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This paper focuses on the historical relationship between new media development and Chinese politics that led to the formation of the Chinese state's strategy on media convergence in 2014. Specifically, it analyses a series of influential public controversies in China's microblog or Weibo sphere in the formative years of Weibo's development (2011–2012) to reveal the profound class biases, partisan excesses, as well as symbolic violence of Weibo as a platform for public deliberation on Chinese politics. The degeneration of Weibo politics and its anti-democratic nature foreshadowed the state's intention to steer the direction of media convergence to ensure that the process will not be hijacked by elite interests so as to sustain some resemblance to the CCP's traditional mass line mode of political communication. However, how to realize the state's vision remains a formidable task.

KEYWORDS   microblogging; Chinese politics; media convergence; new media

Introduction: Microblogs and Media Convergence

On 18 August 2014, Xi Jinping presided over the Fourth Conference of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms. The Conference deliberated and passed the resolution of "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Converged Development of Traditional Media and New Media." In his speech at the meeting, Xi Jinping emphasised the need to accelerate the convergent development of traditional and new media, make full use of new technologies and new applications to innovate the means of communication, and to occupy the commanding heights of information communication (Liu 2014). This set the CCP's tone for media convergence, and made 2014 the inauguration year for convergent media development in China.

The implications and significance of this decision need to be understood in light of the development of China's new media in the twenty-first century. Liu Qibao, Head of the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee, admitted that the ability of traditional media to guide public opinion has been challenged. Moreover, he asserts that "the Internet has become the main battlefield for public opinion and is directly related to China's ideological security and political security" (Liu 2014). Within this context, the rise and fall of microblogs, or Weibo, as China's first influential new media offers far-reaching lessons for the CCP as it tries to win the battle for public opinion in the age of the new media. This paper revisits this history to illuminate the nature of new media politics and explore the future of new media development in China.

The age of microblogs began with the launch of *Sina Weibo* (*Microblog*) beta version in August 2009. Notably, this was also the year Google withdrew from China. Microblogs

peaked in 2011. Interestingly, this year also witnessed the chain-reaction event of *The Jasmine Revolution* in the Middle East and North Africa on social media and the banning of foreign social websites such as Twitter and Facebook in China. By 2014, *Netease Microblogs* had encountered its demise, while *Sina Weibo* had experienced a major decline. Together these two developments marked the end of microblogs and the arrival of the age of *WeChat*. From its initial popularity to its quick demise, the golden years for microblogs lasted no more than 5 years. Still, microblogging not only left a long shadow on contemporary Chinese politics, but also revealed the crux of the problem that plagues the politics of media convergence in China today. Traditional media are state-owned, while new media are privately owned. Traditional media focus on content production, whereas new media leverage platform power. Under such a circumstance, the question of who "converges" with whom is of crucial importance as far as the CCP's ideological agenda is concerned.

Today, even though WeChat has replaced microblogs as China's primary social media platform, the hegemony of the platforms and channels has been consolidated. As the financial share of traditional media advertising has been usurped by new media, profits for traditional media have fallen sharply. From newspapers to the broadcast industry, the entire traditional media system is at the threshold of an unprecedented existential crisis. What does the rise and fall of Weibo reveal about the recent history of media transformation and development in China? Is it possible at all for state-driven media convergence to make traditional media more robust? What kind of tensions have underpinned the evolution of old and new media and politics in China? To where will China's media reform lead?

Social Classes, Partisanship, and the Imaginary Civil Society

The emergence of new media is inextricably linked to developments in Chinese politics. New media is both the barometer of the Chinese political sphere and a structurally constituting part of Chinese politics itself. At its inception, *Sina Weibo* as a new media platform was endowed with democratic expectations. However, how was it structurally established? If one examines the recently revealed story of Chen Tong, then chief editor of *Sina* and the Godfather of the *Weibo* era, it is clear that elitism is a defining feature of Weibo:

> Chen, within a week of the launch of Weibo, settled the goals and tasks of his celebrity-focused strategy. Every single employee in each department at Sina was required to contact and create accounts for at least 20 celebrities or opinion leaders. They also had to ensure that those users were active enough, otherwise, the department leader and the person in charge would be internally fined. For every top-class celebrity invited to Weibo, the inviter would also be awarded 3,000–10,000 RMB.

> Chen explained his celebrity-focused strategy during an earlier interview, saying "we could not go for the grassroots first, or play the technology cards. Neither of these were our strengths. Our advantage was accessing and recruiting high-end people, opinion leaders, celebrities, high-rank and influential people from different communities, and those highly educated, having higher socio-economic status, as well as those in power within their organisations. We want them first. We have to play the game according to our own strengths."

