

Song Linxiao, 2021

Volume 1, pp.12-31

Date of Publication: 26th May 2021

This paper can be cited as: Linxiao, S., (2021). Mediatized Politics in China: A Perspective of Government Communication on Weibo and WeChat. Socialis Series in Social Science, 1,12-31.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

MEDIATIZED POLITICS IN CHINA: A PERSPECTIVE OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION ON WEIBO AND WECHAT

Song Linxiao

Department of Arts in Journalism, Xiamen University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia
CST1709332@xmu.edu.my

Abstract

The Chinese government has expanded the use of social media to communicate information about government affairs in the Web 2.0 era. This study aims to examine the sources who posted the Chinese government's messages on Weibo and WeChat, the focus of their posts, and Chinese netizens' responses to the posts. The issue of the Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang's death during the Covid-19 pandemic was selected. A census sample of 431 Weibo posts and reposts, 145 WeChat articles, and 27,094 comments were analyzed by using qualitative content analysis. The results revealed that media organizations had more influence than the authorities in communicating the government's messages. They were the dominant sources to forward government press releases, and posting positive commentaries about government actions. This study also found that there were almost equal positive and negative responses from netizens, whose comments reflect a diversity of opinions. Based on Schramm's interactive model of communication and the theory of mediatized politics, this study filled the research gap by considering the Chinese government as an active communicator who receives the public's messages and gives feedback.

Keywords

Political Communication, Mediatized Politics, Government PR, Weibo, WeChat

1. Introduction

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2020), there are 904 million Internet users with the penetration rate reaching 64.5% in China. With the convenience of the Internet, especially social media in the current Web 2.0 era, and the increasing use of it, politics has found a place to stay in the online public sphere. And China, the country with the most Internet users in Asia (Internet World Stats, 2020), has much to tell about social media and politics.

1.1 Background of the Study

Since the mobile Internet is developing fast in China in recent years, the country focuses on developing its own social media instead of adopting from abroad (Harwit, 2016). Accordingly, Tencent created China's most popular instant messenger WeChat and Sina created the Twitter-like Weibo (Stockmann& Luo, 2017). As of March 2020, WeChat had 1,203 million monthly active users (Tencent Global, 2020), while Weibo had 550 million monthly active users (Weibo Corporation, 2020). Government organizations are also active on social media. By 2019, there had been over 6.2 million WeChat civic service users and over 139 thousand verified government Weibo accounts (CNNIC, 2020).

With the rise of social media, online discussions about social issues can form public discourses and public opinion more easily (Stockmann& Luo, 2017). The information exchange function and the verified user information on social media facilitate closer communication among strangers with similar interests (Huang & Sun, 2014). Social media can also provide alternative information to foster public deliberation and form online civic groups (Benney, 2011). With the use of social media, problems can be directly reflected, heard, and responded to.

Based on public opinion construction or government censorship, previous researchers held different opinions on social media's political effects in China. Some researchers argued that contemporary authoritarian regimes could effectively control public opinion by controlling cyberspace (Stem & Hassid, 2013). Other researchers held a positive attitude that though social media was not entirely immune to government control and censorship, it could facilitate connectivity and serve as space for voices (Svensson, 2014). Nonetheless, those with negative attitudes overlooked the Chinese government's social media use in responding to social issues.

1.2 Research Objectives

Since previous studies failed to consider the Chinese government's online responses to

social issues and researchers with different focuses held opposite views, this study aims to fill the research gap by examining the Chinese political communication regarding government actions, decisions, and announcements on two domestic social media giants, Weibo and WeChat. Specifically, it seeks to investigate the source who posted the Chinese government’s messages; the focus of the government’s messages posted by these sources; and netizens’ response to government’s messages posted on Weibo and WeChat.

1.3 Theoretical Frameworks

To find answers to the research questions, the interactive model of communication and mediatized politics serve as academic support and guide of this study. The former regards the Chinese government as an active communicator, and the latter investigates its political communication on social media.

1.3.1 Interactive Model of Communication

Previous research (e.g., Stem & Hassid, 2013; Wang & Shi, 2018) has focused on citizens’ social media use regarding government affairs and government censorship, an intervention of online political communication. What they have lost sight of is the government’s interactivity and responsiveness on social media. Therefore, this study is based on the interactive model of a communication model that contributed to understanding both sides of a communication process to discuss online political communication in China.

The interactive model or convergence model, represented by Schramm (1954), included the receiver’s feedback to the sender after decoding. In this model, both take turns to be sender and receiver. Their “field of experience”, which refers to cultural, social, psychological, and situational factors, and the noise on the communication channel may affect the interpretation of the messages (Schramm, 1954).

