Information, Communication & Society, 2015
Vol. 18, No. 2, 139–155, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.940364

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Multiple public spheres of Weibo: a typology of forms and potentials of online public spheres in China[†]

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(*Received 17 April 2014; accepted 26 June 2014*)

The advent of online media, and particularly social media, has led to scholarly debates about their implications. Authoritarian countries are interesting in this respect because social media might facilitate open and critical debates that are not possible in traditional media. China is arguably the most relevant and interesting case in this respect, because it limits the influx of non-domestic social media communication, has established its own microcosm of social media and tries to closely monitor and control it and censor problematic content. While such censorship is very effective in some instances, however, it fails to shut down all open debates completely. We analyse the pre-eminent Chinese social media platform – Sina Weibo – and present a typology of different kinds of public spheres that exist on this platform in which open and critical debates can occur under specific circumstances: Thematic public spheres include phenomena of common concern, such as environmental pollution or food safety; short-term public spheres emerge after unexpected events; encoded public spheres are deliberate attempts of users to circumvent censorship; local public spheres focus on sub-national phenomena and problems; non-domestic political public spheres exist on political topics from other countries but are often referenced back to China; mobile public spheres exist because many people use Weibo on their smartphones and also have access to deleted content there and meta public spheres are debates about censorship itself.

Keywords: China; social media; public sphere; censorship; Weibo

On 20 July 2013, a man in a wheelchair rolls into Beijing International Capital Airport. He carries a brown bag, as well as flyers that he starts distributing among passers-by. Police quickly approach the man and try to stop him from handing out more leaflets. As a reaction, the man reaches into his bag and pulls out an explosive device. At 6:24 pm, he sets off the bomb in front of the airport's arrivals gate, seriously injuring himself and causing chaos for several hours.

Ten minutes after the blast, pictures of the bomber started to circulate in Sina Weibo, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms. They have been taken by witnesses and bystanders of the bombing. The additional publicity for the attack is not to the liking of Chinese authorities, however, and the pictures get deleted after a short time. But after an hour, the newspaper *China Daily* reports the event, referring, among other things, to the pictures from the original

[†]Earlier versions of this paper were presented at conferences by the International Communication Association, the German Association for Communication Science, the Swiss Association of Communication Science, and at the Chinese Internet Research Conference.

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Weibo post. Even though the original pictures had quickly been deleted by censors, other users had simply reposted the message and attached the original pictures again. Eventually, the pictures emanated through a citizen journalist using Twitter to international media, such as the BBC and Sky News.

In the aftermath of the bombing, Chinese netizens uncovered the background of the man in the wheelchair: in 2005, he had been beaten up by local security officers in Dongguan for operating an illegal taxi service. In the following years he had unsuccessfully petitioned for compensation and resorted to the bombing as a desperate expression of his situation. This information led to another extensive debate in Weibo about injustices caused by local security officers and the petition system to fight injustice. Zuoyeben, one of the most popular non-celebrity Weibo users (Sina Technology, 2012) with almost seven million followers, wrote that 'Every single person who suffered unfair treatment is a ticking time bomb for this nation.'[1] Not surprisingly, his post got censored as well – but before that, it had already been shared more than 17,000 times.

This example already illustrates most of the aspects we are concerned with in this article: it shows that control and censorship exist on Chinese social media, and that they can be quickly and effectively used to remove seemingly problematic content from platforms like Weibo. But it also shows that users adapt to these practices and, at times, successfully circumvent censorship – sometimes only temporarily, but with very real effects.

Many such cases have been documented in the scholarly literature on the Chinese Internet as well as in media reports from within and outside China. Other cases have been observed or reconstructed by us. The article at hand shows that these single cases show repeating patterns and can be integrated into a distinct number of 'ideal-types' of public spheres – types that are 'ideal' not in the sense of being normatively ideal, but 'ideal' in that they are purified versions of real-world phenomena, which can be typologically described by social science (Weber, 1922). We call these seven ideal-types the Multiple Public Spheres of Weibo. Our article lays out these public spheres, illustrates them with a core example each and discusses their potentials and shortcomings in the light of public sphere theory.