> Among these, media personalities and celebrities were on top of Chen's list for relationship building: while the former have the voice, the latter have the convening power. "You do not register your Weibo account because of your friends, you do that for the celebrities you like," said Tan Chao, the former leader of the rumour-refuting department of Weibo. Tan thought that the participation of celebrities and media personalities secured the abundance of information sources and the activeness of communication on the Weibo platform (Li 2015).

That said, convincing celebrities, especially stars and entrepreneurs, to join the platform was not an easy task for the then newly-launched *Weibo*. To do this, Chen offered *Sina* web portal's resourceful and powerful promotion ability as an incentive, and also proposed and pushed for the fastest and the most comprehensive client service for users at that time. Internally at *Sina Weibo*, the service staffs were called "the waiters."

For those extremely important celebrities, Chen would try to build personal relationships with them by, for example, inviting them to dinner. Real estate tycoons Pan Shiyi and Ren Zhiqiang were all frequent guests at Chen's dinner parties. According to a former media celebrity who frequented Chen's parties, Chen was a very dependable person: every party or gathering was hosted at least in a five-star hotel. Aside for giving toasts like "thanks to everyone for your use of *Sina Weibo*," Chen hardly touched upon the topic of *Weibo*, public opinion control, and regulation. More often, he was drinking, making friends, and talking about soccer, life, and current hot topics. At every gathering, the guests would receive gifts from Chen: the newest electronic devices at the time, such as iPhones, iPads, or even the latest models of laptops.

According to a Sina Weibo employee, Chen's meetings with celebrities such as Mr. Pan Shiyi and Mr. Ren Zhiqiang were extremely valuable: "company owners like Pan and Ren can motivate tens of thousands of their employees to sign up on Sina Weibo" (Li 2015). After many of these dinners and gatherings, Chen became close friends with these celebrities. They interacted online with each other on Sina Weibo and supported each other offline.

The above picture revealed the class nature of Sina Weibo's structure: the combination of capital, market, and celebrity-oriented strategy predicated the bundling of the fates of public intellectuals, the Water Army of paid posters with Sina Weibo. Weibo is, in fact, a collective platform of the voices of the powerful, and its influence grew on their voices' amplification and integration. Weibo went against democracy since the very beginning. That is, not only does it not impose any restrictions on the powerful classes, but it also, on the contrary, clings to the branches of existing power. In this way, Weibo has a necessary duty to glorify the powerful, the rich and the elites, and to manufacture so-called public opinion for them. This logic has inevitably led to the fabrication of information. As a consequence of such grooming and condoning, the operation of Water Army on Weibo soon developed into a complete industry chain of rumour fabrication. This wildfire of Internet rumours, in turn, provoked governmental intervention. In June 2012, Weibo pushed out a real-name verification system under governmental pressure. In 2014, the government began regulating some "big-V" (VIP micro-bloggers) accounts. As a result, the Internet elites, who used to possess considerable powers, lost their protective environment. By 2015, Weibo had basically lost its role as an incubator for online political topics in China. One of the defining moments was Chen's complete departure from Sina Weibo. Existing analyses often study the fall of Weibo from a technological or economic perspective;

however, if viewed as a failure of an imagined civil society, and if considered from the standpoint of the corrupted anti-democratic roots of Weibo's history, we may be able to find more pertinent answers.

The research findings of Wang and Yang (2012), for instance, show that: 1) Online public opinion platforms such as Weibo have actually provided an important channel for the expression of partisan opinions and advocacy of particular political views, and 2) influential public opinion leaders are groups of people with similar social roles, class identities, and homogenised political views. Moreover, opinion leaders on Weibo also had clear and common political goals and were active and spontaneous in using cyberspace for political mobilisation, which influences real-world policy-making and promotes political reform in a particular way (Wang and Yang 2012, 48–62). Because opposing facts and counterarguments can hardly enter the discussion around a certain topic, the spaces for political discussion on new media platforms like Weibo are highly exclusive. Among those viral public debates triggered by Weibo, legal cases usually received the most attention and were the most controversial. In particular, advocacy-driven partisan lawyers, who constitute an important group of public intellectuals, often emphasised the importance of the independence of legislation and enforcement on the one hand, while on the other hand, supported and participated in online public opinion's interference with the legislative and enforcement processes.

