

PART II

NET-ACTIVISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD:
CASE STUDIES

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*Mapping the Communicative Infrastructure of
a Youth Environmental Organisation in China*

Introduction

Rapid economic growth has resulted in dramatic environmental degradation in China. In response to growing environmental concerns, the government has made efforts to develop policies, promulgate laws, and set up an institutional apparatus (Schwartz, 2004). However, governmental regulations have proven to be inadequate in addressing environmental challenges and are selectively enforced (Zhao, 2014): as a consequence, central government has started opening limited political space for public participation in environmental protection. This has led to the development of several Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS) in the mid-1990s (Wang, 2001), responsible for promoting environmental awareness, monitoring local government efforts, organising local sustainable development projects; as well as the proliferation of student environmental associations in Chinese Universities (Lu, 2003). Thanks to international and domestic pressure that have placed environmental protection at the top of the reform agenda and the influence of active ENGOS, environmental activism has been enjoying a dramatic increase (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). However, ENGOS have to deal with several legal and financial restraints, that limit the exploitation of strategies and resources. As a result, environmental activists have embraced the Internet, since it provides a relatively open forum with lower financial and social costs (Sullivan and Xie, 2009).

Literature Review

The proliferation of communication technologies has benefited environmental activism in China (Matsuzawa, 2012). The Internet has inspired and facilitated the creation of a new associational form, that is to say web-based environmental organisations, overcoming political constraints and the lack of financial resources. NGOs face a restrictive institutional and political environment in China, making it difficult for organisations to be officially recognised (Ho and Vermeer, 2006). The Internet has brought about extensive changes, as it provides ENGOs the opportunity to establish their presence and organise online; and therefore effectively increase their public visibility.

Moreover, the Internet has facilitated the activities of existing ENGOs: it becomes a powerful tool for spreading information and promoting discussions concerning environmental issues, consequently raising public awareness about China's environmental problems, and mobilising potential volunteers (Yang, 2005b). The Internet not only represents a platform for self-presentation and publicity, information sharing and debates, the coordination of online and offline campaigns, but it also plays a crucial role in strengthening the links with both the local and international public (Sima, 2011). Sullivan and Xie's (2009) results suggest that the level of connectivity within the environmental network is increasing, as they have identified a large and dense online network of groups involved in environmental activism.

Finally, the Internet has fostered new resources for citizens to engage in activism (Yang, 2009), introducing new dynamics into popular protest. The 2007 Xiamen protest is an illustrative example of how mobile phones can facilitate the coordination of protest events and citizen mobilization (Liu, 2014), allowing the spread of information, expressing discontent, triggering discussions, capturing and posting events online. Social media provide alternative sources of information and discussion threads, and contribute to mobilising social forces (JH Xua, 2014). Although social media platforms have been defined as apolitical spaces, as the most popular daily trends usually consist of entertainment, news and commercial information (Sullivan, 2012), and are subject to content regulation policies (King *et al.*, 2013), activists in China tend to attribute greater importance to social media to promote and foster public debate (Harp *et al.*, 2012).

Methods

The paper presents findings obtained from qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews (conducted in August 2015) with five staff members, focusing on the role of social media in environmental activism. In addition, data are drawn from the content analysis of 1810 posts retrieved from the group's social media accounts, up to August 2015: 1220 from the social networking service RenRen, 525 from the microblogging service Sina Weibo, 65 from the instant messaging service WeChat. The paper focuses on a student environmental organisation established in 1999 at Tianjin University, made up of 200 students. Its founders describe its establishment as a response to today's tough environmental situation. Its mission is to advocate a green lifestyle, raise awareness, encourage public participation in addressing environmental problems, and condemn acts of pollution. Its activities include energy, water-saving and recycling campaigns within the campus, field training programs, water pollution investigations and classes for school children. The green group has also developed exchanges with ENGOs that are committed to spreading green culture.

Analysis of the organisation's communicative infrastructure

Drawing from a communication ecological approach, the paper explores the communicative infrastructure of the youth organisation, analysing what communication technologies are adopted and how they are used in combination. According to my observation and interviews, the communication of the green group is articulated across different online platforms. Striking differences between these platforms, in terms of function, audience, content, and interaction have been observed.

