

# **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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## **Keywords**

citizen journalism, participatory journalism, social media, Chinese microblogging, Sina Weibo, media control, censorship

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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.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the last two decades, the rapid growth of technology and digital media has brought significant changes to the world. It has transformed individuals' daily activities and routines, as well as professional practice across various fields. Furthermore, it has offered a great range of potential and opportunity for ordinary citizens, who were long regarded as passive audience and targeted as consumers. The emergence of social media, particularly microblogging services, has undermined media corporations' privileged position as publishers and nurtured the growth of user-generated content from every individual, regardless of one's background or profession. The widespread availability and use of smartphones and well-developed telecommunication networks have enabled social media services to become essential platforms for citizens in many democratic countries to acquire news, share information, and become involved in social and political discussions and actions, online and offline.

Even within the "Great Firewall of China" (Shen, 2014), a variety of social media platforms have gained prevalence among Chinese Internet users, alongside the rise of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is a term used to describe practices which can be broadly referred to as active citizens exercising what journalists used to do, through "the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman & Willis, 2003). The content-sharing nature of social media has challenged the Chinese regime's control over media and communication, and the increasing social and political implications of Chinese social media have begun to draw attention from the academic world.

In recent years, there has been a growing amount of research on the topic of Chinese microblogs, focusing on their functional characteristics, their information dissemination models, and their impact on different social aspects, mostly using quantitative research methods or openly available public content analysis. Studies on the phenomenon of citizen journalism in China using qualitative approaches are still relatively rare in Chinese and in Western scholarship. This study ventures into the lived experiences and participation of Chinese citizen journalists through a mixture of qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews with active Weibo (微博) users, supplemented by a content analysis of so-called "Weibo events" (微博事件).

A range of findings emerged from the media content analysis and grounded theory analysis of the research data in this study. These findings examine the role of Weibo in promoting citizen journalism, address the practice models and the relational modes with



Chinese authorities, and further recognise the phenomenon in the particular social, political, and cultural context of China. More specifically, the findings of this research highlight the activities of citizen journalists exercising their voice 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.

By investigating citizen journalism on the dominant Chinese microblog Weibo, this research provides an insight into Weibo citizen journalism, emphasises the practice in correlation with the reinforcement of government control and the weakening of citizen participation, and addresses the complexities of the authoritarian media environment and society. Additionally, it discusses the contradictions and consensus within the phenomenon, extended onto the broader social-political domains in China. In recognition of the complex relational influence of Weibo citizen journalism, this research gives clear “voice” to participants’ perspectives for their experience in public debate, participatory media, censorship and more. As a substantial independent research, this thesis has made an original and distinct contribution to knowledge in the field of Chinese social media and journalism.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Chinese government introduces information technologies principally for facilitating economic development rather than encouraging freedom of expression or social change (Chen, Gao, & Tan, 2005; Heshmati & Yang, 2006; Meng & Li, 2002). However, freedom of speech has been dramatically enhanced in China over the years through the rapid expansion of digital and social media. Active citizens have been seeking to acquire and publish information through alternative information sources besides the strictly censored state-owned media. In fact, Internet and personal mobile communications have become primary channels through which such efforts are possible.

China’s citizen journalism was primarily enabled by the emergence of social media such as Internet forums and weblogs. Blogging services only became available in China in 2002, five years after the launch of blogging technologies in Western countries. The service quickly attracted tens of thousands of users, who were keen to write about their personal experiences, as well as comment on current affairs or significant civil-society issues, and discuss these issues further with other bloggers or their readers. Through the weblogs, everyday citizens from various backgrounds were able to express their viewpoint, which helped build a

general understanding of the current affairs amongst the public. Indeed, citizen journalists, who report, analyse, and distribute news and information, often speak up for the weak and speak out against the powerful on their weblogs. These users have courageously refused to remain silent despite the government's strict media control and legal consequences such as fines and arrest. Citizen bloggers like "Tiger Temple" (老虎廟), Xiao Shu (笑蜀), and Chang Ping (常平) had become influential in both online communities and the offline world and are considered opinion leaders in the Chinese cyberspace. Their in-depth reviews and critical analysis of social-political issues often frame public topics and draw a large readership.

Despite the fact that citizen journalists on Chinese weblogs were not formally organised or united in any way, these independent posters, commentators and critics were able to raise public awareness of social problems. Through reading news and information published by traditional and non-traditional channels, commenting on multiple issues, sharing personal stories and viewpoints, and debating with other users, more Chinese bloggers have become critical of authority and active in the public sphere. In some social spheres, the Chinese government has made concessions because of public concerns raised on the blogosphere. In one example, the local government agreed to suspend the paraxylene (PX) chemical factory project in Xiamen after the project's environmental harms were disclosed through weblogs of citizen blogger Lian Yue (連岳), which resulted in a remarkable debate in the Chinese cyberspace and a real-world protest attended by thousands of citizens in 2007 (China.org, 2008).

While weblogging was an essential factor for the establishment of citizen journalism, the launch of short posts and easy-to-access microblogging services have further expanded citizen journalism in China. Unlike weblogs, microblogging services only allow users to write 140 characters in a single post, but this compact nature of microblogs has significantly encouraged users' productivity and participation. At the same time, it offers a wide range of access options so that users have the capability to post instant updates onto their microblog accounts. Microbloggers can read, write, reply and repost information not only on microblogging websites but also through mobile third-party applications. Unlike the dissemination of information through weblogging, information is disseminated rapidly on microblogging services via networks of followers and the convenience of reposting. Every microblog post has the potential to reach thousands of users within a short period of time, since one's direct followers can repost it, and the message can be amplified by exposure to one's indirect followers, and then to *their* followers.

Additionally, the functions of uploading photos, video clips, and webpage links via one's microblog account has made it easy for real-time broadcasting and reporting, which benefits both account owners and their followers. Over the last decade, much of the live footage of incidents and anecdotes that circulated on the mainstream Chinese media and online communities were taken by citizens; more specifically, by microblog users. For example, in the 2010 "Shanghai residential fire incident", several hundreds of photos of the burning Jiaozhou road apartment were posted on microblogs within one hour of the fire, before traditional news outlets began to cover it (Ye, 2010).

## 1.2 AN OVERVIEW OF CHINA'S INTERNET AGE

### 1.2.1 Internet in China

Being the world's most populous country, China also has the world's largest online population. The total figure of Chinese Internet users has risen to 751 million in June 2017, which is more than half of the country's population (CNNIC, 2017). Driven by the rapid developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICTs), the Internet is no longer accessible only through desktop computers. Using smartphones and advanced networks (3G network, for example), everyone can surf the Internet anytime at any location. According to the latest report released by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), 96% of China's Internet users connect to the Internet via mobile devices, and about 50% of them use the most popular microblogging service Weibo as of June 2017 (CNNIC, 2017). The multi-media Internet has made a huge impact on China's media structures and patterns of use. Millions of users rely on it as a source of information, communication, and entertainment. As of 1999, China has established the "Electronic Government" (政府上網) project to encourage regional and local government to build their websites. While these local government websites provide information and services for the public, they are also expected to become e-government platforms built to serve the citizens (Zhu & Du, 2007). As a result, relations between participants and technologies or their web-based social activities have become complicated.

The Internet has not only expanded people's information worlds but also brought new ways of doing things. As a result of the social media boom, an increasing number of Chinese express their voices online and have created spaces to do this, despite the government's efforts to control the media. Even though most mainstream media companies and organisations in China have also established their online presence, such websites are less attractive to citizens. According to Google's data, the page-view counts of social networking websites such as Youku

(a Chinese version of YouTube) or Renren (a Chinese version of Facebook) were recorded at least four times higher than any mainstream media websites such as the Xinhua News website (Google, 2011).

### 1.2.2 Internet Censorship in China

The Chinese government enforces strict controls over the flow of information to maintain a stable regime. All media, communication and educational materials, including but not limited to television, print media, radio, film, music, video games, literature, textbooks, text messaging, instant messaging and the Internet, are under state control. In line with the propaganda goals of the ruling party, most mainstream media outlets report one-sided news and some are known to manufacture news to support government agendas (Chomhaill, McKelvey, Curran, & Subaginy, 2015). Thus, more Chinese citizens typically rely on the Internet as a source for news and information instead of the mainstream media (Kou, Semaan, & Nardi, 2017). However, the Internet in China is also controlled and regulated.

The Internet, which is commonly considered a global system that breaks down geographical and cultural boundaries, cannot escape the reach of China's censorship. The government has established a specific office to manage and regulate the Chinese network society – the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC; 國家互聯網信息辦公室, shortened to 網信辦; literally: “State Internet Information Office”). Through the office, a wide range of laws and regulations have been made to legislate against online activities, implemented by regional branches of state-owned ISPs, Internet companies and organisations, and local government agencies. Further, using sophisticated methods and technologies, the Chinese government has built up a “Great Firewall of China” (Shen, 2014) to block western social networking services such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. Politically sensitive words and debates relating to June 4 (the date of Tiananmen Square protests of 1989), freedom of speech, democracy, human rights, organisational corruption, food safety, religious content, and more, are often censored and banned in Mainland China. At the same time, individuals' Internet access and online expression is also monitored in China.

Nevertheless, there are means to circumvent these restrictions. For instance, netizens (defined in section 1.7.1) can surpass the monitoring and use Twitter with any Virtual Private Network (VPN) service that is located outside Mainland China (Mamiit, 2016), and although these are routinely shut down, people regularly find new loopholes. Several Chinese

equivalents of blocked Western social networking services are mapped in Figure 1-1 (generated by the researcher).

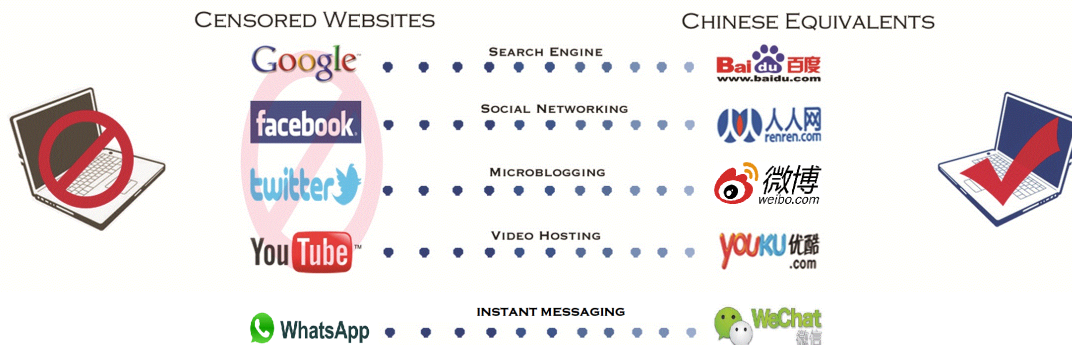


Figure 1-1 Examples of Chinese Equivalent Websites for Blocked Western Websites

To monitor citizen’s online activities, the Chinese government has enforced the “Internet Real-name Registration Project” (網絡實名制) for all telecommunication service users. As of November 2016, anyone who uses the Internet and other telecommunication services in China has to provide identification details. From October 2017, users who have not verified their identities will be unable to make comments online (Shu, 2017). By 2020, all Chinese citizens will have a citizen “trust score” (信用制度評級, literally: credit ranking system) rated by the government, which can be seen as a social credit rating system (Hatton, 2015; Gov.cn, 2015). Under this system, one’s social credit has direct relation to financial approvals and ticket purchases for public transport such as trains and aeroplanes. One’s trust score will be decreased if their online expressions or participations breach relevant cyberspace laws and regulations, including so-called “rumour spreading” behaviour.

### 1.3 THE EMERGENCE OF MICROBLOGGING IN CHINA AND THE WEST

The term “microblogging” refers to a relatively new broadcast and information blogging channel, unique for its limited number of characters per post. On microblogging platforms, users can post microblogs in the text with photos, videos, weblinks, and locations, receive posts in their news feed from accounts they are following, repost others’ microblogs and mention other microbloggers in one’s posts by tagging them. Since Jack Dorsey launched Twitter in 2006 (Sarno, 2009), microblogging has become more popular than other social networking services. By the end of 2008, there were more than 10 million worldwide visitors to Twitter, which was an increase of over 700% in one year (Radwanick, 2009). Within three years,

Twitter became a social networking giant and was ranked as the third in the top 25 social networking websites based on monthly visitor counts (Kazeniak, 2009). Based on Google's 2011 data, Twitter had 5900 million page-views, which made it the world's 15th most-visited website (Google, 2011). By May 2013, Twitter already had over 600 million registered users (Twocharts, 2013), with more than 200 million monthly active users producing more than 140 million messages over the world (Speriosu, Sudan, Upadhyay, & Baldrige, 2011). As of the end of 2017, Twitter had 330 million monthly active users (Statista, 2018).

Despite its rapid growth in 2008, Twitter lost the vast Chinese market in mid-2009 due to China's Internet censors. In 2009, two days before the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protest, the government strengthened its information controls and blocked several Western social networking websites, including Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook (Xu & Albert, 2017). Domestic social media operators were also facing the enforcement of restrictions. After the Urumqi riots in July 2009, the government also shut down the first Chinese microblogging service named Fanfou (飯否), which had operated locally since 2007. But microblogging services had already proven their popularity and were only absent in Chinese cyberspace for a month. Sina Corporation, one of the Chinese Internet portals, quickly released its test version of a microblogging service named Weibo in August 2009. Following Sina, other Chinese Internet portals such as Sohu, NetEase, and Tencent soon launched their beta versions of microblogging websites in early 2010.

Weibo is now the most popular microblogging service among microblogging service providers in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. As of June 2017, it had over 361 million active monthly users (CNNIC, 2017), overtaking Twitter's figure for the first time. In addition to personal and group communications, Weibo is also used for news and information broadcasting. Most Chinese mainstream media companies and organisations, government agencies, and business corporations have their official microblogging accounts on Weibo. Despite sharing the same core service of microblogging, Weibo distinguishes itself from Twitter in many ways; most notably, Weibo has continually developed many functions and services to meet the specific needs of Chinese users and to implement with the government's censorship policies (Berry, 2013; Gao, 2017).

### 1.3.1 A Brief Introduction to Weibo

Sina Weibo, now known only as Weibo, was launched by Sina Corporation soon after the Chinese government blocked Twitter in 2009. From its inception, Sina Weibo was using the subdomain name of its portal owners (t.sina.com.cn), as other portal-owned microblogging services did. In April 2011, Sina Weibo changed its domain name to weibo.com, which made it stand out from other competitors by using the Chinese word for microblog (微博). In March 2014, the name Sina Weibo was changed to Weibo, and in the following month, Weibo filed an IPO in the US. In January 2016, Weibo removed the 140-character limit for original posts, and introduced posts with word counts up to 2000 characters, though the 140-character limit still applied to reposts/reposts and comments. To a certain extent, Weibo can be understood as a combination of Facebook and Twitter due to its functions and services provided. As can be seen from the below screenshot (Figure 1-2), it offers a range of features just on its homepage.



Figure 1-2 Screenshot of Homepage of Weibo.com

Starting with essential microblogging services and functions including instant messaging and replies displayed below the microblogs, Weibo has integrated many features from other social networking platforms into its service. Weibo offers users the ability to create group discussions

(微群; literally: “micro groups”), which is similar to what is available in other Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). And users can also “like” (讚) a microblog or set privacy levels of microblogs, as Facebook users can similarly do with their status updates. Additionally, Weibo has designed certain functions to meet Chinese users’ needs. One of those special functions is called “quietly follow” (悄悄關注), which allows users to follow other users without their awareness. The normal “follow” action causes a new follower notification to be sent to the user being followed and will be listed on his/her follower list. The “quietly follow” action results neither in notification nor the followers’ name being listed as such but will permit the follower to view the person’s microblog feeds. Another essential function is grouping the microblogs one follows. Weibo users, like Twitter users, can sort those they follow into groups to filter and read only the microblogs from one customised group instead of all posts by microbloggers they follow. This helps users filter information and enables flexibility of reading.

Weibo, like Twitter, also offers an account and identity verification service to celebrities, businesses, organisations, government agencies, and even individuals. Because of the platform’s extensive popularity among Chinese netizens, the leading foreign or international media organisations, like the Wall Street Journal and the United Nations, have also registered their Weibo accounts.

When Weibo initially established its platform, it invited many famous Chinese celebrities to register, which then encouraged many fans to join. Besides validating institutional accounts with a Blue V symbol, and verified celebrities with a Red Star, Weibo also provides a verification service to personal account users, which includes verification of interest (expertise in the particular area), verification of their linked media, and verification of own identity. As long as a user has connected their account with a mobile number, a profile picture, has at least 50 followers, 50 followings (including two other verified personal users) and can provide evidence to prove their social status or work position, the user can apply for identity verification. Once their verification application is approved, the user’s display name will be shown along with an Orange V logo, which indicates that account has been validated by Weibo. Any verified individual user with a monthly reading count of over ten million and ten thousand followers is also qualified to apply for the Weibo Gold V verification. These gold-verified Weibo users receive specific privileged services such as a personalised page, a “fan station” to interact with followers, and being officially promoted by Weibo to gain more followers.

In parallel with the various levels of account verifications, Weibo provides professional versions of its interface for different types of users. Apart from its common interface for



individual users, it also has separate interfaces for its business version, media version, school version and government version. Each interface version is customised with extra functions and services such as information management, administrative sets, data analysis, opinion monitoring etc. which are not available to individual users. Figure 1-3 is a screenshot of the government version interface, which was screen-printed from an earlier version of Weibo in 2013. As can be seen, the page section contains five modules, including a management centre, message centre, statistics centre, administrator setting and application centre. Meanwhile, sub-sections can be added in the application centre per the user’s request. This specific screenshot from 2013 is included because managing information about government Weibo accounts is no longer accessible to individuals on the current version of the Weibo website. Although Weibo has been continuously updating its functions and services, presumably the government version interface as well, fig. 1-3 provides a brief understanding of its essential services provided for government accounts.



Figure 1-3 Screenshot of Managing Section on Weibo’s Government Version Interface with Superimposed Translations of the Elements

As mentioned previously, any communication service with the ability to reach a wide audience is censored in China. Complying with Chinese laws and regulations, Internet service providers must commit to internal censorship, as they are liable for users’ conduct on their sites. Weibo blocks and deletes a long list of sensitive words and topics, including but not limited to June 4 (referring to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests), Falun Gong, Dalai Lama, social movements, and the names of certain democracy activists (Rudolph, 2018). As mentioned before, to censor published citizen content as completely as possible, Weibo hires staff for monitoring, stopping and removing sensitive or “harmful” content, in addition to using automatic word-detecting software (Gao, 2017). Also uses a “complex variety of censorship

mechanisms, including proactive and retroactive mechanisms” (Zhu, Phipps, Pridgen, Crandall, & Wallach, 2013). Weibo users who post or repost low-level sensitive content sometimes receive warnings from the system administrator. A sample of a “deleted notice” message sent from the system administrator, whose profile picture is Weibo’s logo in police uniform, can be seen in Figure 1-4. The message content [translated to English] reads as *Sorry, your post on Weibo at (date) (time) "@ (user ID): @ (user ID) ..." has been encrypted by the administrator. This Weibo is not suitable for public disclosure. For help, please contact customer service (link: <http:t.cn/z0D6ZaQ>).* Moreover, accounts may be suspended or removed for those who post or repost highly sensitive content, and users who are considered a risk to social stability will face fines and arrest.



Figure 1-4 Screenshot of Weibo’s Content Deleted Notice

More recently, Weibo adopted a complaint system to supplement its technological and manual censorship procedures. When users find that a post contains inappropriate information, e.g. illegal, harmful, or false information, they can click the “report” button attached to the post and submit a complaint to the Weibo administrator. Users can apply to become a Weibo supervisor and be paid for reporting complaints to the platform. The basic requirements to be approved as a Weibo supervisor include: being registered on Weibo for more than a year, holding a credit score above 80, and being registered with a verified mobile phone number. Users who fulfil these requirements then act as volunteer censors for the platform, and by extension, the regime. Citizens who take the role of Weibo supervisor are thus turned into enactors of government censorship and informers of government surveillance.

## 1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

### 1.4.1 Problem Statement

Realising microblogging's tremendous influence on Chinese society, more scholars have begun to engage with the phenomenon in their research. A large number of studies, in both Chinese and Western scholarship, have focused on China's most popular microblogging service – Weibo. The majority of studies related to Weibo are conducted by quantitative approaches, with numerical data and generated models. For example, quantitative content analysis is used to explain the information dissemination process while the representative survey is used to examine college students' Weibo use and their online political participation (Wang & Shi, 2018). Some of the Weibo studies within Chinese scholarship are theoretical or opinion-based (Lu, C. T., 2016), without analysis of any empirical research data, while the few studies that used qualitative approaches used case studies and content analysis.

As the microblogging services of NetEase, Tencent and Sohu have already ceased their operations, Weibo is now the last remaining independent microblog operated by a Chinese Internet corporation. Therefore, the need to investigate Weibo's role in promoting citizen journalism, its involvement with the government and mainstream media, its immediate users' participation and feedback has become urgent.

The first-hand experience of Weibo citizen journalists, more specifically, the ordinary Weibo users, is crucial to gain an insight into the phenomenon within the unique context of China. These ordinary citizens and their practices on Weibo are the foundation of Chinese social media and Chinese citizen journalism. But until now, there have been a limited number of studies about citizen journalism on Weibo. From a Western perspective, the language barrier would be one of the limitations for conducting qualitative research on the online and Internet space in China. At the same time, cultural resistance to being interviewed and recorded is another significant concern even for researchers who are fluent in Chinese and have a journalism or communication background such as this present researcher.

Despite becoming a sought-after subject in Chinese literature, citizen journalism is still regarded as a sensitive topic for many ordinary social media users as well as Chinese authorities, due to the fact that the term “citizen” infers citizens' individual rights. Instead of referring to the general public as citizens, authorities, especially the state media, frequently refer to them as “people” (人民). Since the concept of the citizen is primarily associated with lawful rights of political involvements and even social movements, the mainstream Chinese media seldom uses the word, unless in the context of emphasising citizen obligations and responsibilities. In the meantime, the Chinese public has realised the tensions and sensitivity

of topics that are forbidden by the state's regime, and thus, become reluctant to discuss such topics openly. As a result, the sensitive nature of studies related to citizen journalism or public participation is challenging, especially to recruit research participants for face-to-face interviews.

Unlike prior research about Weibo, my research investigates the practices of Weibo citizen journalism around complex social-political factors using a qualitative research method of in-depth interviews with long-term active Weibo users. Through the analysis of two "Weibo events" and 28 semi-structured interviews with active Weibo users, my research addresses the characteristics of Chinese citizen journalism on microblogs, with particular reference to Weibo. By using qualitative approaches of case study, content analysis, and grounded theory analysis, it reveals the rise of citizen journalism on Weibo, citizen journalistic practices in the context of China, the responses of the government and mainstream media, the debates raised within the community, and the social influences achieved so far.

#### 1.4.2 Research Question

When I started this research project, the main question I had was: Have microblogging services promoted citizen journalism in China? If so, to what extent? A comparative study between Twitter and Sina Weibo shows that the most-visited Chinese microblog Weibo varies considerably from the dominant English microblog Twitter and had more similarities to Facebook in terms of specific properties and features than to Twitter (Weerasekara, 2018). However, as the research progressed, I become aware that the prerequisite for understanding Weibo citizen journalism is to have an insight into the activity of Weibo users, or more specifically, the practices of citizen journalists and their relations with other social and political domains in the context of China.

How do citizens use the platform? What makes them remain active on it? How do they relate to the concept of citizen journalism? Do they participate in citizen events or Weibo events? How do they engage in the phenomenon? And if not, what keeps them away from participation? Are they aware of the government's monitoring? How do they relate the phenomenon to the Chinese government and the mainstream media? How do these authorities respond and react to the phenomenon?

Consequently, I reframed the main research question as below:

To what extent has microblogging (on Weibo) empowered citizen journalism in China?

And a set of sub-questions were developed to help inform the main research question:

1. How did citizen journalism emerge on Weibo?
2. How do citizen journalists practise and participate through Weibo?
3. How does the Chinese government respond to citizen journalism?
4. How does the Chinese mainstream media engage with citizen journalism?
5. What are citizen journalists' own experiences within China?

## 1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 1.5.1 Data Collection

I have been a participant and observer on Weibo and other Chinese social media since 2010 and have kept notes on the evolution and emergence of citizen journalism. In addition to media content analysis of the two selected “Weibo events”, which publicly available content have been downloaded (e.g. using screenshot function) from Weibo and saved locally (much of this content is not available on Weibo any more), this study uses a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews with currently active Weibo users (as at 2018) who registered between 2009 and 2013. A total of twenty-eight interviews were conducted with Weibo users who live in China and other countries (Australia, America, Britain, Japan, and Singapore). A detailed description of the research design is presented in Chapter 3.

### 1.5.2 Data Analysis

There are two sets of data that I collected and analysed: publicly available online data on two specific so-called “Weibo events”, and 28 interviews with currently active Weibo users. For Weibo events, the method of media content analysis was used, and for the interview data, grounded theory analysis was used. Through the analysis of the two Weibo events that occurred before and after the reinforcement of media control in China, answers for sub-questions 3 and 4 were emerged. Indeed, the two different analysis methods of these two sets of data complement each other by demonstrating how the Chinese authorities (both the government and mainstream media) are aware of developments and concepts around social media and user-generated content and how they have responded.

### *1.5.2.1 Content analysis of two Weibo events*

For exploring the role of Chinese microblogs in promoting citizen journalism, I selected two Weibo events and analysed them using the media content analysis approach. These two Weibo events are the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident. These two Weibo events, their emergence, development, characteristics, government's response and criticisms, were analysed using Weibo content (e.g. Weibo posts, comments or account details).

### *1.5.2.2 Grounded Theory analysis of 28 interviews*

All interview recordings were transcribed and translated to English before data analysis. The interview data was then analysed using the Grounded Theory approach, which means that theory was constructed during the processes of data gathering and analysing (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Codes and themes emergent from the interview data were used to theorise the findings.

### 1.5.3 Key Findings

The findings from the media content analysis of the two Weibo events and the Grounded Theory analysis of the 28 interviews with Weibo users indicates that:

1. For ordinary netizens, their primary activity on Weibo is to browse news and information published by influential accounts, including alternative or mainstream media, and their ways of participation in citizen journalism are mainly through reposting, and sometimes through commenting.
2. Weibo users are well aware of government surveillance of their online activities, and are also aware that citizen journalism can be a dangerous pursuit if they draw too much attention from society, focus on political issues, or upset the government authorities.
3. The Chinese government is willing to support Weibo citizen journalism, but only as long as the outcomes are in line with its agenda of anti-corruption (with particular reference to organisational corruption) and anti-crime. In general, the authorities often focus on a single resolution for an individual case rather than actively improving relevant policy and regulation. Citizen journalism has led to some transparency from the authorities, but only in regard to selective issues that reinforce law and order.
4. Although there was a degree of freedom in the early days of Weibo, media control has been tightened in China in recent years, and various means have been introduced to maintain control over information flow. Therefore, the possibility and willingness of

netizens' participation in online political discussions has declined, and Weibo has evolved into yet another entertainment avenue that keeps netizens occupied and out of trouble.

5. Meanwhile, significant online textual violence and online abuse have become a significant concern for Weibo users when publishing their views or making comments on social affairs and have again resulted in the decline of citizens' participation in social-political discussions on Weibo.
6. Mainstream media, both locally and internationally, use content from Weibo citizen journalism at various levels; and in many cases, the Chinese media presents only selective content from citizens and manipulates the public opinion to support government agendas.
7. Despite the tightening of media control, the increase in online abuse, and the transient popularities of social events, Weibo is still an irreplaceable platform for expression and information and plays a significant role for the public in current China. Citizens have continually figured out new ways and new codes to circumvent the censorship to convey their message, even if it is short-lived.
8. Initially, Weibo citizen journalism was, and to some extent, still is: a grassroots path for the general public to seek justice; a means for civil society to put pressure on the government on specific issues; a practice to enable interactions between netizens and the authorities; a channel for the minorities to have their voices heard; and a platform to participate in political discussions and public affairs.

In summary, microblogging services like Weibo keep Chinese users informed of their immediate community and society and enable the discussion of local (and some national) issues. These are 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.

With the rapid expansion of Weibo citizen journalism, there have been more opportunities and options available to the public, who were long regarded as passive information receivers or audience only. The traditional landscape of mass media and boundaries of production-consumption have collapsed, and thus, the authoritarian power and its complex relationships with various social-political aspects have gone through radical changes. We need to keep in mind that such opportunities to have their voices heard and options for expression are still within the domain of state power. The limited and regulated expression now permitted never equals freedom of expression. Instead, it is simply a compensation, or

even an illusion offered by the Chinese government for preventing any potential online activism and offline social actions, and as an improved means of media control. In other words, the significant social influence of Weibo citizen journalism has not overcome reinforced censorship; citizens' increasing withdrawal of participation in public discussions alert us to the serious difficulties for the development of any robust citizen journalism. Until the time citizen journalists are capable of freely and openly discussing social-political issues, and able to publish relevant content or viewpoints, and further extend their concerns to real-world actions, the empowerment of citizen journalists in China should not be overstated.

## 1.6 CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH

This study extends the research on microblogging services in the context of China through a study of Weibo. It also explores the concept of citizen journalism in the context of China, through the lived experiences and practices of Weibo citizen journalists, by exploring their participation and the challenges involved. Finally, this study, unlike most existing research on citizen journalism in China that uses quantitative research approaches, contributes to knowledge through a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through qualitative, in-depth interviews with Weibo users.

To my knowledge, this is the first study using a mix of qualitative approaches, including case study, content analysis, and in-depth interviews to investigate Chinese microblogging from a citizen journalism perspective. There were 28 interviews conducted in Chinese with users active on Weibo for at least six years. Among the 28 interviews conducted, 10 of them were face-to-face interviews, and 18 were phone interviews. Since each interview lasted from 40 to 90 minutes, the data collected for my research is rich and detailed. Additionally, two Weibo events mentioned by interview participants (both relating to children) were selected for content analysis.

Through a qualitative content analysis of two "Weibo events" and the grounded theory analysis of the 28 interviews with citizen journalists, this research shines a new light on the dominant Chinese microblogging service Weibo and offers insights into the practice of citizen journalism in China. Drawing from the first-hand experience of Weibo citizen journalists, it investigates the phenomenon in relation to current social events, citizens' participation, its social influences and achievements, and the responses and reactions of the mainstream media and the government.



The outcome of this research highlights the role of Weibo in promoting citizen journalism and also examine the controversies and significance of the phenomenon in the complex context of Chinese society. The findings from this research are informed by previous research on citizen journalism and specific perspectives of media and communication theories, including media in the public sphere, agenda-setting, and media power. 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. Since the thesis is grounded in netizens' own concerns and interests about Weibo, and the interviewing has drawn out remarkable reflections from research participants, this research has shown 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. Further, the thesis pinpoints how Weibo users experience the tension between individual agency in social media and a controlled society and explore the fascinating contradiction of a hugely participatory media form under authoritarianism.

This research aims to expand our knowledge of China's social media, and Chinese authorities' adoption of digital and social media, while adding to the conversation around the wider scope of Chinese social media and communication studies. As a substantial independent research, this thesis has made an original and distinct contribution to knowledge.

## 1.7 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is important to note that there are some difficulties with studying citizen journalism in China. Since Weibo is the most-visited Chinese microblog with more than 165 million daily active users as of September 2017 (Weibo Data Centre, 2017), it is crucial to select the right approaches for collecting data and conducting research related to this platform.

The possibility of collecting all relevant citizen content for any single topic on Weibo is a daunting task, because of the massive amount of posts and comments published on any given topic, and also because sensitive posts are often quickly censored and deleted from the platform. There are a wide range of topics and hashtags posted every minute, with various forms of content (usually a combination of images and texts). Although Weibo summarises the most-searched topics and the most-discussed topics into lists, entertainment news often takes the dominant positions in such ranked lists. Individuals or companies also pay to get their names or champions onto the lists. In many cases, citizen journalism content is rarely featured

on these lists, and does so only during emergencies or noteworthy local or international incidents or events.

Being a platform where active users gather, and a massive amount of information is produced, Weibo strictly complies with a range of policies to regulate content and communications. To practise self-censoring and thus cut off the dissemination in a timely matter, Weibo often deletes a sensitive post within one hour of its publication (Zhu et al., 2013). As a result, critical social issues raised by citizen journalists can become quickly censored, and posts and discussions can be shut down accordingly. At the same time, some social activists or groups have shifted to WeChat, an instant communication service similar to WhatsApp, for group communications and information exchange, as it's a comparatively closed platform. However, WeChat is also under the government's censor; many chat-groups (群聊) and public accounts (公眾號) have been removed as they were deemed in violation of the Cyberspace Administration of China's (CAC) laws and regulations.

Another major issue of studying citizen journalism in China is the differences in terms and definitions between English and Chinese. For instance, the term "citizen", which is the Chinese word "gongmin" (公民), may be considered somewhat sensitive for some Weibo users, as the Chinese authorities commonly uses the word "people" (人民) when referring to Chinese citizens. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the term "citizen" is mostly used in formal legal documents and its legacy of individual rights has been viewed as antithetical to mass mobilisation and collectivism (Keane, 2001). Sometimes the word "citizen" can activate the censor's alarm of the Chinese Internet police. At the same time, the terms "wangmin" (網民, literally: net-people) and "wangyou" (網友, literally: net-friend) are commonly used to refer to Internet users in China, and thus, the English word "netizen" is used by mainland China-based English-language media to translate both terms (Fung, 2012).

Additionally, it is not common for Weibo users to see themselves as citizen journalists. Some users refer to their activity on Weibo as cyber investigators, while a group of them instead consider themselves "onlookers". In contrast to traditional news categories, citizen journalism on Weibo discusses a wide range of topics, which increases the difficulties in selecting representative cases for analysis.

Chinese scholarship on Weibo typically aims to discover ways to take advantage of the governance and media control, with purely theoretical writing, or more specifically, speculative argumentation. Based on the Chinese language literature reviewed in section 2.7, there is a significant part of Chinese journal articles about Weibo lack systematic research methods or

data analysis and often present a conclusion with merely discussions. The empirical data or in-depth qualitative research were hardly used to understand the experience of netizens or users of these social media platforms.

In terms of research limitations, advocates of quantitative research methods may argue that the qualitative approaches of the case study, content analysis and in-depth interviews I used are lacking of “systematic empirical evidence” (Wang & Shi, 2018). For the purposes of this research, I interviewed 28 Weibo netizens for 40-90 minutes each, who all provided rich empirical data to address my research questions. Therefore, despite the limitation of participant numbers due to resourcing and logistics, the research is based on rich data at the grassroots level of citizen journalism in China. Finally, variables and errors during the translation and manual coding process also need to be taken into consideration when reflecting on issues relevant to my research.

## 1.8 OVERVIEW OF THESIS DOCUMENT

This thesis contains six main chapters: introduction, literature review, research design, data analysis and presentation of findings, discussion, and a conclusion with implications for future study.

In the introduction chapter, the research background, including the unique Internet environment and the emergence of microblogging services in China, the problem statement, the research design, and the study’s contribution and limitations are briefly summarised. Concepts of public journalism and citizen journalism are introduced in the initial two sections of the literature review, the second chapter. Next, Western scholarship on Chinese social media and citizen journalism in countries with strict media control is discussed, while Chinese scholarship on citizen journalism and its relationship with Weibo are also presented. A detailed explanation of the research methods used for the data collection and analysis processes is presented in the research design chapter. This included qualitative approaches of case study and in-depth interview, to gather data, and media content analysis and grounded theory analysis to analyse the two Weibo events and 28 semi-structured interviews.

The fourth chapter is the focus of this thesis, framed by data analysis and the presentation of findings. The chapter begins with the study of two citizen events on Weibo: the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident; and continues with the results from grounded theory analysis of 28 interview transcripts. Based on the interview data, seven categories of themes were generated, which

include the use of Weibo, changes on Weibo, Weibo censorship, news and information sources, mainstream media, participation in Weibo citizen journalism, social influences and achievements.

Drawing from my findings, a range of questions are addressed and discussed in the fifth chapter. First, the preconditions for the rise of citizen journalism on Weibo are summarised, with the argument that there are three main factors to nurture Weibo citizen journalism, including the desire to publish and participate in public discussions, the gap between information demand and controlled media supply, and the need for immediate and first-hand information. The second section emphasises the government's responses and reactions to the phenomenon, highlighting its contradictions of promoting Weibo conversations while reinforcing media control. Third, I challenge the common description of Weibo as an alternative news and information source by revealing the dominance of mainstream media accounts and influential accounts on the platform. In the last section of chapter five, debates about and the significance of Weibo citizen journalism are discussed in the social, political and cultural context of China. Primary controversies between information and misinformation, media literacy and media control, gaining control and being controlled are proposed and analysed in relation to the complex Chinese circumstances. The enlightenment of civic awareness facilitated by citizen journalism on Weibo is also discussed.

Finally, the sixth chapter concludes the study's findings and arguments arising from the investigation of Weibo citizen journalism, and indicates its implications for relevant scholarship, its significance, and potential future research topics. In recognition of the complex relational influence of Weibo citizen journalism, this research expands our knowledge of China's social media, Chinese citizen journalism, and China Studies in general.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

A range of theories relating to journalism and digital media – from the “medium is the message” theory (McLuhan, 1964) to mass communication theory (McQuail, 1987), to the public sphere (Habermas, 1991), to the network society (Castells, 2000), were all considered for this study. Since this research focuses specifically on investigating Chinese citizen journalism on Weibo, it was necessary to conceptualise the concept of citizen journalism, also known as participatory journalism.

This chapter starts with a brief summary of theories relating to the broader social political context of citizen journalism in China, such as the response of the government and mainstream media. More specifically, theories including those of the public sphere, agenda setting, and media power are presented, first. On the one hand, the rise of citizen journalism and microblogs in China has enabled the possibility of a virtual public sphere; on the other hand, the state regime has continuously set agendas to direct public opinion and strengthen its own media power.

In section 2.2, an overview of the theoretical framework and definitions of public journalism, also known as civic journalism, will be addressed. Even though public journalistic practices and goals were partially extended into citizen journalism, the two unique concepts should not be confused. The emergence of citizen journalism predates the technologies that are seen as their enablers today. Before reviewing the relevant English-language and Chinese-language studies of social media and citizen journalism, recognitions, arguments, and criticisms about the concept of citizen journalism will be highlighted in section 2.3.

In section 2.4, Western scholarship on Chinese social media which have particular relevance to the regime’s media control and the rise of Chinese citizen journalism are reviewed. As China is not the only country that enforces media censorship, studies on citizen journalism in both Africa and the Middle East are briefly reviewed in the next section.

In the last two sections of this chapter, Chinese scholarship of citizen journalism and its relationship with the most popular microblog – Weibo – will be discussed. Prior to the establishment of microblogging services in China, citizen journalism already existed and was exercised in different ways. However, most Chinese-language scholarship on the topic deals with its dissemination characteristics and influences as well as its relationship with the diverse social aspects of China. Meanwhile, the studies that do examine the relationship of citizen journalism and Weibo were conducted from three main perspectives: observational perspective, explaining perspective, and forecasting perspective.

## 2.1 MEDIA POWER: FROM PUBLIC SPHERE TO AGENDA SETTING

### 2.1.1 The Concept of the Public Sphere

A public sphere, in general, stands for any forum or space that allows for free and open discussions or information exchange among the public. Contemporary social relations can be online, whereas in the past places such as the town hall, the village Church, the coffee house, and even street corners were used for democratising politics. (Poster, 1997). Many such public places in China no longer serve as organizing-centres for political discussions.

Habermas introduced the public sphere theory through studies of public interactions in various spaces (e.g. cafes, salons, newspapers) in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century European bourgeois society and the degradation of the European Press in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Habermas developed the normative notion of the public sphere as a community composed of active individuals with critical consciousness, knowledge to engage in public debate, and an ability to engage in legitimate discourse, in which standards for proper and fair political behaviour can be set (Habermas, 1991). Public opinion and consensus are promoted within the public sphere in a democracy and political criticism encouraged. Meanwhile, Habermas argues that neither political nor economic factors directly influence the public sphere as participants in the debates were independent and informed rather than influenced by the bourgeoisie. That is, the importance of a democratic public sphere lies in the process of discussion, which must take the form of rational-critical discourse (Crossley & Roberts, 2004).

There have been critiques of Habermas' position of the public sphere, from questioning the achievements of his model of consensus (Lyotard, 1984) to demonstrating the lack of gender inclusion in his concept (Fraser, 1990). Scholars also argue that Habermas' bourgeois public sphere fails to include "substantial life-interests" and represent "the totality of society" but interprets the prevailing perspective without regard to the proletariat (Negt & Kluge, 1993). In the 1990s, the idea of a public sphere has once lost influence to a certain extent, as the relationship between the public and politics was increasingly managed through public relations professionals.

Traditionally, two stages of information flow - "one-to-many" and "many-to-many" stages of information diffusions - have been studied separately and concerned with different concepts (Sabbar & Matheson, 2019). However, the rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the digital network society have led to a society where the distribution of information is more complex, and the two stages of information flow happen simultaneously

on many social media platforms. In the digital age, information is treated as more than just a product for making a profit. The hierarchies of media production, distribution and consumption have become flatter, and the power of information flow is more prominent than ever. The media, and currently, social media, which are now at the centre of our everyday communications, have created potential for the new public sphere.

### 2.1.2 Agenda Setting function of Mass Media

Emerging from Walter Lippmann's claim about the press' ability of painting the picture of the outside world in our heads (Lippmann, 1922), the agenda-setting theory was officially introduced through the empirical study of the media influence in the 1968 US Presidential campaign based on voters in Chapel Hill, NC and what media coverage they said they had been exposed to (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Drawing from the media coverage of the political campaign and the public feedback regarding the importance of issues, the researchers confirmed their hypothesis that the amount of media coverage of an issue positively influences the issues prioritised in the public agenda. That is, the mass media has a strong impact on the public in determining what issues are important.

Based on this agenda-setting framework, a vast amount of scholarship has been devoted to different aspects of mass media, including traditional media and new media outlets. Over the years, examinations of this media's impact have been undertaken in US print media coverage. Images of foreign countries have been found to be manipulated by professional public relations consultants (Manheim & Albritton, 1983) across major news media such as ABC, CBS, NBC, and New York Times, when discussing stories involving the US in regions of strong conflict (Wanta & Hu, 1993). Meanwhile, the impact of media agenda-setting on the public agenda is likely to be strengthened by interpersonal communication if the personal discussion is about the same issue that has been emphasised in media coverage (Wanta & Wu, 1992). In the era of digital media, agenda-setting retains its power, but its impact varies on different platforms. In electronic bulletin boards (EBB), media coverage has a direct influence on individuals' online discussions (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). However, with the rise of the blogosphere providing citizens with the opportunity to directly publish news articles, the imbalance of power between media corporations and the public has been reduced (Armstrong & Zuniga, 2006), and the power of traditional media has been redistributed into citizen media, especially independent political bloggers (Meraz, 2009). Additionally, citizen journalism is a phenomenon that exists beyond online news, alternative news sources, and journalistic



practices; it creates new forms of “gatekeeping and agenda-setting power” for public participation, and a relatively “reflexive culture” to acquire news and information (Goode, 2009).

Some researchers highlight the agenda-setting theory in conjunction with other media theories, in particular with reference to the distinctions and connections between priming, framing, and agenda-setting (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2006; Weaver, 2007). While some studies have explored beyond the mass media and delve into the domain of public policy (Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993; Soroka, 2002; Wood & Peake, 1998), an increasing number of studies use the agenda-setting theory to examine how issues are addressed in media coverage. This is classified as a second-level agenda setting (McCombs, 1994), and to the salience carried over multiple media platforms, referred to as inter-media agenda setting (Roberts & McCombs, 1994). Diverging from the media effect on the public about issue importance, second-level agenda setting addresses the representation or description of an issue created by the media (McCombs, 2018). In general, the media’s selection of issues to attract public attention as well as their preferences of characteristics to paint such issues both have significant impact on the public agenda.

### 2.1.3 Media Power

While the driving force for establishing a public sphere is to enable citizens’ freedom to acquire and exchange information as well as to engage in public debates; the common purpose for setting agendas at various levels and across different media outlets is to influence the public debate and affect citizens’ decision-making, and thus to achieve specific political or commercial goals. Underlying the relations of the two concepts is the influence that results in intended or unintended actions and outcomes. Therefore, the broader theories of mass media and communication, tensions between the public sphere theory and the agenda-setting theory reflect the crucial concept of media power. In particular, the power battle of information flow between the general public and the powerful authorities, including state regime and media corporations.

From a sociology perspective, the conceptualised power draws on tensions between domination and subordination. This domination, developed from both “corrective influence” and “persuasive influence” and aimed at “stable and enduring relations of control”, is indeed in the hands of the elites among society or a particular field of social life (Scott, 2008). Wielding great economic and political power in a society, the elite, to a certain extent, can be

referred to as Habermas' bourgeois. However, the definition of power should not be restricted to a specific social class. It can be generally interpreted as "a social actor" who has the power to influence "the decisions of other social actors" and then to facilitate one's "will, interests, and values" (Castells, 2009). No matter what type of influence is used or what kind of an ideological message is implied, information or ideas need to be distributed to those who have less knowledge about their society and public life through media and communications. Consequently, when we discuss media power, we refer to the relationships or interconnections between social actors, institutional structures, and the larger contexts of society, which are all involved in "the allocation of symbolic resources" to format specific influence (Freedman, 2015). According to Freedman, the relational conception of media power is constituted by four dimensions of related media scholarship: consensus, chaos, control, and contradiction.

The consensus paradigm reflects liberal pluralism in advancing democracy. In this case, a free and open market is required for competition between different outlets and exchanges of various content to restrict the state power. The market-driven media collapses the dominant political voice and concentrated authoritative power, while the not-for-profit media serves the common interests of the general public, consisting of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Because of the emphasis on the democratic role of media, Freedman's consensual media system approaches a potential public sphere.

The chaos paradigm refers to the cultural chaos of ideological dissemination and fundamental indetermination, especially in the digital empowerment of decentralised power models. With the rise of digital media, traditional order structures, from ideological control to production monopoly to consumption attitude and behaviour, have been tremendously dislocated and relocated. As the progressing technologies favour the audience with more choices and controls among what and when to access news and information, as well as chances to generate and publish content, the power in the digital age is operated "in far less hierarchical ways" (Freedman, 2015). What is more, the popularisation of social media and its significant promotion of online activism resulting in offline social-political actions around the world has proved the concept of "media counterpower" (Castells, 2009). These newly emerged Internet giants also dominate specific areas of citizens' digital social life.

The control paradigm draws from the ruling authority's power of directing and determining symbolic resources to introduce hegemonic viewpoints and values, which restrain public discussion to a limited and manageable consensus. That is, the privileged or powerful group regards the media as a "cultural apparatus" to exercise "propaganda and public relations", aiming for "planned and predictable outcomes" (McNair, 2006). The mainstream

media has then become an essential tool for the state power to eliminate opposition and guide public opinions and actions for the interests of the powers-that-be rather than the public or the underdog. Lastly, the contradiction paradigm refers to the contradictory relationships and the reproduction of existing relations of media power. Typical internal contradictions, based on Freedman, include “structure and agency, contradiction and action, consensus and conflict, and producers and audiences” (Freedman, 2015, p.286). To provide a comprehensive approach to study the media, highlights of such contradictions from a wider social, political, economic, and cultural context are required.

With the emergence of computer-mediated-communication or CMCs and the rapid growth of the Internet since the millennium, many media scholars have highlighted that the decentralised communications of the Internet have the potential to enhance the public sphere and democratic deliberation (Katz, 1997; Kellner, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000). The interactivity notion of the Internet is not only social interaction, person-to-person conversation, or face-to-face communication but also a special case of mediated social interactions where impersonal interactions with media content also occur. Further, the Internet offers a relatively positive and critical approach for individuals to find new ways to develop their freedom through participation and engagements (Silver, 2000). That is, online interactive practices enable users in controlling their information consumption through personalised functions and offer them opportunities to express ideas or experiences as well as to participate in public debates. At the same time, the Internet transforms people from information receivers into information providers, while anybody with minimal skills and access to a computer network can post information online without a license or government permission (Kaye & Medoff, 2001). Although it becomes possible for citizens to get their voice heard through online political participation, they must still comply with the content guidelines set by either corporations or state authorities. As a result, new patterns of information flow have emerged where the power appears to be in the hands of the public, rather than the media corporations or state authorities.

The Internet offers new modes of communication for people, as its global nature crosses national boundaries with affordable technologies, and increases potential access to a vast and diverse quantity of information. The many-to-many mode of communicative interaction online and the increasing interactivity of digital media both indicate the rise of a new form of public sphere regardless of linguistic, cultural and spatial differences (Bohman, 2004). In the online sphere, unofficial and potentially unauthorised information can be quickly disseminated, and discussions of news events can take place in virtual- and real-time. This leads to the return of social participation in which “large groups of people [are] reading and commenting upon

supposedly stable but questionable texts” (Connery, 2013, p.170). Moreover, according to the theory of the network society, power relationships have been transformed by the Internet and digital media, as well as social domination, has been challenged by identity-based social movements (Castells, 1999).

#### 2.1.4 The Failure of the Virtual Public Sphere

Based on Habermas’s claims, the public sphere is constituted by inclusion, equality, and civil deliberative discourse (Habermas, 1991). While most online services and platforms are still operated by international corporations and/or domestic governments, the extent to which the Internet has empowered the concept of the public sphere and towards a democratic society is yet to be settled. Indeed, the state and corporate colonisations of cyberspace threaten the autonomy of online public forums by “replacing rational communication with instrumental rationality” (Dahlberg, 2001, p.4). State censorship and online surveillance continue to prevent freedom of speech and public discussion in many countries. Simultaneously, the increasing integration of media industries has formed a commercialised consumer-oriented cyberspace, where public discourse is largely ignored or incorporated within privatised and individualised forms of interactions such as online commerce, entertainment and business communications. The focus and purpose of the mass media, especially the digital media, has largely shifted from informing the public of social and political issues to offering personalised experiences and serving individual interests. Even within many non-commercial online forums, dialogue and discussion can still be controlled by an authoritative norm in means of either controlling author or text or using moderators (Connery, 2013). In a study of over half a million tweets about the 2011 Aotearoa New Zealand earthquake, Matheson (2018) concluded that ‘traditional markers of a mass-mediated public sphere do not match well onto the ways that individuals use Twitter. Instead, there were multiple overlapping ways of being public, which tended to be both individualised and oriented towards mutual regard for other individuals, but which differed widely in their global or local focus. These manifestations of publicness could be regarded as inadequate or confused, were they to be judged according to traditional norms’ (Matheson, 2018, p. 595). The article instead suggested that they be read as the way publicness is done in the weakly institutionalised space of Twitter and as governed also by local cultural norms of pragmatism, humour, informality and low social distance...[that] they should also be read as connected to the particular moment of the disaster. [before] consensus gave way to frustration and different visions of the city [Matheson, 2018, p.596). Additionally, the Internet encourages

individuals to communicate with each other across distances but reduces time for engaging with their local groups or with local political concerns. This can destroy the balance between individual freedom and responsibilities for issues beyond individual needs that are potentially enabled by the Internet (Slevin, 2000). Consequently, it can inhibit the formation of a potential public sphere.

Due to the progress in telecommunications infrastructures and the affordability of computers and smartphones, the online sphere is considerably more accessible for much of the world's population. However, it does not always enable social inclusion in online discourses. When access is available, many Internet users still experience the limitation of time, cultural capital and community support as hindrances to engage in online political deliberation. Inequities still exist, and thus the Internet merely fulfils an elite public sphere, which extends Habermas' bourgeois public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). At the same time, the empowerment of virtual communities towards open and free public discourse is arguable. Though the anonymity of an online identity may level out social hierarchies and power relations to a degree, there are claims of the multiplicity and flexibility of personality in the liberal online sphere (Turkle, 1999); Internet users still divide others into "new categories with new status symbols and new languages of social domination and subordination" (Kolko & Reid, 1998, p.4). Therefore, online identity is just as problematic as offline, leading to the reassertion of authority and subsequently power differentials. The authoritative power allows some users to be heard more than others, which results in the domination of discourse by specific individuals or groups and leads to inequalities. More specifically, such domination of discourse takes place in three ways: abusive postings, monopolising of attention, and control over agenda and style of discourse (Dahlberg, 2001). Though the abusive posting to belittle and humiliate others is an extreme form of this, the monopolising of attention is possibly more pervasive and damaging to the norms of online discussions and participation. As a result, inequalities and exclusions due to the uneven distribution of power in the broader society are reproduced in online relations.

## 2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM

### 2.2.1 Theoretical Framework of Public Journalism

The origins of public journalism dated back to the remarkable debate between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann about journalism and its promise to the public in a democratic society in the 1920s. Lippmann (1925, republished 2017) claims the public is illusory, disinterested, and with

poor self-management skills in public affairs, which means it is difficult for the public to play an active role in democratic consultations and opinions due to their psychological sense of loneliness and alienation. Lippmann also claimed that the public lacks the ability of decision-making, problem analysing, and problem-solving. However, Dewey (1927, republished as Dewey & Rogers, 2012) disagreed with Lippmann and pointed out his elitist perspective. To emphasise the agency of the public within academic literature, he proposed the concepts of participatory democracy and community journalism. To Dewey, the role of journalism is not just to provide information but also to help the public participate in the discussion of public affairs and to stimulate the public's initiative (Dewey & Rogers, 2012). Unlike Lippmann's philosophy of "informative news," Dewey advocated the approach of "conversational news" and believed that journalists should regard themselves as promoters of "public dialogue" rather than communicators of "expert information."

Habermas argued that the scope of public interactions with critical consciousness had disintegrated as a result of the development of popular newspapers (Habermas, 1991). In his view, the field of political communication has been divided into two systems: one is an informal, personal, non-public opinion system; and the other is a formal, institutionalised authoritative opinion system. Public opinion is generally disassociated from the private informal views of individuals and the formally established stance of public authorities. As a result, the theoretical requirements and practical purpose of public journalism are to link the two systems of communication and thus to form public opinion. After all, the public journalism movement has reshaped and promoted the relationship between the public, the media, and the consensus, and has further facilitated the reform and development of the entire public sector.

The theory of liberalism, which first emerged during the Age of Enlightenment, had gradually merged with the social responsibility theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the context of liberalism, objectivity is a concrete manifestation of journalism practice. In the American press, the accelerated development of objectivity in journalism is caused by the decline of political partisanship in the media and the change of its role from expressing opinions to disseminating news. Liberal journalists consider themselves as spectators of political debates rather than participants and believe that reporting facts is their priority. This lack of social responsibility of liberal journalism was later criticised by the social responsibility theory advocates who believed obligations were complementary to freedom (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). The media social responsibility theory was initially proposed by the Commission on Freedom of the Press in the late 1940s (Yun, 2008). According to their theory, there is not absolute freedom, yet, and the media should have a social responsibility and serve the interests of the

public and society (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). The commission also detailed specific requests for the media: to provide authentic, inclusive, and intelligent discussions of daily events and explain their significances; to become a forum for exchanging comments and criticisms; to accurately represent the image of each social group; to propose and clarify the goals and values of society; and to provide full accessibility of daily information.

To fulfil their professionalism requirements, the media professionals are required to provide information, discussion, and debate on public affairs and to serve democracy and enable the public's autonomy. To a certain extent, the concept of public journalism has adapted arguments from the media social responsibility theory and insists that the role of media is to improve public participation, to organise and promote public discussion, and thus to rejuvenate public life (Gunaratne & Hasim, 1996).

Since the 1970s, the theory of communitarianism was gradually formed through the critique of John Rawls' neo-liberalism (Bell, 2008). Leading academic Communitarians such as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor have criticised Rawls' work and argued that modern liberalism neglected the complexity of social relations (Sandel, 1998; Taylor, 1989). Since communitarianism complements and develops the theory of liberalism, it has also become a mainstay of political philosophy. While promoting the value of the community, Communitarianism emphasises the significance of public interest and advocates public good over individual rights. Communitarians believe that citizens' active participation in public life will be able to relieve social conflicts and promote social cohesion.

Furthermore, Communitarians also claim that citizens have both an obligation and a moral duty to participate in political discussions and public affairs, and that indifference to political debate and the absence of public activities often results in a dictatorship (Arthur, 2003). The Communitarian concept of public welfare can be interpreted as the practice of public journalism, which guides the public to participate in public life. While communitarianism contends that attention needs to be paid to various interest groups such as associations, cultural background, and occupational groups, public journalism advocates the avoidance of extreme reporting and the opinions of the general public. As a consequence, some researchers (Christians, 1999; Glasser, 2000) consider Communitarianism as the theoretical foundation of public journalism.

On the one hand, the concept of public journalism challenges the consumerism of mass media; on the other hand, it expands the theory of professionalism. Due to the rise of consumerism, advertising and branding have become a dominant part of media practice from the 1970s. That is, the media stimulates the public's desire to consume and emphasises the

symbolism and significance of material culture. Driven by this consumerism, the journalism media also began to pursue the audience and satisfy their needs and demands. Nevertheless, the establishment of public journalism has assisted the media in regaining the trust of the public from this consumerism. Journalistic professionalism requires the media to be independent, objective and supervisory and to serve the public rather than rely on any interest groups, which emerged as a belief in public service after the disintegration of the partisan presses. The requirements of professionalism can indeed become practice through public journalism, which encourages public debate and improves public participation.

### 2.2.2 Definitions of Public Journalism

The concept of public journalism (aka. civic journalism) emerged from the new journalistic movement in the early 1990s, while the socio-economic and political development of the United States faced many contradictions. The alienation of the public from public affairs and the over-commercialisation of the media resulted in self-reflection and self-criticism in both the news industry and scholarship. Such reflection and criticism agreed on the role of the media and its commitment to social responsibility. Early practices of public journalism mainly relate to political elections. For example, the *Wichita Eagle's* innovative reporting on the 1990 elections in Kansas, US, was at the forefront of the public journalism movement. The newspaper motivated the local community to participate in the election through organising public discussions and distributing news and information about candidates' stands on public issues (Massey & Haas, 2002).

According to Rosen (1995), who proposed the initial concept of public journalism, journalists play an active role in strengthening citizen awareness, promoting public sphere and reviving public life. Rosen believes that news reporters should not merely report the news and provide information for the public to read or watch. It should include tasks like committing to improve the public's ability to act based on news, focusing on the quality of public dialogue and communication, informing the public about means of dealing with social issues and thus helping the public to actively seek solutions. In Rosen's definition of public journalism, journalists are required: to consider the public not as victims nor spectators but as citizens and participants of public affairs; to help the political community act on issues rather than just knowing the problem; to improve the public discussion environment instead of watching it be destroyed; to work towards better public life and raise public awareness; and to be open to their values, political agendas and public roles (Rosen, 1999). If journalists fulfil such requirements,



they will be able to regain the trust of the public, re-establish their relationship with an increasingly distant audience, enlighten professional ideals, and promote the development of democracy.

Around the same, Meyer (1995) divided the concept of public journalism into six aspects: an expectation to re-establish public awareness, the maintenance of longer attention, an in-depth analysis of the social system, the emphasis on the middle ground of a problem rather than extremes, the focus on content instead of skills, and the enhancement of public's thinking ability. Since public awareness is the basis of journalism's social existence, and both newspapers and readers are parts of the social system, there is a crucial relationship between the reduction of public awareness and the reduction of newspaper readers. When readers are less concerned with public life, they lose interest in reading newspapers. During these times, it is the media's responsibility to reframe public awareness and thus regain readership. Meyer also disagrees with the trend of rapidly switching from one incident to another and argues that the media need to pay more attention to significant issues until all aspects are known to the public. With this method, the public will gain a better understanding and thus make deliberate decisions in daily life. Meyer claims that the media needs to provide insightful analysis of our society, rather than merely reporting incidents, as this fails to provide readers with explanations of the underlying social issues. From a statistical point of view, the majority of the public and their actions occupy the middle ground between conservative parties and progressive parties when it comes to democratic decision-making. While traditional media outlets typically focus on extreme circumstances, public journalism gives more attention to everyday issues and promotes an understanding of other people's viewpoints. According to Meyer, news reports during elections should pay more attention to the impact of the election result regarding public interests and social development, instead of the campaign or the performance of the candidates. After all, opportunities of self-expression are as important as the understanding of other viewpoints and enhancing the critical thinking abilities of the public is vital.

After observing the establishment of citizen journalism in the United States, Haas (2012) continued to enhance the concept of public journalism. He believes that the principle of public journalism contains three core goals. First, to report on issues that draw citizen concerns; for instance, focusing more on existing policy issues rather than isolated political events, as public journalism has an emphasis on problem solving. Second, to report on issues from the perspectives of citizens from more diverse groups, including women and ethnic minorities. Including these citizen perspectives, rather than those of the elites, challenges traditional reporting methods in traditional news reporting. Third, to enable citizen involvement in social

problems, such as providing the community with information on how to participate in local affairs.

