

Renegotiating the Public Sphere

Microblogging in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

The popular rise of Chinese microblogging tools has proposed new challenges and opportunities for both Chinese authorities and Chinese Netizens. This project explores how microblogging tools, exemplified by Sina Weibo, positions itself within the greater Chinese online sphere, and what limitations and possibilities can be identified within the content diffused across such a network.

By applying a theoretical framework of the public sphere, Sina Weibo is argued to be a space that favors interaction across social and geographical boundaries within an easy to use infrastructure. Due to high-speed and a saturated format of posts of text, image and video, microblogs have a potential to spread information in small but meaningful packages.

A content analysis of 281 posts regarding the Wenzhou train crash, and five leaked media directives regarding the same incident, identified microblogs to have an important yet limited agenda-setting function; important as it offers a meaningful alternative to traditional media outlets who remain more deeply subdued by content regulating directives, but limited in lack of significant offline consequences being observed, as well as overall issues of trustworthiness affecting the quality of content.

As part of the same controlled and censored sphere as other off- and online media, Chinese microblogging applications are unsurprisingly discovered to have a clear limitation in overt censorship like blocking and removal of content. Nevertheless are microblogs also identified to offer high levels of flexibility within its controlled frames, where diverse and balanced expression on a variety of topics.

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On July 23 2011 two trains crashed near the city of Wenzhou in the Zhejiang province of China. The stories of those who passed and those who struggled to survive are found within these pages. Behind numbers and descriptions, I hope you will sense the grieving heart and deepest condolences offered to those who left and those left behind, sent with deep respect from a humble student far, far away.

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1 Introduction

The popular rise of Chinese microblogging tools has proposed new challenges and opportunities for both Chinese authorities and Chinese Netizens (online citizens). After riots in the western province of Xingjiang in 2009, the Chinese government blocked Chinese Netizens from accessing Facebook, and continued with blocking another popular social media application, the microblogging platform Twitter (Wauters 2009; Canaves and Chao 2009). Ever since blocking access to two of the most used social media tools worldwide, China has met domestic social networking demands by developing social internet applications that cater to the social media needs of the 500 million Chinese Netizens (CNNIC 2012). These applications, often starting out as clones of their international counterparts, have developed special characteristics on their own merit, and have gained a prominent position on the Chinese online agenda in recent years. With both online technology and online content tightly controlled by the Chinese authorities, the infrastructure of Chinese social media applications, and Netizens use of these applications, proposes interesting and delicate challenges of negotiating expression within the restricted environment for expression in China.

Questions of what implications the rising popularity of social media might have in China was amongst others asked in form of the tellingly titled headline '*Can Social Media push change in China?*' by online editor for the Hong Kong University media research program, *China Media Project*, David Bandurski (2011), in October 2011. Overall, this research program offers great insight to a media sphere that at times comes across as both complex and overwhelming, and this particular question strikes an extra interesting note, because it highlights a theme that has grown in importance and complexity over the last couple of years; might increasingly popular Social Media tools be used for more than sharing the latest picture of your cute cat, keeping track of ex-boyfriends, and sharing funny videos, and actually help push social change in vastly different societies all over the world?

According to Bandurski the development and popularity of Chinese social media platforms have "[...] tempted some to a cowboy-Western reading of the landscape, in which they imagine social media socking it to those in power" (Bandurski 2011). However, the Chinese institutions are also adjusting to these new times of information sharing, with the authorities encouraging online dialogue and officials venturing into the various platforms of social media

(see Bandurski: 2011, Yan, Zhang and Liang: 2011, Offbeat China: 2012). In 2011 many of the top Chinese news stories were indeed defined in part by online social media (Bandurski 2011a), but a trend for public demand of greater openness in so-called *sudden-breaking incidents* (突发事件) can however be traced back to social media-free times like the SARS-epidemic in 2003, indicating that social media is just one of the factors in an already very complex and multifaceted Chinese media sphere. In a media policy statement given at a visit to the newspaper People's Daily in 2008 by Hu Jintao, the Chinese president himself stated a need for more rapid reporting in regards to sudden-breaking incidents (Ibid)¹. However, Hu Jintao also put great emphasis on 'correctly channeling public opinion' (正确引导社会舆论), a nuanced version of the former 'correct guidance of public opinion (正确舆论导向)', that like its predecessor indicated a level of control, while emphasizing that the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) should make targeted efforts in their use of both old and new media channels to influence Chinese citizens (Ibid).

As a frontline of negotiating power between offline and online media in China, the new media holds a strong point in challenging the traditional propaganda apparatus by being able to move fast enough to handle the high levels of speed of information diffusion. Traditional media outlets move slower, and are also subjected to a wide array of content regulating directives issued by the government. Online media are also subjected to such directives, but from the time a content regulating directive has been issued and spread to the relevant media outlets for implementation, a substantial information base could already have been built by Netizens.

Being such a fast moving medium that facilitates rapid information diffusion in sudden breaking incidents, Chinese microblogging applications holds a particularly interesting position in the intersection between censorship and public discourse. Adding to mere speed, microblogging platforms offers an additional power for negotiating expression is due to infrastructures that favors *hybrids of media expressions*. This 'hybridity' is expressed in a

¹ For in-depth English commentary on Hu Jintao's media policy, see Bandurski. (2008). 'Propaganda leaders scurry off to carry out the "spirit" of Hu Jintao's "important" media speech', China Media Project. Available at <http://cmp.hku.hk/2008/06/25/1079/>, (Last accessed 29.11.12) or see the Chinese version of the speech, "在人民日报社考察工作时的讲话 [Speech While Inspecting the Work of the People's Daily]" available at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/7408514.html> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

mixture of text, images and video that is facilitated by the technical infrastructure of the application, but with meaning of content being dependent of Netizen-contribution. These mixtures of media expressions are rich in format, easy to distribute, and at times they might even be found to float by unnoticed, intentional or not, on the censorship-radar that characterizes the Chinese online sphere.

Despite a general interest in the use and effects of social media platforms in China, microblogging platforms has yet to be thoroughly examined in academia. Studies exploring content control (Bamman, O'Connerand Smith 2012) and temporal aspects of trends and trend-setters on Chinese microblogging applications (Yu, Asur and Huberman 2012) have produced valuable insight, discovering that content deletion rates are higher in outlying provinces like Tibet compared to Beijing (Bamman, O'Connerand Smith 2012), and that as much as 49% of posts shared by microblogging applications might actually be spam (Yu, Asur and Huberman 2012). But what are the overall characteristics of Chinese microblogging applications? How do they function and why do they seem to be so valuable for Chinese Netizens? Inspired by influential works by scholars such as Yang (2003; 2007; 2009), Zhao (1998) and Lagerkvist (2006; 2010), who all offer valuable contributions to the overall discussion of online reality in China, this thesis takes a closer look at one specific area of Chinese social media, the use of microblogs, but in a more overall approach to the phenomenon in order to secure a basic understanding of the fundamental functions of microblogs in China. By exploring Sina Weibo, one of the most popular microblogging applications developed in China, this study explores the position of microblogs in the greater context of online China, and aims at identifying main limitations and opportunities of microblogging applications within a theoretical framework of the public sphere.

A case study approach is applied to examine the layers of Sina Weibo; first the infrastructure of Sina Weibo is explored in an observational manner in an effort to explain how information is diffused by microblogs in China; secondly a qualitative content analysis of posts from Sina Weibo seeks to identify some of the opportunities and limitations microblogs reflect in diffusion of information within a government-controlled media sphere.

The analyzed microblogging posts from Sina Weibo all relate to the same incident. On the evening of July 23 2011 two trains crashed close to the city of Wenzhou in the eastern

province of Zhejiang. With 40 fatalities and at least 192 injured, the tragic event gained widespread attention both on- and offline in China. State planning for high-speed railway in China started during the 1980s, developing so rapidly that China by 2011 had expanded high-speed rails across the world's most extensive network, covering 8,358 km (Xinhua 2012a). That being said, the Chinese high-speed railway enterprise has also been controversial, with former Railway minister Li Jizhun being accused of embezzling close to 750 million RMB (121 million USD) during his eight years of administration of the railway ministry (Fischer 2012). With train-travel being the preferred, and at times only economical available, choice for hundreds of millions of Chinese, the project and its controversy are major issues of public interest. The first reports of the Wenzhou train crash originated from within one of the train sets, when a passenger pleaded for help using her Sina Weibo profile. During the following hours and days after the crash the microblogging platform flooded with information and discussions on the crash, running seemingly unhindered in online channels. Diffusion of content-regulating directives regarding the accident seemed to be surprisingly slow as one might suspect the authorities to judge the crash a rather sensitive incident in regards to the controversies at hand. Directives concerning the crash did however also finally surface, some of which was later also leaked online.

1.1 The social Internet

In a somewhat romantic view of communication history, social media has been around since the first cave wall carvings. Eric Harr, blogging for *Social Media Today*, characterized the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc cave paintings, dating back to 30.000 BC, as “Twitter on a sandy wall” (Harr 2011). When using this analogy, any form of non-verbal communication accessible to others over time could fit into the social media category. Following this basic characterization, innovations throughout media history like the invention of book printing, the telegraph, radio and TV would also be regarded as forceful pioneers of developing social media; these mass-communications channels all broke down boundaries of geography, economy and class as they gradually gained prominence in our everyday lives, making communication easier. But all these mass-communication channels, none has held a greater social promise than the Internet, knowing its potential for two-way communication. . With its democratic bone structure and in principle being open for all, the Internet is a free and in theory a vessel for unhindered flow of information. With any piece of information accessible

at your fingertips, the Internet could very well be used to learn how to build a bomb, or to engage forums filled with hate speech, adding emphasis to arguments that some kind control mechanisms should be integrated to the Net as well. One can argue that most information is in some sense or another regulated; be it within the frames of a church community, sovereign governments, professional media houses, the note pad of a journalist, or the topics chosen around the dinner table, or in conversation with an acquaintance you happened to meet on the street. As laws, regulations and information controlling mechanisms caught up with the Internet, moderators have been introduced to control online forums, and we've seen large-scale suits regarding issues such as online file sharing. Questions of privacy and right to access of information has also been raised, as courts have had to take a stand in how to handle information handed over by Internet service providers, and how to handle online diffusion of classified information in the name of freedom of speech (MacKinnon 2012).

Despite the presence of regulatory tendencies, the perhaps most fascinating aspect of the Internet is its ability to diffuse information to millions of potential receivers all over the world in just seconds. Furthermore, the Internet greatly facilitates individual statements, with a low threshold – all one needs is a computer device with Internet access - for personal expression. Information of various sorts has for thousands of years been spread and developed through new communications channels to readers, listeners and viewers in large sums, but has in general been produced by professionals, working in publishing, newspapers, radio and television. The age of Internet, on the other hand, adds the possibility for users to generate their own content and spread their message using whatever online tool they themselves find most appropriate and effective, on a large scale.

1.2 Defining social media

The terms “User Generated Content”, “Web 2.0” and “Social Media” are often used interchangeably to describe online tools that encourage users to connect with each other in different ways, and to actively produce different types of content, by use of written text, images, pictures, videos and so forth that is accessible to others online. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) call for the need to take a step back and revise what Social Media really is, and maybe even more importantly, what it is not.

Parts of the reason why these terms are used interchangeably are the non-linear history of the origin of the terms. The concept of ‘Web 2.0’ was introduced as a way of describing new uses of the World Wide Web, for both software developers and end-users alike, where applications and content no longer solely was created by individuals, but instead continuously modified by all users in a collaborative manner (Ibid: 61). This technological and ideological foundation is what ‘User Generated Content’ (UGC) continues to build upon. The term is usually applied to describe the various forms of content that are publicly available and created by end-users (Ibid), the Netizens. To be classified as UGC, the content should be published on a publicly accessible website or social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; show a creative effort (reposting a link to a newspaper article online is not UGC); and be produced outside of professional routines and practices (Ibid). Upon these fundamental concepts, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) understand Social Media as “[...] a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61).

1.3 Focus of study and research questions

As part of one of the most controlled and heavily restricted online spaces in the world (Deibert et. al 2008: 268; Deibert et. al 2010: 473)), China has seen an interesting development holding a number of unique characteristics. Without access to world-wide popular social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, domestically developed social media applications have attracted millions of Chinese Netizens to their alternative take on these social media classics. The phenomenon of microblogging in China has a short history, and the implications of popular use of such applications are yet to be discovered. Nevertheless, a study isolating focus on such applications should be useful to better understand contemporary China.

1.3.1 Rationale of thesis

According to Tai (2006) “We need to look at how the Internet has affected the life of ordinary Chinese citizens to understand the cyber revolution that is taking place in China (Tai 2006: 287)”. By venturing out on a quest into the myriads of expressions in the Chinese microblogging sphere, is what this thesis aims to do. The data material used to highlight the questions proposed for this study are accessible from within online China. By basing the

following analysis on data that is widely available both within the limits of the censored Chinese online sphere, and also outside, I hope to emphasize in what way, if in any, the popular rise of a new communal space, Chinese microblogging tools, has affected the greater online sphere in current-day China, and under what conditions participants of such spaces generate content.

1.3.2 Research questions

First of all this thesis seeks to explore how a Chinese microblogging application like Sina Weibo separates itself or compliments other aspects of online China, asking:

1) How do Chinese microblogging applications position themselves within the greater online space of China?

Secondly, as microblogging can be regarded as a vessel for personal expression and a tool for communication with others, this project adds to the existing discussion of characteristics (or lack thereof) of a Chinese public sphere, asking:

2) How does a Chinese microblogging application like Sina Weibo relate to the concept of the public sphere?

Finally, this study seeks to explore how information is spread online within such a content-regulated environment as online China, by exploring content spread by Chinese Netizens that can be found within the infrastructure of microblogging applications:

3) What are the main limitations and possibilities that can be identified by exploring the facilitated infrastructure of Chinese microblogging applications, and content diffused across this infrastructure?"

1.4 Outline of thesis

This introduction has presented a rough backdrop, as well as the main research questions and rationale of the thesis. Chapter 2 offers a theoretical understanding of the concept of the public sphere, which will form the basis for the following analysis. Chapter 3 focuses on the somewhat unique context of Internet in China; first some basic statistics of Chinese Netizens and Internet use in China are presented, before mechanisms of censorship and control are

explained. Also, some of the unique specifics of Chinese Internet culture like the online ‘army’ Wu Mao Dang, and so-called Human Flesh Searches are introduced, before a brief history of Chinese microblogging is offered. Chapter 4 concerns the methodology of the project, with reflections on case studies as a methodological approach, as well as reflections on archival research, and of observational and content analysis as applied methods. Furthermore the chapter addresses methodological questions of ethics of Internet research and possible pitfalls with translation of data. A pilot study is presented as a framework for the final study, and the research process towards the final analysis is presented- Chapter 5 continues with the final study of Sina Weibo; an exploration of the infrastructure of Sina Weibo discusses basic functions of the application, before the findings of a content analysis of leaked media directives and Weibo posts regarding the Wenzhou train crash is presented. Finally chapter 6 revisits the initial research questions and offers some concluding remarks.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 The public sphere

The International Encyclopedia of Communication defines the public sphere as “[...] an indispensable element of democratic society and the institutional core of democratic decision making” (Marcinkowski 2008). The idea of the ‘public’ is closely linked to democratic ideals that call for citizen participation in public affairs (Papacharissi: 2002, 10). In schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces within society, that permits the circulation of information, ideas, debates - ideally in an unfettered manner - and also the formation of political will, i.e., public opinion (Dahlgren: 2005: 148).

Searching for a basic understanding and point of departure for further arguments with regards to discussion of the public sphere, there really is no scholar more prominent than Jürgen Habermas. With works like *The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere* (1962; 1989), Habermas is often found at the very basis for discussion within the discussion of the public sphere. Belonging to the tradition of Critical Theory, Habermas developed a substantial contribution to the concept of the Public Sphere, defining it first and foremost as “[...] a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Ibid: 102). The main characteristics within the concepts of ‘public opinion’, ‘the public body’ or ‘the public sphere’, initially emerged in early capitalism as a specific sphere between state and society (Hohendahl and Russian 1974: 46). According to Habermas citizens constitute a public body when they are given an opportunity to confer in an unrestricted manner, “[...] that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest” (Habermas: 1989, 102). Access to the public sphere should be guaranteed to all citizens, and the sphere should furthermore function as a mediator between society and state. As the participants of the public sphere reach consensus through critical discussion, their decisions then ideally would be implemented in society by the state. In such a large public body, Habermas highlights the media as tools viewed especially suitable for spreading information, and also for influencing those who receive the information.

Habermas proposes a historically bound and normative understanding of the public sphere, which adds emphasis to historical evolution of media under capitalism, as well as insistences of unconstrained access to information and the role of discussion among citizens as foundation for formation of political opinion (Dahlgren 2005b: 411-12). In so doing, the public sphere has “[...] emerged as a useful analytic perspective [for] both the empirical and the normative sense of the media from a standpoint of democratic ideals” (Dahlgren 2005b: 411). So useful has the concept been, that it has been debated and criticized by scholars across a variety of discipline and research interests (see Calhoun 1997).

Starting with the conceptualization of the public sphere made by Habermas, critics claim it to be somewhat idealized (see Fraser 1990; Papacharissi: 2002); this symbol of democracy has been undemocratically organized throughout history, by excluding groups like women or those of lower social status, as was also acknowledged by Habermas himself. Adding upon this, Fraser (1990) augments for the existence of multiple public spheres, formed by those who are excluded by some spheres and included in others, and where a public realm or government who represents all these different expressions, never truly has existed.

This is a valid point of argument based in an initial understanding of Habermas, keeping in mind also that he proposed the bourgeois model as a normative ideal. As both critics and supporters have noted, Habermas himself did not imply that his was meant to represent the *only* model, indeed there had “always [...] been multiple, competing and sometimes overlapping public spheres in the arenas of public communication ” (Tai 2006: 50), whereby similar structure of communication saw additional subcultures or class specific public spheres being based on their own premises (Tai 2006: 184).

The separation of one all-reaching public sphere into sub-levels are also argued to be a theoretical development of the Habermasian model that would serve to nuance an analysis of a complicated space like the Chinese online environment. Fraser (1990) argues that from virtually the very beginning there was a plurality of competing publics, counter-publics, which “[...] contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (p.61). In this regard, Keane (1995) also offers a valuable distinction within the different types of *spaces* the public sphere might be said to exist of, marked by main dichotomies like ‘private space’ versus ‘public space’. According to Keane, with spatial frameworks of communication changing, the

old dominance of state-structured and territorially bound public life mediated by the traditional media channels are changing too (Ibid: 8). The concept of a public sphere thereby changes as well, and does not necessarily relate exclusively to the state-protected state media; nor are they as Habermas argues per definition tied to the “zone of social life narrowly wedged between the world of power and money (state/economy) and the pre-political group associations of civil society” (Ibid: 16). The implications of these spaces are that in differing degrees the realm of privacy disappears (Ibid: 17), diminishing justifications of any matter as ‘private’ (Ibid). Furthermore the developments in our increasingly globally intertwined world cannot easily be understood from “within the orthodox perspective on the public sphere” (Ibid), a problem that is discussed by introducing three sub-levels of public spheres; the micro-, meso-, and macro-public spheres. Despite being able to function side by side within the same system, the three levels have distinct features. The micro-public sphere reflects bottom-up, small-scale locales (Fiske 1993 cited in Keane 1995: 9), where citizens create their identities as a counterbalance to top-down power set to regulate public life on a local level (Keane 1995: 9). Micro-public spheres like discussion circles, church communities, and publishing houses are spaces where citizens could question and transform “the dominant codes of everyday life” and counter them with alternative experiences of interpersonal relations (Ibid 10). Even though the micro-public spheres appear to be ‘private’ and tucked away from official public life and media publicity, they find their main strength in being able to operate unhindered in the “[...] nooks and crannies of civil society” (Ibid).

The meso-public spheres are “[...] those spaces of controversy about power that encompass millions of people watching, listening, or reading across vast distances” (Ibid: 11). This level of the public sphere is argued to mainly coexist within the nation-state, but might also extend their boundaries to audiences with a shared understanding of the sphere, like a common understanding of language. Large circulation newspapers such as *Le Monde* and radio- and television channel like BBC are examples of media outlets that could be argued to belong to the meso-public spheres, knowing they extend their influence across geographical and cultural borders by those understanding French and English, respectively.

Above the meso-public sphere, there are macro-public spheres of global or regional magnitude, fueled by multi-national companies like Time-Warner and Reuters. But perhaps one of the single most important developments within this level of public spheres is the introduction of the Internet, a network that stimulates the growth of macro-public spheres

(Ibid: 14-15). It represent a politically constructed space that has no immediate connection to physical territory, showing how public life presently is undergoing a significant process of de-territorialization (Ibid 19).

2.2 Private vs. Public

In descriptive use, the term ‘public’ is commonly understood as an opposite of ‘private’, in the sense that no element can be both public and private, or neither private nor public (Bobbio 1989: 9). As one of the great dichotomies, an understanding of differences between public and private has been dealt with in a variety of disciplines, in both social and historical sciences (Ibid: 1). There are however two separate meanings of private and public, the first being private understood as something that is ‘non-public’, exemplified by how the terms are understood within the laws of private property versus public property, or the entity of family as part of a private sphere as opposed to the greater sphere of the public (Ibid: 4).

The second meaning of public refers to use of the term in meaning of ‘open to the public’ or ‘performed in front of spectators’, as opposed to private, being something said or done within a restricted circle of people, or even in secret (Ibid: 17). As Thompson (1994) describes it, “[...] from the mid-sixteenth century on, ‘public’ became increasingly to mean activity or authority that was related to or derived from the state, while ‘private’ referred to this activities or spheres of life that were excluded or separated from it” (p. 38). A state, characterized by “relations of subordination between governors and governed” (Bobbio 1989: 4), represents a relationship of inequality, between holder of power and command and those who have to obey.

However, the theoretical distinctions do not necessarily help to separate the realms of public and private. Public and private are not self-evident and naturally distinct categories in our increasingly globalized world (Sparks 2000: 90). An Olympic sports event is a public event, but watching it on television in your living room at home would relate the same event to an experience within a private domain. The distinction between private and public are of concern for the concept of the public sphere as well, and also for the behavior of Netizens online. While the Internet has become part of our public life, and subjected to laws regulating public behavior, online activities could still be regarded as belonging to our private domain. Social gaming at an Internet café would be an example of an online activity of a public character, but

you are still also within a somewhat private domain as you most likely would sit in front of your computer alone. Posting a message to your Facebook-wall that only your own personal network of friends can see is online activity restricted to a more private realm that you yourself define the boundaries of, while posting the same post for all your millions of potential Weibo-fans to see, relates a very similar activity to a greater public. In online spaces, the distinctions of public and private, very much comes alive, and could also offer challenges on not only an individual level, but also to the greater society.

2.3 The online public sphere

In his reflections of a communication model of deliberate politics, Habermas (2006) highlights the role of self-regulating media system that is independent of its social environment, in a feed-back loop with anonymous audiences who grant feedback between informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society (p. 412-413). Politicians and media professionals are furthermore seen as essential actors of a political public sphere (Ibid: 416), but for the greater part they have been part of a professional arena off-limits to the greater public. Starting with the early eighties, the playing field for self-expression and information dissemination would change greatly, when the Internet finally would emerge as a particularly powerful addition to the mass-media trio of newspapers, radio and television. Along with this new and efficient technological innovation, came the expansion of the role of the public in the social and political arena (Papacharissi 2002: 10). For some, the Internet represents not only new means to promote citizen activism through the mere speed one can gather and spread information online, but also the power to bring people together without restrictions of geography, and economic inequalities (Ibid: 12).

It could be argued like Jones (1997 cited in Papacharissi: 2002: 10) that cyberspace functions more in lines of, a '*new public space*', where people join in on the strong modern impulses toward self-fulfillment and personal development (Jones 1997 cited in Papacharissi 2002: 11). Thereby also meaning that cyberspace as a public space not is synonymous with a public sphere; the virtual *space* enhances discussion, whereas a virtual *sphere* is understood to enhance democracy (Papacharissi 2002: 11). Dahlgren (2005a) notes that the

[...] impact of the Net on politics is low: use of the Net for political purposes is clearly minor compared with other purposes to which it is put. The kinds of interaction taking place can only to a small degree be considered manifestations of the public sphere; democratic

deliberation is completely overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, nonpolitical networking and chat, and so forth” (p.151).

Both Papacharissi and Dahlgren argue for the Internet to be some sort of virtual public sphere, if not in the strictest normative sense proposed by Habermas, and stressing the point of plurality of spheres as opposed to one single sphere. Not all are in agreement with this view, Dean (2003) argues forcefully against the Internet as a public sphere in her tellingly titled article ‘*Why the Net is not a Public Sphere*’. Simply adding an ‘s to categorize the various conversations, sites and applications online is too simple, the Internet is not a space of multiple realities, as there is only one reality, multiple only to the extent that you can choose different approaches to handle this one reality (Ibid:106). Following this line of argumentation, the Internet takes form as a ‘zero institution’, and a particularly powerful one, as she writes: “its basic elements seem a paradoxical combination of singularity and collectivity, collision and convergence. It brings together both the unity and the split, both hope and the antagonism, the imaginary and the Real in one site” (Ibid: 106).