1. Online public spheres and the Chinese situation

1.1. *Public spheres and online public spheres*

Since the 1960s, scholars have put forward different conceptualizations of public spheres, based on various contemporary and historical cases, and relying on different normative and empirical considerations (for an overview, see Marcinkowski, 2008; Wessler, 2008). While these conceptualizations have not converged in one widely shared concept of public spheres, they share a number of fundamental assumptions: public spheres are seen as places or fora of communication in which collectively relevant issues can be discussed by a diverse set of actors and with different arguments. And while different conceptualizations have strongly divergent views on how such debates should be conducted in terms of rationality and civility, most of them highlight the importance of three basic dimensions that can also be used to describe public spheres empirically: *openness*, i.e. the degree to which a public sphere is open in terms of content, and to which it may include criticism towards decision-makers; *longevity*, i.e. the question of how long such a debate can extend over time; and *participation*, i.e. the question whether all interested parties are allowed to participate (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002).[2]

These criteria of openness, longevity and participation have not been, and are still not, always fulfilled in an ideal way (for prominent criticisms in this regard, see Calhoun, 1992). They are realized to different degrees in different countries, in multiple public spheres with different scopes (from everyday encounters to debates in mass media; cf. Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010)

and in communicative fora with different thematic focuses. Accordingly, it has to be empirically assessed to what extent a given public sphere realizes these criteria – and we will do so for the case of Chinese social media.

In doing so, our article contributes to an already extensive literature on online public spheres. After public sphere scholarship had long concentrated on traditional news media, recent changes in media landscapes have added a new dimension. The advent of the online media and particularly of the social media – i.e. of interactive, many-to-many communication in which user-generated content is exchanged and the distinction between senders and receivers is blurred (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) – has led to intense debates about their potential (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002; for an overview, see Schäfer, in press).

Many of the respective studies have focused on democratic countries such as the United States, the UK, Germany or others. They have shown, for example, that new media indeed give many more people a chance to express themselves and take part in public debates (cf. Dahlgren, 2005), even though they also often lead to fragmented debates and fail to meet more ambitious normative criteria like fostering more civil, rational discussions or leading participants to finding consensus on issues (e.g. Papacharissi, 2002).

But with regard to online public spheres, authoritarian countries are particularly interesting cases. Their governments have the capacity to effectively steer and limit public debates in the news media, at public events and also on major websites. These fora of communication, which are important public spheres in many democratic countries, are therefore particularly limited in authoritarian countries (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; see also Zheng & Wu, 2005). Against this backdrop, social media are particularly appealing to many people in these countries, exactly because they may provide an alternative forum for public debate where control and censorship are more difficult to exercise in comparison to mass media. Therefore, online and particularly social media are an important public forum in these countries – arguably more important than in countries with free news media. This is not to say that such forms of communication on their own will lead to substantive regime, institutional or policy changes in the short run, hopes that were expressed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). But by providing spaces for open and continuous debates among a considerable number of participants, they enable citizens to connect and express themselves on a scale that did not exist before.

1.2. *The case of China and Sina Weibo*

The most relevant and interesting authoritarian country is arguably China. This is not only because it is the country with the world's largest population and a rising political and economic superpower, but also because it limits the influx of non-domestic communication and debate and makes social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, unavailable within its borders (Canaves, 2011). In turn, the country has established its own microcosm of social media, making it an interesting test bed for the analysis of domestic public spheres. Domestic online and social media have a relatively wide reach and availability in China. The country had 618 million Internet users in December 2013 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2014). Its Internet penetration rate is 45.8%, up from 28.9% in 2009, which is still lower than that in most industrialized countries, but higher than that in other developing economies, such as India (12.6%) or South Africa (41%) (International Telecommunication Union, 2013).

Among specific Internet services, widely used microblogging service Sina Weibo – often simply called 'Weibo' – is of particular interest.[3] It has 536 million registered users, and on an average day, 54 million people use it (Sina Hubei, 2013),[4] making it one of the five most visited pages in the Chinese Internet (Alexa, 2013). In terms of usability, the platform shares a

number of characteristics with US-based microblogging service Twitter: Users post 140-character messages, address others with '@' symbols, use hashtags, repost messages and answer them.

But compared to Twitter, Weibo also exhibits two major differences, which are of relevance for the emergence of public debates: First, discussion threats can be attached to individual posts (similar to Facebook), so that publicly visible turn-taking, and even dialogue, is possible and easily identifiable around a certain issue. Second, and maybe even more importantly, even though Weibo's 140-character-limit technically equals that of Twitter, it poses less of a limitation in the Chinese language, where characters signify entire words.

1.3. *Online public spheres in Chinese social media?*

The question of emerging or existing public spheres in China – which scholars have conceptualized as fora for public expression and social interaction, collective identity building, civic association, and popular protest (Yang, 2003) with '1) a disregard for status; 2) a domain of common concern and 3) inclusivity' (Abbott, 2012, p. 334) – has already been the object of considerable scholarly interest.