In summary, the concept of public journalism emphasises new modes of news practices; and defines the motivation, the news content and scope, and its unique reporting methods and goals. Although the emergence of public journalism dates back to the 1990s, its concept is still relevant to current-day China. Since the 2000s, more and more Chinese media outlets have promoted their news programs as “public news” (Chinese: 公共新聞) or “civic news” (Chinese: 民生新聞), which focus on issues that happen in people’s everyday lives and offer opportunities for them to express their viewpoint (Cai, W., 2005a). More recently, due to the strict content censorship and the government control over media, there are some professionally-trained investigative journalists like Deng Fei and others who practice as citizen journalists and activists on social media platforms, especially on Weibo (Zhang & Negro, 2013; Zhang & Harrison, 2013)

With the rapid development of technologies and the Internet, traditional media outlets including newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, have faced new pressures and difficulties. Public journalism, which uses the traditional media as its main platform, has been challenged by the rise of citizen journalism. Examples include the weblog disclosure of the Clinton presidential scandal in 1998, the establishment of South Korea’s citizen news website Ohmynews.com in 2000, the 2003 Iraq war when independent bloggers reported on war news, and the 2005 London underground bombings where millions of citizens contributed to the reporting. Enabled by accessible devices such as smartphones and the popularity of social media, citizen journalism has quickly risen around the world. As a result, during the 2004 Public Journalism Interest Group meeting, Leonard Witt proposed the integration of the concept of public journalism and the concept of participatory journalism (aka. citizen journalism), under the name of “Public and Participatory Journalism” (Witt, 2004).

Although public journalism and citizen journalism both promote public participation, there are distinct differences in the mode of information flow between the two. For public journalism, the media (or the journalists) lead the audience, with a one-way flow of information; but with citizen journalism, the audience are no longer passive. Instead, they become the producers and broadcasters of news stories, with multi-directional flows of information, and content that varies in its scope. Rather than focusing on public affairs, citizen journalism explores a wide range of topics including social problems and political discussions.

## 2.3 AN OVERVIEW OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

### 2.3.1 The Rise of Citizen Journalism

The rise of Internet users and online communities have helped cyberspace emerge as a social space where people are “meeting online” with “new faces” or identities (Stone, 1991). At the same time, like-minded people gather on specific platforms to form “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 2000). Due to the prevalence of smartphones and social media platforms, “the production of public talk” has been made available to almost every smartphone owner and Internet user and the communication boundaries between the public and individuals has been bridged (Matheson, 2018). Unlike the political scandals of the pre-Internet period, the 1998 Clinton scandal first broke on a private weblog on drudgereport.com rather than a traditional media outlet. Two years later, the vanguard of global citizen journalism, Ohmynews.com, was founded to challenge the media domination of political parties and financial groups in South Korea.

Since the bloggers from the Iraq war zone reported their first-hand experiences and provided alternative perspectives to mainstream journalism in 2003 (Clyde, 2014), the impact of citizen bloggers has grown significantly in traditional and new media outlets. Most of the early reports of major global emergencies in recent years (such as the 2001 September 11 attacks, the 2004 December 26 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and the 7 July 2005 London bombings) were not from professional journalists, but social media users who witnessed or experienced the crisis. Often immediately after the emergency, written descriptions, photos, video clips, and even live broadcasts of the scene were shared on the Internet, sharing more diverse and engaging perspectives. In order to expand news sources, increase interactions with audiences, and enhance the value of traditional media, some of the world’s leading media organisations (e.g. CNN, NBC, and BBC) have set up web pages or channels, where citizens can publish their photos or videos to produce first-hand reports.

In the virtual world, everyone is a “potential message receiver” as well as a “potential message provider” (Kaye & Medoff, 2001). In contrast to traditional media, anyone with basic computing skills and Internet access can post information online without a license or government permission. Although there are usually content guidelines for displaying information on websites, the biggest change is that it is no longer necessary to be wealthy to publish information. Most excitingly, with the innovation of smartphones and wireless networks, the Internet is accessible anytime from any place. The rise of citizen journalism is first and foremost a result of technology (Kelly, 2009), and over the last two decades, many

images or video clips used in mainstream news and reports have come from non-journalists. Thus, audiences have become participants, and those who were previously defined as passive consumers have been transformed into active producers (Gillmor, 2006) or from “prosumers” (Toffler, 1970) to “producers” (Bruns, 2008). Empowered by the ongoing digital technology developments and the social media boom, people can create media products, display them to a worldwide audience (O’Reilly, 2009), and interact with others.

Interactivity has been at the centre of new media technologies and studies of network communication for the last two decades. There is no doubt that “it must have some meaningful social and psychological relevance beyond its technical status as a property of media systems or message exchanges” (Bucy, 2004, p.373). Interactivity is generally considered to be the processes leading to increased motivation, acceptance, satisfaction, and learning. In fact, interactivity is more than social interaction, person-to-person conversation, or face-to-face communication. Instead, it is a particular case of mediated social interaction in which impersonal interactions with media content (audio downloads and instant message requests, for example) also happen. Reflecting on both the network society and media, interactions in online journalism are also about participation through action and being part of the conversation.

This participatory notion of online journalism changes the traditional understanding of journalistic practice as well as the definitions of journalism. The Internet has offered opportunities for users to gain freedom of expression and engage in public participation (Slevin, 2002). With the increasing amount of user-generated content, the boundary between news producers and news consumers in traditional journalism is breaking down. The procedure of “filter, then publish” in traditional news production has been challenged by the user-generated nature of online content and proactive citizens’ contributions, resulting in the brand-new approach of “publish, then filter” (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Everyone has the potential to act as a journalist, without being bound by professional standards, procedures of commerce, and commercial or political interests. While the news becomes closer to first-hand experience rather than journalistic reportage, the person who provides the information becomes more than a journalist; and the audiences more than a traditional audience as they can interact with this news provider, participate in the discussion as well as the dissemination, and possibly in the investigation. Through processes of dissemination and discussion, information published by citizens would usually be corrected and verified. The traditional one-to-many model of news broadcasting has been replaced by the many-to-many distribution networks of digital media (Gillmor, 2006). In this case, citizen journalism creates new patterns of information flow, where its control is in the hands of the general public rather than the authorities or media

corporations. Meanwhile, the traditional gatekeeping monopoly of mainstream media has been extended to the “gatewatching” role previously played by citizen journalists (Bruns, 2011). More specifically, the rise of citizen journalism emphasises the openness of social media and the opportunity for fighting against organisational corruption, with the ability to provide news and information which the mainstream media fails to report (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010).

### 2.3.2 Definitions of Citizen Journalism

As the earliest advocate of the concept of citizen journalism (aka. participatory journalism), Jay Rosen believes that the participation of citizens has a significant influence on the newsroom and information flow, and traditional media should have a more positive attitude towards citizen participation. His publications, including *What Are Journalists For* (Rosen, 1999) and *Terms of Authority* (Rosen, 2003), opened a new research field of citizen journalism. In the past, people read news highlighted by editors on the front page, but now, according to Rosen, they are capable of filtering the news and publishing content. For him, the traditional media systems generally connect people and organisations with power in a hierarchical manner, whereas a horizontal flow of messages (between citizens) is possible in new media.

Instead of using the term citizen journalism, Bowman & Willis (2003) referred to it as participatory journalism, where a group of citizens actively participate in news and information production and dissemination, with the aim of providing independent, reliable, accurate and broad information for democratic countries. They also argue that the information provided by participatory journalists is disseminated from the bottom up, which is rarely in line with professional news production and is not involved with an editor. For them, participatory journalism is a result of the combined decentralised dialogues that are simultaneously happening online.

Based on user experience and observations, Gillmor analyses the role of influential bloggers in transforming the pattern of news production and thus the democratic process in the United States (Gillmor, 2006). He also suggests that the future of news reports and production will become more inclined toward dialogue or discussion, and the boundaries between news producers and consumers will be increasingly blurred. In the past, only those who owned the million-dollar media resources had the chance to express their views, but now, every citizen's voice can be projected with the Internet.

Citizen journalism is a term used to describe practices which can be broadly referred to as active citizens exercising what journalists used to do, through “the process of collecting,

reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman & Willis, 2003). In other words, citizen journalism is defined more by what it is than by where it is. Further, user-generated content, or citizen content, can exist either within the framework of a mainstream media outlet or on its own (Kelly, 2009). At the same time, the level of complexity of user generated content uploaded onto the same social media platform varies wildly. It can be as simple as a photo taken using one’s mobile phone, or as complicated as a high quality self-produced video clip. In certain cases, what is generated by a user isn’t just the content. Users are now able to exercise a power that was never endowed to ordinary citizens before – “the exercise of influence” (Kelly, 2009).

To a certain extent, the concept of citizen journalism (aka. participatory journalism) was developed from the theory of public journalism (aka. civic journalism), which arose in the 1920s. Nevertheless, it should not be confused with either the public journalism that is practised by professional journalists, or collaborative journalism, that is the joint practice of both professional and non-professional journalists. Citizen journalists are instead the people known as the audience in the past (Rosen, 2006), but without any professional journalism training.

The general consensus of what constitutes citizen journalism includes the following factors:

1. the development of new media technologies such as the Internet and mobile communication technology that gave rise to citizen journalism;
2. the most significant characteristic of citizen journalism is that the general public experiences and actively participates in the process of information dissemination;
3. citizen journalism content can be created by an individual, or it can be a collective creation;
4. citizen journalism expressions are in diverse forms, that is, it can be in texts, photographs, videos, or just comments or opinions.

Drawing from the above factors, this thesis will examine the role of microblogs and its relationship to citizen journalism in China, with particular references to Weibo, and to investigate the practices of Chinese citizen journalists or netizens and their relations with other social and political domains.

### 2.3.3 Criticisms of Citizen Journalism

Some scholars believe that citizen journalists can benefit news organisations by reducing costs, crowdsourcing information and comments, and expanding news coverage. But questions have been raised about news organisations that use citizen journalists and readers who consume news stories produced by citizen journalists. Criticisms of citizen journalism have been drawn from traditional media organisations, professional journalists and media scholars regarding objectivity and legal repercussions (Grubisich, 2005; Maher, 2005), however the quality of content produced by un-trained citizen journalists is the most criticised aspect. Critics also argue that content created by citizen journalists has the potential to harm the reputation of the media outlet if confusing or incorrect information is integrated into a traditional news report. There are also concerns about the concept of journalism being diluted or disappearing into amateur practices, as citizen content can be an accurate source of information, but may not otherwise be useful information (Moretzsohn, 2006). Indeed, the practice raises the fundamental question on the definition of a journalist. Is a professional journalist with formal training different from an untrained journalist? Or is a journalist whoever produces content approaching journalism?

For several decades, journalism has been known for the concepts of free speech, social responsibility, speaking for the public, and as the basis of democracy. According to Saunders (2003), journalism lays claim to share the role and responsibility of a democratic system by courageously telling the truth without any fear or favour and being able to deliver news rather than promote agendas. McNair (1998) points out that modern journalism has come to represent the principles of intellectual freedom and pluralism of democracy, as well as contributing to the evolution of liberal democratic political systems. Indeed, the democratic concept of journalism is its major characteristic in setting journalism as a professional practice. However, unlike other professions such as lawyers, doctors, and engineers, the definition of the profession does not entirely fit for all journalists. Hallin (2000) argues that the notion of journalists as professionals is “vague and in many ways dubious,” but they still have certain professional standards. For example, professional journalists need to have a serious purpose and observe ethical codes to produce high-quality original work, and more importantly, they need to believe in the ideals of a free press.

To achieve the ideal of not just providing information for citizens but also speaking for the voiceless people, journalism needs to be professional, always recording and representing events factually, independently, and impartially. Conflicts of interest have become one of the

most significant issues in journalism ethics, due to the massive growth of commercialism and the rapid changes in society. Compared to the idea of journalists as professionals, many contemporary journalists have to write every day for money, often using others' work to fill the pages. Today, most of their research is human-interest stories and entertainment or celebrity news, to maximise audiences and profits, as part of a transition from considering readers as "the public" to "the market" (Chalaby, 1998). Meanwhile, the shift from politics to entertainment can be found in any newspaper, which includes shorter stories, colourful graphics, and a shift in the news agenda away from traditional "public affairs," toward lifestyle features and "news you can use" (Hallin, 2000). On top of the external commercial imperative, the internal pressures cause another tension between professional ideals and real journalism practice. Individuals who lack the skills, motivation and experience often resort to cheap, even controversial opinions and become known as "shock-jocks" rather than professionals in the journalism practice. Professional journalists should have clear news values and ethics to inform people of the events in their country (Williams, 2002); but journalists who do not adhere to these standards will fail their responsibility. In this case, they often select certain facts, ignore others, and distort the situation (Tomalin, 1997), which is the opposite power to ignore, to exclude, to reject (Tunstall, 1996), and then cause the readers' to misunderstand the issues.

In this complex environment, it is hard for journalism to resist the influences of other social factors and act alone to achieve its commitment to public interest. The emergence of citizen journalism in the networked society, which is the "characteristic of informational capitalism" (Castells, 1997), has reconfigured the contemporary journalistic practices to reverse the sender-receiver process of traditional journalism. Whereas newspaper, television and online media use the journalist as a "gatekeeper" in the process of selecting and presenting news, in citizen journalism, the journalist is a "shepherd" in the process (Glaser, 2004). However, to what extent can these Western scholarly concepts of citizen journalism be applied to Chinese citizen journalism in a highly controlled media environment? And has citizen journalism been empowered by the flourishing of social media in China? This thesis provides a critical examination of Weibo citizen journalism and an in-depth investigation into Weibo through a citizen journalism perspective.

## 2.4 ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SCHOLARSHIP ON CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA

Despite the government's strict control over media and communication, Chinese social media has prospered due to the rapid development of technologies and digital media. Citizens, or



more specifically the netizens in China, have become increasingly engaged with the current affairs and their immediate communities. In almost every social media platform, where the power of flows prevails over the flows of power (Castells, 1999), users have greater controls over information source, information dissemination, and information contribution. By providing a supplementary information source, an opportunity to deliberate public discussion, and a space to establish online civil communities, the current social media is advancing online political participation, even in democratic societies (Benney, 2011). In non-democratic societies like China, online activism and online political participation have been slowly progressing with the transforming of power relationships. Many researchers have looked at the positive role of the Internet and social networks in developing Chinese civil society from a political perspective (Bohman, 2004; Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Kluver & Powers, 1999; Moore, 2001; Rosen, 2010; Sullivan & Xie, 2009; Tai, 2007; Taubman, 1998; Wang, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2003). Nevertheless, the Chinese government has never relinquished its power over the Internet in China, and continually keeps up with new media and social media, aiming to monitor the public opinion and strengthen its influential power.

In the following sections, Western scholarship is first discussed in relation to Chinese social media and media control. Second, literature reflecting to social media and citizen journalism in China will be reviewed.

#### 2.4.1 Social Media and Media Control in China

While different aspects of Chinese social media have been explored and examined, it is crucial to understand studies that aim at revealing the state regime's responses and reactions to the growth of social media and online activism. In the context of China, social media platforms are operated in compliance with a range of Internet laws and regulations. Fast-adapting to the popularisation of digital media, Chinese authorities have begun to update their ways of monitoring and channelling social media, while using them for propaganda purposes (Chen & Ang, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). Any current empowerment achieved by social media can be taken away when the government decides to shut it down. Examples include the numerous blocked Western social media services, and the termination of the first Chinese microblog Fanfou after the July 2009 Urumqi riots. From this perspective, the political influence of the Internet and social media is overestimated, due to its conception as an electronic tool rather than a cause for political change (MacKinnon, 2008).

In contrast to China's reformed and liberalised economy, the country's media situation is still highly controlled, with the Chinese Communist Party acting as "the owner, manager, and the practitioner" (Chu, 1994). Along with the expansion of the Internet, a number of communication studies of China have focused on issues about media control, Internet censorship, as well as the Internet's empowerment of public discussions (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Harwit & Clark, 2001; Herold, 2011; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; MacKinnon, 2012; Mueller & Tan, 1997; Yang, 2009; Xiao, 2011). Under the government's sophisticated censorship, netizens still try to find new ways to circumvent state restrictions on foreign websites (Lynch, 1999). Although the purpose of censorship is to maintain the regime's control, studies on Chinese social media indicate that there is some degree of tolerance that exists within the censorship regime. That is, the online censorship is relatively looser than the censorship of traditional media, so long as discussions do not challenge the state's legitimacy (Yang, 2009). Likewise, it accepts criticism against the regime, its policies, and its officials to some extent, but primarily restricts information that can lead to any collective action, regardless of the form of the content (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013).

Recent years have seen the emergence of microblogging services as an essential source of real-time news and information updates (Deuze, 2006; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; Kwak et al., 2010). The microblog's nature of instant updates was initially enabled with the widespread use of smartphones and advanced telecommunication networks. Accessing via mobile phone applications, microbloggers can post information or photos at the scene, reaching their followers and potential audience in seconds. In addition to the essential characteristics of user generated content, the variety of topics, and the flexible forms of interactions, microblogging is also well known for its rapid outreach of information, which has challenged the government's monopoly on information in China. In many cases, it is possible for microbloggers to receive and distribute news and information faster than the government's censors. Unfortunately, the Chinese government has quickly embraced and co-opted the newly emerged microblogs and utilised them to maintain the authoritarian control, through partially responding to "agents' misdemeanours" and counteracting the "threatening behaviour" (Sullivan, 2014).

According to Hong Kong-based media observer Qian, the situation of China's social media can be described in three Cs – "Control, Change, and Chaos" (Qian, 2011), where these controls and changes have been developed simultaneously. Furthermore, he suggests the term "Control 2.0" to describe the new ways of information and news controls. Control 2.0 is an upgraded version of China's Internet censorship against what Web 2.0 allows users to do. As

online news sets the agenda for other media (Shirk, 2011), the Chinese government uses online versions of state media like *People's Daily Online* and *Xinhua News Online* to report breaking news, in an effort to mimic social media. Other means of Control 2.0 include: the use of the influence and power of commercial Internet portals; banning information and disciplining uncooperative media in discreet ways; and using online commentators, commonly referred to as the "50 cent party" (五毛黨), to make posts that favor the interests of the ruling party and the government (Chen & Ang, 2011; Qian, 2011). After analysing more than 43,000 posts of online commentators from Chinese social media, researchers claim that the purpose of those online commentators is "to distract and redirect public attention from discussions or events" rather than debating or arguing with the netizens (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2017).

While the development of media can be classified into stages from "Media 1.0: the printing press" to "Media 2.0: broadcasting", and then "Media 3.0: the Internet" (Gillmor, 2010); the progress of media control in China has evolved into an advanced stage of Control 3.0 in recent years. Through investigating the propaganda system in China with reference to two newspapers (*Dahe Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*) and related literature, it is evident that there has been a decrease in the central power of media control but an increase in the control from local authorities to protect local interests (Tong, 2010). With a comparative study of messages on Twitter and Weibo and the statistical deletion rates of Weibo messages, researchers identified a list of sensitive terms banned in Chinese online discussions and indicated the proportional difference in deleted content between provinces (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012). Tibet and North-West provinces such as Qinghai appear to have high deletion rates at about 53 percent while the deletion rates in Eastern provinces is just over 10 percent. That is, complying with Tong's argument, the local censor interprets the state government's media control policies independently even on a nation-wide social media platform like Weibo. Nevertheless, there are long-term benefits from the Internet to the society, regardless of the regime's control over information flow in the short term (Tai, 2006).

#### 2.4.2 Social Media and Citizen Journalism in China

In addition to exploring media control and online resistance in China, scholars have also paid attention to other areas of cyberspace inside the Great Firewall. From the analysis of the online public sphere to discussions of online political communication, many have studied different features of China's social media such as public forums and weblogs. However, there is only a limited amount of English scholarship on the rise of Chinese citizen journalism and its social

and political implications, focusing on its impact on mainstream journalism, news trustworthiness, and public participation (Hung, 2013; Li & He, 2017; Nip, 2009; Reese & Dai, 2009; Tong, 2015; Wang & Mark, 2013; Xin, 2010).

Drawing from the weblog phenomenon and four news cases, it was found that mainstream media in China regularly uses content from citizen journalists as “a complementary news source” and “an alternative channel” to release sensitive information (Xin, 2010). Considering challenges brought by the tightened media control, the forced economic interests, and the domination of nationalist ideologies, the extent to which active citizen-bloggers are able to promote social changes in China is questionable. In significant social events like the case of the anti-paraxylene (PX) plant in Xiamen, citizen content was distributed across various social media platforms, including online forums, microblogs, weblogs and instant messaging services. As a result, the implications of citizen journalism and online activism can be observed. This case emphasises how citizen journalism enhances public participation and provides alternative information against the state’s “propaganda-filled media environment” (Hung, 2013).

Taking the case of the Wenchuan earthquake, researchers critically examined citizen reporting and commentary among multiple social media platforms, including Tianya bulletin board system (BBS), Sina weblog service, and QQ chat groups. Based on the findings, Chinese citizen journalism failed to provide a comprehensive report on the earthquake due to their lack of detailed information, accredited sources, and coordination (Nip, 2009). Again, the chronological sorting-order of Tianya bulletin board is not in favour of the news audience but creates barriers for searching the information in need. Other researchers who also explored the same earthquake alongside four other social events (e.g. the anti-CNN.com and Sanlu contaminated formula issue), on the other hand, suggest that Chinese citizen journalism has enabled public deliberation and encouraged professional journalism toward “clearly articulated values and greater transparency” (Reese & Dai, 2009, p.223).

For nearly a decade, citizen journalism on Weibo has played an important role in many critical social events, particularly in topics relating to earthquake, food safety, corruption, and human trafficking. Just as in other parts of the world, incidents of breaking news, such as the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed train crash, were initially published and spread on social media by Weibo citizen journalists (Lei, 2011). As a result, an increasing number of researchers are now examining the phenomenon of citizen journalism in the context of online forums and blogs posted on the dominant Chinese microblog – Weibo. Researchers have explored it from the perspectives of information acquisition, government practices, news reading, disaster response,

public sphere and also public opinion (Guo, Li, & Tu, 2011; Qu, Huang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011; Tong & Lei, 2012; Wang, 2011; Zhang & Pentina, 2012). Generally speaking, Weibo offers unique communicative means of “impersonal-interpersonal-hyperpersonal interaction” and enables the effective “individual-group-mass transmission fission”, resulting in citizen content rapidly drawing extensive attention from the public (Zhang & Negro, 2013).

Studies on citizen journalism have been conducted within China by Chinese scholars over the last few years. It is also notable that despite the fact that Weibo can be browsed by anyone within or outside China; one needs to have registered with a verified ID to post anything on it, which means that people posting on this social media are already aware of the risks, and have revealed their identities. Hence, messages are rarely openly political although most have political implications. Regardless of reinforced censorship, the Chinese government does notionally provide netizens/citizens with freedom of speech, and hence social topics and political discussions are often acceptable online and offline as long as there is no action taken in the streets against the authorities as a result. According to one reporter “Although the blatantly critical dialogue is promptly quashed, the use of code, metaphor, and satire to make political points is rampant. The in-jokes help create a community identity that's unique to netizens in China compared to their offline compatriots” (Fung, 2012). More recently several netizens in China have devised ingenious methods to avoid the machine-managed censorship of certain words like #metoo, by using oblique references to images that “sound” alike (Andersen, 2018).

To a degree, Weibo is often regarded as a news platform instead of a social networking service (Chen, Liu, Wang, & Gu, 2012). On the one hand, it has provided opportunities for citizen journalists to have their say and has been considered an alternative source for political information (Sun, 2013). On the other, a large proportion of netizens are rarely creating content via Weibo but rather accessing viewpoints or information published by opinion leaders, or those with influential accounts (Fu & Chau, 2013). However, few have investigated Weibo citizen journalism from the perspective of the so-called netizens through a qualitative research approach of in-depth interviews.

## 2.5 CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN COUNTRIES WITH STRICT MEDIA CONTROL

It is evident that the concept of citizen journalism reflects the participation of ordinary citizens in news production, dissemination, and discussion, as well as the creation of diverse information sources. Yet, its developments are varied in different countries, relying on the

socio-economic factors such as Internet accessibility, education levels, governances and regulations. This section will be briefly looking at Western scholarship on citizen journalism in countries with strict media control, as such representative studies and cases will offer a comparative understanding of the situation of citizen journalism in China.

The majority literature usually discusses the rise of citizen journalism with the concept of digital activism, referring to the use of digital platforms in promoting social and political changes as well as real-world movements (Joyce, 2010). With the advance of technologies and social media, social-political information has been able to be generated, shared and consumed by Internet users, and the possibility of developing a democratic society has then been enhanced (Mortara, 2010). However, successful citizen activism is still not evidenced widely, and many of the stories are based on journalistic content rather than critical data analysis (Katz, Barris & Jain, 2013). In fact, some researchers doubt the potential of technologies and social media in changing social orders and believe the authorities will remain in powerful positions (Joyce, 2010). It is necessary to acknowledge that citizen journalists in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin American countries have access to a range of western social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, which were completely banned in China. Nevertheless, their access to these social media platforms and the Internet as a whole can be blocked by their governments during uprisings and social movements (Ali & Fahmy, 2013).

### 2.5.1 Citizen Journalism in Africa

In the last decade, the rise of citizen journalism in Africa has had increasing attention in the literature. Many researchers investigate specific cases and thus address the impact of citizen journalism to community and society (Banda, 2010; Desta, Fitzgibbon, & Byrne, 2014; Paterson, 2013; Mabweazara, 2010; Moyo, 2009; Mudhai, 2011; Mutsvairo & Columbus, 2012). From the underground protest movement of Sokwanele in 2005 to the mobile activism of Kubatana during the 2008 Zimbabwean elections, to the protest movement of RhodesMustFall in 2015 to the 2016-17 Zimbabwe protests with #ThisFlag, the key citizen events have brought the public from online participations to offline actions, even resulting in social changes.

Prior to the rise of citizen journalism, a range of social, constitutional, economic, and technical changes had occurred among African countries. According to Banda, there are six key factors that have founded and shaped the practice of citizen journalism in Africa: the global trend of democracy, the local media deregulation, the commercial driven state media, the

privatised media institutes, the progress of democratic journalistic communication, and the rapid growth in ICTs adoption (Banda, 2010). With a comparative study of citizen journalistic practices in East Africa, the Maghreb, Southern Africa and West Africa, he concludes that the advanced technological penetration doesn't promise effective citizen journalism operations when it's not allied with a high degree of freedom. Although the development of technology is the basis of the establishment of citizen journalism, the democratic values are the social inspirations in which the concept and its practice can become sustainable.

One of the representative citizen journalism events of Africa happened in Zimbabwe, during the 2008 election. After examining the role of citizen journalism in the election, Moyo (2009) points out that the postponement of the election results was strongly related to the citizens' discussions and participation over SMS and weblogs. He then suggests that citizen journalism has made a significant contribution to the circulation of public opinions, and even had influence on the content of mainstream media coverage. Later, researchers investigated the citizen journalism website 'Voice of Kibera' and its role in improving local slum problems. According to them, the principle of citizen journalism is participation and empowerment; yet, its development in such cases is still difficult, due to issues such as a lack of collaboration, funding, and technical support (Desta, Fitzgibbon, & Byrne, 2014).

By reflecting the economic impact of ICTs in Africa, a group of researchers indirectly address the role of citizen journalism in influencing the authorities and its political empowerment for local communities, as citizens are indeed better informed (Manyika, Cabral, Moodley, Moraje, Yeboah-Amankwah, Chui, & Anthonyrajah, 2013). With a critical examination of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, Chiumbu (2015) argues that although the development of technologies changes the communication landscape in Africa, it has not yet strengthened the democratic process nor the citizen participation. Meanwhile, through the investigation of the infamous Baba Jukwa Facebook page in Zimbabwe, researchers summarise the limitations of online activism and raise the issue of "clicktivism" (Karpf, 2010) or a notional activism rather than taking any tangible action, or "free-rider" culture, ignoring offline practices (Mare, 2016). Moreover, other criticisms of online activism in Africa include the lack of critical mass (Mutsvairo, 2013), and the possibility of over-optimism on the influence of social media in advancing political changes in Africa (Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015).

### 2.5.2 Citizen Journalism in the Middle East

Since the Iranian Green Movement in 2009, the world has witnessed a series of citizen events and social revolutions facilitated by social media, including the historical “Arab Spring”. Together with online blogs and mobile phone affordances, social media platforms played a critical role in coordinating and guiding the “rising tide of opposition” as well as in distributing images and ideas to promote the “resistance and mass defiance” across the Arab society (Cottle, 2011).

The majority of studies on citizen journalism in the Middle East are conducted from the perspective of journalistic practice, aiming to examine the impact of citizen journalism on the society alongside its relationship to mainstream media. Without a doubt, citizen content on social media has provided remarkable amount of needed information for traditional media (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). However, although mainstream media advocates citizen journalism, or rather user-generated content, leading news organizations like BBC still place them on the margins of the news operation and regard them as merely a news source or newsgathering (Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). Researchers studying Iran’s Twitter Revolution also indicate that the international media organizations merely obtain Twitter content and use it as the primary source of information rather than gather information on the ground and report professionally (Morozov, 2009a). In the context of Iran, technologies and social media can be used as authoritarian strategies, with the potential to become a tool for surveillance and exploitation. At the same time, the gatekeeping theory of institutional media still applies to citizen journalistic content. Based on the theoretical analysis of three uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya, it now appears that citizen journalists were manipulating stories to accommodate traditional media’s narratives and routine practices to receive coverage in the mainstream media (Ali & Fahmy, 2013).

Nevertheless, the Egyptian government failed to control the overwhelming information relating to the protests because of the remarkable number of citizens involved and the massive amount of content produced and disseminated through various social media platforms. Therefore, social media played a significant role in promoting the movement and the Egyptians’ willingness for participation (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). While the mainstream media and citizen journalism were interactively cooperating with each other in several news production processes, especially when sharing news sources and information, the professional boundaries of “journalistic discourse” and “institutional constraints” limited and politicised the citizen content (Bossio & Bebawi, 2012).



Scholars have argued that social media can amplify the voice of citizens and provide an opportunity for them to reach out for public attention and public participation in online cyber information grounds (Narayan, 2013). But social media is never the sole cause for social movements or revolutions, which happens with the help of “dedicated activists and the collective struggle of their people” (Ali & Fahmy, 2013, p.66). Noticing the advancement of both social media and online activism during the Arab uprisings, Chinese authorities are carefully controlling the related news and information from international news organisations and local social media. The regime severely cracked down on the democratic protest of “Jasmine Revolution” through fast censoring the online appeals for offline action in major cities and detaining the suspected activists (Cottle, 2011).

### 2.5.3 Citizen Journalism in Latin America

As one of the regions with the fastest growing Internet populations, Latin America has experienced the political upheavals brought by the new communication avenue of the online sphere and citizen journalism. Similar to what happened in Africa and the Middle East countries, the emergence of the Internet and digital social media has brought substantial changes and opportunities to the Spanish world. Countries such as Brazil and Chile have allocated significant resources for their digital inclusion programs, which have facilitated a public sphere, online grassroots movements, and thus the possibility of developing a civil society (Prado, 2011). Empowered by the avenues for liberal-democratic expressions and participation, especially in the online sphere, a series of social changes and movements have happened in Latin American countries.

Looking at the context of the populism in contemporary Latin America, the relationship between journalism and democracy is opposite to the normative models. The revitalisation of populism in the region doubts the liberal-democratic notion of journalism and regards it as “an institution in support of goals other than *sensu stricto* democracy” (Waisbord, 2012, p.516). In the Western models of media democracy, the market is placed in the centre of a free press while civil society is the priority of citizen media democracy. On the contrary, the populist visions assign the state an essential position and divide journalism into “popular-national” and “foreign-oligarchic”. Taking account of the history, including the media system and particular journalistic practices of the region, Internet freedom and social media effects are undoubtedly related to the way citizens understand and reflect on their community and society. Focusing on the 2010 Latino Barometer, and analysing survey data and estimating multilevel models,

researchers confirmed that social media has a negative impact on citizens' attitudes towards the political conditions of their home countries (Gainous, Wagner, & Gray, 2016). According to their findings, the flow of information that citizens have been able to access through the Internet has extensive influence on their viewpoints about democracy, but governments are also preventing such potential opposition movements by strengthening their control over the information flow. While many of the region's countries have a relaxed or free-of-filtering media environment, the censorship in Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela are considerably stricter (Castillo, 2014). For professional journalists who pursue objective reporting and ethical practices, access to Western social media like Twitter using anonymous accounts has become the pathway to circumvent government censorship (Nagel, 2014). However, as in China, access to and content of any social media would be censored and blocked by the government to maintain political stability. In Cuba, for instance, the rise of the blogosphere and influential independent bloggers have resulted in the regime's reinforcement of media control as well as the repression of public activism (Henken, 2010). Even though the minimal accessibility of the Internet and the Cuban government's media censorship have caused serious obstacles, active bloggers continue to fight for their civil rights and public space for political debate and discussions.

## 2.6 CHINESE LANGUAGE SCHOLARSHIP ON CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Studies on citizen journalism have drawn much attention in Chinese scholarship over the last few years. A review of the recently published Chinese literature on citizen journalism found that researchers mainly focus on studying citizen journalism from three aspects: 1) the dissemination characteristics and influence of citizen journalism, 2) the relationships between citizen journalism and other social aspects, including traditional media, public discourse, public utilities, and 3) the rise of citizen journalism on microblogs. This section summarises the Chinese literature relating to the first two categories, while the Chinese scholarship on the relationship between citizen journalism and microblogs (Weibo, in particular) will be reviewed in the next section (chapter 2.7).

### 2.6.1 Research on the Dissemination Characteristics and Influence of Citizen Journalism

The concept of citizen journalism was first introduced into Chinese scholarship by Cai Wen and Shao Peiren. Being a visiting scholar in various American universities, Cai spent one year studying about the ways of American media reporting public events and movements of public

journalism and citizen journalism (Cai, W., 2005b). In the article, she summaries the academic debates of public journalism and briefly introduces the emerging concept of participatory journalism (aka. citizen journalism). Cai and Guo give a detailed analysis of the transition from public journalism to citizen journalism in western countries and concludes the significance of citizen journalism is “the empowerment of citizen journalism in ‘news productivity’, for ordinary citizens are rewriting the history of the news industry: it not only encourages citizens to pay attention to public affairs and collects, edits, and disseminates news information but also promotes citizens to create their own media” [translated by researcher] (Cai & Guo, 2008, p.46). Shao and Li (2007) also interpret the concept of participatory journalism (aka. citizen journalism) from the limitation and decline of public journalism. The popularisation of weblogs and bloggers’ reporting on significant social cases on a worldwide scale demonstrates the need to drive “we” (我們) to become the content providers. Indeed, the features of citizen journalism can be interpreted as non-professional, act first (or publish first), low cost, unbounded by time and space, anti-copyright protection, anti-authoritarian, and anti-localism (Shao & Li, 2007).

In recent years, Chinese literature has studied citizen journalism in relation to its dissemination characteristics, its dissemination process, and its authenticity (Yu, 2018; Xie, 2017; Zhou, 2017; Hu, 2017; Liu, 2012; Liu, W. Q., 2016; Sun, 2017; Zhang, X., 2017; Huang & Ma, 2017; Wen & Jiang, 2016). Through the exploration of the PeoPo Citizen Journalism platform, founded by Public Television Service Foundation in Taiwan, Liu (2012) examines the relationship between new media and citizen journalism from the perspective of citizens’ right to distribution. He argues that the significance of citizen journalism in China is to break the monopoly of professional journalism and empower the general public with the right to speak, inform, and distribute information.

More recently, Yu studied the dissemination characteristics and values of citizen journalism from the perspective of online media ecology (Yu, 2018). She believes the significant characteristics of citizen journalism are the individualisation of subjects, the diversification of forms, the popularisation of perspectives, and the interactivity of dissemination. At the same time, the network ecology enhances the value of citizen journalism dissemination. It helps citizen journalism to become more prominent, guides the trend of agenda setting, and also reflects on the actual social presentation. Xie analyses the development of Chinese citizen journalism in the era of “self-media” (自媒體, aka. grassroots media) as well as citizen journalism’s advantages and disadvantages (Xie, 2017). For her, the benefits include saving operating costs, providing comprehensive information, and enabling local cultural

awareness and social resources, while the disadvantages include a lack of authenticity and stability, imperfect transmission and aggregation channels, and shallow reporting.

Similarly, Zhou also finds strengths and drawbacks of Chinese citizen journalism in the Internet age (Zhou, 2017). According to Zhou, the emergence of citizen journalism has expanded news coverage, sped up news dissemination, reduced limitations, and enhanced sociality and freedom of speech. However, there are also drawbacks such as the proliferation of false news, extreme bias, and the lack of in-depth news reports.

By examining the value of citizen journalism, the impact of citizen journalism on traditional media, and the means of adopting citizen journalism content for traditional media, Hu indicates that the primary influence is the reconstruction of discourse power and the reconstruction of information sources (Hu, 2017). Meanwhile, Li discusses the reasons for and the significance of changing institutional news to citizen journalism in the era of new media by clarifying the definition, characteristics, and forms of citizen journalism (Li, Q., 2016). He suggests that the news production model has been transformed from the traditional top-down agenda setting to what is termed reverse-setting (反設置), where ordinary people offer a diversity of opinions and voices reflecting the shift between institutional news and citizen journalism. In addition to the reconstruction of information sources and the transformation of the news production model, citizen journalism, which is voiced primarily from the grassroots, also influences the discourse of authorities in China. According to Liu, citizen journalism plays a constructive role in media literacy, including as a supplement to an official news release and the linkages between “self-media” and mainstream media (Liu, W. Q., 2016). The role of citizen journalism in shifting the information dissemination process in China can therefore be seen from three perspectives: 1) the subject of communication has evolved from professional journalists to individuals; 2) the agenda setting is no longer passive but proactive and with freedom of choice; 3) the news media is filled with grassroots media content rather than mainstream media (Sun, 2017).

The main critique of Chinese citizen journalism in the web-blog period, before the emergence of microblogging in 2009, is the insufficiency of its information dissemination and participation. As Wen indicates, the characteristics of citizen journalism on web-blogs include limited topics and isolated viewpoints, leisure-oriented content rather than a discussion on public issues, and an emphasis on presentation rather than interaction (Wen, 2013). Wen argues that the influence of citizen journalism weblogs is far less than their popularity might suggest

as they merely appear as information sources and usually require the involvement of traditional media to form public discussions.

Since the time microblogs became popular in China, researchers have been questioning the quality and authenticity of citizen journalism content. Taking the “tip-off” (我要爆料) channel of Toutiao (今日頭條), one of the most popular news and information content mobile platforms in China, Zhang analyses the exposed topics and the identities of source providers. She claims that content published by citizen journalists usually involves false information, infringement of privacy rights, and non-standard written language (Zhang, Y. J., 2017). The issues with citizen journalism content are usually summarised as inaccurate information, excessive expression of emotions, illegal and harmful information, lack of professionalism, and inconsistency in pictures and titles or text (Zhang, X., 2017; Huang & Ma, 2017). In Zhang’s view, even though citizen journalists are mainly individuals who have not received professional training, the nature of online platforms (microblogs and other social network services), there are other causes of these issues. This includes the irrational judgments of participants, and the unsoundness of legal protections. At the same time, it appears that netizens tend to choose entertaining topics and content over the current news, which raises the issue of the overly entertainment-oriented content of citizen journalism (Huang & Ma, 2017). While the free speech characteristic of citizen journalism can enhance citizen’s self-awareness and promote discussions on public affairs; it also causes privacy infringement and has potential to damage individual or group interests (Wen & Jiang, 2016).

### 2.6.2 Studies on the Relationship of Citizen Journalism and Diverse Social Aspects

A comparatively large amount of Chinese scholarship examines the relationship between citizen journalism and diverse social aspects, which include analysis relating to media practices and standards and discussions relating to civil rights and public affairs. Critical analysis of citizen journalism in China from the perspective of media practices and standards mainly focus on topics such as professional journalists, traditional media, news ethics, news interviewing, professionalism, broadcast editors, and news production and consumption (Chen, 2016; Ding, 2016; Fu, 2016; Li & He, 2017; Liu, T. M., 2016; Lu, C. T., 2016; Qin, 2016; Shen, 2017; Wu, 2017; Wu & Xie, 2016; Zhang, 2016; Zhang & Chen, 2016). Meanwhile, discussions of citizen journalism in relation to civil rights and public affairs often involve aspects such as public discourse, value proposition, social regulation, public utilities, mass incidents, civic education,

and public supervision (Cheng, 2016; Dong, 2016; Li, 2016; Shi, 2017; Xu, 2016; Zheng, 2016; Zhu & Zeng, 2016).

Supporters of citizen journalism consider it a path to improve media practices in China. From the perspective of news interviewing, citizen journalism enriches the information sources, provides timely feedback on reports, and supervises the mainstream media (Liu, T. M., 2016). Meanwhile, Wu suggests that citizen journalism movements have strengthened the sense of social responsibility of professional journalists (Wu, 2017). According to Shen, citizen journalism promotes the transformation of mass media from being content providers to a service platform, and thus enhances the information flows in communication and the multiple perspectives of news reporting (Shen, 2017). In the discussion of traditional Chinese media in the era of citizen journalism, Fu suggest a similar proposal to Shen. He believes that the strategy for traditional media to develop is to provide an opportunity for citizens to spread news, to establish platforms for interacting with the public, and to integrate information from diverse sources for in-depth news reports (Fu, 2016). To some extent, if traditional media makes use of new media and online platforms to recruit comments, feedback and sources from citizens or sets up a citizen journalism channel or section, it will be able to minimise the issues of false news and privacy infringement (Lu, C. T., 2016; Ding, 2016). Further, from the perspective of news production and consumption, it seems the relationship between professional media and citizen journalism has been reconstructed through public participation and crowdsourcing news (Wu & Xie, 2016).

The question of the possibility of traditional Chinese media integrating with citizen journalism remains. After reviewing the development of citizen journalism in mainstream media and community media in Western countries, Li and He find that it is more realistic for community media to adopt content from citizen journalism, as it encourages a wide range of dialogues among various communities (Li & He, 2017). For them, the approach of integrating citizen journalism into mainstream media will only include a small number of citizen participants and has limitations in terms of enhancing citizens' media literacy. In contrast to the literature that emphasises the advantage of citizen journalism to Chinese media, Chen claims that citizen journalism has both positive and negative impacts on professional journalism (Chen, 2016). On the one hand, citizen journalism challenges the monopoly on power of traditional media over news and discourse production, and expands the news reporting with diversity; on the other hand, it affects the authenticity and depth of the news and reduces the extensibility of professional news. Again, Zhang states that the rise of citizen journalism brings both the "chance for development" and "new challenges" (Zhang, 2014).

Based on her assumptions, citizen journalism and professional journalism are able to collaborate through three different means: 1) citizen journalists provide information as initial sources and professional journalists conduct in-depth reports accordingly; 2) citizens can question and supervise professional media when it publishes inaccurate information, and vice-versa for professional journalists to verify and supervise citizen journalism content; 3) a complete news report will be formed through information contributed by diverse sources.

During the discussions of the rise of citizen journalism about civil rights and public affairs, Chinese researchers mention both advantages and disadvantages. By studying the role of citizen journalism enabling public discourse, Shi summarizes that citizen journalism advances the democratic process of society and realises the basic rights of citizens', however, it causes online violence and sometimes offends established ethics and morals (Shi, 2017). From the perspective of public utilities, Dong (2016) indicates that the positive effects of citizen journalism on Chinese public utilities are enhancing citizens' right to know and right of speech, drawing attention to social issues, and empowering public opinion. She also points out that issues of false information and privacy infringement, which are the main problems of citizen journalism, are also harmful to the development of the public good. When interpreting citizen journalism from the perspective of legal rights, Zhu and Zeng first acknowledge its empowerment of rights of expression, supervision, and participation (Zhu & Zeng, 2016). They then propose methods of perfecting the laws and regulations to prevent conflict and infringements of rights caused by citizen journalism. From the analysis of the video news produced by citizen journalists from the "video-blogger" (拍客) section of Tencent Video (騰訊視頻), Zheng concludes that the main problems of citizen video news are the looseness of topics, weakness of interactions or dialogues, unevenness of production quality, and absence of rational agents (Zheng, 2016). Nevertheless, citizen journalism is favourable to the circumstance of mass incidents as it motivates the public to participate in the society, improves the expression of group interests, aggravates the intensity of mass incidents, and enlarges social issues for potential solutions (Cheng, 2016).

## 2.7 CHINESE SCHOLARSHIP ON CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND WEIBO

Studies on the relationship between microblogging and citizen journalism often start from its representations to its principles and thus explore it at different levels. Based on the cognitive learning theory, the recognition of phenomena requires an understanding of the facts, the logical interpretation and explanation of the causes and the principles, and the discussion and

foresight of its meaning and influence. Accordingly, the following section summaries the relevant Chinese literature on the relationship between Weibo and citizen journalism under the various perspectives: observational perspective, explaining perspective, and foreseeing perspective.

### 2.7.1 Observational Perspective

Researchers who have conducted observational studies on citizen journalism have made detailed descriptions of events on Weibo. By analysing the characteristics of the phenomenon and discussing the problems that occurred during its development, researchers are able to gain an understanding of the relationship between Weibo and citizen journalism.

By examining the Weibo account of *learning (president Xi) fans group* (學“習”粉絲團), who post the daily activities of Chinese national leader Xi Jinping, Zhai analyses the information dissemination model on Weibo, and identifies the characteristics of citizen journalism as rapid news release, colloquial writing, interactive reporting, and information sharing (Zhai, 2013). He believes that citizen journalism plays a vital role in promoting the openness of government affairs, social progress, democratic awareness, and the realisation of online democracy in China. Focusing on the Weibo hot topic of *president Xi's bun purchasing* (習總買包子), Li emphasises that the characteristics of citizen journalism are immediate reporting, timeliness, wide-reach, significant influence, and active content (Li, 2014). While Cai (2015) points out that the characteristics of citizen journalism on Weibo include timeliness, interactivity, low-barrier to entry, and richness in content; Yin (2015) also recognises the low-barrier to entry notion of reporting on Weibo and further indicates the strong influence of interpersonal relations and democratisation of production. According to Yin, the instant reporting of an emergency, the multi-media forms of content, the mobility of broadcasting and the cooperation of news reporting are the main features of citizen journalism on Weibo (Yin, 2015). Zeng (2016) believes that Weibo has expanded and enhanced citizen journalism in China through its properties of participation, the flexibility of reporting, and effectiveness of dissemination. Duan (2017) investigates Weibo's hot topics in recent years and concludes that citizen journalism has characteristics of colloquial, subjective expression, wide-ranging subjects, various structures, high engagement, strong interaction, timeliness, and autonomy.

Cai, P. X. (2015) argues that citizen journalism on Weibo has both positive and negative impact on society. On the one hand, it enhances citizens' power of discourse, strengthens the social supervision of the public, and balances the social conflicts. On the other, it expands the



dissemination of false information, promotes the influence of Big V users (e.g. opinion leaders and celebrities), and can result in online bullying (Cai, P. X., 2015). He then suggests some possible means to reduce the negative impact, which includes verifying user's identity, improving user's ability of rational discussions, and creating positive interactions between users and the government sector. Other scholars have also indicated that there are problems in the authenticity, discourse rights, and ethics over citizen journalism content on Weibo (Duan, 2017; Li, 2014). Duan proposes using information gatekeepers and introducing specific regulations and laws to manage the expressions and online content, and then to raise users' morality and media literacy. Similarly, Zeng raises concerns about the quality of citizen journalism after reviewing the current situation of citizen journalism on Weibo. He points out that citizen journalists lack professional training and often are disseminating information without validating their identities (Zeng, 2016). Also, unprofessional reporting often leads to overwhelming public opinions and issues on news' infringement (of a person's reputation, privacy, etc.), media trials, and cyber violence (Yin, 2015).

Some Chinese researchers examine citizen journalism on Weibo from a more specific perspective. Dai analyses representative and influential gender-related incidents on Weibo, including the incident of Li Yan's murder of her husband (due to family violence), the abduction of a beautiful female teacher in a rural area, and the debate over breastfeeding on Beijing underground trains (Dai, 2016). He thus points out the features of gender-sensitive reporting by citizen journalists on Weibo and reasons for its rise. Yan (2014) provides detailed summaries of Weibo's citizen journalism through reporting characteristics, linguistic features, and in-depth content analysis. He believes that the attributes of personalised writing, the richness of emotions, and public participation enable citizen journalists to become the first-hand information source ahead of mainstream reporting. Also, the public space notion of Weibo gives opportunities for users to find the topics they are interested in and gather with other like-minded people (Yan, 2014). That is, Weibo users pay more attention to news and information that is related to their experiences and preferences. Nevertheless, according to Yan, the entertainment function of Weibo usually exceeds its role of presenting public events and reforming public discussion. Topics regarding entertainment news, dramas, movies, reality TV shows, and gourmet food often dominate Weibo's popular topics list, while celebrities are the majority in Weibo's top ten influential users' chart.

In short, Chinese scholars who analyse citizen journalism on Weibo from an observational perspective focus on its characteristics and problems, and then propose possible solutions for such problems through summarising some Weibo citizen events. Since these

studies introduce the procedures of information generation, dissemination, and evolve into mass debates, they are the foundation for further studies of Weibo citizen journalism in regard to its practice, influence, achievements, and relationships with other social aspects.

### 2.7.2 Explanatory Perspective

Many Chinese researchers go beyond observing the characteristics, situation, and problems of citizen journalism on Weibo, exploring the reasons for its emergence and the relationship between citizen journalism and Weibo. One common argument is that the platform has both positive and negative influences on the development of citizen journalism in China.

Through a detailed summary of the practice and development of citizen journalism on Weibo from a communication aspect, it appears that critical factors in the success of citizen journalism include citizen journalists, content features, the complexity of information flow, and diversity of the gatekeeper processes (Yang, 2012). That is, Weibo citizen journalists participate in the whole process of initial reporting, development reporting, and follow-up reporting, and play a significant role in the initial reporting by exposure to social issues or incidents. Regarding the gatekeeper process, both Yang and Liu suggest that the classic gatekeeper theory no longer explains the gatekeeper process to Weibo's citizen journalism as the public (or the ordinary Weibo users), who are sometimes anonymous on Weibo, have become the news or information source (Yang, 2012; Liu, 2017). According to Yang, citizen journalism on Weibo plays a significant role in initial reporting, which reflects the reporting of real-life social events or incidents on Weibo and thus generates significant attention locally and internationally. Further, they highlight the absence of professional journalists at the scene, which provides opportunities for citizen journalists to release first-hand information, especially in emergencies and issue revealing (Yang, 2012).

To contribute in the initial reporting process, Weibo users consciously act as citizen journalists, using every possible resource to seek details, integrate information, and thus find out the truth during the development of events or incidents. The need for seeking the truth is also motivated by the absence and apathy of the mainstream media and authorities at the time a social issue or incident occurs within a community. Similar to Yang's recognition of Weibo citizen journalists in reporting social issues or public events, Zhai (2017) believes citizen journalism on Weibo is representing the collective wisdom of the public, which enables possibilities of truth discovery in the complicated Internet age. The wide-ranging participation on Weibo provides various channels for communication, clarification and first-hand

information from diverse perspectives, hence generating collective wisdom. Moreover, the multi-interaction characteristic of information dissemination on Weibo enhances citizen's rights to speak, inform, and distribute information, and represents the main principles of their right to communication, which includes freedom, inclusiveness, diversity, and participation (Liu, 2012). Liu claims that the citizen-driven news production on Weibo together with technology-boosted e-democracy can simplify the complicated process of deliberative democracy, which includes civic education, responsibility shaping, rational action, decision-making, and so on.

Some scholars discuss both positive and negative influences of Weibo on the development of citizen journalism in China. Regarding positive influences, Weibo highlights the core concept of citizen journalism, liberates the public's right to speak, enhances the authenticity of citizen journalism, and facilitates the public's sense of responsibility (Chen, 2015; Dong, 2014; Wang & Gao, 2014). Additionally, Shen (2017) states that citizen journalism on Weibo plays an important role in enforcing the rule of law in supervising the legal authority, promoting citizen awareness, resolving public relation crisis, and building an honest government. Regarding negative influences, information on Weibo is often fragmented, resulting in the dispersal of information dissemination. This shallowness of information presentation causes a lack of in-depth discussion, and a significant amount of false information reduces the authority of citizen journalism (Dong, 2014). At the same time, Wang & Gao (2014) emphasise that the authenticity of citizen journalism content has been questioned a lot due to the overflow of false information on Weibo. Moreover, through the study of misrepresentation of citizen journalism content, Huang & Ma (2017) classify them into two types: the partially false news, which often contains pictures and has a mismatch with facts or headlines, and a mismatch with content or even distorted facts, and fake news.

Hou (2012) on the other hand, analyses the discourse structure of citizen journalism on Weibo. According to Hou, Weibo, as a massive news and information platform, has more than the characteristics of efficiency in dissemination; it has a strong ability of self-amendment of false news and rumours (e.g., the correction of false news event on Jin Yong's "death") (Hou, 2012). Meanwhile, he explores the causes of the absence of Chinese peasant farmers' discourse on Weibo and discovers it is a result of both historical factors and the digital divide. Although peasants make up the majority of Chinese society in terms of numbers, they have always been in a disadvantaged position regarding their rights and power. Voices of the peasants are rarely heard, and their viewpoints are hardly taken into consideration in traditional media or new media. Hou (2012) also argues that not all members of society enjoy the benefits of new

technology and new media equally. That is, the power of discourse is mainly available to the existing information-rich class with the access and knowledge to adopt the new technologies.

More recently, Wang, Liu, & Li, (2017) conducted survey research on media literacy and political participation in Weibo at 14 Chinese universities. The findings of their research include: 1) demographic variables cannot predict students' political participation on Weibo; 2) students' media literacy levels have a positive impact on their political participation on Weibo; and 3) different dimensions of students' media literacy have different impacts on their Weibo political participations.

### 2.7.3 Forecasting Perspective

In addition to the literature analysing citizen journalism on Weibo from an observational perspective and explaining perspective, some researchers interpret the relationship between Weibo and citizen journalism from a forecasting perspective.

After conducting a study on the incremental social capital effects of Weibo citizen journalism, with analysis of the incident of Child Abuse in Wenling, Zhejiang (浙江溫嶺虐童事件), Chen (2012) argues that citizen journalism on Weibo increases social capital at all three levels: personal, organisational, and national. The term social capital refers to the social resources that an individual, an organisation, or a country can mobilise to create benefits. At the individual level, social capital includes one's reputation, power, social status, and the combination of one's personal social networks, or that of their family. Interactions and communications of Weibo users, who gather for shared interests or values, enhance the understanding and trust between each other and thus facilitate their social capital. At the organisational level, social capital is reputation, scale, and the fund-raising capacity of the organisation, as well as the sum of the social network of each member of the organisation, and whether the organisation itself is willing or able to bring benefits to the organisation. When an organisation, such as a media company or government institution, participates in the dissemination or discussion of Weibo events, the communication and collective awareness between ordinary citizens and the organisation is facilitated. Therefore, the organisation's social capital is increased in the long-term. At the national level, social capital is more complicated and usually includes a country's international status, economic strength, political system, the legal system, and also international relations owned by the nation or the social relations held by all of its citizens. Since citizen journalism on Weibo enables both the

incremental social capital of individuals and organisations, it is construed that those increases will further contribute to the nation's social capital gain.

Besides the accrual of social capital, researchers suggest that citizen journalism on Weibo brings possibilities of a democratic society. For Wei (2015), the concept of citizen journalism shares a few fundamental requirements with the notion of democratic consultation: social responsibility, public awareness, social recognition and encouragement, and awareness of reciprocity and negotiation. Yet, citizen journalism on Weibo has shifted from publishing or reading simple information to expressing one's self-interest, which means it arouses citizens' democratic awareness. While the traditional form of democratic consultation is limited by time and space, Weibo's citizen journalism offers a pathway for cross-regional deliberations and opportunities for putting online negotiations into practice offline (Wei, 2015). At the same time, Cao (2015) discusses the change of the agenda-setting function brought about by Weibo's citizen journalism and thus indicates the new process of agenda setting, which presents as the procedures of public agenda → media agenda → policy agenda or even skipping the media agenda. What is more, Cao claims that the agendas set by citizen journalism are self-filtering. With the advantage of asynchronous multi-interactions, Weibo automatically screens topics that are of general interest to the public which tend to become mainstream viewpoints through the autonomy of participation and the discussions of social issues by its users (Cao, 2015).

Despite the fact that some Chinese scholars have summarised Weibo characteristics and identified problems of Weibo citizen journalism, a large proportion of them merely adopt a "speculative reasoning with Chinese characteristics" (Lu, 2016) as their research method. Their discussions on Weibo citizen events or analysis of citizen content are mostly limited to personal opinions and are seldom theory-based. That is, many findings and conclusions were presented without explanations of research design or analysis approaches. Also, empirical research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and surveys are seldom used by Chinese researchers in regard to Weibo.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

In this chapter, the details of the research design are explained. The first part of chapter three (Section 3.1) is the summary of the methods used in social media studies, which form the foundations of this study. Following the restatement of research questions in Section 3.2, the research design for this thesis – a qualitative approach – will be reviewed in Section 3.3. The processes for defining cases, selection of participants, data source, and collection procedures are outlined in Section 3.4.

### 3.1 METHODS USED IN SOCIAL MEDIA STUDIES

Over the past decade, social media has become an essential part of our daily lives and society, and thus, the focus of media and communication scholarship. The term social media commonly refers to a range of Internet-based platforms and sites for either social networks or information broadcasting. Although the term is yet to be precisely defined, the key characteristics of enabling communication and user-generated content can still be identified from its existing definitions (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Gruz, Staves, & Wilk, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; McIntyre, 2014). Research questions raised about social media can generally be categorised into two major types: 1) reflecting on the use of a particular social media platform, and 2) exploring a specific social phenomenon and then gaining an understanding of social media usage (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017).

Whether using a quantitative or qualitative methodology, research methods used to investigate different social media platforms can be varied, even with a mixed design of multiple analysis and approaches. One of the most used methods in social media studies is Social Network Analysis (SNA). Using computing resources and algorithm, particularly the analytic software, SNA is regularly adopted to examine social structures based on “the use of networks and graph theory” (Otte & Rousseau, 2002). Through visualised connections, information distribution, and user segmentation, the method analyses the research subjects as well as their communicative relationships. However, since this research is not aiming to discover the social networks nor social structures of Weibo citizen journalism, it was not suitable for answering the research questions.

Netnography and Critical Discourse Analysis are both widely used in social media scholarship. Deriving from “the traditional, in-person participant observation” anthropologic approaches, Netnography is applied to understand interactions and experiences in the context

of digital communications (Kozinets, 1998). Critical discourse analysis (CDA), on the other hand, is “a multidisciplinary and issue-oriented approach” that contributes to understanding “the (re)production of dominance and inequality through analysing language, e.g. text, talk, and meaning, as well as language use (Van Dijk, 1993). Again, these two methods were not used in my research as they did not directly address my research goals.

### 3.2 RESTATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With an easy-access, multimedia, complex social platform like Weibo, relations between participants and technologies as well as one’s online social activities have become complicated. Those complicated uses for Weibo and the overwhelming coverage of Weibo’s hot events locally and internationally inspired the questions that were the foundations for this project.

How do citizens use the platform? What makes them remain active on it? How do they relate to the concept of citizen journalism? Do they participate in citizen events (or “Weibo events”)? How do they engage in the phenomenon? And if not, what keeps them away from participation? Are they aware of the government’s monitoring? How do they relate the phenomenon to the Chinese government and the mainstream media? How do these authorities respond and react to the phenomenon?

Consequently, the main research question was reframed as:

To what extent has microblogging (on Weibo) empowered citizen journalism in China?

And a set of sub-questions were developed for purposes of the study as following:

1. How did citizen journalism emerge on Weibo?
2. How do citizen journalists practise and participate through Weibo?
3. How does the Chinese government respond to citizen journalism?
4. How does the Chinese mainstream media engage with citizen journalism?
5. What are citizen journalists’ own experience within China?

### 3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH: QUALITATIVE APPROACH

The history of using qualitative methods in social science research can be dated back to the early 1900s, and it has been reinforced as a primary research method after the movement that critiques quantitative methods in the 1970s (Vidich & Lyman, 2000). This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which enables researchers to gain an understanding of a social situation or a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Because this study aims to provide an understanding of the role of Chinese microblogging service Weibo through a user perspective, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate one to address the research questions. Based on Creswell's claim, a qualitative research approach enables researchers to explore the causes behind a phenomenon and to address the relationship between different factors (or situations). Since this research also examines the impact of Weibo citizen journalism on its surrounding social factors such as government censorship and mainstream media, the qualitative approach helps to provide insights and interpret findings. From the perspective of media research, qualitative methods focus on the production experience as well as its meaning as a process, which is the context of social and cultural practices (Jensen, 2002). As citizen journalism is a term defined by its practices, mainly referring to acts of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating, qualitative methods are crucially relevant to this specific research topic.