The Internet might however be more apt in meeting demands of the normative models of a public sphere, singular or plural, to a greater extent than the traditional media of press and broadcast. Traditional media, even global actors like CNN and Financial Times, are still rooted within its country of origin, and even though being available on a global scale, these examples nevertheless fundamentally still cater to mainly English speaking elite audiences (Sparks 2000: 79). Press and broadcast mediums on both global and local levels are also restricted by various kinds of censorship, as well as limitations set by concentrations of ownership, market forces and would in many instances also hold a dependence upon revenue (Ibid 78). Genuine access for the larger population to press and broadcast mediums are limited even within the most democratic of countries, further challenging the medias position as representatives of the public sphere (Ibid: 78). The basic foundation of the Internet differs from the traditional media by a design of transparent protocols that in principle are global, and an interactive communication model with reduced entry barriers, which also produces information that is easy to store and diffuse (Ibid: 79-80).

2.4 The off- and online public sphere in China

For communist states, the normative ideal of negotiations between leaders and the public takes on a quite different form than the notions found in the Habermasian model. The Marxist-Leninist position contends an “almost perfect congruence” between leadership policy and mass opinion, making investigations into public opinion redundant (Lagerkvist 2010: 164). Opposition and deviance were to be quelled, so as not to intervene with the official public sphere, as it was portrayed by the state (Ibid). Like early modern Europe, Late Imperial China experienced a greater volume of long-distance trade, developed a more distinctive urban culture in forms of teahouses, and saw an expansion of literacy and circulation of often quite critical literature, followed by an intensification of change in the latter half of the 19th century (Rowe 1990: 314-315). Furthermore China saw city-politics take on a “life and logic on its own as opportunities to engage in political discussion and action expanded” (Strand 1989 cited in Rowe 1990: 323). Rankin (1993) argued that even though the details of Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere hardly could be applied to Chinese society, the embedded negotiations nevertheless had value for understanding the realms and relationship between state and populace in non-democratic China as well:

Such spheres require a state presence, a degree of autonomous or voluntary social involvement, some social impact on policy, and a legitimizing idea of the common good. They are distinguished both from direct state administration or coercive control and from private spheres, particularly of family or other kin groups but also of individual businesses, apolitical friendship networks, and other activities that do not concern matters of common interest (p. 160).

However, as with other socialist states, downplaying political mass-influence could be viewed as a source of stability (Lagerkvist 2010: 165). Indeed, social stability as foundation for economic reform has been one of the most central notions for Chinese Party-leaders after Deng Xiaoping, who while serving as paramount leader of China from 1978 to 1992, introduced ‘*Socialism with Chinese characteristics*’ (中国特色社会主义) as a platform for substantial economic reform that saw continuous importance for Chinese development into the post-Deng eras as a well (Lagerkvist 2010: 165). The mass-mobilization on Tiananmen Square in 1989, and the renewed awareness of public opinion gained by Chinese leaders after the crack-down on the student led protest, has been followed by concepts like ‘*supervision by public opinion*’ / ‘*public supervision*’ (舆论监督) (Lagerkvist 2010:166) and ‘guidance of

public opinion' (舆论导向)² to be incorporated into official political discourse. Investigative journalism (see Tong and Sparks 2009), as well as popular online activities like blogging (see Lagerkvist 2010) has also lead to a renewed appreciation for concepts relating to the public sphere, perhaps favoring a more neutral-sounding terminology of a public *space*, as a theoretical basis for understanding negotiations of power and influence in modern China.

When discussing online reality in China, debate amongst scholars is generally divided along two main lines of argumentation. Within the first, the Internet is regarded as a positive force promoting self-expression, democratization and increased personal freedom, where the second line offers a more pessimistic view, arguing that the positive effects are grossly overrated, and that the Internet might in fact have negative effect on Chinese society as it might just as well facilitate surveillance and promote isolation (for balanced reflections of perspectives see i.e. Tai 2006; Zhou 2006; Zheng 2008; Yang 2009; Lagerkvist 2010; MacKinnon 2012). The positive views on Chinese online spaces would favor arguments of development towards civil society and a public sphere as facilitated by the Internet, while the more negative consequences of Internet use in China would seem to greatly restrict such developments. In this regard, Lagerkvist (2006) makes an important methodological point in trying to avoid *technological determinism*, by arguing that “Information technology like the Internet cannot, in and of itself, revolutionize authoritarian countries such as China into becoming a pluralist democracy, for the simple reason that the technology has no *self*“, and also that “[...] technological innovations can become powerful tools with the potential to generate significant social change, provided that human beings act and make use of that potential (Ibid: 22). Even within the one-party structure of Chinese society, the Internet and microblogging platforms offer means for communication and large-scale information diffusion. However, what influence or meaning such online spaces add to the development of society is dependent of how Netizens as well as the authorities apply the technology. Lagerkvist proposes a view of the Chinese online space as an uneasy ‘social contract’ (Ibid: 39); as long as Chinese Netizens constitutional right to free speech online, as stated in the Internet White Paper of 2010³, remains subdued by regulations and censorship, Rousseau’s

² ‘Guidance of Public Opinion (舆论导向)’. China Media Project. Available at <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/10/05/423/> (Last accessed 29.11.12))

³ In June 2010, the Information Office of the State Council, published a White Paper on the current state and status of Internet in China, as well as implications for the future. The White Paper stipulates freedom of “privacy and correspondence” for all citizens, but also stated intentions to regulate, censor and control the Chinese

ideals of a 'contract social' hardly applies, but has instead resulted in a "mutual embeddedness and strategic negotiation between state and society" (Ibid: 266).

Moving past the technology itself, but still following the lines of a optimistic / pessimistic argumentation, Chinese Netizens are on the one hand seen to be in opposition to authoritarian exertion of censorship and control, and argued to produce forces that pushes towards greater online freedom (MacKinnon 2012). On the other hand, however, we find arguments that whatever freedoms Chinese Netizens might enjoy online, are not a result of the Chinese governments failed attempts to control rebellious Netizens and oppositional online content, but rather based in whatever level of freedom that has been *granted* Chinese Netizens by the government (Herold 2011a: 2). Also, within the Chinese borders, part of reasoning for strict online content control is argued in a basis for caution against influence of foreign-produced information, where the borders of the Chinese cyber sphere must be protected and guarded from foreign influence to protect China's information space and ideology, achieved by filtering and blocking of harmful content, and by actively influencing people's thought patterns (Hui and Huang cited in Lagerkvist 2006: 58). Following this train of thoughts arguments from Chinese academia argue that the Chinese party-state's propaganda apparatus has lost grounds in the world's new information order, resulting in challenges to defend socialist ideology online in the face of hostile Western powers (Li and Wang cited in Lagerkvist 2006: 58). Online China is still very much in a state of flux; content providers offers Netizens an array of applications, Netizens put them to use, and the government seeks to restrict them when deemed necessary by an increasingly smart arsenal of control and censorship mechanisms. Characteristics like personal convictions, political ideology, power structures and nationalism, are intertwined within these negotiations, adding complexity on every level from the individual Netizen to the overreaching state of the intricate Chinese society.

2.5 Applying a public sphere framework

Dahlgren (2005a) proposes a conceptualization of the Public Sphere, constituting of three dimensions. *The structural dimension* closes in on formal institution features; the media organizations, their political economy, as well as control, regulation and ownership and legal features (Ibid: 148-149). *The representational dimension* refers to the output of media raising issues of “fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological tendencies, modes of address, and so forth” (Ibid: 149). Finally *the dimension of interaction*, draws upon both Habermas (1989) and also Dewey (1954), who argue for a “discursive interactional process” of the public (Dahlgren 2005a: 149). The dimension of interaction is two-fold; first it has to do with how citizens encounter the media; how they communicate and make sense of content, as well as apply output; and secondly the interaction between the citizens themselves, that would range from face-to-face interaction between two people to large meetings (Ibid).

This conceptualization of a public sphere framework will, together with the main theoretical points of Keane’ three levels of public spheres, re-emerge as part of the following analysis. In addition to a well-founded theoretical framework, a contextualization of main issues that will be discussed are in place, especially when aiming to understand a media landscape that is as complex and rich as the Chinese one.

3 Exploring ‘Chinanet’

The first computer network was set up in China in 1987, but during the early stages of Internet development in China, access were limited to scientists, researchers and university faculty in metropolitan areas (Zhou 2006: 136). Access became more widely available when China Telecom entered the Internet service provider market, with Internet connected citizens rising from 3000 to 40.000 over a timeframe of only four months in 1995 (ibid.)

The soaring economic boom that followed political reforms of the late 1970s, closely linked to a focus on technology as a key to socio-economical development (see Zheng 2007), eventually brought on the full force of an information revolution and an explosive development of Internet-use in China. Influential leaders Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin both stressed development of information infrastructure as an integral part of modernization, but the eager willingness by the Chinese authorities to develop information technology is often lost within a discourse of control and censorship (Zhou 2006: 137). The focus on control is however hard to ignore; being an authoritarian state, controlled by the ruling CCP, information control has always been of importance. Tensions between government control, self-censorship and citizens opinion, highlight the Chinese Internet sphere as a contrast-driven space of interaction and negotiation, with a continuously steady growth of Internet users adding a new and important dimension to the already established Chinese media institutions.

In most countries, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) run their networks in competition with each other, regulated only by the legislated oversight by their respective governments (Herold 2011a: 2). In China, however, the state or state-controlled entities own the physical backbone of the Internet, from which privately held companies rent bandwidth (Ibid). This means that the Chinese government holds a default position of power and control; when it comes to both technological aspects and contents of the Chinese Internet (Ibid).

Finding reliable statistics on Internet penetration and Internet use in China can be hard, as Kai Lukoff (2011), editor of China tech-blog TechRice, puts it: “[...] there are lies, damned lies, and Chinese statistics. Take them with a pound of salt”. Still, based on available surveys from official organizations, like the state affiliated non-profit organization China Internet Network Information center (CNNIC), and the third party monitoring market and audience performances online in China, Data Center of China Internet (DCCI), as well as third party

companies and blogs, some main characteristics and statistical traits of the Chinese online sphere become evident.

3.1 The Chinese Netizens

In the annual reports on Internet development put forth by CNNIC since 1997, ‘Internet user’ is defined as ‘The Chinese citizens at the age of 6 or above who have used the Internet over the last six months’. In 1997 China had 620 thousand Internet users, a number that by the end of 2011 had grown to 513 million (CNNIC 2012: 13).

With 538 million Netizens, China has the highest number of Internet users in the world, followed by the US and India with 245 million and 137 users respectively (Internet World Stats 2012). Being the worlds’ most populous country, and having undergone a massive economic transformation during the same time in history as the Internet has spread, it might not be surprising that China tops the list. From 2006 to 2009, an average of 6% new Internet users was added to the penetration rate, slowing down to 5% and 4% in 2010 and 2011. The Chinese national Internet penetration rate in 2011 reached 38, 3% (CNNIC 2012: 13), which in comparison is higher than India, holding a penetration rate of 10,2%, but considerably lower than the US with 78, 3% (Internet World Stats 2011)⁴.

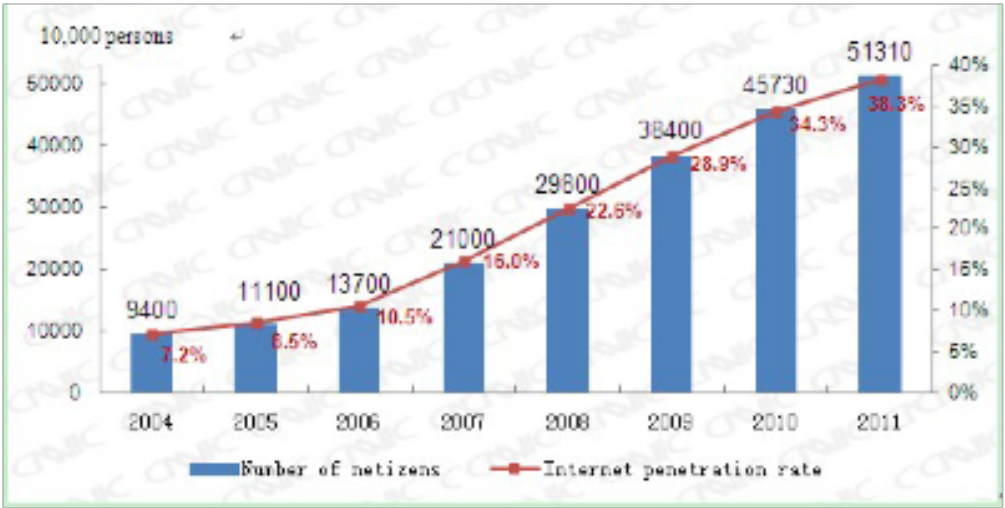


Figure 1 Annual development of Chinese Internet Users, CNNIC (2012)

⁴ The top five countries all have a internet penetration rate over 90%, with Iceland topping the list with 97, 8% penetration rate (World Internet Stats, 2011).

3.1.1 Who are they?

Most Chinese Internet users are young (CNNIC 2012; Lagerkvist 2010: 33). In 2011, 55, 9% of the Chinese Netizens were male, and over 55% were reported to be aged between twenty and thirty-nine years old (CNNIC 2012: 20-21)⁵. A little more than half of China's Internet population has an educational level of senior high school or above, and students constitute the largest occupational group of Chinese Netizens, with 30, 2% (Ibid: 21-22). Nearly 60% has a monthly income of 2000 RMB (320 USD) or less, which constitutes half of the national monthly income average, reported to be just over 4500 RMB in 2011, according to official government numbers (China Briefing 2012).

China's main divide within its population is between the urban and rural areas of the country. By the end of 2011, the urban population of China for the first time exceeded the rural population; 690 million Chinese now reside in urban areas, as opposed to 656 million rural residents (Xinhua 2012). The urban / rural divide is striking in online statistics as well; only 26, 5% of Chinese Internet users are rural residents, with roughly half of non-Internet rural residents stating "do not know how to use computer/network" as their reason for not being part of the growing Netizen population. It is worth noting however, that also more than 40% of non-Internet users in urban areas gave the same answer to the question in the report (CNNIC 2012: 24). The significant divide of rural / urban divide of Internet access thereby seems to be a question largely of technological know-how. From the numbers presented by CNNIC, it would seem that the fifty per cent of the remaining eight hundred million non-Internet users in China are not offline due to lack of access, but rather because of issues relating to grasping the technology itself.

3.1.2 What do they do online?

The average Chinese Netizen spent nearly nineteen hours weekly online in 2011 (Ibid: 20), with 'instant messaging', 'search engines' and 'online music' topping the list over popular Internet applications and activities (Ibid: 33). Online China has a reputation of being vivid and active in terms of interaction, communication and debate.

⁵ The statistical report by CNNIC defines Chinese internet users as "Chinese residents, 6 years or above who have been using Internet in the past six months" (CNNIC 2012, 11). However, only 1,7% were in 2011 reported to be 10 years old or younger.

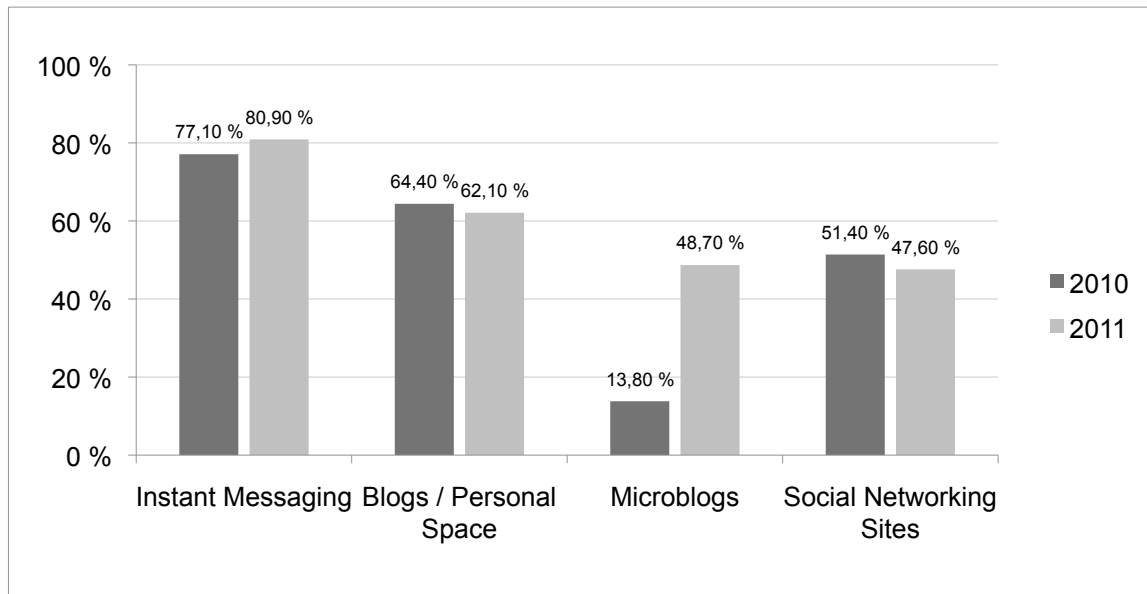


Figure 2 Utilization ratios of selected Internet applications in 2010 and 2011 (CNNIC 2012)

As can be seen in figure 2, communicative tools like instant messaging applications are hugely popular in online China, as are personal publishing applications like blogs. From 2010 to 2011, however, the use of microblogging applications nearly tripled, with now nearly half of the Chinese online population making use of such tools (CNNIC 2012: 42), further adding an emphasis for a need to explore and understand such applications.

3.2 Internet with ‘Chinese Characteristics’

As a country that highly values both its rich history and culture, it would only seem natural that the Chinese online space also consists of some country specific characteristics. Just like Deng Xiaoping described the current Chinese political model as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, it makes sense to talk about an online environment with equally curious Chinese characteristics. Within the Chinese online sphere, widespread use of censorship and methods for content regulation greatly affect the overall user-experience compared to Internet spheres in other parts of the world.

3.2.1 Containing online China

Even though the Internet is hailed as one of the great open and democratic innovations of our time, in principle accessible for all and with an enormous amount of free data available, censorship and filtering of online content occurs, not just in China but everywhere. The

international online community, containing both governments, ISPs and users, have to acknowledge some form of content regulation in accordance to rule of law; blatantly harmful content, such as child pornography, is illegal to distribute over the Internet, and issues of copyright violations have surfaced in regards to online file sharing. That being said, for authoritarian regimes, the Internet proposes an additional set of challenges; one-party states are likely to seek means allowing them to maximize control over the Internet (Hachigian, 2002: 41-42), just like they seek to maximize control over other media outlets. The introduction of the Internet in such societies proposes new difficulties in the regimes persuasive power, due to traits of anonymity, speed and relative inexpensiveness (Ibid: 42). Still, the realm of the Internet offers economic- and developmental opportunities for one-party states just as it does for democratic societies, therefore the main problem for authoritarian regimes is not how to avoid the Internet gaining influence within the population, but how to balance a thriving Internet environment with government policy and interest. During the National People's Congress in March 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao publicly stated that political leaders do pay attention to public discussions on the Internet, and that public opinions had played an important role in helping the government initiate and modify new policy (Zheng 2007: 36). Online discussion is however *very* closely monitored, as Chinese Netizens maneuver an online space that is heavily controlled and censored.

3.2.2 Control and censorship

The many causes and effects that follow from the complicated interactions between Internet users, content providers and authorities are intertwined within a quite unique online space. A very simplistic model of online China is provided in Figure 3, in an effort to highlight some of the many inter-related connections of use and interest within the space.

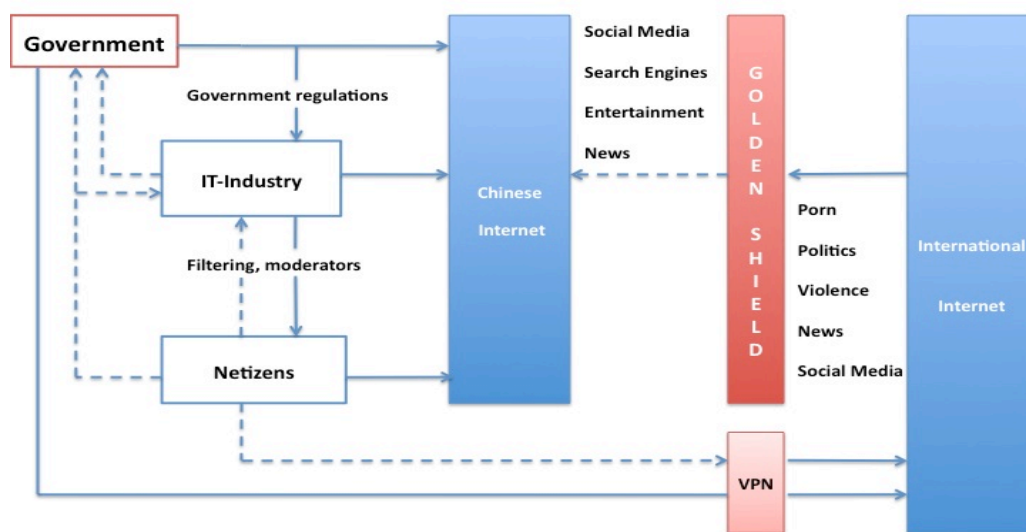


Figure 3 A simplified model of online China / ‘Chinanet’

The most distinct feature of the Chinese online space is the Golden Shield project. Introduced in 1998, and owned by the Ministry of Public Security, the project encompasses significant recourses to monitor online activity (Farrall and Herold 2011: 173). The project also includes the so-called Great Firewall of China, one of the most visible and direct forms of censorship. The Great Firewall consists of several virtual walls that operate across the entire space of the Chinese Internet (Lagerkvist 2010: 32), and effectively filters content from the greater online sphere from being accessible in China. Part of the reasoning for the Golden Shield and the Great Firewall is protecting the Chinese population from violent and pornographic content. However, results for a non-explicit but yet (in China) politically sensitive keyword like ‘Tiananmen 1989’ will produce very different results using a internationally popular search engine like google.com and the Chinese market leader baidu.com; a picture-search using Google offers results like the iconic picture of the man standing still with a bag in his hand, body-blocking a procession of tanks, and picture of casualties after the crack-down on the protesters⁶. A picture-search on baidu.com using the same keyword in Chinese (天安门 1989) gives results of pictures of US president George Bush visiting Tiananmen square in February 1989, and pictures of parades⁷ in addition to a message reading “According to relevant laws,

⁶ Google search (google.com) 26.11.12 using the keyword “Tiananmen 1989”.

⁷ Baidu search (baidu.com) 26.11.12 using the keyword “天安门1989”.

regulations and policies, some search results are not displayed”⁸. Also, blogging applications like blogspot.com, as well as social networking applications Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are entirely blocked by the Firewall, as are sites belonging to the organization Human Rights Watch, as well as parts of bbc.co.uk – to name but a few. Some Chinese Netizens will however use circumvention software like Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and proxy servers to maneuver around the technical shield that covers the Chinese online sphere. Nevertheless, both Netizens who use such circumvention tools, and those who do not, are basically part of the same restricted basis the domestic Chinese online space sets for them. If your VPN is out of order your search for information is limited to what regulated content you are offered. The government demonstrated a very direct power over the infrastructure of online China, when after incidents of social unrest, Internet access was seemingly shut down entirely for months in the province of Xinjiang in 2009 (Hogg 2010; Lam 2010)⁹, and also in the village of Wukan in December 2011 (IFEX 2011). In addition to these very technical measures of censorship, various directives are issued to regulate the form and sentiments of content in online China. From the authorities point of view, incentives for implementing online regulations, both severe technical efforts like those in Xinjiang and Wukan, and also the more ‘everyday’ content regulating restrictions, are explained from a political desire to maintain control over information, using official rhetoric, as a means to secure stability and a ‘harmonious’ society. For ISPs and content providers, the incentive to implement government regulations might be more in lines of fear of punishment by the government¹⁰, where a possible loss of valuable market shares in case of a shut-down would create an incentive of self-censorship in fear of government reprimands.

Although the Great Firewall blocks many Chinese Netizens from accessing international web sites, it does not block international users from accessing the Chinese online space. The Great

⁸ In Chinese: 根据相关法律法规和政策, 部分搜索结果未予显示。

⁹ Government institutes, like police and communication departments remained connected (Lam 2010).

¹⁰ In a 2012 financial statement Sina states that as they have yet to fully implement a government demand of real-name registration to their full Weibo-service user base, the company fear they now face “[...] potentially severe punishment by the Chinese government”. (Sina, 2012. “Annual Report Pursuant To Section 13 or 15(d) Of The Securities Exchange Act Of 1934”. United States Securities and Exchange Commission. Available at http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1094005/000110465912030028/a12-7070_120f.htm#Signatures_102025 (Last accessed 29.11.12) .

Firewall therefore functions mostly as a one-way blockade. In restricting international access for Chinese Netizens, but allowing international Netizens to access the content regulated Chinese Internet space, the presence of international Netizens punches breathing holes in to the argumentation of the Chinese online environment as a space of total isolation, as a fully contained Intranet. In regards to Sina Weibo, non-Chinese organizations like the New York Times, and celebrities like Tom Cruise, are registered Sina Weibo users. However, full use of Sina Weibo as a communications tool and information channel is somewhat restricted for users without knowledge of the Chinese language; posts in English might receive comments, and will be reposted by other Sina Weibo users, but with a user-pool that greatly favors posts in Chinese, the pay-offs of receiving information from the feeds of other users, as well information provided by Sina Weibo itself, is limited for those who do not understand the language.