Particularly the role of online and social media has been analysed, with authors like Jiang (2010), Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith (2012) and Fu, Chan, and Chau (2013) being especially concerned with censorship as the main instrument to circumvent online discourse. The Chinese Internet was a relatively free and unregulated space in the early days, but later government control over the Internet increased (Endeshaw, 2004). The 'Great Firewall' of China prevents Chinese users to access sensitive information on foreign homepages, and services like Twitter and Facebook are not accessible in the country (MacKinnon, 2011). Censorship is common in the Chinese Internet, and it also applies to Weibo, where it is enacted by host company Sina. Sina needs to comply with government's requirements and regulations in order to not be taken down like other services before (Canaves, 2011; Hui & Rajagopalan, 2013). Therefore, Sina actively censors content in two ways: first, some content is automatically blocked based on a blacklist containing links and keywords or delayed until it has been approved by Sina (Bamman et al., 2012; Fu et al., 2013; Zhu, Phipps, Pridgen, Crandall, & Wallach, 2013). Second, Sina employs a large number of human censors, who constantly scan Weibo posts for seemingly problematic content (Hui & Rajagopalan, 2013). These are then deleted or, in a recent approach to camouflage censorship, hidden from all users except the post's author (Zhu et al., 2013). But Sina's interest in censorship is somewhat mitigated by the company's commercial interests, and it therefore aims to remain as open as possible: After all, Sina is a private sector business following a shareholder value model, listed at the NASDAQ and registered in Cayman Islands (Roberts & Hall, 2011).

This ambivalent situation is mirrored in recent reactions of the Chinese government to online communication: On the one hand, the national government increased its efforts to comb Chinese social media, using data mining, or 'opinion mining', as a tool to assess the attitudes and opinions of Chinese citizens in order to be able to respond to them and, thus, stabilize one-party control (Denyer, 2013). This shows the perception of powerful online media among Chinese political elites. On the other hand, the Central Office of the Communist Party has also recently issued a memo addressing party cadres across the country, to warn them about the dangers of foreign ideas, which are threatening the Chinese system (Buckley, 2013).

The scientific community is ambivalent about the emergence and chances of public spheres in China – also, and particularly, with regard to Weibo as the most prominent example (Table 1). Some scholars are sceptical about Weibo's potential to trigger truly open debates (MacKinnon, 2011; cf. Morozov, 2011; Sullivan, 2012, 2013). They argue that Weibo is an apolitical space, where popular users and topics are mainly entertainment based (Sullivan, 2012). Strong

Table 1. Overview over sceptic and optimistic positions towards the potential of online public spheres in China.

	Sceptics	Optimists
Main proponents	(MacKinnon, 2011; cf. Morozov, 2011; Sullivan, 2013)	(cf. Jiang, 2010; Noesselt, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2011)
Main stance/ exemplary quote	'Information transmitted by Weibo can constitute an accountability mechanism in the form of online public opinion, but is capricious and unreliable. Virtual mob justice is a clumsy mechanism for advancing government accountability' (Sullivan, 2013, p. 33)	'The Internet has become a training ground for citizen participation in public affairs: It creates a better informed and more engaged public that is demanding more from its government ... From this perspective, the Internet is not just a contested space, but a catalyst for social and political transformation' (Xiao, 2011, p. 60)
Power perspective	Focus on power of the government	Focus on power of the people
Model of communication	Hypodermic-needle model	Proactive user

censorship in combination with party-paid Weibo writers is seen undermining debates on Weibo in openness, longevity and participation (MacKinnon, 2011). Furthermore, it is pointed out that the government is now more present on social media platforms than before (Sullivan, 2013), and recent crackdowns against 'online rumours' seem to further validate this pessimistic outlook.

Other scholars, however, are more optimistic (Jiang, 2010; Noesselt, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2011). They emphasize that the Chinese Government allows for some degree of public discussion online (Jiang, 2010), where, accordingly, protest is taking place regularly (Yang, 2011). They also see microblogging as a powerful tool for Chinese society to supervise the authorities and to organize collective resistance (Noesselt, 2014), and the Chinese Internet as a 'catalyst for social and political transformation' (Xiao, 2011, p. 60).

Both sides make important points. In many ways and numerous cases, censorship is an effective tool limiting the potential of Weibo and other social media in China. On the contrary, however, it would also be wrong to discard their potential altogether. As we will show in the next section, Weibo content is neither entirely apolitical nor is it a sphere which is fully government-controlled or censored in all instances.

2. Multiple public spheres of Weibo

Communication on Weibo is enormous in volume, and diverse in content. Many, and probably most topics on the platform may be apolitical (Sullivan, 2012), and many others are censored before they can develop. But even so, a significant number of cases have been documented in which issues of collective concern were discussed openly in Weibo – and, at times, also critically towards Chinese authorities – by a large number of participants.

