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

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..............................................................................................................................ii

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS..............................................................................................................................v

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................................vi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the study........................................................................................................................................3

Significance of the study..................................................................................................................................3

Chapter arrangements......................................................................................................................................5

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of China’s Weibo environment.....................................................................................................11

Previous studies on information encountering...........................................................................................18

Previous studies on browsing.........................................................................................................................21

Accidental discovery of information on Weibo: proposing a new model....................................................23

Three indicators of accidental discovery on Weibo.....................................................................................26

Potential outcomes.........................................................................................................................................28

Research questions.......................................................................................................................................31

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Netnography..................................................................................................................................................33

Qualitative content analysis..........................................................................................................................34

Network analysis..........................................................................................................................................36

Interviews.......................................................................................................................................................39

Validation strategy........................................................................................................................................40
Chapter 4: ANALYSIS OF U.S. EMBASSY’S WEIBO

Analysis of Weibo messages.................................................................43

A closer look at content/values through qualitative analysis..................46

Conclusion..............................................................................................49

Chapter 5: IDENTIFY ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY OF INFORMATION

Follower/non-follower...........................................................................50

Unexpected content.............................................................................54

Ideological difference.........................................................................57

Chapter 6: WEIBO MESSAGE DISSEMINATION: DIFFERENT PATTERNS

Distribution pattern.............................................................................59

Three patterns ....................................................................................61

Chapter 7: CONCLUSION

Implications.........................................................................................76

Future Research..................................................................................77

REFERENCES.......................................................................................80

APPENDIX

A. Interview Questions.........................................................................84

B. Weibo Recruitment..........................................................................85

C. Oral Consent Form..........................................................................86

D. Institutional Review Board Approval Letter...................................88
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Yao’s microblog profile</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. US Embassy Weibo, with 663,624 followers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Enthusiasm for participation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feeling like an emperor</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Accidental discovery process on Weibo</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A closer look at a Weibo message cluster diagram</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Accidental discovery beyond one’s own network</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. A heated discussion</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Gender, user type and forward type</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Messages through three layers</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Example of immediate followers pattern</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Another example of immediate followers pattern</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Example of key forwarders pattern</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Another example of key forwarders pattern</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Example of normal forwarders pattern</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REACHING BEYOND IMMEDIATE FOLLOWERS: AN EXAMINATION OF ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY OF INFORMATION ON THE U.S. EMBASSY’S MICROBLOG IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

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.
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

With the ongoing rapid growth of digital media, people have many more options when it comes to media consumption. While some scholars believe emerging technologies will create a more robust information environment, others have concerns that the fragmentation of audiences may create polarized and like-minded groups (Webster & Kiiazek, 2012; Sunstein, 2006).

On social media sites, such as Twitter, users can be as highly selective as they want in choosing the media they consume. Although users do not directly pick content, they can customize their experience by choosing which accounts to follow or other users to interact with. Users see only information posted or forwarded by the accounts they follow on their newsfeed. It is in this way the accounts one follows directly affects what content the user will consume. Several studies about Twitter argue the nature of how Twitter works makes users form polarized small groups, and “Birds of a Feather Tweet Together” (Himelboim, McCreery and Smith, 2013).

However, Twitter, as well as other microblogs, has another function called “forward,” which is often overlooked in previous studies. Specific to Twitter, the name of this forwarding function is called “retweeting,” and this function propagates messages, allowing them to reach beyond immediate followers’ network. For example, if Twitter user A follows five other accounts, then user A will usually only read the information these five sources post. However, if any of the five sources retweet
content from user B’s account, then user A will also be able to read that message from B, despite the fact that A and B are not directly connected.

In this study, the researcher is proposing a new concept model called “accidental discovery” of information on a microblog. As microblog users can be selective and have individual preferences when consuming media, accidental discovery occurs when users are exposed to and discover information outside of their own selections or preferences. In the realm of news consumption, some scholars have already started to realize the importance of accidental discovery. For example, the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2010) reported that eight out of ten Internet news readers experienced serendipitous news consumption.

This study was conducted on China’s microblog called “Weibo.” Operated by the Nasdaq-listed company Sina, Weibo is China’s equivalent of Twitter and basically carries all of the same functions as Twitter. This study examines a total of 165 Weibo posts, all of which were posted by a single source: the U.S. Embassy in China. The U.S. Embassy posted its first message to Chinese users in May 2010, and by 2011, it had 64,000 Weibo followers. Today, the number of Weibo followers has increased to 663,624 (Southern Weekend, 2011). The purpose of the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account is to “promote dialogue with Chinese public, increasing their understanding of U.S culture and society,” according to the account’s homepage. The study of Weibo is particularly interesting because in a country with a long tradition of government-controlled information, the Chinese public is always looking for alternative information channels. The advent of this new type of media consumption
may have created concerns about the polarization of audiences, but for the Chinese public it may have also created opportunities: can Weibo become an alternative channel for the Chinese public to receive information?

**Purpose of the study**

This study looks at how accidental discovery can occur in a highly selective media consumption atmosphere, such as Weibo. The study proposes a new accidental discovery model, supported by illustrated examples. The study also analyzes information posted by the U.S. Embassy on Weibo and how different content might lead to different dissemination patterns.

**Significance of the study**

First, the research shows the usage of social media may not always lead to polarized users or like-minded small groups, as previously thought. These concerns were due to the fact that the study of accidental discovery of information on Weibo specifically has been overlooked. Accidental discovery has become an integral part of the user experience of receiving information from microblogs, and users have access to a variety of content beyond the selection and choices they make. Therefore, they will not become narrow-minded or polarized.

Second, this research seeks to contribute to the study of how China’s Internet usage affects the flow of information in the country. Many of the previous studies on related topics concentrated more on the big picture of China’s Internet regulations and
control efforts as seen in a series of notable events and what impact in general the Internet has had on the Chinese public. This approach, however, has failed to study the world’s largest population of Internet users as individuals. As confirmed by many surveys, entertainment and socialization seem to be the two main purposes of Weibo (Dratio.com). This supports the statement that many Chinese Internet users have minimal interest in actively searching for current news.

However, this study found that the characteristics of Weibo’s interface lead to users being accidentally exposed to such information, whether they are searching for it or not. Using the example of the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account, the United States disseminated political messages effectively and clearly on Weibo, reaching not only immediate followers but also many others who may not have been searching for this type of information. While many researchers might turn their attention on how to allow people to actively search for information in a government-controlled web, this study found an alternative approach: how to deliver information to people without them having to search for it. The government would find it harder to censor the spread of messages in this situation, because if one source gets muted, other users who forward the message would carry on the information flow.

Third, many scholars argue that the Internet would bring more freedom to less democratic countries. For example, MacKinnon (2008) argues that the mere existence of the Internet in China will not bring democracy, but in the long run the Internet and blogs will serve as a tool in political change. However, the current research gap is how precisely the Internet would create political change. This research also explores
the potential outcome of accidental exposure and whether accidental exposure
actually increases the political efficacy of users. In this study, the political efficacy of
users will be assessed based on their participation in political discussions. In China,
increasing the public’s political awareness would be a slow process. Therefore, if
findings show that users get involved in discussions or learn about current events
because of Weibo, whether actively or accidentally, it would be significant.

Finally, the concept of accidental exposure is largely ignored in studies about
online social networking sites, including Facebook or Twitter. Scholars seem to ignore
the practical effect of 140 characters, arguing that users have consumed much time in
social media use instead of seriously reading news or other information. This study
found instead that many social media users are actively discovering and responding to
political information and other news.

Chapter arrangements

In the second chapter, the researcher first reviews studies completed in the field
of information encountering. There are three indicators of accidental discovery of
Weibo messages: unexpected content, followers/non-followers and ideological
differences. These indicators are based off of Erdeleze’s notion (1997) that
information encountering can be studied from four different dimensions: the
information that was encountered, the information user, the information environment
and the information need.
Chapter two also covers previous research explaining similar phenomenon using uses and gratification theory. After reviewing these theories, chapter two will then discuss the limitations of these theories and why they lack the explanatory power to be directly used in this study. Based on these previous models and definitions, a new conceptual diagram appears, which illustrates the process of accidental discovery of Weibo messages.

Next, the concept of political efficacy will be reviewed. Weibo users who experienced the exposure and discovery of information have better knowledge of current events. Thus, the concept of political efficacy is introduced here in order to understand the effect and outcome of the phenomenon. Finally, the chapter raises three research questions based on a literature review.

The third chapter lays out a methodological map. The methods in this study include Netnography, qualitative content analysis and network analysis, as well as three interviews, which served the purpose of validation. Netnography was the general method utilized during the entire study. During this process, 165 Weibo posts from the U.S. Embassy’s account were analyzed. The U.S. Embassy’s usage of Weibo has been generating attention. Not only has the account been gaining more followers, but it has also become more relevant in China’s political landscape. This account attracted more than 60,000 online followers in the first ten months of activation, and as of November, 2012, at least 660,000 users are following the account. It has even become a real political force to reckon with in China.
This study also utilized Weibo messenger to connect with several Chinese users for subsequent interviews to validate the findings from the observations and analysis. Next, a qualitative content analysis of U.S. Embassy’s Weibo answers the question about what information has been posted. For the network analysis, the researcher utilized online software to analyze all Weibo message clusters and draw diagrams showing how information spreads. This method yielded rich data and diagrams. The data and diagrams were then analyzed and categorized.

The network analysis helped to draw a bigger picture of generally how most users respond to the various posts. The researcher could then find differences among similar drawings. There are different patterns of message dissemination and accidental discovery. For example, some users might simply “forward” the message without further comment, while others may forward the message along with their own comments added.

Finally, the researcher located three interviewees, based on their roles in the dissemination of messages. They were chosen after all of the messages were read, and each of them represents a unique situation. The researcher was able to attach their personal interpretations into other parts of the analysis. The interviews, although not in-depth as first intended and also featuring fewer respondents than hoped for, nonetheless serve as validation process.

The fourth chapter features analysis and study of the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo messages. Before studying the accidental discovery of information on Weibo, it is utterly important to know what information is out there. This chapter answers that
question. The information provides a background and explanation as to why this specific Weibo account was used in this study. Furthermore, this chapter also provided a concise content analysis, providing some insight about what messages or information have been posted by the Embassy. The information in the Weibo messages is relevant because the research indicates that the actual content of messages matter as related to how people forward and spread messages. The embassy’s decision to post a variety of content, much of which is carefully tailored, increased the chance that its messages would spread far and reach a lot of people.

The fifth chapter analyzes the three indicators of accidental discovery of Weibo information. It provides the argument and evidence that accidental discovery of information happens on Weibo, based on all of the message clusters studied. Under each indicator, this study uses data and description from the 165 posts to support that many users of Weibo experience accidental discovery.

