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Sina Weibo and Twitter: A Clone or A Reverse?

Ho Hoi-ting Bonnie



(Source: <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/8829/weibo-aug-2014/>)

Abstract

Weibo has been said to be a clone of Twitter, and indeed they both share a number of similarities in terms of technological design. However, because of the censorship system set up by the post-authoritarian party, the CCP, the affordance of Weibo is of great difference from the Western counterpart. This paper will explore how censorship functions on Weibo and explain in what ways it shapes user's point of view. It will then argue that, even if social-networking sites provide space for the public to participate in political discussion, it is not the case in Chinese context. Counter-surveillance can also be controlled. I would propose that Weibo is a reverse of Twitter as it is more likely to disconnect rather than bringing people together. Lastly, it will continue to illustrate how a different information organization system used on Weibo will lead to a different constitution of trends.

Introduction

Along with the thriving economy in China, the rising population of Internet users is predictable. The number of netizens, according to the survey report conducted by China Internet Network Information Center (2015), by December 2014, was recorded 649 million, and the penetration rate of Internet was 47.9%. One of the contributing factors to the growth was the expansion of Internet enterprises, encouraging the masses to go online. As of the end of 2012, Chinese Weibo users had been rapidly scaled to 309 million, though the general growth of Internet users decelerated (CNNIC, 2013). Greater amount of Internet users implied higher flow of information, and more complex governance system to ensure Internet security under a post-

totalitarian regime.

Social-networking sites prosper globally, but at a different geographical location, different implications can be derived. Twitter and Sina Weibo are respectively under Western and Chinese background, in terms of applications, they share quite a number of common grounds. Analysis on the two platforms can hence be inter-referenced to disassemble their mechanics, affordance and cultural effects. The operation of Sina Weibo facilitates online communication but there is not much research on its interconnectivity, the data control and use, therefore by contrasting it with Twitter, I hope to construe the relationship of the platform and China's censorship firewall. Unmasking the effect beneath Weibo's operation and interface is a possible way to make sense of online narratives and hierarchy.

Weibo affordance

After Twitter officially retreated from the China market in 2009, Sina Weibo became the dominant domestic microblogging platform. Sharing many similarities in terms of its functions and interface in order to fit into the local market, the design of Weibo was said to be a clone of Twitter (Boyd et al., 2010; Qin, 2014). Plundered the basic setting from Twitter, Weibo as well adopts the uses of @; #; forward (repost) as to motivate online communication. Briefly, "@user" is a syntax to address others and respond to messages in conversations. Hashtags, despite in a slightly different format compared to Twitter (#xxx#), still share the same function of categorizing posts so that others can search for content under certain topic. And thirdly, reposting instantaneously forward conversation to broader audiences (van Dijck, 2013).

The 140-word limit on Twitter was also put into practice on Weibo, however, as artist-activist Ai Weiwei said, "in the Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella" (cited in Sullivan, 2014:28). Writing in Chinese, because of its language structure, allows users to compose posts that consist of much more information than English, and even allow direct commentary on other contributors without shortening the original text when retweeting. Less characters carrying much more information boosts online following and participation in conversation (Sullivan, 2014), and the piece of information reposted is likely to be complete, whereas on Twitter rebroadcasting another's tweet usually involves deletion and changes of content, due to the word

constraint (Boyd et al., 2010).

Under Chinese context, for there is a richer space to produce information and expression, the possibility of content alternation, mis-addressing, mis-citing and ambiguity can be lower. As what can be observed from Twitter, one long message had to be broken down into fragments in order to survive in word limitation, instead, Weibo users could simply opt to use a built-in tool “Long Weibo”, inserting more than 140 characters and attaching pictures to illustrate an entire story. Long Weibo can be up to several pages long, which is 10 000 words, along with visual attachments, accuracy and traceability are ensured. However, not free of charge to generate Long Weibo, users are required to pay monthly and their identities have to be verified for such purpose. The expansion on word limit, a seemingly insignificant modification of the use of terms, indeed tremendously alter both post writer and reader behavior.