In July 2015, the Ministry of Public Security tracked down a criminal group that used the platform of Beijing Fengrui law firm to incite a group of lawyers, agitators, and petitioners to spread rumours and create social instability. The police had identified more than 40 cases of deliberate manipulation by Fengrui law firm, with the purpose of interfering with the normal operation of the judicial system (Huang and Zou 2015). This case was portrayed in some Western media outlets as the "Great Apprehension of Lawyers of July 9th (709)." Diplomatic authorities from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany made respective official declarations on "July 9th," and demanded the Chinese government to release the concerned lawyers to protect "human rights." Their involvement further amplified the gravity of the case. Meanwhile, associations of lawyers in the West and other relevant organisations also co-signed a public letter to pressure the Chinese government. The American Bar Association even gave its first "International Human Rights Award" to Wang Yu, who was one of the arrested lawyers from Fengrui law firm. On 4 August 2016, Zhou Shifeng, the former director of Fengrui law firm, was sentenced to seven years in prison. On 27 July 2017, influential lawyer Chen Youxi published an article entitled "It Is Time for Serious Self-Reflection" on Weibo, arguing:

> using unlawful means to incite petitions, sit-in protests, demonstrations, sending gravestones, lighting candles, hiring Water Armies to promote online rumours, and expecting the support of overseas democracy movements are not the duty of lawyers, and they do not fit in the framework of three major procedural laws. These things can be done by ordinary people, and street revolutionaries, but do not fit into the responsibilities of lawyers … Online hypes of the Internet age have amplified the influences of these people and their crooked voices (Chen 2017).

This statement confirmed the existence of partisan lawyers, while itself also incited intensive debates between official lawyers and partisan lawyers (Gan 2017).

On Christmas day of 2010, Qian Yunhui, a village chief in Leqing county, Wenzhou city of Zhejiang province, was crushed to death by a truck. Although Wenzhou police authorities

had determined that this was a traffic accident, online opinions believed that Qian was murdered by the authorities to stop him from making petitions about local land requisition. Subsequently, some active "big-V" intellectuals, many of whom are legal professionals, sent several "independent citizen investigation groups" to Leqing county, trying to get the "truth." However, not only were these groups soon internally divided, but the pressure to be "politically correct" eventually overcame the pursuit of "truth" as well. These investigations that concurred with the Wenzhou police's determination were singlehandedly challenged, and, predictably, attacked and cursed on Weibo. Research about the online discourse of the incident found that, when a "politically correct" framework was predetermined, any counterarguments would suffer from self-censorship, and make a mockery of "freedom of speech" (Wang 2013, 30–37). In the end, these independent investigations failed, turning "truth" itself into a distant mirage.

Even though "civil society" and "civic actions" were the holy grails of liberal intellectuals, they have repeatedly missed each other in Chinese reality. Their mismatch also registered an incompatibility between a Weibo incident and real-world occurrence, and the missing joint is democratic politics, as we will see in the case studies in the next section.

State, Public Opinion, and Democratic Politics

The Guo Meimei incident stirred up by Weibo is a good case in point. In fact, this incident continues to have an impact today. In June 2011, Guo Meimei, a young woman who claimed on Sina Weibo to be the general manager of a company called Red Cross Commerce, caught the attention of China's online world when she conspicuously displayed her wealth and boasted about her luxurious lifestyle. Netizens started to question the source of Guo's money, linking her with potential corruption at China's official charity organisation, China Red Cross Society. This immediately caused a credibility crisis for the organisation. Although China Red Cross Society repeatedly declared that Guo Meimei is not affiliated with it, negative public opinion descended like a tornado, forcing China Red Cross Society to undertake a radical reform (Luo 2012, 5–26).

Chinese society has been deeply polarised since the 1990s. It was rife with profound contradictions. Social emotions have piled up like underground lava, ready to erupt through any crack. For the government, controlling public opinion has become the primary means of controlling the new media. Within this context, public opinion monitoring has become a new industry; emergency firefighting has become the normalised mode of governance. However, public opinion monitoring and firefighting-style operation have predictably ended up being attacked for controlling public opinion and inhibiting "democracy." For its part, official discourse has been powerless in responding to this particular way of linking public opinion with democracy, as the CCP's official ideology has been deprived of its own claim to "democracy." In the post-Berlin Wall global configuration, the western form of representative democracy swept the world as a universal value, symbolising "the end of history." In this process, the PRC's founding legitimacy, which is predicated on a notion of people's democracy based on the alliance of workers and peasants, has been undermined and hollowed out. Such a de-politicizing process is also embedded in China's knowledge production system, as it gets integrated with the rest of the world. As a state, "China" became a symbol of authoritarianism, while "civil society" is construed to be the only force that can combat this authoritarian power.

