

How does the Chinese government manage social media?

The case of Weibo

In August 2009, with assurances to the authorities about keeping information flows under control, the SINA Corporation, one of the largest Chinese online media companies, successfully obtained permission from the central government and created the first micro-blogging platform Sina Weibo (微博) in mainland China. Soon afterwards, more and more Internet companies branched out into the industry and launched their own Weibo businesses.

As much existing research explains, Weibo has enabled the Chinese to disseminate information with surprising speed and has also promoted freedom of speech to a great extent, which has never been seen before. Facilitated by this Twitter-like social media, both the Chinese grassroots and the social elites have broken through traditional media's discourse monopoly and the government's strict surveillance, sharing information instantly, setting the agenda for public opinion actively, discussing sensitive topics implicitly, exposing injustice cases publicly, and even calling on the public to put pressure on the authorities directly. It is no exaggeration to say that Weibo has changed the Chinese media ecology, the public opinion environment and the nature of the power triangle between the media, the public and the authorities.

Weibo is the Chinese-style micro-blogging service. According to the Statistical Report released from the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), by the end of June 2013, the number of Weibo users surprisingly hit 331 million. In a short span of four years, Weibo quickly won the favour of the Chinese public, and became the most popular and influential form of social media in the country.

But, undoubtedly, in mainland China, where political and social stability has always been considered as the supreme interest of the CPC (Communist Party of China) and the Chinese government, Weibo can never become an absolutely special zone for free speech. In fact, any individual or media undermining or threatening this stability will definitely be punished, although they could probably enjoy limited and temporary freedom under specific circumstances. That's why since early 2013, the Chinese government has adopted a sequence of measures, including internal censorship and various public crackdowns, to manage Weibo. This caused a sudden and dramatic turnaround: the CNNIC report showed that compared with one year before, the number of Weibo users had steeply declined by 9%, or 27.8 million, to 281 million by the end of December 2013. Many Chinese liberals

and public intellectuals have even made a pessimistic prediction: Weibo is dying.

The question is, however, how does the Chinese government manage Weibo? To put it more specifically:

- 1) What general measures does the Chinese government adopt to manage Weibo?
- 2) How does the Chinese government operate in detail to manage Weibo?
- 3) Has the Chinese government significantly modified its public opinion management in the social media era? If so, how?

By applying text analysis, in-depth interviews, case studies and online field studies as my basic research methods, I identified and explained six major measures in detail to answer these questions:

- 1) Market-access control
- 2) Legal restrictions
- 3) Administrative regulations
- 4) Weibo operators' self-censorship
- 5) Containment and balance of Weibo opinion
- 6) Assimilation and domestication of Weibo

Concluding from the six major measures mentioned above, and reviewing both the old days when traditional media dominated and the early Internet stage symbolized by Blog and BBS, it has become obvious that due to the new trend in communication modes and public opinion resulting from the emergence of Weibo and other social media, the Chinese government has gradually adjusted its strategy towards public opinion management:

- 1) From "specializing in censorship" to "combining censorship with containment"
- 2) Institutionalization
- 3) Personalization
- 4) From defensive to offensive

Based on these basic findings, this research was expanded to further discuss some other relevant questions in order to draw a more systematic picture about China's programmes of controlling public opinion, the opportunities and challenges that the social media industry is facing, and the complicated tri-game played by social media, the public and the authorities:

- 1) How can Weibo survive and play a significant role in promoting Chinese freedom of speech, particularly in its early stage, in a context of severe restrictions?
- 2) What bottom line or fundamental principle does the Chinese government stick to in its Weibo/social media management?
- 3) Has the current Chinese government intensified or softened its public opinion management? Why?
- 4) Can other social media, like Wechat, replace Weibo?
- 5) Restricted by the authoritarian regime, to what extent can social media promote the freedom of speech in mainland China?

