

INTERACTION BETWEEN TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND
SOCIAL MEDIA COVERAGE ON SOCIAL ISSUES IN CHINA
A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

To what extent does online public opinion and traditional media coverage interact with each other on social issues in China? This research employs a content analysis of 524 Weibo posts and 327 news articles regarding a social incident in China. The researcher uses Chi-square tests to compare the use of alternative media and the frame selection of social media and traditional media in different phases. Social media and traditional media react differently when covering social issues. Social media have a better interaction with traditional media while traditional media make less reference to social media.

Additionally, social media and traditional media play different social roles when covering public affairs by selecting different frames. Even if the traditional media are partially free and under the government control, social media can hardly substitute the role of social responsibility of traditional media in defining the problem and issue treatment.

Noticeably, the choices of frame in both social media and traditional media are not influenced by their interactions, but instead by different time frames. Discussion focuses on the changes in the roles played by media, government, and Chinese citizens.

Research Component

As the home to the world's largest Internet user population, the Chinese media landscape has been greatly changed due the stimulus of the Internet. Social media has played an influential role in this transition. People are not only proactively receiving information from the traditional media as they used to be, but are actively seeking information from the Internet and exchanging information through online forums, especially through social media. Public discussion on the Internet has successfully challenged governmental behaviors and served the watchdog role for the public.

But how powerful are the social media in China? And what are the interactions between social media and traditional media? How could these interactions influence each other? In order to explore the relationship and interaction between social media and traditional media, this study has employed framing theory to analyze social media discussion and traditional media coverage on social issues in China. Additionally, this study has also provided an opportunity to explore the changes of the role that the government is playing under the media transition.

Literature Review

Overview of Modern Chinese Media

The Modern Chinese media originated from propaganda department as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. From the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and until the 1980s, almost all media in China were state-run. Despite the rare emergence of independent media at the onset of economic reforms, the Chinese government still played a significant role in controlling and influencing the media outlets by issuing license of their operations (Zhao, 2008). The largest and most influential media organizations in China, including CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, the People's Daily, are still the agencies of the Party-State today, which continue to hold significant market share. Media taboos include topics such as the Taiwan ownership issues, the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China, investigation of government officials' corruptions, the governance of Tibet, and Falun Gong. The government controls the media by pre-editorial censorship and post-publication punishment.

The level of media control has also varied under different party leaders over different periods of time (Zhang & Fleming, 2005). Zhang and Fleming claim the media controls in China were most relaxed under Deng Xiaoping in 1980s, the leader of the Open Reform in China. But after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, media control tightened. Under the leadership of Jiang Zemin in the late 1990s, the control over media relaxed again, but then tightened again under the recent leadership of Hu Jintao because of the growing influence of the Internet and its potential threats towards the party's reign (Zhang & Fleming, 2005, p.336). It is hard to predict the potential changes and the future of media policies under the new leadership of Xi Jinping. Before Xi took over the

position of president, a news article from CNN pointed that one of the first challenges to come to him was the media asking for more respect on press freedom and free speech. It was brought up with staffers of Southern Weekly, a liberal-leaning newspaper in the southern city of Guangzhou that staged a protest after a local propaganda official rewrote an editorial calling for stronger rule of law (CNN, March. 16, 2013). Before Xi officially took over the power, a mysterious Sina weibo account meaning “Study Xi Fan Group” regularly updated the daily life of Xi even ahead of state-run media. It stimulated a fierce online discussion whether Xi would be the first social media president in China (Offbeat China, 2013, Feb. 6). There is now a Facebook page for President Xi to post his pictures of visiting other countries on a regular basis. It is unknown who is monitoring this account. But since Facebook has been blocked in China, this is indeed a sign to show the openness under the new leadership--at least to the rest of the world. There are both positive signs as well as negative signs in terms of the media openness and democracy under the new leadership Xi, and it is too early to make assumption at this point.

Chinese Media Under Transition

As noted earlier, Chinese media are under transition as a result of the 20-year economic reform and are turning into a more commercialized and diversified media market. Many scholars in the field of mass communication argued that the current Chinese media could not fit into any of the Four Press Theories (Siebert et al, 1956) that confines all media to an ideological orientation through four models: authoritarian, communist, libertarian, and social responsibility, but proposes a new theoretical perspective of market authoritarianism (Winfield & Peng, 2004). The authors also claim there appeared to be “a convolution of the Party line and the bottom line” in the Chinese

media system (Winfield & Peng, 2004, p. 4). China is now under media transition pitting together a vigorous capitalist economic system and an authoritarian political system. Hu (2007) later on pointed out the imbalance between the rapid commercialization process and slow political democracy transition that influences Chinese media. Chinese media outlets are embracing more advertisements, private investments, and expanded communication technologies. In addition, development of local media, such as Hunan Television and Oriental Satellite Television, has challenged the long-term monopoly of China Central Television on viewers' ratings and commercial power with sizeable coverage and influence (Zhang, 2011, p. 650). They provide more possibilities for varied expression of the public. However, growing conflicts and tensions with the state political control have also appeared, which lead to various controls over information flow in China (Zhang, 2011, p.665).

Information Control in China

Despite the trends of open economy and media commercialization in China, information dissemination and journalistic behaviors are still not free. Chinese media are under multi-level controls from the government, self-censorship and the Internet censorship.

Government Control

The Communist Party of China used to have economic, ideological, cultural and labor controls over journalists by providing them with housing, social welfare and health insurance (Hong & Cuthbert, 1991). Between 1979 and 1989, the commercialization of the media was led by the government's promotion of a deepening market reform and the financial pressures that faced the media at the time. Increasing financial independence

enabled the media to have more autonomy in operational and editorial decisions. However, such government relaxation was conditioned by the political bottom line of the Party (Winfield & Peng, 2004). A study examining the characteristics of the Chinese print media under censorship on their coverage of the disease of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was conducted in order to explain how Chinese government controlled the information flow (Fleming & Zhang, 2005). The study found three factors matched the three ways in which the Soviet Communist Party and its government control the media content there. As summarized by Sibert, Peterson, and Schramm (1963) the points are: (1) appointing the newspaper's editors-in chief; (2) issuing directives or circulars at various levels; and (3) disseminating direct instructions of top government officials. These methods are still active in today's Chinese media system (Fleming & Zhang, 2005, p.334).

Self-censorship Among Journalism Professionals in China

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) claimed there were four factors influencing the news content—individual journalists, media routines, organizational influences and content from outside of media organization, such as government controls and marketplace. From an individual perspective, one major influencer is the communicator's professional roles and ethical frameworks that are primarily shaped on the job (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.199). This concept derived from the study of socialization conducted by Breed (1995), who described the socialization process as journalists learning what their organizations want by observation and experience. In China, some journalists consider themselves civil servants that are directly or indirectly controlled by

the government. The way in which journalists define their jobs would certainly affect the content they produce (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.202).

A Chinese research paper also uses an example of how coverage on poisoned milk powder was censored by journalists themselves because of multiple external controls from the government, news organization and business entities (Zhang, 2011). This study reveals the perception of self-censorship among Chinese journalists varies, depending upon their experiences. Experienced investigative reporters were more likely to sense the pressure of self-censorship compared with fresh reporters since this “invisible control” can only be perceived and engraved with more experiences in the media market. However, the process of what the researchers call “naturalization” occurs very quickly (Zhang, 2011, p. 53).