In this state versus society dichotomy, any democratic movement inevitably becomes a struggle against the state.

In the Guo Meimei incident, the China Red Cross Society as a government-run charity institution was framed as the opposite of civil society. In contrast, non-governmental charitable organisations were gaining a high moral ground, becoming the symbols of democracy in China. Perhaps not surprisingly, One Foundation, the first non-governmental charity organisation whose board of directors includes prominent private entrepreneurs such as Ma Yun and Wang Shi, cut its links with China Red Cross Society in December 2010. Therefore, it gained the legal qualification to conduct fundraising publicly and independently. After China Red Cross Society lost its public credibility, "If you donate, donate to One Foundation" became the buzzword online. However, in an ironic turn of events, One Foundation was itself the subject of serious online criticisms (Wang 2014) in the aftermath of the 2014 Ya'an earthquake. In addition to the charge of 300 million embezzlements of donations, its management fee was way higher than that of the China Red Cross Society, and its relations with some foreign organisations were also questioned.

In July 2016, Chen Zhu, vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and the president of the Red Cross Society, twice brought up the Guo Meimei incident with anger. According to him, not only were many verified celebrities on Weibo (a.k.a Big-V's) the driving force behind the China Red Cross Society smear campaigns, but there were other behind the scene anonymous promoters who stirred the pot as well. Altogether, this constituted a highly complex and intensive struggle in the public opinion realm (Wang 2016).

Just as democracy is never merely an issue of technical matters, new media technology is never neutral. Rather, it requires the driving force of politics and economics. Democracy is a matter of politics. It has to root itself in a country's social-political systems. The replacement of the "people" by "citizens" represents a crisis of Chinese democracy, not its resolution. Therefore, the main concerns with regards to Weibo as a form of Chinese democratic practice are: how can online opinion leaders represent the people's real wishes? Has the people's will been hijacked? When members of the public are engulfed in a Weibo incident, do they still have autonomy? Can truth be revealed in time? Is there a systematic controlling power? Weibo can hardly give a satisfactory answer to any of these questions. In fact, on the one hand, the proliferation of the Water Army shows that the ideal of direct democracy represented by voting through the keyboard is easily corrupted by the power of money. When money can buy public opinion, democracy has reached its antithesis. Meanwhile, the Water Army has turned Weibo into a battlefield of different forces, leading to the re-feudalisation of the Internet public sphere. As the extreme representation of media violence, the Water Army had quickly resulted in the deterioration of new media governance. Weibo's degeneration into an anarchic underworld and the state's heavy hand of control are the two sides of the same coin.

From the Colour Revolutions that date back to the end of twentieth century to the Jasmine Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa, NGOs were the means by which various foreign forces entered a given society. This is already an open secret. In the age of Weibo, NGOs enjoy unquestionable status as being politically correct, while "civil society" theory serves as their source of legitimacy and the basis of social media revolutions. In this sense, China's age of Weibo doesn't purely belong to China. From Google's withdrawal from mainland China in 2011 and the aborted Jasmine Revolution in China in the same year, to the Bo Xilai incident in 2012 and *Southern Weekend*'s New Year editorial incident in

2013, one witnessed the formation of a transnational discursive alliance and its powerful impact on Chinese politics. Made up of pro-capital officials, newly-minted capitalists, and supporters from the media and intellectual realms, this alliance interacted closely with foreign media and different political forces to stage one perilous political drama after another on the stage of Weibo (Wu 2014, 255–274). With all kinds of characters coming into play in the events leading up to the CCP's 18th National Congress in 2012, Chinese politics experienced some of its most unpredictable and dangerous moments.

Weibo achieved prominence in 2011. That year, in the Top Ten Events of Civil Society released by Peking University's Centre for Civil Society Studies, the Wukan Incident ranked top. To be sure, this is indeed a significant event in the Weibo era. This is a typical case involving land in the process of China's urbanisation, and it involved problems in the transfer of collective land and the distribution of resultant benefits. This kind of case is hardly new, and particularly in places like Guangdong, a frontier in China's reform and opening-up process. However, the Wukan Incident as a Weibo case gained domestic and international attention not because it was an issue pertaining to land, but because the central focus was quickly shifted to an election issue, that is, a matter of democracy (Xiong 2015, 45–53). In the age of Weibo, any discussion that touches upon the topic of democracy immediately strikes a sensitive nerve in the public opinion realm, and even produces its necessary "protesters." The Wukan Incident was seen as a definitive case in China's new media age precisely for this reason. Indeed, to many, the Wukan Incident was interpreted as having opened up the "villagers' autonomy in self-governance" through "election." In fact, it was even deemed by domestic and foreign liberal media circles as one of the biggest milestones in Chinese rural history, coming second only to Xiaogang Village, which took the lead in dismantling the communes in 1978. Yet, what is missing from this narrative is the fact that, the direct election of village committee has been required by the Organic Law of Village Committees of the People's Republic of China since its amendment in 2010. Village elections have been in practice for more than 10 years. It was nothing new.

