Technology and Journalism: 'Dissolving' social media content into disaster reporting on three Chinese disasters

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Abstract

This article examines how three Chinese and two British newspapers sourced content from social media in their coverage of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the 2013 Ya'an Earthquake and the 2015 Tianjin Explosion. The media outlets' citing of social media content present different patterns in line with their political and commercial interests, ideologies and journalistic values. Diverse images of the three disasters as revealed on social media (social media reality) were constructed in the newspapers' coverage. Journalists gate-keep information from social media and dissolve it into daily disaster reporting, accepting selected aspects of social media reality but rejecting others. Especially in the case of the Chinese newspapers, meeting the needs of domestic political and commercial interest groups, journalists endorse social media content that is favourable to these groups. In so doing, social media technologies are used and tailored to meet the needs of journalism.

Keywords: Social media technologies, news sourcing, disaster reporting, foreign news, and Chinese journalism

Introduction

More than a decade ago, in the editorial article for a themed issue of the journal Journalism, Waisbord asked a number of questions about the future of journalism under the impact of digital technology (Waisbord, 2001). The three articles included in the special issue addressed three aspects of the possible impact and these have acted as inspirations ford future studies on the topics raised (Russell, 2001; Garrison, 2001; Ursell, 2001). These studies raise questions about the relationship between journalism and technology, such as: Can the use of technology change journalism and journalistic practices? If that is the case, then in a good way or in a bad way? Or will the use of technology be tailored to meet the needs of journalism?

These questions are still valid today, as new and ever changing technologies continue to present the potential for changes in journalism. This offers ongoing implications for our understanding of the relationship between technology and journalism. The analysis in the present study of how five newspapers cited social media content in their coverage of three Chinese disasters provides some answers to these questions. The three disasters selected are the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the 2013 Ya'an Earthquake, and the 2015 Tianjin Explosion. We have examined the first week's post-disaster coverage in five newspapers: the *People's Daily* (*PD*)[1], the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (*SMD*)[2], the *Huaxi Metropolitan Daily* (*HMD*)[3], the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*)[4] and the *Daily Telegraph* (and *Sunday Telegraph*)[5]. The choice of (Chinese) domestic and foreign (British) newspapers and of China's party and commercial organs offers us a prism through which we can understand the role played by cultural factors - in particular China's authoritarian political culture, newspapers' commercial interests, ideologies, editorial values and principles - in the use of

social media by different media outlets. Such an understanding enables us to find out whether technology in general - and social media technologies in particular - are so powerful that they can diminish the influence of cultural factors on news reports and lead to a homogenised use of social media content by both Chinese and British newspapers.

Social media, news sourcing, and disaster reporting

Social media technologies allow users to communicate, interact and share data instantly. The rise of social media has resulted in changes in the practices and cultures of journalism. Journalistic sourcing is one thing that the prevalence of social media might change (Hermida, 2013). How journalists identify and select news sources comprises an essential part of the gate-keeping process (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Despite the interdependency between journalism and news sources (Strömbäck et al., 2013), not everyone can have their voice heard in news reports. It is journalists and editors, the gatekeepers, who decide whose views will be cited and in which ways, and they have their reasons for selecting the sources. Journalists have been found to be inclined to go to high-profile (official and elite) news sources for information (Davis, 2007; Manning, 2001; Reich, 2009; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, 1983; Shehata, 2010; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Strömbäck et al., 2013). This is partly because high-profile news sources are often regarded as being more reliable and credible than low-profile sources. In addition, when pressurised by deadlines, journalists tend to turn to familiar news sources or press releases to gain instant and reliable information to be included in their reports. Consequently, they may over-rely on particular (high-profile) news sources that they cite regularly, and their news reports contribute to exercising social control and reinforcing the status quo.

