

Social Media as a Deliberative Arena?
Environmental Protection Bureaus Meet Netizens on Sina Weibo in China

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List of abbreviations

ASEAN	= Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAC	= Cyberspace Administration of China
CCIEE	= China Center for International Economic Exchanges
CCP	= Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	= China Central Television
CEID	= Corporate Environmental Information Disclosure
CNNIC	= China Internet Network Information Center
CRI	= China Radio International
CSR	= Corporate Social Responsibility
EGDI	= The United Nation's E-government Development Index
EGP	= EU–China Environmental Governance Program
EPB	= Environmental Protection Bureau
EPI	= E-participation Index
EPL	= Environmental Protection Law
EU	= European Union
FON	= Friends of Nature (a NGO)
GDP	= Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	= German Corporation for International Cooperation
HCI	= Human Capital Index of the United Nation's E-government Development Index
ICT	= Information and Communication Technology
IFA	= Infocom Development Authority
MEP	= Ministry of Environmental Protection
MII	= Ministry of Information Industry
NDRC	= National Development and Reform Commission
NGO	= Non-governmental Organization
NPC	= National People's Congress
OSI	= Online Service Index as Part of the United Nation's E-government Development Index
PRCEE	= Policy Research Center for Environment and Economy
PSB	= Public Security Bureaus
SARF	= State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television
SCMP	= South China Morning Post
SEPA	= State Environmental Protection Agency
SOE	= State-owned Enterprises
SPPA	= State Press and Publications Administration
TII	= Telecommunication Index of the United Nations E-government Development Index
UN	= United Nations
WTO	= World Trade Organization

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1. Introduction

There is overwhelming consensus that the internet and subsequently social media have fundamentally changed modes of communication and interaction on a global scale. They have made information ubiquitous and instantly available, profoundly changing the social sphere. The seemingly uncontrollable spread of social media has challenged political systems worldwide. In democracies, this has led to calls for more direct political participation and e-government – albeit with mixed results (Diamond 2010; Boulianne 2015; Fuchs 2014; Kent 2013)¹. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, have found it hard to cope with these technological developments and have typically reverted to censorship, repression and propaganda (Pearce & Kendzior 2012; Lewis 2016; Lewis 2012; Rod & Weidmann 2015; Zheng 2008; Han 2015; Gunitsky 2015). Much scholarly attention has focused on singular and highly dynamic events, such as the Arab Spring (Banerjee & Agarwal 2012; Boulianne 2015; Bellin 2012), neglecting the everyday interactions taking place in authoritarian states. This research seeks to address this gap by taking China as a case study. China represents an instructive case because a key characteristic of its political system is its resilience (Nathan 2003; Li 2012; Ahlers, Heberer & Schubert 2015; Heberer 2016). The concept of resilience, which often cited as the main reason for China’s longevity, refers to its ability to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. How, then, has the Chinese party-state risen to the challenges ushered in by social media? This research moves beyond the established and well-researched nexus of repression, censorship and propaganda to suggest that everyday deliberative practices between the Chinese state and society take place on social media. However, these practices are not an end in themselves. They do not merely function as a pressure release valve for disgruntled citizens (Hassid 2012; Stockmann & Luo 2017). Neither are they harbingers of an impending overhaul of the Chinese political system (Yuan 2010; Leib & He 2006; Abbott 2001; Leibold 2011; Rod & Weidmann 2015; Tang & Huhe 2013). Instead, this research argues that these deliberative interactions constitute elements of first-order governance – and thus are, in principle, contributing to governance in China. The overarching aim guiding this research is to analyze the scope and intensity with which the Chinese party-state has established social media as an arena for deliberative practices conducive to governance.

Against this backdrop, this research provides a conceptual contribution by addressing the question of why social media has so profoundly changed China’s media landscape, creating significant challenges for the Chinese party-state in particular and authoritarian systems in general. From a more holistic perspective, the emergence, prevalence and success of social media in China can only be understood by taking the historical trajectory of the media as an institution into account. This institutional

¹ In 2013, Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed that the internet is new, uncharted territory to all of us (*Foreign Policy*, June 20, 2013). The remark sparked an outcry among German internet users, who used her expression of uncharted territory (“*Neuland*”) to show the absurdity of her statement.

approach allows for the identification of three key factors that have driven the development of the media: marketization, professionalization, and internationalization. Exploration of each of these factors also explains why, prior to social media, deliberation was very scarce in Chinese media.

From this vantage point, the change brought on by social media is conceptualized as the latest process shaping the media landscape in China. However, the success and prevalence of these new communication platforms cannot be considered a given, especially given the special characteristics of the Chinese polity. On the contrary; the dealings of other authoritarian states show very different approaches, mostly relying on censorship, repression, propaganda, and – in some extreme cases – even withdrawal from the internet as a whole. While these measures are also employed in China, the success of social media and emergence of deliberative practices are only possible due to the complexities of the changing media landscape. However, the change has been incremental rather than abrupt; indeed, it has stretched over decades. These processes are best described from a perspective of institutional change. By doing so, this research looks beyond established paradigms of the antagonistic relationship between social media and authoritarian regimes. Following Migdal's (2001) idea that state–society relations do not have to be a zero–sum game in which the gains of the one side equal the losses of the other, this research evaluates the potential of social media to benefit both “sides”. This requires focusing not on the well-documented uses of social media by the Chinese government in terms of propaganda or censorship, but rather on examining the everyday exchanges between state agencies and citizens in China. The daily nature of these interactions, their mostly unsensational nature and their issue orientation have prevented them from becoming a thoroughly researched topic – not only in Chinese or area studies, but also in political science.

Prior to the analysis of the empirical data, this research contributes to theorizing by identifying which specific characteristics of social media make them so conducive for deliberative practices. By conceptualizing these characteristics and situating them within the Chinese context, the research illustrates the ramifications of social media's rise within an authoritarian environment. Social media differ significantly from traditional media, which has lead scholars to conceptualize them as an entirely new form of media (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Kietzmann et al. 2011b; Coleman & Freelon 2015; Farrell 2012). Despite the extensive scholarly work on social media, there is still no consensus as to what makes social media so different from traditional media, other than rather diffuse definitions that define the former as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010:61).

This research argues that the most distinguishing characteristics of social media are not just the speed with which information travels or the sheer amount of information available to anyone². It

² While these features are important, they are not decisive for recent social events. They have also created new problems; for example, the problem of identifying and adequately processing relevant information. In

identifies three additional, crucial differences between social and mass media: first, social media's consumers are also potentially its producers; second, messages are disseminated across borders; and third, the selection of communication partners and information sources is self-determined. Combined, these characteristics have shifted the long-established monopoly of information provision and diffusion from news organizations and states to society; more specifically, to each individual citizen. Whereas democracies have had comparatively little trouble dealing with these consequences, authoritarian regimes have faced more difficulties; social media has challenged these regimes and made them more vulnerable to unexpected events. For example, the events of the Arab Spring show the potential of social media to mobilize people and further the cause of collective action; the internet's lack of state boundaries enabled resistance movements in neighboring countries within the region to gain momentum, leading to the overhaul of long-established authoritarian regimes. Even though China has excelled in restricting its part of the internet behind the great firewall, a platform that allows information to spread instantly across the whole country poses a significant challenge.

It was not possible to analyze *all* deliberative practices in Chinese social media for this research. Instead, the focus here is on one of China's most prominent and widespread micro-blogging services: Sina Weibo. The research has chosen the policy field of environmental protection through which to analyze deliberative practices between the Chinese state – represented here by its environmental protection bureaus (EPBs) – and citizens who are active on social media – termed “netizens” throughout this research. Environmental degradation is a major health issue for Chinese society. According to one study (Rohde & Muller 2015), air pollution-related fatalities amount to 17% of all annual deaths in China,, translating into 1.6 million deaths every year³. Monitoring and controlling air pollution is just one of the responsibilities of EPBs in China. At the same time, environmental pollution is impeding the economic growth strategy. In 2010, the Chinese Academy of Environmental Planning estimated the costs of environmental degradation to be US \$230 billion annually – or 3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) (Wong 2013a).

Given the salience the policy field and the high volumes of information that social media tend to generate, a methodological approach is required that can not only cope with the amount of data from a macro perspective but also scrutinize its dynamics at the micro level. To these ends, the research relies on methodological triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative instruments with an offset strategy. The strategy enables the retention of the strengths of each instrument in a

economics, Davenport and Beck's (2001) model of an “attention economy” conceptualizes social media's rivaling features, as well as their consequences and implications.

³ Similarly, a study published in *The Lancet* by Yang et al. (2013) situates “ambient particulate matter pollution” and “household air pollution from solid fuels” as the fourth and fifth important factors (respectively) for disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost, and states that “the physical environment is an important driver of health in China”.

way that mitigates the inherent weaknesses of the other. This methodological vantage point is able to validate findings from different perspectives, place the insights into a more comprehensive context, and meticulously examine micro-level dynamics. This research thus will not only assess whether or not deliberation exists, but will also provide reliable data allowing for comparison of its scope in various dimensions. It will explore questions such as: how are deliberative practices regarding environmental protection scattered across China? And is this issue as salient as medical data suggests? These macro-level insights are supplemented and verified from the micro-perspective of case studies and the specific interactions therein. The qualitative evaluation puts flesh onto the quantitative skeleton and provides evidence of everyday deliberative practices, which so far have taken place outside of the focus of scholarly attention. This detailed analysis contributes to a better understanding of issues discussed by EPBs and citizens who are active on social media (“netizens”) at the grassroots level in China.

2. Research design, topic and methodological approach

In this chapter first the key concepts of authoritarian deliberation and social media are introduced and tied together with regard to their role in the governance of China. After the initial discussion of the concepts several explorative research questions guiding the analysis are presented. Each of these questions is then answered in detail in the subsequent chapters (cf. ch. 2-5). By tying together the research areas of social media, authoritarian deliberation and governance this research looks at an issue nexus neglected by current research. By looking the deliberative practices in the field of environmental protection this research addresses not only a policy field of vital importance for the Chinese party-state but even more so for its citizens. The last section of this chapter outlines the methodological approach of this research. It describes the choice of quantitative and qualitative methods as well as the “offset” study design that distinguishes this research methodology-wise from the existing research.

The rise of social media which are often conceptualized as a “liberating technology” (Diamond 2010; Diamond & Plattner 2012) has challenged authoritarian system around the world (Lewis 2012; Bellin 2012). The actual ramifications of their increasing presence however have varied greatly (Wall & el Zahed 2014; Mohamed Nasir & Turner 2013). Whereas some attribute the fall of authoritarian system during the Arab spring to them there is at the same time evidence suggesting that they may contribute to consolidate authoritarian governments. Examining this aspect more closely studies have explored how social media are used by governments in authoritarian systems to increase or consolidate their power (Toepfl 2011; Rod & Weidmann 2015). Almost exclusively these studies have focused on either repressive (Lorentzen 2014; Stern & Hassid 2012; Mou, Atkin & Fu 2011) or propagandistic measures (Huang 2015; Little 2017; Sullivan 2014; Han 2015). At the same time there is a growing body of literature that takes a more nuanced look at the rise of social media and related technologies (Lewis 2013; Ergenc 2014; Hyun & Kim 2015; Skoric, Zhu & Pang 2016). The focus in these studies is typically set on how the Chinese government can now make information such as laws or regulations more easily accessible to its citizens. The underlying argument mostly follows the rationale that the central parts of the party-state have a vested interest in keeping its citizens apprised of new policies (Yan & Xin 2016; Xia 2010). Well informed citizens will develop a sense of rightfulness as to their legal entitlements in their conscience in certain well specified issues.

Subsequently citizens aware of their rights will pressure local governments to implement new or comply with existing regulations. This strategy tries to mitigate the so called “implementation gap” (Ran 2013; Zhang, Mol & Yang 2017) in China. According to this paradigm the central state is unable

to check whether all local governments accurately comply with his policies⁴. In order to push for compliance the informatization of the populace is used a control tool to apply pressure from below to check on the local governances. Another significant part of the studies focusing not on censorship or propaganda looks at the potential of new and social media from a more technical perspective and attempts to measure how the newly available technologies can and are used by the Chinese government in public service provision (Seifert & Chung 2008; Hao et al. 2016; Ma 2013; Zhang et al. 2015). The application scenarios range from agricultural information system (Lu et al. 2015) to special services for ethnic minorities (Jin & Liang 2015) to education services (Schulte 2014). In these studies the interactions between the party-state and its constituency are focused on with regard to the effect it has on policy implementation and its outcomes. There is evidence however that the party-state's use of social media goes well beyond either information provision or issue oriented public service provision. Drawing on the works of He and Warren it is argued here deliberation in China is existing not only in the forms of village elections (O'Brien & Han 2009), town-hall style meetings where local policies are discussed (He 2014b) but also in social media (Heberer 2016). The party-state is using or at least experimenting (Heilmann 2008) with social media as a platform for deliberation (Göbel 2015; Ma 2013; China's e-government network (中国电子政务网 2012). O'Brien notes that social media are one key element in the recent changes of governance in authoritarian regimes around the world in what he calls "shifting patterns of governance in authoritarian regimes" (O'Brien 2016). The next section introduces and ties together the concepts of authoritarian deliberation and social media.

2.1 Social media as a deliberative arena in China

Deliberative practices are not a new phenomenon in China. The most prominent and scholarly discussed example are arguable the elections at the village levels introduced already more than several decades ago. The spreading of deliberative practices has continued ever since in China and extended well beyond the rural areas into the cities in the form of local neighborhood committees (Heberer & Schubert 2009). At the same time deliberation has been experimented with also at the national level in the form of input mechanisms where citizens can share their opinions on specific policy proposals (United Nations 2017). Even in the most challenging and complex policy fields such as health care reforms have deliberative mechanism been introduced to provide public feedback on

⁴ The argument is more complex and relies on the principal-agent model. In this model an actor called a principal assign tasks to another actor called the agent. The agent after having completed the task is reporting back to the principal. A key problem for the principal then is how to check whether the agent has actually executed the task as intended by the principal. A key assumption of the model is that the principal cannot allocate sufficient resources to completely monitor the agent but has to rely on sophisticated mechanism to ensure proper task completion.

the policy making process (Kornreich, Vertinsky & Potter 2012). It should be noted that deliberative practices although often seen together with democracies are not an indication of democratization. On the contrary most scholarly work acknowledges the very constrained spaces in which deliberation is actually permitted in China while they at the same time state that when they occur they “contribute to better governance” (Kornreich, Vertinsky & Potter 2012:203). Counterintuitively then do deliberative practice that are often associated with democracy or democratization rather seem to stabilize authoritarian system by increasing their quality of governance. Deliberative practices have become widespread albeit dispersed phenomenon. The party-state is also not hesitant to change existing institutions to integrate deliberative practices where he sees fit (Heberer 2016; Heberer & Schubert 2009).

Arguable the greatest challenge and the most significant factor of change in the last decade or so has been the rise of the internet and its thorough permeation of every aspect in daily life. The initial attribution of the internet and particularly of social media as a “liberating technology” already came with the insight that authoritarian regimes might use them successfully to “to control the Internet, stifle protest, and target dissenters”. Since then it seems that the scholarly community has focused on oscillating between the poles social media as either a democratization harbinger or a tool of Orwellian surveillance and monitoring. The historical evidence such as the Arab spring provides mixed results when it comes to the survival of political regimes and social media. China not only has the World’s most complex and efficient censorship and monitoring program in place but it has also created the “golden firewall” to control the flow of information from and to China. The control and monitoring mechanism work so effective that China was able to protect its nascent IT industry from global competitors. As a consequence China’s social media ecosphere is not dominated by the otherwise global giants such as Facebook, Twitter or Youtube but has consists entirely of home grown companies. A key obstacle for access to the Chinese market is of course the mandatory cooperation with the Chinese government and the far-reaching consequences. By 2017 however the Chinese companies have developed their services and platform not only to dominate the Chinese market wherein they are protected, but the quality of their services and their adaptability has made them even potentially attractive for users outside of China. The WeChat platform of the Chinese company Tencent for example has become so successful that it attracts about a billion of monthly active users comparable to the likes of Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Even though some 90% of the users of WeChat are Chinese some 10% translating into about 90 million people are not. The success of social media raises the question as to what properties they exhibit that make them so distinguishable from traditional media like television, newspaper or radio? Social media must differ significantly as they have led to phenomena like big-V or self-media (自媒体) (Creemers 2016;

Heberer & Müller 2017; Shi-Kupfer & Zhu 2013). Nonetheless even when social media were said to contribute fundamentally to the destabilizing of authoritarian regimes around the world China seemed to be surprisingly resilient (Bellin 2012; Lewis 2012).

The question what these characteristics are and how each of them impacts on state-society relations has so far not been addressed in the literature. The lack of a conceptual understanding of the key characteristics of social media is probably the cause why phenomena such as deliberative practices have been so far largely neglected. By identifying four characteristics based on a survey of the existing literature this research seeks to contribute to address this void.

Similarly other scholars have made the case for a more nuanced and holistic approach to evaluate the impact of social media on state society relations (Wright et al. 2016; DeLisle, Goldstein & Yang 2016b). Unlike traditional media social media have changed “Although much attention to these media has focused on their importance as a way for ordinary citizens to express and share opinions and information, new media also have changed the way the Chinese authorities communicate with the people they rule. China’s party-state now invests heavily in speaking to Chinese citizens through the internet and social media [...]” (DeLisle, Goldstein & Yang 2016a:1)

Therefore the first starting point of this research is the question how do social media differ from traditional media? While the answers to this question can explain why social media have become a new and thriving platform for state-society interaction they fail to explain why this technology has become so successful in China in the first place. The success of social media is not only due to their technological feature or the willingness of the party-state to use this new platform as yet another tool for public opinion management. The media in China as an institution have undergone profound changes from the Leninist party’s mouthpiece to a complex part of the governing apparatus. From an institutional perspective the media have been molded by complex amalgam of factors over the past decades. Economic forces like marketization and commercialization have not only made the media an industry sector in their own right generating revenues for the state but also the orientation has changed. Increasingly efforts to address audiences outside of China are made to compete on a global scale in the battle of public opinion in the existing western dominated media world. The new economic based incentive structure changed not only the media from a subsidy driven industry sector to one of service oriented value creation. The competition on the micro-level between the different outlets also led to changes in the way the work itself was conducted. Some ramifications came in the form of previously more or less unknown practices such as blackmailing by journalists whereas others evolved around the professional understanding of journalists and reporters. While social media do not work like traditional media in terms of news production and proliferation the discourses and ethos did change how professionals conduct their work. Especially regime critical or

investigative journalists have taken the opportunity to detach themselves from the corset of anticipated obedience and actual governmental control taking place in media companies and use social media as a platform where they can not only get in touch with their tip but also to present their work to an interested audience the much more in the way they see fit.

All of these factors changed the media as an institution in China long before social media arose. How did set the stage for the successful rise of social media in China? In order to answer this question chapter 3 looks at the historical developmental trajectory of the Chinese media landscape through the lens of institutional change.

State-society relations often researched with regard to particular events like catastrophes. But how do the everyday interactions look like? In the shadow of national or provincial events the everyday communication taking place between the government and its constituency provides a more realistic insight into the practices taking place in China on a regular basis.

Deliberation by definition is not tied to a specific policy domain. The complexity of social media combined with the large volume of information and data generated and distributed there on a daily basis however make it necessary to narrow the issue area down. Environmental protection is adopted as the policy field in which the interactions will be analysed for several reasons. First of all the issue itself is comparatively insensitive⁵ which makes censorship on a larger level less of a challenge for the data collection process. At the same time environmental protection has gained prominence not only in scientific research, but also in state-society relations as an increasingly salient topic. The salience of the issue is not only reflected in rising mortality statistics in China which can be tied to environmental pollution. The nature of pollution itself which often comes in very tangible ways such as smog, oily water or lying around industrial waste makes it easy for citizens to identify deficits and document them. Equipped not only with their own oral accounts but increasingly so with audio-visual material documenting their cause citizens can use social media as an ideal platform to articulate their grievances and communicate with the corresponding authorities. Against this backdrop deliberation is researched with focus on environmental protection as a policy field.

Since social media have added the potential for deliberation to the Chinese and that research combining social media and deliberative practices in China is scarce this research takes an explorative approach to address two principal questions in its empirical part: What is the scope to which EPBs are actually present on social media? How do everyday interactions impact on local governance?

⁵ The emphasis here is on comparatively. Any policy domain can become sensitive instantly in case of catastrophes or other events that draw massive public attention to them and potential governmental failure. Nonetheless environmental protection does not carry an obvious almost compulsory potential for state-society conflicts such as topics like falun gong, Taiwan or the events of the Tiananmen square protests in 1989.

The first research question will be answered in chapter 4. Sina Weibo as one of China's key social media platform is taken as a case study to evaluate the extent to which EPBs are present there. The assessment of the scope is most adequately answered with a quantitative instrument as they are best suited to illustrate characteristics of existence, geographical distribution and the distribution of properties of the EPBs presences. The quantitative evaluation thus will shed light on how many EPBs are actually present on Sina Weibo or how they are distributed across China and identify patterns insofar as they exists.

The results of the quantitative analysis also serve to identify promising cases for look in more detail into how exactly the everyday deliberative practices take place and in what manner they contribute to the local governance. In order to collect source material for a qualitative content analysis a set of particularly promising EPBs is selected based on the insights gained in the previously conducted quantitative section. This approach clearly follows a most likely cases design in so far as it looks for deliberation in the place where it is most likely to happen. Therefore if no deliberation were to be found here, it would be highly unlikely that it would exist elsewhere in the Chinese cyber sphere. The advantage of this approach clearly is the data collection will most likely not be in vain and even if it were this fact would contribute to advancement of political science by suggesting that deliberation does not most likely not exist in Chinese social media.

2.2 Central research questions

Against the backdrop of afore delineated rise of social media in China and the government's use of it this research addresses several explorative research questions:

- 1) What are the key characteristics of social media that sets them apart from other i.e. traditional media?
- 2) How can authoritarian deliberation conceptually be tied to social media?
- 3) What factors set the stage for the success of social media in China?
- 4) How widespread are presences of EPBs on social media?
- 5) If and how do the interaction of EPBs with netizens contribute to local governance?

The first two questions are dealt with in chapter 2 and the third question is guiding chapter 3. The focus of this research is set on shedding light on the last two questions which are dealt separately in chapters 4 and 5. Each chapter starts by discussing the relevant literature with regard to the key questions and related concepts. In the empirical based chapters 4 and 5 the literature reviews is restricted to insights immediately applicable to the data and methodology.

2.3 Methodology

In order to obtain a comprehensive as possible assessment of deliberative practices in social media in China two objectives with methodologically antagonistic requirements need to be combined. On the one hand the scope and extent of deliberative practices in social media needs to be explored and measured to assess the spread of these practices across China but also to be able to judge how frequent the phenomenon of deliberation on social media actually is. On the other hand an analysis of the deliberative practices – the interactions between state and societal actors – with regard to their impact on governance which is complex and transcends calculatory tools is needed.

The question of the scope of deliberative practices calls for a quantitative approach because of the nature of the desired insight but also and more importantly due to the potentially large volume of information that needs to be processed. The complex analysis of actual interactions requires an intimate understanding of the context in order to evaluate the dynamics and their outcomes with regard to governance. The intricacies of the material i.e. the conversations on social media require a careful qualitative content analysis on the basis of an adequate analytical framework.

A comprehensive research on deliberative practices on social media requires both approaches to be combined. This is done using an “offset” mixed-methods design. Key to this approach is “that the research methods associated with both quantitative and qualitative research have their own strengths and weaknesses so that combining them slows the research offset their weakness to draw on the strength of both” (Bryman 2012:633). The weakness of the quantitative analysis regarding the scope is that it cannot shed any light on what the contents or the possible results of deliberative interactions in social media are. But without this information the knowledge of the distribution of these interactions is severely limited. The biggest drawback of the qualitative analysis then is that while valuable insights about the course and effects of deliberation are gained, this analysis cannot say whether the analyzed conversations are actually common across China. Additionally the selection of cases for the content analysis should be based on transparent parameters. The offset research design adopted here allows addressing these issues and mitigating them. Using this methodological approach enables this research to make a systematic survey of government uses of social media while at the same presenting results about the dynamics and effects of these interactions.

2.3.1 Generating the sample of EPBs from Sina Weibo

For the data retrieval process, which began in March 2012 and ended in January 2014, a total of 185 EPBs were identified on Sina Weibo's governmental service website⁶. All available account information – such as account description, reason for verification, account creation date, and number of friends, followers, and posts – were downloaded. A detailed list of all available information is provided in the annex to this chapter. To obtain a comprehensive view of interactions between EPBs and other users, the posts of the EPBs, the comments directed towards them, and all discussions originating from their content were downloaded. This was necessary because the analytical concept of authoritarian deliberation requires focusing on the interaction between users and EPBs⁷.

The data was downloaded from the Sina Weibo API (application programming interface) using methods provided by the REST (representational state transfer) interfaces. To do so the author wrote a program in java that used the library `weibo4j`⁸ to access Sina Weibo's interfaces. In order to download the program the author had to register himself in Sina Weibo and then as a Sina Weibo developer to gain personal and program access tokens which are necessary to access data from the portal. The program had to use the limited resources that Sina Weibo offered at the time to developers for free. The limit was expressed as rate limits. Sina Weibo had a specific rate limit for each data type available from its interfaces. Typically the download of messages - which Sina Weibo called statuses – the rate limit was about 1,000 messages every 15 minutes. Technically to download this many messages was finished after some minutes so that the rest of the time the program had either to wait or perform some other task that did not involve downloading messages like collecting detailed user information. Nonetheless the rate limits did affect the data collection to the extent that the download process took a long time to gather all the data that was somehow related to the EPBs. In general the program took a list of Sina Weibo accounts which comprised the EPBs of the sample and then first downloaded all the information concerning the accounts. Then all the messages of the individual accounts were downloaded. The next step then was to download all messages that were related to the already downloaded messages from the EPBs and the account details of the corresponding Sina Weibo accounts or users. All information was stored in `utf8mb4`⁹ tables of a mysql database. The gathered information was mainly stored in two tables: the user data table and

⁶ See <http://gov.weibo.com/government/index.php>, last accessed 18.4.2016.

⁷ The commenting and sharing users were also captured.

⁸ Cf. the download page of the library <https://code.google.com/archive/p/weibo4j>, last accessed 9.7.2018.

⁹ Otherwise messages containing emojis could not be saved in the mysql database;

the messages table¹⁰. Due to the characteristics of the data it was possible to link the data from both i.e. to get all messages from one particular Sina Weibo account or user.

Only with these information then could a data structure like a conversation be constructed. A conversation is the tree like representation of the interactions starting with one specific message. This data structure allowed computing coefficients indicating the level of interaction and deliberation which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5. For the qualitative analysis conversation were exported from the database to rtf-files using a filter written by the author. The filter allowed an efficient – as it did not include advertisement or other place wasting icons – representation of the interactions in word documents for each EPB. Each of the documents then was imported into MAXQDA which is a widely used qualitative analysis software for the qualitative evaluation.

For the quantitative analysis the program SPSS was used which could access the mysql database directly using SQL (structured query language) commands. The direct access of SPSS to the database allowed to compile datasets to specific analytical needs. Some of the analytical insights presented in chapter 5.3.6 that shed light on characteristics of the conversations of the EPBs are based on aggregation of messages and the linking of the conversations back to the users that contributed to the conversations. The starting point for the data collection process was to identify the EPBs present on Sina Weibo, so that their account information could be stored in the user table and then that their messages could be downloaded into the status table. Then all these messages were contextualized in the sense that all information relevant to these messages from other users as well as the details of these users were stored in the database as well.

As Sina Weibo did not offer a list of all EPBs the start of the data gathering at the beginning of 2012 was to manually identify EPBs present on the platform. A reasonably good starting were the 185 EPBs accounts listed on Sina Weibo's "Hall for Celebrities" (名人堂), under the category of "Governmental Affairs" (政务厅), in the section of "Other Structures" (其他机构), and the subsection of "Environmental Protection" (环保)¹¹. To the general public, these accounts represent EPBs whose identity has been verified by Sina Weibo. Citizen users can thus be certain to communicate with a proper state agency when addressing them. Here, the verification process helps citizens to reliably identify government agencies, highlighting the usefulness of verification processes for state entities.

¹⁰ For performance reasons images were downloaded by separate thread from the program and then stored in the status table. For more details on the structure of the tables and the information available for the analysis kindly consult the section in the annex (cf. 8.1 overview of retrieved information).

¹¹ See <http://verified.e.weibo.com/gov/huanbao>, last accessed 19.4.2016.

The placement of “Environmental Protection” under the residual category of “Other Government Structures” suggests a comparatively low popularity of EPBs and the policy field of environmental protection – at least on Sina Weibo¹². This classification stands in contrast to the significantly increased importance that has been assigned to environmental protection in state–society relations (Zhang & Barr 2013). In the polity, the increase became most visible with the upgrading of the formerly-known State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) to the status of the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) in 2008 by the national People’s Congress (Wu 2009). The status improvement, however, has its limits. As Qiu and Li point out, even with their new authority, the resources problems originating from central–local relations and power struggles within the bureaucracy on each administrative level, in combination with the incomplete and rather porous legislative situation, pose significant obstacles (Qiu & Li 2008).

At the time, account verification – to make sure that the account actually belongs to the person, group, or company it claims to represent – was not compulsory for Sina Weibo users. Therefore, an unknown number of EPBs could exist that were not verified and thus not included in the sample. It is necessary to check for these cases as it may decisively influence the representativeness of the sample: too many excluded cases would significantly weaken the sample’s representativeness, whereas only a small number of excluded cases would strengthen the attained insights with regard to their generalizability.

To assess the number of potentially omitted EPBs, a database search was conducted after the completion of the data collection process¹³. The search with the keyword “EPB” (环保局)¹⁴ in the names of the Sina Weibo users revealed that at least 34 more users matching this criterion exist, which are not represented in the 185 cases in the sample. Of these 34 hidden¹⁵ EPBs, six were verified on Sina Weibo, thus marking them as a state agency¹⁶. “Hidden” here refers to the fact that

¹² Beside environmental protection, there were four other government branches in this category: “Culture and Education” (文教), “Sports” (体育), “Meteorology” (气象), “Quarantine” (质检), and “Others” (其他).

¹³ The database, with its more than 9 million users, is not exhaustive compared to the more than 300 million users of Sina Weibo. It would be tempting to take the downloaded users and draw generalizations from their characteristics about the whole Weibo community. Since the sample has not been generated in a random manner, this would be a breach of established methodological conventions. What the sample does allow, however, is making observations and testing hypotheses about the users of Sina Weibo who engaged in discussions with the EPBs. The obvious solution – to search Sina Weibo directly, using its search function – did not yield usable and meaningful results. The implementation of the corresponding feature of the API could not be implemented due to lack of resources, but the results obtained from manual searches suggest it would not significantly alter the outcome.

¹⁴ Searches with other terms, e.g. “环保厅”, did not alter the trend.

¹⁵ “Hidden” here is used to highlight that they were not publicly categorized and promoted (like those in the sample) and were therefore not as accessible to the public as those in the sample. Not being verified may reduce the credibility and visibility of an account and therefore impact on its audience reach and impact.

¹⁶ The identification of these EPBs was only possible after all data had been collected; therefore, it was not possible to include them into the sample, as they were “hidden” (cf. footnote 111). Why Sina Weibo did not list them in the government service section is impossible to determine.

these EPBs were not listed in the corresponding section for environmental protection state agencies on Sina Weibo, and in this regard not accessible to the general public. However, if the audience were to search for them manually, they would be able to discover them.

These six EPBs pinpoint the general phenomenon that not all verified state agencies are categorized properly in or by Sina Weibo. Surprisingly, the MEP seems not to be active on any social media at all¹⁷. Altogether, only six cases that would have been eligible were not included in the sample of 185 cases¹⁸. Strictly speaking, the other 28 EPBs are not necessarily EPBs, as Sina Weibo did not verify them as such using their verification mechanism. A qualitative evaluation of their descriptions and content strongly suggests that the great majority of them are in fact EBPs¹⁹. Most EPBs not only possess verified accounts, but are also listed in the corresponding section of the Sina Weibo platform, suggesting that the sample represents an excellent coverage of all EPBs active on Sina Weibo at the time. The sample representativeness, then, allows for assessing the scope of representativeness of EPBs in comparison to other state agencies. As environmental protection is a relatively insensitive yet prevalent topic in China, with frequent events that are able to garner nationwide attention, it could be reasonably expected that EPBs are among the most active state agencies in social media.

2.3.2 Sample consolidation

The 185 EPBs within the sample represent an excellent coverage of all EPBs active on Sina Weibo. The EBPs are located on every level of the administrative echelon ranging from township to provincial EPBs. However, each of them had to be checked individually to ensure the quality of the sample. A closer look revealed that not all accounts listed in the section of government agencies of environmental protection either belonged to this category or were useful for answering the research questions. Altogether, 51 users had to be removed from the original sample, as they did not represent EPBs or equivalent state agencies portrayed in such a way as to attract a public audience for complaints, demands, and tips in the field of environmental protection. The 51 users were excluded after a manual qualitative evaluation of their account information and posted content unambiguously revealed that, in almost all cases, they represented individuals rather than an EPB.

¹⁷ No account of the MEP could be found on Sina Weibo or the platforms provided by its biggest competitor, Tencent, at the time, and no reference to any social media could be detected on their website.

¹⁸ A criterion for the selection of the sample was that only verified state accounts would be included. But even if one would consider all neglected 34 EPBs, as part of the underlying population of EBPs in China, the representativeness of the drawn sample would still be very solid.

¹⁹ However, for individual cases one must be very prudent. For example, one of these 28 EPBs with the name "成县环保局李雪红" – which can be translated as Cheng county (in Longnan, Gansu province) EPB Li Xuehong – indicated a somewhat official account. However, while the name indicates that this account is at least a member of the EPB, the contents of the account are exclusively of a personal nature (cf. <http://www.weibo.com/u/3967050414>).

The majority of the 51 removed users were state agencies, such as Green Teams (绿化队), which primarily deal with the maintenance of parks and recreation. The rest consisted largely of institutions working on building an environmentally sensitive populace through educational means²⁰. Notable exceptions to this were the United Nations Environment Program (联合国环境署), as it is the sole international organization of the original sample, and the National Tourism Bureau (国家旅游局). The latter is particularly important, as it represents a very active account with an extremely huge followership (more than 5.3 million users). Had it remained in the sample, it would have greatly distorted its quantitative characteristics.

The categorization of government branches by Sina Weibo clearly indicates that a citizen user would find a list of EPBs in this section of the platform. Contrary to this assumption, several non-state actors such as companies and NGOs were also listed there. The most well-known representative for NGOs is the Friends of Nature (FON, 自然之友), putatively the oldest existing NGO in the field of environmental protection, which was established in 1994. Its listing amid the government institutions becomes even more implausible when looking at the reason why FON was given the status of a verified account. In the explanation, Sina Weibo recognizes that FON is an environmental NGO (民间环保组织) but still puts in the government agencies section. Admittedly, FON constitutes the only wrong classification of an NGO in the entire sample.

After the qualitative filtering, the original sample of 185 cases was reduced to 133, which met the criteria previously outlined in the theoretical discussion about authoritarian deliberation (cf. chapter 3.3). From here on, mentions of the sample refer to the refined list of 133 EPBs.

The sample-generating process highlights three issues. First, state agencies are active on social media and want to be clearly visible and accessible as such to the general public. Second, EPBs are still underrepresented vis-à-vis other state entities on social media, such as PSBs, and there is no indication that this imbalance is changing – in spite of the public salience of the issue. Third, Sina Weibo is one of the most popular – if not *the* most popular – social media platforms for both netizens and state entities, whether in the form of individual or organizational accounts. In the following sections, an in-depth analysis of the refined sample of 133 EPBs is conducted.

2.3.3 Critical appraisal of the obtained data

The data downloaded using Sina Weibo's application programming interface (API) is very extensive as the volume suggests. At the same time it should be noted that the data does not represent a raw and

²⁰ An example of this is the user "Education for environmental responsible citizens" (公民环境责任教育). This was originally set up in an MEP-initiated campaign to raise awareness about environmental-related issues in September 2011 (cf. Xinhuanet (新华网) 2011). As the campaign ended, so did the maintenance of the account, and the last post dates back to August 22, 2012.

pure excerpt of the interactions taking place on the platform. Arguably the most important factor diminishing the representational value of the data is the pre-publication censorship. Social media and Sina Weibo is no exception to this rule have mechanisms like stop-word lists in place to prevent certain content from being distributed. So users may actually enter a word or phrase to publish on the platform, but it may automatically be deleted by the platform prior to being visible to others. This also excludes them from data gathering techniques used here to obtain the data set. The second most important factor is post-publication censorship. Some words, phrases, images or videos are only classified to be censored after some time. This is typically the case when a shared message attracts a huge audience quickly and so becomes “viral”. Then messages containing or relating to this viral message are deleted while they may have been publicly available for some time. This impact of pre- and also of post-publishing censorship is difficult to estimate. For pre-publishing censorship it is – given the resources of this research project - almost impossible to determine the scope. Even comprehensive research projects such as The Hongkong University’s Weiboscope²¹ are only able to detect post-publishing censorship but it requires a computational resources that were beyond the scope of this research project.

Despite the possible bias of the collected content the volume of the information retrieved and analyzed in this research is the so far the most extensive in studies about deliberative practices on social media in China. It should also be noted that critical comments and messages of citizens constitute a significant portion of the contributions analyzed in the qualitative evaluation presented in chapter 6. Most likely the wide absence of manually detectable censorship in the retrieved data is rather due to the only local importance of the criticism and the lack of dynamics that could have risen issues from the periphery of the political system to its center or to the national audience.

²¹ Available at <http://weiboscope.jmssc.hku.hk>, last accessed 5.7.2018.

3. China's media: between continuity, change, and deliberation

China's media²² have changed significantly since the reform and opening period. The party-state has constantly adjusted its policies and adapted to challenges triggered by externally introduced processes such as commercialization or the emergence of social media (Chen et al. 2016). Since the 1980s, it has charged its flourishing media sector with tasks well beyond the traditional paradigms of propaganda (Brady & Wang 2009; Shambaugh 2007) or thought work (Holbig & Gilley 2010; Lynch 1999), and today they serve as public diplomacy tools (d'Hooghe 2005; Hooghe 2007; Sun 2015) and platforms to provide consultative opportunities (He & Thøgersen 2010; Teets 2013). While the former is tied to China's foreign policy, the latter has profoundly changed state–society relations in China. Authoritarian regimes are particularly susceptible to the dynamics emanating from social media, as the events of the Arab Spring have shown (Lewis 2012).

How has China dealt with social media? Is the party-state managing them as if they represented a threat to its dominance over public opinion, or is it trying to use them to improve its governance? Answering these questions requires a holistic approach that goes beyond the dominating discourses focusing on the censorship, repression, and propaganda nexus, which insufficiently explains the party-state's reactions and strategies. By replacing the prevalent state-vs.-society frameworks with a more nuanced state-*in*-society perspective (Migdal 2001), this research explores a so-far ignored feature of social media in China: the opportunity therein for political consultation and deliberation.

Participatory elements provided by social media will be analyzed using Baogang He and Mark Warren's concept of authoritarian deliberation. This concept describes how interactive practices improve governance by providing opportunities for state–society interaction in an authoritarian context. In this sense, He and Warren differentiate between consultative and deliberative practices. The former are used to collect and channel societal preferences to the state – with regard to specific topics, which are determined and set up solely by the state. In contrast, deliberative practices provide more opportunities for societal participation and are characterized by the fact that they allow the expression of public opinion about a wide range of topics. Thus, societal actors are allowed (albeit only to a certain extent) to set the political agenda in order to address issues they deem important and to suggest and discuss solutions. In this way, society can have a measurable impact not only on the policy-making process but also on policy implementation and evaluation (c.f. He & Warren 2011:273,74). In reality, it may be very difficult to draw a definite line between consultative and deliberative practices, as they represent more ideal theoretical cases than clear-cut empirical

²² "Media" here is referred to in Wiesław Sonczyk's (2009) sense as the sum of all laws, regulations, norms, and institutions constantly used to inform society about events and news, as well as all the media organizations (e.g. private or public media companies) that are bound by these restrictions and provide channels of mass communication. As Sonczyk points out, the relations between a country's media system and its political system are strong: any "media system functions within a country's political system, is its element and possesses characteristic traits within each country" (2009:2).

findings. Authoritarian deliberation accounts for the particularities of China that elude static and dogmatic approaches.

The occurrence of deliberative practices in China's social media can only be understood by taking into account the trajectory of the development of the Chinese media in recent decades. From this vantage point social media, are the most recent development in China's media, but they are based on – and only possible in – the economic and political environment formed by a variety of processes. To assess the processes changing the Chinese media, an institutional perspective is adopted. The media are conceptualized as an intermittent institution between state and society. In chapter 4 from the existing literature four processes are identified that shape the media in China since the reform and opening period – of which the emergence of social media is but the latest. The benefit of the institutional perspective is that it allows for the detailed and specific findings of existing scholarly contributions to be placed into the broader context of the media, state, and society triangle. From this macroscopic angle, the change in the media that ultimately produced authoritarian deliberation can be explained, and its impact on the micro level contextualized.

This research contributes to the literature on state–society relations in China, with particular regard to the role of social media, which have so far not been addressed in the existing literature. It shows why traditional media were not apt for deliberative practices – despite changes therein – and how social media created the necessary interactive communication platform. The structure of this chapter reflects the theoretical approach and first elaborates on the institutional basis of the analysis before identifying factors shaping the Chinese media. Subsequently, the concept of authoritarian deliberation is introduced and applied to social media. Against this backdrop, research questions for the ensuing operationalization of the concept are formulated in the summary of the chapter.

3.1 The rise of social media in China

Authoritarian deliberation explains how state–society interaction can improve governance, but it does not explain what makes social media particularly conducive to this process. Thus, it is necessary to first look at larger processes of change, which have paved the way for social media and authoritarian deliberation. Due to the slow and gradual nature of change, an institutional perspective is adopted to contextualize the analytical concept within a broader theoretical approach – not only to situate the research within the broader web of scholarly insights, but also because theories “provide an overarching framework – the ‘big picture’” (Mearsheimer & Walt 2013:435). The use of theories is advantageous because theories guide the research process by offering causal mechanism and criteria for the selection of factors. This is particularly important in the current context of “big data”, where scientists struggle to discern between ineffective and relevant factors for obtaining viable results and try not to be led astray by spurious causal relationships. The view of the media from an institutional

perspective is a result of the literature review process, during which multiple processes impacting on the Chinese media became apparent and turned out to be significantly interrelated. Their impact needs to be outlined in order to explain the success and ramifications of social media, which would not be possible without the other three processes.

To illustrate the effects of the aforementioned processes and the resulting incremental change of China's media, the example of social media platform Sina Weibo is provided. Due to its popularity and widespread use, the platform is also used to identify case studies for empirical analysis (Sullivan 2014). The micro-blogging²³ platform Sina Weibo is operated by a private company. With this platform alone, the company earned approximately US \$586 million in 2013, and is worth more than \$5 billion according to its listing on the New York stock market²⁴. The company's stock price reached its all-time high in 2011, at more than US \$8 billion, which coincided with the revelation that the platform would be made available in English (Chao 2011). These facts are important with regard to three aspects: (1) they highlight the economic clout of Sina Weibo, (2) they are symbolic for the internationalization efforts of Chinese media companies (走出去战略), and (3) they reflect the increasing professionalization of Chinese media. These facts represent processes of change; they are linked by causal mechanisms and mutually shape each other. The professionalization is shown by the quality and innovativeness of the services offered by Sina Weibo, even in comparison with international competitors like Twitter²⁵. At the same time, it is the result of fierce competition in the media realm – in this case between Sina and its greatest rival, Tencent (腾讯)²⁶. The professional excellence has so far almost exclusively concentrated on the Chinese market, but measures are taken to extend its services to international audiences; for example, by providing an English user interface. Though the switching of the language itself does not automatically entail a broader or deeper diffusion between Chinese and international audiences, it will be a significant step for the company and closely watched - not only by Chinese state authorities. The state's control is already affecting international news media; with internationalization efforts, this influence is likely to increase (Cook 2013). The state's grip on Sina Weibo is tight with regard to censorship and control mechanisms (Xiao 2011; Yang 2013; Zhu et al. 2013); however, economic pressures take a toll on this firm grip. The state pressured Sina Weibo in late 2011 and early 2012 to introduce a compulsory real-name

²³ Micro-blogging is a special type of social media, which enables users to publish and share short messages – usually not longer than 140 characters. Messages can also contain images or videos and are received instantly by users who have subscribed to the stream of information of the original user, who can forward messages to their followers in turn.

²⁴ See *The Wall Street Journal* 13.08.2013. The western equivalent to Sina Weibo, Twitter, has a similar revenue projection: US \$600 million in 2013 (*The New York Times*, 17.08.2013).

²⁵ For arguments from an economic point of view, see Craig (2013); from a technological point of view, see Falcon (2011).

²⁶ Tencent, with its product WeChat (微信), is even more successful in its internationalization efforts. WeChat has more than 100 million users outside of China (Xinhua 15.8.2013).

registration system, which would have ended the anonymity of the platform. However, the implementation and success months later turned out to be very sloppy. As Negro (2013) points out the reasons for this failure were twofold. First, Sina Weibo tried to do what was possible to let its customers bypass its identification system, thus continuing to guarantee their anonymity. This was done out of economic consideration, as the company feared losing customers to domestic or international rivals. As Sina stated in its official annual report, compliance with regulations “may have a material and adverse impact on our share price” (Negro 2013:9). Additionally, if customers considered Sina to be actively cooperating and strictly complying with state requirements, they might leave the platform. A massive decrease of audience would be a disaster for the company, which relies on advertising revenues that depend on the size of the audience (Lagerkvist 2012). Second, state authorities underestimated the compliance costs that the regulation would produce for the companies. According to Fang Xingdong, an IT expert based in Beijing, in 2006 companies had to pay ¥5 for each check with public security bureaus that they were required to make for every single user (Rong 2006; Negro 2013:9). Considering the hundreds of millions of users of a platform like Sina Weibo, the consequential costs for a real-name registration system would have been immense. The expense calculation adds another motive that explains the ineffective implementation of the regulation. However, other censorship and control mechanisms exist in social media, and there is consensus among scholars that they are working quite efficiently (Chen & Peng 2011; Cherry 2005; Li 2013b). Even the faulty implementation of the real-name registration deterred some users from expressing their opinions about social and political matters (Fu, Chan & Chau 2013). Using the example of the real-name registration request and the case of Sina Weibo, several factors shaping this specific media company are sketched to illustrate their impact on state–society relations.

From an institutional perspective, these observations are systematized by drawing on the existing literature. Three processes in addition to social media can be identified: (1) marketization (Zhao 1998; Zhao 2000; McCormick 2002; Sparks 2008), (2) internationalization (Hooghe 2007; Lampton 2008; Gill & Huang 2006), and (3) professionalization (Lin 2010; Sparks 2008; Tong & Sparks 2009; Chan, Pan & Lee, Francis L. F. 2004). These processes serve as the basis for delineating the slow and incremental changes of the Chinese media in the analytical part of chapter 4. This approach is necessary to give a comprehensive overview of the dynamic developments and to highlight the special characteristics of social media that differentiate them from other types of media. These special characteristics and processes have created an unprecedented public sphere in the media (Dahlberg 2001; Liu & McCormick 2011). This new public sphere is being used by society (Yang 2009b; Yang 2012; Ho & Edmonds 2008), but also by the state as an arena of public participation (Liu & Zhou 2011). Therefore, authoritarian deliberation is linked to all processes of change, not only to social media.

This new public sphere is ambiguous as to its effect on society. There is no doubt as to the significance of its participatory and empowering elements, but there is also a flip side to this development. Society is not only making use of it to improve governance or address issues of common concern in a calm, pragmatic, and solution-oriented manner (Habermas 2005). Other phenomena, such as cyber mobbing (cf. Li 2008b), have reached unprecedented heights and have initiated revisions of law to make them punishable (Kaiman 2013). The public's usage of social media, with all its implications, is not only positive; rumors and defamation may get people into serious trouble, or even drive them to suicide. A typical example of this is the case of the part-time taxi driver Yin Feng in Urumqi. On March 21, 2013, a rumor was purported in social media that a taxi driver had spit on a homeless person in Urumqi. Though the person could not be identified, a partial match of their license plate was posted on the platform. An online mob quickly organized itself to collect all the information they could get. Soon this "human flesh search engine" identified Yin Feng to be the alleged culprit. Through its amassed power, the online mob was able not only to identify Feng, but also to retrieve detailed personal information such as his cellular phone number, his ID card number, and even his mother-in-law's landline. The online mob acted in a self-reinforcing manner and followed a 三人成虎²⁷-like dynamic. Yin Feng only became aware of this dynamic when more and more people started to call him on his cellular phone. Some of the callers threatened to burn down his house if he didn't pay a ransom of 200,000 RMB (Hatton 2014). Yin Feng, who says he is innocent, tried to counter the online rumors with a photo of himself holding a piece of paper stating that he did not do the deed (cf. image 1).

The Yin Feng case shows that social media are put to a lot of usages with both positive and negative effects (cf. Heberer 2013:186). Beside cases like this, the effects of social media have subtle yet permeating ramifications. James Leibold, for instance, argues that the "Sinophone blogosphere is producing the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world" (2011: 1023). Not only, as he argues, has this depoliticization hindered the creation and flourishing of civic activism, but also it has created pockets of communication pushing forward and enhancing negative tendencies such as rising nationalism or the Han-supremacy (汉族) (Leibold 2010).

In line with the negative effects of social media, Daniela Stockmann (2011) puts forth the argument that social media may actually help to sustain authoritarian rule, not simply by providing a venting mechanism for society but by



image 1: Falsely accused taxi driver. source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-25913472>, last accessed 23.5.2015)

²⁷ Even though there was no evidence tying Yin Feng to the incident, more and more people started to believe he was guilty, simply because it was reiterated in social media.

“propagandizing citizens’ experiences in the legal system” with convincing and sophisticated methods that encourage them to make more use of institutionalized conflict-solving mechanisms such as courts. Reality, though, is more multifaceted; in their study of Chinese university students, Tang and Huhe (2013) find evidence that exposure to alternative information on the internet is undermining support for the system in China. The seemingly contradictory findings of Stockmann and Tang and Huhe can be reconciled by Stern and O’Bien’s (2012) argument that the Chinese state is sending mixed signals and using antagonistic strategies as a convenient way to stay in touch with society while keeping a large number of possible options open. In this sense, social media should be seen as a platform whose dynamics affect Chinese society not only through state–society interactions but also, and to a significant degree, through communication between different societal actors.

3.2 Special characteristics of social media

As the latest process of change in Chinese media, social media have had a fundamental impact on state–society relations as they offered a whole new type of mass media for communication (Liu 2011b; Liu 2011a). In the following, social media are defined and their novelty is shown by comparing them to traditional channels of mass communication such as television and newspapers. It is argued that their unique characteristics provide not only ample opportunities for public opinion expression but also the technical prerequisites for authoritarian deliberation.

Social media are often equated with the diffuse concept of the internet. While the internet is the most basic requirement for social media, the technological development necessary to make social media possible is more complex. The construction of the infrastructure necessary to make the internet a mass phenomenon and the progress in software engineering required to facilitate social media explain why they are the most recent processes shaping media systems worldwide, with China being no exception.

According to the definition of Kaplan and Haenlein, social media are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (2010:61). Kaplan and Haenlein’s definition lacks conceptual clearance; they do not explain integral parts of their definition, such as “ideological foundations”. The definition also sheds no light on social media and its implications for state–society relations. Therefore, the following sections carve out salient features from the existing literature that all types of social media share and explain why they are popular among the Chinese populace and how they changed state–society relations.

The changes initiated by social media culminated in new phenomena – such as “human flesh search engines” (人肉搜索引擎), “viral marketing” (病毒性营销), and “shitstorms” (狗屎风暴)²⁸ – which are only possible in, or were substantially facilitated by, social media. The following enumeration of social media’s attributes ties together existing, yet fragmented and dispersed insights, into their nature. The institutional perspective allows for a focus on the features of social media that set them apart from traditional media and irreversibly changed communication between state and society.

By summarizing the existing literature on state–society relations and social media, four key characteristics can be identified. These characteristics not only distinguish social media from traditional media, but also explain how the former were able to have such a tremendous impact on state–society relations. The characteristics are: (1) the consumer-producer equalization, (2) real-time communication, (3) transgression of spatial boundaries, and (4) deliberate selection of peers.

3.2.1 The consumer-producer equalization

An integral feature of social media is that its content²⁹ is created and made available to others by the users themselves. In traditional media, editors and journalists perform the task of selecting what is reported and how it is framed (Entman 2010), giving them significant power as “gatekeepers” (Soroka 2012). In social media, each user decides individually what he or she wants to share or promote in public; thus, there is no intermittent actor to filter topics other than themselves. In this regard, social media do not resemble the communicative one-way street of traditional media but rather establish a network between users, enabling each one to simultaneously receive and share information with others – and, in most cases, the interested public. The empowerment of users to share content has led scholars to assign an egalitarian and democratic nature to social media (Abbott 2001,2012; Yuan 2010; Rosen 2010) and to highlight their democratizing potential as a “liberating technology” (Diamond 2010).

The underlying assumption of the analogy that in social media – just like in democracy – everyone’s voice counts and is weighed equally is flawed. While every user can voice his point of view, it does not have an equal chance of being received by the public; thus, their ability to set the public agenda or influence ongoing discourses is severely limited. This inequality also violates Habermas’s concept of a public sphere in which people come together to discuss matters of common concern, have equal opportunities to participate, and in which social status is disregarded (Habermas 2005:27; Gerhards & Schafer 2010).

²⁸ See Fu’s article in the *China News Service* 18.07.2013.

²⁹ The content of social media can take many forms, such as an image or video, an expression of opinion, or a news update. In interaction with other users, these individual pieces of information can form more complex patterns of communication, akin to discourses.

Rather than being egalitarian, social media reflect existing social imbalances to a significant degree. Famous and socially accepted people tend to wield far more influence in social media than ordinary users. Typical examples are the so-called “Big-Vs” (大 V) on micro-blogging platforms. While “Big” refers to the number of followers – usually more than 10 million – the “V” indicates that the identity of the user has been verified as belonging to the person it claims to be. A verified user account, then, is clearly visible as such on the platform and thus can be identified by other users. Most users avoid the verification process, whether due to fear of easier prosecution or for privacy reasons. The Big-Vs, however, benefit from this procedure and are able to translate their “offline” status into “online” influence.

Most of the Big-Vs, such as Charles Xue, were already well known and prominent before they joined social media. Mr Xue – better known under his username on Sina Weibo, Xue Manzi (薛蛮子), where he garnered more than 12 million followers – is in his “real life” a successful entrepreneur. Over the last few years, he became increasingly active on Sina Weibo and gained a reputation of being an outspoken liberal thinker. In August 2013, he was invited by the director of the State Information Office, Lu Wei, to chat about the responsibility of Big-Vs towards society; subsequently, he continued his activities³⁰. Only two weeks later, in what is considered by journalists and observers on the ground to be a crackdown on critical Big-Vs, he and other Big-Vs were taken into administrative detention³¹.

The group of Big-Vs consists mainly of celebrities and already prominent persons from the economic and cultural spheres. Altogether, this group consists of some 19,000 people – if numbers are combined from the two biggest social media platforms, Sina Weibo and Tencent – and represents only some 0.0003% of all people with internet access. Their influence, however, is tremendous; (Shi-Kupfer & Zhu 2013) state that “everyone with more than one million followers is like an interregional newspaper”. While this cannot be taken at face value, it indicates the significant biases in social media and their un-egalitarian character.

Another indicator of the power of Big-Vs is the state’s efforts to remain in control of these “super multipliers”. In September 2013, the Supreme People’s Court released a document stating: “people will face defamation charges if online rumours they post are viewed by more than 5,000 internet users or retweeted more than 5,000 times” (Zhu 2013). This exposes the Big-Vs to defamation charges, which can translate into up to three years in prison.

Despite these de facto in-egalitarian everyday practices of social media, it should also be noted that they *theoretically* offer the possibility for completely equal and egalitarian communication, in the sense of Habermas’s ideal speech situation.

³⁰ See Xinhua (2013).

³¹ See South China Morning Post (2013).

3.2.2 Real-time communication

In a strictly technical sense in which margins of milliseconds are barely tolerated, “real-time” is not applicable to the actual interactions in social media. However, it illustrates a significant and important qualitative increase in the speed of communication. This undoubtedly distinguishes social media from newspaper and is only matched (if at all) by live television or radio feeds; but again, the latter only serve as unidirectional communication channels.

The real-time communication feature engenders three ramifications. First, people are not able to keep up with the steady flow of information, and much content is either not noticed at all or remains neglected because its potential is not fully grasped. As a consequence of this information excess, people limit their contacts (Dunbar 2012) or classify them as more or less important³². Second, the speed of communication has changed the dynamics of communications themselves (Bielsa 2008) and enabled extremely fast changes in the setting of the public agenda, resembling swarm behaviour (Banerjee & Agarwal 2012). Third, the state’s controlling and monitoring mechanisms had to adapt to be able to reign in communications at this velocity. Censorship of human interaction is rendered almost impossible – not only by the aforementioned speed, but also by the amount of information produced every second.

While it is theoretically not impossible, the cost associated with manual censorship would render any such enterprise economically unviable, or at least a significant burden for the state budget. Hence, the burden is shared between the state and companies. The state has some 20,000–50,000 internet police officers (King, Pan & Roberts 2013) at its disposal. Each of the big companies behind social media platform like Sina Weibo, Tencent, and Youku or Tudou is meeting state demand for monitoring content by employing approximately 1,000 people each on their own payroll (King, Pan & Roberts 2013).

Even these employees do not suffice to survey all the content. As such, they work in combination with a sophisticated automatic censorship. This automatic censorship³³ is nonetheless extremely inefficient and easy to circumvent. As King, Pan, and Roberts (2014) show, the automatic censorship is designed to detect topics that are gaining momentum extremely fast by estimating their popularity using a number of variables (such as reposts or likes) in a given time period. While this system works



image 2: Ai Weiwei holding a plush toy.
Source:
<http://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-power-of-chinas-internet-memes>, last accessed 15.8.2016.

³² Some social media platforms translate this into more fine-grained relationship statuses – such as being friends, acquaintances, or family – whereas other just offer to distinguish between normal and “favorite” relations.

³³ The censorship is often confused with the “great firewall” of China. However, these are – in practice and from a technical perspective – two different mechanisms, even if they are both concerned with limiting information exchange and availability.

very efficiently, it is slow to detect newly disguised topics or events with small or medium impact. Additionally, the Chinese language offers ample possibilities to circumvent censorship by relying on homophones³⁴; users also rely on more artistic approaches, such as Ai Weiwei's image of himself naked holding a plush lama toy (image 2). This is a reference to the grass mud horse meme³⁵, which is a made-up name for an imaginary breed of lama. The name *caonima* (草泥马) sounds almost identical to an insult. Ai Weiwei labelled his image "mud horse block central". The Chinese name (草泥马挡中央) can also be interpreted as an insult to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

3.2.3 Transgression of geographical boundaries

For the party-state to stay in control of the blooming third sector, with its nascent civil society, its sophisticated registration system was vital (Ho & Edmonds 2008). An integral part of this system was the prescription to confine social organizations to specific regional areas and prohibit them from connecting too much with one another, lest they built networks crossing administrative boundaries and became serious competitors to the organizational emperor of the party (Zheng 2010). In part, this strategy was deduced and reinforced through observation of the downfall of the USSR. Its nemesis was partly attributed to its failure to prohibit other organizations from building interregional organizational webs, such as Solidarność in Poland.

As they are based on the internet, however, social media ignore spatial boundaries. Anyone with access to social media can start communicating with anyone else, regardless of the geographical distance between them. This is not to ignore people's interest for their immediate local neighbourhood, but it does allow people who are interested in similar topics to find each other, build groups, and exchange useful information or experiences, as well as to organize or coordinate offline activities. So far, there is limited evidence of social media's impact on social organizations. As information can be exchanged across the nation, imbalances of information between different geographical areas of China are likely to decline.

This may empower citizens, as well as social organizations, and is even in the interest of the central government to a certain extent. The more conscious people are of laws and regulations – a prerequisite for forms of protest such as "rightful resistance" (O'Brien & Li 2006)– the more likely they are to use this knowledge to pressure the local political apparatus with it. In the fragmented, complicit and complex configuration of China's governance, control of the lower echelons of

³⁴ To "harmonize" thus became a synonym for internet censorship. This satirical reference to the "harmonious society" concept is written as "river crab" (河蟹), which sounds almost identical to "harmony" (和谐).

³⁵ A meme, according to Wikipedia, is "an idea, style or action which spreads, often as mimicry, from person to person via the Internet" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_meme, 31.3.2014). Also according to Wikipedia, Richard Dawkins first introduced the term in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, in which it was used to describe the diffusion of cultural information.

government has been a key concern for the central government (Lieberthal 1995; Lieberthal 1997; Mertha 2009). But the effects of the increasing spread of information are not only positive. Geographical boundaries are rendered less important and people can be mobilized even across provincial borders to exert pressure, even if only by voicing their opinion. As (Liebman 2005; Liebman 2011) shows, this has an effect on courts; he describes the increasing power wielded by social media as “competitive supervision”. Liebman concludes that “[i]ncreased attention to law also resulted from party-state emphasis on the media to boost legal awareness” (2011:836). With social media in particular, trails can gain publicity and then become a part of the public agenda to an unprecedented extent. At the same time social media allow netizens to directly pressure the courts, which has positive and negative ramifications. In some cases, this is hindering the courts from functioning properly, as judges feel the need to bow to public pressure instead of administering the law properly. Together with real-time communication, the transgression of spatial boundaries allows for local topics to literally become a national issue overnight; or, as Liebman summarizes, “[t]he speed with which news is posted to the sites – often concurrently with publication in the original source, or, in the case of major breaking stories, in frequent updates throughout the day – means that news may spread nationally before local authorities are even aware of the article being published” (2005:62). This neatly represents the risks that particularly but not exclusively social media represent to local governments (Esarey & Qiang 2008; Esarey & Qiang 2011).

3.2.4 Free selection of peers

In traditional media, the Chinese people have the choice of which particular channel they want to watch or listen to and which newspaper to read. This range of available choices is limited, even today. As pointed out earlier, traditional media are a communicative one-way street; as such, individual media outlets do not tantamount to real communicative partners for facilitating or mediating state–society interaction.

