

Public Abstract

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Title:REACHING BEYOND IMMEDIATE FOLLOWERS: AN EXAMINATION OF ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY OF INFORMATION ON THE U.S. EMBASSY'S MICROBLOG IN CHINA

Scholars believe Internet usage can be highly selective, and thus people are divided into fragmented and polarized groups (see Sunstein, 2006). This study focuses on the specific case of China's microblog, called "Weibo." Through the process of what I call "accidental discovery," users receive not only information based on their online selections and preferences, but they also learn new information accidentally from a variety of sources beyond their own network. Applying the conceptual model of "accidental discovery," this study examines a total of 165 Weibo posts, all of which were posted by the U.S. Embassy in China. The researcher found three main patterns by which these Weibo messages were disseminated, and these patterns are associated with noticeable cases of accidental discovery. This means these messages were not spread only among those who follow or are subscribed to the U.S. Embassy account. These messages were also "forwarded" or "retweeted," and accidentally discovered by non-followers. Despite some anticipation that social media usage would create narrow-minded users, researcher finds that in Weibo case, users can learn, share and engage in discussions in a much more open information environment.