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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Professional intervention and organizational incorporation: examining journalistic use of microblogs in two Chinese newsrooms

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Existing research has widely accounted the influence of microblogs on traditional news production, but less attention has been paid to how microblogs are socially constructed in newsrooms. Taking the social constructivist approach, this study explored the professional and organizational construction of journalistic use of microblogs. We conducted 33 in-depth interviews with news workers at two local newspapers in China and a textual analysis of their microblog posts. We found that Chinese news workers heavily stressed professional values and journalistic authority, which set limits to information appropriation and self-expression on microblogs. Production culture, organization policy, and organization culture were also found to shape journalistic use of microblogs. The highly censored press environment restricted both organizational and individual use of microblogs, but sometimes motivated news workers to seek extra value on microblogs.

Keywords: microblog; social media; newspaper; newsroom; news production; Chinese press; social construction

Introduction

Microblogs have evolved from a niche technology to a mass phenomenon (Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt, & Pushchmann, 2014). Beyond their social functions in everyday life, microblogs have emerged as networked platforms for news production and consumption, social coordination, cooperate communication, and various forms of civic participation (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Weller et al., 2014). As a powerful communication technology, microblogs quickly became diffused among news professionals, triggering scholarly attention regarding their impacts upon traditional journalism. Existing studies have noted that the use of microblogs may lead to innovations in news gathering (Ahmad, 2010; Broersma & Graham, 2012), help promote and distribute traditional news content (Cozma & Chen, 2013; Ferguson & Greer, 2011), reshape the journalist–source relationship (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Hermida, 2010), and increase news transparency (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Zhou, 2013).

With few exceptions (e.g., Artwick, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012), these accounts primarily focus on the ‘effect of,’ rather than the ‘construction of,’ journalistic use of microblogs. This omission stands in contrast to the voluminous literature on the social

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construction of technology in journalism, which has been fruitful in interpreting technological transformations in complex social contexts (e.g., Boczkowski, 2004a, 2004b; Deuze, 2009; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). Moreover, the preponderance of existing research has focused on the front-stage use of microblogs (e.g., journalistic tweeting and tweets as news sources), but little is known about how journalists make use of microblogs in the back-stage of news production.

In this study, we take a constructivist approach in exploring the ‘behind-the-scenes’ use of microblogs within organizational settings. This study is contextualized in China, where Twitter-like microblogging services have witnessed explosive development in the past few years (CNNIC, 2013). Mainly involving young and well-educated users, microblogs arguably have given rise to an alternative space for diverse information and critical public opinion in China (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012; Sullivan, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014). This study focuses on two top local newspapers in Guangzhou, *the Southern Metro Daily (SMD)* and *Guangzhou Daily (GD)*.

While conceding technological impacts on journalism, we focus on the construction of technology in news production. First, we draw on the notion of ‘normalization’ (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer, 2005) in order to explore the process in which traditional journalists bring their old values and norms into the use of new media technologies. Second, we incorporate the discussion on organizational influence on the adoption of new media technology (Boczkowski, 2004b; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008). We propose that journalistic use of microblogs is affected by professional values/norms and incorporated by organizational needs. Based on in-depth interviews and a textual analysis, this study asks the following questions: (1) How are microblogs employed by individual news workers at work? (2) How do professional values and norms shape the journalistic use of microblogs? and (3) How do news organizations construct the journalistic use of microblogs?

Literature review

Press and microblogs in China

The market-oriented reforms since 1978 have greatly changed the ownership, management, and ideologies of the press in China (Zhao, 1998). Currently, the press structure at the local level consists of provincial/municipal organs and various commercialized, general-appeal papers affiliated with them. While party organs still serve as the propagandist instrument, the commercial newspapers enter the market, competing for readership and advertising revenue, financially subsidizing their parent papers (Zhao, 1998). Generally, these commercialized subsidiaries are semi-independent papers that enjoy a certain degree of editorial, personnel, and financial autonomy (Huang, 2000; Zhao, 1998).

Marketization, however, has not resulted in the complete loss of party control over the press. Chinese media outlets have to play the dual role of money-maker and mouthpiece, suffering under both political control and market pressures (Lee, He, & Huang, 2007; Zhao, 1998). Within this ideological duality, the Chinese press displays several characteristics. First, professional principles, such as objectivity, autonomy, and public service, have become accepted widely in non-party news media (Pan, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Second, although the propagandist role is stressed to a lesser degree, party control still prevails, which requires journalists to bargain with censorship in daily practices (Tong &

Sparks, 2009; Wang, 2010; Winfield & Peng, 2005). Third, as part of the cultural tradition, journalism is viewed largely as an authority in defining and interpreting society and history (Tong, 2011; Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen, & Wu, 1997).

Journalism in China has been influenced by Internet-based technologies since the late 1990s. China now has the world's largest online population, and arguably, the most vigorous Internet market (CNNIC, 2013). In such a rich soil, microblogging services in China have undergone explosive development. There are currently 331 million microbloggers in China, accounting for 56% of all Internet users. Despite the keen competition, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo have stood out and dominated the domestic microblogging market (Sullivan, 2012). Sina Weibo attracts more high-end users, such as urban professionals and college students, whereas Tencent Weibo's user base consists of large proportions of users with lower incomes (Sullivan, 2012). Microblogs have triggered debate over the tension between technological empowerment and the expansion of state control (Leibold, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014). Despite controversy, microblogs have opened up a new public space for faster, more diverse, and more critical discussions on public affairs (Chan et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014).

