



REUTERS  
INSTITUTE for the  
STUDY of  
JOURNALISM

**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper**  
**University of Oxford**

**HOW CHINESE JOURNALISTS USE  
WEIBO MICROBLOGGING  
FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING**

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Hilary Term 2012-13

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation

## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, for affording me the rare opportunity to step outside my profession and ponder the meaning of mainland journalism within a global context. Meeting classmates from other countries and attending weekly lectures and courses broadened my outlook and sharpened my intellect on a range of issues within and without journalism. Coming from a country that has deliberately cut off the internet and its media from contact with the outside world, the benefit of experiencing lifestyles and values from outside the Great Firewall is almost immeasurable. In particular I should like to thank John Lloyd for his insightful advice and everyone at the Institute for their help and assistance.

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## Introduction

The advent of internet tools, especially the Twitter-like microblogging service Weibo, has significantly expanded dissemination of information about societal issues among the citizenry of China. After mainland China blocked internationally popular social media including Twitter and Facebook in 2009, Weibo gathered steam. In a new public sphere where internet users gained more freedom of expression, grassroots users, social elites and opinion leaders now constantly discuss public issues, often generating pressure on the authorities to become more accountable.

Weibo (pronounced “way bor”) allows users to post up to 140 Chinese characters, or about four to five regular sentences. But Weibo is not a complete clone. It also has popular functions that Twitter does not offer, notably attaching photos and commenting underneath one tweet.

Empowered by the microblogs of more than 500 million users (about 88.8 percent of China’s internet users), journalists have investigated societal conflicts, protests/demonstrations and corrupt officials. A growing army of young, tech-savvy and ostensibly urban Chinese Weibo users and journalists battle on the frontline for information control, both performing important roles in transforming China into a fairer and more open society. It’s widely accepted that Weibo used by journalists has been playing an increasingly important role in both news reporting and society. Weibo has transformed the model of news reporting, says Lu Fumin of New Express (Lu 2011).

Western investigative journalism monitors how laws and regulations are violated and concealed from the public, either deliberately or accidentally, while watchdog journalism seeks to hold the powerful accountable to the public interest (Coronel 2009; Hunter 2009). However in a communist, authoritarian political structure like China’s, investigative journalism operates inside a complex censorship mechanism under political pressure and is “deployed more for the purpose of making politics than developing public responsibility” (Wang 2010). “Chinese journalists are pushing the envelope to uncover wrongs, sharing the same sense of mission as their counterparts elsewhere in the world, but they work in a challenging, even hostile environment. Chinese journalists are survivors who have mastered the high art of navigating the Chinese media control system,” says Ying Chan (2010). This raises the question of how much Weibo assists or hinders print and online media as authorities shift and tighten control.

I seek to unearth to what extent Weibo has changed investigative methods, how journalists build credibility and how they push back against Communist Party controls. Through Weibo, does Chinese investigative journalism expose government malpractice and hold leaders accountable? Or is it merely that they benefit the immediate victims of a high-profile news story with no improvement in the overall policies or laws relevant to those stories? Finally, this research hopes to illuminate some of the limitations on journalists trying to use Weibo as a tool of societal or political change under an authoritarian political system.

In some cases, media coverage with the help of Weibo has improved government transparency and accountability. More idealistic observers argue that Weibo, similar to Twitter in the Arab spring, is helping internet users become better informed, facilitating discussions and communication about social and political issues that lead China toward greater political liberalization. But there is insufficient evidence to suggest Weibo will cause any significant political structural change or democratization. “Revolution doesn’t

happen when society adopts new technology,” according to Professor Clay Shirky (2008). “It happens when society adopts new behaviours.” What appears as a hint of democratization might merely be an operational adjustment by an unwieldy bureaucracy learning to use new communications technology for surveillance and a sophisticated modern system of internet censorship, notes Yevgenny Morozov (2011). Morozov plays down the role of technology as it works for both pre-democracy forces and authoritarian governments. Malcolm Gladwell (2011) echoed this by saying in a CNN interview: “You could also make the opposite argument that some of these new technologies offer dictators ...the potential to crack down in ways they couldn’t crack down before.”

The Chinese central government is trying to control and use Weibo to its own advantage. The general trend is toward tightening censorship with adjustments based on periodical important events. It has also responded to rising pressure on Weibo. In the final analysis, what is happening in China between the government and Weibo is a tug of war that can have no absolute victor. An authoritarian regime is innovating and learning how to incorporate democratic elements – public scrutiny – into one-party rule. Ultimately perhaps this really is a kind of democratization: democratization with Chinese characteristics.

In the researcher’s opinion, technology is not democracy nor should it be mistaken for it, no matter how fashionable, popular or distracting. Technology is technology: Television followed newspapers. The internet followed television. Blogging followed the internet. Microblogging followed blogging. And in mainland China, Weibo followed Twitter. Tomorrow, WeChat follows Weibo. Let me state it clearly before tomorrow comes: I do not believe that WeChat is democracy either.

## Chapter 1

### Adoption of Weibo by Chinese journalists

#### 1.1 Western journalistic practices using social media

Facilitated by blogging and microblogging, networked journalism “allows the public to be involved in every aspect of journalism production through crowd-sourcing, interactivity, hyper-linking, user-generated content and forums”. News production changes from “linear and top-down to a collaborative process” (Beckett 2010). Its quality can be transformed and enhanced by “making journalism deeper, more connected, diverse and engaged with the public” (Beckett 2010). As Vadim (2010) puts it: “The social media providing information to journalists is making the jobs of investigative outlets more efficient and is enabling watchdog journalism to prosper in many respects.”

In terms of how journalists use social media, Nic Newman offered his take during a seminar at Oxford University: “Journalists predict or receive alerts to breaking news, follow high-quality people or networks for information, track trends and sentiment to inform the news agenda, easily distribute content, find new audiences, get feedback and ask the network for advice through crowdsourcing.”

Social media helps investigative journalists check facts and look for witnesses. Tweets by Guardian journalist Paul Lewis about his investigation into the death of Ian Tomlinson helped collect material showing the involvement of the police in Tomlinson's death. Vadim (2010) argues that investigative journalists can employ the social media community to sort through documents, ably demonstrated by The Guardian when it deployed its community of readers to help sift through 458,832 expense documents of British Members of Parliament.

Through social media, investigative journalists also disseminate their findings and seek corrections from readers (Lewis 2012). In this way, investigative journalists unfold the news event to the public, converting investigative reporting into more of an ongoing process rather than a finished product to be delivered, a new practice for veteran journalists (Mercedes Bunz, 2010). The news article thus becomes more of a conversation about an unfinished product, like a first draft of history that is constantly being corrected as people help you through the process (Lewis 2012).

A trend toward social media stories being picked up by traditional media has triggered a debate about how much Weibo undermines or enhances journalistic practice: Although some see “citizen journalism” as a milestone of improved interaction with investigative journalism, others argue that it lacks credibility and facilitates too much online fakery.

Social media can also make journalists more sedentary. Lewis (2012) said in an interview with organizers for the International Journalism Festival in Perugia, Italy, that if journalists over-rely on citizen journalism material, there might be potentially negative consequences: a risk of only reporting from the office. So journalists need to “balance collaborating with people who have useful information” and do “the basic but absolutely crucial on-the-ground reporting which journalism is fundamentally most about.”

Social media can reinforce prejudices. Prevalent public anger and grievances can undermine objectivity and manipulate the journalists' agenda or the appropriate angle for stories (Newman, 2009).

## **1.2 Chinese journalistic practices using social media**

In the post-Mao Zedong reform era, the newspaper market underwent a massive transformation through the proliferation of new titles, formats and reporting styles. Since the death of Mao in 1976 and the subsequent emergence of Deng Xiaoping (who died in February 1997), the overall climate of economic and social reform was reflected in media content (CIA 1997). Between 1979 and 1996 the number of newspaper titles grew from 283 to 2,163 (Wang 2009).

Such proliferation meant the Communist Party could no longer fully subsidize production. For the first time since 1949, mainland Chinese newspapers found themselves exposed to commercial pressures, generating a controlled but limited political liberalization. As media became more autonomous and diverse, newspaper journalists gained greater leeway than their television colleagues to test the limits. It was against this backdrop of economic advances in the 1990s that Chinese investigative journalism re-emerged and developed. Although enjoying more freedom than was possible in the Maoist era, this new journalism was by no means independent of politics, censorship or the tight control of the authoritarian government (Wang 2012).

As it is subject to so much political control, modern Chinese investigative journalism cannot be regarded as an objective watchdog, more of a watchdog attached to a Communist Party leash or even a lapdog (Wang 2012). As self-proclaimed "kings without crowns", today's investigative journalists work in a media landscape in which "the Party line meets the media's bottom line" (Zhou 2006).

Investigative journalists share most of the practices adopted by their Western counterparts but significant differences arise because of the cat-and-mouse mainland news culture created by the pervasive censorship system. Through its faster and freer flow of information, Weibo has set the agenda for traditional journalism, supplementing and even rivaling professional journalism under government restrictions.

Previous research and surveys have showcased social media's agenda-setting role for traditional media in China: A 2010 PR Newswire Asia survey of 2,503 print, broadcast and online Chinese journalists found more than two-thirds used social media to obtain leads or conduct interviews. Nearly half were frequent microblog users (Dowell 2010). The report quoted Ji Yongqing, a well-known Chinese columnist and former chief reporter for CEO&CIO Magazine, as saying: "Social media channels have revolutionized the work of journalists. In the past, journalists were often the first to discover and publish new information, and now, social media has taken over this role."

As this researcher has adopted Weibo in her daily and investigative reporting over the last two years, she can also offer some simple empirical observations. Interaction between Weibo and investigative journalism works as follows: Professional journalists respond to stories breaking on Weibo and conduct follow-ups. Weibo users pass stories around, attracting more attention and intensifying online debate and flows of information. This was well illustrated by the Guo Meimei case of June 2011 when a young woman claiming to be manager of a "chamber of the Red Cross of China" showcased her extravagant lifestyle. This eventually led to intense questioning of the transparency of the Red Cross Society of China itself.

