# Professional intervention and organizational incorporation: examining journalistic use of microblogs in two Chinese newsrooms

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# Professional Intervention and Organizational Incorporation: Examining Journalistic Use of Microblogs in Two Chinese Newsrooms[1]

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## Abstract

Existing research has widely accounted the influence of microblogs on traditional news production, but less attention has been paid to how microblogs are socially constructed in newsrooms. Taking the social constructivist approach, this study explored the professional and organizational construction of journalistic use of microblogs. We conducted 33 in-depth interviews with news workers at two local newspapers in China and a textual analysis of their microblog posts. We found that Chinese news workers heavily stressed professional values and journalistic authority, which set limits to information appropriation and self-expression on microblogs. Production culture, organization policy and organization culture were also found to shape journalistic use of microblogs. The highly censored press environment restricted both organizational and individual use of microblogs, but sometimes motivated news workers to seek extra value on microblogs.

**Keywords: Microblog, social media, newspaper, newsroom, news production, Chinese press, social construction**

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**Introduction**

Microblogs have evolved from a niche technology to a mass phenomenon (Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt, & Pushchmann, 2014). Beyond their social functions in everyday life, microblogs have emerged as networked platforms for news production and consumption, social coordination, cooperate communication, and various forms of civic participation (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Weller et al., 2014). As a powerful communication technology, microblogs quickly became diffused among news professionals, triggering scholarly attention regarding their impacts upon traditional journalism. Existing studies have noted that the use of microblogs may lead to innovations in news gathering (Ahmad, 2010; Broersma & Graham, 2012), help promote and distribute traditional news content (Cozma & Chen, 2013; Ferguson & Greer, 2011), reshape the journalist-source relationship (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Hermida, 2010), and increase news transparency (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Zhou, 2013).

With few exceptions (e.g., Artwik, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012), these accounts primarily focus on the "effect of" rather than the "construction of" journalistic use of microblogs. This omission stands in contrast to the voluminous literature on the social construction of technology in journalism, which has been fruitful in interpreting technological transformations in complex social contexts (e.g., Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2009; Paterson

& Domingo, 2008; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). Moreover, the preponderance of existing

research has focused on the front-stage use of microblogs (e.g., journalistic tweeting and

tweets as news sources), but little is known about how journalists make use of microblogs in

the back-stage of news production.

In this study, we take a constructivist approach in exploring the "behind-the-scenes"

use of microblogs within organizational settings. This study is contextualized in China, where

Twitter-like microblogging services have witnessed explosive development in the past few

years (CNNIC, 2013). Mainly involving young and well-educated users, microblogs arguably

have given rise to an alternative space for diverse information and critical public opinion in

China (Chan, Xuan, Hao, Rui & Tian, 2012; Sullivan, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2013). This study

focuses on two top local newspapers in Guangzhou, *The Southern Metro Daily* and

*Guangzhou Daily*.

While conceding technological impacts on journalism, we focus on the construction of

technology in news production. First, we draw on the notion of "normalization" (Lasorsa et

al., 2012; Singer, 2005) in order to explore the process in which traditional journalists bring

their old values and norms into the use of new media technologies. Secondly, we incorporate

the discussion on organizational influence on the adoption of new media technology

(Boczkowski, 2009; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008). We propose that journalistic

use of microblogs is affected by professional values/norms and incorporated by

organizational needs. Based on in-depth interviews and a textual analysis, this study asks the

following questions: 1) How are microblogs employed by individual news workers at work?

2) How do professional values and norms shape the journalistic use of microblogs? and 3)

How do news organizations construct the journalistic use of microblogs?

## Literature Review

### Press and Microblogs in China

The market-oriented reforms since 1978 have greatly changed the ownership,

management, and ideologies of the press in China (Zhao, 2000). Currently, the press structure

at the local level consists of provincial/municipal organs and various commercialized,

general-appeal papers affiliated with them. While party organs still serve as the propagandist

instrument, the commercial newspapers entered the market competing for readership and

advertising revenue, financially subsidizing their parent papers (Zhao, 2000). Generally, these

commercialized subsidiaries are semi-independent papers that enjoy a certain degree of

editorial, personnel, and financial autonomy (Huang, 2000; Zhao, 2000).

Marketization, however, has not resulted in the complete loss of Party control over the

press. Chinese media outlets have to play the dual role of money-maker and mouthpiece,

suffering under both political control and market pressures (Lee, He, & Huang, 2007; Zhao,

2000). Within this ideological duality, the Chinese press displays several characteristics. First,

professional principles, such as objectivity, autonomy, and public service, have become

accepted widely in non-Party news media (Pan, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Second, although the

propagandist role is stressed to a lesser degree, Party control still prevails, which requires

journalists to bargain with censorship in daily practices (Tong & Sparks, 2009; Wang, 2010;

Winfield & Peng, 2005). Third, as part of the cultural tradition, journalism is viewed largely

as an authority in defining and interpreting society and history (Tong, 2011; Zhu, Weaver, Lo,

Chen, & Wu, 1997).

Journalism in China has been influenced by Internet-based technologies since the late

1990s. China now has the world's largest online population, and arguably, the most vigorous

Internet market (CNNIC, 2013). In such rich soil, microblogging services in China have

undergone explosive development. There are currently 331 million microbloggers in China,

accounting for 56% of all Internet users. Despite the keen competition, Sina Weibo and

Tencent Weibo have stood out and dominated the domestic microblogging market (Sullivan,

2012). Sina Weibo attracts more high-end users, such as urban professionals and college

students, whereas Tencent Weibo's user base consists of large proportions of users with lower

incomes (Sullivan, 2012). Microblogs have triggered debate over the tension between

technological empowerment and the expansion of state control (Leibold, 2011; Sullivan, 2012,

2014; Tong & Zuo, 2013). Despite controversy, microblogs have opened up a new public

space for faster, more diverse, and more critical discussions on public affairs (Chan et al.,

2012; Sullivan, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2013).