In the initial stages of this research, a mix of both quantitative and qualitative approaches were planned as possible directions for this research. The qualitative methods selected were the secondary analysis of quantitative data, which was gathered by this author for a comparative study between Sina Weibo and Twitter (Cheng, 2013), and the computer-assisted quantitative content analysis for exploring Chinese microblog's influences and reflections on citizen journalism. However, as the research progressed, many changes occurred in both research circumstances and the research object. One of the critical difficulties was the reinforcement of censorship on Weibo in the past few years. Besides the immediate censorship process, which deletes about 30% of posts in the first 5 to 30 minutes (Zhu et al., 2013), a large amount of Weibo posts related to hot events regardless of its political sensitivities were gradually wiped out. Therefore, the research plan was reframed and amended; for example, the substantial question of comparing Weibo and Twitter was replaced, and the quantitative research methods were waived. Most importantly, the primary research method was adjusted to semi-structured interviews after reviewing the research questions and research design.

A combination of case study, qualitative media content analysis and in-depth interview were finally selected to provide the most complete understanding possible of the issues involved. For exploring Chinese microblogging's influences and reflections on citizen



journalism, two “Weibo events” (of social incidents or issues) and 28 interviews with active Weibo users were analysed in this research. The primary research case of Weibo, one of the most popular microblogging services in China, was examined alongside some of the most significant “Weibo events”. These events are some of the most prominent instances where the role of citizen journalists on Weibo have been highlighted. The critical analysis of such Weibo events is essential for answering the research questions, since Weibo users, mainstream media, and government sectors often all participate in such events. They also interact, sometimes cooperate, and impact each other during the progress of a Weibo event. For example, the “Weibo anti-kidnapping” event in 2011 promoted the establishment of a government platform in 2015 for publishing information on children who have been rescued from kidnappers and seek their original families. Similarly, the Guo Meimei or “Red Cross China scandal” in 2011 inspired some other anti-organisational-corruption incidents or social watchdog debates such as “watch-brother” and “property-uncle” events in the following years. Additionally, typical citizen or participatory journalists’ involvements on Weibo have included the live report of Jiaozhou Road residential fire disaster in Shanghai (2010) and the Yaan earthquake incident in 2013.

Qualitative interview methods; more specifically, the semi-structured method of in-depth interviews is used for this research. According to Travers (2006), an in-depth interview is a crucial method in social science for investigating social processes and seeking social meanings. Semi-structured interviews involve pre-designed interview outlines, either general questions or formal guidelines, all conducted according to an interview protocol designed to help answer the research questions. In a semi-structured interview, although the interviewer asks all interviewees similar questions based on the outline, the order of questions, the way of questioning, and even further discussions are flexible and adjustable in each interview (Travers, 2006). Nevertheless, the data from semi-structured interviews is comparatively easier to analyse than a completely unstructured and open discussion, as it is gathered according to interview outlines.

### 3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN: CASE STUDY

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the goal of this research is to explore China’s citizen journalism on microblogs, with particular reference to Weibo, and thus to understand its role in promoting citizen journalism in China. Hence, Weibo’s citizen journalists, or Weibo users

whose practice falls into the definition of citizen journalism, were the object of this study. As Bryman (2016) explains the method of the case study, “the case is an object of interest in its own right, and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth examination of it,”; this approach was most appropriate to carry out this research.

At the same time, Yin (2014) specifically defines the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident” (Yin, 2014). This definition of a case study is appropriate for the context of this research. First of all, the phenomenon of the rise of citizen journalism on social media is contemporary. It is a relatively new concept that has emerged from the development of social technologies and the Internet in the field of journalism studies and wider social science scholarship. Second, the real-life context of Chinese citizen journalism, which often includes but is not limited to social media, mainstream media, censorship, authorities, professional journalists, and citizen journalists or Weibo users, is complex and full of variations. Even within the Weibo platform, there are various types of citizen journalism events happening every day. Third, to answer the question of how microblogs enhance citizen journalism in China, at least one microblogging service provider needs to be selected as the “case” to study. Therefore, the case study emerged as the most suitable method for this research. It is also notable that other social science research methods such as surveys or experiments cannot clarify the role of Weibo in promoting citizen journalism in China nor the relationship between citizen journalism and other social factors, e.g. Chinese mainstream media or the Chinese regime’s reinforcement of media control.

Although the case study is a distinctive method to explore, describe, and explain an event or a set of events, there are concerns about its lack of objectivity and lack of generalisation (Yin, 2014). In my research, the primary case is the most visited microblog in China; Weibo, which is currently the dominant platform as other major microblogs owned by independent companies have closed down in the past few years. As a result, Weibo has become the one and only object to study topics relating to Chinese microblogging services. In terms of Weibo events, which are the cases selected for content analysis, the two events fall into the category of children-related incidents that have been widely discussed online and offline. While they are specific events on Weibo, both of them were initiated by citizens and reached the general public, the mainstream media, and the responsive government sectors. Most importantly, the two cases of “Weibo events” are supplementary to the 28 in-depth interviews.

### 3.4.1 Defining the Case Studies

The following section explains the two cases selected to address the research questions. These two cases explicate the context of Weibo at different levels: Weibo as a microblogging service provider, where citizen content can be published, disseminated and discussed, and as a media platform, where “Weibo events” have influenced the general public and the government, online and offline.

#### 3.4.1.1 *Weibo*

In this study, Weibo is the selected “case” or the object of study for investigating citizen journalism in China’s microblogging service. It is the most visited Chinese microblogging service and the only platform currently operated by a private company. With expectations of “onlookers change China” (圍觀改變中國) and “reposting is the power” (轉發就是力量), Weibo has been raised with tremendous attention and debate among various fields, including the academic world.

Since Twitter was forbidden in Mainland China in 2009, Sina Corporation released its microblogging service Sina Weibo. In March 2014, the name Sina Weibo was shortened to Weibo, and in the following month, Weibo filed an IPO in the US. Regarding the functions and services provided, Weibo combines many feature of Facebook and Twitter. Weibo posts usually contain pictures or videos, and Weibo users can post comments on other’s microblogs, send messages to other users and even quietly follow someone without them knowing. In addition to personal and group communication, Weibo works for news and information transmission as well. Most Chinese mainstream media, government sectors, and police stations have their official microblogging accounts on Weibo. In January 2016, Weibo decided to remove the 140-character limit for original posts, and users were able to post up to 2000 characters, while the 140-character limit still applied to reposts and comments. Being the most popular microblogging service in China, Weibo’s active monthly users had increased to 361 million in June 2016, overtaking Twitter’s worldwide numbers for the first time (CNNIC, 2017).

#### 3.4.1.2 *Weibo Events*

Significant Weibo events were selected as “nested cases” (Yin, 2014) as a supplement to the interview data analysis, for providing a complete understanding of the relationship between Weibo and citizen journalism in China. 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, often named “Weibo Redian Shijian Huigu” in Chinese (review of hot events on Weibo). However, some of those most influential events are not about public issues or citizen activities but entertainment events. For instance, the announcement of the romantic relationship between Chinese celebrities Fan Bingbing and Li Chen had been listed as one of the most popular topics on Weibo in 2015.

Over the past few years, many scholars have studied Weibo through a range of “Weibo events”, including the live report of Jiaozhou Road residential fire disaster (Shanghai) in 2010; the 2011 “Weibo crackdown on human trafficking” event; the Guo Meimei Red Cross China corruption incident in 2012; the 2013 Yaan earthquake; the loss of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in 2014; the Tianjin explosions in 2015; and the Rujia Heyi Hotel female guest assault incident in 2016 (Dong, Li, Zhang, & Cai, 2018; Guan et al, 2014; Nip & Fu, 2016; Qin, Strömberg, & Wu, 2016; Qin, Strömberg, & Wu, 2017; Qu, Huang, Zhang, P. & Zhang, J., 2011; Tan & Cousins, 2016; Wu & Liu, 2018; Wu & Montgomery, 2019; Wu et al, 2018; Zeng, Chan, & Fu, 2016).

My selection of significant citizen events was made from relevant literature and studies about Weibo, in both Western and Chinese scholarship, and the timeframe was from 2009 to the present. Participants were not given a list of all those events. During the interviews, I only discussed any citizen events that were mentioned by the interview participants themselves, so that they had complete control over what they wanted to discuss.

The two Weibo events selected are the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident. Below is a list of the events’ selection criteria:

1. They were both mentioned and discussed by the participants during the interviews;
2. Both are events relating to the issue of child protection;
3. The two events initially emerged on Weibo while citizen content drew significant public attention;
4. The authorities’ responses to these two events was reasonably quick and made mainly through their Weibo accounts;
5. Mainstream Chinese media sourced Weibo content and also reported on and participated in the two events to some extent;
6. There is a time gap between the two events, which is likely to provide a comparatively complete picture of how things have changed on Weibo in the intervening years.

### 3.4.2 Selection of Participants

Weibo was the primary platform for inviting potential participants for the interviews. The researcher approached participants through Weibo and explained the research and the interview process by posting an invitation letter to get their contact details. Participants self-selected themselves from those that saw the post (tweet) on Weibo; the invitation letter was sent via the researcher's contacts, who then sent it to their networks, thus using a snowball sampling approach. It is necessary to note that the sample was skewed to people already interested in Weibo as a public channel and with a long-term commitment. Meanwhile, the researcher made sure not to select anyone known personally to them or someone they considered a friend or relative. Besides contacting participants via Weibo's messaging function, the Chinese social media platform WeChat was also used to contacting participants, and some of the interviews were even conducted on WeChat, as it has audio and video call facilities.

Participants were recruited using the following criteria: 1) They were current users of Weibo at the time of the research, 2) They had started to use Weibo between 2009 to 2013 and hence were long-term users, and 3) They self-selected themselves to participate in the interviews. The reason to limit participants' Weibo registration time between 2009-2013 is that there was less censorship and more public debating on Weibo before 2013 (the period before Xi Jinping became the President of China). Also, many significant citizen events happened during this period: the Yihuang self-immolation incident in 2010, the "Weibo anti-kidnapping" event in 2011, and the Guo Meimei Red Cross China corruption incident in 2012.

There was not a specific city or region that was targeted, as participants could be from anywhere in China (or overseas) as the recruiting was not regional. Thus, for participants who did not live in major cities, the researcher travelled to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other cities to interview them. The options of phone interview (via phone calls or WeChat) or online interview were also offered. These options were given to all participants, but the phone and online interviews were mostly conducted in Australia.

The target was at least 10 participants for semi-structured interviews. However, after overwhelming responses to the invitation letter we managed to secure ten face-to-face interviews and 18 phone interviews with participants across China and overseas. The participants did not receive any payment, but the researcher sometimes bought them a coffee, tea or a cold drink while interviewing at a public cafe.

### 3.4.3 Interview Questions

The primary data for this study is the interviews conducted by the researcher, including interview recordings and interview transcripts. To identify essential influencers in the area of news breaking through Weibo, publicly available information or content including posts, comments, users' profiles (e.g. occupations), list of followed users or followers, were initially collected for analysis before the interviews.

Although the central questions designed for the in-depth interviews are extensive, and based on participants' responses, the sub-questions dynamically expanded on the topic during the interview based on participant responses. As mentioned previously, certain terms in English are replaced with commonly acceptable words in Chinese in the interviews. For example, the term "citizen journalism" is not common in China, and it would be easier for participants to understand if it was referred to as "participatory journalism." Also, the word "citizen" itself is hardly mentioned in China, and instead, they use the word "people," or "netizen" when discussing topics about the Internet. The English version of the interview questions are listed below:

1. Can you tell me about your use of Weibo?
  - A. How long have you been using it for?
  - B. How often do you use it?
  - C. What do you use it for?
    - i. Liaison with friends?
    - ii. Acquiring information/news?
    - iii. Discussing events/topics?
    - iv. Posting/recording personal content?
2. Is it okay if I read your public Weibo account, and ask you some questions about it?
3. Have you noticed any significant changes since you started to use Weibo? If so, what do you think of them?
  - A. Favourable functions?
  - B. Reading habits?
  - C. Duration of discussions?
  - D. Censorship?

4. Speaking of censorship, what do you think of receiving a warning message or being censored when using Weibo?
5. Regarding news reading, what are your primary sources?
  - A. Do you think that traditional media uses information/news from Weibo?
  - B. If so, how do they use it?
6. What is your understanding of participatory journalism (citizen journalism), or in other words, user-generated-content that is about public issues or events?
7. Have you ever reported, analysed, and disseminated news and information on Weibo? If so, do you consider yourself a participatory journalist or a citizen journalist?
8. Can you please talk about your social life before using Weibo or any other social media? Has it changed now? If so, how?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience with Weibo or any other social media?
10. Can I contact you if I have any questions to clarify your answers as I'm writing my research?

#### 3.4.4 Interview Protocol

Only one participant was interviewed at a time. The interview time was approximately one hour, and it was digitally recorded, and notes were taken during the interview. Of the twenty-eight interviews, ten were face-to-face interviews (eight conducted in person in China and two in Australia) and took place at a public location like a cafe, where the participant felt comfortable and was a place chosen by the participant. Three interviews were conducted on the phone, and fifteen through the Chinese social media platform WeChat using their audio-visual technology. The researcher is a native Chinese speaker and all the interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

Because participants were all Chinese Weibo users, both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form were translated into Chinese and given to them before the interview. The semi-structured interviews were also conducted in Chinese. The participants were given the option of providing oral consent in addition to written consent. Since people from Asian societies do not feel comfortable signing documents, it is challenging to obtain signed consent forms from Chinese participants. Asking them to sign consent forms would sometimes cause suspicion concerning the motivation, which can be detrimental to both the

research and the participants. The researcher went through the information sheet with participants and asked for their oral consent at the start of the recorded interview instead of asking them to sign a consent form for those who were not comfortable signing.

Participants were recommended not to identify themselves or any other third parties during the interview. Specific terms were replaced by commonly accepted words for purposes of recruiting participants on Weibo, for example, using ‘participatory journalism’ instead of ‘citizen journalism.’ The participants were also told that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time during the interview.

### 3.4.5 Data Analysis Methods

There were two sets of data collected to answer the research questions: 1) the two Weibo events, and 2) the 28 interviews conducted with current Weibo users. Different methods were used to analyse each set of data. That is, media content analysis was used for analyse the two “Weibo events”, while Grounded Theory analysis was used to analyse the interview data.

#### 3.4.5.1 Media Content Analysis

As a systematic method for investigating mass media, media content analysis was introduced by Harold Lasswell in the 1920s, initially to study propaganda (Lasswell, 1927). Scholars and researchers have used it as a primary research method for examining the impact of a range of social events including violence, racism, and popular culture.

For a long time, there have been debates about whether media content analysis should be classed as a quantitative or a qualitative approach. According to Berelson (1952), media content analysis is a research method for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest communication content, and this concept of being “objective” draws several criticisms. Some researchers argue that it is difficult to remain objective due to the imperfection of scientific methods or the vague nature of expression in media texts. However, as media content analysis developed, more and more researchers realised the complementary efforts of quantitative and qualitative methods and consider both necessary for analysing texts. While the quantitative aspect provides reliable findings, the qualitative aspect helps in understanding the deeper meaning of certain media content.

To conduct a quantitative analysis, the researcher often implements the following three steps (Dill, 2013):



1. determine the preferred parameters of concept extraction;
2. design the measurements of these parameters; and
3. the researcher establishes a method for analysis.

In the second step, numeric measurements often include the word, or concept, frequencies. And in the third step, the method may be based on co-occurring words implying relationships between concepts. Quantitative analysis may also be conducted according to the changing pattern of frequencies or other statistics of concepts.

There are several principles throughout these steps, which are objectivity, a priori design, intercoder reliability, validity, generalizability, and replicability (Macnamara, 2005). Qualitative research in media psychology focuses less on numeric data measurements and more on the meaning embedded in the data. Due to the varied nature of the data, wide-ranging research questions, and methods for examining this data, many methods have evolved with different approaches and techniques (Dill, 2013). In particular, five qualitative analysis techniques are often mentioned in the literature, which are: phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and intuitive inquiry. Besides these methods, in a situation where there is a tremendous volume of text data, several specific techniques informed by text analytics such as content extraction, semiotic analysis, semantic network, and parts-of-speech analysis are recommended (Dill, 2013). Such text analytics is also known as text mining, which often includes procedures of (a) pre-processing tasks, (b) processed document collection, and (c) core mining operations and presentation (Feldman & Sanger, 2007).

In recent years, researchers have aimed to improve traditional media content analysis. Some conducted a simulation study to look into the minimal media effect caused by measurement error in content analysis (Scharkow & Bachl, 2017), while others incorporated social role theory into topic models for social media content analysis (Zhao, Wang, He, Nie, Wen, & Li, 2015). Researchers have not only analysed the relationship between content analysis and the algorithmic coding and recommended computational social science means for traditional modes of media analysis (Zamith & Lewis, 2015), but also provided a comprehensive overview of an automated method in the data-driven content analysis of social media (Schwartz & Ungar, 2015). Furthermore, a group of researchers have proposed a social media content-mining framework that consists of seven phases and tested it empirically during the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Curitiba, Brazil (Thomaz, Biz, Bettoni, Mendes-Filho, & Buhalis, 2017).

Due to the censorship barriers of selecting and collecting valid contextual data from Weibo, this research uses qualitative content analysis to examine the selected Weibo events and the role of Weibo in promoting citizen journalism. Incorporating grounded theory analysis, this method provides insight into Weibo citizen journalism and specific social topics that have been raised by them. Based on the interview discussions, two Weibo events were selected for analysis: the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident. While both events relate to children and anti-crime, the six-year time difference between their occurrences helps reveal changes in Weibo citizen journalism as well as the surrounding social-political factors. The content of the two “Weibo events” were both “downloaded” for analysis using keywords and hashtags and the official Weibo account for one of the “Weibo events” was analysed also. In the analysis, which was manually coded, I looked at the emergence and the timeline of the event, the people and authorities involved, how the event developed, the interactions and relationships between stakeholders, and the features of the issues found in the two events. These will be presented in section 4.2.

#### *3.4.5.2 Grounded Theory Analysis*

In the first edition of their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser & Strauss (1999) established the concept of coding and addressed the procedures of the qualitative data analysis. Grounded theory is a research method where theory is constructed during the processes of data gathering and analysing (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). At the same time, most qualitative researchers consider the coding stage as highly significant for analysing participant observation or interview data. While concepts and categories can be refined through the processes of “open coding,” “selective coding” and “theoretical memoing,” research findings can only be discovered through the analysis and discussion of the relationship between those concepts and categories (Boyatzis, 1998; Glaser, 1998; Richards, 2005).

This research uses a traditional manual approach to coding. After transcribing the interviews in Mandarin, they were then translated into English. The coding process started with highlighting and marking the transcripts of interviews with units on the same topics and then putting these units under themes or sub-themes based on their level of analysis. Generally speaking, the identifiable themes or topics often repeated with some regularity, and the researcher was able to name the themes and label examples of data for analysis. Regardless of what the actual code refers to, a code list was formed after a large number of codes had been created from the data set. The researcher discerned the hierarchy between the codes, and the

lower-level codes were merged into higher-level codes, and a tree diagram of codes was formed as a result. Finally, the translated transcript was cross-coded by another researcher for inter-coder reliability and reproducibility (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013).

In this study, the inductive coding approach proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994), which is similar to the “data-driven approach” named by Boyatzis (1998), was used for generating the codes. Instead of having codes in place before collecting the data, the codes gradually emerged through reading the data, together with the positions and variations of the research data. In this coding practice, the code structure (or a tree diagram of codes) was generated from bottom to top, with the lower level concepts bringing up the higher-level concepts. In other words, the data analysis approach used in this study was Grounded Theory, which is referred to as an approach to generate concepts instead of being a theory in itself (Bryman, 2016).

### 3.5 ENSURING QUALITY

The participant interviews (approximately one hour each) produced rich data that provided in-depth detail about each person's use of social media. As this is a case study set within a specific context, the interviews provided enough rich-text data for the analysis needed to answer the research questions, in combination with the data from existing social media data that is publicly available. That said, the public posts data will not be combined with the interview data here in the thesis or any subsequent publication so that the public data is not associated with any of the interview participants.

All interview transcripts were coded and stored separately from the interview recordings. In the processes of interview transcription and translation, a professional Chinese-English translator was also asked to cross verify the initial translated interview data (completed by the researcher) with the Chinese interview transcripts. Thus, the data quality was ensured through cross verification.

### 3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned earlier in section 3.3, the initial methods selected for this research did not involve human contact, and thus the first ethics application was approved as “nil risk human research” (NHMRC, 2017) by the University of Technology Sydney’s (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee. However, the research design was reframed and amended after the shift to include qualitative interview data, and hence a new ethics certificate was applied for. Because the

research topic is related to China and citizen journalism events, which could be politically sensitive, the committee raised great concerns towards the safety of interview participants and the researcher. Additionally, the committee required detailed explanations with regard to means and procedures of data management as well as data collection in order to simultaneously ensure the privacy and safety of researcher and participants, at the time of travelling to/from China and conducting interviews. By supplying further information and detailed clarification on the new research methods and design, which has been included in this chapter, the ethics clearance for the interviews was finally granted by the university's ethics committee.

All data used in this research was collected after the approval of the ethics application by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee. In addition to the ethical guidelines and policy compliance required by UTS and the "low-risk human research" (NHMRC, 2017), the regulations within China were also observed as this study conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese Weibo users.

Every participant remains anonymous in this research. Ethical standards are maintained in regard to participant identities and information provided by participants to prevent any form of harm in the future. The interview location and mode were determined by the participant, and the researcher was careful of both their own safety and their participants' safety in choosing a public location (like a coffee shop or library) for the interview. The digital interview recordings were uploaded to the university's cloud drive (UTS CloudStor, which, unlike Google Drive, is accessible from China) to a password protected university system immediately after the interview. The recording was then erased from the local device and laptop during the researcher's travel inside China.

As the audio recording cannot be anonymous, before beginning the recording, the participants were advised not to identify themselves by name or mention any third parties by name. To protect the participants' personal information during the process of transcription and cross verification, the oral consent was recorded separately from the interview when the participants chose to use the verbal consent instead of signing the consent form. The audio recordings are re-identifiable (but only by voice matching) while the transcriptions are entirely anonymous. Hence, the audio recordings were erased after cross verification of the transcripts. Time codes and text like "Participant 1" (shortened to P1) were used to link audio recordings and transcripts. Additionally, other data such as anonymised and de-identified transcripts have been archived for five years (on UTS Cloud Drive) and will be destroyed after that.

The risk of persecution by the Chinese government for participating in this research would be slight, or nil as the participant details are anonymised and the information provided

them is de-identified. Although the call for participation was posted on Weibo, potential participants were asked to contact the researcher privately if they were interested and hence their participation was confidential. There is a risk that participants may have felt afraid to express their honest opinion or worry about damage to their social network or reputation as the research topic is about citizen journalism. Therefore, extra care was taken to assure them that the names and other identifying information of participants will never be published anywhere and all published papers from this research will refer to data in the aggregate and not identify them individually. Additionally, there was some inconvenience for research participants including travel to the chosen interview location and giving their time for interviews. Participants may also have felt discomfort about some questions or discussions. However, the researcher endeavoured to create a comfortable environment as much as possible.

Interview participants were free to decide whether or not to take part in the research and could also stop the interview at any time. They could request for the researchers not to use their data even after the interview was conducted. Thus, every effort was made to protect the well-being, interests and welfare of the participants. All of these measures ensured that there was no risk of prosecution for the participants on account of participation in this research. It goes without saying that we cannot control their risks of participation in Weibo itself, which they would already be part of, even before participating in this research.

The interview recordings and notes did not include the name or other contact details of participants but were labelled with a code. The key linking codes (time codes and text codes) to names and contact details of participants are stored separately from the data. Data collected was only used in the aggregate to look for patterns and trends during the data analysis, and their 'posts' on Weibo will not be quoted directly in any publication. Hence, neither their Weibo posts nor their 'handles' can be connected to the research data or the interview quotes. Neither published nor unpublished data are identifiable by any means.

Additionally, a local independent contact person and ethics contact, who works as an academic at a Chinese University, advised the researcher regarding local data collecting rules, and it was confirmed that there are no additional rules for research ethics apart from following standard Chinese laws. The researcher made sure not to violate any local laws and regulations in the collection of the data, and the interview questions were designed following the standard Chinese rules and customs for social interaction. The researcher bought them coffee or other beverages at the coffee shop to thank them for their time.

### 3.7 METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

There are strengths in conducting semi-structured interviews and adopting a qualitative approach for this study. However, there are also challenges in using these methods. As Travers (2006) summarises, the weaknesses of in-depth interviews include the fact that experiences are limited within a small group of people and the findings won't be generalised enough to address large populations' behaviour. At the same time, there is potential for interviewees to provide misleading or false information, either voluntarily or unwittingly. However, when the interview outline is appropriately designed, or the right questions are asked, it is more likely to result in meaningful findings. At the same time, a semi-structured interview can also be meaningless if the outline is "over-designed" and rigid, and does not make sense to interviewees. There is a risk that the interviewee gives an explanation suggested by the question; that is, he or she only realised the issue when the question was asked and replied without thinking it through. Despite these risks, interviews also have the potential to provide rich data that is not possible in a survey or other means (Bryman, 2016; Travers, 2006). Keeping these reasons in mind, the interview questions and interview protocol for this study was designed carefully and fine-tuned through pilot studies (not reported here) in order to help answer the research questions.

### 3.8 DELIMITATIONS

Rather than exploring the emergence of citizen journalism on China's social media in general, this study focuses on the practices of Weibo citizen journalism and its relationship with surrounding social-political factors. This was done not only to limit the scope of the data for the thesis, but also because Weibo is currently the most visited microblog worldwide, having exceeded Twitter's global numbers in 2017.

In terms of research data, two Weibo events, which both revolve around children, but with approximately six years gap between them, were selected to provide a comparative perspective on the development of citizen journalism on Weibo and government responses. Additionally, twenty-eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with long-term active Weibo users, who resided across China and the world, from different age groups and educational backgrounds. Because of this range of participants, a relatively generalised understanding and exploration of citizen journalistic participation on Weibo was possible.



## Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, two sets of research data are analysed through different approaches. Firstly, qualitative content analysis is used to examine the two Weibo events: the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident, with a comparative presentation of the findings on this data set. Secondly, the data set of 28 semi-structured interviews was addressed through the grounded theory analysis to determine the themes emerging from the data. Themes from the interview data can be classified into seven major groups, which are as follows: Use of Weibo, Changes on Weibo, Weibo Censorship, News and Information Sources, Mainstream Media, Participation in Weibo Citizen Journalism, and Social Influences and Achievements. The chapter ends with a detailed presentation of the research findings.

### 4.1 DATA CATEGORIES

#### 4.1.1 Weibo Content and Events

To explore the role of Chinese microblogging in promoting citizen journalism, two Weibo events were selected and analysed using media content analysis. These two events are the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident. Below is a list of the characteristics that were taken into considerations when selecting the two Weibo events:

7. They were both mentioned and discussed by the participants during the interviews;
8. Both are events relating to the issue of child protection;
9. The two events initially emerged on Weibo while citizen content drew significant public attention;
10. The authorities' responses to these two events was reasonably quick and made mainly through their Weibo accounts;
11. Mainstream Chinese media sourced Weibo content and also reported on and participated in the two events to some extent;
12. There is a time gap between the two events, which is likely to provide a comparatively complete picture of how things have changed on Weibo in the intervening years.



#### 4.1.2 Interview Data

A total of 28 interviews were conducted for this research, which includes ten face-to-face interviews in Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Sydney, and 18 interviews conducted via phone calls or WeChat voice calls. All interviews were carried out in Chinese. The duration of the interviews was between 40 to 90 minutes.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, interview participants were recruited via Weibo, using a snowball sampling approach. All participants were active Weibo users who registered between 2009 and 2013. Because we did not target any specific city or region for recruitment, participants lived in various countries, including Australia, America, Britain, China, Japan, and Singapore. Moreover, the participants were adults from different backgrounds, age-ranges and fields of work or study. Below is a chart summarising the interview participants' demographic information:

<b>Code</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Field of work/study</b>
P1	Shenzhen, China	Chemistry
P2	Hangzhou, China	Law
P3	Los Angeles, USA	Film
P4	Boston, USA	Linguistics
P5	Nanning, China	Media
P6	Xi'an, China	Biology
P7	London, UK	Finance
P8	Kyoto, Japan	Social Science
P9	Zhengzhou, China	Media
P10	Tianjin, China	Engineering
P11	Singapore	IT
P12	Fuzhou, China	Education
P13	Hongkong, China	Media
P14	Ha'erbin, China	Architecture
P15	Wuhan, China	Economics
P16	Los Angeles, USA	Public Health
P17	Changzhou, China	Fine Art
P18	Sydney, Australia	Education
P19	Beijing, China	Political Science
P20	Beijing, China	Education
P21	Beijing, China	Education
P22	Beijing, China	Finance
P23	Beijing, China	IT/Gaming
P24	Beijing, China	Agriculture
P25	Guangzhou, China	Media
P26	Guangzhou, China	Agriculture
P27	Hongkong, China	Media/Marketing
P28	Xiamen, China	IT/Social Media

*Table 4-1 Interview Participants' Demographic Information*

## 4.2 RESULTS OF WEIBO CONTENT ANALYSIS

Two Weibo events were selected for this research: the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident, which were also mentioned and discussed by interview participants. Although both involve children, the 2011 event aimed for public benefit while the 2017 incident was a citizens' appeal for justice in regard to child abuse. Additionally, there is a six-year time difference between the occurrence of these events, which reflects the changes in aspects of Weibo citizen journalism and government response in the intervening years. The comparison of the two events are as follows:

1. Both events had first-hand content initially published on Weibo and then in the mainstream media, and thus received vast attention from the public, the media, and the related government sectors.
2. The two events demonstrated that Weibo citizen journalism is a path for the grassroots to seek justice, a means for civil society to put pressure on the government on specific issues, and a practice to enable interactions between netizens and the authorities.
3. While both events revealed that professional Chinese media does use citizen content as a source of information, the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident further demonstrated that only selected information will be presented in their articles.
4. Chinese government is willing to support Weibo citizen journalism, but only so long as the outcomes are in line with the Chinese government's agenda. That is, although both the two events fall into the category of anti-crime, authorities' reactions towards the 2017 event were clearly different from the 2011 event, due to the claims of military involvements when it first emerged.
5. It can also be a dangerous pursuit for citizen journalists when they draw too much attention from society or upset the government, such as in the 2017 event, which questioned the authority and credibility of the Chinese military.

The details of the two “Weibo events” are described in the next section.

## 4.2.1 The 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event

### *4.2.1.1 The emergence of the event*

Trafficking is a serious crime in China with harsh penalties, including a lifetime gaol sentence or the death penalty. However, the abduction, kidnapping, buying, selling, or/and transporting of children and women happens more frequently than the public believes. According to government statistics, there are between 1 million to 1.5 million homeless and begging children across China, many of whom have been abducted from their families. Very few are rescued and returned home. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011, Yu Jianrong, a Professor of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and an opinion leader on Weibo, launched a campaign named “Snapshot, save begging children” (隨手拍照解救乞討兒童). Yu hoped that people could take photos or videos of child beggars on the street and post them on Weibo with the event’s hashtag. The police can then locate and rescue the trafficked children. Three weeks after Yu’s initial Weibo post, over 900 thousand Weibo posts were published to counter child trafficking, including more than 3000 photos, and two children were recognised and rescued by the police (Bandurski, 2011).

Figure 4-1 is a screenshot of the official “Snapshot, save begging children” Weibo account. As can be seen from the screenshot, the account has been verified by Weibo, as both its profile photo and information section contain the orange V signs. The campaign has published more than 11 thousand posts, and its follower count exceeded 230,000 as of November 2017.



Figure 4-1 Official Weibo Account of the “Snapshot, save begging children” Campaign

Yu’s campaign was just one aspect of the Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event. The successful retrieval of Peng Wenle reported by investigative journalist Deng Fei through Weibo also drew significant attention for the event. After Deng posted the initial Weibo search notice for Peng on 27 September 2010, more than 6000 reposts were created by Jan 2011, including reposts from the most influential Chinese celebrities (Yang & Lu, 2011). In February 2011, Peng was sighted by a Weibo user who returned home for Chinese New Year to a village in Pizhou, Jiangsu. With the support of the police force from Shenzhen, where Peng was kidnapped, and Pizhou, where he was sighted, Deng helped Peng’s family successfully retrieve the missing child after three years of searching (Guo, 2011; Lu, P., 2016). Together with Yu and other opinion leaders and social groups, Deng established the official Weibo account for the “Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking” event. In May 2012, He also set up a foundation for the event with the China Social Assistance Foundation (CSAF).

#### 4.2.1.2 Developments arising from the event

Three days after scholar Yu Jianrong first launched the “Snapshot, save begging children” campaign on Weibo on 25 January 2011, *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese central government, published an editorial titled “*The Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event Verifies the Wisdom of the People*” (微博打拐驗證民衆智慧理性). On the same day, the head of the counter human-trafficking office, Chen Shiqu, voiced his support for the campaign via his Weibo account, providing his contact information. In early February, some delegates to the then upcoming session of the National People’s Congress, including singer Han Hong, claimed to submit a proposal regarding the issue of countering child trafficking. The event drew more attention online and offline, and when the reunion of Peng Gaofeng and his kidnapped son Wenle happened on 8 February, an official from the Chinese Ministry of Public Security attended in person to show support.

The chart below (fig. 4-2) tracks the developments of the 2011 Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event through the number of related Weibo posts.

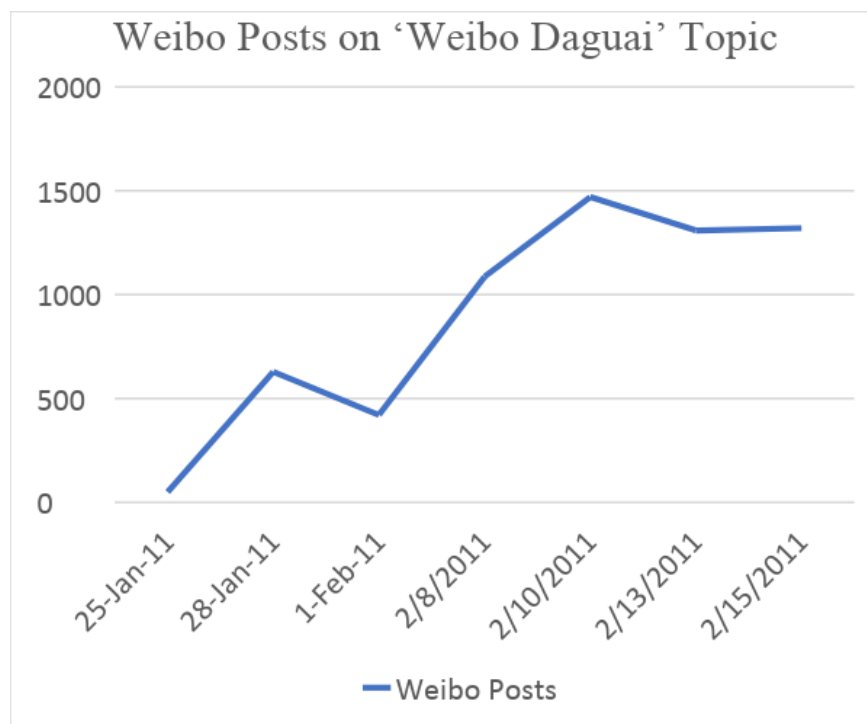


Figure 4-2 The Post Count of Discussions Related to the Event  
 (Data Source: People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Research Centre)

#### 4.2.1.3 Features of the event

While the official Weibo account of the “Snapshot, save begging children” campaign is verified as an individual account with the orange V sign, the account of the “Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking” (or WCCT) event is verified as an organisational account with the blue V sign. This classification difference is caused by the fact that the Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking account was set as a program of the Ai Deng Foundation Child Safety Fund (愛德基金會兒童安全基金). As mentioned in section 4.2.1.2, the foundation was established by Deng for the event, together with China Social Assistance Foundation (CSAF), which is an official non-government organisation (NGO) registered and governed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China.

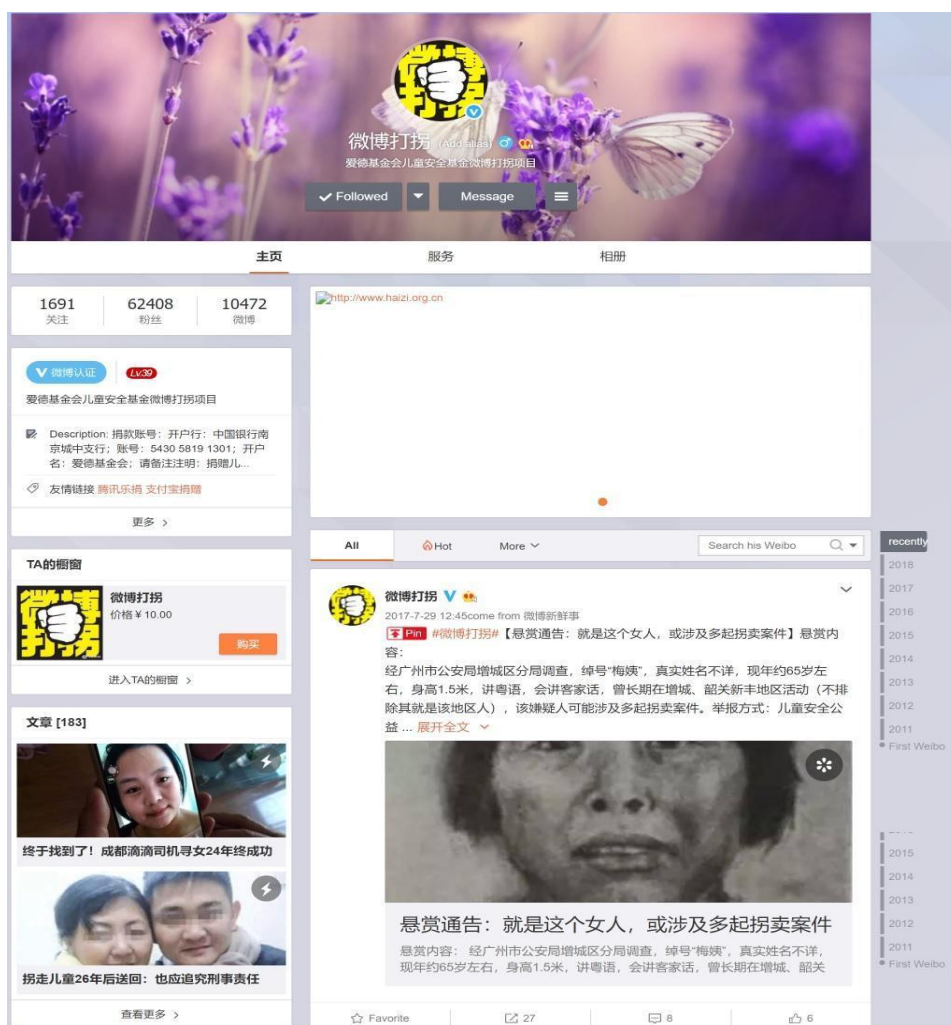


Figure 4-3 Official Weibo Account of the Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event

As shown in Figure 4-3, unlike the massive follower count of the “snapshot” campaign account, the WCCT event account has a mere 62,000 followers. Through browsing their Weibo posts, it is worth noting that the content of their posts is different. The “snapshot” campaign

“forwards” posts from Weibo users who noticed a begging child and submitted their photos on Weibo, often with mentions of the local police station account and the “snapshot” campaign account (using the @ function). But most posts forwarded from the WCCT event are from users with a missing child, who want to circulate the child’s photo or information. Although the content differences between these two accounts are determined by their primary purpose, both of them drew significant attention. Posts were contributed by participants from a wide range of industries, occupations, regions, and social classes, including media accounts and government accounts.

The posts of the two accounts have enabled communication and conversation between marginalised people and authorities to a certain extent. Through the identification of begging children and matching them with missing children’s photos on Weibo, collaborations between netizens, organisations or charities and the police force have emerged. Moreover, the overwhelming responses on Weibo regarding the WCCT event resulted in government action, as described below.

#### *4.2.1.4 Chinese government’s response to the event*

The Chinese government responded to the Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event positively and efficiently. The head of the counter human trafficking office from the Ministry of Public Security, Chen Shiqu reposted and followed the event on January 2011. Many local police stations also followed and supported the event through Weibo. With clues provided by the event’s volunteers, the Ministry of Public Security investigated the issue of registering trafficked children for residence in 2013.

Through the traction this Weibo Event gained from citizen journalists an official government platform was established in 2015 for publishing information on children who have been rescued and seek their original families. The domain name of this platform is [www.qgdgxq.mca.gov.cn](http://www.qgdgxq.mca.gov.cn), meaning “nationwide anti-kidnapping platform for publication of rescued children seeking their original families”. On this platform, people can look for lost children, rescued children, search for relatives of rescued children, and children can be matched with their original parents.





Figure 4-4 The Homepage of the QGDGXQ Platform

As seen above (fig 4-4), the interface features a search engine to find rescued children as well as the related laws and regulations. According to the webpage statistics, its view count is approaching 14 million.

#### 4.2.1.5 Issues raised from the event

Though the Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event can be considered a successful case of citizen participation and collaboration with authorities to stop crime, the event is not without issues. The randomness with which snapshots are taken of children by citizens is one such problem, as a trafficked child has to be seen by a stranger, and then be willing to be photographed and have their face posted as part of the event. Having their photo published online may even put them at further risk of harm, if traffickers discover the information is online. Snapshots can also cause invasions of privacy if a begging child is not trafficked, or if other passers-by were captured in the photo. Further, it is possible that citizen content uploaded for the event may contain false information or be used as a tool for scams. There is also confusion between the crime of child begging and child trafficking, and not all citizen journalists who participate in the event can clearly distinguish between the two.

### 4.2.2 The 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident

#### 4.2.2.1 The emergence of the incident

After filing an abuse case at Chaoyang district police station earlier that afternoon, several parents of children from Xintiandi (新天地) campus of Beijing RYB Kindergarten spoke out on Weibo that night about their suspicions of child abuse on 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2017. The parents accused the kindergarten of abusing their children through needle pricking, feeding them suspicious pills, and even possible sexual abuse. Within a short period, the content published by the parents was reposted by a large number of Weibo users and onto other social media services like WeChat.

*The Beijing News* (新京報) first reported the incident the next day. However, the news article was later deleted from Weibo. The deletion was quickly noticed by many Weibo users, who had read, reposted, or commented on the article. Below is a screenshot of Weibo posts reflecting the Beijing News' article on the abuse incident. The above post was questioning the article's deletion while the second post was reposting the article and making comments about the incident (fig. 4-5). As can be seen from the screenshot, the article was still accessible at 11:54; yet, it had been removed at the time the above post was published at 13:32.



Figure 4-5 A Screenshot of Weibo Posts Reflecting the Beijing News' Report

[translation of the top post: #Beijing RYB is suspected of child abuse# how come the Beijing News's article and video on RYB's girl were deleted? Is the rumour true? Is the truth more than just needle pricking? Otherwise, why are they so eager to wipe things away? Can it be wiped away?]

[translation of the bottom post: < pinprick found on some children from Beijing RYB kindergarten, police investigation started> as a nationwide franchise chain of kindergartens with a lot of training institutions, if they did do such things in Beijing, what would happen in some small cities? @the Beijing News (weblink)]

#### *4.2.2.2 Developments arising from the incident*

22 November 2017: Several parents of abused children posted a screenshot of group chats about their discussions about their suspensions, photos of pinprick, and videos of children retelling what happened in the kindergarten as evidence through Weibo. The citizen disclosures quickly drew the public's attention. The incident initially appeared in the most searched list of Weibo but was later removed from the list. At the same time, a massive deletion of posts related to the incident occurred across Weibo and WeChat, including articles published by "official accounts" (公眾號).

23 November 2017: Following the *Beijing News*' report of the incident, other professional media such as *the Paper* (澎湃新聞), *Beijing Youth Daily* (北京青年報), and the state-run *Xinhua News* and *People's News* began to report it, focusing on the accusation of needle pricking and pill feeding instead of sexual abuse (the Weibo post of *Beijing Youth Daily* is showed in fig. 4-6). While the Xintiandi campus operated as usual, dozens of parents gathered in outside the campus, questioned staff about the incident, and requested to review the recordings of surveillance cameras. Journalists from major media organisations reported from the scene and conducted interviews.



Figure 4-6 A Screenshot of Beijing Youth Daily's Report on Weibo about the Incident

Public discussion and content deletion happened at the same time on Weibo; yet, the deletion rate decreased after the incident was reported on the People's News website and the Xinhua News website. In the article published by Xinhua News, the Beijing News was noted as its source of information. Later, the local police together with the local council formed a special team for investigating the incident, and three teachers from the Xintiandi campus were suspended from their duties. Further, the Ministry of Education responded as part of a public discussion without naming the kindergarten.

24 November 2017: The RYB education group published a statement on Weibo (shown in fig. 4-7), in which they stated that monitoring recording data and equipment were provided to the investigation. They emphasised that the head of Xintiandi campus had also reported a case to the local police regarding the false accusation.

## 声 明

近日，我公司新天地幼儿园国小二班部分家长向公安机关报警，反映怀疑其孩子在幼儿园内受到侵害。对于此事给家长和社会带来的严重不安，我们深表歉意！目前我们已配合警方提供了相关监控资料及设备，涉事老师暂停职，配合公安部门调查，后续我们也将及时与相关各方保持沟通，等待政府部门的调查取证结论。

我公司对此事高度重视。在结论未明之前，首先疏导孩子和家长的情绪，尽量将此事件对孩子们的影响降到最低；另一方面安抚全国教职员情绪，安排其他优秀教师暂管国小二班，保证该幼儿园的正常运转。同时，我们成立了专项小组，对园所进行全方位自查。

我们郑重承诺：

- 一、如有任何违反教师师德的人员和行为，我们坚决奉行零容忍的原则；
- 二、如有任何人员发生违法犯罪行为，我们绝不姑息，坚决移交司法机关依法严肃处理；
- 三、如有任何公司和幼儿园应承担的责任，我们绝不推脱。

对于个别人士涉嫌诬告、陷害的行为，新天地幼儿园园长已经向公安机关报案。

无论如何，孩子是国家的未来，更是每个家庭的希望。让孩子在幼儿园中有一个安全的环境，做到让家长和社会放心是我们义不容辞的责任。我们决定进一步全面升级全国园所的安全管理体系，后续将公布具体措施。恳请媒体和家长朋友们给予我们持续的监督和建议！

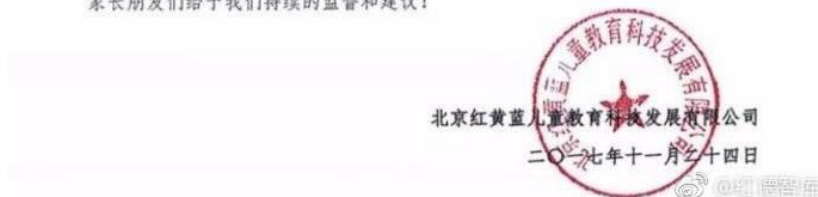


Figure 4-7 The First Statement Published by the Beijing RYB Education Group's Weibo Account

The political commissar of the “tiger regiment” (老虎團) of the Beijing Garrison was interviewed by People’s Liberation Army Daily, who denied the regiment’s involvement with either the incident or the kindergarten. In the evening, at an investor telephone meeting, Wei Ping, CFO of the RYB education group, defined the incident as “turmoil” and claimed that “the worst result of police’s investigation will find the incident as an individual case of one staff’s misconduct” (Li, 2017).

25 November 2017: Chaoyang district police station published two updates regarding the investigation into the incident via its Weibo account.



Figure 4-8 The First Notification Published by Chaoyang Police Station's Weibo Account

The first announced the criminal detention of a female teacher from the Xintiandi campus on suspicion of child abuse (Weibo post of *Chaoyang Police Station* showed in fig. 4-8). However, the second update was about the administrative detention of a female citizen for fabricating and spreading false information online and thus causing negative social impact (shown in fig. 4-9). Based on the police's notification, the citizen had confessed to making up the information of "tiger regiment" members sexually abusing children in the kindergarten and was arrested for disturbing the public order.



Figure 4-9 The Second Notification Published by Chaoyang Police Station's Weibo Account

The Education Commission of Beijing then responded and addressed the reinforcement of supervision and regulation among Beijing's kindergartens. At the same time, the local council responded to the investigation outcome and indicated that the head of the Xintiandi campus had been removed.

26 November 2017: All district councils of Beijing began to inspect local kindergartens, with particular improvements on monitoring camera coverage for safety purposes.

27 November 2017: Pomerantz LLP, a Wall Street law firm, filed a lawsuit against the RYB education group in the Federal District Court for the Southern District of New York. Investors who bought its shares between the IPO Day of 27<sup>th</sup> September to 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2017 could apply for the class action as plaintiffs. The lawsuit alleged that RYB education group and its executives violated the relevant securities trading laws and required them to compensate investors for losses.

28 November 2017: Chaoyang district police station published a new announcement through Weibo, in relation to the investigation further developments (Xinhua Net, 2017). The police did not find any evidence of child abuse from the recovered 113-hour monitoring recordings,

which were damaged because a storage staff switched off the power multiple times. At the same time, the police reported that expert and third-party judicial expertise had conducted a physical examination of the involved child as requested by parents and the result was negative. The police stated that the content of the “child molestation group” rumour was made up and spread by two female citizens; one was already under administrative detention while the other was “criticised and educated” (批評教育) by the police. Based on the police investigation, the father, whose child recounted the scene of being fed with a pill in the video, admitted that the child was not given any pills in the kindergarten, but that the video was downloaded and reported by a television journalist without verification. The police also stated that the content of the story of “my daughter was stripped and had her body checked by ‘grandfather doctor and uncle doctor’” was fabricated by a mother, who was willing to clarify the facts and apologise to the public.

29 November 2017: The RYB education group’s Weibo account posted an apology letter regarding the incident, which was then reported by *People’s Daily* through Weibo (fig. 4-10).

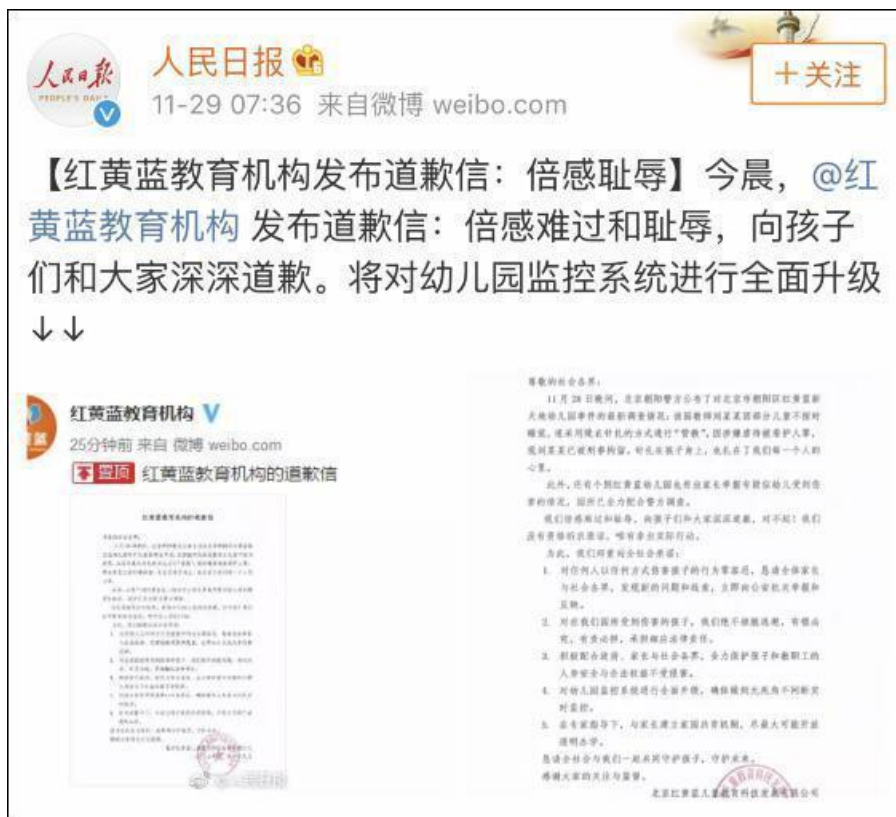


Figure 4-10 The Screenshot of *People’s Daily* Report of the RYB Education Group’s Apologies Letter on Weibo

The Discipline Committee and Supervision Committee of Chaoyang district started investigations on the director and deputy director of the district education commission, as well



as the chief officer of non-government school management, due to their breach of responsibility and insufficiency of duties performed.

29 December 2017: The People's Procuratorate (or Prosecutor General's Office) of Chaoyang district, Beijing, announced that the teacher who had been under detention since 25 November was officially arrested for suspicion of child abuse and the district attorney would file a public prosecution with the court in May 2018.

#### *4.2.2.3 Features of the incident*

Much like other hot social events on Weibo, citizen journalists, the media, and Chinese authorities all took part in the incident and contributed to its development. As shown in previous sections, the 2017 Beijing RYB kindergarten abuse incident started with citizen content published on the platform and quickly drew attention from both the general public and mainstream media. Through their Weibo accounts, parents of the abused children uploaded photo and video evidence of mistreatment, which was then reposted by a significant number of netizens, including influential accounts and media accounts. Following the exposure of mistreatment clues, parents also gathered offline outside the kindergarten to seek formal responses to their suspicions. The gathering received coverage from local mainstream media like Beijing News. However, massive deletions and discussions happened at the same time prior to the state-owned media's reporting of the incident and relevant government sectors' responses. At one point, the incident had received extensive media coverage in both new and traditional media. Conflict between the parents and the kindergarten, clarifications made by responsive authorities, and concerns raised by ordinary citizens had been widely discussed across society, both online and offline. Stakeholders, from the kindergarten company to authorities, responded to the public's enquires of the incident via Weibo. The local police office updated the public with investigation progress through its Weibo account. Soon after the citizen content disclosure, the claim of military involvement in sexual abuse of children was dispelled and classified as rumour, while the hard-drive of the monitoring system in the kindergarten was found damaged. In the end, the authorities took action and came up with a resolution to some extent.

#### *4.2.2.4 Chinese government's response to the incident*

After the Beijing News' report of the Beijing RYB kindergarten abuse incident, the state-owned media Xinhua Net and People's Daily both published a news article about the incident later that day, which represented the regime's attitude towards the incident. As a result, other mainstream media began to report the incident and related government departments such as the local police and education committee also actively responded to it.

According to the announcements published by local government sectors via Weibo, one teacher from the kindergarten was arrested by the police for child abuse, one parent who spoke out on Weibo was under administrative detention. According to the police's announcement, three netizens were accused of starting and spreading rumours about the incident, and three officers from the local educational sector were under investigation.

### 4.3 RESULTS OF GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

All 28 interview recordings were transcribed into text files in Chinese, and then translated to English. Next, using the grounded theory method, the interview data was manually reviewed and coded using open coding. The coding was done by the researchers and the adviser both for intercoder reliability. Common codes were discussed and any unique codes were validated for inclusion / exclusion. Seven major themes emerged from the analysis, which are: use of Weibo, changes on Weibo, censorship, news and information sources, mainstream media, participation in Weibo citizen journalism, and social influences and achievements. Some themes were supplemented with sub-categories, because of the complex context and the richness of data.

#### 4.3.1 Themes Derived from the Interview Data

As mentioned in section 3.4, the inductive coding approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), or the data-driven approach (Boyatzis, 1998), was used to generate the codes and themes from the interview data. Through the review of interview transcripts, codes and subsequent themes were derived based on the following data categories:

##### A. Use of Weibo

- a. Daily usage
- b. The decline in use after the launch of WeChat
- c. Return to Weibo and adopted it as:
  - a source of information
  - a service for information searching

- a space for self-expression and keeping personal records

## B. Changes in Weibo

### a. Functional changes

- i. Functions to enhance productivity or user interactions:
  - multi-media posts
  - live streaming videos
  - variable ways of commenting
- ii. The removal of the 140 characters word limit
- iii. Critiques on the new feature of software algorithmic sorting for posts (no longer in chronological timeline)
  - workaround from some users: switched to the international version
- iv. The commercialised Weibo and its unspecified advertisements

### b. Content Changes

- i. Content has been enriched: in both quantity and variety
- ii. The dominance of entertainment content and marketing content
- iii. The decline in social-political discussions
- iv. The reinforced media control
- v. The significant online abuse

### c. Change in users

- i. The rapid growth in volume:
  - individual accounts
  - institutional accounts
  - government accounts
- ii. From middle-aged users to youth now (20-30 years old users)
- iii. From opinion leaders (or public intellectuals) to interest groups

## C. Weibo Censorship

### a. Experiences of censorship

- i. Preventing publication: “system busy” (系統繁忙), “sending failure” (發送錯誤), etc.
- ii. Deleted content: with warning message or without any notification
- iii. Blocking posts to followers (posts only visible to publishers)

### b. Reactions to censorship

- i. Supporting the regulation of online content on pornographic, violence, drugs, or human trafficking
- ii. Disappointment with the unspecific and reinforced censorship
- iii. Becoming cautious and beginning to withdraw from public discussion
- iv. Post-publication censorship means the possibility of information dissemination

#### D. News and Information Source

- a. Use of Weibo as the main source of news and information because:
  - i. Immediacy
  - ii. Taking the initiative
  - iii. To dig for more relevant information on a news story
  - iv. Accessing a wide range of topics
- b. Some see Weibo as supplementary to mainstream media
- c. Some use other social media or sources due to Weibo's:
  - i. Brevity
  - ii. Unprofessional practices

#### E. Mainstream Media Engagements

- a. The citation of citizen content:
  - i. Especially netizen comments or at-the-scene digital materials
  - ii. by both local and international media
- b. Some Chinese media practise unprofessionally by:
  - i. Selectively quoting citizen content (被代表, literally: “being represented”)
  - ii. Using citizen content without verifying the source
  - iii. Presenting selective information without context
  - iv. Fabricating comments of Weibo users

#### F. Participation

- a. Interpretations of citizen journalism
  - i. Interpreting the term close to its academic definition (referring to it as activities of reporting, disseminating, and discussing or commenting)
  - ii. Some have doubts on its objectivity, quality, and motivation
- b. Experiences of Weibo citizen journalism
  - i. Most of them consider “repost” as the primary activity:

- Participating in the information dissemination process
  - ii. Some repost and comment on the topics of interest
  - iii. Some act as citizen journalists, sharing and publishing first-hand information, but restrict themselves to reposting or commenting on sensitive or social-political topics
  - iv. Some focus on the recording of personal life
- c. Feedback of Weibo citizen journalism
  - i. Credit to its significance in promoting citizen awareness, public discussion, and thus the development of society:
    - A channel to get the public voice heard
    - A path to protect individual rights
    - A platform to participate in public affairs
  - ii. Concerns about the phenomenon:
    - Low quality content (due to lack of professional training)
    - Insufficiency in media literacy and online abuse

#### G. Social Influences and Achievement

- a. Disappointment in Weibo citizen journalism and its failure to produce social change due to:
  - i. Authority's control over information flow
  - ii. Manipulation of public opinion
  - iii. Transitory popularity of Weibo events
  - iv. Inaction of relevant authorities
  - v. Some citizen content was produced for personal interest
- b. Weibo citizen journalism's achievements are limited but it has a strong social influence:
  - i. Slight improvements on policy and regulation (often focus on a resolution for an individual case)
  - ii. The most effective channel for ordinary citizens to have their voices heard and to seek help
- c. Recognitions of Weibo's enhancements of citizen journalism:
  - i. Empowerment of citizen awareness
  - ii. Enable conversations between citizens and interactions between the public and the authority

Detailed description and analysis of the interview data is provided in the following section. Participants names are anonymised through participant number (P1, P2 etc.) and participant quotes are de-identified through removing any identifiable references.

#### 4.3.2 Use of Weibo

All interview participants had used Weibo for at least six years before their interview, and most registered during the first two years of its establishment in 2009-2010. When discussing their current use of Weibo, 18 (of 28) participants acknowledged that they “*use Weibo on a daily basis*” (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19, P20, P23, P28). While some typically used it at a specific time, usually in the morning, some participants regularly opened Weibo via their smartphones when they have free time.

