

Networked framing between source posts and their reposts: an analysis of public opinion on China's microblogs

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ABSTRACT

Retweeting a post on a social media platform is a part of a process of growing significance through which public opinion formation takes place. A 'retweet count' on, say Twitter or weibo, can be taken as a measure of user influence. The assumption is that when B retweets A's message, B empathizes with A and wishes to disseminate the message more widely. But this assumption has hardly been tested and preliminary evidence suggests practices for retweeting on Twitter vary. Nor can retweeting practices on Twitter be assumed to apply on weibo. This paper makes the first effort to understand the practice of reposting on China's weibo, focusing on the content of reposts in comparison to that of the original messages. A quantitative comparison is made of the frame [Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58; Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95, 1–37] of the source post of 21 cases, and their reposts. The posts and reposts all refer to the issue of officials being exposed for corruption on Sina Weibo. The study finds sound evidence of networked framing, in which reposters revised frames of the source posters while disseminating them. Although over half of the reposts merely republished the source post without added content, what emerged were new communicative functions, case definitions, and a diagnosis of the consequences of exposing the cases. However, different types of user accounts drew different reposting frames, which points to a consistent paradigm between the source accounts and the reposters. The results are important for understanding the mechanisms behind the formation of public opinion on weibo.

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Introduction

Changes in information and communication technologies have brought the second media age (Poster, 1995), in which the mass communication society is being transformed into the network society (Castells, 2000, 2011). One key feature of communication in this new era is that the individual can act as a mass communicator in 'mass-self communication' (Castells, 2007, p. 239), involving 'horizontal networks of interactive communication' (Castells,

2007, p. 246), which connect to the mass media's vertical networks of communication. The use of social media contributes significantly to this new configuration of communication. To understand the mechanism of information production and communication flow in a networked environment of social media, scholars have adapted concepts for studying mass media - including gatekeeping, agenda setting and framing (Meraz, 2011; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Ragas, Tran, & Martin, 2014; Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010). But little study in this direction has been conducted in China, where social media is challenging the monopolistic control of public communication by the party-state. This paper seeks to contribute understanding to this transformation by investigating the mechanism of content production and dissemination on social media in China. Using frame analysis, focus is put on how the content of messages may change as they are reposted. The field site is Sina Weibo, a social media platform often described as Twitter's equivalent in China that has helped form critical public opinion and mobilize public action in numerous news events.

Retweet and user influence on Twitter

Twitter, a social media platform that combines features of social networking service and blogging, allows users to publish short messages called tweets, each consisting of a maximum of 140 words. Users can 'follow' others and form interconnected networks. Among the various ways through which a message that is read influences subsequent communication, retweeting is considered the most significant that 'has made Twitter a new medium of information dissemination' (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010, p. 596). Retweet count is also the measure most often used by researchers to gauge user influence.

Before the retweet functionality was built into Twitter in late 2009, users had developed various conventions to retweet. The typical way was to write 'RT@' followed by the username of the author of the original tweet, and then to copy and paste its content. A variant way was to write 'via@name' to attribute the original author without actually copying and pasting the original tweet. In the convention of writing a tweet, '@name' is used to refer to a specific user, and counts as a 'mention' when some other user is merely referred to.

To measure the user influence on Twitter, researchers have focused on the position of the user in the network and the pattern of message propagation. In the former, what is examined is the user's 'link structure', such as page-rank (Lee, Kwak, Park, & Moon, 2010, p. 1137) in the network and the number of followers, while in the latter it is the 'temporal order of information adoption', involving replies, retweets, and mentions (Lee et al., 2010, p. 1137). In a study of over 52 million Twitter users, Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, and Gummadi (2010) found a strong correlation between retweet count and mention count, but discovered that large followings did not necessarily bring many retweets or mentions. Based on a dataset of over 22 million tweets, Romero, Galuba, Asur, and Huberman (2011) similarly found that the number of followers of the poster was a weak predictor of the maximum number of clicks on the retweeted URL. Ranking 41.7 million user profiles in the entire Twittersphere, Kwak et al. (2010) also found that, for 80% of users, only 20% of their followers had first been exposed to the thread of a topic through the tweet sent to them by the writer that they followed, suggesting that information adoption is a more relevant measure of user influence than follower number. Cha et al. (2010) suggested

that follower size was a measure of user popularity, retweet count a measure of the tweet's content value, and mention count an indication of the name value of the user.

95 **Political retweeting**

Content is not the only factor that explains retweeting (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Macskassy & Michelson, 2011), but a clear relationship exists between the content of a tweet and the degree to which it is retweeted. Spreading the content of the message seemed to be a significant motivation behind political retweeting. Ideologically opposed users rarely retweeted each other (Conover et al. 2011). Strongly polarized political webpages were likely to be linked and retweeted by Twitter users from one political camp only (Dyagilev & Yom-Tov, 2014). These seem to suggest that retweeters agree with and support the content of the source tweet. Exactly how retweeting adds to the content of the original posts, however, is little known. This paper aims to understand this relationship using frame analysis on China's weibo posts.

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110 **Framing on online social media**

Framing, a concept developed to understand the influence of mass communication messages on the audience, has been used to study online communication. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) suggested that mass media discourse can be conceived as a set of 'interpretive packages', the internal structure of each of which is organized by a frame (p. 3). Discussing news stories, Pan and Kosicki (1993) referred to the interpretive package as a 'theme', which they described as 'an idea that connects different semantic elements of a story' (p. 59). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identified three reasoning devices - 'roots, consequences and moral evaluation' - as constituting a frame (pp. 3-4). Entman (1993) incorporated the overarching 'interpretive package/theme' and two of the three reasoning devices, while adding two others, in his definition:

120 to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

125 Generic frames - as opposed to issue-specific frames - can apply to different topics and are more abstract (DeVreese, 2005). Notable examples are Iyengar's (1991) episodic versus thematic frames, and Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) five news frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility.