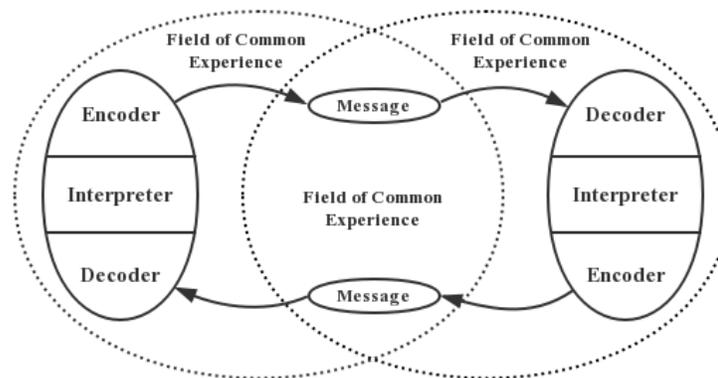


Figure 1: *Schramm’s Interactive Model of Communication (Schramm, 1954)*

1.3.2 Mediatized Politics

Nowadays, media has an intrinsic impact on cultural and social meaning construction activities, politics, economy, and the whole society. Media development and social changes are closely connected (Thimm, Dang-Anh,&Einspänner-Pflock, 2014). Mediatization is a meta-process like globalization, individualization, and commercialization that influences democracy, society, culture, politics, and other aspects of life in the long term (Krotz, 2007). Mediatized politics refers to the intervention and impact of media on modern governance. It is not a one-way process, instead, it owes to the long-term interaction of administrative and media reform (Wang, 2020). Media can shape the political communication process, frame its discourse, and influence the society where it takes place (Lilleker, 2006).

In China, the economic reform since the 1980s has led to a political reform so that the local governments got more autonomy on social and economic policies, and the space to develop their own cultural and publicity projects. Thus, all levels of government in China have put more emphasis on public relations and media in their daily operations (Wang, 2020). The media industry has also been equipped with market logic, including timeliness, sensationalism, and the focus on dramatized details of public discussions (Wang, 2020). Therefore, government officials faced with the pressure of “openness and transparency” as well as online public opinion have become more cautious about public relations in governance (Wang, 2020).

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have contributed to the knowledge of Weibo’s and WeChat’s social functions, online political participation, social ecology, and government public relations (PR) in China, which leads the way for this study.

2.1 Public Opinion Mobilization on Weibo and WeChat

Weibo is an open platform where users obtain information and interact with strangers. Its interactive functions empower users to share information in online public forums and across different social media so that a specific issue can be turned into a public one (Stockmann& Luo, 2017). It has played a key role in critical public opinion formation and public action mobilization (Nip & Fu, 2016). The online opinion leaders, such as Big Vs, are a key factor in spreading alternative information and shaping public opinion (Jiang, 2016).

WeChat is less open and only allows users with verified identity to share information

publicly (Harwit, 2016). WeChat's rules of setting chat groups also limit the formation of communities (Harwit, 2016). Nonetheless, WeChat has the potential to decentralize the government's domination of information flows (Zhou, 2010). Since the space for sharing information is limited, WeChat can only serve to incubate issues (Stockmann & Luo, 2017).

2.2 Social Media and Online Political Participation

Online political participation in China is categorized into voicing opinions or suggestions, contacting government departments, and working with other netizens on social issues (Xu, Ye, & Zhang, 2018). Young people and people with high education, high economic status, and local household registrations are more likely to subscribe to local governments and experience their online service (Jia, Liu, & Shao, 2018). Though the main needs of using WeChat are entertainment and recognition, higher frequency of using and browsing news and information motivates users' political participation (Chen, 2017). In recent years, more citizens use social media to monitor government operations (Xu et al., 2018). Social media provides much political information and news. Weibo (Wang & Shi, 2018) and WeChat (Zhou, 2010) both provide alternative information sources that foster civic virtue and politically mobilize netizens.

2.3 Current Social Media Ecology in China

China is among the countries having the most complicated Internet censorship systems. It implements the Great Firewall, keyword filtering, Internet monitors, and Internet police (Chin, 2018). When facing western hostile forces, China usually blocks and filters relevant websites and social media (Shen & Zhang, 2018). Weibo and WeChat also obey the state's Internet censorship regulations (Men, Yang, Song, & Kiousis, 2018). Nonetheless, Chinese netizens have become savvy to imply politically or socially sensitive issues by non-technological methods or use circumvention tools to visit blocked platforms (Chen, 2017).

As Chinese netizens acquire information from diverse sources, they would lose their common ground in public discussions (Zhang & Guo, 2019). Take Weibo for example, Huang, Gui, and Sun (2019) found that the ideologies on Weibo are beyond the left-right spectrum. Weibo users can no longer be considered as a homogeneous group (Huang et al., 2019). And Chinese citizens are no longer keen on understanding others' opinions or communicating to reach a mutual agreement (Bolsover, 2016).