The proliferation of information on social media platforms appears to have the potential to break the dominance of official and elite news sources in news coverage. One reason for this is that, in theory, the information created and published by social media users can broaden journalists' access to information, help them reach out to key people in time, and flatten the differences between news sources in terms of their accessibility. However, this is not always true in reality, as pointed out by the small but burgeoning literature studying the ways social media is sourced in the news. Drawing on empirical data collected from different geographical places, studies (such as Broersma and Graham, 2012; Jha, 2007; Leuven et al., 2015; Leuven et al., 2014; Paulussen and Harder, 2014; Shan, 2014; Lee, 2012; Hladík and Štětka, 2015) more or less come to the same conclusion that – with the exception of particular categories, such as eyewitness accounts - mainstream media still liked to cite offline sources, and news sourcing patterns have not much changed. On some exceptional occasions where journalists cite information from ordinary Twitter users, this information is only used to represent the voice of the people (Broersma and Graham, 2012; Knight, 2012; Hermida, 2013). Variations also exist in relation to sourcing social media in news. Business/financial journalists in the United States were found making little use of social media to gain story ideas and tips (Lariscy et al., 2009). In the Czech Republic when covering domestic affairs, news media are likely to use social media as news sources, and tabloids like to cite social media more than quality news media (Hladík and Štětka, 2015). Other studies (such as Lee, 2012; Tong, 2013; Tong, 2015a) point out that in the Chinese context the principles and values of conventional news reporting are still influencing the way in which news media quote information gained from social media, and that the patterns of news sourcing are more or less unchanged. These studies demonstrate that, rather than being driven by the enormous amount of information circulating on social

media, journalists only select and source information that they need, and they do so in line with their own rules.

Is the situation different when it comes to disaster reporting? Disaster reporting itself is no exception with regards to journalists' reliance on prestigious and official news sources (Miller and Goidel, 2009; Swain 2012). Nevertheless, in disaster situations there may be an unusually frequent appearance of ordinary citizens in news coverage, talking about their personal experiences of the disaster. It may especially be the case for those news media outlets who assign their so-called 'parachute' reporters to report disasters in foreign territories; as they may not have easy access to local authorities they are more likely to circumvent this obstacle by giving a voice to ordinary citizens, such as victims of the disasters (Miller and Goidel, 2009; Walters and Hornig, 1993).

In disaster reporting, apart from the limited access to sources and the time allowed to collect information, source selection is also affected by a number of underlying social and institutional factors. Social contextual factors such as cultural, political and social traits and the national interests of different countries are often used to explain the differences in the media representation of disasters (He and Tiefenbacher, 2008; Jha and Izard, 2005). For example, national interests and cultures are often used to explain the variations in sourcing patterns (Bennett and Daniel, 2002; Lee and Kim, 2008; Lancaster, 2008). In addition, the commercial and political interests and ideology of news organisations are regarded as responsible for certain patterns of news sourcing, such as that in the case of the NASA tragedy (Sumpter and Garner, 2007).

Disasters are a powerful catalyst for use of the Internet by citizens to seek information about what is happening and about the situation of friends and relatives, as well as to

communicate with others (Hughes and Palen, 2009; Murthy and Longwell, 2013). Social media have been among the most pervasive and powerful digital technologies that have been increasingly used in disaster management (Kireyev et al., 2009; Palen et al., 2010). NGOs such as the Nation's Health have recognised the importance of using social media in disaster management (Palen et al., 2010; Tucker, 2011). Governments also have social media strategies for situations such as weather-related events (Carter et al., 2014). Given its heavy use in times of disasters, social media can offer journalists not only lots of eye-witness accounts but also an easy and de-territorialised access to all kinds of related activities and social actors such as officers, aid organisations, victims, victims' relatives, and donors. So, we can ask a number of research questions about how it is used. What is most quoted from social media in disaster reports and for what purposes (RQ1)? What image of social media reality (reality about the disasters as revealed on social media) is represented in the social media content quoted (RQ2)? Has the attention of news media to social media content increased over time along with the development of social media (RQ3)? Through answering these questions, we aim to generate some knowledge about the relationship between (social media) technology and journalism.

The case study

In this paper, the three research questions are discussed and answered through examining the social media content cited in the coverage of three Chinese disasters in five newspapers. Considering their severity and impacts on Chinese society, we selected the following three disasters: the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the 2013 Ya'an Earthquake, and the 2015 Tianjin Explosion. In 2008, a devastating earthquake struck Wenchuan, Sichuan Province, with nearly 70,000 fatalities. This was the strongest earthquake since the establishment of the

People's Republic of China. The collapse of many school buildings, while other structures were left standing, ignited the anger of the public and many pointed to corrupt officials and local governments as responsible for this because of shoddy construction. Despite the launch of an official inspection, domestic media in China were forbidden from reporting on this issue. Five years later, in 2013, another deadly earthquake hit Ya'an, Sichuan Province. Hundreds of people died in this disaster. In August, 2015, a series of explosions in massive chemical warehouses in Tianjin shocked the world, took more than a hundred citizens' lives and raised huge public concern over the aftermath in terms of pollution and the regulation of the transportation and storage of hazardous and flammable chemicals. A large number of firemen were killed. The subsequent official investigation held relatives and friends of some high-ranking officials responsible for the accident. The two earthquakes were natural disasters, occurring with different levels of severity, and the Tianjin explosion was man-made, though the issue of the school collapses indicates that natural disasters often have differential consequences which are due to human actions This choice of cases was in order to give us an insight into whether the nature and severity levels of the disasters impacted the sourcing of social media in news reports and also whether there were longitudinal changes across the eight years from 2008 to 2015.