130 Most frame studies of social media texts have focused on the moral evaluation embedded or the theme of the post. Non-profit organizations were found to have framed the 2010 earthquake in Haiti more positively than the news media. While both user types employed episodic frames on both Facebook and Twitter, the dominant theme used by NPOs was morality (on Facebook) and the attribution of responsibility (on Twitter), whereas conflict was used by media organizations on both Facebook and Twitter (Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011). Other reasoning devices, including problem definition, interpretation of cause or consequence, or recommendation of remedy, have been rarely studied on social media posts. This study takes reference from the conceptualization of framing to

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make one of the first attempts to analyse the frame of microblog posts in a multi-dimensional manner. Its analysis includes the communicative function (as generic theme), case definition (as issue-specific theme), diagnosis of cause, diagnosis of consequence, and recommendation of remedies. In addition, taking into account the nature of the posts, the diagnosis of the consequences of exposing the cases was also analysed.

'Networked framing'

In news production, frame building occurs when journalists interact with news sources and with each other within the constraints of news making and organizational and professional culture to influence the frames embedded in news articles (Scheufele, 1999). Frame setting occurs in news consumption, with news frames influencing the audience's frames of thought (Chong & Druckman, 2007), which in turn affects the individual's attitudes and behaviours (Chong & Druckman, 2007; DeVreese, 2005), contributing to public opinion, political socialization, and collective actions. Applying the concept and methods of studying frames to social media, researchers found that in the online networked environment frame building and frame setting are no longer two distinct processes, as users are both consumers and authors of messages. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) considered the act of retweeting on social media as involving frame setting and contributing to frame building. Citizen users on Twitter engaged in 'networked framing' with elite users (p. 6), in which 'frames were persistently revised, rearticulated, and redispersed by both crowd and elite' (p. 1). But leaders and participants do not play equal roles in 'networked framing'. Bashir (2012) found that in the Egyptian 6 April youth movement in 2011, leaders' framing on Facebook influenced participant framing in four of five cause frames, and participant framing influenced leadership framing only in one motivational frame. This study will compare the frames of retweets to those of their original message to shed light on the processes of networked framing.

Communication and reposting on weibo

In China, broadcasting is administered by four levels of government, while newspapers can only be published under licence with an official agency above the county level as publisher. The Internet infrastructure is owned by state enterprises and is subject to layers of technical blockage and filtering known as the Great Firewall. All domestic and international Internet service providers are held responsible for their published content, which necessitates extensive mechanisms of self-censorship, the refusal of which led to Google moving its search engine out of mainland China to Hong Kong (an ex-British colony run under a different political system as a special administrative region of China). After the riots in Urumqi in July 2009, Chinese microblogging services were shut down and international social media, including Twitter and Facebook, were blocked. Sina, one of the big four commercial news portals, launched its free microblogging service - branded as Weibo - with a line-up of movie and singing star users in mid-August that year. It soon became the most popular microblogging service in China and 'weibo' became the Chinese synonym of microblogging. Also offered by other companies, weibo claims a total of 1.3 billion Chinese accounts, subscribed to by 45.5% of mainland Chinese Internet users, which accounts for 45.8% of the entire population.

Like Twitter, messages published on weibo are limited to 140 characters, but the Chinese language allows for more content than a text of 140 words in English. Users of Sina Weibo are prompted to bring in their offline social networks and make new connections during the sign-up process and also when using the application. As a result, users 'follow' and are 'followed' by many other users - celebrities, professionals, experts, news organizations, and commercial companies - who do not form part of their offline social networks. Top users on Sina Weibo have a following of over 70 million. Messages that are 'published' or 'reposted' by a user are sent to the home page of the user's 'fans', while all reposts of the same message are threaded chronologically and accessible under the original content. The interconnected social networks on weibo mean that published content, through reposts, can achieve large-scale public dissemination that bypasses the officially controlled mass media system.

On weibo, leisure and mood made up the largest category of hot posts (Li et al., 2015). And despite compliant collaboration of the weibo service providers with the party-state to censor content (Lagerkvist, 2011), weibo has helped form critical public opinion and mobilized public action in the past few years. The Chinese authorities, once alerted, responded either by cracking down (Chin & Mozur, 2013; Patience, 2013), or by incorporating its more famous users (Li, 2013), and by enhancing their own use of weibo (People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office, 2013). In April 2013, China's President, Xi Jinping, cited Internet forums, blogs and weibo as some of the channels used by hostile Western forces to infiltrate China's ideological sphere (Buckley, 2013).

Weibo's built-in repost function automatically offers an input box for the reposter to add content. Nevertheless, reposted messages are still assumed to agree with the original. A Chinese judicial interpretation in September 2013 made people who publish online rumours liable to defamation charges if their messages are reposted 500 times or more (Mu, 2013). A study about the exposure of corrupt officials on Sina Weibo found that the most reposted accounts were those of news organizations and Sina News, and the content of the majority of their messages was nearly identical to that published by official bodies (Nip & Fu, in press). Does this mean that weibo users were participating in disseminating the official version of the cases by reposting them? This does not agree with the general perception that Chinese citizens form critical opinions and mobilize protest actions about social issues on online spaces including weibo (Chin, 2011; Tai, 2006; Tong & Lei, 2013).

