
A Study on the Effect of Chinese Local Governments' Exploration to Improve Their Level of Trust by Utilizing the New Media Tools

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Abstract:

This paper firstly clarifies the conceptual ideas of trust, openness and responsiveness within the scope of public administration. Secondly it introduces the features of the new media like microblog in China, and the background of Tianjin municipal government's utilization of new media tools. Then, four recent typical highly concerned events in Tianjin would be analyzed and discussed. The four cases are: heavy rainstorm in Tianjin in 2012; big fire of a shopping mall in rural Tianjin in 2012; restriction of purchase and utilization of private vehicles in 2013; arrest of a high-ranked official of Tianjin in 2014. By using statistical tools, this paper conducts the analysis on Tianjin government's openness and responsiveness regarding the selected cases in official microblogs. There are three periods throughout the process of Tianjin government's exploration to improve its level of trust by utilizing microblog. In the initial stage, Tianjin government abandoned the traditional one-way mode of publishing official information, and instead explored to actively interact with public through its official microblog to enhance its level of trust. However, in the second phase, when some sensitive events emerge or controversial policies being implemented, the government's way of dealing with the public opinion tended to become backward, which include the restrictive opening of information and avoidant response to the public inquiries, causing its level of trust started to decline. At the last phase, as government's one-way mode of publishing short and vague information without any response and interaction in microblog becoming increasingly serious, the impact of Tianjin government and its major constituting departments' official microblogs have been getting weak to a considerable degree. The situation of other major municipalities' governments is found to be similar. In other words, Chinese local government's exploration to enhance their level of trust by utilizing new media tools ends in failure.

Keywords: Trust, Chinese local government, New media tool, Openness, Responsiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

It is considered that there is a significant correlation between the trust in government and the openness as well as responsiveness of the government. The trust in government is a public value judgment based on the government's public administration and service. In nature, it is the public evaluation and judgment on the value dimensions reflected in the government's public policy formulation and implementation as well as public affairs management, such as fairness, justice, efficiency and accountability. The trust in government is the modern government's foundation to win popular support, to obtain ruling legitimacy as well as to perform the public administration and service function; it also should be the value demands that open and responsive government's pursue.¹ The responsiveness within the scope of public administration refers to that the public policy formulated by the political system should reflect the needs of the society or the social expectations for government agencies. The government becomes difficult to control the position and tendency of the public opinion due to the features of the new media.²

With the rapid development of the internet and the rapid spread of the online media such as microblog, the traditional model of information dissemination has changed, and China has entered a new media era. Before the new media emerged, traditional media and public opinion are under the control of the totalitarian Chinese government, and thus the media's oversight function has been limited to a considerable degree. Chinese government also tends to filter the facts and control the public opinion through leading and propaganda. However, in the new media era, the government has been difficult to monopolize the media discourse and control the public opinions, which have the decentralized and diversified characteristics.³ The government would probably bring negative impacts on the credibility and trust in itself, if delivering information selectively or not timely in the new media era. Some local governments would like to guide and shape the public opinion by releasing information selectively or not timely, and it is possible to achieve success in traditional media era, rather than new media era.

Weibo is the Twitter-like microblog based in China. Its full name is Sina Weibo, and it was formally launched in November 2009. According to the Weibo User Development Report, Weibo has approximately 167 million monthly active users and 76 daily active users by the end of September 2014.⁴ According to the *China Government Affairs Index Report 2014*, which is jointly published by People's Daily and Sina Weibo, there are approximately 130 thousand of officially certified government affairs weibo accounts, including 94 thousand of governmental agency weibo accounts and 3.6 thousand of public servants by the end of 2014.⁵

Tianjin is one of the four municipalities directly under the Central Government in China. It has approximately 13 million of residents currently, and is the industrial and commercial center and the second largest metropolis of North China. There are 37 municipal level governmental agencies (including functional departments, offices, commissions and bureaus) as well as 15 district and county level governmental agencies have official weibo accounts in Tianjin. Among them, the most important and high-leveled weibo account is considered to be "*Tianjin*

Release”, which is the official account of Tianjin Municipal Government Information Office. The account introduces itself as the prime platform and portal for the governance and public service of Tianjin, and aims to maintain the close ties with the masses. It started to tweet since November 2011, and is the earliest Tianjin governmental agency official weibo account; it has posted more than 20250 tweets (excluding the deleted tweets) by the end of 2014, at least four times more than that of any other Tianjin governmental agency weibo accounts. Moreover, it has 1.52 million followers (including the “zombie fans”), more than that of any other Tianjin governmental agency weibo accounts. Thus, this study takes the “Tianjin Release” as the major analysis object, and takes other accounts for reference. “Weibo Reach”, a professional microblog analysis tool that could analyze the number of views or exposure amounts as well as the participating users’ features of one tweet, will also be used in the study.⁶

2. CASE STUDIES

The responses of Tianjin government’s official weibo account for four typical highly-concerned events in Tianjin municipal according to the chronological selection from 2012 to 2014 would be taken as case studies to be analyzed and discussed. The four cases are: the heavy rainstorm in Tianjin in 2012; big fire of the shopping mall in the rural area of Tianjin in 2012; the restriction of the purchase and utilization of private vehicles within urban Tianjin in 2013; the arrest of a high-ranked official of Tianjin in 2014.

