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

# **The Power of the Chinese Netizen?**

How Microblogging is Changing Chinese Journalism

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Hilary & Trinity Term 2011

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation

## **ABSTRACT**

*Microblogging has become a new force in Chinese society, informing public opinion. This research is focused on the boom of Microblogging in China starting in 2009 and addresses its background, together with the resulting influence on and consequences for Chinese journalism, citing some typical cases. The potential influence of microblogging on the future of Chinese Journalism is discussed.*

## **KEY WORDS**

*Microblogging, Microblogs, Weibo, Fanfou, Social Media, Twitter, Facebook, Sina, Journalism, Investigative Reporting, Chinese News Media, Beta testing, Weiguan*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On 28<sup>th</sup> April 2010 at 10:28 pm, I was preparing a report on the Shanghai World Expo 2010 when an email reached my laptop from Alex, a member of staff at the Reuters Institute who had kept in contact with me for a long time. She informed me that I had been successful in obtaining the offer of a research fellowship from Oxford, one of the top universities in the world, thus providing the opportunity for this research project.

This research has been a long time in the writing, and so there are many people whose contributions I must acknowledge. I would like to thank the Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism. It has been a good opportunity for me to work together with top media professionals from across the world, learning their journalistic cultures, exchanging opinions reflecting different perspectives, meeting famous people who are shaping the media in the future, enriching myself, touching the long history of the Oxford, the 'city of dreaming spires', sharing leisure time on and by the Cherwell river, and collecting niche images from many tucked away alcoves ranging from Broad Street to the High Street.

My thanks will go to my knowledgeable referees, Professor Colin Sparks at Westminster University and Martin Huckerby, Journalist and Editorial Consultant, who always push me forward. I also owe my appreciation, as ever, to the staff of the Reuters institute: Dr David Levy, Mr. John Lloyd, the head of the fellowship programme James Painter, and Sara Kalim, Kate Hanneford-Smith, Alex Reid and Amanda Armstrong, who provided me with invaluable suggestions.

I would especially like to thank Richard and Alison, from my heart. They are like my relations here - I spent Christmas with their family in Harrow (North-West London) and attended their daughter's wedding. They always encouraged me to go ahead and gave some irreplaceable help.

Lastly but most importantly, I am deeply indebted to my family in China. I am grateful to my parents, my grandmother and other members of my family; their love has always been the fundamental inspiration of every bit of my work in the United Kingdom.

My experience at Oxford will benefit and enrich my career and indeed my life.

Zhou Kangliang  
19 Sep 2011

## INTRODUCTION

China has the world's largest Internet population. According to the 26<sup>th</sup> survey report on the state of development of China's internet by the 'China Internet Network Information Center' (CINIC) released on 19th January 2011, the number of Internet users in China reached 457 million at the end of 2010, i.e. almost half a billion, an increase of more than 73 million since the end of 2009, showing the steady rise of the Internet in China.

The top three most popular activities for Web users in the country were stated as being using search engines, listening to music, and reading news. 13.8 percent of Chinese Internet users engage in microblogging and this proportion is increasing rapidly. Statistics from the 'Data Centre for the Chinese Internet' (DCCI) indicate that the number of independent Weibo (see below) users will reach 100 million by the end of 2011 and grow to 253 million by 2013. The Weibo market is expected to grow rapidly from 2013.

These facts are the main reasons why I chose the subject of Microblogging as the basis of this research project. Not only is Microblogging a new media phenomenon, but it is also becoming recognised as having a potentially significant effect on the future of China. Many media workers are using Microblogging and enriching their experience, and many media enterprises continue to attempt to reserve space to explore this new outlet. Microblogging has evolved, is evolving and will continue to evolve and influence China.

This study focuses on the relationship between microblogging and Chinese journalism. Microblogging is still a relatively new phenomenon and therefore while its significance makes it an essential constituent part of any research into the Chinese media, it is also difficult to analyse.

The first part of this study reviews the background to Chinese microblogging and presents a brief history before 2010. Notable websites providing a Chinese version of the twitter service are introduced and the impact on them of the government response to the '5<sup>th</sup> July Event' (the riot in Xinjiang) is discussed. This aspect of the report aims to provide an insight into the environment in which both traditional and new Chinese media operate.

The focus of the second part is on the new word '*Weibo*' (pronounced 'way-bore'). In Chinese, 'Wei' means 'Micro' and 'bo' means 'blog'. After some Chinese internet giants entered this market, the number of users increased rapidly and *Weibo* became a fashionable and popular symbol in China. Many events and hot topics combined to form a new phenomenon in Chinese society, and 2010 became known as the year that microblogging was born. '*Sina*', the

largest website providing microblogging services, is also introduced, together with its main competitors in the Chinese market. Some features which enable Weibo users to do more things on this 'platform' (and which are not found in Twitter or Facebook) are summarised.

This part also discusses the interesting phenomenon that since Weibo has become the major target for China's Internet censors and has learnt some painful lessons, all other websites providing microblogging services label themselves as 'Beta' providers. This implies that their activities are effectively a 'trial run', reflecting the reality that they are subject to strict government control and censorship, and will lose their 'power' if they cross the line or threaten the political power of the government.

In part 3, the focus is on the degree to which microblogging is exploited by the 'special interest' group of Chinese journalists and editors, using microblogging not only as a social media, but also as a new tool for their jobs. The author analyses tweets over a particular short period and separates them into several categories, including pointless babble, conversation representing gossip, complaints and satire, serious news and comments, self-promotion and protection, and activities benefitting the public.

The case studies in part 4 examine four phenomena occurring when the media use microblogging for purposes of providing a mouthpiece, researching grassroots opinion, and supporting watchdog activities. It also addresses the danger of rumour: some people have fallen into the trap of rumour-mongering via microblogging, sometimes with serious consequences.

