

*Chinese social media as a dominated public sphere: A case study of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on Sina Weibo*

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0217

The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

The Internet has long been the focus of utopian arguments proposing its democratic potential as a virtual public sphere. Most recently, social media has been proposed as a networked public sphere to facilitate political changes toward democratic ideals in authoritarian societies. This paper investigates the most significant Chinese political event of 2012, the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Communist Party of China in which China's new leadership was elected, through the twin lenses of the social media sphere and the traditional media sphere. It empirically compares and contrasts depictions of the event in the most popular Chinese social media service, Sina Weibo, against those from the most widely circulated traditional mass media outlets, and also carefully examines user identity and the content in both public spheres. The results show that in this political event, social media tended to be dominated by traditional media in framing certain major political events, and that the online public discourse was heavily influenced by institutional accounts representing the official orthodoxies. In such circumstances, social media's purported power is constrained from serving as an effective public sphere fostering dramatic institutional changes.

Keywords: public sphere, social media, Weibo, leadership, censorship, China

The conceptualization of the public sphere is based on the ideas expressed by Jürgen Habermas who uses this concept to refer to a public space emerging in eighteenth century's Europe where private people began to come together as a public and debate over social issues of common concern, and thus monitoring state authority through informed and critical discourse (1989). In the twenty-first century, against the backdrop of the new media environment, the concept of the public sphere has been revitalized as the philosophical background for a number of studies on digital networks and citizen participation (Roberts, 2009, Scammell, 2000, Iosifidis, 2011, Sanford, 2012, Sæbø et al., 2008). The digital public sphere draws attention to the "intimate connection between a web of free, informal personal communications and the foundations of democratic society" (Rheingold, 2008: 101). The idea of the public sphere as a place for discursive debate thus can provide new media researchers with a useful concept which helps explain the significance of online discursive participation and civic engagement.

As we are now living in a global "network society" (Castells, 2004), woven by all kinds of technologies with networking features, both new media and networks of publics have generated a global networked public sphere and civil society. With its focus on sharing and participation increasingly popular, social media encourages more citizens to participate, and potentially fosters the democratic health of a society (Sæbø et al., 2009, Roberts, 2009). Any many scholars have argued that such networked public spheres are indeed emerging through social media (Mazali, 2011, Iosifidis, 2011, Pannen, 2010, Castells, 2008, Knox, 2013).

Among studies of new media in China, a number of previous studies point out the potentiality of Chinese social media as an emerging public sphere and its possible impact on Chinese society (Zhang, 2010, Zheng, 2012, Shen, 2011, Lu and Qiu, 2013). Some examined particular local incidents where this online public sphere played an important role in the dispute settlement process and even induced direct institutional changes (Bei, 2013, Xu, 2011, Ross, 2011, Sullivan, 2013). Most, however, focus on analysis of some particular social issue where censorship failed to exert a pervasive influence and social media's role was tangible and able to be evaluated. Yet we need to shift our focus to social media's supporting role in citizens' daily and routine discursive engagement in the public sphere instead of those of rare radical transformation that seem to suddenly come out of no solid basis.

This paper is an attempt in this direction. By examining the quotidian discussion around a certain particular topic on social media in a Chinese context, we outline the general landscape of the online public sphere through an empirical approach, rather than dispute the applicability of all sorts of concepts and theories, which has been longstanding around this issue in academia. The paper also tries to fill a gap where

studies on the performance of social media in Chinese on significant political issues are lacking due to practical difficulties in collecting data and even publishing findings.

By investigating the most important Chinese political event in 2012- the 18<sup>th</sup> *National Congress of the Communist Party of China* (hereinafter 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC) on China's most popular microblogging platform- *Sina Weibo*, the paper tries to assess how social media depicted this political event and whether this online sphere induced any changes in decision-making process.

## **Data and methods**

This paper examines the public discourse surrounding the 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC which was convened in Beijing from November 8 to November 14, 2012. On this congress, Xi Jinping as the new General Secretary of the Party, also the chairman of the Central Military Committee was elected. He is also the de facto president of China. A new politburo standing committee with seven seats was also elected to take charge of different areas of the state affairs.

