Propaganda innovation and resilient governance: the case of China's smog crisis

Jian Xu and Wanning Sun

Jian Xu (first and corresponding author)

School of Communication and Creative Arts,

Deakin University, Australia

Email: j.xu@deakin.edu.au

Webpage: https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/people/jian-xu

Wanning Sun (co-author)

School of Communication,

University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Email: Wanning.Sun@uts.edu.au

Webpage: https://www.uts.edu.au/staff/wanning.sun

Title:

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Abstract

Crisis communication is essential to the political stability and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but how crises are managed in China is little understood. This paper aims to pursue this question through a case study of China's smog crisis since 2013 – a regular recurring crisis that confronts the population and the Chinese government. The paper explores what innovative media strategies and practices have been deployed by the Chinese government to effectively guide public opinion and maintain social and political stability during smog crises. We first examine the smog coverage in *People's Daily* to critique the propaganda and persuasion techniques in its modern crisis reporting. We then look at WeChat-based citizen journalism as alternative crisis communication to identify its popular themes and the CCP's censorship tactics to manage it. We argue that the CCP's propaganda during times of crisis has been mainly achieved through the revamping of official journalism on its state media and the differential censorship of citizen discourse on social media. The double-pronged approach ensures the public opinion is properly guided in crises and possible disruption to the regime's stability is minimized.

Introduction

Crisis communication is essential to the political stability and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This is once again evidenced by the management of media and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, how crises – ranging from natural disasters, large-scale accidents, and public health crises – are managed in China is still not

well understood. This is despite the fact that better knowledge will provide crucial clues to understanding the enduring strength and staying power of China's authoritarian government.

The most enduring, wide-reaching but least understood crisis in China is air pollution and the regular appearance of smog in China's cities. For this reason, a case study aiming to explore how the smog-related crisis is managed in China presents a useful prism. Since 2013, smog has struck most cities in China and has been one of the most urgent environmental agendas for the Chinese government. The average number of smoggy days in major Chinese cities reached 29.9 in 2013, a record high for the past 52 years (Cang, 2013). In December 2015, Beijing issued a "red alert" for smog pollution twice, the most serious warning level for air quality under a four-tier air pollution emergency response system created in 2013, closing down schools and factories, ordering vehicles off the road and suggesting people should stay indoors (Wang, 2015). The "red alert" was issued again in Beijing and 21 other cities in late December 2016 (Philips, 2016). The perennial smog has not only threatened the health of millions of urban residents, but also has greater potential to cause social instability and poses an ongoing threat to the legitimacy of the CCP if not managed in a timely and adequate way. To cope with the environmental crisis, China's State Council released its Action Plan for Air Pollution Prevention and Control in September 2013 (Wong, 2013), initiating a national battle against smog pollution. In 2016, smog governance was officially written into China's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) as one of the key tasks of the government's environmental protection work (Liu, 2016).

In addition to the government's swift environmental actions to combat the smog crisis, information management has become another battlefield for the government's crisis management and communication. Since the outbreak of the smog crisis, the CCP has been facing pressing challenge from international and domestic societies. Internationally, Western media has widely criticized China's smog crisis as a result of China's relentless pursuit of economic growth without implementing responsible and effective environmental protections (see Floto, 2014; Nielsen & Ho, 2013). Domestically, smog has evoked among the public massive anxiety, panic and discontent with living in smog-polluted cities. In February 2015, the investigative documentary on China's smog

pollution titled *Under the Dome,* produced by Chai Jing, a former investigative reporter for China Central Television (CCTV) with a household name, took Chinese social media by storm and provoked heated online discussion about the cause and harm of the pollution as well as who should claim responsibility for it (Yang, 2016). The dual public pressure from at home and abroad has presented an urgent task for CCP's information and public opinion management tasked with maintaining stability at home and pursuing public diplomacy abroad during the smog crisis.