In addition to ordinary citizens, the Internet also has a political impact on how power operates and the state-public relationship (Xiong, 2019). Before the Internet era, local

governance depended on grassroots power structure; in the Weibo era, local governments paid attention to the rise of grassroots opinion leaders as great social forces; in the WeChat era, local governments directly interact with the masses, and grassroots opinion leaders have lost much influence(Xiong, 2019).

2.4 Political Communication and Government PR in China

Technology has changed and facilitated the way the Chinese government communicates with and serves citizens (Xiong, 2019). In the Web 2.0 era, technology makes it easy and possible for the public to involve in political communication so that negative opinions can no longer be simply suppressed for the sake of the government's relationship with the public (Men et al., 2018). President Xi's administration encourages government departments to utilize online portals to build e-governance systems and reach out to citizens (Men et al., 2018). Equipped with the knowledge of media communication, crisis communication, online public opinion, etc., government officials can handle marketized media environment and interviews and conduct online PR activities(Wang, 2020).

3. Methodology

Qualitative content analysis was used as the research method. This study selected the case of Dr. Li Wenliang from Wuhan as the focus of research. Dr. Li alerted his previous classmates about Covid-19 on WeChat when it was not verified. As there was a standard procedure of reporting infectious diseases, Dr. Li was warned by the local police for spreading false information online. With the outbreak of Covid-19 and his death from the virus later, this issue led to great public concerns and the government's responses.

This study selected three most-discussed relevant issues in the form of hashtags on Weibo: *#Full investigation of Li Wenliang case#*, *#Announcement of the investigation results of Dr. Li Wenliang's relevant issues#*, and *#Dr. Li Wenliang is identified as work-related injuries#*. The time frame of each hashtag started from the first post to the end of the hashtags' hot search time-spans, as shown in Table 1. A census sample of all the posts and reposts consisting of government decisions, actions, and announcements under the hashtags were collected for analysis. Comments of the three posts or reposts with the most comments under each hashtag were collected to represent netizens' overall responses.

Table 1: *TimeFrames of Selected Hashtags on Weibo*

Hashtag	Starting Date	Time Frame
#Dr. Li Wenliang is identified as work-related injuries#	February 6, 2020	20:47 06/02/2020 - 11:00 08/02/2020
#Full investigation of Li Wenliang case#	February 7, 2020	12:42 07/02/2020 - 08:30 08/02/2020
#Announcement of the investigation results of Dr. Li Wenliang’s relevant issues#	March 19, 2020	13:16 19/03/2020 - 07:20 20/03/2020

The same sampling procedure and time frames were applied to WeChat since the information flow about Dr. Li’s death on WeChat was far less than Weibo (Text Retrieval System Analyst, 2020). In total, 431 Weibo posts and reposts, 145 WeChat articles, and 27,094 comments were collected.

Consequently, the inductive approach of thematic analysis was used to develop themes and examine the research questions. To examine the sources who posted the Chinese government’s messages, six account types were developed from the data:

1. Media organizations - TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, new media sites and, other media outlets that are verified by Weibo or WeChat.
2. Authorities - the executive, legislative, judicial bodies, and other government agencies that are verified by Weibo or WeChat.
3. Businesses - business entities or profit-making organizations that are verified by Weibo or WeChat.
4. Non-governmental organizations - non-governmental and non-profit organizations that are verified by Weibo or WeChat.
5. Opinion leaders - individuals who are verified by Weibo or WeChat for having expertise in law, charity, media, local information, arts, antique, finance, housing, health, traveling, and other possible fields.
6. Netizens - individuals having no verification and mostly use Weibo or WeChat anonymously.

To examine the focus of the government’s messages, the posts, reposts, and articles were divided into five categories:

1. Commentary - commentary about the issue or government actions published in media.
2. Summary of government’s information release - summary of the government’s information release.
3. Additional knowledge or advertisement - relevant knowledge or advertisement showing expertise related to the original post content.
4. Government’s information release - forwarded content of the entire or part of the government’s announcements and documents.
5. Media post - forwarded content of the entire or part of media organizations’ post.

Netizens’ comments were divided into three categories:

1. Positive - expressing satisfaction towards the government; showing trust in the government’s future actions; expressing acknowledgment, recognition, or support for the government effort; defending the government’s action or decision.
2. Negative - expressing dissatisfaction or disappointment towards the government; expressing doubts of the government’s future actions; suggesting or demanding more to be done by the government; showing no trust or hope with the government’s future actions; criticizing the country’s social system; demanding for an apology from the involved government agencies.
3. Neutral - commenting with no opinion towards government actions.

4. Findings

In this section, some basic findings are arranged thematically to answer the respective research questions.

4.1 Sources Who Posted Chinese Government’s Messages on Weibo and WeChat

Table 2 below demonstrates different account types’ participation rates in each hashtag.