When scrutinizing the aftermath of different word limit from the two platforms, we can see the result of a different participation practice. Over the last year Twitter has been proposing to discard the 140-word limit and extent it to 10 000. Its original protocol on word constraint, modeling on SMS text message, shapes user engagement in publishing precise and short post, which consequently encourages scrolling behavior, skimming through rather than reading closely. Twitter users are assumed to spend more time on reading lengthy but fewer posts if the extension is finally carried out¹. In contrast to Weibo, already included this feature, the service of long post was indeed designed to support the circulation of business advertisements and event notifications. Insofar as institutions find insufficient space to exhibit detailed information for activity promotion and raise brand awareness, Weibo’s design especially targets enterprises for their convenience (Peng, n.d.). A profusion of scams and misuse of tags therefore flood the site, distracting people from learning important information.

In short, though this Twitter-like microblog serves local netizens like other global familiar social platforms, it was specially tailored under government regulation and surveillance. From the outset, private companies in China have to rent cyberspace

¹ See more on Wagner, K. (2015). *Twitter Considering 10,000-Character Limit for Tweets*. Retrieved 10 Mar 2016 from <http://recode.net/2016/01/05/twitter-considering-10000-character-limit-for-tweets/>.

from the CCP who has been monitoring technological infrastructure for their operation. With the intention to better surveillance, the Chinese government has set up “China Internet Self-Discipline Award” to credit those who carry out “harmonious and healthy Internet development” (Salter, 2003). Thus, it is common for service providers practice self-discipline in their operation and all kind of online activities among users, even chatter and blog posts, to ensure that they accomplish their legal obligation. In particular, Sina.com, the owner of Weibo, is a search engine and news portal which has established a sophisticated censor system to keep an eye on online rhetoric. It aims to retain trust from the government by fulfilling their expectation on stabilizing governance, halting the spread of extreme and latent conversations that wreak any mayhem (Sullivan, 2014). Complex as it is, such control on social networking sites is simply one of the components of the “Great Firewall of China”.

Censorship

The “Great Firewall of China” surrounds all means of digital communication, from news release to blogosphere. It automatically prohibits oversea websites from displaying inside the country (King et al., 2013). Rebecca MacKinnon (2011) termed the result of it as “networked authoritarianism”, implying that Chinese authoritarianism had extended its power in the virtual reality to control online speech and participation. The “free” flow of information on the Internet spurs a fantasy that every user could enjoy equal right and freedom of speech, as if the “public space” that Habermas envisioned (Salter, 2003). The emergence of weblogs perforce encouraged public participation in discussing social issues and government policies, with a view that the state-run media was distrusted and despised by Chinese citizens, forcing the public to turn to alternative for reliable information (Jiang, 2011). Weibo hence becomes a platform for venting opinion and voicing out injustice, in which very quick responses and threads could be easily published and found.

The CCP in fear of destabilization and the outbreak of social activism online that would endanger its ruling, behind Weibo is a “harmonizing” apparatus, meaning to suppress and censor. According to Vuori and Paltemaa (2013:404), “censorship is a security practice that defines the actual boundary between what is deemed to be appropriate freedom and excessive freedom in China online”. The establishment of security technology and political agenda is indeed concealed under the front-end

artefact, but constantly being unaware and unnoticed. Complying with the government, private service providers have adopted surveillance policies to specifically detect “sensitive” words, as part of their obligations. It is their legal responsibility if they fail to fulfil the requirement, leading to license rescission or shutdown (Boyle, 1998). The censoring scheme is visible yet its actual practices still remain a myth.