China's state media, such as CCTV, Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily*, have long played a crucial role in the government's information and public opinion management in times of crisis due to their authoritative status as the CCP's mouthpiece and their nation-wide audiences. In the existing literature on government crisis communication in China, the performance of China's state media has been widely examined as one of the most important parameters to evaluate the performance of government crisis communication, including during the SARS epidemic in 2003 (Lu, 2003; Zhao, 2003), the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 (Sun, 2010; Wang, 2008) and the Wenzhou train crash in 2011 (Ji, 2011). Scholars have reached a consensus that the government has come to recognize that proactive and effective communication through its official media in times of crisis is pivotal to preserve, even enhance, the credibility of the government, guide the direction of public opinion, defuse public discontent and avoid potential social panic and unrest.

During the smog crisis, the government has adopted a "new normal" in its official media's crisis reporting, making timely and extensive smog information accessible to both domestic and international audiences. Some research has been conducted to examine the representation and framing of the smog pollution in China's state media, commercial media and foreign media with a comparative approach (Ouyang, 2017; Wang, 2015; Yin & Tang, 2013; Zhang, 2014). Among these publications published in Chinese journals, in the field of journalism and communication, most authors highly praised the state media's timely, transparent and objective coverage of smog, claiming it has succeeded in "calming the public" and "dispelling its anxiety" (Zheng & Zhang 2013) and has "captured the attention of" or "aroused the interest of" foreign media (Liu 2014; Shi 2014). However, a critical perspective is significantly missing to explore how various propaganda strategies have been innovatively deployed by the state media in its smog

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coverage, which seems to follow exactly modern journalism standards and crisis communication principles.

In the meantime, the government's "top-down" crisis communication has been evolving from highly controlled to more open and innovative in the post-SARS era; the rise of "bottom-up" crisis communication in the form of citizen journalism has become a prominent phenomenon in times of crisis (Xu, 2016). Alternative crisis communication initiated spontaneously by citizens equipped with internet and digital media, though subject to the CCP's tight internet censorship, has given power to mobile public sentiment and set the agenda for the government's crisis management and communication from the bottom-up, such as in the SARS epidemic (Yu, 2007), the Sichuan earthquake (Nip, 2009; Xu, 2015a) and various "internet incidents" (Xin, 2010; Xu, 2015b).

As a national environmental crisis that has seriously impacted people's health and everyday lives, smog has also given rise to a wide range of citizen journalistic practices. However, the limited existing literature on crisis communication in China's smog crisis mainly focuses on mainstream media smog coverage while neglecting the bottom-up crisis communication initiated by digital publics. The timing of the smog crisis, starting from 2013, was roughly concurrent with the beginning of Xi Jinping's leadership, under which internet control and censorship have escalated (Benny & Xu, 2018). At the same time, WeChat has quickly replaced online forums, blogs and Weibo, which were widely used for citizen journalistic practices during earlier disruptive events, to become the most popular platform for the production, circulation and consumption of citizen journalism in China (Wu & Wall, 2019). With over 1.2 billion monthly active users in 2020 (Statista, 2020), WeChat allows individuals to set up their own "self-media" public accounts (*zimeiti gongzhonghao*), through which they can disseminate their reporting, opinions and commentaries to subscribers. Subscribers can read, comment or share received posts through the "Moments" (*pengyouquan*) function or one-to-one or group messaging on WeChat. The rise of "self-media" public accounts alongside growth in legacy media WeChat accounts has made WeChat the primary news source in China (Li, 2018). Examining the bottom-up crisis communication on smog with a particular focus on WeChat will reveal the concerns, anxieties and public sentiments of smog victims, and,

more importantly, could also demonstrate the enabling and limiting aspects of the WeChat-based citizen journalism as well as the characteristics of the CCP's management of user-generated information in times of crisis under Xi's administration.

The article aims to fill the two gaps in the existing research pointed out above. First, it goes beyond the traditional content and thematic analysis of the state media's smog coverage to identify and critique the CCP's propaganda and persuasion techniques in its modernized crisis reporting. Second, it also studies bottom-up crisis communication in the form of citizen journalism to identify popular themes in the citizen discourses around the smog crisis and the CCP's censorship tactics to manage online public opinion. Finally, we propose to understand the CCP's resilient governance and responsive authoritarianism through its constantly updated and innovated media practices and strategies in crisis communication.