Traditional news organizations have embraced microblogging and actively have sought strategies to harness microblog resources. On Sina Weibo alone, renowned traditional media, such as *the People's Daily*, *CCTV*, and *Southern Metro Daily*, have attracted millions of followers. Individual journalists also have adopted microblogs for work-related use rather quickly. Zhang (2011) noted that more than 60% of investigative journalists in China had obtained story ideas from microblogs at least once. According to PR Newswire's Asia (2011) survey, 47.7% of Chinese journalists used microblogs often or on a daily basis. Seventy percent of these journalists reported that using microblogs decreased their use of other social media. Journalists use microblogs for many purposes, including participating in discussions, expanding work-related social networks, and finding reportable stories.

Microblogging as a journalistic tool

Allowing users to post messages under 140 characters, microblogs sustain bidirectional communication networks among individuals, media outlets, and various organizations (Weller et al., 2014). Compared with traditional blogs, microblogs are more interconnected in nature; due to their short form and mobile-friendly applications, they tend to be more frequently updated and reposted. Microblogging is not just an ambient, friend-following medium for mundane everyday interaction; rather, microblogs are a news medium for event-following and public debate, especially in times of disaster and social upheaval (Rogers, 2014; Weller et al., 2014). According to Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014), microblogs may give rise to a more reciprocal mode of journalism in which sustained and multimodal exchange of information encourages trusting and engaging journalist–audience relationships.

The unique features of microblogs make them a potentially useful tool in journalism. With the proliferation of user-generated content (UGC) and its growing relevance in the news industry, social media like microblogs stand out as an information gold mine for journalists searching for stories (Deuze, 2004; Hermida, 2010). Due to the cheap and convenient access to various sources, microblogs have become a kind of news beat.

For instance, Broersma and Graham (2012) have found that journalists routinely monitor voters' and candidates' microblogs for potential news stories, citing their tweets in articles to add flavor to election analyses. Second, as aggregators of information from multiple sources, microblogs can be utilized for news research and verification (Ahmad, 2010; Hermida, 2012). For instance, Coddington, Molyneux and Lawrence (2013) found that, though not the most prominent use, journalists and commentators did tap into the affordances of microblogs for fact-checking in election coverage. In addition, microblog posts can be used to illustrate broader contexts in reports (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

Furthermore, microblogs provided both journalists and news organizations with alternative channels to distribute news and engage audiences. In personalized online spaces like blogs, news workers can expand on issues and interpret current affairs (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Singer, 2005). Similarly, journalists have been known to use microblogs to issue opinions, aggregate and share information, report news events live, promote news outlets, communicate with audiences, and empower citizen participation (Artwick, 2013; Cozma & Chen, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012). Using social media to promote news and connect audiences has become a common practice among news outlets (Ferguson & Greer, 2011; Heinrich, 2011). Researchers have found that microblogs like Twitter appear to be more efficient in delivering news than other social media (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014).

Social construction of microblogs in newsrooms

Researchers tend to agree that various contextual influences construct the technological impact on journalism, including professional values and norms, existing routines, journalistic cultures and organizational structures (Boczkowski, 2004a, 2004b; Deuze, 2009; Patterson & Domingo, 2008). It is reasonable to assume that journalistic use of microblogs also is socially shaped in newsrooms, which is reflected in professional interventions at the individual/ideological level and organizational incorporation at the institutional level.

As part of the journalistic ideology, professional values may set limits on journalist appropriation of UGC on social media. For example, Internet and social media usage remains marginal in Israel because professional journalists heavily value copresent interaction for legitimate news gathering, such as face-to-face and telephone communication (Reich, 2013). Coddington et al. (2013) also have shown that traditional norms like professional objectivity and practices like stenograph still dominate when journalists conduct microblog-based reporting. The influence of professional values and norms also is reflected in mainstream media's reluctance to absorb reader contributions (Ornebring, 2008; Thurman, 2008). In Hong Kong media, 'professional incorporation' in covering online videos reflects prioritization of professional and organizational needs, such as filling space, representing public opinion, and performing the watchdog role (Lee, 2012). More importantly, online video coverage by different news media has become standardized over time, suggesting the shaping power of a consistent professional paradigm in appropriating UGC.

Professional incorporation also may occur when journalists use microblogs to express themselves. In their analysis of 'normalizing Twitter,' Lasorsa et al. (2012) found that there was a general trend of weakening gatekeeping and strengthening transparency;

however, journalists at 'elite' media, supposedly having stronger professionalism, were more reluctant to give up gatekeeping power or to provide transparency. Some scholars have argued that, as a whole, traditional news production has taken on greater visibility to the public in new media environments (Singer, 2014; Zhou, 2013). However, others assert that transparency cannot be viewed as a linear effect. For example, Lasorsa's (2012) analysis of gender and microblog use revealed that female journalists provided more openness and accountability on microblogs than their male counterparts. Similarly, Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, and Holton (2013) found that microblogs offer limited meaningful transparency to political journalists because their job talk on Twitter does not connect directly to the issues and people being reported on.