Contrary to this, social media offer their users the possibility to connect to all³⁶ other users. Most social media platforms provide mechanisms through which to introduce users to one another based on evaluation of certain criteria. These criteria typically include the geographical location of the user; where he or she went to school, college, or university; or for which company one is currently employed. Part of these criteria is the expressed preferences of the user³⁷ and keywords extracted

³⁶ There are some technical and social restrictions: “technical” in the sense comparable to Twitter’s restriction that does not allow a single account to follow more than 2,000 other users; “social” in the sense that at times a relation to another user has to be confirmed by that user – which is not always the case.

³⁷ Most social media force their users to select at least three topics – e.g. sport, cars, or music – in which they are interested. While this may be a distorted representation of the true interests of the users, it is used by the platforms to regularly suggest new, potentially interesting persons with whom to relate.

from the user's self-description. The comfort of an automatic mechanism for finding friends is indisputable; the effect of this mechanism is multi-layered and points to a general trend of this feature.

In theory, the free selection of communication partners would bring users with different opinions and attitudes together to have them exchange arguments rationally, as Habermas suggested in his ideal of a public sphere. In reality, however, this feature mostly has a completely different effect, the roots of which are found in political psychology. People tend to like others with whom they share identical or similar interests, opinions, and attitudes. Consequently, they use their ability to freely choose to build a network of like-minded people. The reason for this is that people try to reduce the amount of contradictory ideas and beliefs they are exposed to as this produces stress, discomfort, and insecurity. Information and opinions that deviate from the individual's own are called "dissonance". Generally, individuals will "actively avoid situations and information which would increase the dissonance" (Festinger 1962:3). Therefore, in social media, users build networks with their relations, forming groups of relatively homogenous interests, beliefs, and opinions. Through their interactions, they find themselves subjectively confirmed in ways that further reinforcing their existing beliefs. Over time, social media lead to groups of networks, the individual members of which have a heightened sense of self-certitude; thus, societal cleavages are enforced rather than dissolved.

3.2.5 Ramifications for state–society relations

The combination of the aforementioned four characteristics makes social media a new type of mass media - not only in China. They represent a new type of autonomous and decentralized communication, which is challenging the Chinese party-state's monopoly on information provision and dissemination (cf. Shapiro 1999: ch. 7)³⁸. The result of the state's almost absolute control of information was an "information poor" environment (Mol 2010), in the sense that all content was either directly state-sanctioned or passed through the media's internalized system of anticipated obedience and self-censorship. This one-sidedness of the information environment had detrimental effects on the Chinese public sphere, as presented in and represented by the media. As no variance in information or opinion was propagated in the media, the public sphere over time was dominated and controlled by the party-state. The result was a frozen "monopolistic public sphere" (Liu & McCormick 2011). Despite apparent censorship, social media transformed this monopolistic public sphere – as Xiao Qiang from the Berkeley China Internet Project states, "[c]ommercial entities have to follow the rules, or else they don't get a license. To survive in cyberspace, they have to censor

³⁸ Historically, there have been similar forms of media, such as the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and other types of forums. However, these never reached a comparable audience as social media and they lost consumers due to lack of technological innovation. A disproportionate number of their users are university students and they are generally in a state of decline (CINNOC 2012).

themselves” (Qiang in Cherry 2005:44). Still, Steven Cherry concludes that today there is evidently more information and content pluralism than before the emergence of the internet and social media (Cherry 2005:44).

The fast-growing popularity of social media is not only attributable to their entertainment value (Leibold 2011). Repeatedly, social media have been used in state–society interactions and have enabled the Chinese people to voice their opinions – and, at times, exert pressure on official institutions. Even though their societal mobilizing potential remains limited to date (Yang 2009b; Yang 2011; Yang 2012; Yang 2009a), they have become an integral part of the everyday lives of the Chinese people – and increasingly not only the young, urban, and well-educated strata.

The state has realized that traditional means of control are not only of limited effectiveness when it comes to social media, but at times also counterproductive³⁹. The state thus began to employ more proactive measures to take an active part in this new public sphere – if not to completely regain its monopoly of discourses and information, then at least to keep pace with the development. To do so, it employed a great variety of instruments, such as the so-called “50 cent commentators” (Han 2015)⁴⁰.

Ever since then president Hu Jintao opened the first public online chat in the *People’s Net’s* “Strong Nation Forum” (强国论坛)⁴¹, it became clear that social media were taken seriously by the country’s top leadership. It was not only Chinese leaders who made use of social media, as Israel’s president Shimon Peres proved in April 2014 by chatting with Chinese citizens on Sina Weibo⁴². This Israeli public diplomacy event became an instant success, with more than 50 million viewing President Peres’s page. The *Beijing Times* (2014) labelled this “weibo diplomacy” (微博外交) and pointed out that already some 200 foreign leaders are represented on Sina Weibo. As the companies behind the social media platforms represent multi-billion-dollar businesses, they vie for political and social recognition. Ma Huateng – chairman and CEO of Tencent – is a member of the 12th National People’s Congress (NPC), and Robin Li – chairman and CEO of Baidu – is a member of the 12th National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Lee 2012; Chen 2013b).

The information and communication technology (ICT) on which the internet and social media are based have contributed significantly to China’s economic development. The ICTs are considered to vital that, in 2006, “China’s Informatization Development Strategy (2006–2020)” (国家资讯化发展战略 2006-2020) was released by the General Office of the CC of the CCP and the State Council⁴³. The

³⁹ E.g. the very fact that censors block a term may draw unwanted attention to an event or fact.

⁴⁰ See e.g. BBC, 16.12.2008, “China’s internet, spin doctors”, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7783640.stm>.

⁴¹ This forum was created in the wake of the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade as a space for virtual protest and expression of nationalist sentiments (Jiang 2010).

⁴² Cf. Lazar Berman in *Times of Israel*, 10.4.2014.

⁴³ Cf. http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_315999.htm, last accessed 20.5.2015

document emphasized the need to steadily improve the necessary infrastructure. Part of the state's ambition to foster the ICTs is to ameliorate the scarcity and low quality of access to the internet – and subsequently to social media (Seifert & Chung 2008). To do so, the state incentivized ICT companies to provide the required infrastructure even to remote rural areas in a project known as the “Connecting Every Village Project”. The project was started by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in 2004, which vowed that, by 2010, every township (乡) would have access to the internet (Servaes 2013:157). Additionally, as Wang and Chen (2011) point out, the government has tried to fill the gap between rural and urban areas by setting up information centres in villages to allow farmers to access the internet. However, due to lack of competency and resulting hesitations, such usage is still short of expectations. The project is embedded in the larger aim to build a “socialist country” (Qiang 2009), and better access to the internet is likely to increase the e-literacy called for by Wang and Chen (2012).

From a macro perspective, the “Connect Every Village Project” ensures that societal penetration of the internet and social media will further continue and will even reach rural areas. Thus, the importance of social media is more likely to increase as time passes, and from an economic perspective the state has an intrinsic interest to further promote ICTs and subsequently social media.

The transition from the Hu to the Xi era has so far shown some continuity and change with regard to the Chinese media. Under Xi Jinping the general understanding of the media as serving the party has not changed. Just like under Hu Jintao the media were expected to help disseminate the information and propaganda in the public while at the same time they were allowed limited watch-dog functionality. Xi Jinping highlighted this in 2016 during a visit of three key media outlets⁴⁴ by saying with regard to party owned media that its “family name is the party” and by insisting that “all news reporting and commentaries should follow the ‘right direction’ – from party mouthpieces to commercial tabloids and online media” (Zhang 2016). The media thus were expected to sustain authoritarian rule and it has increasingly able to do so due to factors like marketization (Stockmann 2011a; Brady 2016). Compared to the Hu era Brady (2016) finds that in recent years the already existing controls on the media as well as the censorship have not only increased but also taken new forms. According to Brady “Xi's administration is running China in crisis mode, so the nation is going through yet another “收” (shou, contraction) cycle of political and social control”⁴⁵ (Brady 2016:11).

⁴⁴ These outlets were the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and China's Central Television.

⁴⁵ Brady here refers to Baum's Baum (1996) idea that Chinese politics are alternating between phases of relaxation (放) and contraction (收): “[w]anting the benefits of modernity without the destabilizing effects of spontaneous, uncontrolled social mobilization, they tended to follow each new round of liberalizing reform with an attempt to retain – or regain – control” (Baum1996:5).

The measures taken reflect the growing complexities of the media industry in China. Traditional media are partially replaced, complemented but also present on new media. The state has largely lost economic clout as the media rely heavily on advertisement related revenues and only marginally on state funding. In this line of argument Ren Zhiqiang concluded “that the media should serve the people and not the Party as it was funded by the taxpayer”. Brady based on Zhao Yuezhi’s work argues that “despite endless CCP “instructions” to the [media, MD] Chinese media conglomerates will do whatever they can get away with in order to survive financially” (Brady 2016:9). At the same time there is a distinct phenomenon of media professionals like journalists, reporters and editors developing their own vocational working ethos and adhering to principles like investigative journalism (Svensson 2017). The Xi administration has tried to counter this with establishing political education classes mandatory for journalists to attend (Svensson 2017:441).⁴⁶ As a result a significant amount of investigative journalists has been jailed and others have left their positions in traditional media outlets and engage in new forms of journalism in new and social media.

There the efforts of censorship and promoting propagandistic information have also increased in the Xi era so far (King, Pan & Roberts 2017; King, Pan & Roberts 2014). The promotion of government benign information has taken unprecedented scope. The estimation of King and his colleagues is that “the government fabricates and posts about 448 million social media comments a year” (King, Pan & Roberts 2017:34). This increased control and promotion of propaganda have been outlined in 2013 when the General Office of the CCP’s central committee issued a report named „Document No. 9 – Briefing on the current situation in the ideological field“ which indicated that more control on the media and censorship are required in order to stop the promotion of ideas such as western constitutional democracy or western concepts of journalism (Brady 2016:8-9)⁴⁷.

Beside the focus of the Xi government on control of the media, some scholars also found evidence of other approaches by the government with regard to new and social media. More recent literature found that parallel to the in general more restrict of internet platforms by the Xi government has also explicitly come to open more participatory and deliberative opportunities on social media platforms (Tang et al. 2017; Creemers 2016; Xie 2016). The tacit acknowledgment of the opportunities created by the special features of social media was followed by dispersed and unsystematic experiment of individual government agencies with no coordinated. The lack of coordination or of a grand strategy how to engage netizens on social media in deliberative ways indicates the still nascent phase of the

⁴⁶ Additionally journalists have to take an exam based on a 700-page manual. According to the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) the goal of this exam is to “increase the overall quality of China’s journalists and encourage them to establish socialism as their core system of values” (Thomas (2013) in Singh (2016)). The GAPP is the state authority responsible for managing news, print, and internet publications (cf. Singh 2016:380).

⁴⁷ Brady adds that the report was not meant for public access, but was leaked Brady (2016:9).

state efforts. At the same time it reflects the challenge how to introduce and implement deliberative elements on social media in an authoritarian context. That opportunities for deliberation are tolerated or introduced in China's social media platform is a surprising fact. Deliberation as a concept has historically been associated almost exclusively as taking place in democratic context (Rosenberg 2007; Bessette 1980; Sass & Dryzek 2014). This notwithstanding China's party-state has successfully for some decades introduced various deliberative measures. The seemingly contradictory fusion of a key element of democracies taking place in an authoritarian context has challenged existing notions of the concept. The following chapter not only introduces the concept of authoritarian deliberation as introduced by He and his colleagues (Fishkin, He & Siu 2006; He 2003; He & Warren 2017) but also ties it to social media as a new platform for interaction.

3.3 Authoritarian deliberation

In the following sections, the concept of authoritarian deliberation is defined and contextualized within the development of the Chinese political system. Against this background, it is argued that social media contribute to the deliberative turn in Chinese politics by adding interactive and participatory elements to Chinese media. This added input mechanism completed the existing functional expectations of the party-state vis-à-vis the media. The emergence of social media and their contribution of deliberation to Chinese media are conceptualized as a conversion model of institutional change adding a new facet to China's first-order governance.

3.3.1 Definition

The origin of deliberation in democratic and normative theory (Habermas 1991; Rawls 1971) makes it necessary to elaborate on what deliberation constitutes in the first place. The concept's genealogy explains not only the late emergence of the concept of authoritarian deliberation but also illustrates the disputes about whether and if so to what extent deliberation can exist in authoritarian contexts. Diana Mutz states that "[i]n fact, it may be fair to say that there are as many definitions of deliberation as there are theorists" and "that it is widely recognized as a senseless and unproductive exercise to haggle about what qualifies as true deliberation" (Mutz 2008:525). Nonetheless she finds that most conceptualizations share some commonalities. Integral but not an exclusive or exhaustive key component of deliberation are the communicative processes of citizens that are concerned with political issues. These processes do not necessarily have to result in concrete policies; at times an exchange of arguments and information is sufficient. The communication and interactions also do not have to be limited to societal actors like individual citizens or collective actors like NGOs but also include state entities to incorporate the consultative state-society nature of deliberation. The prominent place of participatory elements in deliberative theories is a key characteristic distinguishing deliberative democracies from electoral ones⁴⁸.

Deliberation as a concept became increasingly prominent in political science as part of the deliberative turn in democracy research in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bessette 1980; Bessette 1994; Bessette 1994; Habermas 1991; Habermas 1997; Dryzek & Niemeyer 2012). Therefore it is most often discussed with regard to its existence in and impact on democracies. The term "deliberative democracy" was coined by Bessette (Bessette 1980; Bessette 1994) in his works on deliberative politics in the US. Scholars like Habermas (1991), Rawls (1971), Elster (1998), and Fishkin (1992) - to name but a few prominent - have discussed various forms, requisites and ramifications of deliberative practices in democracies. The origin of the concept, the dominant focus on democracies

⁴⁸ It should be noted that both types are not mutually exclusive but can a polity can exhibit electoral and deliberative elements at the same time.

in the western hemisphere, and of western based researchers has led scholars increasingly to discuss its “westernness” of the concept (Min 2014). A central debate focuses on the question whether research that uses the concept of deliberative democracy can be meaningfully conducted outside the western cultural context. The notion of a western cultural context as well as the implied existence of a non-western cultural context is a stark simplification of the existing diversity in terms of political systems, their configurations, and the cultures they are embedded in (Said 2008)⁴⁹.

Nonetheless scholars like Gambetta have argued in this regard by dividing cultures into two sets of “analytic knowledge” and “indexical knowledge” (Gambetta 1998). According to Gambetta deliberation is only possible in western democracies which is equated with the set of “analytic knowledge” and not in countries of an “indexical knowledge”. People of the latter cultural set do not display the necessary impetus and modi to voice and share their opinion publicly thus inhibiting deliberation. Other scholars challenged Gambetta’s findings on the grounds that cultures with varying degrees of suitability for deliberation exist. In this line of argument Sass and Dryzek propose to “[r]ather than take Western practices as a yardstick of democratic performance, we should examine democratic potential wherever it appears , even (perhaps especially) in seemingly unpromising contexts [...]” (Sass & Dryzek 2014:20, curly braces in original MD).

Since Gambetta’s findings were published and discussed scholars have begun to apply deliberation to non-western and non-democratic cases (Vargas et al. 2016; Beeson 2010; Peterson 2011; Ani 2013). The result vis-à-vis the applicability of the concept to non-western and at least partially non-democratic countries is mixed. With regard to China some scholars (Bolsover 2016) found no indication of a difference in principle between western and Chinese at least with regard to political communication in social media. Others adopted the concept for their research on China and found new varieties of public spheres (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2014; Han 2014) or interactions in social media (Medaglia & Yang 2016).

Following the extension of the research about deliberation in more diverse contexts Sass and Dryzek argued that “[w]hile deliberation does manifest a universal competence, its character varies substantially across time and space, a variation partially explicable in cultural terms “ (Sass & Dryzek 2014:3).

From this perspective the concept of deliberation can be applied to China, but the specificities of this case have to be taken into account. Apart from the differing cultural background China’s most striking difference is its authoritarian political system. As such the concept of “deliberative democracy” cannot simply be applied to China. Nonetheless examples of deliberative practices exist in China especially so since the party-state introduced in a top-down manner participatory

⁴⁹ Culture here is understood following Geertz (1973:5) statement that “[...] man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs[...].”

institutions in the late 1990s (Han 2014). They range from civil society consultations in policy matters, deliberative experiments at the village level in rural China (He 2014b; Tan 2006), to public hearings in urban areas (Ergenc 2014) to polling experiments (He & Thøgersen 2010; Fishkin, He & Siu 2006). Against this backdrop He and Warren identified a “deliberative turn” in Chinese politics (He & Warren 2011). Their work is based on other scholars who had already investigated the various facets of deliberative practices in China as exemplified in the edited volume of Leib and He in 2006 (Leib & He 2006). The experiments with deliberative practices have not lead to a form of deliberative democracy, not even deliberative democracy with Chinese characteristics, but they may have served the purpose of actually strengthening the authoritarian rule by enhancing its governing capacity as He and Warren point out:

“it is theoretically possible for deliberative political processes to become an important ingredient in the reproduction and resilience of authoritarian rule—a possibility that remains under-explored in the literatures on regime transitions as well as the literature of deliberative democracy.” (He & Warren 2011:283)

Whether or not certain phenomena in China can be considered to represent deliberation is not only an ongoing discussion among China scholars (He 2014a; Medaglia & Yang 2016; Stockmann 2015; Stockmann & Luo 2017) , but it also highlights different understandings of the concept and its key components. These definitional differences seem to align with the dichotomy of China based and non-China resident scholars. As Wang and Guo remark:

“China scholars in the West should be aware that the statement, ‘the Chinese government has become democratic, accountable, transparent and responsive,’ as is repeatedly asserted by Yu⁵⁰ and other participants in the good governance discourse, does not necessarily imply that the government has moved in the direction of what most in the West would call democracy” (Wang & Guo 2015:1000).

The definitional confusion also extends to the divide between political science theorists and empirical researchers. As Mutz has asserted theorists have not been able to agree on a single definition of the concept. Concordantly Thompson's (2008) concludes that “[e]mpirical researchers do not have to agree on a single concept of deliberation. After all, theorists have not been able to” (Thompson 2008:501). Against this backdrop as well as the particularity of the Chinese case in terms of culture and history the understanding of deliberation throughout this research is based on an expansive definition set forth by Sass and Dryzek:

“Deliberation here encompasses all communication concerning questions of political authority, not restricted to the argumentation, say, of communicative action (Habermas) or public reason (Rawls). Allowable communication includes rhetoric, silence, gossip, humor,

⁵⁰ Wang and Guo refer here to the prominent Chinese scholar Yu Keping and his works on good governance.

ritual, the telling of stories, and what Mansbridge calls 'everyday talk' (but not command, deception, coercion, or private expressions that cannot reach others)⁵¹" (Sass & Dryzek 2014:8, curly brackets in original MD)

In order to avoid conceptual ambiguity and to differentiate this research from the democratic context often associated with deliberation the term deliberative practices is used in the analytical part of this work. Deliberative practices describe all forms of communication taking place on the social media platform between the EPBs and citizens with regard to policies, law, regulation initiation, formulation, implementation and evaluation. The key component of deliberative practices as of deliberation in democratic environments is its interactive nature. This research follows Goodin's understanding of interactivity that "[t]here must be uptake and engagement - other people must hear, read, internalize and respond" (Goodin 2000:92).

The focus of this research is on social media and some statements on social media might not trigger deliberation in the sense of several actors engaging in reciprocal communication. Nonetheless statements and information posted online while not exhibiting visible responses may produce consequences outside the scope of the gathered data. For instance an EPB publishing repeatedly information about the good local air quality may make a reader interested to delve more thoroughly in this issue especially when the subjective perceived reality of the reader differs significantly from the readings of the EPBs. Against this backdrop this research will also take into account the information of the EPBs that did not trigger any visible interactions on Sina Weibo⁵². The main focus of the analysis however rests with interactions between the EPBs and the netizens.

As mentioned before the question whether deliberation as a concept can be applied to China depends not so much on its definitional operationalization but much more on the assessment of its ramification for the political system and its relation to state-society dynamics in more general terms. Especially with regard to China scholars have begun to reconcile the normative genealogy of the concepts with the seemingly antagonistic characteristics the current Chinese political system displays.

Baogang He introduced the concept of authoritarian deliberation to capture the deliberative phenomena found in China with the authoritarian political system (Fishkin, He & Siu 2006; Han 2014; Hyun & Kim 2015; Medaglia & Yang 2016). Since the concept of authoritarian deliberation was coined in 2006 (He 2006) it has been modified (He & Warren 2011) and applied in research (He & Thøgersen 2010; Lewis 2013). The concept describes the use of consultative and deliberative practices within authoritarian regimes "to improve governance, enhance authority, and generate

⁵¹ Sass and Dryzek refer to Jane Mansbridge's work about everyday talk as deliberation Mansbridge (1999).

⁵² This is discussed in depth in chapter 6.

legitimacy” (He 2014:71). As Baogang He (2006 Ch. 6) argues, the western concept of deliberation does not sufficiently reflect the experiences and specialties of China and its unique historical development. The concept of authoritarian deliberation is part of a larger scholarly movement seeking to go beyond applying models developed for, by, and largely in western contexts. In combination with the institutional turn in political science, this has produced a phenomenon that Peter Evans calls “institutional monocropping”: “the imposition of blueprints based on idealized versions of Anglo-American institutions” (2004:30). Institutional monocropping ignores the individual configuration of countries and neglects their specificities, especially with regard to local input and policy experimentation. To avoid the pitfalls of institutional monocropping, Evans highlights the usefulness of deliberative developments, drawing on Amartya Sen’s insight that “processes of participation have to be understood as constitutive parts of the ends of developments themselves” (Sen 1999:79; Evans 2004:36).

At the same time the concept of deliberation in China has led scholars to teleologically tie it to democratization or democracy (Tang & Dryzek 2014; Leib & He 2006). So far deliberative practices are in place in China - not only in social media but also in village elections, public policy consultation or village assemblies (Heberer 2016; Zhou 2012). Deliberation is also increasingly used to get public input for policies that before were likely to be handed down in a centralistic top-down manner as Kornreich et al. show in their case study of the health-care reform in 2009 (Kornreich, Vertinsky & Potter 2012).

The party-state however has not shown any signs suggesting it will introduce deliberation as a key and defining element in the polity. Heberer argues that in any of the deliberative practices it is ultimately “the party-state which decides” (Heberer 2016:19). Given the strict boundaries in which deliberation takes place in China, this research follows Yu’s dictum of “bounded articulation” (Yu 2015) to highlight the confined nature of the practices. The limits of deliberative practices are conceptually accounted for by applying Kooiman and Jentoft’s (2009) definition of first-order governance in the next section.

Context

Deliberative developments, however, seem to be contradictory to the nature of China’s authoritarian political system. Deliberation is traditionally perceived as only occurring in democratic systems and in this sense has been a privilege of the western hemisphere. The survival of China’s political system in recent decades was largely attributed to a mix (Holbig & Gilley 2010) of propaganda efforts (Brady 2008) and output-generated sources of legitimacy (Heberer & Schubert 2006), such as an increasing level of wealth due to a long period of economic growth. Nevertheless, deliberative elements have existed in China for a long time, such as the village committee elections. These elections were

researched enthusiastically and with a very optimistic outlook as to their impact on politics when they were introduced in the late 1980s (Guo & Bernstein 2004). Since then, a more pessimistic view about the ramifications and limits of these deliberative practices has prevailed, and they are no longer considered to be the harbinger of democratic elements (O'Brien & Han 2009). Autochthonous developed concepts, such as the mass line (Teiwes 2000) model, have not been perceived as a deliberative – or even consultative – element of the Chinese polity. In theory the approach of the mass line is consultative in nature. The government seeks contact to the masses to synthesize out their needs and relate these needs then back to them often in the form of policies, laws or campaigns. The crucial criticism here is that ultimately the party-state has the interpretative dominance to declare what the masses' actual preferences are.

Notwithstanding the negligence to recognize the scope of consultative and deliberative practices in China, this has led to a serious misconception about a fundamental aspect of the Chinese political system, which He and Warren seek to address with their concept of authoritarian deliberation.

He and Warren (2011) point out that deliberative practices are present in China; for example, in the election of village committees or neighbourhood communities (社区) (Heberer & Schubert 2009; Heberer & Schubert 2008). They argue that deliberation, according to Habermas, is a “mode of communication in which participants in a political process offer and respond to the substance of claims, reasons, and perspectives in ways that generate persuasion-based influence” (He & Warren 2011:270). In this sense, deliberation is not tied to a particular regime type such as democracy, but can also emerge in authoritarian regimes. The occurrence of deliberative practices in authoritarian contexts helps to legitimize the incumbent regime's actions, increase the accountability of its bureaucracy, and improve its governance. In order for authoritarian regimes to develop such practices, they must exhibit a high degree of flexibility to complement their existing typical top-down structures with elements of more vertical participation. The political system of China so far has been shown to possess all of these qualities to a sufficient degree for it not to resist change as the title of Andrew Nathans' (2003) article “Authoritarian Resilience” suggests, but rather to be able to adapt and accommodate to emerging challenges.

The rationale behind authoritarian deliberation is twofold. First, from a functional perspective it arguably represents a more efficient way of political consensus-finding, political decision-making, implementation, and feedback mechanism. People affected by policies can articulate their concerns before the policies are finalized; their interests can be incorporated to reduce the potential of ex-post protest or to mitigate existing

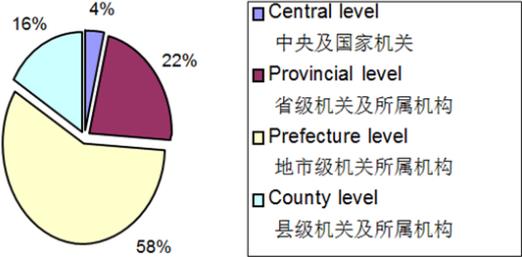


image 3: Distribution of micro-blogging agencies by administrative level. Source: China's e-government network (中国电子政务网 2012).

conflicts. Authoritarian deliberation creates input opportunities for the political system to supplement the so-far dominating output factors, producing legitimacy. Second, in the complex multi-level governance system of China, where policies are formulated vaguely in the central decision-making bodies', deliberative practices can be utilized to check compliance of local governments by exposing them directly to societal demands (Mertha 2009). Rather than regime-level participation, the Chinese party-state can enhance its governance by allowing elements of deliberation to supplement existing mechanisms: "Consultation and deliberation reduce social conflicts and the level of opposition, and facilitate compliance with and implementation of state policy." (He 2006:135). Consequently, the CCP has expanded its consultative and deliberative practices under its rule (党领导下政治协商制度, He 2014:73). From a historical perspective, the focus has shifted from elite inclusion to the inclusion of the masses (群众) (He & Thøgersen 2010).

The concept of authoritarian deliberation is used here in its empirical-analytical sense as "governance-level' participation" (He & Warren 2011:270). As He and Thøgersen point out, the authoritarian regime does have incentives to establish consultative and deliberative elements to improve its governance and bolster legitimacy. These mechanisms are limited in their scope and function and therefore do not contribute to democratization. According to Kooiman and Jentoft, political elites have a reason to favor deliberative practices:

if deliberation generates legitimacy, even in the absence of democratically dispersed empowerments, then elites will have incentives to pursue deliberation. If these conditions exist, then we might expect to see the emergence of what might be called "governance driven deliberation" – that is, the use and encouragement of deliberative mechanisms by elites for the purposes of expanding the governance capacities of the state. (2009:280)

As He and Warren (2011) argue, the conditions for deliberation in China exist and are implemented without specifying what exactly the governance level is. The approach of Kooiman and Jentoft (2009:820) provides a fine-grained conceptualization in which three levels of governance are discerned: (1) the first-order governance deals with problems solving and opportunity creation, (2) the design, care, and maintenance of governance institutions is referred to as second-order governance, and (3) the formulation and application of norms and principles is called meta-governance. Governance – here and throughout this work – is understood in the sense of the "interactive governance" approach as the "whole of interactions taken to solve societal problems and to create societal opportunities; including the formulation and application of principles guiding those interactions and care for institutions that enable and control them" (Kooiman & Bavnick 2005:17). The focus on the interactive dimension of governance allows for the capturing and assessing of key aspects of consultative and deliberative practices. Authoritarian deliberation in China, until today, takes place on the first order of governance, as the power to formulate leading

principles of Chinese politics eludes public participation and effective deliberative practices to directly change state institutions are barely existent (Noesselt 2012; Noesselt 2013).

3.3.2 Deliberative practices, social media and e-government

Social media, as shown previously, have enabled Chinese citizens to directly interact with each other and established a decentralized channel of communication. A white paper published by the state council in 2010 substantiates the link between social media and authoritarian deliberation; according to the white paper, the “Chinese state has actively created the conditions to allow people to supervise the government” (中国政府积极创造条件让人民监督政府). The creation of these conditions resulted in massive representation of state agencies on social media. Statistics of the Chinese e-government network (2011) show that 50,561 micro-blogging entries were published by state entities in the four major micro-blogging sites.⁵³ These include 32,358 entries from party-related organizations and 18,203 entries from single party cadres (党政干部). The interpretation of these numbers is difficult as it is impossible to gauge how many parts of the state bureaucracy should or could be present on social media. Nonetheless the numbers show a strong trend of government bureaus becoming more and more active on Sina Weibo. The report also reveals facts about the geographical distribution of the state micro-bloggers – by far the most zealous cadres come from Heilongjiang, while the most active agencies are found in Zhejiang province – but also shows that 58% of all micro-blogging agencies are located at the prefecture level. Though central level agencies also issue micro-blogs, hardly any individual cadres from that level do so. According to the report, 65% of all cadres using micro-blogs are from comparatively low levels (处级以下), and while at least 5% of all blogging cadres come from the provincial level, none exist from the central level. The report also stresses the function of micro-blogs as an important platform for interaction between the government and citizens (政民互动的重要平台).

The state is present and on social media platforms, which – due to the interactive nature of this mass media – offer ample opportunities for interaction beyond propaganda (Ding 2009; E-Government research centre of the China National School of Administration 2014).

Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang report that 60% of all Chinese internet users have stated that “they

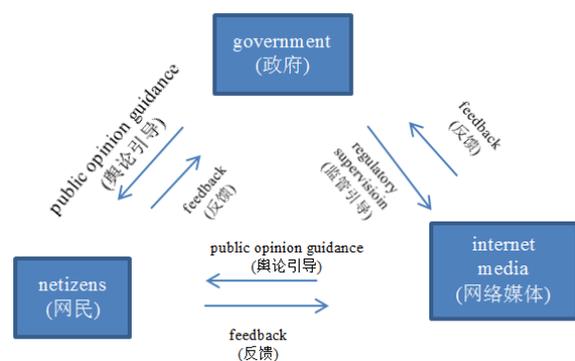


figure 1: Feedback link facilitated by social media between netizens and state. Source: Wang (2012), translation by MD.

⁵³ These include Sina (新浪网), Tengxun (腾讯网), People’s Daily Net (人民网), and Xinhua News network (新华网). According to the statistics, 22,755 micro-blogs were published on Sina, 20,659 on Tengxun, 2,472 on People’s Daily Net, and 4,675 on the Xinhua News network.

have used the Internet to express opinions intended to ‘supervise’ [jiandu, MD] government activities” (2011:299). Thus, communication in social media between state and societal users is taking place and constituting a practice of authoritarian deliberation. Before questions are derived to guide the analytical–empirical element of this theoretical perspective, the impact of social-media-based deliberation on state–society relations is conceptualized, using the works of Wang Jinshui (Wang 2013a).

The growing interaction between state and society in social media also challenges the state’s traditional understanding of the media as mouthpiece or tool of public opinion guidance (cf. *Xinjingbao* (新京报) 2011). Social media requires a new conceptual approach to the state–society–media nexus. Wang Jinshui observed that, “along with the development and popularization of the internet, the internet has increasingly become a convenient way and important mean for citizens to participate in political affairs” (2012). This adds a new functionality to the media as an input mechanism. The triangle between government, netizens, and the internet media (cf. figure 1) illustrates the feedback link facilitated by social media between netizens and the state. As argued earlier, social media rather complemented the existing functional expectations of the party-state, which are represented in Wang’s concept as the guidance of public opinion and the regulatory supervision of the media. Through public opinion guidance, as Zhao (2008) points out, the state tries to maintain its dominance over public opinion formation by demarcating the limits of political discourses. Complementarily, the state’s grip on the media – in terms of censorship, control, and monitoring mechanisms – is disguised as regulatory supervision. Participatory opportunities do not only offer benefits in the forms of consultation or deliberation. As Jason Abbott elaborates:

“the growth of social media and blogging has resulted in widening participation and increased use of the internet as a means for critiquing and challenging authoritarian practices and rule. By empowering users to be both consumers and producers of information; by making it possible to fact-check and monitor the state; and by enabling activists to organize more readily and rapidly the internet and the new social media have created a space in which the aggregated acts of online users challenge existing power structures, particularly informational.” (2012:352)

This quote shows the ambiguous effects of social media and the risks inherent for the political system: if interactions and communications are not taken seriously and engagement is not sincere, the potential of social media can be massively detrimental to the regime’s survival. Based on the existing insufficient and fragmentary empirical evidence, two conclusions can be drawn: (1) the state has recognized the challenge social media pose to its rule, and (2) it is actively engaging its citizens on these platforms. The particularly active engagement of lower levels of the administrative echelon could entail more accountability of local governments and is not without historic precedent. Rebecca MacKinnon suggest that “[t]he idea that you manage the local bureaucracy by sicking the masses on

them is actually not a democratic tradition but a Maoist tradition“ (MacKinnon in Downey 2010). She refers to practices during the Cultural Revolution (when Mao incited citizens to fight against corrupt officials) and equates the practice of online hunting for information as “Red Guards 2.0“, since she considers it to be one of the few way citizens can hold officials accountable or exert pressure. In this sense, social media can be seen as technologically evolved big character posters (大字报).

The efforts however lack a clear strategy and remain isolated and locally confined (Zhang et al. 2015). So far a comprehensive strategy to integrate deliberative practices on social media is missing. Interactions between states and their citizens based on information and communications technologies such as the internet have become increasingly widespread since the mid-1990s. Göbel (2015) argues that primarily two reason are responsible for the adoption of e-participation with its deliberative components in China: first of all to avoid the opportunities presented by internet based technologies would have been economically too costly and secondly that the governance apparatus in China at the time was unable to meet the dynamics its active citizens. The lack of a coherent strategy with long-term goals is also presented by (Zhang et al. 2015) and can visually supplemented by the distribution of online complaint portals (c.f. figure 2). Deliberative practices do not exclusively take place on social media, but their interactive characteristics have made them the most important platform (He et al. 2017 and figure 3). At the same it should be noted that other media platforms also contribute – if to a lesser extent and with varying degrees – to public participation.

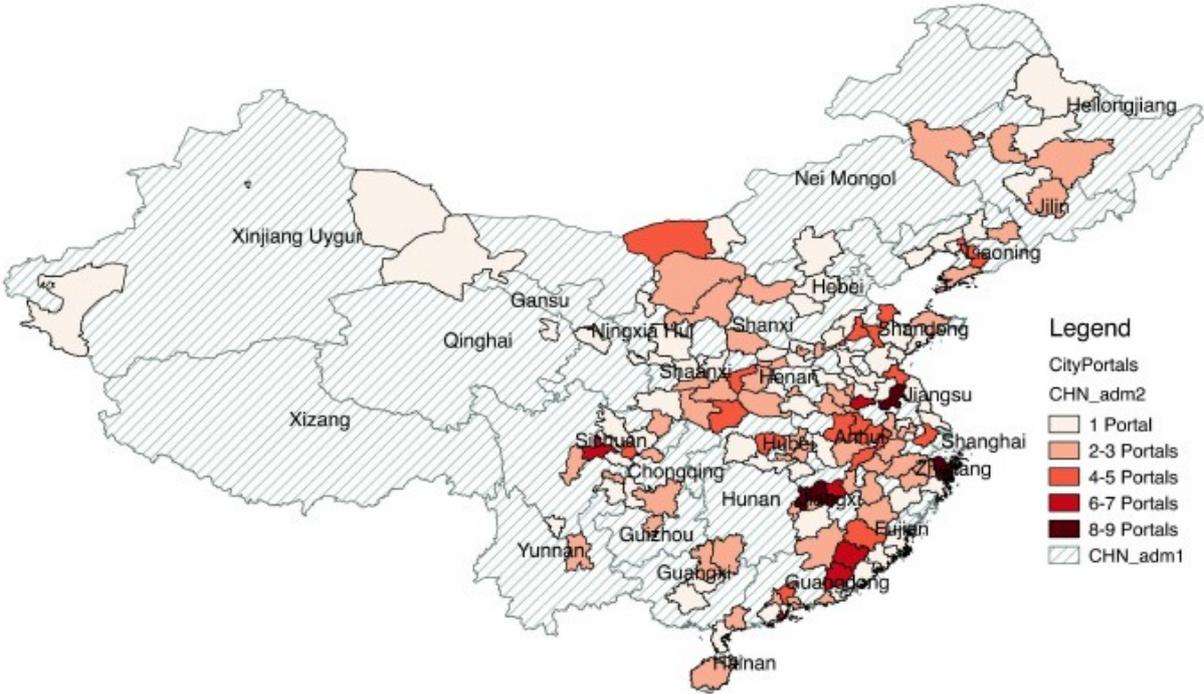


figure 2: Number of online complaint portals and geographical distribution in 2015. Taken from Göbel (2015:10).

ICTs	Rank					Score
	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	No. 5	
Internet	37.15	16.26	11.02	5.51	5.18	5.82
Video and documentary	15.33	18.64	9.4	3.81	4.33	4.78
Government/community bulletin	12.75	6.68	10.01	16.34	20.61	4.58
Magazine (print)	8.69	18.54	11.1	12.18	8.89	4.53
Service of smart phone	10.10	13.71	15.2	15.33	12.12	4.50
TV programs	6.09	8.92	10.81	19.80	14.01	4.35
Newspaper (print)	5.10	8.35	16.71	13.58	16.15	4.30
Radio	4.79	8.90	15.75	13.45	18.71	4.17

Unit percent, % (n = 630)

figure 3: Preferred platforms for participation in environmental protection. 630 people were asked in a survey to rank the platforms to show their importance in promoting environmental public participation. Lower ranks indicate a higher importance. Table taken from He et al. (2017:198).

At the same time social media are primarily used to obtain real-time information and give the netizens a place to voice their opinions. According to the survey taken by He et al. (2017) The key components of deliberation such as participating in governmental decision-making or to exchange ideas and information are significantly less important to netizens. While the findings of the survey are an important contribution to the study of internet based participation in China, they must be reflected critically. The inherent methodological weakness of this particular survey is that it does not elaborate on what the respondents would ideally expect from online participation but rather let them rank the existing possibilities. Against this backdrop the results should be interpreted with caution as it is possible that the respondents wished a certain function would be more often offered or more effectively implemented. In a similar study Hao and his colleagues also find that social media have the potential so significantly increase the interaction between the government and its constituency, but that so far a long-term strategy from part of the government is needed to increase the applicability and effectiveness of e-participation (Hao et al. 2016). In their survey of public administration employees Zhang et al. (2015) find that in the administration „technology is emphasized while service and democratic construction are ignored [...] and the government fails to encourage the public to use e-government systems“ (Zhang et al. 2015:422). These findings align with the insights gained in the quantitative and qualitative analysis. The demand by the netizens for deliberative opportunities exists but only to a limited extent. Netizens do by and large not engage in activities other than retrieving and sharing up-to-date information and expressing their opinion. At the same time the current deliberative opportunities available on Sina Weibo do not offer more complex participatory options. This may in part due to technical obstacles but as Zhang et al.’s

research point out it is also at least partly caused by the lack of a clear governmental structure „[...] the advancement of service for e-government will lag behind that of organization and technology“ (Zhang et al. 2015:421). Therefore policies and regulations promoting and standardizing the deliberative opportunities are required to entice government agencies to achieve the goals set and for netizens to be able to assess what to expect.

Function	Rank							Ranking score
	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	No. 5	No. 6	No. 7	
Obtain real time information	39.39	16.21	10.82	10.19	7.49	4.60	4.59	5.05
Release and present personal opinion	13.21	22.47	18.30	14.61	15.35	8.58	8.61	4.53
Online vote and survey	11.60	15.08	18.56	18.38	16.31	11.40	11.39	4.28
Communicate ideas and information	9.41	11.12	19.22	23.02	15.68	12.49	12.48	4.06
Organize the collective actions	9.68	9.79	15.20	13.68	24.02	15.59	15.58	3.76
Engage in the counseling	6.72	13.18	11.04	11.28	11.72	32.51	32.49	3.58
Participate in the governmental decision-making	10.21	12.11	7.03	8.91	9.40	14.82	14.79	2.86

Unit percent, % (n = 630)

figure 4: Ranking specific functions of online platform in public environmental participation. Table taken from He et al. (2017:198). Lower ranks indicate a higher importance.

Despite the lack of a clear strategy or policies China has been an active country when it comes to using internet based platforms and services to provide deliberative opportunities to its citizens. These efforts are reflected in its significantly above average scores in the United Nations (UN) e-government and e-participation indexes. Conceptually deliberative practices cover at least what is frequently referred to in the literature as e-government, government 2.0 or e-participation. At the core of these concepts is the idea that certain technologies have significantly improve “transparency and citizens participation” (Bonsón et al. 2012:124). While the concepts of e-government or government 2.0 include the provision of public services via new and social media, e-participation focuses on the participatory functions created between states and their citizens.

E-government is defined exemplary by the World Bank as “the use by government agencies of information technologies [...] that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government”.

The UN calculates two indexes to assess the extent of online participation in countries: (1) the e-government development index (EGDI) and the e-participation index⁵⁴. The EGDI consists of three equally weighted parts that capture the scope and quality of online services (OSI), the development status of telecommunication infrastructure (TII) and the inherent human capital index (HCI). Two of the three components of the index measure capabilities in terms “hardware” infrastructure,

⁵⁴ For more information about the data see the UN E-Government Knowledge DataBase available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Overview>, last checked 27.4.2017.

accessibility and in terms of the knowledge to use the services. The former typically represents the accessibility of the services from a technical perspective whereas the latter represents the extent to which the skills required to make use of the online opportunities are present. This ability is conceptually referred to in the literature as e-literacy and its lack is notably spread in rural areas (Zhao 2012). The third component of the EGDI - the OSI index - represents the extent of online accessible government services. Altogether the e-government index does not correspond well with the concept of deliberation. The index represents rather the technical scope of requirements that need to be present in order for deliberation to be possible in the first place. In this indicator China scores better than the regional or the global average but still well lower than either the Republic of Korea which is the regional leader or the United Kingdom which is the world leader in this index (cf. figure 5). A closer look at the three sub-indices reveals an unbalanced development. While China exhibits comparatively high scores with regard to human capital (HCI) and the scope and quality of online services, it received rather low scores for the infrastructure index (TII) confirming Zhang et al. (2015) previously mentioned finding⁵⁵. The UN data would suggest that China's government is trying to expand its services into the online realm, but is hindered by the lacking technological infrastructure. Exemplary for the efforts of the Chinese government is the UN 2016 survey on e-government (2017:56ff.). The survey mentions a program implemented by the MEP that allows citizens to publicly comment on environmental issues that fall in the purview of the ministry. On the website of the ministry citizens can voice their opinions on government document drafts. So far the survey suggests that public input is restricted to a limited set of "priority" items provided and sanctioned by the ministry. It is not known whether an input mechanism will be implemented in which the netizens themselves can have some influence in setting the agenda. The presence of such an input mechanism would enhance the state's governance capability in the sense that he would be made aware of issues actually mattering to its constituents. System theory suggests that the absence of such an input mechanism in general diminishes the effectiveness of any political system (Parsons 1991) as it receives less input in the form of demands from society that it can address and process and ultimately create support for its handling via the feedback loop (Easton 1979). China scores comparatively high with regard to the quality of online services as represented in the OSI index value and the high human capital (HCI) of its people. The low score representing the technical infrastructure (TII) would indicate significant deficiencies in this area in general. A closer look at the distribution of the technical capabilities shows a more complex situation. In general the technical infrastructure follows three trends: it tends to be better following a south-north, central-coastal and rural-urban trend. Southern areas tend to have a better infrastructure similar to coastal regions.

⁵⁵ The TII index is calculated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and represents six indicators: PC's/1000 persons; internet users/1000 persons; telephone lines/1000 persons; online population; mobile phones/1000 persons; and TV's/1000 persons.

Large Cities with their urbanized vicinity also exhibit significantly better technical conditions than do rural areas.

Against this background the distribution of EPBs governmental services should be checked whether or not it follows this trend as well and - if not - identify possible reasons of the deviations. Complementary to the EGDI index the UN provides an e-participation index (EPI) which is defined “as the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery in order to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative” (United Nations 2017)⁵⁶. Similar to the EGDI index the EPI consists of three subindices: (1) e-information, (2) e-consultation and (3) e-decisions-making. The subindex of e-information indicates how well citizens are provided “with public information and access to information without or upon demand”⁵⁷. The subindex of E-consultation measures how citizens can contribute to and deliberate on public services⁵⁸ while the last component of e-decision-making captures the extent to which citizens are empowered “through co-design of policy option and co-production of service components and delivery modalities”⁵⁹.

China scores very high in each dimension measuring e-participation. This is not only surprising given its developmental status as an upper middle income country but more so given its authoritarian regime. Unfortunately the UN does not publish the scores of the three subindices constituting the EPI

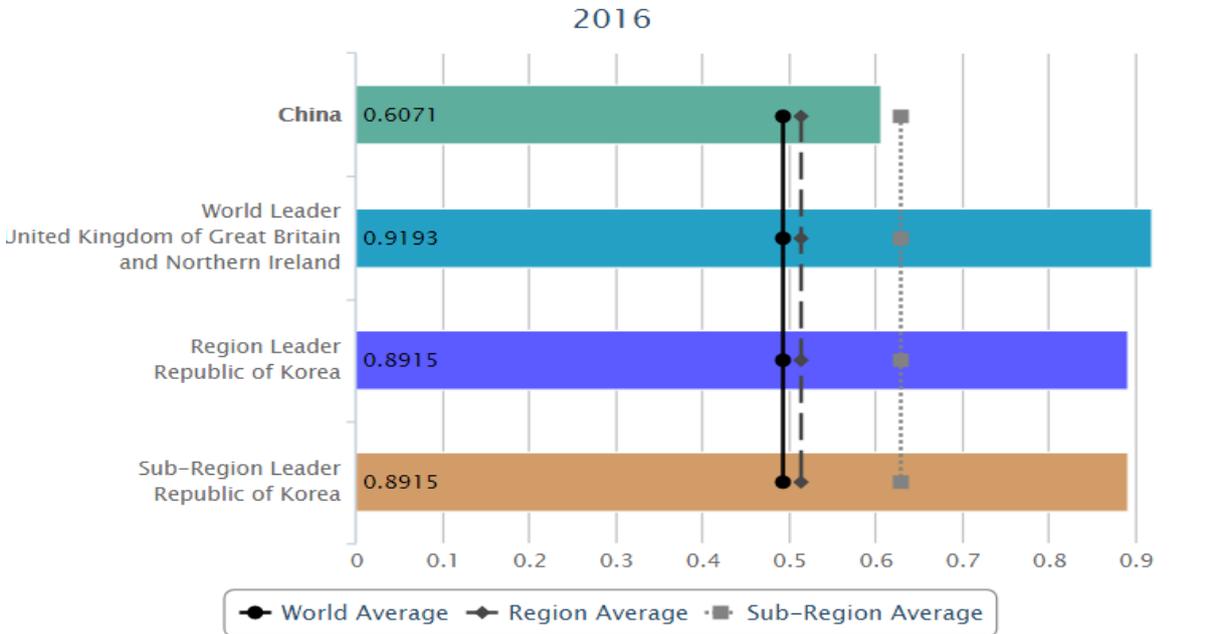


figure 5: China's score in the 2016 UN e-government development index. Image taken from <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/36-China>, last accessed 29.4.2017.

⁵⁶ In the referenced report, the citation is mentioned to originate from the DPADM Concept paper ‘Developing capacity for participatory governance through e-participation’. In this publication however, the mentioned citation could not be found. Thus the UN report is referenced here.

⁵⁷ Cf. the UN E-government knowledge DataBase entry for the e-participation index available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/About/Overview/E-Participation>, last accessed 9.7.2017.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

barring a more differentiated discussion of the results.

In general the e-participation index should be considered with caution. The index is based on a survey assessing “the availability of e-participation tools on national government portals” (United Nations 2017:54). The survey looks for “evidence” of each of the three subindices but what exactly constitutes evidence and how it is weighed remains largely opaque. It also remains unclear who exactly conducted the survey and how the persons were trained⁶⁰.

These constraints highlight that both indexes should not be taken as absolute measures with accuracy to the last decimal place of the score value. They rather aim to provide a comparative rating of countries and provide a general assessment of the situation in each country. China’s high scores both in the more technical and infrastructure orientated e-government index but also in the e-participation index that focuses on information provision and cooperative features is well better than either the world average or even the significantly higher regional average.

The scores suggest that China though lacking at least partially the technical infrastructure is among the most advanced countries with regard to e-participation and online government services. The

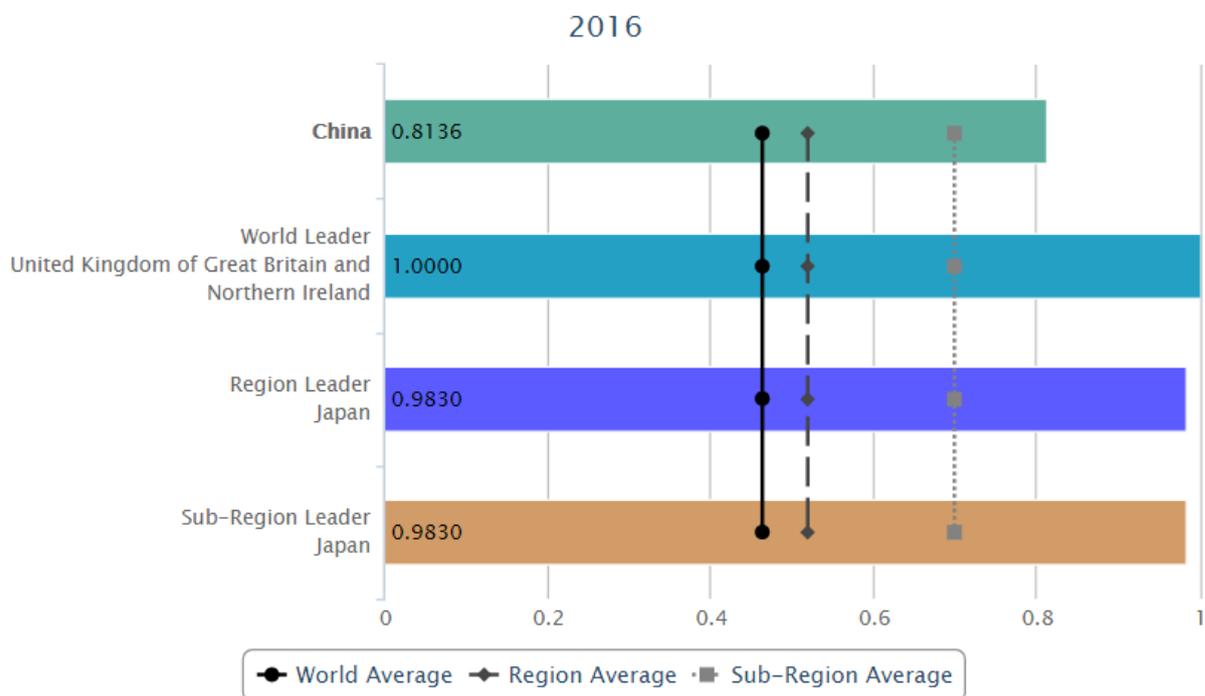


figure 6: China's score in the 2016 UN e-participation index. Image taken from <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/36-China>, last accessed 8.7.2017.

⁶⁰ The UN report on e-government mentions that “a total of 111 researchers, including UN experts and online United Nations Volunteers (UNVs) from over 60 countries with coverage of 66 languages assessed each country’s national website in the native language [...]” United Nations (2017:138). The researchers of the UNVs included graduate students and volunteers from universities in the field of public administration. Each researcher participating in the survey underwent unspecified “rigorous training”. The score of each country was computed based on a list of questions that could be answered in a binary way with yes or no. The list itself however is not publicly accessible thus making an assessment of the indicators used in the survey impossible.

2016 UN report about e-government and e-participation is the first of its kind to include deliberative practices on social media. From a historical perspective China has made significant advances at least in the past 15 years. In 2003 when the first edition of the e-government and e-participation index was published China scored significantly lower in both indices. While its score from the more technical e-government index was still slightly above the world average whereas the e-participation index representing deliberative practices placed China as one of the least advanced countries in this respect (cf. figure 6) . The coincidental rise of the internet and social media between 2003 and 2016 suggests that they contributed or even sparked the extension of deliberative practices in China. Media without social media have become unthinkable. But what characteristics separate social media from traditional media? How did they did they contribute to the deliberative turn in Chinese politics? These factors that have set the stage for social media to become a key element of deliberation will be discussed in-depth in chapter 4. The next section conceptualizes the emergence of social media from a perspective of institutional change to explain why deliberation seems to only have occurred after the spread of social media.

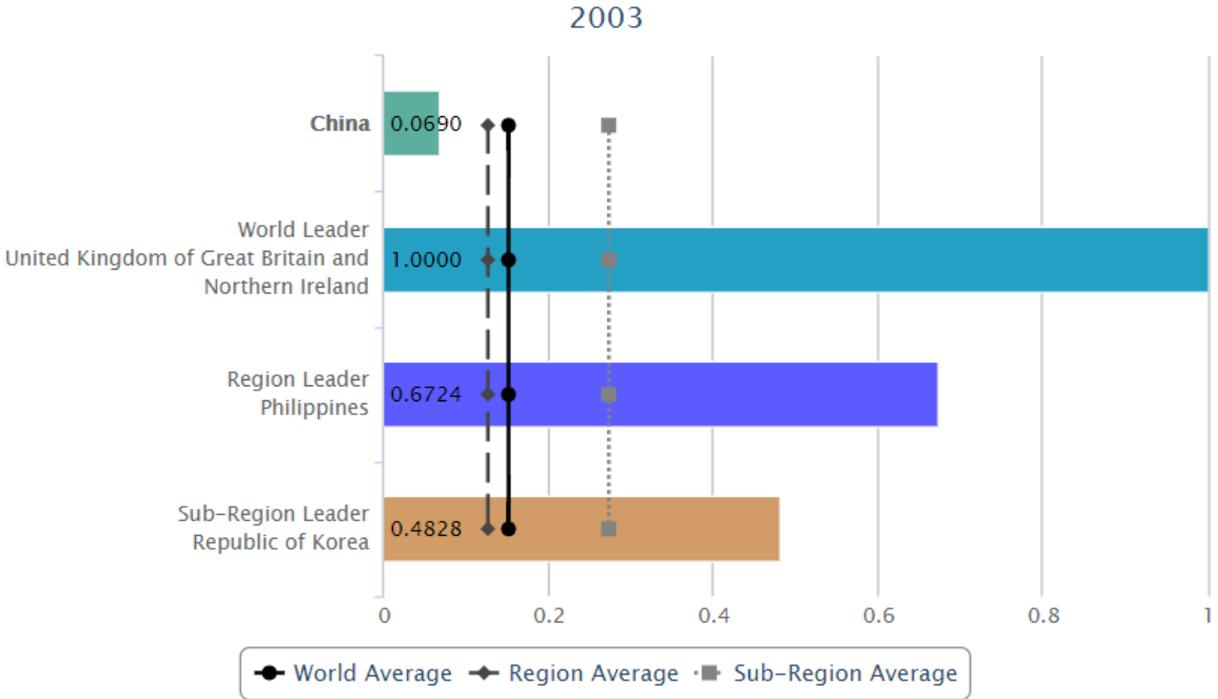


figure 7: China's score in the 2003 UN e-participation index. Image taken from <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/>, last accessed 8.7.2017.

3.3.3 Institutional change driven by social media

The Chinese media have tremendously changed in the past three decades since the reform and opening period. Even though major factors like marketization, professionalization, and

internationalization incrementally transformed the Chinese media, the functional expectations from a state and society perspective have remained largely the same. This is not to deny the generally more critical stance of the media in China today, or to dismiss the activism shown by particular media organizations or individuals.

However technical and political obstacles have prevented the media from becoming a serious platform for state–society interaction. Only social media were able to add a fundamentally new quality to the media in China and create opportunities for immediate engagement. The resulting interaction between state and society is not only confined to social media but also influenced traditional media (McCombs 2006; Scheufele 2000) in terms of agenda-setting or gatekeeping. In fact, social media have led to a caesura in the research about Chinese media (Shirk 2011b; Abbott 2001; Deans & Miles 2011; Tang & Sampson 2012) and – to a lesser but still remarkable extent – state–society relations (Bondes & Schucher 2014; Sima 2011).

The emergence and diffusion of social media have forced the state to adapt to this change. Among the first measures was the expansion of the control and censorship apparatus to cover the new ground (Brady 2006; Shambaugh 2007). After the initial orientation phase, the state decided to supplement its traditional strategy vis-à-vis the media and to use the opportunities created by social media to its advantage as not only a consultative but also a deliberative channel (He 2014). From the institutional perspective adopted here, the emergence of social media changed the “the rules of the game” for the Chinese media (North 1990:3). The players of the game – here, at the topmost layer of abstraction, the Chinese party-state and society – have already adapted to this change. How, then, can this change be conceptually modelled and understood?

Thelen and Streeck (2005) offer a typology of institutional change, discerning each type by whether the processes inducing the change come into effect abruptly or incrementally, and whether the result of their impact leads to a breakdown or continuation of the institution under consideration. From the five modes⁶¹ of institutional change proposed by Streeck and Thelen (2005), the one that best fits the change of media in China is *conversion*. According to this mode, institutions are in a state of conversion when they “are not so much amended or allowed to decay as they are *redirected to new goals, functions, or purposes*” (2005:26, emphasis in original). One of these new functions is the limited watchdog role of the media. Along with the aforementioned four processes of change, the media has also turned from what Liu and McCormick (2011:116) called a “monopolistic public sphere”, filled with state discourses, to a new public sphere in which people can create and share information and discourses more independently from the state. This challenges the state’s monopoly on information and discourses, and ultimately weakens its dominance over society. Social media are

⁶¹ The others are drift, displacement, layering, and exhaustion (Streeck & Thelen 2005a).

not only an arena of cooperation between state and society, as shown in deliberative or consultative practices, but also the platform of ongoing struggle for domination between them (Migdal 2001):

[t]hose who use new media for social change [...] push the conventional limits on freedom of expression and undermine the government's discursive authority. In this way, they are involved in a Gramscian "war of position," a protracted struggle, with both wins and losses, as "the state and society are mutually transformative via their interactions" with new media. (Zheng, 2008, p. xviii)

While the emergence of social media has changed the media itself and state–society relations respectively, their impact was only possible because other processes of institutional change had already prepared favourable conditions. The factors that shaped and still are shaping the Chinese media are discussed in chapter four. It is necessary to trace their impact not only to explain the change in the media system itself and the changing impact it had on state-society relations in China but also to carve out why social media became an arena for deliberation for other than technical reasons.

Social media as a deliberative arena have been used in various contexts from discussion of train accidents (Bondes & Schucher 2014), in general controversial discussion about the nature of the political system (Han 2015), to foreign policy issues (Cairns & Carlson 2016) and to a considerable extent with matters related to environmental pollution and protection (Su & Meng 2016; Sima 2011). The next section explores why environmental protection has become an important policy field in China in the past decades.

3.4 Environmental protection as a policy field

The devastating state of the environment in China today is the result of both historical developments and recent policy prioritization (Economy 2010). Major historical reasons include the internal and external wars that shook China in the last two centuries and its sharply rising population during the beginning and mid-20th century. The biggest impact, though, came from the conscious decision of the party-state during the reform and opening period (since the late 1970s) to prioritize economic progress above all other targets in a "growth at all cost" manner.

The CCP's then-leadership of party leader Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao rhetorically promised to replace the economic growth-centered policy imperative with a more balanced and comprehensive developmental model of "growth with equity", so that China would be able to slowly but steadily grow into a harmonious society (和谐社会) (Han & Whyte 2009:194). The often-cited promotion of the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) to the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) is a significant step in this direction. At the same the institutional reconfigurations have not yet been

able to mitigate the side effects of China's development or to remedy the degradation of the decades since the economic growth kicked in.

Environmental pollution is not only a major health threat for Chinese society; it is also foiling the economic growth strategy. In 2010, a Chinese Academy of Environmental Planning study estimated the costs of environmental degradation at US \$230 billion, or 3.5% of GDP at that time (Wong 2013a). These numbers had increased since 2004, when the costs were estimated to be US \$62 billion, or 3.05% of GDP (ibid). These figures should not be taken as rock-solid, but rather as indicators of a trend, since the statistical service in China is at times not very reliable and the institution that conducted the study is adjunct to the MEP, thus potentially biasing their results.

The environmental situation has become so disastrous that the current Premier Li Keqiang has declared a "war on pollution". This "war" was declared after an investigation revealed that 71 out of 74 cities in China had not met the environmental standards the government set in 2013, and those three cities that did were only medium-sized (Stutts 2014). Some 1.2 million premature deaths were attributed to ambient air pollution in 2010 alone (Alcorn 2013). A report produced by the World Bank and the SEPA, "Cost of Pollution in China, estimated that annually some 350,000 to 400,000 people die because of outdoor pollution (Wong 2013b). An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 environmental-related protests and demonstrations take place every year, making this issue a significant source of societal dissatisfaction (Grabar 2014).

The significance of environmental protection as a policy field for state–society relations in China is evident from its economic and social dimensions. Mark Beeson (2010) argues that – from a comparative perspective – authoritarian regimes in Asia in general and China in particular are more successful at dealing with environmental challenges than their democratic neighbors. This view is challenged by Kassiola and Guo's collected volume, *China's Environmental Crisis* (2010), particularly Alpermann's (2010) and Yu and Zeng's (2010) chapters, which highlight the difficulties and deficiencies of environmental governance.