Traditional news organizations have embraced microblogging and actively have

sought strategies to harness microblog resources (Guo, 2011). On Sina Weibo alone,

renowned traditional media, such as *The People's Daily*, *CCTV,* and *Southern Metro Daily*,

have attracted millions of followers. Individual journalists also have adopted microblogs for

work-related use rather quickly. Zhang (2011) noted that more than 60% of investigative

journalists in China had obtained story ideas from microblogs at least once. According to PR

Newswire's Asia (2011) survey, 47.7% of Chinese journalists used microblogs often or on a

daily basis. 70% of these journalists reported that using microblogs decreased their use of

other social media. Journalists use microblogs for many purposes, including participating in

discussions, expanding work-related social networks, and finding reportable stories.

**Microblogging as a Journalistic Tool**

Allowing users to post messages under 140 characters, microblogs sustain bidirectional

communication networks among individuals, media outlets, and various organizations

(Weller et al., 2014). Compared with traditional blogs, microblogs are more interconnected in

nature; due to their short form and mobile-friendly applications, they tend to be more

frequently updated and reposted. Microblogging is not just an ambient, friend-following

medium for mundane everyday interaction; rather, microblogs are a news medium for

event-following and public debate, especially in times of disaster and social upheaval (Rogers,

2014; Weller et al., 2014). According to Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014), microblogs

may give rise to a more reciprocal mode of journalism in which sustained and multimodal

exchange of information encourages trusting and engaging journalist-audience relationships.

        The unique features of microblogs make them a potentially useful tool in journalism.

With the proliferation of user-generated content (UGC) and its growing relevance in the news

industry, social media like microblogs stand out as an information gold mine for journalists

searching for stories (Deuze, 2004; Hermida, 2010). Due to the cheap and convenient access

to various sources, microblogs have become a kind of news beat. For instance, Broersma and

Graham (2012) have found that journalists routinely monitor voters' and candidates'

microblogs for potential news stories, citing their tweets in articles to add flavor to election

analyses. Second, as aggregators of information from multiple sources, microblogs can be

utilized for news research and verification (Ahmad, 2010; Hermida, 2012). For instance,

Coddington, Molyneux and Lawrence (2013) found that, though not the most prominent use,

journalists and commentators did tap into the affordances of microblogs for fact-checking and

election coverage. In addition, microblog posts can be used to illustrate broader contexts in

reports (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

Furthermore, microblogs provided both journalists and news organizations with alternative channels to distribute news and engage audiences. In personalized online spaces like blogs, news workers can expand on issues and interpret current affairs (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Singer, 2005). Similarly, journalists have been known to use microblogs to issue opinions, aggregate and share information, report news events live, promote news outlets, communicate with audiences, and empower citizen participation (Artwick, 2013; Cozma & Chen, 2013; Larsorsa et al., 2012). Using social media to promote news and connect audiences has become a common practice among news outlets (Ferguson & Greer, 2011; Heinrich, 2011). Researchers have found that microblogs like Twitter appear to be more efficient in delivering news than other social media (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2013).

**Social Construction of Microblogs in Newsrooms**

Researchers tend to agree that various contextual influences construct the technological impact on journalism, including professional values and norms, existing routines, journalistic cultures and organizational structures (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2009; Patterson & Domingo, 2008). It is reasonable to assume that journalistic use of microblogs also is shaped socially in newsrooms, which is reflected in professional interventions at the individual/ideological level and organizational incorporation at the institutional level.

As part of the journalistic ideology, professional values may set limits on journalist appropriation of UGC on social media. For example, Internet and social media usage remains marginal in Israel because professional journalists heavily value co-present interaction for legitimate news gathering, such as face-to-face and telephone communication (Reich, 2013). Coddington et al. (2013) also have shown that traditional norms like professional objectivity and practices like stenograph still dominate when journalists conduct microblog-based reporting. The influence of professional values and norms also is reflected in mainstream media's reluctance to absorb reader contributions (Ornebring, 2008; Thurman, 2008). In Hong Kong media, "professional incorporation" in covering online videos results in prioritization of professional and organizational needs, such as filling space, representing public opinion and performing the watchdog role (Lee, 2012). More importantly, online video coverage by different news media has become standardized over time, suggesting the shaping power of a consistent professional paradigm in appropriating UCG.

Professional incorporation also may occur when journalists use microblogs to express themselves. In their analysis of "normalizing Twitter," Lasorsa et al. (2011) found that there was a general trend of weakening gatekeeping and strengthening transparency; however, journalists at "elite" media, supposedly having stronger professionalism, were more reluctant to give up gatekeeping power or to provide transparency. Some scholars have argued that, as

a whole, traditional news production has taken on greater visibility to the public in new media

environments (Singer, 2014; Zhou, 2013). However, others assert that transparency cannot be

viewed as a linear effect. For example, Lasorsa's (2012) analysis of gender and microblog

use revealed that female journalists provided more openness and accountability on

microblogs than their male counterparts. Similarly, Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, and

Holton (2013) found that microblogs offer limited meaningful transparency to political

journalists because their job talk on Twitter does not connect directly to the issues and people

being reported on.

Beyond professional incorporation, shaping power comes from news organizations.

Prior research has suggested that organizational-level influence shapes the adoption of

technologies, including structure, work routine, newsroom culture and policy. For example,

Boczkowski's (2004) study found that variations in organizational structures, work practices

and user representations resulted in different levels of adoption and use of multimedia and

interactivity technologies. Paulussen and Ugille (2008) identified several organizational-level

factors that caused sluggish adoption of citizen journalism, including hierarchical newsroom

structure, insufficient negotiation, high workload, and lack of time and resources.

