CHINA'S WEIBO

Political and Social Implications?

By Xinyue Chang

Sina Weibo, China's microblogging answer to Twitter, has become one of the most popular sites in China's cyberspace since its debut in 2009. Today, the microblog has about 140 million active users.[1] Compared to noninteractive communication channels, Weibo and similar social networking sites have the potential to challenge China's authoritarian rule.[2] What follows are depictions of how this microblogging technology is being used in China as a source of news, as a tool for combating corruption, and as an incubator of social movements. In each section, I also discuss the limitations of Weibo within the current political structure of Chinese society.

Weibo as a Source of News

Weibo provides social advantages that are lacking in traditional forms of media. Supported by a massive number of users, it makes for easier communication and fast news dissemination. The case of the July 23, 2011, Wenzhou train collision is a good example of Weibo in action. Two high-speed trains collided in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. The crash was widely reported by eyewitnesses via Weibo until Internet censors blocked the site. Weibo users posted information about the crash about four hours earlier than government sources. Weibo users also reported that the Ministry of Railways (MOR) tried to bury parts of the wrecked trains with at least one victim left inside.[3]

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Source: *China English News* website at http://tiny.cc/af7ryw.

When this news spread online, it caused an uproar that forced the national minister of railways to resign. In a press conference, Wang Yongping, the now former spokesman of the MOR, defended the burying of the train cars and said that it was necessary for further proceeding with rescue operations due to the site's environmental conditions. When confronted by suspicious journalists, Wang remarked, ". . . Whether or not you believe [this explanation], I believe it."[4] Internet users, or "netizens," quickly used the comment to satirically point out the lack of credibility of Chinese officials. Wang's speech during the press conference triggered public outrage in cyberspace, which eventually led to his dismissal from the MOR.[5] When *Xinhua News Agency*, an important central government media source, tried to portray a lightning strike as the accident's cause, it confused the public.[6] People again used Weibo to create pressure and get the MOR to provide the real reason for the crash, as well as to punish the relevant officials. Facing public pressure, Long Jing, the chief of the Shanghai Railway Bureau, was fired shortly after the accident. Wang Feng, the deputy bureau chief who ordered the wrecked train carriages to be buried on-site, was also forced to step down.[7]

By supporting constant interactive communication between millions of netizens, Weibo not only revealed the truth about the accident but also encouraged people to donate blood and look for lost relatives and friends during the rescue.[8] After the accident, netizens uncovered other crucial problems in this high-speed railway project. For example, although the ticket purchasing process allegedly was a full name registration system that should have kept records of passengers' identities, the system didn't work and caused problems in identifying accident victims. Many netizens believe Weibo effectively caused the appropriate government responses. However, the ousted Long Jing was replaced by An Lusheng, the Central Railway Ministry chief dispatcher when the 2008 Zibo train collision occurred, which resulted in seventy-two deaths.[9] An Lusheng was demoted and transferred to the Chengdu Railway Bureau because of Zibo but was getting another perhaps undeserved chance—a common government practice when officials make mistakes of this magnitude.[10] This makes many netizens wonder about the ultimate effectiveness of online protests.

If Weibo did not exist, many facts about the Wenzhou train collision would not have been made public, but microblogging technology has its limitations. Because any user can post or edit information online, reliability and accuracy are always concerns. The August 21, 2012, sex scandal case involving a Peking University professor serves as a good example of why these concerns are important. Zou Hengfu, a former professor of Peking University, posted a note on his Weibo account accusing Peking University faculty members of preying on young female workers at a

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Zou Hengfu. Source: *South China Morning Post* website at http://tiny.cc/9p7ryw.

nearby restaurant and giving them degrees in exchange for sex. After this post was made, it was well circulated on Weibo.[11] Peking University filed a lawsuit against Zou in September, and he subsequently admitted that he might have exaggerated the allegation.[12] The interesting part of this case is not the scandal but why most of Weibo's users would choose to believe Zou, even though he didn't provide concrete evidence to support his charges. During a discussion on the TV program *Behind the Headlines*, host Dou Wentao reported on a Weibo post that helps explain this exact question. The post said, "The key is not what the truth is, but whether the majority of the people would believe Zou. However, the existence of this belief actually preceded Zou's original post. Whether Zou broke the news or not, people had already lost their faith in the authorities."[13]

It is possible that Weibo is putting us into the "information cocoon" that Cass R. Sustein, a legal scholar currently teaching at Harvard Law School, described in his book, *Infotopia.*[14] As Sustein argues, among the large amount of diversified information individuals can potentially receive at any given time, they tend to only pay attention to that which they enjoy and only talk about that information with those who share their same interests. Therefore, the overload of information may not eliminate but rather reinforce individual biases.

