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China's Weibo: Is faster different?

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Abstract   The popularization of microblogging in China represents a new challenge to the state's regime of information control. The speed with which information is diffused in the microblogosphere has helped netizens to publicize and express their discontent with the negative consequences of economic growth, income inequalities and official corruption. In some cases, netizen led initiatives have facilitated the mobilization of online public opinion and forced the central government to intervene to redress acts of lower level malfeasance. However, despite the growing corpus of such cases, the government has quickly adapted to the changing internet ecology and is using the same tools to help it maintain control of society by enhancing its claims to legitimacy, circumscribing dissent, identifying malfeasance in its agents and using online public opinion to adapt policy and direct propaganda efforts. This essay reflects on microblogging in the context of the Chinese internet, and argues that successes in breaking scandals and mobilizing opinion against recalcitrant officials should not mask the reality that the government is utilizing the microblogosphere to its own advantage.

Keywords China; microblogging; Weibo; new and social media; cyber-activism; authoritarian; political change.

Introduction

The corpus of cases where online activism has taken the lead in spreading information and mobilizing public opinion about governmental abuses of power, cover-ups and scandals has grown rapidly since the emergence and popularization of microblogging in China (Hasid, 2012a).[1] With their several hundred million users, Sina, Tencent and other microblog services allow netizens to receive and pass along information more efficiently than previous technologies, sometimes faster even than China's vaunted censors can keep up with. However, although microblogging represents a new challenge to the state's regime of information control, when there is growing discontent with the negative consequences of rapid economic growth, corruption and income inequalities (O'Brien, 2008), the government is also using it in multiple ways to maintain control of society. This essay reflects on microblogging in the context of the Chinese internet, at a time when China scholars are coming to term with the ramifications of the growth of China's internet population and the emergence of social media. The uses and effects of social media in China represent an important case for the theoretical literature, both in terms of the on-going debate between cyber-realists and utopians, and specifically in terms of microblogging, where the unusual development of the Chinese context problematizes the easy transposition of arguments.

Chinese internet research

Similar to other contexts, claims about the political effects of the internet in China range from the cyber-realist ('authoritarian states harness the internet to propagate control and maintain power') to the cyber-utopian ('the internet will bring about pluralisation and liberalization and tip the state-society balance in favour of society'). To its credit, scholarly research on China has long acknowledged the potential for the state to use the internet for its own ends, even while raising the likelihood of new challenges to its power (e.g. Chase and Mulvenon,

2003; Harwit and Clark, 2001; Hughes, 2000; Taubman, 1998). On the other hand, commentary in popular outlets has at times been euphoric, such as Nicholas Kristof's (2005) 'Death by a Thousand Blogs' op-ed in the New York Times, which concluded that 'the Chinese leadership itself is digging the Communist Party's grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband' (for a critique of what he calls 'rosy assessments' in the scholarly literature on China, see Leibold, 2011). In the intervening years however, the state has been proven adept at controlling and channelling online activities, despite the rapid growth of the internet population and the popularization of social media. As the field of Chinese internet studies has evolved, scholars have directed their attention to the multifarious interactions between state, society and technology and the many contextual and agent-based factors that affect the outcome of these interactions (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Damm and Thomas, 2006; Hughes and Wacker, 2003; Qiu, 2009; Shen and Breslin, 2010; Tai, 2006). Scholars may still argue that the internet is bringing positive changes to state-society relations, but they talk circumspectly about enhanced prospects for political participation, the growth of a nascent public sphere and mechanisms for potentially increasing government accountability (Herold and Marolt, 2011; Lagerkvist, 2011; Liu, 2010; Sun, 2010; Yang, 2003, 2009; Zhang and Zheng, 2009; Zheng, 2007; Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yuan, 2010; Zhou, 2006). Rather than a duel between state and civil/online society, scholars emphasize tensions between higher and lower level authorities within the state hierarchy, the roles of entrepreneurial and increasingly influential actors in the media, business and cultural elites, and their interactions with an astonishingly large (and growing) number of netizens (Herold and Marolt, 2011; Yang, 2009). The emphasis on the 'increasingly complex relationship between state and society and the contentious issues that have marked this relationship' (Rosen, 2010: 515) reflects broader work on the implicit negotiations and compromises going on between state and society actors in other arenas (Hsu, 2010; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Saich, 2000).