The introduction of convergence technology has created overlapping work contexts,

bringing about conflicts in power relations and between different production cultures

(Robinson, 2011; Silcock & Keith, 2006). This confusion also exists in the

organizational-individual dialect. As suggested by Posetti (2009a), adoption of microblogs in

news work has aroused conflicts because it merged "the private and public experience" and

created clashes between "the personal and professional." Concerns have arisen regarding the

extent to which journalists' opinions and activities represent their employers. Many question

whether or not news organizations' perceived credibility could be affected because

professional principles are less adhered to on personal media (Posetti, 2009a; 2009b). To

resolve these tensions, many renowned news organizations have come up with detailed

guidelines to instruct the use of social media (Hacker & Seshagiri, 2011; Posetti, 2009b).

The literature review has presented two different, yet interrelated, perspectives. The

first perspective is imbued with technological optimism, which accentuates the positive

changes related to new media technologies. Reflecting a social constructivist standpoint, the

latter perspective tends to downplay the technological effects but attaches great importance to

the influence of the social context both at the professional and organizational levels.

Technologically optimistic analyses are fruitful in revealing the advantages of new

technology but have been criticized as simplistic and neglectful of possible constraints

(Domingo, 2008; Weiss & Domingo, 2010). In contrast, most scholars endorse the social

constructivist approach by virtue of its capacity to analyze complex social changes. As

suggested by Boczkowski (2004) and Lievrouw (2002), however, these two seemingly

contradictory views are connected, characterizing two sides of the same coin. In terms of

media evolution, they both generate important insights. As such, this study acknowledges the

impact of new media technology on journalism, but puts more emphasis on analyzing the

social construction of microblogs.

**Method**

**The cases**

Guangzhou is one of the most important media centers in China. With its huge

economic success and contentious culture, media professionalism manages to thrive in the

Guangzhou press. We focused on two local newspapers: *Southern Metro Daily* (*SMD*) and

*Guangzhou Daily* (*GD*). *SMD* is a commercial-oriented local metro paper, with a nationwide

name for liberal culture, journalistic professionalism and daring reports (Shen & Zhang, 2009;

Tong, 2011). Aiming at "recording the era and history", "pushing forward society's

development" and "enlightening the society" (Tong, 2011, p. 125), *SMD* frequently reports on

"boundary-spanning" issues and is regarded as a "trouble-maker" by censors (Lee et al.,

2007). *GD* is the party organ affiliated to Guangzhou Municipal Committee, which, unlike

most party papers, enjoys great commercial success. As a strategy, *GD* conforms to Party

control and pays exclusive attention to local readers' needs by offering useful information in

everyday life (Jin, 2007).

The selection is based on following reasons. First, both newspapers are top

mass-appeal newspapers in China that have large daily circulations and generate huge

advertising revenues. Second, both newspapers maintain professional norms and values in

production and this offers an ideal setting for studying technological impact. Third the two

papers provide certain degrees of contrast in ownership and organizational culture.

This study concerned Sina Weibo as an exemplar of microblogs in China. Started in late

2009 as a Twitter clone, Sina Weibo now has over 500 million registered users[2] and 46

million active daily users (China Daily, 2013), making it arguably the most influential social

platform in China. Unlike Twitter, Sina Weibo has some unique features such as message

threading and direct commenting, by which users can interact in a similar fashion of bulletin

board systems (Sullivan, 2013). As noted, Sina Weibo has attracted large numbers of "elite"

users such as celebrities, government officials, CEOs, artists, academics, and journalists

(Sullivan, 2013).

**In-depth Interviews**

Employing snowball sampling, we conducted 33 semi-structured interviews (see

Appendix for interviewee profile). Except two interviews (S18 and S19), all other interviews

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[2] Sina Weibo claimed its registered users had reached 500 millions. But this number greatly exceeds the official statistics announced by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which reported the overall number of microblog users was 331 million at the end of 2013. The discrepancy might be because that CNNIC data reflect the size of actual microblog users whereas Sina Weibo's data considered all the accounts ever registered, both active and abondoned ones included.

were conducted during a trip to Guangzhou between September and October in 2011. The

interviews lasted 30 to 150 minutes in length, digitally recorded upon interviewees' approval,

and later transcribed by a graduate student helper. We employed thematic analysis to analyze

the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After engaging with the data, we applied the related

literature and concepts and identified potential codes and themes. Then we coded the data in

details while adding new codes and discarding obsolete ones. Finally, we compared,

crosschecked, and interrelated the codes, and then collated them into themes. The codes,

themes and related data chunks were then used to address research questions.

**Textual analysis**

We also conducted a textual analysis as supplement. Out of the interview sample, we

chose 8 microbloggers from *SMD* and *GD* respectively (See Table 2). They were purposively

selected because they were more active users than others. These 16 microbloggers are

addressed with the same ID in the interview sample. As microblogs are frequently updated, a

one-month period could generate rich data for analysis. At last, we retrieved 3118 microblog

entries posted by selected microbloggers between 20 February, 2012 and 20 March 2012, The

we coded retrieved microblogs posts into 6 categories. "Personal talk" was coded when

microbloggers posted content about leisure and everyday life. "Professional talk" was coded

when microbloggers expressed opinions, observations and feelings about their professional

work. "Break news", "opinions" and "share/repost information" were coded when

microbloggers reported original news, expressed opinions on current affairs, or shared

information from other sources. The coded microblog entries were then counted and

interpreted.

