Major Social Media Response Under Covid-19 Pandemic in China

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Abstract. Social media has played a key role in China, including marketing promotion, making new friends, and acquiring news. The increasing role social media plays in Chinese people's daily life has significantly shown after the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. This research has studied and compared three major Chinese social media: Weibo, WeChat, and TikTok role during the covid-19 pandemic and how the users as well as the government utilized social media to share information. The study finds that social media has changed its role in making new friends to information sharing. Therefore, the user of social media and the time they have spent on social media also increase significantly. The research also finds that fake news and misinformation related to the covid-19 have been increasing and even breaking the trust between the government and the users. The research strongly recommends the government should take action in response to fake news, rumors, and the negative consequences that those pieces of news brought to people. Despite the punishment of those people who promote misleading information, the government should also work with technology companies to carefully monitor and control fake news in order to limit the sharing of panic among users. Lastly, I also recommend that future scholars and researchers study more about the violent behaviors, and misperceptions of social media bring to audiences.

Keywords: Social Media, Covid-19 Pandemic, Information Warfare.

1. Introduction

With the breaking out of emergencies and breaking news such as natural disasters, or accidents, social media has become a tool that attracts people's attention as well as connects people in the same region or involve in the same events. Most importantly, with the adoption of mobile devices, the use of social media has been booming significantly. Previous literature has reviewed the importance of social media, and how social media has influenced the audiences such as influencing their perception of gender, work, and other social movements. Bradshaw and Howard (2018), Prier (2017), and Bowd (2016) all state that fake news will strongly influence the audiences' perception of the world and behaviors about their social life. Thus, it is vital to understand the role that social media plays in some important social events.

World Health Organization has always encouraged media transparency from SARS to Covid-19. In 2006, right after the outbreak of SARS, WHO (2006) urged international cooperation for vital disease, as "in this globalized age, the world community expects accurate, complete, and timely information about diseases that do not respect international borders." Besides, public health should be taken more seriously under the development of globalization, as WHO (2006) described that "in a globalized world, where people and products travel vast distances virtually in an instant, threats to health, whether real or imagined, can be economically disastrous." During the covid-19 pandemic, China reported several cases that were based on the virus that was detected on imported products and eCommerce packages. The news was also on social media, which encouraged a debate on how the virus would infect people and how could regular people protect themselves when they shopped online, or purchased seafood. Here social media plays a role in educating the general public on some basic medical knowledge.

2. Major Chinese Social Media Platforms under Covid-19 Pandemic

WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok are the three major social media platforms that local Chinese will use to acquire the latest news about the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to their life. The three channels all have unique features that attract users to stay with them. The three channels all face similar challenges of spreading out fake news, and misleading information as well as the manipulation of public opinion during key events in public life. The lack of transparency on how social media platforms in making regulatory interventions on breaking news also make raising concerns among the audiences. Based on the features of each channel, WeChat, Weibo and TikTok have shown different characters while delivering the news to the audiences. Different functions also present different outcomes on how the audiences perceive the same content.

2.1. WeChat

During the Shanghai lockdown in early March 2022, WeChat plays an important role in local Shanghai residents' life. The social function of WeChat soon encouraged local residents to form group chats based on the neighborhood they live. In this way, they could efficiently share the WeChat articles. Most importantly, local government could effectively share official news as well. As the screenshots show how WeChat Official Account posted a key announcement about new cases and the guideline for shopping for food, and medicines, and ordering food deliveries during the lockdown period (Figure 1). Most of the information had received over 100k visits. This account only targets readers who live in Shanghai with daily posts regarding life in Shanghai. Despite news on the WeChat official account, during the covid-19 pandemic, WeChat also had become the platform for Shanghai residents to speak out about China's "zero-covid policy". However, the most circulated news caused severe panic among its readers. For example, in early April, the rumor that Shanghai might be toke over by armed police had widely spread out on WeChat groups. Members of WeChat group chats were so nervous that their life and work might lose control. The panic soon encouraged more people to share the fake news, which started a bad spiral. The increasing number of sharing on this specific piece of fake news caught the government's attention and the official WeChat account started daily announcements on fake news that quickly spread out among people.