Anger and Kittl (2011) suggested five ways in which users might react to tweets that they read: with compliance, identification, internalization, neglect, or disagreement. Would Chinese netizens on weibo retweet with added content that disagrees with the original message? Do official accounts draw different reposting behaviours from civilian accounts on weibo? How are messages published by mainstream news organizations reposted in the horizontal network on weibo? This paper addresses these questions by examining the content of the reposts against that of 21 original messages about corrupt officials.

Framing on weibo

Few published studies on China's weibo have looked into different types of framing by different types of users. A study found that the majority of weibo posts framed environmental protests as conflicts between the state and the people, and between economic

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development and the well-being of citizens. They also attributed responsibility for wrongdoings to the government (Sukosd & Fu, 2013). These findings are consistent with the view that weibo is a space for challenging the authorities (Chin, 2011). However, conflict frames were likely to have appeared in citizen posts but not necessarily in posts of other user types. Indeed, weibo users have suggested frames in a poll about the death of a toddler in a hit-and-run incident that competed with the official frame of 'moral crisis' (Wang, 2013). Recognizing the importance of the Internet, agencies of the Chinese Communist Party and government have tried hard in the past few years to use weibo and other Internet spaces as 'the foreground of disseminating socialist advanced culture' (Hu, 2008). On Sina Weibo alone, there were 79,000 official accounts in June 2013, an increase of 75% over the previous year, which in turn, was an increase of 150% compared to the end of 2011 (People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office, 2013). How the framing by various user types on weibo differ from each other, and how their different message frames propagate through reposting reflect upon weibo as a space of competing discourses in the formation of public opinion.

Research questions

A survey found that over 80% of Chinese citizens consider corruption to have exceeded the limit of toleration (News.sohu.com, 2009). China's new leader Xi Jinping, who came to power at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, pronounced battling corruption as his top priority. The leadership framed corruption as a problem of individual cadres, inadequate supervision, and little restriction on power. Strengthening disciplinary mechanisms and building a well-ordered system with a normal work style were said to be the solutions.

Weibo became one of the main sites of an official anti-corruption campaign. Given the concern of both citizens and the Party, the anti-corruption effort provides an excellent case for studying the framing of public opinion on the weibo platform. Specifically, this study aims to answer these research questions:

- (1) Do the frames of messages on corruption cases on Sina Weibo influence the frames of their reposts?
- (2) Do the frames of messages on corruption cases published by different account types on Sina Weibo influence the frames of their reposts differently?

Methods

Data and sampling

A search was conducted to identify corruption cases in China's news reports after the 18th Party Congress. The first case was identified on 20 November 2012 and another 30 cases in the following two months, up to 19 January 2013. The Sina Weibo search engine was then used to identify the earliest reposted messages of each of the cases. Eight cases for which the first reposted message was deleted were excluded, as were two other cases (in one case the exposure occurred on two distinct dates separated by a long interval, and in another case there were hardly any reposts). In each of the remaining 21 cases, one of the most reposted early messages was captured with all its reposts by sending a request to the Weibo search Application Programming Interface (API). In most cases, the captured

source post was the one with the greatest number of reposts in the first three hours following the exposure of the case. In other cases, the choice of the source post took into account the mix of user types so that news organizations, the Sina Headline News account, government/Party bodies, Independent news,¹ and citizens were included.

After eliminating duplicates, a total of 22,719 reposts² were captured with 21 original posts. Reverse proportional sampling ranging from 3% to 15% was applied to the reposts of each case. Cases with fewer than 100 reposts had 100% of the reposts included in the sample. The final sample consisted of 1956 reposts and 21 original posts. In each case, a frame analysis was applied to the sampled reposts and the source post.

Coding protocol

Taking reference from Entman's (1993) scheme of frame functions, and Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) list of reasoning devices, and benefiting from Pan and Kosicki's (1993) recognition of the structuring function of the theme of the text as a frame, the coding protocol consisted of six frame functions (communicative function, case definition, diagnosis of cause, diagnosis of consequences, diagnosis of the consequences of exposure of the case, recommendation of remedy). Following the grounded-theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2015), a sub-sample of messages was read to derive the issue-specific frames of each frame function, taking into consideration Iyengar's (1991) differentiation between episodic and thematic frames.

The overarching *theme* of every post was identified as one of 10 communicative functions. On the *definition* of the corruption case, two episodic frames and five thematic frames, each focusing on one particular context, were applied. The two episodic frames were human interest and corruption aspects. The five thematic frames considered the case as relating principally to one of the following:

- locality, an organization, or an area
- China
- PRC/CCP officials
- PRC/CCP institution/rule³
- bad situations/people in general.

In addition, two thematic frames pertaining to the exposure of the case and freedom of expression were used if the content of the message did not focus on but was relevant to the case of corruption itself. Appendix 1 lists the frames of all the frame functions.

Coding

Coding was conducted by two students who had completed a Master's degree in media and communications in Hong Kong. After both coders had gone through two rounds of trial coding of 129 reposts, during which the coding protocol was refined and different codings discussed, the two coders coded another 182 (9.3%) of the sampled 1956 reposts side by side to calculate inter-coder reliability. The rest of the sampled reposts were divided between the two for coding. The 21 source posts were coded afterwards using the same coding protocol. The inter-coder reliability test, conducted on the pilot sample of 182

posts for all frames, was 0.96 (communicative function), 0.98 (case definition), and 1 (all others). For each frame function, statistical tests were conducted on the differences in frames embedded in the source posts and their reposts across the four account types.