### Use of Microblogs in News Work

In the following sections, we first present findings regarding the patterns of microblog

use by journalists for news-making and self-expression. We then analyze how professional

values/norms socially construct microblogs. The final section presents how organizational

cultures and policies have influenced the journalistic use of microblogs.

Aligning with our expectations, we found that news workers widely have adopted

microblogs. Viewing microblogs as a 24/7 public information/news platform, the

interviewees valued the quickness, conciseness, and connectedness of microblog information.

They also thought highly of the openness of microblog infrastructure (e.g., public profile

pages, identity verification, and private messaging), which provided easier access to expert

and celebrity sources that were previously difficult to contact. Interviewees unanimously

agreed that microblogs offered a unique lens to observe the opinion climate in China. Many

interviewees sought extra value out of microblogs due to their ability to circulate politically

sensitive information and dissenting opinions against censorship. An opinion page editor at

*SMD* spelled out the significance of microblogs in the Chinese context: "In an

information-suppressed environment, microblogs might increase the cost of censorship and

that will make a difference" (Editor S9, personal communication, October 11, 2011).

**Use of Microblog Information**

Use of microblogs consists of two activities: Obtaining information from other

sources and expressing oneself by posting content. Overall, obtaining information occupied a

central place in journalistic use of microblogs. Most interviewees indicated that they

preferred observing others and reading their tweets more than posting original content. This

finding was corroborated through textual analysis. The selected 16 nmicrobloggers followed

as many as 862 people on average, suggesting that they received an enormous amount of

information from various sources. However, only three microbloggers generated over 500

tweets during the one-month period; all other selected microbloggers were fairly inactive in

posting content. Within the microblogs, the news workers reposted content more often than

they posted original tweets, as shown in Table 1.

*<Insert table 1 about here>*

Although news workers heavily related microblogs to news work, the actual amount of

microblog use at work was only moderate. As will be discussed later, microblog use was

shaped by various professional and organizational factors. Nonetheless, the interviews

showed that microblogs gave rise to new ways of doing news work in terms of information

appropriation and information gathering. The first and primary use of microblogs was to

appropriate information for reporting. In essence, microblogs were used to monitor trends and

search for reportable stories; news workers could follow important sources in the field,

communicate with editors via the imbedded messaging feature, and obtain information from

peer journalists on microblogs. Though microblog information only occasionally provided

them with story ideas, microblog immersion could assist journalists in sensitizing themselves

to new trends and understanding the news ecology.

Second, microblogs can be utilized for limited newsgathering. Different from previous

studies, our interviews found that microblogs were not only helpful for accessing elite

sources, but also efficient in locating grassroots sources. The *SMD* current affair journalist

made the following statement: "You can find an expert easily if you need to. What if you

want to find a student relevant to an incident at a local university? It might not be as easy. But

now microblogs can help you with it" (S14, personal communication, October 12, 2011).

**Posting on Microblogs**

At least in theory, microblogs can be used for breaking news, promoting work, and

connecting audience members. However, we did not find news workers consciously applying

microblogs for any of these purposes. Figure 1 shows the types of tweets generated by the

selected microbloggers. The news workers most frequently posted content about their

personal lives and opinions about various current affairs. In neither newsroom did the news

workers promote themselves or engage readers often. They rarely broke news on their

personal microblogs. The results also indicated that news workers rarely talked about their

jobs or commented on the media's performance. Of all the 3,118 tweets, only 268 were

related to professional topics. In contrast, sharing information from various sources

constituted an important part of the microblog posts. The selected microbloggers generated a

number of posts about their personal lives, which were mostly mundane and trivial. This

practice may add to the transparency of news work to a certain extent; however, the

phenomenon is more likely a reflection of the inevitable overlap of life and work created by

social media.

*<Insert Figure 1 about here>*

## Professional Intervention in Microblogs

Microblog patterns partly can be explained by the influence of journalistic values

and norms. Overall, the interview results indicated a strong "good old journalism" mentality

among Chinese news workers. They tended to dismiss microblogs and UGC as an inadequate

and inept form of journalism or simply another piece of technological hype. They emphasized

that professional journalism served irreplaceable functions, such as sifting out the true from

the false and providing in-depth analyses. They also legitimized professional journalism by

virtue of professional values and ethics, editorial controls, and institutionalized production.

This stance is best illustrated by *SMD*'s microblog manager's comment on UGC:

> It doesn't matter how you get your information–via telephone or the Internet.
> What matters is the quality of the information you have and to what extent you
> have followed our standards in getting such information… we should stick to
> standards such as cross-checking, background research, and logical construction,
> and then present the product to our readers. (S2, personal communication,
> October 11, 2011)

The interviews showed that news workers applied similar professional considerations

to microblog use. This process echoes previous studies on "normalization" and

"incorporation" of new technologies in journalism (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Lee, 2010).

Specifically, professional interventions were identified both in the appropriation of microblog

information and microblog-based self-expression.

**Citing Microblog Sources**

In both newsrooms, news workers embraced Western journalistic professionalism and

applied it in news work. When evaluating the quality of microblog information, they

invariably expressed concerns regarding its credibility and impartiality. On the one hand, the

low perceived trustworthiness resulted from the fact that there was no effective way to verify

or cross-check the information. On the other hand, interviewees were frustrated that most of

the microblog information tended to be subjective and emotional; they rated many

expressions on microblogs as "angry", "sentimental", "subjective" and "biased".

News workers also applied the principle of impartiality in assessing microblog

information. They noted that the power distribution between elite and grassroots users was

uneven, leading to additional doubts. The culture news editor at *SMD* argued, "In the

mainstream discourse, elite users' voice definitely overrides ordinary users' voice because

they are reposted by many more people…People are naturally inclined to adopt their opinions"

(Editor S9, personal communication, October 11, 2011). According to this perspective,

microblogs, supposedly a democratizing public space, were excessively centered on celebrity

and elite users. Similarly, some of the interviewees worried that the commercialism of

microblogs would corrupt their value as a public space due to corporate interests and public

relation operations.