Besides describing the use of Weibo as a daily activity, some participants talked about their frequent use of Weibo in detail and referred to their usage as “fragmented (time)”, “whenever free”, “(frequency is) very high”. Below are the comments made by P1, P7, P10, P12, P14 and P15 regarding their everyday use of Weibo:

“My use of Weibo is quite fragmented; I browse it in between lectures for example. I spend at least an hour a day or say a total use of one to two hours in a standard 24 hours period.” (P1)

“The frequency of use of Weibo is daily, as long as I am not very busy. I use it to browse some information that I am interested in, and I also record my life on Weibo.” (P7)

“Although I only read the news on Weibo every morning, I do browse it at other times whenever I am free.” (P10)

“Now, on average, I’m sending 2 or 3 Weibo posts a day through my sub-account, which is a private and personal account. ...The frequency of using my sub-account is very high; I spend one to two hours on Weibo every day.” (P12)

“I now use it (Weibo) every day, but it is different from the strong addiction type. I just browse it whenever I have free time, such as in the toilet, before sleeping, or during dining time.” (P14)

“(Frequency of use) is still very high, I use Weibo every day. I mainly read and forward posts, browse all kinds of things my friends have sent, or some news posts.” (P15)

Meanwhile, there were participants who relied heavily on Weibo when they first started to use it. Both P8 and P23 described their extreme usage by giving daily post counts:

“I would publish forty to fifty Weibo posts at most in one day. That is, I would repost almost anything I read.” (P8)

“During the most frequent period, I sent out around ten to fifteen posts each day”. (P23)

In addition to recognising their everyday use of Weibo, P5, P13, P18, P19 and P20 highlighted that the habit of frequently browsing Weibo was relevant to the adoption of smartphones. After accessing Weibo through a smartphone’s mobile application, they become immersed with Weibo and browse whenever they have free time. For instance, P5 considered the switch from accessing the Weibo website on a computer to accessing it via a mobile application on a smartphone as the most significant change in usage. The other four participants emphasised the convenience of having access to Weibo and the information on it at their fingertips, since they carry smartphones with them. In other words, the easy-access characteristic of Weibo has been significantly empowered through the widespread use of smartphones. Below are the detailed explanations given by these five participants when asked about their use of Weibo:

“I probably registered (my Weibo account) in 2011, and my frequency of use has been very high from registration to the present. I use it every day, that is, spend a period browsing Weibo daily. And the main difference between my use of Weibo now is that I browse it more via mobile phone in recent years, probably after 2015.” (P5)

“I didn't use it much when I just registered (Weibo account), because I didn't know how to use it back then. But I use it more now, say in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, on a daily basis. I will browse on Weibo whenever I have free time. Also, I mainly use a mobile phone to browse it and hardly use the computer version”. (P13)

“To this day, I browse (Weibo) every day. I browse it every morning, and I will look at it before going to bed. In the past, when there was no smartphone, I just browsed on a computer. It has become very easy to access with a smartphone now, so I browse it every day. (I) usually used it to kill time.” (P18)

“About the frequency of use, I use it every day. I log in to it and browse new posts probably every hour or two. Young people never get their hands off their smartphones, but (I) browse it whenever I have time.” (P19)

“(I’m frequently using Weibo) since I started to use mobile phones frequently, after I went to university. Because I’m always with my phone, (I) keep browsing Weibo from time to time. I began to find that there is more information available on it and then I become more willing to get

(information) through this channel. It is more convenient. So (my frequent use of Weibo) is accompanied by the use of mobile phones.” (P20)

Some participants indicated that they had become less active on Weibo over the past few years, and some reported that their use of Weibo had decreased to a relatively low frequency, compared to when they first registered. Among them, P16, P26, and P27 discussed the decline in detail and clearly stated that they would not even login and browse it every day. While P16 stopped publishing content and their frequency of browsing had dropped from “once in two or three days” to once a month, P26 and P27 also said their use of Weibo had changed from a daily routine to a twice-a-week or weekly routine. Although the gaps between use could be longer than the regular “two or three days”, P27 still wanted to maintain the use of Weibo, to keep up with information and know what is happening in the media. The decline in Weibo usage was described by participants as below:

“I would have started using it in 2009, but I have stopped sending original posts on it after 2015. I still browse on Weibo, but the frequency is relatively low, which is about once in two or three days. And after having children in 2015, I only browse it once a month.” (P16)

“(I) browsed it more frequently in previous years. It was almost a daily routine behaviour in the past few years. Now, the use frequency is greatly reduced. I now browse it once in two or three days, or at least once a week.” (P26)

“I think my (frequency of use) was quite high at first, and I would browse it every day. I don’t (browse) every day now, maybe I log in to Weibo every two or three days. Or, when I realise that I have not been browsing it for a while, I will log in and browse some (posts).” (P27)

Additionally, P7, P8 and P22 mentioned a decline in the use of Weibo through their observations of friends’ Weibo accounts. For P7, the social need to follow acquaintances on Weibo had decreased, as many friends were no-longer using Weibo or posting personal updates on it. As a frequent Weibo browser, P8 noticed a decrease in the last two years in the amount of posts updated in the network, from the accounts they followed. Yet, P22 found that Weibo had become a private space for personal expressions because of the reduction in acquaintance relationships, which meant their acquaintances would not be viewing what they post on Weibo. Use of Weibo in recent years was discussed in the following examples:

“When I first started using Weibo, I only followed the people who I know (in real life), and now I found that many people (I know) are no longer using Weibo. Therefore, I rarely follow friends now, as I can get to know their updates from (WeChat) friends’ circle.” (P7)



“I belong to that kind (of Weibo user), who, compared with the beginning, my current frequency of reposting and commenting is very low. Most of the time, I just browse on Weibo. ... I browse it almost every day, after waking up in the morning, before going to bed at night, or when I feel bored. Weibo’s user activity has been declining over the past two years. At the beginning (of using Weibo), there were always some (new) posts that appeared whenever you refresh (and browse). But now, there won’t be any new posts or a few new posts at any time, even if I use the international version, which sorts posts in chronological order.” (P8)

“Sometimes, when something happens in (my) life, unpleasant, interesting, or boring, I will write one or two sentences on Weibo. Because there are few people around (me) who browse Weibo every day, I will be quieter and less likely to chat with them (through comments) for a while.” (P22)

Similar to P16, who now prefers browsing the posts of others to publishing their own original posts, three other participants mentioned that their activities on Weibo, particularly relating to content publishing, have significantly reduced. These three participants stressed that their own activities of publishing, reposting, and commenting had reduced in recent years. Although P10, P11 and P20 still browse Weibo every day, they hardly publish posts or make comments, even for the topics they are interested in. And for P11, even the one-click act of reposting occurred irregularly; while it was a nil for P20. Below are experiences of the three participants about their decline in activities on Weibo:

“I read news and discussions (on Weibo) when there’s a hot topic that occurs. I do read their comments, but I rarely make any comments. I don’t post much (personal stuff), just some occasional posts on what was happening in life, something good or bad or for complaining.” (P10)

“I wrote Weibo posts in the early years, and now I hardly record anything (on it). I used to like writing when I was younger, and now I don’t bother to write. The main activity I have on Weibo is now browsing, less chance of reposting, and hardly any discussions. I do repost sometimes, but the frequency is low, probably about two or three times a month.” (P11)

“Now, if it is a huge topic, like the previous (Red, Yellow and Blue) kindergarten incident, I will browse a lot of comments, but no longer making comments. Usually, I only browse, not doing any other activities, not even reposting.” (P20)

Some participants shared further insights on their changed usage and explained their reasons to reduce, or to a certain extent, restrict, their activities of content publishing on Weibo. These

reasons are analysed in the following sections, including section 4.3.4 Weibo Censorship and section 4.3.7 Participation in Weibo Citizen Journalism.

While most interview participants reflected on the fact that their overall use of Weibo had declined since its early days, some specified that the decline was triggered by the launch of the WeChat app. However, some have since returned to Weibo and adopted it as a source of information, a service for information searching, or a space for expression and keeping personal records. The driving force to return is that the social relationships on WeChat have become more complicated as they are connected with family-related and work-related contacts. In this case, participants avoided disclosing too many individual thoughts or personal details in their friends' circles (朋友圈; commonly described in English as "friendship circles") on WeChat. Instead, they returned to Weibo and regarded it as a relatively private space despite its more public nature. Below are the experiences detailed by P3, P9, P21 and P22, regarding to the switch between Weibo and the friends' circle of WeChat:

"I remember that I didn't use a lot of Weibo when I was in university, I used more RenRen (人人網) back then. However, I have used Weibo more since I consider it as my main source of information. Especially after I have started to work, there are too many acquaintances or work-related contacts in my (WeChat) friends' circle, my need for Weibo has become even greater, which is, speaking of my personal need." (P3)

"I now use Weibo even more frequently than WeChat. After adding parents and colleagues on WeChat, they have paid too much attention to my friends' circle; so, I returned to Weibo, where they are not connected with (following) me. I also think that the information in WeChat's friends' circle is not useful or meaningful to me, because they often post about food or having fun in friends' circle. That's why I said I could learn a lot from Weibo. Maybe it's indeed a result of registering a Weibo account for learning, and I'm just keeping it as a habit." (P9)

Like P21, who preferred to express negative emotions on Weibo to escape the resulting attention from colleagues, P3 also restarted using Weibo to satisfy personal needs and stressed its crucial role as "the main source of information". For P9, the vast information available on Weibo is more useful or meaningful than what is on WeChat's friends' circle, which again connected to the learning purpose of registering the Weibo account. Furthermore, P22 suggested that Weibo has become a database where information can be searched and backed up as personal memo, through reposting relevant or required posts to one's account (homepage).

“There was a decline in usage, which happened when (I) started to use WeChat, especially at the establishment of friends’ circle. I felt that was a better way to communicate with acquaintances and thus gave up Weibo for a while. Now, there are too many work-related contacts, including my leaders (aka. managers), on WeChat, because of my occupation, so I cannot (post things too personal). To express the emotions sometimes, I continue to use Weibo, relieving some negative stuff, or talking about the current dissatisfaction with my work, and so on.” (P21)

“I think the social media characteristic of Weibo has slowly decreased. For me, it sometimes becomes a search engine, or a memo, or a small private tree hole (for personal expressions). The use of memo is as I just mentioned, I repost posts that I think are useful for future references, such as book lists and medical information. Or I paste some quotations onto Weibo when I read some good sentences, also for purposes of memorising.” (P22)

P23 had similar experiences to the above four participants, and clearly recalled the switch between the two platforms. Since the initial motivation of registering a Weibo account was for using it to interact with friends, P23 followed other friends’ move to the WeChat friends’ circle. After two years use of WeChat, P23 restarted to use Weibo and considered it as “a channel to acquire information”. Since then, P23 has followed more influential accounts of people who publish useful content, but less on friends and has a significant increase in Weibo usage even when compared to the early years on the platform. According to P23, this increase was also a result of the immediacy of the information available on Weibo, especially at the time of a natural disaster or a social incident. Here is the detailed experience of P23:

“But my high frequency of use had probably lasted until the establishment of friends’ circle of WeChat. After it launched, at around 2012, I slowly used less Weibo. (I) published fewer posts and frequency of use also dropped. Because my friends had left, the social network on the level of acquaintances has switched to the friends’ circle. The demand for information on acquaintances via Weibo then reduced. And (I) started to reuse Weibo, probably in 2014, using it as a channel to acquire information. Then slowly, I discovered that I began to follow more and more accounts who publish information for the public and fewer and fewer of friends. Ever since I set it as a channel to acquire information, the usage has become more frequent than before. As it is for reading the news or getting to know hot events. For example, when there’s an earthquake somewhere, (or) when there’s an incident that happened, I’d rather go to Weibo than go to traditional news websites like Sina News or Netease News.” (P23)

Those who returned to Weibo after their contacts on WeChat became complicated did so with the primary goal of avoiding the disclosure of too much personal information on WeChat. This

is ironic, because Weibo is an open-access public platform and WeChat is a private network. So why do they consider Weibo as a securer space than WeChat for expressing the self and keeping personal records? A few interview participants shared their reasons for choosing Weibo over the friends' circle of WeChat and their views on using Weibo as a form of self-expression. P1 highlighted the microblog nature of following-follower relationships, which mean users must put effort into searching for content or an account that they have not yet followed. Therefore, the process of searching, or the feed-setting characteristic of Weibo, has allowed them to form a personal world, which they can screen to protect it from undesirable content. P3 raised two other advantages of Weibo – the control of visibility for content published in one's account and the slight social implication or impact caused by personal expression being viewed by personal contacts. While P6 emphasised WeChat's essential role as a communication service and classified Weibo as a private space with less connection to workplaces, P21 remained close to a friends' network on Weibo in addition to acquiring information. Nevertheless, the two participants shared their preference of Weibo as it enables expression of the self. The following explanations are given by P1, P3, P6, and P21:

“Just use it as a blog. Because there's the matter of following and being followed, that is, even though your content is open to the public, but (whoever) wants to read what you posted will have to find you and follow you. They can read even without following you, but they at least need to find you (first).” (P1)

“In the past, my WeChat may have been a bit more private, but now it seems the contacts have become complicated. So, Weibo is easier to control. Because it has the function of ‘visible to friends’ (好友可見) and it's easy to set. Secondly, although it is an open platform, everyone is just a stranger, and it won't be a big deal for them to read (my posts). Speaking of WeChat, most contacts are work-related or family-related, I don't want them to read (anything personal).” (P3)

“I use it (Weibo) more for recording my personal life. Because WeChat is now more than just such a software for chatting, many contacts are work-related, or you contact to a lot of colleagues or teachers, you will have something that you don't want to show everyone. And thus, I feel that on Weibo it is more private; there are fewer contacts of such kind. So, I will post something about my daily life, or repost some things that I am interested in, then keep as a record.” (P6)

“Getting information (from Weibo) is one aspect. Also, I think there is no better channel to write something personal. That is, sometimes I would like to record something online or write a little bit of some thoughts, but only disclosing it to a handful of close friends. And then they can give some

responses, or just get them to see it. Even if they don't see it, I still want to write (posts).” (P21)

Likewise, P14 had experienced the switch between Weibo and WeChat’s friends’ circle. Yet, due to the ongoing increase of work-related contacts on both platforms, P14 has decided not to publish anything related to their personal life in either of them. Furthermore, P14 raised the concern about self-presentation and privacy on social media. In a platform where multiple degrees of interpersonal relations are involved, a single post can be interpreted differently by different viewers, based on their own experience, and maybe, their understanding of the content poster. In order to protect privacy and to maintain a professional image among contacts in the two platforms, P14 has become cautious in selecting the content or topics to post or repost on both Weibo and WeChat. The following paragraph is P14’s experiences on Weibo and the friends’ circle as well as reasons for reducing personal-related posts:

“I do send (Weibo) posts, but I’m careful and try not to post anything that can expose personal information. I tend to send more like jokes, or insignificant topics, or stuff that is not invested in many emotions. In fact, my Weibo account is now like a business card. When I meet someone new, we often exchange contacts on WeChat, and they ask if you use Weibo, we will then follow each other on Weibo. That is, the composition of your contacts has become more and more complicated as there will be relatives, friends, and colleagues. You will be confused with what role to play in such a complicated environment. That is why I send fewer posts on Weibo. There was a period that I didn’t use Weibo much, but I returned to Weibo after I used friends’ circle of WeChat less and less. I found it interesting when I first started to use the friends’ circle, and I sent photos regularly. However, my contacts on WeChat had increased and became complicated, by adding parents and teachers. I couldn’t talk randomly (or freely) in the friends’ circle. Thus, I returned to Weibo. Slowly, I found the same issue with Weibo. Since the contacts in friends’ circle or the followers on Weibo both become complicated, which is, although we know each other, the distance can be either far or close, and the relationship can be strong or weak. It is hard to say how will they interpret you when you send a post, as everyone thinks differently. So, I am very cautious, try only to send some jokes.” (P14)

With an average user experience of seven years, most of the interview participants recalled their motivation for registering an account on Weibo as a result of word-of-mouth. According to them, Weibo was introduced as a new service or platform by their friends or schoolmates. Below are the initial user experiences that P21, P24 and P27 had with Weibo:

“(In the beginning,) the main networks were still my friends in real life, such as classmates. There would be some comments between us. I would be more

interested in posting personal stuff that attracted more comments. Otherwise, I will just repost some of the information that I'm interested in." (P21)

"Because my classmates are using (Weibo), everyone is using it. Whenever there is something new, they got to know it from Weibo and thus introduce to me, so I became interested in Weibo and registered an account. At the very beginning, I thought it was (a service) like WeChat, as it had "friends" function and linked me with my classmates. I was very engrossed in increasing follower counts (漲粉) back then." (P24)

"(Because) I think everyone around me has (Weibo accounts). I was using Xiaonei (校內網) at the time, but it was limited to the connection between you and classmates, as well as the alumni. Thus, we went to Weibo, another (type of) social network platform." (P27)

Unlike the other participants, P2 and P9 registered Weibo accounts to fulfil the requirements of the faculty or teacher during their college life. They discussed how they started using Weibo with the following:

"In fact, when we first started using Weibo, many of us (registered) were asked by the school or faculty. To promote some activities or voting for our schools or faculties, they needed us to register a Weibo account. Back then, users could register a Weibo account through mobile phone verification or email verification. Therefore, each of us would have many accounts on Weibo." (P2)

"In 2010, we were all using RenRen (人人網), and not many people paid attention to Weibo. Then, in our class, the teacher asked each of us to register a Weibo account and to use it to complete an assignment. It's an assignment for reviewing a TV program on Weibo, and @ (mentioned) the program via Weibo. At that time, we were registering Weibo accounts to complete an assignment, instead of socialising or networking." (P9)

As mentioned earlier in P24's experience, a significant amount of news or something new (新鮮事) was blossoming through Weibo, which attracted many participants' attention. P26 summarised the reasons that caused the obsession with Weibo at the time he started to use it:

"Because there was a large amount of information available on it, and it's presented in novel ways. Also, many friends are active on Weibo." (P26)

Initially, some participants used Weibo as a means to record personal activities (as its original purpose was web-blogging) and to communicate with friends or schoolmates (reflecting its notion of social networking). For instance, P23 had this to say when they talked about the experience of using the first Chinese microblogging service Fanfou (飯否) and later Weibo:

“At that time, everyone was optimistic about the form of microblogging. When we (first) used Fanfou, we felt that it was less stressful than the previous form of blogging. For example, when you send a short message on the blog, you may have concerns like what will the viewers think of that, or the content is not rich enough. But when we used microblogging, we feel that it’s a bit like information flow. The post I sent out could be a current thought, or a message that I wanted to pass to others. ... Back then, my Weibo was probably more like the feeling of the friends’ circle of WeChat, as I followed classmates, then colleagues, then friends, (especially) offline friends. It was more like an acquaintance of social accounts. (P23)

In addition to the characteristics of blogging and social networking, participants discovered that Weibo was also a source of news and information or a window to the outside world. P2 and P24 explained their thoughts on the characteristics of Weibo as follows:

“I think there is one thing special about Weibo, which makes it different from other social platforms. It has a function equivalent to the news media. We often read the news or other information on Weibo, not just for the social purpose.” (P2)

“But gradually, the more I use it, the more I realised that Weibo is a social networking tool far removed from my daily life. It’s not a service of daily life. I gained more understanding of the outside world through it.” (P24)

Through the above analysis of participants’ user experiences, it is evident that their primary activity on Weibo is browsing. Although the majority of participants use it on a daily basis, the frequency of activities other than browsing is low or nonexistent. In other words, it seems that the information available on Weibo doesn’t come from individuals but mainly from organisational accounts, commercial accounts, or the so-called Big V accounts (influential accounts).

#### 4.3.3 Changes on Weibo

Weibo was established nine years ago, and all interview participants were long-term users who had been registered for more than six years. As a result, they experienced a wide range of changes on Weibo, which were mentioned and discussed during the interviews. The changes can be classified into three categories: functional changes, content changes, and changes in users, according to participant responses. There were both positive and negative comments on the changes that have been applied to Weibo, as detailed below.

Participant descriptions of the changes on Weibo could be summarised under two categories: functionality and content. For P2, the functional changes on Weibo could be generally understood as being duplicated from Western social media, and the content changes occurred as a result of it. P2 commented:

“First of all, regarding its platform, I think that Weibo is imitating more and more functions from these foreign (social media), such as Facebook or Instagram. It seems that the limit of words on Weibo posts is removed, it's not limited to only 140 characters. It has made many changes and has more features than before. And then, speaking of its content, as I said, it has completely broken through the social aspect, with multimedia (platform) integrating all kinds of functions. It has included a lot of things (services), such as news reading, video watching, making friends.” (P2)

Detailed analysis of changes in the two categories are presented in sections 4.3.3.1 and 4.3.3.2. Furthermore, P6, P8, P16, P18, P21, and P26 mentioned the changes in users that have been happened to Weibo, are analysed in section 4.3.3.3.

#### *4.3.3.1 Functional changes*

Many functional changes have taken place continually on Weibo since its establishment; yet some were more noticeable to participants than others. More specifically, functions that enhance productivity or user interactions, such as multi-media posts, live streaming videos, and different ways of commenting, were the most mentioned changes by the participants.

Some participants think their frequent use of Weibo is related to smartphone technologies. P13 suggested that functional changes on Weibo also aligned with the development of smartphones. P13 had this to say about changes on Weibo:

“I remember when I started using Weibo, the posts were sent via SMS or MMS (from a mobile phone). Maybe it is related to the technology; the mobile phones were not very smart back then. Slowly, with the updates to mobile phones, the software updates of Weibo become more frequent. Now, you can send videos (on it) and (paid) members can make comments with gif or picture. Also, there are functions like sending “Weibo Story” (微博故事).” (P13)

According to P24, the later-added function of “Weibo Story”, a function similar to “Instagram Stories”, is refreshing and has some degree of privacy protection. Meanwhile, the time limit feature of a Weibo Story also refers to an instant record of personal life for P24. The detailed explanation of P24 about this function was:



“This feature is a relatively new function. I think I just sent out something (video or photo). In the end, it will delete it for you (after 24 hours); like having some restrictions. Maybe you feel more comfortable as it’s not seen by so many people. Or say, like a record of a certain emotion, I don't want to keep it for long. It may be just an instant feeling, and I want to publish (on my Weibo) immediately.” (P24).

Also, P18 acknowledged to the later-added video-post function and suggested it is practical for both viewers and publishers. When talking about the functional changes on Weibo, P18 said:

“The other new feature is the video posts, such as the embedded videos, live broadcasts, and short clips. Many people still prefer images (over texts) or like to see photos. For people who are on the spot, they certainly have their phones with them, and thus they can take photos and use it as evidence. Weibo is a very good platform for posting such short videos (or photos), which present the perspectives of the public. All kinds of information are available on Weibo.” (P18)

Some participants noticed the removal of the 140-character word limit for Weibo posts and saw it as an advancement of its functions. While P7 and P16 mentioned the change from a publisher’s or a reader’s viewpoint, P4 indicated the change was for “improving user loyalty and user activity”.

“The ways of sending Weibo content have been enriched. For example, the number of words published in a Weibo post has been changed to more than 140 characters, so (users) can publish long articles. They can even discuss the post (in the commenting section). All these changes are made for improving user loyalty and user activity and indeed resulted in the fact that Weibo had already become a listed company and has to be profitable. It needs to be profitable.” (P4)

“A functional change that I think may have an impact on me is the long Weibo post. It was not possible to send a long post before. The post is no longer limited to (140) words, and so I can send long Weibo posts. I think I do benefit from this change, because I used to write blogs before using Weibo. In the beginning, I used MSN (My Space). Later, when MSN was gone, I switched to 163blog. Gradually, those (weblogs) have declined, and there was no place for me to write anything. Ever since the long posts were introduced on Weibo, I sometimes send posts like travel notes or book reviews. I think it is quite convenient to record my life, very helpful.” (P7)

“Weibo has some better functions now. One is to enable the long Weibo post; the other is to send up to nine pictures (in a post). In the past, long articles were all shown in graphics, that is, you have to transfer the text into a picture and then send on Weibo. You can send text directly now. Although I have

never sent any long Weibo post, I think the function makes the browsing more convenient.” (P16)

Similar to P7, P21 ranked the introduction of long Weibo posts, through removing the word limit for original Weibo posts, as a significant change on Weibo. Here is how P21 talked about these functional changes:

“A comparatively impressive (change of function), I think it is the long Weibo posts. Because there were word limits on Weibo posts in the beginning, more posts were created on weblogs instead. Now, Weblogs are hardly used. Instead, those long articles can be posted directly on Weibo. And (users) can also ‘reward’ the posts.” (P21)

As mentioned earlier by P4, one of the noticeable functional changes is to have discussions in the comment section. That is, when commenting on a Weibo post, users can “like” any comments, even reply to a comment that was made on the original post. Both P12 and P28 talked about this change, while P12 reflected more on the personal use of the “like” function for comments and change of activities on Weibo.

“For me, I withdrew from commenting after the “like” function (for comments) was launched, and I started to pay more attention to the comments. Especially now, you can “like” not only the comments but also the replies to one particular comment. Usually, the replies are listed under a comment; you will be able to read them all if you click-in. Sometimes, for example, when I saw a comment that I very much disagreed with, I went through its replies and “liked” the reply that was against it.” (P12)

“I think the significant change is that the kinds of social communication that it uses for user interactions have been expanded a lot. For example, it added the function of live video, and then the means of user interactions are also enriched a lot, such as “two-story room” (樓中樓) commenting, [reply to a comment rather than to the original post], and the “like” function (to comments).” (P28)

P28 continuously highlighted other useful functions that were added to Weibo in the last two years, such as the paid subscription and rewarding of long posts:

“I think that the recently added functions of “subscription” and “reward” for original articles on Weibo are very useful. For example, I subscribe to articles from Jing Huzi (京虎子). (Users) can get access to the high-quality information by paying (a subscription fee).” (P28)

In contrast to P28, P9 expressed the concern over using “reward” functions (which allows users to reward the authors of original posts by sending money) and linking financial details on Weibo. P9 stated:

“The earlier version of Weibo is easier to use for me. I have started to feel that some functions are not very practical although it has various functions available now. For example, the ‘reward’ function; to use this function you need to link your (Weibo) account with either a bank account or an Alipay account. In fact, the reason that we are afraid of losing our mobile phones is that we linked too much with it. If you do lose the phone, for someone who doesn’t set a password like me, all the (personal) information will be lost. Therefore, I don’t think these functions are useful [for me].” (P9)

Although Weibo offers a wide range of functions to its users, the complexity of such functions was found to cause confusion and even resistance to the changes. Many participants expressed their annoyance, especially in regard to the newly-introduced software-based algorithmic post sorting, to increase data traffic to popular content.

Instead of sorting posts in chronological timeline, Weibo now uses a software algorithm to sort posts based on what it thinks users want to read, or, as P25 claimed, the frequency of interactions between users. That is, if users interact with a particular account regularly, e.g. make comments or “like” their posts, the sorting method will determine that specific users are interested in this account. It will give priority to posts published by such accounts and show them more often on the homepage of specific users, supposedly in the user’s best interest. P5 believed that the change from chronological sorting to software algorithmic sorting was aimed to “improve user activity”; however, P3 stressed that it has been causing confusion for users due to its low accuracy in calculating users’ interests. Again, P13 also found the new sorting “confusing” and “inconvenient” as it would show outdated posts randomly after a user refreshes their homepage. Below are comments made by four participants regarding the current sorting feature of Weibo posts:

“That (sorting) is too stupid. Firstly, its calculation is very poor. It was copied from Facebook, but their technical level is not yet up to it. I think it’s a very poor function. Secondly, it makes the content very confusing. For example, many soccer games will be broadcast live (on Weibo), but the broadcast (posts) often are shown back when I check the results in the morning. That is, the result of a game was 3:2 when I first refreshed, and then it became 1:0 if I refreshed again.” (P3)

“To improve user activity, the browsing method (of Weibo) has also been changed. For example, the chronological sorting is now disrupted. Posts are presented according to the interaction frequency and popularity.” (P5)

“I feel that its timeline now is very confusing. For example, the posts from a long time ago would show up if you refresh (homepage) after five minutes (browsing). It doesn’t sort posts in chronological order. I think it’s a bit inconvenient. So, we prefer to use the international version of Weibo.” (P13)

“I know that it changed the sorting (of posts). The updated sorting order is based on the frequency of your interactions with another user, and then (the posts) appear on your homepage are not sorted in chronological order. It happened recently.” (P25)

Like P13, P6 also mentioned the solution for escaping from the newly introduced software algorithmic sorting is to use the international version of Weibo. For P6, this new sorting feature messes up their timeline and delays access to the posts that a user actually wants to read. P6 also referred it as a means to override user initiative and take control of the information flow. To a certain extent, it can be considered a function that reduces the power of the user and reinforces the authorities’ control of media. P6 had this to say when complaining about the feature:

“I am using Weibo international edition; its timeline is relatively clear, in chronological order. Before I was using ordinary Weibo (the domestic edition), where the timeline is messed up, and you would miss many posts. I think this is quite bad. Because I will read those listed ‘hot’ topics when others repost it, it is not necessary to use traffic sorting. I follow a user because I want to. I prefer to read their posts according to the posted time. I think this change (of sorting order) is somehow only showing what it wants you to see, rather than you take the initiative and read what you want to read. In fact, I always want to complain about this feature.” (P6)

As can be seen from the above comments, many interviewees described the software algorithmic sorting that calculated a post’s popularity as based on the interactions between users, more specifically, between followers and their following accounts. In addition to P25, three other participants also indicated that such interactions were mainly related to the activities of ‘like’ and commenting. Since the primary Weibo activity for most of the interview participants was browsing, the new sorting feature would deeply affect their accessibility to the information that they selected to read. This may be the reason why both P4 and P20 referred the feature as “restriction of data traffic” – it restricts certain posts, in order to, according to P20, give traffic to its profit earning commercial content. As P28 summarised, the multiple

ways of communicating on the platform together with the new sorting feature were in fact distractions rather than attractions. Here are detailed comments by P4, P20, and P28:

“There is an update of restriction of data traffic; that is, if you don’t ‘like’ or comment on the users (you followed) you won’t be able to read their posts (from your homepage). I feel it is a bit annoying as some people become invisible to me, which is different from before. Also, there are many ‘popular’ posts that appear on (my homepage), especially those advertisements or micro-business content. And then, you cannot read what you want.” (P4)

“Speaking of the functions, there is one recent update, which makes everyone feel uncomfortable with Weibo, the restriction of data traffic. It’s possible that it added a lot of advertising elements to gain profit and thus it limits some of our original Weibo content. If you don’t ‘like’ the users (you followed) regularly, they will disappear over time from your Weibo homepage. Because its new sorting method will automatically think that you are not interested in that user, and then it will directly block that user (for you).” (P20)

“Although there may be more ways of communication for some users now and may be more forms of expression, it seems to me that the distraction is greater (than attractions). Because it is very complicated, it has too many functions, e.g. you can send videos and watch live broadcasts on Weibo. Also, Weibo has recently changed its recommendation algorithm; that is, if I read your posts and I don’t give you any comment or ‘like’ or save your post, I don’t interact with you, gradually you will become invisible on my front page even if I have followed you.” (P28)

Moreover, based on the claims of P4, P8, P10, P20 and P28, this sorting feature has not only impacted the Weibo posts presented on one’s homepage but will eventually block the users that it thinks users are not interested in, even if users chose to follow them and receive their feeds. Because P10 had no idea how the software algorithmic sorting calculates its results, P10 was concerned that news and information about local natural disasters would be restricted and possibly leave the user in danger. Interestingly, P10 mentioned that Weibo offered a paid service for users’ posts to be ‘headlined’ on their followers’ homepage. This is how P8 and P10 discussed the new sorting feature:

“I think the most influential change is the sorting order (for Weibo posts). I have been using the international version since then, so its impact on me is relatively lower. Still, they say that some posts would gradually disappear (from your homepage) if you don’t interact with the users you’ve followed.” (P8)

“The current sorting order is, like, your posts will only appear on my homepage if we often interact with each other. If our activities are limited to browsing each other, Weibo will not show your posts to me, and you will be slowly pushed away from my attention. Also, you can pay to get your post to be shown as a ‘fans headline’ on followers’ homepages. That is, your posts will be randomly sorted if you don’t pay for the service. I don’t know how they calculate the sorting order. It makes me feel uncomfortable as it’s not chronological. In fact, I am the kind of person who pays fewer attention to unexpected events, as there is not much natural disasters where I live. Now, it’s unlikely for me to notice such disasters in any case due to the non-chronological sorting of posts.” (P10)

The new sorting feature of Weibo posts, according to P4 and P6, has reduced users’ choices and limited users’ information sources. Technically, the more frequently users interact with those they are following, their posts will be ranked as higher popularity and appear more on their homepage. Therefore, it is possible that users’ posts will be viewed by fewer followers when they don’t frequently comment on or ‘like’ their posts. According to personal experience, P14 gave their impression in terms of relationship building on Weibo in the past and present:

“In the past, say in 2009, it’s likely that about one hundred people will read your post after you send it on Weibo. And then, there may be ten users in a hundred viewers who are interested in it. They are likely to make comments on your post and thus follow you if conversations are happening. The situation now is, there may be less than ten users reading a single post of mine among my four to five hundred followers, only those who possibly know me in person.” (P14)

As mentioned above, some users discovered that posts in the international version of Weibo are sorted in chronological order. Therefore, users like P6, P8, and P13 have switched to the international version from the domestic version. P19 also explained the switch and summarised the advantage of using the international version of Weibo as 1) posts sorted in chronological order, and 2) fewer advertisements:

“So, I use the international version of Weibo now. Compared to the domestic version, first of all, the timeline of posts won’t be disrupted through the algorithm. Secondly, the international version has fewer advertisements, and is relatively concise.” (P19)

Unlike other users, P20 found that functions available on the international version are limited and thus changed back to the domestic version of Weibo. P20 also came up with a solution to

avoid the software algorithmic sorting, by following people's posts manually by going to their profile.

“In fact, the domestic version of Weibo is different from the international version. In the international version, the posts appear according to the normal timeline, but it is not in the domestic version. I don't know what rules they follow, but I often see similar advertisements (in the domestic version). I did use the international version for a while, but I found the original image (resolution) won't be posted when you are uploading an image. There are still some restrictions on some functions in the international version. So I used it (the domestic version) again. Since I am the kind of user who likes to 'dive' (潜水) and merely interact with the people I followed, I created a group of users that I particularly like to know about, and click in manually.” (P20)

In addition to noticing the change in post sorting, P22 complained about the “push” approach of Weibo advertising:

“It will select some posts, and it feels that I would like to see such content. It is clear that it screens all our data and information. Then it will push some advertisements, making me very uncomfortable, and I think it is wasting my time.” (P22)

Like P22, the commercialised Weibo and its aggressive advertising have also become a major concern for other participants. Many found that the “reject” function for ads they were uninterested in is ineffective. Below are the experiences on Weibo advertising shared by P10, P21, and P28:

“I often click on the ‘I am not interested’ option, but the same type of push (advertisement) will still appear on my (Weibo) homepage afterwards. I think it must be a pay service, like what they do with search engine advertisements. The business has paid for the advertising space; it will be pushed to certain users, regardless of whether I'm interested or not.” (P10)

“Also, I think the advertisements have become much more, actually very annoying. They won't be blocked even if you keep trying to. I continuously cross them off, but they will appear again when you log in to Weibo. The most annoying part is, it keeps recommending the same category regardless of your preference. There were several times that I decided not to browse Weibo ever again. But I couldn't help using it. It's like having a social dependency.” (P21)

“Also, I find the advertisements on Weibo very annoying. It has too many ads, and it's always recommending the wrong types for me, like the ad on stretch marks removals. Every time I try hard to click the ‘I'm not interested in’

button. It did offer this option, so I clicked on it. I thought that if I clicked the button, it should be possible that it will not recommend similar content to me in the future. However, it would still promote (them), every day. Therefore, the function of rejecting uninteresting advertisements is not functional. I don't know why it has an ineffective function.” (P28)

Unlike the online advertisements in the past, forms of Weibo ads are more than banners or pop-ups. The latest version of ads on Weibo are interstitial -- they appear while a chosen website or page is downloading -- and also mimic regular posts. P27 had this to say when he described how confusing Weibo ads could be:

“And it's not presented in the (old) form of advertisements. You will think it's a normal post like the others if you don't read carefully. You feel like you followed that person, but you are not. There are subtle differences between them. It's similar to what you would experience in Taobao (Chinese version of Amazon), it promotes other sellers or products that might be of interest to you. Its interface is the same as any other Weibo posts, but when you look closely at the person who sent the post, you find that you two are not connected, and you never followed (that person).” (P27)

Besides the hard-sell advertisements, P23 suggested that Weibo also gains profit through its close relationship with Alibaba (the mother company of Taobao) and its product purchasing function. The detailed explanation of P23 is shown as below:

“I think Weibo is now very closely tied to E-commerce. That is, Weibo has become the second largest traffic importing platform for Taobao. Since it has accepted the investment from Alibaba, products displayed on Weibo can be purchased directly within the platform. In such an era of 'online celebrity economy' (網紅經濟), the influence of stars or models on fashion will be transformed into purchasing power and market effects promptly. The most significant difference between Weibo and other social media or entertainment films, (from the perspective of advertising), is that Weibo has become a channel for 'selling goods for E-commerce' (電商帶貨). For example, the clothes Yang Mei wears may soon be discussed in the comments, and someone shares its link (for purchasing), then someone may buy it accordingly.” (P23)

Other than the increase in advertisements, Weibo's commercialised aspects have been reflected in functions such as paid membership, paid search ranking, paid subscriptions, fan clubs, and so on. As mentioned by P25, Weibo sets limitations for ordinary users so that it can highlight the broader flexibility on services and personalisation functions provided for paid VIP members.



“You can't change your username randomly. In the past, it could be changed as many times as you want, but now, non-members can only change usernames twice a year. Weibo members can change (their usernames) five times a year. Further, there is the difference in commenting; non-members cannot comment with images while members can.” (P25)

Meanwhile, P2 suggested that the “most searched ranking list” (熱門搜索排行榜) has been duplicated from Baidu's paid ranking and P24 claimed that it had become a “manipulated and priced” list over time. The two participants talked about the gradual change about the list as follows:

“I always feel that they are promoting the hot topics on (commercial) purpose, which is similar to Baidu's paid ranking (競價排名). Those hot topics often focus on entertainment news, celebrity gossip, or gaming trends.” (P2)

“There is a Weibo most-searched (ranking list), this list is the same for everyone. In the beginning, when it first launched, it did appear with some comparatively popular names or hot events. Slowly, you will find something not so very popular ranked as the first or second most searched topics. Later, many people came to know that it is manipulated and priced. And it already has a sub-list called ‘buy hot searched (ranking)’ (買熱搜).” (P24)

P2 continuously raised the issue of passive receiving. That is, even though the content is said to be recommended based on users' reading habits, users have only limited choices as those ‘hot topics’ (熱點) are actually created by Weibo.

“Weibo now has a lot of hot topics created by itself. Of course, we don't know what purpose it has. Maybe, it's mandatory, what we receive from Weibo. There is no way (for us) to change anything, and you can only accept. Nowadays, those Internet giants all recommend relevant content based on your reading habits.” (P2)

According to P23, Weibo is more like a Business to Consumer (B to C) platform for any celebrities, government sectors, organisations, or even individuals, where they can extend their influence and profit from it.

“It changed from an equal platform for dialogue between users to something a bit like a B to C platform. Many celebrities are using it as a place to maintain their images. In fact, it also works for anyone like government agencies, organisations, pop stars, scientists, even parenting bloggers (individuals). It's more of a one-way flow (of information) in this situation. Therefore, I think it introduced many new functions to fulfil this purpose, such as paying to

subscribe to articles, fan clubs with paid memberships, V+ membership. It has become a platform for influence expending and exchanging for cash.” (P23)

The most significant functional changes on Weibo mentioned by my interview participants were the functions that enable user productivity, particularly the removal of 140 characters word limit for original posts. Meanwhile, the most disturbing change was the new algorithmic sorting, which sorts posts according to popularity, data traffic or advertising. In order to read Weibo posts in chronological timeline, some participants have started to use the international version of Weibo, which doesn't push advertisements to users.

#### *4.3.3.2 Content changes*

Besides the functional changes that have been analysed in the last section, many participants talked about the content changes that have occurred on Weibo over the years. For some participants, the advantage of Weibo now is its richness of content. That is, a wide range of topics and information, including the ones posted by government sectors, international organisations, and niche groups, are available on Weibo. However, many participants expressed their concern about the decline in social-political discussions and the dominance of entertainment content and marketing content on Weibo. Most importantly, the issue of increasingly aggressive comments and online abuse was also noted by some participants.

As mentioned in the section 4.3.2 Use of Weibo, a number of participants resumed their activities on Weibo after adopting it as a source of information. Many participants pointed out the kinds of topics and information available on Weibo have been extended over the years. For example, P6 summarised that Weibo content has become richer than other social media:

“After many years' use of social media, the one that I keep using is Weibo. Because there are all kinds of people (posting) on it, and information from all fields are available on it. There are users such as Guokr doing popularisation of science and some science article writers, and users who post interesting stuff. The information on Weibo is a bit richer than previous social media, also more convenient (to get).” (P6)

Similarly, P17 suggested the wide range of Weibo topics (content) was a result of the growth of its users. At the same time, P17 recognised that their viewpoint on some social issues had changed through reading diverse Weibo content.

“With the increase in users, there are more and more topics available (on Weibo). Thus, a lot of my viewpoints, on society and attitude towards politics, for example, have slowly begun to change. Before we were in a relatively closed or a centralised education environment; there will be some doubts about many problems. You can now read a lot of posts forwarded by others, from all kinds of people. And then you will be able to find out what’s actually happened.” (P17)

Participants such as P1, P7, P9 and P11 have also indicated Weibo content now cover wilder topics from various fields and provided “an opportunity to communicate” for niche groups. Below are their comments about changes in Weibo content:

“It provides an opportunity to communicate for people with special hobbies and interests. For example, I follow the Forbidden City’s Weibo account because it posts things like knowledge about the calendar of the Forbidden City, which I am very interested in. Another example is gaming, those who like to play video games can follow their favourite hosts.” (P1)

“I think there are more information sources since the development of ‘self-media’. For example, there was not many channels to get to know the correct information on fitness even if we want to keep fit. Now, you can follow some athletes or professional coaches (on Weibo) as they share (information about fitness). And it’s possible to become a professional fitness enthusiast from scratch through such self-learning.” (P7)

“Many of them follow their idols or find resources (on Weibo). Because there are a lot of online resources available on Weibo, and accounts such as ‘movie store’ (電影鋪子), they follow those accounts and reply to their posts. Those accounts will recommend some movies and share them on ‘Baidu cloud’ (百度盤).” (P9)

“Speaking of the news content (on Weibo), which I pay more attention to, its range has now become a bit broader. For example, there is more international news available. Before, I think was similar to Facebook or QQ Space, a platform for personal feelings and viewpoints. But the current Weibo, for me, is very convenient (source) to obtain information if not using as a personal space.” (P11)

Also, P24 also emphasised that the growth of the Weibo user base had improved the richness of content, as there are all kinds of interest groups gathering on Weibo and discussing related topics. P24 had this to say when talking about the content changes on Weibo:

“I think there are significant changes on Weibo. At the beginning of its establishment, Yao Chen was the queen of Weibo; and posts with more than one thousand comments were rarely found. Back then, I think most of the

Weibo content, or the most reposted ones between classmates, were ‘chicken soup for the soul’ (心靈鷄湯) type of posts. Slowly, there are more and more users from various fields who registered on Weibo, and the audience of Weibo has become more complicated. For example, I will go search on Weibo when I want to know about a (TV) drama, maybe a US TV series. It’s most likely that you will find a small group of people discussing it whenever you check on Weibo.” (P24)

P24 continuously gave a detailed expression on Weibo’s content changes, and further indicated that authorities at various levels registered accounts and published information on Weibo. According to P24, Weibo is now a “semi-official” platform for media releases as it is now used to provide a good service for government accounts.

“Weibo has now become a semi-official (platform) because the level of government accounts registered on it is very high. From the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, from the State Council to the provincial council, from the local public security bureaus to other government departments, any government sectors that you can think of now have Weibo accounts. Although it is a commercial platform, there are so many authorised accounts on it that release first-hand information. The nature of such a platform then becomes a little semi-official, which makes me find Weibo a bit strange. For example, you won’t read the news released by the State Council on WeChat but will read it on Weibo. In fact, Weibo does have a lot of effect on government affairs. It’s very motivating and provides a service of ‘government affairs express’ (政務直通車). There will be, for example, some mayors register accounts on Weibo. You won’t be able to get in contact with a mayor on WeChat, but you can follow him or her on Weibo. So, I think it’s a unique role of Weibo, as a platform for information exchange, connecting hierarchies from high to low.” (P24)

Similarly, participant P18 and P21 also mentioned that part of the content richness resulted from the increase in official accounts, operated by local and international organisations. Below are P18 and P21’s comments on Weibo’s content changes:

“There are some foreign authorities, such as the United Nations and the embassy of the United States, that have registered accounts on Weibo. From this perspective, (users) can receive information from different sources. Although there are relatively fewer public discussions on Weibo, the news released by government officials has gradually increased.” (P18)

“At the beginning, I think its content is rather poor. Because there were not many ‘self-media’ and government accounts registered, the amount of information available was actually small. The main media sources were still

print media and TV programs at that time. In recent years, on account of the development of official media and self-media, Weibo has become a space where we can find the information needed in life. I now pay little attention to information sources like TV programs and print media.” (P21)

While the above participants draw more attention to the richness of current Weibo content, P6 referred to the content changes and the immediacy of reporting and suggested that “its character of news reporting is gradually strengthening”. For P6, the stories cannot be reported by the mainstream media are often disclosed on Weibo, and thus brought into focus by the public. Here is how P6 described Weibo’s content changes:

“Regarding the news on Weibo, especially the ones about hot events, they are somehow subjective. I think the news should be more objective. Even though the entertainment character of Weibo is quite strong, its news reporting is gradually strengthening. Many (social) issues that happened recently were exposed on Weibo in the first place. For certain issues, mainstream media usually block some information or simply avoid reporting. Thus, the information available in mainstream media are delayed. Nevertheless, any Weibo user can be a news discoverer and publish related information almost in real time. Once the information is posted, it will quickly draw attention.” (P6)

Meanwhile, P1 claimed that the news dissemination character of Weibo is reducing, but its character of public discussions is increasing. However, P1 then explained the most discussed topics on Weibo are mainly entertaining content, which is similar to what P6 suggested. P1 had this to say when referring to the experiences of content changes:

“Speaking of the content on Weibo, I think its news dissemination character is weakening, but its function as a discussion platform is rising. There would not be so many people to comment on a single event in the past. Topics like the love affairs of a mainland male celebrity, WenZhang, and LuHan’s recent announcement of his romantic relationship were very popular. Such entertainment topics always create a large number of discussions on Weibo. There are ‘water army’ (水軍) involved, but ordinary users will also forward related posts. Since they don’t care about the authenticity of gossip topics and merely consider it as a way of entertaining. ...Indeed, there weren’t so many celebrities that had Weibo accounts and interacted with fans, but more and more celebrities are now registered on Weibo.” (P1)

Like P1, participant P3 and P12 also expressed their concerns in regard to the dominance of entertainment content on Weibo. P3 described that the current Weibo is “entertainment-oriented” while the previous Weibo was a “public square”, where collisions and exchanges of

thoughts and ideas happen. At the same time, P12 briefly talked about the change in Weibo content from the observation of its ‘hot topic’ list. These are the concerns raised by the two participants:

“Previously, Weibo was like a public square, where everyone’s thoughts and ideas would collide and exchange. And people were relatively open-minded and democratic back then. But now, Weibo is more entertainment-oriented. There are fewer and fewer discussions on politics, social issues, and serious topics. I think it’s an issue other than commercialisation, since commercialisation is about earning a profit as a product. And I think the main reason for the dominance of entertainment content and the decline in serious discussions is that (discussions are) not allowed.” (P3)

“I don’t know what topics were on the ‘hot topic’ list (of Weibo) before, but I find that the hot topics now are about celebrities rather than political content. Anything related to politics will never be shown on the ‘hot topic’ list.” (P12)

Other participants such as P18, P19 and P25 emphasised the recent decline in social-political content. P18 shared similar viewpoints to P3 and recalled there was a large amount of content on social-political topics available on Weibo when it was first established. Additionally, P19 and P25 pointed out such decline in serious discussions was linked to the reinforced media control. Below are the observations of content changes on Weibo given by these three participants:

“In the past, I browsed more news (on Weibo). But there is not much information for me to read in recent years. I remember there were a particularly large number of reposts on political content and a lot more to read when I first started using (Weibo).” (P18)

“In terms of content, I think Weibo’s self-censorship is getting stricter, and this issue has also been pointed out by some scholars. So, content related to liberals, democracy, vulnerable groups, or protection of human rights have been reduced. Or it just doesn’t present those content on your homepage due to the new sorting (feature).” (P19)

“It’s hard to say whether the content quality has declined or not, but the amount of information available has reduced. Sometimes I cannot send out or forward posts related to topics like homosexuality, popular social events, and political (discussions). Even posts of some government official accounts cannot be commented on or reposted.” (P25)

Besides the dominance of entertainment content on Weibo, some participants raised the issue of overwhelming marketing content, produced by the marketing accounts (營銷號). For P14,

Weibo is now a combination of marketing and acquaintance network rather than a “platform of content”. P18 further pointed out that a significant proportion of Weibo content is advertisements and marketing posts. Two participants had these to say when talked about their experiences of Weibo’s content changes:

“Weibo used to be a platform of content, where everyone posts their opinions, daily life, or some kind of content sharing. But now it has become somewhat like a fusion of acquaintance interactions and marketing. It now has a lot of marketing content, while everyone seems to have be paying attention to the user content before.” (P14)

“Regarding my user experience of Weibo’s mobile application, much of its coverage has been dominated by advertisement, or marketing ‘news’ (advertorials), so I can't read the information from those who I’m really keen to know.” (P18)

P19 suggested that marketing accounts would produce certain content, e.g. comments, to get attention from Weibo users and thus strengthen their influences.

“From my observation, a lot of business accounts on Weibo are purposely trying to cater for the public sentiments by making eye-catching comments in regards to nationalism and authoritarianism. For example, when Global Times publishes a Weibo post, people can like the commentaries underneath the post, and normally the very first commentary would receive the most likes. When you click into those naïve commentaries, you will discover many of them are from business accounts. What are the business accounts on Weibo? Some of them are selling cosmetic products, some are the online shopping agents, or they just want to create a popular Weibo account looking for future business opportunities in online advertising – and a lot of those commentaries are created by them. They are business oriented, and for this reason their naive commentaries promote nationalism and authoritarianism. (P19)

While participant P14, P18 and P19 were concerned about the increasing coverage of marketing content on Weibo, P8 explained how the influential personal accounts had been transformed into marketing accounts.

“When Weibo first began, most people were following Lengtoo (冷兔) for its lame jokes, and I think it was one of the first business accounts on Weibo. And then, there were more and more business accounts that appeared during 2011 and 2012. At first, they were set up as personal accounts. When they’ve attracted more and more followers and fans, they gradually were acquired and managed by the so-called ‘cultural media’ companies, such as a company called Gushan or something else.” (P8)

Moreover, many participants mentioned significant online abuse on Weibo during the discussion of content. The typical form of online abuse, indicated by P6, P8, P17, P19, P25 and P27, is through making aggressive comments. Some aggressive comments do contain abusive language, while others may be a veiled threat or an indirect personal attack. P17 described comments on Weibo as “quarrelling” rather than as rational conversations or discussions, and P19 considered it as “duelling”. Certain topics, especially content relating to celebrities usually tend to cause online abuse. According to P6, there would be a lot of fans making aggressive comments if you mentioned their idol inappropriately. In order to avoid fans’ cyberbullying, P6 would deliberately filter topics or content posted on Weibo. P6 had this to say when talking about content changes:

“Weibo is fully occupied with entertainment content, and the fans are attracted by the topics of the celebrities, along with some malicious commentaries – which is a horrendous phenomenon. The Internet violence committed by those fans is really horrible. In light of this, I would try to avoid those topics in my posts. Things will go uncontrollable if the same situation happened to me – being an average Joe, I don’t think I’m capable to handle those situations, therefore I would avoid those topics on purpose.” (P6)

Both P8 and P17 had a negative experience and indicated that some of the discussions on Weibo turned into personal attacks or abuse. More specifically, P8 gave an example of discussions on feminism, which is indeed a censored topic on Weibo. Content relevant to feminism would most likely be critiqued or abused even if they are not censored. Similar to what P6 had mentioned, P17 received abusive comments when they expressed a personal opinion on a film.

“Of course, it is good to have discussions. If we can only hear one side of the story, it is an awful experience. But, having discussion doesn’t mean you can attack people recklessly. A lot of people are not aware of this point; therefore, some discussions end in personal attacks. For example, around 2012 or 2013, I got to know more about feminism on Weibo. This is one of the sensitive topics resulting in the deletion of many relevant news stories. Afterwards, there was the so-called “Chinese anti-feminism” campaign which I totally have no idea of what it was about. Furthermore, there were many nasty comments made by the trolls who advocate male supremacy.” (P8)

“Sometimes, even a single remark on Weibo will incur many verbal attacks. I have had that experience when I commented on a movie named Under the Hawthorn Tree, which was directed by Zhang Yimou. Someone shared that movie on Weibo, and I simply expressed my point of view and said that it was a terrible movie. Immediately the scolding of me followed. In one of the



backlashes I received, it said, “if you think his movie is terrible, how about you make a good one to show me?” They were just trying to stir up quarrels. Actually, they were not qualified to engage in the discussion, because they don’t have the knowledge bank to discuss with you, therefore they have to resort to quarrelling. There are too many of this kind of people. It’s quite frustrating when you want to voice your viewpoints, but it draws attacks from the trolls.” (P17)

P19 summarised the content changes on Weibo as fewer and fewer rational discussions but more and more posts in the style of “big-character posters” (大字報) from the Cultural Revolution. Further, P19 mentioned a sample indirect personal attack comment - “is your face hurt?” - this refers to the popular Chinese cyber term “face smacking” (打臉) or the English term “in your face”. (Its detailed definition is given in section 1.7.1 Definition of Terms).

“The changes are obvious: there’re less and less rational discussions; on the contrary, there’re more and more posts similar to the “big character posters” in the Cultural Revolution period, and more and more cases trying to oversimplify this complicated world. The vernacular on Weibo is very interesting. For example, when the scholars get together to discuss an academic paper, at first they would say the paper is well written in general, and then they would ask if there’s any improvement in terms of the methodology and details – I think this is a nice way for conducting discussion. In comparison, the discussions on Weibo are very provoking, even after the facts are revealed. For example, they would ask if your face hurts, giving you the “face slapping” feeling, which I don’t think is a rational discussion. This is more like a public duel, and they are equipped with the must-win attitude, no matter in which sort of topics - the social issues, celebrity gossips, personal life, which is the best restaurant, is Costa Coffee better than Starbucks etc.” (P19)

When discussing changes in Weibo’s content, P25 also raised the issue of irrational conversations and then explained two popular cyber terms: “lead the tempo” (帶節奏) and “keyboard warrior” (鍵盤俠) - both of these terms are defined in section 1.7.1 Definition of Terms.

“Mainly it’s because they didn’t watch their mouths, otherwise “fanning the flames” wouldn’t become the buzzwords recently. Take a hot topic issue for example, there are positive and negative sides to it (side A and side B), and I’d like to make side A especially popular so that it offsets side B – I don’t quite remember where I come across this theory. In regards with the Weibo users’ education level, I think this is not a big deal because Chinese lack of independent thinking. It is related to our cultural tradition, cultural habit, or the habit of receiving education. When compared with foreign countries, critical thinking is still a rare thing in the Chinese education. What’s more, it

is very funny that when there are any counter-arguments, those keyboard warriors will get loose and start yelling.” (P25)

Additionally, P27 mentioned the term “water army” (水軍), which is defined in section 1.7.1. P27 suggested that it contributed to the current intense discussions on Weibo and differentiated the opinions on sensitive topics.

“From my observation, the online discussion is getting more intense. Nowadays, the paid ghost-writers are ubiquitous whenever there’s a sensitive topic; however, in the past you wouldn’t see that much of divided commentaries. It really didn’t have this before, so I felt I had a lot of words to say, and it felt bad if you didn’t voice them. Comparatively, people would be more restrained in the past. Nowadays, since people’s tolerance is getting bigger, the commentaries on Weibo are getting more aggressive.” (P27)

#### *4.3.3.3 Changes in users*

While most participants discussed changes on Weibo from the perspective of functional or content changes, some participants emphasised changes among Weibo users over the years. Undoubtedly, the most notable change in Weibo users is the rapid growth in quantity. While many participants briefly mentioned this change like P22, “there are more and more people using it, all kinds of people”; P21 gave a detailed comment and said that “Weibo has infiltrated every netizen”. Below is P21’s full comment about Weibo user changes:

“At the early stages, when I was young, I joined Weibo as a member of the celebrity fan club, which was still relatively small in size at that time, and not many people knew about this platform, so I couldn’t find many Weibo users in my social circle. Later on, I realise nearly everyone around me, basically they are in the same age group, has joined Weibo. No matter if it is for chasing the celebrity news, browsing the current affairs, or following the gossips, Weibo has permeated into every netizen’s life.” (P21)

The growth in Weibo users, including individual, institutional, and government accounts, significantly influences Weibo content. As indicated by P17, P18, P21, and P24 in the last section, such user growth has been nurtured by the diverse Weibo content. However, it has also caused issues with marketing content and aggressive comments.

Through their personal observation and user experience on Weibo, P19 pointed out that the young netizens, in their early 20s, tend to support the authoritarian state regime rather than support liberty, diversity, or democracy. More specifically, P19 referred to the majority of

younger generation Weibo users as nationalists, who attack those who seek justice and legal rights as well as label human rights defence lawyers as “troublemakers”. In some cases, this group of users, mainly college students from middle-class families, would invoke social Darwinism, a term that relates to the common meaning of Darwinism and popularly described in Herbert Spencer’s “survival of the fittest”, and increasingly popular in modern China (Xu, 2012) ; this leads them to criticise those who speak for the weak, and for social justice issues, based on their pro-authoritarian and pro-government attitude. P19 had this to say when discussing the changes in the user base on Weibo:

“Via Weibo we can discover the different ideologies possessed by middle-income class in the large-to-medium cities, or those of the young students from the middle-income families, such as in my generation. ...In my opinion, we are misperceived by the Westerners who consider the new generation of Chinese like myself as more liberal and pro-democratic, but in fact the majority of us are still pro-authoritarian – this is based on my observation over Weibo. ...To illustrate, they would label the people in Hong Kong who ask for an open general election as the running dogs of the British government. This is a rather naive form of nationalism as it calls human beings as the running dogs of the foreign forces. There is also another type of nationalism, which believes a country’s existence has holy characteristics, and they won’t look at a country from the perspective of its functionality, because they consider a country’s image value is more important. ... In the case of Yu Jiangrong who stands up for the underprivileged society, they would ask, based on their pro-authoritative attitude and belief in Darwinism, why the people of disadvantage didn’t work harder. As another example, with regard to the casualties caused by the government’s forced demolitions, they would label the victims as money extortionists, criticising them as the beggarly villagers who didn’t focus on their jobs, and instead meddling with the social orders with the help of those human rights defence lawyers and foreign forces.” (P19)

P26 highlighted the changes to the users’ age group on Weibo and the decreasing user loyalty and user activities. According to P26, the users’ age range has shifted from “middle-aged intellectuals”, where a lot of opinion leaders were enabled, to “younger age groups” who gather on Weibo for their common interests. Such a change in age groups is relevant to the content changes of Weibo, which was stated in the last section by some participants like P1, P7 and P9. Here is P26’s interpretation of Weibo changes in user age groups:

“(Speaking of changes on Weibo,) the second aspect is that the user's age range has started to change significantly. Several years ago, say like, during 2009-2011, I felt that the age of Weibo users was a bit mature. There was a large group of users, who are in their early 40s, so-called middle-aged intellectuals

and elites in various industries. They are the kind of users that Weibo was pursuing and named opinion leaders. Such a group of people was very active on Weibo, and it was also the main origins of information. Yet, with all the changes that happened over the years, until now, I have found that more and more Weibo users are from relatively younger age groups, or niche groups that are founded on shared interests or hobbies, such as cosplayers and video game players. There are no particular opinion leaders with strong influences among those small groups of young users; the most popular ones would merely have ten or twenty thousand followers.” (P26)

P26 later explained three possible factors that would have contributed to such changes in user age groups. Firstly, Weibo introduced some functional changes to disperse data flow and thus decreased the influence of Big V (大V) users. Secondly, the dominance of opinion leaders may have resulted in the simplification of information, which means social and political news would dominate the majority of Weibo topics. And thirdly, Weibo started to attract users from lower-tier cities, where younger people with lower education levels use more social media than older groups. Below is what P26 said about the changes in user age groups on Weibo:

“In summary, I think it is attributed to the following reasons. At first, it’s Weibo itself who doesn’t want to do this. Weibo has experienced many changes in the past years. Strategically, it doesn’t want to be held ransom by those social media influencers, thus it implemented re-routing and made changes in the areas of fans promotion and news feed. Secondly, there’s an increase of opinion leaders, who, from my personal view, bring out a more simplistic and pro-political trend of information, pushing it closer to the categories of societal news, current affairs or political news. It is because these are the topics that can attract the influencers’ attention, and they’re specialised in these areas, such as the topics of social issues and current affairs. Thirdly, Weibo has expanded beyond the metropolitan areas, so it is inevitable that it will change the Weibo user demographics, lowering the average age and education level, as well as making it more localised and dispersed.” (P26)

Through the analysis of the interview data, three primary changes of Weibo have been identified: functional changes, content changes, and changes in users. Regarding functional changes, there are now many updated functions to enhance user productivity and interactions, including multi-media posts, live streaming videos, and different means of commenting. However, many participants complained about the newly introduced software algorithmic sorting, which presents posts based on popularity or interactions rather than in a chronological timeline. While the non-targeted advertisements and its ineffective rejection option have become another major concern for users of the domestic version of Weibo, some users are able

to avoid both issues caused by the non-chronological sorting and the ads by using the international version.