Using Weibo, professional journalists change their investigative methods in the following ways:

- receiving news leads via either public or private messages;
- following newsmakers during investigations for news developments and conducting verification;
- contacting news sources in their preparations for a reporting trip; and,
- disseminating news developments and winning more attention and support from the public.

Collaboration between Weibo users and traditional media has helped investigative journalists uncover social problems, illuminated societal unrest, bypassed party media controls and even helped to hold governments accountable. In a number of news events, Weibo has empowered investigative journalists in their coverage of censorship-challenging news stories including corruption, protests against land disputes, local government's maltreatment of petitioners and authorities' improper handling of deadly man-made disasters. These issues most likely wouldn't have generated nearly as much media noise without Weibo feedback and amplification. Through Weibo, these investigative journalists have moved across into citizen journalism by posting colour stories, editorial thoughts inappropriate to their published stories or posting the censored contents of their banned stories to successfully get their message across despite political control.

Weibo has been criticized by many, especially censorship-related authorities, for rumour-mongering and "for lack of objectivity and impartiality, with poor accuracy" (Zhou 2011). This poses challenges for journalists verifying leads and distinguishing true from false. Others argue rumours on Weibo quickly reach those with the knowledge to refute them and that Weibo users mature to become more reluctant to fall for whatever they read online. When reposting a post of dubious authenticity, users often add the phrase "repost to verify".

As the identities of investigative journalists are verified by Sina Corporation with a verified account through the letter "V" on the bottom right corner of the photo icon that includes their professional title, they tend to be better trusted by Weibo users.

A new Weibo trend has emerged among prominent investigative journalists during the last two years: campaigning as online activists for societal causes and good works. Some retained positions at their publications, while others simply abandoned their careers. One of the most revered investigative journalists in China, Jian Guangzhou quit Oriental Daily in September 2012 after working there for 10 years (Zhang 2012). Known as "the conscience of China", his Weibo tweets<sup>1</sup> revealed the frustration and desperation that prompted the decision: "My 10 years with the Oriental Daily have been the most precious in my life, which gave me all the sadness and happiness, all the dreams. I suffered and endured everything because of the dream I had. And now the dream is dead and I choose to leave." After pressure from Communist Party propaganda departments, China's best-known investigative journalist Wang Keqin is once again on the move. Editors at the Economic Observer pressured Wang into resigning after the newspaper came under pressure from authorities for a series of hard-hitting reports (Bandurski 2013). Wang, assistant editor-in-chief at the Economic Observer until March 2013, launched the Love Save Pneumoconiosis campaign in June 2011 to raise funds for

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay the user-friendly verb "tweet" is often preferred to "make a Weibo post". The phrase should not be confused with tweeting via Twitter, which is of course blocked by the Great Firewall of China.



workers with black lung disease, a terminal disease contracted by breathing in dust from coal and building materials. Sun Chunlong, a former assistant editor-in-chief and investigative journalist for *Oriental Outlook* magazine, has become well-known for assisting war veterans by starting up the Shenzhen Longyue Charity Foundation. Deng Fei, director of the Phoenix Weekly news department has launched three fundraising projects through Weibo: pushing for free lunches for rural primary school students, free critical illness insurance for children and protection of migrant birds.

On the one hand, the press freedom of traditional and major internet media is significantly compromised by multiple layers of censorship ranging from administrative management to content control. For this reason, many savvy observers view Weibo as a fad: something that, through tightening censorship, will exert negligible influence on professional investigative journalism in the long-term future. On the other hand, Professor Perry Link (2012) at the University of California argues that the internet is the first medium in the history of Communist rule in China that the government has not been able to fully control. New media has become a public forum for the discussion and construction of alternative political discourses (Yu 2009).

China's expanding online discourse and the capacity of the internet to advance free speech has formed a cyber-politics to engage citizens in political participation and facilitated social change (Xiao 2011). Xiao writes, "The expansion of the internet and web-based media is changing the rules of the game between state and society: Authorities are increasingly taking note and responding to public opinion as it expresses itself online."

Weibo has been used to expose corrupt officials, with a wave of online whistleblowers providing evidence of misconduct or corruption. Zhang Zhian, a journalism professor at Sun Yat-sen University in the South China city of Guangzhou was quoted by Reuters as saying that in China people can criticize and initiate investigative reports of lower-level officials but cannot criticize top leaders (Lee 2012). Sometimes the criticism and attacks on local officials suit the interests of the central government nicely by suggesting "the emperor is still good" as Michael Anti, a prominent Chinese political commentator and microblogger (Langfitt 2012), has observed.

In some cases, the outcry on Weibo has spurred government to apologize or sack officials in a timely fashion. Optimistic scholars have long argued that information technology in this way will facilitate the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Pessimists argue that it is a mistake to overestimate the impact of the internet on democratic development (Zheng 2008): "In China while it is too early to tell whether the internet can lead to democratization, it has played an important role in facilitating political liberalization in different aspects such as political openness, transparency and accountability."

## Chapter 2

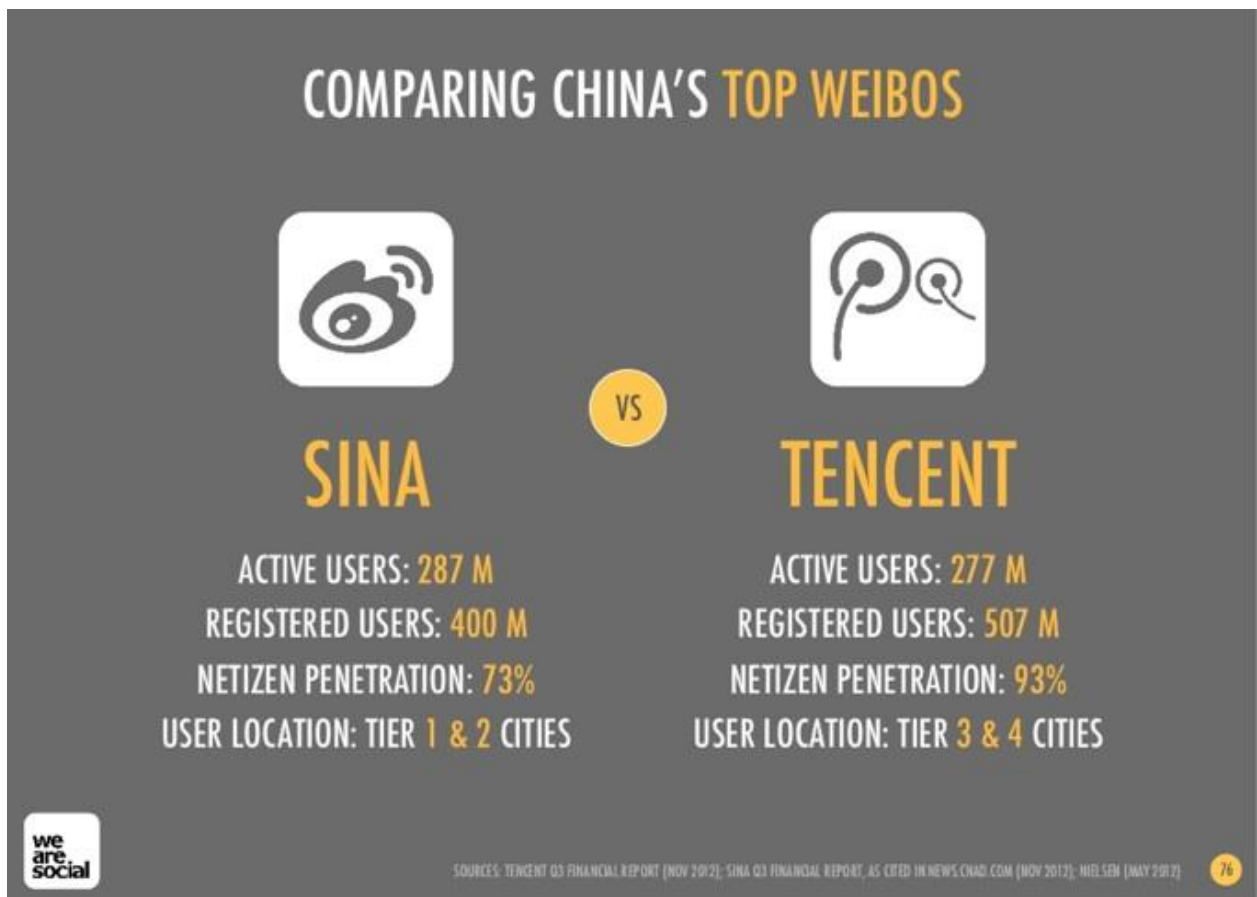
### Research background

#### 2.1 Research focus

This research will focus on journalists' verified journalism microblog accounts or non-verified accounts still unofficially identified as belonging to journalists on Sina Weibo (weibo.com). Mainland China has four major microblogging services operating under four internet news portal giants: Sina, Tencent, Sohu and Netease. Sina is by a long way the most popular and influential microblogging platform in mainland China, with 87.7 percent of all Weibo users. A Xinhua PR Newswire survey found the most-used microblog platform by Chinese reporters is Sina Weibo with 78 percent, followed by Tencent (24 percent), Sohu (12.1 percent) and NetEase (10.1 percent).

Some 92 percent of Sina Weibo's 400 million users were born after 1980, according to Sina's own November 2012 Weibo report (TechInAsia). Most are well-educated, with 55.9 percent having a university degree or higher. Users reside in richer coastal areas and high-tech manufacturing hubs such as Guangdong in South China, coastal Jiangsu province, Beijing and Shanghai. In a nutshell, Sina Weibo users are generally young, tech-savvy, quite well-off and well-educated. They include students, white-collar employees, journalists, academics and scholars.