Paradoxically, China's radical marketisation and urbanisation processes are dependent upon the capitalisation of labour and the land. This is a political process that has been actively promoted by China's liberal universal value supporters. Entailing the massive transformation of urban-rural relationships, the process has led to sustained conflicts among villagers over the distribution of benefits. As one of the main sources for "mass incidents," the problem of land is not something that can be solved by a village's democratic election. Perhaps not surprisingly, the ones who crusaded for Wukan's democratic autonomy were also the ones who had actively pushed China toward to a free market economy, which includes such measures as land privatisation. For these people, procedural democracy was a cure-all solution. Within this framework, villager Lin Zulian was celebrated as a hero by both domestic and international media, after he was pushed to the front lines and selected as the Party secretary of the village with a high supporting ratio. However, this did not alleviate the conflicts over Wukan's land. The newly elected village committee was also inflicted with corruption and clan issues, and it faced the common deadlocks of Chinese grassroots elections. Of course, it is also possible to entertain the following alternative explanation:

> Wukan's democracy failed because of the unsolved issue of land property rights. As long as land property rights reform remains unfinished, democratic politics will be left untended

> … When the land property rights problem is solved, Wukan's democratic politics will proceed smoothly. (Dang 2013)

Under this logic, land privatisation is a prerequisite for democracy. However, when democracy is so defined, it will be reduced to a smokescreen for the massive expropriation and robbery of land in the countryside.

In January 2015, Lin Zulian registered an account on Weibo with real-name verification, hoping to gain public attention for the legal conflicts and problems the village committee was confronting. However, Lin only attracted approximately 1000 followers, and his posts were hardly retweeted. This is a sharp contrast from the days when Wukan was the darling of domestic and international media. Once it goes beyond the dichotomous framework of democracy versus the state, the media's spotlights move away, and Wukan's issues were left untended. Once economic democracy was replaced and hollowed out by so-called political democracy, democracy itself disappeared. In 23 July 2016, after being investigated by the People's Procuratorate of Shanwei City, Lin Zulian was arrested on the charge of bribery. Lin had planned to hold Village Assemblies on 19 June 2016, and then lead the villagers to seek petitions for land problems two days afterwards. On 15 August 2016, the word "Wukan" was censored on WeChat. Wukan once again became a sensitive topic. In fact, as long as farmers don't get their land back, as long as farmers keep losing their land, "mass incidents" will continue to break out.

By then, it had become officially recognised that there existed two public opinion fields. Behind this recognition, one sees how traditional Party media have lost its dominant position in the public opinion realm. This is a crisis that the new leadership after the CCP's 18th National Congress must address. This set the stage for the "media convergence" policy; that is, to coordinate the traditional and new media public opinion fields and achieve integration through new media platforms. From the inauguration of the media convergence efforts in 2014, the process of media reform has been an ever-changing and intimidating one. Today, it has become impossible to ignore the following: there has not been improvement in the mainstream media's credibility and ecology. Instead, the business operations of newspapers, radio, and TV stations are on the verge of collapsing. From traditional Party organs' lack of credibility to the downfall of journalistic credibility on new media platforms, isn't it high time to assess the pros and cons of 30-years market-oriented media reform? When the market is both the illness and the cure, how can (new) media's credibility be rebuilt? Why is there less media credibility in the new media era than that of the traditional media era? These issues deserve the serious attention of media scholars.

