Will the real Weibo please stand up? Chinese online contention and actor-network theory

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Will the real Weibo please stand up? Chinese online contention and actor-network theory

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Social media platforms have become key participants in Chinese political contention. Global media eagerly report on cases involving social media, often celebrating them as signs of political change. This article analyzes the involvement of Sina Weibo in two instances of political contention: one concerns the Huili picture scandal of June 2011, and the other a controversy around the popular rally racer and novelist Han Han that started in December 2011. Drawing inspiration from actor-network theory (ANT), we show how Sina Weibo's particular technological features, the related user cultures, and the platform's systematic self-censorship practices, in addition to the occasional government interventions, mutually articulate each other. By tracing how technological features and emerging practices become entangled, we gain insight into how new publics are constituted and how symbolic reconfigurations unfold.

Keywords: Internet; China; political contention; actor-network theory; Weibo

Introduction

In June 2011, the local government of Huili, in Sichuan province, posted a picture on its website featuring three officials inspecting a newly-finished road. Strangely, the officials seemed to float several inches above the road (for the images discussed in this article, see: http://www.jeroendekloet.nl/images-cjoc/).[1] The badly photoshopped image immediately drew online attention and became a viral hit. While the county's PR department quickly withdrew the picture and issued an apology, the genie was out of the bottle. The picture was not only widely circulated on the popular microblogging service Sina Weibo, but it was also immediately parodied, showing the officials on the moon, surrounded by dinosaurs, on the statue of Jesus Christ in Rio de Janeiro, with Guo Meimei, and joined by the former North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Il. These parodies were subsequently further circulated through blogs and press reports.

Through an exploration of the Huili picture scandal, as well as of a controversy around the popular rally racer and novelist Han Han, this article examines how Sina Weibo is involved in political contention. The two cases are typical examples of contemporary Chinese online controversies, which often start small, but then quickly go viral – so-called *wangluo shijian*, or Internet mass incidents (Yang, 2012, p. 2; see also Qiu & Chan, 2011). In this way, Chinese social platforms time and again become entangled in processes of social and political contention. Global media eagerly report on such cases, often celebrating them as signs of political change. Indeed, the

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popularity of Weibo is staggering. In the two and a half years of its existence, it has drawn more than 300 million registered users, or about one-third of all Chinese Internet users. In terms of the total numbers of users, it is rapidly approaching Twitter, the leading global microblogging platform.

The involvement of Sina Weibo in political contention takes its place within the context of a longer history of activists employing new media technologies. Initially, in the late 1990s, when the Internet became available for popular use in China, Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) were especially important (Damm, 2007; Giese, 2004). In subsequent years, blogs and online videos also became essential. In contrast to the student demonstrations in the 1980s, most online protest, and Chinese activism more generally, is non-disruptive and revolves around modest goals, especially pertaining to the defense of personal rights and interests and the expression of new identities (Esarey & Qiang, 2011; Ho & Edmonds, 2008; Lui, 2011; Sima, 2011; Wallis, 2011; Yang, 2009).

While there are a number of excellent studies available on these non-disruptive forms of (online) protest, little research has been conducted on how specific social media technologies are involved in political and social controversies. Much of the current research on Chinese online contention appears to consider social media as neutral "platforms" or "tools" that can be appropriated and shaped by particular social actors. Drawing inspiration from actor-network theory, this article rather considers social media as "participants" in contentious politics. More specifically, it examines how Sina Weibo's particular technological features, its user cultures and self-censorship practices, as well as the occasional government interventions, mutually articulate each other. In doing so, the analysis not only moves away from the "determined technology" perspective, in which technology is read as the necessary outcome or reflection of social processes, but also from its inversion, "technological determinism," in which technology is seen as directly shaping social and political action (Williams, 2003, pp. 129–138).

We will develop our argument in critical dialogue with the current research on Chinese contentious politics, which will be discussed in the next section. While this research does not consider how particular social technologies are involved in contention, it does provide important insights into the complex economic, political, cultural, and technological relations through which Chinese online contention is articulated.

Commercialization, governance, censorship, and humor

First, Susan Shirk (2011) points out that online contention should be understood against the backdrop of the commercialization of the Chinese mass media (see also Fung, 2008; Zhao, 2008), which began in the 1990s. Today, most media institutions finance themselves through advertising revenues, they are profit-oriented, and their shares are publicly traded on the stock market. This is not to say that these institutions are fully privatized; the share of non-state investments in newspapers, radio, and television stations cannot exceed 49%.