Table 2: *Participation Rates of Different Account Types in the Hashtags on Weibo and WeChat*

Account Type	Hashtag 1 (%)		Hashtag 2 (%)		Hashtag 3 (%)	
	Weibo	WeChat	Weibo	WeChat	Weibo	WeChat
Media Organizations	72.9	68.0	56.9	38.2	24.1	57.9
Authorities	23.7	0.0	38.8	10.5	6.9	10.5
Non-Governmental Organizations	1.7	2.0	0.0	1.3	1.7	0.0

Business Entities	0.0	16.0	0.7	27.6	3.5	15.8
Opinion Leaders	1.7	8.0	2.9	0.0	53.4	5.3
Ordinary Netizens	0.0	6.0	0.7	22.4	10.4	10.5

As demonstrated in Figure 2, the overall participation rates reflect the average of each account type’s participation rates in all the hashtags on Weibo and WeChat. Although the participation rates varied from Weibo to WeChat and from Hashtag 1 to Hashtag 3, media organizations, especially major and national ones, were the most active participants considering their overall participation of 53%.

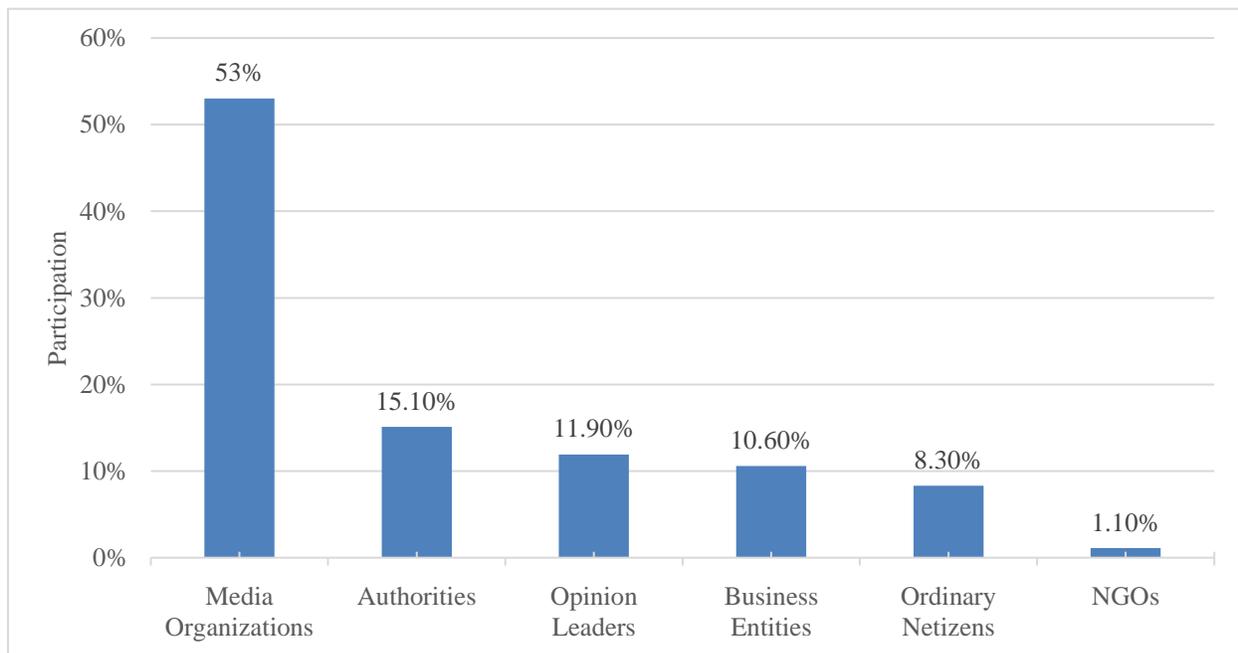


Figure 2: *Different Account Types' Overall Participation Rates in the Hashtags*

All the authorities (15.1%) were at the regional instead of national level. They forwarded content from prominent media organizations’ posts and official government announcements.

Having their respective fields of interest in science, finance, etc., NGOs (1.1%) were the minority involved, including 51labour.com, China Association for Science and Technology, etc. Their posts were completely forwarded content from media organizations and the government’s information releases.

Business entities (10.6%), opinion leaders (11.9%), and ordinary netizens (8.3%) acted similarly. Most of them showed marketing intention. They forwarded news content from media organizations’ Weibo posts to maintain their daily account operations and added advertisements

for themselves or their sponsors.

4.2 Focus of Government’s Messages Posted by Sources on Weibo and WeChat

The previous findings indicate that media organizations were the source in posting the government’s messages. They mainly forwarded or summarized the government’s information releases and sometimes commented positively on government actions (see Table 3). A finding of interest is that all the collected posts, reposts, and articles can be traced back to media organizations on Weibo or the government’s original releases. The Weibo posts were further disseminated by other types of accounts and to WeChat. The focus of those government’s messages was mainly based on the government’s information releases.

