

Social Media as Tools of Maintaining Harmony in China: The Case of Sina Weibo

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Abstract

A significant amount of English language-based literature on how social media in China are used as platforms for discussing politics and criticising the government is available. However, most of the empirical data is gained from the analysis of quantitative data or case studies, while qualitative interview studies asking users to express their thoughts can only rarely be found. The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of social media in the cat-and-mouse game of Chinese internet censorship by looking at the case of Sina Weibo through 13 qualitative interviews conducted within China and Germany with Chinese people. The paper uses the three levels of the public sphere by Gerhards and Neidhardt as well as Foucault's work on the order of discourse as its theoretical basis.

The results show that even though censorship on social media has increased, these platforms play a very important role in maintaining a harmonious society while functioning as tools of information, criticism and dissent for the users and bringing problems within society to the government's attention.

Keywords

Sina Weibo, social media, China, censorship, WeChat, internet, qualitative interview

1. Introduction

“I mean, when my colleagues and I had fun or something like that after a dinner or something, we will play that game and I was told by one of my friends [...], he told me that for all the games in the casino, 21 perhaps is the only one game that you could have relatively equal chance to win the banker. A small like say 45 versus 55. Very close, very close. So, my feeling is like that: Because it’s true that the authorities have the better position for so many statistic devices, I mean to control media and to lead the public opinion, but Weibo [Chinese microblogging service], it’s like a game of 21, which means that the audience, the users have much greater chance than before to win that game” (CC1M).

The so-called “never-ending cat-and-mouse game” between internet users in China and the Chinese government, with its highly sophisticated system of “internet filtering and information control” (Zittrain et al. 2017: 8) has now been going on for more than twenty years (Lillie 2012). While the Chinese government keeps increasing and tightening internet control, users seem to keep finding and sharing new ways to circumvent internet and information control (Deluca/Brunner/Sun 2016). Social web tools play a very important role in this process. This can be shown at the case of Sun Zhigang. He was a student, working in the Guangzhou Daqi Garment Company, who was taken into custody for not having his temporary resident card on him in 2003. He died soon after he was imprisoned. According to police officials, he had a heart failure, but it is suspected that he had been beaten to death in prison (China Daily 2003). This case went viral online after being published by the Southern Metropolitan News. It was shared via bulletin board systems (BBS), online forums and chat rooms in China. The public awareness and criticism the case raised – also very much due to the dead boy’s friends, who managed to raise large support and made the government listen – finally led to the abolishment of the 1982 Measures for the Custody and Repatriation of Vagrants and Beggars in Cities. It was the law on which basis Sun Zhigang had been taken into custody (see Wang/Bates 2008: 12).

The BBS, chats and forums were most commonly used in China before 2004 to discuss political and non-political issues online and to voice criticism (Deibert/Rohozinski 2008). Because of “crackdowns” on the BBS, chats and forums, blogs became “China’s freest media” (Yang 2009: 51f.) from 2004 onwards, even though anonymity was more restricted than before. By 2006, when blog usage had become more popular, free speech on blogs was restricted (Esarey/Qiang 2008: 760). After that, people turned to social network sites. Facebook and Twitter became popular in China. Facebook is said to have played a role in the Uighur riots in 2009, because the riots’ leaders supposedly coordinated their uprising via the network (Deibert et al. 2011: 274). This was a good enough reason for the government to block Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites based in China (ibid.).

From 2010 to 2013, Sina Weibo was the social web tool most commonly used for voicing opinions and free speech. Weibo is the contraction of weixing boke, the mandarin expression for

microblog (Canaves 2011: 76). Similar to Twitter, one can write micro messages consisting of 140 characters (which was extended in 2016) (Zhe 2017). What is specific to the Chinese language version is that almost every character in Chinese stands for a word, therefore, a lot can be expressed within 140 characters.

Sina Weibo came into existence in August 2009, shortly after its predecessor, Fanfou, the first domestic microblogging service was taken offline, and gained popularity very quickly. By October 2010, it had 50 million registrations (Epstein 2011). According to self-reports, Sina Weibo today has 411 million active users monthly.¹ Soon after its launch, Sina Weibo incorporated several social media features. Videos and images could be uploaded, music could be listened to on-site and it even introduced several group functions and an instant-messaging platform to see who is online. Sina Weibo became a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter (Canaves 2011: 76f.). Even though all large internet portals in China offer microblogging services and Tencent Weibo has more users, Sina Weibo is said to have the most active ones.