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Results

Publishers of the source posts were categorized into: (1) Government/Party body ($n = 3$); (2) News organizations/online media ($n = 11$); (3) Independent news ($n = 5$); and (4) Others ($n = 2$) (see Note 1).

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Almost half of the total sampled reposts ($n = 941$, 48.1%) republished the source post without added content. Another 2.5% ($n = 49$) directed the source message to particular addressees without adding content. This means that just over half ($n = 990$, 50.6%) of reposts merely replicated the frame of the source post. Excluding the 58 (3.0%) reposts whose content was not related to the case, the remaining 46.4% ($n = 908$) of reposts contained added content relevant to the case. They included reposts that contained only one or more of the default emoticons provided by the Weibo interface ($n = 93$, 4.8%) (Table 1).

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No statistically significant difference was found for any of the frame functions in the source posts between the account types. It is hard to determine whether this was due to the small sample size ($n = 21$). In the reposts, statistically significant variations were identified across account types in all frame functions except the Diagnosis of cause and the Diagnosis of consequences.

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Communicative function

The communicative function of the majority of the source posts was ‘information provision’ ($n = 17$, 81.0%), while that of the reposts was ‘disseminating/attending to the

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Table 1. Typical source posts of different user types.

Type of source post account	Example of source post
Government/Party body	#Micro notice# Former Deputy Mayor of Ying De City People’s Government, former Director of the Public Security Bureau, ZhengBeiquan, is under investigation by the Communist Party Qing Yuan City Disciplinary Inspection Committee and investigation by the Party Organization for suspected embezzlement, breaking the law, and serious economic problems.
News organizations/online media	[Shenzhen Population Planning Committee Director under investigation for suspected violation of (Party) discipline] Secretary of the Hygiene Work Committee of the Shenzhen City Committee, and Secretary of the Party Group and Director of the Shenzhen City Hygiene and Population Planning Committee, Jiang Hanping, is suspected of serious violations of [Party] discipline and is under investigation by the Party Organization. <i>Nanfang Daily</i> . http://t.cn/zjK31xy
Independent news	Deputy Director of Shanxi Shenmu Agricultural and Commercial Bank, and National People’s Congress deputy of the City possesses two identity cards with the names Gong Aiai and Gong Xianxia, and owns twenty properties in Beijing worth almost 1 billion yuan. Among them, three apartments alone – 3607, 3608, and 3609 in block three, courtyard 8, Chao Yang district, Gong Ti Bei Lu, Beijing – are worth more than 100 million. A blue-collar worker with a monthly salary of 3000 yuan has to work for 2700 years, and a white-collar work with a monthly salary of 5000 yuan has to struggle for 1700 years to buy them. This is a sad reminder: What should we do about our lives?
Others	Reporting hundred-million dollar-village official in Xiaolan Town, Zhongshan City!! Please see the photos below for details! I hope superiors will investigate thoroughly to see if any behaviour that violates the law or the Party discipline exists! @GDTV news frontline @Xiaolan Entertainment news @Xiaolan News @Safe Zhongshan @Nanfang Daily

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case' ($n = 1101$, 56.3%) (Table 2). The difference between the source posts and reposts is statistically significant (Fisher exact test, $p < .05$), which is understandable given the different position of the source posts and reposts in the chain of communication. Interestingly, 691 (35.3%) of the reposts contained communicative functions not found among the source posts, the most prominent being 'analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement provision' ($n = 323$, 16.5%), and 'expressing emotion' ($n = 256$, 13.1%).

Reposts of messages published by News organizations/online media carried the communicative functions 'analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement provision' ($n = 220$, 20.5%) and 'expressing emotion' ($n = 154$, 14.4%) far more than reposts to other account types ($\chi^2(30) = 179.0$, p -value $< .05$), although none of their source posts contained either of these frames. This shows the importance of the news and online media as the basis for forming public sentiment and opinion. Reposts of messages by Government/Party bodies were the least likely to serve the 'expressing emotion' ($n = 5$, 5.4%) or 'analysis provision' ($n = 9$, 9.7%) functions (Table 3).

Case definition

The 21 source posts overwhelmingly framed the cases as episodic: 'about corruption aspects of the case' ($n = 20$, 95.2%), whereas slightly more than one-third ($n = 722$, 36.9%) of reposts contained added text content relevant to the case that gave a definition of the case (Fisher exact test, $p < .05$). Among them, the episodic frame of the corruption case remained the most prominent ($n = 364$, 44.7%; 18.6% of total reposts). As in communicative function, new case definitions ($n = 174$, 8.9% of the total) not found among source posts had emerged: The most conspicuous was the thematic frame 'about corruption in China in general' ($n = 93$, 11.4% of reposts with case definition; 4.8% of the total). While 4.8% ($n = 1$) of source posts defined the case as 'about corruption in the locality, organization, or issue area', 11.2% of reposts with case definition ($n = 91$, 4.7% of the

Table 2. Typical reposts of various communicative functions.

Communicative function	Example of repost
Disseminating the case/attending to the case	Republishing the weibo.
Expressing emotion	Fxxk. Always comes in a pair.
Expressing a sense of morality/public duty/justice	People are acting. Heaven is watching.
Information seeking	Is this true? Again I don't comprehend the truth.
Information provision	Someone on Twitter said those above division level will be investigated one by one next year. Fxxk. It's Twitter news. I don't know if it is true. Don't check the water meter ['Check the water meter' refers to police using fake excuses to arrest people].
Analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement seeking	Never ending! Taxpayers ask: Is there money left in the national coffer?
Analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement Provision	Property prices will fall with the anti-corruption campaign. To save their lives they must sell their properties urgently. To save their jobs they dare not buy properties any more. Reforming and curbing corruption are the ultimate cures to stabilize property prices.
Making suggestions	The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection should intervene, and should not leave the investigation to the Housing Security and Management Bureau.
Calling for action/Mobilizing	More action please, Qiang and Ping [Qiang refers to China's Premier and Ping refers to Xi Jinping, China's President].
Propaganda	Anti-greediness and anti-corruption. No slacking.