In attempt to debunk its mechanism, there had been reverse engineering analysis attempting to list up-to-date blocked words. China Digital Times (CDT)² is run by the Berkeley Counter-Power Lab, a project based and founded by a group of graduate school students in the US. It, particularly focusing on Weibo, has listed and translated blocked words bilingually that they gleaned through consecutively tests and verifications (CDT, 2015). Another study was undertaken by Jason Ng, Blocked on Weibo³. He provides possible explanations on why certain words are prohibited, reveals the boundaries of censoring system (Ng, 2013). Both lists excavate the veiled apparatus working behind the scene every day. Basically there are two types of censors, first is “keyword blocking”, filtering publications that contain taboo words and phrases; the second is hand censoring which requires manual input, as computer equations could not recognize clever rephrasing, for example, derogatory homonymic euphemism (King et al., 2013). Though the operation of censorship has yet to be overtly unraveled, here we could at least encapsulate the complex and layered Weibo surveillance, which is far beyond users’ expectation and imagination, or maybe it has already been neutralized and accustomed.

Surveillance on Weibo closely related to the state’s governmentality, in which the banned words represented the potential discussion that would incite public disgruntle, and then might finally threaten the authoritarian regime. Here I would argue that Weibo is indeed hindering social-networking because censorship interferes the flow of information as well as the connection of people. Research done by Vuori and Paltemaa (2013) categorized the filtered words, results showed that the largest group of censored words was associated with political leaders and the CCP, followed were

² CDT. (2015). *Weibo Search Sensitive Words*. Retrieved from <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/新浪微博搜索敏感词>

³ Ng, J. (2013). *Blocked on Weibo*. Retrieved from <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/about>.

activists and activism. Putting an end to the circulation of “dangerous” critics is thought to dissociate the like-minded from forming an uprising community. In other words, community can never be established when conversations infringe “security”.

Apart from suppressing communication surrounding sensitive topics, an investigation into the removed content on Weibo by King et al. (2013) suggests that the purpose of censorship program is to prevent collective action from happening, for instance, offline social movements, boycotts and protests. “The theory of collective action potential predicts that posts related to collective action events will be censored regardless of whether they criticize or praise the state, with both critical and supportive posts uncensored when events have no collective action potential (2013:12)”, it depicts that the highly censored contents are neither negative nor extreme criticisms towards the authority but the likelihood of group formation. Only will offline action affect the ruling power and social stability, which is why discontent rhetoric is sometimes tolerated because of less measurable effects. Removing expressions that encourage the formation of social action, it stops the connection of people who share common aspirations, and as their mobilization is under government control, it bars them from pursuing corresponding counter-action. Living in this visible censorship system, some netizens might not ascertain why their posts are blocked, or are not even conscious of its influences, but it straightforwardly reduces the probability of networking when involving political call.

Counter-surveillance

The above had stated how security technology worked on Weibo; on the other hand, similar to Twitter, Weibo too served as counter-surveillance of the government malpractices. Although under the censorship program, Chinese government acknowledges the fact that Weibo as the biggest social networking site could never entirely block every post that touched upon taboos. Paradoxically users are to some extent allowed to write about social injustices and gain public awareness.

Studies on Twitter theorizes that it boosts communication between the government and the masses, in which I found their conclusion also applicable to explain the apparatus of Weibo. Self-producing content, handy sharing tool and instantaneity contributed to the release and debates on breaking crisis, making active Twitters felt

empowered (Kwak et al., 2010). This phenomenon does not stand alone, but is also observed under Chinese context in spite of its authoritarian supervision. Both Twitter and Weibo are platforms letting users typify the role of government watch-dogs. Incidents that were not reported on conventional state-run media can be exposed online that reposting promulgated mass commentary and excoriation. Online political discussion becomes easier for public participation, which is no longer the patent for mainstream media. Mass citizens in China, are of a weaker group in terms of voice and narration whereas the government always dominates, can harness Weibo to channel public opinion, denouncing the underlying “Official-Oriented ideology of Chinese politics and society” (Jiang, 2011:137). Online alternative information is perceived to be more reliable and objective as individuals are the major producers. Weibo provides a new form of civic engagement that every user is equipped to be “journalist” composing first-hand data, covering marginalized stories and broadcasting instant news, just like what Twitter users do.