The sixth chapter entails findings on the various patterns of message dissemination. Due to accidental discovery, Weibo messages not only spread among immediate followers of the embassy’s account. For instance, messages can be spread without with the help of “key forwarders.” Key forwarders are influential Weibo users who have a large followers base and whose messages forwarded by their accounts would be read by thousands of users. These forwarders are basically amplifiers. Although news media often describe a popular video as “viral” on the Internet, few explain how exactly this happens. These patterns, which are rarely touched on in
previous studies, provide new insight into understanding the spread of information on social media.

The final chapter contains the conclusion and discussion. This part summarizes findings and discussions from previous chapters and further argues the importance of accidental discovery on Weibo and other social media. This chapter also discusses theoretical and practical implications, as well as future research opportunities on this topic.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the current situation of China’s Internet and Weibo environment. The review provides a background of this study as well as giving context to this research. It also reviews previous scholars’ efforts to characterize and describe various information behaviors. The central concept developed was built upon through decades of research on information seeking. Many early studies assume information seeking is active in nature, but some studies found there may be occasions in which people find information without the direct intention to do so (Wilson, 1977). Later studies confirmed that this “information encountering” is becoming a frequent occurrence to Internet users. Tewksbury and others (2008) found that many news readers lack a clear goal and tend to read a broad range of topics. These readers would generally expect to be exposed to news or information they were not searching for. A more recent study on uses and gratification of Facebook users found users are seeking to fulfill four needs: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking and information (Namsu, etc., 2009).

In the next part, the researcher proposes a new definition and model of information encountering for use in this study. This model demonstrates that the main purpose of Weibo for users is to discover a wide range of information through browsing. The concept of browsing on Weibo reaches beyond news-reading, as Weibo
users have a mixed expectation for discovery, including news, entertainment, and messages from friends and celebrities. This is in contrast to previous studies’ definitions of browsing, which are limited to news-reading. Next, the researcher reviews the concept of political efficacy and how it relates to Weibo users. Political efficacy is a crucial indicator of democracy and public participation. Finally, the researcher raises three specific research questions.

Overview of China’s Weibo environment

The Twitter-like microblog services in China have grown rapidly in recent years, and their popularity is demonstrated by the high number of users on these sites. In the first half of 2011, the number of registered Chinese microblog users reached 200 million, according to China Internet Network Information Center (2011). This number was close to the number of Twitter users in 2011. A comparison between a Twitter user and Weibo user helps further show how similar the platforms are. Lady Gaga has the most followers on Twitter with 25 million followers. Yao Chen, a famous Chinese actress, has around 20 million followers on her Chinese microblog, making them two of the most followed celebrities in the microblog sphere (see Illustration 1).

Illustration 1: Yao’s microblog profile

Illustration 1: Yao Chen’s microblog has 20 million followers.
Some attribute Yao Chen’s popularity on Weibo to her fame in the real world. But that does not explain the rise to fame of many non-public figures on Weibo, who also have accumulated a large fan base in a short period of time.

The U.S. Embassy in China made a perfect example of how a person or organization can use Weibo to gain popularity without traditional publicity (see Illustration 2). The Embassy posted its first message to Chinese users in May 2010, and it had 64,000 Weibo followers by 2011. Today that number has increased to 663,624 followers. The new technology helped the U.S. government achieve the unachievable prior to the Weibo era: uncensored, unfiltered and direct communication with the Chinese public. The current state of the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account would not have been possible without the help of those who read, commented and forwarded the messages on, making the U.S. voice heard by many who would have never found this channel without an accidental encounter.

Illustration 2: US Embassy Weibo

Illustration 2: US Embassy posted 5,522 messages and attracted 663,624 followers

The reason for using Weibo instead of Twitter for this study is that Twitter has lost its opportunity to reach the majority of China’s Internet population. This is
because the service was blocked in the country in 2009. However, the Chinese government allowed similar sites owned by Chinese companies to operate. These microblog services, including the most popular one called “Sina Microblog” or “Sina Weibo,” provide similar functionality to that of Twitter. In addition, they also develop new functions to cater to the need of Chinese users.

By allowing Chinese-based companies to operate microblog services, the Chinese government can exert a certain level of control, which seemed to be a better option for the government than dealing with the U.S.-based Twitter. The Chinese government has developed a consistent pattern of control in the wake of new developments on the Internet. For example, most foreign-based blog providers are blocked in China, while Chinese companies are able to provide local service under the condition of austere censorship. YouTube and Facebook are inaccessible in the country, allowing their Chinese equivalents, “Youku” and “Renren,” to build a solid user base in China. Interestingly, Youku and Renren both trade on Nasdaq. Overall, the Chinese government’s objective has always been to retain adamant information control over the real and virtual worlds alike (Endesha, 2004; Brady, 2006). From the government’s perspective, such efforts to maintain control seem to be quite successful (MacKinnon, 2008). But the proliferation of microblog services now poses an even bigger challenge.

To be clear, there are several microblog services in China, and this research focuses on one of the most influential ones, called “Sina Microblog” or “Sina Weibo.” Operated by the Nasdaq-traded Chinese company Sina Corporation, Sina Weibo had
more than 200 million registered users by 2011. Research done by CR-Nielsen (2011) found Weibo users are 4.5 times more active than Twitter users in terms of posting messages. Weibo generates an average of 10 million new posts every day.

Part of the reason for Weibo’s popularity can be attributed to the fact that Weibo takes a middle road between Facebook and Twitter. Although Facebook and Twitter both fall within the category of Social Networking sites (SNS), the Facebook emphasizes more on socializing functions, allowing fancy user pages, better experience of sharing videos, photos, etc., while Twitter maintains a much simpler user interface and focuses more on spreading news and messages.

Sina Weibo was intended as a copycat of Twitter, but later developed an overall user interface more similar to Facebook’s. Thus it gained its current popularity by catering to users’ needs to socialize with others as well as get news. Another unique feature of Weibo is its post-centric approach, which encourages discussion and the spread of messages. Each message shows the number of comments and “forwards,” and this may encourage the continuance of more reading and commenting (see Illustration 3).

**Illustration 3: Enthusiasm for participation**

Illustration 3: One post was commented on almost 7,000 times, and was also “forwarded” about 40,000 times.
Demographically, the majority of Chinese Weibo users are under the age of 35, and more males use Weibo than females. Many users reported that entertainment and social interaction are their main purposes on the site. However, many users also identified discussing interesting topics or learning the latest news as their main purpose, according to the Data Center of the China Internet (2010). For outside observers of China’s Internet, this picture looks a bit dismal as millions of Weibo users are pre-occupied with socializing with friends, sharing about what they are eating or wearing, music or movies. They follow celebrities and respond avidly to any messages posted by their idols. However, the brighter side is that these same users also have the chance to be exposed to social and political issues accidentally, and gradually, this can lead to them having better knowledge, starting to get interested or even responding to these issues.

Among the various functions of Weibo, the ability to “forward” or share information seems to be the most promising function for ordinary Chinese citizens, and definitely seems to be unpopular with authorities trying to maintain control. Upon clicking the “forward” button, every user becomes a messenger, carrying and delivering information beyond their own immediate network. Everyone becomes an editor, and to forward is to decide what others will read. With the help of Weibo, the prospect of a real-time Internet environment where citizens can share the collective experience of engaging in discussions of current events is getting closer, and no longer can People’s Daily alone direct what people read or think. “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped” (Isaiah 35:5).
From the perspective of the users who read the “forwarded messages,” the experience can be called accidental, at least to some degree. Ordinarily, users expect to read content from their own network from other users they follow and subscribe to. The Weibo microblog is similar to any other social networking site, which means interactions with friends or people who know each other is still the most fundamental function. On the other hand, accidental discovery of forwarded messages beyond one’s own network is increasingly becoming part of the package. The spread of information on Weibo is like radiation which permeates through layers of network, and it would be impossible to restrict Weibo browsing to only messages from immediate connections. As a matter of fact, if you strip the experience of accidental discovery, using Weibo would be no different from any other Internet communication messenger, or from subscribing to a newspaper or magazine.

Internet users are often perceived as active users of media, but in the realm of microblogs, habitual use might be the dominating behavior for these users. Rather than actively seeking information, Chinese microblog users are mainly browsing information; they come across a wide range of information without having a specific intent or goal. In a sense they are more like heavy TV viewers. They may be unable to articulate one specific need that is fulfilled by microblog usage. Admittedly, the microblog does contain a few functions of active information seeking. For example, one can search posts based on keywords, but such Google-like functionality is not used often in the microblog world. This study will further explore how such accidental discovery can lead to greater social and political knowledge or political
efficacy, which means some microblog users can become more confident of their knowledge to discuss current events, or they might start to believe they can influence the Chinese authority in dealing with these events.

An example of this on Weibo occurred after a high-speed train accident claimed 40 lives. The news of potential corruption in the accident and how officials tried to cover up the real cause of the accident went viral. Tens of thousands of users posted pictures and updates of the scene, and casualty numbers, and then also demanded an explanation from the government. The government was unable to censor and stop the trend because of the sudden explosion of messages. In 2011, Weibo began to make more of an impact on Chinese politics and society. There was fear at first that Chinese authorities might shut down the Weibo service, but eventually the government embraced Weibo by requesting thousands of governmental offices to open Weibo accounts. The official People’s Daily newspaper reported that there are more than 20,000 Weibo accounts operated by governmental departments (The People’s Daily, 2011). The government also pledged to be more responsive and transparent by adopting this new communication method (Sina.com, 2011).

There is a Weibo post many users have been sharing recently, and this post shows exactly why Weibo is a powerful tool that can empower people:

In the morning once I start to browse through Weibo posts, I have an illusion that I’m an emperor who is flooded by so many important issues in China that need to be dealt with. I need to make decisions, give advice, or spread the messages out. I’m so concerned about my country and my people. I feel there is not much I could do (see Illustration 4).
The post conveys several messages. First, it clearly has become a habit for the user to “browse” posts. Second, the user is exposed to a large flow of information during the browsing, especially about political and social issues. Third, the person has mixed feelings toward such discovery. However, the user sounds like he or she will not give up the habit, and it almost sounds like he or she is compelled to continue to do so.

Illustration 4: “I feel like a Chinese emperor”

Previous studies on information encountering

Early studies on information seeking behavior (Wilson, 1977) found that people accidentally discover new information in everyday life when they read magazines or watch television without the direct intention of seeking information. Downs (1957, p.146) also found “a stream of information is continuously disseminated to all citizens, like small talk to friends or listening to radio while driving to work,” which people encounter without particular effort. Downs considered such information as “free
stream” and excludes it from his discussion of information cost in voters’
decision-making. However, this free stream of information has gained much attention
among scholars in recent years with the advent of the Internet and new media. Library
and information science (LIS) researchers have been studying everyday life
information seeking (ELIS) and forms of information behavior that do not involve
active or purposeful information seeking on the part of the individual (McKenzie,
2003).