Table 3. Communicative function of source posts and their reposts of different user types.

%	Source (total)	Repost (total)	Source (g/p)	Repost (g/p)*	Source (news)	Repost (news)*	Source (ind n)	Repost (ind n)*	Source (o)	Repost (o)*
Disseminating the case/attending to the case	9.5	56.3	33.3	65.6	9.1	48.7	0.0	66.0	0.0	64.0
Expressing emotion	0.0	13.1	0.0	5.4	0.0	14.4	0.0	11.7	0.0	14.3
Expressing a sense of morality/public duty/justice	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0
Information seeking	9.5	3.1	0.0	5.4	0.0	2.5	40.0	3.6	0.0	4.0
Information provision	81.0	5.3	66.7	7.5	90.9	8.3	60.0	0.8	100.0	1.1
Analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement seeking	0.0	1.8	0.0	1.1	0.0	1.8	0.0	2.3	0.0	1.1
Analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement provision	0.0	16.5	0.0	9.7	0.0	20.5	0.0	12.0	0.0	11.4
Making suggestions	0.0	2.5	0.0	1.1	0.0	2.5	0.0	2.3	0.0	4.0
Calling for action/Mobilizing	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0
Propaganda	0.0	0.3	0.0	4.3	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other communicative function	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0

Note: g/p: government/Party body; news: news organizations/online media; ind n: independent news; o: others.

*Difference in frames used in the reposts across the four account types, p -value < .05.

total) did so. A total of 9.0% (of reposts with case definition, 3.3% of the total) ($n = 65$) of the reposts advanced thematic frames that defined the cases as ‘about People’s Republic of China/Chinese Communist Party (PRC/CCP) officials’ ($n = 24$), or ‘about PRC/CCP institution/rule’ ($n = 41$).

455 All source posts from Government/Party bodies framed the cases as episodic corruption cases, but 6.5% ($n = 6$) of their reposts framed the cases thematically as ‘about corruption in China in general’ and 4.3% ($n = 4$) as ‘about corruption in a locality, organization, or issue area’. One-fifth of reposts of News organizations/online media contained thematic frames, substantially higher than all other account types ($\chi^2(42) = 185.0, p\text{-value} < .05$).
 460 Reposts of News organizations/online media accounts were the most likely to offer the thematic frames ‘about PRC/CCP institution/rule’ ($n = 32, 3.0\%$) or ‘about PRC/CCP officials’ ($n = 17, 1.6\%$). Amid the official anti-corruption campaign, framing the cases as part of the general phenomenon of corruption was officially acceptable. Indeed, that was the most likely new frame found in reposts to Government/Party source posts. However, critical
 465 frames that link the cases to the institution or rule of the Communist Party itself would have been officially unacceptable (Yang, 2008), and were almost non-existent in reposts to Government/Party source posts (Table 4).

470 **Diagnosis of cause**

More than half (57.1%, $n = 12$) of source posts did not contain a diagnosis of cause, while nearly 38.1% ($n = 8$) diagnosed the cause as ‘privileges/power of officials’. Counting only those reposts with added text relevant to the case, only a tiny minority of reposts ($n = 75, 9.5\%$) contained a diagnosis of cause. This might mean the reposters concurred with the
 475 diagnosis of cause in the source posts. Indeed, the most common diagnosis of cause among the reposts was the same as that in the source posts (‘privileges/power of officials’). ‘PRC/CCP institution/rule’ came second.

480 **Diagnosis of consequences**

None of the source posts gave a diagnosis of the consequences. Nor did the overwhelming majority ($n = 788, 99.4\%$) of reposts with relevant added text content. Given that more than one-third of reposts contained added text that defined the case, the lack of a diagnosis of consequences is not likely to be the result of the fear of offering one’s view, but may be
 485 the result of refraining from offering views beyond one’s analysis.

Diagnosis of the consequences of exposing the case

490 None of the source posts touched on the consequences of exposing the cases but 10.7% ($n = 85$) of reposts with relevant added text content did. Thirty-nine (4.9%) diagnosed it as the ‘beginning of serious crackdown on corruption’. While the difference between the source posts and reposts is not statistically significant (Fisher exact test, $p > .05$), reposts to the four account types were significantly different from each other on the diagnosis of the consequence of exposure. Reposts to Government/Party bodies were the most likely to take on this new frame ($n = 4, 14.3\%$), compared to reposts to News organizations/online media ($n = 32, 6.6\%$). Both Government/Party bodies and News

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Table 4. Case definition of source posts and their reposts of different user types.

