

# Microblogs and the Construction of Civil Society

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## Abstract:

The rapid development of microblogs over the past few years has demonstrated their dual value as an information tool and an opinion platform, and their influence on the construction of civil society in many ways. Using this incident as a case study, we analyze the communication process, functions, and potential risks of microblogs based on communication theory and the nature of microblogs, and point out the direction of their future development. Analyzing the communication process, functions, and potential risks of microblogs, and pointing out the direction of their future development.

## Keywords:

Microblog, Civil Society, Information Tool, Opinion Platform

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## 1. Review of the “11-15” Fire Accident in Shanghai and the Public Opinion Environment

We will first review the information and public opinion process of the Shanghai “11-15” fire accident.[1] At around 14:00 when the fire was still burning, some netizens broadcasted the scene to Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, etc. and posted real-time pictures, gaining widespread attention. The response of traditional media was very quick compared to the past: Shanghai’s local news channel broadcast the fire news at 16:00, and then interrupted its normal program to broadcast live. Most of the local media questioned the “city’s firefighting capabilities”. The news of the fire was widely re-posted on Weibo, accompanied by a lot of sympathy for the victims and sarcastic remarks about the government, and on November 16-17, media coverage began to diverge, while the public opinion crisis quickly heated up. Local media in Shanghai focused on social care and the aftermath. On Weibo, claims of collusion between government and business emerged. The traditional media were unanimous in their praise of the firefighters’ performance, while Weibo questioned them on several fronts.

What is particularly important on this day is that on this day, Xinhua News Agency broadcasted the news of the detention of the unlicensed welders, which caused a great backlash on the internet, and the internet public opinion was highly unanimous that it was looking for a scapegoat to exonerate the government, while the detained migrant

workers gained wide sympathy. The above-mentioned information was re-posted on microblogs accompanied by stronger and more pointed condemnation and satire of the government. There were also a certain number of messages mourning the victims.

On Nov. 17-18, the public opinion crisis deepened and began to demand high-level accountability. The “Vanke body” cartoon of sympathy for the detained migrant workers had a strong impact, and the public condemnation of “finding a scapegoat” continued to heat up, and combined with the accountability of Shanghai officials, “officials protecting each other” became a powerful accusation. Some network opinion leaders published and forwarded related remarks, accusing Shanghai municipal leaders of not taking responsibility for the fire and lacking sincerity, playing a role in pushing the wave.

On November 18-19, online self-media and foreign media exerted stronger pressure on civil opinion to respond to some doubts. Of particular importance was the description of the focus on citizens laying flowers at Jiaozhou Road in Shanghai that began to appear on the self-published media. The circulation of several live videos on Weibo and forums was the beginning of a move by Weibo out of the realm of expression of opinion in virtual space and the convening of real action, and thus a landmark. Many private opinion leaders paid tribute to the wreath-layers and called on more people to go and pay their respects.

On November 19-20, more Sunday “first day of the month” calls appeared on Sina and Tencent microblogs, mainly expressing condolences and calling for tributes on the seventh day of the month. Of course, sarcasm and criticism of the government, and calls for officials to step down were still abundant.

From November 20 to 21, there was also a large amount of content on portals, online self media, etc. The morning of the 21st Jiaozhou Road tribute, some of the messages were unhappy with official restrictions on tributes and other actions, but they were not serious.

## **2. The Nature of Mmicroblogs and the Dissemination Process**

### ***2.1. Nature of Microblogs***

The integration of social networking and information circulation is the biggest difference between microblogs and traditional media and other new media. Thus, microblogging is essentially a social media. In the microblogging space, communication is no longer just the flow of information, but information multiplied by relationships. This does not mean that one’s sources and destinations on Weibo are known to oneself, but the high level of interaction (brief content even makes interaction a necessity) creates a kind of community on the Internet, a community in which social networks are conduits for the flow of information, which flows along social relationships and reshapes social networks at the same time. Information adds the color of interpersonal communication because of the relationships it carries, and a person is a node of information transmission, with different sizes of nodes and different influences. [1] This network is a mirror image of social networks on the Internet, but it is more open, flatter, and easier.

The speed of posting is the most important feature of Weibo as a social media. The short content makes the release and retweeting of information on microblogs a “conversation”. Instead of reading text alone on the screen, users chat with other people in the virtual community, and seeing a small paragraph of text is equivalent to

hearing a few words, and retweeting a small paragraph of text is equivalent to telling their friends a few words. The conversation is necessarily generated and influenced by social relations. The mirror image of social relationship provides the basis for relationship generation on the Internet, and the technical means provide the possibility of influence.

The brevity of the content makes it impossible to contain a large amount of information suitable for the expression of emotions, and the existence of relationships creates emotional resonance. It is this nature that makes microblogs suitable as a garden for opinion generation and fermentation. However, public opinion is generated in response to specific information and expressed and fermented as the information is transmitted, so we will explore the mechanism of public opinion through the analysis of the information flow process.

