Limiting, Controlling and Supporting Digital Circulation

The Political and Economic Management of Online Rumours *(yaoyan)* on the Internet in the People's Republic of China

Gianluigi Negro

The paper analyzes three of the strategies of the Chinese government for monitoring online speech.The first analysis examines the implementation of the real name registration system (shimingzhi) aimed at limiting online rumors. The ssecond analysis looks at the strategy that aims to guarantee more accurate control over online content, whilst also limiting the circulation of parodies. The third to be scrutinized is the Chinese government's strategy of hiring people (wumaodang) to comment positively on its actions, increasing the online cacophony.
The goal of this paper is to show the complexity of the Chinese political economy in terms of digital circulation.

The history of the internet in China is interesting from several perspectives. Firstly, China is, since 2008, the most populous country in terms of internet users[1] and it has also experienced the fastest internet development, in terms of infrastructure and services. Some scholars have highlighted the isolation of the Chinese internet from the rest of the world;[2] others how China's internet has succeeded without compromising domestic economic

---

1 CNNIC CHINA INTERNET NETWORK INFORMATION CENTER, BEIJING, "The 21st Statistical report on Internet development in China", Di Erishiyi Ci Zhongguo Hulianwangluo Fazhan Zhuangkuang Jiaocha Tongji Baogao, 24. 1. 2008, http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwx-zbg/200906/P020120709345342042236.rar (accessed on 16. 1. 2017)

2 MACKINNON Rebecca, "China's Censorship 2.0: How companies censor bloggers", First Monday, 14/2 (2009), http://www.firstmonday.dk/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2378 (accessed on 16. 1. 2017); TAUBMAN Geoffry, "A not-so World Wide Web: The Internet, China, and the challenges to nondemocratic rule", Political Communication, 15/2 (1998), 255–272; ABBOTT Jason P., "Democracy@internet.asia? The challenges to the emancipatory potential of the net: Lessons from China and Malaysia", Third World Quarterly, 22/1 (2001), 99–114; TSUI Lokman, "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom Control and Regulation of the Internet in China", China information, 17/2 (2003), 65–82; KLUVER Randolph, YANG Chen, "The Internet in China: A meta-review of research", The Information Society, 21/4 (2005), 301–308.

development.[3] Other researchers have explored important historical steps and their consequences on economic,[4] political[5] and social levels. [6]

More recently, a meta review of internet studies in China looked at the last 20 years of research.[7] That review highlights that the majority of academic publications focused on technical strategies implemented by the Chinese government in order to limit, obstruct and eventually censor the proliferation of online content considered unharmonious or contradictory of official propaganda. In particular, the review demonstrated how the great majority of academic publications have been focused on the co-evolution- ary process between politics and society, and the adaptive practices of the Chinese government related to internet development.[8] This article aims to demonstrate that these two trends find confirmation in three media strat- egies that are: "guidance of public opinion"; "channeling of public opinion" and "public opinion struggle".[9]

As Qian[10] suggests, there are three main media policies that reflect the adaptive governance of the Chinese authorities related to internet development:

1. *Guidance of public opinion (yulun daoxiang)*. According to this strate- gy, the "masses needed guidance and resolution for problems of ideological understandings that emerged as a result of interest reshuffling in the midst of reforms" (Jiang 1994);

2. *Channeling of public opinion (yulun yindao)*. This second media strat- egy was supported by the Hu-Wen leadership and was created in order to "fully understand the social impact of new media, of which the internet is the most representative, and to give high priority to the building, use and management of the internet (Hu 2008). In other words, this second strat- egy addresses not only the control over but also influence upon discourse power *(Zhanghuo huayuquan)*;

3. *Public opinion struggle (yulun douzheng)*. The third and most re- cent strategy can be explained by reading a series of commentaries on President Xi Jinping's August 2013 speech on ideology. The main goal of

---

3 TAN Zixiang Alex, FOSTER William, GOODMAN Seymour, "China's state-coordinated Internet infrastructure", Communications of the ACM, 42/6 (1999), 44–52.

4 ZHAO Yuezhi, Communication in China. Political Economy, Power, and Conflict, Lanham (MD) 2008.

5 LAGERKVIST Johan, After the Internet, before Democracy. Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society, Bern 2010.

6 YANG Guobin, The Power of the Internet in China. Citizen Activism Online, New York 2009.

7 HEROLD David Kurt, DE SETA Gabriele, "Through the Looking Glass: Twenty Years of Chinese Internet Research", The Information Society, 31/1 (2015), 68–82.

8 GOLDSTEIN Avery, YANG Guobin (Eds.), The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China, Philadelphia 2016.

9 QIAN Gan, "Praising the 'Public Opinion Struggle", China Media Project, 24. 9. 2013, http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/09/24/34085/ (accessed on 16. 1. 2017).

10 Ibid.

this policy has been to consolidate and strengthen mainstream ideology and public opinion.

This article will also analyze three different strategies relating to three different periods of leadership (Jiang Zemin; Hu Jintao – Wen Jiabao; Xi Jinping) in order to investigate the main changes in terms of digital circulation:

1. The anti-rumors campaign: preventing the circulation of online rumors *(yaoyan)* through the implementation of the real name registration system *(shimingzhi)*;

2. The implementation of a game-based system in some social networks in order to monitor online content and also to avoid the spread of harmful content on Chinese platforms;

3. The enhancement of rumors in online discussions supported by the Chinese government, aimed at increasing online cacophony and also limiting the proliferation of credible negative online discussions targeting the government.

The goal of this article is to focus on particular features of Chinese internet content management where the idea of circulation plays a crucial role.

As suggested by Balbi, Delfanti and Magaudda, "digital circulation should not be confined to studies of media and cultural industries. 'Digital' and especially 'digitalization' related processes have constituted critical change in almost all realms of modern everyday life enabling processes involving the circulation of content, meaning, object and technologies, competences and embodied knowledge to be generally reconfigured".[11]

The value of circulation is even more important when bearing in mind the words of Appadurai, who noted that things gain specific values and meanings through a process of circulation between worlds, individuals and social contexts (1986).[12]

As will be confirmed in this article, the politics of digital circulation are the result of a series of power struggles that include regulations developed by political and private spheres especially within the Chinese context.