Method

To gain a critical understanding of the CCP's propaganda innovation in handling the smog crisis, we used *People's Daily* (*PD*) as a case study. As one of the most authoritative state media of the CCP, it is often used by researchers as a rich discourse database to analyses the government's framing of policies and politics (Wu, 1994). We collected all smog-related news published in *PD* in 2013 using Chinese Core Newspaper Full-text Database offered via the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Ninety-two smog-related news items were collected for analysis. In addition, we also examined smog-related posts, totaling 89, published by *PD*'s official Weibo account in January and December 2013, two smog-heavy months of the year. Established in 2012, *PD*'s official Weibo account has more than 120 million followers and is widely seen as a successful initiative of the state media's journalistic innovation in the digital era.

As a perennial crisis, user-generated information about smog pollution often dramatically increases during the high-smog days (usually during November–January) after the centrally controlled public heating system in Northern Chinese cities start to operate using coal as the main fuel source. To understand the WeChat-based citizen journalistic practices and governance of these practices during the smog crisis, we collected smog-

related posts published by "self-media" public accounts on WeChat from the high-smog period of December 2016 to January 2017 through participant observation and immersion (Boellstorff et al., 2012). During this period, one author collected relevant posts shared by his friends on WeChat (815 people in total) in their "Moments" or directly received from the public accounts he follows (86 accounts in total). He read all smog-related posts, excluded those produced by legacy media and government institutions, saved only the citizen-generated posts and excluded repetition for further analysis. He took note of posts that were no longer available when he gathered them because of the government's swift censorship. He further checked saved posts after 24 hours to see if they had been removed after his initial reading and took note of posts that had been censored later. He searched the titles of the censored posts on Google. Fortunately, full-texts of these posts could be found on various Chinese-language news sites whose servers are based outside China and are not subject to the government's internet censorship. In total, 57 citizen-generated posts were collected for analysis, including 47 uncensored and 10 censored.

Admittedly, the ethnographic data collection on WeChat is highly dependent on the source the author follows and has limitations. However, due to various constraints, this is the best option we can adopt. First, WeChat hosts millions of "self-media" public accounts. It is a mission impossible to follow all. It is also not possible to predict which accounts publish smog-related information during high-smog periods. Second, WeChat is a semi-public mobile platform. Different from the public Weibo, on which a user can follow any other accounts and view their posts without restrictions, WeChat users must grant other users access to their accounts. WeChat public accounts are also a "semi-public network". WeChat users can only receive posts pushed to them by their subscribed public accounts. A unique URL for each post is needed if WeChat users would like to share a received public account post with people who are not on WeChat (Ng, 2015). Last but not least, WeChatscope, a social media analytical system developed by the University of Hong Kong's Journalism and Media Studies Centre to collect, analyze and visualize censored messages of WeChat's public accounts, is not helpful to collect and analyses uncensored smog-related posts published by public accounts. In addition, launched in 2018, WeChatscope does not support retrospective search of censored information published before 2018. The restrictions of the technological

infrastructure of WeChat, as well as the existing analytical system to collect WeChat messages, makes use of a personal WeChat account the only viable means to collect smog-related posts published by "self-media" public accounts.

PD's smog coverage: Strategies and politics of propaganda innovation in crisis

Controlled transparency

Transparency has long been regarded as a criterion for journalistic quality, which is inextricably associated with "public accountability" (Meier, 2009). Being transparent in journalism is a strategy to enhance "public knowledge and engagement" and could also help "demystify journalistic practices and clarify journalistic values" (Ziomek, 2005, p.vii). In the smog crisis, China's state media have demonstrated unprecedented transparency. Take *PD* for example, in 2013, it published 92 news articles, features and commentaries that covered smog from different angels, ranging from statistics of everyday air-quality, potential health risks of smog, and healthcare on high-smog days, to local and central government responses and the new rules and policies aimed at reducing smog.

However, being transparent with abundant information does not mean the state media reported everything about the smog. Transparency is seen by the government as a double-edged sword that has to be wielded carefully to avoid unwanted side effects, both inside and outside China. Inside China, too much transparency, or not enough, may lead to the government losing credibility. Outside China, if the Chinese media practices unfettered transparency, it may risk feeding the Western media with "ready-made" material, leading to a possible exaggeration or distortion of the situation (Yin & Tang 2013). The need for a delicate trade-off between transparency and political risk means that transparency must be managed properly by practicing what Liebman (2011) calls "controlled transparency". In other words, the government controls what kinds of information state media should be transparent about, the level of transparency, and how this transparency is put to operation.