Finally, the report addresses the potential influence of Weibo on the future of Chinese journalism.

Footnote: This study is based on an analysis of the use of Weibo during its first two years. However, the use and scope of this new medium is growing so rapidly in China that several interesting cases and phenomena occurred after the end of the research programme in July 2011 and submission of the report, while the functionality of the medium has also increased. Since the topic of 'Microblogging and Chinese Journalism' is of considerable interest to me and very worthwhile pursuing, I hope to provide a revised version in the future taking account of these recent changes.

# Chapter 1 The Origin of Chinese Microblogging: The First China Twitter Clones and their Fates

Fanfou( 饭否 ) is the earliest Chinese micro-blogging service provider and is a close replica of Twitter. Launched in May 2007, the literal translation of the name is “Have you eaten your meal or not?” and has similarities to Twitter’s ‘slogan’: “what are you doing?”. At the same time, its presentation clones almost all the features of Twitter: it has a similar blue background color and it uses a layout identifying following, number of followers, location, and public timeline, etc.



Fanfou and Twitter Screens

Weibo (discussed in Section 2.1) is another Twitter-style site; it grew rapidly after 2009. Comparing the two, Wang, who is an investigative reporter working for a national magazine in Beijing and one of earliest users of Fanfou, recalled that Fanfou looks 'simple and pure. We used it to paste news links and comment on news events and current affairs. However, few of my colleagues had accounts in Fanfou, because that was the time of the blogs.'

In fact, in spite of being under the shadow of the blogs at that time, China's Twitter was still popular, especially among a certain subset of Chinese academics, journalists, and artists. The number of users increased sharply, reaching 1 million in 2 years. Other social websites, such as Jiwai ( 叽歪 ) and

Digu ( 嘀咕) also became successful during this time.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009, one day before the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident, the government temporarily blocked Twitter and shut down



Fanfou, but the sites were back up shortly afterwards. However, just one month later, the serious ethnic unrest in northwestern China changed the fate of those sites drastically. In mid-July 2009, a series of violent riots broke out in Ürümqi (the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) over several days. The official media reported that a total of 197 people died, with 1,721 others injured and many vehicles and buildings destroyed.

Mobile phone services and internet access were limited both during and after these riots. As well as Twitter and Facebook, Fanfou, Jiwai and Digu were cut off on 9th July. One employee said on-line: 'Fanfou is now under technical maintenance and will re-open soon. Don't ask me why.' The Government blamed the spread of the violence partly on agitators using the web to stoke it. This response reflected the fact that the government had come to realise the power of such social networks to quickly mobilise large groups of people.

At around 21:30 on 25<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2010, some Chinese internet users found that Fanfou was available again after a break of almost 500 days. This forerunner of the Chinese micro-blogging sites now seems to be back because the word 'Waiting for meal' on the homepage has become a login window.



**Logo of Fanfou**

The rise and fall of Fanfou is just one such story. Other social media websites such as Jiwai and Digu met with similar government responses. Nevertheless, when they were revived, everything changed. Their rebirths incorporated not only replaced chat rooms, but also other features demonstrating that lessons had been learnt.

## Chapter 2 2010: The First Year of 'A Weibo Era'



Picture by artist Xu Jun

When the internationally-popular social media sites Facebook, Twitter, and the Google-owned YouTube were blocked, and Fanfou (the Chinese version of Twitter) was suspended, the result was that the curiosity of Chinese netizens was stimulated. A huge social media vacuum was waiting to be filled.

Some indigenous Chinese Internet giants and other competitors began to realise the potential of microblogging in the realms of commerce and politics. These new media began to focus attention around issues and news events, providing various microblogging services and competing in the world's largest internet market.

The cartoon posted by an artist Xu Jun shows a landscape of burning fires symbolising public opinion flash points, mediated by mobile handsets reflecting the events themselves and labeled 'microblogging'. This illustrates why 2010 was dubbed the 'year of the birth of the microblogging' in China. Part of the microblogging services exploited 'quick win' market opportunities, whilst others lost out on this new source of economic growth.

The rest of this section focuses on the biggest winner and some notable characteristics are analysed. The aim is to help readers to understand why Chinese microblogging has developed as it has, and how it now influences communication.

## 2.1 The Rise of New Participants and a New Popular Word: Sina Weibo



Logo of Sina Weibo

In 2010, Chinese Internet users learnt a new word: Weibo (微博). It is the Chinese term for 'microblogging'; *Wei* literally means Micro, *Bo* means Blogging. Because it sounds like Mandarin for scarf, netizens invented a verb 'zhi weibo', literally meaning 'to knit a scarf'. This has entered the folk vocabulary in China, just as 'tweet' has become a verb in English.

Sina Corporation, China's biggest web portal, was the first to step into the void left by Twitter and Fanfou, offering Weibo services to millions of users in mainland China from August 2009. This initiative was at least four months ahead of its three main rivals, Tencent, Sohu, and NetEase, and the site became the front runner in the Chinese microblogging market. Sina Weibo took Fanfou's Place.



### The main microblogging providers in China in 2010 (Source:Incitez)

Just as microblogging was beginning to take hold, an incident occurred which paused the rapid rate of progress and also resulted in a more wary approach from the service providers. On 7<sup>th</sup> July 2010, just over one week after the 89th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, the microblogging product of Sohu (the main microblogging website in China) was blocked for a few days. The reason was that the tweets, which discussed democracy and criticised the government strongly in Sohu Weibo, 'crossed the line'. As a result, all the

other Weibo websites (including Renmin Weibo that belongs to the People's Daily) attached 'Beta' to their logo, i.e. Sina Weibo effectively retreated by declaring that their products were in the second stage of testing - this after having already run them for one year.