However, Weibo, the platform itself, selectively allows circulation of incidents, scandals, malfeasance, on condition that the concerning party leaders are of lower rank. Corruption, power abuses and privilege are not outstanding practices in the Chinese context. When ordinary people faced unfair treatment, evident cases proved that posting their stories online could gain more effective government involvement and settlement than traditional petition and appeal in court (Jiang, 2011). Detailed Weibo posts (long Weibo) in addition help the spread of breaking news, public circulation of newspaper-like articles with photos and description could draw attention from a wide range of professionals (journalists, lawyers, oversea media). By promoting “participatory surveillance”, in which individuals are not merely supervised in the Panopticon that Foucault proposed, but also partaking in constructing their own surveillance, as Qin (2014) infers that both netizens and government generating information on the same platform facilitates mutual communication between the two.

Under censorship program, Chinese officials are able to detect conversations about bureaucratic misbehavior, as a means to diagnose misconducting performance and promptly address the issue, easing public discontent. With a view to recent tension between mainlanders and Hong Kong Chinese, there appear a legion of discourses

stemming from the patriotic nationalist versus the intransigent liberalist, in which some of the castigations are posted by Hong Kong celebrities⁴. To halt the spread of discussion that involves sensitive political issues, a patrolling strategy is carried out to block the post, sometimes even the account holder, while what is remained is pro-government opinion. Meanwhile, instead of tightening the filtering system, Chinese government occasionally lets pass disclosure of scandals, so as to boost Weibo's popularity; otherwise netizens might utilize other platforms⁵. Trivial incidents, like how sons of the upper-class irrationally overspend in their weddings and take pride in their extravagant daily living, prompt online and offline controversy but do not greatly endanger state control.

Qin offered us an insight to dismantle Weibo's censorship mechanism from a perspective of counter-surveillance. We can therefore map two trajectories of how Chinese government secures its regime. Firstly, censoring system forbids sensitive conversations that would destabilize society. Activist commentaries, criticism towards important political leaders, formation of activism and other kinds of collective activities would be silenced by Internet police. Secondly, Weibo users are empowered by the given ability to release information, yet their opinions are indeed monitored. Quick response of resolving conflicts and mediating in affairs on the one hand reduce probability of collective movement; this act, on the other hand, diminishes the chances of linking individuals bearing similar goals. The social networking apparatus is not fostering communication among people from all walks of life, but the surveillance mechanism constantly reserving users as isolated viewers or producers. Whenever political scandals outburst, both standardized filtering process and offline government involvement will be at work. Either events are blocked from public knowledge or participatory engagement is permitted under the eye of Chinese government. People are hence satisfied in their own living environment, continuously conforming to or even becoming part of the Panopticon. Inside of this architecture, each single cell (piece of information) is only visible to the watchmen (government) and viewers, but their connection is doubted.

⁴ Anthony Chau Sang Wong, Chapman To, Pakho Chau are some of the anti-China Hong Kong artists whose sensitive Weibo posts had aroused online fights and been patrolled. Some of the Hong Kong journalists were as well "harmonized". See more on <http://bit.ly/1RbV5TN>.

⁵ CDT. (2015). *Methods and mechanism of Internet policing*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1OiZcAc>.

Sentiment mining is believed to be part of the Weibo censorship system, though its operation is unclear to the public. It is an access to speculate social affect, and I would say that it will result in online opinion declination. Mark Andrejevic (2013) had suggested that the penetration of Web2.0 is the era of surveillance in big data, and I would like to adopt his theory to make sense of the invisible control of Chinese authoritarian control, where how the system objectifies netizens, turning their expressions into an object to be analyzed in which individual does not matter. According to Andrejevic, “the goal of data-mining sentiment is not to capture the articulated feedback of self-consciously constructed brand and issue communities, but to gain an overview of myriad (decontextualized) ongoing conversations – a perspective within which emotions are abstracted from individuals (2013:56)”, emotion analysis is comparable to screening public disgruntlement on Weibo. Analysts collect data, normalize patterns, and predict what is likely to happen in a particular region as a whole; interactive and counter action will then be made to remedy coming events. The operator of Weibo as well as other government agencies are able to shape the atmosphere around specific trending topics by raising online/offline propaganda campaign to cope with emerging expressions.