Considering the significance of this congress, the Chinese government initiated the most stringent censorship of media coverage especially on Internet. The microblogging service providers also proactively set up stricter self-censorship mechanisms and deployed more personnel to regulate online speech. Offline physical surveillance was also launched to complement the media censorship efforts of the authorities. For this reason, a large proportion of the microblogs about the event before November 2, 2012 were blocked or deterred for public search. And there was also limit for daily retrieval of historical posts, which was a maximum of 1000 posts.

The timeframe of sampling for this study is between October 8 and November 21, time points beginning when the national media began to preview the event, and concluding when the most media coverage began to shift to other issues. A purposive sampling was conducted using the key term "18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC" on Weibo's own search engine, and more than 5000 posts were obtained based on the parameter of popularity. The search parameter is a built-in feature of Weibo search; when it is defined as searching by 'popularity', the most circulated posts would be shown on top of the results and thus collecting this kind of posts could ensure the representativeness of the popular posts. Then the collected posts are pre-processed into a format suitable for further text analysis. To gain a deeper understanding of the online public discourse, this study also collected news articles from three traditional media outlets for comparison. They are *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency* and *Southern Weekend* which represent the most widely circulated and influential national news outlets.

Within the same timeframe and using the same keyword, a total of 2,804 news articles were collected from the three news sources through *Factiva* and their official web databases of the publications, and the traditional media dataset was also pre-processed into an appropriate format for further analysis.

A text mining software program, *Leximancer*, was deployed to extract key concepts and themes from the two datasets and to visualize the global traits of public discourse and connectivity between concepts that appear their respective spheres. As a method for transforming lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns in an unsupervised manner, the *Leximancer* system involves semantic and relational co-occurrence information extraction, each of which uses a different statistical algorithm but employing nonlinear dynamics and machine learning (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). Further by comparing the counts and the weight of the main concepts emerging from the two spheres, the power relation or influence relation between the two could be further explored.



TRADITIONAL MEDIA			SINA WEIBO	
Concept	Weight		Concept	Weight
development	38%	<i>Note: ✓ indicates a matching relation between Weibo concepts and traditional media concepts</i>	✓ 18 <sup>th</sup> NCCPC	51%
✓ Party	24%		✓ Party	18%
Socialism	21%		✓ People	10%
✓ people	16%		Celebration	9%
Chinese	16%		Election	7%
building	16%		✓ representatives	7%
✓ 18 <sup>th</sup> NCCPC	15%		✓ China	7%
scientific	14%		✓ Report	6%
✓ economic	13%		✓ Beijing	5%
✓ reform	13%		Security	4%
✓ system	12%		✓ Public	4%
promote	12%		Police	4%
✓ social	11%		✓ Reform	4%
✓ Society	10%		✓ Social	3%
Improve	10%		Victory	3%
✓ China	10%		✓ Political	3%
✓ Report	9%		Market	3%
✓ Construction	9%		✓ System	3%
✓ Important	9%		✓ Economic	3%
✓ Road	8%		Reporters	3%
Rural	8%		✓ Country	3%
Income	8%		✓ Important	2%
Growth	7%		✓ National	2%
✓ World	6%		✓ Leadership	2%
✓ Political	6%		Policy	2%
✓ Cultural	6%		✓ Government	2%
✓ national	6%		✓ society	2%
✓ Country	6%		Future	2%
✓ Public	5%		✓ Congress	2%
✓ Leadership	5%		✓ World	2%
innovation	5%		Stability	2%
✓ government	5%		✓ Road	2%
✓ Beijing	5%		✓ Reporters	2%
✓ representatives	4%		✓ construction	1%
Achievements	4%		✓ power	1%
✓ Economy	4%		✓ Cultural	1%
International	4%		✓ Economy	1%
✓ power	4%		Corruption	1%

Table 1. Main concepts emerging from traditional media and Sina Weibo

A qualitative textual analysis is conducted to examine and interpret the content and meaning of Weibo posts, or their structure and discourse, in a naturalistic paradigm. Specifically, the researcher captures the identity of users including their demographic information, the meaning of the content of their posts, and how the content was produced asking questions such as “is it an original one or forwarded one”, or “is it an interpretation of other related posts or just excerpt from another” and so on. Moreover, examining the user behaviour such as the publishing frequency and intensity also matters in terms of assessing whether there is an agenda setting effect or not in either spheres.