Weibo as an Anti-Corruption Tool

Another theme that interests Weibo members is utilizing the social media tool to expose ongoing government corruption. The famous collaborative, grassroots, information sharing process known as the "human flesh search engine" is a very Chinese phenomenon where netizens collectively do comprehensive research on people of interest.[15] The following story serves as an example of how Weibo users implemented this technique to combat corruption.

Yang Dacai, head of Shaanxi Provincial Bureau of Work Safety, attracted Weibo users' attention during his investigation of an August 2011 severe traffic accident when he was photographed smiling at the scene. Netizens immediately began the human flesh search. By looking through Yang's past photos online, Chinese netizens noticed that Yang had been wearing a multitude of world-class luxury watches, including a Vacheron Constantin.[16] Although Yang claimed that his watches were not

Wenzhou Protest Jokes

On July 24, 2011, the day after the Wenzhou train calamity, Ministry of Railways spokesman Wang Yongping made a quite controversial comment in response to media criticism of the ministry for ending the train accident rescue prematurely. Although Wang's response has several different English translations, it is clear that the spokesman did not care whether the media believed him or not, as evidenced by the quote that follows: "Because of the constraining landscape, the rescuing team could only work properly after they buried the train compartment. This is what the staff told me. I do not care whether you are convinced or not. I believe [in this explanation] nonetheless (wo fanzheng xin le)." Weibo users turned the phrase "I believe nonetheless" into a sarcastic expression for absurdity and questionable logic.

Unable to vent their frustrations against the government publicly, Weibo serves as a platform for Chinese citizens to mock the government's lack of responsibility and the failings of public officials who are meant to serve as role models for the public. Below are some examples of online Weibo posts making fun of Wang Yongping's "I believe nonetheless" response:

There is no traffic congestion in Beijing today. It is a miracle. I do not care whether you are convinced. I believe nonetheless.

The Chinese Football Association has announced that the China team would be qualified for World Cup 2014. I do not care whether you are convinced. I believe nonetheless.

There is no sex hormone additive in baby formula. I do not care whether you are convinced. I believe nonetheless.

We thank Chun-Yi Sum, a PhD candidate in Anthropology at Boston University, for this contribution.

as expensive as Chinese netizens had estimated and that he had purchased all of them with his salary, Weibo users found it hard to believe and did not stop their investigation of Yang. After a couple of rounds of the human flesh search, netizens uncovered Yang's possession of eleven designer watches, multiple pairs of luxury glasses, and some other expensive accessories.[17] According to *The Global Times*, the Chinese Communist Party of Shaanxi Provincial Commission for Discipline Inspection finally had to start probing Yang's personal finances by the end of August 2012.[18] A two-month formal investigation of Yang's personal finances led to him being fired**.** During the past couple of years, Yang was just one of many corrupt officials that was placed under official investigation due to the preliminary research done by Chinese netizens.

Many Weibo users whom I have interviewed consider it an effective monitoring tool to combat anti-corruption. With the help of Weibo, in theory, more than 140 million people are monitoring China's civil servants. If any civil servant dares to be domineering or abuse power, they risk being put on "cyber trial" by Chinese netizens. However, netizens can only help monitor those who act like overlords in public. Without a transparent reporting system of civil servants' income and strong regulation over their "gray income," the problem of government corruption will not be significantly affected by Weibo users' research on a limited number of corrupt officials. Official abuse of power is widespread, systemic, and requires fundamental civil service reform.

Most of the online rebellions that began on Weibo were done out of anger caused by specific unfair events or unease about income gaps between rich and poor and not due to a more general concern about defects within China's political system. By praising the power and effect that Weibo has, it is easy for netizens to be excessively optimistic about the situation or be deluded by overestimating their power to expose corruption. This illusion has convinced many of the people that I've interviewed over the years that each time they clicked the little "share" button at the bottom of their computer screens, they had actually done something remarkable for their society. This self-comforting way of thinking could easily slacken their vigilance and make them pay less attention or less likely to participate in real social movements.

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Weibo and Social Movements

In 2010-2011,Tunisans used Twitter to initiate the Jasmine Revolution, the political protests that spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In China, microblogging was also used for organizing social movements in physical spaces. The most significant case has been the Chinese Jasmine Movement that was inspired by the events in Tunisia.

