

Preliminary Study on Chinese Government Social Media Presence and User Opinions – A Coastal Province as the Example

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ABSTRACT

Social media has been booming in China recent years. Chinese governments at all levels have involved in operations on social media platforms in various degrees. The study used one coastal province as example to conduct a preliminary study of Chinese governments' presence on the dominating Chinese social media platform Weibo (microblog). The level of activities of major government functional departments on Weibo was examined, as well as that of the Weibo accounts opened by government officials. A survey was conducted to collect Chinese Netters' opinions regarding government weibo status and issues. Insights were obtained for the Chinese local governments to improve their social media operations as well as involvement with the Chinese Netters.

INTRODUCTION

China is experiencing the explosive growth of new media applications since the beginning of this decade. New media, including microblog, WeChat, and mobile news clients, are developing rapidly in China. The Chinese microblogging platform is called "Weibo" in Chinese. Weibo was first launched in 2009 by Sina Corp, one of the top Internet portal companies in China and the largest microblogging provider in China. The new media platforms characterized by Weibo have been the new frontier of the Chinese Internet, especially in the expression of public opinions. Political participation on Weibo has become a new way of citizen participation, and an important channel for governments to understand public opinions. Eyeing this development, an increasing number of Chinese governmental organizations and government officials have opened Weibo accounts and are using them as the venue for information distribution to and interaction with Netizens.

An initial understanding of the social media presence of Chinese governments at the provincial, and local levels as typified by government Weibo accounts will help to assess the Chinese governments' adoption of social media, and the Chinese Netizens' interaction with the government on social media.

OVERVIEW OF THE COUNTRY AND SELECTION OF THE SAMPLE PROVINCE

According to the *First Half-Year of 2014 Sina Government Weibo Report* [1] issued by the Public Opinion Monitoring and Prediction Department of People Net (the network arm of the People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party), as of the end of 2013, Chinese governments' verified weibo accounts surpassed 240,000, among which 119,169 were set up on Sina Weibo.

The *First Half-Year of 2014 Weibo Report* presented the number of government weibo accounts broken down by the 31 provinces in Mainland China (including the four provincial-level municipalities such as Beijing

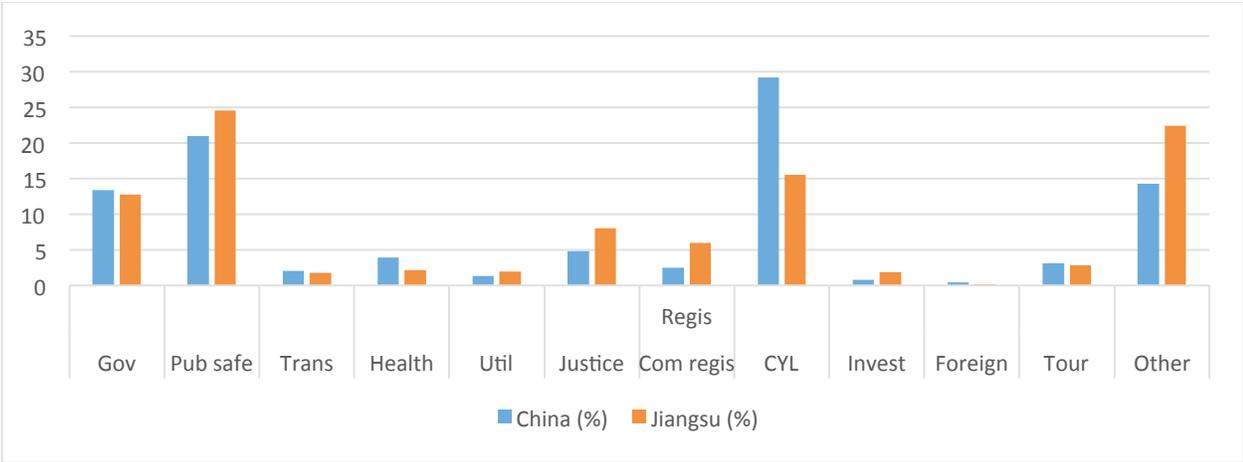
and Shanghai), in which Jiangsu province, the province in our study, stood out on top, with 6,800 government weibo accounts. Jiangsu, the province whose land covers most of the lower Changjiang (Yantze) River basin and encloses most of the vicinities of Shanghai municipality, has been one of the most developed Chinese provinces for centuries. It has always been on top-four provinces (among 31 provincial-level administration regions) for Internet penetration since 1997 (see, for example, [4]). We have chosen Jiangsu in this study, as a preliminary step in our study of China’s e-government social media operations and strategies. We hope that the study of Jiangsu province’s government social media presence and operations status will help to shed light on the understanding of the social media operations and trends for the whole country. We have also conducted an Internet user survey in Jiangsu province regarding the Netters’ use of government social media pages, in order to understand the Netter’s opinions of governments’ social media operations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JIANGSU GOVERNMENTS WEIBO ACCOUNTS