In 2013, with the change of the National People's Congress, censorship on Sina Weibo intensified. Weibo was involved in a controversy in January 2013, when "the newspaper Southern Weekend's [the most outspoken newspaper in China, F.T.] annual New Year's editorial was censored and rewritten by Guangdong's provincial propaganda chief" (Ng 2015). This event evoked waves of protest online and especially on Sina Weibo, which the platform reacted to by blocking critical words and suspending users from the service. In 2013, Sina Weibo celebrities were invited to dinner by Lu Wei, the head of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO), who later that year asked them to be "more positive and constructive" in what they wrote online (Chin/Mozur 2013). It is said that quite a few celebrities had "been arrested and forced to confess to various crimes" (Ng 2015), such as spreading rumours. Subsequently, the activity of those celebrities subsided considerably (Bei 2013; Ng 2015) and many users left "the once vibrant 'town square' public forum Sina Weibo", as Assistant Professor Min Jiang (2015) put it in an article on chinausfocus.com, and moved on to Weixin or WeChat. WeChat is a mobile phone app, similar to WhatsApp, but it includes more functions: "Users can make payments, post photos on a personal blog, download games and stickers, connect with strangers, and hail taxis all from within the app" (Ng 2015). Unlike on Weibo, users can control who accesses information shared on WeChat (Wang/Gu 2016). They can talk in semi-private group chats that

¹<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/weibo-reports-first-quarter-2018-unaudited-financial-results-300645282.html> last accessed 30.05.2018.

are closed to the public. Though this helped users to evade censorship for a while, the authorities have also cracked down on WeChat starting in 2014 (Xu 2014; Ng 2015), which shows the ever-increasing speed at which the government is tightening control on cyberspace.

At first glance, it looks like the cat is about to win this game. However, instead of focusing on the tightening of internet control, this paper wants to look at what happens on these platforms before or even though censorship increases.

The so-called “keyword filtering” is the most commonly found form of censorship on social media. Instead of blocking the whole site, forbidden terms can be identified, and keyword filtering allows (politically) sensitive words or terms to be exclusively blocked. Nevertheless, patterns of filtering in China remain quite uneven, as it is left to the internet service providers (e.g. Tencent or Sina) to do the filtering and each one handles it quite differently (Deibert et al. 2011: 278; MacKinnon 2008). We also know that Chinese people play a lot with words or use irony, sarcasm or spoofs (which are called e gao) online to avoid having their posts deleted (Clothey et al. 2016; Esarey/Qiang 2008; Meng 2011; Tang/Yang 2011; Yang/Jiang 2015).

Studies have also shown that Sina Weibo is not just a source of entertainment, but a platform on which to voice criticism and simultaneously interact with the government on a grass roots level (Canaves 2011; Li et. al. 2016; Qu et al. 2011; Rauchfleisch/Mayoraz 2015). However, as David Herold and Gabriele de Seta (2014) noted based on a meta-analysis of academic literature on the Chinese Internet, literature is still in need of studies looking “at how people in China are using the Internet to do what they want to do, be it politics or entertainment” (ibid.: 79). Most of the English language-based studies on Sina Weibo still obtain their data from the analysis of blog posts or case studies and hardly any qualitative studies exist asking users to express what they are actually doing online and why (exceptions are Kou/Semaan/Nardi 2017; Wang/Mark 2015).

The aim of this paper is to help close this research gap by analysing 13 qualitative interviews conducted with Chinese people in China and Germany about their use of Sina Weibo in order to answer the question which role social media play in China’s society. The interviews were conducted in 2012 when Sina Weibo usage was at its peak. Even though China’s cyberspace is constantly changing, the conversations still give valuable insights into how Sina Weibo has empowered Chinese citizens and help one to understand the general role of social media in China.

2. Theoretical Background

According to Esarey and Qiang, “[i]n post-Mao China two kinds of discourse emerged – the public discourse that had the approval of the state” (2008: 752) and the private one that took place behind curtains and was invisible to the state’s eyes. Political opinions were only voiced in private in front of family and friends or people considered trustworthy. “With the onset of blogging, these two discourses have begun to merge: Conversations once held only in private or in ‘hidden transcripts’ have entered the public domain through skillfully written blog postings whose coded meaning is understood by readers who are aware of stringent restrictions on political pluralism” (ibid.: 752f.).

This fits the description of the encounter public sphere by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990), which they call the first of three levels of the public sphere. Random or spontaneous interactions on the street, in bars, at work or on public transport with little structure take place on this level. These encounters are episodic, mostly considered private and do not need a mediator. Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990: 20f.) say that the encounter public spheres constitute a public sphere next to the politically-staged one in totalitarian systems as interactions are hard to control due to their episodic character and swiftness.

Public events form the theme or assembly level of the public sphere, where topically centred (inter-)action systems can be found. They can form spontaneously or have a high degree of organisation. Interactions on the theme public sphere are more structured and stable than interactions on the encounter level. Someone will usually organise a discussion and give a description and opinions on a topic. Voicing opinions on the side of the audience is more restricted, but, nevertheless, highly important. Public spheres on the level of events are more likely to synthesis opinions into a public opinion and to gain public attention, as they are systematically observed by journalists (ibid.: 21f.).