It is worth adding that participant observation was also involved in this study so that the analysis started even prior the data collection and lasted throughout. The researcher observed and sometimes participated in the dynamic interaction in the online public sphere, to obtain a better understanding of the issues of concern and the associated bigger picture of socio-political conditions, and to maintain a larger perspective on the whole research.

## **Results**

### **1. Similarity of topics between two spheres**

Table 1 lists out the main themes and concepts that emerged from traditional media and Weibo. A remarkable topical similarity between the two spheres was observed. Although the proportions of each concept to its context blocks in two public spheres shows their different foci and topical density, in computational terms, still four fifth of Weibo concepts are aligned with those of the traditional media.

Examining the thousands of Weibo posts we find Weibo mainly focused on conveying basic informational messages about this event without much deep inquiry into the specific agendas and matters of concern. Such concepts accounted for a large proportion of the total topics we found in online public discussion. Only a small fraction (weight $\leq$ 3%) touched a broader range of topics which also well matched the traditional media coverage. By contrast, a more profound and comprehensive elaboration of specific issues around key topics was observed in traditional media coverage. Especially as the Congress approached, the sampled traditional media tended to focus on intense discussions about some key topics such as Socialism, scientific development, economy, system, reform and so on. This hyping of news lasted for a considerable time period.

The focal discrepancy between the two platforms could be attributed to their different natures and architectures. Due to the character limit of Weibo it is simply impossible to pack much context into the 140 Chinese characters. For the sake of convenience, people tend not to choose a slow, thoughtful and considered approach in the new media environment, because fast Internet and social media and deep slow thought don't mix well (Carr, 2008). By comparison traditional media have more time and space for articulation and profundity; they supply the stuff of thought and can also shape the process of thought (McLuhan, 2001).

Despite that, collectively the Weibo posts harvested and analyzed in this study seemed to be rather similar to mainstream traditional news reporting than the harsh and hostile projections of criticism and dissidence that have been recorded elsewhere (Yeo and Li, 2012, Zhu et al., 2013, Ji, 2012). The result may be partly attributed to the analytic approach adopted in this research which attempts to make sense of a larger picture. Yet the result as a whole still gives a rational conceptualization of what kind of discussions were prominently occurring on Weibo and what an ordinary user would likely find about the 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC in this online sphere.

## 2. Institutional Weibo users as dominant

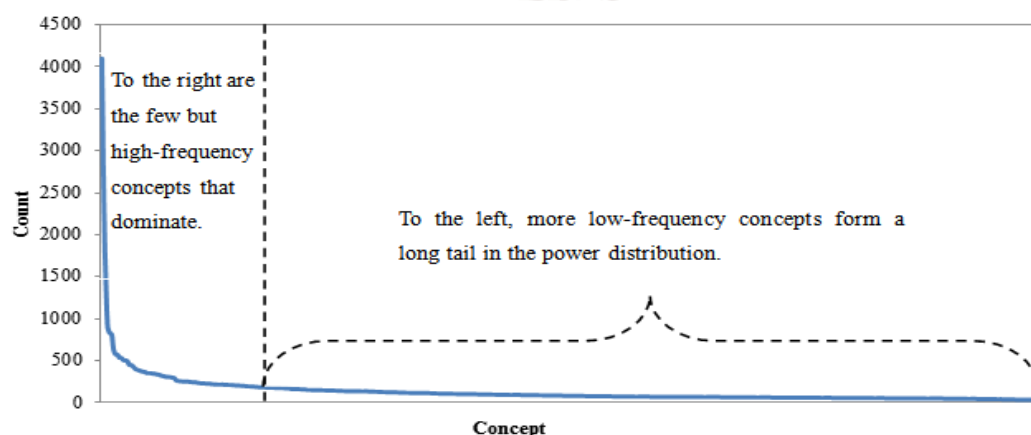


Fig.1 Concept distribution on Sina Weibo

We further examined all the collected utterances that occurred around the topic of this political event, and found that, nearly 80.6% were contributed by individual Weibo users, and 19.4% by verified Weibo institutional users. According to Weibo's verification program, institutional users are mainly composed of governmental and social organizations. It was observed that most institutional actors were either governmental bodies or traditional media groups. Their content, usually well organized and clearly stated, had generated a skewed topical distribution with a long tail which was composed of a large bulk of fragmentized, content produced by