With regard to content changes on Weibo, many participants raised their concerns about the decline in the social and political discussion. Although the overall Weibo content has been enriched in recent years, many participants indicated that the entertainment and marketing content are dominant. Also, some participants talked about the changes in Weibo user demographic, which has generally increased in quantity but decreased in terms of age groups.

Most importantly, these three changes are interconnected and have influenced each other. That is, the functional change of removing the 140 characters limit has enabled the richness of Weibo content, which then contributed to the growth of registered users. At the same time, the more users that registered on Weibo, the wider its topics become. To better attract users and advance user activities, Weibo then continuously updated and introduced new functions and features. Nevertheless, with this wider participation, aggressive and abusive users who promoted pro-authoritarian views, and some commercial and entertainment advertisers took over the platform, silencing some long-time users who had previously thought of Weibo as a “public square” for civil discussions.

#### 4.3.4 Weibo Censorship

In China, every media and communication service is regulated by the government and the ruling party. Weibo, as one of the most popular Chinese social media services, is strictly controlled. All of the interview participants had experience with Weibo censorship, directly or indirectly. As shown in the last section, some of the participants also mentioned this control when discussing changes that happened on Weibo over the years.

To comply with the country’s regulations and policies, Weibo has to perform self-censorship in addition to government monitoring. For instance, P2 mentioned a recently-issued regulation on managing sensitive words by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). P2 had this to say when talking about Weibo censorship:

“There was a piece of news this September that drew my attention. It was about the Cyberspace Administration of China, which issued a regulation about the keywords, requesting platforms such as Weibo to perform their obligations to carry out censorship. Even though you often can see some posts being removed and many ‘Error 404 Page Not Found’ messages, it hasn’t reached the extreme of not allowing you to post on Weibo, as I recall.” (P2)

Weibo adopts various means to control the flow of information, including the use of machine filtering and human monitoring. According to P26, the manual reviewing of content is required for all online media. Since the volume of posts published on Weibo is extremely large, P26 assumed that the process of censorship involves both machine and human labour. Below is what P26 said regarding the media control on Weibo:

“Surely there will be manual censorship all over the Chinese social media, and this demands a huge amount of human input. Internet enterprises’ major responsibility is for content distribution; no matter what platform or configuration. The volume of Weibo posts is enormous; thus, I reckon it will use machine learning for the initial filtering, followed by censorship conducted by humans.” (P26)

Two primary themes related to Weibo censorship emerged through the analysis of interview data: experiences of censorship and reaction to censorship. Both themes will be presented in the following sections of 4.3.4.1 and 4.3.4.2.

#### *4.3.4.1 Experiences of censorship*

Although every interview participant experienced Weibo censorship, there were differences between the levels and the methods of censorship that happened to them. One of the frequently mentioned methods was to prevent publishing, which is related to the approach of filtering sensitive words such as anti-government ideas or controversial social issues. Based on the experiences of P1, P7, P14 and P16, a comment or a post won’t be published if Weibo censors it due to sensitive words or content. P7 also highlighted that media control on Weibo has been tightening and the range of sensitive words has been expanded. This tightening control of Weibo content, reflected in P16’s experience, means that even daily recordings of personal life would be blocked due to sensitive words. Because there isn’t any explanation of what the sensitive words are, P16 finally got one of their posts published after self-checking and deleting certain words. Here are the experiences of Weibo censorship as described by four participants:

“In my personal experience, it won’t allow you to use certain words that are politically controversial in making a comment. I guess the same applies to creating your own post.” (P1)

“I experienced once or twice of a post not being able to be published, probably because it involves certain controversial information. It is ok to me and didn’t cause any impact upon me, as I’m not very keen on political debate. It’s getting harder and harder to get your posts published, due to the tightening of censorship on keywords. There are more serious cases, such as some of the

We Media being banned or even with their Weibo account being forced to close, because of their overt engagement on certain topics.” (P7)

“I had the experience of my posts being censored and not able to be published, triggered by the keywords or the content, which contain the controversial topics. Some posts are being removed after publication. For the posts that cannot be published, they will be sitting in the draft box.” (P14)

“I had one or two encounters in relation to the keywords censorship. Probably it could automatically detect the keywords in my posts and then disapproved their publication. Because my topics are circled around daily life and I won’t touch the sensitive issues on purpose, until now I still have no idea which words in those posts triggered the censorship. I tried to delete some words, and by this way the post was published finally.” (P16)

Like these four participants, P18 also emphasised the rapidly increasing sensitivity of Weibo’s content censoring and gave detailed interpretations of different means of censorship. P18 indicated that regardless of the topic, content won’t be approved if it contains sensitive words. It is even normal for a widely discussed topic to become invisible on Weibo if it contains sensitive words. P18 also talked about the approach of posts being deleted after they were published, and the use of “system busy” to prevent reposting. P18 shared the below about this approach to censorship:

“In the censorship system, you won’t be able to send out any post if it contains sensitive words. It’s a very sensitive system. It will censor your post even if it is talking about some other aspects of the content, which is, including aspects of daily life or entertainment. And it seems impossible to post content focused on some political issues. It is very common (to see) that a very hot topic, which appeared (on Weibo) for an hour or so, suddenly disappears in the entire network. Everyone has already gotten used to such situations. ...There used to be some annoying cases, for example, a post would be deleted after a while even if it was successfully published in my account at the time of reposting. Sometimes the reminder of ‘system busy’ will be shown when I try to repost and I cannot do it no matter how many times I click (the repost button). This is often the case. It’s what happened to me, a restriction on my rights of having my voice and being heard, in my limited experiences of forwarding posts.” (P18)

P19 also found that Weibo uses some “sophisticated” and indirect means of censorship. It’s unlikely for users to receive explanations on what has been censored or deleted. For P19, the means of preventing publishing is a gentle approach to remind users of self-censorship. P19’s post was successfully published after some amendments.

“Probably I had this experience once or twice, due to certain sensitive keywords, such as the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident (the Tiananmen Square Protest). Their approach is kind of sophisticated, making you perceive that (not being able to publish the post) was due to a technical problem, and they won’t tell you straightforward what went wrong. This case is quite similar to the attempts of using Google in mainland China, as it won’t tell you it’s being banned, instead it displays the “404” or “not found” messages. It seems it’s telling me the post is not being able to be posted at the moment, and it won’t tell me the exact reason even if I ask via private messaging. I assume what was making my posts fail was because of certain keywords, rather than the entire article crossing the red line. Of course, I have been paying attention to this kind of issue; therefore, they use a more gentle or veiled method to inform me, hinting me to make some changes. And after some modifications, my posts were published in the end.” (P19)

Additionally, both P25 and P27 mentioned the forwarding of some posts being prevented and explained that unsuccessful reposting was often flagged as “posting failure”, “system error”, or “system busy”. Similar to what P18 had experienced, P25 received a failure notification for a post they had forwarded earlier, even though a classmate had already seen and commented on it.

“I didn’t receive the warning, but my repost of the specific post wasn’t successful. It didn’t display the error message originally; and after a while the message appeared. When it was sent, it failed again. And my classmates made comments on my post.” (P25)

“If the comments are related to any significant incidents, their publication won’t be successful – it will indicate system errors, or system busy. I remember this from when I shared a post and added a comment on it.” (P27)

Compared to the experience of the above participants, P4 and P17’s examples below of being prevented from publishing are more sinister. According to P4, posting, commenting and reposting the activities of overseas users was restricted on Weibo during the June 4 anniversary/memorial of Tiananmen Square incident. For local users who are active on political topics, based on the experience of P17, the same kind of restrictions would also be applied. Nevertheless, P17 managed to escape the restriction in recent years by only participating in the topic through posting seemingly unrelated images with an implied meaning that pointed to June 4.

“Sometimes certain societal news would be banned or removed. I was in the US around the anniversary of the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident, and people were not able to publish their Weibo posts during that period, even if they were overseas. At the moment, I think the censorship system is a very powerful one.” (P4)



“Of course, I had the experience of censorship, and my posts had been disapproved many times. The ban on posting lasted for a couple of days – I was unable to post my content, but still could view others’ regular posts. The ban is because my post contained content about the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident. Every year I’d be banned for a couple days during that period. Therefore, for the past couple of years I would use a tactful way to post an ambiguous image only without adding any text with it – the implied message would only be understood by the people who shared a similar sentiment as mine.” (P17)

Deletion of content is another common means of Weibo censorship, as mentioned earlier by P4, P7, and P19. Ten additional participants discussed the deletion approach when sharing their experiences of Weibo censorship. Such deletion happens after the content has been posted, with or without warning notifications being sent to the user who posted the message.

While P3 described the deletion approach as “burn after reading” (閱後即焚), P5 emphasised that the buttons of reposting and commenting as well as the personal content could be disabled at any moment. Some participants, including P8, P21, P22, and P23, pointed out that Weibo would leave messages on the deleted content, such as “the image has been deleted” (該照片已被刪除), “due to violation of the rules” (因爲違反規定), or “the content you posted has been deleted” (您發佈的內容已被刪除). P20 mentioned that there was no notification received after the comment had been deleted due to Weibo censorship. P20 then clarified that uploaded videos, account names, and portfolio images were censored prior to publishing. Below are the experiences of such deletion shared by interview participants:

“I often shared the others’ posts, but after a while they would be removed by the platform. Most of my Weibo posts were not original UGC (user generated content), that’s because of my timid personality and I’d try to avoid trouble. In my knowledge, literally every micro blogging platform would have some sort of content monitoring implemented, and that’s why people always only share others’ published posts. Nowadays, more and more of the posts are being deleted, and we give this a term - ‘burn after reading’.” (P3)

“Currently, in regard to the shared content, the share button is not controlled by the user, as the post can be cancelled by the platform anytime, and it seems that they will get rid of the comment too, even for the posts written by the users as they could be deleted without a reason or any advance notification.” (P5)

“There were not many restrictions in the past. More and more restrictions are implemented now upon the images and texts, as well as the keywords

pertaining to controversial topics – originally these measures did not exist at all. Some time ago there was a post of a 3x3 grid puzzle of an image of the bare-chested Pigsy (aka. Zhu Bajie, who is one of the main characters in the Chinese novel ‘Pilgrimage to the West’). The whole image was diced into 9 small pieces; however, there was one piece that showed the Pigsy’s nipple was not being displayed. I saw that post but didn’t share it. At that time, the controversial piece was already not being able to display, with a message of ‘this photo has been removed’.” (P8)

“I rarely write my posts. Basically, I only share others’ content. There were several occasions when those posts were deleted a couple days after I shared them.” (P15)

“Yes, I had the experience of being censored. When I was young, I was keen to follow the news on social issues. When commenting on the popular users’ posts, your comment would disappear automatically or be deleted if it contained certain sensitive words, such as the negative review of the government or some other matters. The comment would no longer be found, and there was no prompt asking you to delete them. If it is a user-generated post, such as posting a video clip, the system would give you a notification that it will take some time to go through the approval process. And the censorship would also be applied when updating signature and profile image.” (P20)

“I had the experience of the posts being deleted. After a period of time, I’d go back and check on the posts I shared on Weibo when I got bored, and discover some posts were deleted due to the sensitive topic or something else. After the deletion, the system only mentions that ‘it’s because of violating the regulations’ and doesn’t give you the details.” (P21)

“I never had this sort of experience. Firstly, social issues are not my cup of tea. Secondly, I don’t publish personal opinions, so my posts normally won’t involve the controversial topics. I saw people would post a screenshot of their deleted posts, with the message that ‘your published content has been removed’, on their Weibo and complain.” (P22)

“In most of the cases, it was related to the posts I shared with the original news article being deleted. When you check on your Weibo’s reposted commentaries, you can see the related original post has disappeared. The post deletion will leave a mark in your Weibo history, so you can be aware of it.” (P23)

Similar to what P21 mentioned, both P25 and P28 suggested that they are often confused by the principles behind Weibo censorship as it is not transparent to the public. The deletion of content, according to P25, can happen to any user regardless of their status. That is, even content published by the supreme court or the Weibo CEO could be censored and deleted.

Nevertheless, P28 further assumed that certain content was deleted because it had drawn too much attention on Weibo.

“Sometimes it’s hard to get Weibo’s point. It’s interesting that it would remove the posts written by the courts and even the Supreme Court. What’s more, there’s a Weibo account called “Come and Go” (來去之間); and basically, people know this account belongs to a Weibo CEO who is in charge of its micro blogging business. Even his Weibo post would sometimes be deleted by his own staff.” (P25)

“There are no specific details about the restrictions imposed by Weibo. After publishing a post, it will send you a follow-up message, informing that your content has violated certain cyberspace regulations, and then it will remove your post. It is often that the original post you shared had been deleted in a couple days after you shared it – maybe that post went viral as it’s been shared many times, and this has triggered the censorship mechanism.” (P28)

In addition to the two main means of Weibo censorship, four participants indicated a relatively new method – blocking posts to followers. Without notifying the user, Weibo sometimes sets a censored post as “private” and creates the illusion for the user that the post is visible to everyone. However, the user is the only one who can actually see it and does not realise it has been censored from being viewed by others. The means of blocking posts to followers is rarely mentioned since to the user it will seem like their content has been posted. P2 became aware of this method through participating in a discussion of a flooding disaster on Weibo. After discussing and commenting about the disaster, P2 couldn’t access any news updates about the story on the second day and realised that relevant content may be blocked. P2 had this to say when talking about this experience of Weibo censorship:

“I have one encounter of the censorship that was in regards to the posts about the flooding in Xingtai city, Hebei province. The news report mentioned it caused some casualties; afterwards the online news clarified that it was only a rumour and the number of casualties was far much less than reported. I followed this news on the first day and joined the discussion in the commentary area. However, on the following day there was no more relevant news update on my Weibo. In this case, the censorship mechanism didn’t delete the news report; however, once the users took part in the relevant discussion, they could still be banned from receiving any further update of that story in their news feed as they may have stepped over the red line with some controversial keywords.” (P2)

Compared to P2's receiver-end experience, P10, P12, and P13 were the users whose posts were set to "private" and hence only visible to themselves. P12 discovered this on account of having two Weibo accounts, one for personal use and the other for work-related use. Therefore, P12 found out that a post published in the work-related account had become invisible to followers including to his own personal account. P12 refers to this method as "data traffic restriction" (限制浏览量), which is linked to the newly introduced algorithmic sorting. For P10 and P13, their blocked posts were noticed as they have been questioned by friends about a particular post or incident. Here are the experiences of blocking posts to followers shared by the three participants:

"After the widespread coverage of the big explosion at Tianjin Port, there was another fire incident involving a paper manufacturer that happened in a nearby area, and very close to my school. I could smell the burning in the air, and I wrote a Weibo post about this – Weibo immediately restricted the distribution of this post, making it only visible to me but not the others – it didn't remove the post by force. Other than mentioning the burning smell, my post didn't say anything else. In Weibo's notification, it said something along the line that my post has been restricted or deleted in accordance with certain regulations. Originally, I thought my post would be removed, however when I logged onto my home page, I can still see it there. But, when I asked my close friends, they all said they couldn't see such a post at all." (P10)

"There was a post on my Weibo about the "Red Yellow Blue" childcare scandal – I think this post will no longer be available to the public viewers. At that time, a reporter named Li Mingming called for a press conference around that scandal, and I shared a post in this regard through my regular Weibo account. However, when I used my second account to browse news, I realised that the particular post, including its shares by others and all their comments on it had gone invisible, although I could see it from my posting account. Based on this, I think the censorship mechanism has evolved from simply content removal to restricting the post's reach. In the past, I would simply delete the post or issue a clarification on the so-called rumours. Nowadays, because of the improved algorithm on the news feed, it will block out such distribution." (P12)

"A while ago Weibo enacted a ban on all content with the rainbow theme, which was thought to be related to the same sex marriage topics. During that period, I bought a piece of cloth (with the rainbow pattern) and wanted to show it online but had no intention to take part in the discussion (of same sex marriage); however, in a few minutes my post was blocked – people can no longer see the post after then, except for myself, even though it wasn't deleted." (P13)

Three common means of Weibo censorship were addressed by interview participants, which were:

- 1) preventing publishing,
- 2) deletion of published content, and
- 3) blocking posts to followers.

Some participants briefly mentioned the extreme cases of censorship, such as account removal, interrogation, or even arrest. Since participants experienced various degrees of censorship and understood it from their diverse perspectives, their reactions to censorship are also varied.

#### *4.3.4.2 Reactions to censorship*

Even though all interview participants experienced varying degrees of Weibo censorship, participants reacted in different ways. Some participants expressed their understanding of the need to regulate online content, but they still had concerns and disappointments with the tightness of Weibo censorship. For both P1 and P5, content relating to pornography, violence, drugs, or human trafficking should definitely be censored and banned. While P1 had concerns about the control of political discussions and the authenticity of online content, P5 questioned the original purpose of Weibo censorship and argued it had been used as a tool for manipulating public opinion. More specifically, P5 pointed out that content reflecting the truth, society, or appeals of the weak is often censored and thus restricted. Below are the comments made by P1 and P5 about Weibo censorship:

“In regards to censorship, I think there should be more censorship on pornographic content. As for some political issues, I think it is appropriate for people to participate in the discussion; however, the existing system doesn’t allow people to discuss certain topics. Because of the existence of fake news, there will be negative impact if people can carry out their discussions freely without any guidance. Thus, it is hard to tell whether censorship is good or bad.” (P1)

“Personally, I’m in support of the censorship or the system that can filter out some information. Firstly, it is obvious that the news censorship should be carried out by the relevant authority. Secondly, in regards with the censored content, it should restrict materials of pornography, violence, drugs, and human trafficking – this sort of information should never be freely distributed. Furthermore, the censorship mechanism should avoid being utilised as a means to manipulate the public opinion. However, in reality it is the opposite,

as we can see that the censorship is applied upon the materials that reveal the truth or the social appeals from the disadvantaged, instead of those about pornography, violence, drugs, and human trafficking – obviously, it has become a tool for public opinion manipulation. Therefore, the current censorship system is reviled, as it doesn't fulfil its functionalities as it's supposed to, and becomes a means for certain people or organisations to seek their own profits.” (P5)

Despite showing understanding of the need to perform censorship and maintain a “peaceful” environment, P22 argued that freedom of speech should not be restricted on Weibo since it had been designed as a platform for public discussions. P22 had this to say when commenting on Weibo censorship:

“I can understand the censorship on Weibo – it is understandable that its developers or administrators have to carry out the censorship or traffic restriction in order to maintain a relatively peaceful atmosphere, as Weibo is accessible by anyone for news browsing; however, I'm not a fan of the censorship. If Weibo wants to provide a platform for people to freely express themselves, it should carry out this intention to the end without any cowardly surrender to restrict people's discussion in the name of safeguarding social stability.” (P22)

P10, P25 and P28 expressed their disappointment in Weibo censorship, due to its unspecified deletion of content relating to the censored topic. P10 then pointed out there is no other source to replace Weibo, hence tolerating the censorship is the only option. For P25, Weibo censorship is a “mystery” that serves the purpose of maintaining social stability. P25 continuously pointed out the approach of “if a problem cannot be solved, then (we) solve the person who raised the problem” (解決不了問題就解決提出問題的人). Furthermore, according to P28, any comments or discussions made on state politics or laws and regulations would be censored. Regardless of whether a suggestion is valuable, constructive, and positive or not, it will eventually be deleted when it refers to those topics. Here are the experiences of the three participants in regard to Weibo censorship:

“I've known for long that Sina Weibo would delete people's posts; however, I'm not sure about its bottom line or what exactly would trigger its alert. For example, to me I don't think I said anything controversial, but Weibo would think the contrary. I have no other choice but to live with this, if it doesn't want me to discuss certain topics. I cannot give up Weibo as it is more centralised and convenient than the other apps. Even though it has an impact upon the user experience, I have to accept and tolerate it.” (P10)

“The censorship system is a mystery. In fact, you simply don't know which aspect it is censoring. Of course, things in China are usually handled in terms of stability. But a society cannot just be a ‘harmonious society’. What is harmony? Just being harmonious from its surface? How do you interpret the word ‘harmonious society’? In a harmonious society, there won't be only positive and no negative. It's impossible. It is common to say that a society cannot be like this. Then, to maintain the stability, they are ‘if a problem cannot be solved, then (we) solve the person who raised the problem.’” (P25)

“I feel sorry for those posts being deleted, especially the ones that I've been following. I think their opinions are worthy of consideration, as you can see, they are mild-mannered, without any trace of being extreme, and their suggestions are very constructive and neutral; however, they still ended up being deleted. Take the “Red Yellow Blue” kindergarten saga for example, those posts gave suggestions on how to handle the incident, as well as any regulations that should be improved – I think they are good stuff, but Weibo still deletes them. In my perception, if it is a political topic or the subject is related to the regulations, as long as you're giving feedback to the government, your posts are very likely to be deleted, no matter if the suggestions are constructive, positive, outstanding, or with a mild tone – so we can say the censorship applied by Weibo is very strict.” (P28)

Because of the reinforcement of censorship on Weibo, some participants have become cautious and thus began to withdraw from public discussion. For instance, P6 referred to the current censorship as an invisible tension, which requires users to perform self-censorship prior to publishing any content on Weibo. Friends of P6 also shared the same feeling and found that their expressions have been restricted.

“Frankly, it has left a deep impression on me that, when compared with the very start of when I used Weibo, people have become a bit cautious about the content of their posts, even though they are still very keen to follow the social hot topics. There is something I'm not quite sure, but from my observation, people are very reluctant to touch a lot of topics, and even when those posts got published, they can't avoid the fate of being deleted – it seems there is a form of invisible force that strongly controls the cyberspace. The young fellows close to me also mentioned they have the similar feeling of speech being restricted and controlled. I'd take this into consideration and try to avoid those topics, as it's necessary to have prudence about your words and actions in China.” (P6)

Weibo users such as P9 would now rather not participate in discussions on Weibo and limit their activities to browsing and reposting. P9 indicated two reasons for withdrawing from public discussion: 1) it's time-consuming to get content approval (e.g. publishing a video), and 2) there are no guidelines for users to avoid sensitive words but serious punishments for those

who have inadvertently mentioned them. That is, a user's activity on Weibo may affect their work and life in the real world.

“I used to post some video clips on Weibo, however, the approval process is really long for the visual content, same for those lengthy text posts, and this makes me become inactive in posting. Firstly, we live in an era of fast tempo, and we have no time to wait for the delayed information. Secondly, we're not sure which words are categorised as sensitive. Besides myself, many people in my social circle would share others' posts on their Weibo; however, most of the time we only have our discussion (of those topics) when we meet face-to-face at a gathering during mealtime, and we call ourselves onlookers on Weibo. I asked them why they don't comment on Weibo. They answered saying they're afraid if their comments on certain matters have been dug out, it will cause disruptions to their lives and jobs. In light of this, most of the time we're spectators only, without making a noise.” (P9)

Furthermore, P9 explained their withdrawal through addressing the judicial interpretation of “rumour” announced by the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate (or Prosecutor General's Office) in 2016. Based on what P9 had learned, users will be sentenced if the content they posted or reposted is later defined as rumours, or if the content has been reposted more than 500 times. Nevertheless, P9 doesn't think it's fair for users who have a large number of followers if they accidentally repost a rumour that easily reaches the 500 count.

“I seldom make comments. I'm not sure if you're aware of the Supreme Court and the Highest Prosecutor General's Office's legal definition of rumour, which states that penalty will be applied if the post or your comment turns out be a rumour and it has been shared over 500 times. I used to do some research about this. If you're the source of the information/ rumour and your post has been reposted over 500 times, you will be found guilty; if you're an innocent onlooker who has shared that post, and you have a relatively large follower base to reach 500 people, you will also receive the punishment, but I don't think this is fair and reasonable, and I question its legality.” (P9)

In terms of extreme cases of censorship, while users can be banned from publishing or commenting and even face the removal of their accounts on Weibo, their safety may also be threatened and they could face charges. According to P18, who had the extreme experience of being questioned and a photo taken by a police officer, the withdrawal from public discussion is a form of self-protection. Besides the unexpected home visit from a police officer, P18's phone conversation had also been monitored before. The case of P18 has again proven that the



online censorship is extended to offline monitoring. Below is the detailed explanation made by P18 reflecting their avoidance of sensitive content:

“On the other hand, it’s all about my personal safety. I feel it’s a bit dangerous if I post something that is regarded as extreme or sensitive. Basically, after reading that kind of posts, I won’t repost them. If I want to have a deeper understanding of the concerned matter, I’d spend time on browsing the other websites for information. Previously, when I returned from the UK, I had a visit by the police. I asked them, “Why’re you looking for me?” while keeping the door closed but with a small gap. They said they were investigating my current status after studying abroad. “I cannot see you. Can you open the door wider?” they asked. I thought it was no big deal, and being polite, I did what they requested. And then, the police started taking photos of me without my permission. There was another incident. My online posts were especially proactive during my time in the UK. When I made calls to China, I could obviously sense that my phone was being tapped. That’s the reason why I’m not feeling safe in terms of my personal safety. How can I not be scared as there are so many overseas students, but the police can still (identify me and) come to my place to take photo of me? So, I have to be careful.” (P18)

Similar to P9, P27 also gave two reasons for their withdrawal from public discussion on Weibo, which related to the failure of participation and the fear of being arrested. P27 had this to say when explaining the reaction to censorship:

“After several attempts, you will realise you won’t be able to publish your post as long as it contains the sensitive materials, so I no longer comment on Weibo – after all, even after writing a long paragraph of comment, it won’t be published. Sometimes you would feel scared after hearing some cases, such as a person has been arrested for publishing some materials – it frightens me.” (P27)

Unlike the above participants’ reactions, P15 chose to ignore the censorship and has always maintained the regular use of Weibo, especially reposting.

“I don’t care too much about the censorship. I’d repost if I wanted to at the time, afterwards the post may be deleted, and I don’t care about this.” (P15)

Nevertheless, two participants hold positive attitudes towards Weibo censorship. For P21, censorship would result in enlightening people to think more deeply about the sensitive topic. That is, the crowds on Weibo may start to reflect on the issue and question the deletion.

“For the public space, it deserves freedom, and freedom of speech is very important. This type of censorship makes me overthink, just like many anonymous bystanders, you’d be curious if there’s anything tricky going on, and for those politically sensitive topics, you would speculate on what is the government suppressing etc.” (P21)

At the same time, P23 suggested that the censoring after publishing was indeed providing opportunities for information dissemination to a certain extent. As soon as a post has been published, it will be viewed by one’s account followers. Some followers may predict its sensitivity (and know that it would be deleted), and thus screenshot and save the post for further dissemination. According to P23, the rapid dissemination characteristic of Weibo helps an issue draw public attention regardless of the tightening of censorship. In addition to what P21 believed, P23 proposed that censors would possibly reflect and adjust their deletion standards. Below are the detailed comments made by P23 in relation to Weibo censorship:

“The current means of censoring at the time of publication is okay. Technically speaking, Weibo has not used the means of censoring before publishing. It censors posts after their publications. I think it is OK because the information will already be spread once it has been published. That is, someone will see the information when it has been spread out. There will be someone taking a screenshot and save it. For me, Weibo has not changed such properties even with the reinforced censorship. There will be more and more people paying attention to it. As a matter of fact, every time you censor and delete (a post), you may be questioned. Someone will take the screenshot, and someone will ask: why was it deleted? Therefore, I think, all these doubts and questions will facilitate a reflection of the censorship: is there anything I can avoid deleting and what do I really need to delete? They will then adjust (the rules). Because the boundary is very blurry, and they didn’t tell you what are the things that you cannot do.” (P23)

In this section, both participants’ experiences and actions in Weibo censorship has been analysed. All interview participants experienced various means of censorship to different degrees, and the most mentioned methods were the prevention of publishing, deletion of content, and blocking posts to followers. In fact, some participants did point out that Weibo censorship has become tighter compared to its early years. For many participants, the reinforcement of media control on Weibo has resulted in them withdrawing from public discussions. On the one hand, some participants expressed their understanding of certain rules to restrict online content, especially the ones relating to pornography, violence and drugs. On the other, participants had great concerns about their safety and worried that any “inappropriate” online content they made or reposted would affect their lives, causing arrest

and a goal sentence for example. Yet, some participants see the positive side of Weibo censorship as it did allow dissemination of information to a certain extent, despite the very limited amount of time and space.

#### 4.3.5 News and Information Sources

As indicated earlier in section 4.3.2 Use of Weibo, many participants described their primary activity on Weibo as browsing, and such browsing is an act that is associated with adopting information. Later in section 4.3.3 Changes on Weibo, regarding content changes, some participants highlighted that Weibo content has been greatly enriched in recent years. However, do participants consider Weibo as their main source of news and information? If so, why do they choose Weibo? And do they have sources other than Weibo? If not, what are their primary information sources? The answers to these questions will be analysed in this section, based on comments from interview participants.

Based on the data, more than half of my interview participants addressed Weibo as their main source of news and information, through following their acquaintances and accounts they are interested in. As P4 explained, the reason for considering Weibo as a primary source is that official news will be released on Weibo in the first place. Similarly, P13 pointed out that “a lot of news is initially published on Weibo”, especially for cases of ordinary people who seek for help. For P15, Weibo is more like a version of a news website to get to know current affairs, political news and mainstream viewpoints. The three participants had this to say when discussing their current news and information sources:

“Admittedly, most of my news sources are from it (Weibo). In addition to the news stories, I’ve followed a lot of my classmates (on Weibo), or the people who I think are interesting, and the people who are close to me. I think it is like using Twitter in the US – for some news reports about social issues, they would normally first appear on Twitter. In China’s case, the government announcements would be first published on Weibo.” (P4)

“(In regard to the news source) it is mainly from Weibo. Nowadays you will see a lot of first-hand stories are published via Weibo. For the masses who have no power, Weibo is a platform for them to seek help; therefore, it is common for many stories on social issues to break on Weibo to attract public attention.” (P13)

“Weibo has become a very important channel for me to acquire the latest news and political information nowadays. I treat it like a news source, similar to

NetEase News and Tencent News that I used before, and also a window to see the mainstream opinion related to the news.” (P15)

In addition, three participants choose Weibo for reading news and obtaining information because it provides the convenience for reading a wide range of topics. Rather than downloading and reading through each smartphone application of news organisations, both mainstream and self-media, P9 followed them on Weibo. P11 also suggested that viewing public accounts in WeChat and news applications is troublesome, and P17 found that browsing on news websites is more time-consuming than browsing on Weibo. Here are the comments made by the three participants about their news and information sources:

“I didn’t download/ install any of the news apps, so Weibo is my major source for news. On Weibo, I would follow not only the traditional news outlets, but also some new media outlets, such as Ergeng Shitang, Ali Video, The Paper. In my opinion, Weibo has a broader reach and saves the hassle of downloading the news apps. For example, I can just follow Beijing News and the Financial News on Weibo, without needing to download their apps as they would take up the space of my phone. Also, I don’t have time to read them one after one. Basically, the news published across these platforms are similar.” (P9)

“Weibo is my source of information, and I prefer it better than WeChat in regard to news acquiring. For instance, there are different official accounts at WeChat, which pushes news articles to you on a daily basis. However, it is very troublesome to me, as you need to follow many public accounts and open them one by one through clicking. Even though I’ve been following many public accounts, I seldom read through them. Of course, I didn’t download/ install the news app. I’m getting used to use Weibo and didn’t think about trying the other source.” (P11)

“I don’t have TV set at home, and my information are mainly from Weibo, because I think it takes longer time to browse news online. In the past when Weibo didn’t exist, I used to browse news websites, but the browsing experience was really troublesome. When you try to find a news article that you’re interested in, other entertainment news would come along and make you feel being inundated, while you just have no time to deal with them.” (P17)

Like the above three participants, P24 preferred Weibo to other news platforms since users were able to choose what to follow and read. In fact, P24 would unlink the news service of WeChat due to the forced approach of pushing articles from Tencent News.

“Most of them (news) are from Weibo, because I don’t pay too much attention on the other news platforms. For example, I would turn off the news feed function at WeChat, as it wasn’t my preference to follow those news stories

being push to me. However, for Weibo, I would follow the news voluntarily.”  
(P24)

Despite using Weibo as an exclusive source of news, P23 emphasised the confidence on accounts operated by professional media over individuals or self-media. For P23, news reporting is a practice reflecting timeliness and authority. Therefore, news published by individuals or “self-media” (aka. grassroots media) on Weibo is information rather than actual “news”. P23 often read their comments or analysis about news without taking their reporting into account.

“I only read news on Weibo. In my Weibo, I’ve been following up to 20 accounts in regard to current affairs and political news. I consider time effectiveness and authoritativeness to be crucial for a news story. In light of this, I barely read the stories published by the self-media as I won’t trust the story if it’s published by an individual. But I would read their commentaries and analysis, without treating it as a piece of news story. I’m inclined to trust the traditional media outlets, such as: CCTV News, Toutiao News, People’s Daily, Beijing News, and Southern Weekly.” (P23)

Among those who stated that Weibo is their main channel for obtaining information, some use it together with other sources, including traditional media, new media, and social media. For instance, P18 read news from traditional media, alternative news websites, and Weibo at the same time. While P7 and P20 both ranked the information source of Weibo as first; P7 put BBC the second to *6park* (an Internet forum for overseas Chinese), but P20 considered WeChat the second and print media the last. Like P9 and P11, P21 did not download new applications for a smartphone. On top of reading the hot topic list and official media accounts on Weibo, P21 would also read news from websites and public accounts on WeChat. Below are the experiences shared by P18, P20, and P21 regarding their source of news and information:

“I would look at both Weibo and BBC for news stories. I also scan and skim 6park.com very quickly, not sure if it’s available in Australia, whose layout is an array of news topics.” (P7)

“In regard to the main source of news, I definitely would go for the traditional media. I often check in with Weibo, which is a comparatively major source, as well as several other websites, such as Epoch Times and Jasmine Revolution, which were blocked in mainland China. Recently, I followed a couple extra websites about the Hong Kongese citizen society.” (P18)

“At the moment, my news source is mainly Weibo, and the friends’ circle of WeChat – the reposts from my contacts, or the information being pushed by

the following public accounts. Lastly, I would read the print media, because our school has subscribed to some traditional media outlets.” (P20)

“I rarely download/ install the news app. Normally, they are news feed on webpage or inside the pop-up windows. I would also read news on WeChat, sometimes the Xinhua News and China Daily. And then, I would discover news stories via discussion with colleagues. Weibo is another major channel. I would often look at the top searched list or the hot topics on Weibo, as a habit. I would also follow some official media accounts on it, such as Southern Weekend and New Weekly.” (P21)

For participants who obtain information from Weibo and other media outlets, the role of each information source can be varied. According to P8, news available on Weibo and WeChat are “reproduced”, and it’s necessary to search online and seek more information. On the contrary, P12 preferred to find out what had happened on Weibo after becoming interested in news. Additionally, P12 followed users who speak for the truth on Weibo as sources of information. The two participants had this to say when discussing their news sources:

“Weibo is the source of news to me. This depends on the reposts from the people I’ve followed. Once there’s a breaking news emerge, it will be distributed across Weibo and the friends’ circle (of WeChat). Because these stories might be processed, I would wonder what’s the truth underneath. Once bumped into the topic I’m interested in, I’ll conduct further search, and to discover the truth of the story.” (P8)

“Weibo is my major news source. I sometimes watch TV news programs, such as the CCTV news. However, if I’d like to dig deeper of the truth of the story, I definitely would go on Weibo. What’s more, I’ve been following a lot of Weibo accounts who are daring to speak out.” (P12)

Again, the advantage of Weibo for P14 is to dig more relevant information on a news story while P14’s regular sources are news application and Weibo. P14 then pointed out, in the case of breaking news, a user would be able to access all posts relating to the topic through Weibo’s search function, and the top listed ones often are published by various professional media accounts. Which means it is more convenient than clicking into each official Weibo account of the mainstream media and then reading through all posts.

“I use news apps and news feeds, and Weibo also pushes breaking news. If the topic happens to be the one I’m interested in, I would use Weibo to find out more information, such as the Tianjin explosion incident or the earthquake – you can use keywords to search on Weibo, and among the search results normally the ones from the mainstream media, which is with authoritativeness, would appear on top. This is the method I used to look for the stories, rather

than going through the mainstream media accounts one by one on Weibo to read their news stories.” (P14)

More specifically, P19 classified the sources of news and information into two categories: international and local. P19 reads international news from the BBC application and mainstream media accounts on Twitter, but follows professional media accounts and local news on Weibo. By giving an example of the demolition of houses in the Daxing district in Beijing, P19 identified that certain local stories and issues would not be reported through official media but could be made available on Weibo, with ingenious circumvention of censorship.

“Basically, I followed a lot of media accounts on Weibo, such as Wall Street Journal that is deemed to be trustworthy. I use the BBC world service app on my phone for everyday news reading. I also use the VPN service to access Twitter when I’m in Mainland China. On Twitter, I follow News York Times, the Economics, Financial Times, Bloomberg and other mainstream serious media outlets. In my observation, Weibo’s news sources are mainly from the news around us, such as the local news, particularly the local news that was banned by the authorities. For example, there were a lot of houses were demolished in Beijing’s Daxing District. People would use some intricate methods to circumvent censorship on Weibo, so that the public can know which village it was, for example, and how much force the authorities deployed, or what happened to those people being impacted.” (P19)

Nevertheless, there are participants who primarily use smartphone applications for news organisations and social media services, such as WeChat, and merely see Weibo as a supplementary source of information. Despite the dependence of professional media, P5 still suggested Weibo was a window for reviewing information that was not reported on official news channels and for observing public opinions and social problems. Taking the “coal-to-gas” project news as an example, P5 pointed out that the mainstream media represented it from a positive perspective while related content on Weibo reflected another side of the story. For P6, who often reads news via new media outlets, particularly through smartphone applications, Weibo still has the timeliness of disclosing hot social issues. Here are the statements that were given by P5 and P6 on the source of news and information:

“Weibo plays an important role as complementary to the official reports by revealing the hidden information. I would use Weibo if I want to find out the information missed from the official channels. Additionally, it serves as a small window so that you can see the public’s sentiment and their understanding of certain social issues. Of course, I would also use Weibo to follow up on social news, such as the ‘gas replacing coal’ project in Beijing

and some northern areas, the news reports from the official channels are comparatively standardised, either claiming the progress is underway smoothly, or the government takes good care of its people. However, the other side of the story was revealed on Weibo.” (P5)

“It’s mainly the online news. I’m more likely to browse the news app. I think stories on critical social issue often break out very quickly on Weibo. I also would use the new media apps, such as the app of NetEase News, but I won’t buy hard copy newspapers.” (P6)

Furthermore, four participants referred to WeChat as their prime source of news and information, which included different channels provided within the service. For instance, P16 and P26 mainly read news from articles published by WeChat public accounts, P22 gets to know the latest news and information through discussions that happened in group chats, and P25 obtains information via the reposted articles in the friends’ circle. Being a supplementary source, Weibo is used by P16 to get a general idea of recent events, while for P22, it is for reading about popular topics. They had this to say when sharing their news sources:

“My news source is from WeChat’s public account. For the breaking news, I would check it on Weibo. If I want to get more details about the event and its analysis, I would try browse the public accounts (of WeChat). If I only want to know about the general situation of the news, I’d use Weibo.” (P16)

“Regarding news and information, the majority of them are from the WeChat groups. In this sense, I’m a passive recipient of the news. I joined many groups, and I would only glance the information posted within those groups. I also followed WeChat’s public accounts for news. In fact, I would use Weibo for news as well, but only for those widely discussed issues.” (P22)

“The sources of my information and news are from various public accounts of WeChat and the reposts within the friends’ circle. On Weibo, the media accounts I followed are The Paper and the Yanzhao Metropolis Daily for news reports. Many opinion leaders that I followed have been banned, such as Ren Zhiqiang, Zhang Yihe, and a law professor at Beijing University.” (P25)

“Weibo plays a part, but nowadays it’s no longer the main source. The public accounts on WeChat have played a more important role. I also rely on the professional news websites accumulated from my daily searches. In terms of the traditional media, I rarely buy the hardcopies, but I would follow their WeChat public accounts and their Weibo accounts.” (P26)

Moreover, participants like P1 and P28 hardly use Weibo as their news and information source but focused on reading news from smartphone applications such as NetEase News (網易新聞) or Toutiao (今日頭條). According to P1, the content of the Weibo post was too brief to get the



general understanding of a news story. Thus, P1 preferred to browse on Toutiao rather than Weibo, even to simply kill time.

“When I’m bored, I would randomly browse the news on Toutiao. I won’t browse Weibo, because its content is too short. Take the verified media accounts as an example, such as the People’s Daily; you can finish reading their news story instantly, because the word count is merely a little over 100 words (each post) even for serious news. Sometimes you need more content to think, that’s why I don’t like reading Weibo – the stories are too brief.” (P1)

“I use several news apps, as well as the self-media for listening to the voices of the people involved. I would subscribe to the news feed of NetEase, or the similar official accounts of the new media, and use its app on my cell phone.” (P28)

In addition to P1 and P28, two other participants who currently reside overseas rely mainly on Western social media rather than Weibo for news and information. Both P3 and P27 identified Facebook as their major news source. In fact, P3 explained that the tightened news control, the overflowing entertaining content, and the decline of professional reporting are the reasons for not using Weibo as an information source. They had these to say when discussing their source of news and information.

“When I was in college, Weibo was my main source of news, because it was comparatively more liberal in terms of the news censorship at that time. Nowadays the control over news reporting is very strict, and the environment for the new media is getting worse and worse – everything is centred on eyeball catching and formulating, with less and less professional reporting; therefore, my demand for the information on Weibo is getting lower and lower, especially as I’m living abroad and there is no need to use a VPN, and it is more convenient for me to use Twitter and Facebook. Weibo’s social attribute is not very good, and I currently use Facebook as my news source. I also have subscription for the New York Times.” (P3)

“Facebook is the major information source for me. The newsfeed on Facebook is a very good function, as it would send you different sources relevant to a story topic, so that you can look at it more comprehensively from different angle. For example, after watching a BBC video, it will feed you the CNN coverage of the same story. This is very convenient.” (P27)

Participants’ sources of news and information have been analysed in this section. Even though more than half of my interview participants referred to Weibo as their primary news source, some participants used it as a supplementary source or hardly considered it a news source at all. According to the above participants, Weibo’s advantage of being a news and information

source includes the convenience of access to reading a large number of professional media content via one platform. And for those who consider Weibo a supplementary source, they still recognise that Weibo provides accessibility to information that won't be disclosed on mainstream media.

However, for participants who prefer to obtain news and information through WeChat, Facebook, or other news applications, the disadvantage of using Weibo as a news source is the brevity of its posts and the unprofessional practices of citizen content.

#### 4.3.6 Mainstream Media

As mentioned in the introduction chapter (section 1.2.2), many local and international mainstream media outlets, including state-controlled press and government sectors, registered and have been actively operating accounts on Weibo. Yet, this is just one aspect of the relationship between Weibo and mainstream media. Some of my interview participants stated that mainstream media would also use citizen content from Weibo and discuss the topics raised by Weibo users.

When being asked about how mainstream media engage with Weibo and its content, some participants referred it to the citation of citizen content. According to P5, mainstream media often selectively quoted content from Weibo users to show netizens' support towards government policies and actions. P5 then explained in detail how the public opinion was indeed being represented by the selected content and being favourable to propaganda. P5 had this to say when reflecting on Chinese mainstream media's approach to Weibo content:

“In my observation, they are paying more attention and using the information on Weibo, and they would say something along the line that ‘netizens think’, and mention some Weibo accounts, as well as quoting their posts. Of course, they use that content to support the government’s police and activities – this is how they would use Weibo content. That is to say, it is what the general netizens think, in this way, many people are said to be represented. When the government has released a well organised piece of news, it would say, ‘it is based on what the netizens think’, ‘it has received the support of the netizens’, and ‘it’s agreed upon by a vast amount of netizens.’ Most of time they would use this means.” (P5)

Different participants noticed Weibo content had been cited in other media, from print media to broadcast media. While P7 talked about how BBC referenced Weibo posts as comments on a certain topic; P10 explained the inclusion of a Weibo post by partially identifying the user in

a local TV program. Both P13 and P20 recalled the use of Weibo content in newspapers, either noted with the user ID when citing a comment or described generally as “online sourced” when citing a story. Below are what the four participants shared about their experiences:

“BBC has been using Weibo as a reference in its China related news reports, for example, it would say, ‘according to someone on Weibo’. In memory, there was several times that it directly quoted the speech of a Weibo influential account (Big V) and mentioned he has how many followers.” (P7)

“In my city, there is a TV program that pays special attention to the local news, no matter big or small. I saw it once took a screenshot of a person’s Weibo homepage for the quotation – the account name was blacked out, but the profile photo was shown. I cannot remember the exact incidence; however, it has a far-reaching effect, which was further reported by the provincial TV station.” (P10)

“Sometimes newspapers would quote the content from Weibo. It is very rare for the TV to do the same, but sometimes they would. They would screen-print the original content for quotation, by adding the “@” symbol followed by the Weibo account name.” (P13)

“Yes, they would use the information from Weibo. In the past, they would put a note underneath the news story by stating ‘sourced online’. And sometime the newspapers publish information that I had already read on Weibo, with a note under it and say, ‘this information is from the internet’.” (P20)

On the one hand, P26 and P27 claimed that mainstream media’s principal use of Weibo content is citation rather than a main source of information. As a former media professional, P26 felt it was not professional to use Weibo content as a news source, only for viewpoints or comments. Similarly, P27 suggested that mainstream media would hardly report news based on a single Weibo event, but cited Weibo user’s comments or presented a video uploaded by a user when reporting the news. P27 also assumed that the reason for not using Weibo as a news source is due to the authenticity of its content. Here are the observations of P26 and P27 in relation to mainstream media’s engagement with Weibo content:

“For the traditional media, they would use some Weibo content for their quote, such as the information, comments, opinions, etc. But Weibo is not their primary news source. Because I used to work in the media industry, I think it is not very serious to quote things directly from Weibo or the other new media, such as its arguments and viewpoints. Because of their lack of professionalism, I’d rather deem them (Weibo content) as opinions or commentaries.” (P26)

“They (the mainstream media) would quote Weibo content, for example, they would say it is a comment made by a Weibo user; or they would say this video

is published by a Weibo user. It is very seldom to see a news report is completely based on an incident published on Weibo. Because of the lack of source authenticity for many different things, they won't write a story on it immediately. In regard to some significant incidents, such as the Red Yellow Blue kindergarten child abuse incident, they would quote the commentaries on Weibo after verifying the information source.” (P27)

On the other hand, P19 and P23 both argued that mainstream media including BBC did use Weibo content as a news source. According to P19, international media will sometimes report a phenomenon that emerged on Weibo and take its content as an information source. Meanwhile, P23 pointed out that all mainstream media, including the evening news program of CCTV (China Central Television), gathered information from Weibo, especially in the case of emergencies or natural disasters. P23 further gave examples of how mainstream media used a range of at-the-scene citizen content, such as during the massive explosion in Tianjin (天津大爆炸) and in natural disasters like typhoons. They had this to say when discussing how mainstream media engaged with Weibo:

“For the international media, they would quote the Weibo content in their reports. The first kind is to report a phenomenon on Weibo, for instance BBC sometimes would report that of Weibo in China, and it would report the phenomenon per se. I think it is possible they also use Weibo as an information source, but I cannot recall which particular article. I think BBC would have this kind of channel – as it can contact the news source directly, therefore I believe they would take over the information on Weibo.” (P19)

“Yes, they would use the information on Weibo, and there are many cases, such as some emergencies. Actually, for a fire incident, Beijing News used a lot of photos uploaded by Weibo users, such as the video of the Tianjin explosion caused by fire hazard, and the live video was shot by a user who was at the scene. When I looked at the media release, they have used a range of information posted on Weibo. In the case of Typhoon, they used a lot of videos uploaded by ordinary Weibo users. Nowadays, I think all the media would gather news source on Weibo, including CCTV and its nightly news program, and they would say who has posted a news story on Weibo, and make a comparison.” (P23)

Nevertheless, three other participants indicated that there were times mainstream media took the citizen content from Weibo for granted. That is, P3, P12, and P28 expressed their concerns about the lack of professionalism among Chinese mainstream media. After pointing out newspapers and magazines used comments from netizens, P3 addressed that professional media did not verify information prior to the citation of citizen content such as video footage.

“They would use it, without being aware of they are relying on it. Due to my former profession, I love flipping through the newspapers, all sorts of Daily papers or tabloids, every time when I return to my hometown. I think they would quote it from a certain amount. For example, they would use the comments from Weibo in the entertainment column. The magazines do the same. The key point is there is no serious consideration involved when the traditional media are quoting the Weibo content – they would directly use a video shot by a netizen, without investigation.” (P3)

Again, P12 believed that mainstream media merely presented segmented information from Weibo. In order to explain their viewpoint, P12 then gave an example of how the Oriental Horizon, a Chinese morning news program run by CCTV, reported the Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident and used selective Weibo content.

“I think the information they use from Weibo is very one-sided. For example, I watched the news about the RYB incident (Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident) on the Oriental Horizon (OH) program. When it was first breaking out (on Weibo), it was said to be involved the military as many people on Weibo were talking about the army, “doctor uncle”, and “doctor grandfather”. However, the program didn’t mention these in its report. It spent about ten minutes to report the incident in that episode, which was probably the second or third day after the incident was exposed. It attempted to clarify the rumours for the army and said the army had nothing to do with this incident. I think it is very one-sided, because what it cited those so-call online comments are not what I saw (on Weibo).” (P12)

P28 talked about two experiences with Chinese mainstream media as a Weibo user and reflected on their unprofessional practices of reporting. Firstly, P28 explained how the professional media approach Weibo users for interviewing and publish the news without verifying or asking permission to use their viewpoints. Further, P28 addressed the case of being cited with a fabricated comment by the Southern Metropolis Daily, one of China’s most popular newspapers, in a report of the child immunisation issue. The newspaper journalist merely used P28’s Weibo ID and made up a comment to support the conclusion of immunisation shortage. Due to this experience of fake commenting, P28 begun to question the authenticity of news stories and to lose the trust in Chinese mainstream media.

“Based on my own experience, I was contacted by a few media after I published my opinion and commentary, and they would send me private message and asked if I could do an interview. They chat with me with private message. I think their approach was not meticulous. They ask about your

thoughts on private message and put those directly into the story they're writing. They won't seek proof from you; neither will they ask if you allow them to publish that. They only asked a few questions, when you finished answering – that was already the end of the interview... A friend told me that he could find my comments over the Internet. I was very surprised to know it was about the infant vaccination issues, which was reported by the Southern Metro Daily. And they quoted my Weibo content. It's bizarre that I never spoke things like that before. They said a Sina Weibo user said, 'due to the lack of supply, my kid was not able to receive the pneumonia vaccine' – but I never say anything like that. What's more, the pneumonia vaccine has never been undersupplied in my city. It's impossible for me to say anything like that. But he directly used my Weibo ID and posted something I never said to prove his conclusion. I was surprised and lost confidence on the media. I felt astonished. I began to think if other news stories I read were also fabricated.” (P28)

Besides the above concerns on the lack of professionalism in using Weibo content, P18 suggested that mainstream media and grassroots media often focused on different issues. Although they have some shared topics from time to time, the voice of grassroots media is hardly heard. Similar to P12's viewpoint, P18 also found mainstream media always interpreted the story from a single perspective. However, there is still not a powerful alternative view to provide more information as grassroots media is scattered and voiceless.

“I think there is not much crossover between the mainstream media and the self-media, in terms of the issues that they are interested in; however, self-media seems lacking influential power. ...Self-media probably represents a viewpoint from the general public and come up with some stories. But I seldom witnessed that they report on the same issue at the same time. For the traditional media, they have a simplistic angle. In my judgement, it didn't do a good job, because it only focuses on one-sided information, and then it needs another powerful alternate voice. However, the whole self-media is rather loose. I could hear it from an alternate voice, but that was a slight voice from an individual. Even if it was raised by an influential account (Big V), by supporting a cause, the public is still lacking the ability to think objectively but being impacted by emotions.” (P18)

Based on my interview data, Chinese and overseas mainstream media were found to use citizen content from Weibo at various levels. Nevertheless, some of the Chinese mainstream media did not practise professionally, especially when citing comments or sourcing information from Weibo users. International mainstream media outlets like BBC sometimes reported events that emerged on Weibo and used its content as an information source, however participants did not discuss whether the international sources used Weibo content in line with journalistic codes of conduct.

#### 4.3.7 Participation in Weibo Citizen Journalism

In this section, the interview data relating to the participation of Weibo citizen journalism will be analysed. Three sub-themes emerged during the analysis process, which included 1) participants' interpretations of the term citizen journalism, 2) their experiences on citizen journalism practice, and 3) their feedback on Weibo citizen journalism.

##### *4.3.7.1 Interpretations of citizen journalism*

“Citizen journalism” is an academic term, and the word “citizen” itself is rarely used in the daily context of Chinese media. As mentioned in section 1.4.1 Problem Statement, the comparatively easy-to-understand term “participatory journalism” was used alongside with citizen journalism in the recruitment of interview participants and during the interviews and in the analysis below. Since the term is self-explanatory to a certain degree, most participants were able to interpret the concept of citizen journalism close to its academic definition. Participants who didn't interpret the term in the same way expressed their personal understandings or experiences about citizen journalism and discussed some Weibo events. During interview discussions, I broadly introduced the academic definition of citizen journalism to every participant after they gave their interpretation of the term.

Some participants gave brief descriptions of citizen journalism, referring to the activities of reporting, disseminating, discussing, or/and commenting. P1, P2 and P22 focused on the “discussion characteristic” of citizen journalism, and P21 contributed another aspect of “providing relevant information”. Meanwhile, both P6 and P7 related the term to the fact that every individual can be a content publisher and then share or disseminate such information. In addition to the activity of discussing, P15 addressed the citizen journalism notion of interactivity as well as characteristics of “reposting” and commenting. That is, according to P15, it generates a picture of the current event presented with news and public opinions. However, P28 raised the concept of “being an onlooker” (圍觀) and the potential influence of public discussions resulting in the development of news when talking about the personal understanding of the term. Below are the brief descriptions given by these seven participants:

“Once the topic is published, participants are invited to join the discussion and interviews – this is a form of the participatory journalism.” (P1)

“As an observer, I think we can take part in the discussion once the news or the trend has emerged.” (P2)

“In my understanding, participatory journalism is a means for news distribution – it can be accessed by everyone and not limited to the exclusive use by professional journalists. Everyone can be the publisher of the news and participate in its distribution.” (P6)

“In participatory journalism, everyone is a mini media channel by himself or herself. And then, you can publish something you know, which can be mainstream or non-mainstream, by sharing them on Weibo.” (P7)

“This is a very interactive form of news distribution. Besides the news itself, Weibo also allows people to share the news and make comments. In this way, we can access both the news and people’s attitudes.” (P15)

“People would participate in the discussion of a topic, as well as providing relevant information and leads. This is my understanding of participatory journalism.” (P21)

“Participatory journalism is an open platform. People can put down their comments and express their points of views on the news.” (P22)

“In my understanding, the social media users will participate as observers when the news emerge, and then they will participate in commenting which will in return affect the future development of the news. It is all about participation.” (P28)

Furthermore, P8 and P10 both indicated the advantage of Weibo as a platform for ordinary individuals to have their voice heard. Yet, they also expressed their concerns about the form of citizen journalism. For P8, the vast amount of information created by citizens and available on Weibo is also creating an issue for its users. At the same time, P10 questioned the accuracy of an individual’s voice being heard due to the deletions of sensitive content. In other words, the opportunities provided by such a platform are controlled, and only voices selected or allowed by the authorities would be heard. They had this to say when explaining their understandings of citizen journalism:

“Weibo is a platform, which gives people a channel to voice their opinion or publish information. This is unbelievable if it was ten years ago in terms of the volume of information. It is like a double edge sword when everyone has his or her own platform, and the information volume experienced exponential growth.” (P8)

“As a self-media, Weibo seems to provide you with a platform to express your views on current affairs. However, if Weibo deems your views inappropriate,



it will delete your comments. In light of this, I think it only gives you the perception that you have a place to voice your opinion freely – however, the reality might be a totally different case.” (P10)

Other participants provided more detailed interpretations of citizen journalism and clearly addressed the term from the “reporting” perspective. For instance, P3 recalled what they were taught in university and indicated that the action of reporting social problems requires a conscience and courage. In supplement to P3’s viewpoints, P18 referred to citizen journalists as social activists who were sensitive of social-political news and had the sense of mission for justice and democracy, even if they did not identify themselves as activists. P18 then explained the means of citizen journalism, including activities of “report”, “repost”, or “like”. Below are the explanations of citizen journalism given by P3 and P18:

“When I was at university, participatory journalism was already a hot topic. My lecturer told us that with Weibo, everyone is the eyewitness at the scene of the news. Everyone can be the reporter. At that time, I believed Weibo is a channel to expose the societal problems with your conscientiousness and bravery.” (P3)

“I think that’s certain that in the society some activists might not be aware that they are activists. They are sensitive to the news stories in regards with politics, societal news. Meanwhile, they’re people with a mission – fighting for the justice. They are willing to do something with initiatives, with a view to pushing the Chinese democratic development. Normally they would use their own methods to report the news. Normally they would report the news by themselves. In addition, I would circulate their reports or give them a ‘like’ underneath the news story. This is my understanding of citizen journalism.” (P18)

While P3 mentioned the concepts of being “at-the-scene”, “witnessing”, and “everyone can report news stories”, P19 also emphasised the characteristics of citizen journalism were “immediacy”, “updated” and “first-hand”. For P19, citizen journalism breaks the boundary of traditional journalism and provides opportunities for everyone to participate, discuss, and speak out. P19 then pointed out it is hard for the reposts to be blocked as the dissemination of a post usually “increases in a geometrical ratio”. P19 had this to say when they talked about the understanding of citizen journalism:

“I think participatory journalism breaks the limit of the traditional journalism, by allowing the participants or observers to report the event via social media. Traditionally, the news reporting is conducted by professional journalists via the printed press, or the TV/Radio channels that are authorised by the

authorities. I think its most important benefit is fast and updated news. For example, when the tragedy of a truck hitting the passers-by on the bridge in London, it was reported almost immediately on Twitter, which is even faster than the BBC news app. Secondly, there would be more firsthand information, such as the live situation of the incident, how the truck was crashing, how many shots the policemen fired, or the police were from which division. Therefore, everyone can participate, and everyone can discuss. It's very fast, and truly very fast. ...I think sometimes there's a snowballing effect – people keep re-tweeting or sharing the same story, making it to reach out to more people in a way of explosive increase exponentially, and very quickly. The trend is unstoppable because there are a lot of people participating.” (P19)

P16 and P24 related the practice of citizen journalism to the act of “reporting” or “disclosing”. P16 described the term as ordinary citizens who report what has happened to or around them, and some reports (posts) would be able to draw public attention through reposts of influential accounts (“大V”). According to P24, such citizen reports are often disclosing injustices, and Weibo becomes a path for ordinary citizens to seek for help. Additionally, P24 claimed that the massive discussion of certain news or social events on Weibo was indeed reflective of the participatory nature of citizen journalism. Below are what these two participants commented on the concept:

“My first impression of citizen journalism is about a down-to-earth community member becoming a news reporter. For example, in my shallowest understanding, if I happen to come across an event on the street, I would report it by using the Internet. Afterwards I think I never did anything similar to this – maybe it is because all my posts are about the trivial stuff, nothing is newsworthy. However, sometimes certain news stories and events would be cross-posted by the ordinary people or some Internet celebrities. I'm not sure if this is counted as citizen news.” (P16)

“I think participatory journalism is related with breaking news, such as the sexual harassment case of the professor at Northern Aeronautical University. In the past it was comparatively difficult to expose a scandal, because you had to approach the newspapers or TV stations, and maybe needed to go through censorship or similar procedure. Nowadays if you have any news story and need help from the others, you can publicise the story by simply registering an account at Weibo to raise the awareness of the general public. The Jiang Ge case is just another example. It seems everyone would like to make a comment, and with a relatively broad range for discussion – I think this gives the Weibo user a very strong sense of participation.” (P24)

P9 addressed two main features of citizen journalism: 1) netizens or Weibo users as information sources, and 2) netizens promoting an incident or the development of such incidents by

attracting attention from society. At the same time, P9 suggested that netizens often stepped out and reported the incident because they were the victims, yet, it would be better if citizen journalists focused more on public agendas. Similarly, P12 also raised the role of citizen journalism in promoting the news (or its development) as well as setting the agenda. According to P12, Chinese netizens have started to question the authenticity of traditional media and instead “seek the truth about the news on the Internet”. The two participants had this to say when explaining the concept of citizen journalism:

“There is an important point of participatory journalism which is its source is from the netizens or the Weibo users. Moreover, it pushes the development of the whole news event, raising the awareness of the traditional media – it’s a power from the public and the netizens. Personally, I think this is participatory journalism. Among those users, around 80% of them (previously it was 70% based on our statistics) are the victims of the event. The plaintiffs or the victims are very willing to expose their case to the public. I think their participation makes the exposure become a piece of news. Secondly, because it is citizens’ news, its topics are centred on the public issues, which make it more attractive.” (P9)

“I think participatory journalism is us as "netizens" going to set the agenda. In the past, we got to know news from the traditional media; but now, we are sceptical after seeing it from the traditional media. We will then go online, that is, to seek the truth about the news on the Internet. Before, our habits were to remain sceptical about the online (content) and hoped the traditional media would dispel the rumours. I think this is one aspect. The second aspect is that I think netizens have promoted the news in the process (of participation), which means they take on the role of journalists.” (P12)

Additionally, P20 interpreted the participatory notion of citizen journalism as news readers having influence on the news or its development through the activities of commenting or discussing. Using the murder of Jiang Ge (江歌案) as an example, P20 explained how netizens participated in the news and thus supported Jiang’s mother in seeking justice, online and offline. Also, P20 concluded that every active netizen should practice as a citizen journalist.