Many of the boundaries and rules in Chinese cyberspace are still being negotiated and this context of ad hoc legal structures and unsettled cultural norms presents openings for Chinese netizens to express themselves relatively freely, despite restrictions (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Kalathil and Boas, 2003). Chinese cyberspace is a cacophony of voices, many of them critical, resentful or giving vent to material and other grievances suffered at the hands of the rich and powerful, corrupt officials, or any number of other problems caused by dramatic socio-economic changes (Yang, 2009). There are few calls for radical political change, but the online embodiment of the 'quotidian world of resistance and response' (O' Brien and Stern, 2008: 24) is commonplace. These manifestations of discontent reflect changes in the post-Tiananmen era where the grounds for regime legitimacy changed to observable performance, encompassing both the material (standard of living, upward mobility) and the spiritual (patriotism, China's global status) (Rosen, 2010: 512). And just as the number of 'collective incidents' (riots, strikes, road blocks etc.) has increased exponentially in recent years (Cai, 2010), so dissatisfaction with government performance or the consequences of government policy is prevalent online, in both explicit and oblique forms (King et al., 2012; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011).

One of the most useful accounts of activism on the Chinese internet is Yang (2009). Yang argues that 'online activism derives its forms and dynamics from a broad spectrum of converging and contending forces' (2009: 1) conceptualized as a 'multi-interactionism model' in which the state, cultures of contention, the market, civil society and trans-nationalization all feed into, and are affected by, online activism. Conceiving online activism as both a reflection and reflector of the complexity and multidimensionality of contemporary Chinese society is an important advance. It reminds us that the full range of actors and the same activities and behaviours that occur in the physical world are also present online and that an online/offline dichotomy is artificial and simplistic, as many events are constituted by 'deeply

intertwined real and virtual aspects' (Jiang, 2010a: 5). Yang (2009) chronicles dozens of cases of online dissent and protest, with struggles for recognition and belonging, against oppression and exploitation with protagonists drawn from every sector of Chinese society. However, these incidents are almost always restricted to a single issue and quickly peter out after government intervention in successful cases, or following indifference or repression in others. Yang's findings are consistent with observations of state behaviour (tolerance of protest as long as it is specific, localized and does contain a threat of collective action) and common stereotypes about mass attitudes (there are many critics of the government but the majority of people do not want radical changes in society). More recent Weibo cases show the same dynamics—success in publicizing localized examples of malfeasance, corruption or scandals (Hasid, 2012a), but rapid and strong censorship and counter-propaganda efforts where cases show potential for collective action (King et al., 2012). Yet, even in those cases where Weibo mobilizes public opinion to induce a government response, it is important to recognize that online public opinion is as a capricious accountability mechanism, and the vast majority of injustices, power abuses and grievances don't gain publicity or support. What determines whether or not a case gains traction is an open question in China. Analyzing the success and failure of offline protest acts, Cai (2010) finds that large numbers of protesters mobilizing in reaction to egregious malfeasance by local actors jeopardizing the state's legitimacy are the most likely to prompt successful interventions. Similar dynamics are evident in the Weibo cases where salacious or egregious scandals, particularly those dealing with corruption and privilege, which focus anger on specific individual officials are most likely to gain the attention of important information brokers (e.g. journalists with a large number of followers). The major problem with Weibo events is their sporadic, transient and unsustainable nature (Jiang 2010a), a problem that is not peculiar to the Chinese context (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2011: 191).

