Chapter 13
Social Media in China: A Double-Edged Sword

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ABSTRACT

Widespread use of social media in China is a double-edged sword: social media offers opportunities for the government to connect with society, gauge the opinion of citizens in the public domain, and allow citizens to voice their anger when necessary by blowing off steam online rather than in the streets (Magistad, 2012). However, social media also allows citizens to access information outside of China much more rapidly and efficiently and to link up and communicate with other citizens much more quickly. Social media allows users to share texts, photos, and files, making it much more difficult for the government to control information and to thwart organizing for political purposes. In some instances, the use of social media has forced the Chinese government to take actions that it otherwise would not have done or to reverse actions or policies already set in place. The goal of this chapter is to illustrate the double-edged sword that social media poses to government officials in China, particularly high-level party officials in Beijing.

INTRODUCTION

Zhang argues that since the 1978 market reforms, the communication landscape in China has changed dramatically, with the CCP wanting to manage this development in order “to stay ahead of the unwanted consequences of reform (Zhang, 2011).” Deng and Moore write extensively on how globalization presents to Chinese leaders a double-edged sword (Deng and Moore, 2004). On one hand, globalization fosters economic development, which has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and has supplanted communist ideology as the party’s source of legitimacy. On the other hand, globalization exposes China to economic reforms that put pressure on the government to increase the rights of its citizens; an expansion that, one day, could call for the right to elect their own leaders. Such changes, thus, directly challenge the existing political order. Furthermore, due to globalization, new technologies have become widespread. These technologies have provided

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the state with new tools for surveillance and control of its citizens. Likewise, technology has given millions of people who live in poverty access to vital information in real time. China is now home to 485 million Internet users. This explosion of Internet use has made it more difficult for the Chinese central government to employ old methods of censorship. Citizens are now able to participate to some degree in the policy formation process (“China Struggles to Tame Microblogging Masses,” 2011). Today in China, for instance, there are more than 350 million Weibo microbloggers (Magistad, 2012). Microblogging allows citizens to express dissatisfaction with local policy, while simultaneously sharing pictures and other evidence of a policy’s ill effects.

The goal of this chapter is to illustrate the double-edged sword that social media poses to government officials in China, particularly high level party officials in Beijing.

THE ARGUMENT

The argument in this chapter is that the wide spread use of social media in China is a double-edged sword: social media offers opportunities for the government to connect with society, gauge the opinion of citizens in the public domain, and allow citizens to voice their anger when necessary by blowing off steam online rather than in the streets (Magistad, 2012); however, social media also allows citizens to access information outside of China much more rapidly and efficiently and to communicate with other citizens much more quickly. Through social media, people share texts, photos, and files. The speed at which messages are posted after being sent, the ease of duplication of these messages, and the difficulty with censoring messages embedded in photos combine to make it much more difficult for the government to control information and to pre-empt organizing for political purposes.

On one edge of the sword, growth in technologies, particularly as it relates to social media, aids the government in its surveillance efforts. This growth provides opportunities for government officials to participate via these social media to interact with citizens and foster economic development via new social media economic market places.

Aside from controlling information on social media through the use of thousands of Internet censors, social media is also a useful surveillance tool of Chinese government leaders and policymakers to gauge public opinion, as there are virtually no other government mechanisms to do this. The use of social media by the government to connect to citizens allows local officials to monitor citizen attitudes and sentiments. Recently, this has become more important for local government officials. In an effort to allow citizens to blow off steam and help hold local government officials accountable, the central government tolerates some politically sensitive blogs and communications to take place (Qiang, 2011). The government tolerates the explosion of nationalist sentiment by citizens in response to rising tensions. In 1999, after wide-spread street protests in the face of the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Serbia, the government permitted online airing of grievances through a Bulletin Board Service (BBS) on People’s Daily Online website (Yang, 2008). More recently, in response to tensions between China and Japan over the disputed Diaoyudao/Senkaku Island, the government allowed citizens to express their outrage via social media in order to increase nationalist sentiment. The result, however, was that this was done at the
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