How Chinese Netizens Discuss Environmental Conflicts? Framing and Functions on Sina Weibo

Miklos Sukosd (Associate Professor, Journalism and Media Studies Centre, The University of Hong Kong)

Research seminar, Department of Media and Communication, City University of Hong Kong, Sep 16, 2013
Structure of presentation

- Topic and background
- Cases of outstanding environmental conflict
- Questions: empirical, conceptual, methodological
- Case identification, data collection
- Framing categories and results
- Communication function categories and results
- 4 conclusions

Co-Author: Dr. King-wa Fu (Research Assistant Professor, JMSC, HKU)
**Topic and background**

- How *weibo* was used in the discussion of seven major cases of environmental pollution and related unrest between 2010 and 2012 in China?

**Background**

- By-product of rapid economic growth: unprecedented environmental degradation
- China ranks among the bottom on the world’s environmental sustainability index
- Environmental protection always on the country’s Five-Year Plans but overlooked in local governance
1. Jiaoyang, Fujian, lead poisoning (September 17, 2009)

The lead water emission of Huaqiang Battery factory.
1. Jiaoyang, Fujian, lead poisoning (September 17, 2009)

The lead water emission of Huaqiang Battery factory.
2. Jingxi County Riot (July 15, 2010)

This is a polluted river 20 km away from the Xinfa aluminum mile. It can be expected the water nearer would be in even worse condition.
2. Jingxi County Riot (July 15, 2010)
Demonstrators. Upper banner writes, “Give me back home, give me back river”; lower banner writes, “Make the river clean, make Jingxi beautiful”.

2. Jingxi County Riot (July 15, 2010)

Police blocks the way.
3. Dalian PX protest (August 14, 2011)

In Dalian: there is para-xylene in the giant containers.
3. Dalian PX protest (August 14, 2011)
Citizens demonstrate against Fujia Group’s Para-xylene project.
3. Dalian PX protest (August 14, 2011)
Conflict between citizens and police
In Haining, Jinko Company’s pollution emission pipe is hidden in vegetation.
4. Haining protest against US-listed solar panel plant
(September 17, 2011)
Police and demonstrators in conflict.
5. Haimen protest against the expansion of a power plant (December 20, 2011)

Pollution.
EastWeek photo
5. Haimen protest against the expansion of a power plant (December 20, 2011)

Demonstrators gathered in front of Haimen government building and occupied the terrace.
6. Yinggehai protest against coal plant
(April 12, 2012)
The planned plant
6. Yinggehai protest against coal plant
(April 12, 2012)
Demonstrators; one of the boards says, “People’s livelihood, People have no way to live”.
6. Yinggehai protest against coal plant (April 12, 2012)

A kid with the board saying, “Give me back the seas I am living on”.
7. Qidong protest against paper factory
(July 28, 2012)
Demonstrators with boards writing “Resist Oji Paper Company, protect hometown”.
7. Qidong protest against paper factory
(July 28, 2012)

Demonstrators swamped the Qidong local government building.
7. Qidong protest against paper factory
(July 28, 2012)
Police fighting a demonstrator.
Background

- Environmental activism in China is not allowed to generate sustained contentious social movements (Ho, 2001)
- Environmental protests and movements tend to be scattered, motivated by single incidents rather than more comprehensive agendas that aim at a nation-wide change (Ho, 2001; Hess, 2011)
- Many local cases lack publicity and support from elites, and they tend to be suppressed
- Roles of social media? – an empirical project
Empirical and conceptual questions

- What are the cognitive frames of interpretation that Chinese netizens use in their posts to make sense of, and argue about, major cases of environmental pollution and related social discontent?

- What are the communicative functions of weibo posts? Shows the multiple ways weibo is used as a multi-functional platform, e.g., reposting, emoticons.

- In conceptual terms, what roles weibo play in the dynamics of the public sphere in China?
Methodological questions

- Quantitative approach with some qualitative examples
- How to identify relevant cases?
  - Suppression of social unrest and offline censorship often prevents media coverage
  - Environment-related weibo messages may be too numerous and scattered
- How to build weibo data sets and take samples?
- Interpretation of findings – how to take into consideration censorship?
- Specific research design and methods for social media research in China?
Case identification

- Third route: international press reports
- Factiva database “environmental news”
- Keywords: “environment” + one of “assembly”, “protest”, “demonstration”, “riot”, “protester”, “tear gas”, “police”, “violent”, “clash” and “repress”.
- 11 major environmental pollution and related unrest cases in 55 articles September 2009 and July, 2012
- Haining, Haimen, Dalian, Jiaoyang, Yinggehai, Jingxi, Qidong, Anhui, Shifang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet (Appendix 1 for details)
Data collection and sampling

- Weiboscope online database developed at The University of Hong Kong (Fu, Chan, Chau, 2013).
- Timelines of more than 350,000 Chinese microbloggers who have at least 1,000 followers since January 2011
- By searching the name of the place where these cases took place (i.e., Dalian, Haimen, or Qidong), a total of 76,993 weibo seven out of the eleven cases identified from international coverage
- Four cases (Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Anhui and Shifang) weibos are not available, due to censorship
- Samples from two most reposted weibos
Table 1: Summary of samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Percentage in the sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haining</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haimen</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalian</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiaoyang</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yinggehai</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jingxi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qidong</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1639</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cognitive framing categories

- Frames - interpretations of environmental incidents in the social media discussion
  - select some aspects of reality and make them salient;
  - omit or lessen salience of other aspects (Entman, 1993).

- Categories for framing analysis partly adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000):
  1) “Responsibility” frame
  2) “Human interest”
  3) “Conflict”
  4) “Economic”
  5) “Morality”
Framing categories (cont.)