When transparency is controlled, there is a potential danger that it "be aimed at wrong things and distract attention from what is really important" (Craft & Heim, 2009, p. 225). From *PD*'s smog coverage, we can find that information made transparent has usually not been "especially relevant to the overall goals of greater transparency" (Ibid). Rather, there has largely been information about basic smog facts, official responses and actions and pragmatic individual healthcare suggestions that may temporarily dispel people's sense of uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability. Reporting carefully omitted information that had potential to cause anxiety or public anger that would threaten regime stability, such as the real cause and harm of smog and who should be take responsibility for the air pollution.

Defensive objectivity

In addition to transparency, "objectivity" demonstrated in the state media's smog reporting has also been widely applauded by media scholars and practitioners in China. A comparative study of reporting on China's smog pollution in *People's Daily Online* (English version) and *New York Times* from 2011 to 2015, found that the former covered "objective facts" of smog more than the latter. Moreover, the smog coverage in the former endeavored to be neutral by emotionlessly describing smog-associated information, whereas the latter used more words with emotional tendency in its reporting (Li, Xiao & Zhang, 2016).

Our analysis of the 92 *PD* news articles finds that *PD* provided abundant judgement-free factual information about smog, such as the chemical components of smog, the number of days that smog occurred, and the precise figure of particulate matter (PM2.5), with no political or social interpretation of the situation. This factual style of reporting, that is letting facts speak for themselves, absolves the media of its duty to seek the truth behind the facts and to scrutinize government actions. The strategy is also used by media in liberal-democratic nations to make media power invisible and is critiqued as the "ideology of objectivity" (Friedman, 1998). As Friedman argued, such objectivity "asks us to think of the media not as an independent influence on American life, but only the transparent transmitter of already-existing information" (1998, p. 326).

Moreover, objective reporting of smog overemphasizes the nominal "factuality" but seriously overlooks "impartiality". To be impartial in reporting, journalists have to "gather facts and opinions that conflict, verify information carefully, and seek to determine why accounts conflict" (Ryan, 2001, p. 5). However, smog coverage by China's state media failed to provide the balance. Our analysis of the *PD* news articles reveals that official meteorological and environmental protection departments, government officials, experts in state-funded research institutions, Xinhua News Agency and government reports were dominantly cited as credible sources. Whereas, environmental non-governmental organizations that usually make competing claims and represent the public voice were not cited at all.

The cited official sources speak the language of science, providing technical and specialized information, explanations and advice. This strategy of presenting only scientific knowledge and listening only to technical experts is in fact deeply political, presenting smog as a "nonpolitical and non-ideological problem" (Ong, 2006, p. 3) that requires a technical solution, ironically implicitly absolves those in power of having to take responsibility. Speaking the language of "neutral" and "objective" science also has the benefit of not giving vent to the wide suite of emotions experienced by those besieged by smog fear, anxiety, frustration, and even anger—all of which risk triggering public discontent or outcry, and thus posing a threat to social stability. The objectivity pursued in the state media's smog reporting is therefore not couched in the moralistic terms of truth seeking, but aims to defend political legitimacy and stability through seemingly "value-free" media language. It is in this sense that we refer to the approach as "defensive objectivity".

Strategic responsiveness and framing

Traditionally, state media's propaganda is paternalistic, top-down, and mainly interested in disseminating government policies to the public (Xu & Sun, 2018). In contrast, "responsive authoritarianism" requires the state media to "strike a balance between communicating information from society to the state" while also communicating the government's goals and public opinion (Stockmann, 2013, p. 256). In the smog crisis, state media has demonstrated great "responsiveness", strategically responding to public

concerns that may harm the credibility of the government and political stability if they kept silent.

For instance, the most common public concern about smog is the health risk associated with smog pollution. Online information about smog declaring it may cause infertility, cancer, short life, paralysis and black lung was widely circulated on smog-heavy days. The state media quickly responded to repudiate these fear-causing posts, sending out scientific and authoritative explanations. For example, *PD* published a news report on 10 November 2013 entitled "Experts respond to questions about smog-associated illnesses: smog is unlikely to cause infertility" to refute the rumor (Wang, 2013).