We have collected these instances from the scholarly literature, from Chinese and foreign news media reports, and enriched them with our own research. On this basis, we want to propose seven ideal-types of public spheres in which these cases can be organized (Table 2). The existence of each of these public spheres can be substantiated by numerous examples, some of which we will use in our descriptions. They will show that in all of these 'multiple public spheres of Weibo', issues of collective concern can be discussed, and that they all fulfil at least one of the criteria of openness, longevity over time and a large scope of participation.

They will also show that none of these public spheres fully corresponds to all three of these criteria. But instead of discarding the idea of Weibo public spheres altogether because they do not approach an ideal of such a sphere (which may not have existed historically either, cf. Calhoun, 1992), the ideal-types illustrate that the existence of public sphere may better be assessed on a continuum between the ideal and a non-existent public spheres.

2.1. *Thematic public spheres*

Some Weibo debates are highly regulated and censored, particularly when they touch upon the core of Chinese institutional politics and sovereignty. Posts doubting one-party rule, criticizing corruption among political elites, on the protests on Tiananmen Square in 1989 or on Taiwan independence are prohibited and usually quickly censored, i.e. deleted from Weibo (Bamman et al., 2012). In contrast, however, a number of issues exist on which Weibo debates are more open and much less regulated. This does not only apply to apolitical life-world issues such as fashion or celebrities, but also includes issues of common concern that have consequences to political administrations at local, regional, and at times even national levels. Often, such thematic public spheres exist around issues which have already been acknowledged as problems by the central government, whose existence can hardly be denied and is, thus, common knowledge in Chinese society.

The main example that has repeatedly been analysed in scholarly literature are environmental issues, which have led to the emergence of a 'green' or 'environmental' public sphere in China (Liu, 2011; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). Issues like environmental pollution (Holdaway, 2013), food safety or climate change (Yang, 2010) have been acknowledged as problems by authorities and can be openly debated in Weibo. Figure 1, based on our own research, illustrates this: while not a single Weibo post referring to the Tiananmen incident can be found over a whole month (Bamman et al., 2012), so that the graph flatlines, the graphs for food safety and climate change show lively debates with up to 223 Weibo posts per hour and a total of 21,375 posts about food safety and 5168 posts about climate change. On these issues, lively and open debates can be found, and posts include critical evaluations of the situation as well as criticism towards political authorities. For example, when Chinese real estate tycoon Pan Shiyi criticized the inaccuracy of official pollution measurements on Weibo (Oster, 2013), his posts were not censored, but the government responded by publishing more transparent measurements.

While such thematic public spheres are limited to certain issues, they fulfil all the criteria that have to be met to speak of public spheres: they consist of ongoing, lengthy and often intense debates about problems of common concern. They allow for a degree of openness and criticism – at times directly towards political decision-makers – that may surprise foreign observers (Yang, 2011). And the number of participants as well as the size of the audience is rather large.

2.2. *Short-term public spheres*

Censorship on Weibo – where some posts are automatically censored and the remaining ones monitored by human censors – can be very effective. Approximately 30% of sensitive posts get deleted within 30 minutes of publication, and after one day 90% of them have been removed (Zhu et al., 2013). It is particularly effective in cases the censors can prepare for, like anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square protests.

But unanticipated, sudden events leave censors no time to prepare. In these cases, they can only react ex post, with delays and often only after an event has become broadly known. The speed of publishing and distributing content on social media, and especially on Weibo with its large numbers of participants, makes it impossible at times to prevent – sometimes large – numbers of people from accessing seemingly problematic content and even further spreading it.

Table 2. Overview over the public spheres on Weibo and their characteristics.

	Thematic	Short term	Encoded	Local	Non-domestic	Mobile	Meta
Applies to	Officially acknowledged issues and problems	Sudden, unexpected sensitive topics	Topics known to be sensitive	Sub-national issues and decision-making	Democratic proceeding outside China	Deleted posts and offline communication	The issue of censorship on Weibo itself
Strength of censorship (openness)	Weak	Strong	Strong	Rather weak	Varies	None	Varies
Time frame (longevity)	Long	Short	Rather short	Varies	Varies	Varies	Varies
Number of participants (participation)	Large	Large	Rather small	Small	Varies	Small	Varies
Example	Environmental issues	Airport bombing	Grass mud horse	Local protests	Discussions about US elections	Reposting Zuoyeben's deleted messages	Discussions about censorship

