Nature of public opinion on social media in China
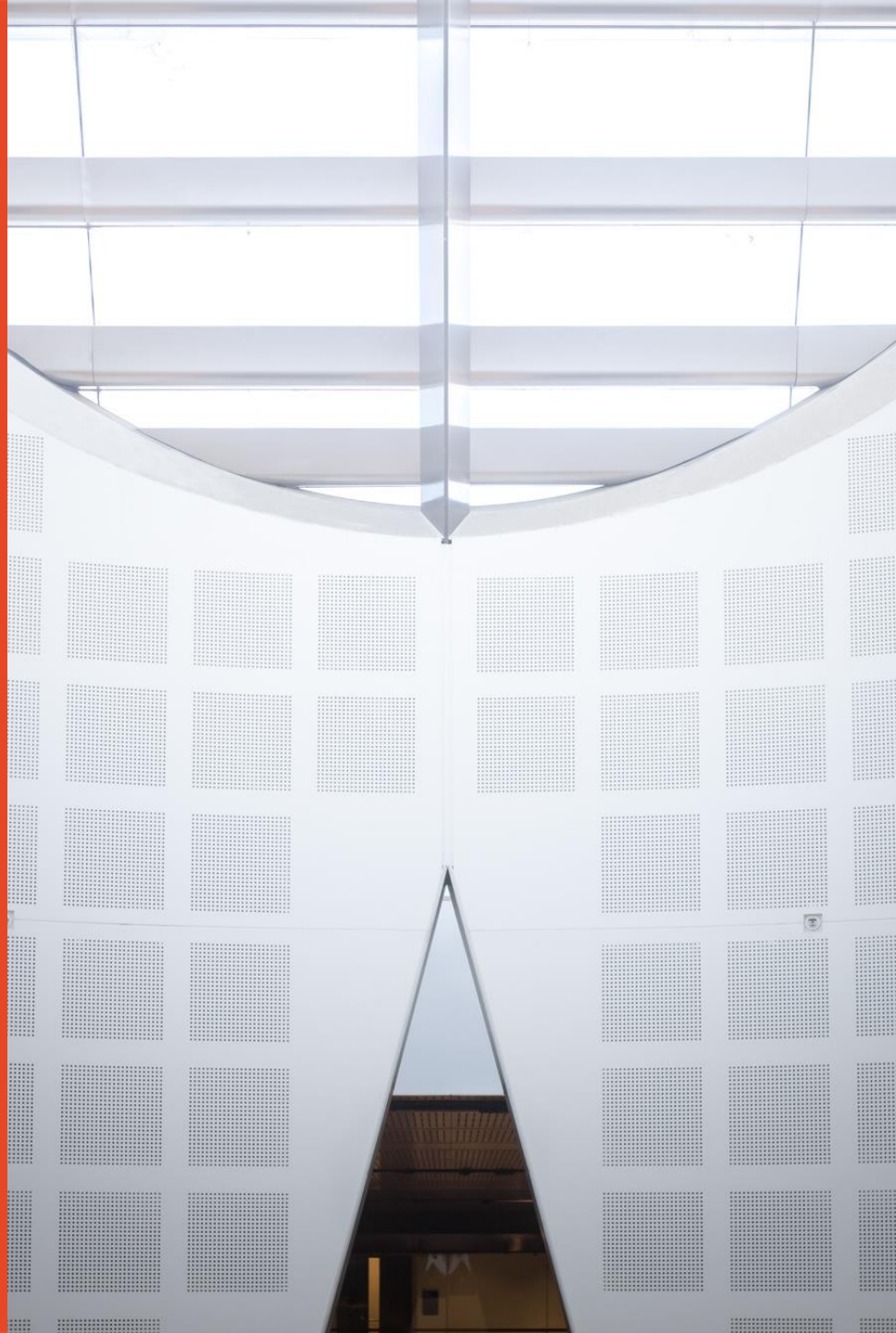
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Why this presentation?