Government Weibo Accounts’ Distribution among Functional Departments

Governments set up weibo accounts to provide easy access to the public, and to become more connected with and responsive to citizens through online channels. Because of the different nature of government departments in the needs and the amount of operations regarding citizen interaction and citizen service, it is anticipated that different government departments would have different level of involvement and performance on social media. Figure 1 presents the proportion of weibo accounts of various government departments of local governments in Jiangsu province, and puts the departmental breakdown in the comparison of the breakdown of the same departments in the national average. The departments shown in the chart are: Government portal (Gov), Public Safety - police (Pub safe), Transportation (Trans), Health, Utility (Util), Justice, Company Registration (Com regis), Communist Youth League (CYL; it is a subordinate of the Communist Party, and the Party is commonly seen as part of governmental institution in China), Investment Admin (Invest), Foreign Trade Admin (Foreign), Tourism Admin (Tour), and Other. We further compared the distribution of government departments’ weibos in Jiangsu province with that of the country as a whole, in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF JIANGSU AND CHINA ON DEPARTMENTAL PERCENTAGE OF WEIBO ACCOUNTS



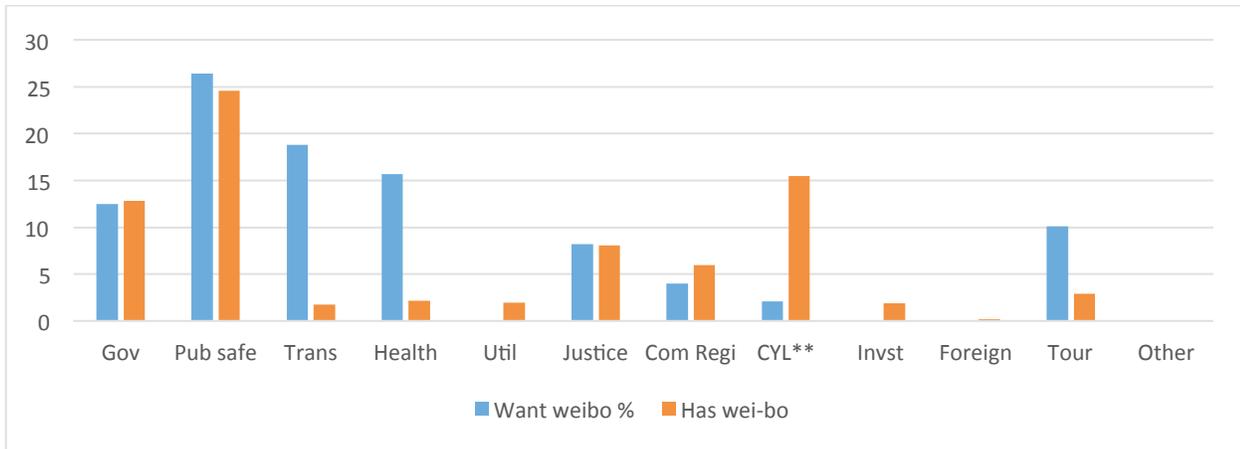
From Figure 1, we can see that the Jiangsu province government departments that are more active, comparing to the national average, in setting up weibo accounts were public safety, utilities, justice, company registration and commerce administration, and investment promotion. The higher percentage of weibo accounts in commercial/investment related departments reflects the fact that Jiangsu is a province with more

active commercial activities. It is promising that Jiangsu’s judicial systems had significantly higher percentage of weibo accounts than the national average, signaling that Jiangsu province government pays more attention to the operation of the judicial system, and to the connection and communication of the judicial system with the public and with attorneys in the province, a sign of the relatively higher development level of rule of law in this prosperous province.

