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# MICRO-BLOG'S ROLE IN CHINESE MEDIA INDUSTRY: A BOOSTER OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND A HOTBED OF GOSSIP

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MICRO-BLOG'S ROLE IN CHINESE MEDIA INDUSTRY: A BOOSTER OF MEDIA  
FREEDOM AND A HOTBED OF GOSSIP

By

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Master of Science Degree

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Professional Media and Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Paul Torre, Chair

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TITLE: MICRO-BLOG'S ROLE IN CHINESE MEDIA INDUSTRY: A BOOSTER OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND A HOTBED OF GOSSIP

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Paul Torre

China's media freedom has improved compared with several decades ago, but the Chinese media is still under the supervision of the Chinese central government. In 2009, Micro-Blog service was brought into the Chinese media market by Sina, one of China's biggest media companies. Since its start, Micro-Blog service has, to some extent, changed the environment of the Chinese media industry. Netizens use Micro-Blog to negotiate with the government about policy-making, to call for help during emergencies, to send their opinions about social or economic issues, and most importantly, to broadcast their everyday lives. But problems have also been generated by this new media product, as false rumors have been found on this platform, and sometimes the rumors have undercut social stability. Based on a wide selection of literature, the researcher explored the Micro-Bloggers' behavior, Micro-Blogging profiles, and the social benefits of this service. The researcher also tried to discover whether Micro-Blog service is filled with rumors, and whether it is challenging the position of the mainstream news industry.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used during the research procedure. A content analysis on the content of Micro-Blogs was conducted from January 29 2013 to February

4 2013. The researcher also obtained survey results from fifty Chinese people. Three case studies were conducted to find out both positive and negative sides of this Micro-Blog service.

The research shows that the Micro-Blog service is really popular in China, and that the Chinese people are mainly using Micro-Blog as a tool of broadcasting their everyday lives to friends. Micro-Blog has provided Chinese netizens an platform to negotiate with government, and a venue to discuss topics about politics and anti-corruption issues. It's clear, however, the Micro-Blog has facilitated the spreading of rumors to some extent. It has also been found that Chinese Netizens have confidence in Micro-Blog, and would like to benefit more from it in the future.

**Keywords:** Micro-Blog, media freedom, rumor, Chinese media industry

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Definition of Media Freedom**

Media Freedom, which is also referred as “freedom of the press” or “freedom of the media,” is the right to publish newspapers, magazines, books, and etc. without governmental interference or prior censorship (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 1999). The concept also can be interpreted as the freedom of communication and expression through vehicles including various electronic media and published materials. While such freedom mostly implies the absence of interference from an over-reaching state, its preservation may be sought through constitutional or other legal protections.

#### **1.2 The Situation of Media Freedom in China**

##### **1.2.1 Overall Condition**

People of some western countries grant the freed of the press as a basic welfare, but not people all over the world have this privilege. For example, in China, journalists are not able to talk about whatever they want in public. In recent years there are cases of journalists sent into the prison because of revealing “secrets” (Jacobs, 2011).

AT the annual meeting of the Communist Party’s leadership held during October 2010, whose theme was to increase China’s cultural reach, produced new calls for increased supervision of journalism and the Internet. (Wines, 2011)

Freedom of the Press, a yearly report provided by US-based non-governmental organization called Freedom House, measures the level of freedom and editorial independence enjoyed by the press in every nation and significant disputed territories around the world. Levels of freedom are

scored on a scale from 1 (most free) to 100 (least free). Depending on the ratings, the nations are then classified as "Free", "Partly Free", or "Not Free". In 2011, from Freedom House's investigation, China's situation was rated as 85, which means not free. (Freedom House, 2011)

### **1.2.2 Comparative Analysis of the Situation Now and Several Decades Ago.**

It has been clarified (Yang & Liu, 2007) that current press freedom has improved compared with the situation decades ago. Based on a comparative content analysis of China Central Television National Network News and People's Daily (domestic edition) from 1970s to 1994, Chang and his fellow investigators (Chang, Wang & Chen, 1994) found that since the reforms in the late 1970s the media is working hard to get back to the right direction. People now are more eager to talk about their feelings, though the topics usually are neither political nor sensitive. "Individuals began to question nonsensical explanations given by those who had claimed to monopolize the truth. Question after question knocked the bottom out of the official ideology... people began to ask why the quality of goods and services provided by state-owned enterprises was so poor compared to that of free market products. While the direct consequences of market reform were modest in the beginning, the debates eventually succeeded in drawing people away not only from old economic concepts but also from the entire ideology of the Stalinist-Maoist state" (Zhang, 1993). It was very difficult for Chinese people to talk about these topics during the 1960s to the 1970s, and people who discussed about unpleasant feelings about the government would have been sent into jail or even executed with the accusation of anti-revolution. The future seems brighter, as during the Beijing Olympic Games held in the summer of 2008, The Olympics environment for Media was quite free and open (Richardson, 2008), and Chinese people could even register Facebook and Twitter accounts. But such openness lasted

only for a few months, and after October 2008, the Facebook and Twitter servers were blocked again.

### **1.2.3 A New Era of Micro-Blog.**

In 2009, a twitter-like network called Micro-Blog was introduced in China, and it is now silently and subtly changing the way people express opinions. Micro-Blogs are very similar to twitter, an online social networking and blogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters.

Sina is the first media company that brought the concept of Micro-Blog into China. Ironically, the "t" of its website: "t.sina.com.cn" represents the word "Twitter", but its US based counterpart "twitter.com" still cannot, and may never be able to, enter the Chinese market. That's because Twitter's server is in the US, and Chinese officials found it impossible (or difficult) to delete "unpleasant messages" as fast as possible. But the company Sina grasped the opportunity, borrowed the idea of twitter, did some very trivial variations, renamed it Micro-Blog, and developed it as the main media production of the company. What's more, unlike Google and Twitter, Sina conducts self-censorship, which means the company's Internet supervisors will actively delete sensitive news or will deal with unpleasant messages according to the advices of China's Propaganda Department by banning related accounts and deleting their Micro-Blogs. Sina is doing very well with its Micro-Blog business, as Cao Bowei (2011), who is the CEO of Sina, recently disclosed in an interview that now there are about 500 million active Micro-Blog users in China.