The professional values and norms also shaped the actual use of microblog information

in reporting. The emphasis on objectivity and accuracy restricted the use of microblogs in

news work. Similar to Reich's (2013) finding, microblogs only offered news workers a

supplementary method for finding and gathering news, or simply provided background

information. Many interviewees doubted the legitimacy of quoting microblog entries.

Conventionally, interviewees make remarks directly addressing journalists' questions.

However, expressions on microblogs do not respond to specific questions, therefore making

them open to inaccurate interpretations. Overall, news workers strongly preferred face-to-face

interaction. Even when microblog information was cited, news workers usually combined

conventional procedures, such as source assessment, fact-verification, triangulation and

background research. For journalists like the culture news journalist (G3) at *GD*, meeting the

interviewees in person or calling them was a necessity unless they already had a strong

relationship in which they had developed profound mutual understanding. Many journalists

have developed strategies to evade risks, such as screen-capturing the microblog post as a

record or double-checking the original post by sending private messages to relevant

microbloggers.

In addition, news workers still applied prominence as a value when gathering news on

microblogs. This practice especially was reflected in the celebrity-centered approach. In

theory, microblogging is decentralized, which in journalism, means increased attention

should be paid to ordinary people. In reality, however, news workers still highly privileged

elite sources on microblogs due to the belief that elite microbloggers provided more

reportable information than grassroots users. Regarding this trend, an editor for economic

news at *GD* commented, "There are too many grassroots microbloggers out there, and you

don't know where to start. Besides, their tweets are so poorly written" (Journalist G7,

personal communication, October 9, 2011).

**Posting on Microblogs**

Interview evidence suggested that news workers saw personal microblogs as extensions of their professional identity, and this mentality shaped their activities on microblogs. The interviewees clearly indicated the importance of maintaining objectivity on microblogs and were aware of the risks of tweeting opinionated content. In practice, however, maintaining absolute impartiality was almost impossible. As shown in Figure 1, issuing opinions and sharing information were the most frequent types of journalistic microblogging. Many interviewees maintained that they tried to repost factual information or others' comments instead of expressing their own opinions. However, the textual analysis showed that information sharing also was accompanied with latent opinion expressions in many cases. This pattern is similar to findings that journalists in the U.S. deviate from the role of non-partisan information providers by frequently generating opinions on microblogs (Lasorsa et al., 2011).

Our findings further showed that, in addition to Western professional values, journalistic microblogging also was influenced by some unique features of Chinese journalists' identity. In general, traditional journalism was deemed to be of high authority in China. Journalists also perceived themselves to be interpreters and educators (Zhu, et al., 1997). Performing the role of interpreter and educator, news workers in China may be more

willing than their Western counterparts to share additional information or provide insights.

Believing that journalists by nature were sensitive to valuable information, news workers

tended to treat the activities of sharing information and providing opinions as ways of

educating or influencing audience members. As some interviewees indicated, making an

impact was the ultimate goal of practicing journalism. This tendency was heightened when

considering the state control on media. As mainstream media is censored unscrupulously in

China, some of these news workers noted that personal microblogs were particularly valuable

for expressing alternative opinions or revealing untold stories.

**Organizational Incorporation of Microblogs**

While professional values and norms set limits on journalistic use of microblogs, our

study further found that the shaping of microblogs in news work took place at the

organizational level. Specifically, we identified organizational incorporation of microblogs in

production cultures across different news beats, newsroom policy and strategies, and

organizational cultures.

**Production Culture**

Different departments and news beats employed microblog information for reporting

to varying degrees. Generally, due to their distinct production cultures, soft news more

frequently cited microblog sources than hard news. Journalists of hard news, such as political

news, court news, and financial news, highly regarded the accuracy of information. They

valued the practice of checking a piece of information with sources or giving sources the

chance to elaborate on their opinions. Therefore, hard news production could not rely on

microblogs due to the potential risks and due to the inefficiency. By comparison, in

entertainment and lifestyle reporting, the accuracy of information sometimes gave way to

sensational effects. Interviewees admitted that they sometimes adopted relatively looser

journalistic standards because entertainment was less directly related to social responsibility.

Appropriation of microblog information in coverage was thus much more efficient for soft

news.

The distinction between soft and hard news also resulted from different levels of

pressures for generating story ideas. In news beats, such as police and court news, political

news, finance news and scientific reporting, established sources and beat systems steadily

provided journalists with reportable stories and information. For example, the finance

journalist (G9) at *GD* said that most of her news tips were derived from industry reports and

informants inside the industry. For the science and technology news journalist (S16) at *SMD*,

academic journals and scientists' online forums were the most important sources of

information. For breaking news, journalists heavily relied on news hotlines for tips due to its

wide availability among various demographic groups. In departments where story ideas more

often flowed from sources to journalists, microblog dependency was less pronounced. In

contrast, in news beats, such as entertainment and lifestyle news where journalists were under

great pressure to find news ideas, microblogs tended to be used more often.

**Organizational Policy**

Both newspapers issued microblog guidelines and communicated the rules to

employees through internal meetings and training sessions. Sharing similar core principles,

the two papers' microblog policies both aimed at distinguishing between journalists' personal

and professional identities. Specifically, the guidelines strongly discouraged revealing

work-related information, such as newsgathering processes, censorship orders, and personal

impressions of interviewees. This policy partly explained why journalistic microblogging

failed to increase the transparency of news production in the current cases. There are three

main reasons for the use of these guidelines. First, seen in a commercial light, the information

gathered at work was regarded as a business secret, and therefore, should be protected to

maintain its exclusive value. Second, as microblogs blurred the distinction between

professional and personal identity, newspaper management needed to extend the scope of

organizational control. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, due to the various censorship

and political risks facing the news outlets, newspaper management felt the need to regulate

personal microblogging so that the organization's operation would not be endangered.