Table 3: *Percentages of Focuses of Government’s Messages Posted by Sources*

Focuses of Government’s Messages	Percentage
Commentary	22.22%
Summary of Government’s InformationRelease	55.56%
Additional Knowledge or Advertisement	0.00%
Government’s InformationRelease	22.22%
Media Post	0.00%

The focuses of the prominent media’s messages are illustrated in Table 4 below.

Table 4: *Focuses of Government’s Messages Posted by Sources on Weibo and WeChat*

Hashtag	Media Name	Focus of Messages
Hashtag 1	<i>Voice of Hubei</i>	Government’s InformationRelease
	<i>People's Daily</i>	Summary of Government’s InformationRelease
	<i>EToday News Cloud</i>	Summary of Government’s InformationRelease
	<i>Youth Video</i>	Summary of Government’s InformationRelease
Hashtag 2	<i>People’s Daily</i>	Commentary
	<i>The Cover News</i>	Commentary
Hashtag 3	<i>The Beijing News We Video</i>	Summary of Government’s InformationRelease
	<i>Yishou Video</i>	Government’s InformationRelease
	<i>Xinhua News Agency</i>	Summary of Government’s InformationRelease

In general, the local media organization (*Voice of Hubei*) was the leading account disseminating the local government’s messages (Hashtag 1), while national media disseminated

both central and local governments’ messages. The widely-spread media posts were based on government announcements and documents. The media either forwarded or rephrased them.

Though some media added commentaries and background information to the forwarded content, their primary function remained as disseminating the government’s messages. Particularly, commentary reflects attitude. Although it was not frequently included in media organizations’ posts, what they showed was supportive of the government.

When it comes to the five focuses of posts, Weibo media organizations covered the government's information release, a summary of the government's information release, and commentary. No advertisement or knowledge was found in media organizations’ posts. The angle “media post” referred to what was published by prominent media organizations, so it was not included in the media’s focuses of posting.

4.3 Netizens’ Responses

Netizens’ responses were reflected through their open comments under prominent Weibo posts and WeChat articles. Although the posts and articles were either neutral or slanting towards the government, netizens’ attitudes were more diversified. Table 5 shows the percentages of their different attitudes in each hashtag.

Table 5: *Netizens’ Attitudes in Each Hashtag*

Attitude	Hashtag 1 (%)		Hashtag 2 (%)		Hashtag 3 (%)	
	Weibo	WeChat	Weibo	WeChat	Weibo	WeChat
Positive	22.64	12.24	64.39	52.99	26.82	60.39
Negative	39.38	46.61	25.44	26.65	56.40	30.52
Neutral	37.98	41.15	10.17	20.36	16.79	9.09

There were many more comments on Weibo than on WeChat, nonetheless, netizens’ attitudes on both were similar. The only difference was found in Hashtag 3 where positive comments on WeChat weighed higher than Weibo (see Table 4). One likely reason is that WeChat allows account owners to exercise their discretion to select open comments. And they might have selected positive ones that were less debatable. Additionally, in Hashtag 2, *The Paper’s* Weibo account displayed selective comments that were all neutral. Otherwise, netizens’ attitudes on Weibo and WeChat might have been more divided. Their attitudes in each hashtag can be found in Figure 3