In the previous sections, the impact of social media on state–society relations has been depicted from an institutional perspective. Four processes – marketization, professionalization, internationalization, and the emergence of social media shaping the media – were identified. The slow and incremental change elicited by these processes fitted the conversion model of institutional change provided by Thelen and Streeck (2005). In this model, the institution is assigned new tasks and functions rather than being abolished or replaced. Social media created opportunities for deliberative and consultative practices, as outlined in He and Warren's (2011) notion of authoritarian deliberation. This concept links deliberative practices as input mechanism to improvements in governance. Governance was then conceptualized as Jentoft and Kooiman's (2009) first-order

governance, which deals with problem-solving and opportunity creation. The lack of studies based on empirical rather than anecdotal evidence exposes a gap in the research⁶². To fill this void, the development trajectory of the Chinese media – based on the institutional approach and the three processes shaping them – is scrutinized.

Against this backdrop the emergence of social media and their ubiquitous presence in China are a precondition for deliberation in the media in an unprecedented scale – not only in the field of environmental protection. Even though this study design is explorative and does not fit into the traditional methodological thinking discerning between independent and dependent variables the presences of the EPBs on Sina Weibo and their shared content would in this regard best be represented as the independent variables whereas the contributions of other Sina Weibo users and the resulting discussions would represent the dependent variables. The first overarching research question then is whether or not – and, if so, to what extent – deliberative practices exist in Chinese social media. A second elementary question guiding the research is whether or not the interactions are apt and actually contribute to the improvement of first-order governance. The contributions will be measured using Bonsón et al. (2012) framework which is discussed in more detail in chapter 6.1. If the discussions and contributions found in the gathered data fit the categories put forward by the Bonsón et al. framework, then an increase in first-order governance has occurred.

⁶² With the notable exception of He and Thøgersen (2010). While their article uses the concept of authoritarian deliberation, it is not applied to social media.

4. The Chinese media from an institutional perspective

The fast spreading of social media and their significant impact on Chinese politics was only possible because several processes shaped the media prior to their emergence (Shirk 2011a; Akhavan-Majid 2004; Stockmann 2013; Steinhardt 2014). These processes slowly but steadily molded the institutional environment of laws, regulations, and practices that allowed social media to become more than just a technologically sophisticated replica of the traditional media.

In this sense, this chapter ties together different insights about the development of Chinese media with regard to not only their impact on state–society relations but also how they shaped the Chinese polity in a way that allowed social media to become a deliberative arena. By drawing on the existing literature about China’s media, several processes can be identified: marketization (Zhao 1998; Zhao 2008; Zhao 2011; Zhao 2000; Zhao 2003; Stockmann 2011a; Stockmann 2013; Stockmann, Esarey & Zhang 2010; Stockmann & Gallagher 2011; Shirk 1993), professionalization (Greenberg & Lau 1990; Chu 1994; Bandurski & Hala 2010b; Li & Lu 2009; Hassid 2011) and internationalization (Shirk 2011b; Shirk 2007; d’Hooghe 2005; Shambaugh 2013; Sun 2015). It is necessary to take all processes into account, as they are interdependent. The development of these processes provides the backdrop for explaining why social media so profoundly changed the media system and state–society relations in China.

The institutional perspective adopted here is dynamic as it portrays the change of the Chinese media over the last three decades. From this vantage point, recent phenomena like *egao* (恶搞), or citizens’ journalism, can be contextualized and assessed with regard to their impact on state–society relations, as well as older but nonetheless prevalent practices like black journalism or trends like the increasingly outward orientation of the Chinese media. This chapter ties together the literature on these individual factors and phenomena to present a comprehensive account of the media’s change since the reform and opening era. The chapter serves two purposes: first, it provides the general background against which the argument of the emergence deliberative practices in social media was proposed in chapter 2; second, it constitutes a literature review of the macro-level processes that are driving the changing role of the media for state–society relations in China.

History matters and these processes represent the path dependency of China’s media. (Hemelryk &

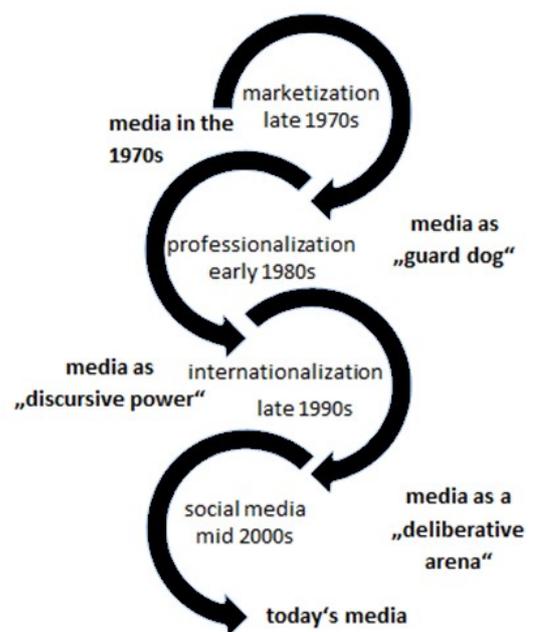


figure 8: Chinese media and the processes of change with their approximate start dates. Functions that were amended to the media are in parentheses by author.

Simons 2002) agree when they state: “change happens on a continuum and that without due regard for the past, we have little hope of comprehending the present” (Hemelryk & Simons 2002:5). Looking beyond the role of the media since the founding of the state is likely to contribute only marginally to understanding the dynamics that emerged and gained momentum since the beginning of the reform and opening period (Lee 1994; Chan & Qiu 2002; Shirk 2011a)⁶³.

Following Thelen and Streeck’s model of incremental institutional change, the development of the media was a gradual transformation; they were “not so much amended or allowed to decay as they ... [were] *redirected to new goals, functions, or purposes*” (Streeck & Thelen 2005b). In this sense, the media underwent a process of change that was caused partly by the party-state and developments within Chinese society (Tai 2006) and partly by dynamics within the media sector itself (Stockmann 2011a). The change resulted in shifting expectations of the party-state and society vis-à-vis the media. For example, contemporary Chinese media are expected – by the party-state and the society – to transmit information and to help with the dissemination of laws, regulations, and policies in a very different way from their Leninist transmission function prior to the 1970s.

Prior to the reform and opening period, the media’s audience was addressed as “masses” (群众) or “comrades” (同志). The concept of “audience” (观众 or 受众) was only introduced in the late 1970s (cf. Yu 2009:9). As Yu points out, along with this ideational change, new values began to be transported in the media – such as the “right to know” (知情权) and the “right to speak” (发言权) (2009:9). This introduced participatory practices in an unprecedented way and scope, which over time fundamentally changed not only the conceptual understanding of the audience but also the state–society relations – as Heberer and Schubert’s work on political participation in urban areas (“from masses to citizens”) exemplifies (Heberer & Schubert 2009).

In their interplay, each of the processes led to a significant shift of the media’s role in state–society relations. As illustrated in figure 8, from an institutional perspective it becomes evident how and to what extent the media changed over time. The emergence of social media due to rapid technological development and enhanced infrastructure in China represents the latest process that led to a new role for the media: an arena for deliberative practices. From this perspective, social media becomes comparable to marketization, professionalization, and internationalization. In the following subsections, each of the processes and the resulting functional differentiation is elaborated in detail from a state–society perspective.

⁶³ The first newspaper in China, *The Court Gazette* (邸报), dates back as early as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) (Xu 1994). Xu remarks that censorship started to appear during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), when “unofficial newspapers, called *Xiaobao*, became popular among the civil society” (Xu 1994:169), emphasis in original). For a detailed and meticulously compiled account of historical developments in the 20th century with regards to party–media relations, see Volland (2003).

Identify change and the processes that trigger it – especially incremental change over long periods of time – requires a reference point to which to compare it. The end of the Mao era marks a widely accepted caesura marking a fundamental change in the political history of China (Saich 2011, ch. 3,4; Teiwes 2010; Gilley 2010). This chapter therefore compares the media prior to the reform and opening era to its current state, drawing on existing literature to identify processes shaping the Chinese media. The literature is arranged to enable a comprehensive understanding of long-term macro-level processes of change.

4.1 State–society relations and the media prior to reform and opening era

In the following paragraphs, the Chinese media prior to the reform and opening period are characterized, with particular emphasis on their impact and function in state–society relations. State–society relations are here defined as “the interactions and interdependency between the state and society” (Sellers 2013:124). To look at state–society relations is particularly useful when a more differentiated view than a state–society dichotomy is required, as it allows analysis of the interaction between the two. The media serve as one of the main arenas of interaction between the different state and societal actors. Based on Migdal’s (2001) insight that state–society relations rarely represent a zero–sum power struggle, the following sections point out the dynamics caused by the media in state–society relations. As with other macro-level institutions, the media system in China changed slowly but significantly over time. It is beyond the scope of this research to meticulously describe every change that occurred in the last three decades. Therefore, large processes driving the changes in the media system are presented rather than particular laws, regulations, or incidents. This perspective streamlines the focus of the analysis and allows the special characteristics of social media – required for the institutional perspective adopted here – to be identified.

Prior to 1978, societal access to the media in terms of agenda-setting or contributing was non-existent or heavily restricted. Societal actors therefore resorted to medium- and small-scale media activities. They staged protests and demonstrations in streets, printed and circulated flyers, made public speeches, or used big character posters (大字报)⁶⁴ (Yang & Calhoun 2008). These means show how severely restrained societal actors were from accessing the media as a platform for mass communication.

But it was not only societal actors who were restrained from accessing information provided by the media. Though cadres had access to special publications like *Reference News* (参考消息), not all parts of the publication were accessible to them. *The Reference News* was first published in Ruijin

⁶⁴ It is not without irony that Mao himself resorted to referring to this method in the document marking the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, entitled “Bombard the headquarters – my big character poster” (炮打司令部 - 我的一张大字报) (Schoenhals 2002:167).

(Jiangxi) in 1931, and adopted its current name in 1942. It provided translations of selected articles and comments from foreign media outlets to high-level cadres. It was circulated in the CCP (内部发行) but accessible at first only to the elite of the party, frequently tagged with labels indicating its consumption was only for leading cadres (供领导干部参考). The restricted access changed (Atwood & Lin 1982); in the beginning of the 1980s, the publication was “available to lower and middle level cadres and party officials and party officials and is available in party offices” (1982:240)⁶⁵. Admittedly, though, Atwood and Lin acknowledge that this assessment is based on hearsay; they begin their remarks with “[i]t is reported to be available [...]” (ibid.). Rudolph (1984) corroborates Atwood and Lin’s statement when he summarizes that “today the *Reference News* is read by practically all relevant basic strata of society in Communist China” (1984:5). He estimated the readership to be about 30 million, whereas Atwood and Lin put it at around 10 million (Atwood & Lin 1982). Rudolph’s significantly higher estimation can be explained by his counting three to four readers for each of the 8.47 million copies sold in 1981 (ibid.). Regardless of which estimate is more accurate, the circulation of the publication had significantly increased by the beginning of the 1980s, as in 1957 it only distributed approximately 2,000 copies (Atwood & Lin 1982). Due to increasing competition and the scarcity of state subsidies, the publication was made accessible to a wider public in 1985, and it has since been open to subscription and sold in bookstores. But not all sections of the *Reference News* were so widely accessible. The section dealing with internal affairs and politics of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – called “Internal Reference” (内部参考) – was and still is highly restricted (cf. Cho 2007:127), only accessible to very high-standing cadres holding a position of level 12 or 13 in the party nomenclature, which is roughly equivalent to the position of a vice minister (Rudolph 1984).

To focus only on the party–state’s use of the media provides an incomplete account of the media’s role at the time. On various occasions, societal actors made use of the media prior to 1978⁶⁶ – as, for instance, during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956 (百花运动). Societal use became prevalent during the time of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命), which is commonly agreed to cover approximately the decade from 1966 on.

⁶⁵ During his residence in China in the late 1970s Thomas Heberer suggests from his personal experience that 参考消息 were restricted in name only as copies were readily available at the time. He points out that periodicals such as 参考资料 or 内部参考 were more heavily restricted and reserved to cadres above the vice-ministerial level (副部级以上的干部) (personal communication with Thomas Heberer 30.11.2016).

⁶⁶ The media played a pivotal role in China prior to the founding of the PRC; the May Fourth Movement (四五运动) in 1919 and (from a more comprehensive perspective) the New Culture Movement (新文化运动) from the mid-1910s to the 1920s were important events in this respect. A comprehensive overview of major historical events prior to 1949 is beyond the scope of this work, and from this point deliberately sidelined, as its contribution to the developments under scrutiny here is rather negligible.

At the time, even national or provincial media like television or radio stations were partially controlled by non-party-state individuals and groups, providing them with unprecedented access to mass-communication devices. Askante and Xie called this “usurpation of the media”, by which the respective actors were able to use them for their own political ends (Asante & Xie 1983; Asante & Xie 1983). Actors such as (but not restricted to) the Red Guards employed the whole variety of techniques available to them for their campaigns. In their longitudinal study, Yang and Calhoun (Yang & Calhoun 2008) showed how the media shaped the repertoire of political protest and contestation; they contended that during the Cultural Revolution:

Some of these contentious activities, such as street demonstrations, depended on physical locations and face-to-face interactions. Other activities, such as the printing of leaflets, depended on rudimentary mass-media. Printing machines, mimeograph machines, loudspeakers, and portable microphones were the most common media technologies in the 1960s. (Yang & Calhoun 2008)

The appropriation of the means for mass communication by a wide array of actors outside the party-state, in juncture with the specific configuration of the Chinese polity at the time and the clash of interests within the party – with particular regard to Mao – showed the impact media can have state–society relations. Following Migdal’s (2001) understanding, neither the state nor society can be considered to represent homogeneous and monolithic actors. Rather, both spheres of state and society are made up of a complex amalgam of actors, with at times overlapping or conflicting interests. From this vantage point, the clashes between individual Red Guard teams are as much a part of state–society relations as the purges of Deng Xiaoping during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was an exceptional period. The erosion of state power as well as the turmoil and chaos that reigned China at the time were unprecedented and have so far not been repeated. As such, a look at the Chinese media prior to the reform and opening period must also account for the trends and developments that took place parallel to, or unaffected by, the Cultural Revolution.

In this sense, the state-owned and controlled media stations had a regular audience of several hundred million people, but represented a predominantly one-way communication. While this may suffice to signal state–societal demands, the state controlled media are inapt devices for communicative or deliberative practices. At the time – according to the media system typology developed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1963; Noesselt 2013)⁶⁷ – Chinese media qualified as representative of the Soviet Communist type⁶⁸: the government strictly controlled the media and was the exclusive owner of all media enterprises. The sole purpose of the

⁶⁷ For a critical theoretical assessment, with particular hindsight to China, see Huang Huang (2006) or Yin Yin (2008).

⁶⁸ In their seminal work on the functions of media, Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1963) discerned between four types of media systems: (1) authoritarian, (2) libertarian, (3) social responsibility, and (4) Soviet Communist.

media was to serve the party-state in its attempt to educate the masses in accordance with the latest version of official ideology or mobilize the masses for campaigns (Brady 2006; Brady 2008). In the historical context, Mao's understanding was classically Leninist; Lenin stated the press had to be the collective propagandist, agitator, and organizer to rally support for the state and mobilize the masses (Resis 1977:278). The party-state is still expecting the media to fulfil this function today (Brady & Wang 2009).

According to Yuezhi Zhao (Zhao 1998:19), the party's understanding of the media at the time rested on three pillars: (1) that the media accepted and embraced the party's ideology as their own, (2) that the media disseminate the party's programs, policies, and regulations, and (3) that the media follow the party's instructions regarding matters of organizational and press policies. These pillars formed the party principle (党性原则) and underlined the party's dominance over the media. The principle was formulated even before the founding of the PRC, and draws on a Leninist understanding of the media as a mechanistic transmission belt. As a result, the media landscape in China was scant⁶⁹. Nationwide, only a few newspapers existed; journalism as a profession was virtually non-existent, and all media reported almost exactly the same content with little or no variation (Tong 2011). The media thus served the state to create a "monopolistic public sphere" (Liu & McCormick 2011):105), which was shaped and filled with content provided exclusively by the party; no opportunity for societal input was planned or established⁷⁰. Although criticism of the government was formally allowed even during the Mao era, as critical reports (批评报告, Sun 2010:43), these usually expressed the opinion of high party-officials or were used as a weapon in politically motivated purgatory trench wars within the party.

This clearly reflected the then-contemporary mode of political communication, which was – also for technological reasons – from the party to society, following a strict one-way modus⁷¹. The media therefore functioned merely as a mechanical transmission belt in the Leninist tradition (Shambaugh 2007). As all media was owned by the party-state, there was competition for neither audiences nor revenues. The absence of advertisement is arguably one of the most striking differences to today's media products. It is in this sense that Liu and McCormick characterized the media as a "monopolistic public sphere," since "[t]he fundamental feature of this public sphere was its monopoly by the party,

⁶⁹ Zhao (1998:17) stated that, during the Cultural Revolution, only 43 regular newspapers existed throughout China (not taking into account publications of movements such as the Red Guards).

⁷⁰ Historical events like the Hundred Flowers Campaign (百花运动) contributed in two ways. From the state perspective, these showed that allowing societal input (or even criticism) is hard to control and does not necessarily yield the desired results. From a societal perspective, the

⁷¹ Though internal reports summarizing events and providing information to the political elites already existed at the time (内部参考资料), they remained rather limited in scope Grant (1988). Journalists and reporters tended to redirect grievances put forth by individuals to the corresponding state organizations (Bandurski & Hala 2010b).

which means that the official ideological discourse did not merely dominate but occupied almost the whole of the public sphere” (Liu & McCormick 2011:116)⁷².

Taking the state of the media prior to reform and opening as a starting point, the historically earliest emerging process of change is marketization. The introduction of economic-based incentive structures in the realm of the media profoundly changed the media and altered state–society interactions in this arena.

In the following section, a definition of marketization and its main characteristics is provided. A summary of each characteristic’s effects on the media landscape is presented, along with the ways in which they are linked with other process of change, such as internationalization. Against this backdrop, two arguments are put forward: (1) marketization changed the dynamics and development of the media profoundly, and (2) the party-state successfully adopted its management methods and functional expectation.

4.2 Marketization

Marketization (市场化) was introduced in China after the caesura in the late 1970s, and was part of the reform policies adopted by the third plenum of the 11th Party Central Committee in 1978. These reforms incrementally transformed the economy – and subsequently state and society, as these are mutually intertwined (Migdal 2001)⁷³. The media industry was no exception to this process and was also exposed to new rules and mechanisms that changed the behavior of individual media entities by introducing new incentive structures. As a result, new phenomena with social importance emerged, such as “hitting line balls” (打擦边球) (Bandurski 2012:37)⁷⁴, black or red envelope journalism (Li 2013)⁷⁵, and “human flesh searches” (人肉搜索) (Downey 2010). Several decades later, marketization has fundamentally transformed the media – from a few state-owned inert entities that were financially dependent on state subsidies and had reluctant audiences, to a great variety of omnipresent media companies constantly trying to keep up with their audiences’ needs in a heavily competitive market (Yin & White 1994; Chu 1994:6).

⁷² The term “public sphere” is used not as a historical or normative category, but rather an empirical one. When Habermas uses the concept, he means: “first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. [...] When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere” (Habermas 1991:399).

⁷³ Due to its gradual nature and the long time period considered here, marketization is understood here as a process rather than a fixed state.

⁷⁴ This analogy refers to a ball abruptly changing its course when hitting a wall in sports. Here, it is applied to describe journalists trying to go as far as possible before hitting the invisible barriers of state propaganda and censure, when they suddenly revert to officially sanctioned content due to fear of repression.

⁷⁵ This phenomenon made it into popular culture through Geling Yan’s novel *The Banket Thief* Yan (2006a). The novel tells the story of an unemployed man, Dan Dong, who pretends to be a journalist in order to be invited to the opulent state banquets, until one day he overhears a conversation and gets drawn into a corruption affair.

While the effects of marketization are clearly visible and scholars seem to share an intuitive understanding of what marketization is, it lacks a commonly agreed definition (Zhao 1998, 2006, 2008; Stockmann 2011). According to van Hoveen and Sziráczi, marketization is the transition process in which state-owned enterprises (SOE) begin to operate as market-oriented firms and private enterprises emerge. The change is induced by modifications in the legal and political environment, allowing for new strategies and the setting up of different incentive structures (van Hoveen & Sziráczi 1997:101). As Thirkell, Petkoc and Vickerstaff (1998:63) argue, marketization is an amalgam of processes that includes but is not limited to the reduction of state subsidies, the restructuring of management, commodification of goods, deregulation of prices, and partial or complete privatization. As they point out, these processes need not occur all at once or simultaneously, but over time they will occur with varying intensity. The following sections provide a summary of the media industry's development, with particular focus on newspapers and television, based on Thirkell, Petkoc and Vickerstaff's analytical understanding of marketization. In the case of China, Daniela Stockmann (Stockmann 2011a; Stockmann 2013) and others have pointed out that the main characteristics of marketization vis-à-vis the media are privatization, commercialization (Zhao 2000; McCormick 2002), competition, and the reduction of state subsidies⁷⁶.

4.2.1 The newspaper industry

The main rationale for marketization is the belief that markets can provide better services than solely state-operated industries (Shirk 1993; Wu 2000). In this sense, the state has a double motive to pursue marketization; by reducing subsidies, it liberates resources that may be used elsewhere while simultaneously benefitting from the increased quality of the services provided. Yet, from a fiscal perspective, reduced state subsidies represent only a minor incentive for marketization. In the case of China, the income generated by taxes levied to media companies turned out to significantly outweigh the savings made by reducing subsidies (Huang 2001). To replace state subsidies, media sectors like the newspaper industry had to turn to advertisement, which prior to the reform and opening period was not officially approved. When the *People's Daily* published their first commercial promotion on April 17, 1979, it was understood as the official sanction of advertisement, which subsequently began to permeate all media industries (Li 2001:19). Though advertisement became a necessity for the entire industry, it sparked debates as to its extent and effect. When *The Shanghai Newspaper* (文汇报) successfully managed to sell two issues in January and February 1993 whose front pages were completely covered with advertisements, discourses emerged focusing on the

⁷⁶ The aim of this section is to provide a summary of macro-level developments in the Chinese media. A detailed and comprehensive account is beyond the scope of this work. This summary focuses on the two dominant media sectors of the time period under consideration: newspaper and television.

appropriateness of the extent of advertisement. The economic impact of commercialization rapidly took shape, and advertisement-related incomes are said to have “increased 35-fold between 1981 and 1992” (Chu 1994: 8). Fears arose that commercialized values might replace traditional ones in a process of spreading, or at least promoting, materialistic attitudes (Wei & Pan 1999; Chia 2010; Gu & Hung 2009; Chan & Cai 2009).

In the 1980s, the party-state already began to significantly cut back its financial aids, exposing media outlets to significant pressure to find alternative income revenues. The pressure for economic success did not even spare the national news agency Xinhua, which by the early 1990s relied more (60%) on its own generated profits than on state subsidies (Xin 2006:52). As Xin (2006:53) posited, this trend trickled down to national, provincial, and even county newspapers, which had to become more economically viable or completely self-sustaining. Over time, the media industries became an important pillar of state income; as early as 1998, they represented one of the four biggest sources of state revenues (Kuhn 2001; Akhavan-Majid 2004). But the state did not limit itself to tax incomes; it also introduced a licensing system. The similarity between the licensing system and the registration mechanism for social organizations (社会组织) is quite striking. For instance, every newspaper had to obtain the sponsorship of a recognized state entity or publisher (Zhao 2000:6). This regulation indicates that a change in command and control mechanisms took place at the time, rather than a fundamental system-wide liberalization or *laissez-faire* approach.

The system established in the 1970s was based on a reinvigorated rule dating back to 1953 that officially prohibited newspapers from criticizing the party-committee to which they were affiliated. The rule was amended over time and developed into an elaborate licensing scheme, allowing for more diversity yet maintaining its controlling nature. Prior to marketization, as Akhavan-Majid (2004:557) points out, the Chinese press⁷⁷ consisted exclusively of papers related to the party or People’s Liberation Army (PLA)- and publications of the country’s mass organizations. But even as privatization was introduced, media companies could not be set up as autonomous private enterprises following the licensing scheme; rather, they had to be registered with “a recognized institutional publisher or sponsor” (Zhao 2006:6). The licensing system served two purposes: to create more state revenue, and I to maintain control over the increasingly growing private sector (Keller 2002:283). In fact, the licensing system works so efficiently that media specialist Daniela Stockmann concludes: “[b]y making decisions about when, where, by whom, and how many newspapers can be founded, the CCP is able to determine the organization of the newspaper industry and its ties to the political structure” (2013:53). The tight control did not inhibit the growth

⁷⁷ While newspapers represent only one part of the media landscape, they are taken here in a *pars pro toto* manner, together with the television industry, to show the general state and development of the media. Undoubtedly, the newspaper and television industries were among the most influential media then as now.

of the newspaper industry, though; in 1994, 2,108 newspapers already existed. Even more impressive was the income generated by advertisement. At the end of 1993, this amounted to US \$4.17 billion, thus indicating the progress made towards a financially self-sustainable and viable media industry. So profitable was the newspaper industry that, according to Wu, people described it as “printing newspaper like printing cash” (Wu 2000:52).

The pressure on party-state media has since then incrementally increased. In 1992, the State Press and Publications Administration (SPPA) issued a policy stating that, by 1994, most state-run newspapers would be cut off from subsidies – or stop “eating from the big pot” (吃大锅饭) (Wu 2000:53) – and had to be financially self-sustaining (Zhao 2000:6). The regulations, however, had only been an official declaration; the process of reducing subsidies had already begun. Furthermore, the subsidy reduction was linked to a change in managerial style, resulting in “managing a non-profit institution in the mode of managing an enterprise” (事业单位企业) (Pan 2000:230). The restructuring of management strategies is a salient feature of marketization according to Thirkell, Petkoc, and Vickerstaff (1998), and aimed to improve the competitiveness of media companies. As early as 1987, the changing nature of the media had become so apparent that the State Science and Technology Commission decided to classify media enterprises as “information commodification industries” (Huang and Ding (1997) in Zhao 2000:6). The commodification of information and news is an integral characteristic of marketization; even at the time, the official listing by the Commission was barely more than an official acknowledgement of everyday practices.

Even for SOEs, the need to increase their incomes became more and more necessary, as traditional venues like mandatory subscriptions to their publications by other public institutions diminished. The consequences were multifold. The competition between newspapers created the need for professionally educated and experienced personnel⁷⁸, but also required drastically new management techniques. The diffusion of managerial expertise and thinking in the media sector started with the party’s most important newspaper, the *People’s Daily*. In the late 1970s, it introduced as one of the first newspapers a “for-profit accounting system” (Zhao 2000:6). The change in organizational structure and processes can be summarized as corporatization (van Hove & Sziráczki 1997), which is both a constituent component and a result of marketization.

The rapidly increasing importance of non-state media outlets can be illustrated by taking newspapers as a proxy. While from 1978 to 1996 the total circulation of newspapers only increased 2.5-fold, the number of newspapers had increased from 139 in 1978 to 2,202 in 1996, of which only 669 originated from party or state entities⁷⁹. Non-state media companies became so efficient that state

⁷⁸ A more detailed account is given in the section dealing with professionalism.

⁷⁹ In terms of ownership and closeness to the party-state, a great variety of media outlets exist today.

Stockmann (2010:272) states that Chinese media practitioners discern between three types of newspaper: (1)

entities (as well as social and academic institutions) increasingly chose to delegate publishing to them rather than to SOEs, in exchange for a share of the profits (He in Akhvan-Majidi 2004:557). The sneaking process of privatization culminated in 2003, when SPPA regulation allowed all private companies “to engage in wholesale distribution of publications” (Akhvan-Majidi 2004:558). Only a few months prior to this regulation, the SPPA had abolished the mandatory subscription to party newspapers by state entities. This bereft the SOE media companies of a steady source of income, leveled the playing field with private sector competitors, and increased pressure on SOEs to compete for economic success in the advertisement market. The toll of the fierce competition can be seen in the *People’s Daily*, the circulation shrank from 6.2 million in 1979 to 2.9 million in 1989. In the same period, the number of newspapers had increased from roughly 100 to more than 1,000, and overall circulation had multiplied simultaneously (Chan 2007:550).

While privatization is a characteristic feature of China’s media industry and an integral part of marketization, it should not be conceptualized as a linear process in which solely private actors expand their activities. As state institutions remained, became economic actors, and possessed commercial clout, they used their economic power to achieve political ends. The Beijing municipal Communist Party Committee bought a 49% share – worth some ¥294 million – of the *Beijing News* (新京报), which is known for its critical reporting. The former owner – the Southern Media Group – had founded the paper in 2003, as a joint subsidiary with the Guangming Daily (光明日报) group. The success of the *Beijing News* newspaper rested on two pillars: the bold coverage of controversial topics, and the financially innovative combination of private venture capital with the steady inflow generated by subscriptions, provided by the Guangming Daily group, to cover the first dire years.

As Nailene Wiest pointed, out this arrangement “broke all the rules of publishing in China”⁸⁰. It also became an insightful case for observing tensions resulting from diverging interests within the party-state. The newspaper could rely on its good relations with the state apparatus provided by the Guangming Daily – itself directly sponsored by the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. These connections shielded the *Beijing News* from control of local authorities and allowed it to report critically about developments at the Beijing municipal level, much to the nuisance of local authorities. Jingrong Tong’s (2009) research confirms the pattern that media outlets at a specific level - for e.g. the provincial - are unlikely to criticize the government of the same level due to the stern control and monitoring mechanisms in place. In general, she concludes that media outlets at a higher level in this case, national-level media are likely to report critically without seriously jeopardizing their existence.

official party or state sponsored papers (党报 and 机关报), (2) semi-official papers that receive no investment (晚报), and (3) fully commercialized papers (都市报 or 小报) that depend entirely on investments and advertisement.

⁸⁰ Cf. the issue of the SCMP of the 22.11.2003.

Against this background, the purchase can be seen as the final action in a long series of attempts by municipal governments to assert control over the newspaper⁸¹. This example shows that, while marketization is advancing in the Chinese media sector, it is not only limited to a tool for the private sector but is also used by the party-state to legally further its interests.

4.2.2 Television – a dominant industry branch since the 1990s

Not all sectors of the media were affected identically by marketization, but the patterns are fairly similar (Li 1991; Lee 2000; Li & Lu 2009). Unlike the newspaper sector, television⁸² and radio were treated with special attention by the party-state as they were considered to represent the “most effective connections between the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Government and the Chinese people” at the 11th radio and television conference in 1983 (Li 1991:341). As Ian Weber (2002) points out, television has challenged the dominance of the newspaper sector since the beginning of the early 1990s, largely replacing it especially with regard to its public opinion formation function. This is a ramification of efforts made by the state to enlarge the audience of radio and television by extending the necessary infrastructure. While only 52 radio- and television-transmitting stations existed across China in 1983, some 1,200 existed in 1991 (Li 1991:341). In 2008, there were more than 277 stations in urbanized regions and 1,968 in rural regions (Liu 2010:74), whereas in 1988, CCTV reached only 55% of the Chinese population (33% of the rural and 93% of urban populations).

From its beginning, the structure of the Chinese television and radio system was marked by far more local broadcasting stations than provincial or national ones. This was a result of the four-level policy (四级班), introduced in 1983, that allowed central-level⁸³ governments to launch their own television channels (Sun & Chio 2012:63-5). At the same time, broadcast stations were embedded in a strict hierarchical structure, which forced them to transmit certain programs like the CCTV news broadcast (新闻联播) to ensure maximum spread of state propaganda throughout society⁸⁴.

After the restructuring of the broadcasting system in the early 1980s, SOE faced the competition of private companies (民营电视) (Liu 2010:75), which remained weak in the first decade. It was only after 1993, when media were officially included in third-sector industries as part of a more general policy to promote such industries, that the engagement of the private sector took momentum (Li & Lu 2009:408). But the state’s dominance via CCTV remains unbroken today, with a market share of

⁸¹ Cf. the issue of the SCMP of the 27.01.2014.

⁸² The initial restructuring of the television industry in 1978 also introduced the network Central China Television or CCTV as it is known today.

⁸³ These were the central, provincial, city, and county level.

⁸⁴ This program is just one example of the party-state’s ample possibilities of having the media convey its content and propaganda. The great variety of tools at the state’s disposal is exemplified by Stockmann, Esarey, and Zhang’s (2010) compelling case of public service announcements (公益广告) as a tool for state propaganda.

35% (Liu 2010). The dynamic of the television and film segment of the media alone contributed approximately ¥272 billion to China’s GDP in 2011, supported 4.5 million jobs, and created ¥57 billion in tax revenues (Oxford Economics 2013).

The state-funded expansion of television and radio broadcasting capacities led to increased demand by the population. In the first decades, the manufacturing industry was barely able to satisfy the demand of receivers. Nevertheless, as people shared television and radio sets – especially in rural areas – audiences increased and turned collective media consumption into a social event. Even today, television remains one of the most widespread media from which the populace learns about news and events beyond their locality (Chan 2002:36). Data taken from the 6th wave of the World Value Survey (World Values Survey Association 2015) substantiates this finding.

Among the 1,747 respondents to a question asking which information source individuals consumed on a daily basis, “TV News” still ranks highly, even among very young people; 65.2% of the youngest generation (aged 18–20 in 2012) view television news daily as a source of information. Nevertheless there is a clear trend towards consumption of new media, which are represented in table 1 as “Internet”, “Email”, and “Mobile phone”. The younger the respondents are the more likely is it that new media are a key information source for them. While the statistics in table 1 show that television is consumed daily by large parts of all generations in China, they do not reveal how people judge the information that television provides.

			Age							
			18-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	>=71	Total
			years	years	years	years	years	years	years	
Daily media usage, by information source	Daily newspaper	Count	4	73	94	83	75	41	17	387
		%	6.1%	21.0%	25.5%	20.6%	26.9%	18.0%	31.5%	
	Printed magazines	Count	4	35	30	30	25	11	3	138
		%	6.1%	10.1%	8.1%	7.4%	9.0%	4.8%	5.6%	
	Television news	Count	43	274	327	366	266	211	51	1538
		%	65.2%	78.7%	88.6%	90.8%	95.3%	92.5%	94.4%	
	Radio news	Count	9	48	49	56	50	44	12	268
		%	13.6%	13.8%	13.3%	13.9%	17.9%	19.3%	22.2%	
	Mobile phone	Count	47	225	151	129	36	19	0	607
		%	71.2%	64.7%	40.9%	32.0%	12.9%	8.3%	0.0%	
	Email	Count	16	76	46	28	4	3	1	174
		%	24.2%	21.8%	12.5%	6.9%	1.4%	1.3%	1.9%	
Internet	Count	39	180	124	76	27	9	1	456	
	%	59.1%	51.7%	33.6%	18.9%	9.7%	3.9%	1.9%		
Talk with friends or colleagues	Count	24	135	136	136	85	47	11	574	
	%	36.4%	38.8%	36.9%	33.7%	30.5%	20.6%	20.4%		
Total	Count		66	348	369	403	279	228	54	1747

table 1: Daily media usage of age cohorts. Percentages and totals are based on respondents. Row percentages refer to the total number of people that said they used this particular information source. Source: 6th wave of the World Value Survey (2015) of 2,300 people in China. Only the results with the answer "daily consumption" are displayed.

In this sense, it can be said that television is still the most regularly consumed information source in China, but we do not know whether or not it is still the most influential source.

Unlike newspapers, television and radio stations remained more tightly controlled by the party-state and directly affiliated to state institutions. The television and radio industries remain highly regulated and dominated by SOE, even after more than a decade of World Trade Organization (WTO) membership (ITC 2011).

Though radio and television were not supposed to generate income at first, advertisement was allowed; it was mainly used to fund staff and expand the transmitting infrastructure. As state subsidies were reduced and similarly to the long-term trend in the publishing industry, television channels increasingly relied on advertisements to finance themselves. In 1995, the party-state began to implement regulations incentivizing an economically self-sustainable television sector by introducing western management styles and increasing income through advertisement (Weber 2002:57). This shows that the process of corporatization set in later in this industry than in the newspaper business and that all media industries were eventually affected by processes of marketization – albeit at different points in time.

The ramifications of this restructuring were twofold: the state massively increased its revenues, and the fierce competition between individual television stations resulted in a much more diverse program for consumers. As Li (2001) shows, at the turn of the millennium, commercials rather than state subsidies had already become the most important income flow for Chinese television. In 2000, CCTV raised some ¥5.5 billion from advertisement, whereas state subsidies accounted only for ¥30 million or 0.5% of all CCTV funds (Li 2001:19). Until the end the millennium, television had become the dominant media in terms of both advertisement investment and audience reach (Weber 2002:59ff.).

But even in this highly restricted environment, television industries began to change. Emerging from the aforementioned economic pressures, the need to adjust to audiences' needs forced television channels to present new formats with more appealing topics to attract viewers. Commercial advertisement set in even earlier than in the publishing sector; the first advert was shown on a local Shanghai television station on January 28, 1979, and was fast taken up by other stations, even on the national level (Li 2001:19). The economically-induced diversification of television companies was pushed further in 2002, when non-media companies were finally allowed to invest in media groups – albeit, as Daniela Stockmann points out, with certain restrictions. For example, the share of non-state investment should not exceed 49%, thus guaranteeing financial control over TV enterprises. Stockmann characterizes this process as a partial property transfer from “public to private ownership” (2010:271).

4.2.3 The impact of marketization on state–society relations

Marketization is the main driving factor changing Chinese media in the past decades and today (Shirk 1993; Shirk 2007; Stockmann 2013; Zhao 1998; Zhao 2008). As shown in the previous sections, in all the dominant industries that constitute traditional media in China, all aspects of marketization are present albeit to varying degrees and at different times: the reduction of state subsidies, privatization of public enterprises, restructuring of management, commercialization, and – as the price of media goods is largely determined by demand and supply – the commodification of information and deregulation of prices. How did these processes of change affect state–society relations?

The sharp increase in media companies with private, public, and mixed ownership forced the state to adapt its controlling and monitoring mechanism. While today “the media sector is no longer the disciplined government service of the past” (Keller 2002:277), the state’s dominance remains a widely acknowledged fact (Stockmann & Gallagher 2011; Whitten-Woodring 2012; Hassid 2011). The state considers the media to have become a multifunctional tool. As Anne-Maire Brady (2008) points out, the media have the paradoxical character of still being the party’s mouthpiece while at the same time serving a limited watchdog function. As a result, the media face a complicated set of clashing interests; as Sun Wangning summarizes it, the media are entrapped in a “juggle between the role [...] as the Party’s mouthpiece and a mass medium, between authority and accessibility, between indoctrination and readability” (Sun 1996:44 cited in Weber 2002:57). Commercialization in particular puts the media in the position of balancing between “the party line and the bottom line” (Zhao 1998).

Most of the watchdog functionality can be explained by decentralization processes and the emergence of “extra-regional media supervision” (异地监督, Cho 2010:170). At the same time, it demonstrates the complexities of central–local relations, which require a more differentiated analytical approach than regarding the state as a single homogenous and unitary actor (Migdal 2001; Tong 2007). Scholarly debates center on the question of whether or not dynamics of marketization undermine the authoritarian system and pave the way for democratization (Lynch 1999). The media are more developed today and can sustain authoritarian rule with continuing propaganda (Holbig & Gilley 2010; Brady 2008); yet, they are more complex, and indirect mechanisms have developed to make the increasing number of laws and regulations more known among the populace, thus strengthening the accountability of local state administrations (Gallagher & Stockmann 2011).

The flourishing media sector also serves as a faster and more comprehensive feedback mechanism; journalists strive to write article for internal journals (内参), as being published therein is widely recognized as a symbol of seniority and achievement (Grant 1988). Due to restricted access and rare references to such journals, it is impossible to estimate the impact of this particular mechanism.

Overall, despite dynamics in the media landscape, the state still exerts tight control (Zhao 2000; Gordon 1997) and has reserved special rights; for example, to propagate public service broadcastings at any time (Chin 2012; Stockmann 2010). Beginning with the more vivid change in China's media landscape in the 1990s, the state changed its mode from using the media as a mouthpiece to using it as a tool of guidance for public opinion (舆论导向⁸⁵ Chan 2007). According to Alex Chan, this "guidance of public opinion is indirect, flexible and subtle in nature", in comparison with plain old-fashioned propaganda (Chan 2007: 547).

For society, the diversified media offer more choices with regard to information consumption and more comprehensive, in-depth coverage of topics. This is a result of the pressures of marketization, particularly the need to compete for audiences to increase advertisement income. Media companies today are sensitive to the audience's demand; this leads to a huge supply of soft and apolitical news or infotainment (Leibold 2011)⁸⁶. On the other hand, it also leads to programs that satisfy the populace's demand for criticism – albeit in very restricted ways. For the dominant two media industries of newspaper and television, two examples are the socially critical television program "Focal Point" (焦点访谈)⁸⁷ (Ding, Fang & Chen 2005; Chan & Qiu 2002; Li 2002; Chan 2002) and the controversial weekly supplement, "Freezing Point" (冰点), of the *China Youth Daily* (中青报).

As Li (2002) points out, "Focal Point" was a critical television format that openly addressed current public grievances. It became so successful that it achieved an audience rate of 20–25%, representing some 200–250 million viewers, at prime time (Li 2002:22)⁸⁸. Even though television is technically not flexible when it comes to interaction with the audience, the program regularly attracted more than 1,000 comments and letters to the editors from the public, which contained leads for more stories (Chan 2002:38). However, this does not mean that blunt state propaganda was absent from these programs. In his research, Alex Chan comes to the conclusion that a significant amount of reports of the program *focal point* (37.9%) can be classified as propaganda. Still, the program departed from Hu

⁸⁵ For a similar concept, cf. Wang (2012).

⁸⁶ A clear-cut distinction between soft news, humor or satirical content, and politically relevant news is not always possible (Li 2011). Apolitical content may be given a different interpretation or framing to use it for subliminal political or social criticism. Gong and Yang (2010) make a compelling case for political parody (恶搞).

⁸⁷ The 13-minute long program was shown from April 1, 1994, on CCTV Channel 1. The slow transformation of the media can be seen by the fact that the program had predecessors, of which the most prominent was called "Oriental Horizon" (东方时空), which first aired in 1993 and "marked the first time that television in China had come out and openly criticized bureaucracy, corruption, pollution and other social problems" Li (2001:7).

⁸⁸ Using a formal model, Lorentzen (2014:413) points out that "an authoritarian regime can benefit from a more sophisticated media control strategy, permitting journalists to report aggressively on low-level malfeasance in order to improve governance, but constantly adjusting the amount of reporting in order to avoid giving discontented citizens enough information to be certain about whether a revolt would receive sufficient support to be worthwhile". Lorentzen also notes that the degree of censorship and control may vary over time. In this sense, Li's assessment of "Focal Point" might only hold true for the time up to the beginning of the 2000s. Bandurski and Hala (2010b) suggest that, in general, the Chinese media have become critical in the last decade, which is also a finding of Tong (2011).

Yaobang's dictum that the media have to present 80% good news and 20% bad news (Chan 2002:42). In the newspaper industry, a case showing the media's critical stance, the complexities resulting from new modes of ownership, and the limits of media freedom is "Freezing Point" – a publication of the *China Youth Daily* (Liu 2011). The supplement had earned a reputation of publishing critical articles and is representative of a general trend in the publishing industries (Tong 2007). "Freezing Point"⁸⁹ was closed in 2006; its chief editor was replaced after an article by Yuan Weishi was published that criticizing Chinese textbooks for providing a distorted account of historical facts – for example, about the late Qing-dynasty – that fostered nationalism and anti-foreign attitudes⁹⁰. The decision to shut down the paper and restructure the editorial board confirms that even state-run papers try to test the invisible boundaries of censorship, whether for economic or political reasons. "Freezing Point" was revived several months later as public protest, including from leading party figures, demanded it to be reinstated. But a signal had been sent to the publishing industries that crossing the invisible boundaries of censorship will be punished, no matter who the perpetrator is (Liu 2011; Tong 2007). Similar events did not occur until January 2013, when the journalists of the newspaper *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) staged a public protest. The reason for their protest was censorship of their new year's message, which called for guaranteed constitutional rights. This was replaced by a more party-friendly article⁹¹. The clash between journalists and the provincial propaganda department is even more interesting, given that the government-run newspaper top leader is the provincial party secretary. In response, other state-run papers – like the notoriously nationalistic *Global Times* in its Chinese web edition (环球时报) – ran editorials criticizing the striking journalists⁹². The strike was not unanimous among the *Southern Weekend* staff; several senior editors were skeptical and pledged for a more pragmatic approach, such as editor-in-chief Huang Can, who said "it's always better to dance with shackles than to no right to dance" (BBC 7.1.2013). The repercussions for the paper were limited; no staff member was directly fired or demoted, and the paper went back to business as usual shortly after the incident.

The examples of *focal point* and "Freezing Point" show that the media now offers more critical coverage – and that propaganda in its various forms is still dominant in Chinese media (Brady & Wang 2009). However, the increasing number of media businesses forced the party-state to adopt its controlling, monitoring, and censorship apparatus⁹³. More significant than the exact authority of the associated state institutions like the state administration of press, publication, radio, film and

⁸⁹ The only four-page counting supplement was founded in 1995.

⁹⁰ Cf. *The Washington Post*, last accessed 25.1.2006.

⁹¹ Cf. *BBC News*, last accessed 7.1.2013.

⁹² Cf. <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2013-01/3440688.html>, last accessed 14.6.2014.

⁹³ A detailed description of the connected institutions, relevant processes, and changes over time with regard to censorship is beyond this work, but can be found in e.g. Shambaugh (2007), Brady (2006; 2009), and Zheng (2008).

television (SARF) or the ministry of information industry (MII) is the more general change in climate regarding repression and censorship. This does not refer to a change in basic illegal techniques, such as inviting suspects to drink tea⁹⁴ and have a chat, laying off or detaining them in illegal prisons, or legal arrangements of disseminating lists containing instructions on what and how to report⁹⁵. Despite the number and variety of repressive mechanisms, these are not the most effective instruments of state repression. Constant surveillance and arbitrary punishment by state authorities has led to a culture and atmosphere in which suspects of potential repression comply with unspoken rules in anticipated obedience. Lokman Tsui (2003) conceptualizes this phenomenon as a panopticon prison. The concept of the panopticon – originally developed by Jeremy Bentham (Bentham & Welzbacher 2013) and further elaborated by Michel Foucault (2015) – posits that the risk of being punished harshly suffices to make people comply. This only holds true if people cannot be sure when they are being monitored and when they are not. This strategy greatly reduces the need to actually monitor everything in detail, as long as the state can credibly claim to be able to exert power when it sees fit.

Television, newspaper, and radio – despite their success and significance for information consumption of Chinese society – by their very nature lack a truly interactive way of enabling societal actors to actively participate in agenda-setting, framing of political news, and participation in discourses about contested policy issues. These media have to act as gatekeepers, selecting which information from society to process and to publicize; this situation is exacerbated by their enclosure within the panopticon.

As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, marketization consists of several factors, among which the most prominent is arguably commercialization. The need to find customers and the withdrawal of state subsidies also forces media outlets to focus on segments of society that are willing and able to pay for the media's content; hence, where profits can be made. Not all societal segments are equally important to the media in this regard. In the 1990s, Zhao (1998:184) already noted a steady decline in newspapers aimed at peasants, and was skeptical about whether newspapers aimed at other societal groups or centering on special interests (like workers' and women's issues) would be able to attract a sufficient audience to be financially viable. Commercialization has thus so far produced ambiguous results: on the one hand it has led to more audience-centered media, while on the other it has marginalized the representation of particular

⁹⁴ As a euphemism, creative Chinese citizens combined the two characters for drinking tea (喝茶) into a new one to describe te police interrogation: (cf. http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Drink_tea, last accessed 3.7.2015).

⁹⁵ Cf. World Press Freedom Index (2013). Intermittently, excerpts from these instructions are leaked on the online news service *China Digital Times* in a section named after how Chinese journalists call the list "Instructions from the Ministry of Truth" (cf. <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/ministry-of-truth>, last accessed 3.7.2015).

segments of Chinese society. The marginalized groups have fewer media representing and addressing them, which contributes to less interaction between the state, these groups, and other parts of society. A decade later, Zhao stresses and expands this argument by recognizing the influence of the media in identity formation within segments of Chinese society, as they affect the “class structure not only as an increasingly central vector of production and economic exchange, but also as the means of social organization and the site of subjectivity formation” (2008:76). The media’s increasing negligence of economically unprofitable societal segments is a byproduct of marketization and reinforces the marginalization of these groups.

The general trend towards negligence of certain segments does not prevent marginalized groups from occasionally entering the public agenda of mainstream media. To achieve this, however, typically requires an extreme event. Zhao (2008), Tong (2007), and Yu (2006) take the 2003 case of the university graduate Sun Zhigang (孫志剛) to highlight this argument. Sun Zhigang had successfully attended the Wuhan University and thereafter relocated to Guangzhou, where he worked as a fashion designer. When he tried to enter an internet bar, he failed to provide his temporary living permit to the police (as he had forgotten to apply for it) and he did not have his ID card with him, so he could only show his residence permit (戶口), which declared his origin of Hubei province. Upon this evidence, the police took him to a detention center, in which he died within three days. An autopsy showed that Sun had received severe beatings in the days before his death. After initial hesitation, the mainstream media took up the story; ensuing public debate ultimately led to the abolition of the Custody and Repatriation Act, which laid the legal basis for the police actions. The conditions caused by the Custody and Repatriation Act (established in 1982) had been well known even prior to the Sun Zhigang incident, but had not gained a prominent place in the public agenda – despite the fact that millions of migrant workers were severely suffering from the regulation. Also in 2003, another migrant worker named Wang Binyu (王斌余) shed light on the severe conditions this segment of Chinese society frequently faced. Wang had started to work in cities outside his home province Gansu at the age of 17. When he needed money to pay for essential surgery for his father, his employer refused to pay outstanding wages. In an argument over the pay, Wang killed four people and was sentenced to death and executed in 2005⁹⁶. Contrary to the Sun Zhigang event, Wang Binyu’s case sparked a public discussion that yield no tangible legislative result (Zhao 2008, ch. 5).

Marketization is still a key factor for the Xi Jinping government. As the preceding governments of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao it had to cope with a diversifying media landscape in terms of media ownership as well as type. At the same time the immediate control via economic shrank as the

⁹⁶ Cf. Xinhua 4.9.2005, “Xinhua Viewpoint: Death Row Wang Yu's character asks” (新华视点：死囚王斌余的道白), http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-09/04/content_3440619.htm, last checked 29.9.2014.

industry relied increasingly on revenues from advertisement and not less on state funding. As such Xi Jinping faced the same challenges as his predecessors who managed to use marketization to sustain their and their party's rule. Brady summarizes the development as follows: "[t]he media marketization launched under Jiang Zemin's leadership in

	1978	1996
Books	16,987	113,482
Magazines	930	7,905
Newspapers	186	1,076
Radio stations	93	1,238
TV channels	32	880

table 2: News outlets development, source: Hao & Xu Xiaoge 1997:40.

the 1990s and continued under Hu Jintao greatly sustained authoritarian rule in China" (Brady 2016:11). In continuity with former governments Hu's administration has sought to compensate the lack of economic influence with more severe political control. Application for license necessary for outlets to publish are now under stronger scrutiny than previously and the media's supervisory organs have overall been strengthened (Singh 2016; King, Pan & Roberts 2017; Brady 2016). The processes of marketization led to a more diverse and pluralistic media landscape in China. They changed the state–society relations – not only in terms of controlling and monitoring perspectives, but also in assigning the media an extremely limited watchdog role.

4.3 Professionalization

The flourishing of the media initiated by marketization led to an increase in media outlets, media products (cf. table 2), and demand for media professionals⁹⁷. The increase of workers in the media industries bore two main effects: it led to revisions in educational policies, and resuscitated debates about workers', intellectuals', and state representatives' understandings of the profession. First, a definition of professionalization is provided here, the characteristics of which are then used to structure the portrayal of the historical development of professionalization in the Chinese media. Subsequently, the effects of professionalization on state–society relations are summarized from the micro-level perspective of the practitioners.

4.3.1 A conceptual approach to professionalization

According to Talcott Parsons, professions – for example, lawyers, police officers, or journalists – emerge out of a specific set of values attributed to an occupational pattern (Parsons 1939). Applied to the media, this encompasses all people participating and constituting in the media production as a channel of mass communication (Chin-Chuan 2000; Greenberg & Lau 1990). In this sense, professions are sets of knowledge that are used by organizations but eventually applied by individuals in their

⁹⁷ "Media professionals" is an ambiguous term, as it comprises more professions than the discussed journalists, reporters, and editors. However, these professions represent general trends and developments and are most relevant for state–society relations.

course of work (Stichweh 1992:40)⁹⁸. This knowledge simultaneously constitutes the prevalent practices and the social identities of its practitioners. As such, these values may be contested among themselves, but still serve as symbols of differentiation vis-à-vis other professional and societal groups, as well as arguments to legitimize dominant practices.

Professions are alterable concepts. “Professionalization” thus represents their dynamic nature, as professions are modified constantly – not only through discourses between group members, but also more broadly through discussions and interactions with other societal and state actors (Stichweh 2000). CCTV’s president Hu Zhanfan⁹⁹, when he took office in 2011, made his understanding of the journalist’s role as a propaganda worker very clear, and urged his employees not to make a “fundamental mistake about identity” (Moore 2011). His concept of journalism is that the “first social responsibility and professional ethic of media staff should be understanding their role clearly as a good mouthpiece” (ibid.).

As mentioned above, to a certain extent professions are contested concepts. A different understanding may impact on state–society relations when it changes the way and the end to which a job is pursued. Former Professor of Media and Journalism at Beijing University, Jiao Guobiao, summarized the dilemma: “[t]he problem is that only the Party gets a mouthpiece, the public does not get a mouthpiece” (ibid.).

The specific set of practices and knowledge characteristic to a particular profession also creates an “occupational closure”. This demarcates people belonging to the profession from others in terms of required qualifications, thereby evoking a sense of belonging analogous to in-group out-group dynamics and serving as a means of social differentiation and structuration. Association to a profession is determined mostly by educational history, the occupational situation, or membership in professional associations. As societies functionally differentiate themselves over time, professions tend to develop standardizing procedures, as represented in the educational and vocational programs associated with them. Professionalization is thus the process of change of a particular profession with regard to its practices and the belief system on which these practices are based, rather than a normative teleological state as assumed implicitly in concepts like the “fourth estate” (Scannel 2009; Whitten-Woodring & James 2012).

In the following paragraphs, a descriptive historical account is given to delineate major trends in the vocational training and educational curriculum of media professionals in China, and to depict discourses among the professionals as to their professional identity. How the professionals interpret and understand their job has significant impact on state–society relations and significantly shaped by

⁹⁸ “Professionalization”, as used throughout this work, is not congruent with conceptualizations depicting an occupation becoming officially recognized as a fully-fledged profession, with professional bodies as well as formal and informal status ascriptions, as used by Hall (1968) or Etzioni (1969).

⁹⁹ Mr. Hu was deputy director of the SARF from 2001 to 2011.

their training. Media professionals functioning as an intermediary between the audience and the information are a key difference of traditional and social media. In traditional media professionals serve as a gateway and control instance for information distribution. Social media on the other hand are explicitly free and decentralized in this regard as no comparable central supervisory entity exists. In this sense a historical account of the vocational and educational trainings of media professional serves to highlight the differences between traditional and social media and their centralized and decentralized nature.

More practically if journalists or editors are trained with high ethical standards they are less likely to be bribed or actively engage in corrupt practices. They also typically try to steer the public agenda to issues they consider important, even if these topics are economically not exploitable or sensitive.

4.3.2 Ethics, practices and educational training

The demand for media professionals and the necessity to increase their number was acknowledged early by the state, and is reflected in the fact that the first national conference on journalism education was held in 1983 by the Department of Propaganda and the Ministry of Education. A first step towards formalizing the profession, as well as decreasing the “occupational gap”, was the ruling in the same year that made university education a basic requirement for becoming a journalist. These university-based programs were an instant success, and multiplied the number of enrolled students from 284 in 1977 to 6,186 in 1996 (Hao & Xu 1997:40)¹⁰⁰.

The poor state and scope of the education system in the late 1970s becomes more evident when comparing the 284 students enrolled in journalism studies at the time to the 460 enrolled in the same subject after the end of the Civil War in 1949. Back then, the CCP added Marxist-Leninist Studies to the students’ syllabi, and experienced war veterans were instated as administrators and lecturers (Hao & Xu 1997:37). This marked the first step in the comprehensive change of the curriculum of journalism studies in China, largely replacing the then-dominant American components. Up to this point, China had a long history of journalism, dating as far back as the Tang Dynasty. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, as Volz and Lee (Volz & Lee 2009) show, the media’s need for more formal education was acknowledged. Already under dynastic rule in the late 1890s, a curriculum for journalists at the prestigious Beijing University was set up, and other renowned schools soon followed. By 1937, shortly before the Sino–Japanese War officially broke out, 32 journalism departments were set up, mimicking examples from the West (2009:712). According to Volz and Lee (2009:713), the American “influence on Chinese journalism education was unequivocal”

¹⁰⁰ Fen Lin, in her study of Guangzhou based journalists (2010) , raises the question of the importance of formal education. She notes that, while the general educational background of journalists has improved, this did not lead to an increase in reporters who had studied journalism; rather, their share declined.

– but could only be so because Chinese intellectuals sought “modernization through a morally and politically responsible press” (2009:720).

The aspects representing western influence in journalism education were immediately disposed of after the CCP’s ascension to power. They were replaced with content and working styles more akin to Lenin’s dictum that journalism “should consciously treat itself as part of the Party, consciously obey the Party, and identify with the Party’s political stand” (Gan 1994 in Hao & Xu 1997:37). The subsequent shift to politically-motivated reporting reflected not only the changes in the educational system but also Mao’s understanding of the media as a tool for the party. The notion of the media as the party’s mouthpiece (喉舌) originated in this era, and remains a constantly repeated dogma today. As a result of the curriculum reforms, “[s]tudents spent more time studying Marxist interpretations of the history and roles of journalism, party history and policies, and criticism of the capitalist press than learning professional skills” (Hao & Xu 1997:37).

Political thought work became even more intense after the break in the university system nationwide, induced by the early phase of the Cultural Revolution. With the social climate emphasizing the family background of students and their political reliability more than their academic merits, the selection process favored party-loyal students. This produced a generation of journalists with soldier-like qualities, following Mao’s dictum that, “[s]o long as classes exist in the society, newspapers shall remain tools of class struggle” (Mao 1997 in Gan 1994:40).

When the politicization of the media was stopped after the Cultural Revolution, the reform and opening policies began to take effect, giving the media more leeway and autonomy as to the regulations of their internal affairs. Through this introspection it became clear how much professional expertise had been lost; as a first step to tackling this, the *People’s Daily* founded a journalism department at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which started to regularly invite foreign experts – among them the renowned scholar Judy Polumbaum – to teach Chinese students and sent students abroad (Hao & Xu 1997:38). This marks the intersection of professionalization and a largely neglected in scholarship part of the process of internationalization. Whereas internationalization is usually understood as the extension of audiences, it also comprises the exchange of professional standards and ethical discourses. Up until today, this flow with regards to professional standards is mostly unidirectional. Chinese media professionals strive to copy and improve practices from abroad, as the following statement by an editor interviewed by Burgh and Zeng shows: “I was very impressed by *Wall Street Journal* reporting of environmental issues in China. It was researched very empirically and reported fairly. This had a great influence on our reporters and we now do investigative stories much better” (Burgh & Zeng 2012:1011).

The media sector’s increasing demand for journalists and editors did not only by far exceed the supply available, but also called for a different type of worker. The professional skills required had

changed dramatically since the end of the 1970s, mainly due to marketization, as Greenberg and Lau summarized in 1990: “[a]nother curriculum trend is the *recognition that the professional fields of communication are businesses*, and that students require management skills concurrent with the skills that will make them good reporters, editors videographers, producers ... advertising executives” (1990:25, emphasis in original).

At first, changes in the education system and the actual practices of journalists began with very basic and cautious steps. The *People’s Daily* and other major newspapers, for instance, called for their editors to write shorter articles in a more lively and timely style. More importantly from a state–society perspective, room was also given for acknowledgments and apologies for errors; this represented a fundamental change in the working style (Chu 1994:7). Soon, changes were no longer restricted to formal aspects of the professional life.

Hu Jiwei – director and editor in-chief of the *People’s Daily* in the late 1970s and early 1980s – adamantly and efficiently reformed the flagship by livening its writing style, expanding its coverage, and adopting and promoting investigative journalism. He encouraged readers to voice criticism through letters to the editor and advocated the promulgation of a press law to protect press freedom (Chu 1994:6). Other media outlets quickly followed the lead of the *People’s Daily*, setting the trend for future developments.

The educational aspects of the profession such as training and the formal requirements such as registering as a journalist have often been used to influence the reporting. The increased control of the Xi era when compared to its predecessor has made renewed use of these mechanism (Singh 2016). The necessity to take an exam to ensure ideological compliance and the constant reminders of the obligation to serve the CCP have resulted in some journalists turning away from traditional media to social media as a platform for information sharing, collaboration with likeminded journalists and publication in spite of the increasing censorship and repression there. Svensson finds that these measure had also a particular deterring effect on newcomers to the profession: „[t]he idealism of these young journalists has proven difficult to sustain when the media environment has become more restricted, and many have now left the profession altogether“ (Svensson 2017:442).

Along with these changes in the training, education, and practices of media professionals, their understanding of the profession became deeply contested among journalists themselves, academics, and officials (Pan 2000; Bandurski & Hala 2010a; Li & Lu 2009; Hassid 2011). As the media became an attractive yet contested job market, new phenomena emerged, such as “black journalism”: phenomena such as disaster reporting. These reporters are specialized in identifying and rushing to disasters areas – for example, the widespread mining accidents – not to report or investigate, but to bluntly extort money for either no more, or more positive, coverage of the event (Hu 2013). At the

same time, media exposure – especially on the national CCTV programs – is highly sought after by ambitious state officials as a means to further their careers. Over time, the practices of bribing – for airtime, for more benign coverage, or to obtain negative reports of competing businesses – has been labeled “checkbook journalism” (Epstein 2008). To distance themselves from these malpractices and to set up guidance for good moral behavior, journalists embarked on a discourse about professional ethics (职业道德) to determine where to draw the line between acceptable and criminal behavior (Zhang 2009a).