Puzzle from Weibo study

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Challenging Official Propaganda? Public Opinion Leaders on Sina Weibo*

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Abstract

This article examines the prominence of various user categories as opinion leaders, defined as initiators, agenda setters or disseminators, in 29 corruption cases exposed on Sina Weibo. It finds that ordinary citizens made up the largest category of initiators but that their power of opinion leadership was limited as they had to rely on media organizations to spread news about the cases. News organizations and online media were the main opinion leaders. Government and Party bodies initiated a fair number of cases and, despite not being strong agenda setters or disseminators, were able to dominate public opinion owing to the fact that news organizations and online media mainly published official announcements about the cases. Media organizations also played a secondary role as the voice of the people. While individuals from some other user categories were able to become prominent opinion leaders, news workers are likely to be the most promising user category to challenge official propaganda.

Keywords: China; internet; propaganda; public opinion; social media; Weibo

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.

analysis/judgement

- 无数的经验证实, 混上正职才是王道。
- 这个要中纪委直接介入, 不能让房产局自查自证
- 不受监督的权力, 产生绝对的腐败。让权力在阳光下运行一日不践行, 这样离谱的事情就不会是离谱, 也不会不可思议。
- 为什么腐败这么厉害？为什么原来的所谓的清官现在被发现是贪官？制度问题

emotion

- 雷冠希是个畜生。
- 双飞哥！哈哈
- 唯有"女人"才能反腐败, 中国特色
- 都是二奶惹的祸
- 真能TMD胡来, 瞎搞！
- 老妖 哪里跑。
- 网络反腐, 好好 //@XX哈哈://@YY:这国是他的国, 不是我们的国。。。。
- 等了很久了！！！//XX:在揭阳, 压根就没见过干净的！
- 太好了我们得奋斗10000年 万恶的tc
- [泪]让我有一套都不会烦到现在满头白发
- 这是中国的事吗？喔, 好神奇。我们英明神武伟大的裆领导下竟然有这样的事情发生, 真是人生大和谐呀！

information seeking

– 是不是他幕后的大哥不爽拉

– 还有多少呢……//@宁波晚报:【宁波市人社局局长金俊杰涉嫌严重违纪】据宁波市纪委有关负责人证实，宁波市人社局党委书记、局长金俊杰涉嫌严重违纪，目前正接受组织调查。

– 明天的报纸会出现吗？//@宁波晚报:【宁波市人社局局长金俊杰涉嫌严重违纪】据宁波市纪委有关负责人证实，宁波市人社局党委书记、局长金俊杰涉嫌严重违纪，目前正接受组织调查。

information provision

- //@XX博士:去郑州出差，讲当地二个身份二个户口之普遍让我大吃一惊
- //@YY:据我所知这个在当地很普遍，别说银行副行长，信用社主任资产都大多上亿，贷款一般都要给这些人支付至少一半利润。信用社普通职员据说年入都最低30多万，还是刚入职的，老员工估计就更不敢想了

action mobilization

- 其实他为揭阳做了很多贡献，不管怎么样、我们做人不能忘恩、请大家为他转一下

Communicative functions

(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

Politics of public opinion

— Public opinion connected to legitimacy

— Nature of public opinion implicates on its status

— (Is offline public opinion more representative than online public opinion?

— Is offline public opinion more rational than online public opinion?)

— Public opinion on social media upsets status quo of "who", "when", and "what" of capturing public opinion

Arrangement of presentation

- What is public opinion?

- Conceptual nature of public opinion on social media

- Operational nature of public opinion on social media

What is "public opinion"?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 2011, p. 172).

— "There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter considers only the general interest, whereas the former considers private interest and is merely the sum of private wills. But remove from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and what remains as the sum of the differences is the general will."

William MacKinnon (1828)

— Public opinion: "that sentiment on any given subject which is entertained by the best informed, most intelligent, and most moral persons in the community" (p. 15).

— vs "popular clamour": "that sort of feeling arising from the passions of a multitude acting without consideration; or an excitement created amongst the uneducated; or amongst those who do not reflect, or do not exercise their judgment on the point in question" (p. 18).