Publicity, Intellectuals, and Media Violence

A by-product of the Weibo-era was the formation of "public intellectuals" as a group. Once celebrated as an influential force in civil society, this group was soon denigrated. The "Han Han Fraud Incident" – a protracted year-long debate in 2012 over whether or not the young Internet celebrity writer, Han Han, used his father or somebody else as a ghost writer – marked the beginning of the downfall of this group. Han Han started out as a "bad student" who rebelled against the education system and gained market recognition with his above-his-peers command of cultural and historical knowledge. His success was built upon a widespread disenchantment with the *Gaokao*, the Chinese College Entrance Examination. That is, the younger generation who subordinated themselves to the cruel *Gaokao*

leached off Han Han's success for an imagined rebellion. Han won market success by constructing an "anti-intellectual" persona. In 2005, he started to contribute to blogs, and became a gold-digger in sync with the blog era. Han's post-2008 transformation from being a writer to a public intellectual coincided with the period of transition from blogs to Weibo, which turned new media into a potent force in Chinese politics. Not surprisingly, Han was the darling of both the domestic and international media. He won the "Civic Responsibility Award" in December 2008 from the Open Constitution Initiative (OCI), received "Person of the Year" titles by *Southern Weekend*, *New Century Weekly*, and *Asia Weekly* respectively, and was also listed as one of the "100 Promoters of China's Progress" by *Time* magazine in 2009. In addition, he ranked second in the category of entertainment in *Time* magazine's "The World's Most Influential 100 People" in 2010, and was listed among the "Top 100 Global Thinkers" by US magazine *Foreign Policy* in 2010, and "One of China's Top Ten Blunt Gentlemen" by *Global Daily* in 2010 as well. This list of recognition is truly dazzling. Tapping into the intersection of the transition from traditional to new media and its interaction with marketisation, Han adopted the business strategy of "Constructing an Intellectual" and thus created the golden rule of "consuming politics" so as to receive high commercial benefits in China. In a nutshell, Han Han is a politically constructed symbol in pursuit of commercialism. All of his supporters, including the media, were highly homogenous in terms of their shared ideology of market liberalism (Shi 2012, 29–49). However, if this explained Han Han's success, it also accounted for his downfall. The Han Han Incident exposed the internal tensions of liberalism. If the market is a wellspring of liberal values in today's China, then fraud itself is a means of catering to the market. However, the deconstruction of "Han Han" as a symbol, and serious criticism towards the market will only bring liberalism to a political crisis. This tension turns the significance and legitimacy of "truth" or "fraud" into a central focus in the public debates on the Han Han Incident. Even though both sides appealed to "civil society" and "enlightenment ideals," the months-long debate was constrained by the ideology of market liberalism itself and full of symbolic violence.

The Han Han Incident also reveals how the annihilation of public interests in a capital-oriented, marketized communication system occurs (Ji 2013, 38–44). Sina CEO Cao Guowei once summarised the six models of Weibo commercialisation as the following: interactive-target advertising, social games, real-time search, wireless value-added services, e-commerce platform, and payments for digital content. In other words, Weibo is designed to expand the exchange value to the maximum. Accordingly, Weibo's popularity depends on its commercialised advocacy, which determined its structure and explained why Weibo values celebrity status. To be sure, the age of Weibo did ignite imaginations of civil society. Communication as a gift brings values such as reciprocity, mutuality, and shared property. All these formed a cyber-utopia, attracted and encouraged more people to join Weibo. However, very soon, these dreams were broken under the greed and control of capital. Real estate developers and capitalists, who rose as public intellectuals, dominated Weibo, giving rise to right-wing populism, turning this cyber community, disguised as civil society, into an enclave of capitalist control.

Cyber violence became more and more severe in the age of Weibo. Stigmatisation as a means of distinction-making and debasement was the main form of cyber violence. The traditional and new media's political orientation, which leans towards liberalism, provides the structural reasons for the profane language used by Peking University Professor Kong Qingdong to advance his arguments in his online media productions. That is, being a

disfavoured leftist, Kong was forced to resort to such a strategy to gain media and communicative power in a highly uneven discursive scene (Jin 2013, 123–130). However, such a strategy is self-defeating and a capitulation to the very structural logic itself. Stigmatisation and labelling are not signs of being open and liberal; instead, they obstruct the possibility of public discussion. If a cyberspace already lost its possibility in rational conversation and can solely rely on verbal abuse to continue conversation among different groups, this itself constitutes a loss of the public sphere. Why the intellectuals who have a specific mission for public discourse will be involved in this kind of mutual stigmatisation, is a question we truly need to consider.