3.2.3 Media Directives

A further complicating factor of the Chinese online space compared to the greater international online spaces, are the presence of government directives. All media outlets are subjected to content regulating directives issued by official government agencies, and at times also local level departments. Two of the most active bodies of media control are the CCP's Central Propaganda Department (CPD), enforcing the party line for the greater Chinese media sphere, and the Information Office of the State Council (SCIO), more actively covering the Chinese online sphere¹¹. The directives generally instruct media outlets how to frame incidents, or to not report on an incident all together. For an application like Sina Weibo, such directives become of a particular interest, as the *media organization* Sina Weibo is part of the content regulated sphere required to implement media directives, while the *users* of Sina Weibo generally would not directly receive any kind of government directives instructing them how to express themselves, and therefore Netizens will largely remain unaware of which off- and online incidents and issues will develop into a topic deemed sensitive by authorities, up until the moment Sina Weibo implements content regulating measures like key word filtering or deleting posts.

¹¹ See China Media Project, Media Dictionary: "Ministry of Truth 真理部". Available at <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/03/07/5372/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

Media directives issued by government bodies make an interesting point of departure when trying to understand the dynamics in play between government and citizens, as the likes of Sina Weibo makes fully implementing these directives harder, mainly due to the high frequency of Weibo posts and the speed such posts can be diffused. Journalists have also been known to use microblogging tools to vent frustration when government directives interferes with their profession, with some reporters and editors publishing stories about the Wenzhou train crash on their microblogs as they were pulled last-minute from traditional media outlets following media regulating directives (Bandurski 2011b). As a result newspapers containing white spaces where information should have been published, both giving a very obvious statement that an act of censorship had occurred, but also portraying a form of protest by not replacing the white spaces with other content.

From time to time, censorship directions issued by central or local Chinese government authorities are leaked online. When leaked, the censorship directions find their way to such sites as the bilingual Chinese news site *China Digital Times*, which has dedicated an own portion of their site to such directives, under the tag ‘Ministry of Truth’, in reference to George Orwell’s gloomy tale of surveillance and control in his book ‘1984’¹². The site is blocked by the Great Firewall, and thus unavailable for Chinese Netizens who do not use circumvention tools. One of the directives used in this study was initially identified via *China Digital Times*, but was followed by picture with a Sina Weibo logo that showed a mobile phone screen with the text of the directive, thereby demonstrating that leaked directives also appear inside the Great Firewall¹³. In general, these media directives are issued across all types of the various Chinese media outlets, belonging to both traditional and new media, and with some of the directives also directly applying to online media.

3.2.4 Online monopolization

In China, a game of Internet Monopoly would put to use a very different board than a Monopoly game in Norway, USA or Japan. Dominate positions in terms of market shares in relations to online activity like use of search engines; instant messaging and online gaming in

¹² See China Media Project, Media Dictionary: “Ministry of Truth 真理部”. Available at <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/03/07/5372/> (Last accessed 19.11.12) and China Digital Times, “Tag: Ministry of Truth”. Available at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/ministry-of-truth/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹³ For picture of the directive see China Digital Times, Available at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/07/directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth-wenzhou-high-speed-train-crash/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

China are dominated by Chinese content providers as opposed to international content providers (Zhong 2012). Numbers from the web information company Alexa showed that in 2011, eight of the ten most popular web sites internationally, found their origin in the US. Tellingly enough, the two sites ruining a total American dominance, were the Chinese search engine Baidu, and the Chinese instant messaging service, QQ¹⁴.

Returning to the fundamental normative foundations of the internet as a free market, development of popular sites like google.com, facebook.com and live.com, might all be seen as representing an American domination in lines of Gramsci' concept of cultural hegemony (Lears 1985: 568). Nevertheless, with such a tremendously large number of web sites available for anyone with computer access, the will and power of Netizens worldwide to choose what sites and what content to access should not be underestimated. For some Facebook would appear to be close to indispensable for keeping in touch with international friends, pretty much like instant messaging service QQ has positioned itself for those wanting to keep in touch with Chinese acquaintances. Whether or not Facebook would have had the same potential to grow internationally had it originated in Luxembourg, Iceland, Singapore or any other country with a consumer base substantially smaller than US is however a question that is worthy of a thought-experiment, but has an answer that lies well beyond the limitations of this study. The domination of domestically developed content providers in online China, however, is an important key when seeking to understand how the Chinese online space functions, and how Chinese Netizens use online spaces for communication.

Whatever political, economic or cultural ideas the Chinese online Monopoly board might be founded upon, some will argue that the dominant positions held by domestic content providers, together with an efficient Great Firewall that keeps unwanted content off-limits, significantly and drastically isolates China from the greater global online sphere (Zhong 2012). With a small portion of the overall amount of Chinese Netizens breaching the Great Firewall by use of VPN or Porxy servers, as well as a possible preference for Chinese-language sites, the Chinese Netizens are willingly or unwillingly part of an online space where much of the influence over their online reality mainly is domestically rooted, compared to the greater international masses of Netizens. Arsène (2012) argues in the opposite direction from Zhong (2012), and claims that the argumentation of a Chinese 'Intranet' is overrated,

¹⁴ <http://andromida.hubpages.com/hub/most-popular-websites> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

and that quite on the contrary the Chinese are expanding their presence and influence in the global Internet ecosystem (Arsène 2012: 1). This might be true in regards to China aiming to spread technical- and service based innovations to the global Internet sphere, i.e. with the presence of telecommunications company Huawei on the international market, and Sina Weibo in 2011 releasing an English interface language option for the mobile version of the microblogging application, making it easier for international users to explore the platform (Gadgets Republic 2011). Offline China has entered, and made an impact, on the global stage as a member of WTO and hosting the summer Olympics in 2008, as well as having “latched onto the notion of ‘soft power’” (Saich 2011: 101) to promote Chinese language and culture by funding Confucius Institutes, expand CCTV International and increasing their presence and aid to Africa (Ibid). Still, being on the outside looking in on online China, instead of being on the inside looking out, a language-barrier leaves the population of the global Internet sphere with no knowledge in Chinese language fumbling around in a vast forest of unreadable characters.

Google and Yahoo! are examples of international companies that have ventured into the Chinese market, and that also both have encountered difficulties in their operations, including having to compromise on company policies regarding filtering, control and censorship to accommodate the Chinese government. In 2005 Yahoo! was widely criticized in accusations of helping the Chinese government jail a writer after handing over information withdrawn from the writers personal Yahoo! e-mail account to the authorities (MacKinnon 2012: 133). In 2010, following reported hackings of gmail accounts, the international search-engine giant Google relocated from mainland China to Hong Kong in order to reduce the levels of self-censorship Internet policy on the mainland demanded (Branigan 2010).

Both Google and Yahoo! still operate in China, trying to secure parts of the huge Internet market China offers. The two internationally popular companies do however loose in competition with Chinese developed services, with search engine Baidu holding a steady grip with a reported 78,6% of the search query market share, with Google coming in second with only 16.6% (China Internet Watch 2012).

Online monopolization and a containment of the Chinese Internet sphere within the Great Firewall can be argued from two separate protectionist fronts; first of all, in order to protect

the Chinese market and boost the Chinese Internet industry it makes sense for the party-state to hold preference to domestic Internet content providers. Secondly, The Great Firewall does not, as previously mentioned, hinder the global Net population to access sites in China, but has instead developed a variety of Chinese Internet sites and applications holding a strong preference for their language, thereby effectively reducing influence of millions of non-Chinese speaking Internet users on the Chinese online space. Therefore, as long as the Great Firewall keeps Chinese Netizens contained within the frames the party-state sets for them at any given time, it makes sense to argue for the existence of a form of Chinese ‘cyberisolation’, or a *Chinanet*.

3.3 Online culture

Despite its highly controlled infrastructure, or maybe because of it, the space of Chinese Internet has offered grounds for a vivid Internet culture to develop. The online cultural phenomena are, together with censorship, monopolization and isolation, vital in an understanding of the Chinese Internet. Three of the most noteworthy characteristics of Chinese online culture, that also are important in an understanding of Chinese microblogging applications, are development of online spoofs and slang as a mode for communication, the presence of an ‘army’ of online commentators called the Wu Mao Army, and a sort of online justice system, by use of so-called Human Flesh Searches.

3.3.1 Online Spoofs and Slang as Communication Tools

As part of a greater online culture of online spoofs, in Chinese called *E Gao* (恶搞), the Chinese Netizens have developed creative communicative puns in order to subvert censorship and control. E gao as a greater cultural phenomenon typically “[...] includes all types of audio, visual or textual spoofs, which often takes advantage of the transformative capability of digital technology as well as the distribution power of the internet” (Meng: 2011: 34)”. Such a transformative creativity has also found a linguistic manifestation in online China, by widespread use of homophones in the pronunciation-sensitivity of the Chinese language. Two beloved examples are the mythical online creatures the Grass Mud Horse (草泥马), and his enemy, the River Crab (河蟹) (Meng 2011: 43; Li 2011). The name Grass Mud Horse sounds harmless in its own right, but as a homophone in the Chinese language, the pronunciation

resembles the more offensive ‘f*** your mother’. His enemy, The River Crab, has a name that by alterations of tone pronunciation resembles ‘Harmonious’, a word that since it was introduced as part of the overreaching goal of a ‘Harmonious Society’ by Hu Jintao, has become a characteristic of censorship (Meng 2011: 44). Expressions established by use of e gao, where elements of entertainment and popular culture phenomena originate and develop within Chinese online discourse (Ibid: 34), offers a indication of the sustained creative space the Chinese online space has developed in to. Chinese Netizens seemingly thrive in a loud and chaotic online space that in many ways bare resemblance to the Bakhtinian ‘carnivale’ (Herold 2011a: 11-12), while media professionals remain subdued to official media directives that still provide the main frames of messages negotiated by traditional media channels. The Chinese Internet is filled with homophones and abbreviations to circumvent online filters and moderators. For microblogging tools, use of E Gao is expressed by new homophones added more or less on a daily basis, developed to get around censorship mechanisms, and also by e gao developed slang expressions being added to the lists of blocked key-words as they are discovered by censors.

3.3.2 The Wu Mao Dang

The Wu Mao Dang (五毛党), in English known as the Fifty Cent Army, is strongly linked to main artery of censorship and control that runs through the Chinese online sphere. With online information not always being verified or approved by the CCP, the party-state is believed to have employed the Wu Mao Dang to not only monitor online discussion, but also to actively post pro-party messages and to attempt to guide online communication (Saich 2011: 17). Applied as a strategy of influencing and molding public perception and opinion, the authorities reportedly pay members of the Wu Mao Dang five mao, roughly equivalent to fifty US cents, for every pro-government comment on online discussion forums, bulletin boards, blogs and so forth. The Wu Mao Dang are often hard to identify, as off course not all pro-government statement found online necessarily would stem from the keyboard of a Wu Mao Dang. However, the Wu Mao Dang has been discusses enough online to secure them at least an indirect presence within online applications like Sina Weibo; whenever a Netizen has an overtly pro-government sentiment, other Netizens are aware that it *could be* a member of the Wu Mao Dang. Also, the economic incentive for becoming a Wu Mao Dang would seem rather low, you would have to post a lot of comments to make it worthwhile for your savings

account, making it reasonable to believe the Wu Mao Dang might have a strong pro-government sentiment as their ideological starting point, thereby not framing the Wu Mao Dang as an army of employed pro-government commentators out to earn a buck, but as a concept encompassing nationalistic sentiment of someone who wouldn't mind making a buck by expressing their personal opinions while surfing the Net. The presence of the Wu Mao Dang, or speculations of their mere existence, drapes a veil of mistrust over trustworthiness and representativeness for Chinese online information, a veil that at times seems hard to lift when studying the Chinese online climate. The mistrust towards levels of representativeness is also in concern for an application like Sina Weibo, that has become to represent a connotation toward more truthful, raw and unhindered expression of the Chinese public' point of view compared to the traditional media outlets (Barboza 2011).

3.3.3 Rule of the Online Mob

Another curious trait of importance in relations to information diffusion and the handling of available information, and also adding a level regarding distinctions between private and public life in China, are the so-called Human Flesh Searches (人肉搜索). The searches can take on many forms; from identification of the woman who posted a video of killing a small kitten by trampling it to death with her stiletto-heeled shoes (China Daily 2006), to “[...] piecing together parts of a puzzle that in some cases could lead to political scandal...” (Lagerkvist 2010: 264). In so doing the Human Flesh Searches become a “[...] counter-public indirectly challenging the public order” (Ibid), an alternative order that not only target individual Netizens, but also public entities of local government.

Some also regard the Human Flesh Searches as an expression of the negotiations of online boundaries, rules and limitations in online China, where the offline stability and ‘harmony’ as emphasized by the party-state, is faced with greater outside pressure from the greater public online, who enjoys greater leeway for criticism online, than offline (Harold 2011b: 128). Human Flesh Searches will sometimes not only result in online shaming, but also lead to offline consequences; the kitten-killing lady, and also the man filming the act, were suspended from their jobs, and animal welfare activists made an example of the incident in lobbying for animal protection legislation (Ibid: 133). In 2007 a woman committed suicide, after discovering that her husband was having an affair with another woman. She left behind a suicide note that her sister later published online, with the sister adding a letter of her own,

attacking the cheating husband, alongside providing information like his name, place of work and place of residence (Ibid: 132). Netizens tracked down the man and his mistress by using the information provided, continuously harassing them, and ultimately resulting in the man losing his job (Ibid). The man counter-attacked by suing three Internet sites, as well as a friend of the sister who had helped her post his personal information online. The case got widespread attention in China during 2008, and one website, as well as the friend of the deceased woman's sister, were sentenced to pay a not very substantial fine, totaling 8000 RMB, for causing the widowed man emotional distress (Ibid), while the two remaining Internet sites were judged innocent. The case shows, that the Chinese court did not condemn online posting, and subsequent use of personal information to track down and harass Chinese citizens, nor did they rule against any individual Netizens participating in the Human Flesh Search, or the Human Flesh Search as a phenomenon in general (Ibid). On occasion, the Chinese government has also welcomed and applauded the perseverance of Netizens, and encouraged them to continue use of Human Flesh Searches (Ibid: 136). When applied as a means to supervise and oppose government officials, and directing attention to various problems on a local level, Human Flesh Searches could to a certain extent provide a "[...] new form of checks and balances previously missing from Chinese politics" (Ibid: 139). However, this collective Netizen action that somewhat resembles a sort of mob-mentality driven online court of public law, is obviously flawed; online information is not always to be trusted, and innocent people might suffer significantly. As a monitoring kit towards corrupt official life, Human Flesh Searches would seem to be a poor substitute for a critical, professional and alert media sphere rooted in the traditional media channels, and a reliable justice system. Nevertheless, Netizens engage in such searches that also are facilitated by use of microblogging platforms, serving as an easily accessible platform with a potential to reach a lot of people outside ones own personal network. At the same time, the information provided during such searches could compromise the privacy of individual Netizens, where misinformation and rumors could spin out of orbit and into offline consequences with unknown ramifications, while at the meantime being stored within the infrastructure of the application where it might be hard to control or remove properly.

3.4 Microblogging

Alongside blogs, social media and personal websites, microblogs are an expression of ‘personal publishing’ online (Iskold 2007). With the coding language HTML being out of reach for some, and other, more standardized tools for making personal web sites offering fewer options in regards to layout and design, blogs offered an easy to use alternative, with pre-made templates for layouts, and a low threshold for continuous update of content (Ibid). During 2003 and 2004 blogging took off in a major way online, Merriam-Webster even declared ‘blog’ as word of the year in 2004 (Kopytoff 2011). Social networking sites like MySpace also emerged in 2004, adding a new dimension to public publishing online (Iskold 2007; Boyd and Ellison 2008: 212). In 2006 Twitter and Facebook launched worldwide, and quickly gained prominence across the global Internet sphere. The new social networking sites further simplified personal publishing by offering tools for short and media rich messages that easily could be diffused across your network of friends, acquaintances and strangers alike.

Compared to blogs, microblog posts are first and foremost restricted in terms of length; for both Twitter and Sina Weibo posts are restricted to 140 characters. Microblog posts are also text-based messages found to be enriched with contextual metadata, such as name/username of the author, date and time for posting, and sometimes geographical location. While every individual microblog may be small in size, and thereby with a more limited information value compared to regular blogs with no length limitations, aggregated microblog posts of multiple users provide a rich source of time-critical information that can point to events and trends of various levels of interest (Lohmann et. al. 2012: 753). The same principles are true for microblogging applications in China. Compared to the internationally quite secure position of Twitter, the flora and history of Chinese microblogging applications is more complex. Many have tried, and many have failed, before finally, in the last couple of years, content providers seem to have managed to gain a foothold in the Chinese online space that encompasses microblogging applications.

3.4.1 Chinese Microblogging

International social media giants, including those dedicated to microblogging, have tried to enter the Chinese market. American company Friendster gave the Asian market special attention with a Chinese-language update of their service in 2007 (Sloane 2007), and

Facebook also launched a Chinese based option of their service in 2008 (Moore 2008), before being blocked out of the Chinese market the following year. Without competition from Facebook and Twitter, Chinese content providers had an golden opportunity to develop services designed for the Chinese market, although they would have to structure their operations in accordance with Chinese Internet policy and regulation.

In 2005 Internet entrepreneur Wang Xing launched Xiaonei, a site that later would develop into the Facebook clone RenRen, and in 2007 he launched his second site with resemblance to a US based service, a Twitter-clone called Fanfou (Epstein 2011a). Fanfou did indeed quickly gain a reputation as ‘Chinas’ Twitter’, and reported close to 1 million registered users by 2009. However, in June 2009, the site was closed for ‘maintenance’ just ahead of the 20th anniversary of the mass-protest on Tiananmen square (Tan 2009), and in July 2009 access to Fanfou was blocked indefinitely by Chinese authorities after allegedly having played a role for allowing online agitators to help stoke violence in upheavals of social unrest in the Xinjiang province, home the Chinese Muslim minority Uighurs (Epstein 2011b). In 2010 the ‘maintenance’ period ended for Fanfou, but by then other microblogging applications like Sina Weibo had enjoyed a flying start in its absence (Ibid).

The social media vacuum that followed the absence of Fanfou left the Chinese market open for new actors, and in 2009, the already well-established Internet-company Sina, who under leadership of CEO Charles Chao, amongst other already hosted a popular blogging service, launched a new microblogging application. By successfully inviting and persuading many celebrities, sports heroes, intellectuals and opinion leaders to add use of the new microblogging application in addition to their existing blog portal, Sina Weibo gained prominence in the Chinese Internet market, albeit in fierce competition with Tencent Weibo, launched in 2010 by the company that also hosts a massively popular Instant Messaging service QQ. Based on their already successful services, the user demographic of Tencent Weibo has been described as more orientated towards younger user, drawn from their QQ demographic, while Sina Weibo has been described as catering more to a white-collar demographic (Lukoff 2011). Whatever application you choose to use, Chinese Netizens are clearly drawn towards Chinese microblogging applications; the English-language newspaper China Daily, dubbed 2010 the “inaugural year” of Weibo (China Daily 2011), with Tencent Weibo reporting 300 million users by the end of 2010, followed by Sina Weibo reporting 250

million users and 25 million daily active users. In comparison, Twitter reported 175 million users as of March 2011 (Carlson 2011). The question remains, however, for both the Chinese and the American microblogging tools, how many of the registers users can be classified as active users, and also, how many accounts are zombie-accounts¹⁵. Also, in the competitive race between Sina and Tencent, it is worth noting that Sina holds the upper hand in regards to microblogging, with 56,5 % market share on active use reported to favor Sina Weibo, compared to Tencent Weibo with 21,5 % (Resonance China 2011). Even with the numbers reported by the companies who host these Chinese microblogging applications being flawed and not completely trustworthy, they still give a solid indication that microblogging has caught on in China, adding to the importance for understanding and studying the application in itself, as well as what implications they might have for Chinese Netizens and Chinese society.

3.4.2 Sina Weibo

Sina Weibo finds its technological DNA in the American microblogging tool Twitter. Like Twitter, Sina Weibo has a 140-character limit of posts. You can however say much more in 140 Chinese characters than in 140 characters used to spell out Latin based languages. Sina CEO Charles Chao axed an initial plan to build a Facebook-like application in favor of developing a microblogging application, with overlaps between the two having some Sina employees referring to Sina Weibo as “FaceTwitter” (Lukoff 2011). The nickname is not far from the truth; Sina Weibo is first and foremost a social media application for short and timely messages, but the stickiness and content richness of the applications has its resemblance with social networking applications like Facebook, offering in-site applications like online and social gaming, a group buying option and even its own currency.

As an application within the Golden Shield, Sina Weibo is in a somewhat delicate position; in order to keep Netizens happy and content, Sina needs to offer an application that is not only easy and attractive to use, but that also allows Netizens to access it as freely and unrestricted as possible. Nevertheless, Sina Weibo also needs to operate in compliance with official policy and regulations, which at times can be quite intrusive in terms of limitations for expression. According to the blog Tea Leaf Nation, rumor has it that half of all Sina Weibo employees are

¹⁵The term describes user profiles that are made up for various reasons, i.e. to create the impression of having more followers than is actually true, or create buzz around a brand etc.

there to monitor posts for inappropriate or sensitive content in order to keep the central government off its back (Tea Leaf Nation 2012). The methods applied by Sina moderators include deleting posts and comments, deleting followers, hiding tweets from viewers, as well as blocking accounts and IP addresses (Ibid). But even with such heavy restrictions, Sina Weibo reports over 100 million posts being diffused across its infrastructure every day (China Internet Watch 2012b). Sina Weibo would not be as important as it has become without the millions of people using it; some to post pictures on cute cats, some searching for celebrity gossip and some looking to voice concern about Chinese society. Besides use of the application by Netizens, the technology implemented in Weibo, the parts and structure of the platform, is also of great importance to understand how the microblogging site works, why it has become so popular and why it is so important in an overall understanding of modern Chinese culture.

4 Methodology

In the hours, days, weeks and months that followed after the tragic train crash in Wenzhou in July 2011, posts regarding the crash flooded Sina Weibo to such an extent that it was labeled a “watershed moment” for the microblogging platform (Buckley and Lee 2011). Official statements were slow compared to those offered by Netizens, with online reports concerning the crash spreading quickly amongst information-hungry Netizens. It was also a matter of days, and not hours, before official restrictions concerning posts on the crash were introduced to publishers of both traditional and new media. The significant amount of Netizen attention, and the absence of limitations set by media directives, are the two main characteristics of the Wenzhou train crash that offers grounds for further studying Netizen’ communication relating to the accident in seeking insight to the research questions proposed for this project. In order to gain in-depth knowledge, a case study approach has been applied as a main methodological approach to answer questions of position, possibilities and limitations of Chinese microblogging applications. Within the design, posts from Sina Weibo, and also the media directives that have been leaked online, has served as easily available sources data that could be retrieved to perform a qualitative content analysis of the material.

A qualitative choice of methodology serves an inquiry of this kind well, as “Qualitative research takes context and cases seriously for understanding an issue under study, [...] often the case (its history and complexity) is an important context for understanding what is studied” (Gibbs 2007, xi), and, as argued by Altheide (1996), aims to “understand the process and character of social life and to arrive at meaning and process; we seek to understand types, characteristics, and organizational aspects of the documents as social products in their own right, as well as what they claim to represent” (p. 42).

4.1 Case Study as methodological approach

A *case study* can be understood as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2009: 18), that has an ultimate goal of uncovering patterns and meanings, as well forming a basis for constructions of conclusions, and theory-

building (Patton and Appelbaum cited in Kohlbacher 2006: par 30)¹⁶. As Kohlbacher (2006) notes, the definition offered by Yin (2009) shows why case study cannot be considered a methodological choice, but rather should be regarded as a research strategy; as a choice of what is to be studied. Theoretical orientation and interest in individual cases are more defining to case study, then what research methods are used (Kohlbacher 2006: par 16). In terms of theory, a case study is also flexible, as it is well suited for in-depth exploration, and adaptable towards analytical discoveries that lead into new constructions of theory (Kohlbacher 2006: par 20).

4.2 Designing a case study

According to Yin (2009: 24) “a research design is the logic that links the data to be collected (and the conclusions to be drawn) to the initial questions of the study”. The design is a blueprint of the study including factors like what questions to study, what data are relevant, what data to collect, and how to analyze the results (Philliber, Schwab and Samsloss 1980 cited in Yin 2009: 26). A good blueprint, a good design, is without doubt of great value when maneuvering in somewhat unfamiliar terrain like the Chinese online sphere.

Like other research methods, case studies can either be explanatory, exploratory or descriptive (Yin 2009: 7-8), and are best suited to answer research questions that aim to figure out ‘how’ and ‘why’ as opposed to a more quantitative basis of ‘how many’ (Ibid: 9). This study explores how microblogs are positioned in the greater Chinese online sphere, use and attributes of Chinese microblogs, as well as how microblogging in China relates to the concept of the public sphere. There is a clear exploratory fundament in such questions, and as with other exploratory questions, they would favor a methodological approach of case studies, histories and experiments, as these are apt in dealing with operational links that need to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidences (Ibid). However, the case of Sina Weibo as an example of Chinese microblogging tools also holds a descriptive factor in choice of the Wenzhou train crash as an overall illustration of use, limitations and possibilities. The material concerning the crash has been withdrawn directly from Sina Weibo for analysis, but has been identified only *after* the incident itself had taken place. As an example that is in close proximity in terms of time, the posts concerning the train crash are archival records, but

¹⁶ In the article *The Use of Qualitative Content Analysis in Case Study Research* by Kohlbacher (2006) there are no page numbers, the citings from the article therefore refers to paragraphs (par) found in the article.

still relating to what could be called a contemporary event. Histories overlap with case studies in this aspect; histories are the preferred strategy when there is virtually no access or control, dealing with the “dead” past, but when the event in question is a contemporary one, it overlaps with case studies (Ibid: 11).