Once the debate took momentum, more corrupt practices were discovered. Ren Li (2013a) identified two basic types of corruption in the media sector: one in which individual journalists profit from taking bribes (e.g. via 红包) or gain advantages for their personal business endeavors, and a second on the meso level of organizational profit-seeking¹⁰¹. According to Li (2013:297), the reason for the increase in malpractices lies in the “media’s unique role in China’s political power structure and their monopoly in information collection and delivery”.

However, the media’s unique position is not by itself a sufficient factor to explain the increase in malpractices. The increase can only be understood in terms of the fundamental change in monetary incentive structures at the meso level, invoked by marketization, and particularly in the remuneration schemes of journalists and editors. The market system (合同工) is a newly developed scheme in which journalists have to sign contracts with the organization every year, thus depriving employees of long-term perspectives and placing them under constant pressure to produce economically exploitable results. Together with disputed ideas about ethical standards, a notoriously inefficient and unreliable judicial system, and lack of inner organizational control mechanisms, this has created favorable conditions for media corruption. The other common remuneration scheme is the quota system (事业编制) (Lin 2010:427). In this system, the organizational affiliation determines the salary-making, treating employees similarly to state officials. The majority of party newspapers, for instance, still largely hinges on the quota system; the opposite holds true for market-based papers (Lin 2010:426). This is especially interesting because – as Burgh and Zeng (2012) concluded – marketized media are *less* likely to report about controversial issues, showing the multifaceted effects of marketization.

¹⁰¹ More concrete phenomena exist that are often summarized as the four nuisances (四项公害, cp. Liu (2005): paid-for-news (有偿新闻) (Ding/Fang/Chen 2005:53), fake news (虚假新闻), news of vulgar style (低俗之风), and inappropriate advertisement (不良广告).

4.3.3 Ramification for state–society relations: of guard dogs and investigative journalism

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, state–society relations focus on the interactions and interdependence between state and society, facilitated and shaped by the media. The media as an institution is made up of number of different organisations active in this industry, which in turn employs individuals to do the actual work. The educational formation and their interpretation of their profession have decisive influence on how, to what extent, and – more importantly – to what end they pursue their work.

The state has shifted its approach toward the media, from using it as a blunt propaganda instrument to using it in more elaborate ways. With ongoing professionalization, journalists and editors started to think more about their own work and what it meant from a broader perspective. The state tried to fill this gap in professional identity, ultimately clinging to its superiority over the media – just like in the pre-reform and opening days – while at the same time experimenting with new concepts like media or public supervision. As Anne Cheung points out, based on an analysis of the *Study Guide for Internal Supervision of China’s Communist Party*, this function represents rather old wine in new skins as it “refers to supervision by the mass, exercised through the media, under the leadership of the CCP, which the latter plays a paramount role” (Cheung 2006:3). The way in which most media professionals understand their profession turned the media into not a watchdog but, as Cheung remarks, a guard dog. This concept, developed by Donohue, Tichenor and Olien (1995:116), proposes to view media reporting “in a constrained way and only on certain issues and under certain structural conditions”, so as to protect the most powerful group controlling it.

What made the editor and reporters guard dogs of the party-state? How do journalists understand “public supervision” (舆论监督)? According to a journalist interviewed by Burgh (2003:810), there are three aspects to this concept: (1) exposing corruption and wrongdoing to keep cadres in line, (2) suggesting new ideas on how to propose government policies, and (3) drawing public attention to problems like women’s rights or the situation of migrant workers. In this sense, investigative journalists see themselves both as impartial observers pointing out grievances and as part of the government, as their actions ultimately aim to “establish confidence in the government” (Xuebin Gu¹⁰² in Burgh 2003:811). Professional Chinese journalists¹⁰³ thus carry a deeply and explicitly ambiguous identity: while they acknowledge the need to criticize the government, they at the same time perceive the need to garner support for it. This particular and unique set of features renders China a special case among contemporary authoritarian regimes with regard to the professional ethics of its media professionals.

¹⁰² Xuebin Gu considers himself to be an investigative journalist.

¹⁰³ Professional journalists must not be confused with people’s or citizens’ journalists (cf. Nip, Joyce, Y. 2009; Reese & Dai 2009).

This conflict dates back to the 1960s, but the debate was reinvigorated and intensified from the mid-1990s on. The dilemma of whether the media should be a government tool or serve the needs of society can be traced back to the “party vs. people character debate” (党性 vs. 人民性). Contemporary debates center on the same conflict, which puts media professionals in the conflicting position of being the “ears, eyes and mouthpiece” of the party while also being obliged to serve the people (Xu 1994 in Hao & Xu 1997:42). A journalist put it more bluntly: “[w]e have dual mandates: both government spokespeople and journalists” (Burgh & Zeng 2012:1018).

Over time, media professionals have developed a more complex understanding of their job and see themselves “not merely as workers within organizations but also as professionals within a social institution” (Chan & Pan & Lee 2004:255). Chan et al. confirm Burgh and Zeng’s finding that two types of journalists exist: those who understand the media as a tool of the party, and those who take a more independent critical stance.¹⁰⁴ This translates into different expectations about education: party-prone journalists consider the proficiency of journalists in party policies and the media’s interpretative role to be more important than their western-orientated counterparts, who emphasize the information dissemination role and prefer a more liberal vocational curriculum (Chan & Pan & Lee 2004:257).

The professional identity of journalists also plays a decisive role vis-à-vis the state’s best method for controlling the media: repression (Cai 2008b; Castells 2007). Stern and Hassid (Stern & Hassid 2012) found that actual repression is very low: only 0.2% of all journalists are subject to state coercion¹⁰⁵. The great majority, however, is kept in line by the uncertainty of where exactly the boundaries of the party-state are at any given moment in time. Testing these boundaries is rendered a risky endeavor as the state acts irregularly with extreme repression. The vast majority of journalists thus refrain from testing the boundaries, significantly reducing the resources needed to actually survey the whole industry, explaining how the party-state was able to cope with the dynamic developments therein¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁴ A third group of professionals also exists that does not take a stand on this argument at all, due to either lack of interest or fear (cf. Lee 2000).

¹⁰⁵ Stern and Hassid admit that data on coercion is “sketchy” (2012:1247). Their calculations are based on data from Reporters sans Frontières, from the websites of the General Administration of Press and Publication, which is unfortunately no longer accessible and from Fu’s study of prosecuted lawyers (2006). From these sources Stern and Hassid found that in 2011 there were 173,000 officially registered journalists in China of which 30 were imprisoned. In 2004 208 lawyers were punished by administrative punishment out of 113,457.

¹⁰⁶ This particularity shows the limits of system-theoretic and modernization theory-based discourses arguing that authoritarian regimes face tremendous pressures due to their lack of adaptability during times of economic modernization, which ultimately leads to their collapse (cp. Lipset 1981; Peerenboom 2008; Przeworski et al. 2000). Despite the apparent successes of the sophisticated repression and control system, the toll is immense. In 2011, China’s spending for maintaining internal stability (维稳) exceeded the military budget (Reuters 5.3.2011).

“In what I received training the most was to guard against risks”, as journalist Chang Ping openly admits (Chang 2008).

Even in cases where repression is applied, the state has a fine-grained set of tools at its disposal ranging from phone calls with explicit warnings, inviting concerned reporters to tea to, and issuing fines for making troubles (找麻烦). However, the stronger the journalist’s personal conviction to these ethical premises, the more likely he or she is to resist repression (Zhang 2009b; Burgh 2003). But repression has also produced unexpected results. As open and critical public reporting is perilous, journalists increasingly preferred to write for not publicly (内参) circulated papers – not only because historically these papers are regarded to be more prestigious, but also because they are considered to be a good mechanism for bringing the news from the people to ruling elite – despite the fact that hardly any journalists under the age of 50 will have ever had the opportunity to publish in one (Lin 2010:430).

A popular argument that economic progress – here in the form of marketization – would lead to a fundamentally more critical media, more responsive to societal needs, cannot be verified at the micro level of professional work. So far, empirical evidence is inconclusive, as Burgh’s (2003) and Burgh and Zeng’s (2012) research exemplifies.

In his 2003 article, Burgh points out that media companies may press their journalists to be investigative, as “companies want their products associated with justice” (2003:802). This suggests a significant incentive from the meso-level for journalists and reporters to critically report about state affairs. A decade later, in a similar study about reporting of environmental issues, Burgh and Zeng found a contrary statement from a leading editor: “[w]ere the newspaper completely commercial, it would publish virtually no environment stories” (Burgh & Zeng 2012:1019). From the micro-level perspective of media professionals, the incentive structures set up by marketization did not lead to a more critical media but rather – if anything – raised the ethical aspirations of individual professionals. The media tests the purposively diffuse boundaries for critical reporting in order to exploit them for commercial gains – as do Chinese journalists, editors, and reporters, due to their changing professional understandings. In doing so, the media provide a new platform in which societal grievances can be addressed; even if only minorities are concerned. Two phenomena are related to this aspect: the rise of investigative journalism in China, and the emergence of citizen journalism (Wall 2015). Investigative journalism, “despite persistent pressure from state censors and other tools of political control [...] has flourished in China over the last decade”, as Bandurski and Hala (Bandurski & Hala 2010b) write in their introduction to an edited volume that provides eight exemplary cases of this trend, ranging from the Henan AIDS epidemic (Bandurski, Hala & Chan

2010a)¹⁰⁷ to the mafia-like practices of Beijing taxi companies (Bandurski, Hala & Chan 2010b)¹⁰⁸. The blooming of investigative journalism as a by-product of professionalization offsets (to a certain extent) the marginalizing tendencies fuelled by commercialization; or, as (Tong & Sparks 2009) put it, “[t]he situation of investigative journalism in China is precarious. There are serious pressures from both the party-state and advertisers that have reduced the opportunities for this kind of journalism”. This notwithstanding investigative journalism has made use of social media. Heberer and Müller (2017) find that “We-Media” or “Self-Media” (自媒体) are a part of social media in which citizen journalism is taking increasingly place. Characteristic for these media is that they are situated outside traditional media mainstream, but that the content provided is produced by actual or trained journalists. In this sense platforms like *paper* (澎湃)¹⁰⁹ represent a hybrid between traditional and social media. The platform *paper* became prominent in 2016 with the exposure of a national vaccine scandal. As Heberer and Müller point out the platform is not independent from the state, but began as an “experiment” and was funded by private investors and the state. They conclude that the party-state is willing to try out these new hybrid media to reach parts of society – especially young people – that are no longer relying on traditional media. At the same time these platforms have to comply to some extent to the invisible lines drawn by censorship such as not to criticize the political system *per se* or its key policies.

Under president Xi Jinping social media came again under scrutiny in 2016 (Brady 2016). Their role primarily as an instrument for the dissemination of party approved information was highlighted by Xi dictum that “Supervision by public opinion and positive propaganda are unified” (舆论监督和正面宣传是统一的) (Bandurski 2016). The increase in control was not limited to traditional media but also extended to social media. At the beginning of 2016 the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) temporarily closed several platforms that provided autonomously created reports such as produced by citizen’ journalism. Instead the platforms were given to understand that they had to rely on officially sanctioned information provided e.g. by Xinhua. Among the targeted platforms were

¹⁰⁷ In 2000, a report of the journalist Jicheng Zhang unearthed evidence proving that a HIV epidemic in rural villages of Henan province was due to a lack of adhering to basic medical standards when collecting blood from donors. The case is remarkable, as the vigor and persistence of the journalists involved were decisive to bringing the scandal to the attention of the public. During their investigation, the journalists met stark resistance from local governments and a lack of interest from national media in the initial phase of the scandal.

¹⁰⁸ In 2002, journalist Wan Keqin from the *China Economic Times* gathered information showing how taxi companies in Beijing charged drivers exorbitant fees, which tantamount to severe exploitation. For instance, drivers were pressured to pay a “risk deposit” of ¥100,000 when signing their contract with the companies. Even though the taxi drivers had protested against the unfair procedures for years, the media failed to draw attention to the story, as they received threats from gangs presumably hired by the taxi companies. The case study is interesting as, in principle, the taxi drivers’ cause was backed at the highest level; in 2001, then-premier Zhu Rongji was reported to have compared the tactics of the taxi companies to those of the Green Gang (Bandurski, Hala & Chan 2010b:95-6) – a criminal organization based in Shanghai prior to the founding of the PRC.

¹⁰⁹ The platform is accessible at <http://www.thepaper.cn>, last checked 16.1.2017.

industry leader like Sina Weibo or Tencent. The cyber administration of China (CAC)¹¹⁰ however did not create a new law or regulation but simply began to implement the “provisions on the administration of internet news information services” from 2005¹¹¹.

The process of professionalization has produced seemingly contradictory scholarly findings. From the institutional approach adopted here, these contradictions are the result of two dynamics: first, the changing professional identities of journalists in China, which vary from investigative critical and legal boundary-crossing understandings of the profession to plain money-seeking individuals who see the profession as a job rather than a vocation¹¹²; and second, the party-state extending the media’s functional portfolio via the role of “guard dog” while simultaneously adjusting the modes of control and monitoring (Stockmann 2013; Shambaugh 2007). Professionalization is thus as much an expression of a dynamic resulting from a revised approach towards the media by the party-state as it is a factor driving it. For state–society relations, the ramifications are multifaceted. On the one hand, investigative journalism is increasingly as much a tool for society to address grievances as it is a sword of Damocles for higher echelons of the party-state to exert pressure on local government¹¹³. On the other, phenomena like “black journalism” are also an expression of a professional identity based on personal gains and a negligence of laws, regulations, and widely accepted ethical standards.

4.4 Internationalization

The internationalization of Chinese media began in the late 1990s, but took momentum shortly after the turn of the millennium, when the party-state increased its public diplomacy initiatives (Shirk 2007, 2011). As China became more and more engaged with and enmeshed in the international arena, the Chinese leadership felt under- and misrepresented by foreign media. As a counter-measure, it decided to boost its image abroad by using soft power (软实力) as well as public diplomacy instruments (公共外交) (d’Hooghe 2007; Sun 2015), and embarked on a “charm offensive” (Kurlantzick 2007). In the following sections, internationalization and related key concepts are defined. They are contextualized in the broader strategic developments of the party-state, reflecting a new feature of China’s foreign policy, the effects of which for state–society relations are then scrutinized.

¹¹⁰ The CAC (国家互联网信息办公室) is the central agency concerned with monitoring and surveilling the internet as part of the central leading group for cyberspace affairs.

¹¹¹ The full text with an English translation is available at <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/provisions-on-the-administration-of-internet-news-information-services>, last accessed 17.1.2017.

¹¹² The latter category comprises not only journalists who engage in corrupt practices, but also those who seek to produce economically utilizable news, given the stern market-orientated pressures within the various branches of media industries.

¹¹³ As Tong (2010) shows, at times the power of the media is significantly constrained by local governments.

4.4.1 From keeping a low profile to the struggle for discursive power

The term “internationalization” is used here to summarize the various initiatives and policies that have led to Chinese media strategically extending their target audiences (Shirk 2011). This change would not have been possible without at least tacit state approval; closer examination reveals that it was a conscious decision of the Chinese leadership, marking a significant shift in Chinese foreign policy.

Until the late 1990s, the Chinese leadership followed Deng Xiaoping’s (Wang 2011; Jiang op. 2008:32) guideline to “keep a low profile” (韬光养晦) internationally¹¹⁴. The result was a rather passive approach to international affairs and a lack of commitment to tackling issues of global concern. Likewise, efforts to represent Chinese interests to the world were limited to the translation of propaganda material, if they were made at all.

China’s incremental turn towards foreign affairs began at the start of the 1990s in a series of normalization of bilateral relations, establishment of contact with regional bodies like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), taking a more active stance in international regimes like the United Nation (UN) – to which China became a major contributor of military personnel for peacekeeping operations – and joining economic institutions like the WTO (Medeiros & Fravel 2004). China’s worldwide image did not reflect its growing economic and cultural importance (Cho 2008). Whereas China’s hard power resources – its economic and military clout – had constantly increased over the past decades, its soft power¹¹⁵ resources had remained at a fairly low level, with opinion polls plummeting with each domestic upheaval. As the Chinese leadership grew increasingly weary of the fact that international audiences were influenced by foreign media, and its international image did not match its propagated identity of a great power (大国), it undertook several initiatives to remedy this deficit (Ding 2009). Wang Chen – minister of the state council information office – summarized this:

[r]ealizing a leap in our country’s international media development and style is a necessity. The purpose is to improve international society’s understanding of China, to know China, and the necessity of explaining China to the world; recognize the necessity of enhancing our country’s soft power; defeat the Western monopoly of public opinion; and contribute to advancing the fair and equitable distribution of international information. (Wang in Shambaugh 2013:222/3)

¹¹⁴ A more literal translation is “hide brightness, nourish obscurity”.

¹¹⁵ The distinction between two types of power that states can wield refers to Joseph Nye’s conceptualization of soft power. A country’s soft power may be generated by “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” Nye (2004:11). Hard power, on the other hand, relies on sticks; for example, military aggression, or tit-for-tat deals such as providing development aid in exchange for political concessions.

A first measure to achieve this aim was increasing the quality of China’s diplomatic service members in terms of education; professional standards were also increased to attract staff who were adept at dealing with foreign media (Heng 2010). This reactive measure did yield positive results, but not to the desired extent. The dependence on and the dominance of foreign media in the portrayal of world affairs was considered a serious lack of appropriate representation of China and its interests. By drawing on domestic academic discourses – which had developed theories emphasizing discursive power as part of the broader concept of comprehensive national power (综合国力) (Yan 2006b)– the need to be present on the international stage with domestic media was acknowledged. The domestic media should boost China’s discursive power (话语权) internationally and provide a more benign and positive coverage.¹¹⁶ In 2008, Yusheng Sun – the vice-president of CCTV – called internationalization a natural “strategic adjustment” and said that international efforts so far were not economically viable (Copenhagen Business School et al. 2008). In order to remedy this, however, the Chinese media had to be restructured, as they were unfit for international competition.

The professionalization described in the previous chapter had already set in, and the professional standards were remarkably high, but only adjusted to domestic audiences within a very unique “theatre” and set of expectations resulting from historical experiences (Richter et al. 2010). To remedy the lack of professionals with explicit international expertise, foreign experts were hired – as the example of the *Global Times* English edition shows. An additional effect of this strategy was that foreigners working at the paper were supposed to weaken the opinion of the international audiences, that this paper is a propaganda tool. Richard Burger – a journalist located in Beijing and one of the first foreigners to work at the *Global Times* – is exemplary in

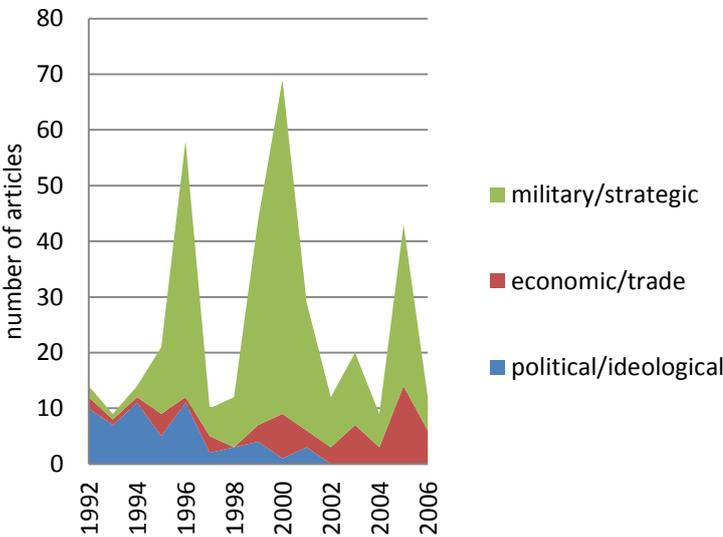


figure 9: China threat discourse in US newspapers. Source: Yang & Liu (2012:704).

¹¹⁶ A study by media experts and political scientists showed that a certain bias against China exists in foreign media Richter et al. (2010). According to this study, China is portrayed disproportionately negatively and framed from a risk perspective.

this regard. He stated publicly that: “[s]ure, they [the *Global Times*, MD] toe the party line on certain topics, but even on the most sensitive of these, they seem willing to present alternative viewpoints, even if they are directly and outspokenly critical of the government” (Richard Burger in Liu 2009).

Chinese media’s increased efforts to target foreign audiences were based on a mix of perceptions of Chinese political leaders, journalists, and academics. In his discourse analysis of official documents and articles in prominent Chinese journals, as well as media reports and analysis, Mingjian Li (2008a) identifies several factors that led to the increased internationalization of Chinese media. On the one hand, the concept of soft power has become very popular in China, and subsequently instruments associated with it have received preferential treatment by the party-state. On the other hand, the Chinese media is supposed to “cultivating a better image of China to present to the outside world, correcting foreign misperceptions of China and fending off unwelcome Western cultural and political inroads into China” (Li 2008a). Nonetheless, even the efforts aimed at publics outside of China (外宣)¹¹⁷ often indirectly address domestic issues in China, and may even be used in national politics.

The following example of the “China threat” discourse illustrates the Chinese leadership’s motivation to set up public diplomacy initiatives in the realm of the media. It explains why the Chinese leadership perceived the need for their media to become international. As such, it is one of many factors that drove the internationalization of Chinese media.

The “China threat” discourse is based on the power transition theory of A.F.K. Organski (1958). The theory posits that, when a newcomer challenges the current balance of power, tension and military conflicts are likely to occur as a result of the adjustment of the power hierarchy. Proponents of the China threat theory thus argue that China’s rise is increasing the likelihood of conflicts, as China seeks a new place in the hierarchy of international relations that better reflects its power capabilities.

The impact of the discourse is not limited to journalists or politicians; it also takes place in the academic realm. In particular, representatives of offensive realism – such as renowned scholar John Mearsheimer (2010) – argue that the change in power relations between the US as the incumbent hegemon and China as the rising power who is unsatisfied with the current setup of the international system will not be peaceful. Or, as Mearsheimer put it, “[t]he most important question that flows from this discussion is whether China can rise peacefully” (2010:381); his answer is: “[t]o put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully” (2010:382). Though one could argue this is only a part of an ongoing academic discourse, the lines of argument developed by its proponents did find application in official American foreign policy making (Yan 2006; Yang & Liu 2012) and made it a prevalent theme of reporting about China in US media (see figure 9).

¹¹⁷ For systematic description of the institutions and organizations involved, see Shambaugh (2007) or Brady (2008).

To counter the China threat, discourses on the concept of peaceful rise (和崛起) were formulated by Zheng Bijian – a former vice principal of the influential central party school. In this concept – which aimed to reassure its regional neighbors – it is argued that China has neither any interest in nor will benefit from any military conflicts. To prove the argument, historical precedents are frequently quoted (Gill & Huang 2006)¹¹⁸. The result, however, was unexpected, and very likely to reinforce existing prejudices against foreign media in the Chinese ruling elite. International media focused on the offensive and aggressive potential of the word “rise” to question the sincerity of the concept. Even changing the concept’s name in 2004 to “peaceful development” (和平发展) did not completely refute the rhetorical damage already done. Against this background, Chinese leadership’s motive of gaining a more benign voice in international news reporting is plausible. Hu Jintao stressed the “urgency of building Chinese Soft Power sufficiently to meet domestic need and increase international competition” (Yue 2007 in Li 2008:289).

The impact of China’s media abroad, however, remains rather limited (Huang 2006). For example, the English version of the *Global Times* (环球时报) – a popular Chinese newspaper – sold between 70,000 and 100,000 copies daily after its founding in 2009 (Shambaugh 2013:234). Though there are not exact numbers, Guo and Yu (2002) argue that students learning English in China are more likely to buy the newspaper than foreigners living there – a claim reinforced by the fact that bilingual special editions in metropolitan areas (such as Beijing or Shanghai) focus exclusively on developing the language skills of its readership (Guo & Yu 2002; Alvaro 2013)

While the rationale of the Chinese state is to create more and more balanced coverage – from its point of view – the extremely close ties of all media companies to the party-state qualify this process as a tool of public diplomacy. According to Hans Tuch, public diplomacy is “a government’s process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies” (Tuch 1990:3). Ethan Gilboa’s (2008) categories of public diplomacy tools classify media as short-term instruments able to react immediately – or at least on a daily basis – to events and new information.

The Chinese media’s new outward orientation was supplemented by a plethora of other activities, such as promoting political paradigms – for example, peaceful development – and staging sports and cultural events – for example, the Olympic Games in 2008 and the Shanghai Expo in 2010¹¹⁹. So far, these measures have not yielded the desired effect. The lack of globally positive reception is strengthening a group of influential Chinese academics opposing soft power or public diplomacy

¹¹⁸ A very common argument deployed is that the voyages of Zheng He – a legendary fleet general in the 15th century – allowed an unmatched armada of Chinese vessels as far as the coast of Africa without engaging in major warfare (cf. Wang 2013b or Finlay 2008).

¹¹⁹ Internationalization, as referred to here, does not encompass people-to-people exchanges and communication (cf. Payne 2009).

efforts as useless due to the special characteristics of China's history and culture¹²⁰. In line with this argument, Bell (2009) points out that China's political values are not a part of China's soft power and all efforts to promote them have therefore so far achieved little or no effect – but this does not mean that other characteristics, such as Confucianism or communitarian values, will not appeal.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese media were not competitive when the political strategy to extend their targeted audiences began to take shape at the beginning of the new millennium. The media so far had solely focused on the domestic market, as they were de facto barred from any international engagement by the party-state¹²¹.

From an economic point of view, the international engagement was a foreseeable unprofitable investment. Thus, the state decided to make an exception and granted the companies selected to turn to foreign audiences long-abolished subsidies in order to realize this aim. As Zhao (2000) points out, despite the subsidies, the companies would not have been able to accomplish their tasks properly had they not been formed since the mid 1990 into big media conglomerates, marking an intersection between marketization and internationalization: "Since the mid-1990s, though, newspaper merger and conglomeration have been pursued as a state policy. [...] Only centrally approved party papers that meet a series of operational conditions are allowed to take over other papers" (2000:15).

Relying on its strengthened and blooming media sector, the state then invested significantly in external publicity work or public diplomacy instruments (Shambaugh 2013). In 2009/10, spending on these activities amounted to US \$8.7 billion. The major recipients of these investments were China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua News Agency, and the *China Daily* newspaper, which compete with already-established services like the BBC under the condition of an attention economy (Simon 1971; Davenport & Beck 2001). According to these figures, broadcasting instruments clearly dominated China's efforts to communicate with the world, while social media – up to 2013 – were constrained to the domestic market. The so-far only remarkable exception is the social media platform WeChat (微信), which explicitly targets foreign audiences; a quarter of its 400 million users are located outside China (Xinhua 15.8.2013).

4.4.2 Internationalization as an expression of an altered Chinese identity

The process of internationalization in the media has strong implications for state–society relations, as it has a distinct domestic and foreign policy dimension. The previous section focused on outward-

¹²⁰ Interview conducted with a scholar from the Chinese think tank China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing (September 2011).

¹²¹ Selected media such as the Xinhua news agency and the *China Daily* newspaper were available in foreign languages previously for a long time. Due to the extreme closeness of these media to the party-state, they represent an exception.

orientated changes in Chinese media, but the international dimension also encompasses inflows from the world to China. The inflow of information in its various forms – in terms of concepts, formats, and types of shows – constitutes the domestic dimension of internationalization, even though particular limits exist; for example, no more than 20 US movies¹²² are allowed to be shown in cinemas in China at any given time, and they are selected for their compatibility with core ideological declarations. Contents and products from culturally similar countries like Japan – and, more importantly, South Korea – have become a tremendous commercial success in China. The “Korean Wave” (Shim 2006) has even begun to challenge the US media’s dominance, at least in East Asia. The strictly regulated inflow of media content from outside of China has had very mixed effects. While the party-state was able to maintain its control on foreign content coming into China, the selection of largely entertainment or infotainment¹²³ content reinforced the already existing trend of a consumerist-driven and largely apolitical media landscape in China (Wei & Pan 1999). Local or even national Chinese media frequently imitate or mimic concepts and themes originally developed elsewhere but modified to fit the constraints in China. Mostly apolitical content was produced in such adaptations (Di 2011); however, there are significant exceptions to this, particularly with regard to international affairs (Stockmann 2011b) and environmental issues (Jiang 2011). The incorporation of foreign media concepts and advanced commercialization have sustained the trend of materialistic sentiments, values, and consumerists’ expectation in Chinese society, which has in turn led to a diminishing interest in politics (Gu & Hung 2009). Following James Leibold (2011), from a negative perspective, the Chinese media can to a certain extent be viewed as an “opium” for the masses¹²⁴ (cf. 2011:4) – even though this perspective is not undisputed (cf. Huang 2006; Chakravartty & Roy 2013). Complementary to the domestic dimension of the media’s internationalization is a foreign policy perspective. From this vantage point, the newly targeted international audiences have so far shown at best moderate interest in the content offered by Chinese media. From the domestic perspective, foreign language media – in most cases in English – are mainly appreciated for improving the language skills of Chinese nationals, or they directly target foreigners living in China. Guo and Yu (2002) found that English-language media in China have special characteristics, in that they are ideologically conformist while simultaneously providing cosmopolitan attitudes and offering a broader and more differentiated picture of world affairs; however, the overall impact so far remains negligible.

¹²² Cf. *The Financial Times*, 19.2.2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d24696e6-5abd-11e1-b056-00144feabdc0.html>, last accessed 25.9.2014.

¹²³ The word “infotainment” – combining “entertainment” and “information” – is used to highlight the intricate relationship between information provision on the one hand and the imperative for it to be commercially exploitable on the other.

¹²⁴ Cf. McKinnon (2005) in-depth discussion of the quote frequently ascribed to Marx.

To narrow internationalization to its direct effects on the Chinese populace would not fully enable its meaning to be grasped. Viewed from a comprehensive perspective, internationalization is more a symbol of China's changing identity regarding international relations and foreign affairs than just a process of change for the media sector. From a constructivist perspective, as Ding (2010) and Heng (2010) argue, the changed identity of China has moved from a long-established and promoted victim mentality (受害者心态) to one of a great power (大国心态). Part of a great power identity is not only a certain economic and military power, which China undisputedly possesses, but also other characteristics such as a self-certitude, and symbols of influence such as culture and language institutes. While the impact of each of these instruments abroad may vary, the ability of the party-state to exploit them domestically is evident. The party-state is using the media (along with other public diplomacy instruments) to charm foreign audiences at least as much as to present its achievements, to convey a sense of pride to China, and to present itself as the facilitator and sole guarantor of this pride (d'Hooghe 2005; Sun 2015). This strategy was complementary to the promotion of patriotic – at times even nationalistic – sentiments in the populace in order to fill the gaps left by the increasingly void Communist ideology (Brady 2008, 2009).

4.5 The emergence of social media

The latest development profoundly transforming media around the world, to which China is no exception, is the emergence and establishment of social media. Social media are an elusive concept as they denote a diffuse set of technologies and associated phenomena. Despite – or perhaps because of – the intuitive grasp scholars have about what constitutes “social media”, there is no widely accepted definition of them. Lev Manovich provides a popular definition of social media that equates them “with the use of a computer for distribution, exhibition, rather than production” (2001:43) of information. 15 years after Manovich published his work, this definition is outdated and needs revision. The accentuation of a single technical device such as a computer is insufficient to capture the complexity and dynamic development of social media. In China, a significant and rising portion of the population is accessing social media via their mobile phones. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC 2014:10):

[b]y the end of June 2013, the proportion of mobile phone Internet users to all new Internet users in China had hit 70.0%, higher than that of the proportion of users that access the Internet via other devices, indicating that mobile phone played an important role in popularity of the Internet, and is now the main source for the growth of the Internet.

The statistics of the CNNIC refer to internet usage, but it is safe to assume that mobile devices are used to a similar magnitude when it comes to social media. Given the rapid technological development, it would be a bold endeavour to predict or anticipate what kinds of technical devices

will be used in the decade to come; but Manovich's definition of social media is not only inadequate for technical reasons. It also fails to capture a core function of social media: the empowerment of people to be no longer solely receivers of content created elsewhere, but to create and share information of their own. In chapter 3, this is subsumed and discussed in more detail as "consumer-producer equalization" (cf. ch.2), which serves not only to distinguish traditional from new or social media but also has led to a veritable decentralization of communication processes. In his book *Technological Empowerment*, Zheng Yongnian argues that social media have created a highly decentralized arena in which "state and social forces are mutually transformative via their interactions" (Zheng 2008:XViii). Zheng refers to a great variety of social media, such as the popular QQ Messenger and blogs, which he subsumes under the concept of the internet. Against this backdrop, it becomes evident why attempts to define social media by enumerating specific examples or their unique technological characteristics risk becoming too broad, inapplicable, and incomplete. Robert Logan (2010), in his attempt to characterize social media, came up with no fewer than 14 typical properties, some as ambiguous as "community" or "continuous learning" (Logan 2010: 49,50)¹²⁵. From a technical perspective, there is consensus that the internet and related infrastructure and technologies form the basis of social media (Lister et al. 2009). From a political science conceptual perspective, the technological features and concrete examples of social media are not as relevant as the ramifications of the shifts in communicative power within state-society relations that accompanied them. Henry Jenkins (2006) similarly argues that social media changed the culture of information production, processing, and provision: from an archaic one-to-many hierarchical model to a more decentralized and participatory model. To depict the impact of the emergence of social media on state-society relations, key effects are presented in the following sections. First, the interplay between "old" and social media is scrutinized. It is argued that the decentralization of communication practices induced by social media has made state-society communications more multidirectional and, through increased opportunities to create and spread information, empowered societal actors. Second, the examples of citizen journalism and the phenomenon of *egao* (恶搞) (Haomin Gong & Xin Yang 2010) or spoofs are used to illustrate the impact of the decentralized communication structure. Third, it is argued that the often-referenced censorship and control of the internet and social media by the party-state are more often than not used in a way that obfuscates complex state-society relations.

¹²⁵ Lev Manovich's enumeration of key properties of new media is omitted here as it focuses arbitrarily on technical features, which in their sum do not properly define new media (cf. Logan 2010). His five characteristics are numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding (Manovich 2001:49-65).

4.5.1 Old and social media: interplay and interdependency

As pointed out earlier, it is hard to describe what exactly social media – or its definitive parts – are. In her study of the changing political beliefs and practices of Chinese internet users, Lei (2011) has tied social media to the emergence of a more politically conscious and active group of people, which for this reason are called “netizens”. Even though the size of this group – as well as their impact on the socio-political system – with a teleological look towards democratization has rightfully been challenged (Leibold 2011), there is consensus about the significance of social media. They provide a platform that anyone can join and on which everybody¹²⁶ is able to create and share content with either their direct peers or the interested public. The shift from media entities providing filtered and pre-processed¹²⁷ information to more egalitarian and participatory communication created more entities producing and disseminating information. The seemingly clear line that can be drawn between old and social media has led some scholars to examine state–society relations by applying a dichotomous view on the media. In this dichotomy, old media are more often than not implicitly treated as an extended part of the Chinese party-state¹²⁸.

Ultimately, Jenkins (2006) argues that old and social media will become more and more enmeshed and converge into one media sphere. The diffusion of social media impacted on traditional media, but so far has not replaced – and is unlikely to replace – traditional media (Gaskins & Jerit 2012). But their emergence has brought yet another actor into the media landscape with new characteristics. While traditional media by and large are still tightly controlled and more or less bluntly used to sustain the legitimacy of the political system, social media offer new opportunities for interest articulation and protest. From a state–society perspective, then, social media have empowered citizens by providing them an opportunity to voice their concerns, which may be contrary to those provided by traditional media. Citizens now have a choice of which information channels to utilize and thus, in a sense, old and social media are in competition. Manuel Castells, in his study of how the internet impacted on the formation of public opinion and the dynamics between old and social media, called this the provision of counter-power to the public. Counter-power, according to him, is the “the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized”

¹²⁶ At least, for everyone that can afford the technical requirements to participate in the new sphere created by new media. The increase in the average livelihood of Chinese citizens and the still-growing number of internet users in China suggest that new media are likely to at least be a persistent daily experience of the great majority of Chinese citizens.

¹²⁷ Neither filtering nor preprocessing is negative per se. Media in general – and even new media are not an exception – are tasked with selecting content for their consumers out of an overwhelming supply of information. Analogous pre-processing refers to the work of media professionals in which they take fragmented information and build a comprehensive – or at least to a certain degree coherent – portrayal of issues. Both processes, however, can result in biased representation of reality to the audience (Chomsky 2002).

¹²⁸ Even though for theoretical considerations generalizations must be made at times, this simplification runs the risk of treating old media as a homogenous set of actors, which it clearly is not. Treating critical yet prudent newspapers like the *South China Morning Post* in the same way as party-state-conforming outlets such as the *People's Daily* is more obfuscating than illuminating.

(Castells 2007:239). As Kennedy (2009) points out, old media have been an institutionalized mechanism of state domination over society in China. The advent of social media has challenged the information monopoly of traditionally more state-bound media and resulted in a society in which individual citizens can – at least in principle – try to draw on the counter-power they provide (Lagerkvist 2005). The actual interplay between new and traditional media, however, is very complex with regard to its effects; for example, citizens can at times even set the national agenda, as the PM 2.5 air quality standard has shown (Xinhua 2012b; Xinhua 2012a). Yet, not all examples of empowerment are so positive. The phenomena of human flesh search engines – which can basically be equated with an online mob, mostly targeting individuals outside of existing laws by applying enormous social pressure (Chao & Tao 2012; Cheung 2009) – as well as (at times rampant) rumour spreading, are also side effects of social media. At the same, it should be noted that the Chinese media landscape consists of new and old media at the same time. While each one has specific characteristics, and at times they seem antagonistic, only their sum constitutes China's media landscape.

From this point of view, the distinction between old and social media is one of technological developments that made the emergence of an unprecedented participatory branch of media possible. This convergence is visible in China, where traditional newspapers like the *People's Daily* hosts a bulletin board called the "Strong Nation Forum" (强国论坛)¹²⁹, which is influencing not only China's domestic politics but also its foreign policy (Shen & Breslin 2010). Social media not only gives room to the expression of public opinion, but also functions as a fermenter and catalyst of opinions and emotions. This is most clearly visible in the aggressive nationalistic opinion formed in social media – particularly in cases that involve sensitive topic, such as Sino-Japanese relations due to the territorial disputes concerning the Diaoyu islands (钓鱼岛), or for historical reasons such as visits of high-ranking Japanese officials to shrines where convicted war criminals of the Second World War are worshipped.

The boundaries between old and social media are blurred, but still, a meaningful distinction can be made. Few studies so far have focused on the interplay between old and social media. At times, citizens are able to put new items on the public agenda using social media; at other times, they are not. Jiang Ying (2014) finds evidence that citizens can use social media to put items on the official public party-state agenda, but only in cases that are within the officially sanctioned discourses. In this sense, Ying argues social media have a 'reverse agenda-setting' effect, as they only allow party-state-conforming discussions. Yunjuan Luo comes to a similar finding but more nuanced conclusion in his study of the agenda-setting dynamics between new and old media and the government (Luo 2014). According to his insight, online activities can change the agenda of traditional media to a significant

¹²⁹ The forum can be accessed at <http://bbs1.people.com.cn/board/1.html>, last accessed 2.10.2014.

extent, but not the political agenda of the party-state. In this sense, old and social media are at times complementary and at times concurrent forces that try to set the media's agenda in China while having weak immediate impact on the state's agenda. Following Talcott Parsons' understanding of power as the capacity of actors to "get things done" (1963:232), social media have empowered societal forces to at least put their issues on the public agenda, and in turn increased the chance of a reaction by the party-state. Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang (2011) agree with this shift in the power relation and add an aspect of contestation to it. Despite the state's attempt to control social media, the pressure of netizens on a large scale has produced forms of protest, like the well-known mass incidents (群体性事件) (Cai 2008a). The new protest form has been called "mass internet incidents" (大型网络群体事件) (Esarey & Qiang 2011) and describes events in which netizens rally together to support a cause. In one case, netizens succeeded to pressure a third of some 80 local government officials to retire from their positions due to allegations of corruption (Zeng 2009 in Esarey & Qiang 2011:300). The new opportunities for societal actors to express and share of content has also led to a more general phenomena undermining state power, such as the practice of *egao* (恶搞) or spoofs. Shih-Ding Liu defines the purpose of *egao* as "to describe practices or works that deconstruct serious themes, or poke fun at authorities, sometimes imbued with a sense of defiance and disobedience to the political realm" (Liu 2013b). Liu (Liu 2013b) argues that the practice of spoofs are one instrument of resistance to official propaganda, ridiculing it in an attempt to criticize and reverse its effects. (Haomin Gong & Xin Yang 2010) point out that the phenomenon of spoofs is not limited to struggles in the socio-political arena but that elsewhere it also "provides an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgressing of existing social and cultural hierarchies" (Haomin Gong & Xin Yang 2010). This new locus of power is only possible within social media because it relies on content created by individuals who in turn use social media to disseminate the material.

4.5.2 Decentralized communication and micro-level empowerment: citizen journalism

The opportunities offered by social media to citizens in terms of collecting, redacting, and disseminating information have partially given them the same potential previously associated with reporters and journalists. As a result of the new decentralized nature of communication, citizen journalism¹³⁰ (民间记者) arose as more recent phenomenon. Unbound by commercial considerations and professional ethics, citizens have become part of the information collection, preparation, dissemination, and interaction with established media professionals; or, as Reese and Dai (Reese & Dai 2009) put it, "citizen journalists are not typically commercially viable and do not

¹³⁰ At times, citizens' journalism is also referred to as "grassroots journalism" (cf. Gillmor 2006 or Xin 2011b).

require adherence to a professional code in order to participate, just the desire to express an idea or support a cause”.

Citizen journalism is increasingly perceptible and has played a key role in a number of recent events, from the “nail house” incident in Chongqing in 2004 (Xin 2011a) to the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008 (Reese & Dai 2009; Nip, Joyce, Y. 2009). In each of these events, citizens “armed with laptops, cell phones, and digital cameras” (Gillmor 2006:backcover) used social media to draw public attention to issues they deemed important. In the case of the Wenchuan earthquake, citizens at the place of the natural disaster immediately reported it and raised questions about the government’s reaction to the earthquake, as well as directing help efforts to places where they were most needed (Nip 2009). Citizen journalism complements professional journalism; as Joyce Nip argues, in the case of China the former is most valuable when the latter fails (Nip 2009:102). The lack of professional standards – such as double-checking facts, using a neutral tone, and giving a balanced account of issues – is arguably the greatest strength and weakness of citizen journalism. It is a strength because it may lend credibility and authenticity to the report, which is highly valued and not only in China’s media landscape. At the same time, the potential lack of professional standards make social media a partial mirror of the state of society: critical yet constructive engagement can be found there as well as defamatory and rumour-based allegations against not only party-state representative but also other citizens, groups, or companies. Despite the indisputably negative side effects of social media, practices like citizen journalism have – as Haiqing Yu argues – contributed to strengthen citizenship by opening “up alternative public spaces to articulate alternative political discourses through their facilitation and promotion of the right and desire to know and to express opinion” (2006:320). Yu makes the particularly important observation that citizens not only use platforms such as Sina Weibo to express their views, but also even the “official websites of highly censored newspapers, such as People’s Daily” (2006:ibid.), which again highlights the aforementioned insight that the distinction between traditional and social media is at times hard to establish.

In the literature on spoofs and citizen journalism – but also in more general scientific discourses about social media in China (Abbott 2001; Esarey & Qiang 2011; Kennedy 2009) – censorship and propaganda mechanisms, like the 50 Cent Party (五毛党)¹³¹, are often portrayed as the biggest impediments preventing citizens and NGOs from taking full advantage of both phenomena to influence public policy (Han 2015). In the following section, this argument will be scrutinized; it will be argued that censorship and propaganda actually represent far less of an obstacle to citizens than most scholars anticipate.

¹³¹ Sullivan defines the often-referenced “50 Cent Party” as “[p]arty-paid internet commentators and opinion leaders” Sullivan (2012:778). The term “50 Cent” is a reference to the alleged reward for the commentators for each party-state friendly post.

4.5.3 Censorship: an outdated state vs. society perspective?

Social media are often portrayed as the latest battleground between party-state and societal forces (Wu & Yang 2016; Nip & Fu 2016; Cheung 2009; Brady & Wang 2009). If the researcher favours a more positive view, social media may be regarded as conducive for freedom of expression, collective action, or democratization (Xiao 2011; Li 2011; Yuan 2010); if the researcher favours a more pessimistic outlook, social media may be viewed as yet another propaganda arena in which the party-state tries to impose its ideological doctrine on society – or at the very least tries to control the flow of information (Fu, Chau & Holme 2013). This simplistic view not only neglects the constructive engagements between state and society in China, but also in most cases dramatically overestimates the actual extent, scope, and impact of censorship and propaganda efforts (Lorentzen 2014; Lee & Liu 2012; Liu 2011b).

In their study on the expression of opinion in the Chinese cyber sphere, Shen, Wang, and Guo come to the conclusion that “the prevalent internet censorship China, to some extent, has successfully stifled people’s willingness to speak out through eroding their beliefs about the power of the internet” (2009:468). Using a formal model, Lorentzen suggests that authoritarian regimes in particular actually have an interest in permitting journalists or citizens to report aggressively on low-level malfeasance in order to improve governance, but constantly adjust the amount of reporting in order to “avoid giving discontented citizens enough information to be certain about whether a revolt would receive sufficient support to be worthwhile” (Lorentzen 2014:413). From this perspective, a question arises: what can actually be said on Chinese social media, and what cannot?

Anecdotal evidence provided by *The New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof in 2006 (Kristof 2006) suggests that automatic censorship mechanisms – such as replacing combinations of characters clearly referencing sensitive topics, such as “June 4 1989” or the “Falungong sect” – work perfectly. However, “the most inflammatory comment” he could think of “describing how on June 4, 1989, he [MD] saw the Chinese Army fire on Tiananmen Square protesters” remain online even after the “June 4” was replaced with two asterisks, leading him to think that “is not the police state that its leaders sometimes would like it to be” (Kristof 2006). Almost a decade later, Nicholas Kristof’s anecdotal evidence seems outdated and no longer valid. The latest and by far most extensive study on censorship in China was conducted by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts (King, Pan & Roberts 2014; King, Pan & Roberts 2013) in 2013. Based on an evaluation of several hundred million posts from social media, they concluded that:

the leadership allowed social media to flourish in the country, they also allowed the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders. As a result, government policies sometimes look as bad, and leaders can be as embarrassed, as is often the case with elected politicians in democratic countries. (King, Pan & Roberts 2013)

In their article, they quote several cases from their material to exemplify the content that can not only be distributed on social media, but also is not redacted or censored, even after a considerable time. The examples range from criticizing local governments¹³² to the one-child policy:

The [government] could promote voluntary birth control, not coercive birth control that deprives people of descendants. People have already been made to suffer for 30 years. This cannot become path dependent, prolonging an ill-devised temporary, emergency measure ... Without any exaggeration, the one child policy is the brutal policy that farmers hated the most. This “necessary evil” is rare in human history, attracting widespread condemnation around the world. It is not something we should be proud of. (ibid: 338)

King et al. found that outspoken criticism of top government policies and local as well as national politicians in China is not constantly censored¹³³. The study finds that censorship is applied most often and rigidly in cases where criticism is combined with calls for collective action. The authors argue that the lack of constant and wide censorship does not mean that social media are not monitored or censored by the party-state, but rather that they have become an integral sphere through which to gauge public opinion. In this sense, King et al. tentatively propose to think of “China’s censorship apparatus [...] as one of the input institutions” that allows the party-state to stay in touch with its constituency (King, Pan & Roberts 2013).

Following the study’s findings – and given the decentralized nature of social media – this work questions whether they actually offer more than merely an arena of constant public opinion polls. In chapter 3, the deliberative potential of Social Media with regard to state–society relations has been highlighted. The focus here is on deliberative practices in social media, to further the understanding of whether social media can function as more than mere opinion polling platforms or as a “safety valve or pressure cooker” (Hassid 2012; Chen 2016).

4.6 Conclusion

Based on an extensive literature review, interviews¹³⁴, and document analysis, three factors that have change and are still changing the Chinese media since the beginning of the reform and opening

¹³² “This is a city government [Yulin City in Shaanxi, MD] that treats life with contempt, this is government officials run amuck, a city government without justice, a city government that delights in that which is vulgar, a place where officials all have mistresses, a city government that is shameless with greed, a government that trades dignity for power, a government without humanity, a government that has no limits on immorality, a government that goes back on its word, a government that treats kindness with ingratitude, a government that cares nothing for posterity...”(ibid: 338).

¹³³ Exceptions to this generalization exist. When Bloomberg News reported the wealth structure of the family of then premier Wen Jiabao, strict censorship was put in place. Nonetheless, the revelation of intimate information about a top leader is a rather rare event.

¹³⁴ The interviews were conducted with Chinese scholars in Nankai University (Tianjin) and a researcher working at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing in 2011, who preferred to remain anonymous.

period have been identified. While these did not set in at the same time, and varied in their intensity over time, they significantly influenced the structure of the media and altered its role in state–society relations. While the party-state has maintained some functional expectations over time, such as its role in reliably disseminating propaganda to the whole population, new tasks were also assigned, such as a severely limited but nonetheless existent monitoring and watchdog role. In more general terms, the media have become more of a transmissions belt between state and society as a result of the dynamics introduced and amplified by marketization, professionalization, and internationalization. While scholarly debates focus on whether these dynamics are stabilizing or undermining the current regime with very mixed results, there is consensus that the media now are not only very different from the media some decades ago but also that the remarkable success of social media in China was only possible due to such a highly dynamic environment.

The instant success of social media would have been impossible, had marketization not produced a highly competitive business environment in which media enterprises compete fiercely over market shares and advertisement revenues. The result is not only an increased tax base for the state, but also media companies that reluctantly – if ever – implement state requirements regarding censorship and repression. At the same time, the success of large Chinese companies such as Sina, Tencent, or Baidu were inspired by the internationally successful examples of Facebook, Twitter, and Google. But the success of Chinese social media was only possible after its international rivals were forbidden access to the Chinese market for reasons of non-compliance with regulation regarding censorship and control of information flows (Branigan 2009). Sina Weibo only became popular after Twitter was forbidden in 2009, in an attempt by the party-state to stay in control before the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen Square. However, Sina Weibo – like most Chinese social media – did not only copy its western rivals; incited by the fierce competition and increasingly professional standards and expectation of users in China, it steadily improved and extended its services, so that today it has reversed the internationalization trend in which China was on the receiving end. The popular WeChat platform from Tencent – with its more than 100 million users outside of China – is an example of this reversed trend¹³⁵.

The individual but interdependent processes described here not only explain the change of the media and the success of social media, but also offer a conceptual perspective to tie together scholarly insights about the Chinese media from a state–society perspective. This perspective allows for making sense of the change and continuity of state–society relations in the media, and provides an alternative analytical lens from the dominant censorship, repression, and democratization frameworks.

¹³⁵ WeChat was originally called Weixin but renamed to become easier to advertise internationally.

After having analysed the change of the media in China through an institutional lens the next chapter approaches the nexus of deliberative practices and social in the field of environmental protection from an empirical vantage point.

5. Assessing the scope of deliberative practices of EPBs activities in Sina Weibo

Before the quantitative analytical part of the research is portrayed in depth, the necessity of employing a mixed-methods approach is outlined. After making the case for methodological triangulation, the threefold aim of this chapter is outlined: first, it shows how the sample of EPBs was attained; second, it provides an in-depth description of the sample's relevant characteristics from a quantitative perspective; and third, based on these insights, it explains how and why the case study of the Jiaxing area was selected from the original sample for the ensuing qualitative analysis in the next chapter. The information about governmental services and representation on social media is scarce and fragmented (Göbel 2014b; Göbel 2015; Stockmann & Luo 2017). This research aims to ameliorate this situation by providing the first comprehensive summary of EPBs presences on Sina Weibo with emphasis on the most important variables typically used in the literature on assessing online presences such as e.g. the geographical distribution of presences, their scope as measured in followers and their general level of activity (Su & Meng 2016; Distelhorst & Hou 2017).

5.1 More than the sum of its parts: quantitative evaluation and qualitative content analysis

Social media platforms such as Sina Weibo are diverse in their functionality and so is the information that they provide. While video-based platforms such as Youku (优酷)¹³⁶ enable their users to comment on the content and engage in heated discussions, Sina Weibo by comparison allows for the distribution of not only short messages, but also images and videos. This diversity, in terms of different representations of information, poses two challenges. First, it requires scientists to take a more holistic view when designing their research projects and to incorporate all (Bryman 2012) of the available information, regardless of its representation. This in turn demands researchers to either possess a vast portfolio of methods or to engage in collaborative and interdisciplinary projects. Second, the diversity of the information is likely to inflate the source material that needs to be processed in order to avoid the inept monocropping of a particular method. The obstacles posed by the necessary use of vast amounts of information can be overcome by employing mixed-methods approaches (Bryman 2012). The use of a mixed-method¹³⁷ design might help to overcome hardened and outdated cleavages in epistemological positions such as the quantitative–qualitative divide; but more importantly, these strategies tend to yield more reliable insights and mitigate shortfalls of individual methods (King 2014).

¹³⁶ Cf. <http://www.youku.com>. Youku is very similar to the popular, also video-based social media platform, YouTube.

¹³⁷ Mixed methods here is understood following Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner's (2007) understanding as representing “an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research; it is the third methodological or research paradigm (along with quantitative and qualitative research)” (2007:129).

Mixed methods can be defined “as research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry” (Tashakkori & Creswell 2007). While it would be overstated to relate the ascension of mixed-methods research designs to the emergence of social media in the past decade, they are likely to spread further spread as a result of it. The diversity of social media simply requires researchers to analyze vast amounts of material; informational representations such as photos, comments, audio files, and videos are no longer tied to one specific social media platform, but are increasingly a feature of all of them – not to mention the uniqueness of each individual platform and their dynamic technical development.

As an example, a mere textual analysis of the Sina Weibo post “无语转发.....” (silently forwarding) posted by user 纪昀 would not reveal why the post had been censored on Weibo shortly after its publication¹³⁸. Only by taking the attached picture into account (cf. image 4) does it become evident why it was censored. The people in the picture to which the text of the post refers hold up a banner calling for more internet freedom. This example underlines the necessity of taking all information into account when evaluating social media content. It is a fairly straightforward example, as the message transported by the picture does not use sophisticated insinuations or hidden allegations, which can often be found in comic sketches or artistic representations. Against this background, for this study it was decided to store all the information provided by Sina Weibo, including images attached to posts¹³⁹.

On a methodological level, the predictable high volume of information this analysis produced required a sophisticated strategy to make the most of it. To avoid the dangers of the sole use of quantitative approaches which tend to make many assumptions and overestimate generalizability or qualitative approaches with non-transparent source material collection and subjective interpretation, an “offset” mixed-methods approach was chosen. “Offset” refers to (Bryman 2012) notion that both qualitative and quantitative methods have their strengths



image 4: Activists holding a banner. Source: own data.

¹³⁸ See the Weiboscope project page for this post: <http://weiboscope.jmsc.hku.hk/wsr/list.py?id=3779035374696609>, last accessed 15.8.2015. Weiboscope is a project of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong.

¹³⁹ This seemingly trivial decision had several technical implications. First, it significantly increased the data size, as images require more storage space than only textual information. Second – and more importantly – it slowed the data retrieval process significantly, not only because of the increased volume but also because connection interruptions, which unfortunately occurred frequently, happened more often and required restarting the data-retrieval process.

and weaknesses but can be combined in a way that draws on the strength of both while mitigating the weak spots of each (2012:633ff.). The strength of quantitative methods is their ability to draw inferences out of a potentially large amount of information and thus their utility for general assessments or hypothesis testing. In this research design, they are accordingly used for two purposes: they allow hypothesizing of the degree to which social media, in the realm of environmental protection, is actually used in China as a deliberative arena. Subsequently, they allow for a transparent and comprehensible selection of case studies for qualitative analysis. While the quantitative assessment can illuminate the general scope of discourses in which EPBs on Sina Weibo are involved, they do not allow for evaluation of individual interactions and discourses. To assess what issues citizens are bringing to the attention of the EPBs and how they and their concerns are treated requires a qualitative and interpretative evaluation of the source material.

Following this “offset” strategy, statistical methods are used to provide the general background and contextualize the findings of the qualitative aspect presented in the next chapter. The basis for the quantitative evaluation is the data sample generated by a systematic information retrieval from Sina Weibo. In the following section, the data selection and gathering processes are presented in detail.

As early as the 1990s, in their study on relations between citizens’ complaints and environmental pollution, Susmita Dasgupta and David Wheeler stated that regulators in China were aware of the fact that they were often “ill-informed about pollution problems because monitoring is costly. To fill the gap, they may solicit complaints from citizens or communities damaged by pollution” (Dasgupta & Wheeler 1996). Subsequently, the state at first unsystematically and intermittently tried to open venues for more societal feedback on the issue, until finally, in 2014, a major legislative revision of the environmental law passed the standing committee of the NPC. A significant part of the revision focused on penal provisions for violators, but a further major pillar was provisions encouraging transparency and fostering public participation in the matter. According to Article 58 of the new Environmental Protection Law (EPL), it is not only social public interest organizations that are allowed to file claims in the People’s Court for environmental pollution and ecological damages¹⁴⁰. The preceding article grants citizens and similar legal entities the right to complain about environmental

¹⁴⁰ The exact wording of the paragraph is:

“[f]or activities that cause environmental pollution, ecological damage and public interest harm, social organizations that meet the following conditions may file litigation to the people's courts:

- (1) Have their registration at the civil affair departments of people’s governments at or above municipal level with sub-districts in accordance with the law;
- (2) Specialize in environmental protection public interest activities for five consecutive years or more, and have no law violation records. Courts shall accept the litigations filed by social organizations that meet the above criteria. The social organizations that file the litigation shall not seek economic benefits from the litigation.” (EU – China Environmental Governance Program 2014:12-13).

pollution – and if the responsible state administration fails to deal with the issues brought forward, claimants are entitled to report the case to higher state agencies. While this is nothing new –citizens had the right to complain about state administration before – the paragraph contains a section reassuring claimants that their report will be kept confidential and their rights protected¹⁴¹.

The revised EPL amends its former version, which was issued in 1989 and was widely positively received, and follows the renewed emphasis of the party-state on environmental protection – or, as premier Li Keqiang said during the National People’s Congress (NPC) in March 2014, the party-state’s leadership will “resolutely declare war against pollution as we declared war against poverty” (Kaiman 2014).

In this “war on pollution”, citizens and social organizations play a pivotal role to uncover incidents and exert a (limited) monitoring and controlling function for the state authorities responsible. In this sense, the policy field of environmental protection has been desensitized, as public input is encouraged by the political system and its valence officially recognized. This notwithstanding, scholars have pointed out that any legislation is only as effective as its implementation. Almost two decades ago, Kenneth Lieberthal (1997) argued:

the Chinese system should move in a direction more favorable to responsible environmental stewardship. Increased information and analytical capabilities, structural changes that begin to disentangle the interests of officials from those of entrepreneurs, and greater responsiveness to growing popular sentiment in favor of environmental protection should combine to increase China’s desire and ability to move toward sustainable development. (Lieberthal 1997:8)

The revised EPL seems like a concrete step towards Lieberthal’s suggestions. Other scholars take a more critical point of view. Beijing-based scholar, Ran Ran, convincingly argued in her article “The Perverse Incentive Structure and Policy Implementation Gap in China's Local Environmental Politics” (Ran 2013) that, despite the formal embracement of principles like transparency and public input, the current structure of the Chinese polity – with its complex and dynamic central–local relations – seriously undermines the effectiveness of laws and regulations, resulting in a implementation gap.

¹⁴¹ The exact wording of the paragraph is:

“Citizens, legal persons and other organizations shall be entitled to report and complain environmental pollution and ecological damage activities of any units and individuals to competent environmental protection administrations or other departments with environmental supervision responsibilities.

In the event the local people’s government and its environmental protection administrations or any other relevant departments fail to fulfill their responsibilities in accordance with the law, any citizen, legal person or other organizations have the right to report it to the competent higher level governments or the supervisory department according to law.

The authorities receiving the report shall keep confidential the relevant information of the informant, and protect the legitimate rights and interests of the informant.” (EU – China Environmental Governance Program 2014:12).

The intricacies of the inner workings of the Chinese political system are important and likely one of the reasons the central state has decided to formally acknowledge the need for public input. Against this backdrop, the role of social media in general and Sina Weibo in particular in facilitating state–societal interactions in the policy field of environmental protection is analyzed from the vantage point of authoritarian deliberation.

5.2 EPBs vis-à-vis other state agencies

A comparison of EPBs with other types of state institutions can reveal how prominent the former are as part of the overall state bureaucracy. In this, the research contributes to existing insights that environmental protection is a frequent issue in state–society relations (Ho & Edmonds 2008; Economy 2010; Chen 2009; Sullivan & Xie 2009). Against this background, it is surprising that previous reports about state activity in micro-blogging barely mention EPBs at all¹⁴². The biggest groups of government agencies active on Sina Weibo are in fact the Public Security Bureaus (PSBs), which are also more active than any other organizational departments with regard to the amount of content posted. According to a study undertaken in 2011 by the National School of Administration of E-Government Research Center (国家行政学院电子政务研究中心), published in the *Chinese Government Micro-Blog Assessment Report (2011:11)*, institutions in the field of public security represented 47% of all organizational state accounts on micro-blog platforms. Other state entities – such as travelling and tourism, traffic, and justice institutions – were at least fairly represented, whereas environmental protection was not listed at all, or subsumed in a residual category (其他机构) with other branches of government. The misrepresentation of EPBs in comparison to other state organizations is exceptional, as environmental-related issues have become a regular and contested issue in state–society relations (Su & Meng 2016; Economy 2014).

The scarce presence of EPBs, despite public interest in their work, can also be seen as an expression of the general position of EPBs in the party-state's structure. From this perspective, EPBs are considered to be weak institutions (Jahiel 1998), as they rank lowly in the state hierarchical system (条条块块) and face obstacles when dealing with other state agencies on the same administrative level (cf. Mertha 2005). But the lack of representation is not only due to the particular configuration of the Chinese polity, as Abigail Jahiel observes:

[o]ne type of institutional weakness in the organization of environmental protection appears to be, as yet, insurmountable: the lack of co-ordination across jurisdictional

¹⁴² See the *Chinese Government Micro-Blog Assessment Report* for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 (National School of Administration of e-government research center (国家行政学院电子政务研究中心) (2011) or the reports on Sina Government Micro-Blogs by the Xinhuanet Public Opinion Monitoring Room for the same years (People's Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room (新华网舆情监测室)).

boundaries – both between EPBs in different geographic locales and between EPBs and other government organs within the same region. (1998:779)

As elaborated in the conceptual approach (cf. Chapter 3), a core feature of social media is enabling their users to transgress geographical boundaries. Social media could thus help EPBs to overcome the deficit identified by Jahiel and communicate better – not only between themselves, but also with other state organizations in the same administrative region.