In fact, the stigmatisation phenomenon does not originate from the Weibo era. Instead, it can be traced all the way back to the age of the Internet, more specifically to the "World China" online forum, which started in 2000 and aimed at creating an academic online community of "freedom, equality, openness, sharing," and to "build a platform for intellectuals who care about China's development and future." Within this forum, which was closed in 2006, there was a group of "public intellectuals" who used verbal abuse as a conventional weapon to combat opponents. Among these were some of the columnists of the Southern media group and metropolitan newspapers. The websites not only encouraged, but also condoned and nurtured this habit of gaining attention through verbal abuse. Other Chinese forums, including the influential Southern media group's Kaidi Forum and Tianya Forum, also relied on media violence to attract attention and eliminate opponents. This was routine practice and a known rule. To a large degree, this was how Chinese liberals became a hegemonic force in the traditional and new media. Such an action, which actually goes against liberalism, was deemed as the achievement of Chinese media. The real problem is that Chinese liberal intellectuals have never seriously reflected on this. Eventually, this violent language was turned against these liberal intellectuals themselves, turning "public intellectuals" into a term of abuse. From community media to social media, the age of Weibo not only replicated this logic, but also pushed it to the utmost, or in another sense, to its opposite direction, leading to the self-destruction of "public intellectuals." Unless intellectuals give up their sense of self-dignity and buy into the media's strategies and logic, they will not be able to voice their opinions in the media. The danger is the transformation of a public space into a violent battlefield.

Conclusion: The Platform Paradox of Mainstream Media – "Mass Line" and the Marketisation of Public Opinion Monitoring

The above discussion sets the context for understanding the paradoxical role of the Chinese state on the issue of media convergence. On the one hand, under the thumb of the hegemonic power of monopolistic platform markets, the Chinese state has no choice but to take the perspective of the new media in encouraging the convergent development of new and old media. Consequently, capital operations such as stock market listings, restructuring, and mixed ownership reform have become inevitable. This, in turn, has opened the door for BAT (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent) to enter the traditional media market. On the other hand, feeling deeply the pain of losing its power in the ideological terrain, the state has invested heavily in building its own platforms, including encouraging traditional mainstream media outlets to construct their own platforms. However, the platform is the playground of aggregated big capital. When traditional mainstream media organisations

concentrate their own capital on new platforms, they are essentially using their weaknesses to fight against the others' strengths. As traditional mainstream media spent their long-accumulated capital on platform-building, they inevitably reduce their investments on news content production. Thus, traditional media's strategy of constructing platforms in order to save themselves has problems, as it appears to be engaging in a war of attrition that is doomed to fail. In this battle driven by the market hegemony of platform worship, the missing critical link is the production of news with public mindedness and social responsibility, as nobody is willing to bear the cost. This cost consists of two aspects: the value of journalists' own labour, and the cost of news production. As a result, journalists' salaries have dropped, causing the draining of many excellent journalists. Meanwhile, there is a reduction of on the spot news coverage. As the "keyboard party" takes over news production without first-hand investigation, the result is the spread of fake news and rumours and the unprecedented and striking deterioration of today's media ecology.

On 19 April 2016, President Xi Jinping said the following in a speech at a meeting on cybersecurity and informationisation:

> Our leaders should go to where the masses are, otherwise how to connect with the masses? Every level of government and Party leaders should learn to use the Internet to carry out the mass line. They should often go online to listen, participate, chat, understand the thoughts and wishes of the masses, collect good ideas and suggestions, and actively respond to netizens' concerns and clarify confusions. Being able to use the Internet to understand public opinion is an essential requirement for leaders to carry out their duties under the new circumstances. All levels of officials, especially leaders, should continue to strengthen their ability in this regard (Xi 2016).

The speech made it clear that all levels of officials should themselves actively use the Internet to understand public opinion. This is not the same as the marketisation of public opinion monitoring services. Instead, the subjectivism, formalism, and bureaucratism of using seemingly "objective" public opinion monitoring services to replace the actual practice of the mass line is a tendency that needs to be guarded against. Can the mass line be purchased through "third party" services? Isn't relying on "public opinion fixes" for problem-solving the exact opposition of the mass line?

When "micro-governance" started to become the embodiment of the Party's mass line, the Big-Vs of the Weibo era and the marketized public accounts of the WeChat era have all stood in for the "masses." The "public opinion monitoring" industry was established on this logic. In turn, this has further reinforced the logic of using government funds to purchase "the mass line." In this way, the politics of depoliticisation has acquired a new form. A more serious problem of this practice is, this kind of marketized operation inevitably carries with it the motivation for rent-seeking. Thus, if rent-seeking in the mainstream media practice of "paid news" involves the abuse of a journalistic privilege in accessing media space, then today's rent-seeking in the newly created public opinion monitoring industry involves the more direct and more easily hidden practice of manufacturing and manipulating public opinion. When the monitoring of public opinion becomes a business, especially when it becomes a conduit for upward mobility to positions of power, the inevitable developmental logic is to control both the upstream and the downstream of the market. As Wang Weijia explains:

> Some Internet marketing companies, and public opinion research companies have formed a complete industrial chain, controlling both the upstream and downstream. On one hand,

they spread rumours, mobilize Water Armies, and seize the opportunity to market their ser-vices; on the other hand, they sell their public opinion monitoring services to the govern-ment and provide contacts for posting deletion services. Inside the government, the departments that are in charge of public opinion acquired tremendous power because of this, becoming the key departments with whom other departments must cultivate good relations (Wang 2017, 5–6).