Different from previous studies, Tong (2009) deems Chinese media system as authoritarian. Chinese media have to find ways to report in order to meet the needs of the market while not annoying to the Party-State (Tong, 2009). Through discourse analysis of Wenzhou Riot of conflicts between government officials and powerless Chinese citizens, the study shows how the newspapers have concealed social conflicts and constructed a positive political stance by revising the original report, which focused more on the cause of the riot, into more descriptions of the action itself. During the editorial process in the newsroom, social conflicts have been concealed and hence lessened the rationality that the original report gave to the rioters. For instance, the word ‘official’ has been changed into ‘government staff’ to avoid connoting hierarchy of the conflict. The researcher claims the practice of self-censorship helps newsrooms bypass political taboos and increases the possibilities of the publication of reports on highly politically sensitive

topics (Tong, 2009). The discourse changes to better comply with the political guidelines. However, Tong (2009) claims self-censorship in both individual level and organizational level plays not as a threat to media freedom, but as a force that increases media freedom. In this research article, Tong does not refer to any previous scholarly research findings that support this conclusion. It is also worth noticing that this research has been conducted by discourse analysis. McQuail (1994) has indicated that the term ‘discourse’ had a broader connotation and covers all ‘text’, in whatever form or language they are encoded and implied that a text was constructed by people who read and decipher it as much as those who formulate it (p.349).

Internet Censorship

The government control of information and journalists’ self-censorship also has influenced the Internet community in China. Economic liberalization and the information revolution have driven China’s fast telecommunication in the past decade. Now China has the world’s largest online population of more than half a billion, and there still exists a huge potential market. The Internet remained unregulated until 1996, when the first set of regulations on the Internet was formally announced (Zhao, 2008). In the ensuing years, several laws passed to tighten the government’s control over the Internet, including December 2000 legislation defining “cybercrime (Zhang, 2006, p. 4). Nevertheless, the vast possibilities of information exchange online and the ever-developing digital technology have made regulation of Internet content a formidable task for the Chinese government (Zhao, 2008). Zhao explains how government and state media were compelled to make instant responses towards online contents that threatened the reign of the Party-State. Chinese policy makers were forced to be reactive rather than proactive

because it was difficult for the government to manipulate censorship the Internet because of its unlimited space and instantly updated contents.

Social Media in China

China's social media world has thrived in the past several years, as China became the world's largest online population. Although Western social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China, Chinese companies has developed their home-grown tools such as Weibo, Renren, Kaixin, which have similar functions with those Western social media platforms and are widely used by Chinese citizens. Social media has become an effective way for Chinese people to get information, disclose corruptions, share knowledge, and react to traditional media coverage.

Shi (2013) concludes the microblog (Weibo) is helpful to the formation of civil society in China, and theoretically will become a new territory of public news. He analyzes three latest cases of citizens using Weibo to report news to show its pros and cons. Shi concludes that Weibo helps to build independent personalities in the society and makes it easier to bring grassroots into public forum for discussion with characteristics of short, open and mutual. However, Shi also explains the limitation of Weibo—which is owned by private corporations such as SINA and Tencent—the 140-character limit that prevents in-depth reporting. The service still operates under the control of government and influence of commercialized entertainment (Shi).

Context of Study

The “Yuan Lihai” Case - On the morning of January 4, 2013, six children and one adult died in a fire that engulfed an unregistered orphan shelter in Lankao County in central China's Henan Province. Eight people, including a 20-year-old and seven children,

were inside the two-room private house when the fire broke out around 8:30 a.m. All of them were orphans or abandoned children.

The homeowner is a local woman, Yuan Lihai, 48, who has been bringing home abandoned infants and children in the past decade, and had adopted more than 100 children as of 2011. Yuan was called as “loving mother” by people around and also the media who have reported on her benevolence. Yuan once told the media that she wanted to build an orphanage but failed because of financial difficulty. She earned a living by being a street vendor in Lankao County, but could barely support the lives of so many children. Thus she relied on the government subsidy for their lives.

When the fire was taking place, Yuan was on her way sending some children to school so that she escaped from the disaster. Yuan was later sent to the hospital after such a huge shock. Later investigation showed that the cause of this fire is due to the children playing with fire. This incident has brought up national attention with controversy (Southern Weekly, 2013, January 10).

The local government announced that Yuan was not qualified to adopt children and Yuan’s “adoptions” were unlawful. The civil affair authorities of Lankao County had a welfare center in Kaifeng City take five children from Yuan in Sept. 2011. The local government does not have an official orphanage to take care of these abandoned children. The public has started questioning if Yuan adopted the children in order to cheat the government out of subsistence allowance and has profited from trading homeless children. Faced with all this criticism and doubts after the fire disaster, Yuan’s response was “If I ever sold those kids to earn profit, shoot me to death.” Yuan has previously admitted that she had “given” healthy children to other families because she could not afford raising

that many of children, especially the children who had disabilities or were ill. Upon hearing these claims, both Yuan's relatives and friends refuted the allegations by saying they are "impossible", according to China.org.cn. Four days after the incident, Yuan said she would never adopt homeless children with problems again. Yuan said she was going to return her subsistence allowance to the government, "I don't have a nickel in the bank. The children are all gone, so that allowance is now useless" (China.com.org, 2013, January 8).

One month after the fire incident on Feb. 3, a party-run magazine *People* published an investigative piece about Yuan Lihai, claiming that Yuan and her family purchased about 20 real estate properties in Lankao and other places. The report was titled in "Lihai woman" (Lihai, in Chinese, means fearfulness) and claimed that Yuan has classified the adopted children based on their appearances, and has discriminated disabled children against healthier ones, leaving them with inadequate care and even neglecting them. The whole article was filled with details and descriptions, but lack solid evidence (Weibo). This report has shocked and irritated some in the public who believed Yuan has actually saved the children's lives. Yuan's son-in-law, Guo Haiyang, denied all allegations two days after the report was published. "I am willing to disclose our assets, I am willing to disclose the color of my underpants if that's what it takes." Because of these controversies, Guo has a "V" (verified) account on Sina Weibo and has published a 2,000-word statement firing back at the magazine allegations and said all the Yuan's family wanted was to return to peaceful life. On Feb. 7, Yuan's son-in-law disclosed the family's assets on Weibo to the public (South China Morning Post, 2013).

This issue has been fiercely discussed and covered by both traditional and social media, and has been considered a typical case to reveal how social media and traditional media interacting on China's social problems.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

This research is founded on framing theory. Framing theory is an effective way to illustrate how journalistic frames have been formed and selected under information control in China as well as how the public reacts to these frames, especially through online media, which is considered as a public forum with comparative freedom in China.

The study of framing theory started in early 1900s, but not until the 1980s was it applied to social constructivism. On the one hand, mass media have a strong impact by framing images of reality (McQuail, 1994); on the other hand, media effects were limited by the interaction between the meaning developed by journalists and the meaning constructed by the public (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Media frames “organized the world both for journalists who report it and for people who rely on their reports.” (Gitlin, 1980) There were two levels of framing: (1) media frames of what the media do; and (2) individual frames of what audiences do (Gitlin, 1980). Framing involved selection and salience. To frame was to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

In media frames, the controversy and essence of the issue were suggested (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). The journalist decides what needed to be emphasized and what needs to be excluded. Gamson & Modigliani (1987) also claimed media framing could influence how audiences end up interpreting an issue. Iyengar (1991) has claimed two types of frames: (1) an episodic news frame that depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances; and (2) a thematic news frame that is directed at general outcomes or conditions. On the issue of whom to blame for social problems, Iyengar (1991) also

found that subjects shown episodic reports were less likely to consider society responsible for the event while subjects shown thematic reports were less likely to consider individuals responsible.