The researcher found that Micro-Blog, with a large population of audience, is forming a kind of Micro-Force, which is gradually changing the situation of media freedom in China.

Because of the immediacy of Micro-Blog posting, the blogs may have been forwarded for millions of times, before a word becomes a "sensitive" and censored by the Great Firewall of China(GFW). GFW is an effective system to detect sensitive messages. It is thus harder for the government to cover up unwelcome messages.

#### **1.2.4 Rumor: A new concern of Micro-Blog**

It is undeniable that Micro-Blog service has positive sides, as it has given Chinese netizens means to express their feelings on political issues and sensitive social topics. At the same time, however, rumors spread on these new social networking websites are even harder to detect. This is not an exclusive problem of China, but also calling for the attention of a lot of governments, including the US government. The US government has spent three years and \$ 42 million to invent high-tech means to control rumors (Mao, 2012). Rumors are an unpleasant feature of the social networking.

Rumors have been spread by Micro-Blog many times since its start in 2009. Here are several examples:

**HIV GIRL:** On October 14, 2009, an unverified Micro-Blogger, who was not using his/her true name, but with the user name Yan disclosed that she was a sex worker recently infected with HIV. She displayed a list of telephone numbers with the names of people who might have been infected. This message was later proven to be false by the local police department. Yan's ex-boyfriend, who wanted to get revenge on her, posted this Micro-Blog. This HIV rumor panicked a number of people who had contacts with prostitutes, and influenced the local social stability.

**SALT PREVENTS RADIATION:** On March 11, 2011, an earthquake occurred in Japan, and one of the Japan's nuclear power plants was destroyed. Radioactive material was exposed

and there was a possibility of nuclear meltdown. Residents living on the east coast of China were frightened by this news. Some people on Micro-Blog websites began to spread the message that “Salt that contains iodine can prevent radiation”. This message was false, as a small amount of iodine does not prevent radiation effects. But this rumor caused a “salt rush” in most of Chinese eastern cities. According to the mainstream press, some of the salt providers started the rumor to raise the price and profit from this salt rush.

The spreading of false rumors is a persistent problem of social media, and Micro-Blog is not immune to it.

Micro-Blog is a double edged Internet app, which means on one hand it is optimizing the freedom of the press in China, as it becomes an emerging news gathering and reporting channel, which has provided Chinese people the breeze of uncensored information. Nevertheless it has become a wonderful tool for Chinese people to express their feelings about those once sensitive issues. On the other hand its anonymous and instant posting characteristics are the perfect soil for the rumors. The rumor spread by the Micro-Blog platforms are harder to distinguish, and far more influential compared with their traditional media counterparts. So about how to balance the contradicting two sides of this brand new service is worth investigating.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the Chinese Communist Party (here after CCP) won the War of Liberation, national war mainly between CCP and KMT, one of Taiwan's main political parties, from June 1946 to June 1950, it since then has applied a comparatively strict way to control the propaganda. Until the late 1970s, the second generation of CCP leader Deng used a "reform and open up" policy, as Tong (2011) mentioned in her research that, the central government subtly released the grasp upon media industry.

Though there have been a lot of improvements (Yang& Liu, 2007), and people now have limited freedom to talk about politics and to criticize the government, the control is still stringent. Zhao (2000) believes that the mainstream press is not fulfilling its obligations, though many stations extended the topics of public discourse, they carefully prevent any kind of overt challenge to party rules or party policies, and the media industry now should use their power to tell the public what is truly happening around them.

Wang (2010) mentioned that media freedom is the proof of society evolution. It is an ideology including ethical responsibility. Media industries in some western countries see telling the truth as their social mission and responsibility.

At present, the freedom of the press in China is officially protected by law. According to the Chinese Constitution, Chapter II Article 35, "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration" ("Constitution of the People's Republic of China ", 2004) But though the law is the law, what is crucial is who owns it, and who uses it. If government owns it, then government can neglect

whatever is written inside, and they can change it whenever they want to, and then obviously the situation will become dangerous. China is a single-party system country, which means there is no oppositional party. The system is also called the People's Democratic Dictatorship, in other words: a person is either the target of democracy or the target of dictatorship. So people in China are afraid of speaking contradictory opinions, which may sometimes influence the interests of the majority group, as nobody really dares to be the target of dictatorship. The Internet has given people a place to speak, to express their dissatisfactions towards the government, as sometimes people can say things on it anonymously.

Wartman (2007) argues that the Internet is harder to regulate than the print media. Because of the nature of the internet, it is very difficult to permanently ban citizens from visiting particular sites.

Abbot (2001) also found that anyone who has some knowledge of the Internet can find a way around censors. However, while controlling the Internet discourses might be beyond the ability of governments – monitoring is not.

MacKinnon (2006) pointed out that China's system of Internet censorship and surveillance is the most advanced one in the world. While tens of thousands of people are employed by the Chinese government and security organs to implement a system of political censorship, this system is also aided by extensive corporate and private sector of corporations, including but not limited to the world's major international technology and Internet companies. This system is tightly controlled by the central government, and is always ready to supervise the forums and discussions taking place on the Internet. The principle of the censoring system can be described as supervising “footprints”. According to MacKinnon (2006) , the Chinese government is

handling the Internet by monitoring the browsing history of the citizens and supervising anyone it feels is a threat on grounds of leaking state secrets.

Liu Xiaobo won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. He was sent into prison partly because of his article *Chapter 8*, in which he appealed that the Chinese government should ensure the freedom of speech, freedom of publish, protect the citizen rights of being informed and supervising the operation of government, formulate the Journal Law and Publishing Law, release the newspaper ban, delete the articles in the criminal law about “inciting subversion of state power”, and forbid speech criminalization. (Liu, 2008)

### **Micro-Blog in China:**

Many sociologists see Micro-Blogs as an important means to optimize the media environment. Zhao (2011) mentioned in her article that from 2009 to 2010, Micro-Blog has become the most valuable web app. As a new media, Micro-Blog has demonstrated its influence on coverage of several social crisis and now is becoming an outstanding reporting tool for journalists. Micro-Blog is a forum for people to comment on policies and negotiate with the government, and it is an efficient vehicle to facilitate business communication.

