

Chapter 3

The Personalized and Personal “Mass” Media – From “We– Broadcast” to “We–Chat”: Reflection on the Case of Bi Fujian Incident

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ABSTRACT

China’s two major social media, the microblog Weibo and the messaging service WeChat have played important roles in representing citizens’ voices and bringing about social changes. They often grow an ordinary event into a national debate as in the case of the Bi Fujian incident. They have also turned ordinary Chinese citizens into amateur reporters, empowering them to influence on issues that matter to them. An equalizer of power and discourse opportunity, the personalized and personal social media “weapons” are delivering the much needed social justice and consolation to the Chinese citizens amid widespread injustice, inequality, hypocrisy, indifference and corruption in the Chinese society.

INTRODUCTION

In a widely circulated home video on WeChat, according to the *Guardian* (Guardian, 2015), Bi Fujian, the host of a talent show at China’s flagship state television station, the CCTV (China Central Television), was entertaining his companions at a private dinner by mimicking an old Chinese revolutionary song about Communist Party-led soldiers fighting bandits in northeastern China in the 1940s. Based on media reports, to the laughter of those guests, Bi inserted improvised comments in a speaking voice between the lyrics. After the part that mentioned China’s late paramount leader Mao Zedong, he used a vulgar Chinese insult, and said “he has ruined us all” (Guardian, 2015). He also mocked the soldiers’ battles as meaningless and the song’s claim of victory boastful. The WeChat video went instantly viral across China. The incident renewed debate both on free speech and about Mao, who many Chinese blame for the disastrous 1959-1961 famine and the decade-long (1966-1976) chaotic Cultural Revolution. However, Bi’s remarks also drew sharp criticisms from the state media and Mao’s many loyal and vocal followers (Guardian, 2015) despite the fact that his policies have been discontinued and critiqued. The

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revolutionary leader, whose portrait still hangs on Tiananmen Rostrum, remains a source of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The identity of the person(s) who taped and released the video remain a mystery.

In recent years, the Chinese microblog (Weibo), the Chinese version of Twitter, and WeChat (Weixin 微信) play an increasingly important role in transforming a local or trivial event into a national issue. Chinese netizens’ intensive and extensive discussion often add provoking meanings and value to that event and frequently turn a seemingly insignificant issue into major national event. With the help of WeChat and Weibo, citizen journalism and online public opinion increasingly influence the behaviors of traditional media and government. This paper investigates the Bi Fujian parody case with regard to WeChat and Weibo. It argues that this kind of “silent” or less vocal expression, which differs from Weibo’s “broadcasting” style, has become an influential way for netizens to engage in civic discourse. It also makes the state censorship less effective by upsetting the media and public agenda.

Following a literature review on Chinese social media, my study will use the Bi Fujian case and the phenomena of WeChat and Weibo to examine the following areas: 1), the differences between Weibo and WeChat, and why more people began to favor WeChat as their choice of social media. 2), the paper argues that not all censorship is political in nature and some may be legitimate and beneficial to the society. 3), social media upset as well as reset public agenda and media agenda. 4), balance, responsibility and compromise between the netizens and the state are needed when it comes to information and speech liberalization and legitimate limitations. 5), WeChat and Weibo serve as an equalizer of social and political power and discourse opportunity. 6), these personalized social media deliver the much needed social justice to the Chinese citizens amid widespread injustice, inequality, indifference and corruption in the Chinese society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In China’s communication and political systems, the media are instruments through which the Party propagates its ideologies and government policies (Pan, 2000). However, with the rapid development of the social media, optimism and even excitement about its ability to derail state agenda-setting capacity and transfer some of that agenda setting power to the public has been high (Chiu, Ip, & Silverman, 2012). As the “singing” incident demonstrates, citizen-generated events on social media has become an important news source for professional media, such as the official *Xinhua News Agency*, *People’s Daily* and *CCTV*, which all have covered this case. Some other sensitive issues, such as the sudden collapsing of residential buildings, have also attracted national media who join the social media to demand the government agencies and authorities to be more accountable and transparent.

Some studies disagree on how effective social media can be. For example, a study by Pew Research Center and Rutgers University (Center, 2014) finds that social media actually weakens instead of enhancing people’s engagement in expressing their opinions especially when they differ from their friends due to a spiral of silence impact (Center, 2014). However, other scholars have argued that discourses are more than expressions of meaning or emotion, they construct or build the world, and as such can serve as a form of an empowerment or power brokering (Poster, 1995; Stockmann D., 2014). Chinese civic discourse, which has been transformed by the emergence of the social media, is citizens’ collective voice on public affairs regardless of their socio-economic class (Chen, 2014; Sullivan, 2012; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). It is both countering and complementary to the authoritative discourse and elitist

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