Microblogging in China

At time of writing, there are more than 500 million internet users, 100 million bloggers and 300 million microbloggers in China (Chan, 2011; Hasid, 2012a). Apart from the sheer size of these numbers, several things stand out about China's internet population. First, the level of internet penetration still has room to grow. Second, the proportion of netizens who access the mobile internet has increased rapidly, reducing inequalities in access (Qiu, 2009). Third, Chinese netizens are relatively young (Liu, 2010), with an average age of 28 years, much younger than their American counterparts (40 years old),[2] which scholars have noted as a possible explanation for the 'wildness' evident on the Chinese internet (Maroldt, 2011). Finally, Chinese netizens are exceptionally social and active, voraciously consuming and producing online information (Yang, 2009). [3] Although the familiar Facebook/Twitter/YouTube triumvirate that dominates the social media ecology globally does not pertain in China (none have been available behind the firewall since mid-2009), Chinese netizens have an abundance of competing local services to choose from, most of them specially tailored for the local market. Applying Min Jiang's (2010b) typology, these services are 'government-regulated commercial spaces,' i.e. privately owned platforms that are subject to government regulation, 'including elaborate requirements for content censorship and user surveillance.' Among them, the Tencent-owned QQ brand draws together multiple platforms from instant messaging to gaming and boasts several hundred million users.[4] The social network site Renren (formerly known as Xiaonei),[5] which is often described as China's Facebook, raised several hundred million dollars with its public listing on the New York Stock Exchange in May 2011. One consequence of the unusual

proliferation of companies and platforms in China's social media landscape is the differentiation of user profiles for different services. For example, while Twitter's small band of firewall-jumping users represents the non-conformist intellectual elite, the QQ platform serves the much greater number of lower income netizens accessing the mobile internet (Sullivan, 2012).

Despite having started life as a Twitter clone, Sina Weibo has added a number of features such as message threading and the ability to comment directly on other users' posts. Chinese microblogs combine elements of bulletin board systems (BBS) and blogs, both of which have been extremely popular in China (Mackinnon, 2008). Beijing University media scholar, Hu Yong, notes that this suits Chinese netizens, 'who like to chat in groups [...and explains...] why you see a lot of bickering and fighting on Weibo' (cited in Jing, 2011). Unlike in English, where the 140 character limit demands terseness, using Chinese characters allows users to write nuanced messages and include other contributors' thoughts in their own messages making it easier to follow and participate in online conversations. As the artist-activist Ai Weiwei notes, 'in the Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella' (cited in Ambrozy, 2011: 241).

The earliest Chinese microblogs (TaoTao, Jiwai, Zuosa and Fanfou) were established in 2007, but did not have their breakthrough moment until February 2009. When an illegal fireworks display caused a fire in a building next to the new headquarters of the state television system, official news outlets responded with their usual caution, to be outflanked by witnesses on the streets of Beijing who broke the story on their microblogs (Ramzy, 2011). This success for citizen journalism showed that information could be accessed more reliably than via state media channels, where coverage is often compromised by the government's sensitivities. During events like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, natural disasters like the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 and numerous food security

scandals, crucial information has been withheld from citizens. Blogs and other online communications have taken on greater importance and credibility than in countries with freer media systems (Ambrozy, 2011: xxvi; Hung, 2006; Lagerkvist, 2005; Wang, 2010). Twitter and the local clones were allowed to operate without any special restrictions until the summer of 2009 when the heightened sensitivities that accompanied the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident were soon followed by disturbances in Xinjiang that killed nearly 200 people. These ethnic riots were apparently triggered by an article posted on an internet forum (Morozov, 2011: 259). The central government claimed that the riots had been inspired by Uighur separatists abroad through the conduit of online forums, and used this alleged threat to deny internet access to the entire Xinjiang province for several months. Since the state controls the technological infrastructure, (private internet companies effectively rent cyberspace from the government) it is able to deny internet access to restive regions (Reporters Without Borders, 2011). The government acted quickly to block US-based internet services like Facebook and Twitter, and shut down the local microblogging services that had been unable to control information flows.