It is surprising that, years after the SEPA was finally granted ministerial level status in 2008, EPBs still struggle to find their place in the state structure. Their marginal representation in social media has not changed significantly over time, even though the social media landscape in China has altered significantly since 2011 and the state's engagement has further increased. This mismatch becomes clearly visible when the sample size of 185 is compared to the more than 100,000 government entities active on Sina Weibo alone. The EPBs represent a tiny fraction of overall government activities (Xinmin Evening News (新民晚报) 2014). The discrepancy becomes even more evident when the more than 250,000 state micro-blogging accounts active in major Chinese social media are taken into consideration (People's Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room (新华网舆情监测室) 2013)¹⁴³.

Governmental micro-blogging recorded enormous growth rates in the early years of the social media boom in China; from 2010 to 2011, their number increased by more than 231% on Sina Weibo alone (People's Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room (新华网舆情监测室) 2013:2). Despite this extremely high growth rate, Sina Weibo was not the most popular social media platform for state organizations at the time. At the end of 2011, Sina's competitor Tencent had slightly more state organizational accounts than Sina (National School of Administration of e-government research center (国家行政学院电子政务研究中心) 2011:6)¹⁴⁴. The tremendous growth rates were not sustainable, but even in 2013, state micro-blogging continued to increase significantly with 46.42% compared to previous years for all major social media platforms (People's Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room (新华网舆情监测室) 2013:10). The trend of late, but steadily increasing, government engagement in social media is thus evident. After contextualizing the scope of EPBs in social media and comparing this to other state agencies, the next sections explains how the original sample of 185 EPBs was reduced to 133.

¹⁴³ The report draws its data from the four biggest social media platforms in China: Sina, Tencent, People's Daily, and Xinhua. The more than 250,000 state accounts are made up of approximately 180,000 organizational and 75,000 individual accounts.

¹⁴⁴ According to the report, Sina Weibo had 12,103 organizational and 10,652 individual accounts, whereas Tencent had 13,911 and 6,748 respectively. The People's Daily had a total of 2,472 accounts and Xinhua's service had 4,675 state accounts.

5.3 Sample assessment using descriptive statistics

The methodological triangulation serves two purposes: first, to describe the characteristics of the sample in order to compare it with existing research and data; second, to allow criteria to be identified in order to select cases for in-depth qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis is necessary to assess the interactions and communications with regard to their consultative and deliberative nature, which eludes quantitative approaches. In order to choose an insightful and comparatively representative case study for the qualitative analysis, the sample is scrutinized in the following sections by their main characteristics: the geographical distribution of EPBs across China, their audience size as measured by their followers, and their embeddedness and connectedness in the virtual community as measured by their friends' network. Finally the degree, of activity of each EPB is used to aid case study selection.

5.3.1 The provincial distribution

As previously stated, EPBs are underrepresented in China's social media; but do differences in their geographical distribution exist as well? Is their distribution following the pattern of diffusion of the necessary technological infrastructure; that is, the internet? Are micro-blogging EPBs located along the centers of pollution (He, Huang & Ye 2014), or do regional exceptions based on other factors exist? What stimulates the EPBs' activity on Sina Weibo?

To start the analysis, it is assumed that social media mirror the proliferation of the internet in China. This assumption is based on the fact that social media are only accessible via the internet and therefore the distribution of EPBs in the sample is likely to reflect its availability. Following this logic, data from the CNNIC (2014:25) suggests that the EPBs in this sample would mainly be found in the coastal provinces, as well as in the distinct urban centers of Shanghai and Beijing, with a general trend of higher density in southern rather than northern parts of China. The distribution of the sample in terms of originating provinces largely confirms the expectations derived from the CNNIC. Accordingly, the economically advanced coastal provinces like Jiangsu, Guangdong, and Zhejiang, together with the urban centers of Beijing and Shanghai, make up almost half (49.8%) of the filtered sample of 133 EPBs. The other half of the sample is mostly scattered around China's interior provinces. This is not surprising given the significantly higher access to the internet in general in these areas.

While the data of the CNNIC is a good heuristic, another factor explains why accumulations within

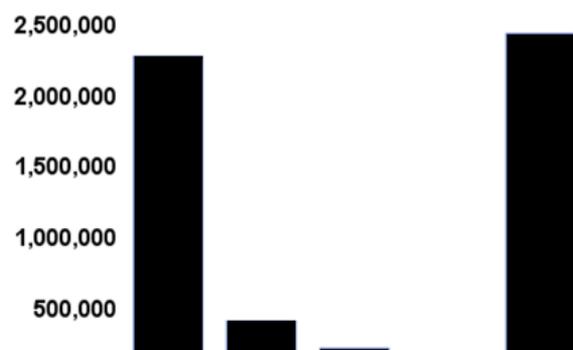


figure 10: Followers by EPB (EPBs contributing less than 3% to the sum are subsumed in the "other" category). Source own data.

regions exist. In the sample, the Jiangsu province and the direct-controlled municipality of Chongqing are the most represented regions on Sina Weibo, with 17 and 29 accounts respectively. The sample data suggests that superordinate state units have a significant influence on the representation of their subordinate units on social media. The Chongqing municipality is exemplary in this regard. In the area, only two EPBs registered themselves on Sina Weibo before the official municipal account (重庆环保)¹⁴⁵ was set up in May 2011. In the following months of June and July, 25 EPBs from subordinate administrative levels (区,县) registered. The timing of the account creation hints at an underlying dynamic. Most accounts from areas with close geographical proximity were created on the same day, with a peak on July 19th, when four accounts were set up¹⁴⁶.

A similar situation can be found in the Jiangsu province. The EPBs active on Sina Weibo in this province are scattered across individual cities like Zhenjiang (镇江), Taixing (泰兴), and Suzhou (苏州), but no clusters of administrative areas that cohesively belong together - like the one identified in Chongqing - can be found. Despite the lack of large cohesive local clusters, Jiangsu still highlights the influence of the higher administrative units. Jiangsu is the only province in the sample in which the provincial level EPB is listed in the sample. Even though local clusters of EPBs do not exist, the impact of the provincial EPB is noticeable, as Jiangsu is the province with the largest number of EPBs in the sample (cf. figure 10).

A similar pattern can be found in Beijing, where almost all EPBs set up their accounts following the example of the city's municipal EPB¹⁴⁷. In the case of Beijing, however, the representation of sub-municipal EPBs resembles a patchwork, as a significant amount of them are not active on Sina Weibo at all.

The fourth such agglomeration found in the data is the Jiaxing area. This region differs from the previous examples in two ways. While Jiaxing is a prefecture-level city, it is not comparable to huge autonomous administrative entities such as Chongqing or Beijing. This notwithstanding, it shows an almost perfectly coherent coverage, as all seven county-level divisions of the city are active on Sina Weibo. Here, again, the pattern that lower-level EPBs register on Sina Weibo after the superordinate EPB in the region registered holds true: after the Jiaxing prefectural-level EPB registered, 11 EPBs followed its lead. The accumulation of EPBs elicited by this pattern makes the Jiaxing area the biggest

¹⁴⁵ The account has been verified by Sina Weibo as the official micro-blogging account of the EPB in Chongqing (重庆市环境保护局官方微博).

¹⁴⁶ On July 19th, 2011, the EPBs of Wansheng (万盛环保), Wanzhou (万州环保), Wushan (巫山环保), and Wuxi (巫溪环保) set up their accounts.

¹⁴⁷ The account has been verified by Sina Weibo as the official micro-blogging account of the EPB in Beijing (北京市环境保护局官方微博).

contributor to the share of EPBs from Zhejiang province¹⁴⁸. Jiaxing is an ideal case, as it is the sole case in the sample for which an entire administrative area and its EPBs are present on Sina Weibo.

The extremely good coverage of EPBs in the Jiaxing area on Sina Weibo is likely a result of several factors. Located in the well-developed province of Zhejiang, Jiaxing is faring economically well, which translates into disposable income for its inhabitants. According to a 2012 report on the work of the Jiaxing municipal government, its urban residents had a per-capita disposable income¹⁴⁹ of 35,696 RMB, while its rural residents still commanded over 18,636 RMB, exceeding the provincial average of 30,971 RMB and 13,071 RMB respectively (Li, Chen & Zhang 2015). To put these numbers into perspective, (Li, Chen & Zhang 2015) reported that, for the same year, per-capita disposable incomes for urban residents in Beijing, Sichuan, and Shandong were 32,903 RMB, 17,899 RMB and 22,792 RMB respectively. Jiaxing is thus a very wealthy area in comparison to other provinces and regions in China, including the metropolitan areas of Beijing and Shanghai – and significantly above its provincial average.

This economic performance is mainly based on industries in the area focusing on the production of solar panels, textile-processing industries, and production of automobile-related parts. The strong presence of these industries might be one factor contributing to the exceptionally dense representation of EPBs in social media. The Jiaxing government had, in the 1990s, already taken measures to promote economic growth. In 1992, the Jiaxing economic and technological development zone (嘉兴经济技术开发区) was established; in 2010, this was recognized as a national development zone by the state council¹⁵⁰.

More recently, the strong focus on economic development was accompanied by a focus on sustainable development. These efforts were marked with a prize for “Cities of the Future” for Jiaxing’s Nanhu Country Village, awarded by the Paulson Institute and the China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE) to recognize the efforts, which represented a:

creative, new approach to solving critical edge development and urban encroachment challenges and showing demonstrable progress that can be scaled in other areas of China. The project addresses key environmental challenges of urbanization affecting air, land and water, through innovative solutions to water conservation, energy efficiency and transportation technologies. (Paulson Institute - China Center for International Economic Exchanges 2015)

¹⁴⁸ Only five EPBs in Zhejiang remain, of which four belong to Ningbo and one to Wenzhou city (鹿城区环境保护局).

¹⁴⁹ The disposable income indicates the amount of money available for either spending or saving and is computed after taxes have been accounted for.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. the *Qianjiang Evening News* article at http://qjwb.zjol.com.cn/html/2012-07/20/content_1639385.htm, last accessed 20th February 2015, and the homepage of the development zone at <http://www.jxedz.gov.cn/news.php?id=3375>, last accessed 20th February 2015.

The prize has a significant symbolic value, as the CCIEE is a think tank registered at the Ministry of Civil Affairs and under the supervision and guidance of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)¹⁵¹. The appraisal of the Nanhu village by a leading domestic body highlights its role model status in a domestic context, which is given additional weight by the international dimension of the commitment of the Paulson Institute. The emphasis on sustainable and ecologically friendly economic development is not only reflected in local development policies, but also extends to the way state–society relations are shaped in the region.

Another major factor that likely contributes to the strong presence of EPBs in the Jiaxing area is the “Public Participation of Environmental Governance in the Jiaxing Model and its Applicability in Zhejiang Province” program. This program was part of the EU–China Environmental Governance Program (EGP, 中欧环境治理项目), which offered €15 million for projects enhancing environmental governance in the PRC in the period 2010–15. The program was implemented in cooperation with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the MEP and executed by the Policy Research Center for Environment and Economy (PRCEE, 环境与经济政策研究中心). The PRCEE is an affiliated think tank and consultative body for the MEP. The EGP funded projects with regard to 4 foci: (1) public access to environmental information, (2) public participation in environmental planning and decision making, (3) access to justice in environmental matters, and (4) corporate environmental responsibility¹⁵². The Jiaxing region conducted a project in the second dimension targeting “public participation of environmental governance in the Jiaxing model and its applicability in Zhejiang province” (建立公众参与环境治理新模式——“嘉兴模式”，并在浙江全省推广)¹⁵³.

The EGP funds projects between Chinese and European partners; in the case of the Jiaxing area, the partners were the University of Leeds and the Zhejiang Environmental Education Center (浙江省环境宣教中心, CEECZJ), who jointly analyzed the “Jiaxing model” (嘉兴模式) and explored how it might be applicable in a provincial or national setting. The key characteristic of the Jiaxing model is its emphasis on public participation in policy processes and the promotion of key industrial sectors with extensive state subsidies¹⁵⁴. Every Chinese local institution had European partners, which in Jiaxing’s case were the University of Leeds and the University of Glasgow¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵¹ Cf. CCIEE website, available at <http://www.cciee.org.cn/NewsInfo.aspx?Nid=200>, last checked 30.3.2015.

¹⁵² Cf. the program’s website, available at <http://www.ecegp.com/chinese/aboutus/aboutus.asp>, last checked 31.3.2015.

¹⁵³ Cf. the program’s website, available at <http://www.ecegp.com/english/place/placefirst.asp>, last checked 31.3.2015. Unfortunately, the website for the Jiaxing project itself is no longer available at <http://www.ecegpzj.com>, last checked 31.3.2015.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. the newspaper article criticizing the high state subsidies for the photovoltaic industry in the Jiaxing area (Zhang 2015).

¹⁵⁵ It should be noted that the European partners do not have to be academic institutions; for instance, the German state development agency “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit” (GIZ) is a major partner in several projects in the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Gansu, and Heilongjiang. The GIZ-

Dr. Li Jingyun, from the Environmental Protection Policy and Regulation Department, stated that public participation is apt to monitor governmental work (监督政府履职) and helps to enforce environmental law, as well as to ensure compliance with corporate responsibility. According to Dr. Li, incorporating the public is not only likely to increase governmental efficiency but also does so at very low cost¹⁵⁶. The importance of social media to reach out to the public in this regard was highlighted by Rolf Dietmar, the director of the Sino-German Corporate Social Responsibility project implemented by the GIZ and the Ministry of Commerce, in a presentation given on May 9th, 2014, on the scope of the EGP for “Improving Corporate Environmental Information Disclosure (CEID) in China” (Dietmar 2014). In his presentation, he emphasized the need to not only publicize environmental related information on official websites of companies or state agencies and in summary reports but also to disclose them on social media (通过网站和社交媒体公开信息) to reach the public (大众). From official documents of the GIZ-related projects, at least one project dealing with CSR also targeted a company in the Jiaxing area. The Zhejiang Zhonghui Fur & Leather Co. Ltd company (cf. GIZ Consultancy Services on CSR) is located directly in the city of Jiaxing and has been a partner of GIZ projects since 2005 – even prior to the EGP scheme. In the case study presented by the GIZ (GIZ Consultancy Services on CSR), one of the main achievements listed is the reduction of emitted sawdust and significant saving of coal-generated energy by more efficiently using the remaining heat of water used in leaching processes before its release. Despite the funding period nearing its end and the financial scope of the program, an analysis or evaluation of the impact of the public participation, which is a key characteristic of the so-called “Jiaxing model”, is not available.

The historic emphasis on economic development and public participation in Jiaxing, especially in environmental matters, explains the strong presence of EPBs of the region on social media. Given the special characteristics of the Jiaxing case, from a methodological point of view it likely represents a crucial case (cf. Gerring 2007). The argument for distinguishing between most and least likely case study designs was introduced by Harry Eckstein (1975). Most likely case study designs examine a single case, which serves to prove that a theoretical argument – in the case of this research, the existence of authoritarian deliberation in Chinese social media – either exists (and therefore, following Popper’s logic of falsification, can be tested and scrutinized further) or should be dismissed completely (on the grounds that, even given the most promising circumstances, the argument could not be substantiated¹⁵⁷). Following Eckstein’s work, and applying Gerring’s advancements, the Jiaxing

related projects mainly focus on environmental conservation and water management and the Chinese partner is the Shangri-la Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC) (cf. <http://waterschool.cn/projects/eu-china-environmental-governance-programme>, last accessed 31.3.2015). The SISC is a registered Chinese NGO (民间非政府组织) and has experience in conducting projects with international partners such as UNESCO.

¹⁵⁷ The least likely cases approach works analogue. If a hypothesis or argument can be made based on the characteristics of a case which is very unlikely to

area represents not just a most likely case study to check for the very existence of authoritarian deliberation, but also a pathway case (Gerring 2007). In contrast to a mere most likely design, a pathway case study allows researchers “to indicate its uniquely penetrating insight into causal mechanisms” (Gerring 2007:238–9). The likely presence of deliberative practices thus makes Jiaying an excellent case study for examining the actual practices there, as well as the factors and dynamics driving authoritarian deliberation, in the qualitative part of the mixed-method design which is discussed in the next chapter.

The almost complete presence of EPBs of different administrative levels in Jiaying allows for testing whether social media are also used to facilitate communication between EPBs in the same area, while also capturing the interactions between different hierarchical layers.

The mere presence of EPBs of higher levels, though, cannot be taken for granted as a catalyst for the joining of Sina Weibo of subordinate state agencies – as the example of Shanghai shows. Despite the fact that the Shanghai municipal EPB is active on Sina Weibo and remarkably successful in garnering more than 130,000 followers, there are only three other EPBs from this region in the sample. In comparison with Beijing, where at least six EPBs other than the central citywide EPB are listed, Shanghai’s lower administrative levels seem underrepresented. In this sense, the registration of a higher-level EPB is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a coherent and dense representation of EPBs in the region.

From the three examples, it can be concluded that local dynamics of higher-level administrative entities can have a decisive influence on the representation of their subordinate administrative units. The evidence suggests that the actual administrative level – for example, whether the superior unit is located at the provincial or prefectural level – does not matter. Whether this insight also holds true for other state entities, such as PSBs, remains to be tested and is beyond the scope of this research. However, insights into the inner dynamics of the Chinese polity suggest that the distribution of other state agencies may exhibit similar patterns, as EPBs are not so different from their counterparts with regard to their relationships with superiors (条, Mertha 2005).

The concentration of EPBs in the Chongqing area is significant, as it represents 21.8% of the sample – more than any other region in the sample. This densely covered region marks a stark contrast to other areas, which are scarcely present in the sample. The areas around the coastal provinces and Chongqing form a ring of comparatively underrepresented areas. The autonomous region of Tibet and the provinces of Heilongjiang, Yunnan, and Shanxi are not represented at all, while Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, and the more central and populous province of Sichuan combined only contribute seven cases to the sample. The only exceptions to the coastal–interior and north–south division are the province of Fujian, which is only represented with one EPB in the sample, and Guizhou, which is

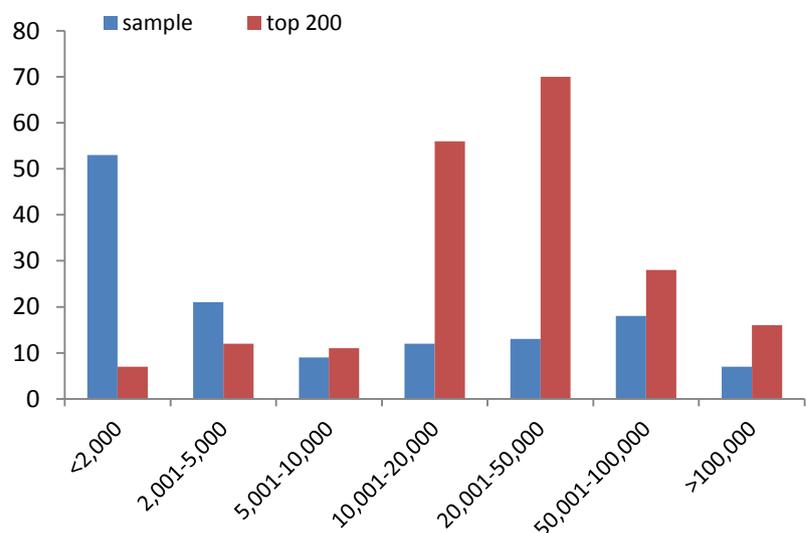
completely absent¹⁵⁸. Further highlighting the underrepresentation of these rather well-developed provinces, the autonomous region of Xinjiang contributes seven EPBs to the sample – the same number as the capital Beijing.

In conclusion, while patterns of diffusion and representation based on the proliferation of the internet largely hold true for this sample, notable exceptions exist in the cases of Chongqing, Xinjiang, and Fujian. The regional agglomerations of EPBs in the sample can partially be explained by the local dynamics of hierarchical relations between the EPBs. The absence or low representation of certain regions in the sample is very likely due to the generally low activity of EPBs in social media – especially when compared to other branches of the state. The previous discussion only focused on the regional distribution and dynamics of the EPBs, which is only one of their characteristics and does not shed light on the potential impact they have on local discourses. The scope of reach of an EPB is best viewed in terms of its number of followers. How many followers, then, do EPBs have on average? Is the potential to reach their audiences equally distributed among them, or are there noteworthy exceptions? What factors determine their scope?

5.3.2 Followers as a measure of scope

The number of followers (粉

丝)¹⁵⁹ is also called the in-degree of a given user; it is an expression of the user’s success in attracting an audience and signifies the user’s potential scope for outreach. While the numbers of followers of EPBs in this sample are far from those of the interprovincial



newspaper category outlined in chapter 3 – which necessitates more than 10 million followers – some of them possess a significant followership.

figure 11: Comparison of followers of the top 200 government agencies in 2011 and sample. Source: own data and People’s Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room (2012).

¹⁵⁸ The lack of data makes it impossible to assess why EPBs of certain provinces or regions are seemingly not using social media. The scholarly literature also sheds no light on this. A possible cause could be that EPBs of these regions use other social media platforms.

¹⁵⁹ “粉丝” actually means “fans”. However, the label differs from the established description of “follower”, and thus “follower” is used synonymously with “粉” throughout this work.

The Jiangsu EPB has more than 2.2 million followers and is far ahead of all other EPBs of the sample¹⁶⁰. This huge number of followers is not surprising, as it is the only provincial-level EPB in the sample. As figure 11 shows, few EPBs possess a very large audience. The distribution of the number of followers confirms existing research from Clauset, Shalizi and Newman (2009) or Gilbert and Karahalios (2009), which states that the number of followers is distributed according to the power law. Distributions following this law typically lead to situations in which a few cases – here, the provincial-level Jiangsu EPB, the Chongqing EPB, the Beijing EPB, and the Wuhan EPB – share the vast majority of the total amount of followers. The four EPBs represent 45% of all followers in the sample; the huge differences between them indicate the extremely uneven distribution of followers among the EPBs. Some 60% of the EPBs have fewer than 6,000 followers and are thus not even remotely near the 163,776 of the Wuhan EPB, which has the fourth biggest followership of the whole sample¹⁶¹. The extreme high followership of the Jiangsu provincial EPB makes the sample a perfect case to show the traps and pitfalls of quantitative methods. The outliers significantly distort, for instance, certain means of central tendency, such as the arithmetic mean. According to this measure of this sample, the mean number of followers is 40,820.68. This value is not only absent from the sample (as no EPB has this exact number of followers), but also heavily distorted by the single case of the Jiangsu provincial EPB¹⁶². A more accurate measurement of the average number of followers is the median of 3,245. The computation of robust measurement of the mean is important, as it sets the standard against which all other cases in the analysis will be compared to determine whether they are exceptional or average. But how does the distribution of followers of the sample compare to other state agencies?

¹⁶⁰ The number of followers on social media is useful to assess the impact of an account on the public in said social media platform. However, good performances in terms of numbers followers or general social media management by state entities do not seem to have a direct impact on the evaluation of respective cadres in China. The general literature on cadre evaluation (Heberer & Trappel 2013; Whiting 2004) does not mention social-media-related activities as evaluation criteria of the cadre evaluation system (干部考核制度); nor do documents or research in the field of environmental protection indicate it. Nonetheless, a good management style on social media can prevent demonstrations and negative traditional media coverage and may inhibit real-life escalation of conflicts, and therefore impact on the veto target (一票否决) of securing social order. The concrete criteria are negotiated in regular time intervals and differ across administrative boundaries. They are, in general, not publicly available; no information could be obtained about the criteria in the Jiaying area.

¹⁶¹ The extreme skewedness of the follower distribution also bars it, to a certain extent, from more complex quantitative analysis, which would require either a normal distributed variable (e.g. in regression analysis) or the transformation of the variable.

¹⁶² If the Jiangsu provincial EPB is excluded from the sample, the arithmetic mean falls to 23,999.59. The difference of 16,821.09 shows the distortion of this method of measurement, especially when compared to the more robust median, which only falls from 3,245 to 3,219 and thus provides a more reliable measurement of the average number of followers.

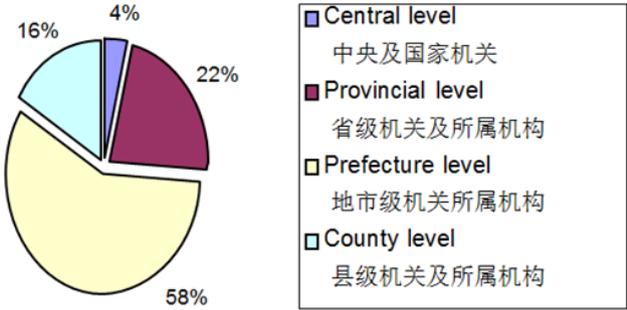
With regard to other available data, the sample reflects a striking distribution of followers compared to the most important 200 state agencies active on Sina Weibo in 2011¹⁶³. The sample is clearly dominated by small- and medium-scale accounts with 10,000 or less followers. Comparison with the data of the People’s Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room (2012) reveals that EPBs with large and very large audiences are not absent from the sample, even if their number of followers does not match the reach of other top state agencies.

From the comparison, it can be concluded that the sample represents a rather grassroots perspective, as the vast majority of cases have fewer than 10,000 cases. The low average amount of followers also sets the sample apart from the most prominent government micro-blogging accounts. The cases in the sample with more than 100,000 followers prove that EPBs can, in principle, become as prominent as other state agencies and successfully attract a large audience, but are very rarely able to do so.

Unfortunately, the low number of EPBs in most provinces does not allow for statistical testing of differences between EPBs based on their provincial origin. A qualitative assessment of the existing data suggests that the provincial origin of the EPBs does not significantly influence the number of followers of an EPB if the aforementioned deviations from the general patterns are taken into account. Are the variations among the EPBs random, or is there a factor that can explain them?

The huge discrepancies between the individual EPBs are best explained by their position in the administrative hierarchy. The vast majority of the sample is located at the county- or city-district level (县处级，市区级); therefore, their potential audience is naturally limited. The composition of the sample with regard to the administrative levels represented therein reflects trends found in other studies, such as the 2013 report on Sina Weibo Government Micro-blogs (2013:7–8) or the 2011 Report of Government Micro-Blogging (China's E-Government Network (中国电子政务网 2012)). The latter report shows that the ten state accounts with the biggest followings consist almost exclusively of state agencies covering

huge administrative areas, such as provinces, or located in densely populated areas, such as Beijing or Shanghai. The average number of followers already indicates that the sample mainly consists of small and medium entities;



this tentative hypothesis is further

figure 12: Distribution of micro-blogging agencies by administrative level. Source: China's e-government network (中国电子政务网 2012).

¹⁶³ To compare the sample data with the existing data of the 2012 *Report on Sina Government Micro-Blogs* (People’s Daily Net Public Opinion Monitoring Room), the followership for each EPB was recoded to fit the ordinal representation of the report. When looking at the figure, the different number of cases in each sample – 133 vs. 200 – has to be taken into account. The imbalance, however, does not alter the trend visible in the graphic representation.

substantiated by the dominance of sub-provincial level agencies in the sample. The data provided by China's E-Government Network (2012), presented in figure 12, reveals that most state agencies are in fact located at the prefecture level. The sample is no exception in this regard; in comparison with the distribution, it represents the lower levels of government even more. This makes the sample an ideal case for studying day-to-day interactions at the grassroots level, where state agencies are directly confronted with societal inputs. Joel Migdal called this level the 'trenches' (2001:17) of state–society relations; it serves as an incubator of interdependent dynamics for deliberative practices.

The sample consists mainly of EPBs located at lower administrative levels, which explains their relatively low average number of followers and thus their limited scope. This limitation has to be relativized, as the areas of which the EPBs are in charge only allows them to attract a certain number of followers (Jahiel 1998). In this respect, the sample is more representative of interactions at the grassroots level than at the provincial or national levels.

5.3.3 Sina Weibo's contribution to connectedness: friends

For decades, a major problem for EPBs has been linking up with other state agencies on the same level and locality, as well as with other EPBs in neighboring areas, to exchange information and coordinate policies (Li & Higgins 2013). More recently, Eaton and Kostka (Eaton & Kostka 2014) have largely confirmed Jahiel's (1998) finding and conceptualized these obstacles as vertical, horizontal, and regional gaps in the environmental policy implementation process. Here, "horizontal gaps" refer to challenges in coordination between departments at the same administrative level; "vertical gaps" refer to challenges in transferring resources and knowledge between different layers of the bureaucratic hierarchy; and "regional gaps" refer to the problem of diffusing knowledge, practices, laws, and regulations across geographical and administrative boundaries (Eaton & Kostka 2014). Eaton and Kostka see the cadre rotation as a significant factor affecting the implementation of environmental policies and the working style of EPBs. Based on their extensive field research they argue that, while cadre rotation has in some ways been beneficial to the issues identified by Jahiel (1998) (by making the diffusion of knowledge faster and more reliable, or accumulating more diverse skill sets for the cadres), it has not remedied the situation (Kostka 2016):

cadres who come in as outsiders to a new locality lack the local knowledge and networks essential for drawing local businesses into greener growth initiatives or for obtaining additional funding from provincial and central governments. When local leaders have attained sufficient understanding of local conditions and interests to serve as effective leaders, it is already time to take up a new post elsewhere. (Eaton & Kostka 2014:378-79)

The lack of ties between different administrative entities is a fundamental and structural problem impeding the work of EPBs, and a contributing factor – among other factors, like the willingness of

the local leadership (Li, Miao & Lang 2011) – to the “enforcement gap” in environmental politics (Lo et al. 2012). Enforcement here refers to the ostensible mismatch between laws, regulations, and officially endorsed policies on the one hand, and actual implementation on the other – mostly (but not exclusively) at the grassroots level. At this point, social media come into play, as they are actively used by EPBs “to involve the general public in order to detect violations” (van Rooij & Lo 2009). Social media, then, can serve as tool for creating and maintaining ties that offer individual citizens, as well as state entities like EPBs, opportunities to not only be kept in the loop about the activities of others, but also – and more importantly – to interact with them publicly and visibly.

From a technical perspective, two types of relationships can be discerned in most social media, and Sina Weibo is no exception. If a user wants Sina Weibo to inform him about the latest news concerning another user, he must befriend him. This, however, is not mutual: the befriended user is not receiving any information¹⁶⁵ from his new follower. The friends of a user then allow to see how pronounced the attempt of that user is to connect with others. The fiends list offers a detailed account of whom it wants to stay in touch with.

From this perspective, the “befriending”¹⁶⁶ of another account on Sina Weibo creates the weakest possible tie, according to Granovetter’s definition (Granovetter 1973). This weak tie is embodied in the friend–follower relationship, which itself is not a sign of actual cooperation; it rather serves as catalyst to facilitate communication, which in turn may result in more institutionalized ways of cooperation (Shi, Rui & Whinston 2013; Friedkin 1982).

From a technical perspective, the “befriending” process just adds the target to the user’s friends list (关注). The sum of all posts and comments by the user’s friends is visible to the user and keeps him in the loop about what his friends are doing. Where the followers represent the audience of an account, friends symbolize the input flows of information. But friends can also be understood to represent a part of the user’s network. By looking at the friends of an account, his outward relations can be scrutinized¹⁶⁷. The more accounts an EPB is following (in other words, paying attention to), the more open it is to external input in terms of information.

name of EPB	friends
Suqian (宿迁)	2,000
Nanan(南岸)	1,694
Fengjie(奉节)	1,291
⋮	⋮
Baohe (包河)	104
⋮	⋮
Dujiangyan (都江堰)	4
Beijing pollutant emission control ¹⁶⁴	2
Water district (水区)	1

table 3: Overview of the number of friends of EPBs in the sample. Source: own data.

¹⁶⁴ The verification reason is more instructive as to the nature of this user: it represents the officially micro-blogging of the Beijing Municipal EPB of pollutant emission control (北京市环保局污染物排放总量控制处官方微博).

¹⁶⁵ Apart from, in most cases, a notification that another user is following him or her.

¹⁶⁶ It should be noted that the target of a friendship request usually cannot refuse it.

¹⁶⁷ Sina Weibo – unlike their competitor WeChat (微信) - does not require both sides to agree that one is following the other. This notwithstanding, on Sina Weibo, any user can see who is following him.

A closer look at the average number of friends in our sample reveals that they also follow the power law¹⁶⁸ mentioned earlier – with the same implications. The arithmetic mean of 218.72 highlights the uneven distribution and is therefore dismissed; instead, the median of 104 is used, as it better represents the data. Altogether, all 133 EPBs of the sample follow 29,090 other users¹⁶⁹. Some 80% of the whole sample’s EPBs follow 290 users or fewer, just 7 have more than 1,000 friends, and none have more than 2,000 friends. The latter represents a technical barrier imposed by Sina Weibo to stop users from following too many other users. The high threshold indicates that the measure primarily aims to prevent malevolent usage of the platform¹⁷⁰. As Dunbar (2012) has shown, average users only possess the cognitive capacity to deal and meaningful interact with approximately 150 users. This seems to naturally limit the number of friends and is antagonistic to the linking up of users; as Friedkin states, the “strength of weak ties lies not in their individual efficiency but in their numbers” (1982: 285). Accordingly any significant surplus of friends above the 150 threshold can be understood as a conscious attempt to extend a network.

Nonetheless – as there is no threshold for the amount of followers one can have, but there is one for the number of user one can follow – this places users in the predicament of carefully choosing who to follow. Befriending someone is not a final and immutable fact; these relations can be changed at any time. At the same time, a low number of friends can also suggest that a user is primarily

¹⁶⁸ The power law describes the fact that very few cases of a population have extraordinary high values, whereas the vast majority has comparatively low values. Statistically, the few cases with high values are outliers, which significantly distort certain measures of central tendency or variance.

¹⁶⁹ The sheer number of friends is well beyond the capacities of a qualitative assessment and again highlights the necessity of deriving case studies from the sample for the qualitative part of the analysis.

¹⁷⁰ As shown earlier, the number of followers is the widely accepted criteria for judging any user’s prominence and is a sign of, as well as a path to, social prestige (cf. 大 Vs in chapter 3). As the demand for having a huge number of followers grew, so did illegal methods for attaining them. Before a threshold was introduced, criminals could set up a large quantity of fake user accounts, which in turn could follow an infinite number of people or like an infinite number of products. Criminals could then sell the followership of their masses of fake accounts to anyone willing to pay for it. For obvious reasons, Sina Weibo has repeatedly tried to eliminate such behavior (cf. The Economist 2014). Nevertheless, ads for the purchase of followers can still be found on Taobao (淘宝), China’s biggest online shopping site (last checked 29.3.2014).

interested in disseminating information rather than connecting to others or building networks. While this seems at first to foil the very idea of social media, it does represent a more pragmatic approach to its usage. A significant number of EPBs in the sample had very little friends, but a noticeable followership. Most of these EPBs seemed to only be on Weibo to disseminate information; for example, daily air quality reports. In these cases, their social media presence is a mere extension of their mostly already established information dissemination channels. At the same time, this *modus operandi* can best be thought of as an attempt to inform the public on a popular platform without the explicit desire to connect with the public, NGOs, or other government agencies.

In the sample, only the account of the EPB of the prefecture-level city of Suqian (宿迁) in Jiangsu province exhausts the potential of its friend's lists; as table 3 shows, the number of friends falls rapidly. The EPB with the lowest number of friends is the Water district EPB (水区环境保护局), situated in the prefecture level city of Urumqi (乌鲁木齐) in Xinjiang province, which is only preceded by the Beijing municipal EPB for pollution emission control. It is surprising that the EPBs with the lowest number of friends of the whole sample came from two comparatively well-represented areas. This suggests that the provincial origin of the EPBs does not have a significant effect on their number of friends.

Analyzing the number of friends as an indicator of connectedness has revealed several insight. First, the great majority of the sample has an average and by cognitive standards reasonable number of friends to connect with, in terms of other government agencies, the general public, and social organizations. At the same time, one group of EPBs seems to have no particular interest in connecting with others, but rather seems to understand social media as merely another channel of information dissemination. However, due to the nature of social media in general and the openness of Sina Weibo in particular¹⁷¹, this does not mean that they *could not* interact with others; thus, the potential for authoritarian deliberation also exists here.

5.3.4 Account age

This section describes the age of the sample with regard to the creation dates of the accounts. This sheds light on when the EPBs began using social media and allows assessment of the frequency with which they take part in the events of the platform. Furthermore, it allows for the identification of accounts that have been inactive for a very long time.

¹⁷¹ This is a decisive conceptual feature of Sina Weibo, differentiating it from platforms like WeChat, where only users who have reciprocally confirmed their acquaintance can communicate with one another. An account on Sina Weibo in this regard resembles more of a public notice board, whereas WeChat is more like a bulletin board in a shared flat.

The mere presence of hierarchically higher-standing state agencies can entice their subordinate units to also become active. When the focus is not restricted to specific EPBs or regions, an overall trend becomes visible. More than half of the sample’s accounts were created in 2011¹⁷². Sina Weibo was created in 2009, and experienced at times more than double-digit account growth rates in its first four years. The fact that only one account of the sample was established in 2010 points to the relatively late start of the party-state’s activity on social media in general and Sina Weibo in particular. The age of an account is instructive; older and established accounts tend to be better connected with peers and have more followers, making them more influential. When Sina Weibo was founded in August 2009, no EPBs registered with the service, and only one did so in the following year¹⁷³. The vast majority of EPBs created their accounts in 2011, with 2012 being the peak year¹⁷⁴. The significant drop of newly created EPB presences between 2011 and 2012 from 84 to only 48 newly reflects the date when the sample taking in mid-2012. From this perspective, it seems as if the growth of registering EPBs on Sina Weibo has stagnated since then. For each account, its age in days was computed using its creation date and the last day of the data collection. The age of an account may indicate its maturity; thus, it can be expected that older accounts have more followers, friends, and posts than younger ones. To assess how many of the EPBs in the sample are still active today, the last day on which each account had posted a status was derived from the database.

Accounts that were created, but shortly afterwards abandoned by their users and not deleted or dissolved are called “zombie accounts” (僵尸). Accounts were considered to be inactive if they had not posted anything in the last 100 days. Surprisingly, all accounts – even those with an extremely long period of inactivity – were still active and had not deactivated by Sina Weibo or deleted by the EPBs. Many possible reasons exist for this lack of deactivation, but two are most likely: the EPB might just not be interested in maintaining the account or closing it, or the EPB has forgotten its credentials and is unable to reset them. Sina Weibo has an intrinsic motive for keep its user numbers high. The number of users a social media platform attracts is decisive for them to earn money, as advertisement is typically tied to the size of the platform’s potential or actual audience.

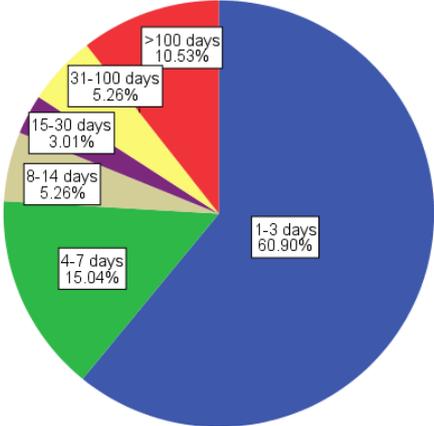


figure 13: Latest post of user in categories indicating their last activity. Source: own data.

¹⁷² The list of EPBs was not completely fixed until mid-2012.
¹⁷³ In 2010, the official account of the Shanghai EPB (上海环境) was created.
¹⁷⁴ The survey period ended at the beginning of 2014; therefore, no newer data concerning the creation of accounts for other EPBs is available.

119 EPBs – amounting to 89.47% of the sample – had issued a post within the last 100 days of the final date of the data collection process. The vast majority (60%) had updated their status within the last three days, suggesting that they were active on a more or less daily basis. 14 EPBs were not active within the last three months of the survey, and can thus be considered to be inactive or zombie accounts¹⁷⁵. Their recent inactivity does not mean that they were never active. On average, they had some 2,190 followers and 54 friends, and altogether had issued 1,641 posts. In comparison with previously computed average characteristics of the sample, they represented small or even very small accounts, which – due to their severely limited numbers of friends and followers – could not have been very well connected on the platform. Thus, they represent non-ideal units for analysis for the case study.

The inactive EPBs are made up of small-scale accounts that were unable to attract a large audience and were scarcely connected to any other users on the platform. On average, the accounts were abandoned after a little more than 106 posts, which means that the accounts made a serious attempt at reaching out but closed nonetheless. A major difference between communication on social media and, for that matter, all digital media and everyday communication is important here. Every day verbal communication is a continuous but irreversible flow of information. Joining a discussion after it has started, for instance, puts the latecomer in the awkward position of being unaware of what has previously been said and how the discussion has evolved so far. In social media, however, everything that has been posted or commented on stays visible until a deliberate attempt is made to delete it or cover it up. On the one hand, this makes even past arguments and interactions comprehensible to others, and may contribute to a more transparent mode of communication. On the other, a poorly conducted discussion or situation may be available virtually forever¹⁷⁶.

Only about 0.25%¹⁷⁷ of all EPBs' posts evoked no response from either the public or other state agencies. This does not necessarily mean that the information provided in these posts is irrelevant for state–society relations. The posts may even have triggered offline or online activities elsewhere. Nonetheless, the fact that no comments on or sharing of the post is known makes these

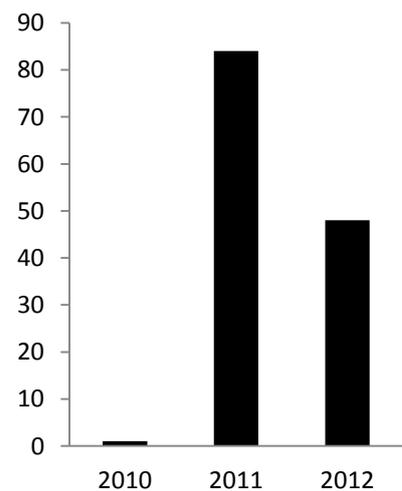


figure 14: EPBs account creation by year. Source: own data.

¹⁷⁶ Of course, users can delete content – as is also done through the censorship of the state or companies – but in most cases, these attempts happen within a very narrow timeframe after the publication of the material (King, Pan & Roberts (2014)).

¹⁷⁷ The 0.25% translates into only 551 posts without any comment or repost of 223,626 and comments are not included.

scenarios far less likely, especially given that social media allow their users to share information easily, even across different platforms. In this regard, the absence of any comment or repost is a significant indicator as to the lack of reception of a given post.

Authoritarian deliberation requires at least a minimal interaction, as the exchange of ideas and arguments is a core feature of the concept. Without any kind of reciprocal communication, this exchange or communication cannot happen. Therefore, all posts from EPBs without any comments or reposts can be excluded from the analysis. From an analytical point of view, this characteristic helps the methodological triangulation in two ways: it allows for selection of interactive conversations for the qualitative analysis, and it allows for the identification of EPBs with actual impact, as measured in interactivity. It should be noted here that the selection of posts with actual interaction is not likely to reduce the amount of posts that need to be processed in the qualitative analysis.

All EPBs in the sample produced a total of 237,519 posts and comments¹⁷⁸, which represent 48,099 conversations. Due to the contributions of other users, the conversations were made up of 9,716,486 shares and comments¹⁷⁹. Ultimately, the reduction made by studying only interactive communication only decreased the information that required processing by about a third.

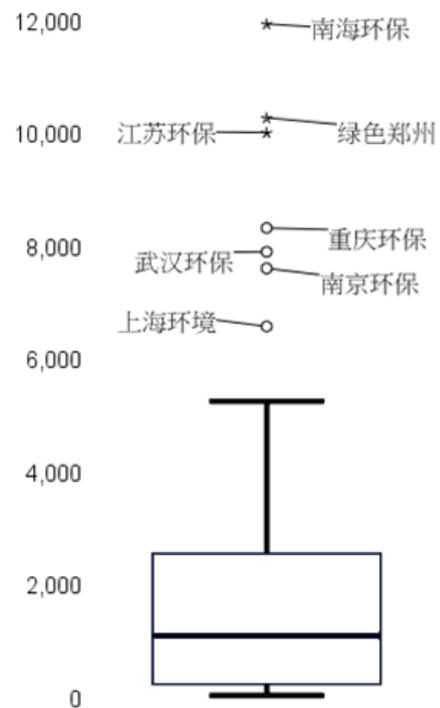


figure 15: Boxplot of status distribution in the sample. Source: own data.

5.3.5 Activity of the EPBs

The interactive processes between state and societal entities are at the core of authoritarian deliberation on social media. This premise can be exploited in two ways: to assess the general activity of EPBs on Sina Weibo, and to aid the selection process by providing an additional indicator for identifying potentially insightful case studies. Activity on social media is important in general to gain visibility and a reputation of trustworthiness in order to be able to reach out and relate to their audiences (Kietzmann et al. 2011a).

¹⁷⁸ This number indicates that conversation, rather than single and isolated messages, makes up the majority of the 18 million statuses in the database.

¹⁷⁹ Differences in the numbers are largely due to two factors: the notorious overestimation of reposts and comments by Sina Weibo, and the gap between nominally available posts and actually retrievable ones.

The number of friends and followers an account has indicates from whom it regularly receives information and to whom the account’s own content is disseminated. The number of posts published by an account indicates its level of activity. The whole sample has produced 237,519 posts on Sina Weibo. Already, the number of posts suggests that any qualitative evaluation of the posts is not feasible. The situation is further exacerbated when all comments and reposts relating to these original posts are taken into account, which increases the number to 15,842,135¹⁸⁰. This extreme increase is a result of two mechanisms: first, during the data retrieval process, all posts and comments related to EPBs¹⁸¹ were collected – even though not all were relevant to the research; second, the vast amount of communication captured did not reflect that the communication between EPBs and other users was equally divided between them. The reasons behind this cannot meaningfully be answered by relying on quantitative methods, but rather require a qualitative assessment.

A quarter of the sample issued less than 200 posts, but on average – as measured by the median – each EPB had issued some 1,061 posts over time. The boxplot¹⁸² in figure 15 shows that seven extreme outliers deviating from this mean can be identified. Each of the outliers had issued more than 6,000 posts

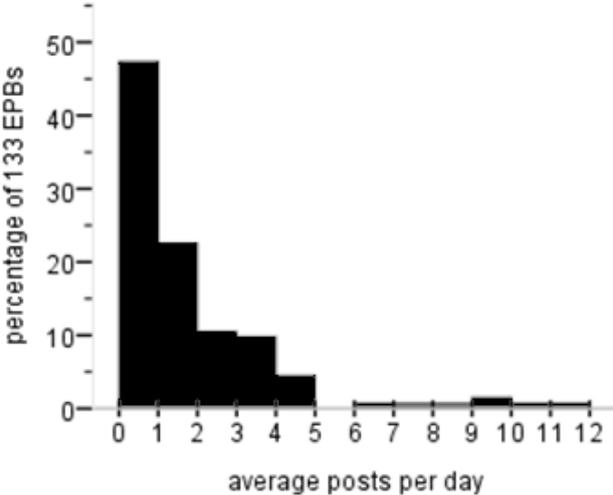


figure 16: Average number of posts per day per EPB. Source: own data.

over time. The most active EPB was the Nanhai District of the prefecture-level city of Foshan¹⁸³ in Guangdong (广东省佛山市南海区环境局), with 11,900 posts. The other outliers were also located in highly urbanized areas, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Nanjing. The close association of activity and urban centers suggests a causal relation. EPBs in highly urbanized areas showed significantly more activity than their counterparts in rural or averagely urbanized regions.

¹⁸⁰ Posts and comments were combined to reach this number.

¹⁸¹ Not all posts were relevant for the research focus. The post in the database with the highest number of reposts (1,723,924) was only an advertisement for another social media website.

¹⁸² A boxplot illustrates the distribution of a variable by using quartiles, i.e. groups that represent 25% of the original sample. Starting from the median, which marks the central thick line, an upper and lower bar represents the 2nd and 3rd quartiles of the distribution. The whiskers attached to the ends of the two bars form the 1st and the 4th quartile, i.e. they comprise the 25% of the sample with the lowest and highest values respectively. Extreme outliers from the median are illustrated either with circles or stars, depending on their distance from the median. A boxplot allows for the easy identification of outliers and makes no assumptions about the statistical distribution of the sample.

¹⁸³ The city of Foshan has approximately 7.5 million inhabitants.

To exclude rather inactive EPBs from the qualitative analysis, ten EPBs were ignored in the selection process. These had not issued a post at least every ten days and had been inactive in the 100 days prior to the final of the data retrieval¹⁸⁴.

A proper assessment of the accounts' activity should also consider when they were established. If an account was created recently, the amount of posts it has produced cannot meaningfully be compared to one that was created two years ago. Therefore, a close look at the age of the accounts can shed light on their average activity when related to the amount of information provided by them. Before using this measure, a glance at the age of the accounts also allows for identifying temporal patterns of account creation.

Based on the creation dates of the EPBs' Weibo accounts, their activity – measured as a ratio of posts per day since account creation – can be computed. Maintaining an active account is a key task for any social media user – be it an individual, a company, or a state entity – to remain visible and accessible to the platform's community. The ratio thus allows for separating active from inactive accounts and give further assist with selecting and narrowing down the sample for the qualitative analysis. By taking the number of posts of an account and dividing this by the number of days since the account was created, it is possible to measure the activity of a user. The activity of an account is crucial; accounts with little or no activity are not only less likely to attract followers and become a social "gravity center", but also less likely

to interact with their audience. Figure 16 shows that almost half of the sample published a maximum of one post per day and nine out of ten EPBs published fewer than five posts a day – with the exception of two outliers, which regularly generated ten or more posts each day¹⁸⁵. Among the most active EPBs of the sample were those from Dengzhou city (绿色郑州), the Nanhai district (南海环保) of Foshan city (佛山市), and the

【每日空气】昨日（6月29日），除北仑区环保大楼站点、龙赛医院站点和钱湖水厂站点为一级优外，我市其余5个国控站点AQI（环境空气质量指数）均为二级良。宁波市环境监测中心发布。详情请点击“宁波市空气质量信息发布平台”（<http://t.cn/zHPasbk>）进行查询。

宁波市国控站点AQI日报					2014年6月29日
监测点位	AQI	等级	质量描述	首要污染物	
环保大楼（北仑）	47	一级	优	-	
万里学院（鄞州）	54	二级	良	PM ₁₀	
龙赛医院（镇海）	48	一级	优	-	
三江中学（江北）	69	二级	良	NO ₂	
市政管理站（高新）	51	二级	良	PM ₁₀	
钱湖水厂（东钱湖）	32	一级	优	-	
太古小学（江东）	52	二级	良	PM ₁₀ 、PM _{2.5}	
市监测中心（海曙）	65	二级	良	NO ₂	
全市平均	51	二级	良	PM ₁₀	

figure 17: Example of daily updated air quality information. Source: Ningbo city EPB's Sina Weibo account from own data.

¹⁸⁴ The accounts belonged to Yushu Sanjiangyuan nature reserve EPB (水区环境保护局); Handan city EPB (邯郸市环境保护局); Dujiang EPB (都江堰环保); Yuetang district of Xiangtan city EPB (岳塘区环境保护局); Xian's PM 2.5 monitoring station (西安 PM 25 监测); Zhongshan city EPB (中山市环保局); Beijing's Xicheng district EPB (西城区环保局团支部); the environmental voices of Luzhou city (泸州环保之声); Beijing's atmospheric station (北京环保大气处), and the Yushu river ecological project (玉树三江源生态保护工程).

¹⁸⁵ The two very active accounts belong to the Zhengzhou Municipal EPB (郑州市环保局官方微博) and the Nanhai's district of Foshan city's Environment, Transport and city management bureau (佛山市南海区环境运输和城市管理局).

Jiangsu provincial EPB (江苏环保). All three of these issued, on average, almost ten posts per day. While it is not surprising to find the only provincial-level agency EPB or an EPB from a mid-sized city like Dengzhou among the most active accounts, the EPB from Nanhai represents a district of an average prefecture-level city and is exceptional in this regard. One reason for the account's vivid activity may be that it is not strictly speaking representing an EPB, but rather an amalgam of the district's environmental, transport, and city authority agencies¹⁸⁶. Yet another reason can be found in the history of the area; it was chosen as a pilot city for e-government and informatization in 2001, a year before the then-county-level city became a district of Foshan city (Yang 2009:89). As such, the state administrative bureaucracy had shown its interest in extending and promoting interactive measures for enhancing first-order governance very early on. As early as 1995, it had begun to build a better IT infrastructure to improve communication between state agencies by building vertical and horizontal links (Yao & Wang 2007). "Vertical ties" refer to the connections between state administrations at different levels, such as towns and villages, while "horizontal ties" describe the institutionalized interaction of bureaucracies on the same administrative level but within different compartments. In 2011, a letter of intent between representatives from the Nanhai district and the Infocom Development Authority (IFA) of Singapore was signed to further increase the district's e-government capabilities by learning from the experiences in Singapore (IFA 2011). This particular region's historic affinity with IT developments and dynamics can also explain its significant amount of activity on Sina Weibo. This raises the question of whether or the degree to which the availability of e-government services in a certain area raises the likelihood of state agencies from that area being active on social media. Conceptually, however, e-government¹⁸⁷ as used here is different from deliberation. E-government aims to strengthen the inner organizational efficiency and effectiveness of the state apparatus, mostly by means of communication. The deliberative and consultative practices under scrutiny here, however, focus on state–society communication and interaction, thus considering activities that go beyond the organizational realm of the state.

On average, 69 EPBs – just over half (51.87%) the sample – posted on at least a daily basis (cf. figure 16). Every three days, 26 EPBs – a fifth (19.54%) of the sample – published a post. The least active 37 (27.81%) EPBs were active weekly, or even less frequently. EPBs' levels of activity were not related to their geographical location or provincial origin, suggesting that other factors are more important in determining their engagement and success on Sina Weibo¹⁸⁸. However the activity of an account

¹⁸⁶ According to the verification reason listed by Sina Weibo (“南海环保”是佛山市南海区环境运输和城市管理局（环保）官方微博，欢迎关注).

¹⁸⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the definitions and instruments, see Wirtz (2010) or the United Nations e-government report (United Nations 2014).

¹⁸⁸ As Professor Kristin Surak suggested, these factors are likely related to local conditions, such as whether social-media-experienced staff are available. Similarly, Zhao (2012) highlights the necessity of “e-literacy” to

alone is not an indicator as to the extent in which it participates in actual reciprocal conversations with others.

A common pattern across all of the EPBs' accounts was the frequent – at times, even daily – distribution of trivial environmental-related information. These statuses were typically not commented on or shared by other users on Sina Weibo, suggesting they had little impact on the EPBs' audience. Sharing this kind of information increases activity of an account, but does very little in terms of reaching out to other netizens. Therefore the sharing of this type of content is not conducive for deliberative practices, but may nonetheless educate the audience.

Representative examples of this type of one-way information sharing are messages in the environmental tips (环保小常识) series¹⁸⁹. Statuses from this series offer advice that can be incorporated into people's daily lives (cf. figure 17¹⁹⁰)

It could be argued that the content of the environmental tips series is not attracting sufficient audience attention. To illuminate this point, a look at potentially more interesting regular statuses of the EPBs should yield a different outcome. Fortunately, a significant share of the EPBs' daily posts were made up of measurements of air quality from their monitoring stations (cf. figure 17). Against the backdrop of the salience of air pollution in state–society relations (Economy 2010) and its constant coverage in traditional media like CCTV (Tilt & Qing Xiao 2010), it would seem likely that frequent status updates about local air pollution conditions would gain public attention and evoke reactions. However, a qualitative assessment of these air condition reports reveals the lack of interest with which the social media community receives them. The reports evoke as much public response as the previously discussed environmental tips. The general public's disinterest here is somewhat surprising, considering that the vast majority of pollution reports not only present official standards of measuring pollution, but also new standards like the PM 2.5. As mentioned before the more rigorous PM 2.5 standard was only adopted after a massive social media campaign undertaken by frustrated citizens. The new standard was supposed to be phased starting from 2012 (MEP 2012), but only became mandatory in 2016. Even with the four-year period that EPBs had to implement the standard, the sensitivity of the population and the pressure to implement the regulation was perceived as so urgent that most EPBs only dared publish data with the PM 2.5 measurement.

fully benefit from the internet and social media. E-literacy is understood as set of skills that enables the users to participate in internet based-services such as social media.

¹⁸⁹ The series title suggests a central organizing authority behind the series, which does not exist. The series combines tips from a wide range of topics, provided by numerous individual sources, which use the term "environmental tips" as a common umbrella.

¹⁹⁰ Figure 18 shows a status from the series "environmental tips", encouraging the users to make better use of water by using it twice: once to wash clothes and once to clean the floor.

These examples of the “environmental tips” series and the air pollution status reports point to a serious methodological challenge. A given account’s general activity can only indicate whether or not that account is well maintained. This raises the question of whether it is possible to identify EPBs that engage in deliberative practices. In order to so, deliberation needs to be operationalized and applied to the data at this quantitative stage of the analysis.

【环保小常识】#顺手做到的二十件环保小事#一水多用：尽量使用二次水。例如，淘米或洗菜的水可以浇花；洗脸、洗衣后的水可以留下来擦地、冲厕所。多淋浴，沐浴节水且更卫生。



2012-12-28 16:23 来自 微博 weibo.com

figure 18: Practical water saving advice. Image retrieved from collected data.

5.3.6 Conversation-centered analysis

In order to separate EPBs which only relied on information dissemination from ones that took an active stance towards their audiences and engaged in discussions, the sample’s data had to be transformed to identify coherent conversations. A conversation here is understood to comprise all the comments and statuses stemming from one particular original status. From a methodological perspective a conversation is a set of comments and statuses which in turn were created by a set of users. The sample assessment can benefit from several properties of conversation: it will allow identifying comments and statuses that are part of a conversation in the first place excluding solitary contributions as they do not fit the deliberative premise of communicative reciprocity. The ratio of the sum of comments and statuses divided by the number of users involved in the conversation is meaningful indicator to the scope of reciprocity in a conversation. Reciprocity is defined here as repeated communication between users. The aforementioned ratio between contributions of a conversation and the number of participant users then can be used to discern types of conversation. A conversation that consists of as many messages as netizens participating in it lacks reciprocal communication and thus does not represent a case of deliberation. It should be noted here that users in this case might add value statements to the information shared, thus expressing their opinions. Deliberative practices, however, require a reciprocal mode of communication; while theoretically it might be possible to entertain the idea that different users pick up a conversation at the point where their predecessors left it, this is arguably seldom the case, and thus conversations like this are omitted at this stage of the analysis. Complementarily, a conversation with a lot of contributions from a small number of users exhibits the traits of communication required for deliberation.

Applied to the data, this means that the 15,842,135 million posts and comments had to be aggregated into proper conversations. The great majority of contributions (~69%) were neither commented on nor shared and thus represent solitary and isolated contributions. On the other hand, 969,268 posts were shared and 616,175 were commented upon. These 1,858,433 contributions constitute 48,099 conversations, representing 3,313,859 statuses

		comments	reposts	users	duration	% of male users
N	Valid	48099	48099	48099	48099	48099
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		59.51	142.50	161.45	8.36	.6646168030
Median		3.00	7.00	8.00	.00	.6666670000
Sum		2862437	6854049	7765744	402211	
Percentiles	10	.00	2.00	2.00	.00	
	20	1.00	2.00	3.00	.00	
	30	1.00	3.00	4.00	.00	
	40	2.00	5.00	5.00	.00	
	50	3.00	7.00	8.00	.00	
	60	5.00	10.00	11.00	1.00	
	70	9.00	16.00	17.00	2.00	
	80	18.00	28.00	30.00	3.00	
90	49.00	89.00	100.00	7.00		

table 4: Selected properties of the aggregated conversations. “Duration” represents the number of days from the creation of the root post to the last contribution; “users” represents the number of individual user contribution to the conversations. Source: calculations based on own data.

and comments¹⁹¹. In particular, the fact that almost two thirds of the total captured communication was entirely non-interactive raises the question of why so little interaction was taking place. Technical and methodological considerations need to be taken into account to shed light on this question. From a technical perspective, a certain percentage of posts might have been commented on or shared after the data retrieval was completed. This could have biased the sample to estimate a lower degree of interactivity than there actually was, but is not likely to significantly distort the findings, as some 80% of all conversations ended within three days^{192,193}.

From a methodological point of view, the possibility that a post may have made an impact on its audience even when no comment or reposts were made must be considered. From a user perspective, the lack of reactions to a status can vary from fear of getting involved in a potentially subversive conversation – which might be censored or, in more severe cases, attract the attention of the security apparatus – to the fact that the content of the post is copied and presented in another communication platform and discussed there¹⁹⁴. Whether this argument holds true or the original post just did not draw any responses from the audience ultimately cannot be answered with the data available.

The interactive dimension of the adopted conceptual approach allows for a crucial decision to be made at this point of the analysis. As interactivity is an indispensable part of consultative and deliberative practices, all posts that have neither been shared nor commented upon can be excluded from the following qualitative part of the analysis. According to the conversation-centered view, this applies to approximately two thirds of the total sample data.

Despite this significant reduction in information, when the data is viewed as conversations, the more than 3 million remaining posts



image 5: Picture posted by 郑渊洁 with the caption: "Prime Minister bows affectionately to the victims. Officials put their hands in their pockets and look unconcerned." (总理深情向遇难者鞠躬。官员插腰袖手旁观。) Source: own data.

¹⁹¹ The difference between the 3,313,859 contributions that the conversations represent and the total number of comments and reposts (9,716,486) is due to restrictions in the data retrieval process. Sina Weibo imposes limits on the number of comments and reposts that can be retrieved for a specific status. These limits change over time; at the beginning of the data retrieval process it was possible to download 40,000 reposts of a status, but at the end the threshold was lowered to 1,000.

¹⁹² To mitigate this problem, the data retrieval process should have been restarted (after the originally established time of data collection) to only update the already captured conversations. Clearly, this would be the ideal way to retrieve the data, but it was beyond the resources and scope of this project to extend the data retrieval process. The potential bias in the data is negligible, as most conversations only last for about five days and most reposts and comments are typically made within the first couple of days after a status has been posted.