In the laboratory setting, Erdelez (1997) laid the framework for the information
encountering (IE) theory. Whereas most information behavior studies assume users
are active and problem-driven, Erdelez found that users can encounter information
related to his or her interest or problem, which prompts users to halt the current task
and move to the background task. Her earlier definition of IE was “memorable
experiences of accidental discovery of useful and interesting information.” Later
Erdelez (2005) narrowed her definition of IE to “an accidental discovery of
information during an active search for some other information.” The main purpose,
as Erdelez said, is to “allow for the presence of other types of Opportunistic
Acquisition of Information (OAI) that yet need to be identified and defined.”
Yadamsuren and Erdelez (2010) developed research on accidental exposure to online
news based on the IE model. In this research, accidental exposure to online news was
conceptualized as “memorable experience of accidental discovery of useful and
interesting news when people engage in various activities online” (p. 1). Compared
with the concept of IE, accidental exposure to online news seems to be loosely

19
defined. However, it also allowed respondents in the study to articulate their perceived accidental exposure to online news in order to “build a rich picture of the concept of accidental exposure to online news and its nature and attributes as perceived by the respondents in the context of news reading.”

As indicated in Yadamsuren and Erdelez’s (2010) research, accidental exposure to online news can happen in news reading, non-news reading, or on the Internet in general. The research confirms that information encountering is becoming quite frequent to Internet users, with most respondents in the study reporting its occurrence at least several times a week. Moreover, the study found that accidental exposure to online news does not only happen “during the active news reading process but also during other habitual reading behavior” (Yadamsuren & Erdelez, 2010, p. 6).

The first limitation of these studies is they assume users are always engaged in active information seeking or active news reading when they encounter unexpected information. These models fail to cover some of users’ Internet browsing behaviors, especially on social media sites in which they are generally less active. Users in these circumstances may not have an active task, but instead are simply experiencing the immersive information environment and browsing for fun.

Also, in some of the studies, “accidental exposure” and “incidental exposure” are used interchangeably. However, there is a subtle difference between the two concepts. In the case of this study, accidental exposure simply captures the essence of the phenomenon, as it emphasizes the unintentional aspect or indicates something happened by chance.
Previous studies on browsing

Studies from the field of information science have identified the specific kind of news reading behavior that has no clear goal or information needs. In mass communication research, the uses and gratification theory has also defined habitual and ritualistic uses of media. Some scholars support a passive audience conception, especially in television viewing, that states audiences largely try to pass time in leisurely ways. Earlier efforts attempted to create a distinction between instrumental and ritualistic behaviors (information-seeking versus entertainment-seeking).

In recent years, researchers also realized the two categories tend to interrelate with each other (Ruggiero, 2008). In many studies that apply the uses and gratification theory to the Internet, users are assumed to strategically seek out media and content for specific gratification purposes. They assume the Internet is used to satisfy many needs based on users’ active behavior, such as locating content through search engines or hyperlinks (Cho et al., 2003).

Tewksbury, Hals & Bibart (2008, p.259) made a notable effort to define “browsing” behavior based on the uses and gratification theory. Browsing is characterized by reading widely on a broad range of topics. Instead of reading only one area, users who are browsing instead read news across different areas. Browsing differs from selecting, in which the news reader has a clear goal and tends to read based on a conscious decision of information need. Tewksbury argues browsing is becoming an overwhelming news-reading behavior of both print and online news. In general, several uses and gratification needs can be fulfilled through browsing: (1)
surveillance: news and other messages can fulfill people’s need to monitor their environment; (2) entertainment: browsing may reveal surprising or interesting news or messages, and being entertained is also one of the basic gratifications; (3) interpersonal utility: browsing may provide useful content for interacting with other people.

Tewksbury’s model is not concerned with the orientation people have toward specific media content, but rather the general selection of media exposure itself. In other words, media uses in Tewksbury’s model would involve little effort to actively search for specific content, but include the general expectation to be exposed to news or information. Tewksbury wrote that this varied set of gratification can be organized under the term “discovery”:

People do not always look for information to fill a gap in knowledge. They also look for information to fill a more general need for the new and unknown. Through media use, people discover what events are transpiring in the world around them, encounter entertaining content (novelty typically being diverting), and find content useful for subsequent interpersonal interactions. (p.259)

After reviewing previous studies, the following caveats and limitations can be defined. First, Tewksbury and others’ use of the uses and gratification theory is more from a functionalist perspective. The concept carries some significance, as it captures a more passive usage of the Internet by many users. However, it still lacks the explanatory power and fails to explain people’s more active behavior. In the online information environment, it is true that users can be somewhat “lazy” and resort to browsing instead of selective searching. But they may still be active in that they are
still responding to certain information while ignoring other information. In other words, they are still actively discovering information.

**Accidental discovery of information on Weibo: Proposing a new model**

The worry that social media usage leads to the fragmentation of groups actually holds some water. One important use of microblogs is to stay connected to friends or family by reading or posting updates and news about yourself or others. A Chinese survey found that 89% of users identified social interaction as their main reason to use Weibo (Dratio.com). Moreover, Chinese users make the following of their friends, co-workers and families’ accounts a priority. This means that many users’ Weibo networks have few connections outside of their circle of immediate friends. Even though these findings seem to indicate a more closed network, there are some optimistic indications that suggest Weibo is a more open network and actually facilitates political discussions. The survey showed that almost half of Weibo users always have the impulse to click the forward button.

Finally, the new concept proposed here is called the “accidental discovery of information” on China’s Weibo. On the surface, the words “accidental” and “discovery” seem to contradict each other. But indeed these two words capture the exact essence of China’s Weibo users’ information behavior. Weibo, like any social media site, provides users with a “limited information space.” There are generally very few opportunities to actively search for information on microblogs. The timeline is where all information posted by the users’ immediate network is shown. The user
can only read messages from the accounts they actively follow on the timeline. This process seems to be passive enough, as users are simply being “fed” information, but it is actually far more complicated than that. First, despite all the information appearing on the timeline, users still make the decision to read some of the posts while ignoring others. Second, users can customize their reading experience by selecting the accounts they would like to follow, un-following those accounts they do not want information from anymore, or even blocking unwelcomed accounts. Third, users can respond to messages by commenting or “forwarding,” or, especially in Weibo’s case, “thumbing up”. Finally, the function to forward messages allows users to discover information beyond one’s own network.

This study captures the nuance of the concept, juxtaposing it between passive learning and active searching of information. Instead of using incidental exposure, which implies users are exposed to some unexpected information while engaging in some active information tasks, being accidentally exposed emphasizes the unintentional, effortless and happening-by-chance aspect of the concept. On the other hand, although exposure itself is accidental, it is in a chain of discovery. It is both active and passive. More specifically, when users browse information on Weibo, they try to actively discover one type of information, but in the process they accidentally discover other types of information. Thus, the new concept can be illustrated in the diagram shown in illustration 5.
Illustration 5: Accidental discovery process on Weibo

Illustration 5: Non-followers experienced accidental discovery when they discovered Weibo messages. These messages were forwarded by immediate followers of the source. Unexpected content and ideological difference will also indicate the accidental discovery process.

The researcher proposes a conceptual definition of accidental discovery of information on Weibo: **users’ experience of discovering information which is not based on their deliberate selection or preferences.**

In the diagram, there are three indicators of accidental discovery, and the most prominent and obvious is Indicator 2, which is follower/non-follower indicator: After the source had posted a message, immediate followers saw it and forwarded the
message. Only through forwarders, users on the far right (the non-follower) were able to read that message. The accidental discovery process allows messages from a source to convey information to users that have no immediate connections to the source.

Accidental discovery of information not only happens when information reaches non-followers, but also when a source posts messages that are accidentally discovered by immediate followers. Based on Indicator 1, an immediate follower may be following the source because of one certain type of content the source provides. When the source posts unexpected content, the experience then becomes accidental discovery.

The third indicator of accidental discovery of information is based on users’ comments. As shown in the diagram, both the immediate follower and non-follower can respond to the Weibo message by commenting. If one message is posted in a homogeneous group and then spread within the same group, the comments on that message will likely reflect similar ideas. However, if the message reached other groups, there may be different ideologies in comments.

**Three indicators of accidental discovery on Weibo**

This study summarized three indicators of accidental discovery of Weibo messages: unexpected content, follower/non-follower and ideological differences.

The main focus of this study is on the follower/non-follower indicator, which derives from the information environment dimension. Basically, a non-follower of a message source who read the message through another user’s forwarding action,
indicates the experience of accidental discovery. In this study, computer-generated diagrams created from 165 Weibo messages clearly show which users are immediate followers and which are non-followers. All immediate followers are connected to the source by red lines, while non-followers are connected to other users with yellow lines. With the help of the software, the prevalence of accidental discovery could be analyzed and the prevalence of accidental discovery could be demonstrated, which will be described in later chapters.

The ideological differences derive from the information-user dimension. One feature of social media sites is interactivity, which allows users to make comments on messages. Users can not only read the original message, but they can read other users’ comments as well, which might encourage them to join the discussion. Some scholars argue that Internet users are highly selective, and this limits their exposure to information only to ideas similar to their own. In such cases, users would most likely make positive comments. On the other hand, users exposed to beliefs or ideologies different from their own would most likely make comments of disapproval and debate the content with other users. Thus the ideological-difference indicator is found by examining the comment section of microblog messages. If contradictory beliefs or ideologies exist or a heated discussion ensues, it can indicate accidental discovery.

The unexpected content, which is the third indicator, derives from both the encountered information and information need dimensions. Although the information need cannot alone explain users’ information behavior on Weibo, it nonetheless can partially explain why users follow or subscribe to certain Weibo accounts. A Weibo
account may post a variety of content to its followers, and some of its content can be expected, as it fulfills the information need of some followers. Other content might be unexpected for users not seeking it. These three indicators serve as criteria for this study, indicating whether users’ experiences are cases of accidental discovery or not.

**Potential outcomes**

Online political discussions can happen in any unexpected environment. In some circumstances, researchers found non-political leisure discussion forums are filled with political discussion (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). Social networking sites, such as Weibo or Twitter, are generally not seen as political discussion spaces. As a matter of fact, Facebook, Twitter and similar services are addictive, and people are spending more and more time checking for status updates from others (Johnson, 2009). One principal use of microblogs is to stay connected to other people through reading or posting updates and news about oneself to others. A Chinese survey found that 89% of users identified social interaction as their main reason to use Weibo (Dratio.com). Moreover, Chinese users make following their friends, co-workers and families a priority. This means that for many users, their Weibo network has few connections outside their immediate circle of friends. Even though these findings seem to indicate a more closed network, there are other more optimistic indications that Weibo as a network is far from being closed and actually facilitates political discussions. The survey showed that almost half of users always have the impulse to click the forward button. They like to share information, news and other content they
are interested in. Users can follow not only family members or friends, but also news sources. Thus, this user would see updates from friends and family, and also news items or links posted by news sources. Moreover, friends of the user might also “share” news they care about, and this has become another important function of microblogs. The concept of “browsing” still applies to microblog usage, but it goes beyond the context of only news reading. In fact, most microblog users cannot articulate a single goal they have. During their use of microblogs, updates from family members or friends, and news items from news sources and interesting things forwarded by other friends all intertwine and show up in one place in front of the user. Thus, for the purpose of this Weibo study, the definition of browsing is expanded beyond the context of news reading. The browsing behavior in Weibo instead is characterized as reading a wide range of both news and non-news information. For this study, another nuance is picking the word “accidental discovery” over “accidental exposure.” An immediate follower of a Weibo user might have some expectation for what the author will post, just as newspaper subscribers know they will read politics, sports, art and other news in the newspaper. However, even for immediate followers, there still can be some “surprises” because most microblog authors do not have a fixed editorial standard like traditional newspapers do. If a message is forwarded several times before being read by a user, the accidental exposure level is higher.