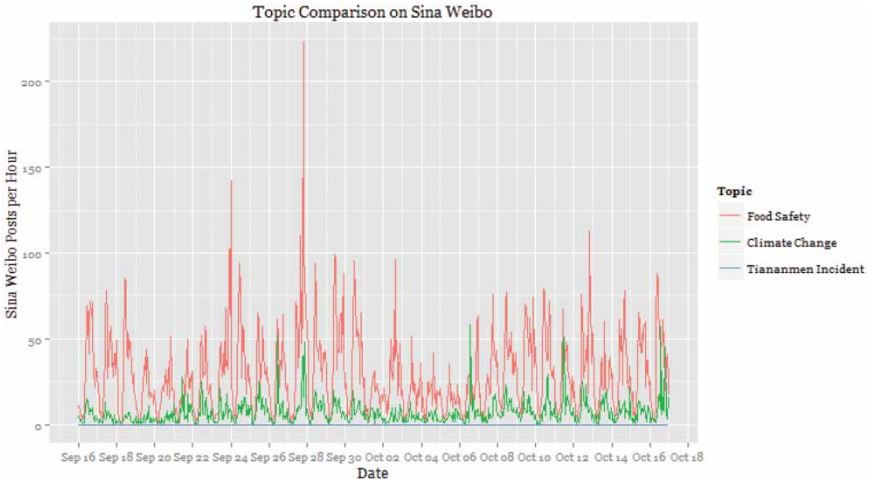

Figure 1. One hour interval time-series capturing all single posts containing the keyword Food Safety, Climate Change or Tiananmen Incident. Food Safety and Climate Change are ongoing debates with up and downs. The data were collected in 2013 with a search function in R software package.

The earlier-mentioned bombing at Beijing Airport may serve as the first example. It spread quickly on Weibo because it could not have been anticipated by censors, and because it was a public incident with many witnesses who shot pictures and posted them immediately on Weibo (Figure 2).

Another example is Weibo communication about the alleged corruption in the family of then-prime minister Wen Jiabao. After *The New York Times* published an article in October 2012 about it (Barboza, 2012), Weibo communication about the issue went viral. Between 4.34 am and 'early morning' Chinese time, 185,000 posts contained the keyword New York Times and many of these mentioned the Wen Jiabao article (Lu, 2012). The legitimacy of the Communist Party was questioned in many posts, leading to a quick response from censors. Later in the morning, the keyword 'New York Times' as well as keywords mentioning Wen Jiabao in connection with the sum of money his family had allegedly amassed were blocked in Weibo, the Weibo page of *The New York Times* was removed after a few hours and access to the newspaper's homepage was blocked in China (Bradsher, 2013).

As their name suggests, the main limitation of short-term public spheres is their lack of longevity. But the number of their participants can still be very large. After all, short-term public spheres are often triggered by breaking news events, often in combination with pictures taken by eyewitnesses. Even though they get closely monitored by censors, they can appear also for sensitive issues.

2.3. *Encoded public spheres*

The Tiananmen protest in 1989 is still one of the most sensitive political issues in contemporary China. Accordingly, the incident cannot be mentioned in written Weibo posts, as the respective keyword is filtered out automatically (Figure 1). But even such sensitive topics do appear on Weibo – when they are posted in encoded form. This often happens as a direct reaction to censorship, in an attempt to circumvent it. But this comes at a price: To process and understand a code, and thus to participate in an encoded public sphere, the audience requires prior knowledge to decipher the code. Therefore, it is not easy for audience and censors alike, who both find it difficult at times to get hold of such encoded public spheres.

Figure 2. Left: Post showing the first picture on Weibo with the airport bomber. Right: Post showing the hand position of Bo Xilai in his trial, interpreting it as a gesture towards the broader public.

Encodings can come in the form of language: studies show that when users realize that certain words referring to sensitive issues are blocked from Weibo, they start using morphed, homophonous words to describe the same incidents (Chen, Zhang, & Wilson, 2013). Encoded public spheres can also come in the form of visualizations. The best known example is probably the 'grass mud horse' (Abbott, 2012), a fictional animal whose name is a homophone of a Chinese curse (Figure 3). It has been created to express anger about censorship in the Chinese Internet and has become a popular meme since. The user who posted the first pictures of the earlier-mentioned Beijing bombing and whose posts were deleted, posted several pictures of the grass mud horse later – a possible reaction to the censorship, and certainly understood this way by many followers.

Examples for encoded public spheres can often be found among posts that refer to anticipated, recurring events like anniversaries of the Tiananmen Protests. Every year users try to commemorate the event, and censors are on alert. In 2013, pictures of the 'tank man' – the famous portrayal of an unidentified person blocking the way of tanks on Tiananmen square in 1989 – were posted on Weibo, but the tanks were replaced with big yellow ducks to camouflage the original picture (Figure 3). Similarly, other, partly cartoonish versions of the pictures were published, using Lego and Angry Bird images instead of the tanks in attempts to evade censorship. And in contrast to textual mentions of the Tiananmen incident, which could not be posted at all, the manipulated pictures were available for short time before being removed from Weibo.

