Strong Weibo, Smart Government: Governmentality and the Regulation of Social Media in China

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Department of Media
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Abstract

Sina Weibo, a social media platform launched in China in 2009, has channeled new energy into the Chinese new media landscape. The acknowledged political significance of the internet has been amplified by the arrival of Weibo. Many scholars argue that Weibo has the potential to expand democratic communication in Chinese society; however, this thesis develops a critical perspective on the common equation between Weibo and expanding democratic communication, arguing that these discussions underestimate the Chinese government’s efforts and oversimplify China’s sophisticated internet culture. A distinctive response to Weibo has emerged within a constantly evolving relationship between the Chinese government, Weibo, and its users. This state response affects the formation and inhibits the growth of public spheres in the context of Weibo.

The debate over the democratising influence of Weibo is rooted in the Western focus of individual liberalism, which assumes that participation in public discourse is clear evidence of the public sphere. This study concludes that in contemporary China, public discourse fails to meet the normative and ideal public sphere, due to effective government control. This thesis examines both the greater freedoms and the continuing control of information simultaneously taking place on Weibo, managed strategically in selective cases, especially in political spheres. Moreover, the apparent freedom on Weibo in fact offers a subtle means for the regime to shape political outcomes. In addition, this thesis argues that the ways in which the state manages and manipulates public discourse in China operate within a complex, interactive, proactive and adaptive process; the state both selectively tightens and loosens public discourse online in order to facilitate control.
The transformation of statecraft from a relatively simple and coercive form of censorship to a more complex style of governance coincided with the “overall planning” attitude of the current leadership in reaction to the new media. The adoption of a proactive attitude by allowing selective freedoms to information, aims to promote social harmony as an important national goal for China’s leadership. The concept of a harmonious society marks a shift from purely economic-centred, authoritarian development to more people-centred and sustainable development.

This thesis adopts a theoretical approach based on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere and the Foucauldian notion of governmentality. While these two theories appear to be in opposition, by applying both to the contemporary Chinese media landscape, it is possible to better understand the mediated version of the public sphere that has emerged in China, and the negotiated dialogue between Weibo and its regulators, and between public expression and official control.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Acknowledgements

The four years of my PhD study have particularly special meanings in my life. During that time, I suffered the great loss of my father and welcomed the birth of my son. Moreover, I left my little boy to be taken care of by my family in China. Therefore, it was the most difficult time in my life. Adversity and suffering mean different things to everyone. To me, however, it was the greatest motivation to finish my study and to continue my life. Despite endlessly missing my father and my son, I can only choose to be brave and go on. Therefore, without the support from my supervisors and my family, the PhD thesis would be nothing. Therefore, it is my great pleasure to acknowledge their support during the journey.

My most profound thanks go to my supervisors Peter C. Pugsley and Ying Jiang, for their patiently listening to my plans, constantly encouraging me and offering me advice when I was in need. I have benefited tremendously from their excellent academic guidance. At the same time, I have been enriched by many teachers in my discipline, their comments, inspiration and support made me feel encouraged in this big environment.

I also wish to thank Dr. Robyn Groves, who helped me in the reading of manuscript and in editing my work. In addition, she generously showed me emotional support and taught me western critical thinking through communication.

I’m also grateful to my colleagues and friends, who have offered generous support during the journey, Weiming Zhang, Minghua Wu and Margarita Flabouris. Their help and friendship to me is unforgettable. In addition, I offer many thanks to people I have met at each conference, who have provided criticism and advice for the development of this thesis.

X
My heartfelt thanks go to my parents Peilin Guo and Gui’e Wang, for their unconditional love, understanding and support during my growth. I’m so sorry and regretful for my father for not having any opportunity to repay him, which is the saddest thing in my life. I also thank my younger brother and sister for taking care of my father when he was ill and my mother when she was alone. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my parents in law, who gave me great support during my difficulties and helped me to look after my son.

Finally, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my husband, Liang Yan, who has also embarked on his own PhD journey together with me, while always giving me care, love and tremendous support whenever I was in need. I would like to say I’m so lucky to have him in my life.
Publications and Presentations

Journal article:


Conference Presentations:

‘The Bo Xilai trial and Chinese governmentality’, presented at Chinese Media Panel held on October 23, 2014 in Adelaide, Australia

‘Constructing autonomous patriotism on Weibo: The case of “Ding was here”’, presented at the International Communication Association (ICA) regional conference held from October 1 to 3, 2014 in Brisbane, Australia

‘Cultural control and new transformative regulatory measures in China’s social media’, presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) annual conference held from July 9 to 11, 2014 in Melbourne, Australia

‘Seeking channels for public space: Media use and political engagement for China’s subculture groups’, presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) annual conference held from July 4 to 6, 2012 in Adelaide, Australia