To sooth public dissatisfaction, Chinese government hence evades direct confrontation by shifting attention to entertainment, less on political debates. Catering diverged tastes and expectations, Weibo accommodates a wide variety of functions, online chatter, games, putting topics into many categories so that users can search for and contribute to dialogues in a split-second. Users heavily relying on a state-run social networking platform, it is true that they are “free” to choose what they want to follow and repost, while what they consistently receive is in fact an aftermath artefact of their own sentimental analysis. Within this platform, a great difference of conversations (mostly centering in entertainment) can be seen, which was termed by Sunstein (cited in Andrejevic 2013) as “balkanization”, their world view is repeatedly deepened because of receiving information from a monolithic source. What users exactly consume is merely the filtered knowledge provided by the government, which is “safe” and “harmonized”.

This leads us to rethink whether Weibo carries out the concept of social-networking

site, to bring people closer that enhance life quality. If the interface of Weibo consecutively reinforces what audiences have already known that follows the propaganda products, information is not said to be permeable but separated, in a way that individuals live in a private habitat surrounding an invisible wall. Surrounded by his own interests (reading what he follows and reposts on Weibo), though users are visibly connected with one another, information is produced inside of a niche created by the government as they have already pre-determined audiences' tastes.

As if in the Panopticon model every cell is isolated, the fact that information on Weibo cannot freely penetrate, where every individual participation lies in their own private space, devoid of integrating with one another. Voices from cells can be heard, but no one can physically or in reality see commentator next door. Why I suggest that information on Weibo is fragmented and inconsistent is because of Chinese authority's intervention of curbing collective action. As long as Weibo police has deleted the original post which contains sensitive content, comments citing that source will be meaningless and incomprehensive. It points to the fact that Internet patrolling retards the spread of information on Weibo, disconnecting some already-connected conversations. The hierarchy of content manipulation is aided too by Weibo's categorizing system.

Liking and Trending

Hashtags (#xxx#) is a new type of information organization system that enables people to coordinate, renew, enrich. This new structure is mostly applied to categorize self-published information, personal as it is, allowing authors to define their works so that it would be findable and retrieval. Even though there are technical problems when organizing information in this new method classification, for example, the absence of rules and inability to merge synonyms, still tags establish kinship of communities, rendering users who share common interest to identify other parties (Wichowski, 2009).

The use of hashtags adopted on Weibo marks posts by virtue of specific topic. Insofar as thousands of posts are flooding on the site every single minute, there is a need to classify new information. Adding hashtag sign in post distinguishes which family it belongs, and only by clicking on tags link users to track topics, increasing chances for

messages to circulate. Flexible user-generated tags, unlike traditional organization structures, can label latest discussion topics, namely current events and issues under discussion. On social-networking sites, users felt empowered because of the autonomy to generate their own tags (van Dijck, 2013). Its boundless nature not only gives way to author's idiosyncrasy, but also helps identify the influences of certain topics. The more posts contribute to the same tag, the more likely it turns into a trend. Both on Twitter and Weibo trending topics are listed on eye-catching column where users can easily discern and probe. Twitter ranks trends by an algorithm that identifies the hottest topic, which recently encompasses the most accumulating posts within a particular geographical location (Twitter, 2015). In that, the hitting rate is the deciding factor of trends, implying that they are co-decided by netizens.

However, different from the Western counterpart, Weibo applies both traditional taxonomy and folksonomy, that is, controlled-vocabulary directory and hashtags. On "Discover" page, posts are put into traditional directory, dividing them into the groups of, to name but a few, videos, fashion, international affairs, etc. Correspondingly, users can make use of search engine to look for content centering the keywords. It is also workable simply to click on tags, user will then enter a collection of results under the same family. Adopting two types of classifications, yet we cannot say that trends on Weibo are determined halfway by the rate of comments and reposts under pre-set categories, and halfway by the use of hashtags. In contrast, there is only little portion that audience members can co-decide trends. Whenever a post mounts a certain extent of likes and comments, Weibo system will grade it according to its *content quality*, in order to determine their legibility and comprise the list of trending topics (Sina Weibo, 2015). Here Sina Weibo does not give a clear definition of "content quality", maybe is the scale to entertain audiences, maybe is its market-value, maybe is the less debatable the better, or maybe is according to the reputation of the trend initiator. What can be known is the fact that an invisible hand is always at work to adjust the hit rate of post to reach a harmonized equilibrium.