### 'Beta' with Logos

However, consistent self-censoring has earned Sina acceptance from the government. Sina Weibo monitors keep a close watch for sensitive words, filtering and deleting any tweets they believe to have vulgar content or anything that violates the rules without explanation. This is the major difference between Weibo and Twitter: in the parlance used by Chinese netizens, Weibo is 'harmonised'.

According to Meng Bo, the deputy editor-in-chief of Sina.com and project manager of Sina Weibo, 'Sina is playing by the rules as they are laid down, with strict word filtering in operation.'<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, this kind of self-censorship provides this new media with a limited space to develop and more chance of survival than its competitors. Sina Weibo is now in a very strong position in China. According to a China News Agency report on 13<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [http://viewswire.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=ib3Article&pubtypeid=1162462501&article\\_id=1168346901&rf=0](http://viewswire.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=ib3Article&pubtypeid=1162462501&article_id=1168346901&rf=0)

May 2011, the number of users of Sina Weibo was more than 140 million. It is projected to rise to over 200 million by the end of 2011. The site is maintained by a growing microblogging department of 600 employees responsible for technology, design, operations, and marketing. Cao Guowei, (CEO of Sina Corporation) announced that the size of this department will double as the number of users increases.

## **2.2 The Main Differences between Weibo and Twitter**

The success of Chinese microblog services did not come just from the foresight to exploit a new media market. It also derived from innovation based on Chinese Language and Internet culture, integrating the best of Facebook and Twitter. As a result, these Chinese Twitter clones are funnier than their forebears and indeed are considered to be more than just Twitter Clones. This section discusses the main distinguishing features of these hybrids.

**Different language: same characters, more information:** Weibo limits the length of posted microblogs to 140 Chinese characters. However, the service benefits from the high information intensity of the Chinese language, and can express more than three times the content message of an English tweet of 140 roman characters. The same number of Chinese characters can make up all the full elements of a news piece with the "5 Ws" (who, what, where, when and why) in journalism, and some users even write micro-novels. In fact, some Chinese media tweet news and believe that Weibo is another channel for them.

**Forwarding and re-tweet:** Sina Weibo allows users to write an entirely new 140-character tweet as an additional comment. Such comments are listed under the entry, like a traditional blog. All discussions are referenced by a single Weibo entry, making Weibo tweets look more like Facebook posts with an interactive comments section, and can therefore be seen easily in one place.

**Embedded picture, photos & videos attachment:** Sina Weibo categorizes content in 7 different groups: Original content, Emoticons, Images, Video, Music, Topic and Vote. Users can also view videos and mp3 without leaving the Chinese micro-blogging site. It works very much like Facebook and is funnier than Twitter. In addition, Sina Weibo enables the sharing of photographs by mobile phone - all the user need do is take photographs. Pictures, photographs audio and video attachments provide more space and convenience for multimedia, both professional journalists and citizen journalists can afford to report by 140 characters script with photographs and videos. Sina Weibo uses their multiple sources and diversified content to reshape the way information flows.



## 6 Function Groups under Original Content Frame

**Group conversations:** Weibo encourages comments and builds engagement within a community. It can easily gather thousands of comments, threaded as one. Users not only share and read, but also converse with other users. This is the main feature of social media and caters to the Chinese culture, bustling with noise and excitement.

Some Chinese media professionals used Weibo at first, and then applied for a Twitter account because of its fame. However, some of these were disappointed with the simple design and lower functionality: Twitter doesn't encourage group conversations, because it supports users speaking to just one person and is therefore not readily compatible with trying to tweet to a group of friends.

**Verified accounts:** verified accounts are a much bigger feature in Weibo. They are given out far more readily, to all kinds of celebrities and brands, and a 'v' appears by every verified user's Weibo entry.

This service causes some strange phenomena. The website is considered to be a mirror of social classes - it presents thousands of 'Followers' as a gift if you are a notable person and join Weibo. One person actually sold so called 'Corpse (false) Followers' online to satisfy the vanity of users who do not focus on tweeting but just pay attention to the number of followers they attract. A radio news presenter closed his Weibo account in August 2010 to protest against this behaviour.

On September 14, 2010, Kevin Thau (Twitter's VP for business and corporate development) announced that Twitter is not actually a social network. He said its main focus was not its social aspects, but its news-delivering mechanisms. The features illustrated in this section are just part of the functions in Weibo; it seems that Weibo is trying to 'corner the market' for all



useful functions and thereby replace all competing social media.

### 2.3 Microblogging War in China: Other Microblogging service providers

Chinese microblogging service providers with different characteristics compete against each other in the so-called 'Weibo Wars'. Two of the main contenders are Sina and Tencent. Sina is considered to be an aggressor whose main purpose is acquiring new users. Tencent, another social networking giant and provider of the most popular free instant messaging computer program, has the most serious potential in its microblogging (t.qq.com). Tencent provides existing users with a new service.

On 15<sup>th</sup> June 2011, Tencent Weibo declared that the number of registered users had reached more than 200 million, with 115 million of those being active. With average monthly postings of more than 1.2 billion, Tencent Weibo's users are more 'grassroots' and teenage in contrast to Sina's primarily urban white-collar professionals.



#### Chinese Microblogging service providers

Under the shadow of these two giants, there are a number of smaller service providers:

- Sohu Weibo (t.sohu.com) focuses on entertainment and tries to attract more famous users.
- Netease Weibo (t.163.com) aims to be based on 310 million users of email

addresses and its slogan is 'Weibo with attitude'.

- Hong Kong's Phoenix media group has a little-used service (t.ifeng.com).
- Even the People's Daily (the Communist Party's mouthpiece) has a lightly trafficked microblog (t.people.com).