2.1. Big fire in rural Tianjin in 2012

There was a big fire in a shopping mall of Ji County, a suburban area in Tianjin, on June 30th, 2012. The official reports that the whole shopping mall was burnt down, and there were 10 residents died and 16 residents injured in the fire⁷. However, the public strongly questioned the truth of the report. According to the witnesses, the real number of died and injured people were far more than that, and there even was a rumor claiming 378 people died and injured in the fire.⁷ Besides, the public dissatisfied the government’s response on the fire. Tianjin government seemed to believe that it was still in the traditional media era, and it was enough to one-way publish short and vague information, even on the controversial events. There was neither further detailed explanations nor followed-up reports on the big fire. *Tianjin Release*’s coverage of the controversial issue was only 140 characters; and none of the official weibo accounts of other major related Tianjin’s government departments, such as Public Security Bureau, Fire Bureaus as well as Ji County Government, had reported or mentioned the big fire at all.⁸ While at the same time, some mainstream media had covered the fire event with more detailed information, follow-up reports and further questions, and caused much more widespread impact. The comparison of the tweets posted by Tianjin Release and some mainstream medias on the fire even on June 30th 2012, are presented in the figure 1. Moreover, the fire event happened at 15:00 June 30th, however, the government’s official weibo, *Tianjin Release*, did not post any relevant tweets until the next day at noon. While *Tianjin Release* had successively posted three tweets at 17:00, 19:00 and 20:00 on June 30th, and their main contents

are: kindergartens parties, transportation plans as well as weather, and of which the numbers of the forwarding, comment and exposure amount are little. This is a typical dealing style of the government in the traditional media era: it turns a blind eye to the public event, and turns a deaf ear to the public questioning.

2.2. Heavy rainstorm in Tianjin in 2012

Tianjin suffered more than 10 days of heavy rainstorm which is the most terrible one within the recent 50 years from July 21st to 1st August, 2012.⁹ There are mainly three rounds of heavy rainstorm: the first round lasted from 21st to 22nd July, of which the average rainfall was 98.6mm, and the maximum rainfall was 294.7mm; the second round lasted from 25th to 27th July, of which the maximum rainfall was 344.9mm; the third round lasted from 30st June to 1st August, the maximum rainfall was 102.8mm.⁹ During the rainstorm, hundreds of vehicles were flooded in the downtown area, and about 45,700 citizens had to be transferred to safer places.

From 21st July to 1st August 2012, “*Tianjin Release*” had posted 138 tweets, 51 of which were directly related or relevant to the heavy rainstorm or weather; by contrast, there was up to one tweet during the rest of July in the most time. The total number of the repost or forwarding of the 51 tweets was 3690, and the total number of the comments of them was 1098; both of the two indicators were more than the sum of the rest tweets in July 2012. The most influential tweet in the 51 tweets is the one issuing the orange rainstorm warning signal in 26th July, of which the number of views or exposure amounts was 21.4 million, and 71% of the participating users were with positive attitude and praised highly of the tweet’s positive role as well as the official account’s active responses. The data of the numbers, repost or forwarding and comments regarding the weather from 21st July to 1st August are presented in figure 2.

The heavy rainstorm in Tianjin is the most influential event since Tianjin Municipality Government registered the weibo account in the end of 2011. During this phase, “*Tianjin Release*” had won a large number of followers and the highest degree of influence through not only publishing the information regarding the committed public sectors’ force and resources, the rainstorm and flood control measures, rescue measures and contingency plan; but also the timely posting useful information and tips regarding the abnormal weather as well as actively interacting with its followers. It no longer mechanically post information that every daily newspaper has; instead, the account had become an online communication tool, and made the residents feel that the government really cared about them. When people ask urgent questions or information in need, the account could always reply in time or response directly; the tweets it had posted became the evidence of self-transform. In other words, Tianjin Municipality Government had abandoned the traditional one-way mode of solely publishing short and brief official information, and instead pursued openness and responsiveness: it explored to actively publish detailed information and timely interact with the public through its official weibo account, in the expectation to enhance its level of trust. Since then, “*Tianjin Release*” started to keep posting tweets in this mode. Considering the positive effect, its transform seemed to be successful. According to the *2013 Development Report of China’s Rule of Law*, the level of

trust of Tianjin Municipality Government had been significantly improved, and ranked among the top three in China's provincial-level government ranking list of trust regarding the openness in 2012.¹⁰