China's media landscape – a nexus of global capital, local media companies, and the Chinese state (Fung, 2008) – constitutes the context in which the commercial development of the Chinese Internet takes shape. In this environment, the different mass media and the many online platforms are engaged in fierce competition with each other over audiences and advertising revenue. Shirk argues that this competition

provides a strong motivation for both on- and offline news outlets to deliver the latest breaking news (Shirk, 2011). In turn, Guobin Yang makes clear that this competition also affects online protest by providing a stimulant for contentious activity because such activity increases web traffic. According to Yang (2009, p. 211), "Major Web sites therefore welcome and embrace controversial media events and encourage their users to participate".

Second, beyond an interest in economic development, the state embraces the Internet because it facilitates the governing process. Following this line of argument, Gang and Bandurski (2011, p. 39) maintain that the Chinese government increasingly considers online communication to be the "voice of the public". The Internet allows Chinese politicians to read citizens' views in raw, unfiltered form, allowing officials to identify and fix problems before they provoke popular unrest (Shirk, 2011). As Perry and Goldman (2007, p. 1) point out, in China, with its "thousands of counties and hundreds of thousands of villages", in particular, "the challenge of curbing malfeasance among lower-level officials poses serious difficulties". To meet this challenge, the Chinese state has developed and stimulated a number of institutions and practices, including "NGO pressure", "popular protests", and "the media" (pp. 1–2). Hence, from this perspective, online contention should not simply be understood as standing in opposition to the Chinese state, but also as an integral part of its governing strategies.

Third, in the light of these considerations, it is clear that Internet censorship is far from a straightforward practice. The censoring of foreign websites, which has received a lot of attention in the international press, is, in fact, the least complex element; tens of thousands of websites hosted overseas are blocked at the level of the nine national gateways that connect the Chinese Internet to the Internet at large (Qiang, 2011, p. 207). The censoring of websites hosted in China itself is a much more intricate practice that requires constant negotiation and modification. Haiqing Yu suggests that part of this difficulty stems from how the censorship system is organized across different ministries, which each have different interests and responsibilities. As a result of these overlapping responsibilities, and the complexity of information networks, online censorship is "inconsistent and unpredictable" (Yu, 2009, p. 115).

More fundamentally, however, Chinese online censorship mostly revolves around self-censorship. Yang (2009, p. 222) calls this a soft-control approach that works through "self-discipline, indirect guidance, efficient management, positive cues, and rule by law" (see also Cunningham & Wasserstrom, 2012). In this system, citizens are asked to voluntarily report on violations. More importantly, the Internet companies themselves are held responsible for the content and behavior of the users on their sites. For this purpose, the News Office of the State Council has created lists of keywords for filtering, which are handed to Internet companies on a regular basis (Yang, 2009, p. 52). To make sure that they comply with government regulations, major Internet companies hire full-time editors to manage content. MacKinnon (2011, p. 3), co-founder of Global Voices Online, has estimated that Sina Weibo employs approximately 1,000 such editors to monitor and censor users.

The final point of interest for this inquiry concerns how this institutional, commercial, and cultural configuration shapes activism. Like in other authoritarian contexts, online activism is characterized by the extensive use of humor. In fact, parody, according to Yang (2009, p. 77), "has never enjoyed such a renaissance as in Chinese cyberspace today". Also prevalent is the use of coded language. To illustrate

this, Qiang (2011, p. 210) gives the example of the widely-used wordplay on the official euphemism for censorship, which is carried out under the slogan "constructing a harmonious society". "The word 'to harmonize' in Chinese (*hexie*)," he explains, "is a homonym of the word for 'river crab.' In folk language, crab also refers to bullies who exercise power violently". Consequently, the image of the crab has become "a new satirical, politically-charged icon". Correspondingly, "photos of a malicious crab travel through the blogosphere as a silent protest" (ibid.). More generally, online protest, like other contemporary forms of contentious politics, should above all be characterized as non-confrontational and playful. As Damm (2007, p. 290) has argued, "The Chinese Internet is more a playground for leisure, socializing, and commerce than a hotbed of political activism".

These are all highly valuable insights on which this investigation seeks to build. Yet, at the same time, it is also clear that these studies tend to focus on particular "social" actors and their specific interests; they eloquently show how different "human" actors use new technologies to achieve certain ends. This, for us, begs the question: what does technology do? To address this question, we have drawn inspiration from actor-network theory (ANT).

ANT

As Bruno Latour (2005) makes clear, instead of focusing the analysis on discrete actors with particular interests and intentions, it is more productive to trace how action is articulated through associations between human and nonhuman actors. Entangled in these associations, actors are far from stable, but are rather constantly assembled and reassembled. Through these associations, material entities, such as keys, viruses, laboratories, and cars, become actors. In the words of one of ANT's key proponents, John Law:

> Actor network theory is a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities, and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located. It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations. Its studies explore and characterize the practices and webs that carry them. (2009, p. 141)

Hence, ANT should not be considered as a single coherent approach; instead, "it is a diaspora that overlaps with other intellectual traditions" (Law, 2009, p. 142).

