

Microblog: Micropower to a Civil Society

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Abstract: Microblog is gaining popularity in China in recent two years. Due to its unique features like briefness, instantaneity and interactivity, it is predicted to have great potentials in promoting social progress. Based on a review of the hot events that happened in China in 2010, this paper explores the role microblog plays in achieving open governance, managing crises and improving livelihood and argues that microblog facilitates the construction of civil society in China through soliciting citizens' active participation in public affairs.

Key word: Microblog; Hot Events; Civil Society; Public Affairs

1 Introduction

Microblog is becoming a buzzword in China in recent two years. Different types of people, especially film stars and singing stars use microblog services to post quick status updates about what they're doing or what they plan to do. Journalists and news sites use microblog both for gathering news and for sharing headlines and linking to news stories on line. E-businesses are starting to take advantage of microblogs by posting about upcoming events, company progress and e-commerce sales. Even delegates to the National People's Congress early 2010 posted brief online messages from behind the scene to share with the public the progress of the conference. Microblogging is growing so rapidly among China's estimated 360 million Internet users that some people said China is undergoing Micro Revolution. The slogan of Chinese Blogger Conference 2009 is "Micro power and a broader world". It anticipated the ways how more and more subtle information-sharing tools and channels promote social progress and collaboration which have immediate impact on our way of life. This paper intends to examine how the netizens' participation in public affairs facilitates the construction of civil society in China through microblogging based on a review of the hot events in 2010.

2 Features of Microblog

By definition, microblog is a form of real-time blog that allows users to write a brief text update (usually less than 140 characters—including spaces) and publish it instantly on the Internet through a variety of digital channels and share them with friends, coworkers, and online contacts. The idea first came from Evan Williams who launched the earliest communications platform service website Twitter in 2006. Twitter is highlighted in western countries, for it helped Barack Obama win the election campaign and become American president in 2008; it was first to have reported the death of Michael Jackson in June 2009; and it played an important role in the political unrest in Iran in June and December 2009. All these events signal the coming of a new Internet age brought by microblog products led by Twitter.

Microblogging has become popular over recent years because it represents a free, fast, and easy-to-use social media tool. Briefness is its remarkable feature. Every message is restricted to 140 characters. And the production of the message is as easy as BBS, QQ texts. Therefore, the access threshold is much lower. The free-style and two-paragraph posts have replaced long-format blog articles, empowering it with great advantage over other media in this information-explosion era in which people are plagued by fast pace of life.

Microblog features strong real-time performance and broad coverage. Users can record what they think, see, hear and feel at anytime via a computer or mobile devices such as a mobile phone. They can post their message, update their message whenever and wherever, and these updates are available to anyone who has subscribed to view the messages. They can also follow or forward others' message and search information whenever and wherever. Therefore, Compared to traditional media formats, microblog provides greatly enhanced real-time performance, which makes it complement to other new media like web pages, IM tools and e-mails. Unlike traditional media characterized by linear communication or weblike computer-mediated communication, the transmission of microblog is fissile. For example, as a social network, Twitter revolves around the principle of followers. When you choose to follow another Twitter user, the user's tweets appear in reverse chronological order on your main

Twitter page. If you follow 20 people, you'll see a mix of tweets scrolling down the page. Having a broad coverage, microblog is actually a real-time broadcasting tool, and every user has a separate channel and his or her own audience. It is an extremely efficient medium.

Microblog is also strikingly interactive. The boundaries between publisher, producer, distributor, consumer and receiver of content are blurring. Everybody becomes participant. Everybody can offer help or donate ideas. They are not only senders but also receivers of information. Microblog is a great way to get information from a large group of friends and peers. Putting a question out there yields results that can provide great value. It's also a great way to share resources that you find interesting and helpful. You can have two-way communication and share information with others at any time. Put those three elements together — social networks, live searching and link-sharing — and you have a cocktail that poses what may amount to the most interesting alternative to Google's near monopoly in searching.

3 The Current Status of Microblog in China

Microblog has had its presence in China for four years. To date, more than 30 websites have been operating or introducing the functions of Twitter. Microblog was introduced to China by Fanfou.com in 2007. Earlier birds like Fanfou, Jiwai and Digu have once come under the limelight of the media. Since the second half of 2009, a host of portal websites such as Sina, Sohu and Tencent have started the testing of microblogging functions in succession. As a result, Chinese Twitters have been a hot topic since 2009.

Sina Corporation started the promotion for a Twitter-like product Sina Microblog in August, 2009. It attracted the joining of the common audiences through the star effect. Sina Microblog has made some improvement of Twitter tailored for China. For example, users can publish topics for discussion and attach images to the messages they send; the display form of the discussion page is similar to that of community forms to adapt to the habits of Chinese users. Sina even allows the users of other websites to register Sina Microblogging accounts. Tencent, an entertainment portal site in China, has also launched the beta-version of microblogging product. Sohu and NetEase are also testing their similar products in the hope of sharing a slice of the emerging microblogging market when it flourishes in future.