Considering the illusion that the popularity can give rise to what they want to talk about, it actually lies on security policing, shortlisting what audience should receive and enshrouding what they should not. Measurement of commentaries produces trends that are in line with government policies and expectations. And, the grading

scheme is not known to the masses. This embedded apparatus is comparable to the “disciplinary society” asserted by Deleuze (1992), where control has blended into a virtual architecture that shapes the mindset and reaction of dwellers.

The situation is writ large as we ascribe to how the government shapes criticism. It is not surprising to say that likes and comments on Weibo are not naturally generated by the public but manually created. By hiring state-sponsored commentators and opinion guiders (Sullivan, 2012), known as the “50 cents” party for the fact that once they publish a pro-government comment, they will gain 50 cents, government is able to negate bad news and rebuild positivity in virtual reality⁶. Other than secret Internet commentators, Weibo patrols also exercise solid control on celebrities. The Chinese government in especial files Weibo accounts who have over one million followers, recording their online activities including IP address and posting time. They internally persuade influential users to keep their followers under fifty thousand to clamp down potential agitation⁷. Influential users probably have to self-regulate in order to survive on this platform. The state so much asserts pressure on celebrities so that netizens can hardly attain support for deviant rhetoric against the one-party regime.

Surrounded by a closed system, Weibo users have no choice but to receive what it offers, realize the government-paved paradigm, embrace what is galvanized. The Internet wall is again strengthened thanks to the national security system, whereas people inside China constantly disjoin the outside world.

Concluding remarks

Weibo as the biggest social-networking platform in China and as a private company, the operator of Weibo is obliged to carry out censorship requirement, no matter monitoring users or self-governance, so as to fight for the running patent and gain trust from government. The setting of Weibo has a certain extent of resemblance as Twitter, namely, chatter, @, likes, comments, reposts, hashtags, all of which are familiar features. And yet inside of a Panopticon, this blogosphere is distinctively different from the Western counterpart's.

⁶ BBC. (2008). *China's Internet Spin Doctor*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7783640.stm>.

⁷ CDT. (2015). *Methods and mechanism of Internet policing*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1OiZcAc>.

The involvement of censorship system is not silent but visible and controlling. As we can observe that post will be filtered if it contains sensitive words or likely to agitate collective movements, the site is somehow disconnecting the connected. Once the original post, which is thought to be unacceptable, is blocked, the remaining comments and dialogues adding on it become incomprehensive and meaningless. Here Weibo does not facilitate the spread and accumulation of information; rather, it hinders changes and reformation. Similar situation is as well seen in the case of revealing government malpractices, calling for social justice and circulating not-reported news. Chinese government selectively permits negative critics, just for maintaining Weibo's hotness, but all data are collected in the opinion poll, ready to be analyzed and put to work. Counter action will be taken to ease public tension once they think it is needed. Still, comforted by the government, individuals are hence contented with what the Internet provides, keeping themselves into private space of entertainment. Again, it points to the fact that the censorship system re-enacts solidarity rather than connection.

The interface of Weibo gives an impression to users that they are free to speak, forward, like whatever they want. Self-produced content and tags are tools that empower individuals to voice out, but indeed, the list of hottest trends, unlike what they used to perceive, are assorted by an invisible hand. Party-paid opinion is a solid but hardly noticed government control, so as the internal warning celebrities to behave, which tremendously shape the tone of major visible conversations. By this means, audience members possibly internalize what they receive, becoming building blocks of constructing the censorship wall. Lastly, I would conclude that insofar as government control on Weibo disseminates from policing user-published posts, to controlling counter-surveillance, to proactively modifying the niche of discussion, its affordance is greatly distinct from Twitter though they share many commonplace, and that the censorship apparatus disunites communities rather than vice versa.

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