From the perspective of individual frames, audiences' and readers' interpretation of information is influenced by their pre-existing knowledge backgrounds. The online public discussion reflects individual frames. Entman (2009) claims individual frames mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' processing information. An experiment was conducted to investigate the effects of news frames and schemas on audiences' issue interpretation and attitudes, which indicated that news frames could activate frame-related issue interpretations as well as affect the public's attitude. Individuals were more likely to change attitudes when news frames resonate with their issue schemas. Thus, individuals' existing issue schemas and predispositions were important factors to be considered in framing research (Shen, 2004).

Entman (1993) specified four functions of frames: define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits; diagnose causes—identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (p. 52). These criteria have been adopted in this study to compare the frames of media frames and online public opinions.

Framing Process

Broadly speaking, a process of framing could be categorized into two parts: frame-building and frame-setting (de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999). Frame-building addresses the processes that influence the creation or changes of frame applied by

journalists while frame-setting is concerned with the salience of issues (Scheufele, 1999, p. 115 -116). These were the key concepts to understand the interaction between traditional media and online public discussion. Due to the popularity of social media, citizens are able to post any facts or comments online for potential discussion. This leads not only to audience interpretation, but creating the news on their own. Frame-setting referred to how news frames shape the public's interpretation of given issues (Moy & Zhou, 2007). Pan and Kosicki (1993) conceptualize media frames to have impacts on individuals' attitudes and opinion. These two processes interact with each other in different phases and are the key concepts that have been studied in this research.

Framing Theory as Applied to Mass Communication Studies in China

Yang (2012) uses framing theory to compare the Chinese media coverage of two crises: SARS in 2003 and Sichuan Earthquake in 2008. It was worthwhile to focus on crisis coverage in China since it closely related to social influence that the government would have more cautious regulation on such issues. The Chinese government is well-known for masking information to protect the government's image (Swain, 2007). Yang found that the rescue and treatment frame was the most frequently used frame in news articles for both crises. Also, when there was a negative response to the government's policy among the public, the use of leadership frames would decrease, but when the government's handling of the crises was considered successful, the leadership frame was used more often. Moreover, the result showed a difference between party media and market-oriented media with governmental sources dominating coverage from party media while non-governmental sources providing most information for the market-oriented media (Yang, 2012).

A content analysis of 206 online posts and 114 news reports regarding a sociopolitical incident in China has been employed to determine how frame-building and frame-setting process manifest themselves in the interplay between online public discourse and traditional media discourse (Moy & Zhou, 2007). The study shows that online public opinion plays an important role in transforming the original local event into a nationally prominent issue (Moy & Zhou, 2007). Additionally, media coverage is the primary source of information for people who contribute to the website content, however, the traditional media coverage did not set frames for online discourse (Zhou & Moy, 2007). This indicates that the public takes advantage of unlimited online space for information exchange and has the ability to disseminate the information that is censored by the government in mainstream media outlets. Six years after that study, this study aims to examine the developments and changes of interaction between online public opinion and media coverage.

Research Questions

What differences appeared in how social media and traditional media framed the Lankao orphanage fire? How do traditional and social media interact over time when focused on such social incident? How do those interactions change at different stages in story coverage?

Methodology

To examine the interaction between social media and traditional news coverage in China, especially on “Lankao orphanage fire disaster” case, a quantitative content analysis has been conducted to examine the related posts and news articles on Sina Weibo and Sina News respectively. Sina News has a news channel that contains all aggregated news articles from both national and local media outlets.

Content Analysis

Traditional Content Analysis

Content analysis has been classically defined as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p.18). Content analysis generally follows a five-step procedure: first, to formulate research questions and/or hypotheses; second, to select sample; third, to categorize for coding; fourth, to train the coders, to code the content and to assess the reliability; and fifth, to analyze and interpret the coded data (McMillan, 2000; Riffe et al., 2005). This study followed such a five-step procedure.

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) have concluded five purposes of conducting content analysis: describing communication content, testing hypotheses of message characteristics, comparing media content to the real world, assessing the image of societal groups, and establishing a starting point for studies of media effect (p.157-159). This study fell into the third and fifth purposes. By coding the functions of frames in both traditional media coverage and social media--which is considered more of the actual reflection of public opinion--the study could compare traditional media content to the real world public opinion. Additionally, the study of social media in China is still in its initial

phase with limited numbers in the mass communication research field. This study also aimed to establish a stepping-stone to the future studies of media effect in the digital era.

Content Analysis in Digital Era

With the prevalence of the Internet, there are more and more challenges, as well as opportunities, for systematic, quantitative content analysis in media and communication research. McMillan (2000) and Weare & Lin (2000), for example, have identified a number of challenges of applying content analysis to the Web, such as to obtain a representative sample because of the vastness of the Web to define the unit of analysis; and to ensure that coders are presented with the same content for purposes of reliability. However, both have concluded minor adaptations to traditional approaches of content analysis, such as using lists to help generate sampling frames and capturing snapshots of Website to be sufficient.

Quantitative content analysis could provide a systematic and scientific way to interpret the comparison and interaction between social media and traditional media news coverage in terms of their different frames throughout various phases. The data set can tell the trend visually. However, the limitation still exists because the sampling from online retrieval cannot be exhaustive. While the data collection has been done with the goal of minimizing the government regulatory influence, researcher of this study cannot tell what information have been possibly filtered or deleted by the government. Through the period of data collection, the researcher has kept a close eye on the numbers of searching results from both Sina Weibo and Sina News and has found no evidence of results being removed based on the total number of the results.

Content Analysis in Framing Studies

Quantitative content analysis has been widely used in both framing theory and comparative researches in the field of mass communication.

Wei (2012) conducted a content analysis to examine the representation of the image of China by three Hong Kong newspapers in different years, and concluded that coverage of China has increased over time and the tone of reports varied according to the different content categories, as a result of the interplay between political pressure and economic forces coupled with professionalism and commercialism of Hong Kong media.

Another study used a quantitative content analysis by examining 130 news articles from world major newspapers to explore the media representation of the political impact of social media in Tunisia and Egypt during December 17, 2010 to February 11, 2011 (International Communication Association, 2012). The findings suggest the use of frames and tones varied by those media outlets in different regions around the world.

In order to measure the frames and tones used by a wide range of world major publications, this study designed its own frames due to the lack of previous studies on the political impact of social media. For each frame, a detailed explanation and description have been given. Due to the uniqueness of the case on which the research focuses, explanatory and descriptive frames would also be given. This study mirrors the method of sampling and producers of a previous study conducted by Moy and Zhou (2007) on the interplay between online public opinion and media coverage by examining the opinion frames and media frames through content analysis. But minor adaptations in methods have been implemented in order to tailor to the context of the “Yuan Lihai” case.

Data Collection

This study took each original post (not including responses) from Weibo and each news article from traditional media as the unit of analysis. Responses of Weibo posts were not included because the search engine did not support to pull out the raw data of all comments and the comments poll is too voluminous to study. But it has placed limitation to this research because sometimes comments provide more details than original posts and may have as much impact on traditional media following the responses. It is also once area that future researchers could explore.

Two sets of data were collected in three time periods listed below to test the interaction between social media and traditional media.