Apart from individual users, central and regional government organizations including police bureaus and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have opened their own Weibo accounts. Sina Weibo is also a prime source for celebrity sightings and cultural memes (Millward 2012). Celebrities have hundreds of millions of followers, actress Yao Chen famously topping the list with 34 million followers. Sina's rival Tencent Weibo (t.qq.com) has greater user numbers than Sina Weibo, but Sina claims more active users. Users of Tencent Weibo tend to be less wealthy or hail from smaller, lower-tier cities, as the Wall Street Journal's blog China Real Time Report (2012) observed, citing analysts. So when they discuss issues online, Sina Weibo users are the kind of people who can set the national agenda (TechInAsia). In short, Sina Weibo is more for movers and shakers.



(Source: We Are Social)

Active Sina Weibo users generate about 100 million posts a day, creating a public sphere where informed users compete to make their voices heard, views and news transmitted at unprecedented speeds. Weibo is now a prime source for breaking news and the sharing of social and political commentaries. Journalists, editors and media organizations not only monitor Sina Weibo for breaking news and topical discussions – they also actively participate.

## 2.2 Research methods

To assess the impact of Weibo on traditional mainstream media investigative journalism methodology, I shall rely on qualitative research methods and supplement them with quantitative methods, as well as drawing on my own empirical experience. Rather than a theoretical or abstract academic discussion, research will instead focus on the practical application of Weibo through four cases, drawing on related news events to supplement that analysis. I have carefully selected four contrasting but representative news stories between 2010 and 2012 to illustrate and illuminate how journalists can – or cannot – use Weibo in their investigations. All four sparked widespread discussion among Weibo users, but journalists were involved to markedly differing extents through posting, reposting or commenting.

First we shall examine Qian Yunhui, the village chief who died under extremely suspicious circumstances after petitioning against local corruption and land grabs. Then we look at Xu Wu, a petitioner dispatched to a mental hospital who sought help from the media after his escape. Third, there is what some define as the watershed Weibo moment: the deadly Wenzhou high-speed train crash. Finally we move to Wukan, the

South China village where locals fighting an opportunistic government land grab found their bloody battle escalating into an international news story or what the Chinese government euphemistically calls a “mass incident”. Here are the details of the four case studies:

i) A deadly “accident” throws government-sequestered land disputes into the limelight

Gruesome photos circulated online on December 25, 2010 of the corpse of a former village chief in Zhaiqiao, Yueqing, Zhejiang province, crushed under the wheel of a lorry. The brutal death of 53-year-old Qian, who had already been jailed for 3½ years of the past five years leading his fellow villagers in petitioning for land compensation, sparked wild Weibo speculation. Most shared the view Qian was murdered by those with connections to power and wealth. Internet postings grew increasingly passionate after two separate village witnesses told Guangzhou-based Nanfang Daily and the Shanghai-based Oriental Morning Post they had seen three masked men wearing white gloves seize Qian's hands and force his head under the wheel. Under local police interrogation the same witnesses abruptly recanted their testimony and repeatedly stated Qian's death was a traffic accident.

During heated discussions, at least four groups of citizens, scholars and activists independently probed the incident, some concluding it was indeed a traffic accident, others more doubtful. As the local government's handling of the case entirely lacked transparency, many concluded it was impossible to know what really happened based on the limited and unreliable evidence made available. That the footage from a nearby closed circuit traffic camera never became available was proof enough for many of a clumsy political murder. On February 1, 2011, the lorry driver arrested for Qian's death was jailed for 3½ years. Qian's family, under intense political pressure, reached a private compensation agreement, the South China Morning Post reported (Tam 2011)

ii) One flew the cuckoo's nest: Challenging the mental hospital incarceration system

In April 2011, 43-year-old Xu Wu, a former firefighter at a state-owned steel company in Wuhan, capital city of Hubei province, escaped from a mental hospital affiliated with his employer. He had been confined there against his will since 2006 when his parents signed a consent agreement under-pressure. Before their signatures, Xu's petitioning of local and national authorities over unfair wages had been gaining significant local media attention. In the days following his escape, Xu travelled to Guangzhou, capital city of Guangdong province. Instead of running to his family, Xu instead contacted all major media outlets and announced that for four years he had been tortured in illegal custody by representatives of his former employer. The story went national.

Seven unidentified men with Wuhanese accents violently abducted Xu back to Wuhan on April 27 (Caixin 2011). Xu's parents were denied visits to their son back in the custody of the same mental hospital. In early May, lawyer Huang Xuetao signed a contract offering legal assistance to Xu and his parents. The provincial government on May 6 set up an investigation team that found Xu had been confined after being diagnosed as suffering from a paranoid disorder. Xu was eventually discharged from the hospital under his parents' guardianship in early June, cnhubei.com reported (2011).

iii) A deadly train crash generates unprecedented fury at a central government ministry

The first national manmade tragedy to occur during the Weibo era saw authorities struggling to control the narrative after two brand new high-speed trains crashed in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province on July 23, 2011. Forty people died and 192 were injured. The government's hasty handling of the tragedy, notably ordering the burial of derailed carriages with a live child victim inside, generated a seething outrage among media and online communities. The accident prompted passionate questioning of official hubris and safety standards by an otherwise tightly controlled Chinese media. The unprecedented anger of Weibo users suggested a serious breach of trust not just in the scandal-plagued Ministry of Railways but in government itself.

The government launched an official probe into the causes of the accident and made the report public in December, blaming serious defects on the design of control centre equipment, lax equipment inspection and failure to adequately respond to an equipment malfunction caused by lightning. Fifty-four officials were held responsible for the accident and botched rescue effort. In August, the government also announced suspension of approvals for any new high-speed rail lines pending the outcome of the investigation.

iv) Death escalates protest against land sequestration, gaining global attention

A South China village with a population of about 12,000 began protesting local corruption in September 2011. The Wukan protest escalated in December 2011 through a chain of ugly incidents: First, officials sold land to real estate developers without properly compensating the villagers of Wukan. Villagers responded by electing 13 representatives to negotiate with the authorities. In early December, five of these representatives were abducted by police. One representative, Xue Jinbo, died in police custody. Villagers promptly threw all police and officials out of their village. The authorities responded by blockading Wukan with about 1,000 armed police, issuing a statement that "foreign forces" had "incited the people with ulterior motives" and slamming the temporary village council as an "illegal organization".

Acknowledging the villagers' basic demands, senior provincial officials intervened in the dispute on December 20. In a series of carefully orchestrated announcements, key local officials admitted to mistakes in handling grievances and vowed to crack down on corruption. Government representatives then reached a peaceful agreement with villagers to cancel a planned march. The provincial government agreed to redistribute land confiscated by the local government. Two local officials were held responsible for mishandling the incident. A new village committee was elected in February 2012.

These four cases offer four types of axiomatic social conflict in contemporary China, where fast-paced economic growth and firm Communist Party control can impact painfully upon the life of powerless ordinary people. Due to the sensitivity of these developing stories, both central and provincial propaganda authorities issued frequent media directives playing down or banning coverage outright. This handed journalists and participants the primary role of informing the Chinese people. Primarily, they used Weibo.

The deeper, investigative issues these four examples expose are land grabs by local governments (village chief and Wukan), safety standards at the corrupt Ministry of

Railways (train crash) and the authoritarian detention system that imprisons sane people in the name of mental health (cuckoo's nest).

The odd one out is Wukan. I chose it to contrast with the three others because it is more political and sensitive from the Communist Party point of view, and especially before the turning point if journalists broadcast anything about it on Weibo, they would be recalled or punished by their employers. In other words, when a real instance of real democratization occurred, mainland journalists and their Weibo accounts fell silent.

I have conducted in-depth interviews with seven journalists and editors, mostly investigative journalists and societal news journalists who covered one or more of the cases:

Wang Sijing, a former reporter with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Business Herald, whose corporate headquarters is in southerly Guangzhou, capital city of Guangdong, traditionally the most liberal and open-minded province of China. She was involved in covering the village chief murder, cuckoo and train crash stories.

Liu Jianfeng is a senior investigative reporter who has worked for the China Economic Times, Caixin magazine and Economic Observer. He covered the village chief murder and Wukan protest.

Liu Ziqian is an investigative journalist with China News Weekly, a magazine under China News Service, one of the two news agencies on the mainland. He covered the village chief murder story.

“Editor A” is a legal editor for a weekly magazine who requested anonymity. A reporter from his team covered the village chief murder, cuckoo and train crash.

Zhu Wenqiang is a reporter at Chengdu Business News and previously worked for the Economic Observer. He went to cover the Wukan protest for the Economic Observer.

Shi Feike, a member of the editorial committee of the Southern Metropolis Weekly

I have also interviewed other analysts including leading academics, activists and former journalists and editors of mainland media:

Perry Link, Chancellorial Chair Professor at University of California, Riverside

John Keane, professor of politics at the University of Sydney

Chang Ping, former deputy editor of Southern Weekly

Raymond Li, head of the BBC Chinese Service

Long Can, former investigative journalist with Chengdu-based Chengdu Business News.

For quantitative methods, I collected and collated two months of Weibo posts by three journalists during the village chief case to analyze the way journalists post news developments and set the agenda for public discussions while building their own credibility. I will examine the impact of their posts including the proportion of original and reposted Weibo posts out of the total number of posts relevant to Qian Yunhui's case, what tones these posts adopted, how these posts offered newsy information and how influential they were.

Combining these methods, this study hopes to address the following seven research questions:

1. How has Weibo changed investigation for Chinese journalists?
2. How have Chinese journalists gained influence on Weibo?
3. To what extent can journalists use Weibo to bypass censorship and protect themselves when in danger?
4. How do journalists, their employers and Weibo operators regulate/control their Weibo accounts?
5. What challenges and limitations do journalists face using Weibo?
6. What's the impact of journalists' Weibo and Weibo itself upon political liberalization?
7. What's the future for Weibo?

