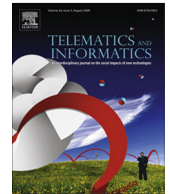




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Social media and internet public events

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary China is experiencing deeper reform and social transformation. The newly born social media have participated in the historical process of China's reform and social change. Based on the existing literature of social media and internet public events, this article aims to study China's internet public events through the perspective of social transformation theory, especially theories of the civic society and public sphere. This study has used case study to explore the role that social media play in social change in China through in-depth analysis of 57 typical cases. We found that social media are not only an important information source and means for online civil mobilization, but also provide citizens an open and free space for discussion of internet public events. The impact of social media in promoting social change was reflected in the supervision of governmental, judiciary and other public power; maintenance of justice and protection of disadvantaged groups; attracting the government's attention, urging governmental information publicity and investigation of the events, and promoting social management innovation and institutional change. Social media are a helpful force in the construction of internet public sphere and civil society of contemporary China. Meanwhile, it is necessary to be cautious that social media is also likely to be a breeding ground for nationalist and populist discourses.

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1. Introduction

Social media have opened up a new space for information exchange and opinion expression. They not only bring about profound changes in the field of public opinion, but also become an important driving force to promote social change. The relationship between social media and social change is an important issue. Internet public events are an ideal starting point to explore such a relationship. In this article, we will examine some typical Internet public events in the Chinese context to explore the impact of social media on social change.

2. Literature review and research questions

Social media and internet public events have become a hot academic research area in China and Western countries along with the concept of Web2.0 started in 2004. From the perspective of social media based on bibliometric analysis, it shows

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that changes in the number of papers published in this field are consistent with the trend of Price Curve (Xu et al., 2014; Tang and Ye, 2015). The themes of research in the West are varied, including social media users, the technological basis, the application of social media in different fields, privacy, trust, and risk (Shen et al., 2013). Social media research in China mainly focuses on the marketing function, social media as a “platform,” how social media disseminate information, and study of the micro-blog empirically (Tang and Ye, 2015). There exist differences in the research about social media between China and Western countries, mainly in the perspectives of analysis and focuses by different scholars. Lin (2013) pointed out that the themes of social media research by Chinese and Western scholars are similar substantively except the emphases.

From the perspective of internet public event, Chinese and Western scholars show a significant difference: the ways of conceptualization and application of theoretical framework. Western scholars, mainly by using the theories of social movements and collective behaviors, take the Internet as a new mobilization resource for studying how social organizations use the Internet to mobilize, or explore how social media promote social movements or collective behaviors. For example, Garret (2006) reviewed the relationship between social movements and new ICTs (information and communication technologies) along three interrelated factors: mobilizing structures, opportunity structures and framing processes. Some scholars are concerned with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for protest purposes and the impact of low, leveraged costs of online activism on participation (Earl and Kimport, 2011).

In China, the conceptualization of “Internet Public Events” varied among scholars. From 1999 to 2010, concepts like “Internet Events,” “Internet Mass Events,” “Internet Public Events,” and “New Media Events” have been produced in the Chinese academic circle. Some scholars have extended the concepts such as “Internet Collective Acts” or “Internet Collective Behavior,” drawn from “Collective Behavior” or “Collective Action” in the Western context. However, the dominant concept is “Internet Mass Events,” an extension of “Mass Events.” Due to the influence of Mass Events on social stability, prevention and control of mass events by the government has become an important task to maintain social stability. Accordingly, the majority of “Internet Mass Events” studies regard them as social crises which must be responded positively, handled timely and controlled effectively. Certainly, there are a few studies to explore this issue under the theoretical framework of civil society and public sphere (Dong, 2016).

Linking Social media to Internet public events/ Internet mass events, “social management” is an interdisciplinary field of research. From the perspective of social management, it is an important issue whether Internet mass events, when treated as social crises, have the same implications as mass events. Dong (2015) showed that most of the “internet mass events” should be named as “internet public events”. Netizens discuss and express their opinions on an event because the topic is public, which relates to the interests or values of netizens themselves. Netizens express their views to form a controversial issue, so as to form an internet public event that arouses public concern and prompts the relevant governmental departments to take appropriate measures. The concept of internet public event not only shows the impact of Internet media in social relations, and also shows the inherent nature of the event. The concept of internet public events helps to avoid preset value judgments as in the concept of “internet mass incidents,” and reflects the neutrality and objectivity of academic research.

Social media emerged in the period when China has been deepening reforms and social transformations. As a new platform of communication, social media provide people with a new space for communication and expression. A variety of prominent societal problems have increasingly inspired people to exchange information and express their views in the internet space. Opinions gather rapidly and become a strong public voice, promoting the solution of societal problems. This process constitutes the sensational “Internet public events” when the common interests and values are violated in these events. In general, internet public events have shown the following features: Firstly, the events involve public affairs and public interests directly or indirectly; therefore, they can be called “public events.” Secondly, netizens actively participate in the discussion of these events that forms internet public and internet public opinions; Thirdly, the process of events is mainly a public opinion process which may lead to collective behaviors and proper solutions in the end (Li and Dong, 2012).

Internet public events might be just an insignificant phenomenon in the human history, but they might also become an important force if they can promote social change in a specific historical period. In fact, once an Internet public event is formed, it will be a part of the process of China’s reform and social transformation, and has noticeable influence. How to describe and establish the role and impact of Internet public events? A popular slogan from public opinion academics is “Attention is powerful, onlookers change China” (Xiao, 2010). Due to the various opinions in the cyberspace and a strong forum of public opinion, people have a chance to make their own judgments and choices, to help resolve the issue properly, and to make the situation work in an optimum way. As a commentator argued, “the Internet onlookers are not only spawning a variety of hot events, but also becoming an important means to present social problems altogether and solve them properly” (Zhang, 2012).

As an integral part of the Internet media, what role do social media exactly play in the occurrence and development process of internet public events? How these events promote China’s reform and social change? The existing literature is limited to intuitive perceptions through examples and experiences, but did not give answers with rich theoretical thinking. Starting from the perspective of Internet public events, this study aims to explore the relationship between social media and China’s reform and social change.

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