Another claim the Chinese government has had respond to relates to their role in the smog crisis, with foreign media and many online posts suggesting the CCP has put economic development before environmental sustainability and failed to take effective action against big polluters (Xu & Stanway, 2018). To counter such claims, the state media has strategically framed the cause of smog in an attempt to "naturalize" air pollution. Our analysis of the narratives about the cause of smog in the selected *PD* articles found that smog is often presented as a global environmental issue and a historically inevitable phase of industrialization. *PD* frequently comments on the problems of air pollution in other developed countries (e.g. US, UK and Japan), and the approaches of these countries to tackling pollution (see Li, et al., 2013). *PD* reporting suggests that since smog is experienced by all societies that have undergone industrialization, there is no reason why "we" should blame ourselves for its existence. In addition to the "naturalization" framing of the smog cause, *PD* also advocates a tripartite model of portioning blame, pointing the finger at local government, industry, and individual consumers, to neutralize criticism exclusively against the central government. In many articles, industry polluters are urged to take responsibility to reduce emission and ordinary citizens are called on to adopt low-carbon lifestyles (see Wu, 2013).

Harnessing social media for strategic interaction and listening

In China, the state media and the internet are often seen to represent two conflicting "public opinion arenas" (*yulunchang*). The former is tightly controlled and speaks for the

CCP, forming an "official public opinion arena". The latter is relatively freer and enables ordinary people to connect and speak, generating an "unofficial public opinion arena" (Li, 2016). Especially in crisis, these two public opinion arenas often clash due to the asymmetry in information and discursive power between the state media and the public. To minimize this discrepancy, the state media are required to get savvy and figure out ways of taking advantage of the digital affordances in order to break the boundaries between the two public opinion arenas. (Luo & Zhu, 2016). *PD*'s official Weibo account is one such initiative.

Weibo, China's equivalent to Twitter, in the West, makes the convergence of data, text, links, images, videos and sound possible in news reporting and therefore has greatly diversified the forms of news (Ding, 2017). Compared with the news published by the *PD* newspaper, *PD*'s Weibo account publishes news in a much more concise way and allows real-time update and interaction with audiences. It has become an effective complement to the traditional *PD* and helped promote a more responsive and participatory image of the state media.

PD's Weibo account published 89 news posts on smog in January and December 2013, almost equal to the total news articles published by the *PD* newspaper that same year. In addition to the characteristics of *PD*'s Weibo posts – timeliness, high frequency, conciseness and straightforwardness – which allow for better responses to public sentiments in crisis, *PD*'s Weibo account also demonstrated a "willing-to-listen" gesture and encouraged public participation. For example, on 10 December 2013, the *PD* Weibo account reported the Liaoning Department of Environmental Protection for the first time had fined eight cities in Liaoning province 54.2 million CNY for their excessive smog in 2013 and would use the fine to improve air quality. The post asked "what do you think?" to encourage followers to leave comments and give suggestions on the governance of smog pollution. The post soon received thousands of reposts and comments. Later in the day, the Weibo account selected and posted a few "excellent" comments and suggestions from followers.

Similar to the function of official Weibo accounts run by government organizations, the state media's use of Weibo also demonstrates the CCP's new approach of governance

that is often described as "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 2011). This approach uses the internet to engage the public, elicit, respond to and steer public sentiment in a certain direction for the purpose of maintaining authoritarian rule by adding some deliberative and participatory elements afforded by the internet into the current system. Therefore, the openness, interaction and listening on *PD*'s Weibo account are "first and foremost a political strategy" that aims to "occupy the online discursive battlefield" (Wang, 2016) to innovate propaganda and better guide public opinion in crisis.

WeChat-based citizen journalism as "bottom-up" crisis communication: Popular themes and differential censorship

In order to identify themes of popular citizen journalism posts distributed on WeChat during the smog crisis, we adopted the thematic analysis procedures designed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The two authors both read the 57 selected posts to familiarize ourselves with the collected data. Each author generated initial codes when independently reading the posts. The codes were then combined, collated and refined until a consensus on the final categories was reached. We defined and named each category according to the main theme of the posts. Four themes emerged, these were "personal experience", "grey *duanzi*" (short jokes), "critique and resistance" and "pro-government defense".