## 2.4 The Culture of Weibo: the 'Surrounding Gaze' ( 围观 )

The conflict between on the one hand the issues of censorship, keyword filtering, and restricted freedom of speech, and on the other hand public opinion, a thirst for news on 'hot topics' and a passion for new social media are shaping a special culture of Weibo in Chinese microblogging.

One new concept is 'Weiguan', which loosely translates as 'surround and survey' or the 'Surrounding Gaze'. While this phrase relates to the English term "public awareness", it means rather more: it also captures the sense of a sharp interest in, or focus on, the topic.

The concept of the 'Surrounding Gaze' points to the social and political possibilities of Weibo, which might promote change by gathering public interest and focusing public opinion around particular issues and events.

The on-line slogan 'The Surrounding Gaze is changing China, paying close attention is power' ( 围观改变中国 , 关注就是力量 ) refers to hundreds of thousands or millions of Chinese netizens gathering through the Weibo in support or opposition to important social and political issues.





**Slogan: 'The Surrounding Gaze is changing China' (Author: Unknow)**

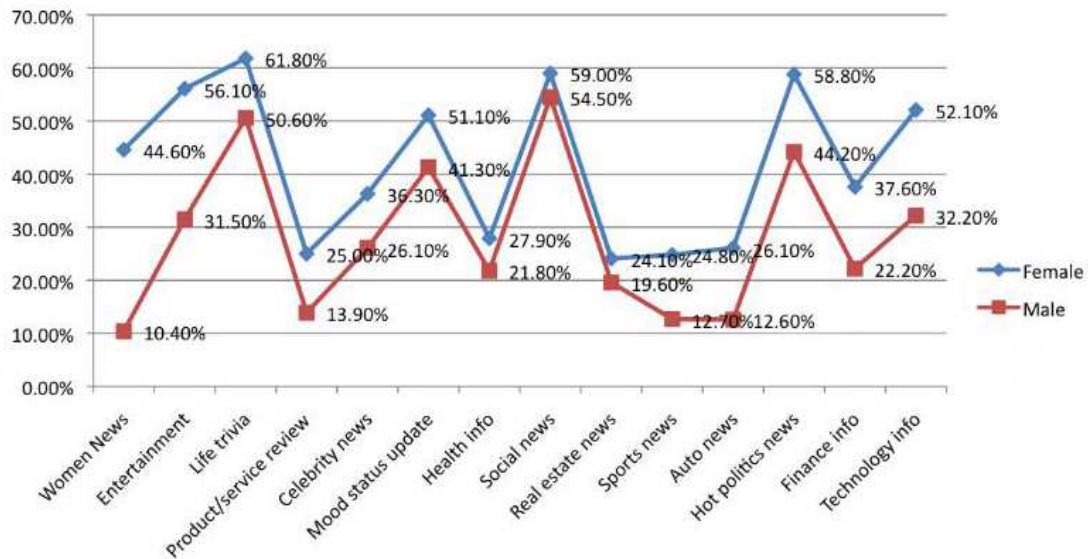
Hu Yong (a Peking University professor) said: 'I want to stress the point that the Surrounding Gaze is a kind of minimal (or “bottom-line”) form of public participation. In fact, it is very far from the process of reaching consensus through participation, or reaching the stage of policy-making and action through consensus.<sup>2</sup> He believes that it is a naive reading of the Chinese situation if netizens hold the simplistic view that they can change China.

Nevertheless, he does not deny the importance of the on-line surrounding gaze. Weibo makes it possible for many people to express their positions and their demands, and these positions and demands, though small, add up to a great deal. Taken together, they can amount to a formidable show of public opinion.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/01/04/9399/>

## Chapter 3 How Chinese journalists use Weibo



**China microblogging user interests (Source: DCCI)**

As users of this new medium, Chinese journalists did not have any more experience than other netizens. As mentioned before, when the many functions available from microblogging are provided, netizens explore and grow their skills to realise purposes other than journalism. According to a statistical analysis and the above graph, the top three popular items on Weibo are life trivia, social news and hot political news.<sup>3</sup>

The main content providers on Twitter largely fall into four groups - celebrities, media, individual bloggers and enterprises or organisations. The first two are mostly interested in their own networks, while the other two have broader interests and may pay more attention to other groups. Nevertheless, Chinese microblog users including journalists and editors log in Weibo for a variety of reasons - social and political news are only two of them on this open platform.

100 media and journalists were analysed for this research, including national and local media, newspapers, magazines and television, media leaders and workers. Of these outlets, the maximum following was 3.14 million, while the minimum was just 25. This part of the report analyzes 3,000 tweets over a one week period between 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011. The tweets have been divided into four categories, as follows:

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dcci.com.cn/>

Pointless babble, Conversation with gossip, complaints and satire	62%
Serious News and comments	25%
Self-promotion and protection	6.5%
Public benefit activities	7.5%

### **Categorisation of Tweets, and Frequency Analysis**

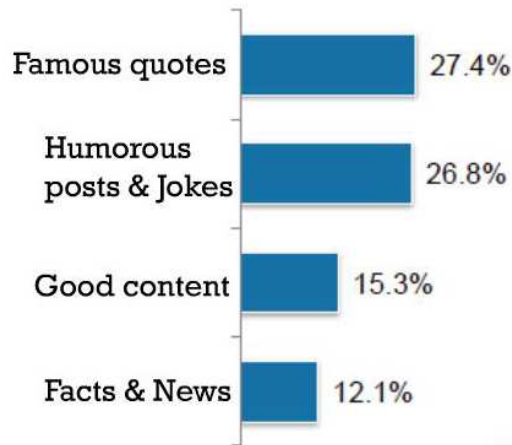
The following analysis looks at these categories individually.