Beyond professional incorporation, shaping power comes from news organizations. Prior research has suggested that organizational-level influence shapes the adoption of technologies, including structure, work routine, newsroom culture, and policy. For example, Boczkowski's (2004b) study found that variations in organizational structures, work practices, and user representations resulted in different levels of adoption and use of multimedia and interactivity technologies. Paulussen and Ugille (2008) identified several organizational-level factors that caused sluggish adoption of citizen journalism, including hierarchical newsroom structure, insufficient negotiation, high workload, and lack of time and resources.

The introduction of convergence technology has created overlapping work contexts, bringing about conflicts in power relations and between different production cultures (Robinson, 2011; Silcock & Keith, 2006). This confusion also exists in the organizational-individual dialect. As suggested by Posetti (2009a), adoption of microblogs in news work has aroused conflicts because it merged 'the private and public experience' and created clashes between 'the personal and professional.' Concerns have arisen regarding the extent to which journalists' opinions and activities represent their employers. Many question whether or not news organizations' perceived credibility could be affected because professional principles are less adhered to on personal media (Posetti, 2009a; 2009b). To resolve these tensions, many renowned news organizations have come up with detailed guidelines to instruct the use of social media (Hacker & Seshagiri, 2011; Posetti, 2009b).

The literature review has presented two different, yet interrelated, perspectives. The first perspective is imbued with technological optimism, which accentuates the positive changes related to new media technologies. Reflecting a social constructivist standpoint, the latter perspective tends to downplay the technological effects but attaches great importance to the influence of the social context both at the professional and organizational levels. Technologically optimistic analyses are fruitful in revealing the advantages of new technology but have been criticized as simplistic and neglectful of possible constraints (Domingo, 2008; Weiss & Domingo, 2010). In contrast, most scholars endorse the social constructivist approach by virtue of its capacity to analyze complex social changes. As suggested by Boczkowski (2004a) and Lievrouw (2002), however, these two seemingly contradictory views are connected, characterizing two sides of the same coin. In terms of media evolution, they both generate important insights. As such, this study acknowledges the impact of new media technology on journalism but puts more emphasis on analyzing the social construction of microblogs.

Method

The cases

Guangzhou is one of the most important media centers in China. With its huge economic success and contentious culture, media professionalism manages to thrive in the Guangzhou press. We focused on two local newspapers: *SMD* and *GD*. *SMD* is a commercial-oriented local metro paper, with a nationwide name for liberal culture, journalistic professionalism, and daring reports (Shen & Zhang, 2009; Tong, 2011). Aiming at ‘recording the era and history,’ ‘pushing forward society’s development,’ and ‘enlightening the society’ (Tong, 2011, p. 125), *SMD* frequently reports on ‘boundary-spanning’ issues and is regarded as a ‘troublemaker’ by censors (Lee et al., 2007). *GD* is the party organ affiliated to Guangzhou Municipal Committee, which, unlike most party papers, enjoys great commercial success. As a strategy, *GD* conforms to party control and pays exclusive attention to local readers’ needs by offering useful information in everyday life (Jin, 2007).

The selection is based on the following reasons: First, both newspapers are top mass-appeal newspapers in China that have large daily circulations and generate huge advertising revenues. Second, both newspapers maintain professional norms and values in production, and this offers an ideal setting for studying technological impact. Third, the two papers provide certain degrees of contrast in ownership and organizational culture.

This study focused on Sina Weibo as an exemplar of microblogs in China. Started in late 2009 as a Twitter clone, Sina Weibo now has over 500 million registered users¹ and 46 million active daily users (*China Daily*, 2012), making it arguably the most influential social platform in China. Unlike Twitter, Sina Weibo has some unique features such as message threading and direct commenting, by which users can interact with each other in a similar fashion of bulletin board systems (Sullivan, 2012). As noted, Sina Weibo has attracted large numbers of ‘elite’ users such as celebrities, government officials, CEOs, artists, academics, and journalists (Sullivan, 2012).

In-depth interviews

Employing snowball sampling, we conducted 33 semistructured interviews (see Table 1 for interviewee profile). Except two interviews (S18 and S19), all other interviews were conducted during a trip to Guangzhou between September and October in 2011. The interviews lasted 30–150 minutes in length, digitally recorded upon interviewees’ approval, and later transcribed by a graduate student helper. We employed thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After engaging with the data, we applied the related literature and concepts and identified potential codes and themes. Then we coded the data in details while adding new codes and discarding obsolete ones. Finally, we compared, crosschecked, and interrelated the codes, and then combined them into themes. The codes, themes, and related data chunks were then used to address research questions.

Textual analysis

We also conducted a textual analysis as a supplement. Out of the interview sample, we chose eight microbloggers from *SMD* and *GD*, respectively (see Table 2). They were purposively selected because they were more active users than others.

Table 1. Interviewee profiles.