Wang (2011) in her recent research further explained that Micro-Blogs now are turning into an extremely powerful new force. All the media companies are thinking about how to utilize it. The user number rocketed in a very short time, which has deeply influenced the social and political environment of China. In the last two years Micro-Blog negotiated with government about policy making, took part in anti-abducting and trafficking children, and also facilitated blood donations during some natural disasters. And it is now challenging the vertical integrated media system, where all the news is made by the central station and sent downward to the

subsidiary stations. This “Micro force” (Wang, 2011, p. 142) combined with the Web 2.0 dynamics may give us a new era of media freedom.

Xiao (2011) mentioned in his report that anti-corruption is the main topic of the discussions taking place on Micro-Blogs. National institutions like Sinopec and the Red Cross are considered by Micro-Blog as “not very credible”. We can easily find that Micro-Blog is not only a communicating tool, but a field for civilians to monitor the operation of government. It is anticipating and influencing the world we are living in, and it may optimize the social ecology and sociopolitical context in the future.

Based on these several sources, the researcher wants to find out whether Micro-Blog is a powerful tool that can enhance the media freedom progress in China.

**RQ1: How are Chinese people using Micro-Blogs?**

**RQ2: Are the Chinese people benefiting from the Micro-Blog service?**

There are pessimistic opinions upon Micro-Blog. Andrew Zhao, PhD in Media Literacy, expressed his opinion during an interview that not every innovation is progressive. Micro-Blog might be the most influential IT innovation in our age, but we do not all benefit from it. It gives us a feeling of “knowing too much”, but actually most of those information is not useful at all. We have too much information but too little time. it is important to focus on thinking, judging and selecting what is important from cyber space, not dissolving our being to a list of 140 bytes of trivial and meaningless digital footnotes. Zhao also believed it is unnecessary to block or restrict Micro-Blog service, because finally most people will find it uninteresting. And it will pass away naturally, just like what they have done to SNS like “my space”. (Zhao, 2011)

Some Chinese presses are holding the belief that Micro-Blog has to be restricted. Chu et al.

(Chu, Zhang, Liu, & Li, 2011) mentioned that some trivial economic and social issues and rumors may occasionally be amplified by the Micro-Blog, and then be politicized. If these consequences are not properly handled in time, they will become hotspots within society and threaten the social stability and social morality. So the government should be ready to “deal with, guide, utilize and control” the Micro-Blog system and apply more systematic management.

Though cannot agree with Chu, because the media industry in China has already burdened too much stress, the researcher still wants to see what kind of “trivial issues” or rumors that have been amplified by social networking websites. So my questions are:

**RQ3: Does the Micro-Blog service spread many rumors?**

**RQ4: Will the Micro-Blog service challenge the dominant position of the mainstream news industry?**

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to find out the impacts of Micro-Blog on China's media industry.

#### **3.1 Content Analysis**

A content analysis about the Micro-Blogs posted online was conducted to find out Micro-Bloggers' demographic characteristics, user behavior and content of the Micro-Blogs.

Everyday, there are approximately 25 million Micro-Blogs sent onto the Sina's website (Weibo.com, 2013), and some 300 Micro-Blogs are posted on the website per second, and technically it is not practical to collect all the Micro-Blogs during a certain period of time in a day. The researcher applied convenient sampling by collecting the data from a limited number of Micro-Blog users. First, the researcher conveniently chose 600 active Micro-Blog users on Sina, which consists of 300 verified users (who are using their true names and true information) and 300 unverified users (who are not definitely using their true names and true information). Second, Micro-Blogs that posted online from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. during one week time (From Jan 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013 to Feb 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013) were collected. A total number of 1702 Micro-Blogs were obtained during that time, and the researcher has sorted them by different categories. The third step was to analyze the users by using the information that collected, and divide them into groups of gender, age, race, education level, and frequency of using Micro-Blogs. Fourth, operational definitions were designed to classify the Micro-Blogs by their contents. Micro-Blogs were divided by their contents into groups of:

1. Everyday life: Micro-Blogs that talk about the daily trivial issues, mainly describing the interesting things happened to people's normal life.
2. Social, economical news : Any Micro-Blogs that are related to the social issues of community development, communal harmony, better working conditions of people, weddings, drug abuse, ethnic issues, family relations, gender issues, and Micro-Blogs about economic situation, the opinions on economic policy-makings, and business analysis, etc.
3. Anti-corruption news: Micro-Blogs that revealing local government corruption, or urge certain departments of the government to clarify their accounts, or provide anti-corruption clues and suggestions, or Micro-Blogs about government's new regulations that prevent corruptions.
4. Education: Micro-Blogs talking about the education system, or of the content of teaching certain kinds of knowledge.
5. Political opinions: Micro-Blogs expressing opinions on government, internal and external policies of the government, policies of about freedom of the press, news about government interference of the operation of media industry, activities of political leaders, elections, problems, political issues, etc.
6. Calling for help: Micro-Blogs that asking people to help, for example: looking for missing people, asking for donation to seriously injured people, calling for blood donation during emergencies, and Micro-Blogs revealing children trafficking details, pictures of the trafficked children and the suspects. News of the missing children, etc.
7. Crime news: Micro-Blogs about theft, protest, suicides, extortions, and terrorist activities.
8. Commercials: Advertisements of products, introductions of new services, discount

information, etc., sent by companies through Micro-Blogs.

9. Entertainment, fashion and celebrity news: Micro-Blogs about sports, video games, music theater, cultural events, celebrities, beauty contests, ceremonies, exhibitions, holidays, travel and tourism, etc.
10. Radical anti-government opinions: Micro-Blogs that directly criticize the headquarters of the government with insulting words, and scold the government, without a clear reason.
11. Scandals and Rumors: uncertified news about underground business, government scandals, assassination of journalists, interrogations to democratic persons, etc, and Micro-Blogs that have been officially ensured as faked news, or can be easily testified to be false rumors, like superstitious prediction of disasters, or “doomsday”.
12. Protecting Ecology: Micro-Blogs that about pollution, pm 2.5, and the activities on environment protection.