2.3. The restriction of the purchase and utilization of private vehicles in urban Tianjin in 2013 and 2014

Tianjin government formally announced the policy of restriction of the purchase and utilization of private vehicles on December 15th 2013. The “double restrictions” refer to that each resident living in the urban area of Tianjin can only purchase one car via license-plate lottery or license-plate auction, and each car cannot be driven on road in one day of the week from 7:00 to 19:00 according to the tail number of the license plate, in order to reduce the severe traffic load.¹¹ This controversial policy makes Tianjin the third city limiting the purchase and utilization of private vehicles nationwide.

Before the order was issued, *Tianjin Release* had posted a tweet asking the public opinions and testing the public response on September 9th. It tweeted that the possibility of restriction on the purchase and utilization of private vehicles is little, but the some experts claimed that the traffic congestion problem consistently challenge the overall living condition of the urban area of Tianjin, and it need further actions to converse the trend, such as to develop urban rail transit. The forwarding and comments of the that tweet were 51 and 25 respectively, and most comments supported the idea of developing rail, and some comments worried about that the aim of this tweet was only to let the public calm down and do not panic purchase the cars. There was no further information about that in the following 3 months. While Tianjin government suddenly issued the order to restricted the purchase and utilization of private vehicles at 19:00 of December 15th without warning, and enforced the order of restricting purchase the next day, and restricting utilization in March 2014. This controversial action made Tianjin the third city limiting the purchase and utilization of cars nationwide, and caught the public strong repercussion. However, *Tianjin Release* did not posted any tweets about that until 4 days later, it only stated that the policy of restricting purchase and utilization of private vehicles is concerned by general residents, and further regulation would be made in the following days. There were 31 forwardings and 24 comments of that tweet, of which the majority complained and criticized that the “double restrictions policy” is unreasonable and would cause troubles and inconvenience of the public daily life.¹² Regarding on the restriction on the utilization of cars, *Tianjin Release* posted a tweet on February 28th, reminding the residents to pay attention to the tail numbers of their vehicle license-plate, as the policy of restriction would be implemented the next day.¹³ There were 119 forwardings and 32 comments of that tweet, and most of them complained and criticized that the policy was unreasonable and could cause a series of problems.

The forwardings and comments of the tweets put forward several major questions. Firstly, when making such policy and decision, why did not first present the draft to the National People's Congress and answer questions of National People's Congress and Chinese People's

Political Consultative Conference? Secondly, why did the government issue the order so quickly without leaving space and time for public debate? Thirdly, why did the government ignore the suggestions and opinions of academic scholars that consider it was inappropriate time to implement such policy? Fourthly, is it necessary to implement the “double restrictions” as the amount of vehicles of Tianjin is far less than that of Beijing and Shanghai, which were precedent cities to implement the restriction policy? Fifthly, how to make balance between the restriction policy and the national encouragement policy for new energy vehicles? Lastly, why did the official new media tool post the government decision so late? In other words, those questions are the touchstone for the openness and responsiveness for the government and its new media tool. The government owed the explanation to those questions, and the weibo became the platform for the government expound. However, its restricted responsiveness clarifies its little openness. *Tianjin Release* did not answer the most questions but one with regard to the new energy vehicles: it posted a tweet on March 11th 2014, three months after the double restrictions policy was issued, announcing that the residents who buy the new energy vehicles could get license-plate freely. It could hardly say that *Tianjin Release* ignored the feelings and demands of the public, as it kept posted tweets reminding the public the restricted tail number of vehicles daily from September 18th to October 12th 2014, lasting less than one months.

It was regarded as a sign that the government had stepped backward to the traditional mode to a certain extent. The official weibo account postponed the controversial policy announcement avoided most questions from the public, reflected a avoidant feature. However, there shall be a certain degree of possibility that the government is exploring to the new media era, as the official weibo account still respond to the public and post warm prompt, though little and short, during this phase.

2.4. The arrest of a high-ranked official of Tianjin in 2014

In July 20th, Dr. Wu Changshun, the former Police Chief and Vice Chairman of CPPCC of Tianjin, was dismissed and under arrested and investigated for suspected seriously violations of laws.¹⁴ Dr. Wu was one of the highest ranking official in China that was dismissed and arrested during national anti-corruption movement since 2013, and was one of the most controversial figure in Tianjin for his oppressive style and suspected collusion with the local interest groups. Dr. Wu was considered by some medias and critics that should have been arrested in 2007, when Song Pingshun, the former Secretary of Politic and Law Committee and Chairman of CPPCC of Tianjin, conducted suicide. Mr. Song was superior leader of Dr. Wu when alive, so when Mr. Song conducted suicide for suspected crimes, the public believed that Dr. Wu would be arrested soon.¹⁵ Finally, Dr. Wu was dismissed, but after a really long period.