The three Chinese newspapers- the *PD*, the *SMD*, and the *HMD* were selected because of their different editorial policies and geographical locations. The *PD*, based in Beijing, is the most important party organ of the Chinese Communist Party. The other two are two metropolitan newspapers with strong market orientations. In contrast with the *HMD*, the *SMD* has a tradition of critical investigative journalism that aims to exercise a public supervision function. The *HMD* is based in Sichuan Province where the two earthquakes

occurred, while the *SMD* is based in Guangdong Province. In reporting the two earthquakes, the *HMD* was the only local newspaper. All three newspapers are out-of-town newspapers in terms of covering the Tianjin Explosion. Examining the performance of these three newspapers therefore will offer us an understanding of the influence of political culture, newspapers' commercial interests, editorial policies and geographical locations on the selection of social media content. The study also examined the coverage of the three Chinese disasters in the two British quality papers as a comparison with, and a reference point for, the analysis of the Chinese newspapers. While The *Guardian* is well-known for its left-leaning editorial policies, the *Daily Telegraph* is equally known to be right-leaning. Both thus may have varied attitudes toward China-related and disaster-related news. By including these two British newspapers and their Sunday publications, the study hopes to discover the role played by access to information and national interests as well as the ideologies of news organisations in sourcing social media in their coverage of foreign disasters. It is of interest to the study whether or not social media technologies can erase the influence of these cultural factors.

The three Chinese newspapers operate in China's authoritarian political culture. Since the 1980s media reforms, overall control of the media by the party-state in China has not fundamentally changed, though it has been accompanied by an increasing complexity in the state-media relationship. On the one hand, we should acknowledge that certain levels of journalistic autonomy were facilitated by the introduction of the market, and there was a revival of occupational consciousness among journalists - especially those working for critical media (Stockmann, 2012; Tong, 2011). On the other hand, we must be aware that the ultimate state control of the media is able to take away such positive changes at any

time. It is also important to note that the fact that the media system is designed to match the administrative system in China provides an effective mechanism and structure for media control. There is a hierarchy in the Chinese media system: The *People's Daily* and *CCTV* are positioned at the top of the propaganda hierarchy, successively followed by news media at the central, provincial and city levels. Propaganda departments have the right to control the practice of news media at the same, or directly lower, administrative levels. Apart from political control, commercial news media such as metropolitan newspapers may be influenced by market forces as well, as they must secure profits for themselves (Zhao, 2012; Zhao, 2008; Lee et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2006; Sun, 2010). The Internet was first introduced into China in the late 1990s and has boomed since then. Forums, blogs and more recently social media have been quite active and are believed to have catalysed social and political changes (Lagerkvist, 2010; Tang and Sampson, 2011). The Internet has already had an impact on the practices of journalism, both for good and for ill - for example by bringing in an enlarged reporting space for journalism - though they may also threaten journalistic legitimacy (Xin, 2010; Tong, 2015b). The Internet has also increased Chinese journalism's commercial competitiveness and its expression space (Hassid and Repnikova, 2015).

When disasters occurred, in the past the Chinese government prevented any information about them from reaching the public. Prominent among these were the 1975 Henan Reservoirs Collapse and the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake. More than 200,000 local residents lost their lives in both tragedies, but neither was mentioned in public for more than ten years. In the case of the Henan disaster the media were silent for more than twenty years. Such shameful cover-ups were mainly the result of concerns by the Chinese government over social stability (Fu et al., 2010). The situation in terms of disaster reporting has