11 BALBI Gabriele, DELFANTI Alessandro, MAGAUDDA Paolo, "Digital Circulation: Media, Materiality, Infrastructures. An Introduction", TECNOSCIENZA. Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies, 7/1 (2016), 7–16.

12 APPADURAI Arjun, The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective, Cambridge, 1988.

The real name registration system: preventing online rumors

China, much like other countries, has influenced how rumors spread online. Indeed, online media have significantly contributed to the shift from hearing rumors via word of mouth to reading rumors as online messages.[13] This shift resulted in increased damages to many individuals and organizations, representing a new channel to be regulated, for at least two reasons. First, it is difficult to monitor circulated information on the internet because online communication is normally done on a real-time basis. Second, in the majority of cases, online communication does not have official gatekeepers to verify the information. In most cases, rumors are first published (and eventually shared) by falsified or unverified accounts. Although online rumors are formally defined at the official level, official organs are also paying great attention to their unofficial reception. Indeed, an article appearing in *Seeking the Truth (Qiushi),* the bimonthly political theory periodical published by the Central Party School of the CCP, stated that "Internet rumors have become very popular and chaotic phenomena which infringe upon people's rights."[14] Moreover, a study published by the Chinese Academy of Social Science on Chinese new media even reported that in 2013 one third of online discussion was based on rumors.[15]

Although online rumors *(yaoyan)* should not be considered a recent issue for the Chinese internet history, the debate on their regulation surged between 2011 and 2012. This was largely in response to the success of Sina Weibo, the most popular microblog platform in China. The campaign against the online rumors and the subsequent implementation of the real name registration system *(shimingzhi)* reflects an example of Chinese political economy coordinated between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), industry, and civil society. The CCP's coordinated media campaign highlighted the risks caused by online rumors and promoted the implementation of the real name registration system. Sina Weibo[16] thus supported the technical implementation of the real name registration system on its service. Meanwhile, civil society helped create of the anti-rumor league *(piyao lianmeng)*, to support online debate. In other words, it is possible to

---

13 Kɪᴍ Jong-Hyun, Bᴏᴄᴋ Gee-Woo, "A Study on the Factors Affecting the Behavior of Spreading Online Rumors: Focusing on the Rumor Recipient's Emotions", PACIS, 98 (2011).

14 Wᴀɴɢ Shi, "Clear up the Atmosphere in Cyberspace (Rang Wangluo Kongjian Qinglang Qilai)", Seeking the Truth (Qiushi), 16. 9. 2013, http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201318/201309/t20130912_270563.htm (accessed on 16. 1. 2017).

15 Kɪᴍ/Bᴏᴄᴋ (see note 13).

16 A privately owned company with a notable history of relations with the government, which relations continue to be particularly significant for its success.

note that in this first stage the main task was to use political, private and a section of civil society sectors to block the circulation of online rumors.

Guidance through traditional media

Official traditional media in China is entirely managed by the CCP. This includes the CPP newspaper *People's Daily,* the press agency *Xinhua* and the national television CCTV. These outlets initially supported the first wave of criticism against the spread of online rumors. For instance, an article published by *People's Daily* in December 2012 provided a comparison of the Chinese and international situation with an article titled: "Internet supervision according to international practice" *(Yifa Jianguan Hulianwang Shi Guoguanli).*[17] The publication of this article was particularly important because it highlighted the necessity t.for avoiding anonymity on on the internet – not only as a Chinese priority but also as a European issue. The article referred to a proposal for public comment provided by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice, in December 2012, recommending that that country's criminal code be changed to incorporate a new definition of public space and public action, which would include the internet. This would allow severe punishment of anyone publishing hate speech, regardless of the medium. Lastly, the article analyzed real name registration system standards implemented in other countries such as the USA, Germany, Singapore and Thailand. This therefore highlighted the importance of cyber security in guaranteeing the security of internet users, and avoiding terrorist attacks, racism and religious discrimination for the country as a whole. In other words, the editorial promoted the idea that the internet should be considered a public space and explored the feasibility of online registration for increased internet security.

This real name registration strategy shows the clear implementation of vertical control over online content and is linked to the first policy phase, "guidance of public opinion *(yulun daoxiang)*". Vertical control involves the CCP providing clear directives to media companies through a top-down decision making process in which Chinese internet users are supposed to play a passive role. Both media and Chinese internet companies are thereby asked to "guide public opinion through intermediaries, so as to lead, rather than be led, in their interactions with netiziens".[18] It is important to highlight that the expression, *"yulun daoxiang"*, was coined after the crackdown on demonstrators in Beijing on June 4, 1989. It was used again

---

17 "Internet supervision in accordance with the international practice (Yifa Jianguan Hulianwang Shi Geguo Guailie)", People's Daily, 19. 12. 2012, http://it.people.com.cn/n/2012/1219/c1009-19939250.html (accessed on 21. 1. 2017).

18 HEROLD/DE SETA (see note 7), 68–82.

several times during the following decade by the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Jiang Zemin. President Jiang emphasized that "control of news and public opinion had to be placed firmly in the hand of those who had a deep respect for Marxism, for the Party and for the people. Those units responsible for news and public opinion must place firm and correct political bearings above all other priorities, thereby upholding correct guidance of public opinion."[19] This policy was also used by President Hu Jintao, the successor of Jiang Zemin, confirming a clear historical continuity.

The role of the private sector

An additional crucial point for the anti-rumors campaign was the direct involvement of Sina Weibo, the most popular microblog platform in China, and three Beijing government agencies. Before the official national implementation of the real name registration system, the Beijing Public Security Bureau, the Communication Administration and Internet Communication Office and the Internet Information Office, together with the Beijing Government Press Office, jointly published new rules. The rules required that users of Chinese microblogging platform services provide their identities when registering their accounts; namely, web users had to register with authentic identities when applying for microblog IDs, which would then enable them to write, publish and share posts. However, real name registration did not ask web users to provide IDs in order to browse and read posts. As reported by an editorial on *Xinhua*[20] some months later: the main aim was to avoid the circulation of illegal content on the internet, including state secrets that could damage national interests and security, ethnic forms of hostility and discrimination, and content that could jeopardize social order.