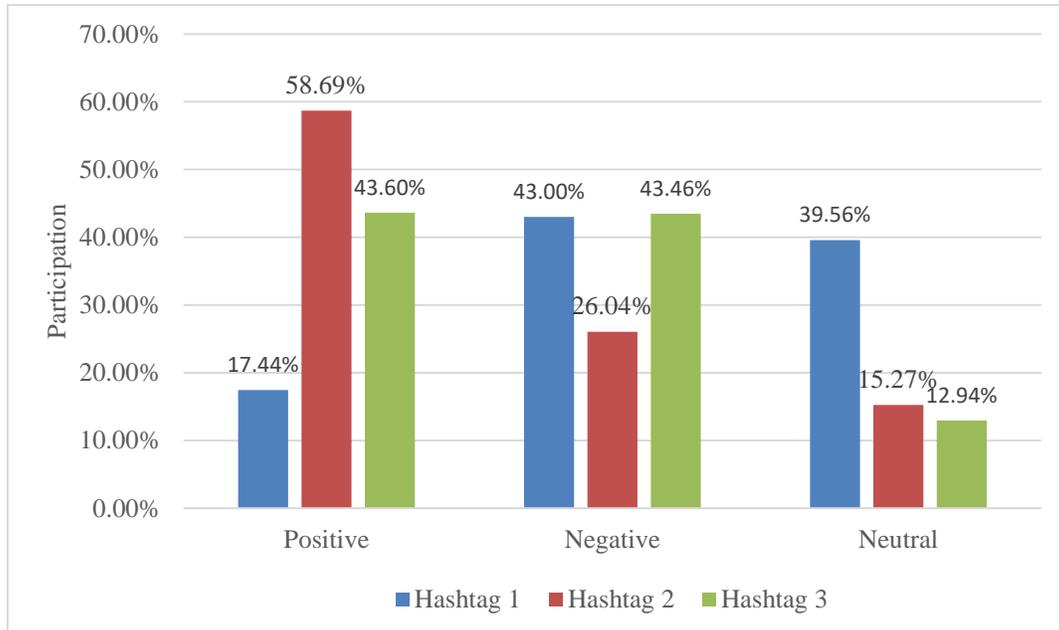


Figure 3: *Netizens' Attitudes towards Government Actions in Each Hashtag*

In each hashtag, the government departments made their official documents public or announced their actions in a formal tone. Nonetheless, it could not satisfy everyone. The positive (40%) and negative (37%) comments had a similar overall percentage. The neutral comments only took up 23%. In addition, the opinion climate on Weibo was much more diverse and active than on WeChat. Netizens' attitudes varied from one issue to another, but their most dissatisfying subject was the local government of Wuhan instead of the central government.

A finding of interest was that in both positive and negative comments, a small number of netizens repeatedly posted the same comments. Sometimes the same content was posted by different netizens as well.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this section, the discussion is arranged thematically following the last section to analyze the findings. Since this study only focuses on a limited perspective of mediatized politics, some limitations and suggestions are also discussed.

5.1 Sources Who Posted Chinese Government's Messages on Weibo and WeChat

Schramm's interactive model of communication portrays the communicators to be active in sending messages and giving feedback (Schramm, 1954). In Dr. Li's case, the government departments were indeed active on the channels of Weibo and WeChat. The public was also

active because they made their concerns heard by the government online and they gave a vast number of comments as their feedback. The government sent the messages of their announcements and documents to respond to public opinion. After receiving and decoding the messages of the public's concerns, they gave feedback by investigating and releasing the results online. Interestingly, they did so via media organizations.

The first reason is that not all government departments were proficient social media users. In this study, the central authority released information on its one-way communication channel website and the limited two-way channel WeChat. It had no Weibo account, while the local authority had a website, Weibo, and WeChat accounts. This is in line with the findings of Chen (2003) that political communication was rather asymmetric though symmetric two-way communication was expected. Chen (2003) explained that government officials had insufficient PR knowledge and tended to avoid responses that required individual efforts.

Secondly, media in China is not independent of the ruling party. The interpretation of political and social issues is influenced by the political and economic power behind it (Yoanita, Nugroho, & Lesmana, 2015). China's President Xi advocates that party-owned media must be "surnamed Party," meaning they should remain as the party's mouthpiece and propagate its agenda ("Xi Jinping asks," 2016). Non-party media in this study also disseminated the government's messages because the content concerned the public.

All the authorities were at the local level, which were better at using social media. Other account types had the purpose of marketing. The daily Weibo and WeChat operation of the authorities and those with marketing intention gives them a chance of presence to the audience. Meanwhile, they shared the government's messages to connect with the public (Ashley & Tuten, 2015) and to improve the public's experience with their accounts (Beig & Khan, 2018). Such similar operation logic reflects mediatized politics.

5.2 Focus of Government's Messages Posted by Sources on Weibo and WeChat

Media organizations forwarded and summarized the government's information releases, or commented positively to convey the government's messages. As WeChat does not limit the number of words as Weibo, WeChat articles published by media organizations were longer with extra information. Nonetheless, it was found that WeChat's search engine could not generate as sufficient article results as in its database, which probably made it inferior to Weibo in sharing information and incubating issues (Stockmann & Luo, 2017).

Media organizations forwarded or summarized the government's information releases because it is a necessary step of reporting. Their supportive commentaries might have resulted from their attached relationship with the government. Wang (2020) pointed out that China's political reform since the 1980s allowed the mass media to be separated from the political system and to enjoy more autonomy to shape governance and public policies. Nonetheless, the media has yet to be fully independent of the government. Chen (2003) found that Chinese government officials regarded the media as their main public, and considered less about other publics such as NGOs. According to Chin (2018), both party and non-party media practice strict self-censorship to assure socially and politically appropriate content.

5.3 Netizens' Responses

China is the country with the highest public trust of 84% (McCarthy, 2018), but netizens' satisfaction in Dr. Li's case was not that promising. The positive and negative attitudes had almost equal weights, and netizens justified their own views against others. One plausible reason is that content evoking high-arousal emotions like positive and negative tends to be more viral (Dermendjieva&Slavova, 2018).

By obtaining information on Weibo and WeChat, netizens are likely to increase their political participation (Wang & Shi, 2018; Zhou, 2010). Compared to traditional media users, social media users hold diverse political views, criticizing the existing political environment, and advocating the concept of democracy (Lei, 2011, pp. 309-310). In addition, by obtaining information from various sources, Chinese people of different social backgrounds are having decentralized opinions in public discussions (Zhang & Guo, 2019). These factors possibly explain why netizens were not satisfied with the government and gave 37% negative feedback.