#### **3.1 Pointless Babble and Conversation with gossip, complaints and Satire**

These functions are typical of the social media. Initially, the majority of Chinese journalists used Weibo for social purposes, considering this new medium to be similar to others such as QQ, BBS, Blogs, and MSN , which they had used before and were familiar with. Usage therefore included activities such as sharing humorous postings and jokes about current affairs, pictures, photographs or hot topics with each other. Such users can be considered to form a group netizen which we term 'journalist', and there is no behavioural distinction between members of this group and the ordinary internet user. For this reason, as the power and influence of microblogging became apparent, some media outlets forbade their employees to post private or unrelated tweets under the media logos.

Active users differ in their behaviour and usage:

- 'Self-expression users' have a passion for writing useless postings and expressing emotion
- 'Social users' like to re-tweet other famous Weibo user's quotes, good content and exchange information,
- 'Discussion users' discuss popular topics, ask questions, or complain of unfairness.
- A minority of 'silent users' do not post much but like to read others' postings.



**Type of Microblogging Posts 'Re-tweeted' (Source: Incitez)**

The percentage of 62% also reflects the phenomenon of "Weiguan" which was mentioned in the last section. A recent example is that of the release of the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei after 81 days of detention: on 3rd April 2011 he was stopped and arrested by police on board an aircraft at an airport while on route to Hong Kong. Every user knows that this is sensitive topic and keeps silent on Weibo: there are no postings, and no comments.

### **3.2 Serious News and Comments**

News is the main business of the media. In general, news in Weibo is posted either by traditional media writing official accounts, or accounts run by Weibo service providers such as 'Xinhua Viewpoint' and 'Top News'. However, little serious news commentary could be found here. As with Twitter, some media actors use this platform to post highlights, links to reports, or the front page of the morning newspaper (these activities could be considered to be in the category of self-promotion which is discussed in Section 3.3). Some users believe Weibo has changed their reading habits: they no longer surf news portal websites because information posted by the media or re-tweeted by users in Weibo can satisfy their demand.

Based on the characteristics of microblogging, Chinese journalists have found that it is not only a social medium, but also a new platform for discovering and spreading news about mass incidents and events. It is quicker than using letters, telephone hotlines, emails, bbs, msn or blogs, especially when breaking news occurs. Weibo provides a new useful and effective channel to both public and citizen journalists; it has become an increasingly important source of news.

As an example, on February 9th 2009 (the night of the festival of lanterns, the

last day of the Chinese traditional Lunar Year,) the new Chinese Central Television (CCTV) building was set on fire. Witnesses to this event posted news and photographs immediately, causing a large number of users and a comments thread. Subsequently, the Xinhua news agency confirmed the accuracy of this piece of news. (A second example, concerning citizen journalism is analysed as a case study in Part 4).

According to a survey conducted by PR Newswire Asia on the work-related use of social media by Chinese journalists from October 22<sup>nd</sup> to November 7<sup>th</sup>:

- Over 60% of journalists have used social media to obtain news leads or conduct an interview in order to complete a news report,
- 47.7% of journalists indicated that they "frequently use" microbloggings, and of them,
- 26.1% indicated that they "use them every day."

The survey revealed that the most likely reason that media journalists utilize microblogging is to search for valuable information and interactive exchange. On the negative side, Weibo is criticised for supplanting the traditional journalistic techniques of interviewing and investigation: some lazier journalists spend all day simply waiting for 'News' online.

Compared to traditional journalism, the limited number of characters allowed in a Weibo microblog (known as a 'fragment') is both an advantage and a disadvantage.

- The major advantage is speed and information. Citizen journalists at the scene of the story can transmit information instantly, and previously unknown or insignificant people can now become the central source of information. Media professionals can re-tweet such information to achieve rapid dissemination, which can exert a powerful influence. Like the first paragraphs in a traditional "inverted pyramid" report, Chinese Weibo can provide the who, what, where, when, and why.
- However, microblogging can be criticised and challenged for lack of objective and impartial analysis and poor accuracy when it is used in the excessive pursuit of speed. A fortunate journalist may find a 'golden nugget', or alternatively he may fall into a trap. The fragmented sea of information made available by microblogging has brought about many new challenges for journalists. Two cases with differing outcomes are presented in Part 4.

### 3.3 Self-promotion and protection

This category takes different forms; three of these are discussed here.

**(i) Media outlet promotion:** Weibo provides a new means for media outlets to promote themselves. Such outlets post tweets about the links to reports, comments from audiences, topical sidelines concerning famous people ('big names'), and scenes of studios. Such inside news provides gossip material for public consumption, stimulating readers to buy newspapers or magazines, listen to the radio, or watch television programmes.

For example, China National Geography (a popular monthly magazine similar to National Geographic) creates topics about their front cover pictures. The Chief Editor posts alternative photographs and tell the netizen how he and his colleagues chose the final cover design. Regular readers can see the cover before they buy the magazine, while others may decide to buy this issue if they like the cover.

By the end of August 2010, a total of 466 major media companies, including TV, radio, print and magazines, had registered with Sina Weibo. This number will increase sharply in 2011.

**(ii) Individual self-publicism:** if a journalist in Weibo attracts hundreds of thousands of followers, he may become a celebrity. For this reason, some individuals compete with each other on the basis of totally false and meaningless 'follower statistics': they buy fictitious ('corpse') followers to attain (apparent) authentication. They not only post news and current affairs, but re-tweet jokes and photographs, create pointless chatter with attendant gossip and comments. One director of a news centre in a local newspaper stated that "It is hard to express your personality if you just use Weibo as a tool, you should attend social events online". Apparently, he always posts "hello" during periods of insomnia at night, and tweets photographs of his breakfast!