Under these circumstances, Sina Weibo played an active role in raising awareness of the real name registration system among its users. Indeed, Sina Weibo designers and developers actively tried to increase the awareness of its users on this issue. Firstly, the microblog homepage emphasized the dedicated "real name" feature, and aimed at getting all users to register. The web page also featured a counter showing how many users had registered using their real identity. Last but not least, a Sina Weibo moderator account posted a message online presenting the "Sina Weibo Community Convention (trial)"; the "Community Management Regulations (trial)", and the "Community Committee System (trial)" highlighting that "order is

---

19 President Jiang Zemin quoted in CHAN Joseph, "Democracy and Meritocracy: Toward a Confucian Perspective", Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 34/2 (2007), 179–193.

20 "Beijing requires real name in microblog registration", Xinhua, 16. 12. 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/16/c_131310381.htm (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

something that we all must work together to maintain".[21] [22] Moreover, the company released a poll on the feeling of its users toward the real name registration policy a few weeks before the deadline imposed by the three Beijing government agencies. The results of the poll were not very positive: more than 77% of users were against the real name rules while only 12% were in favor of them. Sina Weibo also changed the default login credential from an email address to a phone number, although users could still register with an email address if they chose to do so by clicking on a specific link. Sina Weibo was required to do this despite the reticence of its users because this new system would have facilitated the implementation of the real name registration system at the national level tied to mobile phone numbers or ID numbers. The expected goal of the microblog platform was to reach 60% verified registered users of Weibo microbloggers by March 16th 2012.[23] However, on March 15th, 2012, this result was far from being reached. This was demonstrated by the same official Sina Weibo counter, which opened on December 2012 to publicize the "real name" feature and, according to Sina Weibo managers, was expected to count 300 million verified registered users by the end of March 2013. According to the data provided by the same counter Sina Weibo reached only 19 million verified registered users by mid-March 2013.[24] Hence, even after a second upgrade, Sina Weibo is still far from achieving the goal of 60% of verified registered users presented in March 2012. In order to attract more users and increase its market share, the company must offer easy access and user-friendly registration systems; however, they also must be reactive and assertive with regard to the government agencies' requests and regulations.

Guiding public opinion through a grass roots approach

Although the implementation of the real name registration system was effectively a failure, it is nevertheless interesting because it confirms an important characteristic of the "guiding public opinion" strategy. Indeed, spontaneous movements and their use of new media played a quite relevant role. Discontent with the circulation of online rumors was not limited

---

21 RUDOLPH Josh, "Sina Weibo New Rules", China Digital Times, 9. 5. 2012, http://chinadigi-taltimes.net/2012/05/sina-weibos-new-rules/ (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).
22 The complete list of the rules is accessible at http://service.account.weibo.com/roles/gongyue.
23 "China's Sina Sees 60% of Weibo Users Verified by Deadline", Reuters, 12. 3. 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/sina-weibo-idUSL4E8EC11B20120312 (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).
24 MILLWARD Steven, "Sina Weibo Allows 'Real Name' Registration Via SMS, Can be Cheated", Tech In Asia, 14. 3. 2012, https://www.techinasia.com/sina-weibo-sms-real-name-registration (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

to the governmental level, it was also shared and actively supported by the "anti-rumors league" *(piyao lianmeng)*: a spontaneous group of online rumor busters that presented themselves "as truth seeking vigilantes out to identity and neutralize untruths in China's burgeoning microblog sphere".[25] Presently, the informal group has more than 70,000 followers and has posted 200 messages.[26]

In August 2010, an article by the Chinese editorialist Yang Jian was published in the *People's Daily,* praising the activities of the anti-rumors league. In his article, Yang recognized how "in less than three months the 'anti-rumors league' had touched the key points of new media".[27] According to the editorialist, the establishment of the league was also useful in the debate about how microblog platforms should be used, asking whether they should be considered real media or voices from the street. Yang also raised further questions such as "is it possible to demand the same standards guaranteed by traditional media? Could rumors spread on microblogs not uncover the limits of traditional media with negative consequences also for their future existence?" The editorialist also specified that microblog platforms differ from other mass means of communication, with their [at the time] more than 195 million users they have become the primary source of information for other media. He pointed out that "in these circumstances, it is important to question which ethical principles microblogs are based on". Afterwards the journalist advocated: "media professionals must take heed of the news spread through microblogs and users are called on to look for the truth on these platforms […] Activities like those proposed by the anti-rumor league are a good way of promoting the self-purification of public opinion and of supporting rational expression and people-organized participation. The league is the expression of the sense of citizens' social responsibility."[28]

It is also true that some scholars and observers doubted the actual spontaneity of the league, criticizing how Dou Hanzhang, one of the founders of the group, labeled himself as someone who "speaks on behalf of the government". This approach led to overlooking the proper relationship between rumors and lies, targeting popular rumor but avoiding official rumors. It is unclear, however, whether these were active attempts at cover ups or passive neglect.[29]

25 BANDURSKI, David, "China tackles the messy world of microblogs", China Media Project, 8. 11. 2011, http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/08/11/14706/ (accessed on 20. 1. 2016).
26 The Anti-rumor League Sina Weibo Microblog Account http://www.weibo.com/piyaolianmeng?is_all=1 accessed on 20. 1. 2017).
27 YANG Jian, "How is it Possible to Deny Rumors in the Microblog Era? (Weibo Shidai Women Zenmeyang Piyao?)", Renminwang, 10. 8. 2011, http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2011-08-10/073822965891.shtml (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).
28 Ibid.
29 HU Yong, "Are Rumors Really so Bad?", China Media Project, 27. 8. 2013, http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/08/27/33907/ (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