Most traditional media that have registered with Sina are magazines and newspapers, with famous media reporting current issues that draw most concern. Traditional media usually utilize microblog in two ways. One is communicating by microblog. They post the content of media on their microblog account and set topics to bring forth discussion. The other is they defragmentize and reorganize the messages on various microblogs and make it their own exclusive news according to their own orientation. As is analyzed above, the messages on microblogs are the continually updated brief discourse produced and submitted by users. Traditional media can select the right information for their audiences from the fragmented information on different microblogs and form secondary communication. Since different media have different perspectives and criteria, they can produce different news. Thus, microblogs can be used to form a kind of distributed journalism characterized by fast speed, rich sources of information and mighty dissemination.

Despite the prosperity of Twitter in foreign countries, the microblogging market in China still remains at its infant stage. To date, no microblogging websites with million-grade users have taken shape in China. Even though Sina has employed stars to promote its micro-blogging product, its microblogging website still remains at the beta test stage.

4 Microblog and Civil Society

4.1 The connotation of civil society

Definitions of civil society vary. Habermas defines civil society as relatively independent social structure such as non-governmental organizations, community groups, registered charities, trade unions, schools and so on. These organizations form the social foundations of public sphere where they can discuss the widely concerned affairs.^[1] Giddens understands civil society as an entity conditioned by the state, which is not a spontaneous harmonious order. He stressed that a healthy civil society protects individuals from state power. On the other hand, the state must protect individuals from conflicts of interest in civil society.^[2]

The discourse of constructing civil society appeared in China after the reform and opening up. Chinese scholars who introduced the concept of civil society into China and tried to establish civil society in China really appreciate the liberal spirit and democratic tendencies contained in the civil society theory and intended to promote political democratization in China. The representative Chinese

scholar, Deng Zhenglai, once argued, “by limiting the boundaries of the state power and setting the principle of the infiltration of society by the political power, the ideas of modern political liberalism and economic liberalism broke the political despotic thought of unlimited state power, and provided theoretic guidance to the political liberation of the society and human being.”^[3] In recent years, with the rapid development of national economy and mass media, civil society is believed to be emerging in China. Citizens’ active participation in public affairs is indispensable to the construction of civil society. Therefore, in the following part, we are going to examine how citizens participate in public affairs through microblogging by reviewing several events that happened in 2010.

4.2 Microblog and open governance

The new electronic media have been widely hailed as a potential way of escaping from the oppressive “top-down” politics of mass democracies in which tightly organized political parties make policy unilaterally and mobilize support behind them with minimal negotiation and grass-roots input.^[4] During Two Sessions early this year, microblogging sprang up like mushrooms after the rain, rapidly developing (from the one hosted by Sina to more than ten microblogging sites). It assumed four new roles: as a new way for representatives to perform their duties (offering public proposals as well as behind-the-scenes trivia); as a new form of news dissemination for the news media (opening official microblogs, establishing microblog columns and layout in newspapers); as a new platform for citizen participation in politics (virtual proposals were submitted; interaction with council members); and a new interactive way for the press to investigate stories (setting topics to get user comments).

In August, the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau officially launched its microblogging services in an attempt to offer a new communication channel between police and the general public. In the first microblog post, the bureau pledged to offer the latest police affairs news, anti-fraud tips and stories of model community police. More than 17,600 people logged onto the microblog service on Sunday and some posts received hundreds of comments. Most people applauded the services as the social progress and gradual government openness, saying it can bridge the gap between police and average citizens and change the traditionally mysterious and superior image of police officers.

4.3 Microblog and crisis management

Since it is a quick alternative for mass communication, microblog has been used in ways that are creative, widely participative and, often, surprisingly effective to cope with various crises or emergencies. When a crisis occurs, the initial response is critical. It has the power to restore order or chaos; to heal and soothe or heighten tension and cause friction; to clarify and reassure or cast doubt and increase uncertainty. It is a moment that in many instances can forever shape the image, reputation and sometimes destiny of a person, an organization or even a government. More importantly, it is a moment to maintain public safety and social order. As a result, more and more emergency response organizations are utilizing microblog to communicate to the public and gather immediate information from on the ground resources. One challenge during a crisis is how an individual or organization communicates with all stakeholders to include the general public. Coombs stated that a crisis creates an “information void”, with time of the essence in a crisis and no longer existing on a linear plane, that void needs to be filled immediately.^[5] With the advances of technology the speed of communication has been drastically increased bringing people together in virtual communities. Essentially, one voice on the Internet can be heard by millions instantly and in a time of a crisis those voices are filling the void. The traveling speed of crisis information directly impacts the time a crisis team or organization has to respond in order to appear in control. However, if conducted effectively, crisis communication through social media platforms can protect and defend an organization and save lives in urgent situations by filling the information void. Thanks to technological advances, microblog just serves the purpose.

