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Microblogging and Media Policy in China: Xinhua's Strategic Communication on the Belt and Road Initiative

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Citation

Nie, Y. (2019, October 15). *Microblogging and Media Policy in China: Xinhua's Strategic Communication on the Belt and Road Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79516>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2019-10-15

Summary

This research project asks: what is the relationship between social media messaging and media policy in China? Under the current media regulations made by the government, what role does social media play in Chinese external and internal communication, specifically in the case of China's official news agency Xinhua? My project intends to find the answer by studying the interplay between Weibo, Twitter, and the Chinese state-owned media outlet Xinhua News Agency, an active actor on both platforms.

Xinhua, under the supervision of the Chinese central government, is a major official news outlet in mainland China. However, its openness to free flows of information has not been keeping up with the country's fast economic growth after the opening-up policy in the 1980s. The acceleration of global communications by social media has given rise to a major transition in China's external communication strategies. To cultivate a national image, the Chinese government has embraced various digital-media-led communicative strategies, and has established, revised, and adjusted a series of media regulations. These encourage traditional mass media outlets, like Xinhua, to utilize social media platforms such as Weibo and Twitter under the central government's guidance, while also aiming to preserve their leading roles in both internal and external communication. This study explores the interplay between digital media and the government's policymaking under the current leadership. By tying the research concerns of China's political communication and the empirical case of Xinhua's digitalization to broader conceptual issues, the study provides a prism through which the intrinsic relations of the government's communicative strategies and media convergence can be seen.

To find out how a mass media outlet as Xinhua integrates digital platforms into its reporting within the overarching regulatory system, I collected and studied the legal and policy documents from the central government's websites and Xinhua's official website in the first phase of my research. I also conducted a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with media practitioners, scholars, and policymakers during my fieldwork. The comparison between these policy papers and the interviews highlights the relations between policymaking and media changes. This phase of the research is to disentangle the political context of Chinese media production towards domestic and international audiences.

Audiences often treat social media platforms as actual forums for a more responsive discourse. However, whether this perceived role as open forum is recognized and utilized by the other end remains to be seen, and what the impact is on the government's media policy, is worth evaluating in its own right. In the second phase of my research, through digital tools, I first carried out a broad analysis of the public discourse of the Belt and Road Initiative on Weibo and Twitter. Having conducted the analysis on the performances of active players, I then adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyse in particular Xinhua's performance through its accounts on Weibo and Twitter. This study shows that even though Xinhua has vigorously expanded on social media messaging and has a large number of Weibo and Twitter followers, the comments, reports, and retweets are still far from interactive.

As an important part of Chinese diplomacy, the BRI shows that the Chinese government is calling for a greater role in international relations on the one hand; on the other, its establishment has caused contentions from within and outside China. My research explores how Xinhua has taken on this diplomatic task through a case study of China's current diplomacy on the BRI. To examine the Chinese state media's handling of the case, I conduct a discourse analysis of how Xinhua promotes the BRI on its Weibo and Twitter accounts. This analysis examines whether Xinhua adopts different communicative strategies on Weibo and Twitter, how Xinhua conceptualizes news values on social media platforms, and whether social media messaging differs from Xinhua's traditional way of communication. The study shows that, despite recent efforts to use social media to provide quicker and more transparent coverage, there is still space to improve the system itself. On Weibo and Twitter, the news agency's editorial choices show that maintaining China's "face" is often contradictory with the country's efforts of showing its openness. Adopting a policy of merely maintaining a positive image to the outside world can mislead both domestic and international audiences. Xinhua's performance thus demonstrates the challenges that China faces in its internal and external communication endeavour in the transforming period led by digital media.

My research draws attention to the importance of the discourse of political communication under the impact of digital media. China, with its transitional mass media system of the reform period, is turning into a highly mediated society. This study aims to open up avenues of future research into the performance of other news organizations on digital media platforms. My project aims to expand our understanding of how ICTs influence China's official news agency, Xinhua, in terms of the government's communicative strategy, and aims to develop theories as well as research methods that contribute to contemporary Chinese media studies. Based on the results, this dissertation ends with implications of the ICTs' influences on the state media outlets, suggesting that at this stage, the technological innovation alone cannot be seen as a reliable incentive for social change as China continues its opening-up policy.