Microblogging (Weibo) and Environmental Nonprofit Organizations in China:
The Case of Urban Air Pollution Monitoring Campaign

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Environmental Nonprofit Organizations (ENPOs) in China have been actively employing microblogging (e.g., Sina Weibo) and other social media. This chapter, with a case of Wuhan FON in a nationwide campaign of "I gauge air quality for my motherland," examines the key strategies and tactics Chinese ENPOs adopted in using social media to enhance their communicative functions and mobilizing capacities in the unique nonprofit environment of China. The case demonstrates that social media utilization can effectively help Chinese ENPOs in policy advocacy, especially through more efficient information dissemination. This chapter also identifies the major challenges faced by Chinese ENPOs in social media use and the corresponding solutions. It concludes with the discussions on the theoretical and practical implications of the case as well as several promising research avenues in this field.

INTRODUCTION

Social media applications (SMAs) or Web 2.0 technologies refer to "a collection of social media through which individuals are active participants in creating, organizing, editing, combining, sharing, commenting, and rating Web content as well as forming a social networks through interacting and linking to each other" (Chun, 2010, p.2). As a disruptive innovation, SMAs are substantially different from traditional media like Web portals, newspapers, radios, and TVs in many ways (O'Reilly, 2007; Mergel & Greeves, 2013; Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010). SMAs highlight decentralized, interactive, and two-way communications, enable their users to create, organize, and share with others, and promote bidirectional information exchange among crowded users.

The rise of SMAs has substantially transformed organizational life in private, nonprofit, or public sectors. More and more nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have adopted SMAs to promote civic engagement, attract volunteers, raise funds, mobilize supporters and constituents, and advocate for policy change (Curtis et al., 2010; Kanter & Fine, 2010). In contrast to traditional instruments, SMAs can help NPOs to reach larger audiences and raise more funds (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

Environmental nonprofit organizations (ENPOs) are NPOs whose missions are to combat environmental pollution, promote environmental protection and sustainability, and educate the public on environmental issues. Adopting a voluntary regulation approach, ENPOs play an important role in environmental education, activism mobilizing, and policy advocacy. ENPOs rely heavily on their members and volunteers to impact society and its policies; effective leverage of communication channels is pivotal to their strategic success. The utilization of SMAs by ENPOs in the U.S. and other countries has been analyzed by several prior studies. An analysis of 43 ENPOs in Canada found that social media were primarily used for one-way information broadcast rather than two-way dialogical communication (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009).

Although SMAs are used by NPOs to achieve diverse purposes, an understanding of their motivations, strategies, barriers, success factors, and outcomes is still in its nascent stage (Nah & Saxton, 2013). Especially in the context of China, what purposes do NPOs use social media to achieve? How do NPOs use social media? How effective is social media utilization? These questions have not been fully examined and understood. This chapter attempts to explore these questions through a case study of social media use by a Chinese environmental NPO in Wuhan.

Specifically, the following questions will be addressed: First, what are the main factors that influenced the adoption of social media by ENPOs in China? Second, has the utilization of social media enhanced the communicative functions

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