Let’s take Yushu earthquake as an example to illustrate how microblog functions in crisis communication. During the rescue effort, microblogging demonstrated more power in terms of higher efficiency and better accuracy of information than all the other channels of communication. After the earthquake, various microblogging services cooperated and offered a live broadcast of the rescue after the earthquake, constructing the platform for the government and mass audiences to learn about the truth. According to a report in the Chinese media, during the relief effort, there were over 500,000 tweets related to the earthquake, and over 150,000 users had shown their concerns through the microblogging platform. These tweets played an important role in exchanging intelligence, relaying requests for help, and describing on-the-ground situations.

Among the microblogs, the report from China International Rescue Team drew the most attention. Before the reporters came to the area, it posted over one hundred reports on the line and updated them every 10 minutes and even every one minute at the climax. Firefighting Bureau of the Ministry of Public

Security employed microblog to disclose the organization work of the rescue team, including the exact number of the soldiers, trucks and sniffer dogs that were already at work and those to be there. Over 2 million netizens kept close track of their reports. It meets their need to get the information and greatly encouraged them to overcome the disaster. A few example tweets would explain:

Urgent requests for clothes, blankets, tents, medicines and food. Please send directly to the disaster area. Address: Relief Resources Management Office, Yushu People's Government, Post Code 815000. Huang Liming (Deputy Secretary, Yushu People's Government). Phone: 15352985890.

Flights to Xining has been suspended. Nanzhou is only 3-4 hours away from Xining by car. I suggest journalists to take flights to Nanzhou first, then travel to Yushu via Xining by car. This is a cheap method (cars from Xining to Yushu now costs 6 yuan per km)

To 100km west of Yushu, there is a town called Long Bao which is heavily damaged. Apparently no rescue team has arrived there yet. Please notify the relevant authorities.

Experts remind rescue teams to bring medicines for high-altitude sickness and cold, and also vitamins.

Microblog plays a role during all four phases of crisis management, mitigation, preparation, response and recovery. The benefit of real time pictures and videos of on the scene of a crisis allows hazard assessments for first responders and alleviates the stress of the unknowing from stakeholders. The ability to relay immediate information from on the scene before the news has the ability to get on scene allows people even in remote areas to access crisis as it is happening. In addition, in crisis reporting, traditional media can usually provide mass audiences a global picture, while the details on the scene that people rarely know are conveyed via microblogs. They are very necessary supplement to reports of the traditional media, because when one microblogger shares his/her own view, more people read this and continue to share this view with others. Through such constant sharing, collective decision can be made. In short, microblogs can mobilize the whole society in fighting against a crisis. Through microblogging, each and everyone individual in a community can act as a “publisher, sharer and participant” in information exchanges, arousing public attention in a short period of time. It prompts discussion, debate and feedback from those that care about the crisis. The unity of citizens and the cohesion of a nation are beneficial to the construction of civil society.

4.4 Microblog and livelihood

The virtual community formed by microbloggers can also help solve practical social problems. When a person shares an idea with others, other people will pick that up and continue to forward that idea to others, so on and so forth. Such kind of continuous sharing would eventually realize the will of these people. The process is like water drops coming together to form cloud. Isaac Mao, the first blogger in China compares individual to a drop of water and when individual keeps sharing the ideas that they agree with, these people would come together and turn into a power that can supervise civil servants and even change government policy.

Li Mengmeng is a 21 year-old high school student from the countryside of Henan province. In order to save money and send her to university, his dad broke his legs from overworking and her older sister dropped out of school to work in the city. In June, she took the college entry test and scored 565, a score that can help her get into a good university. However, someone who worked at the admissions committee of Kaifeng County forgot her application in drawer, causing her to miss the deadline to get into any universities in China. What was worse was that Kaifeng admissions committee rejected to take any responsibilities. Liang Shuxin, a media practitioner who is very keen on studying Chinese education problems, posted the news on his microblog page to advocate others to retweet in order to help Li Mengmeng get into a college. In 2 days, the post was retweeted over 60,000 times. People were commenting and showing great anger towards the local educational department. Due to public pressure, Li Wenyi, who left Li Mengmeng's file in the drawer, has been suspended from duty. And a later update brings the good news that Henan University of Finance and Economics has admitted Li to their school. It is an example of “micro-power” creating a new “world” for individuals.

5 Conclusion

We should not underestimate the power of microblog, as it calls upon citizens' awareness and enthusiasm for public affairs so that they would take on their responsibility to bring progress to our society. Microblogs are a gathering place for opinion leaders, especially for the gathering of many professionals in the media, and that they have already to a definite degree become the vanguard of other forums in China and of Chinese traditional media. There are still obstacles for the development of civil

society in China. However, when people's will is pointing to the same direction, neither the power bloc nor powerful individuals could stop the momentum.

At the same time, we need a sober mind and be alert to the consequences of relying too much on microblogs. Topics on microblogs are posted quickly, but also fade away quickly. To establish a forum to discuss important issues that need longer-term attention, it is necessary to use microblogs in conjunction with other outlets such as websites and traditional media. Besides, there is a negative tendency: some journalists rely too much on microblogging. Instead of going to the scene to get the first-hand facts or to confirm the facts, they just stay at their offices and search the new on the Internet or quote news from different microblogs. It will definitely mislead audiences in making judgment on a certain event and hence facilitate little in constructing civil society.

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