<i>Southern Metro Daily</i>				<i>Guangzhou Daily</i>			
Interviewees	Sex	Years of working	Work identity	Interviewees	Sex	Years of working	Work identity
S1	M	7	New media manager	G1	M	5	Entertainment journalist
S2	M	11	Microblogging manager	G2	F	1	Entertainment journalist
S3	M	3	Microblog page editor	G3	M	10	Culture news journalist
S4	F	6	Culture news editor	G4	M	1	Rolling news journalist
S5	F	4	Entertainment journalist	G5-A	M	–	New media management
S6	M	4	Travel/lifestyle Journalist	G5-B	F	–	New media management
S7	M	3	Entertainment journalist	G5-C	F	–	New media management
S8	F	9	Opinion page editor	G6	M	10	Economy news editor
S9	M	13	Opinion page editor	G7	F	1	Economy news editor
S10	M	6	Political news editor	G8	F	4	Economy news journalist
S11	M	2	Breaking news journalist	G9	F	8	Economy news journalist
S12	M	1	Breaking news journalist	G10	M	5	Economy news journalist
S13	M	5	Urban affairs journalist	G11	F	5	Local news journalist
S14	F	3	Current issues journalist	G12	M	1	Political news journalist
S15	F	8	Current issues journalist				
S16	M	2	Science journalist				
S17	M	8	Economy news editor				
S18	F	–	Investigative journalist				
S19	M	4	Investigative journalist				

These 16 microbloggers are addressed with the same ID in the interview sample. As microblogs are frequently updated, a one-month period could generate rich data for analysis. At last, we retrieved 3118 microblog entries posted by selected microbloggers between 20 February 2012 and 20 March 2012. Then we coded and retrieved microblog posts into six categories. ‘Personal talk’ was coded when microbloggers posted content

Table 2. A description of selected journalists' microblogs accounts.

Microblogger ID	Number of people followed	Total posts	Original posts (% of total)	Re-posts (% of total)
<i>Southern Metro Daily</i>				
S2	1999	627	11 (1.8)	616 (98.2)
S3	1054	224	37 (16.5)	187 (83.5)
S4	385	64	39 (61.0)	25 (39.0)
S5	623	289	132 (45.7)	157 (54.3)
S7	2000	564	143 (25.4)	421 (74.6)
S8	1984	157	37 (23.6)	120 (76.4)
S11	840	294	52 (17.7)	242 (82.3)
S12	1030	50	16 (32.0)	34 (68)
<i>Guangzhou Daily</i>				
G1	530	49	16 (32.7)	33 (67.3)
G2	303	45	23 (51.1)	22 (48.9)
G3	236	23	17 (73.9)	6 (26.1)
G4	179	44	20 (45.5)	24 (54.5)
G6	979	559	29 (5.2)	530 (94.8)
G9	476	30	0 (0.0)	30 (100.0)
G10	750	25	6 (24.0)	19 (76.0)
G11	437	74	9 (12.2)	65 (87.8)
Total	–	3118	587 (18.8)	2531 (81.2)

Note: Data retrieved on 1 May 2012.

about leisure and everyday life. 'Professional talk' was coded when microbloggers expressed opinions, observations, and feelings about their professional work. 'Break news,' 'opinions,' and 'share/repost information' were coded when microbloggers reported original news, expressed opinions on current affairs, or shared information from other sources. The coded microblog entries were then counted and interpreted.

Use of microblogs in news work

In the following sections, we first present findings regarding the patterns of microblog use by journalists for news-making and self-expression. We then analyze how professional values/norms socially construct microblogs. The final section presents how organizational cultures and policies have influenced the journalistic use of microblogs.

Aligning with our expectations, we found that news workers widely have adopted microblogs. Viewing microblogs as a 24/7 public information/news platform, the interviewees valued the quickness, conciseness, and connectedness of microblog information. They also thought highly of the openness of microblog infrastructure (e.g., public profile pages, identity verification, and private messaging), which provided easier access to expert and celebrity sources that were previously difficult to contact. Interviewees unanimously agreed that microblogs offered a unique lens to observe the opinion climate in China. Many interviewees sought extra value out of microblogs due to their ability to circulate politically sensitive information and dissenting opinions against censorship. An opinion page editor at *SMD* spelled out the significance of microblogs in the Chinese context: 'In an information-suppressed environment, microblogs might

increase the cost of censorship and that will make a difference' (Editor S9, personal communication, 11 October 2011).

Use of microblog information

Use of microblogs consists of two activities: Obtaining information from other sources and expressing oneself by posting content. Overall, obtaining information occupied a central place in journalistic use of microblogs. Most interviewees indicated that they preferred observing others and reading their tweets more than posting original content. This finding was corroborated through textual analysis. The selected 16 microbloggers followed as many as 862 people on average, suggesting that they received an enormous amount of information from various sources. However, only three microbloggers generated over 500 tweets during the one-month period; all other selected microbloggers were fairly inactive in posting content. When posting on microblogs, the news workers reposted content more often than they posted original tweets, as shown in [Table 2](#).

Although news workers heavily related microblogs to news work, the actual amount of microblog used at work was only moderate. As will be discussed later, microblog use was shaped by various professional and organizational factors. Nonetheless, the interviews showed that microblogs gave rise to new ways of doing news work in terms of information appropriation and information gathering. The first and primary use of microblogs was to appropriate information for reporting. In essence, microblogs were used to monitor trends and search for reportable stories; news workers could follow important sources in the field, communicate with editors via the imbedded messaging feature, and obtain information from peer journalists on microblogs. Though microblog information only occasionally provided them with story ideas, microblog immersion could assist journalists in sensitizing themselves to new trends and understanding the news ecology.