It is characteristic for encoded public spheres that they are conscious reactions to censorship in the Chinese Internet and deliberate attempts to evade it. Examples like the grass mud horse are well known to audience and censors alike, but still used and (often) not censored. Others, particularly ones referring to more sensitive issues, are censored more quickly, and only exist for limited time as part of a cat-and-mouse game between users and censors. The number of participants is strongly dependent on how difficult it is to decode the information in question, and by the strength of censorship.

Figure 3. Clockwise from top left: The 'grass mud horse' – a fictional animal being used as a symbol for criticizing censorship in the Chinese Internet. A picture of the 'tank man' on Tiananmen Square, with the four tanks replaced by rubber ducks. Discussion about the deletion of Weibo user Zuoyeben's account, including a screenshot of his deleted account, and a user poll asking if the deletion of his account is justified (blue) or not (red). Weibo overview site with all posts on the US presidential elections 2012, containing 16,480 posts and also including a poll on the candidates Obama and Romney.

2.4. *Local public spheres*

In some cases, netizens publicize localized incidents' in Weibo that are of common concern but not, or not yet, situated on the national level (Sullivan, 2013). In such 'local public spheres', open debates with a strong degree of criticism towards sub-national authorities is possible, as they may be utilized by the Chinese national government as opportunities to legitimize itself by intervening in sub-national matters on behalf of its citizens. It is in these local public spheres that He and Warren's (2011) 'authoritarian deliberation' takes place, with the central government using these spheres as feedback loops (Noesselt, 2014) to keep local government officials in check (Xiao, 2011).

An example was the case of Yang Hui, a 16-year-old junior high school student. He criticized in Weibo how the local authorities' handled the death of a karaoke parlour employee, posted pictures taken at a demonstration afterwards and was arrested by the local police for spreading rumours. As a result, Weibo communication about the case intensified, online protest started and found the attention of the national government (Kaiman, 2013). The central government intervened at the local level, and Yang Hu was released after seven days in custody.

Another recent example is the protest against a chemical factory in Maoming (Tiezzi, 2014). Surprisingly many pictures of the protest could circulate uncensored on Weibo for a certain time.

Usually any online post that represents and reinforces social mobilization is censored (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013), but in this case the protest could be discussed, because it was a local issue.

Such local public spheres exist for a number of reasons. First, they are tolerated by the national government because they often do not directly challenge the state party and are instances in which an intervention can improve the party's legitimacy (Noesselt, 2014). As long as the central government does not want to intervene, local public spheres can persevere. Second, they are possible because censorship mechanisms are centralized, and censors are not always familiar with emerging local problems, which only receive their attention after they are more broadly discussed (Zhu et al., 2013).

Local public spheres tend to be limited in their thematic and geographic scope, as well as in the number of their participants. As soon as influential Weibo users pick up the respective issues, they often become nationally known, their scope expands – and as a result, they become visible for censors and are potentially dealt with differently by the central government.

2.5. *Non-domestic political public spheres*

National political topics can indeed play a role on Weibo – if these cover politics in foreign countries. Presidential decisions, candidacies, election campaigns, etc., in other countries can be openly discussed on Weibo and are even covered by state news media. Interesting for us is that under the umbrella of these broader, non-domestic topics, critical references towards domestic Chinese problems can take place, even though they are under the constant threat of censorship.

The prime examples are Weibo debates about US elections. Nowadays, young Chinese show great interest in the United States (Ji, Hai, & Xu, 2012). Fittingly, the US presidential elections in 2012 became a hot topic on Weibo, with over 16,000 people writing posts with the respective hashtag and more than 5000 taking part in their own poll (electing Obama with 78.9%; Figure 3). While the discussion mainly focused on the race between Obama and Romney, it also commented on democratic elections as a political institution in general. In this context, users repeatedly expressed their frustration and criticized their own system, writing posts such as 'China should hold such an election, then China will move toward democracy and dictatorship should be over' – without being censored.[5]

Usually, such non-domestic public spheres exist only as long as the respective event takes place. But they enable Chinese netizens to debate sensitive questions, discuss democracy and even carefully criticize their own government, under the camouflage of commenting on a foreign phenomenon.

2.6. *Mobile public spheres*

China is a mobile phone country, with 1.185 billion mobile phone accounts and 334 million 3G service accounts (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology [MIIT], 2013).[6] And 49.5% of all mobile phone users with Internet access use Weibo on their smart phones (China Internet Network Information Center, 2013).

Many of them receive posts in real time, as push messages, to their smartphones – constituting the basis of a 'mobile public sphere'. This is because censoring posts on Weibo itself does not delete the messages users have received on their phones, which are saved on these mobile devices. Also, if Sina temporarily deletes an account, the account itself and some of its content will still be visible in the background on mobile phones with a warning message stating that the account is not existent.

