

Social Media as a tool of Resistance and Control in the People's Republic of China

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Modern China and Social Media:

The development of a global internet at the turn of the 21st century has resulted in a public discourse in which anyone can discuss and critique public policy. Citizens in the People's Republic of China have been resisting perceived injustices since before the development of the internet, but social media has enhanced their ability to criticize government policy and organize their movements. However, the government has recognized this and cracked down on the movements in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong by using censorship and propaganda on social media. Society and Technology are altering each other in a manner known to Science, Technology, and Society scholars as Co-production where the actors and the technology that they use are rapidly altering one another as they affect each other (Jasanoff, 2010). The government's actions on social media are changing the way resistance groups like the Uyghurs use social media and vice versa (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Analyzing the way that the Mainland Chinese government and the ethnic and political minorities are engaging in discourse on the internet is important because it shapes the lives of the people in China and the economy abroad. An example of this is in Hong Kong where it was shown by Lau et. al. that the use of Social Media to resist the government was having a significant effect on the mental health of Hong Kong protesters (Lau et. al., 2016).

Documentary Methods and Discourse Analysis:

How is the use of social media affecting the conflict between the government and minority groups in Modern China? Which side is more effective and what strategies have they employed? To properly analyze the usage of social media in Modern China, two primary methods appear the most promising for conducting research. The most important method is

discourse analysis because this method provides the most accurate reference for how both the government and minority groups are currently representing and championing their causes online. The tools of online discourse provide an archive for research into this topic due to the frequent usage of sites like Weibo, WeChat, and LIHKG by members of the Hong Kong protest movements (Chan, 2018). Similarly, members of the Uyghur minority group who have left China have used the internet and other social media tools to garner support for their cause outside of the reach of the Chinese government (Culpepper, 2012). Government censorship, a burgeoning culture of social media usage, and disaffected diaspora movements of highly motivated minority groups has made discourse analysis an effective way to study social discourse on the internet.

The second method is documentary research through which scholarship on the relationship between the Chinese government, its people, and technology is utilized. Another benefit of analyzing scholarship is that social media technologies have rapidly developed within the past decade which makes scholarship on the effect of social media technologies contemporary to the writing of the articles themselves particularly interesting because it reflects both those social media technologies and the presence of current events in China. The analysis of scholarship also provides insight that would potentially be unavailable without the insight of scholars. Due to the inherent privacy of the Chinese Communist Party governance, scholarship regarding the government's actions in relation to technology is much easier to access than the primary documents and communiques of Chinese Communist Party members (Lam, 2018). Researchers also have greater physical access to individuals in China which allows for interview methods and better studies of the actual effect of social media on the mental health of individuals (Lau et. al., 2016). These two research methodologies will provide the best understanding of the relationship between China, the people who live there, and the technology that they use.

Minority Groups and Social Media:

Along with the growth of social media has come the ability for citizens to express their opinions with the click of a button. Social media sites like Weibo and Youku have grown to be massively popular in Chinese culture with millions of daily users (Chan, 2018). However, in the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) dominates speech on the internet through advanced censorship and surveillance techniques in what has become known as "the Great Firewall" (Lam, 2018). The current General Secretary of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping, has pushed the government in the direction of increasing this censorship even more as a means to control protest and criticism of the actions of the Party. Xi Jinping's strategy, as noted in several speeches, is to make the party more influential online by censoring content that is negative and by publishing "positive propaganda" (Caixin Media, 2016). Scholars also believe that the "positive propaganda" of the CPC is just one part of a strategy for nationalistic social media usage with further support for the government being provided from Han Chinese citizens in what has been termed "bottom-up nationalism" (Chen, 2019). The Chinese government is working to make political dissidence in China far more difficult than in any other country on earth.

The Government of China has actively sought to inhibit what it considers separatist political movements in the regions of Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. In the southeastern city of Hong Kong, multiple political protest movements have occurred over the past decade like the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in which social media was a significant factor (Loh, 2017). Social Media in Hong Kong has proven difficult for the People's Republic of China to control due to the fact that Hong Kong resides outside of the control of government censorship and "The Great Firewall". The minority ethnic Uyghur population have led numerous protests against the

secularization and nationalization of the Xinjiang region in the Tarim Basin of Northwest China (Lam, 2018). Similarly, the people of Tibet have fought to retain their national identity in recent years through the use of social media (Grant, 2017). Leadership and members of these three groups have developed new tactics and strategies to counteract the strategies of the Communist Party. The political and ethnic conflicts that have permeated different parts of Chinese society have been amplified with the individualized access to social media which is capable of spreading virally. These interactions have developed into a tense back and forth in which protestors find new ways to subvert censorship and the government finds more effective ways to crack down on protest online (Qin et. al., 2017).