The level with the highest stability and structure is the media public sphere. It needs a technical infrastructure and offers the opportunity to continuously influence public opinion on a large scale as it has a more or less stable audience. It is produced by professionally and institutionally organised people (such as journalists) to consistently provide topics and opinions (ibid.: 23ff.). With the increasing level of public sphere, the role of the audience diminishes, while the possibility of external control increases (ibid.: 25).

The internet and social media have not been included in the original classification by Gerhards and Neidhardt. Donges and Jarren (2017: 78) align the online public sphere on the level of the theme public sphere and Jarren (2008: 330f.) considers social web media to be an expansion of the encounter and theme public sphere. But the internet has also imposed changes on the

media public sphere produced by professionals, as it has been extended. Nowadays, many journalists rely on footage published online by eyewitnesses and citizen journalism has become more common (Schmidt 2011: 135ff). Neuberger (2009), therefore, suggests a model of an integrative net public sphere, as the internet combines different levels of the public sphere in one medium and connects them more deeply.

Public discourse on the internet is predefined and controlled externally in the sense of Foucault (1971) by codes, regulations, censorship and rules of the government as well as internet service providers. Governments implement internet censorship all over the world (Kou/Semaan/Nardi 2017). It is utilised to keep users away from certain content or information, hereby enhancing the government's power as well as shaping public knowledge and discourse about these topics.

Neidhardt (1994: 8) describes the public sphere as a communication system in which topics and opinions are collected (input), processed (throughput) and passed on (output). Regarding these elements, he defines three normative claims that refer to principals and functions of the political public sphere. Input involves a transparency function, as the public sphere is supposed to be open to everyone and have collective meaning regarding all topics and opinions. Throughput comprises a validation function, as agents are supposed to interact with the topics and opinions discursively and change their topics and opinions under the pressure of other people's arguments. Finally, it has an orientation function, as public communication generates "public opinions", which the audience can perceive and accept as convincing (ibid.: 8f.). Neidhardt defines public opinion to be the dominant one, but not necessarily to represent the opinion of the majority of the population (ibid.: 7f.). The question whether Sina Weibo qualifies as a public sphere and, if so, on which of the levels described by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990) will be answered in this paper.

3. Method

Thirteen qualitative interviews were conducted to shed light on the role of Sina Weibo. They took place with seven Chinese in Shanghai, China, and with six Chinese in Chemnitz, Germany, from February to April 2012 (see Table 1). People living in China and Germany have been chosen because in this study, not just Weibo, but general internet usage and how it is influenced by internet regulations and censorship in China were examined. Internet usage was considered to be habitual. Therefore, it was expected that people would concentrate on visiting the same few domains repeatedly and that a change of usage patterns would become most visible to the users when moving to a country with more or less internet censorship than their own.

The interviewees were selected in a double-staged procedure as a stratified sample using the snowball system. At first, knowledge about the field was generated and consolidated by interviewing three Chinese experts² (CC1M, CC3M and CC5M) on the topic of internet regulations and Sina Weibo. CC1M and CC3M were scholars carrying out research on both topics and CC5M was an information technology (IT) expert, who used Sina Weibo a lot in a work-related context. In a second stage, more average internet users were questioned to deepen the knowledge of the field.

All the interviewees were chosen due to their knowledge of English (or German). I am aware that this selection carries the possibility of biased results, as the interviewees might be more interested in censorship and circumventing it than the average Chinese internet user. This possibility has been considered in the analysis. I felt that the topic was too sensitive to employ a translator. I considered this to be the only viable option to conduct the study without possibly endangering the interviewees.

Factors found likely to be relevant for dealing with internet regulations and censorship were the time the interviewees spend online daily and the time spent abroad, which was considered to make a difference in their attitude towards internet regulations and censorship as well as their handling. The interview partners were chosen accordingly.

The research was conducted using semi-structured guidelines. As many of the interviewees were students, most of the interviews were conducted in public places such as cafes. Only a few were conducted at the interviewee's homes or offices. This was due mostly to suggestions of the participants as it was important for me to arrange the interview situation as conveniently for them as possible. The interviews had an average length of one hour. They were audio recorded and transcribed.

Topics discussed in the interviews were the perception of internet regulations in the interviewee's home countries and worldwide, homepages they regularly visited, whether they were aware of any censorship and how they circumvented it, as well as if and how they used Sina Weibo.

The method used for the evaluation was a combination of Froschauer and Lueger's (2003) theme analysis and Mayring's (2010) content analysis. The theme analysis helps one to gain an overview of the data. It reduces it to the essentials by means of summarizing the central aspects. What follows after the theme analysis is completed is an aspect that does not get much

²Following Bogner, Littig and Menz, experts were understood "as people, who – starting from a specific knowledge of practice and experience that is focused on a clearly marked problem area – [...] structure a specific field of action for others with their interpretations in a meaningful and guiding way" (2014: 13).

attention in Froschauer and Lueger’s proposal (2003: 162). Here, Mayring (2010: 69) suggests accumulating the statements from different interviewees on one topic, which was carried out using excel sheets. By combining the methods, I intended to minimise possible disadvantages both methodological approaches might carry and gain the best possible insight into the data collected.