### **3.2 Survey**

As surveys have proven to be an effective way to access people’s voting intentions, to explain the process of decision making, to predict the use of product, and to assess the changes in opinions (Shoemaker & McCombs, 2003, p. 231), the researcher decided to use survey as a method to analyze Micro-Blog.

The researcher conducted an internet email survey among 50 Chinese people, now living in mainland China, and investigated their demographic information and user behaviors. This group of people consisted of students and teachers at University of International Business and Economics. The survey was conducted through Feb 23 to March 1, 2013. Each person was given one week time to answer the questions of the survey. The survey was formed by open-

ended questions, multiple-choice questions, close-ended questions, rating scales questions, and etc. The questions are addressed Micro-Blog users demographic characteristics, user behaviors, opinions of Micro-Blogs.

### **3.3 Case study**

Three case studies were conducted to find out Micro-Blog service's function and its characteristics.

#### **3.3.1 "My Dad is Li Gang" Incident**

The Li Gang incident occurred inside Hebei University in Baoding in Heibe Province at the evening of October 16, 2010. A black Volkswagen Magotan hit two university students who were roller-skating in front of a university grocery store. One of them, 20-year-old Chen Xiaofeng, who was a student from Shijiazhuang at the Electronic Information Engineering College, died later in hospital. The other victim, Zhang Jingjing, aged 19, remained in stable condition, suffering a fractured left leg. The drunk driver, 22-year-old Li Qiming, was said to have tried to escape the scene and continued driving to the female dormitory to drop off his girlfriend. When arrested by security guards, he was convinced his father's position would give him impunity, and he shouted: "Go ahead, sue me if you dare. My dad is Li Gang! (Lv, 2010) At the time he did not recognize that this simple sentence would make him one of the most infamous characters in China both online and offline. this Li Gang incident later ranked at 17th in the China's top 25 influential litigations in 2010 (Ren, Si, Chen, Yang, Wang, Li, Ge, & Fu, 2010).

Students at the college sent Micro-Blogs online to report this incident, and Micro-Bloggers began to investigate this young man and his family. They later found that this Li Gang was the deputy chief of the local police station, and there were calls for the local government to deliver

justice when dealing with this car accident and punish the perpetrator. The provincial government also reacted toward this PR crisis: ten days after the incident, the provincial governor Quanguo Chen discussed about this Li Gang incident at an official government conference. He promised that, Li Gang's occupation as a deputy chief of a local police station would not influence the result of the drunk driver's trial. (Li, 2010)

Before the introduction of Amendment VIII to the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China on May 1 2011, in China, people, who are not the primary responsible character, kill one person in a traffic accident should not be subjected to the criminal law. These cases would usually be a civil law matter, only if the perpetrators can afford a ¥300,000 (approx. \$50,000) compensation fee to the victims' families. After this incident was amplified by the Micro-Blog, many Netizens found these articles in the criminal law to be inadequate, and should be improved. In the meantime, many experts suggested that drunk driving should be listed as a crime. Actually, in August of 2010, the above Amendment about "defining drunk driving as a crime" had been proposed to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, and was widely discussed by the committee members. This Li Gang incident, however, literally triggered the development of this new amendment. A journalist from Southern Weekly pointed out that the Congress' move of "defining drunk driving and drag racing as serious crimes" are made under great pressure from the public (Zhao, 2011). Because of this Li Gang incident, the voice of the public was amplified by the Micro-Blog, heard by the Congress, and eventually urged the related departments to amend the inadequate articles of the criminal law.

The influence of this Li Gang incident didn't stopped at the legislation dimension, however, after several days' discussion about the incident, the online discourse about this issue turned into

a “automatism condition” (Ren et al., 2010). People’s anger has been triggered unconsciously. This anger turned wild, and was later be targeted at all the government officials. Some radicals started to say that all the Chinese government officials are corrupted. Some began to show proof saying that, Li Gang was the son-in-law of a provincial governor, who has a very complex social relationship background. Others said that Li Gang was terribly corrupted and owned at least five houses and apartments in the downtown area. There were rumors about Li Gang threatening the victim’s family to abandon the charge that were widely spread on the Micro-Blog websites.

Through a research done by Wu (2012), new information was discovered. Li Gang’s father-in-law was an 86 year old, retired manager of a local food company. Li Gang only have two apartments under his name, and one of them had already been sold because he needed the money to compensate for the victims family, and there was no proof of any corruption. And Wu (2010) also mentioned not only the Micro-Bloggers, but also some media companies are providing the public what they want to see, but not the truth. This social incident then became a hotbed of gossip and false rumors. Criticism against the government has increases day by day, and people have become more and more angry because of such irresponsible, and farfetched rumors. Wu believes that the mouthpieces of the government are responsible for this unpleasant situation, as the “harmonized” news reporting strategy used by the Chinese mainstream news organizations nowadays has been questioned by the public. The always-positive news provided by the central media is not as trusted as before, because of the Internet has let so many negative messages come to the surface. On the other hand, Micro-Bloggers’ individual bias might be easily amplified by new media tools, represented by social networking websites and Micro-Blog, and those biased opinions mixed with the negative attitudes toward mainstream news resources, have seriously

challenged the government's image and its crisis managing ability.

### **3.3.2 Bo Xilai Incident**

A case study on the Bo Xilai incident was also conducted to analyze the rumors generated by Micro-Bloggers.

Bo incident: On March 15 2012, the former Chongqing party chief Bo Xilai was dismissed from his related municipal and party posts. During Bo's service at Chongqing government, he paid great attention to "red culture", which means the traditional communist ideology, and once forced the Chongqing citizens to sing red songs, relearn Mao Zedong's work and Marxism Classics, which is widely recognized as Chongqing Mode, and this Mode was seen as a personal success of Bo's political work.

On February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Wang Lijun, Chongqing police chief, escaped to Chengdu American Consulate searching for help. The Chinese government at the beginning wanted to cover up the whole news and spread the message as "Wang is dismissed from position because he was detected having certain kind of mental disease which is caused by stress" (Xinhua News Agency, 2012). And mainstream press sent out the news that he is on vacation by that time.