Co-production:

Within the field of Science, Technology, and Society, the rise of internet technologies has proven to be incredibly influential in the way that people conduct their daily lives (Burton, 2010). Social media technologies have both influenced and been influenced by the government and those that live in China. Social media has been shown to affect the mental health of citizens but also be heavily influenced by the same citizens (Lau et. al., 2016; Clothey & Koku, 2017). The best framework for understanding this phenomenon of development and influence between society and technology is certainly Co-production. Science, Technology, and Society researchers consider Co-production to be the process of rapid reconfiguration and interaction by which society and the technology that we use influence each other and develop uniquely (Jasanoff, 2010). This is a great tool for analyzing social media in China for several reasons. Social media as a technology is quickly changing with the rise of new internet platforms and with which people can share content. Jasanoff notes that co-production ascribes, “the production of order in

nature and society ... does not ... give primacy to either” (Jasanoff, 2010). Social media and the government both produce order alongside society itself within China. Neither technology or society in China holds “primacy” as both are changing alongside each other to produce a novel future. In addition to the interactional component of co-production, it is worth noting that the co-production applies to this research because of the parity that social media and the government hold. The continual development of protest on social media and the censor’s efforts to counteract these developments is in which the government views, “Technology in these terms is a “solution” to public order....” (Jasanoff, 2010). This political aspect of co-production ties well into the CPC’s efforts to control free speech in China.

Several researchers within the field of STS like Hackett et. all have raised concerns that co-production be used to model phenomenon outside of co-production’s relevancy (Hackett et. al., 2008). However, this critique was largely in light of the potential usage of co-production to model slower physical sciences and their interactions with society. This criticism is important to note but there are several reasons why it shouldn't apply to this research. Social media and protest movements in China interact on a daily basis and can change policy with the click of a button. Similarly, the CPC’s interaction with social media and “top-down” nationalism are an example of where co-production applies well because an action is viewed on social media and direct policy action can be taken without undertaking what many in the West would consider liberal democratic forms of checks and balances. For these reasons, co-production provides the most effective tool for analysis of the research problem posed.

Results and Discussion:

In Mainland China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) and groups protesting the government have been using a range of co-productive strategies to achieve their policy goals. Protest groups in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong have used microblogging, expressions of

culture, and diaspora contacts to express their grievances towards the government and acquire international attention. The CPC has employed tactics focused on countering protester strategies through censorship and surveillance while also spreading nationalistic messages in Social Media. These strategies follow coproductive tendencies because they act and react towards actions taken by the opposing social entity and changes made to the Social Media platforms themselves. Government strategies have been more effective in areas within the control of the “Great Firewall” and whereas protestors have been much more successful at garnering international support (Lam, 2018).

In the People’s Republic of China, microblogging is one of the most significant platforms for dissent. Chinese microblogging became so rapidly influential on society that members of the Chinese Media deemed 2010 “Year of the Microblog” (Lam, 2018). However, as soon as microblogging technology was developed, technologists working for the CPC developed technology that would allow them to censor content in real time (Lam, 2018). This technology is a co-productive technology because as the CPC recognizes what it sees as threats to the party line on social media, it is able to counteract those threats. Thus, the CPC is attempting to control Chinese society by developing new terms to censor as technology develops and new terms are used on the Chinese internet.

However, protestors in mainland China have found success in using microblogging platforms to criticize the government. For example, the Chinese website Weibo.com was used as a platform to criticize the government after the crash of two trains in 2011 that killed over 40 people (Hassid, 2012). The government agreed to look into the crash but, citizens were disappointed by the weak response and further criticism mounted (Hassid, 2012). The use of microblogging technology by Chinese protestors is an instance of co-production by which

Chinese citizens criticized the government and the government reacted based upon the information from citizens on Weibo. This response led to further outcry by citizens on the technological platform changing the discussion being held on the technology itself.

Along with microblogging, protest groups have actively used social media and the traditional internet to express their culture in defiance of the CPC. Uyghurs in the Tarim Basin of China expressed their will to preserve their culture, and language with posts like, “Mother tongue will not disappear!” and “Let Us Support Our Local Uyghur Brands!” (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Similarly, Tibetan cultural activists protesting what they see as the Chinese colonization in Tibet, are using Social Media sites to both communicate with Tibetans living outside of Mainland China and post photos of themselves in traditional clothing on sites like Weibo.com (Yangzom, 2017). The tactic of participating and encouraging local culture, religion, and language on Social Media allows ethnic minorities like Uyghurs and Tibetans ensure that their culture is not erased by placing it on a platform with global accessibility.