This triggers follow-up communication in two forms: On the one hand, it can lead to interpersonal communication, with people discussing posts with their family, friends, and others. On the other hand, follow-up communication can reach Weibo again and revive seemingly removed

debates. In many cases, deleted posts reappear on Weibo because users save the content or even a screenshot of the original post, and repost it.

One example is the earlier-mentioned airport bombing, another one happened during the trial of Bo Xilai. When former Chinese politburo member Bo Xilai was tried for corruption in 2013, the Chinese government opened a Weibo account to provide a live feed from the courtroom. When one of the most popular Weibo users, Zuoyeben, made fun of a hand position of Bo Xilai during his trial, interpreting it as 'everything is fine', his post was shared several thousand times in less than 12 minutes – before the post itself and Zuoyeben's user account were deleted. Even though the post was deleted, reposts with a screenshot of the original message appeared after a short time (Figure 2).

Such reposts are often difficult to deal with for censors, because deleted texts often reappear as screenshots which cannot be found using automated keyword censorship. Human censors may eventually track these messages, but there will be a delay until deletion takes place. Even though mobile public spheres may be rather short lived, they still have considerable impact, because they may trigger follow-up communication and they make censorship very transparent: In traditional media, censorship is not visible for the audience, because articles or audio-visual content are checked before they are published. On Weibo, however, some users are aware that if a post gets deleted and they can react to it in a number of ways. This leads us to our final Weibo public sphere.

2.7. *Meta public spheres*

For a number of reasons – getting push messages sent to phones that are available to users even after they have been censored on the Weibo platform itself, seeing reposts of deleted content by other users, getting their own posts deleted by censors or just having the general knowledge that certain topics cannot be touched upon – many people are aware about censorship on Weibo. As a result, meta public spheres occur, where Weibo debates make censorship itself the issue.

One example connects to the earlier-mentioned bombing at Beijing airport. A day after the incident, prominent Weibo user Zuoyeben openly expressed his discontent after censors deleted his posts 'Weibo again has a deletion mess' and adding that 'more and more don't understand you'. This post was shared over 13,000 times and led to discussions about deletion practice on Weibo. In the comments attached to this post, users discussed also strategies to evade the censorship. One user, for example, suggested to 'create a screen shot and post it again', as Sina's data mining would not be able to analyse the pictures. In the case of the Bo Xilai trial, the deletion of Zuoyeben's account triggered a lively debate. During his absence, over 37,000 posts discussed his disappearance and users even started a poll asking if it is legitimate that Zuoyeben had been deleted.

Even though such meta-debates touch upon a seemingly sensitive issue, in that they deal with censorship on Weibo and beyond, they are able to attain considerable participation. They help to increase the transparency of these debates themselves, describing mechanisms of censorship and the motifs of censors and host company Sina, which may have an impact on the further development of the other six public spheres outlined earlier.

3. Conclusion and outlook

Online media and their societal and political implications have been a scholarly issue for some time. Particularly interesting cases in this respect are authoritarian countries, in which online media may serve as an outlet for critical opinions which are not allowed in – or at least more problematic to express – news media. We have analysed the case of China, for which scholars have discussed the role of online media and particularly social media in some length already, and for

which rather different positions have been put forward: While sceptical scholars have pointed out that a high degree of censorship is enacted on these media, that most topics are apolitical anyway and that therefore no relevant public sphere can emerge, others have described cases in which more open debates have emerged in the Chinese Internet.

Our analysis took a middle ground by taking the cases that have been previously described, enriching them with our own research and organizing them into types of public spheres that exist on the pre-eminent Chinese social media platform, Sina Weibo. We distinguished seven ideal-types of such public spheres:

Thematic public spheres only exist on a limited number of selected issues. These issues, however, include phenomena of common concern and with political consequences, such as environmental topics, and on these issues, users can engage in lengthy, ongoing debates and discuss them rather openly. *Short-term public spheres* only exist for limited time. For these short periods of time, sensitive topics which are not publicly discussed in any other information channel in China can be spread over the social media, often thousands of times, before they are removed by censors. *Encoded public spheres* are debates that emerge as a result of the threat of censorship – because people are aware of it, they have developed strategies to cope with it and deliberately try to evade it. They use symbols, metaphors, insider jokes and other forms of communication requiring prior knowledge to comment on sensitive issues. In *local public spheres*, issues and problems from a sub-national level can be discussed and criticism towards (at least sub-national) authorities can be expressed. Several cases have been documented in which the national government has intervened against local or regional authorities following Weibo debates. Like thematic public spheres, *non-domestic political public spheres* offer people a platform to engage in debates on sensitive issues which are otherwise difficult to comment on. In the case of non-domestic public spheres, these comments are made under the pretext of debating foreign phenomena, like US elections, but referencing them back to the domestic context. *Mobile public spheres* are mainly available because of the widespread mobile phone and particularly smart phone technology in China. Users get Weibo posts as push messages sent to their phones, where they are available to them even after they have been censored on the Weibo platform itself. Users can then include these posts in follow-up communication, either offline with relatives and friends, or in Weibo itself by reposting the censored messages again. Because these and other practices bring censorship to the attention of many Weibo users, the final type of public spheres emerges: *Meta public spheres* in which users can debate the current conditions and developments on Sina Weibo, criticize censorship and, at times, successfully put pressure on Weibo's host company Sina to keep the platform as open as possible.