Phase I: January 4, 2013 – January 8, 2013: Fire disaster

Phase II: February 3, 2013 – February 8, 2013: Media criticize Yuan Lihai

Phase III: March 3, 2013 – March 8, 2013: Two Session (National People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Conference) when political figures gathered together for leadership transition and political proposals.

Sina Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website, which is an equivalent to Twitter in the U.S. with nearly 8 times more users than Twitter (Rapoza, 2011). Launched by Sina Corporation in August 2009 (China Daily, 2011), it had 368 million registered users as of mid-2012, which was more than 30 percent of Internet users in China (Millward, 2012). Another microblogging service provider, Tencent, with a slightly larger number of users than Sina Weibo, has not been chosen for this study for several reasons. Tencent is more dominant in 3rd- and 4th-tier cities and rural areas while Sina Weibo is more

dominant among white-collar users who are more of a representative of social change in China. This group of people is literate enough to make judgment on social justice. They are sensitive to the social change and dare to express themselves against the injustice. Moreover, many media outlets have official account on Sina Weibo, which makes it easier to generate discussion with the public.

Sina news aggregator has been used to retrieve all listed stories due to its well-functioning search engine, and as private company not owned by the government, it has less likelihood of being censored or information being deleted from the portal than other state-run news websites. Compared with retrieving news directly from search engine, such as Baidu (equivalent to Google in the U.S.), one advantage that Sina news aggregator offers is that it doesn't show duplicate news articles with the same content from different sources.

Before collecting the data, the researcher of this study had used the search functions in both Sina Weibo and Sina News to retrieve the posts/articles on January 5, 2013 for five consecutive days to make sure that the total number of posts and articles remained the same and did not fluctuate due to government censorship and interruptions.

Coding

Instead of coding the topic, theme, position, and tone of articles in a traditional way, this study has taken various framing devices into consideration and analyzed each article as a whole. Entman's four functions of frames (problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation) were chosen as the

primary classification, together with specific frames to fulfill that function (Moy & Zhou, 2007).

Social media frames/traditional media frames

Two frames defining problems

The traditional media and social media employed two approaches since facts are essential to define the nature of the problem related to Yuan Lihai's case. One was to echo reports or news releases from the authorities and to conduct interviews with government officials. The other approach was to reveal behind-the-scene stories and to conduct interviews with family and neighbors around Yuan.

Two frames diagnosing causes

Both Weibo posts and news articles tended to attribute the outcome of the case to a number of factors. Frames across both types of texts suggested two causal factors: government lack of credibility and healthy system of orphanage and Yuan Lihai's illegal adoption. Others do not diagnose causes to this issue.

Two frames making moral judgments

Two kinds of moral evaluation were made towards Yuan Lihai's case: Yuan is innocent and Yuan is guilty. Frames in Weibo posts tended to evoke emotional literary works in a variety of formats. Many of them expressed sympathy and support to Yuan Lihai. Additionally, news articles tended to avoid making moral judgments in the initial phase of the judgments and some portrayed Yuan from a negative point of view. Thus many texts didn't make moral evaluation or stayed neutral.

Three frames suggesting remedies

Frames across both Weibo posts and news articles suggested three remedies: some called for a reinvestigation of the case overall; some claimed Yuan Lihai should stop raising and adopting the children; some suggested the government to take the responsibility and refine the law. Others didn't include treatment as a part of the contents.

Statistical Tests

The intercoder reliability has been tested with 10 percent of the units before the actual coding process. For coding news articles, two coders agreed 100 percent on the validation of the articles for the purpose of this study. Among 39 articles that have been tested, 31 (70.49%) of them are valid. There is an average of 87.1% agreement probability between two coders. For coding Weibo posts, two coders again agreed 100% on the validation of the posts. Among 61 Weibo posts, only 38 (62.3%) are valid. This is due to some Weibo posts are just repost from other places without personal comments or texts without sufficient contents for analysis. The intercoder reliability is 89.47% and the details are listed below.

Frame salience in this study has been operationalized by the frequency percentage of Weibo posts/news articles employing each social media or traditional media frame. Salience is defined as making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audience (Entman, 1993, p. 53). With the variables of this study, the following statistical analysis has been conducted: Chi-square tests comparing the interaction with alternative media (Weibo or traditional media) of Weibo posts and news

articles in three different phases; chi-square tests comparing four frames between the coverage and reflection of Yuan Lihai's case on Weibo posts and traditional news articles; chi-square tests exploring the relationship between the use of social media and the news frames, and between the mentioning of traditional media and the social media frames; and chi-square test comparing the percentage of social media use in traditional news articles, and the percentage of traditional media use in social media posts over three time frames.

Results

Data Interpretation

A total of 327 traditional news articles and 524 Weibo posts have been chosen for this study. Among those, 306 Weibo posts and 210 news articles have been coded as valid into further statistical analysis. In Phase one, 32.1 percent of Weibo posts link to traditional news coverage while only 4.8 percent of traditional news articles refer to Weibo posts. In Phase two, the trend remains the same with 52.5 percent of Weibo posts link to traditional news coverage and 27 percent of interactions on the opposite side. In Phase three, only seven traditional news articles have been found and none of them has mentioned contents from Weibo posts while 33.3 percent of Weibo posts mention or provide links to traditional news coverage.

In traditional news, 16.2 percent of articles have used authorities account and 25.2 percent have used behind-the-scenes stories to define the problem. These numbers in Weibo posts are 4.2 percent and 10.5 percent respectively. 84.6 percent of Weibo posts have chosen not to define the problem. In cause diagnosis, 37.6 percent of news articles and 40.8 percent of Weibo posts have indicated that the government lacks responsibility and a healthy orphanage system, and 8.1 percent of news articles and 3.9 percent of Weibo posts have attributed the outcome to Yuan's illegal adoption. In moral evaluations, 13.8 percent of news articles and 60.1 percent of Weibo posts have indicated that Yuan is innocent, while the percentages for Yuan is guilty are 11.4 percent and 5.2 percent respectively in news and Weibo. Regarding to the suggested treatment, 7.6 percent of news articles have suggested reinvestigation while the number in Weibo posts is two percent; 2.4 percent of news articles and 1.3 percent of Weibo posts have said that Yuan

should stop adopting and raising those children; 37.1 percent of news articles and 10.1 percent of Weibo posts have suggested the government to refine the law. In further statistical analysis, similar and distinctive patterns have been found between the groups and throughout different time periods.

Timing differences between social media and traditional media

The figure below shows the numbers of Weibo posts and traditional news articles coming out within five days after the fire took place. There was a burst of Weibo posts among the public while only a few news articles coming out to state the facts of the incident. Both Weibo posts and news articles undergo an increase with fluctuation in the next few days. Two days after the fire, Weibo posts reach their peak in quantity while news articles reach their peak three days after the fire. When the incident happens, traditional media reacts comparatively more slowly than the social media. But overall, both shared the same trend of increase.