The characteristics of microblogs, such as “fragmentation”, “channel diversity”, “fast circulation” and “variety of communication types” [2] have formed the unique “information aggregation - critical point - information fission” communication mode of microblogs. [3]

## ***2.2. The Communication Process of Microblogs***

Network communication is, firstly, the connection between points, i.e., the way information is transmitted; secondly, the influence of points: the importance in the network and the tendency of the points. Of course, the interface between the network and reality, i.e. the entrance and exit, is also very important. The following will be analyzed in the whole process of information flow.

There are two sources of information in microblogs, one is forwarding traditional media and the other is the origin of microblogs. From the perspective of major online events in recent years, most of the microblog originals were in the forefront, responsible for the initial, informative reports on the occurrence and development of the events, such as the 2010 Shanghai fires and fire-fighting situation, and the Zhouqu mudslide. Because of the technical means and the so-called “public journalism campaign”, information can be quickly posted on Weibo after the occurrence of some emergencies, making it the most responsive news report. This information is original and personal, and provides first-hand accounts from eyewitnesses. In addition, a large amount of non-surge, unconfirmed news is likewise produced in microblogs. Both types of information complement traditional media in terms of information volume, providing a large amount of coverage, and microblog public opinion tends to reflect on this type of information. In opinion generation, both often differ from gated reports and become uncontrollable points of opinion generation. For example, the performance of the fire department in the 2010 Shanghai fire and the statement that “Huang Peixin, the legal representative of Jiayi, is the wife of Zhang Renliang, the mayor of Jing’an District”.

However, in China’s current news environment, there are very few organizations or individuals with Internet roots and the ability to independently investigate and publish information, so it is difficult for microblogs to dig deeper into the subsequent content and logic behind the incident. In this regard, traditional media content is still predominantly reposted. The findings of traditional media are widely forwarded on microblogs, becoming a more authoritative source of information and supporting public opinion in many ways along the original direction. Therefore, the pluralism of microblogging is actually a reflection of China's current public opinion ecological

environment, and it is a reflection of the most active part of it. This point will be analyzed in more detail below.

The community network of microblogs is a hilly area with uneven heights. You can imagine a three-dimensional map of the hilly terrain, with some important tweets at the top of the hill and less important figures on the slopes or at the foot of the hill. The top of the hill has the advantage of being widely “followed” and the information posted can quickly reach a large audience. The less important tweeters’ messages, like a fire set in the dark by a man on a hill, can be seen by many people. Of course, it is difficult to achieve this effect in Weibo, and it requires many objective and subjective conditions, but it does not mean that ordinary people do not have the opportunity. Content is passed on in the form of “retweets”, from one mountain range to another. Important information will ignite the nodes one by one like a beacon, and eventually spread throughout the social network. This is a new development of multi-level communication theory in the Internet environment, but the “levels” are no longer separated by layers, but are gridded, and each person can receive information from important tweets, other tweets, and other sources.

What is important information? This is determined by social psychology. Under normal conditions, lifestyle information is important (because of the social nature of the media), and news events and social events are also widely followed. The latter complements traditional media in terms of coverage, but has greater filtering in hot issues: those that conform to social psychology are noticed, such as demolition, those that do not, such as conference reports, and news value is measured by whether they conform to social psychology.

Outside of the direct flow of information from the dominant microblogs to the general microblogs, the main channel of information delivery is “retweeting”. There are two points worth noting about retweeting: simplicity and relationality. The simplicity of retweeting a message and adding your own comments with a single click makes the flow of information less costly and smooth. The pictures and videos also make the information have multimedia properties, so it has a better communication effect. Moreover, when a person retweets a message, the person’s friends can see that “this person” has retweeted the message. The result is easy to accept and resonate with, as one no longer has to watch the newspaper or TV alone to receive information, but to receive news from people one knows.

Along with the rise of the Internet and the emergence of social media, the way individuals express and share their emotions breaks through the limits of time and space, making more and more emotional information exposed in cyberspace. [4]

The expression of emotions on Weibo is gathered along with the forwarding of information and the addition of comments, and this gathering is reflected in the scattered focus of various topics in the daily state, but it is very easy to converge to a point and form a large pressure of public opinion in unexpected events. Moreover, microblogging has sometimes begun to exert influence on the real society, not only as an online voice, but also as an initiative for the Jiaozhou Road memorial service in the 2010 Shanghai fire, which eventually led to the memorial ceremony and the attendance of Shanghai’s leaders, and without the initiative of microblogging, it would have been impossible to achieve the result of the Shanghai leaders’ memorial service through public pressure.