## Chapter 3

### The impact of Weibo upon investigative journalism

#### 3.1 Building up credibility: the case of village chief Qian Yunhui

Journalists gain influence through tweeting less important details and retweeting other users' tweets during controversial and topical news events. That is well demonstrated by a content analysis of Wang Sijing, Liu Jianfeng and Liu Ziqian's Weibo posts during Qian Yunhui's case from December 25, 2010 to February 28, 2011:

	Posts about Qian case	Original posts	Retweeted posts	Increase of followers
Wang Sijing	289	177	112	700 to more than 10,000
Liu Jianfeng	53	45	8	800 to more than 10,000
Liu Ziqian	56	41	15	600 to more than 6,000

(Source: Sina Weibo posts)


These three journalists gained influence through tweeting mainly original news involving two main types of information: 1) information that could not be published due to its sensitivity; 2) real-time developments not valuable to their eventual investigative articles.

Wang's real-time developments included Qian Yunhui's 83-year-old father lying on the ground to mimic for watching journalists the posture of his dead son under a truck wheel and also some colourful observations about the press conference by the Yueqing government.

Liu Ziqian tweeted a photo featuring Qian's father kneeling at the accident site relating what he saw on the day his son died, which received more than 8,000 retweets. For Liu, his original tweets were about maintaining a cool and objective account of what happened by above all avoiding any subjective or inflammatory editorializing comments. "Subjective comments automatically mislead. When others retweeted or commented on my posts, they would make them 10 times more dramatic. I didn't want to promote a news event. I just wanted to simply let people know what had truly happened," he says.

How active, successful or influential journalists' Weibo accounts can be is associated with the credibility of their newspaper, the management style of editors and organizations, the personality and skill of the journalists as well as the degree of commercialization of their media organization. The essential foundation of a verified journalist Weibo's credibility and influence is the media organization name they work for. When journalists make their names tweeting during news events, it helps their organizations' brand. In this sense, more commercial publications have a higher incentive to encourage/allow their journalists to tweet than more conservative propaganda-friendly organs:



Journalist Weibo:	More active & successful 	Less active & successful 
Media:	More credible & influential More commercial	Less credible & influential Less commercial
Editors:	Less cautious, more freedom	Very cautious, less freedom
Journalists:	High-profile, enjoy attention	Low-profile, wallflower

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Business Herald where Wang Sijing worked is a relatively commercial newspaper with its headquarters based in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province. “My bosses were very supportive of my Weibo posting from start to finish,” she says. She was so good at self-branding that she ended up managing her newspaper’s official Weibo account for one and half years until August 2012.

It’s extra controversial in China whether journalists should tweet real-time information on Weibo. While the window is still open to publish stories in print publications – that is, before a media ban or when there is no media ban – the priority for journalists is supposed to be writing an article paid for by their employers.

### 3.2 Fighting censorship and overcoming roadblocks

#### Bypassing censorship

When a certain type of news breaks, journalists feel empowered by Weibo to bypass censorship. For example, after they are banned from writing for their publications, sometimes they will stay on site and continue reporting with Weibo. Media propaganda directives even serve to intensify journalists’ desire to continue reporting what happens during high-profile news events. They do this for two probable reasons: 1) They feel obliged to keep an account through their own eyes what truly happened and keep the public informed; 2) They hope their tweets will gain the attention of their peer journalists who might also report it.

The day after the death of village chief Qian Yunhui, Wang Sijing arrived at the Central China village of Zhaiqiao. As is common with exciting stories on the mainland, she was promptly informed that her newspaper had been banned from publishing anything at all about the incident. Wang continued to post nearly 300 tweets under the tag “Yueqing information”.

In the case of the asylum escapee, Wang received the propaganda directive on the same day as she arrived in Wuhan (May 2, 2011). At that time asylum escapee Xu Wu had been snatched and jailed by Guangzhou police. The next day Wang and six other journalists from different media – all banned from reporting on the case – went to the Wuhan police station seeking to know when Xu might be released. Wang tweeted at 10:05 am: “In the early morning, journalists from seven media organizations are waiting at the Wuhan Public Security Bureau in hopes of getting Xu Wu home through negotiations.”

Wang says she decided to stay and continue reporting through Weibo in hopes of influencing events. She wasn’t sure whether tweeting after a media gag order fulfilled

her role as a professional reporter or as a conscientious citizen. Either way, she simply concluded it would be fine as long as her employer did not oppose it. In posting new developments in the Xu Wu case after a media gag order, Wang was in fact receiving the tacit approval and support of her employers.

Not only can journalists continue reporting after they receive a ban, but they can also use Weibo to promote finished-but-banned stories. Liu Jianfeng of China Business News published a detailed investigative piece on his Sina blog and posted the link and introduction to his Weibo. Wang Keqin, then head of the newspaper's investigative department, used his Weibo to promote Liu's story and find a publisher. As a result, [www.21ccom.net](http://www.21ccom.net), the website of Leaders Magazine, ran the full story.

For the investigative reporter, the handling of a Communist Party media gag order is often intimately linked to Weibo use. Reporting directives usually reach newspaper editors after the journalist already set out on a reporting trip or arrived at the scene. The order came down the second day for the dead village chief, the third day for the asylum escapee and the seventh day for the Wenzhou train crash. Reporters at the scene and editors in the office scrambled to publish in their traditional media before the inevitable Party directives could end the best hopes for their stories.

Ironically, censorship appears to play a crucial role in building an ego-less professional ethic of teamwork among normally more competitive journalists, a role where Weibo comes into its own. In the village chief case, Wang Sijing stayed connected with what was happening through Weibo and discussed the reporting angle with her editor on the train from Shanghai to Yueqing. They decided to maintain their focus on "land seizure by local authorities". Wang arrived at 7ish in the evening as her colleague was on her way back to the office to write up her part of the report based on her interviews and observations of the accounts of villagers. It was only a bit more than two hours ahead of deadline when Wang began to interview and select those important details from land seizure-related documents provided by the villagers. Her colleagues were contributing from their headquarters at the same time. Wang sent her interview notes to the editor around 10 pm and only then did her editor incorporate her own contribution to the story written by her colleagues. Together, they managed to publish an unusually comprehensive report before the axe fell early the next morning.

Directives often arrive before such a story can be published. At this point, media organizations must make their own call about whether or not to pull their journalists off the story based on key criteria: 1) How strongly worded is the directive such as "recall journalists now!"; 2) Whether it's worth continuing with interviews so they can shelve the story and publish later; 3) How meaningful and influential the story might be in terms of the public interest/greater good. If journalists make their own decisions to stay or are asked to stay by their employer, they too must weigh the pros and cons of whether to continue reporting on Weibo.

Chang Ping, former deputy editor-in-chief of Southern Weekly, supported his journalists continuing on Weibo as he believed the principle was bigger than any one reporter or news organization. "It's about the whole media standing up to the propaganda department," he says. "The social responsibility of the media is to discover and report the truth. When that responsibility clashes with the media company's interests, social responsibility comes first."

Weighing up whether or not to post a banned story on Weibo, Editor A and Liu Ziqian see the situation as far more of a pragmatic or tactical struggle. Knowing many a media ban has an expiry date, they were more willing to wait it out: A story banned today can

be published tomorrow. The journalists meanwhile can continue on site collecting all available materials. “We sent our reporter to conduct interviews about the Xu Wu case long after the first wave of attention had passed,” Editor A explains. “The reporter kept a very low profile when she was there and eventually we managed to publish our story.”

Their way to tackle directives was to continue interviews and save the story until it was less sensitive, Liu says. Less sensitive can also mean less newsworthy. Luckily for an investigative feature that examines the deeper issues or the so-called “story behind the story”, timeliness and newsworthiness are not necessarily the top priority. Liu therefore disagrees with tweeting completed stories on Weibo only as the priority should be to publish for the traditional media employer. “I stayed a month in Chongqing to do interviews for an investigative piece on Wang Lijun [right-hand man of scandal-plagued former Chongqing Communist Party boss Bo Xilai]. After I finished writing this more than 10,000-word story, we didn’t dare publish it. We eventually published it after waiting almost 10 months until November when we were short of stories.”

Weibo is at its most toothless when traditional investigative journalists encounter politically sensitive stories like illegal detentions or violent beatings by unidentified thugs. Disappearances, detentions or high-level corruption cases tend to quickly escalate into taboo topics as discoveries usually lead higher and higher up the political ladder. The Bo Xilai scandal, where the former Chongqing Communist Party was expelled from the party for corruption while his wife Gu Kailai was convicted of murdering British businessman Neil Heywood, was for example widely discussed and speculated about on Weibo between February and April 2012. Those discussions had zero effect upon investigative journalism as traditional media outlets were strictly forbidden to write their own stories or commentaries. They could only carry statements from the state-owned Xinhua News Agency. Foreign media meanwhile had a field day with sensational allegation after allegation.

### **Protective umbrella for journalists in danger**

When investigative journalists head off on interview trips to uncover local scandals, they can expect to meet resistance, hostility or even physical danger from the relevant authorities and/or corporate interests. It’s not rare to see journalists get themselves out of a pickle by seeking help on Weibo. The problem is when a normally objective reporter feels in danger, they may resort to editorializing, eye-catching wording. With fast dissemination of information, the reporter can lose control of how people interpret such posts. The emotive situation then lends itself to accusations of bias, self-publicity or even trying to become the story yourself, warns Wang Sijing.