Personal experience

The category of "personal experience" consists of posts that report smog with a first-person narrative ("eyewitness" perspective) or share personal reactions or feelings about living in smog-affected cities ("victim" perspective). For example, a post titled "Mothers' random snapshots in smog. Today, we don't want to speak. Let photos do!" was produced by a netizen with the pseudonym "*wuyu*" (nothing to say) on a public account named *Boya xiaoxuetang* (Liberal arts education classroom) on 4 January 2017. In it, the author shared more than 60 photos taken by mothers on high-smog days in different Chinese cities. These photos were selected from nearly a thousand responses to a random snapshot activity initiated by *Boya Xiaoxuetang* in its WeChat group on the same

day the post was published. The author started the post by describing her own experience in Beijing with words and an image.

> Back home from sending child to school, the scene outside window is like this. Now it is 7:50am, January 4, 2017, Beijing. At the moment, for mothers living in China, what are the world like outside their windows and how do they feel... We received so many photos and comments. Here are only some of them. Today, we don't want to speak. Let the photos do! (Wuyu, 2017).

The post proceeds with more than 60 photos and a one-sentence comment for each. In one day, the post received more than 100,000 reads, over 8,000 "likes" and countless reposts. In another popular WeChat post, titled "The last love letter to Beijing under smog", the author, with the pseudonym "*Likai wumai de ren*" (the person who has left smog), interviewed 16 people who had left or were preparing to leave smog-polluted Beijing (Xinshixiang, 2017). The 16 interviewees, all middle-class Beijing drifters shared their ambivalent feelings about escaping from Beijing, where they had spent years building their careers and settling in for a better living environment. The anxieties and concerns in their stories demonstrate the complicated feelings of China's middle-class population who are both the beneficiaries and victims of China's rapid economic development with a high environmental cost.

Citizen journalism that focuses on personal experience on smog days is freely distributed on WeChat without censorship. The reason such posts are not blocked is likely because the government sees these "personal experience" posts as providing the public a channel to vent their concerns, anxiety, anger and panic from an individual perspective and in a moderate way without critically questioning the government's responsibility. They are therefore harmless and allowed to continue. Sometimes, the personal experience was shared in a fictional, playful and creative way, generating various "grey *duanzi*", which are widely circulated on WeChat during high-smog periods.

Grey duanzi

The Chinese term "*duanzi*" refers to a short joke that satirically, ironically or cynically describes a social, cultural or political phenomenon with a sense of humor. Sharing *duanzi* has become a popular means of social networking among peers in China's digital age (Yang & Jiang, 2015), as well as a prevalent form of digital entertainment culture to humorously convey frustrations, anxieties and grievances of daily life (Ding & Xu, 2014). *Duanzi* is usually categorized into three colors. "Red" *duanzi* convey positive messages that promote mainstream values and politics. "Yellow" *duanzi* are dirty jokes with sexual references. "Grey" *duanzi* usually describe hot-button social phenomena with critical humor, parody and satire (Ibid). Whenever smog strikes, grey *duanzi* are often widely circulated on WeChat, satirizing the lives of those affected by smog pollution. Different from the "personal experience" posts, grey *duanzi* are usually short, fictional and exaggerated anecdotes with no authorship and are widely shared for fun. They demonstrate the creativity and playful resistance of ordinary people, as shown in the example in a post titled "The most comprehensive smog *duanzi* collection":

> Residents in Beijing described serious smog days like: "I can't see the portrait of Grandpa Mao (Mao Zedong) standing at Tiananmen Square'. Residents in Shanghai hummed and said: "When I took out a 100 CNY note from wallet this morning, I can't see Grandpa Mao printed on it either" (Xiaozhi, 2017).

The smog *duanzi* are able to flow as freely on WeChat as the "personal experience" posts because they empower people to air their grievances in a lighthearted, playful and harmless way, helping to "entertainize" and "depoliticize" the smog crisis. The humor and laughter caused by consuming the smog *duanzi* could temporarily relieve people of their anxieties and frustration and distract them from the cruel reality. However, posts that go beyond personal experience to challenge the government's capability and legitimacy are usually carefully monitored with necessary censorship.