2.2. Weibo

As Chinese Twitter, Weibo acts like an open source and forum for people outside of a certain region to know what is going on in that region as well as the news lists by popularness, which means the most popular news will be listed on top and attract more users to read the news. Thus, Weibo's news will allow more comments from any users to read or post. Weibo also allows user-generated content to share, which will diversify the news source and content. After June 1st, 2022, Shanghai reopened after the two-month lockdown, however, rumors started to show up on Weibo about the relockdown soon due to the increasing covid cases. Even though Shanghai reopened after June 1st, the local government still pursued the "zero-covid" policy, and temporary lockdowns in neighborhoods that had cases reported. The fear of relockdown had started spreading out on Weibo, plus the news reports of Beijing's and Hainan's lockdowns had increased the credibility of Shanghai's relockdown. Unlike WeChat, the government puts more restrictions and monitors on Weibo, because the government wants to have more control on the open platform to control people's awareness of which information they should obtain. "The manipulation of public opinion via social media platforms has emerged as a critical issue facing contemporary digital society," especially during a huge crisis, which might break the trust among people. The intense rumors that happened during the covid-19, for example during the Shanghai lockdown period significantly destroyed people's trust in the social media platform as well as the local government (Figure 2). In order to save credibility, the central government tightened the regulations on social media posting, for example, the geological location would appear on each social media post. Unlike the social media platforms operating in the U.S., where social media is centralized among a few providers, in China, the government will shut

down companies that do not comply with the policies. That means, for each social media provider, will have to hire more censor checkers to prevent them from violating government policies.

2.3. TikTok

TikTok mainly focuses on user-generated content, which plays a huge role during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the Shanghai lockdown, much negative news, and the real tragedy that WeChat or Weibo had been blocked on their channels were significantly shared by TikTok. Based on the nature of TikTok, if users want to get more exposure rate or attention, they have to share content that can attract people. On TikTok, "everything is live, real-time, and always-on," because the audience's attentions are too scarce. Influencers try to capture their attention by sharing the funniest, most supervising content in order to let the content go viral. During the Shanghai lockdown, news of people begging for food, or the shocking terrible condition of mobile cabin hospitals won the most visits and reposts. Influencers even had a million followers. In 2020, Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, had 600 million daily active users, and 22 million content producers. Apparently, in 2022, with millions of users and content providers, the information sharing through this platform would be tremendous and powerful.

Based on the content, it shows that the more user-generated content, the more freedom, and people's comments are involved. Even though TikTok and Weibo are all open sources that allow users to send their own content, Weibo is based on hashtags and searches, which requires users to know what they are looking for. On the contrary, TikTok is based on videos and channels from key influencers, who usually continue to post similar content according to their specialties. As a result, followers will easily find content that they care about the most or are most interested in. Another unique feature is TikTok can be shared with WeChat. This is a transformation from public to private. Even if WeChat users do not follow the TikTok account, they can still watch the news and have private discussions with their friends or on the group chat. Weibo does not have this function that users need to screenshot the news or hashtags to share it on WeChat. Another interesting phenomenon is "one app, two systems," which illustrates that those Chinese social media platforms are operated under two censor and surveillance systems. As a result, the news shared by overseas users might not be able to share with their friends, who registered in China. Same as the official news.

3. Social Media and Information Warfare

There are several influences that social media have brought to the audiences. For user-generated content such as Weibo and TikTok, it is very hard to control the content and justify the creditability of the content. As mentioned above, during the Shanghai lockdown period, there were increasing rumors shared on Weibo and TikTok, which caused great panic among the general public. As social media has reshaped how audiences receive and send information, this also happens to healthcare information. Social media has also changed from disease management to biomedical research. For example, the misinformation on the vaccine has largely spread out on social media, and the side effects of receiving the covid-19 vaccine had scared people away. As the government had never directly responded to the side effects as well as reported the side effects transparently, the rumor and testimony had been all over social media, which increase the resistance to getting vaccines as well as the panic about getting side effects after receiving the vaccine.

Secondly, for official channels, such as WeChat official accounts, the news might fall behind and lack engagement. Many news such as the increasing cases, and shopping information were all published a day behind. Many residents had already known the information from other sources. And for the lockdown period, residents needed a channel to report their issues or comment on the news. These requests can be hardly reached through official channels. Based on what happened during the Shanghai lockdown period, shows that social media channels play a significant role in communicating with local residents and the government. But lack of engagement and real-time response, the official news channels on social media cannot resist the damage of faking news and the audiences' irrational

comments. Prier (2017) and Bowd (2016) state that in contrast to traditional cyberattacks, information battles today target the audiences within a society, "influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, diminishing trust in the government" and affecting the media relationships with "their publics and the geographical places and spaces that they have traditionally served." Many scholars and researchers point out the dangerousness of information warfare today. Information warfare will negatively influence the relationship between the government and the people. In democratic countries, it may affect how voters vote for the political candidates. And in another form of the political system, the relationship between the government and the people might also be affected and eventually led to chaos. During the covid-19 pandemic, the news on social media not only presented how people were struggling during the crisis but also broke the trust among the media, government, and audiences. As a result, the government needs to not only monitor the news and comment on social media but also a response to the hottest issues immediately. The value of the news depends on the time, if time passes, the value of news will diminish. As a result, if the government cannot react to the news immediately, the audiences might either lose interest in reading the truth or the faking news has already caused damage.