In the present inquiry, we especially draw advice from Latour's 2005 *Reassembling the Social*, which distinguishes ANT, the "sociology of associations", from the dominant approach to the social: the "sociology of the social". According to Latour, criticizing the sociology of the social, "There is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, *but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations*" (Latour, 2005, p. 108 italics his).

First, he claims that there are no fixed groups. There are only group formations, as groups are constantly made and remade. This conceptualization of groups is more helpful, we argue, than invoking constructs like "online activists", as though they comprise a stable and fixed group. Latour (2005, p. 31) stresses that to delineate a group, "you have to have spokespersons which 'speak for' the group existence". He adds: "Groups are not silent things, but rather the provisional product of a constant uproar made by the millions of contradictory voices about what is a group and who pertains to what."

Second, it is important to distance oneself from the idea that action takes place as a result of a hidden social drive or of the deliberate intentions of particular actors. Instead, Latour maintains, action is overtaken; it is "is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated" (2005, p. 46). From this perspective, there is no certainty about what action is; it "should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled" (p. 44).

Third, as we already discussed, objects have agency, too. This is not to say that they determine or cause action. Rather, they should be understood as "participants" in actions, which "might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (p. 72). Latour emphasizes that

> ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things 'instead' of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored (ibid.).

Identifying these participants, Latour distinguishes between "intermediaries," which transport "meaning or force without transformation," and "mediators," which "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (p. 39).

Finally, exploring objects as mediators implies that they should not be considered as "matters of fact", but as "matters of concern". "While highly uncertain and loudly disputed, these real, objective, atypical, and, above all, interesting agencies are taken not exactly as objects, but rather as gatherings" (Latour, 2005, p. 114). The road in the Huili case is precisely such a matter of concern. It is no longer simply an object, but a gathering of manipulated photos, weibos and Weibo users, local officials, PR officers, newspaper articles, blogs, and so on.

Method

The two cases that we selected are neither special nor extraordinary, and this is exactly the reason why we have selected them. Through the exploration of these typical examples of online controversies, we hope to demonstrate that the methodological insights derived from ANT can be use across the board. Our ANT-inspired case studies unveil the technical, cultural, and political associations involved in most episodes of online contention in China today.

The Huili case is full of the humor and parody that is characteristic of Chinese digital culture. It resembles earlier cases, such as Little Fatty in 2003, when the picture of an obese young Chinese boy was photoshopped into many different settings, creating an immensely popular Internet meme within days (Voci, 2010; Wallis, 2011; Yang, 2009). Another example is the tiger case in 2007, when a farmer in Shaanxi province, Zhou Zhenglong, claimed to have seen the rare South China tiger. The farmer provided a photograph as proof, which was subsequently promoted by the Shaanxi forest department. Soon, however, the picture proved to be photoshopped. The subsequent trial of the farmer met with severe criticism online; some claimed that the farmer was used as a scapegoat to protect local authorities ("The South," 2007; Yang, 2009). The Huili picture case fits into this tradition of forged images and their subsequent humorous appropriation.

The Han Han case, in turn, can be considered to exemplify the commercialized celebrity culture that has proliferated on- and offline over the past decade in China

(Edwards & Jeffreys, 2010). The case started as a political discussion over three essays on revolution, democracy, and freedom that were published by Han Han in December 2011. However, the conversation quickly morphed into a scandal over authorship and fakery. The case can be seen as the latest episode in a history of political essays that have managed to stay within the boundaries of the permissible, written by bloggers like Wang Xiaofeng and Michael Anti (MacKinnon, 2008). Furthermore, the subsequent scandal over forgery fits into a tradition of quickly-spreading scandals, such as the sex pictures of Edison Chen that dominated the headlines in 2008 (Chow & de Kloet, 2013).

In our exploration of the two controversies, we focused on the dominant textual and visual accounts taking shape on Sina Weibo. As these accounts circulated the widest on this platform and beyond, they allow us to trace how Weibo's technological features, user culture, and censorship practices mutually articulate each other and become intertwined with activities on other media platforms and with occasional government interventions. This exploration will show that a straightforward textual analysis, as practiced in most research on online contention, is not sufficient to understand how social platforms participate in contemporary political and social controversies. It will illustrate how arguments, jokes, and opinions expressed through text become entangled with visual expressions, as well as how these expressions simultaneously involve particular technological features, user cultures, and censorship practices.