However, at least at the time of the interviews, guidelines had not proven effective in

regulating microblog use in newsrooms. News workers had not shown a clear and consistent

understanding of the policy. Sometimes, their understandings even contradicted each other.

This confusion resulted partially from the fact that traditional news outlets had a difficult time

formulating strategies in managing an emerging technology. The more fundamental reason, as

suggested by many interviewees, related to the nature of microblogs as personal media. Most

of the interviewees mentioned that microblogs "destroyed boundaries", "collapsed circles" or

"made different contexts overlap". Some of them even dismissed the attempt to manage

journalistic microblogging as meaningless or wishful thinking.

Moreover, the definition of "political sensitiveness" was never unambiguous. In most

cases, when politically-sensitive incidents occurred or when censorship orders were issued,

news supervisors had to personally warn journalists and editors against talking about such

matters on microblogs. For example, the opinion page editor (S9) at *SMD* once reposted and

praised an editorial on a well-known artist and dissenter in China. Soon after, he received a

call directly from the editor-in-chief asking him to delete the post. Apparently, the guidelines

could not provide rules of thumb for news workers to follow. In a variety of ways, newspaper

management had to pressure individual news workers in order to avoid political risks.

In general, the guidelines provided a general framework rather than concrete rules to

news workers. The cultural news editor at *SMD* stated, "Everyone gradually learns the nature

and the characteristics of microblogs. Then we get used to it, adapt to it and further

understand our identity and responsibilities." (Editor S4, personal communication, October 5,

2011). This statement does not indicate that organizational policy did not shape journalistic

use of microblogs. On the contrary, the regulatory framework, mainly consisting of

professional and political control, sensitized news workers to various commercial and

political factors of practicing journalism in China.

**Organizational Strategy**

Beyond regulation, news organizations incorporated journalistic use of microblogs in

a more strategic way. Both *SMD* and *GD* attempted to expand their influence on

microblogging platforms through official accounts. In addition to the promotion effect,

organizational accounts also were made into an aggregated and unified source for breaking

news. While breaking news through personal microblogs was restricted due to conflicts of

interest, news outlets encouraged original reporting through organizational accounts. *SMD*,

for example, had routinized the workflow of quickly releasing news through organizational

microblogs. Most of *SMD* interviewees knew the procedure of communicating with

microblog management about breaking news. At the time of the interviews, *SMD* journalists

were rewarded with 50 CNY if their contribution was posted on organizational microblogs.

The purpose of directing news-breaking to organizational accounts was not only to

maximize the promotion effect, but also to make sure that news products went through

editorial control and met production standards. The microblogging manager spoke about this

process: "We must make sure that our organizational account is the only legitimate output.

Only in this way is the information controllable" (New media manager S2, personal

communication, October 11, 2011).

In addition to organizational accounts, both newspapers had registered dozens of

department accounts covering topics ranging from lifestyle and entertainment to international

news and economic news. These department accounts, usually with hundreds of thousands

followers, were used to distribute content and to engage readers. In the meantime, all of these

accounts also played the role of incorporating individual journalistic microblogs so as to

bring them under editorial control. When the need for breaking news and engaging readers

was redirected to department and organizational accounts, journalistic microblogs became

dominated by everyday talk and information sharing.

**Organizational Culture**

*SMD* and *GD* have distinct organizational cultures. *SMD* accentuates, albeit

inexplicitly, the value of supervising public power and helping the underprivileged. In

practice, *SMD* has been built into a brand known for investigative reports and daring

editorials that criticize policy defects and reveal social injustices. As a municipal Party organ,

*GD* has to strike a balance between its mouthpiece role and its pursuit of market success.

Under severe control, *GD* strictly follows the party line to produce "politically correct"

reports. In order to attract readers, however, *GD* has developed a pragmatic culture. Rather than criticizing government policies and officials, *GD* emphasizes that the true value of the paper is to provide useful information pertinent to people's everyday lives.

Both papers were aware of the value of microblogging platforms. However, the different organizational cultures shaped how microblogs actually were managed and utilized. *SMD*'s liberal-minded culture put it in a position to quickly tap into the emerging microblog sphere for its news resources and growing influence on audiences. *GD*, on the other hand, remained conservative and circumspect towards microblogs because "political correctness" was prioritized in its news production. The political risks associated with microblogging platforms held *GD* back from fully embracing the technology.

At *SMD*, an organizational-level microblog management team coordinated by a senior editor experienced in reporting Internet incidents, was founded to connect traditional news production and microblog promotion. Department accounts were also well managed. In some departments, news supervisors developed workflows for monitoring trends and distributing news on microblogs. In comparison, at the time of the interviews, there was no microblog management team at *GD*. The *GD* interviewees seemed confused about how the newspaper was strategizing microblogs. They were not familiar with publishing breaking news through organizational accounts, and microblog-based contributions were not rewarded with

monetary remuneration. *GD* had an influential organizational account frequently engaging

readers, but its department accounts were much more sluggish.