However, social and private group chats allow people who are from the same neighborhood, suffer from the same conditions, or share the same emotions to gather together. The shared experience has set up a new social relationship to connect strangers. Wang (2016) and Biały (2017) express the same concept that social media has established a new social relationship, and an "unprecedented opportunity to connect with other people. The exchange of memories, experiences, opinions, views, and agendas became easy and—over time—very cheap." The extension of social relationships is to share one's opinion. The audiences want to stay up to date with news and current events of what their virtual friends are on. The newly established social relations have also changed the nature of social media platforms, for example, Weibo and TikTok are perceived as being less "social", and more "informative". It is very difficult to analyze how tight or how long those social relations will remain and how powerful they will change in society, but those relationships really build on the news. In terms of the breaking event, social media channels provide a more efficient way to inform people and help people respond to the emergency.

As a platform, social media has the original feature of social, but with further development, the social feature has started to be replaced by informative. Users start to share the news with their friends not for connecting with their friends, but to let them know the information. This feature has been strengthened during the covid-19 pandemic. Many group chats still remain alive even after the lockdown ends. This is because, within the group, people still need to receive and send information. The new feature of social media has given chances to terrorists as well, as anyone can create shocking news, and they have chances to be exposed to a large audience. No matter how fast the government responds to the news, the internet will record the news and share it with audiences despite where and when they appear online. Thus, the government and organizations need to treat messages on social media more carefully. For Chinese social media platforms and the government, they should highly value the nature of social media, such as when the news appears on the platform, the audiences start to receive the information. As a result, the conflict is not responding to the message in a quick way, but controlling the sharing and posting of misleading information. Now Chinese government focuses too much on controlling and monitoring messages after the news break out instead of preventing the sharing from the first time.

4. Recommendations to Solve the Problem

Fake news and misleading information on social media are global challenges. Fake news intends to encourage violent and discriminate behaviors toward certain groups of people. While misleading information is unintended sharing the wrong information, the damage to people's perception of truth is the same. During the Shanghai lockdown, the discrimination between the group of people tests positive and negative. Much fake news reports that covid patients will pass the virus or become virus

carriers. The news would also exaggerate the side effect after people get infected. The misunderstanding and fake news would strongly promote violent and discrimination of the covid patient. Thus, the Chinese government has restricted the punishment of people or accounts who post and share fake news and misleading information. Internationally speaking, the calls for increasing punishment for sharing fake news have already caught many governments' attention.

Especially in China, the government might increase the control of the news and information posts on social media. Regulations such as selecting comments via Weibo accounts, and verifying each post's geological location by the sender. The increasing censorship, control, and monitoring have lowered the risks of spreading out fake news, but also increase the concern about privacy protection. Social media plays the war batter field for information warfare, the governments worldwide have tried all kinds of steps to "engage fake news, intercept electoral interference, fight extremist social media in the information space." Despite displaying the geological location, the Chinese government also needs to work with technology companies on monitoring fake news and extreme messages. Most importantly, the government needs to better utilize the official account. Currently, maintaining and posting content is all according to fake news or popular comments, however, this protocol has fallen behind the news and people's awareness. The audiences will not be interested in reading news from last time. They want real-time information. Thus, both the central and local governments need to better implement their responses to the news.

Despite the government regulations, another important protocol that the organizations need to take. The covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the fight between technology giants and the government. The increasing pandemic-related misinformation across the platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and TikTok. Fake news openly encourages people to resist vaccine injection, violate stay-at-home orders, and share the panic about the large death rate and vital side effects of the new variant of omicron. Most importantly, social media platforms also target audiences with misleading healthcare information. For example, canned yellow peaches gained popular in one night, because consumers believed that canned yellow peaches could cure fever. Even the producer of canned yellow peaches announced on Weibo that their products did not have any medicinal effect, still, their official message could not stop consumers' passion on purchase. Therefore, social media platforms need to control their message as well as reduce targeting the consumers during the crisis time. Especially, social media platforms need to limit the targeting of advertisement regarding healthcare and medical content.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of social media has changed people's lifestyles. People start to connect with each other not only based on their personal connections, or work but also on shared experiences and geological locations. Each breaking news will become a shared experience that links strange people. Therefore, the government and companies cannot ignore the power of words and respond to negative news immediately. Today, it is the "present economy" that people will focus on what is going on now. Thus the value of news is based on time. Currently, the government's responses to fake news fall behind people sharing the news. Based on the research findings, fake news and misleading information will negatively influence the audiences' perception. However, this research did not focus on learning how people change their perceptions or behaviors of certain news. For example, it is important to learn how the audiences will respond to the extreme language and negative reports that happened during the covid-19, vaccine, and medical treatment. The future study will raise awareness from the government and companies so that they will take serious actions in response to fake news sharing on social media.

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