The failure of the anti-rumors campaign reached its pinnacle in March of 2012. At that time, both Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo were forced to suspend their comments sections after a plethora of rumors were published about a coup in Beijing organized by allies of a deposed former member of the central Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. At that time, a report from Xinhua stated that the Chinese authorities closed 16 websites and detained six people responsible for devising or circulating rumors online.[30] The report also detailed that the State Internet Information Office spokesperson had announced that both Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo were penalized accordingly. It was the first time in the history of Chinese microblogging that such measures were implemented. In March 2012, Chinese Criminal Law authorized criminal punishment for the release of any false information that disturbed the public order online.[31] Afterwards, it was understood that the punishment consisted of a three-day suspension from commenting on microblog platforms.[32] The decision to suspend the publication of comments was not a complete block of the service, as microblog users were still allowed to make original posts and repost those of others. However, curtailment of online rumors matched the Chinese policy "guidance of public opinion", not only through the formulation of specific rules imposed by the government on the microblog companies, but also through directives that led to blocking specific online services. In September 2015, China's Supreme Court issued a law according to which any libelous post or online messages would be considered "severe" breaches of the law if they were visited or accessed more than 5000 times or reposted more than 500 times.[33] The guilty could be sentenced up to three years in jail.

Nevertheless, the experience of the *anti-rumors* campaign is important because it confirmed that the Chinese government needed to shift away from its management of online rumors. Their new policy was a change from a vertical approach to monitoring and censorship represented by the "guidance of public opinion" *(yulun daoxiang)* strategy to a more horizontal

---

30 CHAO Loretta, "Sina, Tencent Shut Down Commenting on Microblogs", Wall Street Journal, 31. 3. 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405270230381650457731440006466 61814.html (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

31 At the present stage online rumors in the People's Republic of China are regulated by a provision to article 291 (1) of the Criminal Law (Criminal Law Amendment Act [9]) according to which whoever "fabricates or deliberately spreads on media, including on the Internet, false information regarding dangerous situations, the spread of diseases, disasters and police information, and who seriously disturb social order" would face prison sentences – with a maximum of seven years for those whose rumors result in "serious consequences."

32 Ibid.

33 China Court (Zhongguo Fayuan Wang), An explanation on issues of how to use the law to deal with those using information from the Internet to implement defamation and other criminal cases (Guanyu banli liyong xinxi wangluo shishi feibang deng xingshi anjian shiyong falü ruogan wenti de jieshi), 6. 9. 2013, http://www.chinacourt.org/law/detail/2013/09/ id/146710.shtml (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

strategy of "channeling of public opinion" *(yulun yindao)*. The necessity for this new strategy came from the role of new media. The growth of the new media sector and spontaneous groups represented a clear trend. The decision to block the circulation of comments on the microblog platforms confirmed one more time the failure of the real name registration system.

The next section of this article will explore the "channeling public opinion" policy, explaining how the Chinese government influenced the implementation of features on online services in order to limit online political gossip.

Let Chinese internet users play online

The second strategy used by the Chinese government to limit the circulation of online rumors and to safeguard "harmonious" *(hexie)* online spaces consisted of the implementation of gaming systems on web 2.0 platforms. The expression "harmonious society" *(hexie shehui)* is a concept that was (re)introduced by the former President Hu Jintao and was designed at supporting the People's Republic of China's economic and social development. The importance of this concept was demonstrated by its being incorporated within the Chinese government's 11th five year plan (2006–2010) and even into the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party in 2005 and 2007.[34] Hu's political strategy mainly aimed to manage and limit social disparities and conflicts coming from rapid economic development in China. Moreover, according to the Hu's words, a harmonious society is "democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly, and maintains harmony between man and nature".[35] Firstly, it is important to point out that one of the key elements for the success of Chinese internet companies was taking on an active role in terms of monitoring and eventually censoring harmful online content, that is content considered not in line with a harmonious development of the Chinese society and against Chinese laws. An important theoretic analysis of this was provided by MacKinnon with her framework of "censorship 2.0", according to which managers and employees of internet companies – both domestic and foreign – were expected to do their part in preventing China's online discourse from getting out of hand.[36] In particular, authorities had created a system of regulations and obligatory "self-discipline" pledges in the hope of compelling web companies to keep

---

34 CHAN Kim Man, "Harmonious society", in: International Encyclopedia of Civil Society, New York 2010, 821–825
35 HU Angang, "Envisaging China's Grand Strategy: The Ambitious Goal of a Prosperous People and a Powerful Nation", Social Sciences in China. English Edition, 26/4 (2005), 87.
36 See note 2, MACKINNON Rebecca.

Fig. 1: Set of status for Sina Weibo verified account.

Fig. 2: Set of VIP status on Sina Weibo.

user-generated content from going beyond specific limits. One of the most interesting cases occurred in July 2011 and involved the former General Secretary of the Communist Party Jiang Zemin. Some unidentified Chinese internet users noted Jiang's absence from celebrations of the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party some days before, and used this as a pretext to spread news according to which former president Jiang was dead or seriously ill. As the rumor began to circulate on Sina Weibo, both the surname 'Jiang' and the word 'jiang' (river) could no longer be searched for online; and the only result displayed was "search results are not shown in application of laws and policies". The attempt to limit the rumors about Jiang Zemin's death led Sina Weibo to remove even one of the most humorous references to Jiang: an empty set of clothes hanging up, with the trousers hitched up because of the Chinese leader's high waistline. And although two Hong Kong television stations reported that Jiang Zemin had died, quoting unverified sources, Sina Weibo blocked searches regarding 'myocardial infarction', 'hung' (a euphemism for death) and '301 Hospital' a reference to the medical facility that treats top leaders.[37]

---

37 LARSON Christina, "The People's Republic of Rumors", Foreign Policy, 8. 7. 2011, http://www.christina-larson.com/the-peoples-republic-of-rumors/ (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

Not only were rumors about Jiang's death denied, he was also given a high profile in the media for the three weeks running up to the 18th Communist Party Congress. The South China Morning Post also reported that Jiang's appearance coincided with his renewed involvement in key party decisions. Meanwhile, the online rumors' debate was becoming increasingly heated in the official media.[38]

This new mid-level companies strategy also showed that while government regulatory bodies issued directives to companies about what kinds of content should be controlled, the finer details of implementation were left to the companies.

