

A proposal to develop the theory necessary for investigating the role of social media in shaping China's behavior in the South China Sea

Introduction

It is generally agreed that there are three interacting dimensions of China's aggressive stance towards its interactions with its neighbors and the United States in the South China Sea: (1) nationalism, (2) the ability to project military force, and (3) resources such as fish and oil.

All three dimensions have been discussed in Chinese social media such as the microblogging site Sina Weibo. The US government has challenges in understanding the Chinese government's, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's), the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), and the general public attitudes towards the South China Sea. Part of the problem is the lack of transparency and lack of documentation of decision-making in the CCP, PLA, and State Council. Many US journalists, researchers, and government officials hope that the easy to access Chinese social media will provide insights into how China works and into possible scenarios on what will happen in the South China Sea.

We believe that for the US government to effectively use Chinese social media to gather "actionable intelligence", it needs a much better theoretical model of how social media works in China. Such a theory must account for how national consensus develops through the cascading choices of individuals of what brands of social media they participate in and under what situations they "trust" enough to pay attention to, have their beliefs shaped by the attitudes of others, or even link to the position or re-post it. There has not been adequate research on the "trust" level in Chinese social media and on how who or what people trust impacts how social media develops. Literature reviews of trust have shown that trust has a psychological dimension and is culturally conditioned.

- Media associated with the CCP including print, broadcast, and social media.
- Celebrities
- Friends and Relatives
- People whose posts the reader has agreed within the past.
- People whose post the reader agree with now.
- People who are from the reader's city or province.
- People whose posts are echoed by thousands of others.
- People whose posts stir up strong feelings such as anger or love.
- Posts that stir up feelings of "nationalism", pride in China, or resentment at the "victimization" of China.

Though trust relationships are critical to how individual Chinese act in social media, individual posting behavior is also based on assessments of risk based on fear:

- That the post will be deleted by the social media company.
- That the poster will get negative feedback either on line or through their personal relationships.
- That the Public Security Bureau (*Gōng'ān Bù*) will knock on the door.

The History of Social Media in China

Back in February of 1996 the CCP made the decision to embrace the Internet in the interests of becoming a dominant world economic power. At the same time, there was consensus on the value of “informatizing” the country in a way that the CCP stayed in control. What first became as chat rooms run by non-governmental firms evolved into immensely popular information portals such as Sina and Sohu. By 2012, hundreds of millions of Chinese were participating in social media such as the microblogging site Sina Weibo. There has been much media attention about the role of Sina Weibo in the CCP’s succession process and China’s foreign policy towards the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

You can prove anything with social media

In trying to understand this role, we are cognizant of the fact that many research teams who have mined social media have found that there are real challenges in developing “actionable intelligence” from the data. Researchers have found that based on their assumptions they can prove anything when they mine social media.

Different algorithms for different languages

Also, social media techniques that work in America, do not necessarily work so well in China or the Middle East. For example, different algorithms work better in each culture at accessing attitudes in social media. Also, the technology used by a social media company can impact how people use it. The two microblogging sites, the US based Twitter and the Chinese based Sina Weibo, offer different ways of reposting posts and these differences effect the way “memes” gain traction in the country and go “viral”.

Government Control

Finally, another major difference between social media in the United States and China is that the CCP uses legal sanctions, relationships with social media companies, extensive monitoring and post deleting, and social media fed multi-agent modeling to shape how social media impacts group behavior. Though the United States government tries to control social media to a much lesser extent. Because the roles of the government are so different between the two countries, one should be skeptical of anyone who applies social media theory developed in the US to China.

How does a Collectivist Culture use Social Media