To identify the dominant textual and visual accounts, we have used natively digital selection principles that rely on the selection mechanisms introduced by the examined platform itself (Poell & Borra, 2012; Rogers, 2009). Through these principles, such as the "retweet" on Twitter and, in the case of Weibo, the "re-post", users indicate and circulate what they find to be interesting content. This approach "builds on the idea that in social media, the selection of relevant content does not take place before publication, as in the mainstream press, but after publication by users themselves" (Poell & Borra, 2012, p. 700). Following this approach, we selected the top 100 most reposted weibos for the Han Han case, and the top 50 weibos for the Huili case, which generated less traffic. The collection of the most reposted weibos, as well as of the attached pictures, was performed manually, as Sina Weibo is very protective of its data. Weibos cannot be searched through the general search engines, e.g. Baidu and Google. Sina Weibo's application programming interfaces (APIs) are also mostly blocked. Thus, we relied on the platform's native search engine, its own selection of relevant weibos, so-called "hot weibos", and we scanned the pages of highly active participants. Through the combination of these methods, a comprehensive list of the top weibos could be consolidated. Most of these weibos were reposted or commented on at least 1,000 times.

Second, the online reception of the most reposted weibos was explored in order to trace how they circulated on the platform and beyond. For this purpose, the 50 most reposted comments of the top five posts of each case were selected. These top comments provide insight into how the weibos were received on the platform itself and how they trigger, as will be discussed, the articulation of publics. In addition, the broader reception of the Weibo communication on the two controversies has been examined by collecting and analyzing the top 50 press reports and blog posts that mention Weibo in relation to each of the two controversies. These articles and blogs have been manually selected by querying the News Search and Blog Search of Baidu.

com for "weibo" and the key terms of each controversy: "Huili picture" (huili tupian), "Han Han" (hanhan), "revolution" (geming), "democracy" (minzhu), "freedom" (ziyou), and "Fang Zhouzi". The analysis of the selected press reports and blog posts allows us to understand how Sina Weibo is tied to the larger Chinese online media landscape.

The analysis of the most widely-circulated weibos, as well as of the broader media ecology in which they were received, is embedded within an examination of Weibo's technological architecture and its user culture. Like Twitter, Weibo is characterized by three components: the "@user" syntax to refer to other users, hashtags to topically mark weibos, and a 140-character message limit; however, because of the nature of the Chinese language, this character limit allows for much longer texts. A distinct difference from Twitter is that Weibo users are not only allowed to include URLs in their messages, but they can also attach images, music, and video files to their posts. Furthermore, comments to a post can be displayed right below the post itself.

Drawing from Latour's work on actor-network theory, the following analysis explores how Weibo's technological features, user cultures, and censorship practices "participate" in the textual and visual articulation of the two contentious episodes. The analysis of the two episodes is by no means exhaustive, but rather exploratory. The objective is *not* to systematically reconstruct how the two controversies unfolded. Instead, we aim to illustrate and focus the attention on how, in contemporary episodes of Chinese online contention, social practices, cultural expression, and censorship become fundamentally entangled with the technology of social media.

This objective informs the organization of the research into the following parts. We discuss how Weibo's specific technologies and practices become involved in, first, what we term "acts of symbolic reconfiguration", and second, in the articulation of publics.

Symbolic reconfigurations

In each of our case studies, we observed how Weibo quickly became a space of symbolic reconfiguration. This term refers here to the processes in which the original meaning of an event or object is altered by drawing new symbolic associations in both text and images. Once the picture of the three government officials from Huili floating above the new road started to circulate on Weibo, a torrent of creative visual manipulation and parody unfolded. Users not only mocked the three officials, but they drew connections between the picture and various contentious issues.

In our other case, three essays posted online at the end of 2011 by China's most prolific blogger today, Han Han, opened up a similar opportunity for critical exchange. In the three posts, Han Han expressed his views on revolution, democracy, and freedom (Martinsen, 2012). Until that moment, many had heralded Han Han as a creative critic of authority who knows how to play the game with his censors. The three blog entries, however, prompted large numbers of Weibo users to react in surprise to what they considered to be a conservative stance. In the explosion of weibos and comments that followed, Han Han became an icon through which current critical issues were connected and questioned.

These episodes of symbolic reconfiguration are by no means atypical. Visual trickery, symbolic manipulation, parody, humor, and intense interaction have, as discussed above, become key practices in China's online contentious repertoire (Qiang, 2011; Yang, 2009). Here, the challenge is to unravel how Weibo's particular

technological architecture and user cultures were involved in these practices, as well as to trace how Weibo was entangled in a larger political and cultural assemblage in which critical issues are (re-) formulated, questioned, and continuously interconnected.

Funny pictures and allegations

Immediately after the Huili picture was posted online, Weibo users responded and posted their own versions of the picture,[2] many with commentary:

> Share the pictures here; the Huili County leadership cordially greets the people on Mars and brings them rice and quilts.
> Go to see Huili County with its magical road and the magnetic levitation leadership. Only 830 Yuan per person!