Through public opinion monitoring, Internet marketing companies and public opinion research companies have formed a symbiotic relationship with state Internet information administrations, forming a close circuit. This logic of controlling public opinion to hijack state power is actually compatible with that of Weibo and WeChat as platforms. For example, as far as Weibo is concerned, "public opinion" is essentially synonymous to the Big-Vs. Thus, to what extent does public opinion monitoring reflect the real thoughts of the people? This is a problem one has to face. In this regard, our early query on the demo-cratic meaning of Weibo is also applicable to the realm of public opinion monitoring. What are the relationships among public opinion leaders, public opinion, truth, and control in this mode of "public opinion monitoring"? If these relationships are unclear, how can we avoid bureaucracy and formalism that would lead a blind man to ride a blind horse? Once again, can the mass line be replaced with public opinion monitoring and fixes? Should we use administrative power to develop and purchase Water Armies by another means? Is this not surrendering to the logic of market hegemony?

From the above, the relationship between listing the "state team" of mainstream media on the stock market and the Chinese state's goal of ideological construction is not self-evidentially clear. There is a huge tension and dislocation between journalism as a foun-dation for politics and the communication industry as market-driven information services. The model of using the traditional advertising market to subsidy news is no longer sustain-able due to the hegemony of new media platforms, while transforming news organisations into new media technology services companies also bears the danger of underpinning jour-nalism as a foundation for politics. Can journalism as a foundation for politics be allowed to deplete in today's media landscape in China? How should the relationship between journal-ism and the Party be managed? Who should be responsible for serious journalism? The crisis is already urgent, just like a black bear at the door about to break in.

There are no easy solutions. To begin with, mainstream media should further strengthen their news production abilities. No matter how the media reform proceeds, if it undermines this fundamental aspect, such a reform shall be considered as a failure. This is a basic principle that needs to be upheld. It is not true that there is no demand for news, or that China does not need news, it is just that the advertisement market for news has been taken away by new media platforms. However, if there are no content pro-ducers, any platform would be a stream without source, a tree without a trunk. Without content from the mainstream media, WeChat's social function as a public space would be disintegrated, social media would collapse; Without the former, WeChat as we see it today would not have been possible. Thus, in every sense, the platforms should return its favour to the mainstream media as content producers. Only when channels and platforms nurture content producers can they secure long-term development for themselves, rather than being the flash in the pan once again. At the same time, mainstream media should also turn over a new leaf during this process. Mainstream media should overcome their serious problems of formalism and bureaucratism, modify their profit-seeking market logic, and

break free from the phenomenon of the journalistic agenda being hijacked by vested political and economic interest groups. Only then can they reclaim the public and political grounds of journalism. This is the only way through which mainstream media can ensure its guiding role in the ideological field. This is no easy process, but it is where the mainstream media should invest all their energy.

To conclude, it is more urgent than ever to discuss the path and policies of convergence for the mutual benefit of traditional and new media. In an ideal situation, the strengths of traditional and new media should be mutually complementary. Neither should use one's disadvantage to compete with the other's strength. Knowing what to do and refraining from doing certain things is essential for the two sides to fully develop their mutual strengths. On this basis, media convergence in China has a broad prospect for mutual benefit. Any reform will experience trials and errors, the real problems are not the trials themselves, but whether these trials can provide lessons for correcting mistakes and making remedies. The goals of media convergence have been made clear and are already set. The concrete path, however, needs adjustments, so as to ensure that there is no mismatch between top-level design and bottom-level initiation. The theory and the practice of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics faces the question of how to actually serve the people. This is the most important expression of the public nature of Chinese media. It is also its biggest challenge.

In the end, no matter in what form, the reforms and the convergence of the Chinese media is an ongoing process, and nobody is an irrelevant bystander. For their part, media users should not be reduced to guinea pigs in the market of advertising data. Instead, they should be the masters of the Internet. If it were not for the contributions of the users, the Internet industry could not have existed. Thus, only when users and workers can decide the directions of the reform, can the reform embody a public nature, and it is only through this way that the goals and purposes of socialism with Chinese characteristics can be sought after.

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