“From a newsreader perspective, my understanding of participatory journalism is when we make comments about the news story; we actually influence its development or make change of it to some extent. Such as in the story of Jiang Ge, because of a large amount of online commentaries, the direction of its development was changed, allowing more interactions between the person involved and the netizens. And then, Jiang Ge probably received some assistance from the netizens and the new commentators. She received the help not only from her mother but also the volunteers travelling to Japan.

A newsreader and commentators can bring about change for a the development of a news story, and they can participate in the story providing help to the person involved or making an impact – this is based on my understanding. ...Everyone who is active online can play a role in participatory journalism.” (P20)

Moreover, P23 summarised that Weibo is a platform for citizen journalism in general. That is, when a public event or emergency happens, the related information will always be first available on Weibo and often provides comprehensive coverage with content posted by various sources. P23 then explained that one’s willingness to disseminate information had been enabled by the easy-access Weibo. Users would repost (and spread) posts or topics that they think it’s important for others to know, while most of these topics are the ones won’t be published in Chinese traditional media. For P23, Weibo is a channel for ordinary citizens to raise public attention and discussion, especially for incidents relating to child abuse, school bullying, domestic violence, or sexual abuse.

“At the moment, I consider all the news on Weibo belongs to participatory journalism. Weibo itself, or say, it plays the role of a news platform for public participation. Most likely, you could find the most comprehensive information in the fastest way on Weibo, if you want to search for some public events or breaking stories. As the threshold for posting a post on Weibo is minimal, and everyone has a desire for spreading the news. For example, when I’m aware of an unusual event, no matter it is good or bad, I’m willing to share it with the others, at least letting the others know about this event. Therefore, a lot of the news stories are originated from Weibo, including child abuses in many places, school bullies, domestic violence, and the story of a little girl being sexually harassed by her family member in a train station. In light of this, I think Weibo is an online platform for participatory journalism. Many stories won’t be published by the traditional news channels; however, Weibo would do the opposite. There is a very good standard in Weibo in regards with news appraisal – if it can draw the attention from the general public, if it can make people think this is a serious issue, which challenges my views on the world, value and life, so I have to raise the public awareness of it (to support or oppose it). Being different to the traditional media, there is no screening process at Weibo. For traditional media, there is censorship before its publication; but Weibo is a different case. Messages can still get out there to some people before they are censored. Therefore, I think Weibo as a whole is a form of participatory journalism.” (P23)

Contrary to the above interpretations of citizen journalism, five participants addressed their doubts towards Weibo citizen journalism regarding the quality, the participation motivation, and the uncertainty of media literacy when talking about their understanding of the concept. For example, P13 explained Weibo citizen journalism from user’s motivation for publishing

posts and participating in discussion. P13 argued that the individual accounts are usually participating to support their viewpoints (or values) but the grassroots media accounts would sometimes discuss the news from extreme perspectives to increase pageviews and popularity.

“There are two scenarios. Firstly, in regards with the common Weibo users who do not have a large number of followers, their participation represents their personal views that are similar to the general public. However, for some other users who are keen to boost their reaches, they would adopt a radical view when making their comments. Therefore, it is likely to raise doubts upon the correctness of their viewpoints. Ironically, for the sake of increasing their popularity, they would keep holding those radical views. In light of this, I am very reluctant to follow them.” (P13)

Similar to P13, P27 also indicated that a major issue with Weibo citizen journalism was many users could adopt it as a channel to disclose one-sided information or false information in a timely manner and thus mislead the public opinion. Yet, P27 credited the technology’s endorsement of citizen journalism. In favour of digital devices like smartphones, the role of professional journalists in recording and reporting has been challenged and the public has been able to take part in the “watchdog” role. P27 had this to say when interpreting the concept of citizen journalism:

“I think citizen journalism is benefited by the improvement of resources and technology, therefore there are methods to record what you’ve seen from different angles. Otherwise, people might think filming is the privilege of journalists who might provide a single-sided view. Because many people have smartphones, including myself, and more and more of them can monitor (the watchdog role) the event. This can help promote public conversations and supervision. But I think the problem of Weibo is many people would consider it as a channel. Perhaps a Weibo post might not be able to reveal the truth of the story, but the reaction from the Internet would take it as a true story.” (P27)

P14 found it necessary to have a platform or space for public discussion. However, P14 worried about the gap between the rapid development of the Internet and the media literacy of Chinese citizens, which could likely cause a lot of misunderstandings. Although different users interpret the same message differently, according to P14, it is hard to determine the degree of such difference between users, based on their education levels and literacy abilities. This is what P14 had commented about the concept of citizen journalism:

“I think it’s necessary to discuss. We need a platform for the so-called users and citizens to express their voices. However, there is a gap between the

Chinese education level and the Internet development. Therefore, in regards with the citizen or the general public's ability to analyse the information and the media quality, it is very hard to tell to what level have they reached, or how much of a gap there is. Sometimes we would misread the information if we overly focused on discussion, because when a piece of information is revealed, it is hard for us to tell how large the gap between the general public's education level and their ability on self-judgement about the information is.” (P14)

Both P25 and P26 expressed their pessimistic views of the concept of citizen journalism. Indeed, their primary concern was about the quality of citizen content. For P25, it is difficult for a citizen, who lacks professional journalistic training, to investigate or report news neutrally, objectively, and comprehensively. As a former media professional, P26 disagreed with the concept and argued it is impossible for citizens to participate in news production. From P26's viewpoint, reporting news is not a simple communication process that informs the public about various events, but a complex process that requires professional practices of digging, sorting, analysing, and commenting. Further, P26 pointed out such complex processes of reporting were most unlikely to be fulfilled by a news article, one journalist, or a single media outlet. In order to provide the overall picture of a news event, various media outlets from diverse perspectives and investigating journalists with different abilities will need to continuously follow up on the event and provide updates. The two participants had this to say about citizen journalism:

“Does participatory journalism mean I should take part in the news? Honestly, I don't think there is a promising outlook for this type of journalism. It is quite natural to have some subjective opinion when one is commentating – I would try to find the information if I want something to happen. However, for journalists, they need to maintain their neutrality and their report is from an objective perspective, which is trying to comprehensively illustrate what had happened. This is very hard to be achieved by 'self-media'. There is no guarantee for objectiveness and neutrality, if the investigation or reporting is spontaneous.” (P25)

“It seems like there is a popular saying in these few years, and I disagree with this opinion as a former media person. I think the public, that is the normal spectators, could not take part in the news, if it is based on our definition in regards with this kind of participation. A news story sounds like the occurrence of an event, and it sounds like an easy process to distribute the information of this event to the public. But, in reality this process requires the involvement of professional personnel who play the role of investigation, organisation of the information, and providing commentaries – perhaps thanks to this kind of professionalism, the event can be better revealed to the public. What's more, under many circumstances there are more than one media channel or a single

media report or a single reporter covering the story. Normally, it is through different points of view, and the different media have their individual capability to discover the story. In the long run, this is the holistic way to reveal the story.” (P26)

Most of my interview participants were able to demonstrate different levels of understanding about the concept of citizen journalism, given its synonymous term of participatory journalism. Their interpretations of the concept were approaching its academic definition, which focuses on the practice of reporting, disseminating, commenting, and discussing. Meanwhile, the doubts about citizen journalism raised by the participants are also not far from what scholars have been concerned about the content quality, the participation motivation, and the lack of media literacy. In the next section, participants’ experience of Weibo citizen journalism will be analysed.

#### *4.3.7.2 User Experiences of Weibo citizen journalism*

Almost every interview participant considered “repost” (轉發), similar to the action of retweeting, as the primary activity of participating in Weibo citizen journalism. In this activity, users are reposting others’ original Weibo posts, with or without comments made by themselves or other users, onto their homepage and for their followers to read. This allows information to be disseminated on Weibo.

As mentioned by some participants, although their primary means of participating in social discussions has remained the same over the past few years, the frequency of such participation has been reduced. In fact, they clearly explained the kind of topics or content they prefer to repost as well as the reason for them to reduce or control the activity of reposting. For instance, P5 used to repost a large number of social news posts, especially those criticising the regime’s policies and often written by public intellectuals. However, P5 is currently focusing on reposting posts about minorities seeking help or justice, through a gradual change in the attitude towards social affairs. For P5, it is possible that one would take advantage of the sympathies for the weak in order to gain popularity for individual interests and for earning money. In order to avoid spreading one-sided or false information, P5 started to filter the citizen content and tended to restrict the repost posts to certain topics. P5 had this to say when sharing their experience of Weibo citizen journalism:

“In regard to my posts, most of them are sharing or reposting the others’ posts, and these are focusing on the most recent societal news; comparatively the self-generated posts only account for a small number. Most of the societal news is the negative comments towards the ruling party and government, even with strong words of criticism. In the past, most of my reposting was about this kind of things, and the original authors of those posts are well known by the public. Gradually I had deleted those posts slowly due to a change of my societal attitude, and no more of reposting of those materials. At the moment, I would most likely share the stories of the people of disadvantage who are asking for help, or in other words, I’d share the information about righteousness and the pursuit of justice. When I come across this kind of message, I would repost them readily, but on the whole, it is not very frequent when compared to the past. Because there are doubts over the truthfulness of a story, and we cannot ascertain if they are really suffering from the unjust treatment, or they are trying to win over people’s sympathy by pretending to be the disadvantaged. In reality, there involves personal interest and money making, and because of this, I’d rather not share these kind of stories as it is very hard to identify if the story is true or not.” (P5)

Like P5, the major reason for reducing the repost of Weibo posts for P12 is also their authenticity. P12 recalled their most active period of participating in Weibo citizen journalism was between 2013 to 2014. Over time, there were more hot topics raised on Weibo and it became harder and harder to distinguish the fake news from the truth. As a result, P12 has become cautious to the citizen content and began to withdraw from the discussion. Nevertheless, P12 remained active on Weibo, in the forms of browsing and digging for relevant information about particular hot topics. Giving the murder of Jiang Ge, P12 had carefully read through the top-ranking posts related to the topic (through the hashtag grouping function), including the comments of such posts, and also credited some of the comments (through the action of “like”). Below is P12’s experience of Weibo citizen journalism:

“Yes, I would participate. Probably in 2013 or 2014, I would participate via Weibo. But nowadays there’s a lot of this kind of hot topic stories, and it is hard to discern if they are true or not, I become more prudent. I’m very unwilling to participate in the discussion, but I still would follow that kind of news. And I will try to dig out more information, such as the relevant stories. Let’s take the case of Jiang Ge as an example. I’d go through all the relevant hot topic stories, as well as analysing the relevant commentaries. I’d search the story online, follow that hot topic story, and sometimes give a like for the commentaries – I would read the story very carefully. I almost no longer participate in the discussion, that means I won’t make a comment any more after reading the story, because I think I’m not totally clear about the story.” (P12)



Indeed, P18 also found that there are too many hot topics on Weibo and referred to them as “one after another, they occur non-stop in China”. Compared to the previous high volume of reposting, P18 rather reposts less than ten posts a day and occasionally made indirect comments at the time of reposting. Now, topics relating to financial frauds and car accidents or content leading to debates and arguments will not be reposted by P18. When certain hot topics emerged on Weibo, P18 would focus on reposting relevant posts on the day but still with the self-established restriction on post totals (the ten-post daily limit, for example). According to P18, the frequency of Weibo hot topics will become higher and the density will become greater, yet, the duration of a topic’s popularity will be shorter and shorter. This is what P18 had talked about in relation to the experience of Weibo citizen journalism:

“I would share the story, and sometimes make a comment in one or two sentences, but in a mild and indirect way. In the past, I could share more than a hundred posts a day. But nowadays it is down to no more than ten posts a day. The stories that I won’t share are financial frauds, traffic accidents etc. There’re plenty of these stories, and no need to repost them. I also won’t repost others’ discussions. Sometimes I would repost some news, such as the war affairs in the Korean peninsula. For some hot topics, I would only share that story on that day, and I won’t repost it more than once, to make sure my posts won’t exceed the number of ten. There are too many hot topics, one after one. For example, there are too many posts about the gas station explosion in Tianjin. The stories in China are non-stop. In these few years, I think the trend will keep going up with an increased frequency; however, when it becomes more frequent, it will last shorter and shorter.” (P18)

There were participants, such as P24 and P25, who never published any citizen content on Weibo. Even though reposting is the only way of participating in Weibo citizen journalism for them, their frequency of reposting is relatively low. While P24 holds doubts on the direction of public opinion and the impact of participation, P25 found it difficult to comment on some social events, but merely reposted and let others judge on their own. The two had this to say regarding their experience of Weibo citizen journalism:

“Yes, I would repost the posts. I only had the experience of reposting others’ posts. I never post any breaking news like the others do. At the beginning, I would take part in the discussion, and it became less and less frequent when I no longer believe those trending public conversations. Because I think it is useless, I would only express my attitude, but won’t make any in-depth comments.” (P24)

“I only tried reposting the others’ posts, and never create any original posts, needless to say providing any commentaries. I didn’t repost much of the news

stories. The main reason is I'm not able to make comment of them. My purpose is only to share the story with the others." (P25)

Meanwhile, for both P6 and P19, the reason for not publishing original content and selectively participating in Weibo citizen journalism, is that the possibility for an ordinary user to have much influence is slight. According to P19, the effort of publishing quality citizen content on Weibo does not match the potential feedback or impact received, and thus the willingness to participate in discussions has been decreased. P6 prefers not to comment on social issues on an open platform (like Weibo) and events that have not been confirmed as the truth. Therefore, P6 will just follow the development or updates of an event instead of participating and commenting on Weibo. Below are the experiences of Weibo citizen journalism shared by P6 and P19:

"For example, I'd share the story like the Chinese National Ping Pong Team. However, in regards with these issues, I would only pay attention to them, and then there is minimal participation. Because I'm only one of the tens of thousands of the normal users, even if I repost the story, there won't be too much readership and people won't pay too much attention to it. For myself, I don't like making commentaries on the societal problems in an open way, because I think I'm not sure about the truthfulness of the story. Therefore, I would follow this kind of stories, and it is very rare for me to participate and make commentaries towards them." (P6)

"I had the experience of circulating the stories and reposting the posts. But in memory I didn't circulate any of the news stories. I consider myself as a quiet person on Weibo. I think my followers on Weibo are my friends in real life; therefore, my posts won't have any influential power. I'm a rational person and good at evaluation. If I publish a post, I would be responsible for the content of my post, and I would make sure my Weibo post is in line with the academic standards by evaluating a lot of different variables via the scientific methods. This is a tiresome process. Considering the time spent and it is a low possibility that my post would be an influential one, I'd rather not create it." (P19)

In addition to the primary activity of reposting, some interview participants made comments on the topics of their interest and referred to the act of commenting as a way of participating in Weibo citizen journalism. Since P2 considers publishing original posts on social issues as "data in evidence" (數據留痕), P2 will choose what topics to discuss and usually comment to related posts under a topic (available through the hashtag grouping function). On the contrary to P2, P13 includes some personal viewpoints or a topic hashtag at the time of reposting. Yet, P13 also has topic preferences when it comes to reposting and commenting and will focus on the

topics related to socially disadvantaged groups, who try to seek help to solve problems beyond their capabilities. Being an ordinary citizen, reposting or/and commenting is the best P13 can offer to help the minorities to be seen by more netizens. Similarly, P27 thinks it is more likely for a post to attract significant attention if it's reposted by more users. Although P27 has topic preferences and adds comments with the reposts, P27 will only provide brief comments rather than critical remarks. Here are what P2, P13 and P27 have talked about regarding their experiences on Weibo citizen journalism:

“My participation depends on the topics. I'm willing to discuss and take part in some topics, such as Olympic gold medals, the Beijing government's removal of “low-end” population, and the story about converting coal into gas in Northern China. I seldom post on Weibo, because I think it creates a digital footprint, allowing others to see what you've commented. I'm not willing to create a post, but willing to participate, such as participating in the discussion through participatory journalism.” (P2)

“I reposted the posts, such as the stories about the people who are disadvantaged. I think in some areas they are not able to solve the problems by themselves, and we, as one of the general public, cannot help much as well. The only thing we can help is to help them create a Weibo post, spreading the word and raising the awareness of more people. These are what I do: reposting, adding a topic, and voicing my opinion.” (P13)

“I would repost the post in regards to the topics I'm interested in and make some simple comments. I won't make any harsh criticism on the surface. The purpose of reposting the posts is for immediate participation and their importance. The story can reach out to more people if more people share it.” (P27)

Furthermore, for participant like P3, comments are carefully made after reviewing information from different perspectives, which means having a relatively completed picture of the events. At the same time, P3 tries to avoid following (or participating in) the so-called “social hot topics”, including topics related to celebrities. Despite becoming pessimistic about Weibo citizen journalism, P3 still wanted to keep paying attention to events and participating in the forms of reposting, “like”, and commenting. P3 had this to say when reflecting on their experience:

“Of course, I'd follow the topics, but I won't easily make a comment. By following the topics, I can absorb more information, which allows me to have a better view of the whole event, and I won't believe in a one-sided explanation. On the other hand, it is my personal preference not to follow the trend. When everybody is discussing a certain societal hot topic, frankly

speaking I'm not willing to join them. I think a lot of the hot topics are very boring, including the stories of celebrities. Even when I'm becoming more and more pessimistic about it, I would still participate, follow, repost, and take part in discussion." (P3)

While P23 holds similar attitude as P27 towards reposting and commenting on topics of interest, P23 expressed personal viewpoints via the comments and reposts. Most of P23's comments were made on events where government actions or operations breached basic ethical or social standards. According to P23, public affairs discussions on Weibo involve voices from diverse groups, including the authorities, the public, and various sources. Based on the information provided from these different perspectives, it is possible for citizens to locate the social problem or reveal the truth. Through such discussions, P23 did somewhat experience a sense of political participation as a citizen. Below is P23's experience of Weibo citizen journalism:

"I would partake in the discussion. For the news I'm interested in, I would repost it and make comments according to my stance. But for some simple hot topics, I would rather be the onlooker. In regards with the posts that I made the most of comments, they are the ones about the government behaviours that obviously violate the fundamental ethics and logic. I think, in regard to public affairs, the government can make their voice heard on Weibo, and the public can make their voices heard, and all the stakeholders from everywhere can make their voices heard as well. Therefore, it is very easy to see the shortcoming of the party involved via Weibo. I think this gives the citizen a sense of participating in the politics." (P23)

There were participants who acted as citizen journalists on Weibo and published first-hand information. However, some tended to restrict themselves to commenting on sensitive topics or social issues. For example, P4 referred to the experience of publishing as "sharing", more specifically, to share at-the-scene images or information within their social hobby groups. After witnessing the presidential election in the United States, P4 realised that freedom of speech was sometimes limited even on social media like Facebook. Gradually, P4 started to reduce their participation in social or sensitive topics on Weibo but would still browse and think about such topics. This is what P4 shared about Weibo citizen journalism:

"I still would participate. It didn't feel like that. It was to share with everyone. If taking the news and its dissemination into consideration, I really would like everyone to see it. I have several different groups on Weibo, such as the group for basketball fans and the group for a musical band. Therefore, people in my group would think this is a piece of value news and it is what they would like

to see, as I'm the source of the "first hand" information. However, for most of the societal topics, I'm not longer creating posts about them, maybe they are the sensitive topics, especially after the American election in last year. In California, Hillary receiving a one-sided support, and Trump's supporters dared not to speak on Facebook. At that moment I realise there are limitations of the so-called American freedom of speech. What's more, I'm not passionate in discussing this sort of topics. Gradually, it becomes less and less frequent for me to talk about the sensitive topics and the social issues on Weibo, even though I keep following them and have my own opinion, but I just won't talk about them." (P4)

Unlike P4's sharing in particular hobby groups, P9 had published first-hand information regarding a local demolition issue and tried to establish a social topic on Weibo. Yet, P9 failed to draw attention from the public or the mainstream media even though they provided evidence such as images, videos, and written descriptions of what had happened. Based on P9's experience of Weibo citizen journalism, media accounts and celebrities on Weibo, as well as local professional journalists, are very selective in their topics of participation. This is regardless of the forms of reposting, commenting, or reporting. According to P9, it is difficult for Weibo to become a systemic distribution of information as users with discourse power, like professional journalists and celebrities, will not participate in social topics when they cannot benefit from such participations, or there is a possibility of damaging their interests. Due to this experience, P9 began to question the role of Weibo in enlarging citizens' voices and withdrew from Weibo citizen journalism. Here is what P9 shared about the experience of acting as a citizen journalist without successfully drawing public attention on Weibo:

"Yes, to some extent. I've posted the story about house demolition in the past, but my posts didn't generate any impact. In my posts, I tagged all the major media in Henan province, but it was still not effective. I also tried to contact some journalists and send private messages to them. They called me back and let me know they could not report the story. Therefore, I think Weibo is of no use, and I've stopped participating in it. I have pictures and videos as evidence, but the journalists are unwilling to report it for the sake of keeping their jobs, and there's no further follow-up. At the moment, I seldom use Weibo to voice my concerns. There is an important reason – because it is very hard for Weibo to become a systemic channel, in other words, people are unwilling to take care of those issues, including some celebrities. For example, there was a temple in our area facing illegal demolition. Master YanChang is a famous monk on Weibo. At that moment, we think we could contact him and asked him to raise the issue. For a period of time, we kept posting on Weibo, with photos and text descriptions of the matter, and we even sent private message to Master YanChang and tagged him in our posts, hoping he would support our campaign, but we received no response from him. I finally think about the reason, because the matter didn't impact any of his interests, or in other words,

he would need to evaluate if any negative impact arises if he is vocal about the issue. At the moment, it was not a matter of concern for the Big V accounts, the online celebrities, or even the journalists of the official channels.” (P9)

Even if P9 failed to provoke discussion and raise public attention about the local demolition issue on Weibo, P9 still considered their use of Weibo as participatory journalism. For P9, the most participated-in Weibo events are the ones related to good causes or public welfare, including the “snapshot, save begging children” event and the “free lunch” for rural children event. As noted by P9, Weibo events like the Weibo anti-trafficking did result in some improvements such as some lost children being rescued and the act of buying children becoming a criminal offence. Below is what P9 shared about their Weibo citizen journalism experiences:

“I think I am one of the members of participatory journalism. I want to create a topic and agenda but didn’t always succeed. I used to follow the stories on child abuses, and film the moments of the children being saved, thanks to Mr Yu Jianrong who created this campaign. I also participated in Mr Deng Fei’s Free Lunch campaign. I love taking part in the charity campaigns, including reposting the posts, and have given them my support. ...And, the snapchat event has had some impact, helping to save some children. There are punishments for child trafficking, and the situation has been improved.” (P9)

Besides sharing their participation experiences, some other interview participants also identified themselves as Weibo citizen journalists. While P20, P21, and P28 all considered themselves to have participated in citizen journalism via Weibo, the approaches they used were slightly different. P20 gave an example of publishing a live video of a celebrity’s performance on Weibo and thus became a citizen journalist at the time. At the same time, P21 suggested that reposting should be regarded as a practice of reporting the news (or event). Further, P28 credited their participation in discussions and believed it would enable and enhance the event in a better direction. More specifically, P28 reflected the practice of paying attention to a Weibo event and participating in the public discussion as a small personal contribution made towards a positive solution for the event. The three participants had this to say when sharing their experiences on Weibo citizen journalism:

“Yes, I posted on Weibo. I posted a video of a music star meeting his fans in a shopping mall when I bumped into the event while doing window-shopping. I think that this could be counted as participating in the participatory journalism.” (P20)

“I shared others’ posts before, which I think is like reporting an event. On the other hand, I think it is necessary to discuss the story, as discussion and freedom of speech can promote improvement and maturity of a society.” (P21)

“I think I’m part of participatory journalism. If the story can draw my attention to it, I’m wondering if my participation of its discussion could push its development towards a more positive direction in future, as well as pushing myself to some extent.” (P28)

As one of the Weibo citizen journalists, P12 claimed that just clicking the “like” button is a form of self-expression as well as a practice of citizen journalism. In the past, it was almost impossible for individuals to have direct participation in the news; however, for P12, Weibo citizen journalism had offered this opportunity. Despite the slight contribution or influence made by an individual, P12 felt glad to just have a chance to be part of the news. Here is the experience of P12 with regard to Weibo citizen journalism:

“I think I am a participant in participatory journalism. At least I’m expressing my views. Even if I simply press the ‘Like’ button, I think it is a way for me to express my views. In the past, it was not possible for me to participate in the news via the traditional media directly. But under the current situation, my view can bring about change, so I think I’ve participated in the news. Maybe my contribution is small and with a little impact, but it is good to think you’ve participated in the news.” (P12)

Additionally, both P15 and P16 recognised the activity of reposting as a form of participation in Weibo citizen journalism. Based on P15’s viewpoint, an event’s repost count indicates the degree of attention drawn from the public. In other words, the more times a post is reposted, the more counts it will receive from the operating platform (e.g. to be listed on the Weibo hot topics) or the relevant government sectors. Like P15, P16 hardly made comments on the topics they participated in but used “repost” as a way of self-expression. In fact, P16 would repost not only content aligned with their personal opinions but also voices from various perspectives. Holding similar beliefs to P12, P16 also addressed the satisfaction provided by making a sound, even if it’s very little sound. P15 and P16 had this to say about their experiences of Weibo citizen journalism:

“Every day I would browse through it, just like reading the news. If I bump into something I’m interested in or a good piece of story, I probably would share it. But I’m not inclined to make comments or take part in the discussion of a hot topic. ...Personally, I think I’m a member of the participatory

journalism. I think if there's a high rate of reposting, this implies the matter has received a high level of attention. In the era of big data, if a story receives a high level of interest, it will raise the high attention, from no matter the Weibo platform itself, or the government departments." (P15)

"I would repost the story. I think this would count as dissemination. Basically, I didn't make any individual evaluation. But I would repost the views that I agree with, and also some differing voices. On Weibo, there's a group of users who can think independently, and have their own thoughts, interesting sometimes, and rational and have in-depth discussion – but this group of people is a minority. If I come across this kind of view, I'd repost it, because I know to share it with the people who follow me is spreading the voice. Sometimes my purpose is to inform the others – this is what I think. ...I've realised I'm part of the participatory journalism. I think my voice is a very small one, but I feel excited and especially happy that we can produce this sort of voice." (P16)

In contrast to the above participants, three of my interview participants believed their activities on Weibo could not be termed as citizen journalism. Following Weibo events, browsing related comments, awarding "like" to reasonable comments, replying to others' comments, and even publishing local day-to-day information, P14 never saw themselves as a citizen journalist. According to P14, the reason for not considering those activities as citizen journalism is due to their low amount of interaction with other Weibo users as well as a reduced chance of their posts being seen, due to the excessive amount of information being posted on the platform. P14 mentioned that adding keywords or topic hashtags for a post or a repost would increase its chances of being noticed; yet, P14 had never practised this as a means to draw more attention. Below is P14's experience of being a "non citizen-journalist" but still of actively participating in Weibo events:

"I would pay attention to the hot topics on Weibo and read the relevant commentaries. I would click the 'like' button for the good quality comments which has a sound argument; no matter if it's in line with my thoughts or totally different to my stance. Sometimes I would provide my counter argument if I come across some radical and bizarre commentaries, but I would be very careful in choosing my words and guide it with logic – I'm against personal attack and internet bullying. In my former posts, most of them were related to daily life, such as: where the police were checking drink driving, where was the traffic jam, and where was the traffic accident etc. I would share this kind of news. ...I think this cannot be accounted as participatory journalism. According to my experience of using Weibo until now, it is very obvious that there are less and less people who would interact with you there, because of information overload – people are bombarded with huge amount of news. Most probably if I post a vehicle accident nearby, nobody would notice this post and it will be buried away by the other news. However, if I



want more people to pay attention to that post, I could add keywords and hashtags to it to increase its exposure, but I haven't tried this before.” (P14)

In addition to P14, P18 and P22 also don't think their practices can be referred to as citizen journalism. While P18 regarded their participation frequency as very low, P22 identified themselves as an onlooker rather than a citizen journalist. For P18, Weibo is a messy space where everyone can read (and comment) on your posts, and thus it is necessary to be cautious about what to publish and participate in. In order to prevent government surveillance and also marketing promoters, P18 would regularly clean up their follower lists and delete suspicious accounts. Meanwhile, P22's attention was mainly focused on what is behind an event, including social issues, human issues, and future trends. P22 insisted that their practice was merely getting to know the event through Weibo. This is what P18 and P22 shared about their experiences of Weibo citizen journalism:

“I don't think I'm a citizen journalist, because of my low-level involvement, and because I remove my Weibo followers on a regular basis. I would regularly remove the followers who promote multi-level marketing [such pyramid schemes are illegal in China] from my Weibo account. On the other hand, I don't want to attract the attention from the authority that supervises the Internet (including the monitoring of multi-level marketing activities). I also do not follow many people on Weibo. I'm reluctant to make a noise and it is necessary to be prudent on Weibo because the online environment is very complicated and messy; if you create a post, many people can see it.” (P18).

“I never think I'm participating in the news. I think this is only a means for me to know more about the news. I only want to see the societal problems via the news, including humanity and some future events, no matter good or bad. I just want to have a more in-depth understanding of the story. Personally, I'm not quite interested in the news per se. I consider myself more an onlooker rather than a participatory journalist.” (P22)

Four participants emphasised they had restricted their activities in reposting or participating in public discussions and mainly browsed the events or topics on Weibo. Even though P1 would participate in very few specific events by reposting and commenting, P1 preferred to keep their Weibo account as place for sharing personal experiences and thoughts. From P1's perspective, the avoidance of reposting is caused by the authenticity issue of citizen content. However, the reason for P10 to stop reposting is the launch of Weibo's real-name system (where everyone needs an authenticated mobile phone number to be able to post or repost), and its unknown potential consequences. In terms of topic selection, P10 would comment on social hot topics like the murder of Jiang Ge but stayed away from the topics about conflicts between citizens

and the state (or the regime). In fact, P10 does browse posts relating to political issues, as they will be eventually reposted onto P10's homepage by the accounts they follow. Here is what P1 and P10 discussed about their participations on Weibo:

“It is very rare for me to share others' posts. In my opinion, my Weibo account is used to share my personal experiences and thoughts. There's an exception if I would like people to see my comments on some posts, I would share those posts. Other than this, I very rarely share the others' posts. Firstly, I cannot guarantee what you shared is correct. Secondly, it is irresponsible to share some incorrect information randomly.” (P1)

“I would say I never did it (participate) before. Weibo has made some changes and requires ID registration with your real name. Before this, I would share some posts, but when it requires posting with your real ID, I had stopped doing that, as I don't know what will happen in the future. I only would take part in the discussion of some societal hot-button@ issues, such as the high-profile Jiang Ge case in recent. If it were about a conflict of citizenship versus a national stance, I would steer away from that sort of topic. I still would read about the political issues, because they would be pushed onto my Weibo's home page – and I don't know why they can be shared on my home page, but I would have a look at that kind of news.” (P10)

At the same time, both P8 and P11 highlighted they would rather have offline discussions with friends. P8 also mentioned Weibo discussions about the murder of Jiang Ge and reflected on a friend's negative experience of online abuse. P8's friend, a relatively Big V account with 200-300,000 followers, received comments that questioned the account owner's absence in the signature-raising event organised by Jiang Ge's mother. In order to avoid this type of random argument, P8 chose to limit the activity of reposting and commenting, e.g. only few reposts regarding the most discussed social topic of Jiang Ge's case in Japan-Chinese community. For P11, there are two reasons for restricting reposts or comments: 1) typing/ writing (thoughtfully) is an inconvenient way of commenting; and 2) they prefer to talk with acquaintances rather than receive replies from strangers. P11 emphasised that Weibo is used for obtaining information but not for participating in discussions. They had this to say when sharing their experiences of Weibo citizen journalism:

“I don't usually discuss anything (on Weibo). I'd rather have the discussion and analysis with my friends or classmates in private setting, instead of having it on the Internet. For the same reason, I don't want to have quarrel with the others. Occasionally, I would share some posts, such as the Jiang Ge tragedy that happened in Japan, which is one of the hottest debated topics. In memory, I only shared a few posts about the Jiang Ge case from its beginning to

conclusion, therefore I think it is not bad for being an “inessential” person. Some of my friends, they have two to three hundred thousands of followers, of course a large number of them are the so-called “zombie fans” that are provided by Sina (the founder of Weibo). When Jiang Ge’s mother was at an event collecting signatures for a petition in Tokyo, Japan last month, there would be people suddenly appearing on our Weibo account asking why you were not going to the event. They would ask some questions, like ‘Aren’t you in Japan?’ ‘Aren’t you a Chinese student in Japan?’ ‘Why don’t you go to the signature collection petition on the street (for Jiang Ge’s mother)?’” (P8)

“Generally, I don’t take part in such discussions. I only browse for information, and very rarely share others’ posts. ...In regard to any discussion, I would have it with my friends in real life and won’t do it on Weibo. But I would follow news stories. Firstly, it is because of my laziness – typing your comments online is a bother to a lazy person like me. Secondly, I prefer the interaction with my acquaintance and the people I like – most likely it is the strangers that would reply to your comments and it is unnecessary to engage discussions with them. Furthermore, I don’t like expressing my point of view.” (P11)

Every interview participant had taken part in Weibo citizen journalism to some extent, despite some being unaware of having done so. Most of the participants referred to “reposting” as the primary activity on Weibo, which means they were participating in the process of information dissemination. While some of the participants did repost posts and comments on the topics that interested them, primarily non-political sensitive topics; four participants considered their practices irrelevant to Weibo citizen journalism, and that they were merely “onlookers”. Furthermore, some of the participants identified themselves as citizen journalists, who shared and published first-hand information on Weibo besides the regular activities of reposting, commenting or discussing. It is important to note that some of the Weibo citizen journalists did restrict their participation, in particular with sensitive or social topics, mainly due to the fear of unknown consequences or unnecessary online abuse. On the one hand, there were participants who worried that an individual’s voice is too slight to make an impact or preferred to have offline discussions with acquaintances. On the other hand, there were participants who were pleased to make noise online and were willing to help the minorities and raise public attention through Weibo citizen journalism.

#### *4.3.7.3 Views on Weibo citizen journalism*

This section analyses the participants’ views of Weibo citizen journalism. Even though all my interviewees had participated in Weibo citizen journalism to different degrees, half of them

held concerns about its issues of online abuse, authenticity, and inflammatory remarks. While one third of them found the phenomenon to have a dual character with advantages and disadvantages, three participants credited its significance in promoting citizen awareness, public discussion, and thus the development of society.

P4 gave credit to the phenomenon and emphasised Weibo's advantage of being a channel for the public's voice to be heard. According to P4, some posts would be spread wider after being reposted by influential users (Big V accounts) and thus draw attention from society. At the same time, Weibo is also a channel for the public to disclose many social issues, which were not noticeable in the past, e.g. the child abuse cases in kindergartens or the food safety issues. What is more, for P4, Weibo citizen journalism demonstrated that users are participating in protecting individual rights as well as in politics and public affairs. While every citizen has the right to speak and express their viewpoint from their unique perspective, a citizen is responsible for what has been said and takes some social responsibility by expressing their viewpoint. As a result, P4 recognised Weibo as providing "relatively positive guidance" to the public. Even the viewpoint that P4 disagreed on would become a driving force for critical thinking, especially on questioning the cause of such differences in understanding. Here is the positive feedback of Weibo citizen journalism given by P4:

"Actually, this is a good platform; otherwise, we lack a channel for people to voice their voice. To raise any issues with the general public, people can tag their posts with the verified accounts (of Internet celebrities) on Weibo – in this way, they can spread their message to a broader audience about its importance. This is very similar to overseas practices; therefore, I think this phenomenon is not bad. Truly, it brings our attention to some matters that have been ignored for long. In the past when Weibo did not exist, we never imagined child abuse would happen in kindergartens, or the food safety issue. This means people are joining together to defend their rights, and participating in politics and community affairs. I'm very supportive of this in most cases, because we have a right to voice different opinions. *No matter what you said, it is your right to say so, and people can agree or disagree with you.* To some extent, one has to bear his or her social responsibility in terms of expressing opinions – they need to be accountable for their words. In most of the cases, I think it is a positive guidance, and it would make some changes on my views on the world/ philosophy/ life value, even though I would disagree with some of the arguments. It also helps with my critical thinking; for it leads me to think about why that person would say this, instead of me focusing on my disagreement with it." (P4)

In fact, P4's self-reflection of the enhancement of critical thinking is evidence of what P23 highlighted about the role of Weibo citizen journalism in enabling public awareness. According

to P23, Weibo has encouraged both the public and the authority towards a better social direction. From the perspective of the public, P23 suggested that the more they participated in citizen journalism, the more likely they would understand the news from this insight, and thus increase their rational and objective thinking while reducing the chance of following set agendas. In terms of the authorities, P23 pointed out that the more citizen journalism cases that occur on Weibo, the more likely for them to become proactive in disclosing information and responding to the public. P23 continuously explained that the authority's previous means of ignoring or internally reporting social incidents was no longer applicable in the current China, where at-the-scene content would be uploaded and reposted within seconds. Therefore, the authority is required to release the control of information and to interact with netizens through Weibo. In other words, with the nature of rapid dissemination and massive attention drawn from the public, Weibo citizen journalism has not only enabled interactions between netizens and the authority, but also put pressure on authorities for responding to social queries and solving social problems. P23 had this to say when discussing the significance of Weibo citizen journalism:

“It helps promote the development of the whole story. On one hand, more participation in the news story means the general public can develop a better stance and angle so that they can treat it more rationally instead of blindly following the trend. Take the photo (uploaded by netizens) as an example; it should reveal more relevant and comprehensive information. In other words, after participating in more of this so-called participatory journalism, people will become more and more rational and objective, because they understand it is impossible for a single person, or from a single perspective, to reveal the truth of a whole story. Secondly, it pushes the government to proactively use it as a platform for information disclosure, answering questions from the public, in a more open, quicker, and better way, so that people's desire to understand the truth can be satisfied. In the past, you wouldn't be able to know about this kind of information – it was not possible. For example, via Weibo we can be informed if there's a water leakage in the coal mine or derailment – this kind of information wouldn't be disclosed to the public in the past, with zero reporting of it, and the news would only be available internally and it is embargoed for external disclosure. *Nowadays, there is no way to suppress the news for its distribution due to the abundance of sources.* For example, if there's an explosion at a coal mine, the breaking news will be spread out in literally a second's time, because it is impossible to take control of thousands of people who lived in the vicinity of the accident and their conversations online. Therefore, due to the existence of such a platform, I think the public and the government are being pushed to a better direction.” (P23)

In addition to the above credit given to Weibo citizen journalism, one-third of my interview participants referred to its dual character, which means there are both advantages and disadvantages brought by the phenomenon. For these participants, the concerns are again focusing on issues including content quality, media literacy, online abuse, and the profit-driven motivation. Nevertheless, they acknowledged its significance in providing comprehensive reporting on the news, raising attention from the public and related authorities, and thus guiding towards possible solutions for social problems.

First, P5 thought citizen journalism was a good trend in general. P5 then argued that the means and attitudes of participation need to be cultivated due to the issues of false news and fear-mongering (or inducing panic among the society). At this stage, the levels of social mentality and media literacy of the public are still being developed, and for P5, it is possible to introduce some regulations to limit the fake content, but it is unnecessary to suppress their practice of citizen journalism. This is because the public, more specifically the netizens, often provide first-hand information, which supplements the official (state-control) reports to show a relatively complete picture of a news incident. This is P5's view of Weibo citizen journalism:

“Personally speaking, I think this is very good. However, due to the existing status of the general public's psychological quality and education level as a whole, I think it needs more cultivation for the participatory journalism, in terms of the method of participation and attitude; this is because of the prevalence of the fake news. On the other hand, I think there should be some control over the news which promotes panic in the society, even though the news is true by itself, it is helpless in terms of maintaining a stable environment – the society will go into panic, if that kind of news are distributed recklessly. However, it should not be suppressed, as most of them are from the first-hand interviews and the information is the most straightforward, which is a complement to the well-balanced official news reporting, and in the way people can have a more holistic view of the story from different dimensions. *The participatory journalism with the involvement of the general public is indispensable, however, it needs more training of the public in regards with the method and attitude of their participation.*” (P5)

Meanwhile, P6 summarised the duality of Weibo citizen journalism from the practice of reposting. There will be a high volume of reposts and participations happening on Weibo when a social issue is disclosed. With the massive reposts, the issue will then become a popular social topic and draw attention from society. Based on P6's understanding, this may increase the possibility for the issue to reach a better resolution. However, P6 further pointed out that Weibo users usually repost posts with subjectivity, which may be taken advantage of and instigated by one-sided reports. Therefore, the public opinion towards the news would become

overwhelmed with intensely emotional judgments rather than focusing on the essential facts. That is, like P5, P6's concerns about the phenomenon were also about the public's social mentality and its potential of overlooking the truth. P6 had this to say when explaining the dual character of Weibo citizen journalism:

“It is like a two-edged sword in regards with participatory journalism. At first, people are highly active in sharing and participating in the high-profile social issues, raising the public awareness of their resolution, and finally the matters can be better solved. Owing to the huge volume of sharing and the word-of-mouth distribution, the issue becomes high-profile and everyone knows about it, in this way it also raises awareness to the authorities for whom it may be a concern, giving it a better solution. However, I realise that people are relatively subjective when they're sharing a story. Moreover, you can only know about the story from one angle – the angle from which it is revealed, there is still uncertainty about the whole story from its beginning to end. Our conceptualisation of the story is based on the reporting; therefore, the conflict will be further intensified as the audience are agitated by the reporting, and it will impact the truth of the story and the justice. *Because what you see in the reporting doesn't represent the true story, I think we should look at the participatory journalism from both sides.*” (P6)

Supporting P5's claim of citizen content being first-hand information, P9 had evidence of Weibo citizen journalism's crucial contribution to news sources through their previous work experience. According to P9, a significant amount of news, especially the ones relating to social topics, were initially disclosed and spread across on Weibo. Yet, P9 critiqued the slogan of “onlookers change China” and addressed their disappointment in the trend of fighting for individual interest rather than benefiting the public as a whole. More specifically, P9 described the trend as “performance of people with vested interest” that offers opportunities for keyboard warriors to start trouble and thus create chaos in the online sphere. For P9, changes won't be made by the “onlookers” who merely participate by forwarding posts but by those who dare to speak out, that is, through public discussions. Below is what P9 commented about Weibo citizen journalism:

“I worked in a research centre before, had done reports on topics such as the stigma of basic officers and the school bus incident. We went onto Weibo and looked up related content, to observe a whole year's public opinion. We used a lot of netizens' posts (in the research), which are similar to the news sources disclosed in the Post-it section of Tianya online community (天涯報貼). We made comparisons between Weibo and Baidu's Post-bar (貼吧) and rated their percentage of initial news disclosing. We found that there was a significant amount of news first disclosed on Weibo, and the primary and secondary public opinion are all from Weibo. ...“Onlookers change China” (圍觀改變中國) is a slogan. *I have read some articles, and I have experienced some rights-*

*protection and resistance. From what I have seen, it is most are just a performance of people with vested interest. That is, the purpose of fighting against (the authority) is to protect oneself, not us. Ends up giving opportunities for “keyboard warriors” (鍵盤俠) to cause trouble and results in chaos in the online world. The onlookers can't change China; it requires people to speak out.” (P9)*

Similar to P5, the advantage of Weibo citizen journalism for P11 was the enhancement of public attention for some social issues. Personally, P11 become aware of social topics such as the Jiang Ge’s murder and the case of actress Yuanli being a spokesperson for pneumoconiosis (caused by pollution) patients since they were discussed online. Speaking of the disadvantages of the phenomenon, P11 stated that the low cost of online expression may cause online violence or rumours. Sometimes the online violence would be brought into the offline reality and damage one’s privacy and security. Here are the two sides of Weibo citizen journalism pointed out by P11:

*“There are pros and cons, I think. For the pros, it increases the social awareness, such as the recent hotly-debated Jiang Ge case. And we would follow some cases mentioned by Yuan Li in her TV program. Honestly, without her mentioning, I think we wouldn’t follow those cases. As for the Jiang Ge case, we were aware of it via the online discussion. For the cons, it doesn’t require your real ID to leave a comment, and people would think expressing one’s view is at a very low cost, and sometimes this would bring about Internet violence. *The reckless speeches online cause Internet violence, which in turn converts into the violence in real life, finally it negatively impacts on the issues of privacy and confidentiality.*” (P11)*

For P8, P14, and P15, recognition of Weibo citizen journalism were primarily given to the fact that Weibo provides a platform to publish the information, to express themselves, and to discuss the news. Based on P8’s viewpoint, in favour of the citizen content published on Weibo, the quantity of information that users are able to access has now increased dramatically compared to ten years ago. And yet, P8 mentioned that citizen content could be irresponsible if it’s designed to maximise the click rates and gain popularity. Since professional journalists are trained to avoid conflicts of interests and comply with codes of conduct, P8 worried that citizen journalists who have not been trained professionally would act for the purpose of attention-seeking. P8 had this to say when giving feedback on Weibo citizen journalism:

*“Weibo is a platform on which everyone can make their voice heard or publish the information – this is very nice indeed. For example, ten years ago people would not be able to access this amount of information, as there was a huge*



gap in terms of the volume of information between now and the past. Because everyone can have their own platform like this, the volume of information will increase exponentially, and there are pros and cons of this. The flipside is the widespread irresponsible posts caused by the lack of scrutiny, the pursuit of sheer increase of readership, and the desire to be popular. *Professionalism is required when handling the ethical topics, but most of the layman reporters on social media only focus on the buzz-worthiness of the story and they often lack any training in this regard – this makes me think the pros are overcome by the cons.*” (P8)

On the one hand, P14 emphasised the need for public discussions and a space for citizens to have their voices heard. On the other hand, P14 held the same concern as P5, towards the public’s *media literacy ability*, as there is a gap between the rapid development of the Internet in China and the lagging education levels of Chinese citizens. P14 continued to explain that netizens from different education levels would interpret the same content differently and their capabilities of distinguishing right from wrong would also be varied. Therefore, misinterpretations would often lead to misunderstandings of the information and public discussions, which can be overwhelming for some users. This is what P14 said about Weibo citizen journalism:

“It is necessary to have the discussion, and we need such a platform for the so-called users or citizens to voice their concerns. *Currently, however, there is a gap between the education level of the public and the speed of Internet development in China*; therefore, we cannot tell if the public’s news scrutiny ability and the media’s ethical standards are at the same level, or if there is a huge gap between them. When a story is overly discussed, it sometimes can cause misunderstanding, as we don’t know about the education level of the audience and their ability to analyse the information, or how large is the gap between these, when they received the breaking news.” (P14)

Additionally, P15 credited the role of Weibo in forming a platform for individuals and media organisations to participate and discuss issues side-by-side, and its importance of providing the public with a space for expressing their viewpoints. Although it is unlikely to have absolutely zero bias, for P15, media needs to be responsible with the published content while a user needs to comment thoughtfully and avoid using abusive language. While P15 accessed Weibo citizen journalism from the perspective of collaboration and public expression, P16 highlighted its significance in promoting information transparency in China, reflecting both political and economic events, and social news. However, P16 still held concerns about the phenomenon and indicated the issue of the dominance of entertainment and human-interest content, the

fragmentation of information, and the public's lack of in-depth thinking. Below are how P15 and P16 commented on Weibo citizen journalism:

“First of all, I think this is a good way for participation, at least it has a platform allowing both the individuals and media to take part in the discussion of the news, and people can express their opinions on the same platform. However, I think, people should be held responsible for their comments, especially the media in the reporting of the news, even though you can have your own attitude. There are some people who do not pay any attention to what they say and make reckless and even radical remarks, when they are commenting on certain news and phenomena.” (P15)

“Frankly, I'm not too sure about whether this is good or bad. From an ordinary person's perspective, I appreciate the openness and transparency of the news at this stage. At least I think it is good at the moment. This has become a trend in the whole society and it goes beyond the issues on the national agenda, such as the fields in politics and economy, however, among all the open societal news, I think 70% of them are about entertainment, gossips and rumours, and the dramatically unbelievable stories, such as the reports on the extramarital affairs. *The news is presented in a fragmented way, which is lack of thoughtful analysis. Because Chinese are not very good at critical thinking [about such issues], they are being influenced and lead by the mainstream.*” (P16)

Similar to the above participants, P19 recognised Weibo as an important platform for citizens to express their viewpoint and achieve freedom of speech. P19 gave the example of a user who filed a court case against Weibo's deletion of their personal account in violation of their right to freedom of speech, and claimed that even the ruling party of China had to acknowledge its role in promoting public expression. Nevertheless, P19 criticised the marketing accounts' practice of taking advantage of hot topics and influencing public opinion on Weibo. Since it is easy for the public to misunderstand a news incident, this practice of marketing accounts usually reinforces the misunderstanding (or causes bias). According to P19, for users who read merely preferred content, one-sided content published by those marketing accounts somewhat matches with their needs and makes them feel like everyone else shares the same viewpoints. P19 had this to say when providing feedback on Weibo citizen journalism:

“Firstly, I have to say this is a good phenomenon. I think WeChat is a medium for socialising, and Weibo has developed into a platform for freedom of speech, which is even admitted by the Chinese Communist Party. *In 2011, there was a case about the cancellation of a Weibo user's account, and he filed his case in front of the court, arguing the cancellation is a violation of his freedom of speech. And the court of the Chinese Communist Party accepted the case. Therefore, I think it is a very important platform for the citizens to*

*voice their concerns, and this is a very good phenomenon. ...However, I have to mention a lot of people are taking advantage of the discussion of the hot topic issues, such as some Weibo marketing users; they would collaborate with each other and make instigating comments, for the purpose of gaining free advertisement. Psychologically, there are some people who are inclined to read the content of their preference only. ...Therefore, they wouldn't mind the people who take advantage of their posts, as they want to create an environment where everybody in the world thinks just like them.” (P19)*

At the same time, P21 also reflected on the discussion feature of Weibo and its relationship to freedom of speech. Although P21 believed that public discussion can better guide society to maturity, in their opinion, the authenticity of citizen content and its information sources were questionable. Based on P21's observation, some citizen content, especially the grassroots media, were produced from information published by other netizens or even discussions from another online platform without any verification of the source. Such content, even when well-intended, may not be beneficial for the public in understanding the content in-depth. Sometimes, even if the intention of some influential accounts or marketing accounts were to speak out for the disadvantaged, their lack of professional training could result in a lack of content authenticity. Below is what P21 said about citizen journalism on Weibo:

*“On the other hand, especially in regards with the news source of the social media, it is arguable whether they are scientific and trustworthy. It is necessary to check on the source of the news posted on social media, most of time they are simply copying the breaking news from another source, such as a netizen, or another information platform. When they saw the news, they would copy it over and add some comments. In this way, it will increase their readership numbers; but for many ordinary people, they would trust this news reposted by them. ... Some Internet celebrities or the marketing accounts, which have a lot of followers, would write to increase the exposure rate of their account. Some of them make comments on the story, even though it is based on the hearsay, and their article is subject to what their version of justice and their so-called passion for the public interest. I think this is a lack of professionalism. *When compared with the professional media, they don't need to bear the same amount of social responsibilities, and needless to say, they don't have to carry out a scientific analysis of the news.” (P21)**

Instead of addressing the dual character of Weibo citizen journalism, P26 highlighted a dilemma of the phenomenon with reference to the journalism profession. Even though the immediate nature of citizen content does satisfy the need for timely reporting of modern journalism, based on P26's claim, at-the-scene content is usually segmented and may affect the public's understanding of the news. Thus, P26 argued that the strength of citizen journalism

was most suited for reporting ordinary social incidents such as car crashes, fire accidents, and natural disasters, which require instant reports of the events. And for P26, citizen journalists have limited contributions in reviewing the progress of the news, investigating the underlying issues, and searching for the truth, due to their lack of professional training. When a citizen happened to be at the scene of an incident, it is unlikely for them to realise that first-hand information can be presented with different perspectives and the representation of such information will impact an audience's interpretation or/and the news' development. In some cases, P26 continued, citizen content has directed the public to a negative reaction towards the news. Here is the detailed evaluation of Weibo citizen journalism given by P26:

“My view on this phenomenon is a bit paradoxical. It is very speedy that eyewitness can send a photo on site and describe the situation. *But, to some extent, the fastest is also the most biased, and it impacts on the understanding of the whole story.* In light of this, we have doubts on this kind of distribution method. On one hand, I hope someone at the scene, such as at a traffic accident, can take some first-hand photos to reveal what has happened. But I think its efficacy, namely the timeliness, can be only limited to some ordinary social events, such as traffic accidents, fire outbreaks, and natural disasters, as this won't give an in-depth understanding of the background story. Furthermore, this will create some negative impact on the whole process of the story, from its cause to the ending. ... When a story happens, an eyewitness is not sure from which perspective he or she should handle the information. This is why we need professionals at this moment, such as the journalists from the traditional media. Let's think about this. If the ordinary people like us come across an event and take a photo of it and posted it on Weibo, what sort of impact will this be? What would the consequence be? *After taking the photo, shall we keep following up on the news and dig out more information? But it's hard to require ordinary people to do these things.*” (P26)

Over one-third of the interview participants had relatively pessimistic viewpoints about Weibo citizen journalism and raised concerns similar to the issues mentioned earlier. This included the authenticity and objectivity of citizen content due to the lack of professional training, netizens' insufficient media literacy, and the significant online abuse.

In addition to P26's concern of the untrained citizen journalists, P3 suggested that the popularity of citizen content, with particular reference to grassroots media, has sacrificed the professionalism of journalism to some extent. Both P3 and P20 reflected on the unprofessional practice of citizen journalists to report one-sided news or take sides when commenting on popular social topics, which then generate confusion and bias in public opinion. More specifically, P3 pointed out that the public would easily accept the information or perspective provided by whoever seized the initiative and spoke out first, regardless of the fact that there

were often more than one party involved in an incident. At the same time, P20 explained that Weibo users sometimes act like fans and support those who they follow without any hesitation. In this case, the unprofessional citizen content together with the irrational advocacy becomes a barrier for the public to understand the facts and seek possible solutions. Two participants had this to say when expressing their worries about Weibo citizen journalism:

“However, from my personal perspective, I notice things have been changed in regards with citizen journalism, which cannot stand up to its name anymore, with the gradual erosion of professionalism as a cost of the rise of ‘self-media’. Anyone can make a biased reporting, and with the immediate fermentation online, and then this biased view will be adopted by the general public. Many online cases have more than one party’s participation, and if it is reported only from a single perspective, people will take it as the truth of the whole story, and without the involvement of professional journalism, it is very easy to cause the loss of facts. In light of this, we cannot believe, at least not a hundred per cent, the so-called online news, because most of them are biased – you hear only the statements from the person concerned and miss out the genuine information provided in the professional media report.” (P3)

“I think the news story with personal touch won’t give us any positive impact. For news to be news, it needs objectiveness. ...Lacking professionalism will have some impact, for example those ‘self-media’, the Weibo celebrity (Big-V users), followed and liked by many fans, would express their attitudes towards some breaking news stories. And their fans, despite the fact that they are not clear about the truth of the story, would immediately follow suit, because they would think what the celebrities said is true. This is very confusing, and it impacts on the general public. It mainly depends on whether those influencers have a correct understanding of the story; however, this is not the true case.” (P20)

In terms of journalists as a profession, P22 holds the same viewpoints as P26 and believes that it requires systematic training and specific skills to become a journalist, which means the standard cannot be simply met by a random person. In order to report news, according to P22, a journalist needs to first investigate and disclose the truth. During the reporting process, the journalist will then form a perspective of the incident, whether it’s positive or negative, open or private. Therefore, the journalist is able to reveal the social causes of the incident or the conflicts between involved parties. While P22 criticised the rough production of citizen content and its segmentary presentation of news, P25 claimed that it was difficult for citizen journalists to maintain the neutral status and objectivity in investigating or reporting of professional journalists. That is, P25’s main reason for viewing the phenomenon pessimistically is because

citizen content is subjective in general. Below are the issues of Weibo citizen journalism raised by P22 and P25:

“I think journalism is a discipline that requires a strong foundation of knowledge. Firstly, not everyone can be a journalist or the news reporter, as this requires systematic training. In my understanding, if you want to write an article about a news story, you must need to know about its truth, at least you have to reveal the truth in your report. Secondly, you have to have your own point of view, no matter its angle is positive or negative, which can be openly disclosed or has to be kept confidential, and this is the minimal requirement. Thirdly, it needs to dig out the background information, such as the relevant policy, the societal conflicts, or some other issues, and *for a person everyday sitting in front of a computer and reading a few lines of comments after work, it is hard to tell who is true or wrong, as the story can be multi-dimensional.*” (P22)

“Does that mean I will participate in the participatory journalism? My view on this kind of journalism is not positive. Normally, there would be subjective elements in one’s commentary, and you will look for the materials to support your view of point. But, for a news practitioner, they should maintain the neutrality, and try their best to report the whole story in an objective way, which is hard to be achieved by social media. It is hard to maintain its objectivity and neutrality in the spontaneous behaviours of investigation and reporting.” (P25)

When news becomes popular and widely discussed, Weibo users like P7, P10 and P24 hold doubts about relevant citizen content and would rather wait and see than give immediate responses. For them, the authenticity of initial reports was usually questionable and information available wasn’t necessarily reliable. P7 described the news in the era of Weibo citizen journalism as better to be read as “old news”. For them, the comprehensive picture of the news would only appear after alternative voices began to emerge, which usually happened when its initial perspective (or the dominant voice) became less popular. Further, P7 mentioned the term “reversal” (反轉) when explaining this situation and P10 used the term “set the tempo” (帶節奏) when highlighting the influential power of Big V accounts’ initial responses in manipulating public opinion. But for P24, the direction of public opinion is led by the “water army”, which refers to the paid Internet ghost-writers, instead of the Big V accounts. As indicated by P24, a news incident would be presented with a certain agenda and the public would hardly be offered opportunity to discover the truth. Even some of the popular comments may not be reflecting the actual public opinion, which causes P24’s suspicion in such

comments as well as in citizen content. These are how these three participants talked about their mistrust of the phenomenon:

“In regards with the ‘self-media’ in China, there is a phenomenon that after a period of time when the news story was released, say in two to three days or after a week, basically there would be a “turnaround” of the story. The audience should focus on the “old” news instead of the “new” news – *after a few days when the news is settled down and its popularity dwindles, at this moment is when you will hear the explanations from different angles.* Nowadays, unless the news is from a trustworthy social media, I would normally look at it with suspicion.” (P7)

“When compared with the “zero krypton” (零氦) users like us [those who use the free version of the online platforms, unlike the paid subscribers of the service], the ‘big-V’ accounts of Weibo (i.e. the online celebrities) has an advantage in spreading the news in terms of speed. *According to my observation and my long-time experience as a Weibo user, the celebrity users have more power than the ordinary users like us,* however, we have to wait and see if their version of the story is true or not.” (P10)

“I’m not very willing to believe the stories mentioned over the Internet nowadays. You can present the issue from different angles depending on how you strategise your campaign. For the general public who lack the knowledge of its ins and outs, they are inclined to believe what they’re told. They would be manipulated by the comments of Internet “water army”. On the hotly debated topics, their views might be opposite to the mainstream media, but you can still find them among the comments. I’m reluctant to believe those comments, as I’m not sure whether the others think alike.” (P24)

For both P2 and P12, their concerns about the phenomenon was netizens’ lack of media literacy. P2 introduced the term “keyboard warrior” (鍵盤俠), the kind of netizens who publish irresponsible expressions and discuss aggressively without getting to know the truth. In contrast to the keyboard warriors, according to P2, the majority often hold a neutral attitude towards a news topic since it is hard to get a complete picture of the incident. Although P12 stated the need for Weibo citizen journalism in an environment with little freedom of speech, they felt there were less rational discussions when a public event became popular due to the shortage of media literacy. Based on P12’s observation, netizens sometimes linked the irrelevant incidents or topics together and began to comment emotionally as their anger had accumulated over time. They had this to say when discussing their worries about the phenomenon:

“There is a buzzword called “keyboard warrior”. Basically, after the Internet Management authority updated the regulations, all the online platforms require real ID registration. However, keyboard warriors/ trolls still exist, and they would make irresponsible comments online based on no factual evidence. I

think most people should hold a neutral position, as there are so many fake news and we don't know about the ins and outs, so that our discussion is based only on the things we believe and the facts we believe in.” (P2)

“Online discussion is very necessary especially under such a circumstance that the freedom of speech is still limited. However, I think the netizens' media literacy needs to be improved, as some easily become emotional when they are discussing the hot topics. Take the Jiang Ge case as an example, there was a horror car accident happened on a highway in An Hui province, killing 20 people. In the comments about the accident, I saw a message that said they wished that all the family members of Liu Xing (the person involved in the Jiang Ge case) were aboard that car involved in the accident. I think this is very emotional, and they are inclined to link one story with another, in this way the angers are aggregating.” (P12)

Similar to what P10 and P24 mentioned about the manipulation of public opinion, P18 also noticed that public discussion was somehow directed to a negative situation despite the public's positive motivation in discussing a news topic. In order to escape from the manipulation, P18 began to restrict their participation of reposting and commenting and refused to take sides in the binary choices provided by the media. P18 critically summarised that Weibo citizen journalism was a bit like an illusion created by the media with inflammatory speech, where a citizen's voice was hardly heard. Here is P18's review of the phenomenon's issues:

“The general public have good intention at the start. However, the media only provides us with two choices, either support or go against it, but once you've chosen your side, the story will gradually develop to the opposite direction with a negative outcome, totally different than what you expect initially. For example, in the Jiang Ge case and the case of Yue Lin, the pregnant woman who jumped off the hospital building at the start of delivering a baby; originally people would feel disturbed by this sad news and ponder how to use their voices to help the victims; however, the media would guide the story in a negative direction, giving us the feeling that we're being controlled. These cases clearly explain why I'm no longer willing to take a stance, share a post, or make comments. I can understand some news are trying to stoke the anger among the public, and in too much of my past experiences, *I think the media is controlled by someone back stage trying to incite the public, and a netizen might not truly represent the voice of himself.*” (P18)

On the contrary, P17 raised the concern of the decreasing amount of opinion leaders on Weibo, in reference to the decline in citizen journalism. For P17, the Internet trolls and the tightness of censorship are the two factors that cause such decline. P17 also felt disappointed by current circumstances, that even those netizens from third and fourth-tier cities, who think



independently and dare to speak out, have been gradually banned on Weibo. Below is the issue with Weibo citizen journalism for P17:

“This is my understanding: on the one hand, there’re Internet mobs; on the other hand, the governing authority is trying to control the situation. At the moment, basically there are less and less of this kind of mobsters. Literally, they don’t exist anymore, however, there’re a few like-minded people still making comments online, but they cannot be counted as the influencers. *People who are outspoken and value individual views and ideas can still be seen across the country or in the level 3 or level 4 cities, however, their accounts are destined for censorship.*” (P17)

Although three interview participants credited the significance of Weibo citizen journalism in promoting citizen awareness, public discussion, and thus the development of society; one-third of my participants highlighted its dual character. That is, there are advantages and disadvantages brought by the phenomenon. Rather than addressing its dual character, P26 expressed a dilemma of the phenomenon with reference to the journalism profession. Moreover, more than one-third of the participants held a relatively pessimistic viewpoint towards the phenomenon. They raised concerns such as the authenticity and objectivity of citizen-generated content due to the lack of professional training, netizens’ insufficient grasp of media literacy, and the significant online abuse.