During the escapee case when Wang Sijing could not interview Xu Wu because of a media gag, she opted to interview another victim instead. Trying to visit that victim, she was stopped by mysterious guards at the entrance to a residential compound. They wouldn’t let her leave, making Wang nervous. She called her editor and the police. The police came and put her in a police vehicle to take her to the Jiang’an district police station in Wuhan. In the car she called Si Weijiang, a Shanghai lawyer friend who informed her the police had no right to check her national identity card if she wasn’t involved in any specific type of suspicious behaviour. Si then posted what was happening to her on Weibo and sought help and support for Wang when she was detained at the police station for two hours. Friends, journalists and internet users began inundating the Hubei police and propaganda departments with calls about Wang. Wang posted a picture showing a scratch on her hand that was caused when police tried

to grab her phone and bag. A handful of internet users went to the police station. Later that night, Wang was released.

“I cannot imagine how I would have spent that night without the campaign by friends and other internet users,” Wang says. She says she didn’t mean to draw attention to herself or deliberately create an ancillary news event when she was detained. “I was so scared I kind of lost my head,” she says. “I was screaming in the police station and I later thought that it’s silly to scream because nobody would care.”

Some journalists argue it’s self-serving and unethical to publicize this type of information on Weibo. Wang argues there is no clear-cut rule. “As long as the employer doesn’t oppose it, it’s not against the professional code,” Wang says. “It’s a special phenomenon that reporters come across obstacles during their attempts to cover sensitive issues. The public should be kept informed and it’s worth reporting in the style of ‘We Media’.”

Other investigative journalists say that they had never experienced physical danger. “The investigative journalists I know have never been beaten up during reporting assignments,” says Liu Ziqian. “Even if I were beaten up, I wouldn’t tweet that because it’s such a face loss for me: It suggests I’m incapable of handling conflict. I would use my own connections to sort it out.”

Editor A says journalists facing physical danger or other serious threats during reporting assignments should get in touch with their employers as soon as possible. “We don’t encourage journalists to seek help on Weibo unless it’s an extremely critical or urgent situation.

“It’s usually when there’s a very complex situation. Seeking help on Weibo is only one side of the story which can easily generate misunderstanding. As it’s a professional action, it should be dealt with by professional media organizations.”

It’s entirely appropriate to use Weibo if journalists seek to protect essential evidence, Liu Jianfeng believes. “If the evidence is in danger of being seized by others it’s fine to seek help on Weibo,” he says. “It’s very rare to encounter such circumstances.”

There have also been cases where journalists have tried to provoke authorities through harsh and confrontational behaviour. Liu once came across a journalist who deliberately tried to irk local security guards. He told Liu later that “If I got beaten up, that’s a nice extra spin.”

### **3.3 Changing investigative methods**

#### **Working on unique angles**

Before the Weibo era, investigative journalists had much less information before they embarked on an interview trip. On the one hand, Weibo provides better background and more sources of information. On the other, mob discontent towards local government can make it more difficult to separate rumour from fact. That makes it harder for journalists to keep a clear head. Journalists who read Weibo are only human, Editor A says, and often can be influenced by the judgmental landslides of public opinion.

In the case of the dead village chief, villagers knelt down and prostrated themselves before journalists. Reporters were hailed by Weibo users as heroes and saviours. Online polls initiated by Weibo user @游魂 CG found about 97 percent of the first 150 recipients

didn't believe the police announcement of a "traffic accident." As a result, many stories focused solely and exclusively on the murder-mystery angle in an online rush to premature judgement.

The power of dominant public opinion weighed down journalists at the scene. Their Weibo posts ignored the deeper, more critical issue of the land grab and inappropriate compensation that lay behind the incident. Many Weibo users reacted venomously toward those more objective journalists who did not jump to conclusions or attempted to balance their coverage by incorporating the local authorities' version of events, Liu Ziqian says.

In modern mainland Chinese society, the widening gap between rich and poor is now creating increasing conflict between officials and the public, making internet users exceptionally sensitive to issues of wealth and power. In an atmosphere where increasingly proactive censorship is constantly undermining already-limited government credibility, users gloat over government scandals and embrace new corruption stories that humble high officialdom. Public opinion snowballs on Weibo, often intensified by a kind of mainland lynch mob mentality. Journalists are not immune to explosions of online hatred and distrust. It is not hard to see why media reporting on the village chief focused on the immediate murder-mystery angle and overlooked the deeper long-lying causes.

Perhaps a better example is the October 2010 "My dad is Li Gang" case in which 22-year-old drunk-driver Li Qiming, son of a deputy police chief, allegedly shouted, "Go ahead, sue me if you dare! My dad is Li Gang," after his hit-and-run accident killed a 20-year-old Hebei University student (Wan 2010). "My dad is Li Gang" became a national catchphrase overnight, reflecting a deep hatred of privilege prevalent in mainland China. Media reports and Weibo discussions focused almost exclusively on abuse of power. Occasional reports that questioned facts or circumstances surrounding the alleged statement were widely ignored, refuted or attacked. After nearly two weeks' media coverage, the central propaganda department issued a directive requiring "no more hype over the traffic disturbance at Hebei University" and ordered newspapers to recall their reporters. Based on this own researcher's observation, the central propaganda authorities successfully diverted attention from a conflict between the ruling elite and the common people by spinning it into a conflict between rich and poor. This misleading new characterization of an age-old conflict is not such a direct threat to Communist Party rule. Hence "rich-poor" topics, as long as they don't name or involve elite officials, can be covered at the outset until they gain sufficient momentum to incite potential societal unrest. It's a dangerous game, but in this way censors perhaps feel a pressure valve has been released.

In many cases when Liu Ziqian arrived at the scene, he found the actual truth was the exact opposite of the Weibo postings. Independent, mature journalists can avoid being swept along by Weibo's tidal moods and views. "Journalists shouldn't be manipulated or deceived by people in power, nor by people in need," as Liu Jianfeng says.

In the Weibo era after journalists arrive on site during their investigative reporting trips, first they should verify facts and identify rumours circulated on Weibo. Second they should offer balanced views and hard facts, the independent viewpoint rather than mass opinion. Third, they should dig deeper to discover the root causes and vested interests (Liu Ziqian, Liu Jianfeng, Editor A, interviews, 2012)

While reporting on a breaking news event, internet users are often quite well-informed of the basic facts before journalists complete their stories. Some journalists say in the Weibo era it's increasingly difficult to get scoops or exclusives. So they have to work on finding unique angles for their stories. "Investigative journalism should be independent and irreplaceable. Journalists can still find their own angle and different details and evidence through hard digging," says Liu Jianfeng.

### **Receiving online tip-offs**

It's got so bad journalists call their Weibo accounts "online petition offices". Before the Weibo era, people with grievances mailed materials to news organizations or gathered in front of China Central Television in the consistently vain hope of being noticed by the media. Today if journalists investigating social issues identify themselves on Weibo, they receive regular tips via the Weibo private messaging service or tweets directed @ them. How many tips depends on what kind of media the journalists work for and what beat they cover. Most tips are not worth covering because there are countless identical hard-luck stories of unfair treatment by government authorities or local commercial powers in league with those authorities.

Surveys conducted in the mid-2000s found a total 0.2 percent of mainland Chinese petitioners received a response. A total 0.02 percent of petitioners agreed the petitioning system worked. "The petition system has almost zero effect," Lu Yuegang, a journalist who writes about the plight of petitioners, told the New York Times. "Most petitions received by the state bureau are sent back to the local governments, the place where the cases originate. The system is not a problem-solving system but a receiving-and-forwarding system. And it just recycles the cases. This is the core problem." Experienced petitioners soon evolve to pin their negligible hopes on obtaining media coverage. As Shi Feike (interview 2003) puts it, "If all other channels are blocked, the water will surely go to the only channel not completely blocked."

Long, tragic, bureaucratic tales clog up Weibo. About 40-50 percent of the stories he covered in the last two years originated on Weibo, says Liu Ziqian, either through private messages or widely circulated posts. But Weibo posting also makes it increasingly difficult for journalists to come up with a scoop. Unfortunately there is absolutely nothing new under the sun about many kinds of tragedies or injustices in China. The hardened journalist knows the score: He must find a unique angle.

For an investigative piece on Xu Wu being thrown back into a Wuhan mental hospital, New Century Weekly journalist Zhou Kaili found a fresh angle: This well-known malpractice was in fact closely related to a "stability maintenance" mindset among local officials whose performance was evaluated in Beijing by counting the number of petitioners coming from their areas. In this way, she not only beat a reporting ban on Xu Wu's individual story but went beyond it to include other petitioners suffering from similar experiences.

## **3.4 Control over journalist Weibo**

### **Weibo guidelines**

Using a new tool of internet communications technology is a learning process for media professionals hoping to develop a new and appropriate professional code. Whether Weibo is regarded as a blunt or sharp instrument tends to influence attitudes about how best to handle it. In the headlong rush to adopt instant new technology, it's worth pausing to consider how much media organizations should encourage journalists to use

microblogging and how to regulate that behavior. If journalists tweet on their verified Weibo accounts, how much do they speak for themselves and how much their media organizations? Even though they claim their words are only their own personal view that has nothing to do with their newspaper, other Weibo users may still regard their tweets as having higher credibility. The general attitude of mainland media organizations towards a journalist's Weibo is not to intervene except during politically sensitive times such as the Olympic games or a Communist Party congress.

Before the dead village chief when the potential influence of Weibo had not yet been fully recognized, most traditional media had no guidelines. As Weibo gained momentum and journalists' postings provoked increasing controversy, media organizations moved to regulate. Caixin Media Group became more regulatory after the Wenzhou train crash when journalist Zhou Kaili mistakenly posted that authorities had not buried a train carriage, provoking furious internet users to denounce her as a stooge.