The distinction in organizational culture also was reflected in the individual-level use

of microblogs. For example, many news workers at *SMD* used real-name accounts and

frequently interacted with organizational accounts to promote news products. The textual

analysis also showed that *SMD* journalists were much more active microbloggers, often

commenting on public affairs and sometimes touching on sensitive topics, such as civic

movements and democratization. Moreover, *SMD* news workers sometimes employed

microblogs for "boundary spanning," such as disclosing censorship mechanisms or revealing

stories that had been censored in the print edition. In a radical case, an investigative journalist

(S19) covered a politically-charged incident and managed to gather information from the core

sources. However, coverage of the incident was banned in print media by the time the

journalist finished the story. The editors then decided to publish the write-up of the news

story on microblogs in the form of pictures; the story was removed after receiving much

attention. Eventually, they managed to let people know about the story without violating the

censorship orders. The journalist remarked, "I was lucky to have gathered the first-hand

information, but other people knew little about it. It was meaningful to let people understand

what had happened" (Journalist S19, email communication, June 26, 2011).

In comparison, *GD*'s news workers kept a low profile on microblogs. Most of them did not use verified profiles, and their tweeting was more personalized. They talked less about ongoing public affairs and chose not to publicly reveal opinions on microblogs. *GD* news workers rarely promoted the news content and did not stress their identity as news professionals.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Focusing on two Chinese newsrooms, this study examined how microblogs were adapted for journalistic use through both professional and organizational interventions. Admittedly, microblogs have created methods for gathering and distributing news, increased transparency in some aspects, and reshaped journalist-source interactions (Lasorsa at al., 2012; Broersma & Graham, 2013; Zhou, 2013). In this study, however, we argue that such changes are checked by contextual influences within specific newsrooms.

This study yielded somewhat universally applicable findings. When evaluating the information on microblogs, news workers continually referred to professional principles, such as objectivity and impartiality. Such principles further set limits on the use of microblog information despite their efficiency. Maintaining professional norms when posting microblogs may be more difficult due to the blurring of identity boundaries. There was no sign that traditional news workers had given up their professional authority and gatekeeping role. We found it hard to qualify whether journalistic microblogging created meaningful

transparency in China. Journalist did generate microblogs posts about their personal lives, but

they rarely related to news job. The effectiveness of such transparency is doubtful (Lawrence

et al., 2013).

We also found evidence of organizational incorporation. Official guidelines were

unable to give employees rules of thumb in microblogging, but they generated a latent

framework for news workers to utilize microblogs while sensitizing them to commercial logic

and potential political risk. Unlike other production technologies, the adoption of microblogs

usually was subject to individual decision, and the degree of use varied; despite their growing

relevance in news production, microblogs had hardly become an integral tool in the

journalists' everyday practices. Though newsroom managers and supervisors might

encourage the use of microblogs, they rarely required journalists to do so. In dealing with

microblogs, supervisors primarily focused on ensuring that journalists appropriately used

them. Nonetheless, we did find that production and organization cultures influenced how

microblogs were strategized and managed. This study indicated that the open-minded

mentality and politically-liberal culture of *SMD* resulted in greater utilization of microblogs

than the commercially successful but politically tame *GD*. It was found that even individual

use of microblogs was imbued with the organizational culture.

Our analyses showed that the context matters. The Party-state system and the

highly-censored press environment were indispensable to understanding journalistic use of

microblogs. Social media like microblogs arguably contribute to a freer flow of information

in societies. However, the effect of social media must be assessed with great caution in

authoritarian regimes like China, which constantly bring information and communication

technologies under state control (Jiang, 2012; Kalathil & Boas, 2001). Studies have shown

that microblogs in China are tamed by state control and even utilized to foster the Party's rule

(Hassid, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). Similarly, microblogs' potential impact on journalism

possibly is interfered with by the regime's longstanding grip on media and information. As

the Party's state control has been internalized into the logic of journalism, both news

professionals and organizations may experience ambivalence in the adoption of

communication technologies with liberating power. As shown in this study, political control

yielded both motivations and constraints to journalistic use of microblogs. On the one hand,

news workers and organizations had to comply with the control and "play safe" with the new

technology. On the other, political control also motivated them to seek extra value in

microblogs for "boundary-spanning" activities.

What is also at work is the strong self-perceived authority of Chinese journalists. Our

interviewees invariably accentuated the qualities of the "good old journalism" while

downplaying the legitimacy of microblogs as a competitive form of news. This mentality may

have to do with two factors. First, though print media are seeing a worldwide decline, the

overall circulation and advertising revenues of newspapers in China keeps growing,

suggesting a satisfactory status-quo. Second, the long-standing journalistic culture, including

interpretive authority and mass education, may contribute to the continued emphasis on old

values. This suggests that, unlike in Western journalism, the analysis of news production in

China must consider different, sometimes contradictory, sources of ideological influences

(Tong, 2012).

Focusing on journalism in China, this study adds to a growing body of literature on

the adoption and use of social media in traditional news production. In addition, this study

sheds light on technological changes in newsrooms as the dialectic between diffusion and

social construction (Deuze, 2009). Finally, several limitations need to be pointed out. This

study is largely qualitative and exploratory, basing its findings on two specifically selected

newsrooms and snowballing sampling of interviewees. It primarily considered journalists

who were active microblog users. Future studies could benefit from examining different types

of newsrooms and more diverse interviewees, such as editors and supervisors, who arguably

have more control over news production. Future research also could quantitatively assess

journalistic use of social media in China and make comparisons with other emerging new

media technologies.

