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Rise of Microblogs in China— A Challenge and an Opportunity

“The more the number of people, the stronger we are”

Mao Zedong

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In recent years microblogs have emerged as a serious challenge for the Chinese government as they have become an effective means for common citizens to voice their opinions. With more and more citizens joining this new and still emerging media, the Chinese State is doing all it can to curtail freedom of expression. Although the government is trying to have absolute control over the comments and ideas floating on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, its attempts have not been entirely successful. The information flow on the microblogs has in fact threatened the government's legitimacy to a certain extent. The online protests that took place on Chinese microblogs after the high-speed bullet train crash in July 2011 forced the government to rethink its policies on microblogs. The incident, which was underplayed by the government, led to widespread criticism which was reflected by the comments posted on the websites. Recognising the emergence of microblogs as a powerful forum for common citizens to voice discontent, Beijing has now adopted a dual strategy—it seeks to use this media to connect to the people and simultaneously control public opinion through stricter restrictions.

Emergence of Microblogs in China

The Internet was commercialised in China in the mid-Nineties. Fuelled by technological innovation and a booming Chinese economy, the Internet became widely accessible to common Chinese citizens. Today, China has nearly one-fourth of the world's total Internet population with a total of 485 million

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users in July 2011. Ever since the Internet was commercialised, the government has maintained strict control. For censoring content on the Internet, it launched a project called the “Golden Shield” (commonly known as the Great Firewall) which incorporates a sophisticated system of censors that also comprises human volunteers who constantly monitor and delete information on the microblogs.

Matters relating to politics top the government's censor list. For instance, content relating to Liu Xiabao, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, was inaccessible to Internet users in China. Due to its strict Internet censorship policies, the Chinese government has clashed with companies like Google which did not accept the censorship tactics of Beijing. Google also alleged that the Chinese government had hacked into email accounts maintained by the company. Internet service providers in China are required to maintain a monitoring system which the government can access at any time.¹

The advent of social media tools like Twitter and Facebook worried the Chinese government, especially their utilisation by dissidents to voice anti-government opinions; this eventually led the government to ban use of these websites. In turn, Chinese versions of these websites were introduced into the market which attracted a large number of Internet users. The government believed that it could control or moderate the discussions on these websites, similar to the control it has maintained over the print and electronic media. Also, the Chinese versions of Twitter and Facebook were expected to contain the urge in Internet users to illegally access the western social networking forums.

Both these assumptions have been proved wrong as controlling the massive amount of information on the microblogs has become a major challenge for the government. Even the “Great Firewall”, which restricts Chinese citizens from accessing certain websites, including Facebook and Twitter, has not been effective. The sheer volume of messages that are sent across on Weibo has made it difficult for the government to implement its censorship policies. Microbloggers use different expressions and slang to evade censors. Another factor which makes it difficult for the government to exercise control is the massive amount of information to be vetted: the total number of characters a microblog user is allowed to use in one message is 140, but Chinese characters are far more expressive than English. This allows users to send more information in just a single message. Moreover, determined Internet users access downloadable software to jump the firewall and access banned websites like Facebook. These softwares are widely available online.

The Impact of Microblogs

Microblogs have now become a way of life for Chinese Internet users registered with websites like Sina Weibo, a leading Chinese microblog. According to China Internet Network Information Centre, the number of microblog users increased to 195 million in June 2011. According to the *China Daily*, the number has touched 300 million in December 2011. These websites are used by citizens to discuss

issues and topics from all walks of life. Apart from being online discussion forums, microblogs are also turning into helplines. For instance, stories of accident victims in need of medical and monetary assistance float on Weibo, attracting a large number of users who help in raising funds.

However, what has sent the alarm bells ringing in Beijing is the use of these forums to criticise the government on issues that citizens think it has ignored. The most spectacular and the most troubling case for Beijing was the use of these microblogs to criticise the government for its attempts to downplay the high speed train crash in Wenzhou which killed 39 people in July 2011. Sina Weibo had more than four million comments about the incident within 24 hours of its occurrence. After the first week, the number of comments had risen to 10 million. Website polls showed that most of the users were angry with the way the government handled the incident. The rapid pace at which messages were posted on Weibo and other websites made it nearly impossible for the government censors to delete all “restricted” comments.

The discontent shown by the citizens over the mishandling of the incident by the government led Premier Wen Jiabao to order a swift and transparent inquiry into the accident.²

In Liaoning province, about 12,000 citizens, upset over rising pollution levels, took to the streets in August 2011 to protest setting up of a chemical plant. The government was forced to shut down the plant and consider relocation. Sina Weibo played a crucial role in organising and coverage of these protests.³ In another incident, citizens voiced their dissatisfaction with the government's pollution control measures through microblogs. In a poll conducted by a property dealer on his microblog, the majority of people demanded immediate implementation of new environmental standards. Amidst such rising concerns over high pollution levels and the government's ambiguous pollution monitoring system, the Vice Minister of Environmental Protection, Pan Yue, apologised for the situation and took personal responsibility for the deterioration of the environment.⁴