Second, microblogs can be utilized for limited newsgathering. Different from previous studies, our interviews found that microblogs were not only helpful for accessing elite sources but also efficient in locating grassroots sources. The *SMD* current affair journalist made the following statement:

You can find an expert easily if you need to. What if you want to find a student relevant to an incident at a local university? It might not be as easy. But now microblogs can help you with it. (S14, personal communication, 12 October 2011)

Posting on microblogs

At least in theory, microblogs can be used for breaking news, promoting work, and connecting audience members. However, we did not find news workers consciously applying microblogs for any of these purposes. [Figure 1](#) shows the types of tweets generated by the selected microbloggers. The news workers most frequently posted content about their personal lives and opinions about various current affairs. In neither of the newsroom did the news workers promote themselves or engage readers often. They rarely broke news on their personal microblogs. The results also indicated that news workers rarely talked about their jobs or commented on the media's performance. Of all the 3118 tweets, only 268 were related to professional topics. In contrast, sharing information from various sources constituted an important part of the microblog posts.

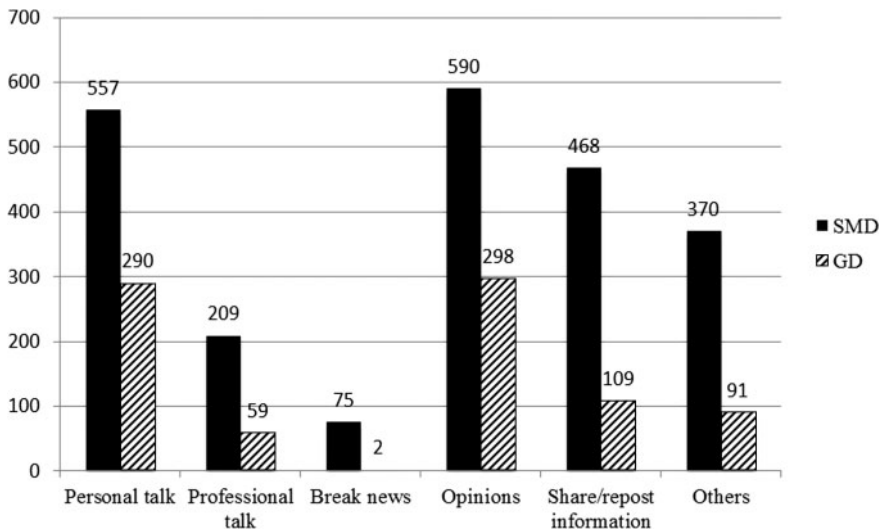


Figure 1. Types of microblogs generated by selected journalist microbloggers.

The selected microbloggers generated a number of posts about their personal lives, which were mostly mundane and trivial. This practice may add to the transparency of news work to a certain extent; however, the phenomenon is more likely a reflection of the inevitable overlap of life and work created by social media.

Professional intervention in microblogs

Microblog patterns can be partly explained by the influence of journalistic values and norms. Overall, the interview results indicated a strong ‘good old journalism’ mentality among Chinese news workers. They tended to dismiss microblogs and UGC as an inadequate and inept form of journalism or simply another piece of technological hype. They emphasized that professional journalism served irreplaceable functions, such as sifting out the true from the false and providing in-depth analyses. They also legitimized professional journalism by virtue of professional values and ethics, editorial controls, and institutionalized production. This stance is best illustrated by *SMD*’s microblog manager’s comment on UGC:

It doesn’t matter how you get your information—via telephone or the Internet. What matters is the quality of the information you have and to what extent you have followed our standards in getting such information ... we should stick to standards such as cross-checking, background research, and logical construction, and then present the product to our readers. (S2, personal communication, 11 October 2011)

The interviews showed that news workers applied similar professional considerations to microblog use. This process echoes previous studies on ‘normalization’ and ‘incorporation’ of new technologies in journalism (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Lee, 2012). Specifically, professional interventions were identified both in the appropriation of microblog information and microblog-based self-expression.

Citing microblog sources

In both newsrooms, news workers embraced Western journalistic professionalism and applied it in news work. When evaluating the quality of microblog information, they invariably expressed concerns regarding its credibility and impartiality. On the one hand, the low perceived trustworthiness resulted from the fact that there was no effective way to verify or crosscheck the information. On the other hand, interviewees were frustrated that most of the microblog information tended to be subjective and emotional; they rated many expressions on microblogs as ‘angry,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘subjective,’ and ‘biased.’

News workers also applied the principle of impartiality in assessing microblog information. They noted that the power distribution between elite and grassroots users was uneven, leading to additional doubts. The culture news editor at *SMD* argued, ‘In the mainstream discourse, elite users’ voice definitely overrides ordinary users’ voice because they are reposted by many more people ... People are naturally inclined to adopt their opinions’ (Editor S9, personal communication, 11 October 2011). According to this perspective, microblogs, supposedly a democratizing public space, were excessively centered on celebrity and elite users. Similarly, some of the interviewees worried that the commercialism of microblogs would corrupt their value as a public space due to corporate interests and public relation operations.