#### 4.3.8 Social Influences and Achievements

When it came to the question of what Weibo citizen journalism had achieved in China, answers given by my interview participants can again be clearly grouped into three categories: raising concerns about its achievements, recognising pros and cons at the same time, and giving credit to its social influences but with limited achievements. In this section, participants’ evaluations about the phenomenon’s significance in promoting social development and resolving social issues will be analysed.

Nearly a quarter of my participants expressed their disappointment in Weibo citizen journalism and explained its failure to affect any social changes. For instance, P22 raised the risk for citizen journalists who are being used by the government in manipulating public opinion. In this case, Weibo citizen journalism would not be able to promote effective discussions and could even cause negative social influences. From a functional perspective, P22 explained that Weibo began to control its data traffic by implementing the new feature of software algorithmic sorting (analysed in section 4.3.2.2.1). Through this function, it can

present one-sided information to a user and thus create an illusion, which is to the benefit of the government rather than to helping the user to know the truth. According to P22, it is highly possible that some citizen journalists would then “be used as guns” (當槍使) to point at the public by the government. Here is what P22 commented about the phenomenon’s failure in achieving resolutions for social issues:

“They would mislead the story development and misguide the public discussion, as they won’t be held accountable for their words. Weibo is now controlling the information flow, and it will push their selected stories for you. For example, if a story has two sides A and B, and if Weibo wants you to know about the story from side A, it will deliver a lot of the side A information. If you don’t have your own view, you would consider side A is correct. Similarly, if Weibo promotes the side B story, you would think side B is correct. However, in fact the truth is neither A nor B, as it could be C, D, F or something else. In light of this, therefore, this group of citizen journalists, who love to publish their opinions online, are very easily being taken advantage of and become someone else’s mouthpiece (當槍使). *If the government wants to change the public conversations, it doesn’t need to tell you so; what it will do is to let you receive their message and believe it is correct – and then the whole story will deviate from its original course.*” (P22)

According to P3, it is unlikely for the public voice to make any change in China since all media is controlled by the Chinese regime. In fact, P3 indicated that there were more discussions and participation in the first few years of Weibo’s establishment, yet the control has been gradually strengthening over time and “onlookers” now have less opportunities for changing the circumstances. To support their claim, P3 recalled that many influential accounts (大V賬號) supported the villagers of Wukan and actively participated in public discussions at the time of the 2011 Wukan protests. Although those accounts were highly influential and with hundreds of thousands of followers, most of them have now disappeared from Weibo. P3 listed some other Weibo events, including the most recent Beijing RYB kindergarten abuse incident, and criticised the outcomes and resolutions, after it was disclosed and brought to attention through Weibo. For P3, the more unresolved Weibo events the public have seen, the easier it is for them to get used to it, and thus their hope for social changes will be worn down. P3 had this to say when reflecting on the disappointment of citizen journalism in China:

*“I think I cannot make any change. It is hard to believe any public discussion can make changes, especially in China, as the ruling party governs the media, so nothing about the media can change. In regards to onlookers, in News Weekly there was a frequently quoted saying, “onlookers will change China”.*

Now I gradually realise nothing can be changed by the onlookers, when compared with the past, at least five years ago, when this idea first emerged and the ruling party at that time was not readily prepared to cope with the situation, as a result the environment was relatively more open as a whole. Now, things are different, as the authorities have formulated specialised strategies to handle it. The Wukan protests case happened when I was at college and it was the event that had a deepest impression, at that time there were many villagers and village officials making their voices online, and they received the support from many ‘Big-V’ users, such as He Weifang, Xiao Shu, and Wu Zhoulai, who had several hundred thousands of followers respectively. Of course, they have vanished from the Internet now. ...In regards with the RYB child abuse incident, the penalty outcome is still pending; needless to say, the explosion in Tianjin, and the contamination of school playground in Changzhou in the further past, all of those stories originated on Weibo, and nothing has changed until now. This also includes a horrible fire tragedy in Hangzhou, killing three children and their mother. Until now, the father has never stopped speaking out about the case and crying for justice that is long overdue, as well as an official explanation. *The more you witnessed, the more you would become indifferent, and subsequently lose hope.*” (P3)

Holding the same disappointment as P3, P6 addressed that most of the popular Weibo events would be discussed for a certain period but ended up with no resolution once their popularity decreased. It is common for a hot topic to be replaced by another and later be forgotten by the public. Based on P6’s observation, the act of reposting can merely help to disseminate the information and thus draw more attention from the society. Although such means of participation should have some influence in contributing to resolving social issues, its influence is still slight at this stage. As P6 pointed out, a social incident would not simply be settled through drawing significant public attention. In other words, the resolution of a social incident usually requires favourable actions from the authorities. This is what P6 shared about Weibo citizen journalism in relation to its limited achievements:

“In fact, sometimes, the story is mingled with some sort of frustration, as *people’s interests are short-lived, when the momentum of the story dwindles, it eventually ends without a result.* It is hopeless, as we never see the outcome. Referring to the RYB child abuse incident, people were infuriated by the story when it first broke out. However, human beings tend to be forgetful. Gradually, it is being replaced by the other hot topic issues that are freshly new. Consequently, we would never know about the solution and outcome of those stories. Sadly, it becomes a ubiquitous pattern that people no longer expect an outcome for the story. As a result, it won’t have any change even if you’ve participated in the story and reposted it. Reposting can only raise the public attention and has some effect on some stories’ follow-up. Finally, it

won't have too much influence upon how the issue is solved, even if it is a far-reaching story.” (P6)

In addition to P3 and P6, P8, P13, and P25 all emphasised the fact that social events discussed on Weibo would come to no resolution. In fact, both P8 and P13 referred to the Beijing RYB kindergarten abuse incident as an example when addressing the failure of Weibo citizen journalism. While P13 suggested that even cases with strong evidence would end up with little explanation of what had happened rather than serious investigation; P8 argued that the necessary reaction to such incidents should be improving regulations to prevent future abuse incidents, even if the information provided is inauthentic. For P13, the abuse incident demonstrated the loss of government's credibility as the public did not believe in the government's response which simply categorised it as a rumour. Again, P25 failed to see any resolution of the sexual assault incidents or the academic fraud case in universities, even if they had drawn significant attention on Weibo. P25 further pointed out that neither grassroots media nor professional media was capable of taking any action. The media is primarily accountable for putting pressure on the authorities, yet, the authority's resolution will often be delayed, and they will wait until the issue has been forgotten. Below are how three participants evaluated the phenomenon:

“Like the RYB kindergarten incident, it seems finally there was a revelation of rumour-mongering. I have two impressions upon the Weibo news: one is the ‘turnaround of the story’ (反轉), and the other is rumour fabrication and spreading. There are many cases of these. *Speaking of the RYB incident, it shows that the government has lost the public's trust fundamentally, and nobody believed what the officials said.* No matter the sexual assaults happened or not, we should be focused on the prevention of this kind of offence, but its final development has deviated from this main point. Even though it is a piece of fabricated rumour, it still has its reason for existence if the government is willing to make some changes in terms of its policy. But there was no change in the end.” (P8)

“There was a deep impression that in fact the matters are left without any settlement on Weibo or in the society, such as the RYB kindergarten incident or the Jiang Ge case. The RYB incident was a breaking story, and it was expected that it would be followed with an in-depth investigation; however, at the end people are still not clear about the truth. We have to believe this is the outcome, as there is nothing we can do about it.” (P13)

“For example, recently, there are many incidents of sexual assault, and mainly in colleges and universities. It drew (attention) every time when happened, but it never works. Even the follow-ups on Han Chunyu's (academic fraud) case, which still has no results. Because the only thing that can be done by either

the 'self-media' or the (mainstream) news media is an explosion. Nothing else they can do. What actions can the media take? It is merely putting pressure (to the authorities). However, (the authorities) are often willing to delay (in responding), and wait. Once it gets away from the spotlight and people start to forget, the issue is 'resolved'." (P25)

Moreover, P9 summarised the phenomenon's limitations from the perspective of both citizen journalists' motivations and the authority's inaction. P9 agreed that it did help to create citizen awareness for the Chinese public, but many citizen journalists focused on the individual or group interests rather than benefits for the wider society. And for many citizen events, the authority merely deals with whatever has been brought to the public attention instead of improving the relevant systems or regulations to resolve the issue. As a result, similar incidents will still occur and be disclosed year after year, and all citizen events had become just a "full stop" on the annual list of popular news. P9 then compared the situation to the disease treatment and criticised that social changes would not be achieved unless the fundamental issues were resolved. Here are P9's arguments on the significance of Weibo citizen journalism:

"I think there are two points: 1) no matter he's the victim or the person involved, he's willing to make his voice heard on Weibo; 2) more people are expecting to transform it from a 'my' story to 'our' story. *I agree with my teacher that this is an act of reclaiming rights, which is the waking of the citizenship awareness.* But what comes next after people have defended their rights or our rights, including the Lei Yang case. And how about the Hui Zexi case? Why new cases keep coming after each other? This means the system is still a fledgling one, or in other words *after the legal settlement we've only tackled the individual cases, but there is still a lack of solution for the same kind of incidents as a group*, such as the compulsory demolition case, Yi Huang case, Weng An case, and the PX case. ...In the end, we still cannot see any profound impact, and the case would stay for a certain period of time and that would be its end. In light of this, the fate of all the participatory news is only like putting a period mark at the end of the news story that broke out in a certain year, afterwards there would be similar cases happening, and this is because of the lack of a thorough solution, such as from policy or legal perspectives. ...However, there were some positive developments, but those are still the rare cases, such as the reform of the detention system after the death of Xu Zhigang, and the Tai Hui case's change on the re-education through labour program, but there are still far too little of these cases. It rarely reaches the root of the problem, and it is like curing a wound just on the surface." (P9)

Differing from the above pessimistic viewpoints, P28 remained hopeful for Weibo citizen journalism in enhancing social developments, even if it would end up with nothing. Through the participation and contribution to online discussion, P28 did feel disappointment with the

government's insufficient responses and inaction of policy improvements towards social incidents like the Beijing RYB kindergarten abuse incident. However, P28 chose to continuously participate in public discussion and never gave up on seeking opportunities for changes. While the situation was bad enough to cause feelings of helplessness and disappointment, P28 still insisted that one's efforts will eventually promote the development no matter how slight it might be. P28 had this to say when expressing their belief in the significance of the phenomenon:

“Like the RYB kindergarten incident, it seems there was no improvement in the government response; even as we the netizens have contributed with our verbal support and followed and shared the story. In my observation, many related comments or posts had been deleted, and in the final police announcement it asked the parents to come out to admit spreading the rumours and confirmed only one teacher was involved in the child abuse. I was very disappointed with the settlement of the case which I think was insincere, lacking details, and improper. However, I'd keep participating in the citizen journalism in any such similar cases in future. *You have to push harder, even if you realise the situation is awful, as it is negative to think it is useless and lose hope for change. We cannot give up. Keep going.*” (P28)

Similar to P28, P18 also had complicated views on the social influences and achievements of Weibo citizen journalism. On the one hand, P18's reaction to the citizen content had become less emotional because the actual power of discourse does not belong to the media (and of course, nor the self-media). On the other hand, P18 does support the phenomenon as it provides a chance for ordinary citizens to speak out, and use Weibo as the primary channel to record the happenings or seek for help at the time of facing difficulties. That is, P18 acknowledges its social influences and its possibility of resolving injustice. Below is how P18 talked about the phenomenon's significance:

“In the past, my thoughts were uncomplicated, being easily influenced by the media and getting emotional, so I was willing to share the posts, under the perception that I was right and it was compelling for me to do that. Now my understanding is more comprehensive, in other words I have downgraded the status of the media in my mind, because Weibo has no discourse power, and it lacks an atmosphere. *Overseas, I noticed people can say what they think, and it is free to talk nonsense; in such an atmosphere I was encouraged to join the discussion, and I was more than happy to exchange ideas with the others.* Meanwhile, it is hard to find people here who I can have a discussion with. Now I have many good friends who have a different political understanding than mine. They won't be influenced by me, even if I try to influence them. For myself, I'm supportive of this behaviour, as it gives people a channel for

their voice. *One day if I come across an incident, I'm sure my first reaction is to take a photo of it and post it onto Weibo, and then I'll consider contacting the relevant authority.*" (P18)

Furthermore, four other interview participants found Weibo citizen journalism to have limitations and achievements at the same time. Despite claiming there will not be any result for the phenomenon due to China's special circumstance, P17 did recognise its influence in putting pressure on the authorities and even in changing people's viewpoints. P21 highlighted the influencing power of Weibo, especially for citizens who are involved in a social incident; yet, the phenomenon has not yet made any significant achievements. Based on P21's understanding, an obstruction would be the shortage of people who are capable of rational and critical thinking on Weibo. P21 suggested that it should be possible to raise the government's attention to a certain topic and enable some change, especially if most citizens are actively expressing themselves and participating in public discussion. Meanwhile, P24 stated Weibo's importance of being a crucial discussion platform, where all kinds of news topics were discussed, unless they were too sensitive. For P24, the main disappointment of the phenomenon was the manipulation of public opinion. Here are the pros and cons mentioned by P17, P21 and P21:

"In China, many things are missing an outcome. Can you see any outcome? No. Anything has an outcome? Never. Things are left unsettled. *Discussion is useless, but it creates some pressure on the government.* Talking about pressure, I notice some people will change if there are more and more outcries for change. For the people who uphold the nationalism and the lefty followers of Maoism, they are slowly changing." (P17)

"Weibo has a far-reaching influence. Let's skip discussing if it will change the fate of China; Weibo indeed brings about an impact on many people's lives. ... If the story goes viral online and draws people's attention, definitely there will be an impact on the life of the person involved. However, I don't think there's any advancement of the phenomenon, as the majority are just sharing the story, and people are still lacking rationality and critical thinking – not many of this kind of people. *Based on my personal view, if the public collectively triggered a heated debate on a topic, it will draw the attention from the government or the authorities toward it, and hopefully that would bring about change.*" (P21)

"I think Weibo is huge platform for discussion, as many current affairs would be discussed on Weibo, including all the news topics, unless it is banned due to its sensitivity. I consider this is an unavoidable trend that every piece of news can be discussed there. I'm confident this will happen in future, and this

is a good tendency. *But, there're still some dissatisfaction, such as the manipulation of the public conversations.*" (P24)

In addition to these three participants, P19 gave a detailed review of the social influence and achievements of Weibo citizen journalism. First, P19 pointed out that citizen journalists did enable many social hot topics on Weibo, yet, its social influence was not able to promote rational discussions of public affairs by reconciling value differences, nor to improve the public's understanding of legal concepts, human rights, and the notion of respecting each other. Besides creating conflict between social groups, citizen content sometimes fails to provide a comprehensive picture of the basic facts. This is how P19 talked about the phenomenon from the perspective of social influences:

*"Within the phenomenon of participatory journalism, there are dissatisfactions, as in China those social hot topics cannot produce any positive outcomes, such as the arsonist case in Hangzhou that a babysitter who deliberately set up fire, and the case in which a person was killed by a tiger in the Badaling zoo; even though those stories have gained some effects of participatory journalism or news reporting. The missing pieces in the puzzle are reconciliation and the encouragement of mutual understanding in between people with different points of view or stance, which helps promoting a more rational public discussion and improving the whole society's understanding of basic rules of law, human rights protection, and mutual respect. On the contrary, it aggravates the tensions in the society and causes rupture; furthermore, in terms of the factual reporting, it seemingly still cannot give the public a better understanding of the truth in the story."* (P19)

Also, P19 recognised the phenomenon's achievement of becoming a path for ordinary citizens to seek justice, with references to the well-known Chinese quote: "posting on Weibo is better than calling the police". As explained by P19, incidents like sexual harassment will usually be negated by the local police in places other than the major cities. But if the incident has been disclosed on Weibo and draws attention from the public, the authorities are more likely to respond to the victim, in order to save face and also to document some proof of action for their own government performance assessment programs. Here is P19's understanding of what citizen journalism has achieved:

*"I think there is advancement to some extent. For example, as a subject of ridicule, there's a saying in mainland China, 'posting on Weibo is better than calling the police' (報警不如發微博) and it is true in reality. In the case of a female facing sexual harassment, dialling 110 (the police hotline) might not give you any help, especially in the medium to small sized cities outside capital*



cities like Beijing. Firstly, they don't have enough enforcement officers to handle the case. Secondly, people are rather conservative and dominated by patriarchy, who don't take sexual harassment seriously, or they don't think this is a matter that needs to be handled by the police. *On the other hand, if you report the case on Weibo, the authorities would have to look into the case, due to the pressure of their performance appraisal and the concerns of public reaction.*" (P19)

Finally, P19 credited the role of Weibo in promoting information dissemination and argued that knowing something is better than knowing nothing, even if the discussion of what you know could only make a minor impact. Since Weibo has a massive volume of users, based on P19's assumption, a valid discussion rate as low as 10% quantifies one million effective discussions already. And the rate will gradually increase over time, which means the phenomenon will then be able to achieve significant outcomes. For P19, Weibo is an irreplaceable source of information for Chinese netizens. Below is how P19 summarizes the achievement of Weibo citizen journalism:

"...(And), Weibo is at least informing the public on the things happen (around them), including some criminal cases like the Zhejiang arson case ('Hangzhou babysitter arson'), or things related to the government such as the forced demolition in Daxing, Beijing. *Considering it's better to know than not to know, this is also an achievement (of Weibo). Although your discussions may be ineffective after you know it, I still think it is better than nothing.* For example, there are 9 million invalid discussions out of 10 million, that is, only 10% of them are valuable. Yet, 10% quantifies 1 million. And I think it will slowly progress; maybe it can reach 30% in 2025. I think that's probably the case. From this perspective, I think it is irreplaceable. Moreover, Weibo is in the dominant position, with so many users. It is still good (direction)." (P19)

Two interview participants confirmed the social influences and achievements of Weibo citizen journalism in relation to charity events, anti-crime, anti-organisational-corruption, and public forum. Reflecting on the 2011 Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event and the free-lunch charity's fundraising through Weibo, P16 credited the role of Weibo in promoting citizens' participation to help those who are in need, such as the abducted children and the underprivileged children. P16 had this to say in supporting the phenomenon's achievements:

"In the early days of Weibo, there was a very impressive campaign called "snapshot, save the kidnapped children". Maybe it was attributed to Weibo's special features, as at the time the other social platforms were unable to do this. Deng Fei was the founder of the Weibo snapshot campaign (the Weibo crackdown on child trafficking), and then he launched another campaign,

called “one-yuan lunch” (the free-lunch charity), asking everyone to donate to help providing lunch for the children in the poverty-stricken areas. I think he’s a brilliant person, who uses crowd funding on Weibo, at the time this term had not been coined yet, to set up some projects to help the needy.” (P16)

Again, drawing from Weibo’s significance in enabling citizens’ participation, P23 stressed that it has become a special public platform where the government is actively engaged. According to P23, the government tries to adopt the platform for releasing information and communication while netizens use it to comment and discuss. Even though there were banned topics and the deletion of content, P23 believed it would progress into a better direction, in terms of immediacy, social influence, or the breadth and depth of information. More specifically, topics relating to uncovering organisational corruption or anti-crime will have better chances of getting a resolution through Weibo than through offline means of seeking justice such as petitions or filling a lawsuit. P23 then addressed the public characteristic of Weibo and its role in enabling dialogues between the authorities and the public, which had never happened in China before. In fact, P23 described Weibo as a public forum to some extent, where netizens would question and comment directly on a government sector’s Weibo account about their issues of concern. This kind of interaction or dialogue breaks the traditional one-way flow of information, and thus evidences the achievement of Weibo citizen journalism. Here is how P23 reviewed the phenomenon:

“Weibo has become a very special platform for public participation in China, which the government did not avoid or ban. *Actually, the government has been very actively participating on this real-time platform, to deliver its voice, to distribute information, and express views.* And the general public would make their comments and conduct discussion on the same platform. Though there were some negative news, such as the banning of commentaries, and the deleting of some Weibo blogs; in general, I think Weibo is doing better and better for building a platform for public participation, in terms of influence, timeliness, and the width and depth of news coverage. At the moment, there is an anti-corruption campaign running on Weibo. *If we discover any injustice, spreading the news on Weibo can archive a better result than reporting the case to the authorities, or filing a legal case. It is the first platform that has the power of public effect. ...Nowadays, Weibo has evolved into an online parliament in China – the government agencies are like the members of parliament, and the general public are the voters in the electorates.* Take the Red Yellow Blue childcare centre scandal in Beijing for example. People would post questions at the “Safe Beijing” (the municipal police) Weibo account, like “when will you, the police, release the case update? When will there be an official announcement? After “Safe Chaoyang” (the local police’s Weibo account) released the update, the netizens would keep asking, “Why was the hard disk broken?” “Why has this never happened before?” *In the past,*

*it's hard to imagine having such dialogues with the government in China, as it didn't have this kind of atmosphere and space, and things were hierarchical from top down – there was no Q&A after a public announcement, or only a selection of journalists were allowed to ask questions.” (P23)*

Based on my interview data, there were pros and cons raised about Weibo citizen journalism. The disappointments in Weibo citizen journalism raised were mainly about its failure to enable social change due to various issues. According to the interview participants, these issues included:

- 1) authority's control over information flow;
- 2) manipulation of public opinion, either commercially-driven or politically-driven;
- 3) transitory popularity of Weibo events since the public attention shifts easily;
- 4) the inaction of relevant authorities; and
- 5) some citizen content that were produced for personal interest instead of public good.

However, some participants recognised that Weibo citizen journalism had limited achievements but strong social influences among the Chinese society. For them, there were slight improvements on policy and regulation from most Weibo events and the authority tended to focus on resolution for each individual case rather than preventing future problems or incidents. Meanwhile, the strong social influences of Weibo citizen journalism reflected the fact that Weibo was the most effective channel for ordinary citizens to have their voices heard and to seek help for injustices. Furthermore, they addressed that Weibo was accountable for promoting citizen journalism in China because it had gradually empowered citizen awareness as well as enabled conversations between citizens and interactions between the public and the authority.

#### 4.4 KEY FINDINGS

Through the media content analysis, both commonalities and differences were shown from the two selected Weibo events, which are the 2011 Weibo Crackdown on Child Trafficking Event and the 2017 Beijing RYB Kindergarten Abuse Incident. As observed in the two events, first-hand citizen content was initially published on Weibo and soon attention arose from the general public, the media, and relevant government sectors. Both events demonstrated that Weibo has played a significant role in promoting citizen journalism in China. In the 2011 event, netizens

practised as citizen journalists and gathered together to resolve the social problem of child trafficking in response to the campaign launched by public intellectuals, while in the 2017 incident, Weibo provided a channel for the victims to have their voices heard and to thus seek justice through putting pressure on the government. Again, the two events evidenced that Weibo has enabled interactions, and sometimes conversations, between netizens and authorities.

Even though citizen content was commonly used as an information source by mainstream media for these two Weibo events, reports of 2017 incident as well as related participants' comments evidenced the fact that professional Chinese media would merely present selective information in their news articles. Indeed, the authorities themselves responded differently towards the two events while both of them can be classified into the category of anti-crime. On the one hand, the Chinese government showed strong support to the Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event, by not only improving related laws and regulations but also establishing an official platform to help rescued children return to their families. On the other hand, a massive deletion of citizen content, including the report from Beijing News, was the instant reaction of the authority in response to the RYB kindergarten abuse incident where the military was supposedly involved. Following the denial of military involvement with the incident, the local police announced the criminal detention of a female teacher and the administrative detention of a female citizen. The citizen, who was said to have confessed her violation of laws, was arrested for fabricating and spreading false information about the "Tiger regiment" (老虎團) members sexually abusing children and thus causing negative social impact. It is also important to note that there were some improvements in the supervision and regulation among kindergartens in Beijing after the incident.

For most interview participants, the use of Weibo was described as daily but with a decline in activities of posting/publishing and discussing/participating. Although they mentioned that the decline in use mainly happened after the launch of WeChat, especially the function of "friends' circle" (朋友圈), some had returned to Weibo in the last two years and adopted it as a source of information, a service for information searching, or space for self-expression and keeping personal records.

After its establishment in 2009, Weibo, like the dominant English microblogging service Twitter, has been through a range of changes, including functional updates, content changes, and changes in users. Speaking of functional updates, it introduced a range of features to enhance user productivity and interactions between users, including functions like multi-

media posts, live streaming videos, and variable ways of commenting. What is more, Weibo removed the 140-character word limit and users can now post up to 2000 characters in Chinese. However, not all changes are favourable for users and the major complaint was focused on the newly implemented algorithmic sorting, in which posts are not presented in chronological timeline but based on their popularity. 14 of 28 participants felt the loss of control over information and switched to the international version of Weibo to read posts from accounts they followed. At the same time, some participants critiqued the commercialised Weibo and its advertisements, questioning the inaccuracy of its personalized ads and invalid function of removing irrelevant ads. In terms of content changes on Weibo, participants indicated there were issues such as the dominance of entertainment and marketing content, the decline in social-political discussions, the reinforced media control and significant online abuse. Yet, they did agree that Weibo content had been largely enriched by the continuous growth of user volume, in all three categories of individual accounts, institutional accounts, and government accounts. Furthermore, some participants noticed there had been shifts in Weibo users: from middle-aged to youth, from opinion leaders to interest groups.

All of my interview participants had experienced some type of Weibo censorship of various degrees. Three of these were frequently referred to by the participants:

- 1) The prevention of publishing through claims of “system busy”, “sending failure” and so on;
- 2) The deletion of content that was usually accompanied by a warning message of breaching Weibo regulations; and
- 3) Blocking posts to followers that creates an illusion for users who think the post is published successfully, but it was only visible to them.

While some participants expressed their support to regulate online content relating to pornography, violence, drugs, and human trafficking, others felt disappointment towards the unspecific and reinforced censorship on Weibo. Sensing the censorship had become tighter as well as worrying about personal safety, some participants explained that they had become cautious about their expression and began to withdraw from public discussion. Nevertheless, there were still participants who believed information could be disseminated under the current implied means of censorship since users are often fighting with Weibo’s deletion to spread the content to more netizens.

On account of the richness of Weibo content, more than half of the interview participants described Weibo as their primary source of news and information. For them, the immediacy of news reporting, the initiative of user participation, the wide range of topics available from individuals, organisations and authorities, and the possibility of digging for more relevant information about a news story are the advantages of using Weibo as an information source. Meanwhile, there were participants who used it alongside other sources, including mainstream media and other social media services. However, a few participants hardly used Weibo for news reading but preferred to obtain news and information through WeChat, Facebook, or other news applications.

In addition to registered accounts and actively practising on Weibo, the mainstream media, both locally and internationally, from print media to broadcast media, has cited citizen content from Weibo, especially comments or “at-the-scene” digital materials. As mentioned by some participants, the Chinese mainstream media often selectively quoted content from Weibo users in order to show support towards government policies and actions. There were also instances where some Chinese media, including traditional and new media, used Weibo content as a source for a news story, without complying with the professional journalistic practice or code of conduct. Based on interview participants’ observations and experiences, these common unprofessional practices included lacking verification of the online source, presenting fragmented information of a news story, and even fabricating Weibo user’s comments for proving one’s viewpoint.

From the perspective of participation in Weibo citizen journalism, participants’ interpretations of the term citizen journalism (aka. participatory journalism) as well as personal experiences and feedback about the phenomenon were analysed. Because the word “citizen” is a less common word in Chinese context and may be considered as a sensitive word for some participants, the relatively self-explanatory term “participatory journalism” was primarily used in the recruitment letter, consent forms and information sheet, and during the interviews. As a result, most participants interpreted the term closer to its academic definition, relating it to activities of reporting, disseminating, discussing, or commenting. In other words, Weibo users were aware of the phenomenon and their participation in it, as some recognised that even a single action of a “like” is still a representation of one’s viewpoint. Furthermore, the majority of interview participants indicated that the information is always available on Weibo first, and the easy accessibility of information published by various sources, including stakeholders and media accounts, usually provides the public with comprehensive coverage of any news story. However, there were participants who held doubts about the term, reflecting on its non-

involvement of journalism and thus its low content quality, participation motivation, and lack of media literacy.

In fact, the majority of my interview participants considered “reposting” (aka. content-sharing) as their main activity on Weibo. That is, they are participating in the information dissemination process by simply clicking a button. A number of participants believed that the more reposts an event or topic got, the larger amount of attention it would draw from the public, and thus from relevant authorities, to have a better possibility of being resolved. Yet, the frequency of such participation has been reduced for a few participants due to different reasons, including questions about the authenticity of citizen content, attempts at filtering reposted content, and concerns over the lack of influence and power of an ordinary individual user. On the one hand, there were users who repost with comments on the topics of interest, while some of them see their comments as a form of discussion or a sense of political participation. Indeed, for certain participants, clicking a “like” button is also an expression of a personal viewpoint, regardless of how tiny the impact of this single contribution is. On the other hand, there were also users who focused on the recording of personal life and browsing information of the events. Although some users acted as citizen journalists to share and publish first-hand information or at-the-scene materials, they sometimes restricted themselves to reposting or commenting on sensitive social-political topics.

When asked about their feedback and viewpoints on Weibo citizen journalism, more than half the participants acknowledged its significance in promoting citizen awareness, public discussion, and enlightening society. Drawing from their experiences, Weibo is a channel to get the public voice heard, a path to protect the individual rights, and a platform to participate in politics and public affairs. Again, the main concerns about the phenomenon are the low quality of citizen content, due to the lack of professional training, the insufficient media literacy, and the significant online abuse. In addition, questions about the extent to which an individual’s post would be effectively disseminated to the public via Weibo’s glut of information was also raised.

Since the establishment of Weibo in 2009, a large amount of social and/or political events have happened or have been initially disclosed through the platform, but there are still disappointments in Weibo citizen journalism and its failure of enabling social change. According to my interview participants, there were five main factors stopping it from reaching its positive potential:

1. the authority’s control over information flow through various means,

2. manipulation of public opinion, for either political interests or commercial benefits,
3. transitory popularities of Weibo events and an information overload, easily dissipating public attention,
4. the inaction of relevant authorities, who usually prefer to wait for a topic to be forgotten or replaced by other newly exposed event, and
5. the produced or made-up citizen content for the purpose of increasing personal influence or profit.

Even though the phenomenon has had a slight positive effect on some policy and regulations, the authorities often tend to focus on resolving individual cases rather than system-wide change. However, Weibo does have a strong social influence among the Chinese community, nationally and internationally. More specifically, it is the most effective channel for ordinary citizens to have their voices heard and to seek help. In short, Weibo has indeed promoted citizen journalism in China through empowering citizen awareness as well as enabling conversations between citizens and interactions between the public and authority.

In summary, the findings from the media content analysis of the two Weibo events and the grounded theory analysis of the 28 interviews with Weibo users indicate that:

1. For ordinary netizens, their primary goal of using Weibo is to acquire news and information, mostly published by influential accounts; and their ways of participation in citizen journalism are mainly reposting and sometimes commenting.
2. Weibo users are intensely aware of government surveillance of their online activities, and it can be a dangerous pursuit for citizen journalists when they draw too much attention from society, focus on political issues, or simply upset the authorities. Nevertheless, people engage in it and do their best to give voice to people's concerns.
3. The Chinese government is willing to support Weibo citizen journalism, but only so long as the outcomes are in line with its agenda of anti-corruption (specifically towards organisational corruption) and anti-crime; basically, law and order matters that aid the government's agenda. Even this may be superseded if the matter involves the military, the government, or party officials. In general, the authorities often focus on a single resolution for an individual case rather than actively improving relevant policy and regulation and system-wide change.



4. Although there was a degree of freedom in the early days of Weibo, media control has been tightened in China in recent years, and various means have been introduced to maintain control over information flow. Therefore, the possibility and willingness of netizens' participation in online political discussions has declined, and Weibo has evolved into yet another entertainment avenue that keeps people occupied in their free time, and takes their attention away from thinking about social and political change.
5. Meanwhile, online bullying and online abuse have become a significant concern for Weibo users when publishing their views or making comments on social affairs and this has resulted in the decline of citizens' participation in social-political discussions on Weibo.
6. Mainstream media, both locally and internationally, uses content of Weibo citizen journalism at various levels, but local media sometimes uses them unprofessionally and manipulates public opinion.
7. Despite the tightening of media control, the increase in online abuse, and the transitory popularities of social events, Weibo is still an irreplaceable source and plays a significant role for the public in current China. Netizens have continually figured new ways and new codes to circumvent the censorship to get their message across, even if it is short-lived.
8. Initially, Weibo citizen journalism was, and to some extent, still is: a path for the grassroots to seek justice; a means for civil society to put pressure on the government about specific issues; a channel for the minorities to have their voices heard; a practice to enable interactions between netizens and authorities; and a platform to participate in political discussions and public affairs.

Microblogging services like Weibo keep Chinese netizens informed of their immediate community and society and enable the discussion of local (and some national) issues, mainly social issues. However, by and large, citizen journalism is not able to make a huge difference in the political sphere in any significant way. That said, Weibo has forced the authorities towards transparency, albeit selective transparency, when it comes to matters of law and order.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The qualitative analysis of two selected Weibo events and interview data with 28 participants was presented in the previous chapter. A range of findings emerged from the processes of media content analysis and grounded theory analysis. These findings examine the role of Weibo in promoting citizen journalism, address their practice models and the relational modes with Chinese authorities, and further recognise the phenomenon in the particular social, political, and cultural context of China. More specifically, the findings highlight citizen journalism practice 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.

In our current technological world, the “revolutionary” role of social media has brought changes to our daily lives (Mason, 2013), even in a heavily controlled media environment like China. Advancing with characteristics of immediacy, easy-access, flexible publishing options, and a substantial amount of content published by users from various backgrounds, Weibo has facilitated and provided a unique online sphere for Chinese citizens. Based on the reports released by Sina Corporation and CNNIC, more than half of the 801 million Chinese netizens actively use Weibo as of June 2018 (CNNIC, 2018; Sina Tech., 2018). Browsing news and information via Weibo has already become a daily routine for them, because of the vast amount of content and different kinds of topics continuously published on the platform. Even though many interview participants acknowledged that their use of Weibo had declined after the launch of WeChat in 2012, most of them later returned because WeChat ended up being too close-knit and full of existing friends and relations and hence not as interesting as Weibo, which broadened both their own reach and the news they had access to. Hence, they adopted it as a source of information, a service for information searching, or a space to express thoughts and record their personal lives.

Although citizen journalism may seem to be an uncommon term for the general Chinese netizens, a number of interview participants were able to interpret the concept to its scholarly definitions, when introduced to its closest equivalent – participatory journalism. While a few participants clearly represented their activities on Weibo as citizen journalistic practices, some of them instead considered themselves simply as “onlookers”. Regardless of how they identified their behaviour, their acts of reposting, commenting, and publishing relevant

information, together with their attention paid to the constantly emerging Weibo events, deliberately or unconsciously, can be referred to as citizen journalistic practices.

In this chapter, the major aspects of the rise of citizen journalism on Chinese microblogs, particularly on Weibo, will be first summarised. Then, the government's response to the phenomenon will be discussed from two perspectives: the Weibo conversations between the authorities and the general public, and the strengthening and strategies of media control, both toward the platform and toward citizen journalists. Meanwhile, the perceived norm of Weibo being a platform for alternative voices will be challenged, as the majority of news and information available on Weibo is contributed by mainstream media and influential accounts. Even though there are grassroots media ("self-media") actively publishing content on the platform, the proportion of social-political issues raised are still not significant while comprehensive investigations and persistent follow-ups are difficult to find. Finally, the debates around the significance of Weibo citizen journalism is addressed. My research findings have uncovered that there are critical controversies that exist within and beyond the phenomenon, including tensions between information and misinformation, media literacy and media control, gaining public control and control of the public. It is critical for citizen journalists to overcome such difficulties on the platform and thus to achieve the potential of a public sphere with free and open public discussion. However, the phenomenon has enlightened ordinary netizens with civic awareness to a certain degree, which was seldom fulfilled before the emergence of Weibo citizen journalism.

## 5.1 THE RISE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM ON WEIBO

As indicated earlier in the literature review chapter, the concept of citizen journalism is a term which focuses on practices, referring to ordinary citizens' experience of and active participation in the process of news production and information dissemination, individually or/and collectively. Supported by new media technologies, citizens are now capable of doing what was only done by professional journalists – source gathering, on-site reporting, information analysis, and news dissemination (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Emerging from weblogs, the rise of citizen journalism on Chinese microblogs, particularly on Weibo, is indeed a result of meeting users' needs and requirements. Through the review of related literature and the analysis of research data, it is evident that the nature of microblogging services has empowered Chinese citizen journalism in three aspects:

1. the desire to publish and participate in public discussions,
2. the gap between citizens' information demand and controlled media supply, and
3. the need for immediate and first-hand information.

### 5.1.1 The Desire to Publish and Participate in Public Discussions

Over the last two decades, the monopoly of traditional media has been subverted by the advancement of technologies, and the privilege of publication is no longer the stronghold of the authorities (Gillmor, 2006). In the digital space, netizens are no longer passive audiences but are encouraged to express their own opinions, to discuss public affairs, and to participate in the process of news production as well as information dissemination (Kaye & Medoff, 2001; Slevin, 2002). For those who participated in this research, they had used Weibo for at least five years and have always considered it as a public channel for self-expressions.

The essential features of the microblog, including easy-access and on-the-go content-generating in a compact structure, have quickly attracted millions of netizens and thus created an online sphere with a diversity of voices. As P23 highlighted, the short-message form of microblogs makes users feel “less stressed” to publish, compared to weblogs, and reflects their immediate thoughts. When Weibo first started, many interview participants were recommended to use it by their friends or schoolmates who were fascinated by the amount of information available on it and its convenience of content publishing. Later, the rapid growth in user volume, in both individual accounts and institutional accounts, contributed to Weibo's content richness to some extent.

Also, Weibo has always been committed to functionality updates, aiming to enhance productivity and user interactions. According to the participants, some noticeable functions introduced in the past few years were multi-media posts, live streaming videos, various ways of commenting, and the removal of the “micro” norm of 140 characters for original posts. Each of them draws attention from a particular type of user and further influences their activities on Weibo. For instance, P18 suggested that the addition of video posts was practical for both viewers and publishers, especially for on-the-spot content that “present the perspectives of the public”. A few participants ranked the multiple forms of commenting as the most noticeable functional change on Weibo, because it facilitated user participation in public discussion. That is, one can get a response to a comment directly and possibly have a conversation with its publisher, or simply “like” a comment to show support for the viewpoint. More specifically, Weibo users like P12 would go through a comment's replies, and “like” the responses that

argue against it if they strongly disagree with that particular comment. Experiencing a sense of belonging in a virtual community from like-minded netizens (Rheingold, 2000), one's willingness to publish and participate in the public discussion is often enhanced when others approve their viewpoint. In this case, the function of commenting in different ways has greatly increased the opportunities for one's expression to be viewed and recognised, and thus creates the "social and psychological relevance" for the content publisher (Bucy, 2004). As P8 and P10 believed, Weibo is a platform for ordinary individuals to have their voices heard and then to participate in discussions on current affairs.

No matter which format a user chooses to publish or respond with, one can access Weibo anywhere, anytime, thanks to the widespread use of smartphones. As a result, users are enabled with capabilities to witness current events, to publish photos or videos, to report what happened on the spot and to present them to a broader audience (O'Reilly, 2009). Such citizen content often spreads to the online world first, and most likely, offline too. While P13 recognised the convenience of accessing it on the go, other participants also pointed out that the frequent use of Weibo was related to the adoption of the smartphone. Moreover, users are offered opportunities to participate in public discussion of topics they are interested in, agree with, or are concerned about, through the means of commenting, reposting, or merely giving a "like" to show support. Here, the cost for participation, for ordinary netizens, in the form of reposting content, is just a tap on the smartphone, and maybe some paid data when there's no free Wi-Fi available.

Weibo's dominance in Chinese social media has faced challenges, mainly from WeChat, a software initially designed to provide an instant messaging service. After the launch of a friends' circle function, which is a contacts-only social network with content visibility options, most participants migrated to WeChat and reduced their use of Weibo. However, many of them returned to Weibo in recent years and kept their personal records on Weibo rather than on the friends' circle, despite Weibo being an open-access platform. For these participants, the following/follower relationship of Weibo forms a comparatively private space to express themselves. What is more, it is easier to manage than their contacts in WeChat, which often bloats with contacts based on friends and family or location alone. In order to avoid showing their connections, mostly work-related and family-related, too many details of personal life, or say, to maintain specific social images, netizens turned back to the more public Weibo for self-expression. Content posted on Weibo is open to the public but mostly viewed by those who follow one's account. Although every logged-in user can see others' Weibo posts without

following them, they would need to make an extra effort in manually searching a specific account or content.

Weibo users do have control over their follower list to some extent. They can decide what to show and whom to view by setting a post visibility level as well as delete or black-list those who they don't want in their follower list. Weibo offers the function for its users to follow an account without appearing in the follower list (悄悄關注, literally: "quietly follow"). A few participants mentioned that they had no problem with personal posts being read by strangers who are less likely to have an impact on their real lives. On the one hand, the complex social relationships involved in WeChat has prevented netizens from expressing personal viewpoints or details about their daily lives; on the other hand, Weibo's characteristics of easy-access, multiple means of content generating, and feed-based networks have fulfilled their desire to publish, and further to participate in public discussions.

### 5.1.2 The Gap between Information Demand and Controlled Media Supply

It is known that all media and communication, including educational materials, are under the government's monitoring in China. That is, the information presented to the public, especially news, has to go through multiple processes of content filtering and comply with the regime's political agenda and interests. With the increasing growth of education levels and opportunities to access diverse sources of information, many Chinese citizens started to question the trustworthiness of the mainstream, particularly on political issues and social events (Hung, 2013). For them, the demand for seeking original and quality information, as well as the truth, has been extended. As a result, the establishment of Weibo, during the period in which censorship was more relaxed and expressions were relatively free (Yang, 2009), gained significant popularity in China. Through Weibo, Chinese netizens can access a vast amount of information from various perspectives and dig for more details on topics that they want to know about.

In the beginning, Weibo established its brand name in mainland China through inviting a lot of famous Chinese celebrities to register, and thus drew many fans to the platform for supporting and interacting with their idols. However, most of my participants recalled that they registered on Weibo because of friends' recommendations, which mainly focused on the wide range of topics and the vast amount of news available on it. While P26 was fascinated by the "novel ways" of information being presented on Weibo, P2 considered it as "equivalent to the news media". In favour of the remarkable amount of active users from diverse backgrounds,

possibly every industry, 10 of 28 participants emphasised the richness of Weibo content. As a result, Weibo becomes a window for them to access various information. Through this window, different users achieve different goals by using different approaches. For P24, it is a window “to the outside world”; while for P5, it is a window to the alternative voices, the public opinions, and social problems. Taking the “coal-to-gas” project as an example, P5 claimed that content on Weibo was reflecting another side of the story in comparison to mainstream media’s compliments and positive reports.

Meanwhile, P19 used the platform to reveal updates about the local community on social issues, e.g. the residential demolition of Daxing, Beijing, which were unlikely to be reported in official channels but would be made available on Weibo by victims or citizen journalists. Despite the reinforced censorship on Weibo, there are always posts that are carefully presented in forms to bypass its censors. Other participants also indicated that a lot of news stories published on Weibo would not be released in traditional media, which means they can access the news and information that is not reported in the mainstream media (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). The more a netizen participates in journalistic practices, the easier it becomes to understand that the truth cannot be revealed by a single voice. In other words, the diversity of topics and perspectives published on Weibo has further influenced users’ viewpoints. Based on P17’s experience, from reading “a lot of posts from others, from all kinds of people”, the user got to find out the actual occurrences and thus changed their understanding of society and attitude towards politics.

One of the advantages of Weibo, according to a few participants, was to give them some control on the information flow. Familiar with Weibo, they are no longer receiving information passively but seeking what they want to know actively. After becoming interested in a news story, one can use Weibo as a channel to gather more information and to seek the truth. During the widely discussed topic of Jiang Ge case, P12 searched and read through all popular posts (most-viewed or most-reposted), then dug into their comments to gain a better understanding of the situation. Similarly, some netizens regarded Weibo as a tool for searching relevant reports to retrieve the most comprehensive picture possible of what has happened. When a user searches an event (or a topic), P14 further explained, posts from “authoritative” mainstream media would be shown in the top of its results. Which means one can easily review a list of articles from different media outlets and various viewpoints published by other users through a simple keyword search on Weibo. This search function, to some extent, advances netizens’ access to news and information, regardless of the kinds of topics or content they are interested in. However, there are boundaries and limitations of it, primarily caused by censorship, as

Weibo will not show up any results if the keyword entered is sensitive or banned by the authorities. Besides censorship, a few participants talked about the issue with Weibo's list of most searched topics (熱門搜索排行榜; literally: "most searched ranking list"), which was described by P24 as "manipulated and paid" list of topic popularity.

On account of Weibo and citizen-generated content, the general public has been able to access information that would only be internally reported between authorities in the past, e.g. a coal mine explosion. Many of them have taken the initiative of searching detailed information via Weibo, and most likely, they would demonstrate a certain degree of analysis to assess the relevance and reliability of content in the process of information seeking. However, there are still concerns raised on the vastness and fragmentation of Weibo content, as they cause an information overload, and create issues and distractions for those who seek information in need.

### 5.1.3 The Needs for Immediate and First-hand Information

To a large extent, netizens were drawn to Weibo because of their desire to publish content as well as their demand for information, most of which are at-the-scene footage or first-hand experiences. After all, it is possible for anyone to coincidentally be part of or witness news when it occurs. Currently, enabled by smartphone and social media services like Weibo, it has become an instant response for netizens to record what they have seen, heard, or experienced and then publish on the platform. At the same time, there are millions of users on Weibo, waiting to acquire such information in a timely manner. From a journalistic perspective, immediacy has always been a critical feature for quality news and information. The goal of publishing an exclusive article or breaking news is the same for either traditional media or digital media. The competition between various media outlets is intense when it comes to crisis reporting or any major social event, because such news often has crucial meanings for both society and individuals. In short, the driving force behind the eagerness to report news promptly is the public's need for getting immediate information, which is likely to help them in the processes of making decisions and for taking action.

With the characteristics of the convenience for content publishing and information dissemination, Weibo users are usually presented with immediate updates and discussions about current affairs. As a result, Weibo is ranked as the primary source for news and information by more than half of my interview participants. From local to international, mainstream to alternative, state-owned to independent, it is evident that a wide-range of institutional accounts actively made announcements, reported and reposted news stories via



Weibo. It is common that official news would be first released on Weibo most of the time, prior to any report in printed media or broadcasting programs. The majority of social news was indeed sourced from the platform, especially the ones related to ordinary people seeking help or witnessing an incident. Again, P19 described the main advantage of citizen journalism content as its “immediacy” and being “updated”, which would then be quickly reposted and widely spread.

Despite seeing Weibo as a supplementary source of information, P6 still recognised it as ahead of other media outlets in exposing hot social issues and claimed that “its nature of news reporting is gradually strengthening”. Even for those who preferred WeChat over Weibo for acquiring news and information, Weibo maintains its outstanding coverage in breaking news and popular topics. This recognition is in accordance with its notion of being an essential source of real-time news and information updates (Deuze, 2006; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Moreover, both Chinese and international media practise newsgathering, especially in sourcing immediate and first-hand information, on Weibo. From local newspapers to national news programs, all professional media organisations would use different types of at-the-scene citizen content from Weibo. In the case of crisis events, citizen journalists often contribute extensive amounts of instant material for the mainstream, and also facilitate the distribution of important messages or official announcements.

For some participants, the immediate posting advantage of Weibo is also reflected in the effectiveness of information consumption. P9 suggested that it is much more efficient to read news by following accounts from mainstream media to “self-media” (自媒體) on Weibo rather than downloading the Apps (smartphone applications) for each media outlet and going through them one by one. Similarly, both P11 and P17 found Weibo easier to control in terms of browsing news and information. P11 preferred Weibo over WeChat’s official accounts (公眾號; literally: “public account”) as it was inconvenient to click into each account and read their articles. And for P17, it is more time-consuming to browse something from news websites than Weibo, due to the overwhelming hyperlinks and entertainment news. More specifically, the timeliness strength was enabled by the feed nature of Weibo, which can be described as the ability to choose who to follow and what to read. From the perspective of media power, such an ability is related to the open market’s ability to “empower”, in which the “choices” of information sources and “variety of media content” are offered (Freedman, 2015).

The rise of citizen journalism on Weibo was primarily determined by three factors: the desire to publish and participate in public discussions, the gap between information demand

and controlled media supply, and the needs for immediate and first-hand information. My research findings have shown that Weibo is providing a convenient and accessible online sphere for Chinese netizens to express viewpoints, acquire news and information, and participate in discussions about issues of their concern.

In spite of the private ownership of the microblogging service provider, Weibo is under the Chinese government's surveillance. To operate in China, the company has to comply with a wide range of cyberspace laws and regulations, particularly relating to content censorship. In the meantime, Weibo also offers customised services for authorities, both institutional and individual, to promote and maintain their established power. Therefore, more questions remain to be answered: to what extent can citizen journalists express and participate on Weibo? Who provides the news and information for them to access via the platform? And, most importantly, to what extent has Weibo citizen journalism empowered changes in China?

## 5.2 GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO WEIBO CITIZEN JOURNALISM

In contrast to Western media, which ideally aims for democracy, freedom of speech, and social responsibility, the majority of Chinese media are best known as “the mouthpiece of the party” (Winfield & Peng, 2005; Zhao, 1998; Zhou & Moy, 2007) or tools for propaganda. However, with the challenge of digital media and the flourishing of user-generated content, the Chinese government has updated their methods for “agenda-setting” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and expanded their “media power” (Castells, 2009; Freedman, 2015) from traditional media to social media, by developing mobile composite applications and operating accounts on social media like Weibo and WeChat. Complying with the central government's requirements, the large number of Weibo government accounts regularly publish posts, comment on certain popular social topics, and run online campaigns to gain more followers. As a result, participants like P24 found it had become a “semi-official” platform, where “hierarchies from high to low” would be connected.

To better assist authorities, Sina corporation has been providing customised services for them across its services and platforms, such as Weibo and Sina.com, with a specific managing sector namely “Sina for government affairs” (Chinese: 新浪政務). With this assistance, authorities have adopted Weibo for distributing news and information to the public as well as improving images and credibility in the tone of the digital age. What is more, many government Weibo accounts interact with other accounts, including individual users, through comments and sometimes reposts. These interactions, or indeed conversations, have never

happened before in China, a country with a one-way, state-controlled information flow and media environment.

Even though Weibo made possible conversations between netizens and authorities, it is still under the government's censorship. As recalled by many interview participants, there was a blooming period of citizen journalism when Weibo was first launched. Over the last five years, censorship has been significantly reinforced on the platform. The range of sensitive topics has been gradually expanded, while a number of sophisticated means of censorship have also been introduced to filter and monitor citizen-generated content. The tightening censorship on Weibo is requested primarily to comply with the developing law and regulations of the Chinese online sphere, which are released and managed by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). As part of their duties, CAC regularly updates its guidelines for self-censoring and content filtering, including the list of sensitive words. At the same time, the judicial interpretation of online rumours, addressed by the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate (or Prosecutor General's Office), as little as 500 repost counts of the defined rumour content can result in serious punishment such as a gaol sentence.

### 5.2.1 Weibo as information source

Before the launch of Weibo and other social media, the general public in China, including netizens, had very limited ways to communicate with the authorities and hardly any chance of receiving responses from them. In the past, the formal way for an ordinary citizen to express viewpoints or protect one's lawful rights was to go through Chinese authorities such as Division of Complaints and Appeal (信訪處), divisions of social consultation (社會協商) and political consultation (政治協商), or reception of administrative leaders (行政領導接見) (Lu, C. T., 2016). The Chinese media, particularly the officially registered media outlets, can be considered another channel for citizens to have their say and to disclose social issues, however, their voices will only be reported if they are not conflicting with the regime's interests. But now, both institutional accounts of government departments and individual accounts from diverse government sectors can be reached via Weibo. Akin to accounts operated by departments, administrative leaders and government officials show a positive attitude towards certain Weibo events. For instance, the head of the counter human trafficking office – Chen Shiqu, who played an important role in the 2011 Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event, responded to and participated in the event via his Weibo account.

Mass media has always had the ability to influence public opinion through its agenda-setting aspects (McCombs, 2005), and has been behind the Chinese government's adoption of new media. Additionally, to maintain the established media power for maintaining "definitional, analytical, and interpretive authority" (Freedman, 2015), the Chinese government has always kept up with the development of technologies and tried to use digital and social media for its own purposes (Chen & Ang, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). On account of the immediacy and content-sharing nature of microblogs and the substantial number of active monthly users, Weibo has become the primary choice for authorities among a range of social media platforms. According to the 2018 first half-yearly report of influence index for Weibo government affairs (People's Daily, 2018), over 175,000 verified accounts of Chinese government sectors, from the state level to district level, from central committees to community office, are actively using Weibo. The most common activity for them, from the perspective of individual users, is publishing media releases or official announcements.

As can be seen from the screen-capture of notifications published by Chaoyang police station on Weibo (in section 4.2.2.2), local police forces usually provide investigation updates or give a declaration regarding some specific but widely-discussed incidents through its Weibo account. Remaining an official form of press release, an image of the statement is uploaded to Weibo with a brief description or hashtag of the case. Looking at the content directly posted on their Weibo accounts, it is arguable that authorities still hold a predominantly controlling and hostile attitude towards the general public. There is one crucial difference between now and before Weibo, in that a lot of these announcements are created to answer the questions or requests of netizens. Nowadays, at-the-scene footage is uploaded onto Weibo within seconds of an incident's occurrence, disseminated to a vast number of netizens, and often becomes a broadly-discussed topic in both online and offline worlds. As a result, it is almost impossible for the authorities to ignore it or keep the relevant information within certain government sectors, which was often the approach used to maintain so-called "social stability" by Chinese authorities in the past.

Weibo has become "a bridge of mutual communication" between the Chinese government and its people (Gu, 2014), and the data analysed from both the Weibo events and my in-depth interviews have shown that diverse types of interactions between netizens and authorities happen on the platform. Generally speaking, Weibo users acquire a large amount of information on social issues, especially about their immediate communities, and many of them repost or comment on the official announcements released by government Weibo accounts. Despite the instances of topic avoidance or of silencing public voices, Chinese authorities are

increasingly responding to netizens' enquiries via Weibo in a timely manner. As experienced and observed by a few participants, Weibo citizen journalism has put pressure on the government in regard to information disclosure, and response to social queries, thus resolving some social problems.

In many events mentioned by participants, immediate and first-hand information was usually revealed on Weibo as soon as a social incident occurred; netizens who held concerns about the incident would then gather and have their say with responsive government accounts. Referring to the monitoring citizens theory, new media gives insight to people on when to pay attention to the government (Schudson, 1999; Deuze, 2008); instead of waiting for relevant information to be released by authorities, they are demanding details or verifications from the government. Soon after the quick spread of citizen content exposing child abuse cases in the Beijing RYB kindergarten, many netizens made enquiries to the Beijing Police's Weibo account as well as the kindergarten's official account through the functions of commenting and messaging. Some netizens would directly mention the responsive accounts, using the tagging function by using @, when commenting on or reposting a post that they regarded as important or relevant to the incident. After the authorities responded to the incident or announced the investigation on Weibo, netizens would again gather to disseminate their posts and to follow up with the development or the investigation's outcome, in hoping for a proper resolution or in seeking justice.

When a popular social topic emerges on Weibo, most of the time, there will be a remarkable number of citizens participating in the discussion through different means. Some are contributing their knowledge about the topic by publishing posts under the topic's hashtag or making comments on particular posts. Others may choose to repost or "like" what they regard as important or agree with, which requires less effort than generating new content. Also, some people see re-posting as 'safer' than generating new content in terms of not being seen as troublemakers by the authorities. Due to the significant attention that will possibly be drawn by a single hot Weibo event, the related government accounts would be very unlikely to remain absent from it. In the 2011 Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event, after the head of the counter human trafficking office, Chen Shiqu, voiced his support via his Weibo account, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security also stepped up and supported it. Following their responses, many local police stations began to follow and cooperate with the event online and offline. By taking part in the citizen event, the Chinese government is indeed taking advantage of this opportunity to portray an image of being close to the public, to build up its credibility

and accountability, and thus to regain its authority in defining, analysing, and interpreting social issues.