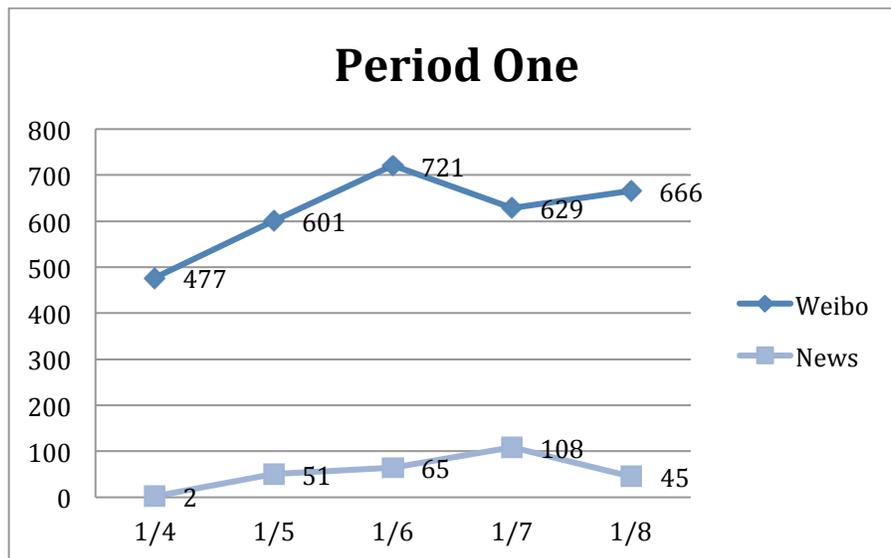


Figure 1 Numbers of Weibo posts and traditional news articles from Jan. 4 to Jan. 8

In period two, from February 3 to February 8, an investigative piece from *People Magazine* triggered fierce public discussion on social media. As news of the fire accident

itself faded out gradually, a decreasing number of people posted related information on social media. Even on the day the investigative piece was published on February 3, only 19 Weibo posts were posted, according to the figure below. The public needed time for reaction. One day after that, the number of Weibo posts increased rapidly, and the increase on the third day was even steeper. Faced with rigid public discussion on social platforms, the traditional media were trying to react to the comments on the issue. When traditional media stories were on a decreasing trend four days after that investigative piece against Yuan Lihai was published, there was no sign showing social media would calm down. Thus social media maintained a longer active discussion period for the public than traditional media.

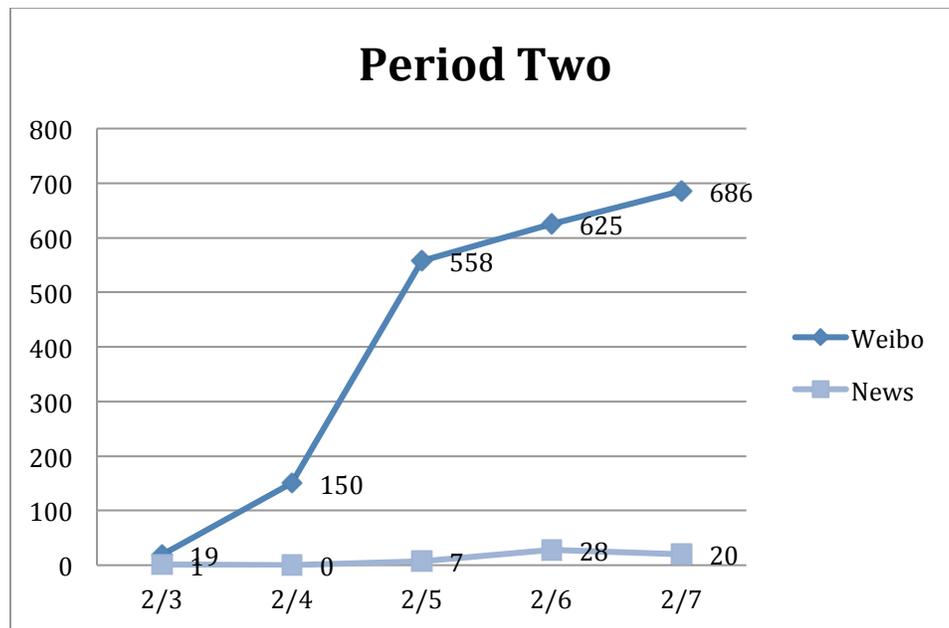


Figure 2 Numbers of Weibo posts and traditional news articles Feb. 3 to Feb. 8.

Period three was two month after the fire incident itself, but it was during the period of Two Sessions in China. It was expected by the researcher of this study that Yuan’s adoption case would be brought up again for proposing a healthier orphanage

system in China. And it was expected as well that the public would join such a discussion during this period. The result came out not as it was expected. There were very limited Weibo posts online during period three, and most of them were irrelevant to Two Sessions. There was some traditional media coverage on the delegations that brought up Yuan's case to reflect the problematic orphanage system in China, but the influence is limited. It was a sign that the fire incident, together with Yuan Lihai's adoption case, had faded out gradually both in social media and traditional media.

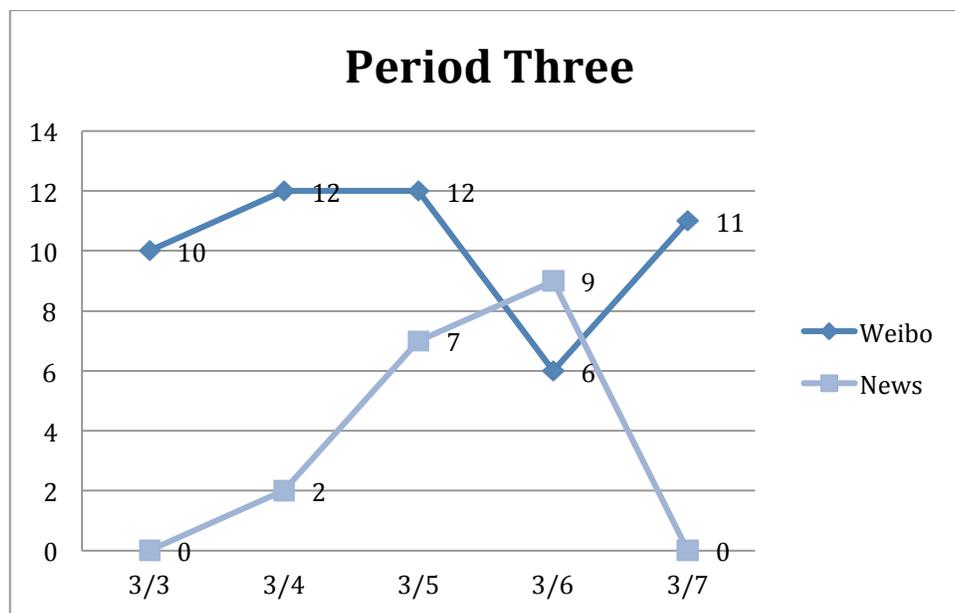


Figure 3 Numbers of Weibo posts and traditional news articles from March 3 to March 8.

Interactions between social media and traditional news

Only the valid data have been processed for further statistic tests. The significance level of 0.05 has been chosen as the default significance level. It has been widely used in social science research area.

	Weibo links to traditional news coverage			Traditional news links to Weibo posts		
	Percent	Frequency	Total	Percent	Frequency	Total
Phase 1	32.1%	51	159	4.8%	8	166

*Table 1 Interaction between Weibo posts and traditional news articles in Phase one.
Note: In phase 1, $\chi^2(1)=40.606, p<.001$.*

	Weibo links to traditional news coverage			Traditional news links to Weibo posts		
	Percent	Frequency	Total	Percent	Frequency	Total
Phase 2	52.5%	63	120	27%	10	37

*Table 2 Interaction between Weibo posts and traditional news articles in Phase two.
Note: in phase 2, $\chi^2(1)=7.376, p<.05$.*

	Weibo links to traditional news coverage			Traditional news links to Weibo posts		
	Percent	Frequency	Total	Percent	Frequency	Total
Phase 3	33.3%	9	27	0%	0	7

*Table 3 Interaction between Weibo posts and traditional news articles in Phase three.
Note: in phase 3, $\chi^2(1)=3.173, p>.05$.*

A set of three chi-square test of independence were calculated comparing the interaction with alternative media (Weibo or traditional media) of Weibo posts and news articles in three different phases. According to the statistical result, significant interactions were found in Phase One ($\chi^2=40.606, p<.001$) and Phase Two ($\chi^2=7.376, p<.05$). In these two phases, Weibo posts had a significantly higher interaction rate with traditional news than vice versa. It means Weibo posts are more likely to provide the links or mentioning news stories, while traditional media makes less reference to Weibo posts. However, in Phase Three, no significant relationship was found ($\chi^2=3.173, p>.05$) since Phase Three has only seven valid articles, which is not sufficient data for analysis.