Sina Weibo: an education and networking channel

Sina Weibo is a microblogging platform that also features social networking services: it allows users to post textual messages, upload videos and photos, and comment on each other's posts. Our youth organisation created its Weibo account in May 2011; as of August 2015, the number of followers is over 1470. The green group has embraced Weibo to reach a broader audience. First, Weibo enables the

spread of information and education of citizens concerning international and local environmental issues. For example, posts are focused on the effects of global warming on the polar regions; or report international news, such as the decision of the Ethiopian Government to burn illegal ivory products. Posts also report national news, like the recent release of a revised Air Pollution Prevention Law, and concerns about local issues. For instance, the group has shared the air pollution data released by Tianjin authorities about the explosions that have hit Tianjin in August 2015; and report cases of water pollution, along with information on how to denounce violations: it is recommended to call relevant authorities, and post recorded violations online. Second, Weibo enables the strengthening of existing connections with youth green organisations, by promoting mutual support and fostering solidarity. For instance, groups with common areas of interest mutually share noteworthy initiatives, such as green Summer Camps or research projects, and show enthusiasm for the establishment of new groups in partner universities. This clearly shows that our green group is part of a network of environmental youth organisations. Content mainly consists of original posts, and reposts of articles and messages. 42,3% of the examined posts contain URLs, linking to outside sources: news sites (as Xinhua News), Chinese environmental institutions websites (such as the Tianjin Environmental Protection Bureau) and international NGOs (like Greenpeace). Moreover, there are few outlinks to video-sharing platforms (YouKu and Sina Video), that point users to video materials, including TED talks and CCTV interviews.

Renren: a recruitment tool

RenRen is a social network that enables users to connect with each other, by posting status updates, uploading photos and videos, and blogging. Our youth organisation joined RenRen in May 2009. The page has been regularly updated, and has developed a following of 1726 likes, up to August 2015. Since its inception, the platform appears to be part of the group's volunteer recruitment approach, as posts invite young people to join the group, and take effective action to address environmental challenges. Messages are directly addressed to potential volunteers; like-minded people, who share common environmental concerns, and appeal to their desire to make their own contribution to the environment. Posts explicitly solicit a conversational response and

are aimed at establishing a connection with them. Recruitment messages often mention successful past activities, to show results the group has recently achieved, and some of the possible benefits that students could gain from volunteering. Renren appears to be the appropriate platform for seeking new recruits, since it is extremely popular with university students. As reported by the company, although RenRen has nationwide penetration with users across all demographics, the core audience consists of college students.

A RenRen account is also used to encourage the engagement of young people in the group's initiatives, including competitions, energy, water-saving and recycling activities to create a healthier campus. Information about how to get involved are detailed, and URLs in order to find further information are also included. Content mainly consist of textual statuses focusing on the group's activities: 28% of posts include pictures and less than 3% contain videos.

WeChat: a publicising platform

WeChat is a mobile instant messaging service, enabling users to generate multimedia messages, that also supports a social network (Moments) and location-based services to chat with WeChat users. Moreover, companies, celebrities, and media can create a public account, to promote their brands. The WeChat public account was created in August 2014 and the green group is investing resources in order to increase its number of subscribers. So far, it has mainly been used to reach Tianjin University students and volunteers, to publicise information about the organisation. Posts focus on the communication of its vision and aims, for example by inspiring students to practice green lifestyles; and provide information about relevant organisational updates, including meeting reports, the election of new members, or future aspirations, like the hope of establishing further connections with university green groups. Informational posts also feature successful initiatives, such as volunteers' investigative journeys, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of environmental problems in specific areas, and evaluating new approaches to managing them. Posts are formulated in the form of a diary, and combine textual and imagery narration to showcase volunteers' missions and enthusiasm. The accurate descriptions of activities highlight the educational aspects of the experiences.

However, the intention of the group is to introduce some changes in the management of WeChat account: content will include more environmental scientific articles. Indeed, the latest posts analyzed concern environmental issues, including Beijing air pollution, and US-China climate and energy cooperation.

Discussion

The study considers the role that social media affordances play in affecting and shaping the communicative infrastructure of the green group, in the context of the emerging new media ecology. An affordance perspective allows one to analyse communicative practices enabled by the relationship between an organisational context and the capability of a technology (Leonardi, 2011). Based on recent research concerning social media affordances (Halpern and Gibbs, 2012; Treem and Leonardi, 2012) and on previous analysis, the discussion focuses on two affordances associated with online platforms observed: connectivity, referring to the possibility of the group to establish and strengthen connections with its audiences, and mobilise them; and visibility, which offers the possibility of amplifying its cause and reaching a broader audience.