The manipulated pictures themselves resonate the global memes of mashed-up images of American presidents, rock stars, and Hollywood movies, images that are accessible to Chinese Internet users through services such as Google Image and that, as shown earlier, also have a history in China. They shuttle the Chinese county representatives out of their context, to be inserted into a global image culture. Each image produces its own significations and associations. Is the leadership so ancient that they are part of a prehistoric age of dinosaurs? Are they like political dinosaurs? Is this the political regime that so eagerly takes pride in its space missions? Why not use their floating capacities for a tourist promotion?

Weibo prompts the creation and circulation of such mash-ups not only because its architecture allows pictures to be attached to messages, but also because of the instant gratification of reading comments of other users who have seen the picture. In these instances, Weibo's comment culture could be observed at its most frivolous, with comments like "hahahahaha", "Damn funny! The leaders are too lazy" and "haha, they are ghosts and shadowless".

In the Han Han case, graphics-editing software also factors in as a crucial actor. While Weibo allows more text in the Chinese language than does Twitter in the English language, 140 characters is still not enough to post an essay. To work around this limitation, many users install a browser add-on or visit a website which generates an image based on the user's input. Subsequently, they attach the image to their weibo.[3] The picture, which contains the article or essay, is called a long weibo. Thus, the limitations set by Weibo's architecture are circumvented by creatively exploiting this very architecture.

Quickly after the Han Han blog posts became a contentious issue on Weibo, the issue mutated from one related to his, according to many readers, disappointing and conservative views on revolution, democracy, and freedom, to the question of authorship. A well known Internet user, Maitian, argued that Han Han's blogs were not, or at least not entirely, written by himself, but by a "team". A commercial logic was suspected behind this theory, as it would allow Han Han to be so enormously productive in different fields. After these initial allegations, Fang Zhouzi, an activist against plagiarism and a popular science writer, further fuelled an Internet campaign about the authorship of Han's overall publications. The pro-Fang Zhouzi camp accused the pro-Han Han side of being part of a complex network involving Han Han, his father, his publisher, Sina Weibo, the Southern media group, and Shanghai censors (Martinsen, 2012).

The conflict between Han Han and his opponents resulted in numerous jokes, cartoons, and the like. Joel Martinsen, the managing editor of Danwei.org, a website that publishes translations from the Chinese print media and online forums and blogs, maintains:

> As in the best flame wars, Han Han PK Fang Zhouzi has been a comedy goldmine. Quick wit, outrageous accusations, dodgy amateur textual analysis, passionate debaters falling prey to the simplest of conversational gambits – if I was a conspiracy theorist, I'd wonder whether Sina had engineered the whole thing to keep people refreshing their microblog feeds over the long holiday. (Martinsen, 2012)

On the one hand, these observations and insinuations correspond with the more general claims by Susan Shirk (2011) and Guobin Yang (2009) about the relationship between activism and the commercialization of the media landscape. On the other hand, the intense interaction and close monitoring of the news by Weibo users clearly resonate with David Berry's (2011) observation of how the real-time web breeds what he calls "the riparian citizen" (p. 144), who continually watches the flow of data. According to Berry, new technical devices give users the ability to manage the new data-centric world. This suggests that Weibo is precisely such a vital element in Chinese contentious politics because its real-time character allows its users to monitor countless data streams. These streams run across multiple online platforms, but many converge on Weibo.

Meta-discourse

Positioned at the heart of a complex web of online associations, Weibo not only mediates contentious politics, but it is itself also mediated through other media. From blog posts and online news sources, we can discern the construction of a meta-discourse on Weibo; the platform is itself turned into a contentious object. The proliferation of such a meta-discourse, in which media continuously comment on other media, is a key characteristic of today's late-modern global media culture. Striking examples of such a meta-discourse could, for example, be observed during the so-called Arab spring, when the notion of the "Twitter" and/or "Facebook revolution" became an object of media attention (Christensen, 2011; Hofheinz, 2011).

In the Huili case, one article reads, "The netizens suggest Sichuan Huili to write the Photoshop event into its county's history" ("The netizens," 2011), whereas another article reads, "'Crisis' is everywhere: they were trapped by Weibo" ("'Crisis' is," 2011). Another article explains that people praise the local government for opening a Weibo account: "Fakeries emerge in the governmental websites; Sichuan Huili is praised when it takes the opportunity to mediate itself" ("Fakeries emerge," 2011).

In the Han Han case, one report entitled "Full story of Han-Fang dispute: From Weibo to court," ("Full story," 2012) identifies Weibo, like the court, as an actor in the controversy. Other reports ("Han's blog," 2012) explain how "Han's blog articles arouse large-scale online debates", and ask for "further discussion on Han-Fang dispute: What kind of online discussion do we need?" ("Further discussion," 2012). In the latter report, we can read how Weibo is compared with the traditional media:

> Traditional mainstream media should uphold "health, maturity, and rationality" as their value-added [...] However, the microblog, as an Internet discussion platform, is inherently crippled. Internet scholars propose that the microblog effectively provides thought-provoking clues and facts, but within the limit of 140 characters, it is impossible

to fully present evidence and make an argument. Microblog discussions [. . .] are more prone to be irrational, which is unfavourable for the cultivation of Internet users' critical spirit.