**(iii) Mutual protection:** Journalism is considered to be a dangerous career in China. If local government officials are not happy with reporting or watchdog activities, journalists can face arrest or have their names added to a national "wanted" list. Weibo has therefore become a place to derive mutual assistance when a journalist is in a dangerous situation.

Qiu Ziming, a business journalist, working for *The Economic Observer Financial Weekly*, has been put on the 'most wanted' list by police because of his report in June 2010 detailing alleged improprieties by a major battery manufacturer based in Zhejiang, including insider trading.

The Economic Observer announced this development and appealed for protection of media rights: "As a responsible media outlet, this newspaper has always upheld the principles of rational and constructive reporting; we believe that Qiu Ziming, along with all our journalists, has abided by the principles of objective and fair reporting. ...we strongly condemn the use of public power to suppress his reporting".

In spite of the huge pressure on him, Qiu continued to protest and defend his innocence on his Weibo account, demanding justice. He garnered broad support on this new medium: more than 8,000 people follow him. An online poll organised by a Weibo provider drew more than 33,000 responses, and found that 86 percent of users viewed the police pursuit of Qiu as "unlawful" and that 98 percent trusted his reports. Some of the respondents were journalists; these commented on and re-tweeted Qiu's post. One such comment read "nobody will help you when your report meets unfair opposition and suppression if you ignore the bitter experiences of your colleague now".

After just 36 hours, the 'most wanted' circular was quashed after a public outcry, and Suichang's police sent a representative to Beijing to apologize to Qiu, a rare victory for media freedom.

### **3.4 Public Benefit Activities**

Several famous journalists have given up their careers and thrown themselves into public benefit activities using Weibo:

- Dengfei, who reported the Yihuang self-burning event (see the case study in Part 4) launched a subject called "Free Lunch". This subject aimed to collect donations to provide a lunch for primary and middle school students in remote areas subject to starvation.
- Sun Chunlong, the former assistant editor in chief and an investigative journalist for the Oriental-Outlook Weekly magazine, was famous for aiding veterans in the CBI theatre of WWII. He subsequently resigned to found a charitable organization.

In both cases, the journalists used their fame on Weibo to help them to research social resources, collect funds and attract volunteers.

## Chapter 4 Case Studies

### 4.1 "Good News": Microblogging as a Mouthpiece in 'Two Sessions'

Traditional national media, such as Xinhua News Agency, used microblogging at 2011 year's 'Two Sessions' of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress.

The 'Two Sessions' are the two important meetings in China's political calendar: the fourth session of the 11th National People's Congress, China's top legislature, which opens on 5<sup>th</sup> March, and the fourth session of the 11th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's top political advisory body.



### The webpage of the Central People's Government about 'Two Sessions Microblogging'

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2011, the Xinhua News Agency set up an account called 'Two Sessions Microblogging' (新华两会微博) on Sina Weibo. In the first twitter, it posted that "...the report team includes more than 300 journalists to provide coverage in 7 languages." The website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China reported this news about the news medium, showing that the government is trying to exploit microblogging to its benefit, monitoring comments and traffic to take the pulse of the nation, and perhaps even to anticipate and respond to signs of social discontent. The government encourages and promotes its mouthpiece to use this new media, report



"positive coverage", win the market, and direct public opinion. There were 4,487 twitters and 894,160 Followers by 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2011. Jia Fenyong, the leader of the team, said: "The use of Weibo in reporting of the Two Sessions shows progress in Chinese Journalism".



**Front page of 'Xinhua Two Sessions Microblog'**



**The first three twitters in 'Xinhua Two Sessions Microblog'**

One official medium sang the praises of Weibo's reporting of the Two Sessions by exploiting the words of the Apollo astronauts involved in the lunar landing: "One small step for Xinhua News agency, one giant leap for Chinese journalism". Jia said: "we cannot lose our voice as a national medium when microblogging and providing impact and influence; what we can do is respond with initiative and act positively, gradually changing our own style and characteristics to adjust to the times."

Although it looked too late, the official news agency launched its own microblog site on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2011, one month after the 'Two Sessions'. Xinhua Weibo went online at t.home.news.cn, entering the crowded Chinese microblogging space when Sina already occupied more than 50% of market share, and other service providers were vigorously competing with each other.

At the same time, traditional national media, such as CCTV, People's Daily, China National Radio, Guangming Daily, launched their microblog sites in Sina Weibo.

#### 4.2 'Bad News': Microblogging as a Watchdog in a Forced Demolition

Compared with the good news from mouthpiece media microblogs, Weibo users sometimes prefer bad news, commentary and re-tweeted news about hot topics (such as social inequality, corruption, food safety, housing prices, education, disasters, poverty, human rights and scandals), especially when the state media keep silent or resort to misrepresentation. This new medium offers such users a way to vent frustration. Their participation may change the course of an event. Journalists may join to discuss, comment, re-tweet, and even complain if their coverage are cut or censored before publishing or transmission.



**'Blood House Map'**

Forced Demolition in China is a constant hot topic online. This 'Blood House Map' marks 86 reported violent demolitions dating back to 2001; red icons

such as beds, fires and volcanoes are used to label incidents and conflicts in which people reportedly died, set themselves ablaze (self-immolation) or rose up in protest. The famous self-immolation incident to protest the forced demolition of their home happened in Yihuang county, Jiangxi province; it was believed that this single tragedy formed a landmark in the contemporary history of Chinese media, as well as a bitter victory for microblogging.

On the morning of September 10, the Zhong family were confronted by 40 local police officers and urban administrators seeking to carry out the forced demolition of their home to make room for a new construction. In the course of their protest, three members of this family, Zhong Zhifeng, 59, her daughter Zhong Ruqin, 31, and Ruqin's uncle, Ye Zhongcheng, 79, set fire to themselves and jumped off the roof of their house. Ye eventually died in hospital.