All seven news articles did not use any reference from social media in Phase Three. Thus only Phase One and Phase Two will be taken into further discussion on traditional media.

Overtime changes in social media and traditional media coverage

Traditional news articles.

A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the percentage of social media use in traditional news articles over three time frames. Among all news articles, a significant interaction has been found ($\chi^2(2) = 19.720$, $p < .001$) between time periods and use of social media. The use of social media increased from 4.8 percent in Phase One to 27 percent in Phase Two, and then decreased to 0 percent in Phase Three. A set of chi-square tests of independence has been calculated comparing the news frames over three time frames. Significant interaction have shown in problem definition ($\chi^2(6) = 45.822$, $p < .001$), cause diagnosis ($\chi^2(4) = 15.149$, $p < .05$), moral evaluation ($\chi^2(4) = 9.540$, $p < .05$), and suggested treatment ($\chi^2(6) = 18.687$, $p < .05$) over three periods of time.

Traditional News	Problem Definition			
	Authorities account	Behind-the-scenes stories	Both	Neither
Phase 1	20.5%	20.5%	32.5%	26.5%
Phase 2	0.0%	51.4%	0.0%	48.6%
Phase 3	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	85.7%

Table 4 Percentages of assigned frames in problem definition in traditional news articles over three time frames.

Traditional News	Cause Diagnosis		
	Government lacks credibility and lack of healthy system of orphanage	Yuan's illegal adoption	Don't make stance
Phase 1	44.0%	7.2%	48.8%
Phase 2	13.5%	13.5%	73.0%
Phase 3	14.3%	0.0%	85.7%

Table 5 Percentages of assigned frames in cause diagnosis in traditional news articles over three time frames.

Traditional News	Moral Evaluation		
	Yuan's innocent	Yuan's guilty	Don't know/neutral
Phase 1	15.7%	9.0%	75.3%
Phase 2	5.4%	24.3%	70.3%
Phase 3	14.3%	0.0%	85.7%

Table 6 Percentages of assigned frames in moral evaluation in traditional news articles over three time frames.

Traditional News	Suggested Treatment			
	Reinvestigation	Yuan stop raising/adopting the children	Government needs to take the responsibility and refine the law	No treatment
Phase 1	6.0%	3.0%	39.8%	51.2%
Phase 2	16.2%	0.0%	16.2%	67.6%
Phase 3	0.0%	0.0%	85.7%	14.3%

Table 7 Percentages of assigned frames in suggested treatment in traditional news articles over three time frames.

An increasing percentage of the news articles used behind-the-scenes stories to define the problem from Phase One (20.5 percent) to Phase Two (51.4 percent). With a limited number of stories in Phase Three, it was hard to tell the significance trend. For the cause of the case, the percentage of news articles that attributed the outcome of the case to the government lacking credibility and a healthy system of orphanage decreased over time, from 44 percent in Phase One to 13.5 percent and 14.3 percent in Phase Two and three respectively. In terms of the moral evaluation, the percentage of news articles that claimed Yuan's innocent has decreased from 15.7 percent in Phase One to 5.4 percent in Phase Two, and then increased again to 14.3 percent in Phase Three. These numbers fit the trend of the development of the case itself since an investigative news article had been published against Yuan in Phase Two. In treatment frames, the percentage of articles that called for the government to take the responsibility to refine the law decreased from 39.8 percent in Phase One to 16.2 percent in Phase Two. And this number rose to 85.7 percent again in Phase Three during the Two Sessions.

Weibo posts.

A chi-square test of independence has been calculated comparing the mentioning of news articles Weibo posts over three time frames. Among all Weibo posts, a significant interaction has been found ($\chi^2(2) = 12.448, p < .05$) between time period and reference of traditional media. The use of traditional media has been increased from 32.1% in Phase One to 52.5% in Phase Two, and then decreased to 33.3% in Phase Three. A set

of chi-square tests of independence was calculated comparing the news frames over three time frames. Significant interaction occurred in problem definition ($\chi^2(6) = 23.401$, $p = .001$), cause diagnosis ($\chi^2(6) = 18.436$, $p < .05$), and suggested treatment ($\chi^2(6) = 31.113$, $p < .001$) over three periods of time. No significant relationship was found ($\chi^2(4) = 4.774$, $p = .311$) when comparing the moral evaluation in three time frames.

Weibo	Problem Definition			
	Authorities account	Behind-the-scenes stories	Both	Neither
Phase 1	7.5%	16.4%	0.6%	75.5%
Phase 2	0.8%	3.3%	0.8%	95.0%
Phase 3	0.0%	7.4%	0.0%	92.6%

Table 8 Percentages of assigned frames in problem definition in Weibo posts over three time frames

Weibo	Cause Diagnosis		
	Government lacks credibility and lack of healthy system of orphanage	Yuan's illegal adoption	Don't make stance
Phase 1	50.9%	2.5%	46.5%
Phase 2	30.0%	6.7%	62.5%
Phase 3	29.6%	0.0%	70.4%

Table 9 Percentages of assigned frames in cause diagnosis in Weibo posts over three time frames.

Weibo	Suggested Treatment

	Reinvestigation	Yuan stop raising/adopting the children	Government needs to take the responsibility and refine the law	No treatment
Phase 1	0.0%	0.0%	13.2%	86.8%
Phase 2	5.0%	3.3%	2.5%	89.2%
Phase 3	0.0%	0.0%	25.9%	74.1%

Table 10 Percentages of assigned frames in suggested treatment in Weibo posts over three time frames

A decreasing percentage of the news articles used behind-the-scenes stories to define the problem from Phase One (16.4 percent) to Phase Two (3.3 percent), and the number increased slightly again in Phase Three to 7.4 percent. Similar to traditional news coverage, the Weibo posts also mentioned less about the definition of the case itself over time. For the cause of the case, the percentage of news articles that attributed the outcome of the case to the fact that the government lacks credibility as well as a healthy system of orphanage decreased over time, from 44 percent in Phase One to 13.5 percent and 14.3 percent in Phase Two and Phase Three respectively. In treatment frames, the percentage of Weibo posts that called government to take the responsibility to refine the law has decreased from 13.2 percent in Phase One to 2.5 percent in Phase Two, and then rose to 23.9 percent again in Phase Three. These numbers mirrored the trend of traditional news coverage.

Comparison of social media and traditional media framings

Three sets of chi-square tests of independence have been calculated comparing four frames between the coverage and reflection of Yuan Lihai's case on Weibo posts and traditional news articles. In Phase One, three significant interactions were found between the type of media (social media or traditional media) and their assigned frames

in problem definition ($\chi^2=97.775$, $p< .001$), moral evaluation ($\chi^2=71.027$, $p< .001$) and suggested treatment ($\chi^2=50.745$, $p< .001$).