This meta-discourse effectively establishes Weibo as a crucial actor, which, for better or worse, mediates the controversy.

In the above-quoted report, Weibo is presented as an irrational platform by which people express their opinions in a heated way, and "traditional" media are considered to be the right tools to bring back rationality. The meta-discourse on the alleged importance of Weibo indicates how media mutually articulate each other as actors. For researchers trying to come to grips with how social media, such as Weibo, are involved in contentious politics, it is vital to recognize that this meta-discourse is part of the associations that need to be traced.

Simultaneously, while this discourse constitutes a highly-productive set of associations, one should be careful not take it at face value. As Alexandra Segerberg and Lance Bennett (2011) point out, critically reflecting on the notion of the "Twitter revolution", it is crucial to avoid abstracting media technologies from the complex contexts in which they are involved. In doing so, the risk is that these technologies become "fetishized and personified" (p. 199), which is precisely what happens in meta-media-discourse. Hence, instead of taking popular claims about "Weibo's age" at face value, it is important to examine how such claims contribute to Weibo's political and cultural resonance.

Scandals, scandals, scandals

We have already discussed how unexpected associations take shape in processes of symbolic reconfiguration articulated through Weibo. Of course, these processes not only resonate with global visual memes, but they also inspire connections drawn across the Chinese political landscape.

A good example of how this works can be observed in the Huili case. Arguably the most interesting mash-up from this case is the one in which the three officials are photoshopped into a picture alongside Guo Meimei, who was around the same time involved in a parallel scandal.[4] This scandal revolved around a 20-year-old girl, Guo Meimei, who claimed to be affiliated with the Red Cross Society. At the same time, the pictures she posted online showed off her extreme wealth. Soon after the discrepancy was noticed, Weibo users started to scavenge the Internet for further visual evidence of her wealth, causing the controversy to grow exponentially. They discovered her NetEase photo album, which showed how her lifestyle had, in two years, become extremely luxurious. In 2008, she rented a house, sold cars, and had a Chinese brand phone, and by 2011, she owned a villa as well as a Maserati sports car. In the end, Guo Meimei explained that she had lied and was not affiliated with the Red Cross (Fauna, 2011). On Weibo, however, people continued to question whether or not the Red Cross had made her flamboyant lifestyle possible, thus hinting at possible corruption within the state-level governmental organization.

More importantly, Weibo users drew connections to the Huili case through the mash-up of the two incriminating pictures. Mashing the Huili officials with Meimei in front of her Maserati amplifies the fraudulent and corrupt associations the two pictures evoke. The collected Weibo comments on the Huili case further intensified these associations; some stated, for example:

> #Huili three leaders# Guo MM said there was a lot of pressure.
> Don't forget Guo Meimei because of the Huili three brothers!

Tracing the Huili picture assemblage, we witness how a picture that was originally meant to represent a fact, the building of a new road, and signify the progress of a region, is transformed into a matter of concern, an opportunity for unexpected associations, and an agent of doubt and corruption. The picture became entangled in a web of associations in which Weibo, due to its user practices and architecture, became an important mediator.

Thus, shifting the focus from particular actors and interests to the associations between actors, it becomes clear that Weibo is much more than an intermediary that facilitates communication between human actors. Instead, its technology and user cultures become participants in the examined episodes. Here, we have explored how the practice of incessant commenting, as well as the manipulating and circulating of images, have turned the controversies into occasions for drawing unexpected connections across the political and cultural landscape. Further, as will be discussed in the next section, these practices also very much shape the articulation of publics.

The articulation of publics

Ganaele Langlois (2009, p. 417) and colleagues have argued that in studying the articulation of publics through social media platforms,

> the challenge is not simply to identify new communicational practices and their effects on the content of public discussion, but to understand how the encounter between technologies of communication and political processes creates new conditions for the formation of issues of common interest and their publics.

Thus, rather than speaking of a fixed, stable public, it makes much more sense to conceptualize the public as an emerging assemblage of actors, which can include not only various groups of social media users, but also corporations, technologies, state institutions, and courts of law. This led to our choice to write about the "articulation of publics", given that articulation refers to *the neither essential and fixed nor absolute* way in which things become linked. As Noortje Marres (2007) has pointed out, such a public is fundamentally heterogeneous. It comes into being through the process of defining the scope of an issue or problem of common concern, binding antagonistic actors together in an issue network.