China has a unique information environment because of government-led efforts to suppress and censor news. According to Downs (1957), information is costly even in a democracy. Since merely assimilating information requires time and therefore is
costly, Downs reached the conclusion that it is irrational for most citizens to acquire a high level of political information solely for purposes of voting. In China, censorship can be seen as raising the cost of information, and eventually most citizens either cannot afford it or lose interest in obtaining it. Accidental exposure to current news on microblogs creates opportunities for the majority of users, who have little intention to seek costly information (current news), to accidentally encounter it at zero cost, while they are also enjoying the site in a leisurely way.

A high level of political efficacy, along with political knowledge and political participation, is necessary for many citizens in an optimal democracy (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Political efficacy has two dimensions: internal efficacy and external efficacy. According to Niemi (1991), internal efficacy can be described as “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in, politics” (p.1407), while external efficacy can be referred to as “beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizen demands.”

The research by Kenski and Stroud found a significant connection between Internet usage and political efficacy (Kenski& Stroud, 2006). Furthermore, Tewksbury, Weaver and Maddex (2001) explored the relationship between accidental exposure to news on the web and knowledge of current events. According to their research, even among people who hardly follow politics at all, more than half reported accidental exposure to current-affair information. “In other words, the World Wide Web today may provide a public space where a broad cross section of the population encounters news not purposively but accidentally while going about daily business” (p. 547).
The literature review proposed a new concept of a diagram of accidental discovery of information. Three indicators were also proposed that examine the existence of such phenomenon. In the following paragraphs, the three research questions will be discussed.

**Three research questions**

RQ1: What kind of information is posted on the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo feed?

This should be the first step of research, because it would be useless to discuss accidental discovery of information without clarifying what information is being discovered. As in the case of the U.S. Embassy, messages can have discursive power. Different messages might also lead to different patterns of dissemination and, eventually, different patterns of accidental discovery.

RQ2: What are the general patterns of dissemination of the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo messages?

With the help of software generating diagrams illustrating the “route” of message spread, all 165 diagrams were examined and categorized. The findings may contribute to the understanding of microblog communication and, furthermore, how to effectively reach out to people. More importantly, this study proposes a connection between accidental discovery and non-followers: A user will experience accidental discovery when he or she is not an immediate follower of the message source.

RQ3: What are the indicators of accidental discovery to the U.S. Embassy’s messages among Chinese social media users?
Accidental discovery of information can occur in different patterns. An immediate follower might have some expectation of what he or she will read, but surprises can occur because microblogs are casual and there is no strict standard for what the blogger can post. For non-followers, especially those who read the message through several forwarders, their accidental discovery might be most obvious and prominent and will be the main discussion of the study. As for the ideological differences discussed earlier, it will be mostly noted in the comment sections of the U.S. Embassy’s messages. Users from different ideological backgrounds partaking in a common forum can also be an indicator of accidental discovery. In the following chapters, all three indicators will be discussed thoroughly.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study takes a mixed-method approach to examine accidental exposure to information. Four methods were used: (a) netnography, (b) qualitative content analysis, (c) network analysis and (d) interview.

Netnography

The researcher used a Weibo account to participate in and observe Weibo usage. The U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account gained more than 60,000 online followers in the first ten months of activation, and as of November 2012, more than 660,000 users were following its account. It has even become a real political force to reckon with in China. In 2012, the embassy’s account angered the Chinese government by constantly publishing messages on the conditions of Beijing’s air pollution. The Chinese government even made threats using diplomatic channels (Associated Press, 2012). But the effort to muffle the embassy’s Weibo ended in humiliating failure. The U.S. Embassy continued to publish the figures, citing that it posted the data in order to protect the health of embassy staff and U.S. citizens in the country. After identifying the embassy’s Weibo as a potential source of analysis for this study, the researcher closely monitored the operation of the account, including its content, any news relevant to it and how it interacted with Chinese
users. The researcher also wrote a short paper about the content of the embassy’s Weibo account, analyzing how it uses “soft power” to convey American values to Chinese Weibo users. The researcher was also able to use Weibo Messenger to connect with several Chinese users as potential interviewees. As Kozinets (1997) found in her study, netnography is a branch of ethnography, which combines online observation with in-depth interviews. As discussed in the literature review, many studies on the accidental discovery phenomenon are either in lab settings or involve focus groups recalling their experiences. By adopting netnography, the researcher was able to be there when it happened, with the disadvantage that some Weibo users did not trust a stranger online. Some interview requests were either ignored or turned down sternly. To battle this disadvantage, the researcher adopted full disclosure. The researcher used his own Weibo account, which included a detailed biography and many photos of the researcher and his family members. It helped because a few interviewees agreed to interviews requests after.

**Qualitative content analysis**

The qualitative content analysis was used to answer the first research question: What information is on the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo? Two months of posted messages were analyzed as samples. The first month analyzed took place from July 21, 2012, to August 21, 2012, as samples from this month are representative of the most current form of the embassy’s Weibo. The second sample is from messages posted between June 21, 2011, and July 21, 2011, which can be considered the mid-point from the
date the embassy’s Weibo was created. Samples from the midpoint are slightly different from the more recent ones, but those samples better represent development and changes. Samples were picked from both month-long periods to make sure the samples for analysis are inclusive enough. There were a total of 403 messages during this two-month time frame.

All of these messages were downloaded to a single Word file. Basic information was collected, including the post ID (from 1 to 403, which was used for convenience for further analysis of any single post), the date of the post and the number of comments, as well as the number of retweets (i.e., forwards). These messages were coded using a coding scheme to look at: 1. Issue scale: to decide whether an issue described in a post refers to a U.S. domestic only issue, U.S.-China issues or issues involving multiple nations; 2. Global issue/interest: whether an issue is considered a global concern of all humans; 3. Type: whether a post is episodic, which takes the form of event-oriented case study, or thematic, which is issue-oriented; 4. The main topic of the issue, which includes categories such as elections, science, culture, education, sports, etc. A total of 20 categories are included in the coding scheme; 5. Pro-active engagement: whether a post involves actively communicating or engaging with Chinese public; 6. Target audience: to decide whether a message addresses a specific group of people, such as business people or students; 7. Source; 8. Human subjects: what kind of source is directly indicated in a post, and what kinds of people are portrayed in a post? A message directly quoting the U.S. president or other officials, or a post describing an American athlete who won an Olympic medal are
examples of two human subjects; 9. Discussion of females/minorities in a post. After coding and content analysis, the next step was to take a closer look at each post. Although the content analysis can give a general picture, further viewing was needed to identify patterns or values carried throughout the embassy’s messages.

**Network analysis**

Network analysis is an effective method in assessing the relationships or links among a set of entities (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). In network analysis, “clusters” may refer to subgroups in a network in which nodes are substantially more connected to one another than to nodes outside that subgroup. Clusters can also be seen as community structures in networks (Himelboim, McCreery and Smith, 2013). The network analysis in this study, however, slightly differs in definition. A total of 165 Weibo messages were analyzed as network clusters. All entities or nodes in those clusters are only closely connected through one relationship: They all discovered and responded to the message posted by the source, which is the U.S. Embassy.

The study utilized two online software platforms, both of which are free of charge. One software, named “Doodod,” was utilized for content analysis. Doodod also has a commercial version which charges the user a premium for a more complicated analysis. The software was created by a graduate from Tsinghua University and was mainly used for data mining and analysis of Weibo dissemination.
A total of 165 messages posted by the U.S. Embassy were collected for use in this study. Each message has a unique URL, also known as a web address. The software analyzed each URL and retrieved data from those messages. Based on the interactions and connections between the participants of the dissemination of each message, the software can generate diagrams which illustrate those relationships.

However, the researcher also found that the diagrams drawn by Doodod in some circumstances did not clearly represent the spread of information. Thus, a second software named “Weibo Reach” was used for diagram drawing. According to its website, Weibo Reach is the product of an independent data-mining and survey institute, which was created by a graduate student from Harbin Institute of Technology in China and works in cooperation with the school. The two software programs are reliable online analytical tools, and their analyses have been published in Chinese media. Moreover, the researcher primarily used these two software programs for content analysis, retrieving information and generating diagrams. The interpretation of data and diagrams, however, did not depend on software.

Illustration 6 (on the next page) shows a diagram drawn by Weibo Reach after it completed the analysis of one Weibo cluster. At the center of the large circle is the message author, the U.S. Embassy. Lines of radiation represent the spread of information. The yellow dots are Weibo users who read and also forwarded the message. The dots connected by red lines and forming the inner circle represent the immediate followers of the embassy’s Weibo account. On the outside, there are
fewer dots, and the furtherest dots on the outside represent users who were able to read the embassy’s post through several forwarders.

Besides diagrams, the software can provide others useful data. This data includes key forwarders, the total number of users covered, gender, verified users, whether forwarded with/without comment and layers of forwarders. The data gives the big picture about all 165 clusters.

**Illustration 6: a closer look at a Weibo message cluster diagram**

Illustration 6: this diagram is among one of 165 diagrams generated by software, and the Chinese character near the center red dot reads “U.S. Embassy Weibo.”
Interviews

Three interview subjects were picked based on their experiences of accidental discovery of information. The three interviews are used as a supplement to other analysis and also as a validation strategy. Although diagrams and data provide a bigger picture of how accidental exposure takes place, word from users with real experience also benefit this study. The three interviewees were picked also based on the different types of accidental exposure they may experience. Interviewee X (male, who is an employee in a company in Zhongshan) is an immediate follower of the embassy’s Weibo. As previously discussed, such a user may experience little or even no accidental exposure because he is already subscribed to the author and expects or knows what types of content will likely be posted. However, the U.S. Embassy posts on a variety of topics, including visa information, education information, U.S. tourism information and politically related information. A user might follow the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo solely for education information, but later discover much more information than expected and thus be accidentally exposed. Interviewee Y (a male graduate student in Guangdong) was picked from users who read the U.S. Embassy’s messages indirectly from a key forwarder. This situation can be categorized as accidental exposure or could also be expected. Interviewee Y follows the key forwarder and expects the forwarder to either post original content or forward content to read. Interviewee Z (male, who works for a government-controlled enterprise in Beijing) was picked from users who read the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo indirectly from another ordinary forwarder. In this case, the
forwarder is likely to be his friend or family member. In this situation, the researcher anticipated the interviewee to be more surprised when he discovers the message because he is fulfilling a different specific need (socialization) and finding other information is unexpected.