Despite this setback, microblogging had proven sufficiently popular that after the crackdown other companies were willing to enter the vacuum with assurances to the government about keeping information flows under control. First to enter the market was the search and news portal Sina.com, which set about building the platform by inducing entertainers, CEOs and sports stars to sign up with exclusive financial contracts (Jing, 2011). Use of Weibo reflects trends in the broader Chinese internet, which is dominated by entertainment (Guo, 2005). The most popular daily trends on Sina Weibo[6] and the most popular Weibo users, judged by their number of followers, is consistent with Twitter in the US (Hargittai and Litt, 2011). That said, well known academics, journalists and prominent business people have also attracted substantial followings. Sina Weibo has clearly learned

from the earlier experiences of Twitter and Fanfou, implementing comprehensive and proactive censorship. To track and block content, Weibo employs thousands of censors and uses sophisticated software to monitor 'sensitive words.'[7] In order to retain the trust invested in it by the government, and fulfil its legal obligation to observe 'self-discipline' (Mackinnon, 2011: 37-8), Sina Weibo implements multiple levels of censorship. Attempting to evade this control, many Chinese netizens use clever methods to elude the suppression or 'harmonization' of their more, or less, subversive messages,[8] for example posting images instead of more easily censored text, or using the 'grass-mud-horse lexicon.'[9] There is scattered evidence, and much optimistic commentary, that the speed of and volume of Weibo is challenging the state's information control regime

Challenges to the state's information order

Information (facts, frames, histories, discourses, ideas, narratives) is a key component in the 'soft power' that authoritarian governments leverage in order to maintain their claims to legitimacy and delegitimize their opponents. Authoritarian regimes select and control access to the information that citizens are exposed to and interpret 'the facts' for them. Media and education systems are especially useful for this purpose, reinforced by multiple forms of propaganda and censorship. The centrality of the Ministry of Information and the lengths that the state has gone to in order to regulate information flows on the Chinese internet is evidence of the premium that the government places on controlling the information that netizens are exposed to and can pass along to their friends (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). However, information control has become harder in China, both with the increasing accessibility of internet access, and popularization of the citizen's 'right to know' (Chan and Bi, 2009). The right to know, particularly about the social consequences of rapid economic growth, resonates with citizens who observe growing economic disparities, the spread of

privilege and corruption, and the negative externalities of industrialization, combined with suspicion and scepticism about the motives and abilities of the government to deal with these problems. Investigative journalism addressing social injustices and giving the marginalized a voice is popular, commercially viable, and in-keeping with interpretations of Jiang Zemin's 'three represents' and the current leadership's 'harmonious society' doctrine (Chan and Bi, 2009: 7). Commercial media outlets are engaged in a process of implicit negotiation with the government, pushing the boundaries of what it is permissible to report (Huang, 2007), sometimes in response to stories broken in the blog- and micro-blogospheres (Hasid, 2012b; Xin, 2010). Rosen (2010) argues that the sum of these developments is that they have effectively eliminated the state's monopoly on information.

Zhang (2011) argues that, 'in the olden days, Chinese waited for the benevolent official of myth and fiction to come and deliver justice: Today people wait for microblogs to apply pressure, administering some semblance of justice.' Hu Yong (2011) redefines the notion of the 'surrounding gaze,' which originally referred to the callous indifference of crowds at public spectacles, to describe a situation where everyone is now a witness to the state and its agents' actions. These claims are supported by numerous examples of where online, citizen-led journalism has generated political pressure via online public opinion. Zhang (2011) cites the case of Liao Weiming, Vice President of Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics who ran down a group of students, killing two, before driving off while intoxicated. This example of privilege and abuse resonated with netizens, whose widespread outrage induced the Nanchang City government to intercede. In a similar case, online public opinion was instrumental in the arrest and conviction of Li Qiming, who implied after a fatal hit and run accident that justice would not be served due to his privileged status as son of the deputy director of the local security bureau. His contemptuous attitude of was encapsulated in the phrase, 'Li Gang is my dad', which became a rallying point for

