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SOCIAL MEDIA AND E-DIPLOMACY IN CHINA

Scrutinizing the Power of Weibo

Ying Jiang

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Abstract

Public diplomatic communication is transforming due to the boom of social media. There are more than 165 foreign governmental organizations in China that have embarked on the use of Weibo (a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter in China) to engage with Chinese citizens. Journalists and a handful of scholars in China started paying attention to foreign embassies' use of Weibo; however, there has been no systematic study of the effectiveness and challenges of using Weibo for public diplomatic communication. Importantly, when it comes to incidents like the "Kunming terror attack" in China in March 2014, Chinese Weibo users tend to express severe nationalistic sentiments towards foreign countries' statements, and those Weibo accounts of foreign embassies became targets. Those nationalistic comments left on foreign embassies' Weibo pages, mainly criticizing those embassies' "soft statements," have caused the difficulties of e-diplomacy and are calling for immediate attention (Wu 2014).

This book, based on systematic research of Weibo usage by embassies in China from September 2015 to March 2016, *is the first in the academia* to explore the challenges that the use of Chinese Weibo (and Chinese social media in general) posed for foreign embassies, and to provoke thoughts about better ways to use these or other tools. It is not intended as an argument against the use of local popular social media for public diplomacy purposes, but to encourage a critical look at its practice and encourage those employing it to better analyze it.

This book doesn't deny that social media provides the right channel to reach youth populations, which is one of the major goals of current public diplomacy efforts. Weibo does give embassies a great channel to listen to and understand China's young populations' thoughts, aspirations, information seeking, and other behaviors. But when it comes to using the spaces for interaction, increased engagement, and thus furthering the goals of public diplomacy, the power of Weibo might have been overestimated.

Reference

Wu. Y.S., (2014). *China's Media and Public Diplomacy: Illustrations from South Africa*. Paper presented atthe international conference China and Africa Media, Communications and Public Diplomacy.

PART I

Social Media Landscape Differences Between China and the West

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Background Knowledge

Abstract Draws out the sketch of what the "problem" this thesis is dealing with, and clarifies the fundamental question this thesis examines: Is China's cyber-nationalism bringing any challenges to foreign embassies' practice of e-diplomacy in China? If it is, what sort of challenges is cyber-nationalism bringing to e-diplomacy?

Keywords Social media · China · Public relations
Political communication · Weibo · Public diplomacy

1.1 Aims of the Research

The 2014 Kunming attack was a terrorist attack in the Chinese city of Kunming, Yunnan, on 1 March 2014. The incident, targeted against civilians, left 29 civilians and 4 perpetrators dead with more than 140 others injured. The attack has been called a "massacre" by some news media. On 2 March 2014, the US Embassy made a post on its Weibo account, stated: America condemns this horrible and senseless violence in Kunming. We send our sympathy to the families who lost their loved ones, and send our regard to everyone who is affected by this tragedy. Not long after this post, Chinese netizens expressed severe condemnation at the wording of this particular post, arguing that the use of "senseless violence" in the post demonstrates the US avoided considering this tragedy as a "terrorist attack". The US embassies' Weibo account has soon become a target

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for Chinese Weibo users. It received more than 50,000 comments and 40,000 retweets; most of them were focusing on interrogating the avoidance of using "terrorist attack" by US Embassy in this statement.

Public diplomatic communication is transforming due to the boom of social media. There are more than 165 foreign governmental organizations in China that have embarked on the use of Weibo (a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter in China) to engage with Chinese citizens (ChinaLabs 2013a, b). Journalists and a handful of scholars in China started paying attention to foreign embassies' use of Weibo (ChinaLabs 2013a, b); however, there has been no systematic study of the effectiveness and challenges of using Weibo for public diplomatic communication. Importantly, when it comes to incidents like the "Kunming terror attack" in China in March 2014, Chinese Weibo users tend to express severe nationalistic sentiments towards foreign countries' statements, and those Weibo accounts of foreign embassies become targets. Those nationalistic comments left on foreign embassies' Weibo pages, mainly criticizing those embassies' "soft statements," have caused the difficulties of e-diplomacy and are calling for immediate attention.

This research, based on systemic research of Weibo usage by embassies in China from September 2014 to March 2015, is the first in the academia to explore the challenges that the use of Chinese Weibo (and Chinese social media in general) posed for foreign embassies, and to provoke thoughts about better ways to use these or other tools. It is not intended as an argument against the use of local popular social media for public diplomacy purposes, but to encourage a critical look at its practice and encourage those employing it to better analyze it. This book doesn't deny that social media provides the right channel to reach youth populations, which is one of the major goals of current public diplomacy efforts. Weibo does give embassies a great channel to listen to and understand China's young populations' thoughts, aspirations, information seeking, and other behaviors. But when it comes to using the spaces for interaction, increased engagement, and thus furthering the goals of public diplomacy, the power of Weibo might have been overestimated.

1.2 Key Terms in Use in This Book

There are issues of definitions in this thesis that are important to clarify. The first is "Weibo." Weibo is a Chinese microblogging (Weibo) website, in use by well over 30% of the world's Internet users, with a similar

market penetration that Twitter has established in the USA. According to CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) report in 2015, there are 668 million Internet users, 594 million mobile Internet users, and 212 million monthly active Weibo users (CNNIC 2015). Although this most recent report did not mention the number of registered Weibo users, the CNNIC report in December 2012 announced that there are 309 million registered Weibo users in China (CNNIC 2013); the announced numbers of Weibo users provided by each Weibo service providers are much higher than the figure this official report disclosed. This is probably due to the competition between each Weibo service providers, but scholars and journalists in China often use the estimation of more than 400 million, which is somewhere between CNNIC's official report and commercial Weibo service providers' statistics.