The names of the interviewees have been anonymized. Members of different groups can be distinguished by the first two letters in their group name (Chinese in China are marked as CC and Chinese in Germany as GC). The numbers 1 to 13 have been added to further differentiate between the interviews and to avoid mix-ups. The letter after the number marks the gender of the interviewee (‘m’ for male and ‘f’ for female).

Sample Overview	Chinese in China (CC)	Chinese students in Germany (GC)
Male/Female	5 Male/2 Female	3 Male/3 Female
Occupation	2 Scholars 1 IT expert 1 Chinese teacher of foreign students 1 Student of International Politics 1 PR manager 1 Psychology counselor	Students: 2 Intercultural Communication (Master) 1 Automotive Software 1 Customer Relations Management (Master) 1 Mechanical Engineering 1 Automotive Software Engineering (Master)
Country/Place of Origin	2 Hubei Province 2 Shanghai 1 Zhejiang Province 1 Fujian 1 Kanton Province	2 Beijing 1 Shanghai 1 Fujian Province 1 Heilongjiang Province 1 Shangdong Province
Time spend abroad	Between none and 8 years	Between 10 months and 6 years

Table 1: Sample Overview

4. Results

Three subsequent research questions were asked to describe the role of Sina Weibo (and later of social media) in China’s cyberspace: 4.1 Who uses Sina Weibo and for what? 4.2 What is the value of the platform for its users? 4.3 What is the value of the platform for the government according to the users? While chapter 4.1 has a rather descriptive character, it also gives insights into who the users think utilises the microblogging service. The chapters 4.2 and 4.3 help us to understand the function that Sina Weibo fulfils for both the people and the government and if it qualifies as a public sphere in Neidhard’s (1994) sense.

4.1 Who uses Sina Weibo and for what?

Eight of the 13 interviewees reported that they were regularly using Sina Weibo. Six of them were Chinese living in China and two were Chinese students in Germany (see Table 2). They had been using Weibo for between a month (GC9F) and two and a half years (CC5M) (which was almost since the very beginning at the time the interviews were conducted). They stated they used it between one and two hours daily (CC4F) and all day long via mobile phone, checking it every five to ten minutes (CC6M). Three of the interviewees said they would rather read than write posts on Weibo (CC1M, CC4F, CC5M) and five claimed to do both (CC2F, CC3M, CC6M, GC9F, GC13M). They had between 13 (GC9F) and 700 followers (CC5M) and followed between 10 (CC4F) and 1000 (CC5M) people.

	Period	Read/Write	Time on Weibo	Followers	Follows
CC1M	2 months	Read	2 h daily	-	-
CC2F	1 year	Both	Not too much time	500	300
CC3M	500 days	Both	6-8 h daily	-	-
CC4F	2 months	Read	1-2 h daily	-	10
CC5M	2 1/2 years	Read	1-3 h daily	700	1000
CC6M	2 years	Both	All day (phone)	431	380
GC9F	1 month	Both	-	13	54
GC13M	-	Both	-	200	164

Table 1: Interviewees' usage of Sina Weibo

Most of the users found out about Weibo because their friends (CC2F, CC4F, CC6M), colleagues (CC1M) or students (CC3M) were talking about it. CC1M had colleagues who kept emailing or forwarding interesting Weibo posts to him. He had just signed up recently, because he was afraid that it would be a waste of time, but then found that it had a lot of important and useful information. CC3M mentioned that he had signed up just for fun. CC4F had joined it, because she did not want to be left out of her friends' conversations: "When I go out with my friends they all talk about Weibo: If I don't have the news here when they talk about it, I feel very lonely". GC9F had planned to get an account for a long time but wanted to wait until the flaws of the new technology had been worked out. When asked what they were using Weibo for, different reasons were mentioned.

CC2F read the news on Weibo and used it to let people know what was happening in her life. She also posted information on the tea ceremonies she organised once a month. CC6M read the newspaper posts there, while CC5M used it, for example, to see what other people were posting at a work-related conference they were attending. CC4F used the network to connect

with friends, to find out what was happening in her home province and to get news. For GC13M, connecting with his friends in China was an important reason for using Weibo, as well as getting news on famous people:

“like the boss of some enterprise, like some actor and actress, like maybe some officer from part of the government and they have also the account of Weibo and the policemen, the police station has Weibo sometimes. So that’s quite a good way to know what’s the attitude they have about something” (GC13M).

CC1M treasured Weibo’s informational value: He felt he could learn a lot from people on Weibo, “who are quite prominent in their own sector [...] starting from editors and journalists and reporters first and second lawyers [...] and the third like some celebrities, who always make their wishes heard on important issues.” It was also “a great resource for me in terms of research or understanding the society better or what is going on here, what are the trendy issues” (CC1M).

