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Weibo interaction in the discourse of internet anti-corruption: The case of "Brother Watch" event

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ABSTRACT

Extant studies have been predicated on the assumption that Weibo interaction plays important roles in the formation and development of Internet anti-corruption, but little attention has been given to how such interaction is locally constructed among Weibo users. Drawing upon analytical tools evolved from Conversation Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis, this study examined a pool of Weibo tweets and responses employed in discussing an Internet anti-corruption event, i.e., the "Brother Watch" event which happened in 2012. The analysis showed that Weibo interaction featured an overarching sequence of "key tweet + responses", wherein key tweets were formulated as newsworthy and authentic messages to engage the audience. Responses were designed to project new meanings and actions while orienting to prior turns. As a result, exposed information became repetitively circulated, amplified and reinforced, and eventually shaped into an online public event.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has launched an unprecedented war on corruption, with many high-ranking and lower-level corrupt officials sacked or sentenced. In 2016, for example, 36 vice-ministerial level officials were dismissed, 41 officials were heard, and 36 were sentenced (Wang and Zhang, 2016). Along with the government-led anti-corruption campaign is the rise of Internet anti-corruption movements, during which Sina Weibo (hereinafter "Weibo"), a major Chinese microblogging website, has played an important role.

Based on a pool of tweets and responses deployed in discussing the "Brother Watch" event, an Internet anti-corruption movement, this article explores how interactions on Weibo were locally constructed, and what roles it had played in the movement, using concepts mainly from Conversation Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis. The following section is a brief review of Internet anti-corruption, Weibo interaction and their relationship with Conversation Analysis. Section 3 is a description of the data. A detailed analysis of the structures and practices of Weibo interaction follows in Sections 4 and 5, focusing primarily on the sequence organization and turn design of three key tweets and their responses in relation to the "Brother Watch" event. We discuss the implications of the findings at the end of this paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. The discourse of Internet anti-corruption

Internet (or networked) anti-corruption can be defined as a process of online movement in which "the Internet exposure of individual government officials' wrongdoings causes social impulses toward criticism and impeachment – or administrative investigation – that result in the downfall of the accused official" (Dai et al., 2015, p. 38). It happens mainly in China rather than in the West. Western countries fight corruption primarily relying on public supervision, e-government and transparent administration (Abu-Shanab et al., 2013; Dai et al., 2015; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016; Shim and Eom, 2008). In China, however, this remains impossible due to its imperfect supervision system and complex social structures. Nonetheless, with the flourishing of social media platforms such as Weibo, Internet anti-corruption movements in China are springing up at a surprising speed (Dai et al., 2015; Gao and Stanyer, 2014; Han, 2011; Li and Huang, 2015; Nip and Fu, 2016).

Internet anti-corruption often starts from Internet exposure, i.e., open whistleblowing on the Internet (Dai et al., 2015; Han, 2011). According to Han (2011), the exposure per se will not lead to an

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Internet anti-corruption movement if it cannot develop into online public opinion. The formation of online public opinion needs widespread dissemination and interaction. Dissemination is the re-transmission of the exposed information such as re-tweets, reprints and hyperlinks. In due course more information may be discovered, usually through "online muckraking" or "human flesh search" activities (Gao and Stanyer, 2014). Such information is usually powerful enough to switch the direction of discussion and pushes the event forward (Dai et al., 2015), during which traditional media will amplify it through wide dissemination, while Internet users will engage themselves with more discussions, until eventually it becomes an online public event (Garrett, 2006; Tang and Iyengar, 2011).

Scholars have made various conceptualizations of interactions within and beyond the Internet (see, for example, Gurevitch et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006). In terms of Internet anti-corruption, two types of interaction are crucial: macro-level and micro-level interaction. Macro-level interaction can be understood as a type of convergence between old and new media, meaning "a situation in which multiple media systems coexist" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 282). It may include initial discussion about the exposed information across different Internet platforms, which will then be re-disseminated through the interaction between traditional and new media platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Micro-level interaction concerns the discussion and communication among Internet users on the same platforms such as Weibo, Facebook or Twitter (Herring, 1996; Hutchby, 2001; Meredith, 2017; Paulus et al., 2016). The contents of interaction may include postings/re-postings, likes/dislikes, comments, and any actions involved in discussing the exposed event. Our article focuses on the micro-level interaction, specifically Weibo interaction in relation to Internet anti-corruption events.