4.2.1 Linking Research Questions to Data

This case study is designed as an exploratory single case study, with Sina Weibo as the unit of analysis (Ibid: 30), used to describe and explore use of Chinese microblogging applications on two levels; first how such a microblogging tool functions within the greater Chinese online space, and how it relates to the concept of a public sphere; and second how limitations and possibilities for information diffusion can be identified within the application.

The event of the Wenzhou train crash serves as a further contextualization within the case, as an analytical frame for the actual use of microblogging applications. The rationale for choosing a single case as opposed to a multiple case design, that might make a project more robust and compelling in terms of evidence (Ibid: 53), is that the train crash constitutes a unique case when analyzing microblogging in China; it generated widespread interest, and has an abundance of material to offer, an abundance that partly was facilitated by an initial lack of official directives to curb Netizens reactions and comments on the accident. As part of a strictly controlled media sphere, this also adds to the unique characteristics of the Wenzhou train crash.

The research questions of this study are two-folded. The question of “*how do Chinese microblogging applications position themselves within the greater online space of China?*” as well as the question of “*how do Chinese microblogging applications relate to the concept of the Public Sphere?*” are addressed in a more theoretical manner by proposing a simplified model of online China understood in lines of contextualizing examples given in Chapter 3, before the communicative space of Chinese microblogging, represented by Sina Weibo, are analyzed by an observational exploration of the main features and infrastructure this microblogging platform offers its users.

The question of “*what are the main limitations and possibilities that can be identified by exploring the facilitated infrastructure of Chinese microblogging applications, and content diffused across this infrastructure?*” expands the limits of a mainly theoretical reflection. To

examine these questions, a content analysis of five leaked media directives and 281 microblogging posts that all relate to the Wenzhou train crash has been conducted.

Applying Virtual Methodologies – the Internet as a place

It has been a clear aim for this project to base the analysis in data that is available online, preferably data that also would be available from within the Great Fire Wall, in order to best examine the conditions for an online public sphere *in* China, not just from the outside looking in. Markham (1998 cited in Markham and Baym 2009: 9) argues that the Internet can be seen not only as a tool, but also as a place, and a way of being. The Internet has increasingly become more and more intertwined with our everyday lives and activities, which might purpose a different approach of research as opposed to regarding the Internet as “a separate and automatically virtual sphere” (Hine 2009: 10). The widespread use of smart phones, and the possibility to send data using mobile networks, adds emphasis to this argument, as they enable you to report the latest happenings from your surroundings, without necessarily being restricted to a PC, laptop or a cable modem. The Internet is a *place* and a *space*, but it is a place and pace that is filled with cultural complexity (Ibid). The amount of data that are left behind online, however you choose to access it, is staggering, and offers intriguing opportunities for research. It also calls for careful methodological considerations, as online studies tend to draw upon a wide variety of research traditions and approaches.

The online material and data that has been obtained for this study is identifiable in an online environment, an environment that is open for all who 1) have Internet access, and 2) registers a Sina Weibo account. There are some important considerations to be made when choosing online material as the sole basis for data selection; in order to construct a coherent methodology for the following case study, a reflection of applying online data, and the ethical considerations that follows, are in place.

This project is based solely on online data that has been obtained by *virtual methodologies*, that is, data based on either contextual, technological or cultural aspects of the online sphere, obtained with methods implemented by and through the Internet (Orgad 2009: 35). As for other researchers studying online spaces, the sheer amount of available data for this project was overwhelming. The online data found on Sina Weibo is also rich in depth; information is provided by use of text as well as photographs and video. In addition, more hidden layers of

textual meaning cannot be overlooked in the framing of Chinese online spaces as controlled and censored. A number of challenges had to be tackled in methodological considerations for this study, both in relations to acquiring the most purposeful data, and also for securing an exhaustive research design. Both quantitative and qualitative methods could be used within a case study, however with qualitative data generally presumed of holding a predominating position over quantitative (Kohlbacher 2006: par 16). As mentioned, this project is well suited for qualitative analysis as it seeks in-depth understanding of a complex environment. Quantitative methods could however also serve the purpose of the research questions stated for this project as well, but with limitations of time and resources, the data selection for this particular study is applicable for a mainly quantitative approach, first and foremost because the data is extremely limited in scope compared to the total amount of data available within Sina Weibo. Although qualitative approaches within this limited data selection would exclude possibilities for establishing any casual relationships, qualitative analysis could be applied to point to trends within the overall environment of Chinese microblogging.

Case Studies and Documentation

A unique and important aspect of case study strategy is the unique strength a case study holds to “[...] deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews and observations...” (Yin 2009:11). The data for this study can be classified as one of the six most commonly used sources for evidence when conducting a case study, *documentation* (Ibid: 101). While online documentation, posts from Sina Weibo and leaked media directives, are vital parts of the following analysis, the content of posts and directives are contextualized by an observational exploration of technological features within the Sina Weibo structure.

The main methodological approach for this project is therefore formulated as a *qualitative content analysis* of online material, but with the data continuously having been gathered within a real-life context that bears close links to *direct observation* (Ibid: 109) or *naturalistic observation* (Bordens and Abbott 2002: 197).

To fully grasp the intentions of Chinese Netizens use of Sina Weibo, personal interviews could have added a layer of clarification to the study, however, the role of Netizens themselves, as fundamentally important as they may be for a communicative space like Sina Weibo, are not the main concern for this study. Furthermore, the levels of trust needed to

obtain answers of value from Chinese Netizens would be hard to obtain as a researcher situated outside China, who would have to rely on online correspondence, a form of interaction that might not be regarded as secure enough for Chinese Netizens to offer fully exhaustive answers to questions of online behavior. As the main objective for this study is to examine an online space, it makes sense to stick with online data, and to apply methodology rooted in textual analysis.

There would be a number of ways to identify data from Sina Weibo for textual analysis. One would be to gather posts from applications like WeiboScope, a University of Hong Kong initiative that scans up to 300.000 Weibo accounts¹⁷. However, an exploration of Sina Weibo as a communications tool in its own right would be in order to better understand the flow of information on the microblogging platform, an understanding that would not be reached by scrapping data from applications like WeiboScope. Instead, an exploratory approach with observational features has been applied to explore how Sina Weibo facilitates communication, as well as offering a point of departure for identification of Sina Weibo posts eligible for textual analysis.

4.2.2 Applied Methodology: Issues and Choices

According to Orgad (2009), the data any researcher chooses as basis for analysis

[...] should be collected and generated after solid preparation based on a clear rationale; should fit with the question and the context; should convincingly support the claims being made; should be used reflexively and be context-sensitive; and, finally, should be ethically grounded (p. 51)

Most researchers would agree with this assessment, and it also fits with the overall methodological approach of this study of a case study design, which stresses need for solid preparation, as well as continuous flexibility during the course of a research project. Orgad makes a strong and valid point about contextualization of our offline and online existence when she states that “It has become clear that the separation between online and offline cannot be sustained. Researchers have consistently argued for the need to frame the online both in its own right and in relation to other contexts and realities (Ibid: 37).

¹⁷ <http://research.jmsc.hku.hk/social/search.py/sinaweibo/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

A critical point for projects based on online data, especially regarding a wide reaching topic the concept of public sphere, is that even though there are hundreds of millions of people participating in online conversations every day, there are also hundreds of millions of people who do not. The Internet is full of Netizens who do not participate in online conversations or voice opinions by online applications. Netizens who read and observe, but nevertheless remain passive participants within the online spaces (they might get very verbal on subjects that sparked interest online in offline spaces), are excluded as a group from the data collected for this project. This is of course a major drawback for the overall external validity for this study, as it will be for any project framed to explore a society consisting of over a billion people, half of whom have Internet access. It seems indeed impossible to generalize findings across such an extensive population. In this regard, a combination of offline and online data, like a supplement of a large scale survey, would have been useful to highlight the nuances of the data found online, but this was not an option within reach for this project.

So how then, would it be possible to contextualize a happening that generated interest nationwide in China? According to Sina Weibos own reports, over 300 million registered users post 100 million posts every day (China Internet Watch 2012b), and even though these number stems from an unaudited report there is little reason to doubt that the total number of registered users and posts indeed could be well within six-digit-ranges.. The vast amounts of information, situated within this complicated online domain, added incentive for structuring the design of this project as a one-case study, with data drawn from a set time frame. Such a design approach also align well with *archival research* (Bordens and Abbott 2002: 206) and *historiography*, adding emphasis to the traits of the Wenzhou train crash as a *history* traced within a infrastructure with archival characteristics.

By analyzing data that has been identified in a past event –albeit with a proximity in time that frames it as a contemporary event - this study separates itself from other virtual methodologies like virtual ethnography (Marshall and Rossman 2011) as data collection has not been conducted in real-time. Although being a retrospective study, the exploration of archival data identified on Sina Weibo helps to explore an online space, which in general provides a disembodied site where social identities are hidden.. Such an online space creates a “[...] possibility of studying the construction of identity solely through texts.” (Ibid:182). Online and offline identity is thereby separated; the millions of Weibo posts that relate to the Wenzhou train crash would not exist in this particular form without this specific online space

to frame them. Naturally, content of posts from Sina Weibo might be discussed offline, or online actions facilitated by Sina Weibo might lead to offline consequences of some sort, but the application itself exists because of the Internet. Furthermore, I as a researcher have separated myself from gathering offline material for research and analysis, and I have not directly interacted with any Sina Weibo Netizens; this study is solely based on exploring posts from the *online space* of Sina Weibo, proving to be both time- and cost efficient as compared to field studies in China.

4.2.3 Archival Research

As a non-experimental research strategy, *archival research* involves studying existing records like historical accounts of events, court records, published research articles, and other types of archived information (Bordens and Abbott 2002: 206). Archival research is suitable for identifying trends and correlations, but in its descriptive nature, you cannot establish causal relationships (Ibid: 206). Also, archives might not be complete, although they do often contain an “overwhelming amount of information” (Ibid), as is the case with Sina Weibo. A single case focus has helped this study to narrow down and identify material for analysis, facilitated in the initial stages of the study by the infrastructure of Sina Weibo offering in-site search functions. The leaked directives are also archived material, but not within the Sina Weibo infrastructure. They are however retrievable online.

Material regarding the Wenzhou train crash was withdrawn from Sina Weibo, with text and pictures from the different Weibo profiles compiled in computer documents. The text – both the original Chinese posts, and a subsequent English translation – as well as pictures, was later imported and stored in the qualitative analysis tool HyperResearch for further analysis.

4.2.4 Qualitative Content analysis

Content analysis has been stated to be “the longest established method of text analysis among the set of empirical methods of social investigation” (Titscher et al. 2000 cited in Kohlbacher 2006: par 34), but according to Kohlbacher (2006) there still does not seem to “exist a homogenous understanding of this method at present” (par 34), although the term originally “referred only to those methods that concentrate on directly and clearly quantifiable aspects of text content, and as a rule on absolute and relative frequencies of words per text or surface

unit” (Titscher et al. 2000, cited in Kohlbacher 2006 par 34). Altheide (1996) separates between *quantitative content analysis* and *qualitative document analysis*, where a qualitative methodological approach could serve particularly useful if the aim of a study is to discover new or emergent patterns” (Ibid: 16). Furthermore, Bryman (2004) defines qualitative content analysis as

an approach to documents that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning in texts. There is an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item is being analyzed, and the categories derived from it, appeared (cited in Kohlbacher 2006: par 41).

This is however, as Kohlbacher (2006; par 42) also argues, a rather descriptive understanding of a general approach to qualitative document analysis. A further understanding of qualitative content analysis can be found within the works of influential scholars on the field, like Mayring (2000), who amongst other adds emphasis to the importance of systematic and rule-based analysis, placing categories in the center of analysis, and theory guided analysis (Ibid: par 54)¹⁸.

Altheide’ (1996) understanding of qualitative content analysis bears similarities with the method of *grounded theory*, sharing a focus on constant comparison, contrasts and theoretical sampling in their approach (Ibid: 17). However, qualitative document analysis is more orientated towards concept development, data collection and emergent data analysis than grounded theory (Ibid). Furthermore, the aim of grounded theory is to generate testable hypotheses as a foundation for theory development, whereas qualitative document analysis is more oriented towards clear descriptions, and definitions compatible with the material that is gathered (Ibid). This project does not aim to generate hypotheses, but seeks instead to explore the spatial characteristics of Chinese microblogging application; qualitative content analysis was therefore considered to be a reasonable choice of direction for this particular project.

Understanding Documents

On the very basic level, documents are by Altheide (1996) understood as “any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis” (p. 2) and can be studied in order to “[...]understand culture – or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings

¹⁸ In the article *Qualitative Content Analysis* by Mayring (2000) there are no page numbers, citing from the article therefore refers to paragraphs (par) found in the article.

that make up a social reality shared by members of a society” (Ibid: 2). Yin (2009) also notes that documents must be handled carefully, and not be accepted as “literal recordings of events that have taken place” (p.103). Online documentation relating to the Wenzhou train crash is of course not in any sense or form exhaustible documentation of every aspect concerning the crash and its aftermath. However, online posts are in this instance an example of personal expressions and a desire to share information, and do thereby represent a somewhat more unique form of documentation as opposed to media reports, or other forms of documentation provided by different types of official agencies involved. As a tool for public expression, the leaked media directives represent documents that formulate the point of view officially held by the authorities, adding a layer of negotiation between the two major fractions within a normative understanding of the public sphere; the government and the governed.

The Process of Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis follows recursive and reflexive movements between concept-development, sampling, analysis and interpretation, where “the aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid” (Altheide 1996:16). This reflexive movement goes towards *constant discovery* and *constant comparison* of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (Glasser & Strauss 1967 cited in Altheide 1996: 16). This, it would seem, fits the nature of a case-analysis of Sina Weibo. However, there are a number of methodological choices to be made.

First of all, the researcher must pursue a specific problem that will be investigated. Altheide (1996) argues that “the research problem helps inform the appropriate unit of analysis, or which portion or segment of relevant documents will actually be investigated” (p. 24). For this project, a lot of time was spent researching the background of the main topic, the use of microblogging tools in China. Formulating research questions that were manageable within this large topic proved to be an enormous challenge, partly due to the almost unlimited possibilities a project within the field of Chinese online studies proposes. Designing a methodological approach that is manageable with such a large amount of available material turned out to be both difficult and time-consuming, with research questions changing form and scope many times during the course of the project. Media analysis relating to the public sphere is well-documented territory, and therefore an additional project within this particular field of media studies would need to be fresh and hopefully innovative.

With Sina Weibo being both large and somewhat vague for me in my first encounter with the application, the approach for category development, both the initial exploration of the application itself, as well as the material withdrawn to identify possibilities and limitations, was *inductive* (Mayring 2000: par 8). Within an inductive approach, the main idea is to let “themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher’s careful examination and constant comparison” (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009: 1), with a main idea to “formulate a criterion for definition, derived from theoretical background and research questions, which determines the aspects of the textual material taken into account” (Mayring 2000; par 12). An inductive approach has its counterpart in *deductive category application*, where prior formulated and theoretical derived aspects of analysis are brought in connection with the analyzed text (Ibid: par 13). In relations to identifying categories and themes, and in line with a division between an inductive or deductive approach, Gibbs (2007) also separates between *concept-driven* and *data-driven* coding (p. 44-45). Concept-driven coding is aided by a pre-set list of thematic ideas that the researcher might have generated from previous studies, research literature, personal hunches etc. (Ibid), whereas data-driven coding, or open coding as it also is called, does not start out with any lists of codes, seeking to set aside any preconception the researcher might have, thereby allowing the material to decide the direction for analysis. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, most research moves back and forth between the two (Ibid: 46). Having framed this research towards a theoretical emphasis of the public sphere, and by integrating leaked media directives into the analysis, there was an underlying presumption that the material withdrawn from Sina Weibo would answer the questions of possibilities and limitations offered by use of Chinese microblogging applications. However, I had no presumptions about the actual content of the posts themselves, other than that they had been many, and hopefully varied in terms of opinion. Media reports that were part of the initial research stages for designing this project had also mentioned that posts concerning the Wenzhou train crash had served as a watershed moment for the application, indicating that Netizens had been critical towards the incident. How this criticism was framed and how widespread it was, and if these reports really represented a truthful and balanced picture of online attention towards the train crash, was however uncertain.

The following analysis of the Wenzhou train crash has therefore relied on inductive category-development. Both the initial stages of research, and the main analysis that followed, has overall been data-driven; I entered Sina Weibo with an observational approach, and after

having based a design for a study on a theoretical framework concerning the public sphere, Sina Weibo posts were withdrawn for further analysis. However, as Gibbs (2007) also notes, no one enters a research project without any pre-existing ideas, as a researcher is both an observer of the social world, but also part of that same world (p. 46). By exploring the material, and letting the material decide the direction and scope for themes and categories, a preliminary set of findings were identified. The initial explorations of Sina Weibo identified material that later would be built into the final analysis, and also served to test and develop categories and themes that had emerged. These explorations worked as a pilot study for the final analysis, complementing the notion that pilot studies are, if not integral, then a highly advised part of a case study design (Yin 2009, 94-95).

4.3 Methodological concerns

There are several concerns this type of study must consider. How to handle online information and careful considerations of issues of privacy are particularly important, as well as issues of how a lone researcher can produce a study that reflects the ‘real’ space of Chinese microblogging.

4.3.1 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Literature discussing qualitative methodology all touch upon the importance of aiming for research that is trustworthy and that also holds a high standard in terms of ethical considerations in order to protect those involved in the study (see Marshall and Rossman 2011; Elm 2009). In our technological day and age, new issues of importance in this regards arises.

What constitutes as private information might differ between culture and countries – what is regarded private information in Norway might not be regarded as private in China (Elm 2009: 71). In China, commenting on a person’s weight, or asking about monthly income, is more common than it is in Norway. In regards to the train crash in Wenzhou, pictures of wounded passengers, and also personal details such as name, age and telephone number were spread by Netizens (see also section 5.3.4). Cultural differences in regards to private versus public information do however not relieve a researcher of ethical responsibility in protecting organizations and individuals the data material is drawn from.

The Internet is accessed by individuals for a variety of reasons; getting a transcript from your bank would be a personal matter, commenting on a news story in a online paper's comment section – under ones real name or an alias – would be a more public online activity. Some Netizens create personal Web sites as a personal space to express their individual views and thoughts; others might dedicate blogs to their favorite celebrity, cute baby animals, cooking recipes or commentary on a nation's foreign policy. How individuals choose to apply the vast opportunities the Internet offers are completely up to them, they should however be aware that regardless of use, be it venting frustrations, offering advice on the perfect steak or criticize incompetent politicians, the Internet *can* be very private, but also extremely public.

Your email account is personal, as is the emails you receive to the account. You log on by use of a password, and most would be worried if a third party would gained access to your email correspondence. However, you also use a password to log on to your Twitter account, but your posts, or tweets, unless you actively choose to restrict access to them to your followers exclusively, will be accessible to the greater Twitter community. If someone gained access to your Twitter profile and starting posting in your name it might be more upsetting than someone reading your emails. According to Sveningsson, there are different *degrees* of private and public that apply to the online environment (Elm 2009: 75).

A public online environment is one that is open and free for everybody, with no requirements for registration or membership, i.e. open chat rooms or web pages (Ibid). A semi-public environment however, is a space that in principle is accessible for everyone with online access, but that requires some form of membership and registration, like web communication or social networking sites (Ibid). However, within both public and semi-private online spaces, there might be private spaces that can be applied for private interaction, as closed rooms within chat exemplify (Ibid).

While open online spaces require no consent, and private spaces do requires consent (Ibid: 76), the semi-public and semi-private spaces are more blurry in regards to obtaining consent for observation (Ibid). Also, content within the space, be it public, semi-public or private, might also differ in degree of private and public. Our conceptions of public and private can be blurred because both can exist within the same online space (Allen 1996 cited in Elm 2009: 76). Furthermore, private chat rooms might not only be used to discuss private matters, but topics of public interest as well, while others might discuss private matters on publicly

available online channels, either by inclination, or in ignorance. In an example of the latter from China, a government official and his mistress posted personal messages to one another on Sina Weibo, unaware that the entire Weibo community could follow their conversation (Li 2011). Online users might also not reflect over the fact that silent lurkers could record, analyze and publish findings based on their online activities (Eml 2009: 77). What kind of online content then, can be considered public enough to be studied without informed consent? According to Elm (2009), Thompson (1994) offers guidelines within this shady gray area; public content would be content that concerns societal matters, whereas private content concerns individuals private lives separated from societal matters (Elm 2009: 80).

The data used in this study has already been noted to having been generated in its entirety from an online environment. By registering an account on weibo.com I gained access to the online space of Sina Weibo, where posts regarding the Wenzhou train crash were identified. As a microblogging tool, Sina Weibo is structured around a core of communication. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, who offers a choice to openly share their profiles or not, all Sina Weibo profiles are open to all Sina Weibo users. The platform in itself is thereby a semi-private application. The content on the platform, - the expressed, shared and observed opinions on Sina Weibo - range from private (unwillingly exemplified by the exchange of sentiments between the government-official and his mistress), to conversations on public matters like sports scores, national news stories and general politics. The data gathered for this study cuts across a vertical slice of the Chinese online sphere; posts are gathered from profiles representing official bodies (like government and police); semi-official organizations, giving an impression of larger body representation (see also section 4.3.3); media organizations; media professionals; opinion leaders; and private profiles, that is, profiles without clear affiliation to any of the above-mentioned categories. The categories of media professionals, opinion leaders and private profiles are the most vulnerable group in terms of ethics for this project, as they all are represented by individuals as opposed to groups without one distinct sender behind the produced posts. Within these individual voices, the posts posted by media professionals and opinion leaders do however position themselves as more public statements than posts posted by Netizens belonging to the private category. All posts, however, regardless of their senders, concern a matter of major public interest; the Wenzhou train crash. The accident was of public importance and of public concern, and sparked discussion of public interest on a variety of issues. Personal opinions might have been

expressed, but they all related to a public matter. As will be discussed in the analysis, there were however themes of interest relating to the crash that was of a more private manner, like personal stories of individual passengers on the train (see also section 5.3.4).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) cautions researchers to not be fooled by the apparent openness of public material, as use of such materials might still be able to harm organizations or individuals in ways not anticipated by the researcher (p. 162, 183). Due to the open nature of Sina Weibo, and more importantly due to the overall public interest in the case studied, I have not obtained consent from Weibo Netizens to subject their posts for analysis, The reason for also including a category of private profile follows from the overall ‘publicness’ of the case studied. On Sina Weibo, the playing fields for voicing opinions between levels of society evens out; the infrastructure of Sina Weibo are same to all whether you are part of a public body or represent your own personal voice. The majority of posts that are referred to in the analysis are all still available on Sina Weibo. There are however some posts that were identified during the course of the study that since has been removed, posts that either have been removed by Weibo users themselves, or perhaps also by moderators on basis of content in the posts. Such posts are referred to in the analysis only when they highlight important aspects for analysis, and the senders of such posts are made anonymous.

4.3.2 Translations

When data is transcribed or translated, it is no longer raw data, but ‘processed data’ (Wengraf 2001 cited in Marshall and Rossman 2011: 164). Translating involves subtle meanings and connotations (Ibid: 165), and becomes especially complicated to work around when the original language of the posts is as culturally complex as Chinese. Chinese online culture involves both sarcasm and slang that originated in the vivid Chinese language (Meng 2011). As a student of the Chinese language I have a basic, but still unfortunately very limited, understanding of such subtleties. The major themes of Weibo posts are comprehensible by applying existing knowledge, and a dictionary when in need, but underlying meanings might completely be lost in my crude understanding. The data presented here has therefore been translated into English by help of two native Chinese speakers, making my own understanding, supplemented by additional translation by a native speaker of Chinese, the foundation for the analysis in Chapter 5. As part of the Chinese-language specific portions of this study is to explore the infrastructure of Sina Weibo, as well as overreaching themes in

regards to the Wenzhou train crash, such an approach to handling struggles with language would seem sufficient. There is however also a more complicated portion of the research questions in the language-specific aspect aimed at highlighting possibilities and limitations of posts in negotiation with censorship mechanisms. As this project is an archival study, based on observations only *after* the Wenzhou train crash, there is a great possibility that posts that I have identified in relation to the crash first could have undergone an initial interpretation, by Sina Weibo, either allowing the post to spread via the application, or removing it. Only after such an initial interpretation would I have come across the post in my own exploration of Sina Weibo, before the post would have undergone a second interpretation by being gathered, translated and analyzed in this project. Posts with content that would seem to push towards the limits set by content regulating directives might therefore be understood to be controversial based on both my initial understanding, and also the final translation, but this is still nevertheless an *interpretation* of content. Such multi-levels of interpretation, which in a possible removal of posts by Sina Weibo also adds to concerns of completeness of the application as an archive, offers challenges of the overall completeness for this research project. It would however be difficult to secure a complete and exhaustive understanding of Sina Weibo while content is open for interpretation on so many levels; first by who-ever posts a Weibo post, then by other users of Sina Weibo, and possibly a moderator of content, before possibly removed by moderators, or the person who posted the Weibo posts in the first place, before finally might being interpreted by someone outside China with limited knowledge to all the cultural specific aspects of the Weibo post.