### **3. The Existence of Microblogs has a Positive Effect on Building a Civil Society**

In the context of the era of media for all, citizen news, as a public spontaneous and distributed communication activity in the social public sphere, is gradually forming a force that can compete with the traditional professional media. [5] Of course, all expectations should not be placed on a particular technological tool, and political and social problems should also be explored for solutions at the political and social levels. But it is also wrong to ignore the value of technological tools. Neither technological uselessness nor technological optimism is a complete analytical framework; what we do should be a specialized analysis based on the social context and technological characteristics. We are at the historical stage of building a civil society, deconstructing the powerful power of the state and politics in society, and using common sense to reconceptualize this society. In terms of this goal, the positive role of microblogging is primary and its own problems are secondary, and its positive role is ultimately to increase freedom of expression, mainly in the following three ways.

#### ***3.1. The Role of Openness and Transparency of Information***

Information transparency is the primary role of microblogs, and this role is rooted in their uncontrollable nature. At the macro level of microblogging as a whole, this role is achieved in two ways: by reporting information and by retweeting information. Reporting information comes from citizen journalism rooted in microblogs, the existence of which increases the number of sources of information that can be publicly released, allowing all kinds of information to be quickly presented to audiences, thus invalidating the first control gates of propaganda departments. Retweeted information comes from traditional media. Microblogs act as a dissemination channel for traditional media information, but this channel has a strong filtering of information, often filtering out specific categories of information from traditional media so that the status of such information is magnified. Microblogs achieved the first coverage of the incident in the Shanghai fires, while post-event retweets of and traditional media information filtered out content such as collusion between government and business, while topics such as guardianship and mutual aid were significantly less vocal than traditional media.

It is worth mentioning that the influence of microblogging information disclosure is also penetrating traditional media, and both sides present a limited interaction situation. For example, the voices demanding accountability from the leaders that emerged from the Internet after the Shanghai fire were later reinforced in the traditional media, and some of the photos posted on Weibo were used in newspapers. The involvement of traditional media will allow information on microblogs to reach the mass communication platform and be able to reach people who have less access to new media, such as the elderly.

Openness of information is a prerequisite and basis for the construction of a civil society, which can exist by reacting to a large amount of social information [6]. Microblogs provide a channel to publish and transmit information, making it possible to build a civil society. All kinds of influence of public opinion and microblogs on real society can be categorized as functions of civil society. In this sense, microblogs are conducive to the construction of civil society.

### ***3.2. Pluralism of Public Opinion Expression***

“Whether we are willing to accept it or not, a basic fact we must face today is that the mass communication dominated by professional media people in the past has expanded to the communication with the participation of the whole people, and we have entered an era in which everyone is the media.” [7] Although there is no lack of cynicism, public participation can still be seen in the explosion of public issues. The wide participation of the public has led to an obvious plurality of interpretations of events, which can be presented in a more realistic and logical way. [8] It is worth mentioning that although the interpretations are diverse, they share a common logical basis and social psychology, and common sense is the most important factor influencing the interpretations. Common sense is the most important factor influencing the interpretation. The picture of events thus obtained is often different from the caliber gated by the propaganda department, but it is difficult to be refuted because it conforms to the cognitive logic, and thus has great power.

In the case of the 2010 Shanghai fires, for example, different perspectives from the traditional media were shown in this case, such as firefighting capabilities and the criminal detention of migrant workers, especially the latter, which was unanimously condemned by online public opinion and was almost confrontational with the official media. This continuous pressure was not relieved with the detention of the head of the company, and until today, a month later, there are still voices of injustice for the eight workers on Weibo.

If we broaden our horizons, we can also see that Weibo complements the public opinion gap in traditional media coverage. In the 360 vs. QQ case, for example, compared to the widespread impact and high level of interest in this case, traditional media were mostly unsalty in their comments due to their level of interest and awareness. However, online evaluations are more explicit, with condemnation of the misconduct of both sides and calls to defend the interests of Internet users being the main voices, and some professionals have also made more fair analyses on Weibo. The media industry is faced with the double dilemma of not weakening political control and strengthening capital control, and its own reporting capacity is limited. Microblogs, especially the voices of professionals on microblogs, can supplement these gaps, and although they are full of “murmurs” of verbal violence, they do not affect the overall voice of public opinion.

### ***3.3. Information Tools for Social Organizations***

Microblogs can be used as information tools for social organizations to publicly release information, express opinions, and call for action, which are of great value to the construction of civil society. This is determined by its low-cost, easy-to-use, and no-authorization features. The realization of this step is constrained by more external conditions, such as the degree of awakening of civil rights awareness, the degree of development of social organizations, etc. Microblogs are just tools, but tools offer possibilities. When external conditions allow, microblogs are expected to promote the development of social organizations and thus improve the muscles of civil society.