After Bo's ouster, there are guesses on the connections between Bo's political failure and Wang's escape to American Consulate. And soon after that, BBC disclosed a piece of news showing that Wang talked about several political scandals related to Bo. One of the scandals is "Neil Heywood's death": A British business man found dead in his hotel room in Chongqing in late November, 2011. The cause of death was "excessive drinking", but Wang left several evidences at American consulate showing that Bo and his wife Bo Gukailai are responsible for Neil's death. (Bristow, 2012) There are also reports saying that Bo Gukailai is a suspect of

directly murdering Neil.

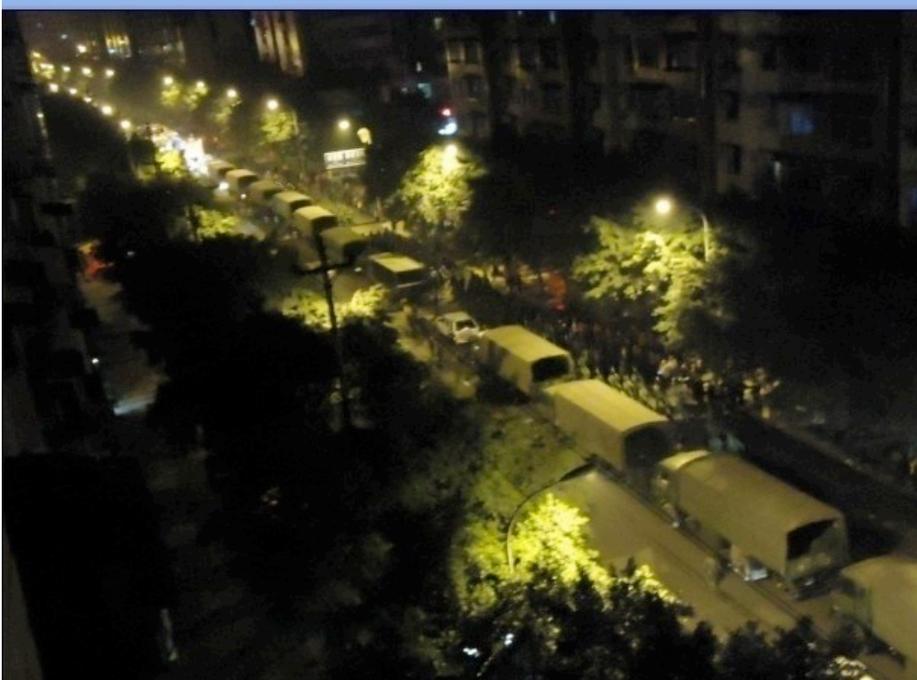
But from Bo's dismissing on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012 until April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Chinese mainstream presses didn't give any explanations on Bo's political downfall, and the government spokesman stonewalled inquiries from the British government and told curious Chinese that Heywood died of "excessive drinking," admonishing them "not to spread groundless rumor." So basically, there is no official explanation about this Chinese political incident during those 26 days. But suddenly on the morning of April 10<sup>th</sup>, the once "rumor" (Neil Heywood's death is related to Bo Xilai), repressed by censors and dodged by government spokesmen, had become a state-approved fact just overnight, and was replayed on every mainstream news agencies' programs. (Gao, 2012)

But during the 26 days of "silent time", rumors are widely spread as both Chinese netizens and Western media are taking wild guesses upon Bo's political fate in the future. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 there are Micro-Blogs appear on t.Sina.com saying that "I have heard gunshots in Beijing tonight", and Micro-Blogs with the content of "tanks being seen frequently all around Beijing downtown" appeared first on Sina and then on RenRen and then all the other Chinese social networking websites. Analysts are quite enthusiastic about this shocking news and start to write articles or blogs on every explanation and possibilities of this political crisis. Based on these messages, writers of Da Ji Yuan, which is a Falun Gong organization controlled press, started to weave the whole story by saying that: "Zhou Yongkang (ranked ninth in Chinese Politburo Standing Committee), who's the political partner of Bo, is unpleasant about Bo's ouster, and wanted to use his military power, Beijing armed-police, to force President Hu and Premier Wen to "rethink" about Bo's dismissing". Though partly explained the messages of tanks and gunshots, it's not credible enough to convince all the Chinese netizens. But these messages were

wildly spread online for more than three days and finally drew the attention of Propaganda Department. By that time, the government didn't take extreme actions towards it, but just use their Propaganda machines to repress the rumors.

After hearing this news, the researcher was also worried about the situation in China. Through phone call with an anonymous police officer of Beijing armed-police force on March 21 2012, the researcher was informed that "the Beijing headquarters actually reached an agreement on Bo's issue and have no conflicts on the final decision of Bo's dismissing. All the messages that about gunshots in Beijing or tanks in Beijing are rumors and those related departments of the government are already working on it."

Liu, a Beijing citizen who lives in the downtown, wrote in the Micro-Blog that he hasn't heard any gunshots during that night. And he hasn't seen any tanks in the downtown.



(Figure 1.)

The researcher also checked the properties of the pictures about "tanks in Beijing", only to

find out that the picture (Figure 1) are taken on September 2009, which is just the period of time that the government preparing for the ceremony of 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of National day. There was a military parade on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, and those tanks are a part the parade that been exhibited. So there are people using those old pictures to make up rumors and send them online. Actually if Chinese netizens are patient and wise enough, this kind of groundless rumors can be easily clarified.

But not everything that once was defined by the government as rumor is really groundless. After April 10<sup>th</sup>, as Bo was depicted as a party and state criminal, the Chinese government stands out to clarify everything. To a lot of people's surprise, the former rumor: "Bo is related to Neil Heywood's death" then became a state approved fact. Micro-Blog user "jieyigongjiang" posted Micro-Blog that "What was treated as attacks spread by 'international reactionary forces' has now become truth. Then what other 'truths' exposed by foreign media should we believe?...God knows!". And Zousifangye said "How did those all become truths? Am I fooled?" Gao (2012) described this phenomenon by saying that: "Chinese web users even more deeply confused about the distinction between political truth and rumor, one that has always been hazy in China but is now blurred even more by social media.