4.3.3 Concerns of quality

Quantitative methodologies have developed a variety of approaches and techniques in order to ensure that research is true and accurate, consistent across circumstances and applicable to a greater whole (Gibbs 2007: 91). Qualitative research, being reflective and interpretive in nature, will often fall short in reaching goals of *validity*, *reliability* and *generalization* that quantitative research aim to fulfill. Qualitative research stands at risk for being biased and partial towards methods applied, and the yielded results, and should therefore strive to produce as high-quality projects as possible (Ibid). As a researcher I have done my utmost to stay aware of personal views and inclinations that could color my analysis of Sina Weibo. My view of the world has been molded by years of Norwegian education, and my mindset clearly

belongs to Western European modernity. My existing mindset was however challenged when I from 2007 to 2010 altogether spent just over a year and a half in China, studying the language and culture, and engaging in discussion of all things Chinese with Chinese and expat friends. The complexity of the Chinese society is difficult to grasp from the outside, and remains puzzling in many regards also after having gained some insight to it. This project emerged from my interest in Chinese society and politics, and the questions asked also stem from my whatever knowledge, misconceptions and curiosity I have gained from my studies as a student of media and communication with a special interest for China. The reflections and answers I give to the questions are hopefully not tainted by my own beliefs, as I have certainly tried to stay aware of any biases in any direction or form. The analysis of how information travels on Sina Weibo by analyzing the infrastructure of the application is at no greater risk for being subjected to personal beliefs, and with posts from Sina Weibo being translated by a native Chinese speaker before being subjected to analysis, a thorough basis for a balanced view is believed to be achieved within the limitations a MA project sets in terms of resources.

Constant comparison of codes and coded material (Ibid: 96) has been another important guideline for this study. Overlapping codes and coding has been a constant concern for this analysis, but even with a rigorous coding regime, there is no escaping that accuracy and validity of this type of project is a major issue. Also, with the small and limited dataset applied in this study, it is not possible to generalize results to the all the different Chinese microblogging tools.

But even with these concerns, Sina Weibo is argued to be a good point of departure for understanding the main traits of Chinese microblogging applications as part of the greater online China. The Wenzhou trains crash, sparking public outrage and generating millions of Sina Weibo posts, furthermore represents uniqueness in magnitude within the Chinese online sphere that justifies a single-case approach.

4.4 Getting Familiar with Sina Weibo

The pulse of Sina Weibo is extremely fast moving, with Netizens focusing in on new stories pretty much every single day. Some stories do however maintain interest over time, gaining attention from a variety of microblogging Netizens, including both opinion leaders, celebrities

and government-affiliated profiles, and profiled belonging to the greater public. In 2011 such stories included a Chinese actress becoming the focus of attention for re-posting anti-gay sentiments on her Sina Weibo profile, and a following criticism of her online action broadcasted by a presenter on the state-controlled station CCTV (Tan 2011), as well as a longer-running campaign aimed at identifying missing Chinese children suspected to be kidnapped by human traffickers, initiated on Sina Weibo by scholar Yu Jianrong in early 2011¹⁹. The campaign-initiative made the round-up list of Sina Weibo's biggest stories of 2011²⁰, as did a story that unfolded in June 2011, when a twenty-something young woman by the name Guo Meimei sparked Weibo outrage, initiated by a Sina Weibo user commenting on her profile listing "Business General Manager of Red Cross Society" as her employment details, accompanied by a string of photos of fancy cars, expensive handbags and first-class plane rides. Hundreds and thousands of comments started pouring in her Weibo profile, turning the story into a trending topic on Sina Weibo, as well as being reported in offline media (CCTV 2011). Tracking the story of Guo Meimei served as my first more thorough familiarization with the Sina Weibo interface and structure, occurring shortly after I had registered my own Sina Weibo account. This initial introduction to Sina Weibo eased my introduction to the case that will be subjected for a more thorough analysis; the Wenzhou train crash.

4.4.1 The Wenzhou train crash as a single case

On the evening of July 23 a Netizen posted a plea for help by use of her Sina Weibo profile

Please help! The high speed train D301 has derailed not far from the Wenzhou South station. All the children are crying in the train. And there is no working staff to help us. Please come and help us! (Posted July 23, 20:47,²¹)

The message was posted after two high-speed trains had collided on a viaduct just outside Wenzhou in the eastern province of Zhejiang. Train D3115, travelling from Hangzhou to Fuzhou, came to a standstill on a viaduct, and was shortly after rear-ended by train D301, a derivative of the Japanese Shinkansen 'Bullet Train', running at 99km/h from Beijing to Fuzhou. The impact resulted in the derailing of six train cars, with four of them falling off the

¹⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/jiejiquier> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

²⁰ <http://tech.sina.com.cn/z/2011pandian/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

²¹ Posts has since been removed, original: 求救！动车D301现在脱轨在距离温州南站不远处！现在车厢里孩子的哭声一片！没有一个工作人员出来！快点救我们！

viaduct. In the following days millions of posts relating to the crash were posted online, a great amount of them flooding the channels of Sina Weibo as well.

China has spent enormous resources on developing high-speed train connections across the country. As with other grand-scale projects, like the Three Gorges Dam, the development of high-speed train rails in China has been part of the emerging image that China processes both economic and political will to establish itself as a modern, technological highly developed one-party state based on the capitalist-friendly one-size-fits-all ideology of ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. The development of high-speed trains and rails is not only a high-prestige, and incredibly costly project for the Chinese state; trains are also a much preferred, and perhaps also the only economical available, means of transportation, for millions of Chinese. Consequently, development of such projects, as well as complications they might encounter, are topics of great interest for the Chinese public. Compared to the enormous natural catastrophe of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, where over sixty thousand people lost their lives, the forty lives lost in the Wenzhou train crash, compared in nothing else than cynical numbers, comes across as marginal. Understandably, the train crash caused public outrage on a massive scale, both on communication platforms like Sina Weibo, and also in traditional media channels like newspapers and state controlled television station CCTV²². Adding to the complexity of the circumstances surrounding the train crash, online mechanisms of censorship did not kick in with full force during the evening of the crash, nor did it in the following aftermath. In the days following the crash, media outlets were told to refrain from investigation and commentary, but online information, opinion and speculations floated more or less freely across platforms. By analyzing some of the posts that emerged after the crash, and keeping in mind the official demands for media reports regarding the crash, the Wenzhou train crash facilitates a venture into some of the complex dynamics at play in the negotiation of information and expression between authoritarian rule and content control, and firsthand sentiments and views on greater social issues within the public.

The train crash in Wenzhou represents first and foremost a terrible human tragedy where too many lives were lost, and is an incident that needs to be handled with respect and caution when implemented into a research project. Compared to a case like the Guo Meimei incident,

²² Shanghaiist. 2011. "Even CCTV's now turning up the heat on the Ministry of Railways" http://shanghaiist.com/2011/07/28/watch_cctv_news_anchor_qin_fang_una.php (Last accessed 29.11.12)

the human tragedy of the train crash represents the major difference between the two, in other aspects the two cases share similarities; both generated millions of posts and comments on Sina Weibo; both gained nationwide attention; both gained widespread attention offline which would only be natural with such a tragic incident as the train crash, but not necessarily so with the case of the money-flaunting young woman. The human tragedy of the train crash led to comments, here observed only on Sina Weibo, and not so much in traditional media outlets, to take on a more humane form than the comments relating to the case of Guo Meimei, which were overwhelmingly negative in general. The criticism of Guo Meimei targeted not only the organization of The Red Cross Society in China and the overreaching implications of corruption it also targeted her personally. Posts regarding the train crash, on the other hand, took on a more nuanced form, presenting a more balanced focus in questions of how such a terrible accident could happen at all; how the government acted in response to the crash; expressions for public grief; concern in calls for blood-donations and so on. With the familiarity of Sina Weibo gained by following the Guo Meimei case, maneuvering the more complex case of the Wenzhou train crash became a threshold that could be overcome, and the train crash in Wenzhou was consequently chosen as a single, unique case for his study. This project is therefore conducted within a design of an holistic single-case study, with the 2011 train crash in Wenzhou as a critical case analyzed in light of the theoretical framework proposed by Dahlgren (2005a), and with material directly linked to crash as its main base for data-withdrawal and subsequent analysis.

4.4.2 Constructing a protocol and identifying the data

The process of coding qualitative material can take on different forms. This study draws upon Gibbs (2007), who separates between concept-driven and data-driven coding, where concept-driven coding is aided by a pre-set list of thematic ideas that the researcher might have generated from previous studies, research literature, personal hunches etc. (Gibbs 2007: 44-45). With the two approaches not being mutually exclusive (Ibid: 46), this project has moved back and forth between the two; by first applying an observational approach to gaining a basic understanding of Sina Weibo, and thereafter having based a design for a study on a clear theoretical framework, the first onset for coding was concept-driven, with a list of preset concepts and themes being applied to a pilot study that aimed to be a small-scale version of the final study. The list of preset concepts was however also before the pilot study had been

conducted believed to be in need of revision before the final study, and was therefore only to serve as a basis for identifying further themes and concepts in order to remain open for data-driven revision in the final analysis. The basic, concept-driven list of themes and concepts for the final study consisted of:

- 1) **Sentiment of content:** content of posts that described critique, support, grief, anger etc.
- 2) **Use of images:** posts that in addition to text added content of pictures relating to the crash, like on-site pictures, passengers lists, family members/friends of passengers, government officials, grief and national sentiment, newspapers reports etc.
- 3) **Use of video:** posts that in addition to text added content of video from on-site locations, passengers, news reports, grief and national sentiment etc.
- 4) **Use of internet meme/internet slang**
- 5) **Embedded posts from other Sina Weibo users**
- 6) **Numbers of times reposted / number of times embedded post has been reposted**

By identifying material that possibly could be built in to the final analysis, the hopes were also to test and develop the pre-existing ideas of what information might be found within in the Sina Weibo posts. Pilot studies are also a, if not integral, then highly advised, part of a case study design (Yin 2009: 94-95).

4.4.3 Pilot study

The main challenge for a qualitative content analysis based on exploring the Sina Weibo infrastructure, is identifying a selection of profiles to study, as there in theory are potentially 300 million profiles eligible for analysis.

An analysis of any online public sphere should strive to include as many layers of the online community in question as possible. On a basic level, the public sphere is believed to be in negotiation with the state, so representatives from state agencies should be included if possible. The mass media, serving as channels for negotiation between state and public, should also to be included. On the other side of the negotiations table we find the public, so

citizen-voices were to be included as well. As expression of public sentiment, civil society could form valuable pressure groups in negotiations between state and society, so non-governmental organizations should be also included in the selection.

For a pilot study for this project, I started exploring Sina Weibo for profiles that would fit within five preset categories profiles:

1) Official and verified profile affiliated with Wenzhou or central government (see also section 5.1.2 for more on the Sina Weibo verification process)

2) Non-governmental organizations

3) Verified profile of opinion leaders

4) Verified private profile

5) Verified profile of official media organizations

One profile from each category was identified for the pilot study, with a maximum of ten and minimum of five Weibo posts withdrawn from each profile. In exploring and observing Sina Weibo, the selection of profiles for the pilot study was identified during August and September 2011. For most part the identification of profiles were arbitrary, starting by an in-site search using keywords like ‘Wenzhou power car’ (温州动车) or ‘7.23 power car’ (7.23动车). A profile belonging to the official news agency Xinhua, called *Xinhua point of view* (新华视点) was not added by arbitrary selection, but was included as an example of a professional media organization known to represent the CCP party line. Following an in-site search for profiles run by official entities a profile run by the Wenzhou police, named *Wenzhou safety* (平安温州) met the criteria for having posted at least five posts regarding the crash, and was added to the pilot as an example of a verified official profile.

A similar in-site search for non-governmental organizations made it apparent that those are harder to come by on Sina Weibo. However, while typing in keywords like those stated above, the in-site search function of Sina Weibo provided a list of search phrases that included, but also extended my initial keyword, leading to profiles with *official sounding names* like *Wenzhou High-speed Train Derailment Rescue Team* (温州动车脱轨救援队). In exploring previous posts from the profile-history, it became clear that the profile belonged to

an individual who after the crash had changed the profile-name to a more organizational-sounding name relating to the train crash. That an apparently private Netizen would alter their Sina Weibo profile to something resembling an official-sounding organization was found to be very interesting, a re-naming that also carried connotations of some kind of civil-sounding organizations. This profile was therefore included in the selection of profiles for the pilot study as a modification to the category of non-governmental organizations, altering the category into rather carrying examples of a sort of pseudo civil society found on Sina Weibo.

By exploring Sina Weibo, the mysterious blogger *Ran Xiang* (染香), self-proclaimed president of the Wu Mao Dang, was identified and added to the pilot study within the category of opinion leaders, while a blog post²³ started out as a source for identifying a private user that had expressed their sentiments regarding the crash on their microblog profile.

In order to be included in the selection for further analysis, the posts had to be posted between July 23 and August 01, and needed to refer to ‘train crash in Wenzhou’, ‘Wenzhou incident’; refer to the date of the crash, ‘July 23’, ‘7.23’ or ‘723’; refer to the Ministry of Railway or people affiliated with the Ministry of Railways; or refer to the Internet meme that in initial research stages had been identified as relevant for the train crash, “Whether you believe it or not, I certainly believe [it to be true]”.²⁴ The profiles had to include a minimum of five posts regarding the crash, and a maximum of ten posts regarding the crash were gathered from each profile. In order to highlight information diffusion, the selection of posts was based on frequency of reposts. Comments in form of threads linked to posts were not included in the analysis. Based solely on my own understanding, the posts were imported into the research software HyperResearch for additional coding. The software handles both text and image data, and therefore served the content-rich posts of Sina Weibo well.

Initial findings of the pilot study showed that by immersing myself into Sina Weibo, the Wenzhou train crash indeed offered a well-documented case that was suitable for further exploration of Sina Weibo. The selection of posts was discovered to be flawed in terms of discovering traits of information diffusion; under each Weibo post there is a number showing how many times a post has been reposted. However, if the post contains an embedded repost from another Weibo user, the embedded post also contains a number showing how many

²³ <http://hyperallergic.com/31517/social-media-street-art/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

²⁴ http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Whether_you_believe_it_or_not,_it%E2%80%99s_up_to_you,_but_I_do_an_away. (Last accessed 29.11.12)

times that – now embedded - post has been reposted. For the selection of posts in the pilot study I did not include numbers of reposts of embedded posts into my organization of most reposted posts, thereby possibly excluding posts that had been widely diffused, which also missed an opportunity to explore how information on Sina Weibo flowed outside the very few profiles I had identified myself. Therefore, for the further selection of posts for the final analysis the number of forwards of *embedded posts* were given priority.

4.4.4 The Final Selection

Two new categories of profiles were added to the selection of profile categories after the pilot study. The first, *media professionals*, was added as a weighing point of official news organizations, as journalists are known to be active Sina Weibo users, and their personal opinions might differ from the opinions portrayed by official news outlets. The second addition was a category situated close to the *semi-official organizations*; profiles dedicated to *rumor busting*. With the amount of chaff and unverified information floating around on Sina Weibo, some Weibo users have dedicated effort to refute rumors and verify information. However, not all of these rumor busting profiles might be legit themselves, further adding navigational issues in the Chinese online information stream. The rumor busting profiles have nevertheless found a function within the Sina Weibo structure, with Sina Weibo running a rumor busting profile on its own.²⁵

With a revised set of categories for profiles in place, a goal of identifying approximately two hundred posts for final analysis was set to be manageable in terms time and resources. The decision was made to identify three separate profiles within each profile-category, and to withdraw a maximum of ten posts from each profile for final analysis, which would bring the maximum number of posts for analysis up to 210. As a number of this maximum number of 210 posts would contain embedded posts, and as these also would be analyzed, the final selection of posts for analysis could (and probably would) however exceed 210, but still be within a manageable amount in terms of time and resources.

Adding upon the profiles identified for the pilot study, further profiles within the categories of *private profiles*, *semi-organizational* and *rumor busting profiles* were identified by arbitrary explorations, pretty much like it would for any Weibo users searching for profiles of interest

²⁵http://e.weibo.com/weibopiyao?ref=http%3A%2F%2Fs.weibo.com%2Fuser%2F%2525E8%2525BE%25259F%2525E8%2525B0%2525A3%26Refer%3Dweibo_user (Last accessed 29.11.12)

to follow. I did curiously enough not come across the profile dedicated to rumor busting that is run by Sina Weibo, but did by exploration of various other profiles identify a profile called the *Rumor Busting League* (辟谣联盟), *Wenzhou Train Crash Fact Search* (温州动车追尾真相探寻), as well as *AC Kongqi Xibo* (AC 空气稀薄); by description on his Weibo profile a ‘amateur rumour-hunter’, and also affiliated with Anti-CNN, a web site dedicated to correct what the founders of the site deem to be biased reports on China by Western media.²⁶

Profiles belonging to the category of *official verified profiles* were identified by exploring government profiles listed within the ‘hall of famous people’ (名人堂), as provided in the Sina Weibo ‘public square’ (广场).

Selecting three private profiles to study would by no means be hard with such a large user-base available, but as it was this category that was most vulnerable in regards to privacy, a few criteria were set; private profiles for the final selection all had more than 10.000 fans (followers) and had posted over 500 posts.

The categories of *opinion-leaders*, *media professionals* and *professional media organizations* were seen as examples of participants that are part of a public space that might be closer to the center of power (Dahlgren 2005b, 420), and the selection of profiles from these categories has aimed at portraying a diversity in viewpoint. In addition to the profile run by news agency Xinhua, a profile belonging to liberal newspaper Southern Weekend, and the conservative newspaper Global Times were identified as selection of profiles for the category of *official media organizations*. Blogger and self-proclaimed citizen journalist, *Lao Rong* (老榕), as well as the former journalist and outspoken blogger *Muzi Mei* (不加V)²⁷ were added to the selection for the category of *opinion leaders*. Finally, editor of conservative newspaper Global Times *Hu Xijin* (胡锡进), as well as news editor for one of the few privately owned and known to be outspoken television station Phoenix Television, *Luqiu Luwei* (闫丘露薇), and commentator and columnist *Yang Jin Lin* (杨锦麟) were added to the selection of profiles for the category of *media professionals*. There were many voices to be heard on Sina Weibo in the days after the crash. This study, with limited scope of selection of profiles, had no intention of capturing them all. The profiles selected for further analysis might not even be the

²⁶ <http://www.m4.cn/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

²⁷ Journalist and blogger Muzi Mei uses an alias as her username on Sina Weibo, 不加V。

most representative ones within the myriad of profiles available on the application. To address such issues, the decision to withdraw the most forwarded posts from each profile would seem to help to at least identify posts that were of added value to more than solely the Weibo users who posted the post in the first place. Also, by adding emphasis to the number of reposts in embedded posts, posts that had been posted by other Weibo users (and then reposted by someone belonging to my selection of profiles) would be added to the selection of posts for analysis, thereby also adding a new layer of voices within the identified profile-categories.

Still keeping selection of posts in lines of minimum five posts regarding the crash being identified on each profile, a selection of maximum ten of the most forwarded Weibo posts were withdrawn from each profile. During the time of profile identification process, all profiles met the criteria of containing at least five posts regarding the crash, but not all profiles were found to contain as many as ten posts concerning the train crash. If this was the case, another profile was added to the category to bring the number of posts withdrawn from each category of profiles as close as possible to the goal of 210, still not counting embedded posts.

Furthermore, in order to explore opportunities and limitations of microblogging, five media directives that had been leaked online were also added to the data selection following the pilot study. By adding media directives as an analytical level for content analysis of the Sina Weibo posts regarding the Wenzhou train crash, it was the hopes that the final analysis would be able to identify not only some of the major themes of public concern and interest regarding the train crash, but also highlight some of the negotiations and boundaries of expression in online China.

5 Analysis

The following analysis is two-fold; first, the infrastructure of Sina Weibo is analyzed in its own right in an effort to contextualize Sina Weibo as a communication tool within the greater Chinese online space. Secondly, a content analysis of leaked media directives, as well as 281 Sina Weibo posts regarding the Wenzhou train crash, are used to identify some of the main possibilities and limitations Sina Weibo proposes to its users within its infrastructure, and to pinpoint some of the main themes of public interest regarding this specific incident, as an example of online negotiation of public discourse in online China.

Based on the simplified model of the Chinese online sphere in section 3.2.2, Sina Weibo is argued to be a semi-public²⁸, content regulated, high-speed, two-way communication platform and personal publishing tool. As an application that in principle is open and accessible for everyone with Internet access by computer or smart-phone, Sina Weibo has grown popular amongst a variety of Netizens, adding celebrities, opinion leaders, news organizations, multinational corporations, as well as the general public to their user demographic. With personal expression blended with news, entertainment, games and more, presented within a common-for-all infrastructure that largely dismisses communicative boundaries between Netizens of varying social status, Sina Weibo functions as a sub-sphere for communication and interaction within the greater online space of China, that also offers an easy-to-use platform for self-expression which is much more accessible to the greater public than the traditional media-channels in China.

5.1 The structures of Sina Weibo

After registering an account with Sina Weibo, you get access to your own personal Sina Weibo page, your profile page. By navigation from this profile page, you are free to add whoever you want to your list of profiles that you ‘follow with interest’ (关注), and see which users of Sina Weibo follow you, in the list of ‘fans’ (粉丝). In regards to user relationship, Sina Weibo is not mutually reciprocal; you are free to follow whomever you want, but those you follow do not have to follow you back, and you choose whether or not you want to follow

²⁸ Registration is needed in order to use the application

someone who follows you. Popular celebrities might have millions of ‘fans’, but only follow a small amount of profiles themselves. You might want to follow your favorite newspapers for updates, but they do not necessarily follow you back. The structure helps build a more arbitrary network that extends well beyond off-line networks, and fosters a low-threshold opportunity to interact with people you not necessarily would have any contact with offline. You post Weibo posts from your personal profile page, and it also displays a continuously updated feed of posts posted by those profiles you follow. Your Sina Weibo profile page offers possibilities to add personalized information like occupation and interests, as well as options to add a profile picture and add graphical background pictures of your own choice. In addition to your own Weibo posts, and the feed of posts from those you follow, there is an in-application chat function available for interaction with other online Sina Weibo users. Sina Weibo offers a variety of additional in-application features like gaming, group buying and a tool that can be used to ask Sina Weibo users to answer questions in polls. Such features, if successful, could help keep Netizens happily entertained within the application, making it a saturated web-experience catering to an array of needs; from keeping tabs of celebrity gossip, staying in touch with your friends, asking fellow Weibo-users their opinion, reading jokes or keeping up to date on news stories. Sina Weibo is an entertainment center, a news portal and a tool for personal publishing, all rolled into an easily navigated online infrastructure.

5.1.1 Posting ‘Weibos’

Once you are a registered user, you can post microblogs yourself. The post will appear in a feed, or timeline, on your followers profile page, just as Weibo posts posted by users you follow will appear in a feed on your profile page. Like Twitter, each Weibo post has a 140-character limit, however you can say far more with 140 Chinese characters than by using the Latin alphabet. You can also add emoticons and hyperlinks to your text, as well as pictures and videos, to create posts saturated with media. Also, so-called long-Weibos (长微薄) enables you to posts text, or a combination of text and pictures, into a picture format, suitable for posts that will exceed the 140-character limit, in practice making the 140-character limit superfluous.

Once a Weibo is posted, fellow Weibo users are free to comment and forward your post. Each post provides information on date and time for posting, as well as how many times a post has been forwarded (转发), and how many comments (评论), it has received. Another way to

comment on posts is by adding your own text when forwarding the Weibo. Interaction on Sina Weibo, like Twitter, uses the @-sign before usernames to mark original sources, to indicate response or reply to users, or as a means to make specific users aware of posts or comments.

The option to forward posts highlights information diffusion within the Sina Weibo infrastructure. Forwarding posts offers an effective process of information sharing across your network. Adding comments to Weibo posts does on the other hand facilitate direct interaction and participation across the Sina Weibo user base. However, it is also worth noting that you do not need to follow a Weibo user in order to forward or comment on posts, further adding to the open structure of Sina Weibo. Weibo posts that are featured on Hot-topics list have often been forwarded thousands of times, and received thousands of comments. In the data of the Wenzhou train crash, Weibo posts that had been forwarded hundreds of thousands of times were identified, offering a testimony for the potentially huge power of information diffusion within the Sina Weibo infrastructure.

Information is however not diffused in an unhindered manner on Sina Weibo. Sina is bound to follow official media regulations, meaning that posts that are regarded as being in violation with official policies can be deleted by Sina Weibo, and in-sight searches for certain topics might not yield any results. A search for ‘collective stroll (集体散步)’²⁹ using Sina Weibo renders no other result than a standardized message from Sina Weibo telling that “In accordance to relevant laws, regulations and policies, search results for “collective walk” can not be displayed”³⁰ (see Picture 1), before offering suggestions to alter keywords and search again, or check out lists of the latest news.