JIANGSU NETTERS’ OPINIONS REGARDING AND INTERACTIONS WITH GOVERNMENT WEIBO

In order to find out the Jiangsu Netters’ opinions regarding governmental weibos in their province, we conducted a survey of Weibo users with a survey asking the users’ opinions regarding (1) the contents of interest in, degree of interest in, and degree of interaction with government weibo accounts; (2) the users’ opinions regarding government weibo accounts. The survey obtained 183 valid responses, from employees in businesses and non-profit organizations, as well as students, and freelancers in various professions. From the survey we found that Jiangsu 24.05% weibo users in Jiangsu province did not follow and never read government weibos; 45.9% weibo users followed or checked government weibo contents, but never interacted with them; only 30.05% of weibo users followed government weibos and often check updates, with frequent interactions. We also identified the types of government weibo contents that Netters were interested, and the government departments the users want to see opening weibo accounts the most. We combined the last piece of information – “what departments the Weibo users most want to see opening weibos” and the data of the percentage of government departments that had opened weibo accounts – a “supply and demand match” type of analysis, which is presented in Figure 2 below:

FIGURE 2: NETTERS’ NEEDS AND GOVERNMENT’S OFFERS RE DEPARTMENTAL WEIBO PRESENCE



From Figure 2, we have seen that there were departments whose social media presence relatively matches Netters’ needs and expectations, while there were departments not doing well. Those who did well are: government portal, public safety, justice, company registration and commercial administration. Those who need more efforts in setting up weibos and interacting with citizens are: transportation, health, and tourism, in which the gaps between the needs and the offerings are significant.

On the survey item asking Netters’ interaction with government weibos, nearly 78.7% of Netters responded negatively on “likelihood of interacting with government weibos”; only less 21.3% said they would comment on or retweet government weibos. Netters were largely apathetic in interacting with government weibos, which calls for serious attention of the governments at all levels.

On the trust of the operation of government weibo in terms of responsiveness to citizens' comments and requests, only about 1/5 (20.8%) had confidence that government weibo would definitely reply or give feedback, while 4.4% expected absolutely no reply. A large majority (3/4) held doubts that government weibo would respond. It is a major task for government weibos to build Netters' confidence in the government weibos' service orientation and ability.

Netters had intensive interaction with other Netters, with public intellectuals, with media, and with some companies' weibos. From those interaction, the Netters formed their expectation of various types of weibos. The Jiangsu Netters held that the government weibos' main roles were:

TABLE 1: NETTERS' EXPECTATION OF GOVERNMENT WEIBO ROLES/FUNCTIONS

Roles	Understand People's needs and thoughts	Disseminating gov news	Closing gaps between gov and citizens	Lower threshold for public participation
%Believe	53.12	49.31	45.57	38.54

The first three items were all surpassing or near 50%, reflecting high expectation and needs from the Netters for the government weibos to perform on those matters/issues. Further study should be done on measuring the attainment of government weibos on those high-demand items. The last one – “lowering threshold for public participation” could tell a story from two sides: on the one hand the Netters did not have high expectation of the government weibos to achieve that goal, which may be an issue of Netter/citizen education; on the other hand, it could be the result of dissatisfactory participation opportunity and availability/accessibility that drove lower the citizens' expectation. In either scenario, the government needs to improve its work to facilitate and encourage more citizen participations.

Lastly, the Netters expressed their opinions on the existing problems of governmental weibo operations:

TABLE 2: NETTERS' PERCEPTION OF PROBLEMS RELATED TO GOVT WEIBOS

Problem	Content boring	Lack of interaction	Infrequent update	Can't solve problem
%Believe	79.17%	66.67%	66.34%	62.70%

From Table 2, we can see that the top issue Netters perceived was the lack of attractiveness of the contents of the government weibo, which sent an alert to the government weibo strategists and operators: the government weibos are not there for cosmetic purpose; they must function, and they must deliver. Issue number four reinforced the conclusion: over 60% of Netters held that government weibos “can't solve problems I had”. Therefore, government weibos must break away from “just another window/showcase of the government”; they must deliver service and solutions and responses. Also item number two emphasized the repeated theme: interaction; the lack of which has been the lingering ailment of government weibos in several perspectives. The government weibo strategists and operators must strive for a significant improvement in interaction, so as to truly leverage the best features of weibo as a social media platform.

References available upon request from the first author.

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