dramatically changed since then. At present, the news media are at least allowed to cover some disasters, especially natural disasters. What is more striking is that natural disaster reporting may actually be used to serve the interests of the government. The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, for instance, is depicted as an event "uniting the hearts of common people" and establishing a "people-centred myth" (Kondo et al., 2012: p72; Yin and Wang, 2010). The coverage of the earthquake reinforced the ideals of social harmony that the Chinese government wants to propagate. In this sense, it is possible that reports on natural disasters may be welcomed by the Chinese government if they do not touch on any politically sensitive issues, such as those about accountability or the failure of governance. In terms of man-made disasters, however, there are more areas that the news media cannot touch. Generally speaking, news media from the higher-administrative levels and from outside of the- locality enjoy relatively more reporting autonomy than those media based in the places where disasters happen. However, this does not mean that those media who have some autonomy can perform well. In He and Tiefenbacher's study, to take an example, the coverage of a bridge collapse in Guangdong by the *People's Daily* (a newspaper from the highest administrative level) and the *Shanghai Daily* (a newspaper from outside of the town) were found to be relying on feeds of government information and focusing on on-scene descriptions and the consequences of the collapse, without raising questions about accountability and pre-disaster warnings (He and Tiefenbacher, 2008). In their study, the control of the media is still evident in the coverage, although both newspapers were relatively free to report on the disaster in theory. Therefore, there may not be significant differences between newspapers, no matter if they are party organs or commercial newspapers and whether or not they are based in different geographical locations and from

outside the locality. Therefore, it is possible that the three Chinese newspapers all cite social media content to sing the song of social harmony.

For the two British newspapers, coverage about the disasters occurring in China is by definition foreign coverage. In the literature of international communication, historically there is a common argument that foreign coverage is always about negative things (Riffe, 1993; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Simon et al., 1989; Natarajan and Hao, 2003; Goss, 2015). A number of factors influence the production and selection of foreign news for coverage in media elsewhere in the world. The factors include national traits, national identity and national frames, the taste and interests of the local audience, a geographical, political or cultural affinity, organizational determinants, the dynamics of news production in each particular media organization, news factors in news organizations and so on (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Gurevitch, 1991; Nossek, 2004; Clausen, 2004). The coverage of China in British news media is often about important and dramatic events and influenced by the media outlet's political orientation and readership (Sparks, 2010). In Sparks' study, elite newspapers such as the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* give extensive, serious and regular attention and more coverage to what happens in China than popular newspapers such as the *Mail*. These foreign media outlets now have their own correspondents in China. However an interesting study by Swert and Wouters finds that stationing foreign correspondents in China does not make a big difference to the general image of China constructed in Belgian television news broadcasts (Swert and Wouters, 2011). From the discussion here we can assume that if we focus on elite newspapers in the UK such as the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*, we will find that social media content cited about the three disasters in China is likely to focus on the negative aspects of the disasters,

fear and the problems of governance such as statism and corruption, similar to the findings about the coverage of the International Herald Tribune/International New York Times (Goss, 2015).

Research Design

The present study examines how the five newspapers cite social media content when covering three Chinese disasters. It examines context units surrounding the names of nine social media in the reports on these disasters. The nine selected social media are Twitter, Weibo, Facebook, Blog (*bo ke*), Fanfou, Forum (*lun tan*), MSN, QQ, WeChat and Internet (*wang luo*). These social media applications are the most important ones used in both Chinese and British contexts. Context units refer to word combinations that contain the name of the social medium. In the actual analysis process, we have usually included the sentence or the paragraph where the name of a social medium appears, but we also read the paragraphs immediately before and after the location in which the name is mentioned and included the paragraphs that we felt most relevant in a context unit for further analysis. Below is an example of a context unit:

> "On China's popular microblogging platform Weibo, some users complain that their posts about the blasts have been deleted, and the number of searchable posts on the disaster fluctuated, in a sign that authorities are manipulating or placing limits on the number of posts." (cited from The Guardian, "*China blasts: fireball from Tianjin explosions injures hundreds and kills at least 44*", by Claire Phipps, August 13, 2015)

We chose context units as the analysis unit because the focus of the study is on social media content quoted in news reports rather than on the whole reports. The study is inspired by the idea of context units proposed by Osgood and others (Osgood et al., 1957). Osgood and

his collaborators proposed examining context units because they view the meaning of cultural objects as influenced by the linguistic contexts that surround these words. Their study provides the underpinning of the present research in that it supports the notion that we can focus on examining context units comprising and surrounding the names of social media in order to comprehend the meaning of the cited social media content conveyed in the reports.

The study focuses on the reports published within the first week after the disasters happened. The sampling periods of time are thus between 12 and 18 May, 2008, between 20 and 26 April, 2013, and between 12 and 18 August, 2015. Reports in The *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* and their respective Sunday titles were collected from the Lexis/Nexis database. The Chinese reports were assembled from the WiseNews database. The following keywords were used to search and collect the sample: "Wenchuan", "Wenchuan earthquake (dizheng)", "Yan'an", "Yan'an earthquake", "Lushan[6]", "Lushan earthquake" and "Tianjin explosion (baozha)". All articles included in the dataset for the following analysis are closely related to the disasters. That is to say, any articles that only mention the disasters but have no meaningful content about them have been removed from the dataset.