Yangcheng Evening News and Guangzhou Daily prefer their journalists not to identify their employer. Other media organizations like Times Weekly, a weekly belonging to Guangzhou Daily, apply for verified accounts on behalf of their journalists. Most media organizations have either print or verbal guidelines to regulate journalist Weibo. Typically they append Weibo guidelines to their general editorial guidelines to control the following types of behaviour:

- posting internal information of the media organization without permission;
- revealing news developments during interviews without permission;
- publishing removed or censored contents; and,
- damaging the image of media organizations (e.g. not criticizing the reporting or editing of the publication for whom they work)

Although many media organizations have Weibo guidelines, they are often vague or not strictly followed. Flexible, noncommittal phrases like "be cautious" or "try not to" proliferate. In effect, journalists retain considerable wiggle room with Weibo until their posts attract broad public attention and bring trouble down on their employers. When Liu Jianfeng worked at Caixin Magazine, he received a phone call from the magazine demanding he delete a Weibo post about a corruption case in Zhejiang province: Caixin's licensed owner is the Zhejiang Daily Media Group. The Zhejiang owners had simply intervened in support of their own narrow commercial interests.

More nakedly political is the example of Zhu Wenqiang, a Beijing-based journalist for Chengdu Business News, who received a call from his boss warning him to be "cautious" about Weibo posting in the run-up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress of November 2012, a comparatively sensitive time.

To avoid premature bans, leading financial and topical social magazine New Century Weekly asks its journalists not to leak sensitive stories before distribution. The magazine also forbids journalists to comment on peer journalists' reporting and requires they comment only cautiously on topical social or political issues.

The most conservative media hire or assign staff to monitor their own journalists' Weibo postings. When in June 2011 the China Economic Times decided to dismantle its award-winning investigative department, Liu Jianfeng published two Weibo posts expertly denouncing the decision, then quit. The paper's leaders immediately ordered the managing director of the editorial department monitor all journalists' posts, then appointed an editor to perform this duty on a daily basis.

## **Self-regulation**

A verified Weibo account is a double-edged sword. Journalists speak more cautiously on a verified journalist Weibo, but verification also allegedly grants greater protection against comments being deleted or accounts being shut down. In short, Weibo enhances the fine art of self-censorship, by far the most prevalent kind of censorship in mainland China.

Whether investigative journalists should post breaking news on Weibo is a highly contextual and controversial question, best examined on a case-by-case basis rather than indulging in an abstract or theoretical discussion. This is especially true in mainland China where the added burden of sudden and heavy censorship makes the “We Media” issue more complex than in more democratic countries. After the media gag arrives from propaganda departments forbidding media to cover politically sensitive issues, some investigative journalists hold the view a reporter shouldn’t take advantage of the resources supplied them by their media organization: By selfishly pursuing their own personal values, irresponsible journalists create a professional headache not only for themselves but also for their managers, editors and employers. Others argue that it’s fine because they are tweeting as citizens not journalists, especially in those cases where they paid their own expenses.

The broad consensus is that during a media gag it’s not unprofessional for a journalist to continue publishing news developments as long as it’s permitted by their employer (Interviews with Shi Feike, Wang Sijing and Zhu Wenqiang, 2012 and 2013). Wang Sijing says: “It’s a tacit agreement between journalists and the media organization. Why on earth should others point their fingers at this? Due to media censorship, I cannot openly state that my boss allowed me to do so as it might endanger the newspaper.” (Interview Wang 2012)

## **Control by Weibo operator and authorities**

Weibo’s operator is the Sina Corporation. Sina assigns staff to communicate with influential journalists, scholars, writers and public intellectuals, giving them the “heads-up” from time to time about what topic they need to be careful writing about in their posts. Deleting posts is rare. Weibo’s self-interest is to censor as rarely as possible those original first-hand posts tweeted by frontline journalists because they are their most important resources in the media market. Weibo tends to wait for explicit directives before deleting posts by their top posters, who already tend to self-censor in any case.

Of the four case studies, only Wukan earned massive and concentrated deletions. For the other three, it was rare indeed to see journalists’ original posts being censored or blocked. Some tweets originally posted by others then forwarded by these journalists were sometimes removed, regardless of whether they had added their own comments.

The central propaganda department includes the behaviour of journalists on Weibo in their propaganda directives during important news events such as the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 and the annual National People’s Congress in March, according to China Digital Times’ Ministry of Truth section, which tracks and records propaganda department directives. The latest reads “media personnel must not post information which is harmful to the government on their Weibo accounts.”

The government holds Sina accountable for any or all content appearing on the site, urging the company to employ an army of censors for content control. Weibo has seen



tightening control including hiring more and more real-time censors and introducing real-name registration in 2012.

There are generally five methods to censor Weibo accounts: removing verification, key word filtering, making posts unavailable to followers, deleting tweets, suspension from tweeting and shutting down accounts. A number of influential opinion leaders' (including journalists and editors) Weibo accounts have been either closed down or paralyzed. Most assume an elite Communist Party mandarin ordered Sina to do it. For example, Chang Ping's Weibo account was rendered dysfunctional after he was forced out of the Southern Daily Group in January 2011.

### **Pressure from local governments**

Local authorities monitor discussions and internet users' feedback on Weibo concerning news events in their areas. During her Weibo coverage of the asylum escapee case, Weibo users in Wuhan who clicked Wang Sijing's Weibo URL address were redirected to a pornographic website. Wang believes her account had been hacked by Wuhan police. After she left Wuhan, she revealed on Weibo that the police visited Wuhan University where she had studied as an undergraduate to investigate her background with teachers and classmates. More recently, a keyword filtering system prevented Wang from posting anything about the deadly June 2012 Beijing rainstorm: Sina Weibo appeared to be taking direct instructions from city police and propaganda departments.

## **3.5 Challenges and limitations**

### **Social-movement style journalists**

Through interviews with active journalists on Weibo and analysts as well as analyzing their coverage, there appears no direct correlation between journalists' Weibo activity and the quality of their printed media reports. Journalists who are active and influential on Weibo don't necessarily produce better investigative stories. Quite the reverse: Writing good investigative reports depends on digging up evidence, interviewing, logical reasoning and balanced coverage, not Weibo usage. "My observation is that those journalists who are very active and high-profile on Weibo usually don't produce better investigative reports," says Shi Feike. "They made their names on Weibo, but that didn't add any credit to their stories."

Liu Jianfeng goes further: Successful "name journalists" on Weibo have yet to produce a report that readers actually remember, he says. For investigative reporting, Weibo offers useful background context, help with the big picture. But real investigation requires core journalism skills like the acquisition of important evidence, something not typically available on Weibo. "Weibo is very useful in terms of offering relevant background info for journalists to understand the big picture," Liu says, "but the real investigation must reach the core issues of events and acquire key evidence not usually available on Weibo."

Liu harbors a special disdain for the "We Media" concept, especially those self-serving journalists who try to hijack news via Weibo. Shi coined a term for those who place themselves at the centre of a news event: "social-movement style journalists". "Frontline journalists should never become the focus of attention or engage in self-publicity," he says. A true investigative journalist observes and records, he says.

"Sometimes when they are too involved in a news event, their basic objective judgment might be compromised so they become emotional and draw biased conclusions," says

Editor A. “This has something to do with personality. It’s usually those people with a penchant for amateur dramatics that tend to behave like this.”

In the case of the asylum escapee, Wang and a few other journalists criticized the victim’s lawyer, demanding she be replaced. “That’s not their call at all – very unprofessional,” Editor A says. “That revealed they had a wrong idea of their role in this matter, acting only out of sentimental impulse and a sense of justice.”

### **Lessons learnt from using Weibo**

#### **i) Wenzhou train crash: Just the facts**

Hindsight is a biased, handy tool, but if Zhou Kaili had sent her observations first to her editor at Caixin Magazine before posting them on Weibo, her editor says that she would have urged caution. Examining Zhou’s two sentences – “It’s not buried. Don’t discuss it” – the first is plain inaccurate while the second is both unprofessional and incendiary. Mainland Chinese internet users tend to passionately distrust anything authorities say in such situations, especially when local authorities are trying to “manage” a news event. Whether or not official government credibility has been weakened any further by Weibo is debatable, but it has certainly brought transparency to widespread popular distrust of governing authorities. During reporting highly controversial and high-profile news events in which internet users can be blind to adversary opinion, it’s better if journalists separate facts from opinions, says Wang Sijing. Don’t provoke the public with a counter-mainstream opinionated voice, she suggests. It’s better to tweet only what you see rather than jumping to conclusions based on those observations.

#### **ii) Jelly anchor: Rumour-mongering**

Journalists take uncertain risks disseminating uncertain information. State-owned China Central Television news anchor Zhao Pu (Shanghaiist 2012) was reportedly fired from his program after advising people on his verified Weibo account not to eat jelly. His post in April 2012 reads like this: “You’ll never want to eat solid jelly or jelly ever again, especially kids. The inside story is horrible, but I won’t go into details.”

Without a shred of evidence, the story escalated into unfounded allegations that Chinese jelly-makers added industrial gelatin, made from used leather, in place of edible gelatin. The final nail for Zhao during the weeklong rumour-train came from an unlikely source: a backlash from investigative journalists. Zhao was subjected to journalist-on-journalist verbal violence for his lack of professional reporting standards.

Once again, hindsight helps. If she were Zhao, Wang says, she would have posted “I heard this, but I am not sure if there’s any truth in it.”

#### **iii) Wenzhou train crash: reposting is risky**

Journalists need to exercise extreme caution before reposting Weibo posts. If they subsequently prove fabricated or false, their fellow journalists will prove the harshest critics of all, Wang warns, even throwing about violent swear words and eye-catching, unseemly threats. Wang once reposted a captured print-screen shot of a verified Tencent account on her Weibo. The original poster claimed to be a relative of a train crash victim, alleging his/her son’s name had been left off the

official death toll register. She reposted the tweet. Then Wang called the Wenzhou authorities who denied it. She then added a comment underneath her original tweet, commenting that the authorities had denied it. Even though she had clarified it, her original post was cut out, separated from her subsequent comment, and retweeted as a prime example of shoddy journalism. Rent-a-quote conservatives and influential academics immediately attacked Wang in an apparently orchestrated series of interviews, connecting the post to another fabricated news post where internet users were swindled out of 50,000 yuan (about US\$ 8135) by a conman feigning to be a victim's family member. Wang checked through her contacts' IP addresses and found that the man who claimed to be the victim's family member was the same person who had claimed to be swindled. She now believes Chinese authorities go so far as to hire people during emotional high-profile news events to generate erroneous information, then accuse reporters who repost that information of "manipulating facts". By feeding misinformation then "refuting rumours", relevant authorities hope to damage the credibility of the journalist and critically, divert internet users' attention away from the real story.