²⁹ The term ‘collective stroll’ first appeared online in June 2007, when people took to the streets in the city of Xiamen to protest a PX-factory under construction. It refers to a non-violent expression of citizens’ dissatisfaction, which is formed in an apolitical matter with its absence of banners or slogans that one usually finds in demonstrations.

³⁰



Picture 1 Screen-shot of ‘Collective stroll’ search from Sina Weibo

Posts containing filtered words might however still be available by browsing individual user profiles, but will not show up in the in-application search, making them harder to identify. The lists of filtered words are not static, but in a state of flux, and might change on a day-to-day basis. Keywords that once were blocked might suddenly produce results again, and keywords that have been accessible before might suddenly be blocked. In the summer of 2011 Weibo searches including the Chinese character for ‘river’ (江) resulted in a message like the one stated above, sparking online rumor that former president Jiang Zemin (江泽民) had died³¹, fueled also by the former president being absent at the monumental celebration of the CCP’ 90th anniversary during the same time period (BBC 2011). By filtering search terms, the government is able to control content, but at the same time they indirectly offer Netizens grounds for speculation by implicit giving an indication of what information the government deems too sensitive for public comment and debate.

5.1.2 Verification and user registration

Sina Weibo offers a verification system for user profiles, both for individual users and also for profiles belonging to organizations. At the end of 2011, verified Sina Weibo profiles reached 300.000 (Chen and She 2012: 2), making it only a small percentage of Sina Weibos total user base. Basic requirements for individual users for having their profile verified, includes a true photo as profile picture, no alias as user-name and having more than 100 followers. Users also have to provide residential identification, job description and employment details, as well as a

³¹ He had not: <http://shanghaiist.com/2011/10/09/jiang-zemin-xinhai.php> (last accessed 30.11.12)

brief user description. After verifying and approving the application, Sina Weibo adds an orange ‘V’ after your Sina Weibo username, as a completion of the verification process. For organizational profiles, Sina Weibo provides a blue ‘V’ as sign for verification that just like for verification of individual users, are meant to provide trustworthiness of information, and combat speculations and rumors within the Sina Weibo infrastructure. The case of Guo Meimei revealed flaws in the verification process, as her verified identity of “general manager for Red Cross Commerce” (China Daily 14.12.2011) was contested by another Sina Weibo user, and proved indeed to be false thereby unveiling one of the biggest events in online China during 2011. Further diminishing the system are reports that some companies, for a fee of 80USD, offer verification outside the Sina Weibo verification process (The Economist 2012). In addition to orange and blue verifications, Weibo DaRen (微薄达人)³² offers ‘expert-verification’ in form of a red star next to your username for those who add lists of personal interest to the verification process, and eventually also issuing a ‘social credit card’ offering bonus points for use and discounts to the four million Sina Weibo users who now have DaRen verification (Ye 2012). Further adding to the myriads of Sina Weibo profile types, is the option to become a Sina Weibo VIP member (微博会员)³³, where a monthly fee of 1.50USD gives you eighteen different privileges, including an ‘exclusive symbol’ in form of a crown next to your username, extended ability to follow users anonymously, and the possibility to un-follow users while still appearing to follow them (Carter 2012). Paid membership on Sina Weibo is not that much different from signing up by free registration, but if you are looking to fly more under the radar on Weibo, the features of paid membership might seem appealing. Also, paid membership could also possibly help handle issues of spam accounts, as those who run multiple fake, spam accounts, might not be willing sign up with paid membership for all of them. The various profile options Sina offers, are seen as a measure to keep users engaged in the platform, and in the case of VIP membership, also as a mean to monetize Sina Weibo. The case of Guo Meimei as well as the reports of verifications for sale, weakens the trust of Sina Weibo’s many verification processes, and offers few other solutions for Sina Weibo users than to always keep in mind that seemingly verified profiles might indeed be false. The issues of verification therefore had implications for this study as well; despite not being able to fully verify profiles with verification-marked profile names, verification was kept in the protocol for profile-selection as preferred for all

³²Weibo DaRen: <http://new.club.weibo.com/> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

³³Sina VIP membership: <http://vip.weibo.com/privilege> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

profile categories. Within the final selection process it was however difficult to in the end identify all-verified profiles in each category, and five of the profiles in the final study are therefore unverified (no blue or orange V and no crown symbol), belonging within the profile-categories of *semi-organizational profiles*, *private profiles* and *rumor busting profiles*. For private profiles a high number of fans indicated that many did indeed trust the profiles, and the profiles of rumor busting and semi-organizations were regarded as valuable and somewhat unique types of profiles of Sina Weibo, securing a rational in the final selection even if they were unverified. The various verification symbols can be confusing, and the lack of trustworthiness misses the purpose of such processes completely. Verifications do however help to make the various types of profiles more distinct from each other, and as for all Netizens using Sina Weibo, critical navigation of profiles and the information they provide would always have to be found in a fundamental reading of content. Healthy skepticism towards information should be kept independent regardless of verification processes.

5.2 Content Analysis of Media Directives

The five directives that has been applied directly in relations to the analysis of Sina Weibo posts, all stem from the web site *China Digital Times*, and were found in two different postings on the site entitled *Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Wenzhou High-speed Train Crash* (CDT 2011a), and *Directives from the Ministry of Truth: July 5-September 28, 2011* (CDT 2011b). According to China Digital Times, the translated directives surface from “[...] a variety of sources” and are checked against “[...] official Chinese media reports to confirm their implementation” (CDT 2011a; CDT 2011b). In order to better understand the scope and overall tone of Chinese media directives, the content of the directives directly relating to the Wenzhou train accident are compared to other directives that were leaked in the same China Digital posts (as found in CDT 2011b).

5.2.1 Directives in general

Altogether, twenty-seven media directives are found in the two separate China Digital Times posts (CDT 2011a; CDT 2011b). In the post *Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Wenzhou High-speed Train Crash* (CDT 2011a) there is one directive regarding the train crash, while in the post *Directives from the Ministry of Truth: July 5-September 28, 2011* (CDT 2011b), four directives directly concern the Wenzhou train crash. The remaining twenty-two directives of

this second post relate to a variety of different topics, such as drought, a chemical plant, a charity federation, land grabs, home-purchasing restrictions, a basketball match, the rumored death of former president Jiang Zemin, independent candidates running for election, the American ambassador buying a cheap lunch in Beijing, a bank run, an attack by ruffians on a Xinjiang police station, a woman believed to be promoted on basis of being a mistress, and incidents with political activists. The directives are all dedicated to one specific topic or case, often referred to as an ‘incident’ (事件). Of the twenty-seven directives, twelve were issued by the Central Propaganda Department, with the rest being issued by the State Council Information Office, as well as a variety of local propaganda departments across China.

Almost a third of the non-crash related directives order media outlets not to ‘hype up’ (炒作) incidents, sometimes with also offering a clear frame for reporting:

From the Central Propaganda Department: All media outlets are to carefully handle reports on land grabs. Do not question the legitimate procedure of demolition; do not offer public support to those who ask for unreasonable compensation; do not report forced demolition related incidents involving suicide, self-harm, or large groups. Do not hype up the very few extreme cases. No collective or linked reports will be allowed. (CDT 2011b)³⁴

Another seven of the non-train crash related directives, tells the media to refrain altogether from reporting on incidents. For instance, on August 18 2011, coinciding with an official visit by US vice-president Joe Biden, a basketball game between a US team from Georgetown University and Chinese team Bayi Rockets ended in an on-court brawl between players (BBC 2011b). Two days later a media directive surfaced:

From the State Council Information Office: All media outlets are not to report the fight between the Bayi Rockets and the Georgetown Hoyas. Control needs to be strengthened over all online sports channels, military channels, and websites. All online discussion forums, microblogs, and interactive programs are not to hype up the incident. All related pictures and video clips are to be promptly removed (CDT 2011b)³⁵

Also, more dramatic and grave news are at times found to be off-limits for Chinese media outlets, like this directive issued on August 15:

³⁴ **Original:** 中宣部：各地媒体需稳妥把握”征地拆迁报道，对依法依规开展的正常拆迁“不要质疑”，对漫天要价不要给予舆论支持，对暴力拆迁及拆迁中发生的“自杀、自残、群体性”事件不报道，对极端个案不炒作，不搞集纳式和链接式报道。

³⁵ **Original:** 国新办：一律不报道有关八一篮球队与美国篮球队打架斗殴的消息，加强相关网站体育频道、军事频道及网站管理，论坛、微博等互动栏目不炒作，及时删除相关图片、视频等信息。

From the Propaganda Department of the Qingdao Municipal Party Committee: According to instructions from the superiors, all media outlets are prohibited from reporting the incident during this morning's forced demolition at #9 Shantou Road, in which a former military officer used gasoline [to] set himself on fire (CDT 2011b)³⁶.

As seen in the examples stated above, the directives will at time also function pretty much like news-stories or sources of information in their own right; from reading leaked media directives, you not only get a sense of what information the government seeks to control, and what measures they in each incident apply to gain control, but you also get an update of what's been going on in China lately.

5.2.2 Directives on the Wenzhou train crash

Of the five directives directly relating to the train crash in Wenzhou, one did not have a clear date of issue, the three others were dated July 24, July 25 and July 29 (CDT 2011a; CDT 2011b). The directives were posted to the China Digital Times site in two separate posts, with one directive leaked July 25 (CDT 2011a), and the three others on October 20 (CDT 2011b).

On July 24 a directive with an unspecified sender was issued as a “Reminder of reporting matters”:

All reports regarding the Wenzhou high-speed train accident are to be titled “7.23 Yong-Wen line major transportation accident.” Reporting of the accident is to use “in the face of great tragedy, there's great love” as the major theme. Do not question. Do not elaborate. Do not associate. No re-posting on micro-blogs will be allowed! Related service information may be provided during news reporting. Music is to be carefully selected! (CDT 2011b)³⁷

The following day another directive was issued, this time from the State Council Information Office, with specific regulations for online media:

From the State Council Information Office: All articles related to the Wenzhou hi-speed train crash are to be kept on back pages; no relevant articles are allowed on front pages. All news centres are to keep only one report of the most recent development. Do not release any commentaries. No recommendation of related topics on any forums, blogs, or microblogs will be allowed. Immediately remove all relevant posts and blogs that have already been recommended on front-pages. Any posts, blogs, or microblogs that are unable to meet the requirements based on today's order must be deleted. All websites are to immediately carry out and implement this order

³⁶ Original: 青岛市宣部：根据领导意见，今天上午部队在汕头路9号进行强迁时，一转业干部泼汽油将自己点燃，各媒体均不得报道。

³⁷ Original: 宣传提示：温州动车脱轨事故报道名称统一使用“7.23甬温线特别重大铁路交通事故”。温州动车事故从现在起以“大灾面前有大爱”为主题报道，不质疑，不展开，不联想，个人微博也不要转发！节目中可提供相应服务信息，音乐注意氛围！

within the next half an hour. Review of implementation is required after another half an hour (CDT 2011b)³⁸.

Towards the end of the first week of the train crash aftermath, The Central Propaganda Department issued a directive telling the media to reduce reporting on the train crash drastically:

From the Central Propaganda Department: Due to the increasing complexity of the domestic and foreign public opinion on the 7.23 Wenzhou high-speed train crash, all media outlets including all subordinate newspapers and news websites are to immediately cool off on reporting the accident. No additional reports will be allowed except positive ones or information released by authorities. Do not publish any commentaries (CDT 2011B)³⁹

All five directives mention restrictions regarding framing of reports, telling them not to reflect, associate or provide commentaries on matters relating to the crash. Two of the directives also ask that no questions should be asked, or investigations made. Of the five directives, three mention electronic media specifically, asking that no recommendations of blogs, forums, microblogs etc. be made, web sites are to be “well controlled”, and that content that does not meet requirements of the directives must be removed (CDT 2011a; CDT 2011b).

The directives mainly seek to ensure that only official information is released, that no independent reporting should be done by journalist, that media should not make any individual assumptions concerning possible causes for the crash, or make suggestions in regards to who is to blame for the crash. Furthermore, an interesting aspect is that three of the directives give very distinct orders for how the media are to frame reports; the focus should be on acts of benevolence like blood donation and taxi drivers driving for free (CDT2011b). The overall theme of ‘in face of great tragedy there is great love’ is followed by a demand for emphasis on “touching stories”, and finally an order that “no additional reports will be made except positive ones (Ibid).

³⁸ Original 国新办：有关温州动车事故的所有稿件，各网站立即压至后台，首页一条也不许留，新闻中心只保留一条最近动态，不得刊发任何评论。论坛、博客、微博不得推荐 相关话题，论坛类网站速将首页、频道首页已推荐相关贴文、博文撤下，不符合今天下午通知要求的贴文、博文、微博要坚决删除。各网站立即落实本通知要求，半小时内执行到位，半小时后复查落实情况。

³⁹ Original: 中宣部：鉴于7.23甬温线特别重大铁路交通事故，境内外舆情趋于复杂，各地方媒体包括子报子刊及所属新闻网站对事故相关报道要迅速降温，除正面报道和权威部门发布的动态消息外，不再做任何报道，不发任何评论。

5.2.3 Directives compared

With partial exception of a demand for ‘cool off reporting’, none of the train crash related directives tell media outlets to stop reporting on the crash. Overall the directives relating to the crash are more softer-sounding than the non-train crash related directives; instructing media not to release commentary or reflections on the train crash as opposed to not reporting on incident at all. The crash related directives are also more focused towards framing of reports than the non-crash directives, which instead are more focused towards not hyping up stories. Off course, the government would have had a hard time putting a full lid on such a tragic incident, with forty fatalities and nearly two-hundred injured by involvement of one of the most commonly used means of transportations. Further complicating matters for the authorities, where reports, speculations and debate quickly flooded online channels in the hours after the crash, making the media directive issued on July 24 seem like a somewhat slow official reaction. The non-crash related directives are not related to incidents with the same massive implications as the crash, although land grabs, forced demolitions and citizens running for office (CDT 2011b) are matters of great national concern as well. With framing of reports and Net behavior as the center of attention, the crash related directives are examples of the government’s efforts to guide public opinion; when the government cannot stop the media and the people from talking, they will at least do an effort to spin the reporting in a desired direction – in this case ‘in the face of great tragedy, there is great love’.

5.3 Content analysis of Sina Weibo posts

The following content analysis draws upon data gathered from profiles that were identified by exploring the infrastructure of Sina Weibo. The analysis starts by identifying sources of discussion on Sina Weibo regarding the Wenzhou train crash, and continues to describe three analytical layers applied for organizing the analysis. Within the three analytical layers, there is a close focus of four major themes indentified within the posts, that are presented individually, and also in form of a timeline from the first week following the crash to highlight interaction between the themes. Developing upon the initial outline of themes and concepts, the final analysis of Sina Weibo posts has been based on a data-driven approach for exploring themes and concepts within the final material. The basic concept-driven list of themes and concepts from the pilot study expanded to include 184 codes across three different

layers; 1) non-content specific characteristics, 2) major themes of discussion and 3) content within the major themes of discussion.

5.3.1 Identifying Sources of Discussion

A total of twenty-two Weibo profiles were identified across the seven preset profile-categories identified in section 4.4.4. Within these twenty-two profiles, a total of 4112 Weibo posts were posted between July 23 and August 1. Of these 1990 were related to the Wenzhou train crash. After withdrawing a maximum of ten and no less than five of the most forwarded posts relating to the crash, the total number of posts for analysis in the final selection reached 196.⁴⁰ Of these 196 Weibo posts there were 107 posts that contained an embedded post from other Weibo users, and as these also were analyzed, the final selection of posts reached 303. All these posts were analyzed and coded, and during the analysis 22 of the identified embedded posts were found to be reoccurring across profiles, bringing the number of *unique* posts that have undergone analysis down to 281.

5.3.2 Layer 1: Non-content specific characteristics

In addition to the content of posts, the more technical information provided by Sina Weibo in relations to each posts offers some interesting in-sight; especially frequency of posts, number of reposts, number of embedded posts and number of posts that also include other media-formats in addition to text.

Post frequency

As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority of the 196 posts that were withdrawn from the twenty-two profiles (not including dates of embedded posts), were posted in the three first days after the crash, with nearly 60% of the 196 posts posted between July 24 and July 26.

⁴⁰ The categories of *opinion leaders*, *private profiles*, *media professionals* and *official media organizations* all contain 30 posts each, while the categories of *official verified profiles*, *semi-organizational profiles* and *rumor busting profiles* contain 25, 25 and 26 posts respectively, as profiles within these categories saw examples of profiles that did not have as many as ten posts related to the crash to be withdrawn.

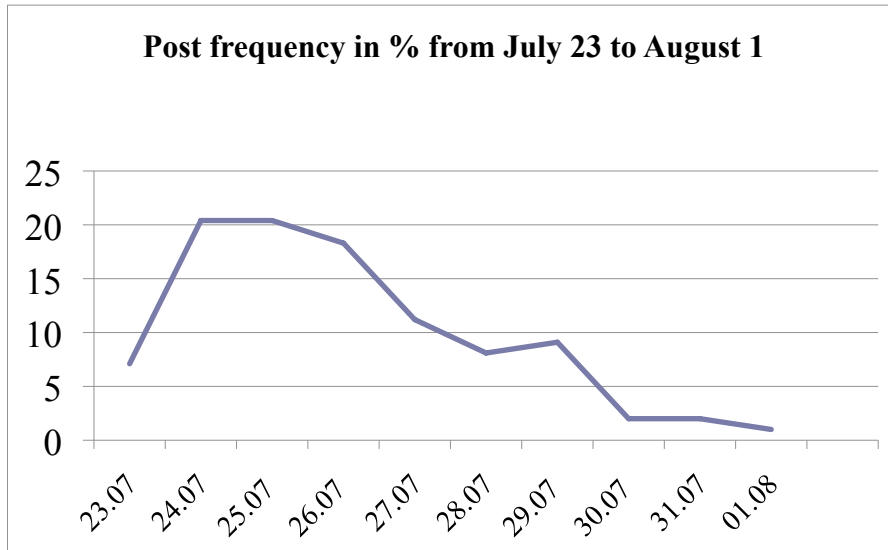


Figure 1. Post Frequency by date

Due to limitations of the dataset for this project compared to the overall amount of posts relating to the crash on Sina Weibo, it is very important to note that there are no grounds for speculating whether this is representative for general posting frequency in regards to the train crash, and the figure is provided only to illustrate the frequency of this very limited portion of the overall discourse regarding the crash. It is however plausible to believe that within a fast-moving medium like Sina Weibo, incident would receive most attention in proximity to their actual occurrence, thereby holding a preference for immediacy. There might however also be any number of reasons for why the analyzed data for this project in general shows a decline in frequency of posts during the first week; other stories might have already taken over as the front-runner on Sina Weibo; the first initial shock, grief and anger settled amongst Netizens; or it might just be that of all the hundreds of thousands of profiles containing posts regarding the crash, the twenty-two represented here did by coincidence not contain many posts regarding the crash in the end of July 2011.

Frequencies of forwards for individual and embedded posts

As noted earlier, 107 of the 196 posts withdrawn from the twenty-two profiles contained an embedded Weibo post, indicating that across the frequency of posts, there are many Weibo users who use the application to spread posts by other Weibo users in addition to posting individual posts themselves. Almost half of the 196 posts withdrawn from the twenty-two profiles were reposted less than 100 times, indicating that a lot of Weibo posts have a rather

limited reach compared to the high density of Weibo users. Within the embedded posts, the information-sharing powers of Sina Weibo became more evident, with 18 of the embedded posts having been reposted more than 100.000 times. Some of the most reposted Weibo posts included a post honoring the memory of the driver who died while driving the D301-train, reposted over 260.000 times⁴¹, and a list of missing passengers was reposted over 520.000 times⁴². A post offering economic support to a little girl who lost her parents in the crash, pledging to donate 1 RMB for every repost within twenty-four hours, truly demonstrated the diffusion powers of Sina Weibo with the post being reposted over 800.000 times⁴³ (see also section 5.4).

Frequencies of other media formats adding to text

A total of 104 of 196 posts contained image in addition to text, 31% being on-site images portraying the damaged train sets, rescue effort, photos taken during press conferences and so forth. The material also included 14 posts that presented text in a picture format. Text as pictures can be used when the 140-character limit proves to be restricted, but might also be applied as a measure to post more sensitive content, as the same filters for blocking keywords are harder to be implemented for pictures. Within the material, 10 posts also contained video clips; 4 of related to news reports; 1 covering a press conference; 1 on-site video; and 4 that had been removed or for whatever reason, thereby being unavailable at the time of this analysis. Despite being limited to only 140 text characters, the options to add photo and video to posts adds a layer of content to microblogs that ensures that the posts can be small in size, but big in meaning.

5.3.3 Layer 2: Four major themes of discussion

The second layer and third layer overlap, as they both frame the content of Sina Weibo discussion in regards to the crash. Layer two identified four main themes within the 281 unique Weibo posts (196 originally identified posts + 107 embedded posts – 22 reoccurring posts = 281); and level three explored the content of these four major themes in a more in-depth manner. The four main themes, as well as their main content specific characteristics were found to be:

⁴¹ <http://www.weibo.com/1926315504/xgvhlEdg7> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁴² <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgrgSsgA8> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁴³ <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgzk8swmq> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

- 1) Posts that mainly provided **information and news**, like time and place of the crash; handling of passengers luggage; contact information for friends and family members of victims; passenger list; on-site rescue efforts; press conference reports; reference to media reports; official reports of death tolls and injured, and so forth
- 2) **Opinions** regarding the crash; critique and support of the government or Railway Ministry; reflections on Chinas development, including high speed rail, and value of human life; reflections on media coverage; critique and support of the rescue effort and so forth
- 3) Posts with mainly **emotional characteristics**; expressing condolences to victims, in general and/or to specific people involved; stories of an often dramatic character relating to victims of the crash, or people otherwise involved, and so forth.
- 4) Posts containing **speculations** on a variety of issues like death tolls; cause of crash; rescue effort; levels of censorship and so forth

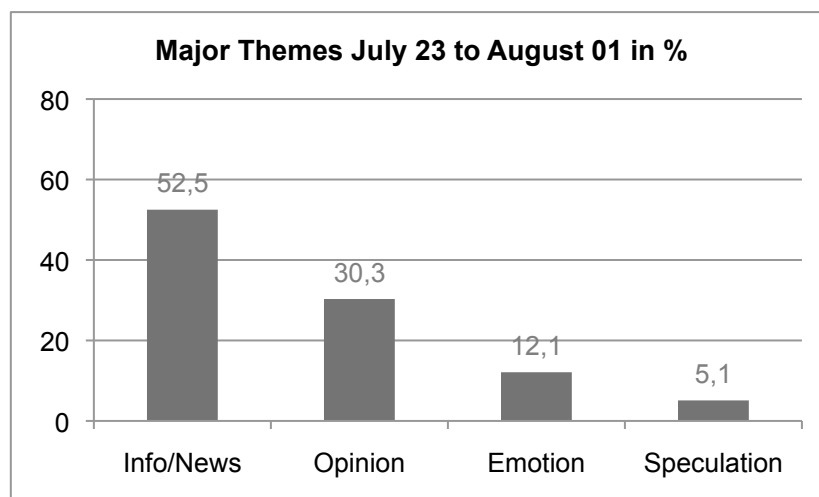


Figure 2 The four dominant themes, in percent

As seen in figure 2, info/news dominated as the major theme throughout the first week following the train crash, with over half of the analyzed Weibo posts belonging to this category. Opinions also had a dominant position within the first week of the train crash aftermath, sparking discussions on a variety of topics. When the four major themes are portrayed collectively according to their date of posting, as in figure 3, the nuances between the themes of info/news and opinion become clearer: while Weibo posts containing information and news overall remained dominant throughout the first week, and particularly during the first three days after the crash, opinions regarding the crash grew as the week

progresses, being equal to info/news on July 26 and dominant over info/news on both July 27 and July 29.

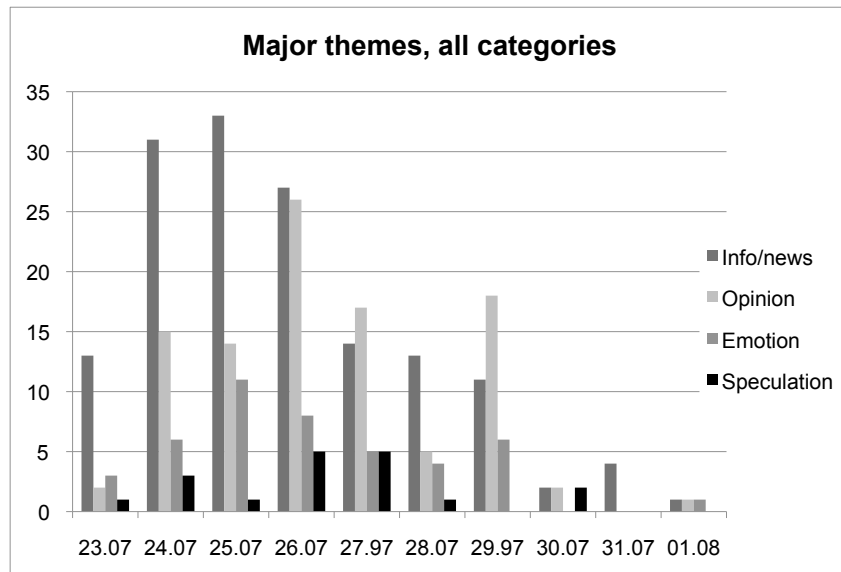


Figure 3 Frequency of all themes, by date

Also, as posts found in the profile category of ‘official news media organizations’ have a news/information characteristic applied to them pretty much by default, controlling for codes of ‘info/news’ in that specific profile category indicates an even more prominent position of opinions in the overall data.