The incident was quickly 'harmonized' in the mainstream media and major websites by the propaganda department and web-censors. However, video taken by local residents from the scene started trickling out online.

The turning point happened on September 16<sup>th</sup> when Zhong Rucui and Zhong Rujiu, who are daughters of Zhong Zhifeng, tried to travel to Beijing for a petition visit (this is a process whereby citizens can have their grievances heard by central government). On their way to Nanchang airport, they were chased by police and government officials who tried to stop them. Finally, the two girls had to lock themselves in the women's toilets at the airport and sent out mobile text messages to local reporters to seek help.

Over the next three hours, with the help of a reporter on the ground in Jiangxi, Deng Fei, a journalist for the Phoenix Weekly, reported live on Sina Weibo on the news of their plight and the actions of local officials in the airport. He posted 20 tweets; after re-tweeting and additional comments, this event became breaking news and a news focus in China.

Then, Zhong Rujiu opened her own microblog account in Sina Weibo. In the following days, she made 253 postings to her Weibo site, relaying the bitter experience of her family members in the hospital. More than 30,000 followers expressed their anger toward local government, with each entry re-posted by an average of a thousand other netizens. As information sped through the microblogs and drew popular attention to the forced demolition case, this event reached the ears of high-level government officials.

More than half month after the self-burning, on 17<sup>th</sup> September, Qiu Jianguo, the Party secretary and top leader in Yihuang, and the county's governor, Su Jianguo, were put under formal investigation. The county's deputy governor, Li

Minjun, was removed from his post and subjected to investigation. The media were allowed to report this result; some newspapers even published the story on the front-page. Netizens commented that “rights were fought and won through each microblog post.” In the push to defend the rights of citizens, microblogs have offered a ray of hope, helping to promote civil society in China.



### **Zhong Rujiu's Weibo with picture that she and her sister, Zhong Ruqin**

This is one reason why some journalists try to attract more followers in different ways. It means they wield more influence and have a louder voice in public. One former journalist said: "if you have 1.7 million followers, your broadcast power will surpass that of many newspapers; so long as we all involve ourselves, no information can be concealed."

This case reflects the fact that when government censors block news, the media can do nothing in their traditional fields. However, journalists can report online and extend their influence by re-tweeting and commenting. With the support of other netizens and public opinion, they can investigate and dig up more background about that piece of news, provide more information beyond 140 characters on Weibo, and finally win the right to report this news in the traditional media. The track of the process from 'could not report' to 'must report' is as follows:

- A citizen journalist provides a news cue.
- Professional journalists and Netizen re-tweet and comment online.
- Professional journalists interview and check the story.
- The traditional media report with the permission of the propaganda department.

Nevertheless, not all incidents and grievances attract attention on Weibo. In this case, the netizens were fortunate: if Zhong Rujiu and her sister had not tried to go to Beijing, if local officials had not blocked them, if they had failed to contact journalists, then these netizens could not have exploited Weibo to obtain real justice.

### 4.3 Grassroot News : "Webcast" from Citizen Journalists

One of the beneficiaries of Weibo is the Citizen journalists who can post breaking news before the traditional media can. One such typical event that was 'webcasted' concerned a landslide that happened in the town of Zhouqu, under the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

At midnight on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2010, a temporary lake caused by a recent landslide broke loose above the town of Zhouqu. The outflow slid down the valley as a wall of mud, wiping out houses and multi-story buildings, and killing at least 1,144 residents, with over 600 reported as still missing.



**"Flood. Blackout. People from the building gathering by candlelight."**

Four hours after the landslide, a 19-year-old college student Wang Kai (whose online name is 'Kayne') tweeted the first news about Zhouqu along with a photograph from his mobile phone: "Flood. Blackout. People from the building gathering by candlelight." Since then, Kayne has carried out interviews and reported from the disaster area using a digital camera, continuing to update his Weibo, and releasing a total of more than 200 tweets with further messages and pictures from the scene.



#### Wang Kai's Wibo

The state medium, the Xinhua News Agency, praised "the records of these



persons on the Internet, using the keyboard to deliver care, and gathering resources to help." Wang Kai said: "Weibo and the landslide changed my life." 86,267 users followed him until 24th June, 2011. His major subject at college is English, but after this experience as a citizen journalist, Wang Kai tried to apply for a masters degree in Journalism.

#### **4.4 No News, Just Rumour: Louis Cha's Death**

Knowing how to filter valuable clues from texts in social media and how to find out the truth is a necessary skill for journalists and editors when they use this new tool. Unfortunately, some fall into the 'Weibo Trap', and unwittingly become involved in generating and spreading false rumours. A typical case was that of 'Louis Cha's Death'.

Louis Cha is a best-selling and popular novelist, known by his pen name Jin Yong, in the Chinese world (including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia) and the United States. His fifteen works were written between 1955 and 1972 and earned him a reputation as one of the finest Wuxia (martial arts and chivalry) writers. Over 100 million copies have been sold worldwide.

On the night of Monday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2010, Deng Lihong, who was the new media editor of China Newsweek, was at home when she saw a tweet about Cha's death on Weibo. It would be surprising breaking news if it was true. Deng re-posted this unchecked news immediately using China Newsweek's account without naming the source of the story.

China Newsweek was founded in 1999 by the China News Service, China's second-largest news agency. This popular magazine covers domestic affairs, culture, and politics as well as international news.

The news 'Louis Cha's Death' spread quickly with many people believing the story because the magazine is a respected publication with a reputation for accuracy. However, the story was soon found to be false. The 86-year-old Cha answered the phone at his house when a reporter called and confirmed that he was not dead but enjoying his dinner.