Critique and resistance

In times of crisis, citizen journalism has demonstrated its ability to keep in check the performance of the state media and government by providing alternative facts and commentaries in China (Xu, 2016). On smog days, a popular category of citizen

journalism blames the government's inability to manage environmental risk as the main reason for the ongoing smog crisis.

In a post titled "Truth of smog: Confession from an environmentalist", published on 20 December 2016, the author, with the pseudonym "*Baiyuntian zhongkeqi*" (expecting blue sky and white cloud), sharply pointed out the main reason for the smog crisis. He argued that the main reason was not what the media were saying, but the loopholes in the government's regulations of emissions from industrial enterprises. He used statistics and many examples to justify his claim. In concluding, the author wrote a "special declaration", saying that:

> The article neither targets at any specific individual, enterprise, governmental department or local area, nor aims to impede economic development … but wants to lead the perfection and change of the current system of monitoring and managing air pollution through collective efforts and appeal (Baiyuntian, 2016).

Though the article directly pointed a finger at the government, its restrained and meticulous expression and presentation of scientific evidence meant it could remain uncensored on WeChat. This suggests that criticism is not completely intolerable to the government, as long as it is moderate. However, radical posts that go beyond the discursive critique and call for or report contentious actions offline are intolerable and incur strict censorship.

In an article titled "Today's smog is 100 times more dangerous than SARS, but we are just like slow-boiling frogs", the author not only criticized the government's performance in smog governance, but went further to argue that collective resistance could defend people from the harms of smog in the long run. He wrote that in the US, UK, Japan and other countries, victims of air pollution take to the street to protest or sue relevant industrial enterprises for compensation. In China, victims have little courage to defend their rights like this (Yu, 2017). The post was quickly removed because of the provocative language that may incite rights defense actions offline. When clicking the post on WeChat, a warning notice comes up saying the post is suspected to violate laws and regulations. The notice is followed by a link to WeChat's regulatory policy. Further

clicking the link leads to Section 12, Chapter 4 of the "Operating Specification of WeChat Public Account", which details banned content that violates national laws and regulations on WeChat. Under the section, 12 types of banned content are listed, including information that incites unlawful assembly, association, procession, demonstration and protest that disturbs social order. Similarly, posts that report smog-provoked rights-defense actions, such as the post titled "Conversation with the lawyers who sued the government: Fight against smog as citizens" (Weiquanwang, 2016), were also quickly blocked, as they are seen as sensitive topics that may stimulate disruptive collective actions.

Comparing the death and survival of the "critique and resistance" posts shows that the government applies differential censorship to critical voices. The mere discursive critique is acceptable, as it could help the public vent their discontent and grievances. However, posts that encourage offline resistance and challenge the CCP's legitimacy are silenced to maintain stability.

The three popular themes discussed above more or less reflect ordinary people's negative emotions around living in smog, either personal, satirical or critical. However, citizen journalism is not always negative or critical of authority, but can sometimes also speak for the government.

Pro-government defense

In the last two decades or so, bottom-up nationalism facilitated by digital media and communication has frequently emerged when China's national interests and images have been under threat or the CCP's credibility challenged (Shen & Breslin 2010). When regular smog pollution is likely to cause a crisis of credibility in the government at home and tarnish China's image overseas, online patriots came out to defend the government.

In a widely circulated post titled "Under the smog dome, why didn't I go back to the US?" written by *Xiaofeiji* (little plane) in her personal public account on 6 January 2017, the author, who returned to China to work after completing her PhD in the US, expressed her opinion on smog. Disagreeing with popular sentiments, the author argued

that "complaint or criticism is of no help. Actions can make real change. Moreover, every individual's action will make a difference" (Xiaofeiji, 2017). She wrote that addressing the problem of smog is a long-term task that requires technological innovation and environmental education of the nation. She concluded the article by saying "no epoch is perfect. What we need to do is to do something we can do and to reach consensus to make changes together" (Ibid). The solutions to smog pollution presented in the post were highly aligned with the suggestions from state media and government.