PHASE ONE	Problem Definition			
	Authorities account	Behind-the-scenes	Both	Neither
News	20.5%	20.5%	32.5%	26.5%
Weibo	7.5%	16.4%	0.6%	75.5%

Table 11 Percentages of assigned frames in problem definition in both traditional media and Weibo in Phase One

PHASE ONE	Moral Evaluation		
	Yuan's Innocent	Yuan's guilty	Don't know/neutral
News	15.7%	9.0%	75.3%
Weibo	61.0%	3.8%	35.2%

Table 12 Percentages of assigned frames in moral evaluation in both traditional media and Weibo in Phase One

PHASE ONE	Suggested Treatment			
	Reinvestigation	Yuan stops raising/adopting children	Government needs to take the responsibility and refine the law	No treatment
News	6.0%	3.0%	39.8%	51.2%
Weibo	0.0%	0.0%	13.2%	86.8%

Table 13 Percentages of assigned frames in suggested treatment in both traditional media and Weibo in Phase One.

In Phase One, about one third of the news articles have used both authorities account and behind-the-scenes when composing the stories, while 75.5% of the Weibo posts have used neither of these two frames. Weibo posts also used more behind-the-scenes stories (16.4%) than authorities account (7.5%) while these two proportions for

news articles were about the same (20.5%). Regarding to the moral evaluation, 75.3% of the news articles didn't provide a clear answer about Yuan was innocent or not, they either stayed neutral or claimed that they didn't know, while 61% of the Weibo posts claimed that Yuan was innocent. In terms of the treatment, 86.8% of the Weibo posts didn't provide any treatment of the case and none of the them have called for reinvestigation or claimed that Yuan should stop raising or adopting children in Phase One. But in news articles, 39.8% has claimed that the government needs to take the responsibility and refine the law, compared with the percentage of 13.2% among Weibo posts. About half of the news articles also had no treatment for the case in Phase One.

Phase Two was similar to Phase One that three significant interactions have been found between the type of media (social media or traditional media) and their assigned frames in problem definition ($\chi^2=52.354$, $p< .001$), moral evaluation ($\chi^2=33.300$, $p< .001$) and suggested treatment ($\chi^2=16.739$, $p= .001$). In Phase Two, there was a big shift in the frames defining the problem in traditional news coverage. About half of the news articles used behind-the-scenes stories while the other half used neither authorities account nor behind-the scenes stories. Most of the Weibo posts (95%) still used neither of these two frames. In moral evaluations, both Weibo posts and news articles followed similar pattern with Phase One. Most (70.3%) traditional new coverage stayed neutral while a large portion (59.2%) of Weibo posts supported Yuan Lihai and believed in her innocence. In terms of the suggested treatment, the percentage in both news articles and Weibo posts that have called the government to take the responsibility decreased (16.2% of news articles and 2.5% for Weibo posts) and those called for reinvestigation has increased (16.2% of news articles and 5% of Weibo posts) in Phase Two.

In Phase Three, only one significant interaction was found between the type of media (social media or traditional media) and their assigned frames in suggested treatment ($\chi^2=8.414$, $p<.05$). 85.7% of the news articles asked the government to take the responsibility and to refine the law while 74.1% of the Weibo posts claimed no treatment. Neither news article nor Weibo posts asked for reinvestigation or asked Yuan stop raising or adopting the children in Phase Three.

The influence of social media and traditional media interaction in framing

In all three phases of news articles, no significant relationship was found between the use of social media and the news frames, according to the calculations of chi-square tests of independence. Some chi-square tests of independence were calculated in three phases for Weibo posts. The only significant interaction was found in Phase One ($\chi^2 (2) =10.463$, $p<.05$) between the uses of traditional media with the moral evaluation. The results showed that those Weibo posts that did not refer to traditional media coverage had a higher percentage (68.5%) that believed Yuan's innocent than those that referred to news articles (45.1%).

Discussion

The findings from the study of the Lankao orphanage fire suggest that social media and traditional media react differently when covering social issues. When an issue has just occurred, traditional media are more cautious about the accuracy and political correctness of their coverage, thus reacting not as quickly as social media, where the public has a freer platform for the information going out. However, when the social issue further develops to the point beyond one incident, what has been covered in traditional media tends to trigger more social media posts and online discussion.

One major finding of this study is that social media have a better interaction with traditional media by either providing the links or mentioning those news stories, while traditional media make less reference to social media. From a journalistic standpoint, traditional media have to provide information from a trusted source. However, as a public discussion forum with limited regulations, the credibility of the information on social media is low. Moreover, traditional media outlets are mostly under the control of the state government, especially when covering sensitive public affairs. They have to be really careful when critiquing governmental behaviors, such as the local government's reactions and responsibilities in Yuan Lihai's case. On the other hand, as a public discussion forum, social media such as Weibo provide the public a place to have virtual conversation and self-expression. People react to what they read or watch from traditional media and thus refer to them more often. In China, the traditional media organizations are under such strict regulation of the government that people lack trust of these sources, and the public tends to express its distinctive and sometimes negative feelings on social media to oppose the information delivered by traditional media. These analyses could be

supported by the research result of a significantly higher interaction rate in Weibo with traditional news than vice versa in Phase One and Phase Two, when the case happened, developed and reached its apex. Phase Three did not show significant result due to the limited data for analysis.

Another main finding of this research shows the usages of frames are significantly different in social media and traditional media in China. Social media and traditional media play different social roles when covering public affairs. To take Yuan Lihai's case as an example, in Phase One, the public used very few authorities' accounts or behind-the-scenes stories when defining the problem on Weibo posts. Instead, the public showed its sympathy and concern for the children who either died or survived in that tragedy. Some also pointed out the corruptions of the government officials that indirectly led to this tragedy. Compared with Weibo, the traditional media used more of authorities account as well as behind-the-scenes stories when defining the problem. The traditional news coverage mainly included two concepts—one was that the government-run orphanage shelters were not providing enough support; the other was that the private charity organizations should be legalized. The media coverage avoided making any assertion or conclusion of the case. However, in Phase Two when the party-run magazine *People* published an investigative article pointing out Yuan's guilt, there was a large shift in problem definition in traditional news coverage. In order to frame Yuan Lihai as a "fearful" woman, the magazine had to find more behind-the-scenes stories such as interviews with Yuan's neighbors and relatives to support its argument and thus to increase its credibility. In social media, since it has been a month since the fire took place, the public did not define the case itself any further, but reacted more on the

traditional media coverage. In terms of moral evaluation, Phase One and Phase Two shared similar pattern. About three-fourths of traditional media stayed neutral or gave a “don’t know” answer to Yuan’s case. This might be because either the media outlets were cautious about any conclusion they drew might become false with further investigation, or they were unable to express freely because their editors and the government were keeping an eye on them. In contrast, a large portion of the Weibo posts claimed Yuan’s innocence. The public expressed its doubt about People’s coverage on Yuan Lihai by pointing out the weakness of the news articles – the reporters showed too much of their personal view that makes the story one-sided; the story itself lacked facts; and the investigation methods were too simple and contradicting. What is more, significant differences are found in treatment frames, both in Weibo and traditional media. Weibo posts tended not to give treatment for the issue in general. In traditional media, the percentage of asking government to take the responsibility and refine the law has decreased from Phase One to Phase Two, and increased again in Phase Three. This might be because the social media as a public forum do not play the social role of providing solution and treatment to the problem while traditional media takes this functionality more seriously.