The Chinese Jasmine Movement was a weekly prodemocracy street demonstration in thirteen cities—including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Xi'an—that began on February 20, 2011, and ended about a month later. As in Tunisia, its origins were on the Internet. In 2011, I conducted fieldwork in order to better understand the way recent returnees to China who had lived in the US perceived government censorship right after this movement ended. I found that my informants' views on this movement were divided into two groups: those who considered the Chinese Jasmine Movement as a positive undertaking for developing democracy in China and those who viewed it as a useless action. One Weibo user explained to me what he believed:

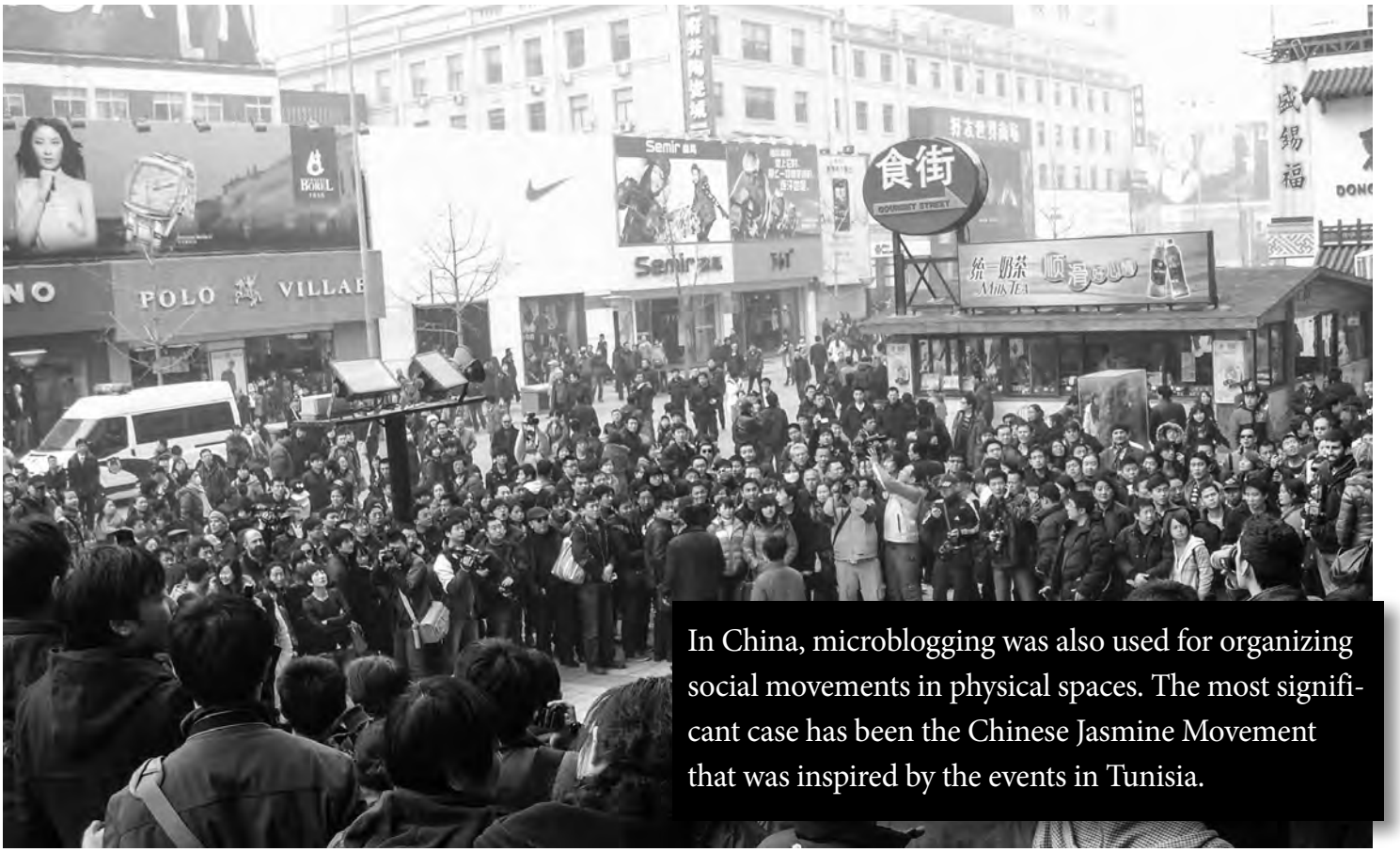
> *The Chinese Jasmine Movement will not amount to anything. Chinese society is quite different from that of North Africa. First, people in China are better off than those who live in North Africa. Yes, there are all kinds of social problems [in China]. But those problems are not so serious as to incite a revolution. Second, because of extensive Internet censorship [in China], which is not found in Egypt or Tunisia, there are very few Chinese people who are using Twitter and Facebook regularly. Other platforms like Sina Weibo or Tencent Weibo are closely monitored by the government. Thus, although you see thousands of people involved in the Chinese Jasmine Movement, considering the large population base, they still are the minority*.[19]

Another of my informants heard this comment and disagreed. She argued that although the effect of the movement was not yet significant, it still had a positive influence on Chinese society. This was not only because the movement had called for civil rights, such as freedom of information and freedom of speech, but it had also established a prototype for how Chinese netizens could use new media to facilitate social activism. In addition, although violent suppression was still used against protesters in Beijing and elsewhere, the lives of protesters were not as threatened as they were in the past. My informant felt that compared to social movements in the 1980s, today's Jasmine Movement represents a marked improvement in relations between the authorities and political protestors.