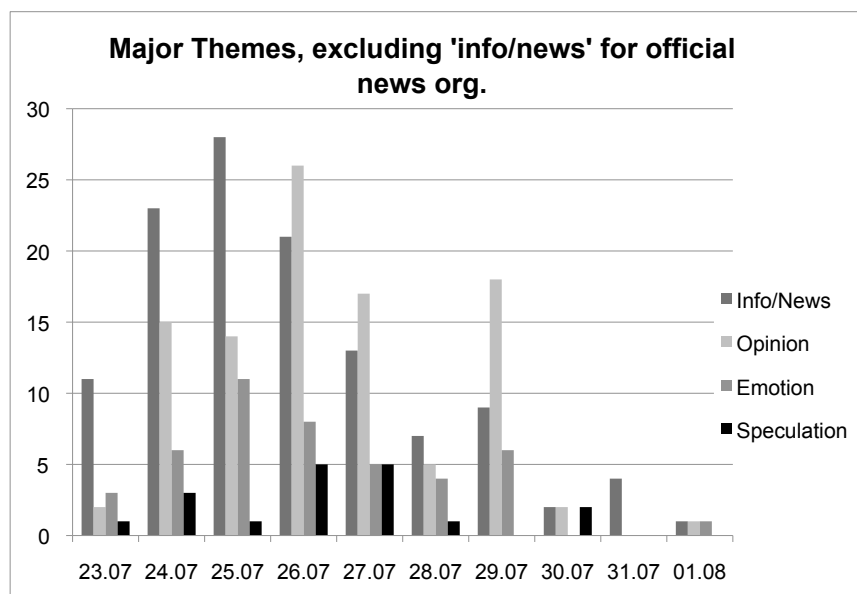


Figure 4 Frequency of all themes, excluding News/information within the profile-category of ‘Official Media Organizations’

The four major themes overlap, with especially the themes of information/news, opinions and speculations being closely linked to each other. Posts referring to press conferences, or other news reports, would be coded as 'News/information', but also as 'opinion' or 'speculation' if the Weibo-user in question added individual comments within the same post. The theme describing primarily emotional content separates itself more from the other overall themes, characterized by a lot of pathos-driven language, i.e. expressing condolences for the deceased.

5.3.4 Layer 3: Content within the four major themes

Despite overlap there are several individual characteristics of the four themes. For the third layer of analysis, the data was analyzed in order to discover the more specific characteristics within the four major themes, including but not limited to criticism and/or support of various kind; information concerning passengers; expressions of grief; sarcasm and use of Internet memes; calls for investigations and so forth. In order to organize the many types of expression properly, the four major themes will still serve as a main framing structure for the various types of content found in the second layer of analysis.

Information and news

Sina Weibo took form as a channel for information and news in the hours and first days after the train crash that Netizens seemed to appreciate greatly. The first reports of the crash came from inside the train when a passenger pleaded for help by her Sina Weibo profile. During the first hours after the crash, initial reports, including mostly bare specifics like time and place of the accident, started to surface on Sina Weibo, and the in-train online plea for help was reposted by other Weibo users over one hundred thousand times⁴⁴. After the crash, request for blood donors posted online lead to long queues outside Wenzhou hospitals⁴⁵, and Sina Weibo also offered a channel for requests of human interest, where Netizens inquired about missing persons, often adding pictures and personal information like phone numbers to posts⁴⁶. Posts containing passenger lists were also widely spread on Sina Weibo⁴⁷, while

⁴⁴ Original post since removed from Sina Weibo: 求救! 动车D301现在脱轨在距离温州南站不远处! 现在车厢里孩子的哭声一片! 没有工作人员出来! 快点救我们!

⁴⁵ <http://www.weibo.com/1189729754/xg8WjBX5q> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁴⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xggk74pmn> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁴⁷ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgrgSsgA8> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

Netizens also expressed anger towards the Railway Ministry for not making passenger lists publicly available⁴⁸. Other widely circulated posts included reports of late-night digging with excavators on-site⁴⁹ and a video-clip with statements from a Japanese Shinkansen expert stating that the Chinese high-speed trains has defects in its emergency technology, and that digging pits to bury the wreckages was "ridiculous"⁵⁰. On July 28, premier Wen Jiabao held a press conference at the site of the accident. The following day a dialogue between relatives of the deceased and the Premier emerged on Sina Weibo where the relatives expressed grievances regarding the circumstances of the rescue effort, like the focus of compensation for the deceased resembling 'bargaining for cabbage' and also demanding a full passenger list to be released⁵¹.

Opinions

The theme of opinions in the Sina Weibo posts, were divided between different types of criticism and support. Leaning more heavily towards criticism, the Netizens did not shy away from expressing their opinions on the Railway Ministry, local and central government, media coverage, as well as overall implications the crash might have for the Chinese society. Blogger Ran Xiang, known for a pro-government and nationalistic sentiment, cautioned people to use the train crash as an excuse to raise political issues⁵², and also questioned why a bus accident, killing forty-one passengers on July 22, did not receive the same widespread attention as the train crash⁵³. Ran Xiang was not the only one voicing opinions that had an undertone of support. While the Chinese government in general was subjected to criticism, Weibo users were found to offer support for premier Wen Jiabao⁵⁴; the Premier' choice of footwear struck a note amongst the Netizens; a picture of Wen Jiabao wearing worn out sneakers was reposted over thirty thousand times on Sina Weibo and was followed by text holding a sympathetic tone towards the Premier⁵⁵. Netizens also criticized officials from the Railway Ministry being interviewed inside an air-conditioned bus, while the Premier held his press conference in the heat under a bridge close to the scene of the accident, just days after

⁴⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgzq13QtI> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁴⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1494720324/xgrlmywTV> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵⁰ <http://www.weibo.com/1750935105/xgrfXaTTp> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵¹ <http://www.weibo.com/1189729754/xh0oZjXud> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵² <http://www.weibo.com/1654592030/xgrvLjyYY> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵³ <http://www.weibo.com/1654592030/xgY0quO5b> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵⁴ <http://www.weibo.com/1189729754/xgYMw3MmO> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵⁵ <http://www.weibo.com/1750935105/xgTyfDrDA> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

he had been reported to being ill⁵⁶. Other Weibo users expressed support for Wenzhou locals cuing at hospitals to offer help after “urgent appeals for people to come forward and give blood in all types of media, such as Weibo and radio broadcasts”⁵⁷. Supportive statements were also issued for local authorities, including “rare but good party-secretary” Chen Derong⁵⁸, and the local rescue effort. The future of Chinese railway was also a topic of discussion; Global Times editor Hu Xijin paraphrased Japanese news commentary on the future of export of Chinese high-speed train technology being severely threatened because of the crash⁵⁹. Adding commentary to his own post, Hu Xijin expressed hopes for export to increase employment rate, and a hope that the Railway Ministry would face their problems and win back public trust⁶⁰. Others were not so optimistic for the future, comparing travelling by Chinese high-speed rail with “riding on a flying coffin”, and demanding explanations from the Railway Ministry⁶¹. The Wenzhou High-Speed Derailment Rescue Team reposted a message with a poetic reflection underpinned by despair:

It is sad that one leader resigned as a scapegoat, it is suspicious how a stupid decision was made to cover up the accident, it is respectable of the local Wenzhou people with selfless kind hearts, it is lovable of the young boys fighting hard to save lives, it is a pity to see those victims who didn't manage to break the car windows to escape, it is stupid to see the railway authorities only bragging on the good they did, it is laughable that the red cross only have a donation of 300,000RMB, reliable are the armed soldiers who dashed ahead heedless of safety, it is fearful to think that the high speed trains are going to run again right away on those tracks, it is hopeful for the Chinese high speed trains to slow down- @Yydan Jingdian Yulu⁶²

Media reports were also found to be quite critical and opinionated in their coverage; a Weibo post followed by news headlines from the liberal newspaper Southern Metropolis Daily was widely circulated, with an added comment from a Netizen on the integrity of news-reporting in the south, with headlines including “Truth is the best memory” and “A controversial rescue action”⁶³. The newspaper the Weibo post refers to was released after at least two of the media directives regarding the crash were issued (with two being released prior, and one having

⁵⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1968545540/xgWLLv0sa> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵⁷ <http://weibo.com/1663933725/xgebDBEw7> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/1750935105/xgvxapF4Z> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁵⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1989660417/xgFIF8dT1> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶⁰ <http://www.weibo.com/1989660417/xgFIF8dT1> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶¹ <http://www.weibo.com/1494720324/xh9dAphHd> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶² Derailment (1)1 Post has since been removed from Sina Weibo, original: 可叹的是替罪羊局长莫名免职，可疑的是仓促埋祸的愚蠢决定，可敬的是温州人民的无私爱心，可爱的是九零后少年勇于担当，可怜的是砸不破窗的无辜乘客，可恨的是好高喜功的铁道部门，可笑的是红会只捐三十万，可靠的是武警战士的奋不顾身，可怕的是马上恢复铁路的运行，可望的是让中国的高速慢下来#动车#

⁶³ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgXGT0FIc> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

unclear date of origin), and goes quite clearly against the major theme of the ‘great tragedy...great love’ by running headlines like “Dreams to be a diplomat stays forever on the Chinese railroad”⁶⁴.

Speculations

The three main issues that saw widespread speculation amongst Netizens were mainly cause of the train crash, death tolls, and handling of the damaged train sets on-site. Speculations on death tolls were questioned throughout the first week after the crash; on July 31, the semi-organizational profile of *Wenzhou Train Incident Right Upholding Association* asked a “simple math problem”:

How do you work out this simple math problem? A total of 6 coach-train carrying 600 passengers falls off the bridge, 210 people are found alive, but in the report by Xinhua news agency only 35 were dead, According to their data, then $600 \text{ (total)} - 210 \text{ (injured)} - 35 \text{ (dead)} = 355$, so where did these 355 people go?⁶⁵

On July 26, a Weibo posts including an on-site picture of a severely damaged train set was forwarded over 118,000 times: The post offers room for interpretation in regards to censorship and withholding of information by calling the on-site picture “very precious” in the Weibo text, and also rhetorically asking, “how many bodies could come out of this?”⁶⁶. Speculations on death tolls were also found linked together to another dramatic speculation regarding the crash, where the authorities were accused of trying to cover up responsibility by burying train sets shortly after the crash⁶⁷. Over 61,000 Netizens reposted a Weibo stating that local villagers were outraged by train sets being buried, asking “what if there is still people in there?”⁶⁸. The Weibo was also followed by a video clip, which since has been removed⁶⁹- There is however no telling who removed the clip; the author of the post, or Sina Weibo moderators.

Sina Weibo users also speculated in why high-level officials did not visit the scene of the crash before July 28, when Premier Wen Jiabao finally made an appearance in Wenzhou. The

⁶⁴ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgXGT0FIc> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶⁵ Post has since been removed from Sina Weibo, original: 【这道小学数学题怎么算】共6节车厢满员600人掉到30米高桥底下，桥下已知活着的为210多人，而新华社报的亡者为35人。照新华社数据，那么， $600 \text{ (总)} - 210 \text{ (伤)} - 35 \text{ (亡)} = 355$ 人，这355人去哪了？

⁶⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xh7NYE6pZ> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶⁷ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgh271F2x> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/1968545540/xgerx4hru> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁶⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1968545540/xgerx4hru> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

official reason for not visiting the scene of the crash earlier was reported to be due to the Premier being on sick-leave, which later was contested by reports that the Premier had attended a meeting in Beijing prior to his arrival in Wenzhou (Lasseter 2011). Blogger Muzi Mei commented that levels of censorship and control regarding the crash seemed very low, and whether or not the low degree of censorship was rooted in a government wish to “reform” the Railway Ministry⁷⁰. Such speculations offer indications that Netizens suspect there might have been disagreement towards how to handle the circumstances around the train crash aftermath amongst higher-ranking officials.

Emotions

Weibo posts displaying emotions were found to be aimed at the tragedy of individuals involved in the crash, condolences in general to the deceased, as well as pathos-driven gratitude towards those involved in the rescue process.

As an expression of condolences, the profile of *Government Weibo Assistant* encouraged Netizens to post emoticons of a lit candle to their profiles to commemorate victims⁷¹. A profile affiliated to the Wenzhou Railway offered an example of local initiative and rescue effort hand in hand by posting a picture of an old lady with “silver hair, holding a brand new kettle, serving her homemade tea the whole time to the fire-fighters and rescuers”⁷². Other posts gave credit for rescue workers working non-stop without warm food in rain, mud and heat⁷³.

There were also a number of emotional and very personal narratives to be found within the data material. Discussion of blame for the crash was by some Netizens argued to involve the drivers of the trains being exhausted and partly responsible for the tragedy. A post in defense of Pan Yiheng, the deceased driver of D301, was reposted over 230,000 times in the days after the crash:

The train driver who died in the accident last night Pan Yiheng, was a good friend to my father. They used to work in the same team. My father was in deep sorrow after he heard the news, and said: Mr. Pan has a son who is only 7 years old. He is a good person, hardworking and responsible. If he had escaped before the collision, he could have saved his own life, but the death toll could have had increased over 10 times. It is sad to hear rumors, before his soul has

⁷⁰ <http://weibo.com/1496913734/xgvJziyCd> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷¹ <http://e.weibo.com/2053061043/xgvnOjNVh> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷² <http://weibo.com/1896910382/xhpHM6640> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷³ <http://weibo.com/1896910382/xgety45k2> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

come to peace, saying that he worked under exhaustion and should be responsible for the accident. This is absolutely nonsense and unacceptable!⁷⁴

Other Netizens also offered their respect to Pan Yi Heng, who according to one Weibo post died

[...] with the emergency break piercing through his chest in the rear-ended train accident at 20:27 on the 23rd July 2011. Instead of fleeing for his own life, he managed to pull the emergency break in the last moment of the tragedy. He died at his post to save the lives of the passengers⁷⁵

Another highly emotional narrative of passengers involved in the accident was the story of a deceased three-year-old boy, who reportedly was discovered at the same time rescue workers found the last reported survivor, a two-year-old, nick named Little Yiyi. The boy was said to have suffocated to death, adding heartbreaking details like traces of tears being visible on the little boys face as he lay in the body bag. A video with an interview with the teary-eyed father of the little boy, who also lost his wife, followed the post⁷⁶.

For a tragic accident like the Wenzhou, killing forty and injuring nearly two hundred, grief and sadness are natural emotions to have surfaced amongst Sina Weibo users, and a mixture of anger, sorrow and general despair runs as fragile thread through the analyzed material.

5.4 The First Week: A 7.23.Weibo time line

The previous categorization of the four major themes that were proposed by Netizens has identified the main points of public interest, but a timeline of the Weibo posts will offer additional insight into how the themes interacted with each other.

As an online space that never seems to rest, the four major themes identified in the material surfaced more or less simultaneously on Sina Weibo in the hours after the crash. Widely circulated posts included reports of long queues by Wenzhou locals wanting to donate blood during the night of July 24⁷⁷; and as a new day dawned speculations of death tolls and mistrust towards the Railway Ministry rose⁷⁸. Netizens also quickly started to spread information seeking to locate relatives of victims, like a nine-year-old who had been separated

⁷⁴ <http://weibo.com/1926315504/xgvhlEdg7> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷⁵ <http://weibo.com/1663933725/xge6VFowj> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1496913734/xgP6d4wMX> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷⁷ <http://www.weibo.com/1189729754/xg8WjBX5q> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁷⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgh27lF2x> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

from her mother in the rescue effort⁷⁹. July 24 also saw the beginning of one of the major narratives that would emerge from the train wreck, the story of Little Yiyi. The two-year old girl lost both her parents in the crash⁸⁰, and was found alive in one of the train sets after the rescue effort had been shut down. In the morning of July 24, fire brigade teams, reported to have been searching through the fallen carriages “more than ten times”, reported there to be no more survivors, and official news reports on CCTV also stated there had been “no sign of life at the site of the accident”⁸¹. According to Sina Weibo posts, it was police captain Zhao Ye Rong, who by refusing to follow orders to stop the rescue operation⁸², was able to pull the two-year old girl Xiang Wei Yi out of a train set, twenty-one hours after the crash.

After the ‘miracle’ of Little Yiyi, Weibo users harshly criticized the Railway Ministry for their handling of the rescue operation. At the same time critique on a more general level against the Chinese government, albeit still predominantly represented by the Railway Ministry, started to surface, with posts telling the Railway Ministry’ to “f*** off”⁸³. Outrage was also expressed of allegedly large-scale corruption within the Railway Ministry, exemplified by the 2.8 billion US dollars discovered in overseas accounts belonging to Zhang Shuguang⁸⁴, the engineer and former Railway Minister once known as the ‘grand designer of China’s high-speed rail’.

Other wide-reaching microblogs included a picture comparing front pages of four Chinese newspapers to four Japanese front pages the morning after the crash⁸⁵; the Chinese papers look more or less identical carrying reports on an official meeting in prominent view, next to the Japanese newspapers who all displayed big headlines on the train crash⁸⁶. The post serves as a commentary towards the operating conditions for the traditional media, as well as a comment on streamlined media coverage dictated by control and regulations.

Speculations on a series of aspects of the crash also started to grow amongst Netizens, especially regarding rumors that on-site excavators were burying the wrecked train carriages, in what conceived by Netizens to be a very suspect handling of potential

⁷⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgk74pnm> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸⁰ <http://e.weibo.com/2053061043/xgvNzajlU> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸¹ <http://www.weibo.com/1707642567/xgi3Hg5lo> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸² <http://www.weibo.com/1968545540/xgx1Gdazo> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸³ <http://www.weibo.com/1707642567/xgAVg7DJ1> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸⁴ <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgdeM0jfQ> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸⁵ <http://weibo.com/1408482140/xgd8Apctv> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸⁶ <http://weibo.com/1408482140/xgd8Apctv> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

evidence⁸⁷. The digging pits were ‘clarified’ by the Rumor Busting League to allegedly be part of work to flatten the earth in order to convenience cranes that later would lift the train wrecks⁸⁸. However, speculations of the excavators continued to float on Sina Weibo, with posts stating that local authorities disagreed with the burying⁸⁹, as well as Netizens reporting that huge machines on-site were “smashing vehicles” in the evening of July 25⁹⁰. Other speculations focused on death tolls; by means of online investigation, the Rumor Busting League busted online claims that in recent years the death tolls of major Chinese accidents had not exceeded 35, allegedly because exceeding this number would mean that the “relevant official in charge would be fired”⁹¹. The Rumor Busting League also posted information showing that a public march in Hong Kong, supposedly in support of the train crash victims, were in fact manipulated photos from a march in regards to a Philippine hostage case⁹². More media criticism also emerged, like a widely spread post commenting on a CCTV segment that devoted majority of its twenty minute duration to praising rescue effort and reporting how top leaders cared deeply about the matter, but only one minute to explain the crash, and zero minutes “[...]about burying the train and the responsibility”⁹³.

Amongst the most reposted microblogs during July 25 was an encouragement for posting a picture of a black ribbon as an offer of condolence to those involved in the crash, reposted over 400.000 times⁹⁴. A list of names, put together by bloggers, providing information about lost relatives, was also spread widely, with over five hundred thousand Weibo users reposting it⁹⁵. Pictures of an impromptu press conference, held by Yang Feng, a man who lost five relatives in the crash, also started surfacing, with Yang Feng telling how police reportedly stopped him and other relatives of victims from approaching a Railway Ministry official with demands for an explanation. At the same time, the story of little Yiyi kept evolving; Netizens spread a picture of the little girl on her first train ride⁹⁶, taken only weeks before the devastating train crash. Railway Ministry spokesman, Wang Yong Ping, who on questions of how the little girl could be rescued after the announcement that there were no more sign of

⁸⁷ <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgzjMk2Po> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/2106610594/xgfcfrj4b> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁸⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1750935105/xgvxapF4Z> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹⁰ <http://www.weibo.com/1494720324/xgrlmywTV> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹¹ <http://www.weibo.com/2106610594/xgmQ46xRM> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹² <http://www.weibo.com/2106610594/xgoPNDKn7> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹³ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgrBHaxle> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹⁴ <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgl2dwlWi> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹⁵ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgrgSsgA8> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1750935105/xgrfXaTTp> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

life replied, “that’s a miracle”⁹⁷, was also extensively criticized. During the same press conference Wang Yong Ping also provided Netizen with a quote that would become *the* very Internet meme relating to the train crash, when ending his effort to explain the circumstances for burying train sets with “whether you believe it or not, I certainly do [believe this explanation]” (至于你信不信,我反正信了). Netizens heavily criticized the press conference, and in a later development Wang Yong Ping was removed from his position as Railway Ministry spokesperson, and re-located to a more obscure post in Poland (Jacobs 2011).

July 26 saw a continuing speculation on death tolls, and Railway Minister Sheng Guangzu was subjected to criticism. One Netizen gave the official a “serious warning” in a widely circulated Weibo post asking the Ministry to stop insulting the intelligence of the Chinese people, and to issue a full passenger list⁹⁸. A post forwarded more than 100.000 times, containing a picture that was “extremely hard to get hold on” showed parts of one of the wrecked train car, and asked Netizens to “make your judgment again” regarding the official death toll, which at that time had reached 39⁹⁹. Kudos were also given to Weibo users, crediting online activity for a decision by officials, who by then had decided to “dig out the on-site buried train engine” for further investigation¹⁰⁰. Regardless that the statement of such an investigation, credited to “the voices of doubt on Weibo”, came from an “unreliable source”¹⁰¹, Netizens seemed to accept the thanks with gratitude, forwarding the post a little over 100.000 times. The forwarding power of Weibo users was also further demonstrated on July 26, when businessman and Chinese congress member, Chen Li Hao, posted a microblog stating that for every repost of that particular Weibo within the next twenty-four hours, he would donate 1 RMB to Little Yiyi¹⁰². The microblog was reposted well over 800.000 times, and to commemorate her time of rescue, the total donation was documented the following day by a Weibo post containing a picture of a transfer receipt of 1,072 417,20 RMB (close to 168,000 USD)¹⁰³. In another developing story, Yang Feng, the man who lost five relatives in the crash was reported on Sina Weibo to have “changed his attitude greatly” after a meeting with the Workers Union in the Railway Ministry, dealing with issues of compensation for

⁹⁷ <http://weibo.com/1408482140/xgiB863W3> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/1968545540/xgo4O6tlW> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

⁹⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgzq13QtI> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰⁰ <http://weibo.com/1408482140/xgxBCu70I> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰¹ <http://weibo.com/1408482140/xgxBCu70I> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰² <http://www.weibo.com/1496825941/xgzk8swmq> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰³ <http://www.weibo.com/1750935105/xgOES7CZr> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

relatives of the deceased¹⁰⁴. Blogger Muzi Mei offered a short and pointed comment on the latest development of Yang Feng: “Oh, the government finally sealed his mouth”¹⁰⁵. On July 27, nearly ninety thousand Sina Weibo users forwarded a Weibo post comparing the lack of information of information regarding the crash, with the abundance of information available regarding a mass-shooting in Norway occurring the day before the train crash:

We can get into some small details about a shooting incident in Norway over 10000 km away, but we cannot get any clear death toll on the accident in Wenzhou. We can interview the mayor in Norway or civilians, but we cannot get into a village next to the site. We can read pages of report about millions of people holding flowers and lighting up candles for their victims, but we cannot report about the candles we lighted last night at Wenzhou square. What a strange reality?¹⁰⁶

Reports also came that Wenzhou Judicial Administration Bureau and the Wenzhou Lawyer Association had notified all law firms not to accept any cases relating to the train crash, due to “sensitivity of the 7.23 accident to social stability”¹⁰⁷.

The on-site press conference held by Wen Jiabao on July 28 was met with support for the Premier by Sina Weibo users, in a somewhat rare expression of support within the posts concerning the crash. One Weibo post remembered how it was the Premier who also visited the earthquake-stricken areas in the province of Sichuan, where over 69,000 people lost their lives, and also pleading the Premier to punish those responsible for the train crash¹⁰⁸. In contrast to the support of Premier Wen, parts of a Q & A with the National Railway Research & Design Institute of Communication and Signal Co. Ltd, left Netizen to express more critically inclined sentiments:

The following is some of the Q & As.

Q: Which models of the signal systems have you provided for the high-speed rail?

A: This you can find out online.

Q: How are you related to the Railway Ministry?

A: You should know this if you are here.

Q: Why are you holding this press conference then?

¹⁰⁴ Wenzhou Fact search (23)23 Post since removed from Sina Weibo, original: 【原谅我的无能为力】昨日，有微博称动车追尾事故中痛失5位亲人的杨峰与官员会面后，态度发生大转变，声称与铁道部工会主席会面，得到良好回应，并谈到赔偿问题，但不方便透露内容。此后一直担任受害者家属代表的杨峰再也没出现，也拒绝接受采访。

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.weibo.com/1496913734/xgFwza5C2> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgFxYAfHD> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.weibo.com/1189729754/xgJcSFkoJ> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.weibo.com/1189729754/xgYMw3MmO> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

A: We don't know either. The weather is a bit hot. It wouldn't be convenient for you guys to be outside.