John Zaller (1992, p. 6)

— "Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it."

Conceptualization of "public opinion"

– Clear articulation of the concept from 18th C
– No agreed definition

– Shift in concept (Price, 1992):
1) From elitist concept toward inclusion of the mass
2) from normative political and philosophical concept (as collective public opinion) to empirical psychological and sociological concept (as aggregate of individual opinion – blurring boundary between public and private)

An integrated framework (Arnold, 2007)

Table 2: Opinion Types

Published opinion	Public opinion	Opinion of the public
Individual opinion intentionally expressed publicly, different from private or confidential opinion	Conglomerate of published opinion that is shared by many, agreed upon opinion	Formal-theoretical concept, public opinion as form of social will, societal values, actual articulation of public opinion, its subject is the public

Degree of adoption by (agreement among) the majority

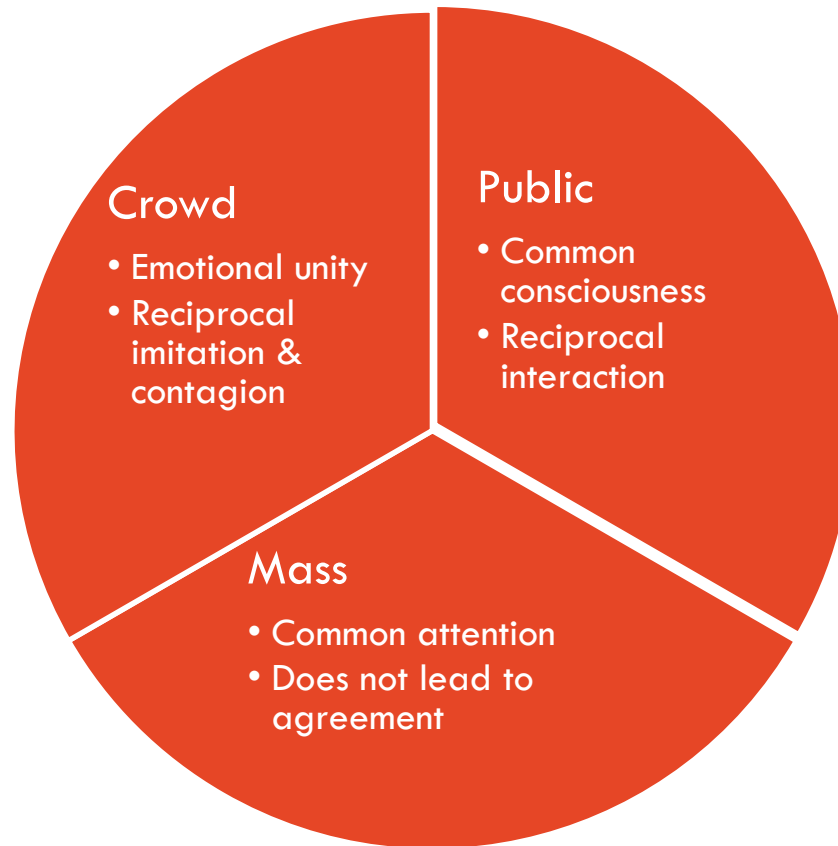(Based on Tönnies 1922; 1971; Splichal 1999; Gollin & Gollin 1973)

Table 5: Typology of Conceptualisations for the Study of Public Opinion and Popular Sentiments

Dimensions	Forms of social will					
(1) Phenomenon:	*Popular sentiment*			Opinion of the public		
(2) Product:	Mass sentiment	Published opinion	Public opinion	Ephemeral	Fluid	Solid
(3) Subject:	majority	none apparent	passive crowds	active crowds	inconsistent groups	imaginary group
(4) Means of expression:	vote, polls	public utterance	public utterance	public debate	public debate	public debate
(5) Nature of expression:	approval/ disapproval	approval/ disapproval	approval/ disapproval	deliberation	deliberation	deliberation