However, some of my informants showed an ambiguous attitude toward the Chinese Jasmine Movement. One argued that this ambiguity was due to the fact that

> *. . . our society is a society without trust. This is a huge problem. This is why even though the Internet is really helpful in terms of creating*

Source: *chinaSMACK* website at http://tiny.cc/l5c7yw.



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Chinese Jasmine Movement. Source: http://tiny.cc/end7yw, author JerryofWong Wikimedia Commons.

social networks and spreading news, it is rare that those who receive that information would want to be a part of the movement. People don't trust the society, nor do they trust each other. That's why people would rather be observers.[20]

It is difficult to say what has caused this lack of trust to develop in present-day China, and its origins are complex. Some of these issues of trust are related to China's past tragedies, such as the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, when even family members turned against each other. Although present-day politics are less traumatic than in the past, people still don't trust CCTV (China Central Television). They have become accustomed to assuming that any news from state-run outlets can't be entirely true. Most Chinese believe that some facts must be censored out of broadcasts in order to be approved for public viewing. The speed at which Weibo and other new media sources transmit information circumvents censorship to a limited extent. However, as the example of the Peking University's sex scandal illustrates, a disadvantage of new media like Weibo are their potential lack of credibility as a source of accurate information. Thus, Weibo also has the unintended potential to contribute to China's deficiency in social trust. Between the confusion of censorship and the defects of new media, most of my informants would rather observe than participate in social movements that begin as microblogs.

Conclusion

It is commonly argued that mass media will end China's closed regime and foster democratization. I agree that new media channels such as WikiLeaks, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and their Chinese counterparts are persistently challenging traditional modes of governing. Moreover, we can see that cyber-disobedience is exposing the weaknesses of the current government. The Chinese government is scrambling to counter the influence of these new forms of media. According to the *Budget of China* website, more than 550 billion renminbi (RMB) were set aside in 2010 for public safety, including an unspecified amount used for the "stabilization of society"—the unofficial name for media censorship.[21] Yet in the end, it is people that initiate a reform—not technologies. Technologies can only be utilized to support political activism. Without the enthusiasm and motivation for pursuing political objectives, a real "Jasmine Movement" can hardly be successful if it only takes place in China's cyberspace.

China's cyberspace is being transformed from a technological concept into a tension-filled social arena with inevitable conflicts. This process is also encouraging Chinese people to become more involved in social issues than ever before. To a certain degree, the efforts of Weibo users to make the news more transparent, acting on their civil right to monitor the government and carry out social movements that not only draw domestic but also international attention, has been chipping away at the corrupted parts of China's authoritarian government. These activities also provide officials with an incentive to do a better job in governing. When Jin Yong—former chief editor of *Ming Pao* in Hong Kong and a novelist famous for his martial arts and heroism fiction—decried the fickleness of contemporary Chinese society, he overlooked cyberspace. If heroism still exists in China, cyberspace is the place you can find it. Unfortunately, most of the heroic actions and civil rights demands that begin online end online as well. Weibo users care about their society and the unfair things happening within it. Yet to a certain degree, they also see their activities on Weibo as a form of entertainment—a self-presentation and something that is worth their attention but that should not be taken too seriously.

The dynamic interactions that Weibo has enabled Chinese netizens to engage in can also be seen as an educational process for both the public and the government. It encourages Chinese netizens to be more involved in social issues and more interested in exercising their civil rights.

Can Weibo be defined as a civil society in today's China, or will at least it lead Chinese people to a civil society?

Meanwhile, it has also required the paternalistic government to explain the causes of various public crises rather than just describing the calamities. With millions of people participating in (or just observing) these discussions, this new media is establishing a series of collective memories for China's youngest generation. Instead of seeing the government as the "big brother" who is in charge of everything, Chinese citizens' awareness of civil rights has been gradually improving. Further, it will alter the old relationship between the government and its citizens with the potential to mutually benefit the long-term improvement for everyday life in Chinese society.

Can Weibo be defined as a civil society in today's China, or will at least it lead Chinese people to a civil society? At this point, I remain skeptical. Good Samaritanism has not died out, but it largely only exists in cyberspace. Most netizens keep their participation in politics only online. But I am not sure what will stimulate this interaction to move offline. As discussed earlier, this new medium is not helping encourage netizens to engage in politics more sensibly, nor is it making groundbreaking changes in the current social structure. Moreover, the practice of censorship certainly is setting obstacles for new media to be more influential in Chinese society today. It is important for us to recognize the contributions that Weibo has made in helping Chinese people pursue a better and fairer life. Without a doubt, Weibo is making changes to China, but whether these changes democratize China is yet to be seen. ■

NOTES

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