Weibo interaction has been widely examined from different perspectives. Firstly, Weibo is seen as an online public place where social problems are openly discussed. It is found that pressing social problems such as corruption are heatedly discussed on Weibo until they become high-profile mass incidents (for example, Dai et al., 2015; Gao and Stanyer, 2014; Han, 2011; Nip and Fu, 2016). Secondly, Weibo is seen as a political tool with which people fight for justice. For example, Gao and Stanyer (2014) found that Chinese Internet users tend to hunt for corrupt officials through a "human flesh search" on Weibo and other Internet platforms. Huang & Sun (2016) found that people tend to express their discontent with authorities and strive for legitimate rights on Weibo as a form of online protest. Thirdly, Weibo interaction is seen as a form of computer-mediated communication. Tong & Zuo (2014), for example, identified two modes of communication in discussing "mass incidents", namely, one-way communication whereby residents (i.e., ordinary people) may take initiatives, and two-way communication whereby both residents and elites take initiatives in turns.

These studies have emphasized, more or less, the role of Weibo interaction in the development of social events. Most research, however, seem to have paid more attention to macro-level interaction than micro-level ones that may have also played important roles in the course of the events. We therefore intend to address this issue by asking the following questions: How is the interaction on Weibo locally organized and constructed? How does it work to push forward the Internet anti-corruption events? We think Conversation Analysis (CA) can answer these questions.

2.2. CA and the structure of Weibo interaction

Many CA concepts have been applied to online interaction, demonstrated especially in special issues of some journals including Deppermann (2013), Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014), Gerhardt et al. (2014), Arminen et al. (2016), and Giles et al. (2017). In Giles (2015) the authors advocated studying online data with a framework of digital CA. These studies demonstrate that CA is applicable to online interaction as long as we take into account Internet-based technological affordances and constraints (Hutchby, 2001). As for Weibo interaction, CA can be applied in at least three aspects as follows.

(1) *Turn-taking*

Turn-taking means the recurrence of turns in a speaking exchange. It is constrained by the principle of "one person speaks at a time" (Sacks et al., 1974), meaning that participants in conversation can only make their contributions on a turn-by-turn basis. Similarly, the act of posting on Weibo is also a practice of turn-taking, i.e., by making a posting the user is taking the floor of composing a turn or tweet. Any posting can be seen as a turn, whether it is initiated or made to respond to prior turns. They come together in an overarching sequence, i.e., key tweet + responses.[1] A key tweet is a turn that is responded by one or more tweets. A response can be a reply, re-tweet, or embedded responses. A reply is a comment about what is mentioned in a prior tweet, a re-tweet is the re-posting of a prior tweet, and embedded responses are those included recursively in later responses.

(2) *Sequence organization*

Sequence organization concerns the order of talk within or beyond individual turns, including the organization of adjacency pairs, additional sequences and preference sequences (Schegloff, 2007). An adjacency pair is a smallest unit of conversational exchange realized by two adjacent turns such as question–answer and offer–acceptance/refusal (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Usually, a complete sequence includes not just an adjacency pair, but a base sequence with additional ones prefaced, inserted or expanded (Schegloff, 2007). Preference organization means the structure of preferring some actions over others. A speaker, for example, is more likely to perform an agreement/acceptance than a disagreement/refusal in responding to a comment made in a prior turn (Pomerantz, 1984).

Following the structure of "key tweet + responses" and the above description, we can identify four major types of sequence organization in Weibo interaction, though we cannot say that they follow strictly the organization of adjacency pairs, additional sequences or preference sequences: (1) key tweet + re-tweet, (2) key tweet + reply, (3) key tweet + responses (reply + embedded responses), and (4) key tweet + responses (re-tweet + embedded responses). A response can be either a re-tweet of a prior tweet or a reply to that tweet (types 1 and 2). Or it consists of a reply plus embedded responses in which turns are recursively embedded (Type 3). Type (4) differs from type (3) in the way in which the current user makes no reply but posts a re-tweet.

(3) *Turn design*

Turn design involves "the selection of an activity" and "the details of verbal construction" in a turn (Drew and Heritage, 1992a, p. 32). The former refers to a speaker's "alternative ways" of "performing a particular activity" in a turn and the latter means the wording and formulation of that turn (Drew and Heritage, 1992a, p. 36). Though CA is applicable to online interaction, some issues cannot be adequately solved with CA methods such as the written-text form, multiparty interaction and asynchrony. As for Weibo interaction, a tweet includes not only the verbal text but also multimodal resources such as emoticons, hyperlinks, and images. The selection and employment of these multimodal resources may better convey participants' communicative purposes. We can therefore incorporate Multimodal Discourse

[1] We exclude some independent tweets in the structure of "key tweet + responses" due to the fact that they appear neither to respond to a prior tweet nor receive response from subsequent turns.

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