All the male Chinese in China interviewed pointed out that the power of Weibo did not lie in the quantity of its users, but their quality and the platform’s “information and how people use the account” (CC5M). Those celebrities and experts often had lots of followers and high credibility. In GC9F’s opinion, these famous people have the power on Weibo. They did not even have to write a text themselves but could simply repost something and show their followers that they had the same opinion. According to CC5M, those who were related to the government were especially critical, as they did not have to be that afraid of possible punishment. GC8M mentioned that scholars were more likely than other user groups to find out whether the government is lying, because they could research facts and knew how to fight back.

According to CC7M, Weibo users are westernized, open-minded and educated people who are sensitive about certain topics and dare to criticise the situation in China. CC5M describes them as “quality people”,

“who are satisfied with their full-living [...]. Other people who are struggling with living, they are complaining about the government, but it is all like basic things; it is like they complain about the food, the prices, different things. Only the people who have ability to live better situations, they will talk more, so, so these are quality people” (CC5M).

CC3M summed it up: “The younger, grass roots people will prefer the Weibo of Tencent and those quite successful and elite people will prefer to discuss in Sina.”

4.1.1 Interim Conclusion

The main motive for the interviewees to sign up on Weibo was that people were talking about it. Once signed up, they used it to connect with friends and elites from all kinds of fields (ranging from movie stars to scholars, lawyers, government officials or experts on China's history). They read interesting things on Sina Weibo as well as entertaining content and shared (work-related) content, which reflects trends on the Chinese internet where entertainment is dominant (Sullivan 2012). However, Weibo's real value for the users lay in the information it made available. Sina Weibo strived hard from the beginning to get celebrities, influential bloggers and media elites on board. Similar to Twitter, it has two kinds of user accounts: regular ones and the verified user (V's) accounts, usually in the hands of well-known public figures and experts (Yu/Asur/Huberman 2011). Users felt that Sina Weibo had managed to attract people in a large quantity who were interested in imposing a change in China.

4.2 What is the value of Sina Weibo for its users?

One major function that Sina Weibo fulfils for the Chinese can be explained by the case of Wang Lijun, which went viral on Weibo. Wang Lijun was the police chief under Bo Xilai, who was the mayor of Chongqing and had been an aspirant to the position of the premier of China, which would have guaranteed Wang Lijun a high position as well. Unfortunately, Bo Xilai's wife had been involved in some illegal businesses and killed the British businessman Neil Heywood, who had threatened to make her illegal dealings public. Wang Lijun, having found out about this, confronted Bo Xilai, who got angry and hit him in the face. Wang Lijun escaped to the American consulate in Chengdu, hoping to get political asylum with this information, but the US government refused to get involved. Soon after Wang Lijun arrived at the consulate, it was surrounded by police cars, which attracted the attention of passers-by, who then posted it on Weibo and made the issue go viral (Follath/Wagner 2012). CC1M considered the case to be very important for the Chinese public, because

“[t]he significance of that story is, (clearing his throat) for a long time, I could, I could say that for a long time, for example, the general public, they knew something was going on at the top level and they knew there was a conflict of interests between those political bosses. [...] I think when Mr. Wang Lijun, the Chongqing police chief, suddenly visited the embassy, it left so many, I mean unknowns to the public, but at least for the first time that conflict between those political figures and their political interest unfolded itself to the general public [...] tens of thousands of Chinese netizens stayed up all night to follow each new post about that story“ (CC1M).

As CC5M explained, people in China are not allowed to speak about politics in public. Therefore, this is a rare insight. CC5M and CC6M said that it was hard to get negative news on the

authorities before Weibo. CC1M even goes one step further by saying that with information being leaked onto Weibo, “they have a much better access to the truth and especially, for example, about the history of China and of the communist party”. CC5M comes to a similar conclusion: “It’s like sometimes the government wants to hide some things and Weibo help to transfer this information to different people, to all kinds of people, so it effects a lot that people all know the things.”

The informational value of the microblog was considered to be very high by users and non-users in China alike (CC1M, CC2, CC4F, CC5M, CC6M, CC7M). Even if information posted was deleted soon afterwards due to censorship on the platform, during the time it was online it could be shared, posted and reposted millions of times. Many interviewees emphasised that the spread of information on Weibo was very fast (CC1M, CC5M, GC9F, GC13M).

Furthermore, CC1M stated that history education was a huge problem in China, but that many experts on China’s history were on Weibo and spread information there. CC1M felt that due to this, his students would gradually begin “to doubt or to ask questions”.

“For the past, for example, ten years, gradually and gradually, there have been some discussions about, for example, history education in China [...] and that, gradually and gradually, they are asking more and more new and important information about them and my students, because their education – Kindergarten, primary school, high school – and now finally many of, most of them, when they become college students have better access to history and they find out that much of what they have received as common sense or the truth in the past are lies. So, in that sense, it could change“ (CC1M).