individual users (see Fig.1).

Although the debates mostly consisted of citizen actors, it was media and political accounts that held structurally stronger positions in terms of messages received or reciprocated. In addition, these actors sustained a more stable and continuous presence in the networks, compared with citizens users, who reflected more variable levels of engagement.

No.	User name	Forward frequency	User category
1	@Caijing	25202	The official account of a news group
2	@Headlines	21059	The official account of Sina news service
3	@People'sDaily	9036	The official account of the State newspaper, <i>People's Daily</i>
4	@SouthernMetropolisDaily	4235	The official account of a Guangzhou based local newspaper, <i>Southern Metropolis Daily</i>
5	@XinhuaNewsAgency @XinhuaViewpoints	2385	The official accounts of the State news agency, <i>Xinhua News Agency</i> and its affiliated column, "Xinhua Viewpoints"
6	@SinaVideo	1320	The official account of Sina video service
7	individual users	425	including verified and unverified users
8	Other institutional users	420	including ordinary organizations as well as the Party's grassroots departments

Table 2 main user accounts of the most circulated 1000 posts on November 9, 2012

Table 2 sampled the most circulated 1000 posts on November 9, 2012, which was the second day of the Congress, and calculated the forwarding frequency of the main Weibo users. The top six users are all the official Weibo accounts of traditional media, the party's mouthpieces and mainstream news service. By contrast, the individual users had obtained much less attention from the public.

Where content is concerned, many Weibo posts conveniently fed off traditional media's editorials or news articles. Taking one post released by institutional user "Headlines" on October 1, 2012:

[People's Daily Editorial points out China's modernization cause is at an extremely important point in history] Today People's Daily published an editorial under the title of "Striving on a hopeful Chinese way". Looking back at the development China has made in the past decade since the 16<sup>th</sup> NCCPC, the article pointed out China's modernization cause is at an extremely important point in history. We shall seize opportunities to push the cause and proceed on the hopeful Chinese way, to welcome the convening of the 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC with excellent performance. <http://t.cn/zlcYPiK>

The content of the post was mainly an excerpt from *People's Daily* editorial (see Fig.3), and the hyperlink in the post would redirect to a reprinted version of the editorial by *Xinhua News Agency*. In this way, Weibo and the Party's two leading mouthpieces were highly synchronized, through the hyperlink and media reprinting,

forming an interrelated topical network. Social media genuinely became an extension of the traditional media in terms of both the content and influence.



Fig.3 Screenshot of People's Daily Editorial on October 1, 2012

This reciprocity can be observed in a large number of posts published by institutional Weibo users, especially those official accounts of governmental organizations. Besides, the Party's local media outlets were also frequently quoted as news sources in these users' posts. Such institutional actors, including news groups, government agencies and organizations, with informants for attribution or quasi-propaganda have actually dominated the public discourse on social media. And the symphony between Weibo and traditional media thus plays up strong spin doctoring in their respective public spheres.

In sharp contrast, most ordinary individual users' posts, either reposting institutional users' content or describing their personal experience associated with the event, tended to be overwhelmed by the flood of the uniform information disseminated by institutional users, and therefore presented a relatively weak field of public opinion..

This phenomenon further confirms the "Matthew effect", i.e., "the rich get richer" and 80/20 rule (the Pareto Principle) which widely exists in various areas including online discussion where popular participants will get more attention in a growing



conversation network (Himmelboim, 2008, Wang et al., 2013). Through a study of Twitter discussion, Wu et al. (2011) also find that elite users usually attract the majority of attention, even though they compromise only a minor proportion of the user population. The same also applies to Weibo and particularly in this case study the discussion was dominated by elite institutional and governmental users.