The numbers of articles analysed are displayed in Table 1. From this table, we will see that all five newspapers have given a quite significant amount of attention to the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. It is understandable in the light of its severity. The *SMD* especially devoted an extraordinary amount of space to its coverage of this natural disaster. Overall, this newspaper gave more coverage to all three disasters, compared with any of the other four newspapers and even than the *HMD*, which is based in Sichuan Province, where the two earthquakes took place. It is not a surprise to see that generally the three disasters

received more coverage in the Chinese newspapers than in the British newspapers. The present qualitative analysis pays a particular attention to the quality rather than the quantity of the reports.

[Table 1 is about here]

All the reports were uploaded to NVivo for a detailed qualitative analysis. The analysis focused on exploring the patterns and main themes emerging in the context units within the texts. There were three steps in the actual analysis stage. First, the names of all nine social media networks were searched as keywords in the texts of all articles. After a careful and close reading (Moretti, 2013), where social media were mentioned in a meaningful manner, relevant context units before and after the names were selected. Normally the paragraphs where the names appeared were selected. But in some instances, several paragraphs before or after the locations of the names were selected for further analysis. The selection and inclusion of texts depended on their relevance. Second, these selected examples were closely read and coded for the subsequent analysis, in which we looked for patterns and themes. In some cases, we also read the whole news report and even examined the background of the article in order to understand the meaning of selected context units. Particular attention was paid to three aspects of the content in the coding process: what the content was about, what reality the content constructed, and what functions the use of the content might have. An inductive approach was adopted in the coding and analysis process. Third, the codes (and coded content where necessary) were closely examined again by using a number of functions, such as the Matrix coding offered by NVivo to look for prominent patterns across them and emerging themes. Patterns and themes were grouped in order to generate meanings from them.

Findings

In total, the Chinese newspapers quoted content from social media 131 times, while their British counterparts did so only nine times; the *Daily Telegraph* and its Sunday newspaper did not use any information from social media at all. Therefore, the quantities convey an ostensible impression that overall the Chinese newspapers paid more attention to information on social media about the three disasters than their British counterparts. However, if we take into account the total numbers of articles published by the Chinese and British newspapers about these disasters, the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) in fact referenced social media quite frequently.

The use of social media content in newspaper reports is far from being homogeneous. Prominent variations exist between British and Chinese newspapers, with the former using lots of eye-witness accounts and the latter citing social media content to meet their political and commercial interests. In the coverage of the latter, social media content, little of which was eye-witness accounts, was cited primarily to exercise social control and maintain social harmony and on rare occasions to serve the public interest.

Research question one asked about the nature of the social media content that is most quoted in news and the functions it has, while research question two examined the image of reality that was constructed in the social media content cited. Overall, the social content cited in the news serves three functions: 1) to provide information about the disasters or disaster-related issues, 2) to exercise social control and 3) to serve the public interest. In both Chinese and British newspapers, the largest proportion (nearly 73% altogether) of social media content cited was to provide information about what has happened in the disasters, such as about how affected areas and citizens are being supported, what actions

commercial organisations and famous individuals have taken to support individuals and areas affected, what sad but touching stories have emerged, and who the victims are. Content of this type encompasses an array of information ranging from eye-witness accounts and heroic stories to facts about the support being given. All the five Chinese newspapers and the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) sourced such informative social media content. But the difference between Chinese and British newspapers was that the first type of social media content cited by the Chinese newspapers was mostly about how the affected areas and people were supported by famous individuals and companies, while that cited by the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) was about eye-witness accounts of the disastrous aftermaths of the disasters.

Meanwhile, a small amount (about 15%) of social media content quoted was intended to exercise social control by debunking stories on social media as fake or based on rumours or by exposing criminal activities on social media intended to exploit the disaster for personal gain. All three Chinese newspapers, especially the *PD*, cited the second type of content, but no British newspapers did so. In addition, interestingly, a slight proportion (about 11.5%) of cited content acted in the public interest as it monitored the activities of governments and prestigious individuals. This included trying to hold somebody accountable for the disasters, revealing governmental faults and censorship, calling for government investigations or questioning the activities of privileged individuals and organisations. This third type of information was mostly cited by the *SMD* and the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*).