Tracing the articulation of publics in our cases, it immediately becomes clear that they were articulated differently in each instance. In the Huili picture case, the government became a central actor. Within a day after Weibo users started poking fun at the Huili picture, the Sichuan Huili county administration (sichuansheng huilixian zhengfu) opened its own Weibo account. Through this act, it validated Weibo as a public platform. The county administration posted the original picture and stated, "Here are the original pictures taken at the inspection site. We thank our friends for your concern and criticism, we will draw a lesson from this and work harder and more prudently in the future".[5] In this unexpected association between users poking fun at the government, the platform itself, and government officials opening their own Weibo account, we can observe a public in the making. By acknowledging the platform, the county administration became part of this public and actively contributed to its constitution.

More generally, as the government forces Weibo to self-censor the communication on the platform, it politically validates Weibo. Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith (2012) found that no less than 16% out of a random sample of 1.3 million weibos had been deleted. Not surprisingly, they also discovered that messages containing politically sensitive terms were characterized by "anomalously higher rates of deletion". In turn, King, Pan, and Roberts (2012) have discovered in their analysis of millions of social media posts from nearly 1,400 different social media services all over China, that the Chinese censorship system is specifically "aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content". These authors also found that "posts with negative, even vitriolic, criticism of the state, its leaders, and its policies are not more likely to be censored".

In our case studies, we made similar observations. We noted that a lot of jokes and critique aimed at the government remained uncensored, yet posts that hinted at joined action were deleted. Moreover, we also observed more subtle censorship practices; the list of "hot weibos" in particular appeared to be a politically-charged object. Messages were removed from this list despite the fact that they were very "hot" in terms of number of comments. The only way to locate these "sensitive" weibos was by reviewing the Weibo pages of individual users, page by page.

Weibo communication is, however, not only held in check through practices of self-censorship, but occasionally also through direct government intervention. This happened, for example, during the Bo Xilai controversy in the spring of 2012, when the once-promising candidate for membership in the Politbureau was removed from his position as Chongqing Party leader after a scandal. At the height of this controversy, the authorities asked Sina Weibo and other social platforms to close down their comment function for three consecutive days to avoid the rapid spread of rumors (Gao, 2012). A similar intervention occurred a year earlier in February 2011, when Chinese-language websites called for a "Jasmine Revolution" in major Chinese cities. In reaction, the state severely curtailed Weibo activity: "Post forwarding and photo publishing were suspended, and searches for the word *jasmine* were blocked" (Canaves, 2011, p. 77).

In turn, in their comments on Weibo, the users, who often refer to themselves as "netizens", have positioned themselves as a distinct component of the public: one that will not be fooled by the authorities. The first weibo and the second most commented one in the Huili picture case read:

> Today, I visited my county's governmental website, on which the news headline is about the high standards of building township roads. [When I] saw the pictures, I spit out half a liter of blood! Even an amateur like me can recognize that these pictures are photoshopped. They even have the guts to put them on their homepage as a headline. Maybe, they think that no one would see their homepage. How fake our county PR pictures are.[6]

Others also express their amusement. BorisX claims, "There are no [photoshop] traces, admire!" In reaction, Iron Superman (tiejia chaoren) jokes in his weibo: "It is said that it would be better if the shadow effect were added. @ Kevin Xu." They comment on each other's Photoshop skills and praise themselves: "Netizens are so talented." They also question the authenticity of the "real" pictures posted by the government; one user writes, "The first one is not original, either, and it is so badly p-ed [photoshopped]". At times, the comments express appreciation for the

government's willingness to admit its mistake, but most users continue to poke fun with statements like "Please do not explain, do not stop our joy."

Perhaps the most striking element of the comments is their brusqueness. In blunt tones, they usually either confirm the message on which they comment or simply continue the fun. Weibo's comment culture, which in this sense corresponds with social media comment cultures worldwide, increases the sense of shared joy. It strengthens the articulation of an issue-specific public. The brevity of the comments is prompted by Weibo's technological architecture, inspiring an aesthetic of speed and abundance. The significance of these brief comments lies less in their content and more in their performativity; they turn political controversy into a celebration of wit.

This is also clear in the Han Han case. Here, the comments also mostly support previously-articulated positions. The commenting users merely approve or disapprove: "thumbs up", "I love Han Han", and alternatively, "Uncle Han, go to bed early". The cheerful messages posted in the comments, often with smileys, make the discussion more light-hearted, as do the aesthetics of Weibo, with its light blue interface and many pictures.

When examining the Weibo messages themselves, it becomes clear that there were also a number of differences in how publics were articulated in both cases. In the Han Han case, the Weibo messages were much longer and often contained links to news sites, including blogs. For example, Li Chengpeng only posted a very short line on Weibo: "Democracy means not to claim kinship. http://t.cn/SIFhi5." The link refers to a much longer blog post in which Li expresses his views on democracy. In that text, we read,

> Is 'one person, one vote' really most urgent for China? I think the question itself is a misunderstanding. I would like to see it in this way: 'One person, one vote' is certainly not the most urgent, but it is the most important.

