

Investigating Chinese Microblogging through a Citizen Journalism Perspective

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Freedom of expression has been unwittingly enhanced in China over the last decade through the rapid growth of social media, despite censorship and other punitive measures to control this new media. With their ever-increasing popularity, there are a growing number of research studies on China's social media and the new territory of Chinese microblogs, but most studies focus on the technology from a systems, services, or marketing perspective rather than a sociological perspective. However, a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with the so-called "netizens" (a term commonly used by Chinese media to refer online users) to understand their participation on Weibo has seldom been conducted. In this study, twenty-eight Chinese netizens were interviewed, alongside a content analysis of Weibo public posts on two "Weibo events", in an effort to expand our understanding of China's social media and Chinese citizen journalism, with particular reference to Weibo. The key research question was: to what extent has microblogging (on Weibo) empowered citizen journalism in China?

Using qualitative approaches, a range of findings have emerged from the processes of media content analysis and grounded theory analysis in this research. These findings examine the role of Weibo in promoting citizen journalism, address the practice models and the relational modes with Chinese authorities, and further situate the phenomenon in the particular social, political, and cultural context of China. More specifically, the findings highlight the means through which citizen journalists practise on the platform, the existence and implications of Weibo citizen events, the responses and reactions of the Chinese authorities, including government and mainstream media, the debates and controversies about the phenomenon, and the social influences it has achieved so far. Microblogging services like Weibo keep Chinese netizens informed of their immediate community and society and enable discussion of local (and some national) issues, mainly social and law and order issues, but by and large, citizen journalism is not able to make a huge difference in the political sphere in any significant way, due to both techno-political constraints and socio-political control. Nevertheless, it has forced the authorities to engage in selective transparency in regard to some high-profile issues of public interest.

While most scholarship in English speaks for the experiences of Chinese citizens on public debate, participatory media, censorship and regulation, this research gives a sample of articulate Chinese netizens a voice on these matters. The thesis is grounded in netizens' own concerns and interests about Weibo and the interviewing has drew out remarkable reflection

from research participants, this research has been able to show how Weibo users participate in an information dissemination process on the platform and develop a particular kind of media literacy in a context of low trust and high censorship. As a substantial independent research, this thesis has made an original and distinct contribution to knowledge.

Definition of Terms

As mentioned earlier, specific terms used in this thesis are English translations of the Chinese words, mostly Internet terms or slang. Although some are self-explanatory, the uses of such terms in the English context sometimes differs from their uses in Chinese. Therefore, it was necessary to include a list of the particular terms and their meanings frequently used in the thesis.

1. **“404”**: This is the code that often shows on the Internet error page of “Page not found” and is frequently used to refer to the intended blockage of sensitive content among Chinese cyberspace.
2. **“Big V”** (大V): A VIP user with a verified account on Weibo, generally with an outstanding number of followers and strong influential power among the Chinese society; sometimes also refers to online opinion leaders.
3. **“Burn after viewing”** (阅后即焚): Refers to a sensitive post that survived the prescreening censorship, but it will still be deleted after a short period, which means it will be burned after being viewed by (potentially) a group of active users.
4. **“Complain”** (吐槽): A post to complain about one’s unpleasant experience, to vent one’s feelings, or to deliberately refute a statement or claim; usually presented with a tone of banter or joke.
5. **“Face smacking”** (打臉): Refers to a situation when a person is proven wrong; synonym for the slang of “in your face”.
6. **“Fifty cents”** (五毛) or “fifty cents party” (Chinese: 五毛黨): A person who is hired by the Chinese regime to conduct online propaganda work, e.g. praise the party and criticise others, including attack anyone who questions the party or the party’s decisions; it is named thus because the payment received for each comment made to advance the party’s interests is 50 cents.
7. **“Internet Water Army”** (水軍 or 網絡水軍): A group of people who are paid to write content, mainly comments, to promote a particular agenda, from a company image to a single product, for public relations or media manipulation; similar to “Internet ghostwriter”.
8. **“Keyboard warrior”** (鍵盤俠): A person who acts aggressively and spreads discord in an online discussion, through posting harassment, or (sometimes unrelated) inflammatory messages to provoke others; similar to the slang of “Internet troll”.

9. **“Lead the tempo”** (帶節奏): This refers to situations when public opinions have been directed by powerful and influential accounts (e.g. opinion leader or mainstream media) to encourage a specific attitude, which potentially confuses the truth of a social issue but benefits the interests of a particular group.
10. **Netizen** (網民, literally: net-people): A term frequently used to reflect Internet users in China, as Chinese mainstream media refers to them as “網民” in Chinese, and the China-based Western media then translates the term to netizens; it was formed as a combination of the word Internet and the word citizen, as in “citizen of the net” (Hauben, 1995).
11. **“Online celebrity”** (網紅 or 網絡紅人): Refers to the person who becomes famous through the help of the Internet, especially on social media platforms.
12. **“Onlookers”** (圍觀群眾): Refers to netizens who gather together for a specific topic or event and seek to understand it, while being outsiders to the actual situation; in the context of Chinese slang of “the onlookers who are unaware of the truth” (Chinese: 不明真相的圍觀群眾).
13. **“Tieba”** (貼吧 or 百度貼吧, literally: Baidu Paste Bar): The most significant Chinese online forum/platform hosted by China’s search engine company Baidu; being a topic-based forum, many personal interest topics can be created, uploaded, and discussed via Tieba.
14. **“Popularity sweeping”** (蹭熱度): The behaviour of someone who joins a popular debate for increasing one’s own viewing count or influence without making a meaningful contribution to the discussion.
15. **“Reversal”** (反轉): The situation when a previously unknown side to a story is disclosed, which directly contrasts what the public was told at the beginning of an event’s emergence.
16. **“Self-media”** (自媒體): Social media accounts based on user-generated-content and operated by ordinary citizens, also refers to the term “we media” from English literature, and a synonym for “grassroots media”. They are not officially registered as media organisations to the Chinese government and thus not directly controlled by authorities (Lu, C. T., 2016).
17. **“Selling goods for E-commerce”** (電商帶貨): The situation when an influential account, particularly of a celebrity, is selling a product or a service and raising public

attention through social media; in many cases, the purchase link is usually provided with the post or within relevant comments.

18. **“Tower building”** (蓋樓): Refers to users’ act of leaving comments and thus building a list of comments on a post; mostly favourite posts with high viewing counts that motivated readers to express their viewpoint.
19. **“Two-storey room”** (樓中樓): When users reply to one another and have discussions about relevant issues within the comments section on the original post.
20. **“Weibo Events”** (微博事件): This refers to citizen events that originated on Weibo, often creating substantial attention and discussions from society, both online and offline; it can be related to any social or political topic, including but not limited to natural disasters, safety incidents, crimes, corruption, and injustice, with participation from various social groups from authorities to ordinary citizens. Note: since the launch of Weibo in August 2009, a range of Chinese media, including Weibo itself, have been reviewing the most influential events/cases annually (Chinese: 微博熱點事件回顧, literally: Weibo hot events review).
21. **“Zombie fans”** (僵尸粉): Refers to the fake Weibo accounts that generate nil or limited content and are usually registered for commercial purposes. They are mainly designed for real users to purchase followers and increase their popularity ranking. While the earlier generation of zombie fans were mostly Weibo accounts with no profile pictures, no followers and no activities of commenting or reposting (Yuan, Feng, Fu, & Cao, 2012); the current version of zombie fans are more active and seem more “real” with account profiles, which are often controlled by specific software/program. In essence, they are bots, similar to Twitter bots.