The *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) mainly cited the eye-witness accounts of the disasters posted by ordinary (low-profile) internet users. These were descriptions of videos or translated texts describing disaster scenes or explaining the experiences of ordinary citizens.

There were two exceptions. When reporting on the Tianjin explosion the Weibo announcement by the Binhai New District government in Tianjin City explaining why fire-fighting efforts had been suspended was quoted. The Guardian also quoted complaints by Weibo users about the deleting of their posts, which revealed the government's online censorship (this context unit has been cited above). Therefore, The *Guardian* referenced social media mainly to exercise the informative function though with a slight attempt to address the public interest by exposing the existence of online censorship. With the focus on eyewitness accounts of the disasters, the cited content conveys the catastrophic nature of the three disasters and reveals the media control by the Chinese government.

By contrast, eye-witness accounts of the disasters were not the main genre of content the Chinese newspapers sourced from social media. Of informative social media content quoted, the proportion of eye-witness accounts quoted from social media is tiny (about 6% of the total cited social media content) in the Chinese newspapers' coverage. The *PD* did not source any eye-witness content from social media at all. This party organ only quoted social media content three times. Each time the content was created by low-profile Internet users, which was proved to be based on rumour, and it cited offline high-profile official and academic elite news sources to refute such content. During the Ya'an earthquake, for example, the newspaper published a news article in its column called *'Seeking Truth, Endless Verification* (*tansuo zhenxiang qiuzheng buzhi*)'. This report acts as an interesting example of how the party organ cites social media content to reinforce social control. This column was launched in 2011, aiming to 'fight' and to refute online rumours, to correct negative online sentiments in Chinese society, to reveal the 'true' versions of these online "rumours"

and to promote rationality (VerificationColumnofthePeople'sDaily, 2014). In this report, the newspaper summarily quoted online discussions about official and online civil predictions:

> "Since the 4/20 Sichuan Lushan earthquake, a lot of Internet users have heatedly discussed whether earthquakes can be predicted" (*Can earthquakes be accurately predicted*? The *People's Daily*, April 26, 2013)

The background for this report is that after the Ya'an earthquake took place, in one vigorous online discussion Internet users praised some predictions made by civilians online which turned out to be true, while questioning why the government did not provide accurate earthquake predictions. The whole article relies heavily on high-ranking experts in China, Taiwan and Japan and uses the words of elites (scientists) and regulations to prove that online arguments cited in the context unit are rumours and should not have been published in the first place. As a consequence, the party organ has constructed a reality and an image of social media in which social media networks circulate rumours about disasters (and thus cannot be trusted) and those Internet users who circulate them may even need to be punished.

Another example of this is during the Tianjin explosion, when a video became popular online. Internet users believed this video was about the attempt of Chinese officials to prevent a foreign correspondent from interviewing victims in a hospital. One of the *PD*'s two reports on this tragedy briefly introduces the information about the video first and then explains this is not true and the person who is seen stopping the foreign man in the video is actually a relative or friend of a victim rather than an official. The article quotes the comments of a local official in Tianjin to this effect, as well as the remarks made by its own author. This type of social media content quoted by the party organ and the way it quotes it

exercises a surveillance function, in order to monitor ordinary citizens and to exercise social control.

Social media content was cited frequently for social control purposes across the three Chinese newspapers and in the context of all three disasters. Like the *PD*, both metropolitan newspapers also cite social media content for the sake of maintaining social order, through exposing online information to be based on rumours or fraud. In addition, three prominent patterns emerge in the two commercial dailies' sourcing of social media content. First, most of the cited content was informative and supports social harmony. More than half of such quoted informative content informed readers of the support received by affected areas or individuals and given by famous individuals and commercial organisations - financial and blood donations in particular. Only very little of the cited social media content was about the rescue operations themselves. The rest of the cited content consists of heroic stories about victims and their relatives and friends and about how people sacrificed themselves or helped those in need. There was a rapid rise in the number of heroic stories about firemen who died in the 2015 Tianjin explosion.

Second, celebrity and commercial entities occupied central roles in the cited informative social media content concerning charitable action. Both metropolitan newspapers gave extensive attention to the support provided by famous individuals and organisations, especially celebrity and commercial companies, to those affected areas and citizens. The *HMD* also gave lots of publicity to the support donated by its own newspaper organisation. This was particularly prominent in 2013. For these newspapers, the actions of celebrities and commercial companies and how affected the areas and people were supported (rather than rescued) are obviously more important than the process of recording history through

eye-witness accounts. Such a focus on charitable acts by celebrities and commercial entities reflects their commercial interests. It is possible that they are their advertisers, and also running stories about celebrities boosts circulation.