¹⁹³ A list of the longest conversations captured with the original post can be found in the annex.

¹⁹⁴ In this sense, a link to a Sina Weibo status could be copied to WeChat and discussed there without any indication of it being visible on Sina Weibo. The fact that Sina Weibo statuses tend to be accessible to the general public, whereas WeChat discussions tend to be restricted to its users' network, marks a general characteristic difference of the two platforms.

constitute too much material to be qualitatively analyzed in a meaningful way. Additional selection criteria to further narrow down the analysis therefore need to be applied. To group the data into conversations and solitary pieces of information following the prerequisites of the analytical concept is a crucial point in analysis, connecting theory with empiricism. The huge reduction of information highlights the necessity of the applied mixed methods approach. The quantitative element allows for postulating that, while interactivity and subsequently deliberative practices exist on Sina Weibo in China, in the field of environmental protection with regard to EPBs, at least they are uncommon phenomena. The vast majority of the posts captured did not draw any reaction from the audience whatsoever. Only the qualitative analysis will be able to shed light on what characterizes the majority of the solitary posts.

While it is safe to exclude posts with no shares or comments from further analysis, what characteristics do the conversations in the data sample have? How many people participated in an average discussion? How long did an average conversation take? How many reposts and comments made up a conversation? The summary of the key characteristics of the 48,099 posts can be found in table 3¹⁹⁵, which shows the means of the number of comments, reposts, users, duration, and percentage of male users for all conversations and for ten percentiles. A glance at the table reveals that 50% of all conversations consisted of 10 or fewer reposts and comments that have been created by eight users it lasted only about a day. For the analytical perspective adopted here, this means that interaction is taking place, albeit on a rather intimate level. The fact that the conversation was made up of ten contributions from eight different people indicates that the conversations resembled rather a collection, in which interested users toss their opinion as they stroll by, rather than an exchange of opinions and arguments as postulated by the authoritarian deliberation paradigm. A deliberative practice would have seen fewer users producing more comments and reposts as they engaged one another in discussions resulting in a lower user-to-reposts-and-comments ratio. At the same time, when the comparatively small audiences of most EPBs in the sample are taken into account, the small number of conversation participants indicates that interest in their works exists and that some kind of feedback is given to them. Though the feedback is not on a massive scale, it does exist. A closer look at the contribution of the conversations reveals that smaller conversations in particular are made up almost exclusively of reposts. While reposts may contain additional information, such as a remark by the sharing user, they are more likely to just contain the forwarded message. Based on this assumption, the data suggests that interactive elements are more likely to be found in conversations in which more than just a few people participate. This argument is sustained by the

¹⁹⁵ Table 4 again underlines how important it is to discern the diverging means of central tendency, such as the median and the arithmetic mean.

increasing gap between the sum of comments and reposts and involved users in the upper percentiles of the sample¹⁹⁶.

The duration of the conversation is on average a day or less; only about 10% last longer than week. Only 245 conversations lasted longer than a year and some went on as long as two years. The longevity of these conversations can partially be explained by their high number of participants, frequently tens of thousands. One of the longest-lasting conversations of the sample shows that not all the retrieved content was directly or even indirectly related to issues of environmental protection. It lasted for some 683 days and shows a picture of then-Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, bowing to the victims of the train crash in Wenzhou in 2011 (cf. image 5). The conversation centers not on an environmental issue but on questions concerning the morality of the top leadership in contrast to ordinary state officials, and only partially follows the dynamics laid out by Bondes and Schucher (2014) in their analysis of Sina Weibo posts captured following the incident¹⁹⁷. With regards to the whole sample, these large and long-lasting conversations are the exception; small conversations with little interaction constitute the vast majority of cases.

So far, the activity has only been related to the EPBs, without taking the temporal dimension into account. Figure 19 shows all the statuses and comments of the database over time on the x-axis and their share of the total data in percentage on the y-axis. The data here confirms the previously made observation that the EPBs' representation on Sina Weibo only took momentum after 2010. The detailed account in the chart reveals a cyclical pattern in the activities of the EPBs. During the summer periods, their activity remains at a steady and moderate level. Significant peaks occur almost exclusively during the winter season. Due to the volume of data, it is not possible to relate the activity peaks to individual events or to corroborate particular patterns. A non-representative qualitative assessment, however, strongly indicates that the annual peaks relate to the deteriorating air quality situation, which for physical

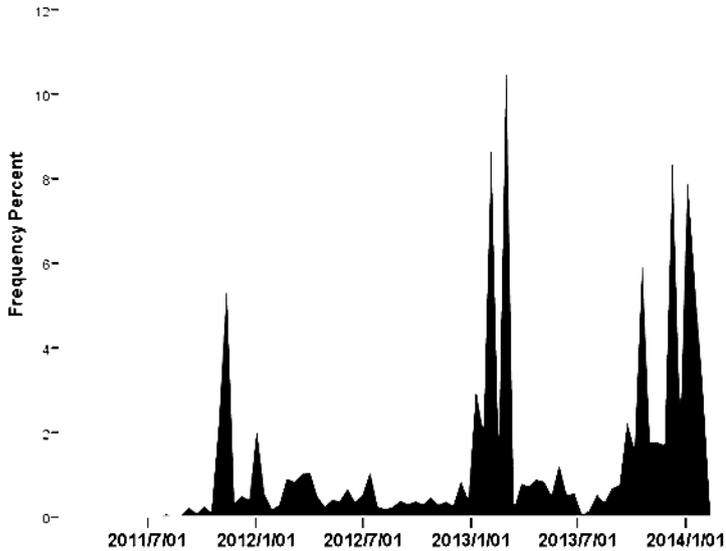


figure 19: Sample activity with regard to variation in time. Source: own data.

¹⁹⁶ The gap increases even when it is expressed as a percentage to account for the different sizes of the conversations.

¹⁹⁷ The conversation referred to here started on May 9, 2011 – almost two years after the incident – and involved 39,004 people.

and meteorological reasons is substantially worse in the winter than in the summer.

5.3.7 Social media activity through a gendered lens

A specific characteristic of Sina Weibo¹⁹⁸ is that it allows the gender of its users to be downloaded. This feature separates it from other prominent social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Even though not all the gender-related information is correct, the size of the sample – more than 9 million users – is likely to even out small discrepancies. Sina Weibo requires a gender for every account it creates, regardless of the applicability of this feature to every case. For instance, the EPBs of the consolidated sample each have a gender assigned to them, even though they represent institutional state agencies. In total, 9,089,468 users who had direct or indirect contact with the EPBs in the unconsolidated sample were stored in the database. Male users accounted for 4,172,607 of these and female users for 4,916,861, constituting a slight female majority of 54% to 46%.

In her study on the impact of new media on the production and reconfiguration of gender in rural China, Cara Wallis (2014) argues that new media offer new possibilities for women to shape their networks and identities. At the same time, she observed that unequal access to and usage of social media reinforces existing gender differences. Gina Chen’s study (2015) about the impact of the gender on the use of social media revealed differences in motivations between male and female users. Based on her survey of women bloggers on Facebook and Twitter, she could establish three main motivations for why women use social media: information, engagement, and recreation¹⁹⁹. If differences in motivations exist, they might translate into different communication patterns. To analyze these patterns, the data needs to

be aggregated to represent discussion threads. Each thread represents a sum of interactions between users and offers some insight into quantitative differences in the communicative structure between men and women. To differentiate the conversations, they were grouped by the gender of the user that initiated conversation by making the first

	first post user gender	N	Mean
conversations comments sum	male	40363	57,78
	female	7736	68,56
conversations reposts sum	male	40363	128,12
	female	7736	217,52
involved users	male	40363	146,92
	female	7736	237,27
user fragmentation index	male	40363	22,62382589
	female	7736	26,28134194
conversations percentage of male users	male	40363	,6708104655
	female	7736	,6323010325
conversations duration	male	40363	7,16
	female	7736	14,63

table 5: Characteristics of conversations by gender. Source: calculations based on own data.

¹⁹⁸ Major western social media like Twitter or Facebook do not store or offer the gender of their users for download.

¹⁹⁹ Chen (2015) also found that the type of social media platform matters. Social media in general were considered to be more of a recreational space, whereas Facebook and Twitter were used primarily for informational purposes. It is beyond the scope of this work to determine the motivations of men and women with regard to Sina Weibo, but its technological closeness to both Facebook and Twitter suggests an information-driven motivation.

contribution. The conversations started by men attract significantly fewer comments and reposts compared to discussions initiated by women: 185 to 286 respectively. The differences between men and women appear more striking with when looking at the conversation initiated by men and women. Conversations started by men only produced 66 comments and 267 reposts whereas those posted by women yielded 278 comments and 606 reposts²⁰⁰. Women thus produced and attracted more than double the activity of men.

Subsequently, conversations started by men are joined by fewer people (147 compared to 237) and last only half as long (7 days compared to 14). While fewer people join discussions initiated by men, these participants engage more actively and make the discussions more reciprocal and interactive. The difference of 3.66% in the user fragmentation column in table 5 indicates this. The user fragmentation of a conversation represents the amount of users who make more than one contribution to the conversation. Another statistically significant finding presented in table 5 is that both men and women attracted more contributions from their own sexes. Conversations started by men received on average about 67% contributions from men.

The high number of male contributions across all conversations is already a significant finding, which – albeit to far lesser degree – is also reflected in the contributions evoked by the users. The gender across all 9,283,616 users of the sample reveals a nearly equal distribution of 54% women and 46% men. This stands in stark contrast to the ratio published by the CNNIC (2014:26), which states that in 2012 and 2013, 56% of all internet users were male and 44% female. The gender ratio found in the sample is thus antagonistic to the ratio for general usage of the internet. The unexpected ratio found here could be the effect of users not providing their true gender, as a strict identity check was not mandatory during the data retrieval process. In the sample, 252,214 users had undergone the identity check. Of these verified netizens the gender ratio could be computed again. Of the verified users, 32.4% were female and 67.5% male. Compared to the whole sample, the share of women was thus reduced by some 22%, representing one third of all verified accounts. This is even less than the CNNIC data indicates and a considerable change with regard to the total sample. While the ratios of the whole sample and of the verified accounts provide contradicting results, it must be taken into

²⁰⁰ The seeming contradiction between the average numbers of comments and reposts for conversations and the first posts of a conversation are accounted for by technical necessities. The numbers for the first posts are directly retrieved from Sina Weibo; those for the entire conversations are computed from the retrievable data. Sina Weibo is reluctant to reduce the number of comments and reposts of any posts, as it would diminish the activity of the platform, thus causing it to struggle with its competitors and potentially being detrimental to its advertisement revenues, which is mostly determined by the amount of activity on the platform. As such, even when comments or posts are deleted because of censorship, the data and statistics derived from them will show this seemingly contradictory picture. The similar phenomenon of “artificial inflation” of activities on social media has been discussed with emphasis on the technical details in the work of Asur, Yu & Huberman (2011a) Asur, Yu & Huberman (2011b) and, to a lesser extent in Ng (2013).

account that the set of verified users (2.72%) represents only a very small fraction of the whole sample.

Another possible reason for the diverging ratios could be that users that do not have gender – such as companies or NGOs – must still choose one during the registration process. The EPBs represent an example of this; a look at the gender distribution of the 133 EPBs reveals that 12% (16 EPBs) had claimed the female sex and the vast majority – 88% (117 EPBs) – had chosen the male sex²⁰¹. This suggests that accounts created by genderless organizational entities prefer to choose the male sex. It is not feasible within the scope of this work to verify whether or not this preference also holds true for other organizational entities. If it were to hold true, it would further underline the surprisingly high amount of female users in the whole sample.

Based on the assumption that there is no underlying process distorting users' provision of their genders, and given the imbalance in the number of cases, the deviant ratios can be understood as a statistical aberration and any prudent interpretation should be based on the ratio of the whole sample. This clearly indicates a topic in which future research is needed; due to the focus of this work, this cannot be done here. Nonetheless, the striking and significant differences justified this excursion. In any case, the gender ratio highlights the fact that social media – while technologically dependent on the internet – are a distinct medium in terms of gender representation; at least in the field of environmental protection, as operationalized here.

5.4 Case study selection

Of the 185 EPBs that the data retrieval process originally generated, several cases had to be excluded because they did not represent EPBs. Subsequently, the sample was reduced to 133. Following the description of the main characteristics of the data, a further task is identifying cases for the qualitative part of the analysis.

From the discussion of the sample's characteristics it becomes evident that, even though EPBs in China are scarcely active on Sina Weibo (especially when compared with other state agencies), several interesting local agglomerations can be found. The Chongqing region is the most densely covered area of the sample. At the same time, it is also one of the most active regions, which translated into an unmanageable amount of information that would need to be processed in the ensuing qualitative analysis. For a purely quantitative evaluation, the Chongqing area would be the ideal

²⁰¹ During the 2011 workshop of the DFG research and training group "Risk and East-Asia", Professor Kristin Surak pointed out that, even though the EPBs' accounts on Sina Weibo are organizational accounts, the staff responsible for setting up and managing the accounts may have chosen their own gender during the registration process. Though a verification of this hypothesis is desirable, it did not seem feasible with regard to the age and number of the accounts.

choice, but in this mixed-methods design that specifically seeks to combine quantitative and qualitative explanatory powers, the vastness of information presents an insurmountable obstacle.

The Jiaxing area in Zhejiang province is the second biggest local cluster of EPBs. It has fewer EPBs than the Chongqing area, the information retrieved from this area is still very extensive for a qualitative analysis. The Jiaxing area is unique in the sample as it contains a whole network of EPBs, including sub-city administrative areas. This offers ample opportunities for analyzing communication between EPBs of the same level, as well as between higher and lower levels. The dense local concentration may also shed light on other state agencies with which EPBs seek to establish contact. The hierarchical relationship between the different levels of government organizations impacts on their behaviour on Sina Weibo which has been preliminary shown by regarding the timings of the creation of accounts by EPBs on Sina Weibo.

The region of Jiaxing is experiencing moderate economic growth and is well known for its textile industries, the techniques of which can be particularly harmful to the ecological environment²⁰². The economic structure of Jiaxing poses great challenges to environmental protection management, which may make conflicts between citizens and companies – and their address on social media – more likely.

The sum of all statuses of the sample of 133 EPBs comprised 237,519 posts, which is far too many for any kind of qualitative analysis²⁰³. Narrowing down the cases to those within the Jiaxing area reduces the amount of posts to a more manageable 11,600. This number only represents the posts of official EPBs; including responses and comments to these posts greatly inflates the number of posts required to obtain a comprehensive picture and to contextualize the actions of the EPBs.

Of the 16 EPBs present on Sina Weibo from the Zhejiang province, 11 were from the Jiaxing area, four from Ningbo city (宁波市), and one from the Lucheng district of Wenzhou city (鹿城区). The thorough representation of the Jiaxing area is unique in the sample, with the exception of Chongqing. The prefecture-level city (地级市) Jiaxing is home to some 4.5 million people. After reforms in 2006, the city consists of seven county-level units: the two city districts of Nanhu (南湖) and Xiuzhou (秀洲); the three county-level cities of Haining (海宁), Pinghu (平湖) and Tongxiang (桐乡); and the two counties of Jiashan (嘉善) and Haiyan (海盐). The EPB of the city itself, as well as those of all the subdivisions, are present on Sina Weibo (cf. table 6). This complete area-wide coverage of EPBs makes this region an ideal example.

²⁰² A Deloitte investment report (2014:8) shows that from 2009 to 2013 the GDP of the Jiaxing region has risen from 1981.03 in 2009 to 3147.66 in 2013 measured in 100 million RMB. The key contributor to the economic growth is the secondary industry contributing more than half (55%) to the regional GDP.

²⁰³ In their study of comments on the Wenzhou high-speed train accident, Günter Schubert and Maria Bondes (2014) used 4,600 posts for a purely qualitative analysis.

name	administrative position	followers	friends	posts	account creation
嘉兴环境保护 Jiaxing EPB	prefecture level city (地级市)	45,494	291	2,568	2011-02-21
嘉兴港区环保 ²⁰⁴ Jiaxing harbour district EPB	special economic development zone (嘉兴经济技术开发区)	634	28	64	2011-03-17
南湖环保 Nanhu EPB	district level (市辖区)	714	97	294	2011-03-20
海盐环保 Haining EPB	county-level city (县级市)	2,644	403	1,897	2011-03-20
嘉善县环境保护局 Jiashan EPB	county of Jiaying city	2,576	454	1,227	2011-03-20
桐乡环保 Tongxiang EPB	county-level city (县级市)	3,912	107	1,211	2011-03-21
秀洲环保 Xiuzhou EPB	district level (市辖区)	799	46	554	2011-03-24
海宁环保 Haining EPB	county-level city (县级市)	20,691	605	2,077	2011-04-02
嘉兴市环境监察 Jiaxing monitoring EPB	located at the prefecture level city (地级市)	1,409	37	315	2011-09-01
平湖环保 Pinghu EPB	county-level city (县级市)	2,919	130	1,431	2011-09-05
嘉兴市环保局行政审批处 environmental protection examination and approval office	located at the prefecture level city (地级市)	462	12	12	2011-09-13
Sum		64,050	2,210	11,600	

table 6: Official EPBs in the Jiaying area. Source: own data.

The data presented in table 6 suggest a hierarchical relationship between the individual EPBs. According to Sina Weibo, the account of Jiaying environmental protection (嘉兴环境保护) was verified because it is the official EPB of the city²⁰⁵. All the other EPBs represent subordinate administrative units, such as counties or county-level cities. Whether the creation date of the accounts is an indication of a strategic orchestrated attempt to build a presence on social media or the result of a dynamic initiated by the Jiaying EPB cannot be answered; however, the resulting

²⁰⁴ The Jiaying economic and technological development zone (嘉兴经济技术开发区) was established in 1992 and was approved as a national development zone in March 2010 by the state council (cf. the *Qianjiang Evening News* article at http://qjwb.zjol.com.cn/html/2012-07/20/content_1639385.htm, last accessed 20th February 2015, and the homepage of the development zone at <http://www.jxedz.gov.cn/news.php?id=3375>, last accessed 20th February 2015).

²⁰⁵ The account has been verified by Sina Weibo as the official micro-blogging account of the EPB in Jiaying, Zhejiang province (浙江省嘉兴市环保局官方微博).

pattern is self-evident. Once the Jiaxing municipal EPB had set up its account on the February 21, 2011, the other EPBs in the area followed within seven months.

None of the 11 accounts in the Jiaxing area (cf. figure 20) must be removed from the sample, as they were all fairly active during the observation time. Some of the EPB accounts displayed a rather low followership, such as the Nanhu EPB, which had 714 followers. However, the low number of followers does not necessarily imply that an account went unnoticed by the Sina Weibo community and is relatively unimportant for state–society relations. Each of the Jiaxing EPBs has a clearly defined area of interest, determined by administrative rules for which it is responsible. Accordingly, it can be reasonably expected that, in general, only citizens living in the corresponding area have a vested interest in communicating with them.

According to the 2010 population census, Jiaxing’s city district, Nanhu, was home to 612,663 people²⁰⁶. This number has to be divided by half to account for the average popularization rate of the internet in China²⁰⁷. A rough approximation of the actual potential audience on Sina Weibo cuts the number in half, leaving some 300,000 people. In 2012, half of all people with access to the internet in China used Sina Weibo, which would mean another approximate 50% reduction, resulting in only 150,000 people using Sina Weibo in Nanhu at the time. The 714 followers would then translate into 0.5% of these people following their district EPB. In the Twiplomacy study of usage and reception of micro-blogging of heads of state and government as well as foreign Ministers, conducted by PR company Bruson-Marsteller (2015), Barack Obama was at the top of the “most followed” list, with some 43.7 million followers on Twitter. Barack Obama has when computing in a similar way his coverage a followership of no more than 8% of the US overall population. Considering the huge imbalance in terms of global visibility and reputation, the significant discrepancy between the proportion of followers of Nanhu EPBs (0.5%) and Barack Obama (8%) suggests a rather surprising level of interest among local residents in Jiaxing with regard to their EPBs in particular and environmental protection in general.

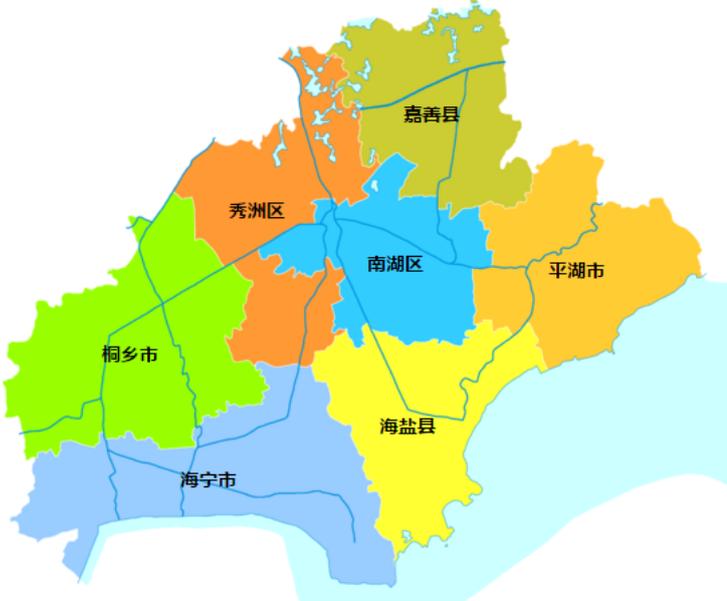


figure 20: Jiaxing city with its administrative divisions.
Source: <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/嘉兴市>, last accessed 15.6.2015.

²⁰⁶ Cf. <http://www.citypopulation.de/php/china-zhejiang-admin.php>, last accessed 22nd February 2015.

²⁰⁷ Obviously the popularization rate in highly developed coastal regions like Jiaxing is higher than the national average; the calculation here is merely exemplary. Considering the fact that very young and old people – who are very unlikely to have access to the internet – are not excluded at this point might mitigate this bias.

The Jiaying, with its 11 EPB accounts, has been chosen from the sample for the further qualitative analysis. The necessity of qualitatively analyzing its interactions allows for light to be shed on the dominant topics and patterns of interaction, which at this quantitative stage could barely be answered, and even then only from the point of view of the EPBs²⁰⁸. To show the limitations of the current stage and highlight the need for a further interpretative analytical step, the account description of the Yuetang district (岳塘区环境保护局) of Xiangtan city (湘潭市) in Hunan province is provided as an example. In its description, the EPB states: “[w]e look forward to make together with the majority of the internet users microblogging the tool to function as a bridge and link between the environmental protection department and the people”²⁰⁹. This text fragment suggests that EPBs try to contact citizens to work on issues related on environmental protection; however, it does not – and cannot – shed light on the actual practices, interactions, and routines between the EPBs and their audiences. The next chapter takes the information published by the EPBs themselves – as well as all comments, questions, and demands directed at them – to evaluate the dynamics from both sides: EPBs and citizens.

²⁰⁸ The description of the EPBs’ Sina Weibo accounts could be analyzed. For instance the

²⁰⁹ The original description is also followed by an idiom, c.f. “期待广大网民与我们一起努力真正发挥好微博作为环保部门联系人民群众的桥梁和纽带的作用。“铃声一响，民意即通””

6. Case study analysis

In the mixed-method design adopted here, the previously conducted quantitative evaluation provided valuable insights to contextualize the use of social media in state–society relations in general, and with regard to EPBs in particular. An analysis of the characteristics of EPBs active on Sina Weibo allowed for assessment of their attributes, popularity, connectedness, and regional distribution. An equally important task of the quantitative evaluation was the selection of a region from which to choose case studies for a qualitative content evaluation.

The case studies were selected to provide a heterogeneous sample with regard to the administrative position of the EPBs, their hierarchical relations, and the scope of their activity on Sina Weibo. At the same time, the number of case studies had to be kept to a minimum in order to ensure a manageable amount of source material. The conversations of the municipal EPB alone account for more than 2,500 pages, and do not include the ten other EPBs identified in the region. In order to be able to capture patterns in the interactions among different levels of the administrative hierarchy, the municipal EPB was chosen to represent one case study. It demarcates the highest level of the EPBs in the region and has the largest presence on Sina Weibo, with published 2,568 statuses and 45,494 followers.

Quoted usernames in citations were not altered in order to preserve authenticity. In terms of the Chinese language, the self-chosen usernames of the netizens at times already carry symbolic meaning. For example, a key advocate in environmental affairs is named “中樞老人”, which can be translated as an old person planting trees indicating the environmentally sensitive consciousness of the netizen. Additionally, it should be noted that a significant number of usernames cannot meaningfully translated (for example, “cjsx13736449341”) or have more prosaic meanings (for example, “禾风无语”²¹⁰), the translation of which might divert from the content. Therefore, in the following analysis the actual usernames are used when citing from source material to provide as much authenticity as possible. Two years after the initial data collection, all citations were checked to ensure that censorship had not deleted them. In almost all cases, the statuses were still publicly available online. Their continued presences indicate that citing them in the context of this research will not expose the corresponding netizens to state repression²¹¹.

The language found on social media – not only Chinese social media – is often not syntactically or semantically pure. Slang expressions, abbreviations, and the use of emojis – which are at times hard

²¹⁰ The name cannot literally be translated.

²¹¹ It should be noted that all downloaded material was freely publicly available at the time. No information had been collected that the netizens had declared to be private.

to translate – complicate the translation of the statements. In order to ensure transparency, in case of doubt, the Chinese expression is provided as well as an English translation.

The qualitative content analysis follows a hybrid approach of what Mayring (2000) called inductive and deductive category application. The approach is hybrid since the main codings are taken from the framework proposed by Bonsón et al. (2012) in a deductive manner. They are supplemented with subcodings derived during the actual coding process, which allow the capturing of insights specific to research topic of authoritarian deliberation in social media in the field of environmental protection; for example, the issues that citizens most frequently complained about, such as air, water, soil, or noise. In Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) categorization the analysis is a directed content analysis as it extends and complements the existing analytical framework to adapt it to the source material at hand (2005: 1281).

6.1 Analytical framework

The purpose of the ensuing qualitative content analysis is to fathom the dynamics on the social media platform and test whether they allow for authoritarian deliberation – a concept describing the use of consultative and deliberative practices “to improve governance, enhance authority, and generate legitimacy” (He 2014:71). The assessment of the deliberative practices taking place between EPBs and netizens on Sina Weibo requires a framework that focuses on the scope and dynamics of the interaction with regard to its ramification on the first level of governance to increase the scope or quality of governance. Following the logic of the research design, this framework needs to be qualitative in nature to complement the findings of the previous chapter regarding the distribution, configuration, and importance of EPBs on Sina Weibo. It must allow for assessment of the interactions of each EPB as well as comparing them with one another and taking into account the societal side; that is, netizens’ demands, remarks, and suggestions.

In the following section, a framework based on Bonsón et al. (2012) is introduced and operationalized, which models the effects of social media on governance and meets the aforementioned criteria. It serves as the conceptual backdrop by structuring the assessment and providing the analytical template for each case, thus allowing the evaluation of each EPB, comparison of them with their peers, and exploring the interplay between them in their bureaucratic hierarchy.

Bonsón and his colleagues (2012) provide a framework for assessing the impact of social media on governance with regard to interactions among government entities and with societal actors. Based



figure 21: The three public expenses. Source: Chen (2011)

on a summary of the then-existing literature and an analysis of their own collected data from 75 EU local government activities on social media, Bonsón et al. concluded that social media's impact on local governments can be found in four dimensions: transparency, policy making, provision of public services, and knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation (Bonsón et al. 2012:125–6). The framework's four dimensions serve as analytical categories within which the collected data is analyzed to assess if – and to what extent – each dimension is present in the selected case study of the Jiaxing area. In the following sections, each category is illustrated, serving to guide the qualitative content analysis of the case study.

6.1.1 Transparency

Transparency is understood as the provision of information by state entities to the general public (cf. Mergel 2013). Unlike websites that citizens have to check regularly of their own accord to obtain news²¹², social media offer an automated way for citizens to be informed about new developments. Once they follow an EPB, they will always receive the latest information published by that EPB. (Zhang & Chan 2013) point out that reforms initiated and actioned in 2007 by the then-outgoing government of Premier Wen Jiabao significantly increased what could and should be made publicly available. In 2011, the state council suggested that central government agencies should disclose their budget for overseas trips, food, and entertainment, as well as the use of state-owned vehicles (Chen 2011). The so-called three public expenses (三公经费) was a campaign to regain trust in the government by showing increased transparency (Chen 2013a; also cf. figure 21). Against the backdrop of this trend to increase the amount of governmental information made publicly available, the qualitative content analysis will identify the information released by the EPBs. The information is then classified into categories derived from Bonsón et al. (2012) and complemented by findings discovered during the content analysis, such as laws and regulations, pollution measurement readings, and other categories that have to be created during the analytical process. The information will also be categorized according to its origin in the administrative echelon. This can shed light on whether the local EPBs function as a forwarder of information from sources at the provincial or national level, or if they focus on distributing locally or regionally generated and relevant information. The provision of information by the EPB must be complemented by looking at requests submitted to them by other users. If requests are ignored or not dealt with, the potential for social media to generate transparency, trust (Park et al. 2015), and ultimately legitimacy (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer 2015) can result in the opposite effect.

²¹² It should be noted that websites may offer the opportunities for readers to subscribe to a mailing list to receive email notifications.

6.1.2 Policy making

The second dimension identified by Bonsón et al. (2012) on which social media impact is the policy-making process. The analytical focus here will be twofold. First, issues that are frequently referred to will be identified to shed light on the most prominent problems that societal users brought forward to the EPB. Second, interactions are related to the different stages of the policy cycle. This allows for determining the stages at which social media are actually used, and whether or not their application is beneficial to the whole process. The five stages of the policy problem cycle comprise recognition, issue identification, policy formulation and decision making, implementation, and evaluation. These stages are derived from (Jann & Wegrich 2007; cf. figure 22) and slightly differ from the original seven-stage version developed by Lasswell (1956). The first stage, from this procedural perspective, is identifying and recognizing that a problem exists and that at least some state intervention is required to address it. Following its acknowledgement, the problem must be put on the public agenda and become a public issue. After the issue's salience has been asserted, it will be further processed by the relevant decision-making bodies as part of the next stage of the policy cycle. The formulation of a policy proposal can involve societal actors in advising or drafting functions. Though the EPBs themselves have no legislative power, the public may address them with new policy propositions or modifications of regulations and laws in place. The rationale here is to inform the responsible governmental bureaucracy so that it can pass on the information to the higher levels.

Policy formulation and adoption may take a long time, which makes this strategy a viable alternative. In the Chinese polity, policies are formulated rather vaguely and diffusely in order to grant regional and local authorities some leeway to adjust them to their specific situation. At times, this may produce seemingly paradoxical phenomena. In five-year plans, for instance, concrete targets for pollution reduction are announced. At the same time, however – and as Young et al. (2015) point out – the central state only states these targets (目标) and concludes agreements (责任书) with the bureaucracies of the lower administrative echelons, in order to determine their share for fulfillment of the overall target (Young et al. 2015:165). The rationale behind this strategy is that it provides local state bodies with the discretionary power to achieve goals in the way that best suits

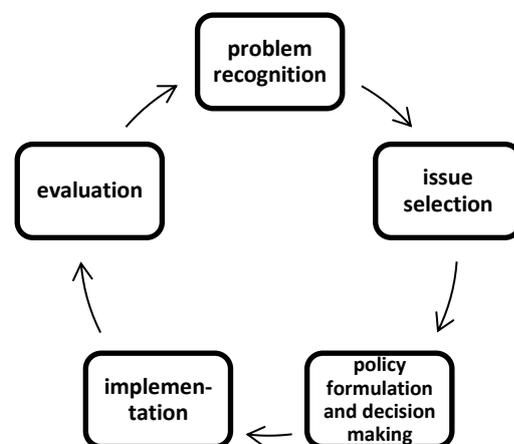


figure 22: Stages of the policy cycle. Figure is based on Jann and Wegrich (2007).

their local needs, thus avoiding the negative effects of strict centralism.

The adoption of a policy is followed by its implementation, which is typically a process that evokes a lot of public responses, ranging from “not-in-my-backyard” (NIMBY) protests, which lead to the cancellation of projects, to silent observation and self-muted protest (Deng & Yang 2013; Lang & Xu 2013; Johnson 2010). All EPBs in the Jiaxing area are situated at the lower ends of the administrative echelon, which makes them more receivers and implementers than producers of policies. To account for this, implementation is here understood in a practical manner, following Lipsky’s assessment that “[p]olicy implementation in the end comes down to the people who actually implement it” (Lipsky 1980; Blum & Schubert 2009).

The final stage of any policy comes after it has been implemented and has been in place for some time to produce the desired effects and in many cases also unintended side-effects. Then the policy is evaluated and typically the policy cycle starts anew. In this case study, special attention will be paid to whether and how citizens use social media to put forward their complaints, grievances, and suggestions. This societal input is a vital and irreplaceable contribution, which enables the government in general and EPBs in particular to assess the impact of an implemented policy (Nathan 2003).

As important as the stage at which public participation through social media is present in the policy making process are the modes of interaction. Johnson (2014) stated that newly introduced channels of public participation, such as social media, are part of an “extending governance” strategy that aims to garner public support for environmental legislation and enforcement, as well as to depoliticize conflicts. At the macro level, this development is part of a general strategy of the party-state’s leadership to establish a managerial style way of government (Heberer & Schubert 2006). According to Johnson (2014), the participatory elements are especially ambivalent, as citizens tend not to simply follow the state’s rationale and play by its rules but rather use the opportunities of participation and expression of opinion to their own ends. Against this backdrop, the analysis will therefore also evaluate the forms that this struggle takes, and will explore how both state and society try to advance their goals.

6.1.3 Public service provision

The third dimension of the framework is the provision of public services. In contrast to the previous policy dimension, this category includes all interactions between EPBs and citizens that refer to the application and enforcement of existing laws and regulations – not in the sense of suggesting modifications or pointing out deficiencies that need to be mended, but rather in the sense of ensuring these laws and regulations are correctly applied and executed. The prevalent mismatch between officially adopted laws and regulations on the one hand, and their fragmentary

implementation on the other, could be mitigated by social media if the EPBs responded to citizens' demands adequately. The analysis will determine – vis-à-vis the provision of public services – whether or not, and to what extent, social media are able to narrow or overcome the enforcement gap (Lo et al. 2012; van Rooij & Lo 2009; Tilt 2007; Sina Newscenter (新闻中心) 2014).

The growth of social media in China and their increased usage by the government is a stable long-term trend. A report concerning the government's micro-blogging activities in the first half of 2015, published by the *People's Daily*, highlights that the aim of the government's engagement in social media is improving public service provision. The reports refers to governmental micro-blogging as no longer "icing on the cake" but rather an "important mean" of buttressing public service provision, due to continued efforts of the party-state at all levels to use social media (Wang & Yang 2015).

The qualitative analysis will reveal how much of the propagated increase in public service provision can actually be found in the data. Precisely due to structural problems that have led to an implementation and enforcement gap, a critical evaluation of real interactions between EPBs and citizens is necessary to gauge whether social media can remedy these shortcomings.

6.1.4 Knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation

The fourth dimension of the framework focuses on the relational aspects of social media. This encompasses the flow of knowledge not only between different governmental entities, such as EPBs and public security bureaus, but also between different societal groups. This analytical category aims to capture all interactions and information in social media that facilitate "to transform the relationships within the organizations and between different public entities" (Bonsón et al. 2012: 126). Fulda et al. (Fulda, Li & Song 2012) have shown that cross-sector cooperation takes place not only between different civil society actors, but also between individual government officials and state organizations. As such, it can contribute to increasing the quality of governance, especially at the lower administrative levels. From this vantage point, relations that EPBs have with other governmental organizations matter as much as their relations with societal actors. From a technical perspective, the friends list – which, as explained earlier, comprises all users from whom the EPB is automatically receiving information – is the first starting point for assessing this dimension.

All four dimensions of this framework are considered to be ideal types, in Weber's sense, and serve as heuristics to guide the qualitative content analysis (Weber 1988: 190). The analysis comprises all accounts of EPBs in the Jiaying area that were active and maintained during the data-gathering period, which ended in 2012.

6.2 The Nanhu EPB (南湖环保)

Nanhu county is an administrative division of the prefecture-level city Jiaxing. Its geographical position puts it at the center of the city and it is enclosed by the remaining six county-level divisions of Jiaxing city (cf. figure 20). According to the 2010 census, Jiaxing has a total population of 4.5 million people, of which some 600,000 lived in the Nanhu district²¹³. The Nanhu EPB's presence on Sina Weibo was rather small, with some 700 followers. During the data-gathering, process the software captured 294 of the EPB's statuses. Of these, 47 – representing some 16% – are part of interactions with other users²¹⁴. Statuses constituting a coherent thread of discussion were grouped together and are henceforth referred to as conversations. Each single status of the EPB and each conversation in which it was involved are assigned unique number for identification, which are henceforth used as a reference. Following the analytical framework presented previously, the following sections present the results of a content analysis of the Nanhu EPB's contributions and conversations with other users.

6.2.1 Transparency

The EPB functions as an informational focal point by gathering environmental-protection-related information and presenting this to its audience. The vast majority of information relates to events, policies, and actions that are situated in the immediate vicinity and area of responsibility of the EPB. Complementary laws, regulations, or events taking place at the national or provincial level are rarely mentioned. A typical example of the everyday activity of the EPBs is status 159, in which the EPB reports a “garbage classification” and information activity (生活垃圾分类从我做起) it has conducted. Sina Weibo does not allow more than 140 characters in each status, which results in the EPB producing rather superficial summaries in its statuses. This kind of descriptive information very rarely triggers any reaction from other users. According to Cha et al. (2010:17), reactions depend on “the content value” of a status. Applied to the Nanhu EPB's statuses, the argument suggests that the information describing its daily working is basically of no interest to the public. Despite the lack of interaction sparked by its description of routine work, the regular updates signal to the Sina Weibo audience that the EPB actively maintains of its account. Following (Kietzmann et al. 2011b), this display of frequent activity openly signals that the EPB is available for interaction and takes its presence on the social media platform seriously.

On the infrequent occasions when a status that the EPB initiates providing information about local events leads to interaction, users tend to address shortcomings of the described practices. In conversation 32, for example, the Nanhu EPB reports that it has just installed a monitoring system to

²¹³ Cf. <http://www.citypopulation.de/php/china-zhejiang-admin.php>, last accessed 27.8.2015.

²¹⁴ A user here can be a citizen, another state agency, or a civil society actor such as an NGO.

gather data about heavy metal pollution. The user “石头紫溪” asks the EPB to “disclose the monitoring data online” (在线监控要数据公开). Requests to disclose pollution readings occur not very often but regularly. In all cases, the EPB chose not to release any data. However, the EPB did so in a passive way; it simply did not respond to the demands at all, rather than openly stating it would not do so.

In contrast to the analytical framework, the EPB’s statuses are rarely used to disseminate information relating to laws or regulations. Transparency is understood by the EPB as reporting on its concrete working activities, which are continuously presented to the public. The low level of interest among the public in these activities, and the EPB’s reluctance to meet the requests of citizens, severely limit the impact on state–society relations with regard to transparency as outlined by Bonsón et al. (2012) .

6.2.2 Policy making

Central to the concept of authoritarian deliberation is cooperative interaction between state and societal entities, which can ideally be found in every stage of the policy cycle. In the case of the Nanhu EPB, most statuses relate to the stages of policy implementation and recognition of problems. The vast majority of statuses and conversations belonging to the former category are reports of the Nanhu EPB’s progress in implementing existing laws and regulations. These are similar to descriptions of its daily work identified in the transparency category; however, they differ because they are more than mere descriptions of daily routines about internal meetings – they specifically portray the EPB in its function as an executor of policies. A typical example of such conversations is conversation 84, in which the EPB announces it has fined a company for legal violations. Notwithstanding that this is part of the EPB’s daily affairs, the status highlights its fulfillment of his duties. Its areas of responsibility range from punishing farmers for illegally disposing of sewage²¹⁵, shutting down companies for violation of heavy metal pollution²¹⁶, numerous accounts of inspection teams visiting companies and factories²¹⁷, and the installation of video surveillance system to monitor the processing of solid waste²¹⁸.

The second largest portion of statuses and conversations is dedicated to the recognition and identification of problems. These conversations are commonly initiated by users and directed to the EPB. The topics are almost exclusively complaints about pollution-related issues, accompanied by requests for immediate action. In most cases the EPB responds in a timely manner and engages in the conversation. From this perspective, Sina Weibo seems like a viable input channel for citizens to contact the state bureaucracy in a convenient way, especially at the stage of policy implementation.

²¹⁵ Cf. conversation 35.

²¹⁶ Cf. conversation 47.

²¹⁷ Cf. conversations 118 or 92.

²¹⁸ Cf. conversation 55.

At the same time, calls for stricter environmental protection laws and regulations occur infrequently and concrete suggestions to be implemented in policies are basically absent. This finding even holds true for the complaints about air pollution, in which calls to adopt the stricter PM 2.5 measurement standard were non-existent²¹⁹. Given the lively debate in traditional and social media about the standard at the time, this is a remarkable finding. In the rare occasions when societal users refer to national policies, it is almost exclusively to strengthen their criticism. In conversation 78, the user “无忌道言” remarks that a civilized city (文明城市) should not have black smoke coming out of factory chimneys²²⁰.

The practical implementation of policies and identification of problems constitute by far the largest amount of interaction found in the corresponding conversations. It is significant that neither the evaluation nor the formulation and preparation of policies are prominently referred to by either the EPB or the public. In this sense, the public provides very little input into the exact formulation of regulations, but rather focuses on pointing out areas in which it sees the need for action.

6.2.3 Public service provision

Areas of interest referred to by the public are waste management and pollution of the soil, air, and water. Citizens complain most frequently about air and water pollution, but the EPB only shows initiative on rare occasions. In September 2011, the EPB ensured a quiet environment during the time of the college entrance exams²²¹. A large part of all conversations related to public service provision is initiated by citizens and directed towards the EPB. In their complaints, citizens tend to give a detailed account of their grievances, such as the exact location of the alleged pollution; they provide pictures to substantiate their claims (cf. images 6 and 7). In all cases, citizens provide the Nanhu EPB with an extensive scope of information and the EPB acknowledges the situation and promises to take action. In the few cases where insufficient information is provided, the EPB requests further details. In every case, when a citizen complained about a specific issue the EPB at least acknowledged the request and promised to look into it. In most cases, the EPB reported back on Sina Weibo. In these cases the users clearly appreciated the fact that the EPB took their suggestions seriously.

²¹⁹ At the time, the standard was neither adopted nor officially endorsed.

²²⁰ The roots of the civilized city program (文明城市) date back to 1980s, and have more recently integrated into an urban development scheme, which aims to raise the standards of cities as part of scientific (科学发展) development towards a harmonious society (和谐社会) (cf. Zhao 2011). To attain the status of a national civilized city – as Jiaying did in the third national evaluation – cities have to meet set criteria, such as steadily raising living standards for their inhabitants (居民生活水平稳步提高) and – most likely the issue referred to in the comment mentioned – a good ecological environment (生态环境优良) (cf.

http://hxd.wenming.cn/blog/2010-05/10/content_118965.htm, last accessed 12.8.2015)

²²¹ Cf. conversation 26.

The frequent interactions between the EPB and citizens in this category, however, did not begin immediately. It took about a year for the EPB to build and maintain its presence before citizens started to engage with it. The first noteworthy interactive encounter – in the sense of a deliberative or consultative practice – took place when a user complained about dumped garbage, attached a picture to his post, and provided the exact location at which the garbage could be found (cf. image 7). The initial post of conversation 57 exhibits two characteristics that most discussions of this analytical category share as it shows how different social media platforms can be intertwined.



image 6: Smoking chimneys.

Source:

<http://www.jx09.com/read.php?tid-332825.html>, last accessed 15.11.2015.

The link in the initial post of the conversation leads to the page on which images 6 and 7 among others can be found: a discussion on a local internet discussion platform²²² called “Jiaxing District 9” (嘉兴第9区). In the forum, the Weibo user “official Jiaxing district 9” (嘉兴第九区官方), who is putatively representing the operatives of the forum itself, posted the same pictures as on Sina Weibo and called for action on the subject. In the forum, which is also publicly accessible, a heated discussion of the matter took place. The topic could not reach the EPBs of the region there, though, as they are not active on this local communication platform. Against this backdrop, it seems reasonable to assume that the user “Jiaxing District 9” started another almost identical conversation on Sina Weibo to obtain the attention of the authorities. This argument is substantiated, as right from the start he includes the user “嘉兴环保发布” – an old name of the municipal EPB. The discussion in the local forum took a very different turn than that on Sina Weibo, where the discussion was soon concluded after the Nanhu EPB stated that it had taken care of the situation. In the forum, however, the discussion quickly centered on the question of how such a garbage disposal was possible and why the authorities had not reacted so far. The forum discussion presents an ideal case for showing how the public treats the same cause, with the same information, framed in almost the same way, without the interference of the EPB. By contrasting the two conversations, the difference of the interactive behavior of the EPBs can be carved out.

In the forum, the user “转眼黄昏” expresses his perception of the incompetence of the EPB in very pejorative words. He

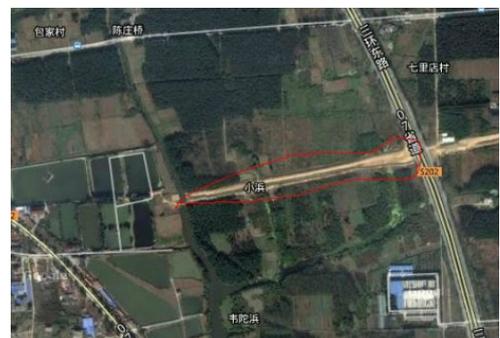


image 7: Image marking where garbage could have been found. Source: <http://www.jx09.com/read.php?tid-332825.html>, last accessed 15.11.2015.

²²² The website is accessible at <http://www.jx09.com>, last checked 15.7.2015.

accuses the EPB's staff of only being interested in earning money and doing nothing²²³. Another user (“档中央总竖鸡”) agrees and stresses the EPB's powerlessness and indifference towards its duties²²⁴. Nevertheless, interest in seeing the issue resolved was also present on the forum. After some time, the Nanhu EPB also registered in the forum with an account called “南湖环保 01”, and replied with a copy of its Sina Weibo posts showing it had conducted an on-site inspection and would be working with the city's waste disposal center to clean up the mess. While the critique of the EPB is evident, the user “一直往北走” remarks that the pollution was initially caused by a fellow citizen and urges others not to exclusively focus on the EPB's slow handling of the situation: “(y)ou do not blame people who dump garbage mess . . . but blame the waste disposal unit . . . How could the social morals become like this”. The critique previously voiced by societal users about the EPBs not showing enough initiative is countered by the user “小区协管员”²²⁵, who stresses the need to tip off the EPBs in order to solve the issue²²⁶.

In one conversation, for instance, a user complained about garbage that had been dumped nearby at a remote roadside. When the EPB responded in a timely manner and said it was looking into it, it won the affection of the user: “Online office, transparent office, good [praise] the best results can be feedback about, even more perfect”²²⁷. What is particularly interesting about this conversation is not only the comparatively large amount of interaction it sparked, but also that the local Nanhu EPB only became active after the city-level EPB had publicly delegated the matter to it. The citizens did not take the delegation as a sign of diversion, but rather accepted it as good way of delegating administrative tasks. The quick responsiveness of the EPBs assured them of the good will of the users participating in the conversation.

However, the EPB's feedback was at times received with mixed reactions. Frequently, the EPB did not find the pollution described in the original message or could not confirm that a problematic pollution level had actually been reached. The questions of whether the EPB's assessment is correct and whether it actually did check the facts on-site are beyond the scope of this research. In the cases in which the EPB was unable to confirm the allegations brought forward, the citizens did get frustrated, and at times doubted its willingness and competence. For instance, in conversation 176 a user complained about black smoke emerging from a factory. After the EPB said it had investigated the tip,

²²³ Cf. the quote “环保局都是一帮拿钱不干的事的人” from <http://www.jx09.com/read.php?tid-332825.html>, last accessed 15.7.2015.

²²⁴ Cf. the quote “环保局一点都不给力的 你以为他会给你关啊 做梦的”, *ibid.*

²²⁵ It is possible that the person behind this username – which can be translated as “district coordinator” – was a state clerk, who might be prone to defend a fellow state agency. As this username had not undergone the real-name registration process, this assumption cannot be verified or falsified.

²²⁶ Cf. the quote “The EPB cannot see such a thing [...]”(这种事环保局是看不到了[...]) in the forum's discussion available at <http://www.jx09.com/read-htm-tid-332825-page-2.html>, last accessed 15.7.2015.

²²⁷ Quote of the user “田舍郎” in conversation 57.

it could not corroborate the complaints. The response of the citizens was sheer disbelief: “was not found does not mean there actually isn’t, it only means the enforcement is weak!”²²⁸ In general, from the content and the way in which the conversation was conducted, these critical remarks seemed more like the expression of preexisting prejudices against the EPB.

On average, the users had a rather neutral expectation of the EPB and sought help from it for concrete problems. Conversation 122 is exemplary in this regard; a user complains about a layer of oil on a river and says “[w]e are very worried and hope that the authorities can help us solve this problem”²²⁹. The EPB tentatively confirms the user’s statement and adds that the spillage was caused by criminals, who used a road tanker to move the waste to the scene and dumped it there. Even with the use of surveillance footage, it was impossible to identify the culprits.

The conversation took place a year after the EPB launched its presence on Sina Weibo, and marks the starting point from which citizens began to refer to the account to point out acute problems. Following this logic, social media have become a viable channel for citizens to interact with state agencies and increase the scope of public service provision. As outlined in the theory chapter (ch. 3.2), a special characteristic of social media is the permanent storage and provision of all content ever published. This can reflect badly on EPBs if they do not react to citizens’ input, as it can be traced back and referred to at any time. In one conversation, a citizen aired a grievance that two years ago he had made a complaint with which according to him the EPB still had not dealt. The citizen used this old incident to again question the willingness and credibility of the EPB to investigate citizen’s cues: “You still believe Jiaying’s EPB? Sad, too simple, look at my microblog entries concerning the Yangguang district river pollution made two years ago”²³⁰.

6.2.4 Knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation

Interactions and references between the Nanhu EPB and other state agencies are rare. The most frequently found reference is initiated by the city-level EPB and directed specifically to the Nanhu EPB. In almost all of these cases, the reference contains a request for the Nanhu EPB to investigate a claim brought forward to the municipal EPB by a disgruntled citizen. In most cases, the city-level EPB articulately expects its subordinate branches to become active and to provide feedback in a timely manner on Sina Weibo: “@Nanhu EPB immediately investigate and take appropriate measures to avoid the contamination from spreading, timely feedback”²³¹.

This pattern of delegation from the municipal EPB constitutes the majority of citizens’ complaints, which the Nanhu EPB has taken care of. The city-level EPB seems to function as a magnet for citizens’

²²⁸ Quote from user “通元张永军” in conversation 176.

²²⁹ Quote from user “SHERO 朱杰” in conversation number 122.

²³⁰ Quote from user “庄子啊哈” in conversation 130.

²³¹ Quote from user “南湖一勺水三世” in conversation 151.

input; the vast majority of complaints stem from different citizens. The complaints directly addressed to the Nanhu EPB, however, were treated with the same vigor regardless of whether the superior EPB was involved in a citizen's request.

Knowledge and information transfer between different types of state agencies was absent; even between the EPBs of the Jiaying area, interaction was minimal or non-existent. The Nanhu EPB did try to reach out to its audience by making use of Sina-Weibo-specific options, such as micro-groups²³². The activity of the micro-groups of which the Nanhu EPB was a member was rather limited. The EPB often used the micro-group to make documents available to the public. In conversation 60, the EPB published an article about the "twelve-five emission reduction program"²³³, made available in the micro-group. The article likely contained the planned contributions of the EPB to the then-recently issued twelfth national five-year plan. The fact that the EPB was part of the group and actively used it to disseminate policy documents emphasizes its engagement on Sina Weibo²³⁴.

The rare exchange of information or interaction between state agencies is in stark contrast with the citizens' frequent references to official policies, regulations, laws, and environmental-protection-related information in general. Citizens often quote from or mention these to strengthen their claims or arguments; even more so if the information stems from the national level.

In conversation 78, a user demands the EPB to immediately conduct an investigation concerning black smoke. To underline the importance of their request, they mention a quote from then-vice minister of MEP, Zhang Lijun, who had allegedly recently said at a national conference: "If we don't eliminate pollution, pollution will eliminate us"²³⁵. The logic of referring to policies and statements from institutions or officials of higher administrative echelons is a regularly recurring phenomenon. The references are used with the intention of exerting pressure on the local authorities, as one comment from conversation 78 also exemplifies: "The higher levels [referring to Zhang Lijun, MD] have put it very well, now we will see the implementation of the lower levels"²³⁶.

The expectation inherent to this part of the analytical concept – that social media would foster interagency cooperation, exchange, and interaction – has largely not been met by the Nanhu EPB, which exhibits virtually no ties to other state agencies on a horizontal level, and vertically only to its immediate superior: the city-level EPB. In terms of knowledge or information exchange, the most active flow is from the Nanhu EPB to the public. The EPB constantly keeps the audience informed about its activities, adopted regulations, applied standards, and issued fines. However, apart from the published fines, this information triggers almost not responses from the public, strongly

²³² Micro-groups are a form of forum and are frequently used to publish documents, images, or videos.

²³³ Quote from Nanhu EPB in conversation 60.

²³⁴ Unfortunately, the document itself is no longer available on Sina Weibo.

²³⁵ Quote from user "种树的老人" in conversation 151.

²³⁶ Ibid.

suggesting that it is of no interest to them. At the same time, the Nanhu EPB's audience actively addresses it with political statements, policies, and regulations from higher administrative echelons – most frequently the national level – in order to add authority to their demands.

6.2.5 Summary

The Nanhu EPB presence on Sina Weibo has a relatively small audience. Even though its presence is correctly categorized on the platform as a government body in the field of environmental protection, the amount of citizen complaints and requests delegated to it by the far better known municipal EPB suggests it could achieve a broader scope. The account was regularly updated during the observational period, but most contributions remained uncommented upon. Transparency is the most frequently assigned category of the analytical concept in the EPB's statuses and conversations (cf. figure 23)²³⁷. As pointed out in the earlier section on transparency, in the case of the Nanhu EPB the category almost exclusively consists of descriptive displays of everyday work. These regular activities do not trigger immediately deliberative practices; however, they do seem to increase the Sina Weibo public's awareness that EPBs active exist and take this platform as a serious channel through which to interact with their constituencies.

The focus on practical aspects clearly dominates interactions between the EPB and the citizens. This is reflected in both the policy- and the public-service-provision-related categorized statuses and conversations. The policy dimension consists primarily of societal requests and demands to ameliorate specific conditions. A closer look at the stage of societal input, as provided by the policy cycle, reveals that most complaints targeted either the lack or inadequate implementation of existing policies. At the same time, suggestions for new laws or regulations to amend existing grievances were largely absent²³⁸.

The third largest category found in the EPB's conversations dealt with public service provision. Here, the conversations were often started by citizens and requested some kind of response from the EPB. The EPB responded in almost all cases in a timely manner, took action, and reported back the results of its investigations. The EPB not only retained a neutral tone even in contested and heated conversations, but also took action even though no law or regulation compels it to do so. Whether or not the reports of the EPB were accurate or real investigations were conducted is somewhat irrelevant, as the virtual audience was convinced that action had been taken²³⁹. In the long-term,

²³⁷ The classification was allowed for multiple assignments of one status. Therefore, the sums could have added up to more than the original number of statuses. A small portion of the statuses, however, could not be assigned to any of the analytical categories.

²³⁸ Whether this is due to the lack of ideas or the implicit expectation that this is the task of the government is beyond the scope of this study. No evidence could be found to relate the absence of suggestions to censorship or repression. On the contrary, the citizens were quite outspoken and sometimes made pejorative remarks.

²³⁹ No indication could be found at any point in the data that the EPB had not done what it said it had.

fraudulent claims like this might pose a serious credibility threat; however, during the observational period, nothing resembling this could be identified.

Only a comparatively small amount of statuses and conversations dealt with cooperation and knowledge transfer. Interaction between different government agencies was absent, apart from the delegation of work from the municipal EPB to its county division. Despite citizens regularly requesting data, such as pollution readings, these were also basically absent. The only mention of national legislation, regulations, or remarks was made by societal users to lend authority to their claims.

The Nanhu EPB proves that deliberative practices in the field of first-level governance are possible on social media, and are most prominent in the fields of policy implementation and public service provision. The EPB’s responsiveness and continuous efforts are evidence that Sina Weibo is a viable channel for citizens to deliberate with its local government. At the same time, intra-governmental interactions or knowledge sharing could not be found in the EPB’s conversations and statuses.

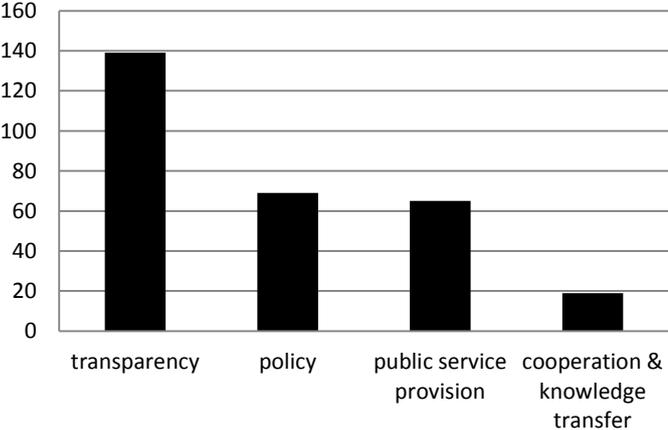


figure 23: Chart displaying the sum of assigned codings for each analytical category assigned during the qualitative evaluation.

6.3 The Haining EPB (海宁环保)

Haining is a county-level city belonging to the Jiaxing administrative area and is located south of the prefecture-level city Jiaxing. According to the 2010 census, Haining was home to 806,966 people in 2010, which marked a significant increase from the previous census in 2000, when it had 660,080 residents²⁴⁰. It is the second most populated area in Jiaxing, only surpassed by the county-level city of Tongxiang (桐乡), which has 815,848 inhabitants.

The Haining EPB's presence on Sina Weibo had 2,118 followers, which made it the median of the Jiaxing sample and a representative example of an average county-city-level EPB. The Haining EPB displayed regular levels of activity with an average of two statuses per day. At the end of the data-gathering period, it had issued 1,541 statuses and 536 comments that were part of 1,392 conversations and single statuses. Of these 1,392 contributions, 50.09% were part of conversations with other users – significantly more than the share of the smaller Nanhu EPB (16%). Due to the increased size of the source material, analysis of the Haining EPB only takes into account the conversations it had with other users and only a random sample of the content it provided that did not spark any interaction. In the following sections, the conversations and randomly selected single contributions are analyzed using the four categories provided by the analytical framework of Bonsón et al. (2012) to evaluate e-governance in social media.

6.3.1 Transparency

Descriptions of the EPB's daily activities constituted the majority of statuses published. This pattern was also found in the communications of the Nanhu EPB. Similarly to the smaller EPB, the vast majority of the Haining EPB's contributions triggered no responses from the audience at all. In the case of the Haining EPB, however, the few statuses that led to conversations with other users did not yield entirely critical comments; a significant number consisted of citizens lauding the EPB for particular efforts. The statuses that triggered positive responses mainly dealt with activities the EPB had organized with public participation, such as an event to promote energy conservation, raising awareness of a low-carbon lifestyle, and a green traveling initiative.

A sizeable portion of the statuses published by the Haining EPB consisted of local air quality readings. Similarly to the air quality updates of the Nanhu EPB, these triggered very little interaction. When other users commented on these statuses, they largely expressed their disagreement with and disbelief in both the quality of the readings and the EPB's official interpretation of them. In conversation 876 – which is exemplary for this kind of interaction – the Haining EPB summarizes the air quality for May 24, 2013, as “good” (良). Several users commented on this post and stated their frustration resulting from comparing their personal experience with the official assessment, such as

²⁴⁰ Cf. <http://www.citypopulation.de/php/china-zhejiang-admin.php>, last accessed 27.8.2015.

user “士骑酒酣”, who is very upset that from his window he could already see that the air quality was not as officially described. “士骑酒酣” stressed the severity of the pollution as it occurred during the time of the college exams²⁴¹. Similarly, user “兜兜里的小” seriously doubted that there was a place in Haining where the conditions were good: “[w]here are the good conditions” (状况良在哪). Citizens frequently stated their disbelief of the air quality reading, such as user “汤耕车田”, who stated that the night prior to the measurement the air quality was so bad he lacked the words to describe it (conversation 385).

In contrast, the Haining EPB’s report on training sessions for its staff triggered mainly positive reactions from its audience. In conversation 1,324, the Haining EPB documented that its staff was trained in law enforcement – possibly in response to frequent user criticisms of the EPB’s lack of proper enforcement. To a much lesser extent, the EPB also reported about its other activities, such as the public celebration of the 65th World Environment Day²⁴² jointly organized with the local Communist Youth League (共青团), or the campaign for the reduction of vehicle emissions: “drive less today – add more green” (少开一天车, 多添一点绿)²⁴³.

6.3.2 Policy making

In general, conversations relating to existing policies in the form of suggestions for modifications or proposals for new policies are rare, with two notable exceptions: the first concerns the air quality standard PM 2.5, and the second an environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedure. In conversation 349, the EPB published one of its regular updates concerning the air quality measurement of its surveillance devices. The user “天翔” took this opportunity to ask for confirmation of whether or not Jiaying had ranked second to last in the province according to the PM 2.5 standard. The EPB did not reply and the source from which source the user had gained this information was unclear. At the time, the strict PM 2.5 standard was not mandatory; as such, the user’s question can be understood as a suggestion of adopting and implementing the standard. In conversation 439, the user “全国文明村-永福” directly asked when the PM 2.5 standard would be introduced. The user was not a simple citizen but rather a verified account belonging to the Yongfu village (永福) of Hainan city. About a year later, the Haining EPB forwarded information regarding this subject from the provincial EPB.

²⁴¹ See the user comment: “Now tell me what situation is outside my window!! now!! How are people supposed to take the college entrance exam! It seriously affects my mood!” (告诉我现在窗外什么情况!! now! 高考怎么考! 严重影响心情啊!).

²⁴² Cf. conversation 454.

²⁴³ Cf. conversation 1,115.