## Chapter 4 Liberalization or democratization?

### 4.1 Impact of Weibo journalism

Measuring the impact of Weibo-related investigative journalism can begin by first assessing how far justice was delivered to the immediate victims of a story, then how much that article succeeded in pushing forward legal or policy changes for other similar victims before finally securing the ultimate goal of a more systematic, enforced political change and justice for all.

The immediate victims benefited in all four cases. The family of village chief Qian Yunhui, for instance, allegedly received more than 3 million yuan (about US\$488,000) compensation, three times the widely reported official amount of 0.9 million yuan, Wang Sijing says. “Dozens of journalists went to report the case,” she says, “but the only impact was to help the victims receive a little more compensation.”

Asylum escapee Xu Wu was released after journalists’ campaigning on Weibo (Wang Sijing, Liu Ziqian and Shi Feike, interviews 2012 and 2013). Xu would probably never have been released without traditional media and Weibo getting across the message.

In the case of the Wenzhou train crash, journalists’ posts complemented information revealed by internet users. Together they pushed officials to answer whether China was rushing too fast building a modern industrial economy and jeopardizing safety in the process. “The nature of Weibo communication empowered the voice of internet users. It pressured authorities to investigate further and answer questions raised by internet users,” says Song Shinan, a Chengdu-based media analyst at Southwest University for Nationalities. Authorities had to form an investigation team, abandoning their initial scapegoating of “equipment failure caused by a lightning strike” (Jiao 2011). The investigation ignored larger questions and rounded up mid-level officials to blame for top-level central government failure. Nearly two years later in March 2013, the central government announced all future high-speed rail projects would require an extra layer of top-level bureaucratic approval from Beijing and that the extremely culpable Ministry of Railways would be subsumed into a larger transport ministry.

The two-year hiatus makes measuring how much Weibo or investigative journalism altered the politics an open question. Every investigative journalist interviewed about the Wenzhou train crash agreed the crash had significant political implications, but Weibo posts and stories didn’t play a major role in effecting concrete political change. Similarly, the launch of mental illness regulations in 2013 cannot be directly connected with Weibo or journalism because policy-makers have spent at least two decades discussing these regulations, approving them one year after Xu Wu’s escape. There was no connection at all, insists Shi Feike. Even if there is, as Wang Sijing points out, the regulations themselves duck all the core issues raised by investigative journalists: The villagers of Zhaiqiao who lost their leader to a lorry wheel have never been compensated or had their land returned. Thus if the journalists involved in these Weibo investigative stories are to be believed, then three of the four case studies achieved zero tangible legal or political results. Victims received some small measure of justice and that was about it.

Wukan was different. Few dispute that Wukan introduced significant political changes on top of victims obtaining compensation. The Wukan compromise included 900,000 yuan (about US\$ 146,400) official compensation for the family of village representative Xue Jinbo, officially recorded to have died of cardiac arrest at the age of 42/43 by the Shanwei public security department post-mortem (Jacob 2011) despite Xue's eldest

daughter Xue Jianwan denying her father had a history of heart problems (Buckley 2011). This amount was about the same as that officially offered to the family of village chief Qian Yunhui. But in this case, the provincial government also agreed to redistribute land confiscated by the local government. Two local officials were held responsible for mishandling the incident. A new village committee was elected in February 2012.

None of these changes had anything to do with Chinese investigative journalists or their Weibo postings because journalists' avoided tweeting at the time to avoid alerting authorities to their presence in the village. Tweeting might have led to them being recalled by their employers during the middle of an explosive political confrontation (Chang Ping, interview 2013). Therefore any shift in government attitude or political progress came about through the efforts of the villagers themselves on the ground, perhaps their Weibo tweets and the pressure exerted by extensive foreign media coverage, says Xiong Wei, an observer of the subsequent grass-roots village election. More than 100 foreign journalists gathered in the village making his job much more difficult, Zhu Minguo, deputy Communist Party secretary of Guangdong Province, reportedly said. Villagers meanwhile kept opening new Weibo accounts under new names and tweeting the latest developments. Those accounts kept being closed down. So yes, Weibo played a role, Xiong says, but not a decisive one. "Even without Weibo, the government would still eventually make the compromise."

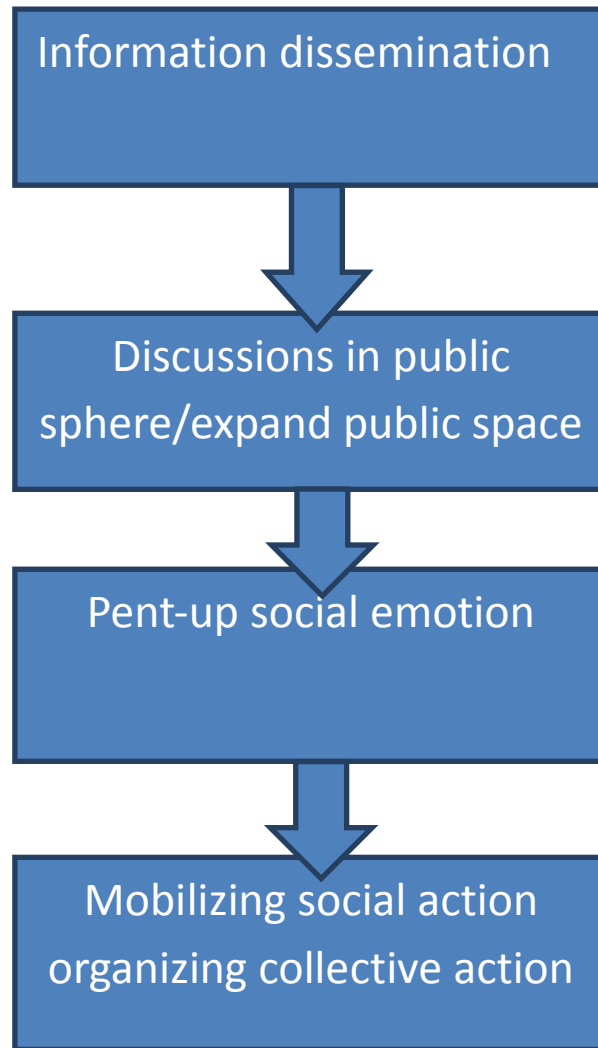
Thus it appears highly unlikely that Weibo, investigative journalism or both working together had any influence on policy-making in any of these four hugely important investigative cases, Wang says. No matter how high-profile the news event or story, no change follows in policy-making or legislation because these events threaten or challenge the "core interests" of the political power of the party, government or top officials (Raymond Li, Interview 2013). The dead village chief's land dispute, for example, ran up against an extremely powerful electric company (Wenzhou Daily 2011).

Policy changes come when authorities put them on their political agenda. Sometimes policy-makers latch onto an item of news as a catchy bullet-point to promote their own pet policy, regulation or law. In this narrow sense and this sense alone, Weibo can be seen as pushing forward policy-making, Shi Feike says.

## **4.2 Impact of Weibo**

If Weibo investigative journalism is changing China at all then it is for much the same reason that Weibo itself is changing China. "There is no question that Weibo and other social media are changing China, by giving ordinary people 1) a non-governmental news source, and 2) a platform for organizing and bringing pressure," writes Professor Perry Link in an e-mail reply.

Apart from offering an alternative source of information and a public sphere for people to discuss social and political issues, Weibo very occasionally can mobilize social/political action or movement. Through reading and talking to analysts, the researcher has developed a four-stage process of engagement to illuminate the role of Weibo in mobilizing social and political action.



(Zheng Yongnian, 2010; Shi Feike, interview 2013)

To see this process in action, let us examine the recent Southern Weekly standoff in January 2013 between editors and the Guangdong propaganda department that developed into protestors standing outside the Nanfang Daily Group. Offline actions came about through online mobilization, Shi believes. This combination of online and offline protests eventually made both sides – editors and the Guangdong provincial propaganda department – reach for a political compromise. Editors regained some of their lost editorial freedom and in an exceptionally unusual development, not one participating editor was sacked or demoted (at the time of writing). Thus pent-up social emotion gave rise to social action, online activities preparing the ground for offline activities. Only when online discussion evolves into offline activity is it possible to achieve any significant political or social change.

Political liberalization can be gauged in different ways and through different paradigms of mainland China. Individuals have gained more freedom of expression and are better informed through Weibo. They can publicly discuss social and political issues. In the media sphere, journalists can use Weibo to bypass censorship and engage in online causes. Weibo also pressures the government-run media to do a better job, where “better” means faster, more truthful. This pressure comes because ordinary people will increasingly ignore state-run media if it remains slower and more false than social

media (Link interview 2013). In Chinese society, these discussions also facilitate the strengthening of a civil society and development of non-government organizations. The broadcast of protests against chemical plants in recent years on Weibo has encouraged others to follow suit. In some cases, discussions and public opinion on Weibo have pressurized local governments to become more accountable by being more responsive and sometimes changing their way of handling conflicts and controversies. In this sense, Weibo has helped improve political liberalization in China.

But this impact is limited, only reaching a certain degree, says Raymond Li (Interview 2013). “If it crosses a certain line, then it’s beyond the power of the media and needs action be taken offline into structural change of the political system.”

Even if one rejects the argument that information technology and the internet is democratizing the Chinese state, we cannot deny it has introduced changes to that state (Zheng and Wu, 2010). They argue information technology has promoted political liberalization in China. Critically, liberalization can exist *without democratization*.