Third, the *SMD* stands out in its attempt to serve the public interest by paying attention to the social media content that tries to hold powerful individuals and entities to account for responsibility for the disasters or their effects. Very interestingly, the newspaper tried to exercise its surveillance function in its coverage of the 2008 earthquake, by questioning the responsibility of governments and individuals with regards to the collapse of school buildings. This fits in with its critical journalism tradition. This suggests journalistic values are more important than where the news outlets are based (in other terms, whether or not they are outside-of-the locality).

As a result, what is very interesting here is the different images of social media reality that have been constructed by these newspapers as the result of performing their gate-keeping function. The message conveyed by the fact that nothing was quoted from social media by the *Daily Telegraph* (and *Sunday Telegraph*) was that there was nothing of interest about these three disasters on social media. In the reports of the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*), the social media reality about the disasters is mainly concerned with their catastrophic nature. In the three Chinese newspapers, especially the *PD*, however, a construction of social media is revealed as a place where people have done something bad: making up stories, circulating rumours and even conducting activities which attempt to exploit the situations and the victims. For the *HMD* and the *SMD*, social media is the place where people - in particular celebrities and commercial companies - do charitable things. For the *SMD*, apart from the same image as that woven by the *HMD*, the image of social media is also related to Internet

users' challenge to the government and privileged individuals who were responsible for or exacerbated the aftermath of the disasters. This reflects its tradition of critical investigative reporting.

Research question three asked whether the attention to social media content is changing over time. What is striking is that the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) have paid an increasing amount of attention to social media content over these years, while the Chinese newspapers much more actively cited information from social media during the two earthquakes in 2008 and 2013 than in the 2015 Tianjin explosion (more than four times as much). The *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) did not reference anything from social media in 2008 but cited one piece of content in 2011 and 8 in 2015. This tendency makes sense as social media are becoming more pervasive as time goes by.

On the Chinese side, however, the amount of social media content increased from 2008 to 2013 but plunged in 2015. In addition, the diversity of quoted social media content has declined over time. In 2008, all three types of information (informative, social control and public interest) were quoted. Most of the social media content cited was informative and concerned what happened in the Wenchuan earthquake and about the donations and free services commercial organisations and celebrities provided to help victims. Despite that, there was a small amount of content cited by the *SMD*, questioning governments and pushing for inquiries such as investigations into the collapse of school buildings. Such public (interest) supervision content has clearly declined over these years. There was also a small proportion of information cited in order to be debunked as online 'rumours'. The amount of such social control content was stable across the three years. In 2013, the most prominent type of social media content cited was about celebrities and commercial organisations'

financial support and about the assistance, such as financial and blood donations, which those affected received. In 2015, the focus shifted to heroic stories such as those about firemen who died in the explosions, in order to increase social harmony.

The special patterns on the Chinese side have three implications. Firstly, media control in 2008 was at its loosest. This is reflected in the fact that the *SMD* managed to serve its public interest function in 2008, but only a small amount of social media content was quoted in 2015 and these were all about heart-warming heroic stories. Secondly, related to the first point, Chinese newspapers' use of social media is heavily influenced by the political atmosphere and media control, which suggests there is no heavy reliance on social media for information. Thirdly, the commercial and political interests of newspapers are the most important factors that influence their citing of social media content.

Discussion and conclusion

From the above discussion, one can see that social media are treated as a normal news source that is no different to conventional news sources. Social media technologies are not so powerful as to be able to diminish the influence of cultural factors. These newspapers continue to follow their own principles and interests to select content from social media. The opportunities offered by easy and de-territorialised access to social media are limited by the continued gate-keeping function of journalism, in which the cultural factors including the political and commercial interests, ideologies and editorial values of newspapers play their important parts. Journalists select certain aspects of social media reality to report on and decide which way to report them. Only in this way can social media reality be either refuted or justified by offline media as part of accepted media reality. Going back to the questions raised by Waisbord (2001) at the start of this paper, the findings emerging from

this case study confirm that the use of social media content is tailored to meet the needs of journalism. The consequence of this tailoring is that newspapers selectively construct and accept social media reality in their coverage and in so doing dissolve social media content and the impact of social media into their existing journalistic practices.