In the note, the provincial EPB introduced its online real-time air quality portal (浙江省环保厅门户网站空气质量实时发布平台)²⁴⁴. Data from this portal suggest that the Jiaxing area in general has a particularly high level of air pollution – especially when compared to other cities in the region. The data shown in figure 24 refers to the PM 2.5 standard, which is stricter than the PM 10 standard that was in place during the observational period, and it was measured more than 2 years after the aforementioned conversations took place. Nonetheless, the poor ranking of the Jiaxing area is more consistent with the opinions expressed by the citizens and indicates that the adoption of the stricter standard was a step towards converging official readings with public perceptions.

The second example of policy-related interactions concerns the EIA of an industrial park in Haining city. The EPB reported (cf. conversation 421) that the plan of the project had been approved. The news was met with critical responses from the audience. User “永福花园丁” asked whether the people located in the vicinity of the industry park had been consulted during the process. The EPB did not react to any of the audience’s responses, but the incident shows that the Sina Weibo public expressed the wish for more participatory opportunities in processes like EIA. The available data does not allow for checking whether the public were provided with an opportunity to participate in the process mentioned. However, the user’s comment is in line with Li, Ng and Skitmore’s finding that EIA are “essentially dominated by a shibboleth of experts with little serious attempt of incorporate the views of outsiders”. (Li, Ng & Skitmore 2012: 55) at least partly attribute the lack of public consultations to governmental decision-makers’ fears that their project might not proceed as planned when faced with public feedback. The hopes of Li and his colleagues that the media can play the role of watchdogs to ensure sufficient public participation is, at least in this instance, not fulfilled.

6.3.3 Public service provision

Kooiman and Jentoft (2009) refer to the provision of public services referred to as the “first-order” level of governance, highlighting that this encompasses the solution of concrete problems. The pattern identified in the previous analysis of the Nanhu EPB interactions – that citizens are very vocal in passing information on to the EPB where they see the need for action, as well as demand responses – is also dominant in the case of the Haining EPB. The issues most frequently pointed out by the citizens are

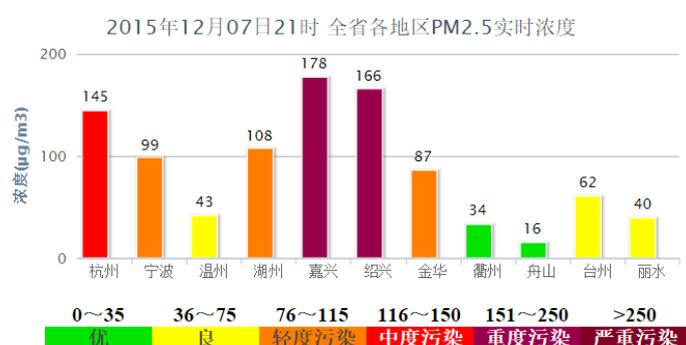


figure 24: Air quality readings from different cities in Zhejiang province. Source: Zhejiang online air quality portal, available at <http://www.zjepb.gov.cn/hbtmhwz>, last accessed 13.12.2015.

²⁴⁴ Cf. the portal’s website available at <http://www.zjepb.gov.cn/hbtmhwz>, last accessed 10.8.2015.

related to air and water pollution. Soil contamination and waste dumping are seldom mentioned and noise disturbances are scarcely present.

A typical example of a water-pollution-related issue is conversation 251, in which the user “典型的巨蟹” complained about the quality of drinking water in his area and urged the EPB to check to situation on site. The Haining EPB’s only comment was that one of their inspection teams was currently investigating. The user seemed content with this; even in the absence of the inspection’s results, they quickly ceased to ask questions. Only two days later, in a similar conversation²⁴⁵, the EPB showed a different – more responsible – stance. Following the request of user “一号燕子”, who complained about the quality of the water in the river (cf. image 8), the EPB at once announced that it had dispatched officers to investigate the situation and three hours later published a detailed account of the findings. The exemplary handling of the user’s request is in stark contrast to the at times indifferent treatment of societal input.

In general, the expressions of citizens tended to be more positive when the EPB took an active and cooperative stance in the conversations. Citizens were particularly positive whenever the EPB reacted by inspecting a request. In conversation 308, for example, the user “百分之 38” wanted the EPB to check a place from which he thought strong smells and smoke had emanated. The EPB ordered an inspection, which did not find anything, but it promised to keep a close look on the nearby industries. The user was very satisfied with this interaction, concluded that the EPB had responded very quickly, and displayed a satisfactory attitude: “[t]hank you, praise you!”. The EPB seemed to learn from this and similar experiences and has since been far more exhaustive and enduring in its communication with inquirers. A conversation²⁴⁶ that took place about one month later is exemplary in this regard. The discussion centered on the EPB’s report that it had conducted an unannounced search of various companies in the area. In the process, it found criminal violations, which it announced it would punish. The audience’s reaction to this report was very positive and one of the few cases in which a work description of the EPB triggered reactions –and more importantly, positive ones.

However, even responding in a timely manner and showing initiative did not always suffice to satisfy citizens. For example, in conversation 389, a user complained about the very poor air quality in his vicinity. The EPB responded quickly and reported back in detail the results of a survey that an inspection had produced. The investigation had identified a company responsible for the air pollution. Even though the EPB acknowledged that it found violations and promised to keep the pollution to a minimum level, it was starkly



image 8: Polluted water. Image attached to user “一号燕子” comment in conversation 259.

²⁴⁵ Cf. conversation 259.

²⁴⁶ Cf. conversation 379.

criticized. User “小濮同志” clearly expressed his dissatisfaction and desire for more concrete information: “[r]epl@Haining Environmental Protection: this is not saying anything, I want to know which plant it is, how you are monitoring it”. Some users questioned the authenticity of the released information as dubious (真的假的²⁴⁷), while others were skeptical as to the usefulness of publishing this kind of information in general, such as user “卡塔尼警长”: “has publishing this kind of thing any actual meaning?”²⁴⁸. Citizens were disappointed by the scarcity of information shared by the EPB – and particularly about its silent refusal to answer their questions.

As previously mentioned, air quality was the most frequent topic of conversation, seemingly due to its ubiquitous presence. While not every citizen saw a river, lake, or other site in which garbage was wrongfully dumped, air is available to all citizens no matter where they live or what routes they take in their daily life. In addition, the sensory detection of potential air pollution is quite easy, as the numerous requests for the EPB to investigate smoke and stench prove.

A representative example of complaints about air pollution was a discussion initiated by user “沫沫1020”²⁴⁹, who complained about smoke coming out of a chimney in the local power plant park (cf. image 9). The Nanhai EPB reacted to the complaint, stating that the company in question was one with a national focus on monitoring. Following this, the EPB was able to perform two examinations: a check of online data gathered from the company by the national monitoring scheme, and an on-site inspection of its own staff. The results of both investigations found no irregularities, but relate the smoke observable in image 9 to specific conditions usually found early in the morning or evening, when condensation of water vapor occurs at a high rate. Similar reports from the EPB, which found no evidence of violation of regulations or pollution emissions but instead attributed the statements of concerned citizens to natural phenomena, were often received critically by the Sina Weibo public. These incidents indicate that it is not only the way in which the EPB joins a conversation that matters, but also the results or answers it provides.

At the same time, the Haining EPB sometimes chose not to participate in discussions directly addressed to it, as in conversation 735.

This discussion revolved around the complaint of user “绿色海宁” which can be translated as “green Haining”, who identified yellow smoke coming out of a chimney. The discussion took on a relatively intense dynamic, attracting 43 contributions from individual citizens. The absence of both the municipal and the Haining EPBs was notable, as both were directly addressed by



image 9: Smoking factory chimney. Attached to user “沫沫1020” comment in conversation 723.

²⁴⁷ The expression is used by user „Darkeeeeeer” in conversation 396

²⁴⁸ Cf. the original text of the user’s comment: “公布这样的东西有实际意义吗”.

²⁴⁹ Cf. conversation 723.

citizens several times, referring to them not only in their texts but also by using their screen names. When a user is addressed using his screen name (“@海宁环保”), the addressee will see this comment, even if the addressee is not observing the user who made the comment.

The course of the conversation suggests that Haining EPB’s decision not to join the conversation exacerbated the situation. When the calls directed to EPBs went unanswered, citizens began sharing a negative image of the EPBs, as they felt nothing was being done to help mitigate their concern. User “故海盐事” stated that the air in the images looks like tobacco smoke and wondered where the EPB has gone²⁵⁰; other users directly addressed the head of the Haining EPB and alleged that he was financially involved in the company owning the chimney. The user “武原公社”’s comment, “the [municipal] EPB is weak and that the pollution is too much”²⁵¹, represents the dominant sentiment in this and other conversation: that the EPB is not powerful enough to implement, monitor, and enforce laws and regulations. The company in question was Zhejiang Dehong Ceramic Limited (浙江德宏陶粒有限公司); the Haining EPB reported that it had dispatched an on-site inspection. The inspection team found that the yellow smoke was caused by the combustion of glutinous clay and the EPB suggested it was not detrimental to health. The finding was met with incredulity by citizens. The EPB’s management of the case, together with its rather sluggish communication efforts, makes this incident an example of poor performance with regards to public service provision.

The citizens’ frustrations regarding the air quality became more severe over time, up to a point at which citizens reverted to openly sarcastic tones in conversations with the EPB. Nonetheless, the fact that the bureau was still addressed indicates that, despite its inactivity and sluggish performance, still it was still considered a potentially helpful and useful point of reference.

The initial post of conversation 995, made by user “科雷傲”, is representative of this trend. In the post, the citizens complained about air pollution and used a rhetorical figure to suggest that only significant public pressure would force the EPB to take action: “[w]hen opening the window a wave of smell came! I don’t know but this smell should only occur in the north of the city? Please do not forward this 500 times! The EPB does not have a nose!”²⁵² A similar tone is expressed in the ensuing discussion²⁵³ – also dealing with air pollution – in



image 10: Images of yellow smoke. image attached to user “绿色海宁” comment in conversation 735.

²⁵⁰ Cf. the original text of the user’s comment – “同一片蓝天，这里有黄烟！环保局哪去了” – which can be translated as “With a blue sky, there is tobacco smoke! Where has the EPB gone”.

²⁵¹ Cf. the original text of the user’s comment – “嘉兴环保不给力！污染太多！” – which can be translated as “The Jiaxing EPB is weak! Too much pollution”.

²⁵² Cf. the original text of the user’s comment: “打开窗，一股臭气扑鼻而来！我不知此味只应城北有？还是满城尽带齷齪味？请不要转发 500 次！环保部门是没有鼻子的！”

which the user “灰色逆行” inquires as to why the EPB is not replying online despite being explicitly requested to do so: “[w]hy is @Haining EPB²⁵⁴ not responding? Is the problem not serious enough? Or are you afraid of offending the government departments? [...] What is your intention to use micro-blogging?”²⁵⁵

The conversations in which citizens voiced clear criticism of the EPB’s work were in contrast to examples in which they provided positive feedback to the EPB. In conversation 1,078, the EPB was called to action to check a chimney emitting potentially harmful smoke. The EPB reported that it did find the situation as described and ordered the company to take care of it within one week. The impact on the conversation’s audience was very positive and is exemplified by the status of user “淡蓝天空白云一抹”: “Reply @ Haining EPB: Thank you very much, I would not have thought that one tweet has such good effect”²⁵⁶.

The vast majority of citizens’ complaints identified a company, factory, or some other kind of industrial entity as sources of pollution. Other sources of pollution are rarely mentioned, although conversation 273 is an exception. The conversation centers on the complaint of user “灏然哥” concerning the pollution, caused by farmers, of a nearby river. The EPB responded in a timely manner, promised an investigation and then reported back that it has confirmed the user’s description of the situation. Administratively, however, the EPB pointed out that it was the duty of the Changan town (长安镇) EPB unit to deal with this case. The EPB was lauded for its “rapid response” and “timely action” to clean up the mess by user “灏然哥”. The next contribution to the conversation came one and a half years later from user “灏然哥”, who had previously lauded the EPB but then complained about a pollution situation at the same place. The user seemed disappointed about the recurrence of the problem and urged the EPB to take action. The fact that the user chose to contribute to the existing conversation rather than create a new one is a special characteristic of social media. Social media such as Sina Weibo record ever interaction and contribution made on their platform. Information once published can be retrieved easily – even years later. Therefore, conversations that took place years ago can be brought back to life at any moment. This feature of social media is particularly suited to documenting progress – or its absence.

Conversation 1,012 similarly highlights this characteristic. On September 24th, 2013, the user “海宁小郭” complained about the situation following a wastewater pipe leakage in of the Yanhua town (袁花镇). The user complains that the measures taken since the issue was originally raised – about a

²⁵³ Cf. conversation 996.

²⁵⁴ The “@” reference here refers to four of the conversation’s previously mentioned users: the Haining EPB, “海宁号外”, the official Haining network microblog (海宁网官方微博), and “平安海宁铁路”.

²⁵⁵ Cf. the original text of the user’s comment: “为什么@你们却没回复? 是这个问题不够严重呢? 还是你们怕得罪政府部门? [...] @海宁环保 @海宁号外 你们微博的初衷是什么?”.

²⁵⁶ Cf. the original text of the user’s comment: “回复@海宁环保:非常感谢, 想不到一条微博效果那么好”.

month previously – had been insufficient. To substantiate his protest, the user attaches an image from his mobile phone from a previous conversation with the Haining EPB on August 26th (cf. image 11). The Haining EPB acknowledged that a problem had existed and added that it has been fixed. It pointed out that the city water management office (市治水办) had asked the Yuanhua town government (袁花镇政府) to implement measures to mitigate the situation. Social media record every interaction and make it accessible at any point in the future – unless the content is deleted – which increases the possibility for citizens to hold EPBs accountable. Citizens can use historical information to increase the pressure on EPBs by using it in a documentary way.

As previously stated, users' preferences for using old conversations when they face the same or a similar problem results in each conversation being dedicated to one particular problem. There is, however, one notable exception to this pattern. Citizens' and EPBs' contributions related to the Jingko (晶科) incident not only took place over several days, but were also spread over several conversations. This incident is likely the most actively discussed event in the social media presence of the EPB. Due to the extent and intensity of the interactions related to this issue, the next section is dedicated to the incident.

The Jingko (晶科) incident

The international stock market-listed company, Jingko Solar, possesses a factory in Jiaying in which it produces photovoltaic panels. On the evening of September 15th, 2011, several hundred villagers from Haining city's Hongxiao village gathered in front of the factory to protest and subsequently stormed the factory compound. The protest turned violent, cars were overturned (cf. image 12), and the property was damaged, but no harm to humans was reported.

The protests were primed by the statement of a 33-year-old Hongxiao villager published online on September 8th that year. According to newspaper articles (Wenzhou TV online [温州视线] 2011; Wu 2011) in the statement the author referred to a medical report and alleged that 6 cases of leukemia and 31 of other cancers in the village could be attributed to the pollution caused by the company. The ministry of health, however, argued that 4 people for 2010 and 2 people for 2011 developed cancer but did not directly relate the occurrences to the incident. In the aftermath of the protests, the author was detained and prosecuted by the local authorities for spreading false

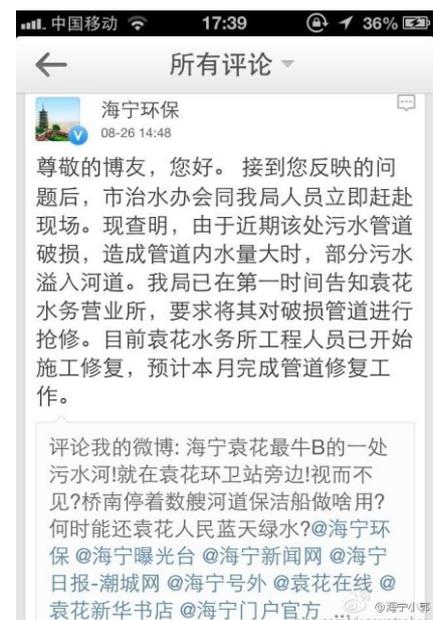


image 11: Conversation copy. Attached to user "海宁小郭" comment in conversation 1012.

information²⁵⁷. The actual trigger of the protests in terms of mobilizing people seems to have been massive deaths of fish in a nearby river. Citizens had complained about the company's pollution emissions half a year before the incident. A government official acknowledged that the company's waste disposal system had been failing pollution tests since April the same year. Apparently the measures taken had not been sufficient to prevent the protests or the pollution, most likely due to lack of implementation on behalf of the company. According to Wang Jing, then an associate professor at Beijing University, "[t]he local government failed to handle the problem" (Qi 2011). The role of social media in the mobilization and coordination of the villagers was key, as Zhang Zhi'an, then communication professor at Zhongshan University in Guangdong province, states: "[t]hey play an important role in gathering public opinion [...]" (*China Daily* 2011).

The conversations relating to this incident on the Haining EPB's Sina Weibo account were analyzed in detail against this backdrop. The earliest reference to the incident can be found in conversation 32, which started with a post from the Haining News Network on September 19th. The post contained several images (cf. image 13) showing a sealed door, the transportation of alleged dangerous goods, and villagers visiting the Jingko factory compound. The post sparked a heated discussion in which most citizens severely criticized the misconduct of the company and blamed the lack of strict regulations and laws, as well as inadequate implementation of existing ones. The user "木木 Joanna" called for the company to face the consequences of the disaster and alleged that posts relating to the incident had been deleted²⁵⁸. Against this background, the user strongly welcomed the Haining News Network's post: "[H]aining news has finally responded, that is good thing". The authenticity of the footage is seemingly supported by the claim of user "龙骑士 Leo" that some of the photos showed members of his family, who had not consented to having them published and furthermore did not live in the Hongxiao village. Furthermore, it was not only the local audience that was concerned with this incident. Some users saw the situation as symbolic for the developmental path of favoring economic growth at seemingly all costs that China has taken in the last decades. This



image 12: Overturned car in the Jingko solar panel factory.
Source:
<http://www.wenzhoux.com/news/zhejiang/39417.html>, last accessed 15.12.2015.

²⁵⁷ The spreading of false information is not only a statutory offense for the individual actively committing it, but is also a legal pitfall for the company enabling the individual to do so (Lanfang & Peng 2014). This is why, according to the Freedom House report on internet control mechanisms:

intermediary liability in China has resulted in private companies maintaining whole divisions responsible for monitoring the content of blogs, microblogs, search engines, and online forums, deleting tens of millions of messages or search results a year based on administrators' interpretation of both long-standing taboos and daily Communist Party directives. (Kelly 2012:6)

²⁵⁸ The data collection began at a significantly later date than the incident. Deleted posts and conversations would not have been accessible by the time the data was retrieved. Therefore, it was not possible to check whether or not the user's allegations were true.

line of argument is most vividly expressed by user “提着 XO 瓶子打酱油”’s comment that the real question now was not exactly where the pollution was discharged, or the medical treatment, but rather where this road of development was taking them.

Some users justified the violent turn that the protest took with reference to the higher principles of governance. The comment of user “秋天的原野上” is exemplary in this regard; it related to higher principles of the rule of law – such as openness, justice, and fairness²⁵⁹ – and implicitly alleged that these principles had not been adhered to in this case. Against this backdrop, the user argued that historical precedent existed to show that the originators of such violations were liable to being subject to revenge. The user thus implicitly justified the course that the protests had taken. Following this point of view, protesters felt empowered; they perceived a fundamental breach of rights – not only in terms of law and regulations, but also with regard to how the government should protect them. From this perspective, the protesters conducted an act of “rightful resistance” (O'Brien & Li 2006) from both a rule (Perry 2009) and a rights consciousness point of view (Li 2010). The comment was posted approximately a week after the clashes on the company property, which gives the impression of an ex-post justification of the protests. The conversation was very multifaceted, as it also included critical voices about the protest. The user “zizixiaomi” pointed to the economic ramifications. The protests and the temporary suspension of work at the factory may have endangered the jobs of some 4,000 people employed at Jingko.

While citizens vividly discussed the incident, the Haining EPB’s sole contribution to the conversation was its remark that the company’s production had been suspended to deal with the pollution and that affected citizens had accepted the EPB’s supervision of the company as part of the solution. At the same time, and unrelated to this conversation, the Haining EPB published a status²⁶⁰ – reminiscent of a press release – in which it announced that the provincial environmental inspectorate and the Haining EPB would jointly conduct an investigation into the Jinko facilities to assess the pollution situation and supervise the company’s rectification efforts. Despite the fact that the protests were ongoing at the time, the EPB’s status did not trigger any interactions from its audience.

On September 20th – just one day after the previous discussion – the Haining News Network (海宁新闻网) publishes a post that sparked



image 13: Attached to user “海宁新闻网” comment in conversation 32.

²⁵⁹ Cf. the user’s statement in conversation 32: “公开，公正，公平。是现代法治的三条基本准则。谁不遵守受历史报复是迟早的事。此事处理期待并相信能遵循以上原则”.

²⁶⁰ Cf. conversation 19.

conversation 35, in which it announced that a press conference would be held to present the latest developments in the Jingko case. The tone of this conversation was much calmer than the previous discussions. User “海宁晴” proposed viewing the pollution incident as “a good thing” as it could constitute an “opportunity for the government to think carefully” about how to balance economic development and environmental protection for the welfare of citizens. The author of the post also saw it as a good way for “the masses to improve their legal consciousness”²⁶¹. In this line of thought, the user contradicted the comment made in an earlier discussion by another citizen, and emphasized that legal and lawful means – not illegal or radical ones – should be used to deal with violations. As in the previous conversation, stark criticism of the government remained a key motive in this discussion, but a portion of the users still looked to the government and expected it to deal with events like these. The statement of user “戴沁明” – “I hope the government will give the people a satisfactory answer” – was representative of this attitude. User “wq94520” had similar views and hoped that the government would strengthen the supervision and management of companies so that mass incidents like this do not occur anymore. The participants did not stop at this abstract level; they frequently addressed concrete government entities that they expect to act. Apart from addressing the EPBs of Haining city, a common pattern in this conversation was citizens’ calls for the local justice department (海宁司法) to investigate the matter. Even though the department maintained an account on Sina Weibo, it chose not to join the conversation, in which the EPBs were involved. Shortly after the mid-September weekend when the demonstrations took place, the issue was no longer actively discussed by the Haining EPB or brought to its attention by citizens. Given the scope of the incidents, which placed the city in national and international news, this seems like a rather quick abatement. The topic resurfaced only in conversation 537, which took place half a year after the incident at the beginning of February 2012. The conversation was started by an EPB post, in which it reported that a delegation of village representatives and deputies of the towns people’s congress visited the Jinko company property to obtain a first-hand account of the environmental management. In the discussion, citizens expressed discontent about environmental law enforcement, but also recognized the constructive role the EPB had played in the incident. Some comments suggest that the incident had changed the EPB’s level of activity for the better, labeling it the “Jingko event effect” (晶科事件效果)²⁶². Some users urged the EPB to continue to strictly monitor the

²⁶¹ Cf. the user’s statement in conversation 32: “在某种意义上，晶科能源的污染问题也可以说是一件好事，一是把事件作为一个契机，让政府好好思考，让企业在发展中如何保护环境和周边居民健康的问题；二是提高群众的法律意识，如何通过正当合法的渠道表达诉求，维护自己的合法权益，而不是使用过激的、非法手段，使本来应该是合法的维权演变成违法行为”。

²⁶² See the user “海宁小女” comment in conversation 537.

company, which otherwise might continue its misconduct under the impression that “the mountain is high and the emperor far away” (山高皇帝远)²⁶³.

6.3.4 Knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation

The Haining EPB account on Sina Weibo had vivid and frequent interactions with four distinct groups of actors: NGOs and activists, media representatives, as well as other state agencies, and fellow EPBs. Conversation 230 was typical of the Haining EPB’s seldom but regular contact with activists and NGOs in the field of environmental protection. The topic of the thread was a call for participation in and support for an environmental protection and awareness-raising campaign. The author of the call, “邵文杰 NGO”²⁶⁴, was located in Beijing’s Chaoyang district and has no obvious contacts or relations to the Haining area. User “历史和现实 V”, who was located in Jining (济宁) of Shandong province, contacted the EPB with a prompt to support the cause. Subsequently, the EPB joined the discussion with a positive and supportive remark, expressing its appreciation for members of the public reporting violations – so long as they did so using their real names. At the time, Sina Weibo like most social media platforms allowed users to freely choose a username and did not check their identities. As a consequence, the majority of people on social media platforms cannot reliably be identified as a specific person. This anonymity has led to some extreme phenomena and been constantly challenged by the party-state. During the observational period, Sina Weibo did not properly implement a mandatory real-name registration and this was not legally required. If applied strictly, the EPB’s endorsement and promotion of the policy – which indicated that only input from verified users would be taken seriously – would have banned the vast majority of Sina Weibo users. In general, those rare Haining EPB interactions with activists and NGOs that were unrelated to a specific complaint were concerned with mutual acknowledgement and support pledges for campaigns and events.

The Haining EPB frequently interacts with traditional media, such as newspapers, and representatives of other media, such as online news portals or regional discussion fora²⁶⁵. The presence and activity of traditional media outlets, such as local newspapers or TV stations, on Sina Weibo is a sign of the technological shift from traditional mass media to new and social media

²⁶³ See the user “家有田宝” comment in conversation 537. The Chinese saying is generally a symbol reflecting a central power’s lack of control over remote areas.

²⁶⁴ According to the Sina Weibo information, the username represents the researcher “邵文杰” at the “Nature University” (自然大学). According to a research report (Vanacore 2012) and the entry about Nature University in Baidu’s Wikipedia (cf. <http://www.baik.com/wiki/自然大学>, last accessed 10.11.2015), it is a non-degree community center located in Beijing, which has affiliations with prominent activists and NGOs such as Friends of Nature.

²⁶⁵ Cf. the account “99 号网站”, which, according to its own description, is the “official microblogging of the Jiaying Nanhu Evening 99 website”; available at <http://www.jx99hao.com>, last accessed 14.11.2015.

(Castells 2007:252). Both types of media are in the act of converging their public spheres and becoming more intertwined. National- or provincial-level media outlets, such as the Zhejiang Online Environmental News Network (浙江在线环保新闻网)²⁶⁶, very rarely engage in the same conversations as the EPB. Far more frequently, local media – such as the Haining News Network (海宁新闻网)²⁶⁷ – participate in conversations with the EPB. The focus on the administrative area of Haining city and its immediate vicinity is emphasized by the presence of very small but highly active presences of media such as the *Haining Daily* newspaper (海宁日报). In most cases, the media outlets' participation is induced by citizens directly addressing them and asking them to join a particular conversation. The comments of the citizens suggest that they are referring to the media to assist their cause by building public pressure. This strategy can be effective in two ways. First, the media presences tend to have many followers²⁶⁸, which means they might be powerful multipliers on the social media platform. Second, they have additional ways to disseminate information, such as to print articles in their newspaper or broadcast a televised contribution. Direct interaction between these outlets and the Haining EPB occurs less often than their participation in the same conversation might suggest. Media representatives rarely address EPBs, and vice versa. The media mostly keep a passive stance; their presence is mostly a result of persistent invites from citizens. The media are thus an instrument with which citizens can build leverage vis-à-vis the EPB and raise awareness for their cause. Paradoxically, the EPB only very seldom tries to use the media, when it wants to promote one of its campaigns.

The third type of actors with whom the Haining EPB interacted regularly albeit rarely is other government agencies. At times, the EPB included these agencies in their activity descriptions; for example, in conversation 601 the EPB stated that for the first time (in 2012) it had sentenced a person responsible for pollution to administrative detention – a joint effort with the local public security bureau. This status differed from similar ones made by the EPB insofar as it explicitly mentioned the company's name. Another example of cross-agency communication is conversation 611 – a discussion started by the EPB with a report of how, in cooperation with the Haining City's People's Procuratorate (海宁市人民检察院), it had reached a settlement with a local company for wrongful disposal of wastewater. The settlement was reached in mediation during a public interest litigation suit (公益诉讼案) in the Haining City People's Court. The audience's response to this was

²⁶⁶ Cf. conversation 422 or 907.

²⁶⁷ Cf. conversation 342 or 1,303.

²⁶⁸ At the time, the *Haining Daily* had 13,792 followers and the Haining News Network had 10,658 followers.

negative. While some users were not aware that mediation was possible in this particular case, others thought such a solution was inappropriate and called for severer punishment²⁶⁹.

In comparison to its counterpart in Nanhu, the Haining EPB more frequently delegated citizens' requests to other state agencies, and was also passed more requests from other state agencies. In conversation 1,048, for example, the user “周不鲁” complained about the odor and noise of nearby factories. The Haining public security bureau (海宁公安) responded to this complaint by including the EPB with an “@” reference. The EPB was thus made aware of an issue that fell in its area of responsibility, and instantly addressed the problem by promising to investigate. This exemplary conversation shows that different state organizations can effectively use social media to delegate citizens' requests to the appropriate entity. In most cases the communication is dedicated to redirecting citizens to the appropriate agencies, including the departments for transportation, public health, and urban construction.

Conversation 490 represents an atypical example of cross-agency communication. The discussion was sparked by a post in which the user “王徐钢” complained about a government vehicle that turned left at a crossroad through a red light (cf. image 14). The user was able to provide footage of the incident, which identified the white car belonging to the environment law enforcement (一辆白色环境执法车). The post sparked one of the EPB's most active conversations. The Haining Traffic Police (海宁交警) quickly joined the conversation, confirmed that the vehicle belonged to the Haining EPB, and directly asked the EPB to respond.

The EPB's audience heavily criticized the officers responsible; some even demanded that they were fired. Others confirm that this red light violation was not an exception but rather had happened before, and that government cars often violate traffic rules. After some time, the EPB joined the discussion, stated that the driver turned when the traffic light was yellow, that the staff members had been criticized for their driving style and compelled to abide by traffic regulations in the future. After the EPB's statement, and against the background that no harm resulted from the traffic violation, the user “逆风狂人” stated: “at the same time we strengthen social supervision, we should at times also have a little leniency”²⁷⁰. As the



image 14: Car jumping a red light. attached to user "王徐钢"

²⁶⁹ This incident occurred prior to the revision (on January 1st, 2015) of the Chinese Environmental Protection Law (EPL). The revised version strengthened civil society organizations' ability to directly sue polluters (cf. Stern 2013; Wilson 2015).

discussion continued, the municipal EPB joined in and reminded the Haining EPB to keep traffic safety in mind. The statement was interpreted by other discussants as a reprimand. At the same time, the discussants alleged that the Haining police and the municipal EPB had so far been too lenient with the culpable staff members – or, as user “洛溪宋新江” put it, “in the end it is family, which be excused and lighter dealt with”²⁷¹. The user “穿着拖鞋逛华联” linked the traffic violation to the rule of the CCP by stating: “[this, MD] is the result of the dictatorship and ending the communist party”. Despite the very critical stance expressed in the message vis-à-vis the Chinese political system as a whole the status was not deleted from the conversation.

A couple of days later, and amidst ongoing discussion, the Haining police department stated that it had fined the driver of the car in question, named Wu (吴), 150 RMB and three points. After this announcement, the tone of the discussion changed and the users stated that the matter should now be considered finished; for example, user “王徐钢” stated: “everybody let’s stop it. I didn’t want to make this thing too big, at the time I was just a bit cynically exposing illegal behavior. We all make mistakes, not only driving a car this way [...]”²⁷². This incident is a prime example of the ways in which showing government agencies interact with each other in a rather tacit and restrained way. It also shows how seemingly isolated small incidents, such as the passing of a red light without resultant accident, can quickly turn into a conversation in which the performance of the party-state system in general is discussed.

As previously indicated, the Haining EPB was significantly more apt at delegating tasks to other state agencies. This was particularly true for its local branches. In conversation 1,003, for example, the EPB was made aware of a possible air pollution problem and delegated the task of handling an on-site inspection to its Dingqiao branch (丁桥分局). This represents one of the frequent instances in which the district-level EPB actively referenced one of its branches. Most of the inter-EPB communication takes places either between district-level EPBs and their equivalents or between the municipal EPB and the district EPBs. The existence of these sub-district branches suggests a rather tightly meshed network of EPBs covering the whole prefecture-level city, but not all of them may be active on Sina Weibo. The Dingqiao branch was not the only branch mentioned; in conversation 1,078, the Xiashi branch (硖石环保分局) was directly addressed by the Haining EPB in a similar manner. Both branches verified their accounts so that the public could be sure they were interacting with a real

²⁷⁰ Cf. user “逆风狂人” comment in conversation 490: “[...]在加强社会监督的同时，有时我们也要多一份宽容!”.

²⁷¹ Cf. the user’s comment in conversation 490: “底是自家人，可以原谅的，从轻处理了”.

²⁷² Cf. the user’s comment in conversation 490 “大家到此为止吧。我也没想把这个事情搞得太大，当时只是有点愤青地想曝光一下违章行为. 大家都有犯错误的时候，不只是开车这方面”.

EPB²⁷³. In addition to these two EPB branches, six more branches situated in Haining city could be identified in the analysis, which the Haining EPB addressed in its conversations: the industry development zone branch (经开环保分局); the Yangang branch (盐官环保分局); the Qiaowangmiao town branch (周王庙分局); the Xu village branch (许村分局); the Changan town branch (长安分局), and the branch located at the Ma bridge (马桥分局). Almost all branches had verified accounts, but low levels of activity in terms of published information and little connectedness in terms of followers. Despite their seeming inactivity, the fact that the Haining addressed them regularly indicates that their presence on Sina Weibo was monitored regularly. From the available data, the possibility that EPBs used other means of communication (such as phone calls or emails) cannot be ruled out. From the perspective of the citizens, however, the interactions between the EPBs show that their concerns were taken seriously and directed to the locally responsible contacts.

6.3.5 Summary

The technical characteristics of the Haining EPB mark its presence on Sina Weibo as average in terms of activity and follower size. The bureau generated significantly more interaction than the smaller Nanhu account; about half of its contributions consisted of conversations with its audience. The qualitative evaluation of the Haining EPB based on the analytic schema (cf. figure 25) shows that transparency-related conversations made up the majority of contributions of the EPB. The EPB’s audience appreciated its disclosure of information – if the public perceives this information to be useful. The public ignored the EPB’s descriptions of daily activities or notes that were – in extreme cases – only relevant to its staff. The most published and most discussed topics were disclosures of air quality measurement readings. The audience on the one hand welcomed these attempts to increase transparency, while on the other criticized the measurement standards. In extreme cases, when the public perception starkly deviated from the public readings, the EPB’s audiences clearly expressed its incredulity regarding

the data. The citizens’ comments constituted valuable feedback for the EPB; even if it did not comment or act upon them, the comments represented a crucial input channel for the bureaucracy with regard to existing policies.

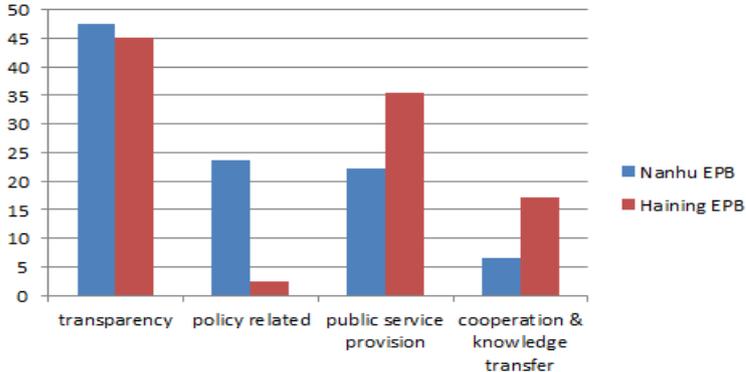


figure 25: Comparing the percentages of the codings for the Nanhu and Haining EPB. Source: own data.

Citizens very rarely made policy-

²⁷³ They were not included in the original sample, derived in chapter five, because they were not on Sina Weibo’s official list of EPBs in the government organization section.

related suggestions of their own. Most contributions in this regard were criticism of current standards and the lack of meaningful ones. The category of policy-related contributions contains the smallest amount of codings. This was also the smallest category in the Nanhu EPB analysis, but the Haining EPB audience made significantly fewer contributions. The few propositions and suggestions mainly concerned the then-heated issue of air quality measurement standard PM 2.5. Suggestions for applying existing standards and checking whether current laws and regulations were abided with constituted the second largest category of public service provision. More than one third of all conversations fell into this category, which also exhibited the highest overall levels of interaction between the EPB and its audience. These types of conversation were usually initiated by the complaint of a specific user. In most cases, the complaints were illustrated with and supported by visual material such as photos. The course of these conversations generally followed a pattern of citizens stating their claim and then demanding action from the EPB, further bolstering their issue by strategically referencing local – and, to a lesser extent, provincial and even national – media. While in most cases only local media tended to pick up the topic and then only on the social media platform, this strategy was very effective in getting the EPBs attention. The EPB usually acknowledged the issue, sent an inspection team, and reported back the results. The vast majority of conversations in this category followed this pattern and ultimately produced positive feedback from the audience. An exception to this pattern was the Jingko case, in which protestors stormed the solar-panel-producing factory compound amidst allegations of heavy pollution. The incident was reported in national and international news media but was little reflected in the social media presence of the Haining city EPB. The imbalance between the impact of the incident outside of and inside social media shows that social media constitute one of many public spheres, which at times may represent an issue very differently.

Cooperative communication and interactions constitute the third pillar of the Haining EPB activities on Sina Weibo. The cooperation was not limited to the surprising amount of EPB branches that were active throughout the city, but also extended to other – mostly local – state agencies, such as public security bureaus or the urban department for transportation. The local EPB branches are subordinate to the Haining EPB, which often delegated tasks to them, just as in turn the municipal EPB directed citizen's requests to it. The communication in Sina Weibo thus reflects the bureaucratic and organizational structure of the state.

6.4 The Jiaxing municipal EPB (嘉兴环境保护)

The following sections analyzes the conversations and randomly selected single contributions of the Jiaxing municipal EPB's Sina Weibo presence, using the four categories put forward in the analytical framework of Bonsón et al. (2012) to evaluate e-governance in social media. During the data-gathering process, a total of 2,568 posts and 1,066 comments from the municipal EPB were collected, representing 1,917 conversations that the EPB either initiated or contributed to. This high volume²⁷⁴ of data required to select a small sample of the total content for the qualitative evaluation. For the analysis, only conversations that included contributions from other Sina Weibo users were processed, as well as a random but small selection of the bureau's published entries that did not trigger any reaction at all.

6.4.1 Transparency

The municipal EPB published regularly air quality readings, similarly to its branches at lower administrative echelons. Reactions to these statuses were also very similar: the vast majority did not evoke any reaction from the audience. This is remarkable given that the municipal EPB's followership was ten times larger than those of its branches on Sina Weibo, including the two previously analyzed county-city level EPBs in Nanhu and Haining. The lack of reactions to this news from a large audience substantiates the previously formulated hypothesis that this kind of information is in most cases irrelevant to the netizens. Against the backdrop that environmental pollution is a widespread phenomenon in China, and as indicated by the comments made by netizens also very present in the Jiaxing area, the disinterest of netizens to these environmentally related messages is surprising. Most likely the lack of interest can be attributed to two factors. Either the published information is of no relevance to the public, or netizens do not trust the official authorities enough to react. From the responses to the few statuses that triggered reactions motivations could be identified. The netizens did not feel that the technical readings corresponded with their personal experience; in the vast majority of cases, they perceived a significantly worse air quality than the official readings suggested. Netizen “快乐小妞 66”'s statement²⁷⁵ was representative of this sentiment: “which monitoring station is this, our noses all seem to malfunction?” Netizens frequently and repeatedly expressed a desire to know more about the monitoring systems. The EPB's audience gave the impression that detailed information about the monitoring equipment was not accessible to them and that the municipal EPB rarely provided information. Through persistent inquiries the netizens were able to

²⁷⁴ The entire quantity data amounted to more than 2,500 pages.

²⁷⁵ Cf. user “快乐小妞 66” comment in conversation 1,023.

obtain the locations of three measurement stations in Jiaxing²⁷⁶. More detailed information regarding the standards of measurement provided by the monitoring machines were not provided by the EPB. The lack of detailed publicly accessible information was a constant source of conflict and resentment on the part of the netizens. Neither did the EPBs explain why they were so parsimonious in disseminating the requested information.

The vast majority of statuses published by the EPB were descriptive accounts of its activities. These also only occasionally triggered responses or inquiries from the audience. Information about new laws and regulations represented an important but quantity wise very limited amount of the statuses published by the EPB. The idea of informing the public and raising awareness of specific issues was present, but to a significant lesser degree than descriptions of daily work routines. The largest proportion of updates about laws and regulatory news was concerned with reforms on the provincial level; national policies were only scarcely referred to.

6.4.2 Policy making

In general, netizens rarely bring concrete proposals for policies and practical suggestions for rules and regulations to the municipal EPB. Existing laws are heavily criticized, but mostly with regard to their improper or absent implementation. An almost unique exception is the air quality standard PM 2.5, which is used to measure microscopic particulate matter (Chen et al. 2014). In 2011 and 2012 in particular, vivid discussions concerning the standard took place in China. The conflict was between the government (which refused to make it an officially adopted standard) and parts of the public (who advocated strongly for it). The government's arguments were at least twofold: it argued that the standards then in place were sufficient, and that the PM 2.5 standard was not adequate for China's current state of development. The public, on the other hand, pointed out that the new standard would provide a much more realistic and accurate picture of the air pollution situation, especially with regard to the very detrimental health impacts (Watts 2012).

Discussion about the air quality standard did not take place equally over time; on the contrary, it was mostly discussed with the municipal EPB and its branches in the winter season, from November 2013 to February 2014 (cf. figure 26). The notable exception to this was 2012, when very few references were made to the standard –counterintuitively, as it was at this time that the public discussed the standard most intensively (Xinhua 2012b). This suggests that the public decided to argue for implementation of the standard almost entirely outside of the sphere of the EPB.

²⁷⁶ The municipal EPB revealed the locations in conversation 391, which centered on publishing the results of an air quality reading. The three devices were located at Jiaxing University (嘉兴学院), Qinghe Elementary School (清河小学), and the official monitoring station in Fanggong Street (纺工路监测站).

The data simultaneously shows that, from the moment the standard was officially endorsed in March 2012, it became much more prominent in conversations with the EPBs. This is remarkable insofar as the standard did not have to be implemented across the country immediately, but rather incrementally over an extended period of time. In analytical terms, the standard had then moved from the policy formulation and decision-making phase of the policy cycle to the implementation process and – in places where it had been put into practice – evaluation phase.

The official adoption of the standard significantly spurred its discussion by and in the public and made it more prominent in state–society relations. In the conversations between the municipal Jiaxing EPB and its audience, netizens typically referred to the PM 2.5 standard in their complaints. The cause for these complaints was the contradiction between the perceived air quality and the officially published data (Wang et al. 2013). The former tended to be negative, whereas the official data suggested a good or at least satisfactory air quality. The netizens’ references to the PM 2.5 standard are summed up here to allow for a comprehensive view of the issue. For this purpose, some source material that best fits into the analytical category of “transparency” is referred to here to highlight the impact of the PM 2.5 standard on pre-existing practices. The PM 2.5 standard thus initiated discussion about not only itself but also other regulations, which is part of the evaluation and feedback phase of the policy cycle.

An example of this is conversation 239, in which the EPB relied on an article from the *Beijing Times* (京华时报) that contained the opinion of an MEP environmental expert. The post referred to the expert and stated that the MEP would soon amend these standards. Even though the EPB did not directly mention the air quality standard PM 2.5, it clearly referred to these discussions,

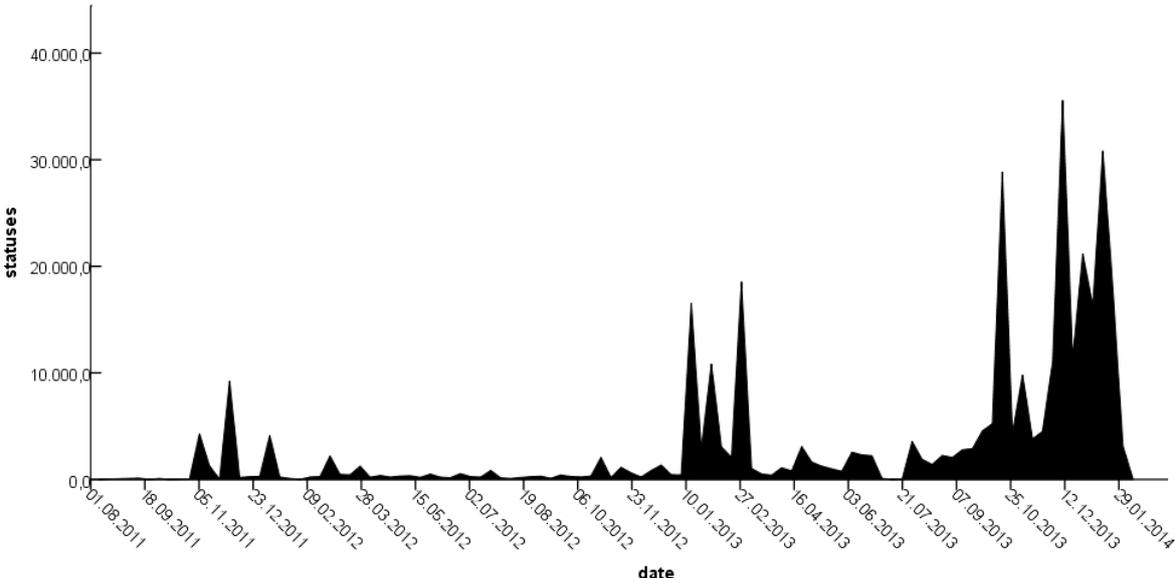


figure 26: Frequency of statuses over time concerning the PM 2.5 standard; statuses are weighted by their reposts and comments. Source: own data.

which were extremely prevalent among the public all over China at the time. The post was issued on October 2nd, 2011, which is neither the time at which air pollution problems in China tend to be at their worst nor the time at which the issue is usually actively discussed.

The discrepancies between citizens' perceptions of the air quality and the assessments published by state agencies were significant. This gap has eroded the people's trust in state agencies in general, and EPBs in particular. The comment of user “唐在林”, referring to the MEP expert mentioned in the status of the municipal EPB, illustrates this viewpoint: “[t]his environmental expert is telling lies, now his forecasts serve the government and not the people”²⁷⁷. This criticism not only expresses disbelief in the statement of a government official, but also questions whom the government is actually serving. The Chinese expression used by the netizen in his comment (为政府而不是为人民服务) is strongly reminiscent of the title of a speech Mao Zedong used in 1944 (为人民服务), which adds an ideological trait to his criticism.

Discussions dealing with the PM 2.5 air quality standard contain the majority of references to national actors, such as the MEP or state-wide legislation. As pointed out in the transparency section, references to national-level issues or political bodies are a rather rare phenomenon. In conversation 331, however, the municipal EPB issued a post stating that the MEP considered the PM 2.5 standard inapplicable to China because the situation in China was not “ripe” (不成熟) enough. The timing of the post is interesting, as it reflected official policy at the time. Four months later, however, the policy was revised to include the standard and its incremental application (cf. Xinhua 2012b). The municipal EPB's constant reiterating of the official MEP's position can be interpreted as highlight the EPB's lack of autonomy. EPBs are embedded in a tight bureaucratic structure and situated at the receiving end of the policy formulation and implementation process. They therefore seem to be more of a executing and implementing governmental body, strictly following and not deviating from the official at the center in Beijing-determined policies (Mertha 2009).

In conversation 331 as in aforementioned discussion 239, the MEP's strategy of boosting the credibility and legitimacy of regulation by relying on supposedly scientific expertise failed to convince netizens²⁷⁸. Furthermore, it contributed to a very critical attitude on the part of the public in terms of judging government experts. In conversation 331, the discussants challenged the MEP expert's statement on several accounts. First, they argued that the standard should be adopted, as it is an internationally used and accepted standard. Second, they argued that the experts were only the

²⁷⁷ Cf. the user's comment in conversation 239: “The environmental expert is telling lies, now the environmental forecast serves the government rather than the people” (这个环保专家在讲假话，现在的环境预报是为政府而不是为人民服务的).

²⁷⁸ Cf. part of the original message in conversation 331: “environmental experts say the air monitoring standard PM 2.5 is not included because the time is not ripe” (环保部专家称空气监测未纳入 PM 2.5 因时机不成熟).

scapegoats of the MEP²⁷⁹. Third, they strongly disagreed that the standard could not presently be applied to China, as the requirements the MEP implicitly referenced were neither defined nor tangible²⁸⁰; citizens demanded transparency and equality regarding the criteria that these standards had to meet²⁸¹.

It should be noted that the municipal EPB did take steps to increase the monitoring situation. In conversation 261, it announced that it had conducted measurements of air quality in the northern part of the city in September. The data was collected during the daytime of Thursday, September 8th, and showed the measurements for the odor according to the standard GB14554-93 (恶臭污染物排放标准)²⁸². The post, which aimed to inform the public and satisfy its need for more transparency in the EPB's monitoring activities, evoked strong criticism from the audience. Most netizens were concerned that data had only been collected on one occasion during the day and not at night²⁸³. The EPB took the criticism and promised to improve their practices in the future.

Beyond the dominating topic of the PM 2.5, other policy-related input was very scarce. The suggestions brought forward by netizens were typically very concrete and related to the specific local situation. An example is conversation 56, in which user “伟大射手座的盛怒” added to the post of the municipal EPB that reported on a meeting of the environmental monitoring network group. The netizen suggests that the bureau introduce garbage classification (cf. “为什么不提倡垃圾分类呢!?”). Just as policy-related suggestions are rarely directed at the EPB, the EPB rarely call for such input. Exceptions include threads such as conversation 57, which started with the EPB sharing a link to voting website where users can express their own ideas of an ecological Jiaying (生态嘉兴).

6.4.3 Public service provision

For the EPB, the provision of public services is not only one of its core tasks, but also arguably the area of its work that most frequently puts it into direct contact with both the people it should protect

²⁷⁹ Cf. the comment made by user “818gan”: “This time the expert is really made a scapegoat”(这时候专家倒真的是代人受过).

²⁸⁰ Cf. the comment made by user “轻二一举”: “The conditions are not ripe? What are the conditions? Bottom line is the government is afraid of the challenges posed by the public [...]” (条件不成熟? 什么条件? 说到底政府怕公众质疑 [...]).

²⁸¹ In a related conversation that took place a few days before, users expressed their lack of faith in existing standards and methods of measurement. The conversation centered on the announcement of the municipal EPB that it had just installed a new air quality monitoring device in the northern part of Jiaying. The discussants, however, doubted the usefulness of such a device; user “vivian 的快乐与你无关” made the very ironic remark was made that, while the human nose could detect the pollution, the devices could not (cf. comment “这设备没用吧? 人鼻子都闻到味道了它怎么就检测不到呢? ”).

²⁸² Cf. the official documentation for the standard on the MEP, available at <http://www.mep.gov.cn/image20010518/5303.pdf>, last accessed 14.12.2015.

²⁸³ Cf. comment: “Only one day of measurements, not convincing, there should at least be one night monitored” (只有一天的数据, 没有说服力啊, 至少晚上也得弄一份监测吧) from user “小白菜啊” and comment: “data with no night readings are not credible” (无晚上的数据, 无可信度) from user “嘉土 Chunghwa”.

and the culprits of environmental pollution. In this position, the bureau communicated the measures it took vis-à-vis polluters and the verdict it passed to its audience.

Before evaluating the interactions between the EPB and its audience related to the provision of public services, a summary is provided of both sides' expectations regarding their presence and usage of the social media platform. Conversation 154 is instructive to this; it reveals insights into the EPB's and netizens' different anticipations of their usage of the social media platform. The post central to the conversation was issued by the EPB on August 16th, 2011; it referred to a statistic provided by Sina Weibo relating to EPB's presences therein. In the post, the EPB stated that at the time it ranked as the third most prominent EPB account on the platform nationwide, only superseded by bureaus from Chongqing and Beijing. The audience's reaction can be divided into two categories. The first category included netizens showing support for the work of the EPB so far, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of environmental protection²⁸⁴. The second category included users who attributed the EPB's high ranking to the severe levels of pollution in the Jiaxing area²⁸⁵ and the vigorous nature of Jiaxing citizens, who pursue their concerns with verve²⁸⁶. In general, the netizens had very concrete ideas about how the EPB should use Sina Weibo. They explicitly remarked that, if the EPB wanted to increase its number of followers and subsequently its public visibility, it should make good use of the platform²⁸⁷ in the sense of taking care of the real needs of the people²⁸⁸. This request marks the EPB's descriptive and largely superficial description of its everyday activities and routines as superfluous. It suggests that netizens would prefer the EPB to listen more to users' input and react more to their requests and demands. At the same time, netizens considered the EPB's social media presence not as an end in itself but rather a means of staying in touch with people and solving actual problems, as exemplified by the comment of user "Mobius 木子": "to be concerned is to understand the trend of improving the environment, not to show off to your fans" (关注是为了了解改善环境的动向, 不是来给你炫耀粉丝的).

Earning praise from the public was difficult to achieve for the municipal EPB. Most of the positive comments directed towards the EPB occurred in conversations in which it stated that it had punished a company for pollution. An example of this is conversation 352, in which the EPB announced it was shutting down several factories for pollution violations. In its message, the EPB stated that it had shut

²⁸⁴ E. g. the post: "Awesome!!! Support, come on!"(给力!!!支持, 加油!) made by user "王晶晶 AYIXIN".

²⁸⁵ Cf. comment: "Jiaxing's pollution is not small, water pollution, air pollution, I really hope that Jiaxing's EPB (including its counties) get more powerful and determined to shut down a lot of polluting enterprises, to make the living environment of ordinary people better" (嘉兴污染不小啊, 水污染, 空气污染, 真希望嘉兴环保(包括下面五县)再给力一点, 下决心关停一批污染企业, 让老百姓的生活环境好一点) made by user "曝书亭儿".

²⁸⁶ Cf. the comment made by user "海上地平线" in the conversation.

²⁸⁷ Cf. the comment made by user "morningjean" in the conversation.

²⁸⁸ Cf. the comment made by user "唤醒之剑" in the conversation.

down another brick factory, totaling three in the city district, in an attempt to curb regional pollution. Only three people commented on or shared the post. This is a very low-key reaction, taking into consideration not only the scope of the measure executed by the EPB but also the severity of the pollution. In general the data of the municipal EPB suggests that receiving few but positive or neutral messages already is an accomplishment for the bureau and rather an exception than the normality. In general, audiences positively receive EPBs' measures of shutting down companies – even if only temporarily. Employees of the companies affected did not contribute to the collected discussions; their perspective was therefore not part of the discourses. Nonetheless, economic considerations were not entirely absent. Some users pointed out that even temporarily closing down companies translated into ordinary people losing income and that these measures may thus endanger the employee's livelihood. The users held the companies accountable for their closing down, which they attributed to mismanagement and criminal behaviour. The companies concerned did not join the discussion; their point of view therefore remains largely opaque.

Netizens' reactions to the punishment of a company also depended on the type of penalty to which the company was sentenced. In cases when companies were issued a fine, as in conversation 373, netizens tended to be more critical. In this discussion, netizens vocally demanded a more effective punishments of companies other than issuing fines; for example, netizen “石头紫溪” called for more severe measures: “[...] companies need to be punished severely not just fined” ([...] 要严惩破坏环境的企业，不仅仅罚款). The netizens argued that the scale of the fines was insufficient to prevent the affected companies from continuing their malfeasance or to thwart others from choosing a similarly environmentally harmful means of pursuing their business. Some netizens believed that the companies anticipated the fines and factored them into their business model, along with expenses for bribes, to remain undetected for as long as possible.

Netizens' very critical stance toward the use of fines against polluting companies raises the question of why this attitude developed and is so prevalent. In conversation 1,713, the user “梦想家-家瑋哥” presents one rationale for this reasoning:

[t]he government dares not to stop the company's production, because of the local economy. Companies do not want to invest in environmental protection, because of profit. Even though the government to protect the environment. But here is the contradiction. Fines are actually useless. For the businesses they are just a scratch. Stop production! As long as the problem is not fixed, the work can't be resumed!²⁸⁹

The understanding of economic growth and environmental protection as antagonistic is widely shared by the audience of the EPB. In this regard, conversation 245 is representative. This

²⁸⁹ Cf. the user's comment in Chinese: “政府不敢让企业停产，因为关系着当地的经济。企业不想投入环保，因为利益。虽然政府也想搞环保。但是矛盾放在这里。罚款其实是没有用的。对企业来说只是挠痒痒。停产！不整治好，不开工！” (conversation 1,713).

conversation was sparked by a post from the comparatively influential user “章剑”²⁹⁰, in which she elaborated on the difficult situation of local cadres, who were caught between safeguarding the clashing interests of their constituency and those of local businesses. Other users picked up on this and argued that businesses needed to meet their social responsibility and cadres needed to safeguard the people’s rights. According to them, problems only arose when cadres did not live up to their duty.

In general, the perceived fluctuation in EPBs’ public service provision was also attributed to the difficulties of finding cadres who were competent and not selfish; it was thought that even if such a cadre could be found, he was likely to turn bad in a short time, and that this pattern was apparent at any government level. The significance of this conversation is twofold: first, it shows that the municipal EPB was aware of the importance of local cadres and the difficulty of finding competent and impartial ones, and second, it shows that the people tend not to blame companies for their behavior so much as criticize the cadres’ inability or unwillingness to stand up for society.

In general, most netizens share the opinion of user “maryain” that environmental protection should be more prioritized than economic growth: “I hope that more people will consider environmental protection and not blindly prefer economic development” (希望能更多的考虑环境保护 而不是一味的发展经济)²⁹¹. The netizens considered a key problem to be the seemingly antagonistic relationship between economic growth and environmental protection. They felt that in Jiaxing the economy was considered more important than environmental protection (“济发展和环保谁轻谁重”²⁹²). Some netizens were convinced that the same dangerous prioritization was dominant on a national level, at which leaders “only care about GDP” (领导只关心 gdp 的)²⁹³. This remark reflects a criticism of the incentive structure the government has set up, which entices the cadres to focus on specific goals such as GDP growth in their region. Failing to meet the targets has a significant impact on a cadre’s career expectation. The incentive system referred to here is the cadre evaluation system (干部考核制度) (Kinkel & Hurst 2015; Gao 2015; Ahlers & Schubert 2015; Heberer & Trappel 2013). The cadre evaluation system serves – among other functions – to maintain a good level of public service provision, which in this case translates into well-performing environmental protection. The system discerns between different types of targets. If hard targets are not met, this significantly impacts on the cadre evaluation and thus its career perspectives. Typically, the increase of the GDP is such a hard target, but maintaining social stability is also a very widespread hard target. Veto targets

²⁹⁰ She is a very active user who has published more than 2,500 posts since her account was created on 21st January 2011. Up to January 2014, she attracted more than 60,000 followers – significantly more than the municipal EPB, which had about 45,000.

²⁹¹ Cf. the user’s comment in conversation 358.

²⁹² Cf. the comment of user “有馅的猛馒头” in conversation 87.

²⁹³ Cf. the comment of user “jxbella” in conversation 333.

(一票否决) are requirements which, if not fulfilled, automatically result in a negative cadre evaluation – regardless of their performance on the other indicators. The implementation of the one-child policy was typically a veto target. The third category, soft targets, only marginally impacts on the cadre’s evaluation; thus, these requirements are often neglected. Environmental protection is – if at all – typically located in this category. Against this backdrop, the cadres have intrinsic motives to favor economic growth over environmental protection, in order to advance their careers. This holds true up to the point at which environmental-related issues cause a rupture of social order. In this sense, the cadre evaluation system at least partially foils its purpose of increasing the provision of environmental protection as a public service.

A key factor influencing the scope of responses to the municipal EPB’s work was the amount of information the EPB provided. The netizens responded particularly positively to details, especially when some kind of measure was taken (such as halting a construction or work process) or fines issued. Otherwise, netizens remained very skeptical and reluctant to believe in the sincerity of the EPBs’ work. A comment made by user “幽兰 9999” is representative of this pattern: “I hope one day to see the specific enterprises and organizations here, rather than empty talk drifting with the wind”. The data shows that, while fines and temporary working bans were bureau’s most frequently used measures, its portfolio was quite diverse. In conversation 334, the bureau announced it had applied administrative penalties against the Green Friends LLC company in Pinghu (平湖市) city for dumping hazardous sludge and pursuing a public interest litigation lawsuit; societal users responded to his very positively (cf. comment “环保部门给力, [good] 处罚得好! [good]” by user “凝望树林”). Despite this positive reception, scholars remain skeptical about the measure’s impact, even suggesting its nature was one of monitoring rather than regulation (Carpenter-Gold 2015:271ff.)

A significant number of users’ comments directed at the EPB reflected a very critical attitude regarding the bureau’s credibility. A common argument suggested that both the municipal and its local branches were more dedicated to covering up pollution and safeguarding companies against public scrutiny than protecting the environment or the interest of the people. This widespread allegation was epitomized in the labeling of the EPB as a “pollution protection bureau” (污染保护局) by a particularly vocal user, whose name can be roughly translated as “old man planting trees” (种树的老人)²⁹⁴.

While the data at hand does not allow for proving whether or not the allegations are correct in general, correct in specific cases, or totally unfounded, it is safe to assume that a corruption scandal would further deteriorate the EPB’s image in this regard.

²⁹⁴ Cf. the user’s comment in conversation 530.

In 2014, a total of six members of Haiyan county EPB’s staff – including the former directory secretary and deputy – were involved in a corruption trial in Jiaying. They were suspended and sentenced to up to seven and a half years’ imprisonment for accepting bribes as bonuses (分红款). The convicts’ jobs were mainly to check that companies complied with the environmental law requirements. This included participation in on-site investigations in accidents, regular checks, and dispute resolution.

The corruption blossomed due to a lack of administrative oversight and insufficient control mechanisms. The convicts were sentenced not only for having protected polluting companies, but also for receiving payments from companies in the business of selling and installing pollution control equipment. The EPB staff members were in the unique position of having exclusive knowledge that companies needed to install or upgrade their emission control equipment; they passed this knowledge on in exchange for money. During the trial, one businessman who bribed the EPB’s staff is quoted to have said: “my business is doing environmental projects and sewage treatment facilities. I want good relations with the EPB staff, so they will recommend me to a number of polluting enterprises [...]” (news.163.com).