Suddenly, the spokesman's mobile rang, he asked the reporters: Can I take it?

A: You should at least show some respects to us. You are holding a press conference!

Q: Well then I'll just take it.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, the newspaper Southern Weekend posted a series of Weibo posts stating that a reliable source at the Railway department had identified the cause of the crash to be faulty design of a control circuit from the China Railway Signal/Communication Corporation¹¹⁰. A tragic story of a deceased passenger, the three-year-old boy found in the same carriage as Little Yiyi, also surfaced on July 28. The next morning official news agency Xinhua posted a Weibo paraphrasing a widely circulated Weibo post that Little Yiyi's mother had written to her daughter before her death, giving the post a higher meaning as a symbol of "the endless questions after the innocent lives lost"¹¹¹. On July 29 news outlet Southern Weekend posted a Weibo referring to regulations of the Chinese constitution stating that any serious accident should be investigated thoroughly by a committee selected by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, and also demanded free public seats be available during the hearings, as well as live broadcasts in television and radio¹¹². The same day over 119,000 Sina Weibo users forwarded headlines from the Southern Metropolis Daily, as another example of the "professional integrity of the people in Nandu"¹¹³. The headlines amongst other questioned why the Railway Ministry was in such a rush to get traffic back up and running after the crash. Meanwhile, rumor buster AC Kongqi Xibo, affiliated with a website dedicated to identify Western media reports with an anti-China bias, reposted a busted rumor of a "new miracle"¹¹⁴: A man perceived to be dead had been reported on microblogs to have abruptly gained consciousness after spending twenty-one hours in minus 21° in a funeral parlor. The story was claimed to be true, but happening in South Africa, and not China. Five Netizens were identified as having spread rumors that the story was related to the Wenzhou train crash

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.weibo.com/1494720324/xgRUzkbyM> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹⁰ <http://www.weibo.com/1639498782/xgPhqmitt> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹¹ <http://weibo.com/1699432410/xgSA81KET> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹² <http://www.weibo.com/1639498782/xgZmfDZIU> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

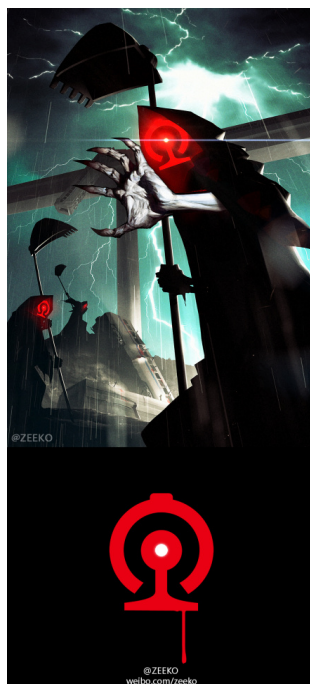
¹¹³ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xgXGT0FIc> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹⁴ <http://www.weibo.com/1707642567/xh0u6EF0h> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

aftermath, and were punished by having their posting functions on Sina Weibo closed for a month¹¹⁵.

On July 29 news outlet Southern Weekend also posted a Weibo criticizing the cost of ‘efficiency’ in Chinese society, quoting an insider at the Railway Ministry stating that after the crash officials were mainly concerned with the reason for having traffic as soon as possible after the crash was to have traffic recovered as soon as possible and minimize effects of the tragedy¹¹⁶.

Towards the end of the first week speculations on official death tolls continued¹¹⁷. One Weibo-user posted a portrayal of the Railway Ministry as the Grim Reaper in a picture that was followed by the text “They don’t allow us to speak then we draw (server 1)”¹¹⁸.



Picture 2 Picture posted to Sina Weibo on July 29 (has since been removed)

The mention of a specific server number indicates that numerous servers might be in use as a means to circumvent censorship. The gloomy interpretation of the Railway Ministry has since has been removed, either by the Netizen who first posted it, or by Sina Weibo moderators.

¹¹⁵ <http://www.weibo.com/1707642567/xh0u6EF0h> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹⁶ <http://www.weibo.com/1639498782/xgXU7iys2> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹⁷ <http://www.weibo.com/1199582333/xh7NYE6pZ> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹¹⁸ Post since removed from Sina Weibo, original: 不让说咱就只画图吧。大图点开（1号机）

5.5 Limits and opportunities of Microblogs

The main limitation of Sina Weibo for voicing opinion seems rather obvious; your Weibo posts might be removed. Together with blocking of keywords, removal of content is the most visible and clearly overt feature of limitations set forth by the microblogging application.

Posts like the portrayal of the Railway Ministry as the Grim Reaper, which openly refers to censorship, is but one example of the visibility of content control on Sina Weibo. Yet another form of such a visible limitation are traces of content that has been removed: A post from a profile belonging to rumor busters Wenzhou Train Crash Fact Search comments “We see the advantages of China’s socialist system from the train collision in Wenzhou. PS: It is a miracle that a person who can write such an article is alive”¹¹⁹. However, the picture the post refers to has since been removed, and is instead replaced by a grey, standardized image used by Sina Weibo in place of the original posted image. The information given is thus *not* the image intended to be shared, but rather a layer of structural understanding that information has indeed been removed, forming a visible reminder of content control. Not all content could however be claimed to be removed by Sina Weibo, the picture in this example might have been removed by whoever posted it in the first place. But either way, the grey image offers a reminder that original content is missing. Removed videos follow the same principle as images¹²⁰, and as with pictures it is important to keep in mind that also videos might have been made unavailable by others than Sina Weibo moderators.

While removal of pictures and videos are accompanied by standardized replacements, Sina Weibo applies three different kinds of messages providing information that text has been removed. Two of the messages are very similar in wording; “Sorry, this microblogging has been deleted. For help, please contact customer service¹²¹” and “Sorry, this microblogging has been deleted by the original author. For help, please contact customer service”¹²². The third message reads, “Sorry, this microblogging is not suitable for open to the public. For help,

¹¹⁹ Posts since removed, original: 评论员文章：从温州动车追尾事件看中国社会体制优越性；PS：能写出这篇文章的人，活着真的是个奇迹。

¹²⁰ <http://www.weibo.com/1408482140/xgsaejLBT> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹²¹ 抱歉，此微博已被删除。如需帮助，请联系客服

¹²² 抱歉，此微博已被原作者删除。如需帮助，请联系客服

please contact customer service¹²³”, thereby overtly stating that information has been removed to protect the public from some kind of ‘unsuitable’ information.

Netizens also speculate in a type of ‘covered’ text censorship, where posts are visible to you on your own Weibo profile, but not visible for other Netizens who access your profile (Millward 2011), thus you have no clue that your posts in fact are being censored. Compared to the openness of censorship messages given in image, video and text, this would be a form of stealth-mode censorship.

Despite these very visible limitations of microblogs on Sina Weibo, information and expressions found within the posts concerning the Wenzhou train crash as a space of opportunity as well; the space for expression offered by a microblogging tool like Sina Weibo can, when it is allowed to be, serve as a flexible space for wide ranging opinions, seemingly to a much larger extent than the official media channels. Bringing forth the media directives that were issued in regards to the crash, the inherent power of microblogging applications like Sina Weibo becomes even more apparent.

5.5.1 Directives and online negotiation

The main theme within the five directives that relate to the crash was a demand for “no commentary” and “no reflexive reports” (CDT 2011a; CDT 2011b). In this regard the posts from Sina Weibo quite clearly cross the limits of the media directives, with almost thirty percent of the 281 Weibo posts offering criticism and/or support. Many of the posts serve as powerful comments on not just the state of Chinese railway, but also on Chinese society in general:

A strong country will not be overthrown by legalizing sale of weapons, but under a weak government, a real name may have to be given to buy a food knife. In a humane country, the president will announce the names of the victims one by one and give condolences, but under a dehumanized government, even the number of casualties needs to be hidden. In a free country, journalists can chase after, and question, the officials till they sweat with fear, but under a confined government, officials can say to the journalists: "whether you believe it or not, I believe it."¹²⁴

Although there were examples of posts from Sina Weibo that were in accordance with the major themes of ‘touching stories’ and the theme of ‘great tragedy...great love’, the critical

¹²³ 抱歉，此微博不适宜对外公开。如需帮助，请联系客服

¹²⁴ Original text: 一个强盛的国家，开放枪支都不会被颠覆；一个虚弱的政体，买菜刀都需要实名，一个人性的国家，总统会逐一念出遇难者的名字致以哀悼，一个冰冷的政府，遇难人数从来都是高度机密要被隐瞒，一个自由的国家，记者可以将内阁大臣追问到满头大汗，一个禁锢的体制，官员则告诉记者，你爱信不信，反正我信。

disposition of many of the most circulated posts, offers clear opposition to the frames given to mass media organizations by the directives. The demand of “no reporting on frequent basis” (CDT 2011a) found in the directives was massively ignored by Sina Weibo user, with millions of Sina Weibo posts. By the time the government had decided it was time to cool down reports on the crash and its aftermath, Netizens had already build a substantial information base. Within this information base there is however a lot of unverified information. The Chinese government has issued a combat against online rumors (Xinhua 2012), but given the extreme complexity of information flow in all layers of the Chinese media spaces, one might wonder if the ‘rumors’ the government refers to would be regarded as ‘facts’ that have been censored by others. On the other hand, there is no denying that rumors and wild speculations are part of the Chinese Netizen culture, with the ‘new miracle’ of the man waking up in a funeral parlor, as one relevant example.

The issues of rumors in online China are also fueled by the speed of the microblogging platforms, where increasingly popular use of these helps diffuse information to large quantities of recipients in a matter of seconds. Once a spark has been lit, it might be hard to control it from growing into a powerful flame, be it truthful or not. Presence of rumors and the speed of which they travel therefore also proposes a limitation of microblogs, as a limitation for trustworthiness for microblogs as part of public discussion. The speed of which information can be diffused, however, remains one of its most powerful features in negotiation against censorship and control. People will urge fellow Netizens to watch, spread or save information as quickly as possible before information might get censored, as one Netizen states; “This clip just got censored again, but I found it again, hope everyone takes a good look at before it gets censored, again.”¹²⁵. In what is perhaps a more surprising statement, the *Government Weibo Assistant* quoted the newspaper China Youth Daily in saying “The most important is that Weibo has changed the way information is spread. It has become more and more difficult to ‘refine/alter’ an incident/accident before it is announced to the public”¹²⁶, again highlighting the diffusion powers of microblogging applications. For a profile fronting official representation such a statement is as puzzling as it is interesting, especially as official entities simultaneously actively frame public perception directly by implementation of media directives.

¹²⁵ <http://weibo.com/1408482140/xgsaejLBT> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

¹²⁶ <http://e.weibo.com/2053061043/xgmMImgDT> (Last accessed 29.11.12)

5.5.2 Negotiations by media ‘hybridity’

Besides speed, the mixture of media formats that Sina Weibo supports in its infrastructure is of great value for expressing opinions; by adding text, image and video into microblogs, a new type of format is formed, with what can be called a ‘hybridity’ of formats that facilitates diversification of information; supplementing text with pictures and videos, posts on Sina Weibo holds a potential of offering a small but powerful and media-saturated format for personal publishing. Together with speed, this hybridity of formats is one of the most defining features of Sina Weibo, and also a feature of great importance in diffusing information of personal opinions. As a user-generated format, the hybridity of Sina Weibo helps negotiate opinions, often seen in combination with official media reports like newspaper articles or video-clips from news broadcasts. However, the traditional media pushes against government control of the media as well; the eight-page special on the Wenzhou train crash in *The Economic Observer* hit newsstands after the directive ordering stories to back pages the demand to “cool off” reports on the crash (Chin 2011).

6 Concluding Remarks

With the stories of Sina Weibo and the Wenzhou train crash in mind, we return to the initial problem at hand; a contextualization of Chinese microblogging in greater online China, and reflections of how such applications relate to the concept of the public sphere. The work of Habermas, as well as his critics and supporters, offers a “useful analytic perspective” of media from a standpoint of democratic ideals (Dahlgren 2005b: 411). However, also in an authoritarian environment there seems to be flexibility for something resembling a form of public space for communication and opinion formation.

6.1 Microblogging and Greater Online China

Reflections regarding the two first research questions of how Chinese microblogging applications position themselves within the greater online space of China, and how microblogging tools relate to the concept of the public sphere, are interrelated. First and foremost, Chinese microblogging tools are inevitably part the same space as every other Chinese Internet application, contained within the frames of the Golden Shield and other forms of government control. Within the simplified model proposed during the course of this study in section 3.2.2), microblogging tools are somewhat unique in their current massive rise in popularity, increasing reported use by nearly 300% from 2010 to 2011 (CNNIC 2011: 42). Microblogging applications have thereby developed an important presence in Online China, and have been noticed internationally too; the word ‘Weibo’ has begun to show up in news reports and articles all over the world, and microblogs in China are often portrayed as a crowbar against oppression, and as a powerful tool for self-expression (DeWoskin 2012). The specific focus on microblogging separates itself from a more overall coverage on the ‘Chinese Internet’ in its entirety, thus separating microblogging more as a specific element of Chinese Internet culture. As online China still largely remains contained and isolated from the inside by the Golden Shield, international reports on microblogging may serve as an entry point for understanding cultural specifics like E Gao and the Wu Mao Dang, thereby opening up some of the very culturally specific elements of ‘Chinanet’ to those outside of China.

As seen in the analysis of content relating to the Wenzhou train crash, the reality of online China demands a closer reading than a black and white picture of an evil and censoring authoritarian regime and citizens ready to storm the online barricades to fight for political reform and free speech; both support and criticism are part of the discussion on Sina Weibo, and there is no saying what *kind* of tool for communication Sina Weibo will develop into, as that depends both on Sina's interactions with authorities and Weibo users, as well as actual use of the application by Netizens, and reactions to all such developments from the authorities. Even though Netizens could prove to be quite powerful in numbers, and perhaps also very reluctant to accept any alterations that would drastically change conditions for use of microblogs, one must never forget the Chinese authorities holds a tremendous technological power over the entire Chinese online space, including microblogs. In his assessment of the Chinese Internet, Lagerkvist (2006) does however remind us "[that] people who suddenly enjoy more political freedom than before are extremely unwilling to take even a single step back again" (p.128). Pursuit of continuous freedoms online, or at least a reluctance to let any achieved freedom go again, are part of the constant negotiations that take place in online China, and also via microblogs; the authorities has since the very beginning of the Internet in China appreciated the value of the Net as part of modern progress, facilitating a thriving online space with an array of well-functioning applications. At the same time, as seen in critical comments regarding the Wenzhou train crash, Netizens will keep pushing towards the limits of what authorities find expectable within the official idea of a 'harmonious society', with critical expressions that are facilitated by the easy to use infrastructure of microblogs. Wedged in between are content providers like Sina, who are eager to please both Netizens with solid and user-friendly applications (to secure market shares) *and* demands set by the authorities (to secure that they are allowed to be part of the market at all). The dynamics between authoritarian regime, content providers and Netizens are crucial for the future position of microblogs in greater online China.

A fascinating aspect of the greater online China, is that while discussion used to center on access to blocked sites in the shadows of the Great Firewall, it has now in many ways shifted towards a discussion of premises for applications *within* the limits of the Firewall. For the time being, 'Chinanet' seems securely contained, protected by a Golden Shield that offers enough leeway for expression and entertainment to keep Netizens from tearing down the Great Firewall. If the use of microblogging applications were to be severely restricted, or

removed completely, there is however no saying how Netizens would response. Online China is space full of tension, and many of those tensions become very visible within popular and dense microblogging applications.

6.2 Microblogging and the public sphere

In his reflections on collective actions, Calhoun (1993) notes that a political public sphere is successful when it “provides discourse about shared societal concerns that is both rational-critical and influential” (p. 276). The rationality of a space such as Sina Weibo has been discussed; although it is a substantial source for information, an archive of discussions and opinions on a variety of topics of public concern, it is not necessarily trustworthy. Despite encouragements from the government to use Internet and microblogs as a tool for communication, applications like Sina Weibo has yet to demonstrate a lasting powerful offline influence in negotiations of power. There are however tendencies of perceived influence observed in Netizens, as we saw in the analysis of the Wenzhou train crash and particularly the post praising the power of microblogs as part of the reason for further investigations of the damaged train sets. With a strong authoritarian one-party state still in place, Chinese microblogging applications could turn out to be little more than a vent for frustration, favored by the Netizens because it opens possibilities for large-scale communications, while also being favored by the authorities, being able to keep track of the pulse of online public opinion within an environment they can control.

Possible awareness amongst Netizens that use of microblogs could develop into something more powerful than a frustration-vent that would lead to substantial offline consequences with implications for Chinese society might also spark new awareness in perception of Chinese citizen-identity (Habermas 2006; Dahlgren 2005b). Even with renewed awareness amongst citizens, and a possibility to develop microblogs as a powerful tool for public expression, notion of Chinese microblogging applications as a normative public sphere quickly collapses due to the strong authoritarian presence. There are however great differences between theory and practice for use of the concept of a public sphere (Habermas 2006: 412); if microblogging tools serves to develop public understanding concerning rights and liberties, inclusion and equality and public deliberation (Habermas 2006: 412), they could have a real practical impact on Chinese citizens and their perception of collective identity in modern China.

Sina Weibo is however first and foremost an informal arena of communication, and even though there are numbers of profiles representing official entities, and many topics of public interest are discussed, there is no solid structure in place for gathering collective opinion across the fast-moving medium. If collective action were to grow on Sina Weibo, the application could very well develop as part of an emerging Chinese civic-culture and civil society (Dahlgren 2005b, 423; Lagerkvist 2010). At present, such an optimistic assessment is however subdued by but the amounts of chaff, misinformation and rumors found on the microblogging platform.

Nevertheless, within the many informal deliberations Sina Weibo does have a function as an agenda-setting tool, as could be observed in the variations of content regarding the Wenzhou train crash. Were we however to add the agenda-setting functions of Sina Weibo to an imagined public sphere as “an intermediary system of communications between formally organized and informal face-to-face deliberations in arenas at both the top and the bottom of the political system” (Habermas 2006: 415), would the limitations of censorship and control yet again dampened enthusiasm for microblogs as a space for conceptual success towards the public sphere.

The analysis regarding the train crash has however demonstrated how Sina Weibo might be viewed as an *entry point* into political conversation for Chinese Netizens, with politics serving in addition to the perhaps more popular themes of entertainment, gossip and other types of light-conversational topics. In that sense Sina Weibo could help to diffuse private opinions in a public space, where private opinions could find their way into a space of general public discourse, to a greater extent than within the traditional media channels, who by and large remain subdued to an array of content regulating directives ¹²⁷.

6.2.1 Structure, representation and interaction

With international attention and half of Chinese Netizens reported to use microblogs, companies running these applications have secured important structural capital by developing microblogs as an alternative for personal publishing within a media sphere that otherwise is off-limits to most ordinary citizens. The structural dimension of microblogs as part of a public space is however greatly clouded by authoritarian control that also influences the

¹²⁷ See also Dahlgren (2005b) on schematic sequences of the non-political, the para-political and the fully political (p. 420)

representational dimensions of microblogs; Sina Weibo does represent a pluralism of views within a public space that in offline instances can be very conform, i.e. with no Chinese news papers reporting on the Wenzhou train crash the day after the accident. And even with an inherent agenda-setting function for popular discussion, rumors and content control restricts a lasting representational accuracy for opinion formation. On the other hand, representational dimension and technological features like opportunities for large-scale diffusion of information, and media ‘hybriditiy’ in media-rich posts aspects of microblogs are of great value to Netizens; it is not the infrastructure of Sina Weibo in it self that favors diffusion of misinformation and rumors. People, not technology, spread rumors. Sina does however have a responsibility to secure those aspects of microblogs that they *can* control; the many types of verification processes indicates an effort to make services appear trustworthy on different levels; trust towards users who use Sina Weibo services; trust towards the greater online space by indicating that information on Sina Weibo has been checked and verified, while also reassuring the authorities that they have their user base under (registered) control. Accounts used for spam is nevertheless still a real problem for Sina Weibo, with one report claiming that as much as 49% of all Weibo posts that are forwarded could stem from counterfeit profiles (Yu, Asur & Huberman 2012). The various verification options on Sina Weibo do not seem to work for a purpose of adding trustworthiness to the applications, on the contrary, they add confusion to an already quite chaotic space.

Despite all shortcomings, microblogging applications like Sina Weibo has a tremendous strength in favoring interaction in a sense that favors the concept of a ‘public’ (Dahlgren 2005; Dewey 1954). Mass media generally relates to a ‘public’ as being a passive audience; we can watch, listen and read, but possibilities for direct participation is limited. With applications like Sina Weibo the ‘public’ can receive information, share information and contest information. Interaction flows between groups of various sizes; some posts will be left with no repostings and no comments (but they might still be read by a unknown amount of Netizens) while other posts travel with great speed across the application, being rapidly shared and heavily debated.

6.2.2 A meso-level space with macro- level possibilities

Depending on use, Sina Weibo relates to both the micro- and meso- levels of a public space described by Keane (1995). Again it becomes a choice of the Netizens for how they apply the

application: by restricting use and interaction to a very limited number of other Weibo users, Sina Weibo could form an individual micro-space for personal publishing. With millions of ‘fans’, and thousands of Weibo posts, other users seem to prefer interaction on a meso-level of public participation. The meso-level characteristics of Sina Weibo are more urgently present than the micro-level choices that could be made by each Netizen; with posts being open for all registered users to read it not only reduces levels of privacy, but also encourages interaction unhindered by geographical and class-related constraints. Sina Weibo also has a spatial potential on a macro-level; while Chinese Netizens encounter difficulties breaching the Great Fire Wall, there are no limitation for international Netizens who wish take a look on what is going on behind it. You will however, need to prepare yourself for maneuvering in a space that greatly favors use of Chinese language, and even if you are able to read and understand Chinese you will also have to tackle fast-moving slang to secure full comprehension.

6.3 The (fragile) power of Weibo

In reflection of Sina Weibo in relations of conceptual frames regarding the public sphere, Chinese microblogging applications has been identified as a public space with wide-reaching possibilities for interaction, that albeit contained within the space of ‘Chinanet’ could be of importance for public deliberation and debate. As the analysis of the infrastructure within the application indicated, there are hopes for being optimistic on behalf for Chinese microblogging tools as they offer easy-to-use functions for sharing information. Also, due to the massive and still growing popularity, you have the potential to be heard by many. There are however, as has also been identified throughout the study, clear limitations of Chinese microblogging applications, the most obvious being a clear presence of content control in blocking of keywords and removal of posts. Even with overt restrictions on content, Sina Weibo is identified as a space where Netizens can express an array of views in online discussion. During the first week after the Wenzhou train crash, Netizens raised a number of questions; some were very direct in mode of address, speaking openly of censorship and using harsh characteristics in their criticism of officials. Others framed their messages in a more discreet manner, adding in-direct comparisons and sarcasm to media-rich Weibo posts, which would require a more thorough interpretation by receivers to fully grasp their meaning. As part of a vibrant and creative online culture, in-direct meanings are a strong-point of

microblogging tools, but does also propose an almost ironic limitation to microblogs as vivid and creative use also affects trustworthiness of information that is diffused across the applications; the widespread presence of unverified information, misinformation and wild speculations does not help to build a reputation of microblogging as a reliable source of information and opinion formation in China.

The Chinese authorities have also on numerous occasions demonstrated their very direct power within the Chinese online space, by blocking access to international sites and shutting down online access within China during times of civil unrest. During 2012 Chinese authorities have also introduced measures directly towards microblogs; in March 2012 microblogging applications were issued a demand for real-name registration for all users (The Economist 2012; Global Times 2012), causing concern that authorities were stepping up measures of surveillance over Netizens. Also, following an online rumor of a coup stirring in Beijing in late March 2012, several popular microblogging applications, including Sina Weibo, were ordered to suspend comment functions on Weibo posts for three days (Chao 2012). Apart from blocking Weibo predecessors like Fanfou altogether in 2009, this was the first major intervention into the infrastructure of microblogging platforms, demonstrating the very direct power of the authorities, while reminding Netizens that the power of Weibo may be real, but it is also fragile.

Whether or not the Chinese online community will manage to create grounds for political change outside the fiber optical lines of cyber-communication is a question yet to be answered; Sina Weibo is a channel for entertainment and information, and even with explicit limitations towards content regulation, the opportunities for personal publishing and interaction are without doubt of value for Chinese citizens. The constant and inter-changing negotiations between authorities content providers and Netizens keeps 'Chinanet' in a constant state of exiting flux. This also challenges researchers and commentators to provide new and creative theoretical frames to suit this complex space; just as there is room for creativity in online China, there is room for creativity in theoretical and empirical reflections regarding this complex space. However, any claims and predictions about the future of 'Chinanet', and their possible offline ramifications, should be stated with great consideration. Cultural understanding and caution in regards to developing trends are important guidelines in exploration of the Chinese cyberspace, as the Chinese complexities and online cultural phenomenon like Sina Weibo further sneaks into global awareness. If you enter this chaotic

and exiting space chances are that you will feel quite overwhelmed by all the amazing (and unbelievable) stories you encounter; a tragic train crash first reported online, billion of dollars of corruption, evidence being buried, and a little girl rescued against all odds. Whether you believe it or not, I believe it anyway - because it is all there for us to explore, debate, challenge and share.

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