%	Source (total)	Repost (total)	Source (g/p)	Repost (g/p)*	Source (news)	Repost (news)*	Source (ind n)	Repost (ind n)*	Source (o)	Repost (o)*
Episodic – about the human interest of the case	0.0	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.0
Episodic – about the corruption aspects of the case	95.2	18.6	100.0	14.0	90.9	19.8	100.0	15.4	100.0	25.1
Thematic – about corruption in a locality, organization, or issue area	4.8	4.7	0.0	4.3	9.1	6.6	0.0	2.3	0.0	1.1
Thematic – about corruption in China in general	0.0	4.8	0.0	6.5	0.0	6.3	0.0	2.8	0.0	1.7
Thematic – about PRC/CCP officials	0.0	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.6	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.6
Thematic – about PRC/CCP institution/rule	0.0	2.1	0.0	1.1	0.0	3.0	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.0
Thematic – about bad situations/bad people in general	0.0	1.2	0.0	1.1	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0
Thematic – Beyond nature of case about exposure of case	0.0	1.3	0.0	1.1	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.3	0.0	5.1
Thematic – Beyond nature of case about freedom of expression/informant system	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.0
Content is related but does not define case	0.0	4.8	0.0	3.2	0.0	4.1	0.0	7.5	0.0	0.0
Content is related but defines case in other ways	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0
Content does not relate to case	0.0	3.0	0.0	4.3	0.0	2.9	0.0	2.3	0.0	5.1
Default icon only	0.0	4.8	0.0	4.3	0.0	4.9	0.0	3.9	0.0	7.4
Mentioning somebody	0	2.51	0	4.3	0	1.4	0	2.43	0	8.57
No content of any type	0	48.11	0	55.91	0	44.16	0	54.62	0	45.14

Note: g/p: government/Party body; news: news organizations/online media; ind n: independent news; o: others.

*Difference in frames used in the reposts across the four account types, p -value < .05.

545 organizations/online media drew reposts with the ‘beginning of serious crackdown on corruption’ frame – a frame consistent with the frame of official propaganda about the anti-corruption campaign – more than the other two account types ($\chi^2(21) = 33.3$, p -value = .04). This shows that reposters of official bodies as well as news organizations and online media were inclined to stay within the officially sanctioned boundaries of speech (Table 5).

Remedy recommendation

550 Only 9.5% ($n = 2$) of all source posts contained a remedy frame. More, but still only 14.6% ($n = 116$) of reposts (with relevant added text content) suggested a remedy, the most popular of which was ‘responsibility – investigate/arrest/punish the official involved/all corrupt officials’ ($n = 70$, 8.8%). Significant difference was not found between the frames of the source posts and those of the reposts as a whole (Fisher exact test, $p > .05$) but significant difference was found between reposts of different account types. While none of the Government/Party source posts suggested any remedy, their reposts were the most likely to offer a remedy. About one-third ($n = 9$, 32.1%) of Government/Party reposts suggested localized remedies, including ‘responsibility – investigate/arrest/punish the official involved/all corrupt officials’ ($n = 6$, 21.4%) and ‘reform the governance of the locality/organization issue area’ were the most popular ($n = 3$, 10.7) ($\chi^2(18) = 37.2$, p -value = .005). Again, these remedies are consistent with the party-state’s perspective of treating corruption as a discipline issue, rather than an issue inherent to the political system (Table 6).

Discussion and conclusion

565 This study focused on one particular aspect of the reposting practice on China’s Sina Weibo, namely how the frame of reposts may differ from that of the source post. Through analysing 21 source posts and samples of their 22,719 reposts about corrupt officials, it found evidence of networked framing on Weibo, previously found on Twitter in other countries. While just over half of the reposts merely replicated the communicative function of the source posts (which merely disseminated the cases and communicated information), over one-third advanced new communicative functions (most prominently ‘analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement provision’ and ‘expressing emotion’). Close to 10% of reposts defined the cases in new ways, including the highly critical case definition that framed the cases of corruption as a problem involving PRC/CCP officials or PRC/CCP institution/rule. These are evidence that new content is created in Weibo user’s reposting chains.

580 Different account types drew different reposting practices. News organizations and online media drew the most critical reposters, who were the most willing to define the corruption cases as problems of the PRC/CCP. Reposts of News organizations and online media were also inclined to express emotion, make judgement, and frame the cases in a thematic rather than episodic manner. In contrast, reposters of Government/Party source posts were more likely to diagnose the exposure of the corruption cases as the beginning of a serious crackdown on corruption, and to suggest remedies. The focus on remedies, not criticism, is a notable feature of official-style news reporting in China (Li, 2008). The specific remedies offered in the reposts were also consistent with the official

Table 5. Diagnosis of consequences of exposure of the case in source posts and their reposts of different user types.

%	Source (total)	Repost (total)	Source (g/p)	Repost (g/p)*	Source (news)	Repost (news)*	Source (ind n)	Repost (ind n)*	Source (o)	Repost (o)*
Show casing of crackdown effort only	0.0	1.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.4	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0
Repeat of pervious unsuccessful crackdown attempts	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0
Uncertain about sustained effort on crackdown	0.0	2.8	0.0	7.1	0.0	3.1	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0
Beginning of serious crackdown on corruption	0.0	4.9	0.0	14.3	0.0	6.6	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.0
Decreased level of corruption	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Improved governance/rule in country	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other diagnosis of consequence of exposure	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.0
No diagnosis of consequence of exposure	100.0	89.3	100.0	75.0	100.0	87.5	100.0	92.5	100.0	100.0

Note: g/p: government/Party body; news: news organizations/online media; ind n: independent news; o: others.

*Difference in frames used in the reposts across the four account types, p -value < .05.

Table 6. Recommendation of remedy in source posts and their reposts of different user types.