The professional values and norms also shaped the actual use of microblog information in reporting. The emphasis on objectivity and accuracy restricted the use of microblogs in news work. Similar to Reich’s (2013) finding, microblogs only offered news workers a supplementary method for finding and gathering news or simply provided background information. Many interviewees doubted the legitimacy of quoting microblog entries. Conventionally, interviewees make remarks directly addressing journalists’ questions. However, expressions on microblogs do not respond to specific questions, therefore, making them open to inaccurate interpretations. Overall, news workers strongly preferred face-to-face interaction. Even when microblog information was cited, news workers usually combined conventional procedures, such as source assessment, fact-verification, triangulation, and background research. For journalists like the culture news journalist (G3) at *GD*, meeting the interviewees in person or calling them was a necessity unless they already had a strong relationship in which they had developed profound mutual understanding. Many journalists have developed strategies to evade risks, such as screen-capturing the microblog post as a record or double-checking the original post by sending private messages to relevant microbloggers.

In addition, news workers still applied prominence as a value when gathering news on microblogs. This practice especially was reflected in the celebrity-centered approach. In theory, microblogging is decentralized, which in journalism, means increased attention should be paid to ordinary people. In reality, however, news workers still highly privileged elite sources on microblogs due to the belief that elite microbloggers provided more reportable information than grassroots users. Regarding this trend, an editor for economic news at *GD* commented, ‘There are too many grassroots microbloggers out there, and you don’t know where to start. Besides, their tweets are so poorly written’ (Journalist G7, personal communication, 9 October 2011).

Posting on microblogs

Interview evidence suggested that news workers saw personal microblogs as extensions of their professional identity, and this mentality shaped their activities on microblogs. The interviewees clearly indicated the importance of maintaining objectivity on microblogs and were aware of the risks of tweeting opinionated content. In practice, however, maintaining absolute impartiality was almost impossible. As shown in [Figure 1](#), issuing opinions and sharing information were the most frequent types of journalistic microblogging. Many interviewees maintained that they tried to repost factual information or others' comments instead of expressing their own opinions. However, the textual analysis showed that information sharing also was accompanied with latent opinion expressions in many cases. This pattern is similar to findings that journalists in the US deviate from the role of non-partisan information providers by frequently generating opinions on microblogs (Lasorsa et al., 2012).

Our findings further showed that, in addition to Western professional values, journalistic microblogging also was influenced by some unique features of Chinese journalists' identity. In general, traditional journalism was deemed to be of high authority in China. Journalists also perceived themselves to be interpreters and educators (Zhu, et al., 1997). Performing the role of interpreter and educator, news workers in China may be more willing than their Western counterparts to share additional information or provide insights. Believing that journalists by nature were sensitive to valuable information, news workers tended to treat the activities of sharing information and providing opinions as ways of educating or influencing audience members. As some interviewees indicated, making an impact was the ultimate goal of practicing journalism. This tendency was heightened when considering the state control on media. As mainstream media is censored unscrupulously in China, some of these news workers noted that personal microblogs were particularly valuable for expressing alternative opinions or revealing untold stories.

Organizational incorporation of microblogs

While professional values and norms set limits on journalistic use of microblogs, our study further found that the shaping of microblogs in news work took place at the organizational level. Specifically, we identified organizational incorporation of microblogs in production cultures across different news beats, newsroom policy and strategies, and organizational cultures.

Production culture

Different departments and news beats employed microblog information for reporting to varying degrees. Generally, due to their distinct production cultures, soft news more frequently cited microblog sources than hard news. Journalists of hard news, such as political news, court news, and financial news, highly regarded the accuracy of information. They valued the practice of checking a piece of information with sources or giving sources the chance to elaborate on their opinions. Therefore, hard news production could not rely on microblogs due to the potential risks and due to the inefficiency. By comparison, in entertainment and lifestyle reporting, the accuracy of information sometimes gave way to sensational effects. Interviewees admitted that they

sometimes adopted relatively looser journalistic standards because entertainment was less directly related to social responsibility. Appropriation of microblog information in coverage was thus much more efficient for soft news.

The distinction between soft and hard news also resulted from different levels of pressures for generating story ideas. In news beats, such as police and court news, political news, finance news and scientific reporting, established sources and beat systems steadily provided journalists with reportable stories and information. For example, the finance journalist (G9) at *GD* said that most of her news tips were derived from industry reports and informants inside the industry. For the science and technology news journalist (S16) at *SMD*, academic journals and scientists' online forums were the most important sources of information. For breaking news, journalists heavily relied on news hotlines for tips due to its wide availability among various demographic groups. In departments where story ideas more often flowed from sources to journalists, microblog dependency was less pronounced. In contrast, in news beats, such as entertainment and lifestyle news, where journalists were under great pressure to find news ideas, microblogs tended to be used more often.

Organizational policy

Both the newspapers issued microblog guidelines and communicated the rules to employees through internal meetings and training sessions. Sharing similar core principles, the two papers' microblog policies both aimed at distinguishing between journalists' personal and professional identities. Specifically, the guidelines strongly discouraged revealing work-related information, such as newsgathering processes, censorship orders, and personal impressions of interviewees. This policy partly explained why journalistic microblogging failed to increase the transparency of news production in the current cases. There are three main reasons for the use of these guidelines. First, seen in a commercial light, the information gathered at work was regarded as a business secret and, therefore, should be protected to maintain its exclusive value. Second, as microblogs blurred the distinction between professional and personal identity, newspaper management needed to extend the scope of organizational control. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, due to the various censorship and political risks facing the news outlets, newspaper management felt the need to regulate personal microblogging so that the organization's operation would not be endangered.