Cultural factors, especially the political and cultural interests, national interests and ideology of the newspapers, are the main reasons behind the patterns found in the sourcing of social media content in disaster reporting. For the *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) and the *Daily Telegraph* (and *Sunday Telegraph*), the three disasters happening on the other side of the earth only amount to a piece of foreign news that will not take up a great proportion of their coverage. The *Daily Telegraph* (and *Sunday Telegraph*) did not bother to consult social media for news sources. The *Guardian* (and the *Observer*) might have wanted to include some information about how people are affected in the disasters but have some difficulties in accessing victims of the disasters, although most of these reports were written by their correspondents in China, who are not really "parachute" journalists. As a result, the papers paid most attention to the eye-witness accounts or on-the-scene sights and experiences reported by low-profile victims. In addition, given the *Guardian*'s liberal tradition, it is not surprising to see they quoted social media content about government censorship. This feature found in the *Guardian* and its Sunday publication matches the findings of previous studies on international news (such as Riffe, 1993; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Simon et al., 1989; Natarajan and Hao, 2003; Goss, 2015).

As regards the Chinese newspapers, their sourcing of social media was obviously influenced by political culture. For example, the fading diversity and attention given to social media content over the time period under consideration, could be explained by the

declining number of reports on the Tianjin explosion itself, but another important reason could be the tightening of reporting policies and the narrowing of speech space since Xin Jinping came to power in 2012. It was also probably because the Tianjin explosion was a man-made disaster, and so theoretically someone should be held responsible for it, and therefore it was a politically sensitive event. In addition, it is in the interests of the ruling political party for these Chinese newspapers to act as authoritative gate-keepers to endorse particular social media content but to refuse and exclude other types. For these newspapers, these disasters were of course one of the most important topics during those periods of time. Given their severity and negativity, which match news selection criteria, if they were allowed by the propaganda departments, they would give a large amount of coverage to these events. But first and foremost they share the responsibility to orchestrate the rhythm of social harmony, as required by the government. This is why they all cite social media content that needs to be debunked as fake or based on rumours. In so doing they exercise social control. This is especially obvious for the *People's Daily*, whose function is to promote the official ideology and to achieve the consensus of the public. The lack of eye-witness accounts may result from the fact that these outlets probably have already interviewed victims or people affected and have got enough material of this kind. The reason for the absence of eye-witness accounts cited in their coverage may also be to avoid describing how bad the disasters were. For the sake of reinforcing social harmony, they need to stress the support that areas and individuals affected have received.

Apart from political culture, the economic interests and editorial values of these Chinese newspapers also underlie the patterns of their sourcing of social media. The two Chinese metropolitan newspapers share a commercial interest in reporting on the activities of those

charitable celebrities and companies, who may be their financial sponsors. Although overall, the three Chinese newspapers evidently help maintain social harmony and social order and do not attempt to hide their market-driven nature, the fact that the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* gave attention to social media content that tries to make governments accountable reflects the public supervision efforts of that newspaper.

This case study suggests journalism tailors the use of technology - in particular social media technologies- to meet its needs and that cultural factors play an important role in shaping the relationship between technology and journalism. By dissolving social media content into daily disaster reporting traditional journalism turns social media into a routine news source, which is the object of journalistic investigation and verification. To include or not to include social media content is decided in the gate-keeping process, which in turn tends to reduce the impact of social media on journalism.

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Table 1 Numbers of reports

Newspapers	Numbers of reports		
	Wenchuan Earthquake (12-18 May, 2008)	Ya'an Earthquake (20-26 April, 2013)	Tianjin Explosion (12-18 August, 2015)
The People's Daily	54	10	2
The Southern Metropolitan Daily	746	33	16
The Huaxi Metropolitan Daily	36	21	8
The Guardian (and The Observer)	17	2	4
Daily Telegraph (and Sunday Telegraph)	11	1	2

[1] The *People's Daily* is the most important party organ of the Chinese Communist Party.

[2] The *Southern Metropolitan Daily* is a commercial newspaper run by the Southern Press Group which has a liberal and critical tradition. This group has a party organ- the *Southern Daily*, which is at the provincial administrative level, and a large number of commercial children newspapers and magazines. Famous and influential amongst others are the *Southern Weekend* and the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*.

[3] The *Huaxi Metropolitan Daily* is the first Chinese metropolitan newspaper launched in 1995 and the most influential one in west China. This newspaper is populace-oriented and citizens-centred with a reputation of covering lifestyle and tabloidised news.

[4] The Guardian is a leftwing broadsheet. The *Observer* is its Sunday newspaper.

[5] *Daily Telegraph* is a rightwing broadsheet and its Sunday newspaper is *Sunday Telegraph*.

[6] Lushan is the name of the district that contains the place of Ya'an.