About the reason why people sent rumors and believe in these rumors on Micro-Blogs, Pan explained that "rumor producers are good at utilizing people's emotion and control the audience's psychological needs. They are using people's curiosity, and want to play the roles of insiders. They created several special, strange messages to fulfill netizens' desire of being informed. Though a lot of the rumors can be easily testified as faked, people are still blind when interpreting the messages that they want to believe." (Zhang, 2012)

Bao, a Beijing citizen, said in the Micro-Blog that Micro-Blog is used as the tool of sending rumors just because of its “instant posting” concept. It is a double blade sometimes, people want the uncensored information of course, but they want the credible information as well. It’s harder and harder to distinguish rumors on Micro-Blog, because once some social issue becomes a hotspot, and then there are thousands of people sending so-called credible sources on this social networking website. Once the rumors forwarded among a comparative large population, they even can become the truths. Six people have already been arrested because of generating rumors and influencing the social stability, which is a severe crime in China. And through an unofficial reports, it’s been disclosed that over 1000 Chinese Micro-Bloggers are warned because of sending rumors.

The ending: Chinese Propaganda Department warned several social network companies for not fulfilling the obligation of censoring the Micro-Blog content. Sina and other Micro-Blog companies were forced to shut down for 24 hours to delete all the Micro-Blogs about Bo incident. Tang and other five people were charged and later arrested because of generating the rumor of “Tanks in Beijing” and “Gunshots heard in Beijing”.

### **3.3.3 Carjacker Killed Baby in a Stolen Car:**

The researcher kept tracking the Micro-Blogs after the data collecting period. On the evening of March 3 2013 (GMT-6:00), the researcher found that a Micro-Blog about a missing baby in Changchun were forwarded by a lot of people. According to CNN’s Journalist Armstrong and Levs (2013), The missing infant’s (Haobo) father parked his car Monday (March 4 2013 GMT +8:00) in front of his own grocery store, and he entered into the store to turn on the stove. He left his son in the backseat while the cars engine was still running. But somebody drove away

his car just in that period of time. The young grieving parents called the police immediately, and also sent Micro-Blogs on different platforms calling for help. Their Micro-Blog has been forwarded for thousands of times at least. According to the researcher's data collection, during the period of 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. March 3 2013, there are 44 out of a total of 312 Micro-Blogs were talking about this missing baby. According to China's state-run news website Xinhuanet, On March 4, a 48-year-old man, identified as Zhou Xijun, confessed to the local police that he had stolen the car, strangled the baby, and buried him in the snow. This news about the murder "provoked a storm of anger" on Weibo.com, thousands of people were furious about this murderer, and demanded the death penalty for him, while, some others began to question the moral issues of nowadays Chinese society, and not least, a number of car companies even use this incident to propagate their new car secure system. On March 5 2013, 278 Micro-Blogs were collected, and 40 of them were about the missing infant and the carjacker. The researcher kept tracking the number of Micro-Blogs related to this case till March 11 2013, and the number declined abruptly. From the data collected from March 11, the researcher found only about one per cent of the online discourses are still about the missing infant.

### **3.4 Limitations**

Because of the limited time and source, convenient sampling was used in this research paper, so the results may not be applied to all the population. And because the content analysis was conducted in only one week time, so certain functions of Micro-Blogs might not be very obvious. For example, Just like in the case "Carjacker killed baby in a stolen car", this occasional event can largely influence the results of the research. Another thing is Sina.com's self censoring system may also have an impact on the credibility of this paper and the China's national

censoring system the “Great Firewall” may also reduce the number of certain news. This research was conducted in the US, so some of the Chinese websites could not be accessed through an US IP address, and this might also be a limitation to this study.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1 Results and findings from the content analysis:

Through the content analysis of 1702 Micro-Blogs, 412 (24%) of the Micro-Blogs are the stories of the Micro-Bloggers' everyday lives, which became the largest proportion. And the second largest proportion of content was protecting ecology, say, 18% of the Micro-Blogs were about pollution, PM 2.5 problems, which are caused by air pollutants with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less and etc. 187 Microblogs were about celebrities, TV shows and entertaining programs, and 151 (some 80% of the Entertainment) were posted by female users. Also there were a lot of people (10%) concerned about economic and social news. But the result of this content analysis also alerts that scandals and rumors cannot be neglected, as 191 (11%) of the total 1702 Micro-Blogs were scandals and rumors. Especially for rumors, there were 15 in total, five were about politics, and the other 10 were social news. All these 15 rumors were sent by 10 people, and one of them is verified user, and the other nine are unverified users (not using their true names). There were four radical anti-government messages found during this one week time. One answer to this phenomenon might be: it's not a major topic, while, the other answer might be: it's because of the powerful Great Firewall of China has censored and deleted most of them. 135 (8%) of the Micro-Blogs were about politics, and 17 of them were forwarded from mainstream press, while, all the others were all holding neutral political opinions. 117 (7%) Micro-Blogs were talking about anti-corruption issues, and compared with an early content analysis conducted by the researcher in March 2012, the number increased by about five per cent from 2.04%. (Wang, 2012) It might be concluded that there are more and more people talking

about politics and anti-corruption issues on Micro-Blog, but still those are not major topics, and not least, the opinions are usually neutral, say, Chinese people are still cautious about presenting their political opinions, even on Micro-Blogs, but Micro-Blog did have provided a fresh approach to these former taboos.

Former studies show that calls for help, for example calling for blood donation, is a very important positive function of Micro-Blog, but there was no message about calling for blood donation collected during the one week period. But three messages were about trafficked children's information, and partly testified the result of former studies, as Wang (2011) pointed out that Micro-Blog is playing a very important part in Anti-Children trafficking and Calling for help.

#### **4.2 Results and findings from the survey:**

50 (N) people took the survey and 47 (n, 94% of N) of them are Micro-Blog users. All of them have received at least college education, and 12 (24% of N) of them are post graduate students. All the three (6% of N) people that didn't have Micro-Blog account said that they are not interested in it. 36 (76.6% of n) people who use Micro-Blogs are among the age of 18 to 25, and it means that young people are more eagerly to adapt this new media production. And 41 (87.2% of n) have been using Micro-Blog service for more than 6 months, and 31 (66.0% of n) of the Micro-Blog users are using Sina Micro-Blog service. 39 (83.0% of n) people log on to their Micro-Blog website every day, and 28 (59.6% of n) of the Micro-Blog users post 3-5 Micro-Blogs every week. These statistics show that more than half of the Micro-Blog users surveyed are active users and over 80 percent of them are extremely involved in it.