### 3. Traditional media as agenda setters

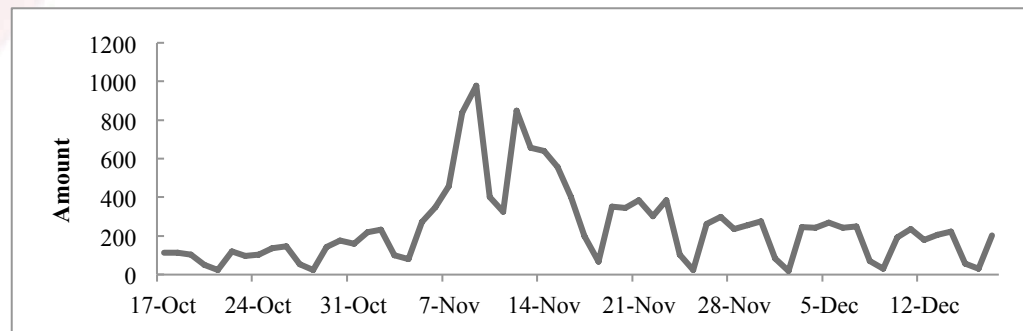


Fig.4 Event trend on traditional media

Fig.4 traces the evolutionary trends of 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC event on legacy media over a time series of 2 months. The trend map shows a steady distribution curve throughout, with flat curves on weekdays and down valleys on weekends, except the two prominent spikes at the beginning and the end of the Congress. This indicates an explicit agenda setting effort by traditional media.

Time period	Top 10 concepts
Pre-Congress (Oct.8- Nov.7)	development, Party, people, social, reform, economy, China, construction, scientific, system
During Congress (Nov.8-Nov.14)	development, Socialism, characteristics, China, people, Party, economy, reform, system, scientific
Post-Congress (Nov.15-Dec.8)	development, Socialism, Party, China, people, scientific, economy, social, report, system

Table 3 Top 10 concepts emerging from legacy media's periodic coverage

Table 3 shows the concepts emerging from news articles of the three time periods, and the top ten concepts extracted from the texts respectively. There is little difference among key topics emerging from traditional media's pre, during and post- congress coverage, and this also suggests a monolithic block of propaganda with shameless consistency and effective agenda setting. . By highlighting some key topics, the traditional media played a focused role as agenda setter, keeping impressing and influencing the audience through repeated and comprehensive coverage pre, during and post the congress. With clear intention of propagandising the audience, , the



sampled traditional media had comprehensively reported every aspects of the event in a formal, elaborative way and thus generated a rational, systematic agenda-setting coverage.

In fact, this kind of propagandist agenda setting has become the Party media's consistent practices for major political events in China (Zhang et al., 2012, Chan, 2007). It usually commences more than one month before the event, and will follow up for more than one month after.