netizens (Wines, 2010). The death and aftermath of Qian Yunhui, an elected village head in Zhejiang, highlighted a different type of abuse of power. Qian, who had relentlessly petitioned the local government for better compensation for villagers from a nearby power plant, was run down by a truck shortly before he was due to stand for re-election. The convenient timing and suspicious nature of the accident focused public attention on the election, in which villagers were emboldened to vote for Qian's cousin.[10] Another high profile case involved a family in Yihuang, after three members burned themselves to protest the demolition of their home. While the local government reported it as an accident, two family members prepared to travel to Beijing in order to petition the central government. Agents of the local government prevented them from taking their flight, but trapped in an airport restroom they connected with Phoenix Weekly journalist Deng Fei who broadcast the standoff live on his Weibo. The attention this generated in the microblogosphere quickly led to intervention by the (higher level) Municipal government and later, conciliatory statements by Su Rong, the highest ranking Communist Party official in Jiangxi Province.[11] Ying Chan (2011) argues that 'given how information from Yihuang was spread, this story signalled a landmark moment in contemporary Chinese media with the emergence of microblogs.' Despite this apparent success for citizen journalism, the outcome in this, and other, cases was highly circumscribed. People vented their anger, malfeasant agents were identified and removed and cases were quickly forgotten. Systemic problems that allow corruption and other societal ills to flourish on a national scale were not addressed, and the party was able to propagate its image as benevolent protector of the nation let down by the wrongdoings of its representatives. This is one outcome among many that lends support to Morozov's claim that 'the web can actually strengthen rather than undermine authoritarian regimes' (2011: 28).

State adaptation: Using Weibo to maintain control

China scholars, policymakers in Washington and others have spent much energy considering the contradiction of Beijing's genuine commitment to developing the internet and almost compulsive attempts to control it (Mackinnon, 2011: 37). Although this attitude may appear schizophrenic, it is consistent with the system of 'consultative Leninism' that the party has adopted since the death of Deng Xioaping (Tsang, 2009), in which maintaining power is paramount. Among the instruments used to achieve this goal, the party has enhanced its capacity to elicit, respond to and direct public opinion and shown flexibility in governance reform to pre-empt widespread demands for greater liberalization. These and other adaptations are clearly evident in the state's use of the internet, which Chinese internet expert Rebecca Mackinnon, drawing on the work of He and Warren (2011), characterizes as a system of 'networked authoritarianism' (2011).

The central government is faced with a serious principal-agent problem in which lower level authorities have substantial autonomy in their implementation of state policies. In the same way that O'Brien and Li (2006) show how 'rightful resistance' can signal problems in the principal-agent relationship, online discontent alerts the central government to cases of local malfeasance, civil unrest and mass opinions (Verran, 2009). In the cases noted above, online public opinion alerted the central government of abuses of power which acted to reign in its principals and send a signal to other would-be transgressors. At the same time, the government showed itself willing to listen to and act 'on behalf of the people', giving the facade of responsiveness while neutralizing any urge to join a movement calling for more systemic change. King et al.'s (2012) systematic analysis of censorship of millions of social media messages similarly demonstrates that the government is content for netizens to voice their grievances, but aggressively censors anything that could lead to broader mobilization or challenges to state legitimacy. One example is the experience of independent candidates standing for election to National People's Representatives Congress, the lowest branch of

China's multi-tier legislature with 30000 members. Ostensibly open elections are held every five years, but these exercises are generally choreographed with carefully Party-selected candidates. In 2011, over 100 independent candidates declared their intention to run, with the vast majority running their 'campaigns' via Weibo. Independent candidates running online campaigns did not fare well; in most cases they did not make the ballot, being ruled out on technicalities or made-up rules, harassed, threatened or arrested (Mackinnon, 2011).