Over the years, some Chinese companies decided to pursue another strategy intended to limit the proliferation of political communication online, and did so by generating an increase in online entertainment. This trend was foreseen by others: Guo and colleagues previously commented that the internet in China "rather than being an information highway, is more like an entertainment highway".[39] At the time there was evidence to demonstrate that most Chinese users were more interested in entertainment online, not hard news or serious political discussion. This trend was particularly visible through the success of Sina Weibo. It is safe to say that Sina Weibo concretely implemented the "politics of aesthetics"[40] in order to let the Chinese party-state manipulate the platform itself as well as stifle political communication and, in more general terms, dissent and activism.[41]

One interesting example is provided by Benny who notes how new users who subscribe for their first time on Sina Weibo are asked to select one or more "interests" before to getting access to the service. This choice is crucial because users are obliged to follow a particular set of Sina Weibo users. Moreover, as Benny confirms, it should not be considered a coincidence that the majority of "interests" are based on consumerism and entertainment[42] (ibid). Although users can eventually

---

38 TAM Fiona, "Jiang Zemin makes second public appearance ahead of power change", South China Morning Post, 21. 10. 2012.

39 GUO Liang et al., Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Ffive Chinese Cities (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Funded by the Markle Foundation), Beijing 2005; MACKINNON Rebecca, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China", Public Choice, 134 (2005), 31–46.

40 RANCIÈRE Jacques, "Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement. Interviewed by Solange Guénon and James H. Kavanagh", SubStance, 29/2 (2000), 3–24.

41 BENNEY, Jonathan, "The Aesthetics of Chinese Microblogging: State and Market Control of Weibo", Asiascape. Digital Asia, 1/3 (2014), 169–200.

42 Ibid.

de-follow these interests, the original idea of influencing users' interests still remains.

In more general terms, it has been demonstrated that the majority of Chinese websites and online services are characterized by an "aesthetic of abundance" and a relatively flat hierarchy of information, leading to a complicated selection of information placed on one single page. Other studies have proven that the majority of Chinese design choices were driven by limited resources and unsophisticated design expertise.[43] Nevertheless, other research has focused on the importance of cultural dimensions and their impact on web design choices.[44] However, scholars have highlighted the importance of online aesthetics in marginalizing the role of the state, especially in China.[45] The success of Sina Weibo indicates how particular design choices could influence monitoring activities, thereby avoiding visible surveillance.

Sina Weibo became popular not only because Twitter has not been accessible in China since 2009, but also due to a gradual failure of other domestic microblog platforms that were shut down by the government between 2009 and 2011.[46] Moreover, Sina Weibo was initially supported by the news portal Sina and they heavily invested in the microblog service. Nevertheless, the domestic success of Sina Weibo is not limited to economic reasons, it can also be explained by the support of the Chinese government. Chin and Chow confirmed that the existence of Sina and its microblog service is linked to the requests of the Communist Party; hence, official government visits to Sina's headquarters and recalls for censorship and online security should not be underestimated.[47]

On the one hand, Sina Weibo and all Chinese online services have to invest in their own personnel and software in order to guarantee a circulation of online content which is in line with and not against social stability. On the other hand, Chinese internet companies have to make profits. For this reason, most companies have based their core strategies on entertainment.

In terms of microblogs, Sina Weibo and Twitter have some notable differences. An important difference is linguistic: the 140-character limit to microblog messages uses the Unicode character encoding, meaning

---

43 See note 36, MacKinnon Rebecca.
44 Hsu Jeffrey, "Chinese cultures and E-commerce", in: Thanasankit Theerasak (Ed.), E-Commerce and Cultural Values, London 2003, 268–289.
45 See note 39, Guo Liang et al.
46 Zhang Zhan, Negro Gianluigi, "Weibo in China: Understanding its Development through Communication Analysis and Cultural Studies", Communication, Politics & Culture, 46/2 (2013), 199–216.
47 Chin Josh, Chao Loretta, "Beijing Communist Party Chief Issues Veiled Warning to Chinese Web Portal", Wall Street Journal, 24. 8. 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000 14240531119042790045765262932765958 86.html (accessed on 20. 1. 2017).

that every letter in English is considered as a Chinese "character". This distinction is extremely relevant because in Chinese every "character" is equivalent to an English word. In other words, this means that the use of the Chinese language allows more elaborate discourse in its microblog sphere than using English would.[48]

One of the most original features characterizing the popularization of Chinese online services was the sensational promotion instead of the discursive discussion of social issues.[49] Regarding the aesthetic characteristics of Sina Weibo, some scholars have argued that the Chinese microblog platforms were the result of peculiar decisions,[50] such as instance, the layout and the gamification of the platform.

These trends have been confirmed via interviews with two anonymous editors from Sina Weibo, conducted in 2013 by the present author. The interviews confirmed that Sina Weibo enlisted specific partners during the initial years, such as celebrities in cinema, sports and other fields, paying them for every post. This trend heavily contributed to the popularization of the service; however, compared to Twitter, the growth of Sina Weibo was supported by celebrities. Icons and colors are used with a specific reason in mind, as they are important both in terms of creating a personal identity online and in terms of bottom up surveillance. One confirmation of this comes from the set of icons used to define user's status (confirmed through the real name registration system); user VIP level (see image above) and user's level of credibility.