The researcher first made contact with the interviewees on Weibo during the netnography observation. Among the three interviewees, two agreed to talk over the phone and the other insisted on using Weibo messenger. For a full description of interview questions, see Appendix 1.

Certain measures of precaution were taken although the study held minimal risks and no political consequences were expected for participation in the research. All research was conducted in the United States through Skype calls, minimizing the risk of data being confiscated by the Chinese government if deemed sensitive. Skype calls were not recorded, and the researcher recorded information by taking notes. Furthermore, the researcher ensured the anonymity of interviewees by only referring to them as “X,” “Y” and “Z”. Any personal information that could compromise their identities was treated with caution.

**Validation Strategy**

This study uses (a) triangulation, (b) extended fieldwork and (c) participant feedback for validation purposes. Triangulation, defined by Denzin (1978), is "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon." The triangulation of this study comes in two senses. First, three indicators were defined
to identify accidental exposure on Weibo. None of the three indicators would alone be able to prove the existence of accidental exposure. However, this study used various methodologies and confirmed that all three indicators are found in the research, thus leading to more valid and evidence-supported results. Second, the study combines the methodologies of netnography, network analysis, content analysis and interviews. The interviews not only provide details and support the other findings in this study, but they also serve as a validation strategy. The researcher was able to refer to their answers and make proper adjustments to the interpretation of findings based on their statements.
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF U.S. EMBASSY’S WEIBO

This chapter answers the first research question: What kind of information is posted by the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo? Because the entire study concerns Weibo users’ accidental discovery of this information, the first research question is actually connected to the other questions as well. The qualitative content analysis does more than just provide an overview or distribution of content. It also aims to make some interpretations and anticipations, such as how different content might lead to different dissemination patterns.

For Weibo users, accidental discovery can be both passive and active. They only read the information that appears on their timelines, but they can choose which accounts to follow, and they can also ignore information appearing on their timeline. Thus, not all information from the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo is created equal. Some messages attract more attention and spread among a large number of users, while other posts only attract a handful of viewers and forwarders. From the perspective of the U.S. Embassy, which is tasked with promoting dialogue with the Chinese public, deliberate decisions must be made on whether to provide more fact-based information, value-based content or politically oriented topics.

Some general findings need mentioning up front. First, there are many Chinese users actively interacting with the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo, shown by the large number
of comments and forwards the account gets on a regular basis. Second, the U.S. Embassy made dozens of posts on education topics. These messages were clearly targeting Chinese students, who make up the majority of followers of the embassy’s Weibo. As discussed previously, for Indicator 1 of accidental discovery, some of these followers are simply following the U.S. Embassy for education information, and they bump into this information without expecting to. Third, a large number of the messages promote various American values. These messages are often subject to more discussion and sometimes even online debates. It also means that these messages are more likely to become a topic and thus more likely to be spread among Chinese users.

Analysis of U.S. Embassy Weibo content

Chinese users made a total of 20,723 comments and forwarded the selected messages 33,270 times. On average, each post was commented on 128 times and forwarded 205 times. These figures confirm that a large number of active users are following the U.S. Embassy Weibo because these users are not only reading but also actively responding to these messages. These Chinese users are indeed actively engaged in the process.

According to a Chinese media survey (Southern Weekend, 2011), students make up the largest group of followers of the embassy’s Weibo account. Among 403 posts, the U.S. Embassy dedicated 72 of them to directly addressing students’ questions and needs. The U.S. Embassy also made good use of the unique features of Weibo. Almost 40% (146) of all posts analyzed involve some kind of active
engagement with Chinese users, including promotion of its offline events, hosting online writing contests, English study or directly answering users’ questions.

In the analysis of the scale of issues, the top category is U.S. domestic issues with Chinese comparisons or implication. Thirty four percent of posts fall into this category. Posts in this category are about the United States, but explicitly or implicitly make a comparison with China. Like issues of education or housing price, they are of great concern in China, and Chinese readers even made requests for the U.S. Embassy to write on such issues. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that posts in this category also received more reactions than those in other categories. They frequently generate more discussion and more “forwarding” from Chinese users. This kind of information easily becomes a topic, and Chinese users may feel that they should have some input into them.

There are only 56 posts in the U.S.-China relations category. Messages in this category naturally often generate heated discussions as they are politically oriented. Even now, the Chinese government still restricts Chinese media from using foreign sources. The embassy’s Weibo provides a unique channel for Chinese citizens to access foreign sources. The researcher expected comments from various ideological backgrounds and even rude or “nasty” comments to be made. However, even these rude comments are actually a good sign, as explained in Indicator 3 of accidental discovery. Heated discussions show that people from different groups with different opinions all discover the same information. This kind of information, therefore, actually facilitates broader discussion.
Another trend to note is that the U.S. Embassy also provides a large number of fact-based posts on science and culture. This is understandable, as the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo is part of the U.S. government’s public diplomacy effort, and promoting culture and science exchanges is part of public diplomacy. However, from the perspective of promoting accidental discovery information in this category, which is sometimes considered as “high culture,” these messages interest only some members of the Chinese public. They may not lead to accidental discovery on a large scale. On the other hand, as shown in examples in later chapters, science information can attract more attention when it becomes topical news (for example, the Curiosity’s landing on Mars).

The U.S. Embassy has a distinct emphasis on students as a unique group. *Southern Weekend*’s found students make up the largest group of followers of the embassy’s Weibo. Among the 403 posts, the U.S. Embassy dedicated 72 of them to directly addressing students’ questions and needs. The U.S. Embassy’s strategy for Chinese students can also lead to more accidental discovery of information. As explained in Indicator 1 of accidental discovery, students who follow the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo may be focused on getting education-related information. As these students are followers of the U.S. Embassy, they are exposed to the variety of content the embassy posts. It is an inclusive package: Users either read all of the types of content or they do not read anything at all. In this process, some followers accidentally discover new information, even though they may not be fully aware of the process.
The U.S. Embassy also makes good use of the unique elements of social networking. Almost 40% (146) of all its posts involved some kind of active engagement with Chinese users, including using Weibo to promote its offline events, to host online writing contests, or English study or to directly answer online users’ questions. As shown later in one of the message dissemination diagrams, Weibo interaction might also promote accidental discovery- Chinese users are generally active in participating in online discussions. The U.S. Embassy’s interactions with them further encourage such participation. More users may become willing to forward these messages, leading to even more accidental discovery by Chinese users.

A closer look at content/values through qualitative analysis

The U.S. Embassy’s Weibo is not just an alternative channel for Chinese users to get “hard” information. The account also promotes “soft power,” or value-based content. The fact that the United States government can promote its values to the Chinese public through Weibo carries even more significance. As scholars argue about whether new media leads to “narrow-minded” versus “open-minded” users, the U.S. Embassy has already begun the process of opening the eyes and minds of a foreign public.

Democracy has always been a core value of the United States, but, interestingly the word is nearly absent from the embassy’s Weibo messages, only appearing about ten times. However, this does not mean the embassy is not trying to communicate such values to the Chinese public. On the contrary, democratic values are subtly
placed into messages. For example, one message said, “President Obama and his challenger are both using Twitter, Youtube and Facebook. These sites have become a vital part in the election.” The Chinese public’s initial reaction to the message might be that all three websites mentioned above are inaccessible in the country. Another way it subtly conveys the value of democracy is through comparison. One post stated that “The U.S. Federal government has a total of 660,000 vehicles, including 210,000 owned by U.S. Postal.” In China, officials’ excessive use of vehicles has always been a source of public anger. Chinese users who read the message immediately understand this is democracy that is working, in contrast to their own system of government. To build soft power means making values attractive to others in a subtle way. When using Weibo, it is not necessary to repeat phrases like “human rights” or “democracy.” One only needs to make a case and let others draw a conclusion.

Individualism is an equally essential part of U.S. values, and it has also been exhibited extensively throughout the analyzed Weibo posts. Because the time period examined coincided with the 2012 London Olympics, sports were used several times to illustrate U.S. individualism. One message read: “During the London Games, 90-year-old William Bell from a small town in Arkansas again broke the senior record in pole vault which was held by himself.” Beside sports, the embassy’s Weibo also introduced one of the Curiosity Expedition’s leading scientists, who is known for his Mohawk hairstyle. “Who’s that dude with the Mohawk-style haircut at the console?” That “dude” was Bobak Ferdowsi, flight director for the Mars Curiosity rover. It is
hard to find a better example to demonstrate individualism than showing a non-mainstream scientist.

The value of philanthropy is also portrayed in the embassy’s messages. The Weibo messages extensively showed Americans’ love of helping others. Several messages posted were related to the U.S. Embassy donating to disaster relief in China. “Ambassador Gary Locke who represents American people has donated 100,000 dollars for China’s disaster relief.” There are also posts about young Americans participating in volunteer activities. “Members of Peace Corps volunteer Stephanie Bergado’s small island community pull the boat used to access their local health center to shore.”

Another value promoted through seemingly unrelated topics, such as sports or science, was equality and the respect for women and minority groups. “Sally Ride was the first female astronaut in U.S. She spent six days in space in 1983, and this has significantly increased the stature of women, especially female scientists.” And in another post, “Gymnast Gabby Douglas’ historic gold medals — she’s the first woman of color in Olympic history to be the individual all-around champion and the first American to win both individual and team all-around competitions at the same Olympics — were made possible in part by a very strong network of maternal support.”

Patriotism and respect for tradition as values were also introduced in numerous messages. The embassy posted several messages introducing its history, parades and other details. In the posts related to patriotism and tradition, it can be seen that the
United States furthermore values environmental protection and small towns. The embassy’s Weibo constantly introduced less-known universities and small towns to its Chinese followers. Later, as requested in some users’ comments, the embassy also began discussing housing prices in those same places.

**Conclusion**

The qualitative content analysis shows that different messages from the U.S. Embassy are disseminated in different patterns. There may be more accidental discovery of some posts, while others may only attract a few comments and forwards. Factors affecting the dissemination of posts include: whether the post is topical or informational, whether it has Chinese connections and encourages comments, and whether it is hard information or promotes values. The researcher would like to emphasize the last part about the U.S. Embassy promoting values. At least in Weibo’s case, social media is not just about negatives, in terms of users’ learning about current events and politics. Scholars might just have overlooked the accidental discovery of information—an invisible, yet important channel of learning.
Before analyzing the diagrams and data discovered about the dissemination of Weibo messages, this chapter first defines which situations qualify as accidental exposure to information. Three indicators will be discussed and each illustrated with some practical examples.