In another popular post titled "Why can't we accept the remedy from the West for China's smog pollution", the author argued that CNN had intentionally exaggerated China's smog pollution in its coverage. He also criticized developed countries, such as the US and UK, for selectively forgetting their own smog pollution in the 1950s and 1960s but now shamelessly criticizing China (Yang, 2016). The pro-government posts could help mobilize people's nationalistic or anti-Western sentiment in crisis and combat popular criticism against the government, these posts, of course, can survive.

Propaganda innovation, public opinion guidance and stability maintenance in crisis in authoritarian China: A conclusion

Authoritarian systems are seen as "inherently fragile" because of "weak legitimacy" (Nathan, 2003, p. 6). To ensure legitimacy and longevity, the CCP has made "stability maintenance" (*weiwen*) foremost on its political agenda since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis and made it an enduringly urgent task from the Deng to Xi eras (Wang & Minzner, 2015). Besides various coercive measures exercised by the state apparatus to maintain stability, mass media are widely used and carefully managed by the CCP as a softer but effective means of stability maintenance because of their agenda-setting, cultivation and persuasion functions and, more importantly, because of their irreplaceable roles in shaping, guiding and mobilizing public opinion (Hassid & Sun, 2015). Especially in times of crisis, when social order and political stability are likely to be shaken, using media strategies to guide public opinion for the purpose of stability maintenance has become the core task of the CCP's propaganda work and crisis communication. The media strategies and practices applied in crises have been constantly updated and innovated to better accommodate the ever-changing communication environment.

This paper uses China's smog crisis as a case study to examine the CCP's propaganda innovation in times of crisis under Xi's leadership. Research findings presented above invite rethinking the notion of "control" and "censorship", often associated with the Chinese state media and the government's internet governance in politically sensitive moments. From our critical reading of the *PD*'s smog coverage, we can see the state media are increasingly noted for their practice of "resilient" and "responsive authoritarianism" (Stockmann, 2013, p. 254). The resilience and responsiveness are demonstrated in the *PD*'s innovative appropriation of the concepts of "transparency" and "objectivity" in smog reporting, as well as in its incorporation of digital platforms for strategic interaction with and listening to the public in crisis. Moreover, our analysis of the popular themes of citizen journalism has revealed that the government has applied sophisticated and nuanced censorship to citizen discourse during the crisis and successfully turned social media into a "safety valve" to reduce public discontent rather than a "pressure cooker" to ferment contention and conflict (Hassid 2012).

We therefore argue that the CCP's propaganda innovation during times of crisis has been mainly achieved through the revamping of official journalism on its state media and the differential censorship of citizen discourse on social media. The double-pronged approach ensures public opinion guidance during crises remains under the government control and minimizes possible disruption that is likely to threaten the regime's stability. Different from some authoritarian regimes whose resilience is usually ex-post and knee-jerk after crisis or revolution, such as the authoritarian backlash in the Middle East after the Arab Spring (Harding & Arthur, 2013; Su, 2014), the CCP's management of the regime's instability during crises through propaganda innovation and public opinion guidance is more proactive, preventative and carefully-designed. As scholars who study China's authoritarian regime argue, the CCP's ability to learn and adapt to new challenges makes the regime resilient and unshakeable (Tsai & Dean, 2013; Yan, 2011).

Our case study reasserts the CCP's increasingly adaptive crisis communication and management strategies since the 2003 SARS epidemic. By looking at the creativity of the state media's smog coverage and the boundaries of netizens' free speech on WeChat on high-smog days, we challenge the usual binary and simplistic view of Chinese media in crisis and everyday life, such as "transparency versus openness" (for the state media) and

"resistance and censorship" (for the internet and social media). We suggest future work on crisis communication in China further critically scrutinize how the CCP and its state media continuously adapt and improvise in times of crisis in order to find new and effective ways of guiding public opinion to ensure political survival. In the meantime, we also suggest paying attention to the evolving citizen journalistic practices as alternative crisis communication in order to gain a holistic view of the discursive landscape during crises and understand the CCP's sophisticated internet censorship and the changing relations between the state and society. We believe a critical approach to studying crisis communication in China can provide an apposite prism through which the CCP's resilient governance could be better understood.

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