%	Source (total)	Repost (total)	Source (g/p)	Repost (g/p)*	Source (news)	Repost (news)*	Source (ind n)	Repost (ind n)*	Source (o)	Repost (o)*
Responsibility – Official involved gives up the corrupt money	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0
Responsibility – Investigate/arrest/punish the official involved/ all corrupt officials	9.5	8.8	0.0	21.4	0.0	8.8	20.0	7.5	50.0	8.0
Reform the governance of the locality/organization/issue area	0.0	1.4	0.0	10.7	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0
Reform the governance of the PRC/CCP in China	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0
Improve freedom of expression/information/	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0
Improve public transparency/accountability	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other recommendations of remedies	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.0	2.7	0.0	2.0
No recommendations of remedies	90.5	85.4	100.0	67.9	100.0	85.5	80.0	86.3	50.0	90.0

Note: g/p: government/Party body; news: news organizations/online media; ind n: independent news; o: others.

*Difference in frames used in the reposts across the four account types, p -value < .05.

perspective. This agreement between reposters of Government/Party accounts and official ideology suggests that, although the reposters had offered new frames, they did not venture outside the paradigm of the source post accounts that they had followed and reposted. This finding may seem counter-intuitive as news of angry sentiments and opinions following weibo reports explode into massive public outcries from time to time, to which the government is forced to respond hastily. The reality is, however, that weibo, after its early years of existence as a citizen social media, has become a platform on which various social forces compete for influence. As stated above, the government/Party is strategically using the Internet and social media, weibo included, for ideological formation. The number of weibo accounts of public agencies and officials rose in December 2012 by almost 250% over the previous year, totalling 176,700 accounts on four of the weibo service providers (Sina, Tencent, *People's Daily Online* and Xinhuanet) (Wang, 2013), while the number of news media accounts also rose exponentially. Recognition of the diverse uses by different weibo account types formed the premise of the present study. So far, government/Party accounts do not draw very large numbers of reposts (see Note 2), but their presence can act as a gathering space on weibo for their supporters to form public opinion that frames issues supportive of the official paradigm.

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News control imposed by the Chinese party-state deems that government and Party agencies are the main source of public information. However, the fact that news organizations are obliged to carry government announcements and propaganda gives non-compliant weibo users who are concerned about government information a choice to follow news organizations/online media accounts rather than government/Party accounts. This study found that reposters of News organizations/online media were more likely than reposters of government/Party bodies to frame the corruption cases as a problem pertaining to the institutions or rule of the Chinese Communist Party itself - a frame that goes beyond the officially acceptable limit. This testifies to the significance of the news media as the basis of critical public opinion, despite tight party-state control imposed on them. This study did not differentiate, as analysts sometimes do, between party media and commercial media, out of a recognition that news outlets, irrespective of their degree of marketization, remain under the instruction of the Chinese Communist Party.

Unexpectedly, reposters of News organizations and Online media accounts were more analytical and critical than reposters of independent news accounts, the latter of which consisted of news workers, independent media workers, online media workers, NPO workers, and one Hong Kong news organization. The role of Internet-enabled citizen-generated news in relation to mainstream news has been an issue of interest in recent years. In China, citizens look to the news media to redress their grievances, given the executive interference in the court system and an ineffective petition system of the government. The Chinese Central Television Station, for example, is known for drawing citizen petitioners who try to get their stories broadcast (Zhao, 2000). With the popularity of weibo, journalists describe their accounts as 'online petition offices' (Bei, 2012–2013). This suggests that citizens still look to the news media to voice their concerns on their behalf, even if online social media give them easy channels to do so themselves. The fact that reposters of news media are more analytical and critical than reposters of independent news could be explained by one of several reasons: It is possible that analytical/critical reposters preferred to follow mainstream news suppliers because of their

comprehensive content. It is also possible that weibo users who wished to spread their analysis and criticism chose to repost content published by news organizations as a strategy as news media content is considered officially acceptable for dissemination. Another possibility is analytical and critical reposts to independent news accounts were more likely to be censored than reposts to news organizations and online media and hence they were not captured in the current study.

Chinese citizens often rave about the freedom afforded to them by the Internet. However, some outsiders have visualized the limit of this freedom as a 'giant cage' (Epstein, 2013). There is also evidence that opinions among Chinese citizens mirror official statements (Herold, 2013), probably as a result of cultivation in the controlled information environment and perpetual propaganda. In the Internet regulatory environment in China, Internet users are always aware that the party-state does not welcome the posting of sensitive content. What counts as sensitive content is referred to in blanket terms (ChinaITLaw.org, 2010) but in the operation of censorship its interpretation varies from region to region and from time to time (Wright, 2014). This in itself, some have argued, makes government controls the more effective as users resort to self-censorship. The result is, except for the few who are motivated to push for a cause, the typical users of weibo steer clear of trouble for themselves by not expounding views at all, or if they do, nothing explicitly contrary to the official ones. Satire is often observed in user-generated content on the Chinese Internet but it could only be described as 'enigmatic criticism' at best, cynical but not critical in the sense of challenging the hold on power by the Chinese Communist Party (Lagerkvist & Sundqvist, 2013, p. 143).

It is therefore understandable that less than half of the reposts contained any content added by the reposters. The new content added offered mainly new communicative functions and case definitions, but rarely diagnoses of cause, consequence of exposing the cases, or recommendation of remedies. This testifies to the function of weibo as less a platform of public expression or discussion than one of information. Indeed, this study found that the communicative function of the majority of the source posts was 'information provision' and that of the reposts was 'disseminating/attending to the case'.

The exposure of corruption cases is encouraged by the high-profile official crackdown on corruption. In the campaign, weibo is a prominent communication platform used so much so that the term 'weibo anti-corruption' came into being. If an officially endorsed public issue that has a significant impact on people's livelihood only drew lukewarm discussion, it can be expected that discussion over other types of issues would be even less active.