In the previous literature review, the accidental discovery of information on Weibo was defined as: **users’ experience of discovering information which is not based on their deliberate selection or preferences.** As previously discussed, Weibo or any social media site usage can be highly selective. Users choose which accounts to follow and in this way customize their reading experiences. Accidental discovery happens when a user “bumps” into information from a source which he or she did not choose to follow, or when a user reads messages he or she did not intend to read.

**Indicator 1: Follower/non-follower**

The timeline is the most basic function of all social media sites. New messages and posts appear on users’ timelines in chronological order from top to bottom. Users of sites such as Twitter or Facebook can get addicted, and research shows they are spending more and more time checking updates from others (Johnson, 2009). The same holds true for Weibo users. There is a Chinese name for
this addiction, “Shua Wei Bo,” meaning “keep refreshing Weibo page.” Weibo addicts stay online all day, connecting with other users, reading updates and news. Following others and being followed are the fundamental relationships among social media users, by which they become dense subgroups of interconnected users. These connections are the context in which users are exposed to messages (Himelboim, McCreery and Smith, 2013). In other words, social media users generally expect to read posts and updates from their immediate network. Next, there is the Weibo “forward” button or “retweet” (RT) in Twitter. By using the forward function, a message outside an immediate network can be shared within that network, appearing on the timeline of all users in the network. Even though these users have no connections and do not follow the author of the message, they can still read and respond to that message. In such cases, users read something unexpected, and they have now experienced accidental exposure to information.

Illustration 7 is a software-generated diagram that clearly demonstrates the concept. In August 2012, the U.S. Embassy posted a photo showing Secretary of State Hilary Clinton with former South African president Nelson Mandela. A short text description read, “Mrs. Clinton met Mr. Mandela privately, without giving interviews to journalists.” The message only generated lukewarm interest from Chinese users, as it was only forwarded 100 times. However, the diagram of this message interestingly captured the process of one user who forwarded the message to her network, reaching another 12 users, who were accidentally exposed to that information. The large yellow dot on the left represents the information source,
which is the U.S. Embassy. The small red dots surrounding it are immediate followers of embassy’s Weibo. The diagram shows most of these red dots have no further extensions, meaning that the spread of information stopped at their end. However, one red dot on the right, which is a user with the Weibo name “Yuting in America,” is an exception. Her dot looks like a dandelion seed: After she forwarded the original message, another 12 users within her network read and responded (see the 12 red dots on far right).

Illustration 7: accidental discovery beyond one’s own network
These 12 users are only directly connected to “Yuting in America,” and they have no direct connection with the U.S. Embassy’s account. They would have been unlikely to read this post had the forwarder not forwarded the message to her immediate network. Based on the accidental discovery concept, these users have experienced accidental exposure to a Weibo message. It is also intriguing to note their responses to the exposure. “Yuting in America” did not only forward the original message, but also added her own observations to the original post. She noted that Clinton was standing beside Mandela, who sat in a sofa. She praised Clinton and also made a comparison to China:

In the mindset of most Chinese, in a powerful country like the United States, the secretary of state should not stand humbly beside a former president of a small country. Some fellow Chinese could never understand: Respecting others is also respecting themselves.

Among the 12 users who read the message from “Yuting in America,” seven users simply forwarded the message again, without attaching any of their own comments. This suggests they simply agreed with the original message and the added comment by the forwarder. Because they chose to forward the message indicates they were paying attention to the message and felt it was worth the time for them and their networks to read. The decision to forward a message on is a gesture of approval. Another five users made their own comments, which turned into a heated discussion. One user named “Shanghai Shuimu Xiangrong” said, “China has yet to learn to respect other countries in the same way.” Another user, “Chui Da Niu,” also took the opportunity to criticize the Chinese government: “The idea that whoever holds guns has the power has become so stubborn in our minds. And that is why we do
not understand this world.” These comments were met with opposition from “Lao Sun,” who responded, “It was just appropriate to show some respect for people like Mandela. Why do you have to compare and belittle Chinese?” Another user’s comment was short and critical: “Don’t believe the photo. It’s just a show.”

This example clearly shows the process of accidental exposure and what it can lead to. Thanks to the forwarding action by one user, there were 12 more users who not only read the message from the U.S. Embassy, but also participated in a politically related discussion when they otherwise would not have. In other situations of the dissemination of Weibo messages, there are hundreds and thousands of such forwarders, and the effect of accidental exposure occurs on a much larger scale. The researcher argues this is one of the main reasons for the success of the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo.

**Indicator 2: Unexpected content**

The most obvious indicators of accidental exposure are when the message author and recipient(s) are not within the same immediate network or do not follow each other. However, accidental exposure can also happen within the immediate network. Following another Weibo account is comparable to subscribing to a newspaper: The subscriber has some idea and expectation of what they will read on his or her timeline. For instance, by following a government office account, the subscriber will likely receive a great deal of information on government policies. In contrast, subscribing to a traditional media outlet’s Weibo account would give the user a lot of news in real
time. Social media has also provided more freedom for authors. Many accounts are creative and post a wide variety of content. The U.S. Embassy posts a variety of content, fulfilling different needs or providing different gratifications for its different followers. For instance, science, culture, diplomacy and everyday life are some of the more commonly emphasized topics. The embassy pays attention to trending topics among the Chinese and then posts relevant information, like on air quality, housing prices and the national sports system. The embassy’s Weibo also offers Q&A on visa issues, attracting a large number of Chinese followers who care about U.S. visa policies. As stated earlier, however, students make up the largest demographic of followers of the embassy’s Weibo. The embassy makes an effort to engage with Chinese users by using posts to promote its offline events, hosting an online writing contest, discussing English studies or directly answering online users’ questions.

All of this information comes as a package for followers. If they want to read about the U.S. Embassy’s visa policy, they also have to read about U.S. history or U.S. national policy. When some immediate followers only intend to learn about one kind of information and have little interest in other information but read it anyway, this indicates a type of accidental exposure.

Three Weibo users were interviewed for this study. Respondent X is an employee in a company in Zhongshan, Guangdong. The researcher located his Weibo account when X commented on one of the messages by the U.S. Embassy:

Some of our readers asked if there were any annual car inspections in the US. Actually different states have different rules. In some states, there was no annual inspection. But other states do have inspections. For instance in Virginia, the inspection fee is now $16, and it would take 10-20 minutes.
Respondent X made a brief comment, stating “in my hometown, it is not free.”

During the interview, the researcher asked X why he wanted to follow the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account. He replied, “I was just curious. I don’t have any specific reason as why I read.”

As to why he chose to join the discussion on that specific post, he said:

“Because it is about what happens around me and is closer to my reality. It is about comparing China and the U.S. By comparing, you can tell a lot. And I want to share about the inspection fee in my hometown.”

The interview with Respondent X had many limitations. For instance, he gave short answers and was reluctant to elaborate. Thus, it was difficult to elicit enough useful information about X’s experiences with accidental exposure to information. This may also be due to the difficulty of explaining the concept. The researcher simplified the question to: “Have you read some posts from the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo that you felt were either shocking or extremely compelling, which you have never heard of?” The response was: “I might come across their (the embassy’s) Weibo three or four times a week. No. Maybe I often read a lot of Weibo. I’ve got used to read from (the Embassy) Weibo. There are not a lot of messages would surprise me.” The interview did yield some results when asked again about a post X commented on. This time he briefly touched on the issue of political participation:

I felt that some of my friends and even my family have little idea about U.S. They sometimes even think ridiculously. I tried to say, “Look, I heard it’s not like that. If you don’t believe me, you can check the Weibo.” Yes, in general I might be more assertive when talking about some issues.
Indicator 3: Ideological differences

Online political discussions can happen in any unexpected forum. In some circumstances, researchers found that non-political leisure discussion forums are filled with political discussion (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). Social networking sites such as Weibo or Twitter are often not seen as political discussion space. But potentially Weibo might play such a role. Some studies on Twitter discussed concerns that a subgroup of users might post homogeneous content and then have little exposure to different ideas (Himelboim, McCreery and Smith, 2013). The Weibo situation is quite different. With accidental exposure, certain messages reach different groups of people who have conflicting ideas. Weibo users can forward messages and attach their own ideas with it. The spread of messages often result in heated discussions and debates, many of which are far from friendly. But these clashes of ideology actually support that Weibo space is more public and open than similar sites. Again, users’ experiences are largely a reflection of their immediate network. If there were not accidental exposure or actions of forwarding, there also would not be many heated debates or ideological discussions on Weibo. Thus, the many arguments, debates and ideological differences on Weibo are also an indicator of accidental exposure.

Illustration 8 shows several participants discussing one of the messages posted by the U.S. Embassy. Although some government offices and even embassies regulate their comment sections, the U.S. Embassy seems to be intentionally providing freedom of speech to Chinese users. Obscene comments and
even threats are not deleted. One explanation could be that the U.S. Embassy is trying to use its account as a direct contrast to the Chinese government’s tight control on information and speech. In the example shown in illustration 8, these Chinese users’ comments have little to do with the original message, which was about the U.S. Embassy donating to flood victims in China. The topic of the comments is an argument about real patriotism. One user commented that it is extremely difficult to be a patriot today, because of the prevalent problem of corruption and “half of party leaders have sent their wives and children to U.S.” These comments were met by stern scorn from another user, who claimed, “Some of us Chinese are shameless and would bring misfortune to our country.” Arguments and discussions such as this indicate users frequently check the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo. Different ideas are constantly thrown against each other.

**Illustration 8: heated discussion also shows ideological differences.**
Chapter 6

WEIBO MESSAGE DISSEMINATION: DIFFERENT PATTERNS

The previous chapter discussed indicators of accidental exposure of information on Weibo and described a few specific examples. This chapter returns to the bigger picture, showing general patterns of how Weibo messages spread. First will be a discussion on the general distribution data and background. Then the researcher discusses the three dissemination patterns that emerged through observation.

Distribution

First, there is some basic data concerning the 165 Weibo clusters. In terms of gender, male users (73%) are more active participants compared to female users (27%). Ordinary users are the backbone of the embassy’s Weibo readers and forwarders, and only 7% of these users are verified users. On Weibo, verified users are usually more high profile users. This includes public figures, intellectuals, celebrities, government officials and so on. Generally, these users have more followers and a larger fan base than ordinary users. Although they are fewer in number, they often become key forwarders in the process of message dissemination. They are more influential than ordinary users forwarding a message, because it will be seen by many more users. Another meaningful finding is that about 56% of users
not only forwarded messages, but also attach their own comments with it. The remaining 44% of users only forwarded the message without making their own remarks (see illustration 9).