It is important to note that, when Chinese people say "Weibo," it is commonly referred to Sina Weibo. However, Sina Weibo is just one of the various Weibo service competitors. Sina Weibo claims it has around 500 million registered accounts as of December 2012 (Gao 2013). Others include Tencent (the owner of QQ.com) which also alleged having a microblog site with 400 million registered accounts; and Sohu Weibo with over 100 million registered accounts. Therefore, it is more accurate to say "Tencent Weibo (Tenxun Weibo)" and "Sohu Weibo (Souhu Weibo)" to differentiate from "Sina Weibo (Xinlang Weibo)".

Due to its success of overseas users' penetration, Sina Weibo is still the most well-known Weibo service; therefore, the term Weibo used in this article refers to Sina Weibo.

"Public diplomacy 2.0," public diplomacy is a "term to describe the efforts by nations to win support and a favorable image among the general public of other countries, usually by way of news management and carefully planned initiatives designed to foster positive impressions" (Comor and Bean 2012, p. 204). The Internet has created an international space where communities around the world are more connected than ever. With this new level of interconnectivity, it is imperative that government utilize the tools provided by new media to communicate with foreign publics (Harris 2013). The innovation occurring in media has produced numerous social media tools worldwide. Rising numbers of additional users also contribute to social media's usefulness as a tool of public diplomacy (Mor 2012).

But a clear-cut definition of "public diplomacy 2.0" is not available; Cull (2010) from Harvard University summarized the three key characteristics of it: the first characteristic is the capacity of the technology

to facilitate the creation of relationships around social networks and online communities. The second characteristic is the related dependence of Public Diplomacy 2.0 on user-generated content from feedback and blog comments to complex user-generated items such as videos or mash-ups. The third characteristic is the underlying sense of the technology as being fundamentally about horizontally arranged networks of exchange rather than the vertically arrange networks of distribution down which information cascaded in the 1.0 era. Cull has also pointed out that while the technology is entirely new, the underlying pattern of relationships underlying the operation of Public Diplomacy 2.0 is not.

"E-diplomacy," the term "e-diplomacy" describes new methods and modes of conducting diplomacy and international relations with the help of the Internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs). The term also refers to the study of the impact of these tools on contemporary diplomatic practices. E-diplomacy may be considered a subset of e-governance. Related (and interchangeable) terms include cyber diplomacy, net diplomacy, and digital diplomacy. E-Diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy has generated significant attention and criticism, with views ranging from technology allowing "people around the world to obtain ever more information through horizontal peer-to-peer networks rather than through the old vertical process by which information flowed down from the traditional sources of media authority" (Cull 2013) to claiming that efforts in public diplomacy often are understood as little more than top-down dissemination of (counter)-propaganda (Hoffman 2002).

Researcher Hanson from the Lowy Institute in Australia who had undertaken extensive research into the emerging role of e-diplomacy at the US State Department (Parliament of Australia 2012). Hanson commented that e-diplomacy was more than the use of either social media or public diplomacy:

> … e-diplomacy is not just about diplomats getting on Facebook and Twitter and promoting government messages; most of it is invisible to the public.

1.3 The Nationalistic Sentiments

In November 2013, an anonymous post titled "You Are Nothing Without the Motherland" gradually gained momentum online. It has since been reposted by numerous Chinese media such as the Beijing

Daily and the Global times. The post used the "fallen-apart" Arabic Spring countries as examples to call for the Chinese people to stay alert for "Western anti-China powers," because the ultimate victim of "social instability" is the ordinary people (J.M. 2013). "A strong and stable motherland is the only way for the Chinese people to be happy and free," the article argued. It specifically called out the conspiracies by Western countries to bring down any potential rival. In particular, the USA "now lists China as its biggest threat." "Everybody knows that the US has been plotting to overthrow the rule of the Chinese Communities Party (CCP)" (Ibid).

According to the post, China will fall into chaos without the leadership of the Communist Party. The solution is to believe in Xi Jinping, China's current president who took power earlier this year. Because "Xi knows China and politics" due to his family background. More importantly, Xi has the courage to "fight tigers," i.e., fighting corruption.

Loving one's motherland is not only a Chinese phenomenon, but the point I make here is that this "love for the motherland" has been largely in the presentation of supporting the central government, despite the corruptions of local government which have been exposed in a lot of cases. The other presentation of "love for the motherland" is the resistance to critical comments towards China.

It is necessary to mention here that the anger towards the embassies described in this book is not expressed by all generations in China; it is a phenomenon concentrated amongst China's post 80s and 90s who have access to the Internet, and generally consume social media obsessively. According to Sina Weibo's 2015 report, 83% of their active users are between 17 and 33 years old (Sina Weibo 2015). They consume Western products such as Starbucks's coffee, or wearing Adidas shoes, getting Western degrees, and even becoming permanent residents of Western countries, the love for their motherland China is also getting stronger and stronger. They are proud of the accomplishments made by China.

Before foreign embassies opened up Weibo accounts, Chinese nationalists used to express their condemnation via website or their own blogs/microblogs (Jiang 2012). Therefore, the appearance of foreign embassies' Weibo accounts provided a direct channel for condemnation, particularly when controversial events happen. It is interesting and worth investigating that even an embassy choose not to broadcast any political topics, and even Chinese followers are engaging with the embassy in a very harmonious manner, it still becomes a target when any sensitive issues occur.