Though the overall opinion climates on Weibo and WeChat were similar, the breadth of the content on Weibo was more interesting because Weibo allowed strangers to communicate and exchange information. There were two rare streams of comments with the same content on Weibo. One stream is positive comments. As censorship does not work competently enough, the state employs Internet commentators to shape online public opinion (Han, 2015). Another stream carries negative comments, which proves President Xi's argument that antagonistic western forces have penetrated China's online networks to affect public opinion (Buckley, 2013). In some extreme cases, such comments could come from domestic Internet companies that mobilize online rumors and then serve to monitor public opinion for the government (Wang, 2020).

5.4 A Perspective of Mediatized Politics

There are many perspectives of mediatized politics in China, such as government PR training, online public opinion guidance, local government branding, etc (Wang, 2020). What this study discussed is the government's political communication and PR-oriented activities on Weibo and WeChat. Mediatized politics in the communist country of China differs from western countries because Chinese media does not affect the selection of government officers by shaping public opinion.

In terms of government PR and communication on social media, this study had some reverse findings. Wang (2020) argued that the government attempted to respond to public opinion within 72 hours or shorter, and crisis management in some extreme cases would even replace the investigation and negotiation process for immediate accountability. Conversely, the central government's investigation report in this study was released more than one month after the investigation decision, while the local government acted quickly. One plausible reason is that the central government wished to carefully deal with public opinion because they were facing a wider public and severer PR consequences.

Although this study focused on the positiveness of online political communication, there could also be negative effects. The government's being active could result in restricted public deliberation (Liu, Yang, & Zheng, 2020). As it constructs closer communication with the public, social problems can be directly reported to the government, which reduces the possibility of social instability (Liu et al., 2020). This agrees with Xiong's (2019) findings that in the WeChat era following the Weibo era, online opinion leaders began to lose power.

5.5 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Firstly, this study did not apply inter-coder reliability. Hence, the results may be subjective. Future studies are suggested to have more than one independent coder to decide on the coding scheme to increase the reliability of content analysis.

Secondly, this study investigated the Chinese government's messages on Weibo and WeChat by researching a particular case of Dr. Li Wenliang, and the government departments were mostly at the central level. Therefore, the results are not representative. Future studies are encouraged to research more issues from both local and central governments' perspectives to further enrich the understanding of mediatized politics in China.

Thirdly, as social media is developing fast, other online platforms such as TikTok are

rising rapidly and have attracted many authorities to register. According to CNNIC (2020), all the 31 provinces in China had opened 17,380 TikTok accounts altogether to communicate government affairs by 2019. Future studies are suggested to investigate the Chinese government's communication in short videos.

REFERENCES

- Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative strategies in social media marketing: An exploratory study of branded social content and consumer engagement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(1), 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20761>
- Beig, F. A., & Khan, M. F. (2018). Impact of social media marketing on brand experience: A study of select apparel brands on Facebook. *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective*, 22(3), 264–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972262918785962>
- Benney, J. (2011). Twitter and legal activism in China. *Communication, Politics & Culture*, 44(1), 5-20.
- Bolsover, G. (2016). Harmonious communitarianism or a rational public sphere: a content analysis of the differences between comments on news stories on Weibo and Facebook. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 27(2), 115-133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2016.1214743>
- Buckley, C. (2013, August 19). China takes aim at Western ideas. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/asia/chinas-new-leadership-takes-hard-line-in-secret-memo.html?_r=0
- Chen, N. (2003). From propaganda to public relations: Evolutionary change in the Chinese government. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 13(2), 96–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980309364840>
- Chen, Y. (2017). WeChat use among Chinese college students: Exploring gratifications and political engagement in China. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 10(1), 25-43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1235222>
- Chin, S. J. (2018). Institutional origins of the media censorship in China: The making of the socialist media censorship system in 1950s Shanghai. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(114), 956-972. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1488108>