Illustration 9: gender, user type and forward type

The fact that more than half of users choose to forward messages along with their own ideas shows they are eager to participate in discussions. They are not afraid of giving their opinions. According to Niemi and other researchers (1991), these users demonstrate “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics” (p.1407). Also, by attaching one’s own opinion to the original message, one can open the gate for more heated discussions. Other users might not respond to the original message, but instead to the opinions attached to the message. As shown in the example of the forwarder who commented on Hilary Clinton standing beside Nelson Mandela, the original photo and message are uninteresting, but the forwarder’s comment caused a small political discussion among 12 users who saw the message and commented. The 44% of forwards who did not comment might not be as active as those who did, but they nonetheless made the decision to forward the message, and that action speaks for itself.
On average, each message disseminates through at least three layers, according to the software-generated data. The three layers are presented in illustration 10. A message was posted by a source, and it was then forwarded by an immediate follower. The forwarded message was discovered by a non-follower of the original source, who forwarded the message yet again. In the three layers of dissemination, the original message is forwarded three times.

**Illustration 10: messages through three layers**

Three patterns

Based on the pattern of how messages spread, they were placed into one of three categories. The first category is immediate follower’s pattern. In this category, the embassy’s message rarely reaches beyond its immediate followers. The number of non-followers exposure in these cases is less than 10. The second category is key forwarder’s pattern. In these cases, the key forwarders play a central role in the dissemination of the Weibo message. These key forwarders become a second or third central, as shown in the diagrams, and sometimes their forwarded messages reach even more users than the original message did when reaching immediate followers. The third category is normal forwarder’s pattern. Although key forwarders are missing from this pattern, normal forwarders are still able to spread the message.
Illustration 11: Immediate followers’ pattern, example 1

Immediate followers’ pattern (a total of 54, or 33%)

The immediate follower’s pattern includes the Weibo messages that rarely reach beyond the source’s immediate followers. Most forwarders shown on the diagrams are closely surrounding the center. There are a few dots that stray further away. The number of non-followers exposure in these cases is defined as less than 10 users.

Only 54 messages, or 33%, fall in this category. A message posted on August 2012 introduced new technology. It said that studying plants at the molecular level
may lead to better biofuels. It attracted little attention from Chinese Weibo users, with only 44 people forwarding the message. Even with only 44 forwards, the diagram still shows the existence of non-followers who read this message through forwarders. On the upper left, one forwarder can be seen leading three more users to this post. In the lower right, there are three more forwards that propel the message beyond immediate followers. A closer look at the comments and forwards shows fascinating results. Even on this message about technology and science, many users’ comments are about politics. One user’s comment read: “People in Africa are starving while the American government is using corn as biofuels. Where are true human rights? “ Another user disagreed: “Do you think China sending aide to Africa means that we have human rights? It is exactly the opposite….”

This fascinating discovery indicates Chinese Weibo users treat the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo as highly political space, no matter what content is posted. It also indicates that some Chinese users view the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo as a forum for debate. People from different ideological backgrounds always find opponents to fight, and these arguments happen regardless of the message content, as shown in the previous example.

In another example of the immediate followers’ pattern, the following post is about the U.S. presidential election and use of social media. The message posted on August 17, 2012, read:

In 2008, Presidential Candidate Barack Obama announced on Twitter that he has chosen Joe Biden as his partner. In 2012, social media has become an important tool for election to government posts. President Obama and his challenger frequently use Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.
This message was forwarded 117 times, and only 10 non-followers were reached through accidental exposure. This result came as a surprise. Even though this message is also informative and not topical, it touched on a sensitive area as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are all blocked sites in China.

A closer look at the comments and forwards section reveals that this post attracted many Chinese political enthusiasts. Only a few users chose to forward the message without comment; most forwarders attached their own thoughts. So why did this message not attract much attention from non-followers? The software only records those who actually forward the message. There may be a large number of
Weibo users who read this message through their immediate followers, but decided not to forward the message themselves. Even though these users also experience accidental exposure, they are “invisible” to the software and thus cannot be shown on the diagram. Also, as seen when looking through users’ comments, this message did not create any controversy. Chinese users generally agree among themselves and express similar attitudes toward China’s censorship of the three social media sites. This may have also led to the diagram being less dynamic. Finally, the fact that this message is informative and not topical means less interest among outside users. Forwarding places this message onto the timelines of many users, but their own interests still matter primarily, and they have the choice to ignore the message.

Key forwarders pattern (36 posts, or 22%)

Key forwarders patterns include those in which one or two forwarders played an essential, if not a central role in dissemination of messages. Key forwarders have a large followers base. When these users forward a message, it is seen and read by the thousands of immediate followers of these users. It is worth noting that accounts with large followers bases, including public figures, celebrities, companies, media or government offices, often forward each others’ posts and become each others’ key forwarders. This kind of healthy interaction benefits both sides, leading to an increase of followers for both celebrities. However, the U.S. Embassy has never forwarded messages from sources other than its own offices (Chengdu Consulate, Shanghai Consulate, etc.). The reason for this might be that the U.S. Embassy’s
Weibo represents the U.S. government, and to forward messages is often seen as an endorsement of the content of those messages. Thus, the U.S. Embassy intentionally avoided this. For example, the Cairo Embassy recently had quite the controversy over linking to a Jon Stewart episode. Still, the U.S. Embassy is able to utilize the help from other key forwarders to spread messages. The analysis shows there were 36 messages, or 22% of all messages studied, receiving the boost from key forwarders.

**Illustration 13: key forwarders pattern**

Illustration 13: The Chinese characters shown in the diagram means “The U.S Embassy in China.”
On August 10, 2012, the U.S. Embassy posted a Weibo message that generated interest from Chinese public: “U.S. Olympic athletes’ rewards and taxes: the gold medalists were given $25,000, silver medalists were given $15,000 and bronze medalists were given $10,000. Those athletes also need to pay their income taxes.”

The information in this message provides a stark contrast to Chinese sports. In China, the national sports system makes sure that all athletes are paid by the nation. Winning Olympics medals would bring enormous monetary gain to athletes, but at the expense of tax payers’ money.

This message was forwarded more than 700 times. As shown in illustration 13, on the left half is a large number of dots surrounding the red center, which represents the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo. This shows the message was forwarded many times by immediate followers after it was first posted. The dots farther from the center again represent non-followers who read the message through other forwarders. In essence, what truly makes this diagram different from the previous ones is that two centers exist. The message was first posted at 2 p.m., and around that time there was a peak of the number of forwarders. At around 9 p.m., the message was picked up by Caijing’s Weibo, and there was another high peak of the users forwarding the message. Caijing is one of China’s most respected journalism publications. Its Weibo account has more than five million followers, which is ten times more than the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo. Even a small percentage of its
followers reading and forwarding the message brings an enormous boost to the spread of information.

The data shows that a total of 172 followers of Caijing forwarded this message. It might seem to just be an interesting interaction on Weibo, but this interaction actually carries more significant meaning. Caijing, as well as other more liberal media outlets in China, has always enjoyed a little more freedom than many of its counterparts. However, there have always been restrictions from the propaganda department prohibiting Chinese media from using foreign media content. The U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account has given these outlets an opportunity to directly interact with foreign sources. Though Caijing only forwarded the U.S. Embassy’s content, it nonetheless created a caveat that Chinese officials and censors would never allow outside the Internet. Recently, Chinese officials have started to close up this loophole on Weibo. The latest order issued by the General Administration of Press and Publication specifically asked Chinese media’s Weibo accounts not to forward information from foreign sources. It is yet to be seen whether Chinese media outlets will strictly follow such orders, but it is likely there will not be similar “collaboration” between the U.S. Embassy and Chinese media to promote some messages in the near future.

To further validate this research, another Weibo user, Respondent Y, was interviewed. Y follows Caijing and also saw and forwarded the embassy’s message. He was contacted by the researcher through Weibo. Y is not a direct follower of the U.S. Embassy, but he follows Caijing Magazine’s Weibo. Unfortunately, Y said he
only had a vague memory about commenting and forwarding the message. “I can remember the post you talk about. It was about Olympic athletes, right? I did write some comments about China should learn from U.S. on this.”

Illustration 10 shows the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo sometimes does not need outside help from key forwarders. On August 7, 2012, the embassy posted information about an offline movie event, inviting Chinese followers to watch “The Rookie.” The first message was posted at around 10:40 p.m., and within one hour, the embassy had forwarded the original message, adding there would be no need to RSVP as the embassy had found a bigger theater. A few minutes later, the embassy’s Weibo answered a question raised by a Chinese user. The post told the person that there would be Chinese subtitles—and again forwarded the original message. A few minutes later, the embassy forwarded the original message for one final time. By interacting with its followers and forwarding the same message repeatedly, the embassy was able to reach many non-followers. The three large clusters on the diagram all represent the U.S. Embassy’s account, as it repeatedly forwarded the same message. Surrounding each cluster, there are non-followers who were able to read the message through several forwarders. Each time the message was forwarded, more non-followers are shown connected to big clusters. In this case, it was beneficial to repeat the same information over and over. There is no way to find out if the embassy intentionally facilitated such dissemination of the message, but it does shows a strategy that other social media accounts could consider in order to reach more users through accidental exposure.
Normal forwarders pattern (75 posts, or 45% of total)

The normal forwarders pattern is the most common pattern for the spread of messages. Some may think without help from key forwarders, it is not possible to reach many non-follower users. But the data shows otherwise. In fact, in some cases the dissemination of messages could be even more complicated than patterns with key forwarders, the latter of which at least have a clear center.
On August 17, 2012, the U.S. Embassy posted a message about donating to China’s flood victims: “On behalf of American people, Ambassador Garry Locke donated $10,000 for China’s disaster relief. The Ambassador expressed deepest condolences to the Chinese people who lost lives, property or fields.”

This message was generally welcomed and received many warm comments and forwards. As shown in the diagram, a total of 335 users who responded are immediate followers of the embassy’s Weibo. The data also shows that 108 users who commented or forwarded are not immediate followers of the embassy. The
normal user’s pattern also leads to belief of fragmentation of work. In the case of C, he read a message from U.S. Embassy, not because of any key forwarders but a friend. The message was about the U.S. Embassy’s donation to China for flood relief. The researcher asked Respondent C if he felt surprised or if the encounter of that message was lucky, but C said he expects to read this type of information when friends forward them. He said when he browses Weibo, he usually reads forwards from friends on his timeline, and it would not be a big surprise.

Overall, most of the analyzed posts (45%) fell into the normal forwarder pattern. It further supports that accidental discovery is prevalent on Weibo, and accidental discovery has become an integral part of dissemination of information. The characteristic of this pattern is that small forwarders are the backbones contributing to the dissemination. Each forwarder might reach a much smaller number of users compared with key forwarders, but when these small forwarders are combined, they add up to a larger number.

The key forwarder pattern was seen in 22% of the posts studied. This makes sense because verified users only take up 9% of all users following the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo account.
In essence, social media is about relationships, connections and dynamics between users. Like other social media sites, China’s Weibo users’ experience is fundamentally about socializing and interacting with others. Many previous studies focused on the immediate connections—following others and being followed, writing posts, and reading posts within one’s own network. However, these connections do not tell the whole story.