However, it is important to note that the call for realistic action means that the expression of public opinion has reached a relatively intense level, which conflicts with the government's requirement of “maintaining stability”. Regardless of the demands, it is easy to become the object of regulation and suppression. If microblogs

play this role too much, they may be subject to more severe policy restrictions and regulation, so it is not advisable to overemphasize this role.

#### **4. Potential Risks in Building Civil Society on Microblogs**

Microblogs are still in their “adolescent” stage of development, but based on their communication characteristics and some of the problems that have emerged, we can identify the following factors as risks that could affect the positive role of microblogs, and pointing out these potential risks could help microblogs develop more healthily.

##### ***4.1. Doubtful Ability to Clarify Itself, and Rumors that Spread Throughout the Microblogs Can Hurt the Innocent and Harm the Microblogs Themselves***

Microblogs provide a platform for countless ordinary people to publish information openly without censorship, but they also provide the best space for rumors to spread. A media platform full of false information does not play a constructive role for civil society, and may even become a destructive force, depriving communication of its proper order. This problem has already emerged in the case of Jin Yong being killed. Although the incident was clarified after the disinformation, some things cause damage that is difficult to undo, such as corporate reputation. If it is planted with ulterior motives in the future, it will certainly cause harm to innocent people. Can Weibo develop the ability to clarify itself and avoid becoming a haven for disinformation? The answer is not yet clear.

##### ***4.2. Lack of Rational Thinking, Fermenting Psychological Bias, and Catering to Audiences to Solidify Stereotypes***

Microblogs are suitable for emotional expression and can strengthen emotions through empathy. But these may lead to a bad consequence, namely the fermentation of psychological prejudices. A message that fits the general psychology of the public but is in fact incorrect may trigger public pressure and cause harm. Although there is a reasonable point in appealing to the grassroots to judge events through common sense, which is a clear progress in modern Chinese history, it has to be admitted that the general public lacks the ability to discern and recognize many issues. Some scholars expressed pessimism and anxiety, believing that under the “appearance of noise and prosperity in the industry”, what citizen news constructs is just a “Utopia of online journalism”, and the participation and empowerment in citizen news is just a “Carnival illusion”. [9] Under the psychological expectation that the general public does not trust the government and traditional media (especially party newspapers), microblog public opinion is likely to reject the guidance of public opinion from these two sources and follow its own path. Through the vast cyberspace and extensive social networks, surpass the limitations of the real social space, and take yourself as the node for more autonomous and personalized divergence. [10] At this rate, the tyranny of the majority is not an unattainable myth.

Moreover, to gain widespread attention one must cater to the psychology of the audience, who select information only according to their own psychological needs. Such catering will solidify stereotypes and expel content that does not meet the requirements from the communication channels, and audiences who have long obtained information through microblogs are likely to have deeper stereotypes than those exposed to traditional media.

### ***4.3. Becoming a Tool of Capital and Losing Its Public Nature***

As far as government management is concerned, microblogs are difficult to control, but for capital, microblogs are easy-to-manipulate low-cost tools. Capital forces are able to hide behind many pseudo-civic voices and deliver purposeful messages in the guise of grassroots in order to pursue their own interests. This is extremely confusing and damaging, but the planners are often able to achieve their goals. The hype events that appear time and again on the Internet now are a preview of the capital game, and one could even say that to some extent netizens even enjoy this orgy that is being arranged and are happy to do so, such as Phoenix. When capital's control and means are strengthened, the voices of ordinary people may really return to the "grassroots" and lose the right to speak in public space once again. Weibo becomes a new tool of social control and an advertising channel, and loses its place in civil society.

It is important to note that microblogs are still in a period of rapid development, and the problems mentioned above either do not yet exist or are not serious, and we see more enthusiasm and vigor on microblogs. As far as the characteristics of Weibo itself are concerned, some problems are unlikely to follow the worst path, such as the ability to clarify itself. And, very notably, these problems are more serious in traditional media. These are raised only to suggest some attention to the development process of microblogs, and not to deny their existence because of it.

## **5. Conclusions**

While we have discussed the process of microblogging, its advantages and potential risks in some detail above, it would like to be suggested that, in China's current environment, the primary concern is to avoid suppression. Because of the sensitivity of freedom of speech, microblogs may be restricted by the government, as Sina and NetEase changed back to beta versions after a year of operation as a result of pressure to speak out of turn. As for the management of microblogs themselves, it can believe that there should be a relative separation between public and private microblogs, and that the management of public microblogs should be strengthened, while private microblogs should be given a free hand. In this way, inaccurate information will hide in a corner and become a kind of self-indulgence because it does not have the advantage of a high enough platform, while public microblogs will have the limit of credibility and thus become a more credible source of information. Sina's "v" logo is an effort in this direction. It is believed that with the development of microblogs, civil society will have more open channels of information, which will do more good than harm for China's future.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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