Another clear example is illustrated by the verification badge assigned to verified accounts (in the case of Sina Weibo, big V or *da V*). On Twitter, the status of verified user is limited to a blue "V" associated with a user's profile picture. Meanwhile, verified Sina Weibo users are strongly encouraged to provide more personal information in order to get privileged access to extra services. The promotion of a system based on the achievement of levels represents a very important part of the gaming approach; the more time users spend on the platform, the more chance they have to increase their status and improve their online reputation. That being said, every user is also asked to be part of a competition to boost his/her online reputation, in order to obtain a more credible status on the platform. At the same level, the promotion of VIP status is considered useful, both for the government and for the company. As Chinese users provide more personal information,

---

48 QI Gao et al., "A Comparative Study of Users' Microblogging Behavior on Sina Weibo and Twitter", in: International Conference on User Modeling, Adaptation, and Personalization, Berlin 2012, 88–101.
49 SULLIVAN Jonathan, "China's Weibo: Is faster different?", New Media & Society, 16/1 (2014), 24–37.
50 TAN Chui Chui, "Chinese Web Design Patterns: How and Why They're Different" (2011).

there can be higher levels of control and monitoring. On the one hand, the privileged access to some Sina Weibo services will let these users easily access specified content; on the other hand, the lack of pseudonyms, and the implementation of real names will facilitate the control of microblog editors. More importantly, the implementation of verified users will support the trend of self-censorship among Chinese users, who will limit their online criticisms.[51]

Compared to Twitter, the Chinese microblog platform integrates emoticons, video clips and pictures. In other words, the Sina Weibo design influences online activities of their users implicitly, with posts being focused on pictures instead of texts. This shows a piloted shift from online written circulation of messages to multimedia ones.

Coming back to the encouragement of new Sina Weibo users to select their interests, it is notable how Sina Weibo users' choices are influenced from the outset by the structure of the platform itself. The entertainment features are furthermore exemplified by the importance given to the levels *(dengji)* one can achieve. The levels are set in terms in terms of the collection of specific badges, profile customization and virtual credits that lead to the creation of specific avatars. This demonstrates that Sina Weibo supports constant interaction with its users based on entertainment and competition among users themselves.

The implementation of the level system is effective and expedient, not only in limiting online discussions and promoting a game competition, but also in feeding a bottom up monitoring system. In May 2012, Sina Weibo introduced a new feature on its platform: a point based system for measuring user behavior.[52] Labeled as "Weibo Credit", the new system encouraged microblog users to report other user's negative comments, harassment and other "non-harmonious" online content. A collection of grassroots reports provided by other users could lead to a lower credit score and potential public humiliation, resulting from that low score and from the potential suspension of one's Weibo account. More specifically, the "Weibo Credit" system is ruled by the following six points:

– *User reports:* all the members participating in the Weibo Credit system are asked to be verified users;

– *Handling of reports:* reports and the eventual assignment of points is left to the Community Committee;

51 XU Beina, "Media censorship in China", Council on Foreign Relations, 30. 9. 2014).
52 CHIN Josh, Censorship 3.0? Sina Weibo's New 'User Credit' Points System, in: Wall Street Journal, 29. 5. 2012).

– Credit calculation: The system assigns more points for positive and concrete reviews but also deducts credit in case of online misconduct;

– Credit grades: credit grades and credit scores are both subject to specific regulations;

– Low credits: the profiles of users with a low credit will be visible and marked by a specific "low credit" icon;

– Credit recovery: If users with low credit change their online behavior without violating Sina Weibo rules for a fixed period of time, they will have their credit restored and their low credit icon will be dismissed.

The roots of the "Weibo credit" system and the notion of the "harmonious society" are not limited to current economic and political contexts. Indeed both the credit system and, in more general terms, the harmonious society are concepts that share a Confucian background. The role of *guanxi* for instance, is an important way to "contrast the conception of online community as a social network with what has been observed about the social and political lifeworlds of East Asia society".[53] Social rules such as face *(mianzi)* aimed at supporting mutual dependence and trust within a defined network or *guanxi* network (that is the sum of social relations that the individual relies on), play a crucial role in carrying out the "Weibo Credit" system. The concept of "harmonious society" *(hexie shehui)* was inserted in a more complex political background, under President Hu Jintao's leadership, when there was a revival of Confucianism mainly led by the Communist party. This revival was based on specific party concerns for harmony and peace and that were used for propagandistic purposes. According to Rachael Gary, there are three groups of studies that explain the rehabilitation of Confucian values.[54] The first line of thought considers Confucianism as "a conservative reaction against Westernization".[55] In other words, Confucianism is considered a way to fight the "spiritual pollution" of the West.[56] A second line of thinking regards Confucianism as the most appropriate response to the domestic social unrest that started to grow in the mid-2000s. Under these circumstances, recalling Confucian harmony helps support order and stability and counters disaffection amongst the lower strata of society. The last perspective explains a return to Confucianism as a reaction to growing Western liberal democracy. More specifically, harmony and social peace are considered the most useful reactions to

53 YUAN Elaine J., "A Culturalist Critique of 'Online Community' in New Media Studies", New Media & Society, 15/5 (2013), 665–679.

54 GARY Rachael, China's Confucian Makeover, Dissertation, University of Puget Sound, Department of Politics and Government, 2012, http://www.pugetsound.edu/files/resources/social-sciences-rachael-gary.pdf (accessed on 23. 1. 2017).

55 Ibid.

56 ZHAO Suisheng, "A State-led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China", Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 31/3 (1998), 287–302.

growing agitation. What emerges from these three perspectives is the pragmatic use of the Confucian value of "harmony" by the CCP, designed to make the idea of "democracy with Chinese characteristic" more credible intellectually. It is important to highlight this concern of the CCP that the idea of Western democracy is not applicable in China, and it is for this reason that a Confucian alterative based on a benevolent state is proposed.

The coordinated implementation of design and gamification aspects of Sina Weibo was part of the "public opinion channeling" *(Yunlun Yindao)* strategy. This effort was launched by the Hu-Wen leadership with an aim to "actively set the agenda".[57] Sina Weibo and the Chinese government cooperated in order to influence Chinese microblog users' online activities, and also to guarantee the bottom up monitoring of activities. According to the plans of the government, the entertainment features of Sina Weibo would have decreased the credibility of the platform itself; making it unlikely to be considered an authoritative source of information. Nevertheless, Sina Weibo not only ranks as a favorite online news source in China[58] but it is also considered by Chinese scholars to be one of the most important online spaces for coordinating online and offline protests related to exceptional events, such as the Wenzhou train collision.[59] Both the Chinese government and companies were obliged to implement a new strategy to influence the circulation of opposing online ideas.