CC3M similarly expressed that there were many different points of views that would compete “in this cyberspace, and during this debate people, normal people, those observers, those normal citizens become more and more mature how to understand or find out the real fact of Weibo”. As there were lots of rumours in cyberspace, people had started organising themselves to verify or deny them: “which means, when they saw a post and if I think that may be rumours, I will try to verify by myself. If I find different evidence I will just post it and say that ‘Okay, I have found different evidence’, and allow other observers to make their decision whether this is true or not” (CC3M).

According to CC1M, Weibo had also changed how media and especially investigative reporters did their job: “[T]hey could follow up with some tips by, for example, ordinary Weibo users, follow up with that and, finally, found a very important start and there have been many cases of that”. CC3M mentioned that “people can use their cell phones to make a record of short videos and upload it directly and share with millions of people in several minutes and that will be very powerful weapons for those journalists, dissidents, activists or even normal citizens”.

Apart from simply making information publicly available and spreading it quickly, another feature of Weibo is that it has become “one of the most important platforms for discussion [...] Chinese people can discuss public policies and express their ideas on the future development strategy of China and on any interesting topic quite freely and in a relative cheap and effective way” (CC3M). People can relieve their anger and frustration on the platform. Instead of going directly “to the street, having a face-to-face confrontation with the government, you can just write several posts to express their ideas. [...] Sometimes they just delete or neglect it. Any way you want to write, just write it” (CC3M). According to GC8M, if the government did not like what people were doing, the latter would get a warning from the censors or the police and many would probably be afraid of getting into trouble and stop criticising. GC8M thinks that it is still worth trying, as an article could wake other people up.

CC3M and CC1M also described Weibo as a base for mobilization, to turn criticism into action. In Wukang, a village in the south of China, protests were successfully organised via Weibo which, in the end, led to real democratic elections in this village (for further information, read Moore (2011) or Chin (2012)):

“You can read this guy’s blog. He uses his blogs and he uses Weibo and Weibo and this guy just organised a very successful protest in a small village named Wukang. And this protest lasted at least about I think 2000 the September 2011 till now, more than five or six months And some people believe or some people think that should be a Chinese version of Arab Spring, but finally the Guangdong municipal government made a kind of compromise and this guys was allowed to keep his blog open in Weibo and to make a direct broadcasting discussion with other guys including those dissident activists in Sina to show their angries satisfied and frustrate and desperate about the latest development of democracy, democratic process in China” (CC3M).

Therefore, CC3M thinks that Weibo has given “the civil society [...] their new tools and weapons to become kind of more powerful and build a new type of relationship with the government, especially with different levels of the government” (CC3M).

4.2.1 Interim Conclusion

Political decisions in China have never been discussed publicly but finalized in obscurity. Weibo gives netizens a glimpse of what happens behind the political curtains. It caters to any kind of information being spread fast and wide and information online going viral offline, too. People who do not dare to circumvent internet censorship themselves can access information received and reposted by others. However, as information of an oppositional discourse would usually be deleted very quickly, being online at the right time or as long as possible is vital. Having this information led the interviewees to believe that people were 1) now able to educate themselves, especially in terms of China’s history, 2) more critical as well as 3) questioning the information given more often. If netizens felt that information presented to them was fake or

just a rumour, they would try to verify it, as CC3M described. This kind of action is called a human flesh search engine. It is an activity where “thousands of volunteer cyber vigilantes unite to expose the personal details of perceived evildoers and publish them on the Web” (O’Brien 2008). Netizens’ activism has also become “a form of ‘checks and balances’ for local officials who have proven hard to control for the centre throughout China’s history” and it “permits government and citizens to engage in political interactions aimed at improving the governance of the People’s Republic of China, while ostensibly focusing on solving apolitical, local problems” (Herold 2011: 3).

In an environment like China, where journalists sometimes get paid by how much government officials like their statements, one way to get unfiltered information is by citizens becoming active as journalists and reporting independently (Esarey/Qiang 2011: 309). They search for information, go where the action is and document it personally. Pictures of an event can be uploaded within seconds to Weibo (or cyberspace in general), especially with today’s mobile phone technology, and retweeted millions of times before censors are even aware of what is happening.

This form of citizen journalism has affected investigative journalism. As Bei (2013) states: “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” (ibid.: 34). A study by Fu and Lee (2016) showed that journalists reporting and performing job-related activities on Weibo enjoyed an “increased journalistic autonomy and freedom” (ibid.: 97).

A lot of information can still be found on Weibo that the government does not approve of. It would be easy for the government to shut down Sina Weibo, as it did with its predecessor Fanfou, which has not been the case. The reasons that the interviewees identified for that will be displayed in the following chapter.