By linking to other websites, a much broader discussion, in this example on the value of democracy, was opened up and extended. Conversely, pictures and comments circulating on Weibo also bled to other online platforms, as well as to the mainstream media. In this way, Weibo's hyperlinking practices extended the public and circulated content across the media landscape.

As the Han Han controversy played out, there were a few crucial shifts in how the public was articulated. At the start, Weibo users primarily reflected on the contents of Han Han's essays, while in the second stage, the discussion shifted towards that of authorship. Simultaneously, the involvement of the government also changed. In the beginning, and in collaboration with Sina Weibo, the government censored the more sensitive weibos, most of which argued or even urged for democratization or revolution in China. When the issue shifted, the Han Han communication triggered less state intervention. Thus, in the process, the public was reconfigured.

Conclusion

Our exploration has demonstrated how Weibo's specific features, such as its comment function, the ability to attach pictures and videos, and its user cultures and self-censorship practices, mutually shape each other. In this process, they become entangled with the activity on other media platforms and the occasional government interventions. It was through these associations that the two examined controversies

were articulated. By tracing how technological features and emerging practices become intertwined, we gain insight into how new publics are articulated and how symbolic reconfigurations unfold.

Compared to the current research on Chinese social media and contentious politics, we have argued for a more relational approach, which focuses the attention on how actors, both human and nonhuman, become entwined with each other. It is through these associations that actors are configured and reconfigured as actors. Moving beyond the identification of particular actors and interests, it becomes clear how in the course of contentious episodes, fundamentally heterogeneous publics emerge. In these processes, Weibo's particular technological features and user practices become crucial components of these larger configurations. As such, they participate in the rapid proliferation of not only mashed-up images and insinuations, but also broader political reflections. Simultaneously, both central and local state authorities, as well as a range of other media, position Weibo as a crucial political actor. Moreover, creative associations are drawn by tens of thousands of users: local leaders join a corrupt rich girl, grass-mud horses, and foreign dictators. Likewise, a popular rally racer and novelist, subsequently, is positioned as a defender of the status quo, reinterpreted as a fraud, and ultimately functions as a catalyst to discuss the current state of Chinese politics and the increasingly commercialized media culture.

Tracing the actor-networks of online contention unveils a wilderness that is not defined by the interests of any particular actor, but is mutually shaped by a wide range of actors, including a variety of technologies. What these temporary assemblages will produce is impossible to predict. Their speed and cultural vitality are potentially explosive and can generate political change. Yet it is also clear that these configurations can be easily thwarted when the government forces Weibo and other social platforms to disable key features, which is what happened in the Bo Xilai controversy and during the 2011 calls for a "Jasmine Revolution".

New assemblages will, however, continue to emerge as existing platforms tinker with their architecture and new platforms and user practices are developed. Chinese political contention has become highly visual, reflecting global social media practices that are thoroughly interactive and potentially explosive. Publics around particular issues can suddenly emerge, leading to a rapid proliferation and mutation of symbolic configurations, as well as propelling unexpected associations across China's political and cultural landscape.

The final question then becomes: what politics are rendered possible? This ANT-inspired approach suggests that, addressing this question, researchers should shift their focus from individual actors and interests to the constantly-shifting associations between actors, which include objects and technologies. This implies that the "real Weibo" will not stand up. Weibo is not one thing, but rather constitutes a techno-cultural assemblage which becomes entangled with a wide variety of other actors in the course of contentious episodes. Consequently, each analysis of the "meaning of Weibo" always has to start with a specific event or issue. Grand words like "participation", "democracy", and "freedom of expression" do not allow us to explore the many ways in which Weibo is involved in contentious politics.

The political impact of Weibo lies in the new configurations in which it becomes involved. Each assemblage holds the potential to disrupt the everyday, the stable, and the static. Each assemblage may turn what is considered a matter of fact into a matter of concern. How does one give these new matters of concern a place in the already

assembled domain of Chinese politics? But do we need to go back to that domain? As Latour (2005, p. 252) argues, "Is it not obvious, then, that only a skein of weak ties, of constructed, artificial, assignable, accountable, and surprising connections, is the only way to begin contemplating any kind of flight?" Following this line of thought (and flight), may it not be the case that a mashed-up picture of three leaders floating on the moon can be more disruptive than yet another plea for democracy? Or is that too scandalous a thought?

Notes

1. Tianya Forum. (2011, June 26). Huili officials checking a newly-built road [Picture]. Retrieved from http://www.weibo.com/1650297492/eCR9q9Nj2Zq. Archived at http://www.jeroendekloet.nl/images-cjoc/.
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5. http://www.weibo.com/2203793661/eCUjWSnyuzR.
6. http://e.weibo.com/1650297492/eCR9q9Nj2Zq.

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