

Chapter 70

A Comparative View of Censored and Uncensored Political Discussion: The Case of Chinese Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Through a content analysis on Chinese online dissidents' social media discourses, this study examines the impact of Internet censorship on Chinese dissidents' political discourse in two social media platforms: Weibo and Twitter. Data was collected during a time period when China's Internet censorship was tightened. Results revealed that Chinese online dissidents are more likely to post critical opinions and direct criticism towards the Chinese government on Twitter. In addition, dissidents on Twitter are more likely to engage in discussing with others, while Weibo dissidents tend to adopt linguistic skills more often to bypass censorship. No difference was found in terms of dissidents' civility and rationality across the two platforms. Implications and future research are discussed in detail.

INTRODUCTION

Since the “Arab spring” of 2011, the past years have seen a considerable amount of studies emerged in the social science literature examining how social media empowers citizens and social-political movements in both democratic and emerging democratic country states. While the academia cheers for the power of social media in engaging the general public and mobilizing citizens in various movements, a point that is often neglected by scholars is that the effectiveness of social media in facilitating online public involvement is limited under the Internet censorship at certain country states. One such example is China.

With over 632 million active Internet users (CNNIC, 2014), China has the world's largest population connected to the World Wide Web. Although the popularity of Internet and social media dramatically changed Chinese people's lives, the Chinese government has been criticized for censoring the Internet

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and infringing people's free of speech. Among other censorship mechanisms, "the Great Firewall" (Zhang, 2006) receives the most attention. Essentially, the Great Firewall (GFW) is a digital gate that limits Chinese users' access of many Western-based websites (e.g., nytimes.com) and online services (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube).

Despite the long-run issue of Internet censorship, many Chinese Internet users nowadays actively bypass the GFW and go on some of the world's mainstream social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) to share their political views. Their discourses on those platforms, potentially, benefits the information exchange among citizens across the world. Against this background, this chapter seeks to understand: under the pressure of Internet censorship, how do Chinese Internet users use domestic social media platforms (which is regulated) and International platforms (which is relatively free of censorship). A special focus of this chapter is to see how Chinese users', especially dissidents' political discourses vary across two major social media platforms (Weibo and Twitter). Such an inquiry will not only add valuable empirical evidence into the ongoing research on social media use and political involvement, but also contributes to the general understanding how communication policy (Internet censorship) affects citizens' media communication behavior at different online platforms (Weibo, Twitter, Facebook etc.).

To achieve these goals, this Chapter presents a comparative content analysis of Chinese online dissents' political discourse on both Weibo and Twitter. Specifically, we first synthesized previous studies that concerned Internet censorship in China. After establishing the milieu in which Weibo arose, we went through relevant literature regarding Chinese users' social media usage. Finally, a content analysis was detailed based on the concept of networked public sphere and the literature on online group identity.

INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN CHINA

In order to establish the milieu in which Weibo arose, it is important to understand the Internet environment in China. Since the introduction of the Internet in 1987, China has generated the largest number of "netizens" (Internet citizen, Zhou & Moy, 2007) in the world. While serving for both economic and educational purposes by the Chinese government, the Internet is also widely used by the general public in mainland China. One of the unique characteristics of Chinese netizens, as Huang (2012) suggested, is that they tend to be more active online than offline. In a comparative survey study, Watt (2008) found that Chinese Internet users feel three times as free in the online world and are twice as likely to report an addiction to the Internet as American users. Another survey (CNNIC, 2008) indicated that 81.5% of Chinese netizens read online news and consider the Internet their primary news source. The number was 75% in the U.S (Pew, 2010).

Therefore, the online world is considered an important community that has been built by Chinese netizens where people can interact with each other more freely than in the off-line world, especially in terms of sharing information and opinions (Huang, 2012).

Despite the optimistic attitude towards Internet, Sinnreich and his colleagues (2011) stressed the vulnerability of the Internet:

Although the Internet is largely decentralized in its communication and social patterns, its technical and regulatory apparatuses are highly centralized and hierarchical. Consequently, digital communications

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