4.3 What is Sina Weibo’s value for the government according to the users?

CC3M mentioned that nearly all the municipal governments had official accounts on Weibo and used them to engage in direct discussions and negotiations with the people regarding the government’s policies and urgent problems. As an example, he mentioned an accident that happened in the Shanghai metro when two trains crashed. He said that the Shanghai municipal government

“successfully transferred crisis into an opportunity by taking advantage of using this Weibo well. They make quite good job of Public Relations and the people finally realized, okay, you are transparent enough, you do not hide this information, but now this, maybe you should act as quickly as possible and more effectively, then that will be okay” (CC3M).

He claimed that the government encouraged its people to use Sina Weibo as a platform to participate in the policy decision-making process and representatives of the National People’s Congress to make their drafts of bills available on Weibo and discuss them online. This was confirmed by CC6M, who said that “Weibo poses a potential threat to the regime’s survival and of the CCP” but that an “increasing number of government departments or public organisations go online, they open a Weibo account”. CC1M mentioned that the government was a very active adopter of new media technology as it gave them benefits for the legitimation of the government. The party would use Weibo as a test area, to find out what public opinion on certain political projects looked like and that Weibo was an

“important source for the government to crack down on corruption. It’s like, I mean, the general public has become a huge informant to government authorities at different levels to follow up, for example, information on those corrupt officials and, in many cases, there would be a further investigation of those cases, as many of them actually, finally have to go to jail” (CC1M).

Corruption of government officials is a huge topic in China that people no longer tolerate and are enraged by (CC1M, CC3M, CC4F). The interviewees said that very often if there were problems between the citizens and the government, they concerned the government of the province or the lower government, which directly manages the villages. CC3M said that the Central Government would generally not know about the problems and only found out about them via complaints by netizens on Weibo.

At the same time, CC1M was aware that the government had control over Weibo “the same as they have done with the traditional media, but they have to develop more subtle devices”, such as having users register with their real names. CC5M also mentioned that on Weibo, “more than 2000 people work 24 hours every day monitoring the information and killing the information which is a danger to the government”. CC3M felt that the government had settled

“to find a compromise space, which means the government try to become more confident and self-constrained, saying, ‘Okay, you just do it, but I will watch.’ I watch, and I would like to try to be a kind of monitor rather than censor, and the company [Sina Weibo, F.T.] also says: ‘Okay, I can provide a service.’ I will try to make you satisfied“ (CC3M).

Therefore, CC3M said that Sina Weibo had designed very detailed guidelines on whether a post can be published or should be deleted.

Sina Weibo, like all internet service providers in China, is in a very delicate situation. “You know Weibo also get pressure from both, from government and also from the users.” (CC5M)

The users “want to talk more about the government” (ibid.), while the government wants to control information on Weibo.

CC3M reported that the relationship between the Sina operators and the government could be quite tense. The providers have to have a very flexible attitude to survive. If the government tells them: “Come on guys, please help to cen-, to delete all these posts” (CC3M), Weibo has to satisfy this requirement. But the Sina providers also use the chance to communicate with the users and tell them: “Sorry, we had to delete it, but maybe you can understand” (CC3M). CC5M felt very positive about the people from Sina as they were very polite when they called to tell users to keep it quiet for a while, which had happened to a colleague of his.

4.3.1 Interim Conclusion

Complaints by netizens on Weibo have brought problems to the government’s attention which it might not have been aware of otherwise (Herold 2011). Government officials are even actively using Sina Weibo as a platform to engage in grass roots discussions with netizens (Li et al. 2016). While the government uses it to identify problems and find out about the opinions of its netizens, Weibo still poses a potential threat to the government. It might not have shut down the service, but it has other measures of control. The case of Bo Xilai, for example, not only led to his and his wife’s imprisonment, but also the detainment of six people for “fabricating or disseminating online rumours” (Ng 2015). After the Bo Xilai case went viral, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo suspended their commenting features for three days, “admitting their sites had been overrun with rumours and [were, F.T.] in need of a clean-up” (ibid.). Weibo provides the administration, first and foremost, with the people’s thoughts online, for everyone to see. It does not intend to rule democratically, but to preserve its harmonious society. If that means listening to political statements voiced online and to take action when the harmony seems to be endangered, it will do so. But, at the same time, it will not allow netizens to challenge its reign and silences their “rumours” if necessary.

5. Discussion

To identify the role of social media in China, firstly, the question whether Sina Weibo qualifies as a public sphere will be answered.

Sina Weibo fulfils the normative claims of the three principals and functions of a political public sphere identified by Neidhardt (1994). It satisfies a transparency function, as it gives users insights, for example, by means of citizen journalism, into political conflicts, such as the case of Bo Xilai, which they would not find out about through traditional media. The government is

likely to become active especially when cases of corrupted government officials are brought to its attention and communicates its actions through government officials and institutions being represented on Sina Weibo, thus, becoming more transparent.

As previously obscured information has been made available on Weibo, users described that Chinese citizens are starting to think more for themselves, to scrutinize information and to ask critical questions. This prepares them for the validation function of the public sphere. The function is, for example, utilised when users try to verify or deny a given piece of information or rumour and start a human flesh search engine. It then provides an orientation function through the information given, their credibility and the credibility of their sources, which the audience can accept or look for more information. Therefore, Sina Weibo fulfils Neidhardt's (1994) three normative claims to the public sphere and, in that sense, qualifies for one.