Readers should be cautious in interpreting the statistical results reported above. Despite the fairly large number of reposts, the small number of the source posts ($n = 21$) poses a limitation on the confidence, particularly regarding the difference between the source post and the reposts. Fisher's exact test was used to calculate the differences so the low cell count (<5) does not pose as a major problem. In addition, the inter-coder reliability figures could be misleading as the pilot sample used for calculating the reliability figures did not contain sufficient variation across all categories. All the reposts in the pilot sample were coded as 'no diagnosis of consequences'. A larger pilot sample with diverse frame categories would be desirable for a more accurate calculation of inter-coder reliability.

Notes

1. Categorization was made on the basis of the description given on each of the account's home page on Sina Weibo. News organizations, the Sina Headline News, and Government/Party bodies are verified accounts whose offline identity has been confirmed by the Sina Weibo service provider as corresponding to their online description.

The Sina Headline News was among the most reposted accounts in the exposure of corruption cases on Sina Weibo (Nip & Fu, *in press*).

The 'independent news' category included news workers, independent media workers, online media workers, NGO workers, and one Hong Kong news organization. The decision to include the Hong Kong (an ex-British colony run under a different political system in China as a special administrative region) news organization under this category was based on the observation that its post was very different in content from those published by mainland China's news organizations but more like those published by individual news/media workers.

2. The number of captured reposts for the source posts published by Government/Party bodies were, respectively, 701, 293, 29, 21, 10; for News organizations/online media were 3267, 1163, 880, 873, 851, 772, 450, 444; for Independent News were 6778, 2927, 1533, 496, and for Others were 695, 439, 85, 12.

3. PRC/CCP institution/rule refers to the entire system, in contrast to 'an organization', which refers to an official agency.

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Appendix 1. Coding protocol for content published during forwarding

Unit of analysis: Individual post

Instruction: Choose one category only for each repost except when instructed otherwise.

(1) Communicative function

(Instructions: Choose *two* for each repost. Input the main communicative function into one, and the secondary communicative function into two. If only one communicative function is identified, choose 12 for function two. If the forwarder inputs no comment, or '@ somebody' without any self-written comment, choose 1 only.)

- (1) Disseminating the case/attending to the case
- (2) Expressing emotion
- (3) Expressing a sense of morality/public duty/justice
- (4) Information seeking
- (5) Information provision
- (6) Analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement seeking
- (7) Analysis/interpretation/opinion/judgement provision
- (8) Making suggestions
- (9) Calling for action/Mobilizing
- (10) Propaganda
- (11) Other communicative function
- (12) Unidentifiable

(2) Case definition (Episodic vs thematic frame)

(Instructions: First, decide if the content is related to the case. If it is, then decide if the framing is episodic – focused on the case alone, or thematic – contextualized).

If more than one applies, choose the largest number.)

945

- 950
- (1) Episodic – about human interest of the case
 - (2) Episodic – about corruption aspects of the case
 - (3) Thematic – about corruption in a locality, organization, or issue area
 - (4) Thematic – about corruption in China in general
 - (5) Thematic – about PRC/CCP officials
 - (6) Thematic – about PRC/CCP institution/rule
 - (7) Thematic – about bad situations/bad people in general
 - (8) Thematic – Beyond the nature of the case – about exposure of the case
 - (9) Thematic – Beyond the nature of case – about freedom of expression/informant system
- 955
- (10) Content is related, but does not define the case
 - (11) Content is related, but defines the case in other ways
 - (12) Content does not relate to the case [Go to question 7].
 - (13) Default icon only [Go to question 7].
 - (14) '@somebody' only [Go to question 7].
 - (15) No content of any type [Go to question 7].
- 960

(3) Diagnosis of the cause of the problem

- 965
- (1) Personal quality
 - (2) Morality
 - (3) Absence of social justice
 - (4) Privileges/power of officials
 - (5) PRC/CCP institution/rule
 - (6) Other diagnosis of cause
 - (7) No diagnosis of cause
- 970

(4) Diagnosis of the consequences of the case/phenomenon

- 975
- (1) Economic – Draining funds of the locality or organization
 - (2) Economic – Draining funds of the government
 - (3) Economic – Undermining the economic development of China
 - (4) Social – Awakening/Reinforcing awareness of the problem in society
 - (5) Social – Undermining social morals/social values
 - (6) Social – Undermining the progress of China
 - (7) Political – Awakening/Reinforcing awareness of the problem under CCP institution/rule
 - (8) Political – Undermining the credibility/stability of CCP institution/rule
 - (9) Political – Undermining the stability of China
 - (10) Other diagnosis of consequences
 - (11) No diagnosis of consequences
- 980
- 985

(5) Diagnosis of the consequences of exposing the case

- 990
- (1) Showcasing of crackdown effort only
 - (2) Repeat of previous unsuccessful crackdown attempts

- (3) Uncertain about sustained efforts on crackdown
- (4) Beginning of a serious crackdown on corruption
- (5) Decreased level of corruption
- (6) Improved governance/rule in the country
- (7) Other diagnosis of the consequences of exposure
- (8) No diagnosis of consequences of exposure

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(6) Recommendation of remedies

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- (1) Responsibility – Official involved gives up the money obtained through corruption
- (2) Responsibility – Investigate/arrest/punish the official involved/all corrupt officials
- (3) Reform the governance of the locality/organization/ issue area
- (4) Reform the governance of the PRC/CCP in China
- (5) Improve freedom of expression/information/
- (6) Improve public transparency/accountability
- (7) Other recommendations of remedies
- (8) No recommendations of remedies

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