6) “Ecology”
7) “What’s next”
8) “Purely informational”
9) “Personal”
10) “Censorship”
11) “Propaganda”
12) “Uninterpretable/unclassified”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>“There is going to be a prairie fire” [1] [The conflict between people and the state]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Unlimited commercial exploitation is bound to cause irreversible ecological damage” [The conflict between two issues]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>“The government must take the primary responsibility!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“[The governors] are trading for money and promotions with the well-being of the people.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purely informational</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>“Asking for the truth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>“I remember that eucalyptus is originated from Australia. I don’t think it has such a strong negative impact to the ecology as alleged [in the original post]. But I do think single cropping of eucalyptus could upset the balance of local ecological system. Want more information on this @ Guoke Wang [2].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human interest</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>“Poor citizens in Dalian”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and unrelated</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>“Yinggehai, a beautiful name, I knew since I was young that the place is abundant in sea salt. I still store sea salt at home these days. I drink salt water when I have a sour throat. It works very well.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s next</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>“Concerned!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Let’s just see what happens”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censorship</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>“I need to forward this message before it is removed so that more people can see it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>“Ignoring the future generations for a little money and a position. Where is justice? Where is the conscience?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>“Be cautious of Japan’s economic imperialism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninterpretable / Unclassified</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>“Forwarding”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m so sad that my hometown is on the list [of places being affected]”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propaganda</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case</td>
<td>Most numerous frame of original posts</td>
<td>Most numerous frames of reposts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qidong</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Responsibility; Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haimen</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Conflict; Uninterpretable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiaoyang</td>
<td>Human interest</td>
<td>Human interest; Uninterpretable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yinggehai</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Conflict; Uninterpretable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haining</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Responsibility; Uninterpretable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalian</td>
<td>Purely informational</td>
<td>Responsibility; Uninterpretable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jingxi</td>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>Conflict; Ecology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communicative functions

- Multiple ways of weibo use; “communication acts”
- Harlow (2011) categories regrouped:
  1) “Information-oriented” messages
  2) “Stating opinions”
  3) “Action/mobilization-oriented”
- We developed
  4) “Expressing emotions”
  5) “Forwarding”
  6) “Questioning credibility”
# Table 4: Communicative functions results, with examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Proportion (%)</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opinions</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>“What's the use of economic development without caring about people's health!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>“So sad for China!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Info-oriented          | 15.7           | “Can I ask for some explanations from environmental protection specialists?” [Asking for information]  
                        |                | “For those who are concerned, you can read this article about foreign companies planting eucalyptus in China [Contributing information]  
                        |                | “I think we should use less tissue paper and switch back to handkerchiefs”  
                        |                | “Boycott products from Oji Paper Company!”                             |
| Action/mobilization    | 8.2            | “Forwarding”                                                           |
| Forwarding             | 6.8            | “Is the news reliable?”                                                |
| Credibility            | 5.2            | “I think the weibo message contains over-exaggerated information. I’ve already reported it.” |
| Total                  | 100.0          |                                                                         |
Conclusions 1: Frames

- Combined “Conflict” and “Responsibility” frames 48.6%
- Conflicts between
  - “the state and the people”,
  - rapid economic development and citizens’ well-being
- Attribute responsibility for the wrongdoing to the government
- Political interpretation
“The state vs. the people” master frame

- Political interpretations overshadow
  - “Environmental” framing (6.8%), despite the fact that the conflicts concerned environmental incidents
  - “Information” (11.8%)
  - “Censorship” (1.4%)
- Discontent with the government remains case-specific, localized, time-bound, unrelated to other cases
- Protest arguments target single issues in singular times in a “not-in-my-backyard” fashion
The meaning of “People”

- No sign of formation of a green social movement
- “The state vs. people” interpretation remains spontaneous
- “People” usually means
  - people impacted here and now in this particular case, or
  - a generalized national identity;
- Not a “civil society against the state” type of strategic frame
- Does not imply a purposeful, strategically acting, civil society
Conclusions 2: Functions

- 140-character limit for arguments, opinions, statements or judgments that entail a sense of rationality

- Habermasian public sphere functions prevail:
  - “Opinion” (35.3%)
  - “Information-oriented” (15.7%),
  - “Action/mobilization” (8.2%)
  - “Credibility” (5.2%) – asking about source

- Public sphere-related, argumentative (Habermasian) communication functions together represent 64.4% of messages in environmental conflicts in China.
Conclusions 2: Functions (cont.)

- Strong presence of “Emotions” (28.8%): “I’m so angry with the government”
- “Action/mobilization” (8.2%): most messages are not aimed at mobilizing people to offline protests but rather concern changing personal and collective consumption habits
- Strong emotions, no protest mobilization: explosive tension
Conclusions 3: Methods

- Social media research methodology to include
  1. *case selection* from the international press to circumvent domestic censorship
  2. *Weiboscope* as an autonomous, original database of weibo messages
  3. *censorship itself among the content analysis* categories.
  4. specific *interpretation of results*:
     - not “weibo communication about local environmental conflicts”, but “officially tolerated weibo communication about local environmental conflicts” (as for weibo’s impact on online public opinion, exactly relevant)
Conclusions 4: Communication vs. action

- Divergence of communication and action in *weibo*
  - Communication networks ≠ trust networks ≠ mobilization networks

- *Samizdat* (underground, uncensored political publications in Central and Eastern Europe before 1989)
  - Communication networks = trust networks = mobilization networks
Acknowledgements

- This work was supported by a grant of the General Research Fund of the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong (project # 105000097).

- We are grateful to our research assistant Nancy Dai who contributed greatly to the project.