; all social networking platforms must make serious efforts to ensure that users are not harmed when they are connected to others.