People surveyed also pointed out that Micro-Blog has facilitated their communication with

friends. 33 (70.2% of n) believe that Micro-Blog service is attractive to them because it can provide uncensored news. From this result we can say that Micro-Blog has obtained Chinese netizens' trust.

The researcher also used five points rating scale questions in the survey to find out people's opinion on Micro-Blog's. People's attitudes toward the statements are scaled from the ratings of 1 to 5 (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). The mean of the statement 1: "When some social issue happens, and the traditional mainstream media's report is different from the news provided by Micro-Bloggers, you prefer the Micro-Blog news" is 2.1; the mean of statement 2: "Micro-Blog is the most sufficient way to collect news." is 2.5; the mean of statement 3: "Compared with other media productions, Micro-Blogs have given you more freedom to talk about your feelings." is 1.1; the mean of statement 4: "Compared with the traditional ways of expressing personal feelings, Micro-Blog is not-in-depth enough and lack of logic." is 2.1; the mean of statement 5: "Compared with the traditional media productions, the rumors on the Micro-Blogs are even harder to distinguish." is 1.4; the mean of statement 6: "Compared with the traditional media productions, Micro-Blog may attribute more to optimize the Freedom of the Press in China." is 1.1; the mean of statement 7: "If one day Micro-Blog service is banned, you will be very unhappy." is 1.1. From the data, it can be concluded that Chinese people are positive toward the Micro-Blog news, and are more likely to trust this brand new news distribution channel. People tend to rely on this new medium and want it to survive and develop in Chinese media market. But the results of statement 4 and 5 have also shown Chinese people's concern about the not-in-depth content and rumor controlling of this social networking tool. From the results of statement 3 and 6, we may conclude that in most of Chinese netizens' mind, Micro-Blog will

improve the situation of freedom of the press in China and have given Chinese people more freedom to talk about their feelings.

But to the question: “Do you have some suggestions on today’s Micro-Blog service?” the answers were polarized. 13 (n1=27.7% of n) people have given suggestions on it, and eight (61.5% of n1) are holding the ground that there should be less censorship upon Micro-Blog and they are against the idea of verifying Micro-Blog user identities. While, the other 5 (38.5% of n1) said Micro-Blog service needed more regulations, and the media companies and the government should do more to prevent rumors from spreading. It’s obvious that people have different kinds of requirements towards Micro-Blog: some may want it to be more reliable, and others may want it to be an efficient means to get uncensored news.

The survey has well-answered most part of my research questions, and has shown the user behavior of the Micro-Bloggers. Micro-Blog is very popular in China now, and Chinese people are using it to present their everyday lives to friends and communicate with people, collecting social, economic, political news, and also seeing it as a reliable source of uncensored messages. And most of the Chinese netizens want it to last longer and to improve itself. And there is a new trend that Micro-Blog is becoming a more and more important and trusted news distribution channel which is challenging the mainstream press.

#### **4.3 Results and findings from the case studies**

From the case of Li Gang incident, the researcher found that Micro-Blog service, on one hand, can be concluded as an effective communicating tool between government and public in China, as the discussions about inadequate articles in the criminal law has finally accelerated the procedure of revising incumbent malfunctioning regulations. Once a social incident be amplified

by this Internet App, the influence is usually radioactive. On the other hand, the Micro-Blog discourses are suffering from a chaotic-developing mode, which means, Micro-Blogs sometimes can generate unexpected results, and from the case of Li Gang incident, the researcher may conclude that those results are sometimes even irrelative to the social incidents themselves. False rumors can be easily created and broadcasted by this new media tool, and the credibility of the information is sometimes very hard to verify.

In the case of Bo's political incident, vast amount of rumors have been generated online, and according to China's mainstream press, the rumors that started "aimlessly" by Tang and other 5 people, has seriously destroyed the harmonious social environment and brought a PR crisis to the central government. From this incident and former results of the content analysis, it can be concluded that rumor is also an important part of Micro-Blog's content. And rumors on Micro-Blog website are even harder to distinguish. But people with certain computer knowledge are capable of making correct judgments upon the credibility of the sources. Pictures and even video clips are also used in rumor spreading. And messages with pictures are more credible compared with the text-only Micro-Blogs, say, rumors attached with pictures are harder to be testified and need certain special knowledge of related softwares.

Micro-Blog rumors have shown its destructive power in several social incidents, and it can be concluded that the influences of rumors that combined with social networking websites are even greater than the rumors merely broadcasted by traditional media. And controlling rumors on Micro-Blogs is not that easy as Micro-Blog system is based on a "instant posting" concept, and the Micro-Blog posting procedure is irreversible, say, once the Micro-Blog is posted, then it's very hard to eliminate its influence.

Rumors are popular on the Micro-Blog websites also because Chinese people can use it anonymously. And it's comparatively hard to trace the people who have sent the rumors online. Government's ambiguous attitude towards political scandals is also a major reason of rumor spreading. Chinese people are thirst of the uncensored information, but they cannot obtain it from a decent mainstream report, so sometimes they have to turn to the "insiders", but the so-called insiders' information is not always credible. Government's first action towards political scandals, usually, is to cover up, but there are loopholes on the faked news that provided by the mainstream mouthpieces. When people find those lies told by the government, they will be skeptic about every piece of news that presented by the mainstream. This distrust will also lead people to the less interfered, and original news sources: Micro-Blogs. This rush towards Micro-Blog has provided the rumors a hotbed to grow.