In comparison to WeChat, where many government sectors operate official accounts to distribute news and information, P24 suggested that one could hardly get in touch with a mayor on WeChat, but they would be able to follow a mayor's Weibo account and even tag them. In fact, without following the mayor on Weibo, one can still read, "like", repost, or comment on any published posts. It is possible that the mayor may respond to one's comment or repost or tagging, and perhaps start a discussion. Although conversations between ordinary citizens and Chinese authorities on Weibo are usually not as obvious as in this case, it is evidenced that it has been a game-changer for both sides.

With the characteristics of rapid dissemination of information and significant attention drawn from the public, Weibo citizen journalism not only enables the conversation between netizens and authorities but also puts pressure on them in responding to social queries. Therefore, the Chinese government tends to be more responsive or even proactive towards public issues. However, it doesn't necessarily foster a constructive solution. As can be observed from the two Weibo events selected in this research, solutions are given if the social issues raised by citizen journalists are in line with the government's agenda, e.g. anti-crime or anti-corruption. Moreover, the authorities would adjust their attitude and strategy when dealing with the different popular social topics raised on the platform. There were times that the authorities just waited in silence until a new social topic emerged from Weibo and took over the public's attention rather than resolving the actual social issue. For them, as P25 claimed, "the issue is resolved once it gets away from the spotlight and people start to forget".

In some cases, the authorities would silence / censor those who raised the popular social topic instead of seeking resolution for the issue, if the topic was identified as "sensitive" or endangered social stability. Netizens describe this approach of problem-solving as "if a problem cannot be solved, then (we) solve the person who raised the problem" (解決不了問題就解決提出問題的人). In the following section, the current strategies of Weibo censorship will be summarised, which includes the means used to settle the "problematic" person. The fear of this happening is ever present for all the participants, which often leads them to use Weibo simply as a source for information which they then use to have offline conversations and discussions with their friends, family, and peers.

### 5.2.2 Media Control

It is evident that the government's media control on Weibo has been reinforced over the past few years. While the platform regularly updates its function and services to enhance the user experience, it simultaneously introduces new means of censorship to strengthen the control over citizen content and public discussion. From comments to posts, from a user profile to an account picture, all citizen content published on the platform is monitored and censored by both the company and the relevant authorities. Based on interview participants' experiences, three common approaches of Weibo censorship were: preventing publishing, deleting content, and concealing posts. The implementation of these methods varied depending on the issue.

For any posts that contain sensitive words, intentionally or unintentionally, the content publisher may receive "explanatory" notices from Weibo, and the unpublished post would be automatically saved to one's draft box. Such a notice never explains the actual cause of unsuccessful publishing but rather attributes it to the sophisticated ICT system, claiming it's due to "system busy" (系統繁忙), "sending failure" (發送失敗), or "request timeout" (要求逾時) etc. If one wants the post to be successfully published, words or images contained will need to be carefully reviewed to navigate through the filtering system. In other words, Weibo users are required to conduct the process of self-censorship in addition to Weibo's software censor, which has a continually updated sensitive-words database. Nevertheless, active citizens on Weibo continually find new ways to bypass the censor and use deliberately oblique or coded content with symbols or metaphors to mitigate the sensitivity of the automated censorship.

Occasionally, the failure of content publishing happens after a post has been published or/and received comments from an account follower. In some instances where a post was prevented from being published, an account would be silenced (禁言) to a read-only mode for some time if the content censored was highly sensitive. Specific groups of Weibo users can be restricted in content publishing, usually during politically sensitive periods, e.g. meetings of the National People's Congress or the period around June 4, the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests.

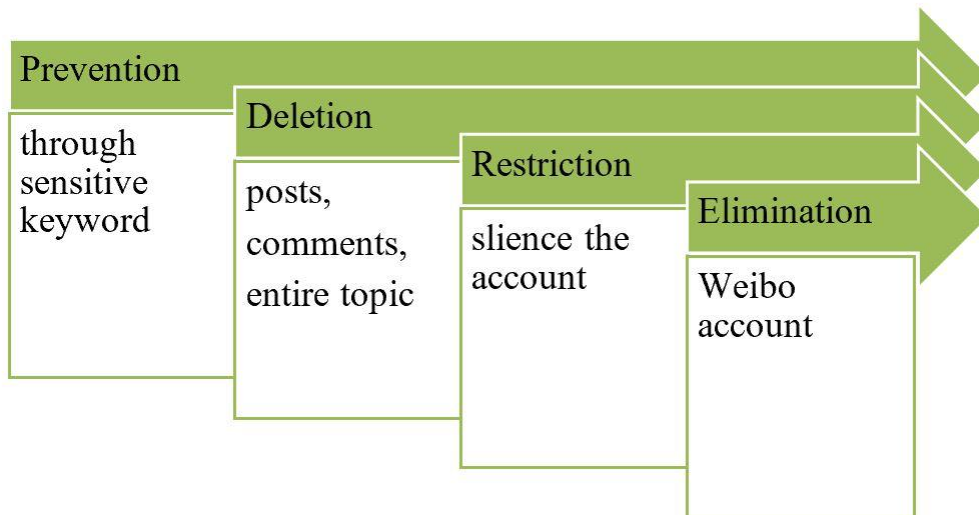


Figure 5-1 A Brief Process Flowchart of Weibo Censorship

The above fig. 5-1 shows the process of Weibo censorship. While the approach to preventing publishing is used prior to a post being published, content deletion is widely enforced after the publication. Some users would receive a message from Weibo administrators (微博管理員) at the time of the removal, regardless of whether it's an original post, a repost, or a comment. Although most citizen content was deleted without any notification received, the deletion was still noticeable since a “descriptive” note would be shown where the removed content would otherwise display. Typical notes shown on deleted posts are “the post has been deleted due to multiple complaints and under the Weibo Community Convention” (該微博因被多人投訴，根據《微博社區公約》，已被刪除) or “sorry, the post has been deleted by the author” (抱歉，此微博已被作者刪除), without providing a specific explanation for what caused the deletion. The note claiming author deletion is the most frequent one to appear on a removed post; yet, netizens doubt its authenticity and regard it as a statement made to divert attention from the tightened censorship. Again, it is also normal for an entire social topic to be censored and then erased from Weibo when it draws too much attention from the public.

In some cases, one's Weibo account would be completely eliminated if the account repetitively publishes sensitive content and is thus classified as harming the platform's social stability. In the worst-case scenario, the citizen who published or reposted content breaching relevant laws and regulations would be arrested by the police and even face a jail sentence. In the 2017 RYB kindergarten abuse incident, three citizens were accused of fabricating the story and spreading rumours against the Chinese military.



Compared to the commonly-used approaches of prevention and deletion, a relatively new approach of censorship has emerged on Weibo and has only been noticed by a small group of netizens. Aiming at suppressing specific topics, it blocks the post to one's followers and is only visible to the publisher. Unlike the direct deletion of posts that often results in netizens' strong reactions or other repercussions, the blocking approach creates an illusion for them to believe their viewpoints were expressed and disseminated, and that nobody responded. Generally speaking, content publishers hardly ask their followers for feedback about a published post, even if they know some followers in person. Therefore, this approach can reduce the potential contradictions and build a harmonious platform as requested by the authoritarian regime. In fact, not only a single post can be hidden from its followers but also any and all relevant posts to a particular social topic (deemed unsuitable) can become suddenly invisible on the platform. Some participants explained that the means involved was "data traffic restriction" (限制瀏覽量), which is somewhat related to the newly introduced software to help algorithmic sorting of Weibo posts.

In 2017, Weibo replaced the chronological timeline with a new feature where posts are presented based on an algorithmic order, reflecting its popularity or interaction received. It's commonly known that the new sorting method sorts posts according to so-called user preferences, according to the interaction frequency between a follower and the followed account. That is, the more you "like", comment, or mention (via the @ symbol) the account you are following, the more their posts will be shown on your Weibo homepage. And if you only read the account you follow without any interactions with it, the new sorting method will conclude that you want to ignore the account and eventually block everything published by the account for you. However, some netizens suspect its accuracy in calculating one's preference as well as its integrity in presenting posts. It is designed to take control of the information flow, which was described by P6 as "showing what it wants you to see rather than you take the initiative and read what you want to read". To a degree, it also limits the amount and types of information a user can access on Weibo, despite the user having already decided who to follow. Fortunately, there is still means to avoid the confusing software algorithmic sorting by switching to the international version of Weibo, where all posts are sorted in chronological order, and where "push" advertisements are not inserted.

Besides the technological approaches introduced to censor citizen content, the Chinese government also employs a significant amount of labour to manipulate public opinion in Weibo discussions, known as the "50-cent party" (五毛黨) or the "Internet water army" (水軍). The

“50-cent party” are online commentators who publish content and promote the regime’s interests (Chen & Ang, 2011; Qian, 2011), through a relatively straightforward way of expression, such as to argue with citizens in defending the government or supporting authoritative policies. The “Internet water army”, on the other hand, are online commentators who focus on distracting and redirecting netizens from a specific social topic or the public discussion in general (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017). Because netizens are aware of both types of online commentators, they become increasingly cautious with the voices or perspectives expressed on Weibo. Some of them have realised that many popular comments were made by members of the “water army” to direct public attention, which can be reflected in the widespread Internet slang “lead the tempo” (帶節奏). It is necessary to state that the term “internet water army” also refers to ghost-writers hired to lead the direction of public opinion towards entertainment or commercial topics.

Although the principles behind Weibo censorship or the list of censored words at any given time is not disclosed to the public, a few netizens have noticed that any content pointing to the actual state of the society or that appeals for help for the weak and downtrodden are more likely be censored and restricted. It is also common for personal posts to be censored, which has caused negative user experiences for many Weibo users. For them, the prevention approach is confusing and creates trouble for their daily logging of activities, since any simple record of personal life has the potential to contain sensitive words. Therefore, the user is required to adjust their wording without being given any clues. A lot of users instead give up at the time of publication failure and gradually withdraw from content publishing and public discussion. At the same time, some participants pointed out that it is indeed necessary for the authorities to regulate online content, particularly on pornography, and violence, drugs, or human trafficking issues.

Many interview participants were disappointed with the non-specific deletions and the tightening of censorship. Some of them would carefully consider and repost information which they think is crucial for others to know, in the hope of spread it for a greater distribution before its deletion. The others have become cautious with their expressions on Weibo as they could be accused of inappropriate activities and of violating CAC regulations, which can affect their work and their life. Referring to the current censorship as “an invisible tension” for Weibo users, P6 stressed that the fear of being censored and the powerless feeling of failure in publications, or the later deletions can occur simply as just a tap on the reposting button. As a result, these netizens remain “onlookers” rather than express their views, or participate in

discussions on Weibo, even in regard to the social issues they are really concerned about. Considering the potential negative consequences of participating in “sensitive” social and political topics on Weibo, some of them prefer to talk about controversial issues in offline conversations.

The limited and regulated expression of Weibo citizen journalism is indeed undermining citizens’ freedom in finding and sharing information, which is needed for making “informed decisions about public life” (Freedman, 2015). Instead, it would be possibly a compensation, or even an illusion, offered by the Chinese government. By providing a specific online sphere, and apparently, the dominant one, the regime is prepared with means and strategies for maintaining its control over media, both traditional and digital. Further, as a single platform where the majority of Chinese netizens gather, it is obviously more manageable for the authorities and easier to control and to prevent potential online activism as well as real-world social actions. In this case, the significant social influence of Weibo citizen journalism has merely achieved a selective transparency of the Chinese authorities and has hardly been granted with exceptions from the reinforced censorship. Overwhelmingly, citizens’ increasing withdrawal of participation in public discussions highlights the grave difficulties for its development into a public sphere.

### 5.3 MAINSTREAM OR ALTERNATIVE?

Because Weibo offers the convenience to access a wide range of topics, the immediacy to know the current affairs, and the potential to be exposed to new ideas and diverse perspectives, it has been considered a critical source of news and information for the majority users. There is no doubt that a substantial amount of information is available on the platform, from local to international sources, from citizen content to professional media. However, to provide a variety of topics does not guarantee the emergence of a diversity of values and cultures, not to mention that the primary activity on Weibo for most of my interview participants was news browsing or information acquiring rather than content publishing. Given the number of institutional accounts practising on Weibo and the fact that the majority of interview participants use it for information browsing rather than content publishing, it leads to questions about such information: To what extent can the information on Weibo be regarded as an alternative to the mainstream? Is Weibo truly a platform of citizen content? The following sections will discuss the possible approaches to this question.

### 5.3.1 Mainstream Media on Weibo

Apart from the remarkable amount of government accounts operating on Weibo, it is possible to say that every officially-registered media institute in China, including the ruling party's mouthpieces, have a verified Weibo account. Because of the platform's prevalence, the leading foreign or international media organisations have also registered Weibo accounts. Therefore, it is described as a news platform where current political and social events from various official sources can be accessed at one time for several participants.

Based on the company's latest media report, there are more than 1400 mainstream media organisations cooperating with the company and operating accounts on Weibo (Sina Weibo Data Centre, 2018). These accounts, owned by various organisations from print media to broadcast media, have drawn over 500 million followers on the platform. Many netizens follow many media Weibo accounts, from traditional media institutes such as *CCTV News* (央視新聞), *People's Daily* (人民日報), *Beijing News* (新京報), and *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) to new media outlets like *The Paper* (澎湃新聞, literally: "surge news") and *Toutiao* (今日頭條, literally: "today's headline"). While Sina report data shows that *CCTV News* and *People's Daily* are the most popular accounts among Chinese media outlets, they were also the most-mentioned official accounts in my research interviews. Furthermore, some of the participants rely more on mainstream accounts and have strong faith in their professional journalistic practices. Posts published by individual accounts or "self-media" (aka. grassroots media) accounts, on the other hand, can only be regarded as commentary or reviewing articles rather than news.

Compared to the fixed schedule and complicated approval process required for news production, in reality, Weibo content is much easier to organise and publish even for mainstream media. As a result, the media organisations tend to give priority to releasing breaking news through their Weibo account, later providing a link to the detailed news article on their official websites. Again, it is common for official news to be first released on Weibo, before any reports in printed media or broadcasting programs. Meanwhile, the platform also grants priority to posts published by mainstream media. According to participants' user experience, the top-listed results are often relevant news articles from authoritative mainstream media accounts if one searches a news topic on Weibo.

### 5.3.2 Influential Accounts on Weibo

In addition to the mainstream media accounts, a large proportion of Weibo posts are contributed by the verified influential accounts, including individual Big V (大V) accounts and “self-media” (自媒體) accounts. While a “self-media” is usually a collective creation operated by a team or a company, the Big V accounts reflect the verified individual accounts with a significant number of followers. Also, some of the Big V accounts are identified as opinion leaders by the Chinese media and the general public. According to researchers on Chinese online opinion leaders, different accounts cater to different purposes, and the main practices include agenda setting, information disseminating, opinion guiding, voice strengthening, strategic entertaining, and individuals (or victims) uniting (Ding & Li, 2010). On account of influential accounts’ being outspoken and participating in public discussions, many social issues, which would not have any chance to be noticed by the public in the past, become exposed through Weibo. Moreover, the influential accounts can all be considered citizen journalists, as they are already engaging in journalistic practices with the use of their influence and power (Kelly, 2009).

Due to the strict control over media in China, any form of news reporting conducted by professional journalists have to comply with the government’s guidelines before being approved for release. Meanwhile, there will also be other restrictions, such as the length of coverage, ways of representing or framing the information, and cost of production applied to the news production after a topic has been granted permission for interviewing or reporting. However, for those who believe in the role of journalism and its commitment to social responsibility, the establishment of weblogging and later microblogging has offered a platform to publish the information obtained and analysed, and thus, possibilities of spreading it to their followers. By reading their posts that integrated information from multiple sources, the general public can get to know a relatively comprehensive story. Some of the most well-known journalists like Chai Jing, Deng Fei, and Wang Zhian, who were professionally trained and had worked in leading Chinese mainstream media organisations, are all active Weibo users with millions of followers. To a certain degree, these influential accounts with the journalism or media industry background can be identified as public journalists rather than citizen journalists on Weibo. Here, the requirements of professionalism have indeed become practical through providing “conversational news” to encourage “public dialogues” and improve public participation (Dewey & Rogers, 2012).

In addition to professionals from the media industry, part of the influential individual accounts is formed by verified users from other professional backgrounds, such as lawyers and scholars. Regardless of their professions and residences, they consistently share their thoughts and knowledge about current affairs, from not only socio-economic aspects but also political factors. Some focus on speaking for the disadvantaged and fight to defend civil rights; some have a strong sense of social and political issues; some hold the sense of mission for justice and democracy. Although many of them seldom identify themselves as social activists, their contributions to attract public attention as well as promote public participation are apparent. While a social issue raised by an ordinary citizen may be hardly heard on Weibo, where a vast amount of posts are published every day, the possibility for citizen content to draw more extensive attention is usually increased after being reposted by some influential accounts. In the 2011 Weibo crackdown on child trafficking event, Deng Fei's initial Weibo search notice of Peng Wenle was widely-spread by few of the most influential celebrities in China via the platform (Yang & Lu, 2011). That is, such accounts play a crucial role in enlarging citizen voices in the process of information dissemination on Weibo, since a repost by an influential account may lead to hundreds of thousands of potential reposts. And for their followers, they are participating in the dissemination process as well as public discussion through the act of reposting, with or without commenting.

Other than individual verified accounts, there is a significant amount of Weibo accounts verified as so-call "self-media" (aka. grassroots media), who actively publish citizen content to the platform. Many of these accounts were registered initially as individual accounts and later operated as businesses by their funders as they attract a substantial number of followers and start to have a strong influence across the platform. There are a variety of "self-media" accounts operating on Weibo; some focus more on social issues, and others produce content for leisure and entertainment. The currently active well-known grassroots media on Weibo mentioned by interview participants are the ones seldom involved with political topics, such as Guokr (果殼網, literally: "nutshell website") and Ergeng video (二更視頻, literally: "night-time video"). While Guokr aims to promote science and technology knowledge to the Chinese public through various social media platforms and its website, Ergeng uses short videos and user-generated content presenting stories of ordinary citizens.

It is necessary to note that a group of verified individual accounts and grassroots media, e.g. Xiaoshu (Chinese: 笑蜀), Rage Comic (暴走漫畫) and Connotation Jokes (內涵段子), have been erased from Weibo over the last few years due to the reinforcement of media control.

In the most recent online campaign to purify the online environment, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) announced the removal of more than 9800 social media accounts. These accounts are said to have been providing citizen content in violation of Chinese laws and regulations, such as “distributing politically harmful information, maliciously tampering with histories of the country and the party, slandering images of heroes, and discrediting the nation’s image” (CAC, 2018). In much of the Chinese scholarly literature, opinion leaders are commonly regarded as tools to direct public opinion for the government, while researchers emphasise the potential of using or controlling such influential accounts to privilege the authority (Lu, 2016).

Overall, the influential accounts have a significant impact on the development of a Weibo event, as they provide the public with information about the event as well as perspectives towards it. In certain cases, some of the influential accounts would provide opportunities for multiple stakeholders to have mutual communication. Therefore, ordinary netizens often try to gain support from such influential accounts when they bring forward a social topic via the platform. But it is never easy to be noticed or get a response from an influential account, who often knows not only the significance of one’s influence but also the sensitivity of the Weibo censorship. From failing to draw public attention to the forced demolition of a historical temple via Weibo, P9 was disappointed with both local professional journalists and the influential accounts of religious leaders. P9 further described some of the Weibo events as a “performance of people with a vested interest”, for the influential accounts would only repost a topic if it related to their interests. In other words, the proportion of social-political issues raised on the platform is still not significant, while the comprehensive investigation and continuous follow-ups are hard to find.

Without a doubt, there are vast quantities of information published on Weibo every hour, even every second. And many of them are contributed by government accounts and media accounts. Although influential accounts including grassroots media, and individual professionals also generate a considerable amount of citizen content, the ones who are involved with sensitive topics have slowly been restricted and eventually removed from the platform. In this case, topics and discussions related to social issues or political debates have continuously declined, due to the tightening control over media. There is both authorised information and citizen content available on Weibo, but it doesn’t mean that mainstream viewpoints and alternative perspectives are provided equal weighting. In fact, posts published by the so-called official media are always given priority in a search result or popularity rankings, possibly also in the new software algorithmic post sorting. To some extent, it is evident that the government

has adjusted its approaches towards social media and strengthened its media control to regain power and to promote its mainstream ideological concepts.

Moreover, Weibo has now become the only privately-owned microblogging service in the Chinese cyberspace. The monopoly of Weibo has enhanced its influence on society, and somewhat pushed it to the top, among all other social media in China, in terms of information exchanging. Being assigned to such a dominant position and filled with mainstream and official content, the independent and alternative notion of Weibo has been largely reduced; yet, its political implications have become obvious.

#### 5.4 DEBATES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WEIBO CITIZEN JOURNALISM

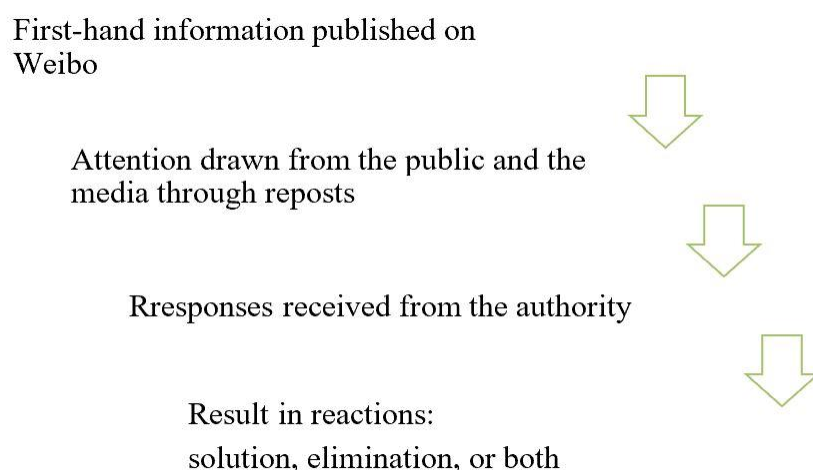
With the advancement of social media, smartphones, and communication networks, Chinese netizens have begun to express their thoughts and to seek new sources of information actively. Likewise, the establishment of Weibo opened up a window for both expression and information, in the unique, authoritarian media environment. Citizen journalism, which reverses the sender-receiver process of traditional journalism, has then become an involuntary practice for most of the netizens on Weibo. Like what P23 emphasised, “Weibo itself...it plays the role of a news platform for public participation”. P23 also sees it as “the first platform that has the power of public effect. ...[that] has evolved into an online parliament in China, [where] the government agencies are like the members of parliament, and the general public are the voters in the electorates”. While this may be somewhat wishful thinking, it certainly proves that many users consider Weibo to have brought some semblance of openness and transparency about the government into their daily lives, for when citizens get to know and understand what is censored, that in itself provides them some information about the truth.

From the data analysis of two Weibo events and 28 semi-structured interviews, it is possible to conclude that information-browsing and content-reposting are the primary practices for active Weibo users. That is to say, source-gathering and news-disseminating are their fundamental ways of participation in Weibo citizen journalism. The on-site reporting is mostly experienced by those who happen to be at the scene or to be one of the stakeholders when an incident occurs. The information-analysing, on the other hand, is embedded partially in the process of seeking diverse perspectives and thus commenting on the event, which can be either a comment to a related post or an original post reviewing any given information about the incident. Although an ordinary netizen seldom performs all practices of citizen journalism all the time, a Weibo topic or event is indeed the result of collective creations by citizen journalists.



This generally involves a group of stakeholders, a few media accounts, the responsive government accounts, and of course a large number of netizens. More specifically, each netizen participates in the event through various forms, while some repost or comment more actively via Weibo and others prefer to talk about it in offline.

The progress of a Weibo event, as shown in fig. 5-2, can be summarised into four stages. Regardless of what topic the Weibo event is categorised in, it first emerges from the first-hand information published on the platform. The relevant citizen content will then be reposted by concerned netizens and through their followers, drawing extensive public attention. During this information dissemination process, both opinion leaders and grassroots media usually play the role of tipping points. And thus, the event will receive responses from various authorities: from state-owned media organisations to responsive government sectors, all in a short period. However, the reactions do not promise any potential of resolution to the social issue related to the event. A solution is only more likely to be achieved when the authority shows support towards it or allows it to be discussed on Weibo. If the government responds to it negatively, any relevant citizen content and discussions will thus be censored and deleted (or blocked) from the platform, and users will also possibly be banned from other social media platforms as well as mainstream media coverage. In many cases, the resolution of a Weibo event is a combination of both a solution and an elimination. That is, the Chinese authority deals with it selectively, resolving the aspects in line with its agenda but avoiding or suppressing the aspects in conflict with the regime and its interests.



*Figure 5-2 A Brief Flowchart of Weibo Event's Development*

Through Weibo events, a typical form of citizen journalistic production, it becomes possible for grassroots to seek justice, for civil society to put pressure on the government about some

matters, for the minorities' voices to be heard, and for ordinary netizens to have a conversation with authorities as well as to participate in discussions and public affairs.

Nevertheless, it is again necessary to indicate the dual characteristic of Weibo citizen journalism, discussed in academic literature and experienced by my interview participants. In the next section, debates in relation to information versus misinformation, media literacy versus media control, and gaining control versus being controlled will be explored. The enlightenment of civic awareness brought by Weibo citizen journalism will also be summarised.

#### 5.4.1 Information vs. Misinformation

It is evident that a high percentage of netizens use Weibo primarily to acquire news and information. They are relying on the platform for a variety of topics and the immediacy of news updates. To some extent, the vast quantity of information available on Weibo meets their demands for information access, but it does not promise a better understanding of the current affairs. Whenever a social issue occurs, no matter if it is a community-based one or has nation-wide impact, it will be at least mentioned on Weibo, since it is a preferred platform where citizens publish and discuss what they are concerned about or interested. However, similar to the criticism of citizen journalism in academic scholarship, the primary concern of Weibo citizen journalism raised by my interview participants was also focused on content quality. For them, much citizen-generated content fails to meet the professional journalistic requirements of authenticity, objectivity and neutrality. More specifically, P26 questioned citizen journalists' ability to analyse information and investigate a social incident, as such abilities are commonly gained through professional journalistic training. A comprehensive news story is unlikely to be presented by one news article, one journalist, or one media organisation, but requires long-term collective journalistic practices involving multiple reporters with diverse abilities and different media outlets from different perspectives.

Again, the lack of ethical conduct is likely to cause the issue of unreliable content, especially when one's motivation of content-publishing is to benefit oneself or to earn profit. P5 indicated "repost" as their main form of participation, focusing on the messages sent out by the disadvantaged people who seek help or justice. However, P5's overall frequency of reposting has declined as there are questions about the authenticity of these posts and concerns about publishers' motivations. As time goes by, the driving force behind a popular Weibo event would be unfolded, and sometimes, citizen content initially available on the platform might be proven to be one-sided or false information. In this situation, which is referred to as the case of

“reversal” (反轉) by Chinese netizens, the truth is only discovered after the social topic has successfully drawn attention from the public. In addition, there is citizen content designed to take advantage of a topics’ popularity (蹭熱度) instead of providing valuable opinions or constructive insights.

In fact, some of the participants’ doubts on the phenomenon are in tune with the government’s agenda of regulating online content. According to their viewpoint, much of citizen content is fake news, and even the authentic ones have the potential to cause fear and panic in society rather than help maintain a stabilised attitude among the public. Even though they suggest it is unnecessary to suppress the practice of citizen journalism; they still prefer to introduce specific means to limit fake information. Since June 2017, anyone who publishes or/and distributes fake news or rumours online will be investigated and affixed legal liability, in accordance with the Cyber Security Law of the People’s Republic of China.

Journalism has long been recognised as a profession; thus, it seems reasonable for the public to expect professional media outlets to provide quality news and information and to require the same for Weibo citizen journalism. All Chinese mainstream media, which refers to the ones officially registered and licensed, are monitored and controlled by the government. Being the regime’s mouthpiece, to what extent can professional journalists practise without political interference? And, can news be authentic, objective and neutral when it is produced only to fulfil the government’s agenda?

For decades, professionalism has been a critical debate in both theoretical and practical aspects of journalism. The ideal journalistic practice has been continuously challenged by the growth of commercialism and consumerism. In the digital world, where the publication of news and information is no longer dominated by either political or professional authority, ethical issues have never been absent. To a degree, the rise of new media has caused an increase in unethical practices of professional journalists, such as plagiarism and lack of verification (Chan, 2014). Weibo, which offers convenience for ordinary netizens to access immediate and vast information, is also supplying the professional media with handy news sources.

The mainstream Chinese media not only publish timely news articles through their Weibo accounts but also practise newsgathering via the platform. From at-the-scene footage to first-hand information, from comments about popular topics to viewpoints on social policies, citizen content is sourced and used in print news and broadcasting programs. However, a large proportion of interview participants have indicated that some of the Chinese media use such citizen content unethically, on and beyond the platform. It is common for a professional

journalist to take citizen content for granted and thus include it in a news report without any verification process. In other cases, netizens' comments and viewpoints are quoted selectively in the mainstream news, and out of context, so that specific government policies and actions are presented as being endorsed and approved by the public. Such practices of representing fragmented information has been commonly referred to as "being represented" (被代表) by netizens. Moreover, there are occasions when professional journalists would even fabricate citizen comments or views, aiming for either political or commercial interests.

Since neither Weibo citizen journalism nor professional Chinese media can promise quality information and achieve ethical journalistic practices, it is up to netizens to seek and evaluate what has been made available to them, by using their skills of media literacy.

#### 5.4.2 Media Literacy vs. Media Control

Similar to what Chinese academics have been criticised, a few interview participants argued that netizens need to improve their ability of media literacy (媒介素养). For them, netizens' insufficiency in media literacy will impact the progression of public discussion and participation in Weibo citizen journalism. As there are some quality issues with citizen content, netizens are then required to have a certain degree of media literacy to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. At the same time, the higher one's media literacy level, the more likely they can identify false or one-sided information.

However, it is essential first to identify the term media literacy, and then the means to enable this ability. As a result of long-term progress, media literacy is, in fact, a set of various skills to deal with media content, including analysing, evaluating, and criticising information and creating content (Potter, 2010). To present, despite Weibo having facilitated Chinese netizens in generating content and accessing information, the capability to analyse, evaluate and criticise are still challenging to gain through the browsing of a few Weibo events. Since all media and communication, including educational materials, are strictly controlled by the Chinese government, the general public has been given acutely limited opportunities to develop skills relating to media literacy. It will be almost impossible for anyone to think seriously and make thoughtful decisions if critical social and political issues are merely disclosed or discussed.

Furthermore, abilities required for media literacy are partially reflecting on democratic practices and values, which are usually prohibited in China. In contrast to the citizenship education established in western countries, Chinese students are taught with so-called

“peopleship” education (Xiao, 2012). Rather than encouraging the public to think critically, to become open-minded, and to develop autonomy, the regime retains strong dominance in the ideological sphere. It was almost impossible for ordinary citizens to have a say in decision making or to participate in political affairs. Therefore, it seems unacceptable to blame netizens for the lack of abilities in information analysis, news evaluation, and content production.

While to be included in public life is favourable, to build one’s sense of belonging in society, one should be able to recognise another’s right to speak with respect when their rights are fulfilled in daily life. In other words, citizens will be able to accept other voices and acknowledge the differences between viewpoints when they sense the social inclusion. Such recognition, acceptance, and acknowledgement can thus influence, and perhaps lower the occurrence of online abuse, which has become a critical issue for Weibo citizen journalists in recent years. In addition to the deliberate intentional comments published by the “water army”, which was explained in the earlier section, the overwhelming discord started by Internet trolls (鍵盤俠: literally: “keyboard warrior”) and the negative attitude of “face-smacking” (打臉) another’s viewpoint have discouraged netizens from participating in Weibo citizen journalism. To prevent becoming potential targets for harassment or resentment, many interview participants have begun to avoid publishing controversial viewpoints and then to withdraw from public discussions.

In September 2018, Weibo introduced a new function for verified accounts, which allows them to punish those who abuse with language violence. When receiving an abusive or harassing comment, a verified account can use the function to delete the comment and block its publisher, who will thus be silenced for three days on the entire platform. Soon after the announcement of this silence function, debates about the intention of such implementation have been raised across Weibo. On the one hand, its advocates claim that it would be an effective means to discipline the “keyboard warriors” and thus reduce the occurrence of online abuse. On the other hand, critics of the function argue that it is designed to get netizens familiarised with the silence punishment and to enforce the conflicts between the powerful and the powerless, more specifically, between the verified accounts and the commenting accounts. While Weibo emphasis the silence function empowers the account holder’s control of one’s homepage, it merely benefits the verified accounts, who already have much more influential power than an ordinary user. Again, the principal component of this function is neither the deletion of an inappropriate comment nor the blockage of the content publisher, but to remove a user’s right to speak on Weibo for three days. To a degree, the equality between Weibo users

has then been disrupted, by conferring to certain user groups the ability to cover one's mouth with invisible tape.

On the contrary to the imperative silence punishment, the participation of Weibo citizen journalism is an effective method for ordinary citizens to gain the ability of media literacy autonomously. That is, citizen journalism plays a constructive role in media literacy (Liu, W. Q., 2016). Through their participation, netizens will progressively learn about the fact that the truth cannot be revealed by a single stakeholder's claim or an impressive image, as they merely represent one side of the story. In order to get a relatively comprehensive picture of the whole story, it is necessary to gather as much relevant information as possible and then analyse and evaluate it critically. As suggested by a few participants, the more a citizen experiences citizen journalism, the more likely for one to understand the news from its insight and thus to strengthen one's ability of rational thinking. And slowly, one would be capable of practising media literacy and classifying one-sided information or set agendas. At the same time, approximately one third of participants expressed their confusion and uncertainty regarding identifying the trustworthy of citizen news or stories, which can be seen as a result of lack of media literacy.

Research has found that personal factors like use patterns and civic skills are the most likely contributors to indicate individuals' citizen journalism activities on Twitter (Kim & Lowrey, 2015), while the most significant personal factors to influence Weibo users' participation in citizen journalism also include the knowledge of media literacy. Nevertheless, everyone's progress in developing skills related to media literacy is different, even throughout similar participation experiences. To a degree, the gaps between one and the other's capability level of media literacy are also reflecting the differences between netizens' experiences of public life and interpretations of democratic values, which has been mostly absent from their upbringings. And for those who have already gained a higher level of media literacy ability, the practice of citizen journalism on Weibo is a struggle to gain control over information and to fight against the regime's reinforced media control.

#### 5.4.3 Gaining User Control vs. Being Controlled

In general, new media provides relatively liberal platforms, where people have control over what they consume and have a clear understanding of the gratification sought (Ruggiero, 2000). Weibo offers ordinary citizens opportunities to produce content and to access a wide range of information, which would not be reported through official media channels. Its notions of real-

time content publishing and at-the-scene broadcasting has weakened the government's domination of news and information by providing the public with such unofficial sources (Tong & Lei, 2013). Similar to other social media, an underlying principle of Weibo is again to empower user initiative. On the platform, a netizen can decide whose accounts to follow, what information to acquire, and which topics to discuss. But the newly introduced software algorithmic sorting has overridden the empowerment, together with the reinforced censorship on Weibo.

The algorithmic sorting, which displays posts based on interaction frequency between users, is confused and disrupted. As P6 complained, it is “only showing what it wants you to see rather than you read what you want to read”. Through such sorting means, specific content, possibly sensitive topics related to political and social issues, are restricted to the public. Additionally, another recently added means of Weibo censorship – blocking posts to followers, uses mainly the same methods of data traffic restriction. Instead of deleting the censored content directly, the platform sets it visible only to the publisher, who will then believe one's expression has been successfully published. At the same time, the results given at a Weibo search are again filtered and sorted according to media hierarchies of China. After all, the authority is aiming to strengthen the control of information flow as well as influence the public by presenting selected information.

Under the Chinese government's strict control over information flow, netizens are still struggling to find ways to gain access to freedom of speech as well as political participation. To disseminate what they think is important for the public to know, they will use symbol or metaphor in replacement of the possible sensitive word and thus navigate through Weibo's prevention of content publishing. Once content about a sensitive topic has been published, it can still be censored by various means and then deleted from the platform. Weibo's deletion approach, which is regularly used when a social or political topic becomes extensively discussed, is occasionally referred to as a favourite social media function of “burn after reading” (閱後即焚). Knowing the sensitivity of certain topics, active netizens regularly screenshot the post that they think will alarm the Weibo censor. At the same time, some users will screenshot the censored content and publish it in a new post to complain about the censorship, sometimes with the deletion notice if they received a message from the system administrator. Through such means, even a censored topic has the potential to be known by other users, and thus to draw attention from society. From this perspective, the rapid dissemination notion of Weibo facilitates the possibility of public discussions, in spite of the

continued growth of sensitive keywords. What is more, the deletion of specific content may result in deeper thinking or reflection about the underlying issue for some Weibo users, whose reaction may then cause the authority's to rethink the necessity of its deletion.

Subject to the punishment for breaching CAC regulations, many netizens are frightened and prefer to repost than make comments on Weibo, even on the social topics of their concern. However, the repost button is not always in the hands of users and can be taken by the authority at any time, as the reposted content can be deleted and one's account can be silenced.

Besides the apparent means of censorship, authorities also advocate the growth of entertaining and commercial content on the platform, which has disturbed netizens' attention and discussion on serious social and political issues to a great extent. The owner of Weibo is one of the leading Internet giants in China, Sina Corporation, which means the platform was never operated on a non-for-profit principle. After successfully securing Weibo's dominance in the Chinese microblogging industry, Sina began to slowly guide the platform into a marketplace, where "a market of readers" (Chalaby, 1998) is provided with "news you can use" (Hallin, 2000). To maximise user activities and profits, Weibo regularly updates its function and service. At present, the overflowing marketing posts and advertisements have become an obstruction of information acquisition for many users. The latest version of Weibo ads is interstitial, which is designed in the form of a regular post to captivate user attention. In order to avoid the confusing algorithmic sorting and the non-specific flooding advertisements, a large group of users have switched to the international version of Weibo, where they are more in control with reading news and information.

When censorship has become part of the daily life, most netizens act carefully to avoid specific social-political topics, and some have learned to get along with it and tried to express viewpoints tactfully. Even though Weibo is continuously updating the means and procedures of censorship, there are still netizens who believe in the influence of Weibo citizen journalism, its enhancement to civic rights, and its contribution to provide the diverse individuals about topics of common interests. This group of netizens continually exercise their rights and speak out for the weak and the injustice, using their slight voices to unfold the truth.

#### 5.4.4 Enhancement of Civic Awareness

Microblogging services in China, particularly Weibo, have enabled the freedom of publication for Chinese netizens and contributed to the enlightenment of civic awareness: from the right to speak to the right to know, from the right to participate to the right to petition. As emphasised



by several interview participants, Weibo had opened up a platform for both information acquiring and expression delivering. Through the platform, netizens were provided with opportunities to understand the current affairs, to raise public awareness, and to participate in public discussions. In many cases, citizens are initially gathering through Weibo to claim and defend their rights, and therefore to engage in political or public affairs.

A large amount of Weibo users started their microblogging journeys because of the recommendations given by their friends, with excitement bought by its convenience of content publishing and revolutionary freedom of expression. Back then, many of them focused on recording the happenings in personal life and interacting within their acquaintance network. But gradually, they have discovered more possibilities with the platform, through the rise of citizen journalism. Holding “the desire to express an idea or support a cause” (Reese & Dai, 2009), netizens usually gather on Weibo and raise more extensive attention from the public about issues closely related to their daily lives or local communities. In addition to the form of publishing original content on one’s homepage, a netizen also expresses one’s viewpoint through reposting, commenting, and giving a “like” to show personal support for a particular content.

Over time, Weibo users have started to adopt the platform as a source of news and information. More and more users have stepped out and shared their experience and knowledge regarding various kinds of topics on the platform. Enhanced by the ability to access a wide range of information, especially the ones almost impossible to be revealed in the past, users become aware of their information demand as well as their right to know. Base on participants’ experiences of Weibo citizen journalism, it is more likely for citizens to accept new ideas and perspectives and thus to develop critical thinking skills if they are exposed to a large amount of information from diverse viewpoints. For most of them, browsing on Weibo is part of their daily routine, even if they are not sending any original posts. When a social topic becomes widely discussed, many users tend to search for more relevant or detailed information via Weibo; regardless of where they first got to know the topic. The vast amount of content available on it, including first-hand information, mainstream reports, and an alternative perspective, is creating a relatively comprehensive picture of the occurrence.

Traditionally, or say, ideally, citizens participate in public affairs by freely expressing their viewpoints on social and political topics, identifying social problems, and thus resulting in political actions. In the past, there were only limited channels for the majority of Chinese citizens to seek help or appeal for justice, let alone having a say in political topics or social issues. With Weibo, they now have not only opportunities to publish content and access

information but also a platform to participate in political discussions and public affairs. Due to the government's long-term media control policy, most of them have to learned to speak out, to acquire information, and participate in discussions from the beginning. While netizens have just started to make progress towards public life, the censorship has been reinforced in recent years. Therefore, many users began to withdraw from social and political discussions, and their primary form of participation has become as little as tapping the repost button.

It is predictable that there will be arguments raised against this repost form of participation and classified it as slacktivism, a term referring to a person's putting little or no effort into whatever they support but only feeling good as if they made contributions. Critics of slacktivism question the effectiveness of activities on social media as well as its promotion of political participation in reality (Morozov, 2009b). For them, fighting for democracy requires practical actions. Despite the lack of evidence in supporting the claim that online activities have corresponding influence to political decisions in real world, there is again little evidence to validate the slacktivism accusation (Christensen, 2011). In the context of China, it is almost impossible for an ordinary citizen to engage with real-life political participation. It is unacceptable to generalise the democratic ideal and apply universal standards to countries with different historical and cultural backgrounds. A tap on the repost button is already significant progress for ordinary citizens to gain experience in public discussion, in a more relaxed way. It doesn't mean that the topic or news they repost is not serious; on the contrary, they only repost the critical or useful content onto their Weibo homepages. There are huge risks even to personal safety for such a small action like reposts. In many cases, netizens are aware of the slightness of their voices, but they are still willing to help the disadvantaged or support a cause. Through the act of reposting, netizens are expecting the information will again be reposted by their followers, and thus to attract extensive attention from the society as well as possible resolutions.

When each citizen must self-educate for media literacy and even rational discussion, a tapping of the repost button is significant enough for an ordinary citizen. Indeed, they will need to find their voices before speaking out, even to express personal viewpoints. The search of one's voices is a gradual development founded upon browsing a substantial amount of quality information and diverse perspectives.

Weibo citizen journalism is perhaps still taking baby steps for the perspective of democracy, yet, it is a giant leap for Chinese citizens. The practice of citizen journalists on and off the platform is indeed fundamental for constituting a democratic world, which are behaviours of "expressing their opinions, disagreeing with others, making their choices among

options” (Reese & Dai, 2009). At the same time, together with the phenomenon, the platform has become a space for Chinese netizens to gather intentionally and unintentionally, even in “dynamic and unexpected ways”, for possibly nurturing democracy and civil society (Narayan, 2013). To present, the social influence of Weibo citizen journalism can be sighted through a popular online slang – “posting on Weibo is better than calling the police” (報警不如發微博), which was cited by P19 during the interview. Regardless of its success in tremendous social influence, it is necessary for Weibo citizen journalism to step beyond the “electronic tool” and contribute towards “a cause for political change” (MacKinnon, 2008).

With the rapid expansion of Weibo citizen journalism, there have been more opportunities and options provided to the public, who were long regarded as information receivers and passive audiences. The traditional landscape of mass media and boundaries of production-consumption have collapsed, and thus, the authoritarian power and its complex relationships with various social-political aspects have gone through radical changes. It needs to keep in mind that such opportunities and options are still within the domain of state power. The limited and regulated expression never equals to the freedom of expression. Instead, it would be possibly a compensation, or even an illusion, offered by the Chinese government in prevention of potential online activism and offline social actions and preparation for the improved means and strategies of media control. In other words, the significant social influence of Weibo citizen journalism does not mean it escapes from the reinforced censorship, and citizens’ increasing withdrawal of participation in public discussions alert us to the grave difficulties for its developments. Until the time citizen journalists are capable of freely and openly discussing social-political issues, publishing relevant content or viewpoints, and further extending their concerns to real-world actions, the phenomenon’s empowerment should not be overestimated.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

With the characteristics of open and easy access, instant and short posts, multi-media publication, multiple forms of interaction, and rapid and widespread dissemination of information, Weibo has established an online sphere for Chinese netizens to generate rich content and discuss diverse topics. Consistent with previous literature about citizen journalism and Chinese digital media, the findings of this research have revealed that the emergence of microblogging has directly contributed to the rise of citizen journalism in China. Emerging from weblogs, citizen journalism has grown on Weibo because of three essential conditions: the public's increasing desire to publish information and participate in public discussions, the gap between citizens' information demand and the controlled media supply, and the public's needs for immediate and first-hand information.

### 6.1 OVERVIEW

The major obstacle for Weibo citizen journalism to progress in China is, not surprisingly, the media control. Although there was a degree of freedom in the early days of Weibo, the Chinese government has quickly adopted digital and social media, particularly Weibo, after its fast-growing and remarkable success in the online sphere. In recent years, the authorities have gradually tightened censorship and introduced various means to maintain their control over the information flow. Weibo users are aware of government surveillance of their online activities, and almost every interview participant had more or less experienced different types of Weibo censorship. They also acknowledged that it can be a dangerous pursuit for citizen journalists if they draw too much attention from society, focus on sensitive political issues, or simply upset someone in the government. That is, the government will use a problem-solving approach like what is described in the Chinese online slang: "if a problem cannot be solved, then (we) solve the person who raised the problem". In this case, it is not just those who raised the social issue or topic who will be silenced and even eliminated from the platform, but also any netizens who participated in the processes of dissemination and discussion, through activities of reposting or commenting.

Besides the reinforcement of censorship, the authorities also have been involved in directing online public opinion and promoting commercial and entertainment content. While Weibo has evolved into another entertainment avenue that keeps people occupied and

distracted from social issues, the significant online textual violence and online abuse has also obstructed citizen journalists in expressing their views or commenting on social affairs. As a result, the possibility and willingness of netizens' participation in online social-political discussions has considerably declined. Many of them began to withdraw from the Weibo sphere and restrict their online activities, particularly those which might cause any subsequent legal accusations and punishments.

The findings suggest that the Chinese government has shown support for Weibo citizen journalism, but only as long as the outcomes are in line with its agenda, such as anti-organisational-corruption and anti-crime. In general, the authorities are actively promoting their values and agendas on Weibo and improving their E-government services via the platform. On the one hand, Weibo citizen journalism has put pressure on the government in terms of information disclosure, responding to public queries, and thus resolving social problems. On the other hand, the government often focuses on a single resolution for an individual case rather than positive improvements in relevant policies and regulations, on top of their actions of topic avoidance or silencing public voices. That is, the state regime of China merely provides a selective transparency towards the public.

As observed in the analysis of research data, in general, the primary activity of Chinese netizens is reposting, which can be referred to as the processes of information disseminating, while activities of commenting or discussing happen mostly on a topic of interest. Indeed, citizen journalistic practices are spontaneous behaviour rather than deliberate behaviour for most of Weibo users. For ordinary netizens, Weibo is commonly considered a source to acquire news and information, which is mostly published by influential accounts such as the mainstream media, government offices and bodies, and opinion leaders. Similar to the way of citizen journalists on Facebook has been driven by the “bridging capital” (Kim & Lowrey, 2015), Weibo citizen journalism activities are also demonstrated through the users’ needs to acquire updated information and gain new experiences. This bridging capital can be identified as the most potent force to attract users to participate in citizen journalism, and further maintain their citizen journalism activities on Weibo. But the “bonding capital” (Kim & Lowrey, 2015), which had motivated users to register on the platform and connect with their close acquaintances, has largely been reduced due to the prevalence of WeChat.

The mainstream media, both locally and internationally, not only publish timely news stories through their Weibo accounts but also use Weibo citizen journalism content at various levels. However, some of the Chinese media use such citizen content unethically, on and beyond the platform. Other than misconduct such as the lack of verification and selective

presentation of information, they regularly manipulate the public opinion to show support towards specific government policies and actions. Furthermore, the verified influential accounts, such as opinion leaders and grassroots media, are also making a significant contribution to the richness of Weibo content. These influential accounts on Weibo provide the general public with information and perspectives about social events and topics, and even opportunities for two-way communication for various stakeholders. They are also under the government's censor and have issues of unethical practices.

Since neither the mainstream media nor the influential accounts can be trusted to present neutral and objective viewpoints, the vast quantity of information available on Weibo does not promise a better understanding of the current affairs. While the quality of both citizen content and journalistic news is still to be improved, it is up to netizens to seek and evaluate the most useful information for revealing the truth, drawing public attention, and resolving the problem. Through their participation in Weibo citizen journalism, they have been able to facilitate their media literacy skills, which were hardly developed before they had access to a relatively free and open information platform like Weibo. Meanwhile, active citizen journalists have continually figured new ways and codes to circumvent censorship to get their message across, even if it is short-lived.

Despite the tightening of media control, the explosion of online abuse, and the transitory popularity of social events, Weibo is still an irreplaceable source of information and plays a significant role for the public in current China. After all, Weibo citizen journalism initially was, and to some extent, still is: a path for the grassroots to seek justice; a means for civil society to put pressure on the government about specific issues; a channel for the minorities to have their voices heard; a practice to enable interactions between netizens and authorities; and a platform to participate in political discussions and public affairs.

Without a doubt, Weibo citizen journalism has had a strong influence on Chinese society. Through the platform, netizens, especially Weibo users, are obtaining news and information about their immediate community and broader society, participating in the dissemination process with topics of their concern, and sometimes discussing relevant local and national issues, online or offline. Overwhelmingly, there were very limited collaboration between professional journalism and citizen journalism. However, by and large, citizen journalism was not able to make a huge difference in the political sphere in any significant way.

Both the related literature and the analysis of research data have evidenced that Weibo provides opportunities for netizens to publish, participate and disseminate news and

information. The at-the-scene reporting footage is a vital aspect of Weibo citizen journalism, of which its social influence can be enhanced, and public participation and discussion can be promoted. Since its establishment, the platform has been commonly represented as a path for ordinary citizens, particularly the disadvantaged or the weak, to seek help and appeal for justice. In order to do so, they first disclose first-hand information, usually from the perspective of a victim or a stakeholder, and then try to attract as much attention from society as possible. At this stage, “Reposting is the power, onlookers change China” (轉發就是力量，圍觀改變中國), it is the appropriate description of Weibo citizen journalism as well as its prospects. It may not be powerful enough for onlookers to make any significant changes to the current China, but it will slowly progress and encourage more netizens to speak out and to fight for their rights. Again, in comparison to the previous close-to-zero chances of being heard, the simple action of reposting is already the most accessible and practical means for Chinese netizens to speak. While an individual’s voice is slight, it will inevitably become louder and stronger when tens of thousands of voices gather together. Indeed, every single sound and click is awakening their civic awareness.

Advancing through their experiences of Weibo citizen journalism, the general public in China has been encouraged to express viewpoints, to access diverse perspectives and to participate in social discussions as well as public affairs. The Chinese government, to a degree, has become responsive and relatively open to social problems raised by Weibo citizen journalists. However, it is still far less than what citizen journalism was expected to achieve, as the authorities are merely demonstrating a selective transparency towards the general public and discussions relating to political topics are mostly censored and prohibited. Additionally, anything leading to offline actions will result in accusation and detention.

The present circumstances of citizen journalism in China are not optimistic, not only for those who are active on Weibo but also for any netizens who are exercising citizen journalistic practices or merely acquiring information on other social media platforms. Weibo citizen journalists are not alone; Chinese mainstream media that has officially registered with the regime also struggles to meet requirements and standards for news production under the tightening censorship. Therefore, the possibility for citizen voices to be heard via Weibo becomes slighter. At the same time, the tension between the public and the authorities is expected to be progressively increased, while the power imbalance surrounding news and information available on Weibo continues to exist.

Because of the microblog, Chinese citizens have been provided with an online sphere in which a range of immediate news items and information is quickly disseminated, and certain degrees of public discussions is allowed. But the power of information flow has not yet defeated the flow of power. The state regime has adjusted to a selective transparency rather than comprehensive disclosure of social issues and has seldom resolved issues raised by citizen events. Citizen journalist's participation in political topics and discussion are still limited and mostly self-regulated due to the ongoing expansion of authoritarian content and the threats of online abuse and negative consequences in real-world. It appears impossible for the authorities to reverse what has been achieved by Weibo citizen journalism and restrict every netizen who has already experienced a certain level of free expression, open information and the power of making choices. It is also unlikely that the Chinese authorities will slow down the reinforcement of media control, which then leads us to the following critical question: how far can Weibo citizen journalism go?

## 6.2 CONTRIBUTION

This research makes important contributions to a range of scholarship in Chinese social media research, digital media research, and journalism research. Initially, the research analysis of the two Weibo events and 28 in-depth interviews with active long-term Weibo users provides insight into Chinese citizen journalism on the dominant microblog, particularly on the citizen journalistic practices and participation. The findings expand scholarly knowledge of the phenomenon and its relationships with related social and political factors, under the strictly-controlled media environment. Through the explorations of selected Weibo events and first-hand user experiences of the platform and participation in Weibo citizen journalism, this research also supplements broader literature of digital engagement, media censorship, E-governance, and professional journalism, as well as online and public participation.

Since the 2000s, there have been a large number of debates about the impact of digital media on journalism, especially the newly raised concepts of citizen journalism. Through investigating Chinese citizen journalism on the dominant microblog – Weibo – this research adds to the understanding of the rise of citizen journalism in the context of China. Some of the underlying conditions for its emergence are very close to what has been identified in western media environments: the advancement of ICTs, the widespread use of the smartphone, the desire to self-express, and the need for immediate information. This research confirms these facilitations and extends the existing conditions of citizen journalism that are found mainly in



countries with strict media censorship and regulation: the desire to participate in public discussion as well as the gap between citizens' information demand and the controlled media supply. Most importantly, it provides an exploratory examination into the citizen journalistic practices on Weibo, giving opportunities for researchers to understand the phenomenon and related controversies. Although the majority of Weibo citizen journalists focus on the information dissemination process, there is occasionally public discussion; their clicks on the "reposting" button represent the willingness to participate and the awareness of civil rights, even under the reinforcement of media control.

This research reveals various means of content censorship that are currently implemented on Weibo, and generally to all Chinese media and communication activities. By analysing the two Weibo events and interview data, it indicates that the government has strengthened the control over media through diverse means, which are comparatively new and strategic. Further, the mainstream media outlets in China, which are commonly recognised as the government's mouthpieces, have taken citizen content for granted and seldom collaborate with citizen journalists. That is, this research may help to enhance the explanation of authorities' responses and reactions towards citizen journalism, from a domain with a different political system. The thesis is grounded in netizens' own concerns and interests about Weibo and the interviewing has drawn out remarkable reflections 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.

This research assesses the achievements and social influence of Weibo citizen journalism as well as the debates related to the phenomenon, raised by both academics and interview participants. More specifically, it interprets the research findings into discussions regarding a range of social and political factors, such as the conflicts between information and misinformation, media literacy and media control, gaining control and being controlled. As a substantial work of independent research, this thesis has made an original and distinct contribution to knowledge.

### 6.3 SIGNIFICANCE

With the development of technology and digital media, some new phenomena and concepts have emerged in media and communication research. Despite the differences in language, culture, and state regime, the popularisation of the Internet and social media has

brought significant change to people's everyday life in China. Therefore, there have been more and more studies conducted in the field of Chinese social media, from many of its related aspects. Due to the language barrier and cultural difficulty in accepting interviews, most of the related scholarship uses quantitative research methods, especially computer-assisted analysis approaches. To my knowledge, my study is the first research using a combination method of the case study, in-depth interviews, and media content analysis to study Chinese microblogs from a citizen journalism perspective. 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.

I interviewed 28 Chinese citizens, who have been active Weibo users for at least six years and live across the world, and each interview lasts between 45 to 60 minutes. Afterwards, I selected two Weibo events that were mentioned by research participants and both related to children; a topic that frequently draws extensive attention from society. Through the interviews, first-hand experience and observations of Weibo citizen journalism and its surrounding social-political factors were collected. It then became possible to explore the phenomenon by using grounded theory analysis together with the supplementary content analysis of the two events.

From the examinations of netizens' use of Weibo, changes on Weibo, the censorship implemented within the platform, netizens' news and information consumption, mainstream media's involvements with the phenomenon, and social influence and achievements of the phenomenon, this research opens a new window on the Chinese dominant microblog – Weibo. It provides insight into the citizen journalism in contemporary China, and generates a comprehensive picture of Weibo citizen journalism. By exploring the first-hand experience of Weibo citizen journalists, this research relates the phenomenon to current social events, public participation, and the reactions from mainstream media and the authorities. Additionally, the research findings emphasise the significance of citizen journalism and the reinforcement of media control on Weibo, address the relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media in China, and critiquing the achievements of Weibo citizen journalists.

A variety of literature on China studies has drawn on the regime's media control and propaganda, even from the aspects of digital media. However, research about censorship implementation and improvements in social media are still in the developing stage. This research presents an overview of the updated means of media control on Weibo, including creating conversation between authorities and netizens, to promote entertainment and

commercial content, and to implement invisible pressure for netizens to conduct self-censorship.

Furthermore, the findings of my research confirm both current Western and Chinese scholarship regarding the role of microblogging services in promoting citizen journalism. The social media services in China, especially microblogs, have significantly enhanced citizen engagements and civic awareness, such as the right to speak, the right to know, the right to participate, and the right to petition.

Through the investigation of Chinese citizen journalism on Weibo, this research fills the gap of scholarship on Chinese microblogging from a citizen journalism perspective. It also contributes to the growing study of Chinese journalism, expands our knowledge of China's social media, and supplements existing digital media studies in English literature. Moreover, this research provides insight for future researches on journalism and communication fields in general.

#### 6.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

Through the analysis of Weibo events and semi-structured interviews with long-term active Weibo users, this research provided insight into Weibo citizen journalism and its surrounding social-political factors, including changes on Weibo, government responses, the reinforcement of censorship, and mainstream media practices. Further, debates and significance of the phenomenon emerged through the analysis, from the experiences and perspectives of ordinary Chinese netizens, even if they have not yet realised what they exercise on Weibo are citizen journalistic practices.

In favour of Weibo citizen journalism, most participants have started to realise that one single perspective is unlikely to provide a comprehensive picture of an incident. Information from diverse angles and viewpoints give a better opportunity to understand the event but can still be insufficient for revealing the full story or the truth. The same principle is again applicable to media and communication studies. My research has offered insight into the phenomenon of citizen journalism on the dominant Chinese microblog Weibo, yet, it still has bias and limitations. From the perspective of quantitative researchers, the qualitative approaches that I used, including case study, content analysis, and in-depth interviews, are not systematic evidence. Also, the time frame and resources, personally and financially, for doctoral research are minimal. I could only arrange 28 interviews from the first 50 replies and stopped further research recruitments; and I could only select two Weibo events for content

analysis, among thousands of significant social events which emerged on the platform, to ensure the research was feasible within such limitations. Therefore, there are sampling limitations that may affect my research findings. Moreover, due to both Weibo content data and interview data being in the Chinese language, certain information may have been lost in the processes of translation and manual coding, which I undertook myself.

Until today, the methods of media control and functions available on Weibo have been continually updated. Both Chinese authorities and citizen journalists are progressing, even though they may not share a common goal or aim in the same direction. Therefore, the ever-growing engagement and involvement of citizen journalism on Chinese social media, particularly Weibo, is an ongoing research subject. For instance, questions regarding online participation as well as its offline discussions of specific user groups and communities are still to be addressed. Under the severe censorship, netizens' explorations of skilful methods and potential spaces to discuss sensitive social and political topics need continuous attention. Similarly, the government's new involvement and implementation of censorship on Weibo and citizen journalism require further study.

WeChat, another popular social media in current China, with a media publication push function, has been regarded as the most competitive service to Weibo. Referring to the context of China, comparative studies between Weibo and WeChat from media and communication perspectives are worthwhile for further comprehensive research. Taking the e-government perspective, for example, there are still a range of questions to be investigated when looking at the regime's response to social media: are the two platforms being treated differently? What are the media strategies the government implements within them? Moreover, how their users react to the regime's online media strategies?

Last but not least, due to the ongoing reinforcement of media control in China, both citizen journalism and public participation remain in a disadvantaged position. Therefore, future research is required to continually keep track of the developments of Chinese social media as well as the corresponding changes and actions of the Chinese government.

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