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Table 1

A description of selected journalists' microblogs accounts

| Microblogger ID | Number of people followed | Total posts | Original posts (% of total) | Re-posts (% of total) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Southern Metro Daily* | | | | |
| S2 | 1999 | 627 | 11(1.8%) | 616(98.2%) |
| S3 | 1054 | 224 | 37(16.5%) | 187(83.5%) |
| S4 | 385 | 64 | 39(61.0%) | 25(39.0%) |
| S5 | 623 | 289 | 132(45.7%) | 157(54.3%) |
| S7 | 2000 | 564 | 143(25.4%) | 421(74.6%) |
| S8 | 1984 | 157 | 37(23.6%) | 120(76.4%) |
| S11 | 840 | 294 | 52(17.7%) | 242(82.3%) |
| S12 | 1030 | 50 | 16(32.0%) | 34(68%) |
| | | | | |
| *Guangzhou Daily* | | | | |
| G1 | 530 | 49 | 16(32.7%) | 33(67.3%) |
| G2 | 303 | 45 | 23(51.1%) | 22(48.9%) |
| G3 | 236 | 23 | 17(73.9%) | 6(26.1%) |
| G4 | 179 | 44 | 20(45.5%) | 24(54.5%) |
| G6 | 979 | 559 | 29(5.2%) | 530(94.8%) |
| G9 | 476 | 30 | 0(0.0%) | 30(100.0%) |
| G10 | 750 | 25 | 6(24.0%) | 19(76.0%) |
| G11 | 437 | 74 | 9(12.2%) | 65(87.8%) |
| | | | | |
| Total | - | 3118 | 587(18.8%) | 2531(81.2%) |

Data retrieved on May 1, 2012.

Figure 1

*Types of microblogs generated by selected journalist microbloggers*
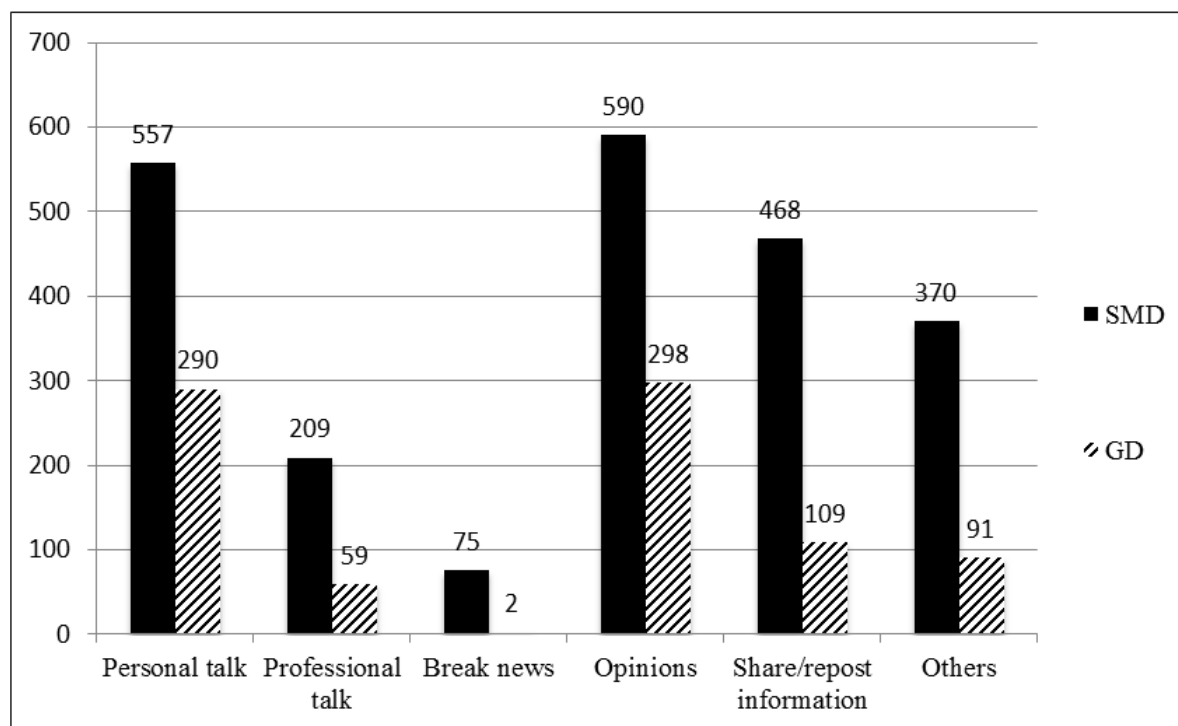
Appendix

*Interviewee profiles*

| Southern Metro Daily | | | | Guangzhou Daily | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interviewees | Sex | Years of | Work Identity | Interviewees | Sex | Years of | Work Identity |
| S1 | M | 7 | New media | G1 | M | 5 | Entertainment |
| S2 | M | 11 | Microblogging | G2 | F | 1 | Entertainment |
| S3 | M | 3 | Microblog page | G3 | M | 10 | Culture news |
| S4 | F | 6 | Culture news editor | G4 | M | 1 | Rolling news |
| S5 | F | 4 | Entertainment | G5-A | M | - | New media |
| S6 | M | 4 | Travel/lifestyle | G5-B | F | - | New media |
| S7 | M | 3 | Entertainment | G5-C | F | - | New media |
| S8 | F | 9 | Opinion page editor | G6 | M | 10 | Economy news |
| S9 | M | 13 | Opinion page editor | G7 | F | 1 | Economy news |
| S10 | M | 6 | Political news | G8 | F | 4 | Economy news |
| S11 | M | 2 | Breaking news | G9 | F | 8 | Economy news |
| S12 | M | 1 | Breaking news | G10 | M | 5 | Economy news |
| S13 | M | 5 | Urban affairs | G11 | F | 5 | Local news |
| S14 | F | 3 | Current issues | G12 | M | 1 | Political news |
| S15 | F | 8 | Current issues | | | | |
| S16 | M | 2 | Science journalist | | | | |
| S17 | M | 8 | Economy news | | | | |
| S18 | F | - | Investigative | | | | |
| S19 | M | 4 | Investigative | | | | |