At any time, millions of messages are being sent around Weibo, a corpus of opinions that represents a de facto polling system that the state uses as a feedback mechanism to adapt its policies, inform official media or identify and neutralize potential threats. Needless to say, promoting one's opinions online does not come with a guarantee of individual rights and freedoms: netizens can be, and are, arrested for what they say online. The detention of online activists (and charging them with 'inciting subversion of state power') is one way that authorities restrict online criticism to specific complaints, which keeps online public opinion divided and compartmentalized (Mackinnon, 2008: 34). King et al. (2012) find that 'mobilization issues' are strongly censored, consistent with the fear that all authoritarian regimes have of like-minded people coalescing in mind or body. The Chinese government is rightly worried by the possibility of discontents from different areas and socio-economic sectors coming together to form a cross-region, cross-class coalition that could challenge the party's stability mantra if not the regime itself. Hypothetical 'collapse' scenarios are frequently driven by some combination of laid-off workers, dispossessed homeowners, unemployed graduates, hungry farmers, ethnic and religious minorities discovering that they share grievances (e.g. Shirk, 2008: 35-78). Keeping different groups in ignorance of one another (and thus unaware of their collective power) is of utmost importance and, as periods of unrest in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia have demonstrated, if the perceived threat to

stability is sufficiently strong, the government can exercise its control of the technological infrastructure to deny or severely limit access to the internet.

Since the state recognizes the value of the internet to its continued economic modernization (Mackinnnon, 2011), and no doubt understands the value of a venue in which a large proportion of the population are kept entertained, actively setting the agenda rather than responding to it with draconian suspensions of service is preferable. With its influence on ostensibly private internet companies, pro-active censorship regime and strong guidance to online media, Chinese cyberspace provides abundant evidence of what Morozov (2011) calls the 'spinternet'. Like many authoritarian regimes, the CCP has made effective use of the internet for propaganda purposes. This is particularly evident in the proliferation of popular nationalism online (Shen and Breslin, 2009), patriotism having long-since replaced Communism as the Party's unifying and guiding ideology (Tsang, 2009). Since 2004 national and local governments and institutions have made use of paid commentators to guide online opinion. The use of '50 cent' commentators (a derogatory term alluding to the alleged price paid for their services) has expanded as the internet population and venues for discussion online have increased. King et al. (2012) estimate that the central government alone employs between 250,000 and 300,000 commentators to manipulate online discussion. In addition, government institutions and officials have developed an extensive web presence to communicate directly with netizens. For instance, official surveys report that by December 2011 there were 50561 verified government agency accounts across four major microblog platforms, of which 32358 were associated with party organs (E-Government Research Center, 2012). Although Hasid (2012a) argues that some official organs welcome public participation and oversight, he also notes that the majority of official Weibo accounts are associated with various organs of the public security system.

Conclusion

Despite the elevated expectations that social media have engendered worldwide, the potential for microblogs to affect political behaviour and political change in China is constrained by conditions online and offline. Dissent and mobilization remain bound by censorship and control, and the objectives of its participants are necessarily circumscribed. The government's embrace and control of the information revolution continues to serve it well and it continues to keep the lid on the mobilization of either large-scale, cross-cutting protests or a viable opposition movement. Although some scholars argue that 'political participation has taken a big step forward because of microblogging' (Xiao quoted in Richburg, 2011), there is insufficient empirical evidence to support the view that microblogging holds new and qualitatively distinct potential for political behaviour and political change in China. Mass movements in the physical world are facilitated by communications between people, and social media like Weibo support this, but communication does not equal mobilization. Rather than reporting 'trace data' that support the author's view about the effects of social media, we require a systematic analysis of a large number of cases, without selecting on the outcome, so that we have a better idea about the conditions under which Weibo 'campaigns' gain traction (or fail to). A larger number of cases would also enable us to better infer the conditions in which online acts lead to mobilization offline (as exemplified by Cai, 2011 in the case of offline protest acts). Furthermore, as Jiang (2010a) and others have argued, it is increasingly difficult, indeed artificial, to separate the uses and effects of social media from other forms of online and offline means of communication. For all the exuberant commentary surrounding social media use during the Arab Spring, more careful analysis suggests that traditional media and face-to-face communications were equally, if not more, influential (Calhoun, 2011). Prior research on social movements in China similarly demonstrates that physical world social ties are crucial (O'Brien and Li, 2006; Shi and Cai, 2006), even where campaigns have a