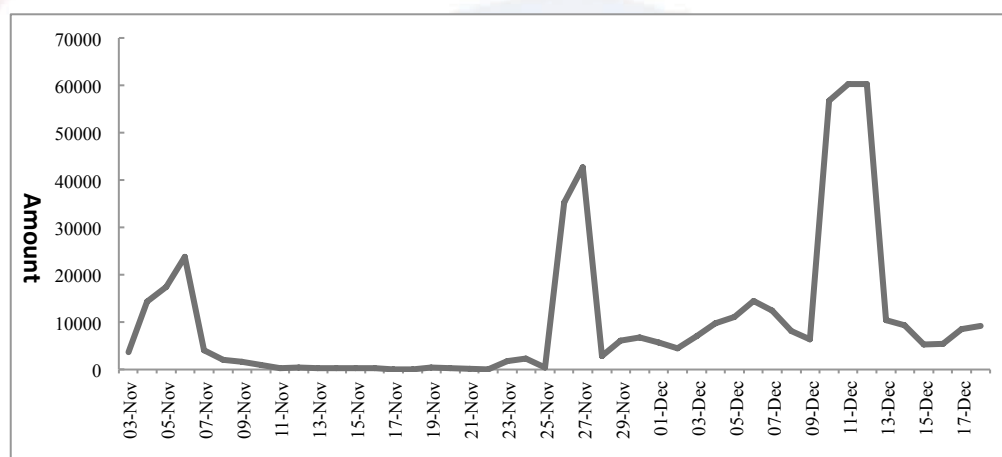


Fig.5 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC's Weibo Trend

Fig.5 traces the evolutionary trends of 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC event on Weibo over a time series of two months, showing one evident spike of online public discussion before the congress and two after the congress. The first spike appeared y before the event on November 6, but what is odd is that immediately after that day the curve went to a downswing and remained surprisingly low throughout the Congress (from Nov 8 to Nov 14), indicating an evident political apathy or withdrawal behavior of ordinary citizens. The two spikes after congress were provoked directly by the cull of several corrupted officials in the anti-corruption actions initiated by the new leadership immediately after the Congress, projecting Chinese people's great interest in the new government's anti-corruption moves. Compared with traditional media's staged coverage, Weibo was more instant and spontaneous in responding to some particular issues. The fragmentized attention to particular topics consequently generated an ever-changing, dynamic public discourse with remarkable ups and downs over time.

This result, tallies well with the conclusion of a previous study. Du (2011) conducted a comprehensive survey on topics Chinese netizens are concerned with, and found that the public shows a remarkable apathy to serious political topics, especially news about those significant political conferences or events. This apathy may be attributed to propagandist news coverage in the state media in this study, the unattractive

stereotyped news reports and the stringent censorship. As a result, citizens tend to either keep silent or be overwhelmed by traditional media and their surrogate speakers- the institutional users- in the online public. The online public sphere constructed by Weibo is thus strongly dominated by the official discourse both in content and influence.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Power distance**

According to Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions theory which describes the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members and how these values relate to behavior, one dimension to investigate a society's national cultures is power distance. Power distance is "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1991: 28, Hofstede and Peterson, 2000: 401). Cultures that endorse low power distance expect and accept power relations that are more consultative or democratic; people relate to one another more as equals regardless of status, and are more comfortable with and demand the right to contribute to and criticize the decision making of the rulers. On the contrary, in a high power distance society like China, the less powerful are in relations with power that are more autocratic and paternalistic; people do not attribute much impact to their individual activities on the ruler's decision making process.

This may explain why a large fraction of users on Sina Weibo tend not to make use of hashtags. Joseph (2012) argues the process of hashtagging is one way for Twitter to realize the notion of a vernacular public sphere, as the function has improved the searchability of the topic and further blurred the lines between institutional and non-institutional discourse. However, it is not the case in China. In a high power distance society under continuous surveillance, Chinese social media users are less eager to disclose information in the public discourse especially when they criticize the political system. By not using hashtags they at least can avoid being traced quickly by others including censors and avoid potential trouble such as blockage, deletion or even clampdown.

Yet in this case study some usage of hashtags are still observed among citizens. They used "#18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC#" or "#welcome the 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC#" with excerpted or forwarded content from other sources, but rarely associated with those posts containing criticism or dissent. That is to say, they tended to use hashtags in a contingent way and obviously know where the safe boundary was.

Power distance can also partly explain social media users' apathy towards the political event. In a society exhibiting a large degree of power distance people also tend to accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. This resonates with the deeply rooted Confucian thought in Chinese culture that everyone must confirm their status ("know thy place") within a specific social rank and hierarchy. Since the Party's position is paramount in this country, and the agenda of its congress is about leadership election, without a legitimate system in place for a referendum, Chinese citizens are unlikely to well justify their "place" in this election but rather to accept the fact reluctantly that "the leader has been pre-decided internally without civil engagement which is Chinese characteristic" (@cleaner520, 17 Oct). Nor did they believe the discursive participation could make a difference to the formidable system, "having no fantasy for the congress" (@yeqing, 7 Nov), especially when positioned as dominated by the official discourse and the immediate gaze of censors. Just as one Weibo user posted, "the congress has everything to do with our lives, but our words carry so little weight" (@lawyerlxy, 2 Nov). In a word, people tended not to mobilize during the congress.