However, at least at the time of the interviews, guidelines had not proven effective in regulating microblog use in newsrooms. News workers had not shown a clear and consistent understanding of the policy. Sometimes, their understandings even contradicted each other. This confusion resulted partially from the fact that traditional news outlets had a difficult time formulating strategies in managing an emerging technology. The more fundamental reason, as suggested by many interviewees, related to the nature of microblogs as personal media. Most of the interviewees mentioned that microblogs 'destroyed boundaries,' 'collapsed circles,' or 'made different contexts overlap.' Some of them even dismissed the attempt to manage journalistic microblogging as meaningless or wishful thinking.

Moreover, the definition of 'political sensitiveness' was never unambiguous. In most cases, when politically sensitive incidents occurred or when censorship orders were issued, news supervisors had to personally warn journalists and editors against talking

about such matters on microblogs. For example, the opinion page editor (S9) at *SMD* once reposted and praised an editorial on a well-known artist and dissenter in China. Soon after, he received a call directly from the editor-in-chief asking him to delete the post. Apparently, the guidelines could not provide rules of thumb for news workers to follow. In a variety of ways, newspaper management had to pressure individual news workers in order to avoid political risks.

In general, the guidelines provided a general framework rather than concrete rules to news workers. The cultural news editor at *SMD* stated, 'Everyone gradually learns the nature and the characteristics of microblogs. Then we get used to it, adapt to it and further understand our identity and responsibilities' (Editor S4, personal communication, 5 October 2011). This statement does not indicate that organizational policy did not shape journalistic use of microblogs. On the contrary, the regulatory framework, mainly consisting of professional and political control, sensitized news workers to various commercial and political factors of practicing journalism in China.

Organizational strategy

Beyond regulation, news organizations incorporated journalistic use of microblogs in a more strategic way. Both *SMD* and *GD* attempted to expand their influence on microblogging platforms through official accounts. In addition to the promotion effect, organizational accounts also were made into an aggregated and unified source for breaking news. While breaking news through personal microblogs was restricted due to conflicts of interest, news outlets encouraged original reporting through organizational accounts. *SMD*, for example, had routinized the workflow of quickly releasing news through organizational microblogs. Most of *SMD* interviewees knew the procedure of communicating with microblog management about breaking news. At the time of the interviews, *SMD* journalists were rewarded with 50 CNY if their contribution was posted on organizational microblogs.

The purpose of directing news-breaking to organizational accounts was not only to maximize the promotion effect but also to make sure that news products went through editorial control and met production standards. The microblogging manager spoke about this process: 'We must make sure that our organizational account is the only legitimate output. Only in this way is the information controllable' (New media manager S2, personal communication, 11 October 2011).

In addition to organizational accounts, both the newspapers had registered dozens of department accounts covering topics ranging from lifestyle and entertainment to international news and economic news. These department accounts, usually with hundreds of thousands followers, were used to distribute content and to engage readers. In the meantime, all of these accounts also played the role of incorporating individual journalistic microblogs so as to bring them under editorial control. When the need for breaking news and engaging readers was redirected to department and organizational accounts, journalistic microblogs became dominated by everyday talk and information sharing.

Organizational culture

SMD and *GD* have distinct organizational cultures. *SMD* accentuates, albeit inexplicitly, the value of supervising public power and helping the underprivileged. In practice, *SMD*

has been built into a brand known for investigative reports and daring editorials that criticize policy defects and reveal social injustices. As a municipal party organ, *GD* has to strike a balance between its mouthpiece role and its pursuit of market success. Under severe control, *GD* strictly follows the party line to produce ‘politically correct’ reports. In order to attract readers, however, *GD* has developed a pragmatic culture. Rather than criticizing government policies and officials, *GD* emphasizes that the true value of the paper is to provide useful information pertinent to people’s everyday lives.

Both papers were aware of the value of microblogging platforms. However, the different organizational cultures shaped how microblogs actually were managed and utilized. *SMD*’s liberal-minded culture put it in a position to quickly tap into the emerging microblog sphere for its news resources and growing influence on audiences. *GD*, on the other hand, remained conservative and circumspect towards microblogs because ‘political correctness’ was prioritized in its news production. The political risks associated with microblogging platforms held *GD* back from fully embracing the technology.

At *SMD*, an organizational-level microblog management team coordinated by a senior editor experienced in reporting Internet incidents was founded to connect traditional news production and microblog promotion. Department accounts were also well managed. In some departments, news supervisors developed workflows for monitoring trends and distributing news on microblogs. In comparison, at the time of the interviews, there was no microblog management team at *GD*. The *GD* interviewees seemed confused about how the newspaper was strategizing microblogs. They were not familiar with publishing breaking news through organizational accounts, and microblog-based contributions were not rewarded with monetary remuneration. *GD* had an influential organizational account frequently engaging readers, but its department accounts were much more sluggish.