What is the general role of social media in China's society? A closer look at the levels of the public spheres social media accommodate will be taken to give an answer to this question.

Hidden transcripts of a private discourse have entered the public domain with the onset of blogging, as described by Esarey and Qiang (2008). In relation to Gerhardt and Neidhardt's (1990) theory, this means that discourse from the encounter public sphere that has previously been hidden has moved from a private to a more stable, organised yet also visible and traceable theme public sphere.

From there, users moved on to social networks and microblogs. They make it easier to connect and interact with people on a larger scale, creating an even bigger theme public sphere. Sina Weibo not only extends the encounter and theme public sphere, but also the media public sphere with citizen journalism and the (more or less) stable availability and plurality of information and opinions that has, according to the users, never been there before.

Many interviewees expressed the hope that the relatively open communication on Sina Weibo would lead to a more democratic exchange with the government. However, this has not been the case, as censorship intensified in 2013 with the change of the National People's Congress. Officially, this was due to rumours being spread online. The government has managed to shape public knowledge and discourse on Sina Weibo through the use of internet regulations and employed power under the threat of penalties (Foucault 1971). It detained powerful users, such as the V's, and Weibo users for "illegal distribution of content in recent years" (Ng 2015) and has with the announcement of even tighter regulations in Sept 2013 been "criminalizing actions on microblogs like simply retweeting false information" (ibid.), thus, making sure that the dominant discourse is the one it approves of.

After that, users moved on to WeChat. Discourses that had been visible to the public eye on Sina Weibo moved back into the more secluded private environment of WeChat, where users have more control over who can read their posts. Therefore, the public sphere here should rather be described as an encounter or possibly theme public sphere on a smaller scale, but no longer serves as a media public sphere as was the case with Sina Weibo.

Just like the Chinese government will not let go of internet control and censorship, it also became obvious in the interviews that the criticism online would not lead to a political uprising or revolution. Most of the Chinese interviewees still considered the government to have good reasons to cut off certain information and were generally supportive of it. Findings from academic literature indicate that this attitude is rather typical of Chinese citizens (Wallis 2011; Wu 2015). In fact, some Chinese even call for the increase of government control online (Guo/Feng 2011). An explanation for this behaviour can be found in the implementations of Confucianism:

“Confucianism insists that a government’s performance and the care for its people are more important than procedural arrangements such as fair elections. [...] Ordinary citizens only oppose the government under extreme conditions, such as when political leaders significantly deviate from expected norms and the virtues of Confucianism” (Kou/Semaan/Nardi 2017: 3).

Instead of thinking about the users as fleeing from one platform to another, one should think about social media as creating an arena in which to test new forms of interaction and checks and balances with the government. Chinese social media platforms, where activists find ever new ways to circumvent what is censored (Deluca/Brunner/Sun 2016), rather than the internet itself, facilitate as Wu (2012: 2222) describes it: “changes in the political attitudes and practices of its users”. They are also platforms for the users to learn new things, even though censorship will always restrict this learning process massively. This happens in rather public social media environments, such as on Sina Weibo, or in small and private encounter spheres, such as WeChat. Therefore, the main role that social media in China play is not one of organising a revolution, but of improving and maintaining a harmonious society while creating new levels of interaction. They help to educate and empower Chinese netizens (within limits) and the government to act if major problems are brought to the latter’s attention and to easily identify dissent that it considers threatening, thus, securing its reign.

6. Limitations

When looking at the answers the interviewees gave, especially in chapters 4.2 and 4.3, one gets the impression that they are very well informed, sophisticated and have put a lot of thought into their usage. At second glance, it becomes clear that it were mostly CC1M, CC3M and CC5M, the Weibo experts, who had a lot to say on these issues. Therefore, this part should be read

carefully, as those three do not represent the average user on Sina Weibo but helped the author to gain a deeper understanding of the platform.

In addition, all the interviewees spoke English well enough to answer questions about the role of internet censorship and social media in China. Those are usually people who are either very interested in the West, have been in contact with foreigners or have been abroad. Though they are more inclined to visit English language-based websites that are blocked in China than other users, they represent typical users of Sina Weibo as described in chapter 4.1.

Another critical issue is that the sample did not include any internet users seeing themselves as politically active on the Chinese internet. This could have added more depth to the research. The most critical fact about the study is that the interviews were conducted in 2012. As the study shows, a lot has happened in China since then. However, the interviews still give valuable insights into what the role of Sina Weibo was at the time the interviews were conducted and what they consider the role of social media in China to be. Furthermore, this is one of the few studies on Sina Weibo that uses qualitative interviews as its empirical basis and, therefore, gives users a voice to describe how they experience the role of Sina Weibo and what changes it has imposed in China.

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