- China Internet Network Information Center. (2020). *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Retrieved from <http://cnmic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/>
- Dermendjieva, G., & Slavova, R. (2018). Online Sharing Platforms as a Medium for the Emergence of Viral Content. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), 177-199. <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.177199>
- Han, R. (2015). Defending the authoritarian regime online: China's "Voluntary Fifty-cent Army." *The China Quarterly*, 224, 1006-1025. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015001216>
- Harwit, E. (2016). WeChat: social and political development of China's dominant messaging app. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 10(3), 312-327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2016.1213757>
- Huang, R., & Sun, X. (2014). Weibo network, information diffusion and implications for collective action in China. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(1), 86-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.853817>
- Huang, R., Gui, Y., & Sun, X. (2019). Beyond the left-right spectrum: A typological analysis of ideologies in China's Weibo space. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(119), 831-847. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1580423>
- Internet World Stats. (2020). *Internet Usage in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>
- Jia, Z., Liu, M., & Shao, G. (2018). Linking government social media usage to public perceptions of government performance: an empirical study from China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(1), 84-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2018.1523802>
- Jiang, M. (2016). The co-evolution of the internet, (un) civil society & authoritarianism in China. In J. deLisle, A. Goldstein, & G. Yang (Eds.), *The Internet, social media, and a changing China* (pp. 28-48). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812292664-002>
- Krotz, F. (2007). The meta-process of 'mediatization' as a conceptual frame. *Global Media and Communication*, 3(3), 256-260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665070030030103>

- Lei, Y-W. (2011). The political consequences of the rise of the Internet: Political beliefs and practices of Chinese netizens. *Political Communication*, 28, 291–322.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.572449>
- Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key Concepts in Political Communication*. London: Sage.
- Liu, T., Yang, X., & Zheng, Y. (2020). Understanding the evolution of public-private partnerships in Chinese e-government: four stages of development. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 42(4), 222–247.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2020.1821726>
- McCarthy, N. (2018, January 23). *Where trust in government is the highest and lowest*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/chart/12634/where-trust-in-government-is-highest-and-lowest/>
- Men, L. R., Yang, A., Song, B., & Kioussis, S. (2018). Examining the impact of public engagement and presidential leadership communication on social media in China: Implications for government-public relationship cultivation. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(3), 252-268.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1445090>
- Nip, J. Y. M., & Fu, K.-w. (2016). Networked framing between source posts and their reposts: an analysis of public opinion on China's microblogs. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(8), 1127-1149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1104372>
- Schramm, W. (1954). How communication works. In W. Schramm (Ed.), *The process and effects of communication* (pp. 3-26). Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Shen, F., & Zhang, Z. a. (2018). Do circumvention tools promote democratic values? Exploring the correlates of anticensorship technology adoption in China. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 15(2), 106-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2018.1449700>
- Stem, R. E., & Hassid, J. (2013). Amplifying silence: uncertainty and control parables in contemporary China. *Comparative Political Studies*, 45(10), 1-25.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011434295>
- Stockmann, D., & Luo, T. (2017). Which Social Media Facilitate Online Public Opinion in China? *Problems of Post-Communism*, 64(3-4), 189-202.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1289818>

- Svensson, M. (2014). Voice, power and connectivity in China's microblog sphere: Digital divides on Sina Weibo. *China Information*, 28(2), 168-188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X14540082>
- Tencent Global. (2020). *Tencent Announces 2020 First Quarter Results*. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IH09J0CGOJqaYHFWXC4fNw>
- Text Retrieval System Analyst. (2020). "Li Wenliang yishengqushi" *shijianwangluoyuqingfenxi*[Online Public Opinion Analysis of the "Dr. Li Wening's death" case]. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qa8q3J86srmsXVcqU-Nhug>
- Thimm, C., Dang-Anh, M., & Einspänner, J. (2014). Mediatized politics - structures and strategies of discursive participation and online deliberation on Twitter. In F. Krotz & A. Hepp (Eds.), *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age* (pp. 253–269). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137300355_15
- Wang, H., & Shi, F. (2018). Weibo use and political participation: the mechanism explaining the positive effect of Weibo use on online political participation among college students in contemporary China. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(4), 516-530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1289234>
- Wang, W. (2020). Mediatized politics: A perspective for understanding political communication in China. *Javnost - The Public*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2020.1727277>
- Weibo Corporation. (2020). *Weibo Reports First Quarter 2020 Unaudited Financial Results*. Retrieved from <http://ir.weibo.com/news-releases/news-release-details/weibo-reports-first-quarter-2020-unaudited-financial-results>
- Xi Jinping asks for "absolute loyalty" from Chinese state media. (2016, February 19). *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty>
- Xiong, Y. (2019). Technology transforms politics: Internet + government services and the transformation of the grassroots power structure. *Social Sciences in China*, 40(4), 173-192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2019.1674042>
- Xu, P., Ye, Y., & Zhang, M. (2018). Assessing political participation on the Internet in contemporary China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 11(3), 243-266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2018.1445119>

- Yoanita, D., Nugroho, A. D., & Lesmana, F. (2015). Media Construction on Indonesia Political Conflict: A Framing Analysis of Kpk Vs Polri Case. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 426-436. <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2015.s11.426436>
- Zhang, Y., & Guo, L. (2019). 'A battlefield for public opinion struggle': How does news consumption from different sources on social media influence government satisfaction in China? *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1662073>
- Zhou, X. (2010). The political blogosphere in China: A content analysis of the blogs regarding the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu. *New Media & Society*, 11(6), 1003-1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809336552>