The distinction in organizational culture also was reflected in the individual-level use of microblogs. For example, many news workers at *SMD* used real-name accounts and frequently interacted with organizational accounts to promote news products. The textual analysis also showed that *SMD* journalists were much more active microbloggers, often commenting on public affairs and sometimes touching on sensitive topics, such as civic movements and democratization. Moreover, *SMD* news workers sometimes employed microblogs for ‘boundary-spanning,’ such as disclosing censorship mechanisms or revealing stories that had been censored in the print edition. In a radical case, an investigative journalist (S19) covered a politically charged incident and managed to gather information from the core sources. However, coverage of the incident was banned in print media by the time the journalist finished the story. The editors then decided to publish the write-up of the news story on microblogs in the form of pictures; the story was removed after receiving much attention. Eventually, they managed to let people know about the story without violating the censorship orders. The journalist remarked, ‘I was lucky to have gathered the first-hand information, but other people knew little about it. It was meaningful to let people understand what had happened’ (Journalist S19, email communication, 26 June 2011).

In comparison, *GD*’s news workers kept a low profile on microblogs. Most of them did not use verified profiles, and their tweeting was more personalized. They talked less about ongoing public affairs and chose not to publicly reveal opinions on microblogs. *GD* news workers rarely promoted the news content and did not stress their identity as news professionals.

Discussion and conclusion

Focusing on two Chinese newsrooms, this study examined how microblogs were adapted for journalistic use through both professional and organizational interventions. Admittedly, microblogs have created methods for gathering and distributing news, increased transparency in some aspects, and reshaped journalist–source interactions (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Zhou, 2013). In this study, however, we argue that such changes are checked by contextual influences within specific newsrooms.

This study yielded somewhat universally applicable findings. When evaluating the information on microblogs, news workers continually referred to professional principles, such as objectivity and impartiality. Such principles further set limits on the use of microblog information despite their efficiency. Maintaining professional norms when posting microblogs may be more difficult due to the blurring of identity boundaries. There was no sign that traditional news workers had given up their professional authority and gatekeeping role. We found it hard to qualify whether journalistic microblogging created meaningful transparency in China. Journalists did generate microblogs posts about their personal lives, but they rarely related to news job. The effectiveness of such transparency is doubtful (Lawrence et al., 2013).

We also found evidence of organizational incorporation. Official guidelines were unable to give employees rules of thumb in microblogging, but they generated a latent framework for news workers to utilize microblogs while sensitizing them to commercial logic and potential political risk. Unlike other production technologies, the adoption of microblogs usually was subject to individual decision, and the degree of use varied; despite their growing relevance in news production, microblogs had hardly become an integral tool in the journalists' everyday practices. Though newsroom managers and supervisors might encourage the use of microblogs, they rarely required journalists to do so. In dealing with microblogs, supervisors primarily focused on ensuring that journalists appropriately used them. Nonetheless, we did find that production and organization cultures influenced how microblogs were strategized and managed. This study indicated that the open-minded mentality and politically liberal culture of *SMD* resulted in greater utilization of microblogs than the commercially successful, but politically tame *GD*. It was found that even individual use of microblogs was imbued with the organizational culture.

Our analyses showed that the context matters. The party-state system and the highly censored press environment were indispensable to understanding journalistic use of microblogs. Social media like microblogs arguably contribute to a freer flow of information in societies. However, the effect of social media must be assessed with great caution in authoritarian regimes like China, which constantly bring information and communication technologies under state control (Jiang, 2010; Kalathil & Boas, 2001). Studies have shown that microblogs in China are tamed by state control and even utilized to foster the party's rule (Hassid, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). Similarly, microblogs' potential impact on journalism possibly is interfered with by the regime's longstanding grip on media and information. As the party's state control has been internalized into the logic of journalism, both news professionals and organizations may experience ambivalence in the adoption of communication technologies with liberating power. As shown in this study, political control yielded both motivations and constraints to journalistic use of microblogs. On the one hand, news workers and organizations had to comply with the control and 'play safe' with the new technology. On the other, political control also motivated them to seek extra value in microblogs for 'boundary-spanning' activities.

What is also at work is the strong self-perceived authority of Chinese journalists. Our interviewees invariably accentuated the qualities of the ‘good old journalism,’ while downplaying the legitimacy of microblogs as a competitive form of news. This mentality may have to do with two factors. First, though print media are seeing a worldwide decline, the overall circulation and advertising revenues of newspapers in China keeps growing, suggesting a satisfactory status-quo. Second, the longstanding journalistic culture, including interpretive authority and mass education, may contribute to the continued emphasis on old values. This suggests that, unlike in Western journalism, the analysis of news production in China must consider different, sometimes contradictory, sources of ideological influences (Tong, 2011).

Focusing on journalism in China, this study adds to a growing body of literature on the adoption and use of social media in traditional news production. In addition, this study sheds light on technological changes in newsrooms as the dialectic between diffusion and social construction (Deuze, 2009). Finally, several limitations need to be pointed out. This study is largely qualitative and exploratory, basing its findings on two specifically selected newsrooms and snowballing sampling of interviewees. It primarily considered journalists who were active microblog users. Future studies could benefit from examining different types of newsrooms and more diverse interviewees, such as editors and supervisors, who arguably have more control over news production. Future research also could quantitatively assess journalistic use of social media in China and make comparisons with other emerging new media technologies.

Note

1. Sina Weibo claimed its registered users had reached 500 millions. But this number greatly exceeds the official statistics announced by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which reported the overall number of microblog users was 331 million at the end of 2013. The discrepancy might be because that CNNIC data reflect the size of actual microblog users, whereas Sina Weibo’s data considered all the accounts ever registered, both active and abandoned ones included.

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