However, on some occasions when the government expects people to support their political action, such as in the moves against corruption which would have direct bearing on the authority of the new leadership and the legitimacy of its ruling, they would seemingly lift the ban and agitate the citizens to create a particular kind of extensive participation, and generate prominent topical heat in the online public sphere. This is evident in the previous Weibo trend map (Fig.5). This kind of enthusiastic online engagement seems to be initiated spontaneously by citizens but in fact largely guided by the Party, and its official discourse.

## 2. Agenda setting

Agenda setting is about the effect and influence of mass communication. It specifies the practice that mass media pick out important aspects of the reality according to their own values and principles, processes these "facts" following a certain structure, and influence the public perception of which issues are important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, Sterling, 2009).

It is not surprising that the traditional media in this case study played a focused role as agenda setter since they were not only the Party's mouthpieces but also the sole news source for this particular event. More specifically, it is the state media that set the agenda for other local media outlets, and they together set the agenda of the online publics directly or through their official online surrogates. For example, when one

state media publishes an important article, the other mainstream media usually would republish the article, or launch a series of peripheral commentaries by their editors or authoritative experts. The local media, willingly or not, are obliged to publish similar pieces to cater to superior propaganda authorities. The official accounts of these media organs on Weibo would go on carrying out similar practices and conveying the message to the whole online public. The social media has become a welcome good recipient of traditional media's agenda setting effect, rather than an alternative agenda setter that could influence the official discourse.

Although a previous study argues that an alternative and popular agenda on Chinese social networks influences the sanctioned agenda setting of official and state-controlled media (Lagerkvist, 2006), in this case study the online public opinion in social media did not have an agenda setting effect on the government, because the government set the agenda of online publics through the state media. This finding also implies that the online public sphere tends to play a bigger role in promoting the salience of a specific issue, like the 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC, rather than setting the entire issue agendas of the traditional media and the government.

### **Limitations of this study**

Since Sina Weibo's Application Programming Interface (API) is not totally open to developers, currently there is no efficient way to get access to the whole database of Weibo. Moreover, there is also limitation for daily retrieval of Weibo post search that is 1000 at most. So for individual researchers, manually harvesting data on the basis of certain terms becomes the only workable way of data collection. So the study can only focus on one narrow aspect of the whole puzzle, which is largely determined by the available posts the researcher could obtain.

The stringent censorship is also an uncontrollable, restricting factor which may affect the completeness of the data because most "inharmonious" posts are deleted or blocked. Thus the metadata collected were already pre-filtered, falling short of more diversified traits. But in turn this exactly composes one unique characteristic of Chinese social media as a surveilled online public sphere.

Yet with a smaller but typical dataset can still appropriately explain part of the critical facts in Chinese social media's landscape. With the same effort, subsequent researches could further explore other aspects of this online public sphere as well as its impact on social issues based on more diversified datasets.

### **Conclusion**

This study chose a paramount political event in China - the 18<sup>th</sup> NCCPC where a new generation of Chinese leaders was elected into power and its new ruling guidelines were declared, and, using a text analytics application, conducted a qualitative content analysis of public discussions around the event happening both on social media and traditional media. The results indicate that in significant Chinese political events, the public sphere facilitated by social media is very limited, weak and dominated by traditional media actors.

While some people fancy social media's powerful agenda setting and catalytic effect in some occasions, this disparate facet of social media revealed in this case study reveals the substantial boundary that constrains social media from serving as an effective public sphere to induce dramatic institutional changes in 'sensitive' political events. Online public opinion did not genuinely make much difference to the government, albeit it might have a profound effect on Chinese citizens' psyche and awareness in the long term. The impact of Weibo on Chinese society is, therefore, an extremely complex and long term evolutionary issue.

Subsequent research case studies depicting different issues such as environmental issues, social-cultural issues, religion or the place of celebrity I may explore what kind of roles the online public sphere can play in different events with diversified empirical data.

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