Yet, the government has counteracted this movement in the past by turning off the internet in Xinjiang where Uyghurs live after the ethnic Urumqi Riots of 2009 (Clothey & Koku, 2017). This action was deemed necessary by the government with one of the fears alleged by the CPC as “leaking state secrets” (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Social Media technologies have enabled prompt protest by ethnic groups and censorship by the CPC results in a different technological environment than they began with the development of new technologies like VPN’s to avoid censors (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Many VPN’s were then removed in 2015 by the CPC led by Xi Jinping (Lam, 2018). This action and reaction between the Government, the citizens of China, and Technology, is altering Chinese society by encouraging the development of new technologies and techniques to deal with the effects of technology.

One other major technique used by protest groups to fight the CPC is by having members of ethnic diasporas or individuals of the Hong Kong protest promote their causes on Social Media sites outside of Mainland China. Protestors are able to damage the international image of China by using Social Media websites that they are unable to censor. Ethnic Uyghurs are using the internet and Social Media platforms outside of China to garner support from governments and NGOs, communicate with other diaspora members, and represent their culture and history (NurMuhammad et. al, 2016). These actions are so successful because international Social Media technology used by dissenters is forcing the CPC to respond. Researchers analyzing the ability of Uyghurs to compete with Chinese state media online found that by attempting to suppress the Uyghur presence online after the Urumqi riots, the Chinese state media had actually brought more visibility to the Uyghur cause and weakened their own agenda (Culpepper, 2012). The inability of the CPC to adequately counter the diaspora movement online without bringing further attention to the dissenters is a significant failure on the part of the government to project “soft-power”.

To counteract protest movements online, the CPC and associated state media outlets have promoted Nationalism and Unity to juxtapose themselves against “subversive” groups. This action by the CPC is an example of “Top-down” Nationalism, a concept supported by political scientists like Andersen and Schneider in Nationalism is formulated by the government itself and disseminated by the media. (Chen et al., 2019). “Top-down” Nationalism offers a promising alternative for the CPC compared to more traditional forms of Social Media control like surveillance and censorship. In different regions of China under crisis, local leaders have turned to Social Media as a way to show their support for the CPC and the party line (Qin et al., 2017). Social Media services have provided a way for the leadership of Mainland China to react to

protest movements, affirm the stability of the government, and to spread news about the protests in the provinces in a point of view that aligns with party rhetoric and theory.

Similarly, the PRC also advocates for “Bottom-up” logic when producing nationalistic rhetoric to counter dissent and protestors on Social Media. “Bottom-up” logic is to say that Nationalism and Unity comes from the people and that support for the PRC is constructed at least in part by its citizens (Chen et al., 2019). An analysis in 2012 of the Social Media platform Weibo noted that there were roughly 50,000 official government Social Media accounts on the platform but as many as 600,000 unofficial or PRC-affiliated accounts (Qin et al., 2017). The percentage share of government or government-affiliated Weibo accounts per region was shown to be strongly correlated with severity of newspaper biases and number of posts deleted per region (Qin et al., 2017). Regions where ethnic protest was common had some of the highest numbers of deleted posts and the highest shares of government accounts (Qin et al., 2017). This correlation is an example of the government recognizing the turbulence in society, and encouraging Social Media activism from the “bottom-up” based upon their observation of Social Media.

Censorship and surveillance have become the dominant forms of control that the CPC uses to combat protesters on Social Media in recent years in Xi Jinping’s efforts to make China a “strong internet power” (Kent et. al., 2018). The Xi government has changed the way that the CPC controls social media presence by recognizing the power of Weibo as a tool of dissent in the ethnic clashes of the early 21st century and pushing for stronger methods of surveillance. However, this push for stronger surveillance on the platform of Weibo in the early 2010’s has in part resulted in the rise of a new platform, WeChat. Scholars such as Kent et. al., have noted that “the expansion of official accounts has weakened the diversity and attractiveness of information

on Weibo” (Kent et. al., 2018). Although other factors like increasing use of personal messaging applications and mobile app usage have encouraged the rise of WeChat, so have the political shifts that have pushed people away from WeChat (Kent et. al., 2018). The political shifts that have pushed people away from Weibo are a co-productive action in which Weibo usage changed the CPC’s stance on technology usage which in turn pushed citizens to seek a more “attractive” platform Social Media application in the form of WeChat within the span of a decade.