significant online component (Sullivan and Xie, 2009). As the Weibo user base continues to grow and becomes increasingly mobile and integrated into everyday lives, the need for more holistic studies that treat social media as one component of the communications repertoire increases (cf. Farrell, 2011).

Information transmitted by Weibo can constitute an accountability mechanism in the form of online public opinion, but is capricious and unreliable. Virtual mob justice is a clumsy mechanism for advancing government accountability. Furthermore, rather than a 'carnivalesque riot' (Herold, 2011) human flesh searches raise the spectre of Cultural Revolution-era vigilantism, albeit not systematically directed by state ideology (Mackinnon, 2009). In cases where netizens have acted against recalcitrant citizens (rather than government agents), authorities have usually declined to become involved (Herold, 2008), indicating tacit acceptance of a form of 'justice' that can result in severe harassment and physical world consequences for the targets of such actions. Governments in China sometimes respond to their agents' misdemeanours more efficaciously when they witness rapidly assembling and riotous netizens, but they are also using information culled from Weibo to identify and neutralize the same 'threatening' behaviour. Netizens will likely continue to use Weibo to publicize localized incidences of low level malfeasance, and the central government may allow them to proceed and may sometimes intervene. But wherever a Weibo event holds potential to grow beyond the parameters of localized discontent, the state will implement its censorship and propaganda regime, reinforced by control of technological infrastructure, legal and political leverage over internet companies and by marshalling physical world public security apparatus. Ultimately, while microblogs may speed up the diffusion of information, there is little reason, as yet, to believe that 'faster is different' (Tufecki, 2011). The implications of Weibo may thus not be in isolated events that generate small scale interventions, but in a longer term process by which netizens become

accustomed to greater transparency, political participation and demand more systematic

mechanisms for accountability, as suggested by Tai (2006) and others.

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[1] The word 'weibo' is the Chinese equivalent of microblog. Microblogging is often synonymous with the US-based Twitter platform that is dominant market leader everywhere except China where it has been inaccessible behind the firewall since mid-2009.

[2] Netpop Research, Social Face-off: A comparison of US and China social media use. Available at: http://www.netpopresearch.com/node/26705.

[3] See for instance research by the international brand agency Ogilvy, Available at: http://www.ogilvy.com/On-Our-Minds/Articles/July-2010-The-OgilvyOne-Connected-Report.aspx

[4] http://qq.com/. According to the internet traffic analysis company Alexa (http://www.alexa.com/) QQ.com has a three-month global traffic rank of 10, which places it second within China.

[5] http://www.renren.com/.

[6] Most popular daily trend based on data supplied by Sina. Retrieved from http://weibo.com/

[7] For an updated, annotated list of sensitive words on Sina Weibo, see China Digital Times http://bit.ly/jYQB4T

[8] To be 'harmonized' is a euphemism for censorship, parodying the government's mantra of a 'harmonious society' as a justification for censorship and other controls. Savvy netizens often refer to the homophonous 'river crab'.

[9] The term grass-mud horse, which has similar pronunciation to a common mandarin expletive and is embodied by the South American alpaca, was originally created as a way to avoid, but also to mock, government censorship of vulgar content. It has since come to denote the vocabulary used to avoid censorship and for some netizens, a personal and political identity (Tang and Yang, 2011). For the definitive resource, see China Digital Times, Grass-mud-horse lexicon. Available at http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon

[10] http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/qian-yunhui/

[11] http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-09/19/content_20961825.htm