The fifty cents army *(wumaodang)*

The majority of scholars focused on the Chinese internet have observed that the Chinese government has been modifying its strategies of control over the years, largely in response to increased online criticism that is linked to the declining credibly of traditional media. Lagerkvist studied this trend in order to explain how traditional Chinese propaganda has shifted its focus

---

57 The new media policy was launched by Hu Jintao during the two national conferences on ideology held in December 2003 and January 2008. The general idea was not only to further the main goal of the CCP, to educate, guide, inspire and encourage people, but also that the Party's new challenge would be a new strategy oriented more towards "raising the CCP's ability to channel public opinion (tigao yulun yindao nengli) by defending Chinese citizens' cultural interests and respecting different points of view". However, the new strategy also aimed to "fully build the reporting system for sudden breaking public events, reporting authoritative information at the earliest moment possible and enhancing transparency". The role of the Internet was crucial because the strategy was not limited solely to the control of online content but also demanded discourse power (zhangluo huyuquan).

58 ZHANG Y., YANG Y., MENG J., "Micro Blog Leads Revolution in China", China Daily European Weekly, 22. 4. 2011.

59 GUAN Wanqiu et al., "Analyzing User Behavior of the Micro-Blogging Website Sina Weibo during Hot Social Events", Physica A. Statistical Mechanics and its Applications 395 (2014), 340–351.

from ideology to public attention.[60] This trend is particularly remarkable in the case study analyzed in this section.

The third strategy examined in this article is that that has sought to influence online debate through the implementation of online "astroturfing"[61] techniques. On the Chinese internet, such techniques have been exemplified through the establishment of an army of online commentators also known as the "fifty cents army" *(wumaodang)*. These are web commentators – instigated, trained and financed by party organizations with the goal of safeguarding Communist Party interests by infiltrating the online debate.

As with the Sina Weibo credit system, the "fifty cents army" can also be considered a bottom up monitoring strategy. The name of the army is derived from the "fifty cents" *(wumao)* paid for each post in favor of the Chinese government. The experience of the fifty cents army is important, though some scholars have suggested that the Chinese government is not able to effectively limit the circulation of unfavorable online content.[62] Other scholars have argued that it is not the intention of the Chinese government to eliminate all public expression.[63] King, Pan and Roberts[64] empirically confirmed that the real problem for the Chinese government is not general criticism online, but rather that online platforms could support offline collective actions which could compromise social stability.

The history of the fifty cents army began in the early-2000s. According to Watts, in 2004 several provinces in China began recruiting members to join the online army. Around the same time the term "net commentators" appeared for the first time on the official website of Nanjing university.[65] The university established a specific program called the "Work Study Programme", involving student union officers and "people with strong initiatives". The program provided students with subsidies based on a monthly assessment of their work as net commentators, with the main goal of distributing material beneficial to the university, influencing online discussions concerning the Bulletin Board System (BBS)[66] and replying

---

60 LAGERKVIST (see note 5).
61 According to Zhang, Carpenter and Ko "astroturfing occurs when groups of people are hire to present certain beliefs or opinions, which these people do not really possess, through various communication channels". See ZHANG, Jerry, CARPENTER Darrell, KO Myung, Online Astroturfing: A Theoretical Perspective. Proceedings of the Nineteenth Americas Conference on Information Systems, Chicago, Illinois, 15–17. 8. 2013, http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2013/HumanComputerInteraction/GeneralPresentations/5/ (accessed on 22. 1. 2017).
62 ESAREY Ashley, QIANG Xiao, "Below the Radar: Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere", Asian Survey, 48/5 (2008), 752–772.
63 BARBOZA David, "Billions in Hidden Riches for Family of Chinese Leader", New York Times, 25. 10. 2012.
64 WATTS Jonathan, "China's Secret Internet Police Target Critics with web of Propaganda", The Guardian, 14. 6. 2005.
65 At the time, the most popular platforms for debate online were the Bulletin Board Systems that were heavily used on university campuses (see below footnote).
66 A bulletin board system is a computer server running software that allows users to connect

to negative comments. They were also asked to complete and send specific reports to the Office of School Network Management Directorate experimenting *de facto* the real name registration system. The program of Nanjing University was replicated in other schools, including Suqian, Jiangxu, Quanzhuoi and Fujian.[67]

The role of the fifty cents army was not to stamp out anti-CCP thoughts, but rather to bolster its image on several platforms.[68] It is interesting to note that some Chinese intellectuals, such as the novelist Xia Shang, compared the activities of the fifty cents army to that of the Red Guards, a mass paramilitary social movement mobilized by Mao during the cultural revolution in 1966 and 1967.[69] Historic comparison aside, the most important aspect to highlight is that the strategy of the fifty cents army was aimed at interfering in and bolstering official perspectives in online discussions discussions rather than limiting them.

Fifty cents army commentators operate in a grey zone; for Chinese users, it is not easy to understand whether their activities are affiliated with the government or should be considered spontaneous. Nevertheless, a series of leaked documents collected by Prof. Xiao Qing and his staff at the Berkeley School of Information gives an idea of the organization and the dynamics behind the fifty cents army. For example, in June 2015 a document titled "The Notice of Recommendation of Core Internet Commentators and *ziganwu*"[70] was officially issued by the Sichuan Province education office.[71] This document was addressed to teachers and students and suggested that each public college should employ 50 web commentators from their student body. At the time, there were estimated 3450 commenters representing 81 provincial colleges. Furthermore, the document included a list of recommendations and methods to be followed. The most important recommendations were:

– Be consistent in promoting the awareness of laws and constitution of the CCP as well as the path of the socialism with Chinese characteristics;

– Use convincing political language, demonstrate proper writing abilities and be professional. Aim for high academic and scholastic performance;

---

to the system using a terminal program. This system is still popular in China and had its heaviest usage at the beginning of the 2000s.

67 LEI Ya-Wen, "The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens", Political Communication, 28/3 (2011), 291–322.

68 MACKINNON Rebecca, Consent of the Networked. The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom, New York 2013.