Groups protesting the CPC have been successful in using Social Media as a tool to criticize the current government of China because these groups are able to act and react rapidly to actions taken by the CPC on the ground and online. A study published in 2016 showed that in Hong Kong, Social Media usage was directly correlated with participation in offline civic participation and activism among youth (Chen et. al., 2016). This study noted that this was likely due to the power of the democratic Umbrella movement taking place in Hong Kong and that no correlation was seen among those in the rest of Mainland China (Chen et. al., 2016). Social media is at the very least correlated with activism in this case and arguably the cause for this spike in activism. Pang Laikwan, professor of Cultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, published an article discussing Social Media and the Umbrella Revolution and noted that, “There is no such thing as a disinterested spectator in the age of social media, but the netizens watch one another and influence one another.” (Pang, 2017). Online Forums, Messaging services like WeChat, and microblogging platforms like Weibo have all become ways in which individuals can witness the suffering of others and project their views to an international audience at lightning speed. This technological revolution has led to a society in which protestors and the government are able constantly influencing the technology they are using while the technology influences their own actions.

Initially the CPC had difficulty controlling Social Media, but with Xi Jinping's government, areas under more strict physical control of the Chinese government like Xinjiang have also experienced stricter controls on Social Media. After years of suppression by the CPC, many Uyghurs have begun to use Social Media as a way to express their loyalty to the government and Han culture through music (Anderson & Byler, 2019). This support for the CPC may be in part due to the state of surveillance that Uyghurs live in everyday where smartphones are taken for processing at police checkpoints and their lives are constantly being recorded by CCTV cameras (Dooley, 2019). The physical presence of the CPC in much of mainland China provides some of the reasons that their Social Media strategies can remain effective.

However, much of the CPC's success in Xinjiang and China at suppressing the local population on Social Media may also come from the Leadership of Xi Jinping. After coming to power, Xi and the General Office of the CPC published "Central Document 9" which prescribed that all forms of media must follow "correct guidance" (Lam, 2018). This "correct guidance" has resulted in fewer politically critical headline news stories and viral social media posts gaining popularity in Mainland China following the Wenzhou Rail Incident of 2011 (Lam, 2018). Xi Jinping's focus on cyber technologies compared to his predecessor has created a faster reaction to dissent on Social Media and a greater network of techniques and technologies to surveil and censor Social Media.

This paper was significantly limited in that the length of research was limited and the development of the researched medium is so rapid. Just as co-production suggests, Social Media and society rapidly develop and influence each other (Jasanoff, 2010). Analyzing the effects of these intense changes are and predicting the effect of tactics on Social Media used by the CPC and protesters is difficult because of their intensity. Along with the difficulty of keeping up with

developments, the length of the research period intended for the doctoring of this paper was shorter than the topic at hand likely warrants. Documentary Research Methods and an analysis of CPC policy could have been supplemented with further discourse analysis to strengthen the resource paper but time served as an extremely limited resource.

This research should be viewed as a top-down view of the current relationship in Mainland China between the CPC, Protest Groups, and Social Media that acts as a communication bridge between them. Future research would benefit from using this research as a guide for a more in-depth analysis of aspects of this coproductive environment like about Uyghurs and Social Media as an Internet of Things. WeChat is now voluntarily integrated with your government identification, other social media apps like Weibo, and the user's bank account. This concentration of data combined with the CPC's ability to legally access this data has resulted in marginalized groups like Uyghurs detention at checkpoints in Xinjiang based upon information found concentrated on their phones (Dooley, 2019). Research on this particular aspect of Social Media and government control would benefit from the analysis provided in this paper. This research has the breadth to provide a basis for further analysis of Social Media in China but lacks much long-term sociological or political research that would be constructive to the field.

Conclusion

The CPC and protest groups in 21st century China have many strategies for attacking and defending their respective portrayals on Social Media with differing levels of effectiveness. Uyghur, Tibetans, and Hong Kongers have been highly successful at garnering international attention, expressing their culture, and using microblogging platforms to outpace government censorship. The CPC has been successful at projecting nationalist sentiments in Mainland China

and maintaining their state of surveillance and censorship to prevent physical uprising. These tactics have been successful at reaching the agenda set by these groups but the importance of these effects is difficult to analyze without the insight of the future. Will international attention result in a change to the way that the CPC views Uyghur people? Will Xi Jinping's focus on "correct guidance" and nationalism result in Chinese citizens not identifying with the plight of the protest groups? Chinese protestors, the CPC, and Social Media outlets are acting co-productively such that the final result of these interactions will likely be unique to any potential prediction and in the meantime, researchers must watch for what will occur in this rapidly advancing interaction of technology and society.

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