These results demonstrate that even though Weibo communication is limited on many issues and in many ways, a set of issues, situations and conditions can be identified under which Weibo communication fulfils some of the core criteria of a public sphere such as open debates about issues of common concern, continuous debates and a large number of participants. In our view, it is useful to think about the existence of public spheres – whether in China or beyond, whether online or in traditional new media – not in dichotomous terms of a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Between both poles exists a continuum, and research should identify the instances and conditions in which public spheres emerge, the shapes they have and the degrees to which they exhibit characteristics such as openness, longevity and a large participation.

Our results also show that Chinese netizens are aware of censorship, and adapt and react to it in creative ways. This contradicts a hypodermic-needle model of censorship which views the audience as a passive mass, and highlights the creativity and responsiveness of an active online audience. As the real-life examples to our ideal-type public spheres have shown, these responses may involve switching from one public sphere to another. For example, when short-term public spheres are censored, users may use encoded posts to further express their opinions (Chen et al., 2013).

Even though the evidence we presented is certainly fragmentary, we feel confident that it represents more than isolated instances: typical configurations, i.e. ideal-types of public spheres, which can be analytically defined and empirically illustrated with multiple examples and which can not only be found on Sina Weibo, but also in other social media in China as well as in other (authoritarian) countries. Still, future studies should certainly address and answer a number of questions that we had to leave unanswered here.

First, it would be worthwhile to further validate the types of public spheres that we have presented. Second, future analyses should scrutinize how common these different types of public spheres are, and what their scope is thematically, temporally, and also geographically. Scholars should map, for example, for which issues thematic or short-term public spheres exist, or to what extent offline public spheres take place and are re-introduced to Weibo after having been removed. Third, it would be interesting to explore whether there are more, and other, types of such public spheres, whether they have changed over time and if so, in what ways. Such analyses should also take social media platforms other than Sina Weibo into account. Fourth, the larger societal and political implications of these types of public spheres are an important issue worth exploring. Furthermore, their relation to traditional, 'old' mass media would certainly merit further analysis. While online debates happen in a bounded space, they can expand and contract faster than traditional media (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004), helping to expand societal debates and set, sustain or even defeat the news media agenda (Tang & Sampson, 2012). Indications of such a role of Weibo public spheres exist – like the airport bombing which provided the introductory scene for our article, and which made its way from Sina Weibo into the national and international media.

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Notes

1. This and several other quotes have been translated into English for this publication.
2. Similar conceptualizations can be found among scholars analysing public spheres in China. While some, like Abbott (2012) or Jiang (2010), took cues from Habermas' concept of a deliberative public sphere which ought to fulfil ambitious criteria, such as civility, rationality, etc., the limitations of applying this concept to China were repeatedly pointed out (e.g. Yang & Calhoun, 2007) and its adaptability questioned (Rowe, 1990). Many scholars have, therefore, moved away from the concept of open deliberation. Yang (2003), for example, sees Chinese public spheres not primarily as spaces for rational debate, but as fora for public expression and social interaction, collective identity building, civic association and popular protest. Abbott (2012) sees them as spaces with '1) a disregard for status; 2) a domain of common concern and 3) inclusivity' (p. 334), and He and Warren (2011) as well as Jiang (2010) have demonstrated that public expression, interaction, and also protest can take place in Chinese online spaces, even though they might be limited to certain conditions.
3. In terms of user numbers, Tencent's Weixin service is even more popular than Weibo. But as a personal messenger service, its capacity to disseminate messages and reach mass audiences is limited in comparison to Weibo. For example, group chats on Weixin consist of a maximum of 40 users, and celebrities can only post one message a day on their public profiles (McKirdy, 2014).

4. These numbers have to be treated with some caution: Fu and Chau (2013) found that 57.4% of the sampled accounts were 'zombie accounts', which are commonly used for marketing purposes or to inflate the number of a user's followers.
5. Because of the sensitive issue the identity of the users will be kept anonymous.
6. It is notable, however, that MIIT counts the number of accounts instead of the number of unique users.

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