All the hopes pinned on Weibo to transform China fundamentally are ludicrously overoptimistic, Shi Feike says, because Weibo is just like blogs, chat groups or other social media, an upgraded medium to facilitate dissemination of information that finally falls under the grip of authorities. Chinese government control is always one small step behind the latest technology. The government responds to such changes as follows: come to know, observe, research and discuss, draft regulations or tactics, launch and implement, Shi says. Internet users can get their messages across and have access to others by making the most of the window of time when the government needs to respond to a sensitive event, says Chang Ping. Weibo is a platform for censors and internet users to play cat-and-mouse games and in the process of playing this game, netizens have to a large extent changed themselves, he says.

John Keane, professor of politics at the University of Sydney, perhaps sums it up best: “There will be no absolute victory for the Chinese Communist Party but there will be no revolutionary victory for Weibo,” he writes in an e-mail interview. “What is happening now is the push-pull, action and reaction.”

### **Future of Weibo**

Although social media poses a threat to its authoritarian regime, the government whose overarching goal is to maintain tight political and social control, tolerates it. That is because social media is simply too influential not to be exploited to their own advantage, including monitoring public opinion and letting the public vent as long as it’s under control or guidance. Thus most interviewees agree that the Communist Party attitude towards Weibo is simply the same as other media: 1) try to control 2) try to use it to own advantage including observing and guiding public opinion.

Government control over Weibo will thus only inevitably intensify, fluctuating with periodical events like the Tiananmen Square anniversary or riots in Tibet. China targets outspoken liberal voices on Weibo and will continue to do so. “Basically it’s a combination of control over incidents and people,” says Shi Feike.

Journalists are already growing less active using Weibo because:

- Control over Weibo is intensifying, limiting freedom of speech
- Journalists are increasingly cautious posting anything significant after learning the lessons of their own or others’ mistakes

Rather than being impulsive with their Weibo posts like the old days, journalists now assess the risk when facts are uncertain. For this reason, it's unlikely a journalist can now make a name for himself from scratch using Weibo.

The number of active Weibo users declined nearly 40 percent in the last six months of 2012, according to the Global Web Index report. The main reasons appear:

- Growing government control like real-name (or cellphone number) registration, intensified filtering of sensitive words, banning sensitive topics, forcing out outspoken public intellectuals, as well as a growing presence of official government accounts, which has resulted in a weaker voice for alternative views;
- Shifting usage to more informal social media including WeChat, a mobile app launched by Tencent.com that is in synch with the latest global communication trends towards smaller circles; and,
- A natural decline in enthusiasm towards new technological tools.

(Raymond Li and Shi Feike, interviews 2013)

If these three factors stay the same, Weibo may wither away (Raymond Li, interview). A report (Fu and Chau 2013) by Hong Kong University found that over 57 percent of Weibo's 500 million-plus registered users may be "zombie" accounts that post no original tweets. The study further found that just over 10 percent of users appear active in a given week. It's still a bit premature to conclude Weibo's best days are over, say Lu and Wertime. They list six reasons:

- "Not that many" is still quite a lot. Less than half of Weibo users still adds up to more than 200 million;
- Active Weibo users are influential because they are current and future leaders of China who dominate discussions over political and social issues and who might shape the future of China as well;
- Inactive users get their information and find like-minded people from Weibo and other social media sources;
- Weibo's impact is multiplied through other media platforms due to its agenda-setting function and its influence over traditional media as well as other social media;
- Inactive users can become powerful users overnight by connecting with journalists, lawyers, social activists or sympathizers during newsworthy events that attract media attention; and,
- Weibo is the best available tool out there to gauge social sentiment in China.

(Lu and Wertime 2013)

So although Weibo might seem quiet most days, it can also explode when dormant Weibo users and journalists become active during a high-profile topical issue. Thus like the new technologies that came before it, Weibo is evolving toward its own niche of more rational and sustainable usage.

China's authorities will continue to make the most of Weibo as a tool for maintaining stable rule, as well as assisting the central government in keeping power to control information concentrated at the political centre (Chang Ping and Anti, 2013). The central authorities might still like to use Weibo to constrain the power of local governments by permitting tweets that complain about local and regional government



corruption or ineptness, Michael Anti wrote (2013). Of course they will continue to ruthlessly censor critical posts about central government. It's a shock absorber that allows the centre to be seen as the good ruler (Keane 2013), keeping the country stable and united.

Many local conflicts that were exposed and circulated on Weibo went viral, generating pressure for local authorities. After a local protest against a Japanese paper plant in Ningbo broke out and discussions snowballed on Weibo, the project was put on hold by local authorities. "It's an example of how top-down power is contested publicly using the new media," John Keane writes in an e-mail interview. "I see it as a trend you can observe in China. But whether it's a new model, that's unclear."

This might be an entirely new process of democratization of power which did not happen in Central Europe in 1989, partly because the Chinese polity is different and partly because the party avoided the mistakes the Soviet Union Communist Party made, Keane observes (2013).

"It's just possible that so-called authoritarianism is able to learn how to handle these conflicts by developing new mechanisms for anticipating and even incorporating the Weibo disturbances," Keane says. "In that sense, China is a laboratory. A big experiment is going on about how far a one-party system of power can incorporate democratic qualities. I call it smart power. It's possible that it's the beginning of the development of an entirely new path to democracy, which will not be liberal democratic. It will be a democratization, Chinese style."

## Conclusion

Journalists tweet real-time developments during high-profile public events to build up credibility, which is especially effective when the traditional media are banned from covering these events. By doing so, they in a sense bypass the censorship imposed on their media and manage to get their messages across directly to the public. They are usually compelled to do so because they think they are obliged to record what truly happens in the hope of catching the attention of peer journalists who might be able to report it. In this way, Weibo usage is intimately linked with issuance of propaganda directives. Their efforts on Weibo usually cannot change the issuance of these directives, especially when news events are not topical nationwide. When harassed or in danger, journalists sometimes get out of trouble by seeking help and support on Weibo and mobilizing public opinion.

Weibo has changed the investigative methodology of journalists. As Weibo offers so much information to the public, it's the job of professional journalists to either verify or refute information and secure important evidence to support their investigative pieces. They also need to work on unique angles because 1) Weibo users are already well-informed; and 2) It's difficult to secure scoops when most news sources are already exposed and circulated on Weibo.

Some errors by journalists using Weibo have promoted them into the middle of a story. Influential journalists with thousands of followers need to be cautious about what they post, especially during fast-moving news events when users are often too frantic, gullible and easily provoked.

Some high-profile journalists have been called "social-movement style" journalists who abuse We Media to make themselves the centre of events, interfering in an unprofessional way with the normal evolution of a story. The investigative journalists interviewed generally don't think Weibo has improved the quality of their investigative pieces for media publications. For them, Weibo's most useful function is to disseminate information when censorship hits their day job.

Journalists and media organizations are developing a professional Weibo code through successes and failures. Today journalists who identify themselves on Weibo are subject to self-regulation, professional regulations by their media organizations, and control by Weibo's owner the Sina Corporation as well as central and local authorities. Journalists with a large number of followers tend to be cautious with their posts. Media organizations usually don't interfere too much as long as journalists are careful enough not to ruin stories planned for publication by alerting propaganda departments. They still have a certain freedom to decide what they post as long as their tweets don't cause trouble for themselves or their employers. The Weibo operator assigns editors to stay in touch with influential journalists and the central propaganda department issues media directives targeting journalists' behavior on Weibo during important political events.

Investigative journalists' Weibo posts and Weibo in general tend to make authorities more responsive. Their posts pressure authorities to secure justice for immediate victims, perhaps even make a scapegoat of a few officials. But investigative journalists' Weibo postings and stories are largely irrelevant to policy-making or legislation. Frustrated by this impotence, investigative journalists who recognize the grass-roots power of Weibo have turned to founding and supporting their own local charities.

With the assistance of journalists Weibo has a role in mobilizing political action through a four-step process: 1) information dissemination; 2) expanding the public sphere; 3) pent-up emotions accumulating toward critical mass; and, 4) mobilizing collective social action. Investigative journalists mainly contribute to the first and second online steps.

Even though it's beyond Weibo's capacity to effect significant political structural change such as democratization, it aids and abets political liberalization in China among individuals, media, society and government. The public pressure organized on Weibo sometimes has held local government or officials more accountable and responsive, making authorities adjust their approach to social conflict.

The activeness of Weibo has subsided considerably since the second half of last year due to three reasons: 1) growing government control; 2) shifting to WeChat, a mobile app launched by Tencent.com, and 3) the natural life cycle of new technology. If the three remain unchanged, Weibo will continue to decline except during high-profile news events.

WeChat, a new social media network allowing people to share information and photos within small circles of friends, colleagues and acquaintances, has been gaining popularity and momentum among urban middle-class users. WeChat works differently from Weibo, focusing on a circle of friends and local areas. It works better than Weibo in discussing and planning among people you are familiar with before making it public or even nationwide on Weibo. For instance, during the recent Southern Weekly standoff, editors and journalists communicated and came up with statements on WeChat before publicizing them on Weibo. WeChat filters sensitive words but at the moment is much less restrictive than Weibo. Sina has hired 1,000-2,000 censors to manually censor sensitive posts, mostly 5-10 minutes after they are posted. It therefore seems future online campaigns will see more use of WeChat for collective planning and Weibo for spreading the word.

The Chinese central government is trying to control and use Weibo to its own advantage, and the general trend is toward tightening censorship with adjustments based on periodical important events. Under rising pressure from Weibo, top officials are also becoming more responsive to public opinion. This bottom-up public scrutiny/surveillance of Weibo can be used by the central government to constrain the power of local governments through censoring negative posts that blame the central governments and targeting local governments instead.

What is happening in China between the government and Weibo, a tug of war, can have no absolute victor. The regime is innovating and learning how to incorporate democratic elements – public scrutiny – into one-party rule. Ultimately it is a kind of democratization: democratization with Chinese characteristics.

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