During the Jasmine Revolution, the use of social networking websites by protesters to organise rallies and communicate to the outer world—which eventually forced the Tunisian government to step down—resulted in further government efforts to control information on Chinese microblogs. For instance, the word “Jasmine” was banned from microblogs. At a meeting chaired by Wang Chen, the Director of the State Council Information Office, it was decided that stricter “management” was required to address problems that were fuelled by microblogs.⁵ It was also “advised” that microblogging services should be used to serve the cause of the party and the Nation.⁶

A communiqué issued after a Communist Party of China's (CPC) Central Committee meeting in October 2011 warned Internet users that stern action would be taken against those who disseminate “harmful information”.⁷ Beijing has now introduced a system which would require microblog users to

register with their real names.⁸ By introducing a real name registration requirement, citizens will no longer be able to make comments anonymously. In Beijing's view, this would automatically make the user more responsible while posting comments on microblogs.⁹ In dire situations, the government has also resorted to completely cutting off the Internet. This was done to control information during the ethnic violence that shook Urumqi, in the autonomous region of Xinjiang.

It appears that Beijing views the microblogging issue as a challenge as well as an opportunity. Citizens using microblogs to express their feelings provides an opportunity for the government to get a sense of the popular perception about certain issues. It serves the government three purposes: Microblogs give the government a prior notice about issues that the public believes need redressal and allows it to take action before large scale dissent arises. The Chinese government has already instructed officials to follow Internet-based discussion forums to detect impending concerns. Secondly, the government gets an opportunity to connect directly at the grassroots level by using Internet rather than relying on regional offices and departments, which is also time consuming. Thirdly, microblogs enable the government to disseminate its own version of news and information.

Today, the Chinese government operates more than 40,000 microblogs across the nation to release “authorised” information to the public and address queries.¹⁰ Recently, the Beijing municipal government opened platforms on Sina Weibo to post policies, regulations and work developments. The Municipal Public Security Bureau has about 1.8 million followers on its microblog. The use of microblogs allows the government to address the concerns of the citizens quickly. For instance, the Beijing Emergency Medical Centre launched a microblog after the Fukushima disaster in Japan to provide quick response to public concerns over nuclear radiation.

As noted earlier, China has nearly 485 million Internet users out of which 300 million are microblog users. What adds to China's problems, apart from the vast number of microbloggers, is the use of mobile phones by citizens to access the Internet and social websites. As of July 2011, over 300 million users were accessing the Internet through mobile phones out of which 108 million used their phones for microblogging. A mobile phone enables a microblogger to comment instantly; thereby, messages are spread at an uncontrollable pace. The number of microblog users is expected to rise after showing a phenomenal increase of 209 per cent in just the first half of 2011. It is important to highlight that these figures do not include the number of people who visit these websites without having a registered user account and hence the actual number of people who follow such blogs is far greater.

Another important factor is the demographic structure of China's Internet users. Age-wise, the group from 20-40 years constitutes the largest chunk of total Internet users in China; students constitute 29 per cent of China's online population. About 70 per cent of Internet users are from the urban cities of

China. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CINIC), “low awareness about Internet and expensive Internet fee” are the reasons for less Internet usage in the rural areas. Also, senior citizens and rural folk are not Internet savvy and do not have computer knowledge and skills. However, efforts are underway to connect even the remotest areas of China through Internet. This should significantly reduce the gap between urban and rural Internet users.¹¹

With the number of microblog users skyrocketing, the market shares of top microblogging companies have soared. Sina Corp, the owner of leading Chinese microblog Sina Weibo, has made huge profits. As of June 2011, Sina accounted for 57 per cent of China's microblog users and 87 per cent of total microblogging activity. The websites are widely used by companies to advertise their products. This mode of advertising has been beneficial for companies due to the low cost involved and the ability to reach millions of customers. Advertising has also earned Sina huge amount of profits. Sina reported a spike in its overall expenses which it attributed to increase in “personnel expenses.”¹² This could be a result of stricter censoring measures undertaken by Sina after receiving directives from the government.

Conclusion

Instead of focussing on controlling the flow of information on the Internet, the Chinese government could use this opportunity to redirect its policies based on public reaction—at least on domestic issues. Connecting to the citizens directly through microblogs will provide better governance in China. Recent moves by Beijing indicate that such a strategy is being considered—but along with strengthening of State control over microblogs. Information flow on the microblogs has proved to be a tough challenge for Beijing and the government is not willing to surrender to the might of Internet. It is unlikely that microblogs will be shut down but stricter norms regulating usage of microblogs are likely to be implemented by the government to ensure that such forums are not used to threaten the CPC's position.

Microblogging and use of the Internet have become a part of the lifestyle of modern Chinese citizens. Any abrupt attempt to curtail their freedom further could have a far greater negative impact, undermining the interests of the CPC. Given the demographics of the section of society which constitutes the largest chunk of microblog users, China has to be very careful while dealing with these issues. Although chances of microblogs triggering a political change in China are unlikely, if such a change occurs—the Internet most likely will be the game changer.

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