As slow as the pace of Dr. was arrested, *Tianjin Release* surprisingly delayed posting the tweet about that information five days later, jointly with the information about the appointment of the new Police Chief.¹⁶ There were 75 forwardings and 43 comments of that tweet, and the exposure amounts were 2.16 million; and most of the forwardings and comments questioned

Tianjin Release that why the information was posted so late, in addition to scold and expose the well known suspected crimes of Wu Changshun. Some comments directly asked why Dr. Wu was arrested so late rather than 2007, as his major suspected crimes were conducted before that time and was noticed by officials of the Ministry of Supervision when Mr. Song conducted suicide; some other comments pointed out that the man protected Dr. Wu was Zhou Yongkang, the former member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and asked whether this arrest was a the current leaders' assault for the political opponents.

However, the government's official weibo account did not only ignore all the questions and inquiries, but also blocked comments for that tweet. *Tianjin Release* closed the message board and comment section since July 27th 2014 for about several days, and even deleted most tweets relating to Dr. Wu. When it posted the tweet announcing Dr. Wu was formally under censorship of accreditation on February 13th 2015, the majority of the 38 forwardings and 21 comments complained the action that *Tianjin Release* blocked comments and messages previously, and questioned why the relating interest groups and stakeholders were free from charged. The response of *Tianjin Release* was ignore all the inquiries and to block the comments since the afternoon of that day for another several days.

The government was considered to go backward to the traditional media era, even worse. In the traditional media era, the government would just leave the comments and messages and ignore the public opinions; while concerning the arrest of Dr. Wu, the most concerned and hottest public event in the second-half of 2014, the government' weibo account delayed the announcement, ignored the public inquiries, and even began to block comments and delete information. The openness and responsiveness were considered to be fading away. The public was probably aware of the tendency of the government's media to go backward to the old mode, since the amount of exposure and concern for *Tianjin Release* had been declining dramatically, according to the figure analyzed.

3. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

This study finds that there are four periods throughout the process of Tianjin government's exploration to improve the level of trust by utilizing microblog. In the initial stage, Tianjin government regarded the weibo platform as an extension of the traditional media tool, and was reluctant to make changes. In the second stage, Tianjin government abandoned the traditional one-way mode of publishing official information, and instead explored to actively publish information and interact with the public through its official account at weibo, in the expectation to enhance its level of trust. During this phase, the level of trust of Tianjin government had been significantly improved, and ranked among the top three in China's official ranking list of trust. However, in the third phase, when some sensitive events emerge or controversial policies being implemented, the government's way of dealing with the public opinion and concern tended to become backward, which include the restrictive opening of information and avoidant response to the public inquiries; the government even delete some public comments in its

microblog in order to avoid the enhancement of the sensitivity, causing its level of trust started to decline in the public view to a certain level. At the last phase, as the government's one-way mode of publishing short and vague information without any response and interaction in the microblog becoming increasingly serious, the impact (in terms of the numbers of forwarding or repost, comment as well as linkage clicks) of Tianjin government and its major constituting departments' official microblog accounts have been getting weak to a considerable degree, and even there have been non comments and forwarding in the major governmental departments' microblog accounts for several weeks, which shows that the lack of openness and responsiveness has been lowering the level of trust and concern of government in the public perspective.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. The comparison of the tweets posted by *Tianjin Release* and some mainstream medias on the fire even on June 30th 2012

Accounts	forwardings/ repost	comments	exposure amounts
Tianjin Release	71	75	1.6 million
Caijing News	349	167	14.4 million
Caixin News	481	102	4.9 million
People's Daily	214	363	20.9 million
Sina News	1388	1479	140.9 million

Figure 2. The numbers, repost or forwarding and comments regarding the weather from 21st July to 1st August

Date	Numbers	Forwardings	Comments	Exposure amounts
July 21 st	4	266	80	2.7 million
July 22 nd	2	49	15	0.7 million
July 23 rd	2	49	12	0.7 million
July 24 th	3	71	20	1.3 million
July 25 th	5	418	97	4.6 million
July 26 th	13	1882	476	21.4 million
July 27 th	6	289	131	2.9 million
July 28 th	4	147	121	1.9 million

July 29 th	3	79	34	1.4 million
July 30 th	3	242	60	2.8 million
July 31 st	2	90	16	1.5 million
August 1 st	4	108	36	1.8 million
All	51	3690	1098	43.7 million