Firstly, social media provide different features facilitating interaction among users. On Weibo, mentions are used to address messages to specific green groups within its network of youth organisations, and to directly engage them in discussion. This form of 'addressivity', that is crucial for conversation to occur (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009), is often combined with the practice of reposting, which allows the forwarding of other users' content. Our green group creates its own posts version, by adding additional content when reposting a message, such as reactions to specific news, and solicitations to users to share their opinions; sustaining a high level of interactivity. However, public discussion does not take place frequently, although Weibo encourages debate through the threaded comment feature. Discussion mainly involves youth organisations, that are more active in leaving comments, in particular when they are mentioned in a post. Hyperlinking represents a central practice of the green group, and appears to increase collective solidarity and strengthen ties, as the outlinks may refer to sources of information about other associations' causes and activities.

On RenRen, commenting and social tagging features can be seen as mobilising structures (McCarthy, 1996), as they may encourage potential and actual volunteers to actively engage in the group. These interactional features are closely related: they may not only contribute to strengthening existing connections within the group, but may also involve more people in the organisation's RenRen community. Indeed, tags within comments enable volunteers to connect with one another, and include their friends, by encouraging them to join the community. These practices may also potentially increase support towards the green group and create opportunities for offline civic engagement, by motivating potential volunteers to become involved. These features are reinforced by statuses that stimulate more interactive exchanges among volunteers, and explicitly call potential volunteers to action. WeChat's public subscription account operates differently: it enables users to broadcast one message per day, and does not offer opportunities to customize profiles, providing a more basic communication approach and low interactivity. Subscribers do not receive push notifications, but have to access the group's account within the Subscription Accounts subfolder, to check new content updates. In addition, interaction with content is limited to liking and reposting functions. However, WeChat enables the green group to engage in direct communication with its audience, as content is delivered to subscribers on their mobile phones. The group manages to create engagement with its followers through quality and in-depth content, mainly self-published articles about organisational identity, history, activities and perspectives. The platform is perceived as a tool for receiving and sharing significant and timely information.

Secondly, social media platforms provide functionalities able to enhance the visibility of online content. On Weibo, our green group is interested in influencing public opinion in terms of environmental behaviour and positively impact on environmental causes, by increasing their awareness. The reposting practice represents a key mechanism, as it facilitates information dissemination on the platform. Communication through Weibo begins from an individual sharing with his follower groups and, after several layers of group sharing, the message propagates and may rapidly reach the masses (Zhang and Negro, 2013). On RenRen, the possibility to share content within multiple formats enables our group to gain more attention from its target audience. From the observation, it is clear that posts combining

textual, imagery and video resources generate more engagement, as they receive more likes, comments and reposts than textual status updates. Original content may appear in News Feeds more frequently, thus amplifying the message. The platform facilitates the practice of picture sharing, through a number of functionalities, including multiple photo uploads and album uploads. The preference of the group to frequently use features that support high-context communication, such as emoticons as a substitute for non-verbal communication, has been observed. Compared to Weibo and RenRen, the WeChat account has limited visibility in terms of information diffusion, as content is delivered to subscribers who are interested in the group. However, the design of the public account makes content easy to repost within subscribers' personal networks, on Moments and other social media platforms. The green group itself reposts WeChat articles on its Weibo account, to achieve better dissemination. The reposting among one's own networks allows greater views of such posts, triggering attention and attracting traffic via personal influence. WeChat is perceived to be a platform which can disseminate social messages and exert a positive influence on users.

Conclusion

Social media play a significant role in the work of the Tianjin University green group. Online platforms enable our youth organisation to educate its audiences, by disseminating environmental information. This may contribute to raising awareness and influencing public opinion in terms of environmental behaviour, and positively impacts on environmental causes. Social media are also crucial in spreading information about the group's identity, history, activities and perspectives. Moreover, social media interactional features play a crucial role in strengthening existing connections among volunteers and with the network of youth organisations, thus promoting mutual support and fostering solidarity. Finally, online platforms facilitate the mobilisation of actual and potential volunteers, encouraging young people to join the group, and take effective action in addressing environmental challenges.

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