The trial against the corrupt staff of Haiyan had an earlier precedent in 2007, when a similar trial had been held in Hangzhou and 23 out of 90 accused staff members were convicted. The suspects came from 13 county-level cities of the region. The regional dispersion of the Hangzhou case suggests that the corruption in the Jiaying area case was not limited to Haiyan. Nonetheless, no formal or official charges have so far been brought forward (*Zhejiang Online* 2014).

The gathered data does not allow for checking whether the EPB sent inspections teams when called, or whether the inspection itself was conducted properly. In the worst-case scenario, public input may have actually increased corruption by directing corrupt EPB personnel to companies from which they could demand bribes in order to present a clean record to the public. The corrupt staff could have also benefited if they facilitated business between the polluting company and the producers of emission control equipment.

The Jingko incident

Besides the typical daily interactions, special events or crises have a significant impact on both the short-term and long-term relations between an EPB and its constituency. Their lasting effects are due to their prominence and symbolic character (King & Zeng 2001). A key incident in this regard is the aforementioned Jingko incident, which took place on September



figure 27: figure insinuating that EPBs protect polluting companies due to corruption. Source: news.163.com, last accessed 13.12.2015.

15th, 2011, when more than 500 people gathered before the factory of the Jingko factory located in Hongxia village (红晓村) of Haining city's (海宁市) Yuanhua town (袁花镇). The people were upset about the large number of fish dying in the nearby river and had decided to take action. The fish had most likely died after heavy rainfall had washed polluted material from the factory to the river; however, the pollution situation near Hongxia must have been severe for some time before the accident, as the deputy of the Haining EPB declared that the company had failed to meet standards since April²⁹⁵. A medical examination conducted in August had revealed that of Hongxia village's 3,300 residents, six had leukemia and 31 had other forms of cancer²⁹⁶. The Jingko Company was founded in 2006 and quickly became a successful producer of solar-related products. Furthermore, it had become a major source of environmental problems in the area even prior to this incident. Since 2010, the company has been listed on the New York stock market; its operating income in the second quarter of 2011 were some US \$350 million (cf. *ibid.*).

At the time of the incident protesters entered the factory compound and overturned eight cars. Later, several hundred bystanders gathered at the scene and witnessed the damaging of four police cars. Riot police had to be brought in to end the mass protest and restore order. The incident – of which photo footage is available – made it to the national news in China, was reported by the BBC²⁹⁷, and was mentioned in an article in the *China Economic Review* (cf. Dodson 2012). The Jingko company incident (晶科公司) becomes a topic almost instantly after the protests. In the conversations joined by the municipal EPB people question how, despite repeatedly reported trainings for staff members of company like Jingko in ecological consciousness incidents like this are still possible²⁹⁸.



image 15: Image showing mass protest of Jingko incident.
Source: <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-61-581868-1.shtml>, 13.12.2015.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Zhengyi Net, 20.9.2011. Jingko was likely among the companies on the blacklist mentioned in the municipal EPB's post on April 6th: “一批 11 家企业环保“黑名单”。 In retrospect, Jingko did not or not sufficiently implement the measures advised there within the given three-month period.

²⁹⁶ Cf. the entry in the online encyclopedia-like Baidu 百科 platform, available at <http://baike.baidu.com/subview/6506580/6622594.htm>, last accessed 5.4.2014.

²⁹⁷ Cf. BBC article, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14963354>.

²⁹⁸ Cf. comment: “I would like to ask, since you so vigorously promote the training and advancing of environmental and pollution monitoring, how could the Jinko company incident happen, does it really take a cancer village, people suffering from leukemia and dying to know that there is pollution? Is it possible that cancer can develop in one day?” (“我想请问，既然大力宣传培训推进环境监督与污染监测能力，为何还会

Despite the rumor that the Haining EPB at that point had already issued a fine of 470,000 RMB²⁹⁹ to the company, the opinions expressed in conversations with the EPB clearly suggested that drastic measures would not suffice to put the public at ease in this case. Discussants were particularly angry that measures were only taken after the media exposed the pollution and villagers took action. In their view, the scope of the pollution questions the ability of the government to tackle such issues; to an extent that corruption seems like the only plausible cause for the sloppy work³⁰⁰.

The questioning of training and supervision practices raises a particularly important point. In a conversation that took place only a month earlier; users had singled out the Jingko company as target for a supervision and inspection program³⁰¹. The program was announced by the municipal EPB and included instructors (指导员) who would be stationed at companies for one week to inspect the pollution prevention management at the factories (污染防治) while simultaneously examining the vicinity of the factories. The instructors were to work as both “police” and “doctors” on the scenes of potential incidents. It cannot be deduced whether – and if so, with what result – the Jingko company was included in the program from the available data. Against the backdrop of the potentially neglected societal input and the fact that the incident occurred only four weeks after the program, it is very likely that the belief of the audience in particular and the population in general in the effectiveness of such programs has diminished. This hypothesis is substantiated by comments made immediately after the incident, in which users criticized the fact that routine monitoring had not discovered the pollution earlier³⁰².

Discussants did not see the 470,000 RMB penalty as a serious effort of EPBs to punish the company. With regards to the gravity of the pollution and the economic clout of the Jinko company, it was seen instead as a symbolic gesture, signifying as politely as possible that such behavior is out of bounds (cf. comment “又一个“罚酒三杯”!” made by user “Dear-小笨”)³⁰³. A user named “Cindy 晶科” very clearly expressed this anger about the amount of the fine:

产生袁花晶科事件，难道一定要出了癌症村，患了白血病，死了人，才知道有污染吗？难道癌症是一天就能患上的？”) made by user “capricornzxd” in conversation 203.

²⁹⁹ Cf. the comment of user “稽小晨” in conversation 203: “according to reliable sources Haining’s EPB has decided to fine the Jingko company with 470,000 Yuan ” (据可靠消息，海宁环保已对晶科公司作出 47 万元的行政处罚决定).

³⁰⁰ Cf. comment: “村民闹事被媒体曝光才处理,之前干嘛去了，里面是否有腐败政府职能部门应好好查了” made by user “高小蒜”.

³⁰¹ Cf. comment: “[They, MD] must come to Jingko, and make unannounced visits” (那晶科一定要来，而且要暗访) made by user “清风岛的传说”.

³⁰² Cf. comment: “How did the EPB’s EIA go? How come the everyday control work did not find anything?” (环保局的环评是怎么过的？为何日常监察工作中没有发现？) made by user “ryan9527”.

³⁰³ He (2012) points out that the idiom “罚酒三杯” cannot meaningfully be translated into English, as “it is impossible to convey fully the praising and politeness” it expresses when criticism is voiced. Applied to the context of this conversation, the EPB fine is considered to be the most superficial and humble punishment possible, which is judged negatively by the audience.

[w]here is the basis for such micro-blogs, in our village one elder woman is from Jingko, people are still working there, the daughter of my mother's colleague is also working in this factory, everyone is regularly working there, where did you suspend the production for rectification, paying only 470,000, 470,000 are worth 38 lives, Yuanhua's entire water quality and blue skies are worth 470,000 „³⁰⁴

Neither the user nor her posts are available on Sina Weibo³⁰⁵, but this post reflects the feeling of a large audience. However, this post is the only occurrence in which the municipal EPB responded with a warning that spreading rumors can entail judicial consequences (cf. 传播谣言是要负法律责任的, 请尊重事实). This threat was not well received by the audience³⁰⁶. Particularly in a time of crisis, the EPB behaving threateningly towards users only undermined its image and the will of the public to interact with it.

A few days later, the municipal EPB issued a statement saying that almost ten of its experts went to the site of the incident to inspect the contamination and the process of its disposal³⁰⁷. After the initial activity about the incident, the topic slowly vanished from the agenda; it was only raised again two weeks after the incident, when the EPB again announced it had made an inspection to the Jingko factory to make sure the company stepped up its environmental protection measures and to listen to the suggestions of local residents³⁰⁸. The participation of the public as well as the verve with which the conversations were conducted steadily diminished over time and, after a last conversation on October 2nd, the topic did not reappear at all. However, the incident left its marks in the collective memory of the netizens is subsequently referred to as a symbol for the suffering of the people and their unfortunate experience with environmental disasters. The comment of user “一片世情一片天”, in a conversation more than half a year after the incident, illustrates this:

Ordinary people have become stench experts, we cannot always use historical problems as an excuse. The EPB's watch is only a means, it is really the municipal government who must make a decision. The lesson from Haining's Jingko energy is close at hand!³⁰⁹

³⁰⁴ The user comment in Chinese (“这样的微博哪里来的依据，我们村里的一个嫂嫂是晶科的，人家还是在正常上班啊，我妈同事的女儿也在这个厂里啊，都在正常工作啊，你们哪里来的停产整顿，才赔 47 万，47 万值 38 条人命，47 万值整个袁花的水质和蓝天？”) in conversation 206.

³⁰⁵ Whether this is due to censorship or the closing of the account is impossible to determine. The content of her post could be reconstructed by the answers and comments made to her statement from other users. In this sense, a technical “glitch” preserved the information.

³⁰⁶ Cf. comment: “Thank you for the warning, everybody is afraid of the law, ‘I do not dare to complain about anything again, We are butt people, how can [we, MD] compare [us, MD] with you, but, what is the fact? [...]” (谢谢你的警示，法律人人怕，我不敢再抱怨什么了，我们是屁民，哪里能跟你们比，但是，什么是事实? [...]) made by user “MJJandME“. The word “butt people” (屁民) can be understood as an opposing concept of citizen (公民) who are aware of civic obligations and those (屁民) who are not (cf. the corresponding Baidu 百科 article available at <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1971166.htm>, last accessed 25.3.2016).

³⁰⁷ Cf. conversation 209 from 19th September 2011.

³⁰⁸ Cf. conversation 223 from 27th September 2011.

³⁰⁹ Cf. the user's comment in Chinese (老百姓都成恶臭专家了，总不能以历史问题为借口吧。环保局再监管也只是一中手段，真正要下决心的是市政府吧。海宁晶科能源殷鉴不远啊!).

The pollution of the Jingko company factory was the single biggest event observed in the data. The demonstrations reached their hiatus when protesters stormed the factory compound in mid-September 2011 and demolishing the property (Wu 2011; Wenzhou TV online (温州视线) 2011). Even though the company's waste disposal system had been failing tests since April that year, the EPB was either unable or unwilling to pressure the company to control the emissions or temporarily shut it down (Qi 2011; Kurtenbach 2011). The incident was also part of the municipal EPB's conversations. The first mention of the company took place in conversation 140 on August 9th – about a month prior to the demonstrations turning violent. The conversation started with news from the municipal EPB that it was sending out trained personnel – so-called “factory instructors” (驻厂指导员) – to carry out inspections at designated companies for an extended period of time. This news was met with mixed responses, ranging from praises that pollution is about to be tackled to skepticism about whether the measure could adequately be implemented³¹⁰. The user “清风岛的传说”'s comment “You must go to Jingko, and make unannounced visits” was also made about a month prior to the protest. This indicates that the public already suspected the company of emitting illegal pollutions, even though at that time it was not public knowledge that the company had failed the test.

The impact of the Jingko incident was felt even half a year later, when netizens referred to the incident as an exemplary case that should never happen again. The consistency with which incidents similar to the Jingko incident occur has turned “people into foul smell experts”³¹¹. The remark describes how citizens have become sensitized and explains their initiative in bringing their grievances to the public, the authorities, and the media.

The Jingko incident is a rare case in which content that was previously deleted could at least partially be recovered. This was possible due to Sina Weibo including as much as possible from an original status when somebody else shares or comments on it.

In conversation 206, which started on September 18th, 2011, and centered on the Jingko incident, the municipal EPB commented on one user's status that “spreading rumors is liable, please respect the facts”. The netizen's original account could not be retrieved; neither could the original status to which the municipal EPB's comment referred. The user who initially published the deleted statuses was named “Cindy 晶科”; in the conversation, two text fragments relating to this account could be found. The first referred to the alleged number of casualties the pollution caused. The source material suggests that the account of “Cindy 晶科” stated that 6 cases of leukemia and 31 cases of

³¹⁰ Cf. the comment of user “天才小混混混”: “It is a good measure, but once it is implemented it may not be adequate” (是一个好办法, 但一落实起来, 就可能就会走了样).

³¹¹ Cf. the comment of user “一片世情一片天”: “People have become experts for foul smell [...]” (老百姓都成恶臭专家了 [...]) in conversation 847.

cancer were found in a village of 1,500 people.³¹² The second text fragment that can likely be attributed to the account talked about the compensation Jinko would pay. At the time, the sum was set at RMB 470,000, which several netizens stated was not enough to compensate for the deaths or loss of quality of life allegedly caused by the company³¹³. The amount of the fine was corroborated some days later by an official press release from the company (Jinko Solar 2011). The company stated that, prior to the fine issued in September, the EPB had issued another fine of the same amount on May 11th. The company stated that it had successfully appealed against the first fine, which was nullified by the EPB on August 7th.

Netizens responded to the municipal EPB's statement that spreading rumors might bring charges upon the instigator with a mixture of incredulity and sarcasm. User "MJJandME" stated:

[t]hank you for the warning, everybody is afraid of the law, I don't dare to complain about anything again, we are citizens³¹⁴ how can we compare with you, but what are the facts? We seek explanations!! The government does not come forward to explain, so citizens³¹⁵ have to take rumors seriously.³¹⁶

6.4.4 Knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation

At the end of the data-gathering process, the municipal EPB followed 280 other users on Sina Weibo, including its subsidiary branches in the Jiaying area as well as some EPBs from other regions. The latter were sometimes from the same province, but others were situated as far away as Beijing or Chongqing³¹⁷. As there was almost no trace of interactions between the Jiaying municipal EPB and these remote EPBs, how these ties were established remains unknown. A possible and plausible explanation could be that Sina Weibo – like many other social media platforms – suggests that its users follow other users who match their interests. In this way, an EPB in one area might be made aware of another and decide to follow it. The reasons why one bureau would follow another bureau in another province remain opaque. To assume that the suggestion mechanism is responsible seems reasonable, though, as it would also explain why the municipal EPB is following the prominent NGO

³¹² Cf. the first fragment, found in conversation 206: "6 human leukemia, 31 persons with cancer, and a village of 1,500 people" (6 人白血病, 31 人癌症啊, 一个村子就 1500 人).

³¹³ Cf. the second fragment, found in conversation 206: "[...] pay 470,000, 470,000 for 38 lives, 470,000 for the water and air of Yuanhua?" ([...]才赔 47 万, 47 万值 38 条人命, 47 万值整个袁花的水质和蓝天?). It should be noted that in this conversation, different assumptions about the actual size of pollution victims are already evident. The 38 lives mentioned here do not reflect the 37 victims mentioned in the first text fragment.

³¹⁴ The word "屁民" is very pejorative for "citizen", expressing the contemptuousness of the government towards its constituency.

³¹⁵ Cf. previous footnote.

³¹⁶ Cf. the user's comment in Chinese: "谢谢你的警示, 法律人人怕, 我不敢再抱怨什么了, 我们是屁民, 哪里能跟你们比, 但是, 什么是事实? 求解释!! 政府不出面解释, 屁民只能听听谣言来当真".

³¹⁷ Cf. conversation 258, in which the municipal EPB forwarded a message from the Chongqing EPB. This shows that the EPB was actually reading the content of the accounts it followed and trying to stay informed about EPBs in other regions.

“Friends of Nature” (自然之友), which is headquartered in Beijing³¹⁸. Despite the extensive interconnectedness of the bureau with fellow EPBs and a modicum of NGOs, the overwhelming majority of its interactions take place with netizens living in Jiaxing and its subsidiary EPBs. Where interaction with non-Jiaxing users takes place, these users are usually located in the provincial capital Hangzhou, the nearby metropolitan area of Shanghai, or Beijing. The frequency of interactions between communication partners decreases as the geographical distance increases. The data does not shed light on why people that seem to live hundreds of kilometers away from Jiaxing would join conversations dealing with local issues. Some of the remotely located people do not have verified accounts, so the home location they have given are not necessarily true. At the same time, some of these users *do* have verified accounts, and it can be reasonably assumed that their information is accurate. In these cases, the information available in the dataset suggests that these are either former residents of the Jiaxing area who still have personal and family ties to the region, or people who are particularly interested in environmental issues.

The vast majority of the municipal EPB’s communication with other state agencies was directed at the subsidiary EPB branches of the different parts of the Jiaxing administrative area. When it began its activities on Sina Weibo in February 2011, this was not possible, as the branches created their accounts later. In conversation 174, the municipal EPB announced that three EPB branches had created accounts on the platform. In its post of September 5th, 2011, the bureau added that these presences and its own serve as a point for the public to access the bureaus and promised not only to respond to requests but also to deal with them (我们将在第一时间作出回复和处理). The three accounts mentioned belonged to Jiaxing city’s Environmental Monitoring (嘉兴市环境监察), Environmental Monitoring in Jiaxing city (嘉兴市环境监测), and Jiaxing Environmental Approvals (嘉兴市环保审批).

From the day of its announcement, the municipal EPB maintained a constant rate of interaction with its local branches. These interactions were dominated by one pattern: the municipal EPB frequently delegated citizen’s requests and complaints to the local branches. The communication was not equally distributed among the branches (cf. figure 28).

Given the high profile of the previously discussed Jingko incident it is surprising that the Haiyan EPB rather than the Haining city-level EPB was the most frequently addressed branch. Almost a fifth of all interactions with its branches were directed at the Haiyan branch. The great majority of EPB branches only attracted about 13% to 10%. The three smallest of Gangqu (5.8%), Jiashan (4.7%), and Jiaxing approvals (0.7%) attracted significantly lower portions of the municipal EPBs interactions. The frequency of the interactions do not seem to follow a clear pattern; they are related neither to the

³¹⁸ Despite the tie between the municipal EPB and the NGO, there is not a single interaction between them in the entire dataset. In general, interactions with NGOs took place only very scarcely.

number of inhabitants in each area nor to the number of followers of each branch’s Sina Weibo account.

Against this backdrop, a possible explanation is that the industry located in the county-level city evoked frequent complaints from citizens. Reliable data linking the area’s industry to environmental pollution is missing³¹⁹; however, netizens clearly linked the pollution in the area to the industry. In conversation 569, the user “种树的老人” sarcastically stated that the ecological county of Haiyan is situated between nuclear power plants in its south and a chemical industrial zone in its north³²⁰.

In its communication with its branches, the EPB encouraged them to verify their accounts. In conversation 247, the municipal bureau congratulated the Gangqu EPB for its first tweet with its verified real-name account, while stating that some branches still lacked verification. This strong encouragement is most likely the reason why so many of the EPB branches in this area obtained a real-name registration after this announcement. The netizens welcomed the real-name registration, as they could now be sure they were addressing a verified government entity. While the real-name registration for citizens is a controversial topic – with contentious issues ranging from censorship to the advantages and drawbacks of anonymity – the mechanism is universally well received when it comes to state agencies. The data suggests two pivotal reasons for this positive reception. First, netizens can easily identify major state agencies such as the MEP or the State Council, but the same does not hold true for hitherto unknown agencies of lower administrative echelons. Second, verified accounts are more likely to be correctly categorized, as they generally provide more details on their presence; correct categorization thus makes it easier for netizens to find the appropriate state agency for their claims. The main cause for the municipal EPB’s frequent interactions with its branches was the requests and claims brought forward to it by locally resident netizens. The physical locality of netizens in the EPB’s area of responsibility radiates into the social media sphere.

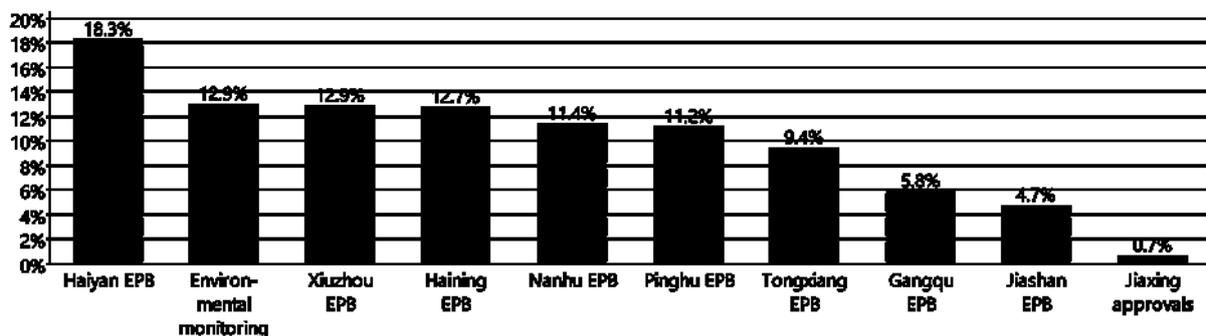


figure 28: Interactions of the municipal EPB with its branches, based on own data from qualitative analysis.

³¹⁹ It should be noted here that even though scientific evidence linking the local industry to the pollution – and subsequently to an increased level of complaints – is missing, this does not mean this is not the case.

³²⁰ Cf. the user’s comment: “Nuclear power plants in the south, a chemical industry zone to the north, Haiyan is an ecological county” (南有核电站，北有化工区，海盐是个生态县。) in conversation 569.

Most of the requests are delegated from the municipal EPB to one of its branches in whose area of responsibility the issue occurred. In most cases, the branches quickly respond to the delegated tasks – but not always. In conversation 41, the municipal EPB addressed the Nanhu EPB and asked it to “respond promptly” (请南湖区环保局及时回复) to a netizen’s complaint about air pollution coming from a handicraft factory located in Nanhu. Despite the direct request, the Nanhu EPB did not react. Since both the claimant and the municipal EPB did not pursue this issue, it remained unprocessed and unresolved. As pointed out in chapter 3, content posted on social media does not evaporate naturally³²¹ but rather stays available for the public to see. Against this backdrop, an unresolved issue such as conversation 41 contributes to a negative image of at least the EPB involved – especially if, as in this case, the netizen mentions that he or she has repeatedly complained previously and nothing happened ([...]投诉了 N 次, 没什么效果, 这是为什么呢?).

Even though visible disobedience or ignorance of the municipal EPB’s requests by its branches is scarce, such events are well suited to undermine the EPBs authority. An event with a similar outcome is represented in conversation 340. In this discussion, users complained that the email address “zhangjw@jepb.gov.cn”, which was listed on the municipal EPB’s website along with a request for public comment, was not working. Despite the fact that complaints had already been made for more than a week, the netizens pointed out that no action had been taken³²². In addition to the no-longer-working email address, the netizens complained that the EPB had originally promised to include the comments in their annual report. This complaint made by user “东升路小新” sparked a significant discussion, with more than 60 comments and reposts, which other users joined to criticize the EPB. The netizens demanded that the bureau fixed the email account and take their comments taken seriously. Some users even suspected the unexpected malfunction of the email address to be part of an EPB strategy to publicly call for comments but do their best to either not receive any input or not process it. The EBP reacted, announcing that the technical problems were fixed and that the consultation time was extended by seven days as compensation. This conversation shows that calls from state institutions for public comments on social media or internet portals are not only welcomed, but also actively used by the people. When the public faces obstacles to submitting their comments, they try to exert pressure and complain to at least have their opinions received, if not properly processed, by the EPB.

Conversation 344 represented a rather rare conversation in which the municipal EPB interacted with, referred to or mentioned other, non-state actors. In the discussion, the bureau announces that a

³²¹ As opposed to oral conversations, which after the sounds have faded are impossible to reconstruct and comprehend.

³²² The email address “zhangjw@jepb.gov.cn” is mentioned in the posts, thus further extending the scope of the public feedback.

center for environmental rights (环境权益维护中心) would be set up to provide legal aid for environmental protection. According to the EPB, the center was to be the first of its kind, not only in Jiaxing but also the whole province. The center's key tasks were to "use legal weapons to punish those who harm the environment" (用法律武器严惩危害环境者). The announcement was positively received by the public, with netizens signaling their sympathy and support. This conversation provides evidence that the EPB's dealings with non-state non-economic actors were mostly very well received by its audience.

Conversations in which the municipal EPB addressed other state agencies were as rare as its interactions with NGOs. These cases were very similar to the bureau's delegation of tasks to its branches: the EPB redirects an issue to another agency if it falls under their purview. In conversation 1,049, a user complained about the noise coming from a construction site and asked the EPB to take action against this. The EPB educated the netizen that his request should be directed at the urban management bureau (城管局), since noises coming from construction sites belonged to the latter's authority. In a similar case, the municipal EPB redirected a netizen's request concerned with social noise to the law enforcement bureau (执法局)³²³. Whether or not the municipal EPB is right to redirect netizens' requests to various other state agencies, the EPB's actions were contrasted by the actions of its branches, which in similar cases sent their own teams.

The municipal EPB occasionally but systematically publishes information about its branches. These messages are similar to its previously discussed introduction of its branches' Sina Weibo accounts or its encouragement to them to verify their accounts. One of these messages reveals netizens' critical attitudes towards EPBs. On November 15th, 2011, the municipal EPB announced that the recently appointed party-secretary would visit Haiyan county. The reactions of the public were in general very positive, if prudent. Some netizens welcomed the new staff member and hoped that a change in personnel would also lead to better performances, as "a new broom sweeps clean" (新官上任). Others, though, did not share this enthusiasm, calling for a more prudent approach and wanting to wait before judging³²⁴. More critical voices called for more action on behalf of the EPB and particularly mentioned that the establishment of a new leadership should not be taken as an excuse to slow down the EPB's work in the transition process.

The municipal EPB focused its communication on its subordinate branches in the Jiaxing area. It rarely interacted with other state agencies; on the rare occasions when it did, the EPB followed the similar task delegation pattern it exhibited with its branches. The virtual absence of interactions with NGOs or other types of organized societal collectives suggests that state-society interaction here was

³²³ Cf. conversations 844 and 437.

³²⁴ Cf. comment: "A new government has taken office, wait and see!" (新官上任, 拭目以待!) made by user "许新峰" in conversation 350.

limited to individual citizens. These citizens, in turn, built issue-oriented ad-hoc communities that were dissolved as soon as the underlying matter was resolved.

6.4.5 Summary

The municipal EPB's presence on Sina Weibo was very similar to those of its local branches. A significant amount of its published messages consisted of descriptions of daily work routines. Even though most of these updates did not trigger reactions from its audience, they did show to the Sina Weibo public that the EPB took its presence there seriously and was ready and receptive for input.

In the category of policy making, netizens very scarcely provided input to the municipal EPB – with the noticeable exception of the discussion concerning the introduction and application of the PM 2.5 air quality measurement standard. The prominence and longevity of this topic (not only on Sina Weibo) shows the severity of air pollution in China, but also that netizens are more likely to relate to issues tangible and accessible to them. This pattern is also very dominant in the public service category. Here, the EPB was able to attract positive remarks whenever it reacted in a timely and transparent manner to public requests. Often, however, netizens did not feel that the EPB took them seriously and even outright doubted the sincerity of its efforts. This was seemingly based not only on a general and diffuse skepticism against government entities, but also on netizens' past experiences. Additionally, cases of corruption such as the Haiyan EPB further contributed to a significant decrease of trust in not only the concerned bureau but also the municipal EPB – and arguably all EPBs in the area. The extent of netizens' mistrust was epitomized in the belief that the EPB did not protect the environment – and subsequently, the citizens – from pollution, but rather shielded the polluting companies from public scrutiny and legal consequences. This understanding was summarized in the description of the EPB as a “pollution protection bureau” (污染保护局, cf. figure 27)³²⁵. Netizens' lack of trust of the EPB was exacerbated by the EPB's seemingly unnecessary discretion in applying punitive measures. The bureau did not explain why it did not publish the names of companies it had punished. There could be legal constraints forcing it not to do so, but the tenacious reluctance to give more information – without providing an explanation for this reluctance – reinforces netizens' existing skepticism towards the EPB.

According to the knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation analytical category, the municipal EPB possesses a pivotal role in the network of EPBs in the Jiaying region. The relations mirror hierarchical dependencies in which the municipal bureau largely delegates tasks brought to it by the netizens to the corresponding local EPBs. It occasionally also shows support for local activities, and in this way increases the visibility of the smaller branches. Interactions with other state agencies occur seldom and communication with non-state entities, such as NGOs, is basically non-existent.

³²⁵ Cf. user “种树的老人” comment in conversation 530.

The analysis of the municipal EPB as the hierarchically uppermost bureau in the sample also revealed that the “offline” hierarchy extends into the realm of social media. The chronology of account creation by the branches, the way they were subsequently introduced, and tasks delegated to them allowed for the carving out of the network of EPBs in the area, and also suggests that their institutional hierarchy transcends into Sina Weibo.

Methodologically, this insight highlights the validity of the chosen mixed-methods approach. Only a mixed-methods design is able to reveal information that – from the start of the data gathering through the quantitative part of the analysis – remained undetected for technical reasons. The qualitative evaluation sheds light on these aforementioned “invisible” cases (cf. chapter 5) and thus complements the quantitative evaluation³²⁶. The late detection of the account in the analysis did not allow it to be incorporated into the analysis for technical reasons. It does however *ex post* prove that the selection of the Jiaying area as a case study was a good choice, as the regional network of EPBs in the region is even tighter than estimated in the previous chapter.

³²⁶ It should be noted that the extent of “invisible” EPBs remains at a fairly low level so that the previously gained insights remain valid.

7. Conclusion

The starting point of this study was the reasoning that China's highly responsive and adaptive political system was very likely to have developed a more nuanced and multifaceted approach when it comes to dealing with the rise of social media. This is not to deny or even ignore but to complement the rich scholarly insights into how the state uses repression, censorship and propaganda to keep control of the social media platforms and contain outburst of societal anger (Cairns & Carlson 2016; Brady 2016; Stockmann 2015).

The argument made here is that the focus on the success of the censorship and propaganda based Chinese model of what has frequently been labeled "networked authoritarianism" has largely ignored other phenomena happening simultaneously. This research follows Daniela Stockmann's and other's lead who assumes that the Chinese government is making use of social media beyond the repressive aspects represented in concepts like networked authoritarianism (DeLisle, Goldstein & Yang 2016b; Shi & Yang 2016):

"Their [the Chinese government's, MD] idea is to intentionally provide relative freedom on social media to then guide and steer the community by managing platforms with the help of institutions. I call that responsive authoritarianism – or authoritarianism 2.0. Allowing users to give feedback through social media and to participate in public discourse while scanning these debates offers a solution to the dictator's dilemma which refers to the problem of the authoritarian leaders not knowing what the people think about their leadership"³²⁷

In order to observe where and how the state might use social media other not for censorship, repression or propaganda but for deliberation it is necessary to see how they differ from the existing media. This is the first research questions as outlined in chapter 2.2 and addressed in chapter 3.

7.1 Social media's properties and deliberation

At the beginning of this research the questions were raised what key characteristic set social media apart from traditional ones and how can they be tied to deliberative practices³²⁸. This section not only summarizes the results of the relevant conceptual chapters (cf. ch. 3) but also presents insights gained during the empirical analysis (cf. ch. 5 and 6).

In the case of an authoritarian system like China – where the quality of local governance is a crucial factor the entire political system – social media because of their special properties can become an

³²⁷ This quote of Daniela Stockmann is taken from the report of an event of the German think tank MERICS (Mercator Institute for China Studies) "Authoritarianism 2.0 – Social Media, Political Discussion, and Authoritarian Rule in China". Daniela Stockmann was invited to talk about the topic as an expert (<https://www.merics.org/de/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungsueckblicke/authoritarianism-20-social-media-political-discussion-and-authoritarian-rule-in-china>, last accessed 20.7.2017).

³²⁸ Cf. the questions 1 and 2 enumerated in chapter 2.2.

important instrument for power consolidation. The transgression of geographical boundaries of social media is an important factor for deliberation for two reasons: first of all they allow citizens anywhere in China to virtually come together and voice their grievances to the - if present on the platform - proper state agency. Secondly the interactions remain available for evaluation by third parties, including higher ranking state agencies but also other netizens, NGOs or online journalists³²⁹. In general third parties can find the exact course of interactions on the platform which enables them to judge for themselves the behaviour of the involved parties. In this sense then social media exhibit more transparency by the way they record and protocol interactions for all participants and outsiders as well. For the public this can and as shown in several examples in the case study analysis (cf. ch. 6) has actually been used to hold state agencies accountable.

(Cha et al. 2010)The focus on deliberative practices however has also shed light on this characteristic from another perspective. In the mobilization literature social media usually are recognized as a platform where people from large distance to the location where an event is supposed to take place can be reached and mobilized either for online or “offline” support (Deng & Yang 2013; Sullivan 2014; Liu 2011a; Liu 2013a). For deliberation however the ubiquitous reach of social media is less important as most participants stem from the area that immediately is concerned with the particular issue discussed. As the qualitative analysis has shown almost all cases of deliberation are and remain limited to their localities. The few exceptions like the Jingko (晶科) incident (cf. ch. 6.3) are usually escalated conflicts where the citizens took their grievances and protests to the local streets.

Social media offer real-time communication (cf. ch. 3.2.2) which makes them a communication platform ideal for the very quick escalation of conflicts. Topics can go “viral” (Cha et al. 2010; Hu et al. 2016) which in China can translate to a local event becoming an issue receiving nation-wide attention. The qualitative analysis shows however that viral dynamics almost never occur in the everyday deliberative practices. Even attempts to gain the attention of provincial news outlets or reporters usually go unanswered. This is not necessarily some sort of anticipated obedience on part the addressed journalists who try to avoid criticizing even local governments as they are unaware whether or not this would already be a transgression of the invisible boundaries set out by the party-state. It is more likely that most stories despite the attempts of netizens cannot be escalated as they do not possess the potential to gain sufficient attraction for media professionals and other multipliers to engage (Davenport & Beck 2001).

³²⁹ The underlying assumption here is that state agencies from lower administrative echelons cannot easily censor or delete content. This argument is at least partially supported by two of the most extensive studies on censorship (King, Pan & Roberts (2013); King, Pan & Roberts (2014)).

Nonetheless the netizens interactions with the EPBs point to the characteristics so far only taken into account in the mobilization literature (Deng & Yang 2013; Liu 2013a). The free selection of communication partners (cf. ch. 3.2.4) does not only mean that netizens can establish links to one another to form networks which help them to distribute information and mobilize for events. It also means that given state agencies such as the analysed EPBs are present on social media platforms and recognizable as such, netizens will actively approach and engage with them. This indicates that the local bureaucracy is still an often approached contact. Given the scarcity of EPBs present on social media nation-wide and the willingness of citizens to engage with them social media represent a largely untapped potential for deliberative practices to be unlocked by the party-state. The strong focus on deliberation located at the first order of governance, as well as often successful interactions between the state and netizens, would be worth studying systematically from a comparative perspective³³⁰.

Key to the deliberations observed in this research is the ability of netizens to create and communicate their own concerns (cf. ch. 3.2.1). While they certainly at times struggle to find attention for their cause with the authorities, they can directly address them in a publicly documented manner. This marks a stark contrast to traditional media where journalists and reporters performed the task of a gate-keeper by filtering the messages they received from citizens before processing them journalistically or redirecting them to the corresponding authorities. Bestowed with the ability to publicly communicate with authorities netizens feel empowered and make use of it. Unlike before they are not merely reduced to consumers of information but are enabled to influence the setting of public agendas themselves. The limits of this empowerment however cannot be overstated. Given that a potential for influencing or even setting the public agenda exists for anyone on a social media platform, it is for most only a theoretical option. Social media are not an egalitarian or democratic space where any opinion or message holds the same value or is of equal importance. On the contrary typically the number of people following an account is the equivalent of its reach and power. Therefore a hierarchical system has established itself with so called influencers, opinion leaders or big-Vs (Luo 2014; Nip & Fu 2016; Shi-Kupfer & Zhu 2013). In most cases however the high number of followers on social media is a mere reflection of these individuals' reputation and prominence in real life. Accordingly the consumer-producer equalization (cf. ch. 3.2.1) enabling netizens to share their own opinions supplemented with audio-visual content sets social media apart from traditional media, but in practice the typical outreach is very limited.

³³⁰ For example, virtually none of the German equivalents of EPBs are active on social media; where German bureaucracy is present on social media, it tends to be less accessible.

While social media have created an unprecedented space for deliberative practices in China, their rise is also accompanied by negative phenomena. Social media offer opportunities, but are also the arena and source of much contestation in state–society relations. The emergence of social media was accompanied by nationalistic sentiments that pressured the Chinese government regarding how to conduct foreign affairs (Shirk 2011b), Han supremacism (Leibold 2010), and new phenomena like human flesh search engines (Cheung 2009; Herold 2011; Hatton 2014; Chao & Tao 2012) and the spreading of rumors (Kaiman 2013).

The primary limit of this research is its “cyberfield field research” strategy. It was a conscious decision to take the perspective of an ordinary Chinese netizen and collect all the data available to her as source material for empirical analysis. Future research, however, should take the insights gained here and validate and modify them – not only with other analytical instruments, but also and more importantly from other perspectives (Göbel 2014a). As a result of this study’s research design, the intrinsic motives of the netizens, cadres, and officials remain largely opaque. In-depth qualitative methods could shed more light on the inner dynamics of EPBs – or state agencies in general – when using social media.

7.2 China’s media change from an institutional perspective

How did social media become so successful and widespread in China? As an authoritarian system China’s party-state had to address the challenges of this “liberating technology” (Diamond 2010). The rise of social media did not take place in vacuum in China but in a very specific context which was beneficial if not necessary for the social media to become the omnipresent and ubiquitous phenomenon they are today. China’s media are marked by both change and continuity. As predicted by the model of institutional change China’s party-state used changed in the affecting the media as opportunities to add functionality to the media rather than abolishing them or trying to make them retain the status quo at all costs. Not all processes however have led to an immediate change of functional expectation from the party-state; some only changed the environment in which the media are operating in. Marketization is such a process. When it was first introduced in the early 1980s the media’s main task was still to convey propaganda and publicize government policies. The more marketization however gained tractions, the more the party-state had to change his mode of control. Where previously all media outlets were economically dependent on state subsidies, a market for advertisement developed in which media outlets had to compete for business³³¹. The more media companies became financially independent of the state, the more other forms of control were

³³¹ As discussed in more detail this also held true for the most part for party or state funded media (cf. ch. 4.2).

required forcing the party-state to adopt its modus operandi. The consequences of marketization today can still be felt, when social media companies reluctantly – at least at first and for a considerable time span – hesitantly if not sloppily implement government policies detrimental to their business such as the real-name registration (Shu 2016). While even social media companies eventually follow the party-state's directives it is precisely this new very modest amount of autonomy that has helped social media to become so successful.

Not all factors that shaped the media can also be related to social media. The process of internationalization for instance should not be confused with the protectionist policies that shielded Chinese companies from their global competitors. It seems reasonable to assume that Sina Weibo would have had at least a much rockier standing in the market if Twitter or Facebook were still present. The outward orientation of the Chinese media follows political considerations. The economic viability of these endeavors remain fragile and the scope of the publications is limited. This even holds true for Chinese social media platforms that are technically at least on par with their global equivalents. The platform WeChat for example is very popular in China but struggles to expand its influence outside China to more than mainland natives living there and trying to stay in touch with their contacts.

Similar to internationalization the professionalization of Chinese media has also very little impact on social media. Professionals working in social media are typically not the kind of journalist, reporters or editors that by the evolving professional ethos (cf. ch. 4.3). Employees of social media are typically concerned with technical issues rather than content production. Nonetheless social media have become a central platform where journalists and dedicated citizens can present their opinions and findings (Heberer & Müller 2017).

The context in which social media become prominent was coined by marketization and the standing dictate of the party-state that all media must promote official propaganda. When it became obvious that they were not only a thriving part of the economy but also offered entirely new ways of communication and interaction, the party-state experimentally assigned the new task of deliberation to (social) media. This supplemented the existing functions of policy dissemination or propaganda promotion in the form of the 50cent army (King, Pan & Roberts 2017:14ff.) The notion that social media may be used by China – or any other authoritarian system – is so far a neglected if not absent notion from the scientific literature. This research is offering a first assessment of these activities from both a conceptual and empirical basis in the hope that more research will follow. The following part is dedicated to examine the potential scope of deliberative practices as represented by EPBs.

7.3 EPBs scope of presences on Sina Weibo

In order to assess the existence and proliferation of deliberative practices on social media as put forward in research question 4 (cf. ch. 2.2) this research focused on the state EPBs' activities on a core social media platform: Sina Weibo. The list of EPBs accounts on Sina Weibo was generated through the platform's own classification system. Ultimately, the sample contained 133 EPBs, all of which were correctly categorized and officially authenticated accounts at the time of this research.

The data collection showed that EPBs were not the most active part of the state bureaucracy on Sina Weibo (Su & Meng 2016). The largest share of state accounts belonged to the PSBs, which were very active on the platform in terms of contributions and responses from the public. Indeed, environmental protection – as represented by the number of EPBs – was only marginally present. This is in stark contrast to reports on this policy field in more traditional media. Simultaneously, both large-scale environmental disasters and common phenomena such as smog triggered massive activity on social media. This seeming contradiction between the presence of the issue in public and the lack of EPBs to meet societal demand for discourse suggests a rather bleak situation for authoritarian practices in this policy field. The reasons for the mismatch between issue significance for society and lack of state discourse can be attributed to the general low importance of this policy field for cadres. The evident mismatch between societal interest in even very basic interactions with the state bureaucracy such as local EPBs and the state's in general reluctant attitude to engage limits deliberative practices on social media.

This may have changed since Xi Jinping took office in 2012. The Xi administration has begun to more extensively use social media (Tang et al. 2017) under the “Weibo, WeChat and Client” framework to provide a “direct channel to the government” (Hou 2017:149). At the same time the scholars suggest that the efforts in terms of control, censorship and repression have also significantly increased under Xi's reign. The Xi government seeks to bolster control of both the traditional and social media as expressed in the 2014 year of media convergence and has increased attempts to shape public opinion off- and online in a favorable way with the “50cent army” (Han 2015).

So far the repressive efforts have had a much more significant impact on the media than the deliberative and consultative measures. Against this backdrop this research concurs with Brady's assessment that :

“[...] we can expect that unless Xi eventually makes an adjustment in governance—handing more power to society to administer itself through laws and regulatory bodies, as advocated in *Under the Dome*, and allowing the Chinese media to be a ‘channel for the people to oversee state and societal affairs’—the likely outcome will be increased resistance to CCP rule, not less.”

The geographical distribution of EPBs largely reflected the pattern of internet diffusion in China. EPBs of coastal areas were typically more present on Sina Weibo than their counterparts in interior provinces – with the notable exception of the metropolitan area of Chongqing. Regardless of their geographical location, the EPBs present on Sina Weibo were able to attract only small or moderate audiences: from a few hundred to some thousands of followers. These rather low figures, however, must be put into context: most EPBs in the sample were responsible for small counties or county-level cities. Against this backdrop, the followership seems adequate. The analysis of the administrative level revealed that most EPBs belong to rather lower levels of the bureaucratic echelons, such as the village, township and county levels. While this reflects the natural asymmetry inherent to the hierarchical structure of the Chinese polity, it is deviant when compared with state agencies from other fields, in which the central level (中央及国家机关) accounts for more than half of all accounts (China's e-government network 2012; Ma 2013).

At the same time, findings from Tong and Zuo (Tong & Zuo 2013) suggest that the dominance of local bureaus has a positive effect on regime legitimacy. In their analysis of Sina Weibo messages related to mass incidents, the scholars found that discourses focusing on local conditions are far less threatening to the legitimacy of the political system as a whole than critique voiced at national policies, regulations, laws, or government staff. The majority of local EPBs thus offer netizens ample opportunities to channel their grievances to the immediately responsible EPB. The discussion then typically centers on local conditions; critique of, or references to, the polity are thus eclipsed by concrete attempts to solve a tangible problem. Complementarily, Hyun and Kim argue that the partial inclusion of the public in selected issues and deliberative practices are likely to increase regime legitimacy and stability (Hyun & Kim 2015).

The quantitative analysis proved that while other state agencies make extensive use of social media, EPBs are only marginally present therein. More importantly, the majority of EPBs fail to engage their audiences. As such, deliberative practices in the field of environmental protection are scarce, despite the prominence of the issue (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2014). Given that the central government has encouraged agencies at all levels and in various fields to make use of social media to promote transparency in governmental affairs and contact their constituency (Zhang & Chan 2013) EPBs will need to address this deficiency even in the Xi era (Yang, Liu & Li 2017).

In addition to their relative scarce presence on Sina Weibo, EPBs only started joining the platform in 2011 – several years after social media had been widely recognized as an established communication platform³³². The late anticipation of Sina Weibo, and the small number of EPBs that use it,

³³² Sina Weibo was founded in mid-2009 after the Chinese government had shut down the (then-leading, but foreign-based) platforms Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

contributes to an image of EPB as lethargic adopters of social media. In addition to their hesitant use of the platform, statistical analysis found that most content shared by EPBs is not of interest to the public, the great majority of whom (69%) did not respond to EPBs' content at all. This number includes forwarding of statuses, meaning that the EPBs' information was not passed on to other users. The generally late adoption of and lack of interest in social media by EPBs in China made it difficult to select a case study for detailed analysis of deliberative practices. Based on activity and size of followership, the Jiaxing area was selected as a case study for this qualitative assessment. The Jiaxing area is home to some of the most active EPBs on Sina Weibo; furthermore, the EPB covered almost the entire administrative region. This comprehensive coverage offered the unique opportunity to study not only individual EPBs but also the interplay between different EPBs, both on the same administrative level and in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

7.4 Daily deliberative practices and local governance

The Jiaxing was the basis of the case study in which the daily interactions between EPBs and netizens was analyzed to see how they relate to the – not necessarily – local governance as stated as the fifth explorative question guiding this research (cf. ch. 2.2). At the time of the research, there were 10 county- and county-city-level EPBs subordinate to the municipal EPB of the prefecture-level city. Due to the volume of information produced by the 11 EPBs' accounts, it was necessary to select individual accounts to make the qualitative content analysis feasible. As such, for the ensuing in-depth analysis of deliberative practices, three accounts were chosen to represent presences with small, medium and large followership and to reflect hierarchical dependencies³³³. The qualitative content analysis was based on the interactions of the prefecture-level EPB with 45,494 followers, the district-level Nanhu EPB with 714 followers, and the county-city-level Haining EPB with 20,691 followers. Based on a framework that sought to assess the impact of social media on governance, the three accounts' interactions and information were scrutinized to decipher whether they actually constituted deliberative practices suitable "to improve governance, enhance authority, and generate legitimacy" (He 2014:71) for the party-state.

The EPBs' presences were evaluated following the framework's four pillars of transparency, policy making, public services, and knowledge management with cross-agency cooperation. A large part of all three EPBs' messages consisted of descriptions of daily work routines. While these messages did not trigger reactions from other users on Sina Weibo (and therefore do not constitute a deliberative practice), they did document the seriousness of the EPBs. These frequent updates allowed others to get a glimpse into the EPB's – most likely idealized – daily affairs. Technically, it was impossible to

³³³ In addition, all accounts had to be regularly active with at least publishing one message every two weeks on average. Rybalko and Seltzer used a similar threshold of one message a month in their study (2010).

find out whether netizens used this opportunity silently or whether these messages were considered by the EPB's audience as useless and contributed to diminishing its scope on the platform.

The largest share of posts consisted of descriptions of daily affairs; posts relating to the transparency dimension of the analytical framework were shared to a far lesser degree. Nonetheless, for all three EPBs the transparency dimension was most prominent, along with the public service provision dimension. The EPBs actively tried to inform their audiences about news, regulations, and laws. In this disseminative function, the bureaus almost exclusively focused on local and provincial matters. The lack of promotion of national-level policies – even by the municipal EPB – is one of many indicators of the EPBs' strong local and regional focus. In addition to policy-related updates, the bureaus also solicited well-meant advice on how to save water and energy and reduce garbage in an educative manner. The nature of users' feedback on the EPBs' transparency-related posts depended entirely on whether the audiences considered the information useful. When the bureaus published information of interest to the public, they generally receive positive comments. This could have led bureaus to provide more and more adequate information to their audiences as time went by. However, the analysis showed that this constant incremental improvement did not take place: the bureaus did not adopt to provide better information to the public. As such, there is much room for improvement for EPBs to reach out to and activate their constituencies.

The least common aspect of deliberation was contributions to, and interventions in, the policy-making process. EPBs provided scant opportunity to participate in these processes; furthermore, in the few cases in which they did, the reaction was rather lethargic. The lack of options for inputting to the EPBs was as significant as the lack of requests from netizens and the anemic participation. Given their position at the receiving or implementing end of the intricate Chinese party-state system, the EPBs likely felt that providing input channels for policy suggestions or comments was not their duty – and indeed, might even be detrimental to them. They would focus rather on issues directly related to implementation and executing such policies. This hypothesis is congruent with the finding that all three EPBs had a distinct focus on the public service provision aspect of public deliberation.

Contributions to the category of public service provision were not only a key pillar of all analyzed posts, but also contained the largest share of vivid exchanges and interactions between bureaus and netizens. The vast majority of deliberative discussions focused on concrete complaints about air, water, soil, or noise pollution. Unlike most other conversations, these were generally not initiated by the bureaus, but rather by netizens who used the platform to vent their anger and approach EPBs for help. Key to the satisfactory handling of these requests, from the point of view of the netizens, was the timely feedback of the bureau's findings and steps taken. In most cases, the bureaus not only responded quickly but also provided detailed and credible feedback for the netizens, promising to investigate the allegations and take appropriate measures. Nonetheless, netizens also took these

opportunities to voice criticism in general and specific terms. On a broader level, the perceived prioritization of economic growth at all costs over minimal standards of environmental protection was frequently evoked. Criticism targeting the political system as a whole or its key characteristics was present – and not deleted by censorship – but rare; far more common was scorching criticism of local conditions. The most common theme was the alleged conspiracy between companies and cadres to cover up environmental pollution. Netizens voice stark criticism concerning this type of corruption, seeing it as the most important obstacle to implementing and executing environmental protection. In this context, it is significant to note that – other than discourses relating to the PM 2.5 air quality standard – the critique did not relate to insufficient or lacking laws, regulations, and guidelines, but rather almost exclusively to their insufficient implementation at local level. Corruption is a key topic because it threatens the CCP's rule and has frequently been invoked, especially during the auspices of General Secretary Xi Jinping (Keliher & Wu 2016; Fu 2015). By not adopting a more reflexive and transparent style, the EPBs run the risk of profoundly damaging their reputation and credibility on the platform; indeed, some netizens already scathingly refer to EPBs as “pollution protection bureaus”.

Another commonly occurring criticism was the lack of detail provided whenever the EPB became active as a result netizens' input. Solely confirming pollution, identifying the perpetrator, and reporting that a fine has been issued was often not deemed credible and did not satisfy the curiosity of the audience. Providing specifics – such as the company's name, details about the pollution, and how the bureaus are trying to make sure it does not happen again – is crucial to gaining netizens' approval and trust. Despite netizens frequently requesting this information, all three EPBs repeatedly refrained from providing it. This is particularly detrimental given the dire need of all local bureaucracies – not just EPBs – to refute allegations of corrupt practices. With regard to governance the interactive characteristic of social media should be taken more into account by the EPBs. When netizens are given the opportunity to ask specific questions, these claims need to be addressed adequately by the EPB. Ignore claims or replying with empty phrases without actually answering the raised questions reduces social media to a mere propagandistic platform. The key to use social media as a deliberative arena is to not only listen to netizen's input but to respond and ultimately put the discussion into practice when applicable. As shown in the qualitative analysis the lower the position of the EPB in the administrative echelon the easier it seems it is to answer to netizens questions and execute related measures. In this sense the deliberative practices on social media can enhance governance in the sense of first-order governance but are not likely to go much beyond.

Existing research does not incorporate interactions between government entities on social media. As such, this research provides the first insights into inter-bureau communication on the platform. The municipal EPB possesses a pivotal role, as it was the first bureau of the area to create a Sina Weibo

account. Netizens frequently address the municipal EPB with their concerns about acute pollution, most likely due to its size and prominence. The municipal bureau then redirects the request to the bureau of the relevant area and prompts it to take action. In almost all cases the subordinate branches comply and take over. This pattern not only reflects the administrative hierarchy, but also draws more attention to the smaller bureaus, publicly designating them as officially sanctioned contacts for netizens³³⁴.

In general, however, communication between the areas' EPBs remained at a fairly low level. All interactions that the EPBs had with themselves, peers at different administrative levels, and other state agencies were captured by the analytical category of knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation. Apart from the municipal bureau delegating tasks to subordinate branches, virtually no other communication between these agencies could be identified. This suggests that the EPBs focus strictly on their field of duty and have a strongly developed orientation – even in their social media activities – to follow 'offline' hierarchical relations. However, local EPBs were clearly aware of one another; by "following" each other, they were kept in the loop about activities elsewhere.

Communication with other state agencies was very rare – largely limited to the department of transportation and the local PSBs – and consisted of redirecting netizens' complaints to a more appropriate authority. Information diffusion, in the sense of EPBs forwarding interesting or relevant information to one another, was very rare. From netizens' perspectives, increased sharing of information among state agencies in general – and EPBs in particular – would ensure that the administration is up-to-date, especially at the grassroots level. Similarly, it would be useful for netizens if more state agencies – not just the EPBs and PSBs on which this case study focused – were present on Sina Weibo; the coverage of more policy fields on the platform would enable the fulfillment of more societal needs.

The findings of this research imply that social media are useful but confined to increasing first-order governance (Kooiman & Jentoft 2009), which is concerned with the "nitty-gritty of governance activity" and "starts with the identification of problems" which only become so "in the minds of societal actors" (Kooiman & Jentoft 2009). Social media offer the space for state and societal actors to meet, communicate with each other, and even team up to deal with local issues. In this regard social media can give citizens the crucial feeling (Göbel 2014b) that their needs and complaints are heard and processed – albeit with varying levels of satisfaction.

From a conceptual perspective, the concentration on local issues by users living in the localities renders a key property of social media – the transgression of geographical boundaries – useless. The fear that conflict will take place between EPBs and netizens, gain provincial or even national

³³⁴ Technically, this designation would not be necessary, as the EPBs branches all had verified accounts at the time; as such, netizens could already be sure they were addressing an official state agency.

attention, and evade state control is not supported by the data³³⁵. This is not for lack trying on behalf of netizens, who frequently forward their cases to national news outlets. In turn, news outlets likely do not react because a bad-smelling smoking chimney in Jiaxing does not qualify as national – or even provincial – news.

The deliberative practices observed in this analysis also indicate that social media – even when used constructively by state and society – cannot compensate for or mitigate fundamental conflicts inherent to the polity structure. An example from the data is corruption, which for years has been framed by both the state and society as a key threat to the political system’s legitimacy. Based on the data, however, there is no indication that deliberation in social media is working as a counterforce threatening the political system as a whole. On the contrary: the often-observed phenomenon of netizens venting their anger, which positions social media as a pressure relief valve (Chen 2016), is accompanied by the imminent danger social media becoming a pressure cooker (Hassid 2012; Qiang 2011).

The deliberative practices also show the limits of citizen’s power vis-à-vis state entities. Even though EPBs are in most cases engaging citizens and seem to address their concerns, citizens did not have any power to hold them accountable in cases where they felt not treated properly or where they felt that more adequate measures were needed. Pressurizing local EPB by addressing their superior branches did not in most cases yield satisfactory results – if any. Ultimately the EPBs could simply ignore the citizen’s comments, complaints and demands even against eyeball and graphical evidence in some cases. In this regard Heberer’s assessment that in deliberative practices the party-state “it is the party-state which decides” (Heberer 2016:19) also holds true in social media. At the same time citizens did not succeed to gain attraction of larger media outlets such as provincial or national television stations or newspapers needed to create sufficient public pressure to have the local state authorities address their complaints. As highlighted in the chapter 3 social media are in this regard not a platform that provides individuals with reliable opportunities to medially escalate their conflicts.

This research has shown that deliberative practices in social media exist, and has provided insights into the extent to which they exist. Environmental protection remains only a peripheral policy field on social media in terms of active state agencies on Sina Weibo as the quantitative analysis has clearly shown. The case study chosen for the qualitative evaluation following a most-likely heuristic

³³⁵ The Jingko incident does not nullify this statement, as the violent event happened prior to the topic gaining traction on social media. Additionally, the story only became well known in China and abroad because it was reported by traditional news outlets, such as newspapers and television.

proved to be correct, as the EPBs of the Jiaxing area were very active in terms of responding to citizens county governments (Chen, Pan & Xu 2016)³³⁶.

The contribution of the deliberative practices to the government however remains fairly limited. The observed interactions remain at very descriptive levels addressing almost exclusively only local issues. In doing so however the netizens typically voice their grievances about the lack of insufficient implementation of already existing laws and regulations rather than providing input for new legislative initiatives. The lack of policy suggestions can be explained when taking into account that the observed EPBs are situated at the lower administrative echelons of the bureaucratic system of the party-state have no legislative power in their own right. As such deliberative practices as observed in the case study are largely focused with public service provision. The properties of the social media platform make EPBs very approachable for netizens. Most interactions involve local netizens and address local issues. As such deliberation here is primarily concerned with local governance.

³³⁶ Chen, Pan and Xu conducted an online field experiment with 2,103 Chinese county-level governments. They found that the governments responded on average to about a third of all citizens demands expressed online.

8. Annex

8.1 Overview of retrieved information

List of information retrieved for Sina Weibo users using the REST interface of Sina Weibo. (cf. <http://open.weibo.com/wiki/2/users/show>, last accessed 21.9.2014).

variable	type	Description
id	int64	user id
idstr	string	user id string
screen_name	string	user screen name
name	string	user name
province	int	user province
city	int	user city
location	string	user location
description	string	user description
url	string	user url
profile_image_url	string	user profile image url
profile_url	string	user url
domain	string	user domain
weihao	string	user weihao
gender	string	user gender
followers_count	int	user follower count
friends_count	int	user friends count
statuses_count	int	user statuses count
favourites_count	int	user favourites count
created_at	string	user account creation date
geo_enabled	boolean	indicating if the user let's Sina Weibo know his exact location
verified	boolean	indicating if the user is verified
verified_type	int	indicating the users verification type
remark	string	remarks about the user account
verified_reason	string	reason for verification
online_status	int	the user's online status at the time of retrieval
lang	string	the user's language setting

The user information was provided by the Sina Weibo API in the form of a JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) entity like the one shown below. The JSON-object then had to be parsed and converted before it could be stored in the database.

```
{
  "name": "微博开放平台",
  "domain": "openapi",
  "geo_enabled": true,
  "followers_count": 13247,
  "statuses_count": 158,
  "favourites_count": 0,
  "city": "8",
  "description": "新浪微博开放平台市场推广官方账号，如有技术问题，请@微博 API 或者发私信给微博 API",
  "verified": true,
  "status": {
    "created_at": "Mon Nov 29 16:08:43 +0800 2010",
    "text": "各位开发者，我们的论坛上线啦~http://sinaurl.cn/h4FWc7 欢迎大家的参与~另外，关于技术相关的问题，可以在论坛上提出，也可以@微博 API 这个官方技术支持账号哦~感谢大家对开放平台的支持~[呵呵]",
    "truncated": false,
    "in_reply_to_status_id": "",
    "in_reply_to_screen_name": "",
    "geo": null,
    "favorited": false,
    "in_reply_to_user_id": "",
    "id": 3958728723,
    "source": "<a href='\"http://t.sina.com.cn\"' rel='\"nofollow\"'>新浪微博</a>"
  },
  "id": 11051,
  "gender": "m",
  "friends_count": 5,
  "screen_name": "微博开放平台",
  "allow_all_act_msg": true,
  "following": false,
  "url": "http://open.t.sina.com.cn/",
  "profile_image_url": "http://tp4.sinaimg.cn/11051/50/1280283165/1",
  "created_at": "Wed Jan 20 00:00:00 +0800 2010",
  "province": "11",
  "location": "北京 海淀区"}

```

List of information retrieved for Sina Weibo status and comments (cf. <http://open.weibo.com/wiki/2/statuses/show>, last accessed 20.9.2014).

variable name	type	description
created_at	string	creation date of the status
id	int64	status id
mid	int64	status mid
idstr	string	status id as a string
text	string	status text
source	string	status source
in_reply_to_status_id	string	string indicating the status to which this is a reply to
in_reply_to_user_id	string	string indicating the user to which this is a reply to
in_reply_to_screen_name	string	string indicating the user screen name to which this is a reply to
thumbnail_pic	string	small version of an image attached to the status
bmiddle_pic	string	middle sized version of an image attached to the status
original_pic	string	original version of an image attached to the status
geo	object	geographical information about the exact location this status was sent
user	object	information about the user who posted this status
reposts_count	int	number of reposts of this status
comments_count	int	number of comments to this status

Similar to the user objects the status and comments information were provided by Sina Weibo in a JSON entity.

Not all of the retrievable information was useful for the aim of this study and so a substantial of it was not stored in the database as it would have further increased its size. The data fields provided by the Sina Weibo API that were not included in the data set can be divided into two groups: the first group consists of information that would have been useful had the aim of the research design been different. If a large scale quantitative network analysis had been part of this study information such as the ids of followers and friends would have been included in the database³³⁷. In fact at the beginning of the data collection this information were stored, but as limitations with regard to the speed of accessing the data³³⁸ and the size of the database become apparent these information were no longer gathered for the biggest part of the sample.

³³⁸ Retrieving the followers and friends of a given user at the time would have approximately slowed down the collection process by the factor of 10 due to rate limitations imposed by the Sina Weibo API (cf. <http://open.weibo.com/wiki/接口访问频次权限>, last accessd 20.9.2014). Additionally the number of followers and friends that could actually be retrieved was limited by Sina Weibo to 5,000. Depending on the popularity of the users this would have only yield a partial representation of the user's actual network.

The second group of omitted information consists of technical aspects. These data fields would only have been useful if the data retrieval software had been distributed to individual Sina Weibo users so that they could use it themselves – like a commercial application. As the purpose of the software was only to gather publicly available information there was not need to offer the software to a larger public and so data fields indicating for instance whether a user was allowing all other users to or only a restricted group to communicate with him or her were not stored.

The data collection software had to take the data fields provided by Sina Weibo and convert them into a format which then could be stored in the database. At times this was required as the format provided by Sina Weibo was not supported by either the retrieval software or the database storage engine. The creation dates of users, statuses and comments are such an example. Sina Weibo provides dates in the format like “Sat Nov 27 10:08:43 +0000 2010”³³⁹ whereas the date was stored in a format like “2010-12-27 10:08:43”³⁴⁰ thus making some computational conversion necessary.

³³⁹ The part of the date „+0000“ represents the offset in hours to the GMT time.

³⁴⁰ The GMT offset is not represented in this time format and was also not stored in the database.

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