Later that night, Liu Xinyu, the deputy editor-in-chief in charge of news on the *China Newsweek* website, posted: "The editor re-copied the rumour in haste without confirmation, which exposed the editor's lack of professionalism as well as management loopholes." He also accepted criticism from the public "on behalf of the magazine's new media department."

As a result of this media incident, Deng was fired, and the new media content supervisor Tang Yong was demoted and fined and later decided to resign. Liu

Xinyu offered his resignation the following day. They became the first group to pay the price for their carelessness in using the new media.

Liu said: "I should be responsible for the mistake and the negative impact the rumour brought on the reputation of China Newsweek." He revealed the reasons behind his decision to resign on his personal Weibo page on Wednesday morning, saying that the news media should always follow the rules of good journalism, such as editors checking sources through multiple channels.



**Louis Cha was awarded honorary doctorate from Cambridge University in 2005. (Source: Xinhua Photo)**

The fake news not only revealed a trend due to the lack of professionalism, the pursuit of Internet cronies and the sensational effect, but provided a fantastic opportunity for the authorities. One month later, China's media industry launched an educational campaign designed to curb false and distorted news through the twin processes of 'self-inspection and self-correction'. The Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, the All-China Journalists' Association and the General Administration of Press and Publication called for ethics in journalism, especially when there is uncorroborated information flowing about in Weibo.

The campaign for ethics in journalism urged journalists to 'learn a lesson' from this case. They have an obligation to check the truthfulness of any news. The event compelled the media to consider how to use this new tool and set up a punishment system for those who make mistakes.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion



(Source: China Daily)

Microblogging via Weibo is providing a new and powerful channel of communication for Chinese people to express themselves and their opinions. Users can focus on and discuss current affairs ('hot topics') and reveal wrongdoing in local government or other official bodies. This open platform also contributes endless information and breaking news for the media. However, while such microblogging provides increased scope for freedom of speech, like other traditional media, Weibo is 'dancing in fetters', because the postings available to all users are censored.

According to past experience with QQ, BBS, MSN, Blog, new software is generally popular with the Chinese Netizen. However, many users just apply for an account to follow the latest trend. As such, many people are inactive: they watch or re-tweet, but do not post new items.

Research has been carried out to estimate the number of active microbloggers using Weibo. This research was based on 443 collected samples derived from an online search of users with a common name (chosen at random). 108 of these had no following, 302 users had 1 to 9 followers, and only 22 users had more than 100 followers, i.e. just 5-10%. This shows that although the number



of Chinese Weibo microblog users is increasing rapidly (currently 200 million), the majority of users are passive with only a few exploiting the power of the channel. Therefore, the real power actually exercised by the Netizen needs to be re-evaluated.

Self-filtering has necessarily become a new trend in Weibo. After the initial excitement of using a new medium, many media professionals began to 'unfollow' other users, because they realised they cannot afford pointless tweets. What professionals want is useful information quickly. The service provider must address this problem; it is not a case of 'more functions are always better'.

Weibo represents a continuing upward spiral of social progress. As Chinese online microblogging services grow and traditional journalism grows with them, it is learning from lessons and experience. However, censorship, sensitive word filtering and media restrictions limit the scope of online topics, and the growth of Chinese microblogging could be curtailed. "Beta" labels beside logos are like the Sword of Damocles hanging over their heads: if the government decides they have become too powerful a force in public opinion, the sword may descend at any moment. For this reason, the majority of users keep silent and steer well clear of the 'red line'. The common netizens' view is that "we should be careful for our own sakes and for the sake of the website - otherwise we will lose this new platform". While they enjoy its benefits, such users are worried about the future of microblogging.

Weibo, the Chinese microblogging phenomenon, is still growing. It may reshape media behavior in China over the next few years; since many young users do not read newspapers or watch television, Weibo is becoming their main source of news and information. The speed of Weibo information sharing and the vastness of its reach are also beyond both beyond the capability of blogs or forums. Exploiting this medium and providing meaningful and useful content for the next generation is both an opportunity and a challenge for the Chinese media and journalism in general. According to a PRNewswire-Asia report, almost half of Chinese journalists believe that new media will pose a fairly large threat to traditional media.

In summary, while microblogging brings some new functions and opportunities for Chinese journalism, especially for citizen journalism, what can be done and the scope for bringing about change are limited.

## ***Appendix A Brief History of Chinese Microblogging***

1. 21<sup>st</sup> March 2006: Odeo interior subject "Twitter" goes online.
2. 15<sup>th</sup> July 2006: Twitter starts up.
3. 14<sup>th</sup> April 2007: Jiwai (叽歪) starts up.
4. 12<sup>th</sup> May 2007: Fanfou (饭否) starts up.
5. 9<sup>th</sup> July 2007: Zuosha (做啥) starts up.
6. 13<sup>th</sup> August 2007: Tencent Taotao (腾讯滔滔) starts up.
7. 12<sup>th</sup> May 2008: Plurk starts up.
8. 8<sup>th</sup> February 2009: Ditu (嘀咕) starts up.
9. 22<sup>th</sup> May 2009: Juyou9911 (聚友9911) starts up.
10. 6<sup>th</sup> August 2009: Follow5starts up.
11. 16<sup>th</sup> August 2009: 139Shuoke (139说客) starts up.
12. 28<sup>th</sup> August 2009: Sina Weibo (新浪微博) starts up.
13. 14<sup>th</sup> December 2009: Souhu Weibo (搜狐微博) starts up.
14. 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2009: People's Weibo (人民微博) starts up.
15. 20<sup>th</sup> January 2010: 163 Weibo (网易微博) starts up.

16. 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010: Tencent Weibo (腾讯微博) starts up.

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