69 WONG Patrick, "Local Chinese Authorities Use Internet Slang 'Ziganwu' in Their Propaganda Recruitment", Global Voices, 15. 6. 2015, https://globalvoices.org/2015/06/15/local-chinese-authorities-use-internet-slang-ziganwu-in-their-propaganda-recruitment/ (accessed on 23. 1. 2017).

70 The expression Ziganwu refers to self-motivated Internet commenters.

71 See note 67, LEI Ya-Wen.

– Have a collaborative and good personal character, avoid taking economic advantage of the commentator role by gaining profit for oneself or other organizations;

– Be familiar with the traits of internet communication. Conduct interviews and offer advice and suggestions relating to online public sentiment.

The methods detailed in the document were as follows:

– Guide public opinion and sentiment by writing commentary and conducting interviews;

– Be active on Sina Weibo, We Chat and other platforms;

– Assist the provincial education office in utilizing practical measures of administration, and techniques to promote opinion columns.

It is not possible to conclude whether the fifty cents army was successful. Some Chinese commentators have noted that there are commercial enterprises contracted for specific commenting functions.[72] However, web users have easily spotted this trend because posts for pay have become repetitive and mechanical. Ironically, this trend was criticized by pro-government users stating that paid supportive comments were useless and a waste of money.[73] Furthermore, empirical research has confirmed important limits of the fifty cents army; namely, due to a lack of motivation and the persistence of old propaganda logic, this strategy has been ineffective and sometimes counterproductive.[74]

Both disturbing activities and the association with Red Guards could be linked to the third media strategy presented in this article and proclaimed by Xi Jinping in his August 19 speech on ideology in 2013, which according to the *Global Times,* referred to "public opinion struggle" *(yulun douzheng).*[75] The public opinion struggle strategy aims to increase the level of cacophony on the Chinese blogosphere by increasing the level of cacophony in the Chinese micro blogosphere, thus disturbing the circulation of thoughts against the CCP. Under these circumstances the role of the fifty cents army reminds one of the past role of the Red Guards. In both cases the main goal was to increase the reputation of the CCP by enhancing the official ideology.

The "public opinion struggle" strategy was also analyzed by the Xinhua News Agency chief Li Congjun who confirmed how "the Party must be [confident] and courageous in its positive propaganda, carrying out the

---

72 HAN Rongbin, "Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China's 'Voluntary fifty-cent army'", The China Quarterly, 224 (2015), 1006–1025.

73 LINK Perry, "Censoring the News Before it Happens", NYR Blog, 8. 11. 2012, www.nybooks. com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jul/10/censoring-news-before-happens-china/ (accessed on 23. 1. 2017).

74 See note 70.

75 See QIAN Gang, "Parsing the 'Public opinion struggle'", China Media Project, 26. 9. 2013, http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/09/24/34085/ (accessed on 23. 1. 2017; nicht mehr erreichbar).

public opinion struggle with a clear banner". More importantly, Li pointed out that new media have to be considered "the priority battlefield in the struggle" arguing that "they [new media platforms] have already become the chief battleground in the public opinion struggle, and their importance and status in the overall news and propaganda framework is ever then obvious".[76]

Conclusions

This article has presented three strategies implemented by the Chinese government in order to limit, control and interrupt the circulation of rumors online. The three different strategies are linked to three different media policies in order to show that the online management is not limited to government directives but also involves enterprises, such as the real name registration system or the Sina Weibo "credit system". The creation of the fifty cents army showed how the Chinese government was able to involve public users and promote a system aimed at monitoring and influencing the public debate in which state agencies, private companies and users all play active roles.

The combination of these three strategies confirmed once again the adaptability and the flexibility of the Chinese government in the manage-ment of online discourse over time. It remains to be seen if these changes will affect the credibility of the government itself. With respect to this concern, it is possible to find some contradictions in the implementation of the three different strategies. For instance, the implementation of the real name registration system could affect the effectiveness of the activities of the fifty cents army, as it generally operates anonymously. Another prob-lem is represented by the diverging goals of internet companies needing to accomodate both internet users with higher education asking for more online privacy and transparency and the Chinese government still worried about having its position compromised or threatened. Moreover, as this paper shows, negotiations are not limited to the three different layers of government, private sectors and users but they are also quite present in-side the three different layers. Lastly, another consideration is that these strategies are not alternative and have been implemented differently and during different periods at central, provincial and local levels.

The processes analyzed in this article are in a constant flux and involve continual negotiations between several actors. From a methodological perspective, it has been argued that topics such as the roles of internet

---

76 See note 9, QIAN Gang.

industries, design and commentators need to be analyzed with more attention in order to explore the articulated development of the Chinese internet management. Following Balbi, Wu and Chen's approach, this article has sought to provide an analysis on the history of the internet in China through a long term perspective, because the "contemporary media landscape and especially the reasons behind choices and strategies are deeply rooted in the past culture, ideas and mentalities".[77] In more general terms, this article aims to provide an analysis of the Chinese experience in terms of control and should not be considered an isolated case. Snowden's revelations on NSA and PRISM programs showed that forms of control have been consistently applied also in western democratic countries. If, on the one hand, as Creemers stated these leaks have to be considered "the gift that keeps on giving for China",[78] on the other hand, China represents an interesting case in which control and domestic economic success coexist. It is safe to argue that this combination might also be appealing outside China's borders.

Gianluigi Negro
is a Sino Swiss Science and Technology Visiting Scholar at the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University, Post-Doctoral Researcher Fellow and Assistant Editor at the China Media Observatory (CMO) at Università della Svizzera italiana (USI). He is author of *The Internet in China* (Palgrave, 2017) and member of the Global Internet Governance Academic Network (Giga-Net).

---

77 BALBI Gabriele, CHEN Changfeng, WU Jing, "Plea for a (New) Chinese Media History", Interactions. Studies in Communication & Culture, 7/3 (2016), 239–246.

78 Rogier Creemers interview, DENYER Simon, "China's Scary Lesson to the World: Censoring the Internet Works", The Washington Post, 23. 5. 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-works/2016/05/23/413afe78-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html?utm_term=.f45faa15a4a9 (accessed on 31. 1. 2017).