A new characteristic of Micro-Blog service has been revealed by the case of Carjacker Killing Baby in a Stolen Car. The fluctuations in the numbers of different types of Micro-Blogs are usually adhered to certain influential social issues. But it is also obvious that Micro-Bloggers' enthusiasm toward certain incident is very resilient, or time-sensitive, and based on the result of the case study, the researcher assume that Micro-Bloggers' interests won't concentrate on one issue for quite long time, say, it seems that people online have very short memory. So, it's really questionable that whether this Micro-Force generated by Micro-Blogger could be enduring and effective, especially when it's playing the important role of government-public communication tool.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Micro-Blog is a brand new media production in China, and it is still in its infancy. But it is

undeniable that Micro-Blog now is becoming more and more important, and having more and more functions than ever expected. It is really popular as over 500 million Chinese people are using it, and it's becoming a Micro-Force to reflect people's voice. But until now, the most important function of Micro-Blog is presenting the Micro-Bloggers' everyday lives, say, it is like a tiny customized station that constructed by the Micro-Bloggers to broadcast their own stories online, and it also facilitates communication among people. Another positive thing about Micro-Blog is that it opens a new way for the Chinese people to discuss topics like politics, corruptions, which means it will help to supervise the government's operation, but this function should not be amplified as most of the Micro-Blogs are not directly criticizing the policies but to provide neutral personal opinions on certain issues. And in several cases, Micro-Blog has shown its ability of calling for help and anti-children trafficking, but people's enthusiasm on these issues are largely influenced by social incidents, and usually, their interests in those issues are not long-lasting. Though there are some problems, it is undeniable that Chinese people are benefiting from Micro-Blog service in different ways. There is also a trend that Chinese netizens are paying more and more attention to Micro-Blog as a new news distribution channel, and a sizable percentage of them even trust it more than the traditional mainstream press. People would like to benefit more from Micro-Blog service and want it to survive in the Chinese media market. The researcher may conclude that the Micro-Blog system is subtly challenging the dominant position of the mainstream news agencies.

Rumors on the Micro-Blog websites are also concerning the Chinese people and government, as a lot of rumors, which at first couldn't have generated great influences among people, amplified by the Micro-Blog service and caused much more negative effects, so, about

how to control the rumors spread by the Micro-Blogs should be an interesting and important topic to be discussed. Through the research it has been found that Chinese people believe that Micro-Blog may attribute more to optimize the freedom of the press in China, and they are confident about Micro-Blog's future. So, Micro-Blog does positively influencing the China's freedom of the press. But rumors sent online through Micro-Blogs have also influenced the social stability of China, and the government is beginning to figure out ways to regulate social networks. To control rumors, Propaganda department may take extreme actions like verifying all the users' identity or conducting more censorship. And this might bring more negative influences to China's media industry. And those would be interesting topics to investigate in the near future.

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## APPENDICES

## Cover Letter

**Introduction:** I am WANG Yizhe, a graduate school student from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. As a part of my research project, I am doing a short survey on “Micro-Blog’s Impact on China’s Media Industry”. I will be grateful if you can take about 15 minutes to complete this survey. Completion and return of this survey indicates voluntary consent to participate in this study. Your identity will be strictly kept confidential.

**Instruction:** Please circle the answer that is closest to your opinion. And write your brief answer to question 20.

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If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me or my academic adviser Dr. Paul Torre through the contact information provided above.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subject Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail [siuhsc@siu.edu](mailto:siuhsc@siu.edu)

## Questionnaire

1. Gender

- 1) Male
- 2) Female

2. Age

- 1) 18-25
- 2) 26-35
- 3) 36-45
- 4) 46-55
- 5) 56 and above

3. Education level

- 1) Some school
- 2) HS graduate
- 3) Some college
- 4) 2 year college
- 5) 4 year college
- 6) Graduate school
- 7) Post graduate

4. Are you a Micro-Blog user?

- 1) Yes (Please go to question 5)
- 2) No (Please go to question 9)

5. How long have you been using Micro-Blog?

- 1) Less than one month
- 2) One month to six months
- 3) Six months to one year
- 4) One year to two years

6. Which Micro-Blog service are you using?

- 1) Twitter
- 2) Fanfou
- 3) Sina
- 4) Netease
- 5) 139 Speaker
- 6) Any others (Please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

7. How frequently do you log onto Micro-Blog
  - 1) Every day
  - 2) 2-3 times a week
  - 3) 4-5 times a month
  - 4) Once in a month or less
  - 5) Seldom use it
  
8. Frequency of posting Micro-Blogs
  - 1) Every time login
  - 2) 3-5 Micro-Blogs a week
  - 3) Seldom
  - 4) Never
  
9. Why not using the Micro-Blog service? (Please go to question 21)
  - 1) Not interested in it
  - 2) It has a bad reputation among other users
  - 3) Never heard of it.
  - 4) Other reasons (Please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
  
10. What do you generally do with Micro-Blog?
  - 1) Post everyday trivial issues
  - 2) Post personal opinions on social, political, economic issues.
  - 3) Communicate with other people
  - 4) Browse news
  - 5) Other things (Please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
  
11. What aspects of Micro-Blog service attractive?
  - 1) The freshest news
  - 2) The uncensored true information
  - 3) It's interesting to read the discussions online
  - 4) It's user friendly
  - 5) Within 140 words I can get the idea of news, it is brief
  - 6) It's a new technology
  - 7) Other reasons (Please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
  
12. What information do you read most on the Micro-Blog websites?
  - 1) Political
  - 2) Art
  - 3) Entertainment & Celebrities
  - 4) Everyday life
  - 5) Science
  - 6) Others (Please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

No.	Variables	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither A nor D	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13	When some social issue happens, and the traditional mainstream media's report is different from the news provided by Micro-Bloggers, you prefer the Micro-Blog news.					
14	Micro-Blog is the most efficient way to collect news.					
15	Compared with other media productions, Micro-Blogs have given you more freedom to talk about your feelings.					
16	Compared with the traditional ways of express personal feelings, Micro-Blog is not-in-depth enough and lack of logic.					
17	Compared with the traditional media productions, the rumors on the Micro-Blogs are even harder to distinguish.					
18	Compared with the traditional media production, Micro-Blog may attribute a lot to optimize the Freedom of the Press in China.					
19	If one day Micro-Blog service is banned, I will be very unhappy.					

20. Do you have some suggestions on today's Micro-Blog service?

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21. What other ways are you using to collect news?

1) Newspaper

2) Radio

3) Television

4) BBS

5) Mobile phone news services

6) Facebook

7) Xiaonei

8) Others (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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MICRO-BLOG'S ROLE IN CHINESE MEDIA INDUSTRY: A BOOSTER OF MEDIA  
FREEDOM AND A HOTBED OF GOSSIP

Major Professor: Paul Torre