This study examined an often overlooked usage of microblogs. Users do not only make their own posts; they also share and forward messages and information. This study found that messages are not confined to a single connected group. Instead, they flow like water, reaching beyond immediate connections and permeating different groups of users. Many users experience accidental discovery to information, in which they bump into messages they were not intended to read, while engaging in their various activities of choice on Weibo.

The accidental discovery of information not only exists, but it has also become an integral part of the dissemination of messages. Many readers of messages are not followers of the message author, and thus were not the expected recipients of the message. Diagrams show these non-followers nonetheless saw the messages through “forwarders.” Overall, both followers and non-followers actively engage in
conversations revolving around the original post, often adding their own opinions or comments on top of the original messages. This demonstrates active political participation.

One cannot understand China’s political landscape today without knowledge of China’s Weibo or microblogs. Despite the country’s continuous effort to restrict the Internet through the Great Firewall and censorship, the Internet continues to flourish. Now, microblogs have given Chinese people a new, crucial avenue to use to communicate with each other, to share and spread information, and to receive news. The accidental discovery of information on Weibo greatly compromises the impact of the Great Firewall, because information from the “outside” can be easily forwarded. When too many researchers focus on studying the “wall,” they miss what is happening inside the wall. Chinese users do not have access to Twitter and Facebook, but with the help of “forwarders,” interesting information and messages from those sites can still be disseminated on Weibo. For example, Chinese users can enjoy John Stewart satire with Chinese subtitles on Weibo. *The New Yorker* noted that “the popularity of Stewart and ‘The Daily Show’ among the urbane crowd offers a good measure of how China is changing” (Evan Osnos, *New Yorker*, 2013). The rise of microblogs in China gave the Chinese an optimistic chance for freedom of information, and to the government, it poses a formidable challenge to information control. Although the same can be said about Twitter or Facebook, which are also becoming more and more prominent in communicating current events or political information, this study shows that China’s Weibo is playing the biggest role in China.
The study explored the concept of accidental exposure to information from a different angle. Instead of focusing on individual-level interviews, the focus is on the bigger picture of how messages are forwarded and spread on Weibo. The study argued that accidental exposure happens when Weibo messages are forwarded and reach beyond immediate followers.

Using Weibo message clusters as units of analysis, three general patterns of how information spread were identified: clusters with mostly immediate followers, clusters with immediate followers and non-followers, and clusters with key forwarders.

The accidental discovery of information not only exists, but also is an integral part of dissemination of microblog posts. Among the data retrieved, the high percentage of people who make a comment when forwarding carries significance. However, even those who do not comment and simply forward messages are making a less obvious statement.

The second indicator-follower/nonfollower has been discussed in length. But the other two indicators can also be found in the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo case. For instance, students who follow the U.S. Embassy purely to receive education information might accidentally discover messages that promote U.S. values or discuss politics.

Such a phenomenon may have profound implications. As in indicator 3, although the researcher was unable to quantify the heated discussion, cursing and yelling in the comment section, it is fair to say Chinese users of different ideological
backgrounds are constantly visiting the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo page. Furthermore, these users from different groups all have the chance to be exposed to unexpected content and engage in broad discussions.

Because of China’s current situation, any social and political change in the country would take a long time. The Internet alone will not be the panacea that brings democracy to the country. But as some argue (MacKinnon, 2008), the Internet and other new technologies will serve as tools leading to greater changes.

Despite the cautions and concerns of scholars in the West, China’s Weibo provides a positive image of the effects of new media. Instead of creating “narrow-minded” users divided into separate groups, Chinese users are being exposed to and actively discovering a variety of information.

**Implications of the study**

Theoretically, the study implicates the subtle nature of accidental discovery; it is not the functionalist definition of browsing (Tewksbury, 2008), nor is it accidental exposure, which implies very passive use. The study captures the nuance of the concept, juxtaposing it between passive learning and active searching of information. Instead of “incidental exposure,” which implies users are exposed to unexpected information while engaging in active information seeking tasks, accidental exposure stresses the unintentional, effortless and happening-by-chance aspect of the concept. Although the exposure itself is accidental, it is in a chain of discovery. It is both active and passive. Moreover, despite the differences of Weibo and other microblogs or
social media sites, it would be interesting to apply this study to other social media sites.

Many scholars believe social media usage can be highly selective, dividing people into small online groups. This study shows that on China’s Weibo, through the process of accidental discovery of information, people are actually able to participate in much larger discussions. Political and current news content can be effectively spread far and beyond different groups. Users are not only accidentally exposed, but they also discover. Some users/forwarders not only forward the message so more people are able to read it, but also attach their own opinions on the message. In some cases, opinion leaders can be formed.

**Future research**

The researcher has noted in this study that users’ responses to Weibo messages can also indicate accidental discovery of information. This study has a main focus which is how information is disseminated and this study is slightly weak in terms of discussing results of accidental discovery of information. Actually, it would be extremely interesting to study users’ comments and responses on Weibo using methods such as content analysis. Users’ comments could be categorized and more interesting comments could be highlighted and specifically analyzed. The researcher would strongly recommend future study in this direction because it would at least show some results of accidental discovery of information and how it might help
Chinese Weibo users to counter the effect of the Great Firewall and information control in general.

With more than half of users commenting and forwarding, the Weibo sphere is extremely lively. At the individual level, the three interviewees all claimed they have some expectation for messages. Accidental exposure is not something absolute, but it can be measured. The software restricts analyzing posts that have been forwarded more than 1,000 times, which is a limitation of this study. All posts analyzed in this study were affected by this. The assumption is that posts with more than 1,000 forwards should have similar spread patterns. But, these posts may facilitate even more layers of exposure. Also, future research could choose a different source’s messages to study other than the U.S. Embassy Weibo.

This research is an exploratory study which identifies patterns of accidental discovery of information on Weibo. Future studies can look beyond China’s case, such as looking instead at the United States or other countries. In China’s case, information control and censorship lead to fewer media channels, and thus Weibo usage has shown a very positive picture. In the United States, there is an abundance of mainstream media channels outlets and therefore social media could play a totally different role.

Also, since this study focuses on information posted by the U.S. Embassy’s Weibo, future studies could emphasize non-political topics such as those on everyday life. People may accidentally discover information in different circumstances. They
may use social media to engage in seemingly non-political conversations, but everyday life topics could also lead to discovery of political content.
REFERENCES


## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Questions to address each concept</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **RQ1:** Among selected Sina Weibo users, how do they use microblog? | **Browsing**

  - How much time do you usually spend on microblog every day? What do you usually do with microblog? Can you describe what you have read on microblog today/yesterday? Do you use microblog to learn news? How do you decide what people to follow on Weibo? Do you have expectation for what to read on Weibo? |

| **RQ2:** What is the process of incidental discovery of information for users of Sina Weibo? | **Incidental discovery of information**

  - How did you learn about the post/message? Do you remember who created or forwarded that post to you? How do you decide what information you might comment on or forward to others? Describe what were you doing when you saw that post? Were you surprised to learn about it? What was your initial response? |

| **RQ3:** What are some outcomes, including changes of political efficacy of such exposure? | **Internal political efficacy**

  - Do you think you are more interested in political and current news since you started using Weibo? How did you response to the news later? Do you think you understand the whole issue revolving the news? Do you make more comments or posts about the news? Do you talk to friends or family members about the news? |

  - **External political efficacy**

    - Do you think the government is more responsive after Weibo became popular? What do you think the outcome of the news event would be? Are you confident that the government will listen to what people are saying? Are you confident that what most people post online would pose as pressure for the government to act? |
Hello, my name is Yue Xi, and I’m a researcher with University of Missouri. The University of Missouri is in central U.S. I’m a second-year graduate student who is from China. I’d like to invite you to participate in a study about how people incidentally discover information on Weibo. I’m particularly interested to explore people bumping into information about social or political news. I saw you comment on a post about a political news. I saw you comment on a post about a political news. The way you saw that news and respond to it might fit the description of incidental discovery in my study. I would be honored if you would be willing to participate!

I’ll interview you twice in the study for less than an hour each time. I won’t ask you to do anything else other than being interviewed. Please let me know if you are interested and we can set up an interview using Skype or telephone, at which time I’ll explain to you more details about the study. Thanks!
My name is Yue Xi and I am a graduate researcher from University of Missouri and would like to talk to you about incidental discovery of information on Weibo. I’m working to see if people may be incidentally exposed to information, and especially social and political news. My research also explores whether such exposure may help users to have better knowledge of social and political news. I ask you to help with my research because From the Weibo I saw you comment on a post about political news. The way you saw that news and respond to it might fit the description of incidental discovery in my study. The whole study will last between 1-2 months. But the only two occasions I will need your time for participation are two interviews which will last 45-60 minutes and 20-30 minutes separately. Beside interviews, I will observe and analyze your Weibo activities, and there is no need for you to do anything unusual for this study. In general, you do not have to help, it is your choice.

If you say yes, I will ask you to answer some questions. The interview process will take from 45-60 minutes. There will also be a follow-up interview within 1-2 months. The follow-up interview will be shorter, which will last about 20-30 minutes. You do not have to answer all the questions and you may raise any questions during the process.
There is minimal risk that someone outside the study will see your information. But I will do my best to keep your information safe by using a special code in place for your name. I will take notes during the interview and all interview notes will be kept on my hard drive encrypted, using password protection.

I will use interviews to explore the process of incidental discovery of information and how it might affect people’s knowledge of social and political information. During the follow-up interview, I will share my notes with you. The note will be based on my observation and initial interview and I’d welcome any feedbacks and comments.

Do you have any questions? Again my name is Yue Xi and I’m the principal investigator of this study. You may reach me by telephone at (01)573-639-2530 or email at yxpf6@mail.missouri.edu. You may contact my thesis advisor, Yong Volz, at (01)573-88202159 about your questions or problems with this work. You may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board, which approved this study about any problems or concerns at (01) 573-882-9585.

May I begin?
APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

February 12, 2013

Principal Investigator: Xi Yue
Department: Journalism

Your Exempt Amendment to project entitled "Will Weibo Breathing Land to Higher Political Efficiency? : The Process and Outcomes of Incidental Discovery of Information on China's Microblog" was reviewed and approved by the MU Campus Institutional Review Board according to terms and conditions described below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IRB Project Number</th>
<th>1202677</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Application Approval Date</td>
<td>May 17, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Date of this Review</td>
<td>February 12, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Expiration Date</td>
<td>May 17, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Review</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Status</td>
<td>Active - Open to Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Level</td>
<td>Minimal Risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All unanticipated problems, serious adverse events, and deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
3. All modifications must be IRB approved by submitting the Exempt Amendment prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.
5. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date.
6. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
7. Utilize the IRB-stamped document informing subjects of the research and other approved research documents located within the document storage section of the IRB.

If you have any questions, please contact the Campus IRB at 573-882-9585 or umoneresearchbr@missouri.edu.

Thank you.

Charles Bourdeau, PhD
Campus IRB Chair