Empirical-quantitative → Normative

(Arnold, 2007)

Subjects of forms of social will
(Arnold, 2007)

Crowd
- Emotional unity
- Reciprocal imitation & contagion

Public
- Common consciousness
- Reciprocal interaction

Mass
- Common attention
- Does not lead to agreement

The crowd and the public
(Arnold, 2007)

— Examples of passive crowd: spectators at the theatre; the audience of a speaker

— "dissolution of individual consciousness into a 'crowd mind' (Le Bon 1897/1960; cf. Park 1972): A leader repeats a message to the members of a crowd…. The repeated messages–emotions or actions–spread through the crowd by contagion…; individuals lose self-consciousness and their minds and wills become absorbed in a collective mind" (p. 15).

— "[A]s soon as rationality is abandoned–for instance, because the members of the public become overly excited about an issue--the public becomes a crowd" (Park, in Arnold, 2007, p. 15).

- Active crowds: ideologically motivated formations

Conceptual nature of public opinion on social media (Nip, 2017)

- Mass sentiment: likes, shares

- Published opinion: approval/disapproval

- Public opinion: majority of published opinion

- Opinion of the public: action, analysis, emotion, information→deliberation

Operational nature of public opinion on social media

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Expression of public opinion on social media

Offline public opinion/

mass sentiment

— Representatively drawn sample + non-response

— Issues selected by pollster

— Over particular period of time

Online public opinion

— Non-representative volunteer "sample" of active Internet users

— Issues not pre-determined

— No set period of time for issue; long-tailed

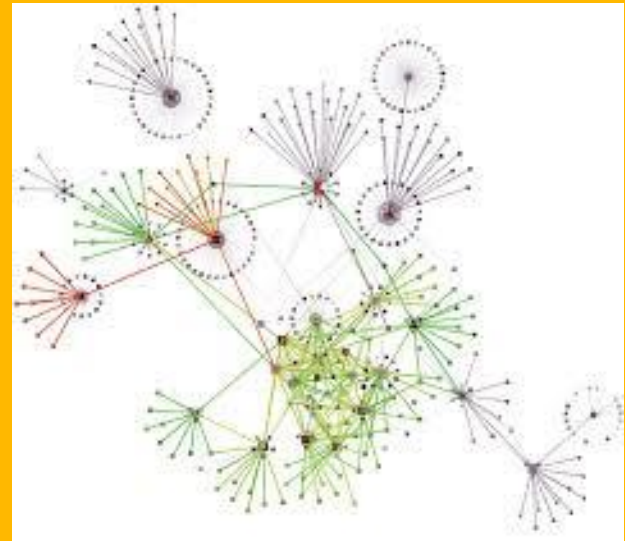# Articulation of public opinion on social media (Nip, 2017)

Offline public opinion/mass sentiment

- Articulation in product (response to Q)

— Close-ended answers

— S → R1
      → R2
      → R3
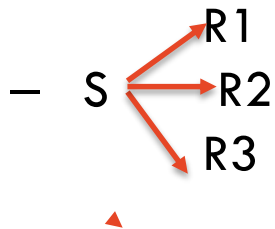
Online public opinion

- Several ways

— Co-production of opinion of the public in *process* (response——often instantaneous--to other messages)

— Open-ended answers

(socialwebthing.com)

Proposed model of formation of public opinion on social media (Nip, 2017)

Offline public opinion

— Linear S–R product model

— Foreground stimulus is question of pollster

— Background stimulus — multiple

— Response is choice from given answers

Online public opinion

— Networked S-R process model

— S-R

— S-R

-S-R

- Foreground S:

• for posts unclear

• for likes, shares, comments: previous layer of messages

- Background S: multiple

- Response is self-produced

Summary

— Relevance of action, analysis, emotion, information to online public opinion formation

— Online public opinion as mass sentiment, published opinion, public opinion and opinion of the public

— Characteristics of expression and articulation of public opinion on social media

— Proposed model (networked S-R process) of formation of online public opinion

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