

Chapter 46

Social Media and Public Sphere in China: A Case Study of Political Discussion on Weibo After the Wenzhou High-Speed Rail Derailment Accident

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to answer the question of whether a microblog can function as a promising form of public sphere. Utilizing a combined framework of public sphere based on the theories of Mouffe and Dahlgren, it examines the political discussion and interrogation on Sina Weibo, China's leading microblog site, concerning the Wenzhou high-speed train derailment accident in July of 2011 through a critical discourse analysis. Its results suggest that Weibo enables the creation of new social imaginary and genre of discourse as well as the construction of new social identities.

INTRODUCTION

Two high-speed trains clashed and derailed near Wenzhou, China on July 23, 2011, killing 39 and injuring hundreds of passengers. Up to then, the high-speed railway project had been celebrated as the symbol of China's economic success. Not surprisingly, mainstream media were ordered by government to limit their coverage of this incident (Xu, 2016). However, only this time, the tightly controlled traditional media were unable to keep the Chinese public in the dark. Minutes after the accident, messages started to be posted on Weibo, China's microblog sites and immediately drew great public attention. The public started

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3706-3.ch046

to ask further questions when a little girl was rescued from a wrecked train hours after the government announced that they had ended the search and rescue effort because no more survivors could be found. Later, they became outraged when a video was posted to Weibo, showing the Ministry of Railway used bulldozers to bury the wrecked trains only 38 hours after the accident before any in-depth investigation had been conducted. This widely circulated video triggered unprecedented nationwide discussion and political interrogation concerning government accountability. In informing the public and provoking political discussion, Weibo made a notable case for inquiring the potential of social media in creating a public sphere.

The theme of media and public sphere has occupied a critically important place on the research agenda of communication scholars for decades, and the field has witnessed continuing debates on the ambivalent roles played by the media in public life. More recently, Internet-based social media are believed to have the potential to give voices to disadvantaged groups and direct public's attention toward social issues that would otherwise be ignored. Thus it is important to examine whether social media will contribute to a more democratic political sphere, and with what risks and limitations, or they will be more inclined to conform to the existing media environment characterized by government control and surveillance (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

The rise of social media has been considered especially important in the context of China. While Chinese mainstream media such as TV and newspapers are tightly controlled and tend to function as the mouth-piece of the Chinese Communist Party, social media are less censored due to the technical difficulties in controlling tens of millions of users as well as an astronomical amount of information. Therefore, social media represent a new opportunity for more freedom of speech and open discussions about social issues (Yang, 2009). One prominent type of social media in China is Weibo or microblogs. Having the features of both Twitter and Facebook, Weibo is one of the two most used social media applications in China. Evidence shows that Weibo is subject to the least amount of governmental or corporate control among all types of social media (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012), and is becoming an important instrument in revealing social injustices and promoting discussions on social issues (Harp, Bachmann, & Guo 2012). Despite its potential, the actual role played by Weibo is yet to be examined.

Presented here is a case study of the discussion about the Wenzhou derailment accident on Weibo through a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). Utilizing a combined framework of public sphere based on Mouffe (1995)'s theory of agonistic public sphere and Dahlgren (2005)'s theorization about Internet as public sphere, it examines how China's microblogs lead the political deliberation and interrogation related to the derailment scandal, and how political uses of microblogs constitute China's public sphere. What makes this study different from previous studies is its conceptual framework of public sphere adapted to the changing social reality and new media landscape in China. It offers a civic and cultural approach to public sphere and bridges the gap between observable evidences and their theoretical corroboration. Broadly, the analysis will further elucidate the concept of public sphere and its applicability to different ideological and social contexts.

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