A final, but important finding is that the choices of frames in both social media and traditional media are not influenced by their interactions, but instead by different time frames. The use of alternative media sources has a limited effect on the frame choices in problem definition, cause attribution, moral evaluation and suggested treatment. In Weibo posts, the only significant interaction was in Phase One on moral evaluation. People who referred to traditional media coverage were more likely to believe

Yuan's innocence when the case just happened. But as noted earlier, most of the news articles in Phase One actually provided no clear answer about Yuan's moral evaluation, but rather stayed neutral on such judgment.

Although the interaction with alternative media forms has no significant influence on choosing frames, the development of the case itself, or the time frames does. In terms of the traditional news articles, since Phase Three had only seven articles to analyze, only articles from Phase One and Phase Two will be used to further this discussion. Among traditional news articles, there were increasing moral judgments and critiques rather than attributing the cause of the fire incident itself. From the fire just took place to the incident itself gradually faded out but with more concerns on the things buried beneath, traditional media has utilized more behind-the-scenes stories as their sources when defining the problem. The social media were just on the opposite direction – a smaller percentage of Weibo posts used behind-the-scenes stories in Phase Two comparing to Phase One. Its focus shifted from the tragedy itself to the investigative news article has been published on *People* against Yuan with doubt and anger. Additionally, with this news reporting, more news articles claimed that Yuan's guilty in Phase Two than Phase One. Also because of it, lower percentages of news articles called government to take the responsibility in Phase Two than Phase One in terms of suggested treatments. The same trend can also be found in Weibo posts. Almost half of Weibo posts attributed the cause of the case to the government and unhealthy orphanage system in Phase One, but later this number had dropped significantly. This indicated the negative news article did have its influence on both traditional and social media platforms. But what was tricky about the investigative article is that it has been published on *People* magazine. As a

state-run magazine, all contents it could publish were under scrutiny of the government. In other words, the contents were supposed to be permitted for publish. However, after the article itself has triggered the first public reaction, the state media Xinhua News Agency published another article that holds a different view than *People* magazine, claiming that Yuan Lihai should not be judged morally by the standard of selfless. Without claiming that Yuan was innocent, Xinhua News Agency covered this issue from another angle as a reaction to both *People* magazine and the furious public.

It could be seem from this study that the role of Chinese media has been changed due to the technology development, popularity of social media, and the increasing well-educated population. The Chinese media industry is currently under a dramatic transitional period. On the one hand, the trend of commercialization has led to diverse voices since the media outlets are less dependent on the government; but on the other hand, the government does not want to weaken their control over the communication vehicles as their propaganda tools.

Under such transition, media cannot just play its old role as a propaganda vehicle for the government, but in a more sophisticated position, to balance the commercialization trend of media industry and the regulations from the government. From the media side, more economic independence means the traditional media outlets would have more democracy in producing news and other media forms. They have to prove with their subscriptions or audience viewing rates to convince the advertisers to put their money in to support their continuing operation. However, when encountering the highly sensitive political issues that related to the government affairs, these media outlets sometimes lose their press freedom again. But overall, Chinese media today are playing a

much more courageous role when dealing with the unfairness of the society and the wrongdoings of the government.

Back in July 2011, two high-speed trains collided on a viaduct in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, China. 40 people were killed and at least 192 were injured. Officials responded to this accident by hastily concluding rescue operations and ordering the burial of the derailed trains. It elicited strong criticism from Chinese media and online forums. Local media responded really fast and collected evidence and footages on site. In response, the government issued directives to restrict media and asked them not to publish such reporting articles. However, the order from the Propaganda Department seemed to be powerless at that time. Both independent and state-owned media outlets directly criticized the Ministry of Railways and expressed their skepticism over the government, including China's major state-owned television CCTV. Qiu Qiming, a news anchor of CCTV program *24-Hours*, commented on air about Chinese society, "if nobody can be safe, do we still want this speed? Can we drink a glass of milk that's safe? Can we stay in an apartment that will not fall apart? Can the roads we travel on in our cities not collapse? Can we travel in safe trains? And if and when a major accident does happen, can we not be in a hurry to bury the trains?" Chinese media was especially skeptical of the rescue efforts that have been concluded less than a day following the accident and the burial of the damaged train cars. The spokesman of the Railway Ministry, Wang Yongping, said that the burial was for facilitating the rescue work. The answer prompted disbelief from the journalists who believed that the burial was to prevent further investigations. Being questioned by the journalists why a little girl was found alive after the rescue work had been announced finished, Wang said, "This was a miracle." Wang

Yongping soon gained particular notoriety online. Online users were skeptical that the crash was caused by a natural disaster, but the management failure. One frequently reposted comment on Sina Weibo stated that, “When a country is so corrupt that one lightning strike can cause a train crash, none of us are exempt. China today is a train rushing through a lightning storm, we are all passengers.” With all efforts from traditional media and social media, Wang was dismissed from the Ministry of Railways within a month after the accident. This case well illustrated the fact that with the joint efforts of traditional media and social media platforms, government transitioned its role from proactive to reactive, and the social justice was more likely to be realized.

At the same time from the government side, it was also changing its old ways of governance. Journalists in China today are not comparable with the journalists in the past. As media originated from the governmental propaganda tool, people who work for the media outlets were selected for their political compliance and good writing skills. Most of them did not go through professional journalism training. But today, more and more journalists are well-educated and professionally trained. They have a better understanding of the role of journalism and embrace press freedom. Some of them received their journalism education from western countries where journalists are supposed to be the watchdog instead of government followers. Under such change, it is inevitable that there will be more conflicts as well as challenges for both the media and the government.

In January 2013, a conflict was initiated between the Propaganda Department of Guangdong Province and *Southern Weekly* in press freedom. The Southern Weekly is a part of the Nanfang Media Group, which is a provincial government-owned media corporation. Its top leader is the party secretary. However, despite it is a state-owned

media, *Southern Weekly* is known for investigative journalism, testing the limits of free speech in the country. In the New Year of 2013, its original New Year's special editorial was changed significantly under the pressure from the propaganda officers in order to glorify the Chinese communist party, which bypassed the normal publication flow. The original editorial was intended to call for proper implementation of the country's constitution. The newsroom staff went on a strike to protest against censorship. The demonstrations outside the gates of the *Southern Weekly* newspaper drew attentions from overseas. Some of the Southern Weekly reporter posted on Sina Weibo to protest Tuo Zhen, an official from the propaganda department, for censoring the editorial behaviors of *Southern Weekly*. As a consequence, 15 reporters' Weibo accounts got muted or deleted. Later on, more journalists on the editorial board were asked to hand in their password of Sina Weibo account. Because of the incident, keywords such as "Southern Weekend", "Tuo Zhen" have become sensitive words and filtered by the Chinese firewall. And this incident wasn't a coincidence, according to Southern Weekly editors, because 1,034 of their stories were censored in 2012 alone. In this incident, social media has been used as a tool for the journalists to fight against the government censorship. But unfortunately, even the independent social media forums cannot be free from the government control. It has also been taken advantages from the government to strengthen their control over the media and the information dissemination.

But with a better-educated population and an unlimited Internet world, the government can no longer utilize media as a brainwashing tool on the public. Chinese citizens can also utilize social media as a platform to reveal the unfairness of society and seek support against the wrongdoing. Last year, when the islands dispute evoked tension

between China and Japan, many Chinese citizens were upset about the soft approach taken by the Chinese government and thus turned to the social media. Many young Chinese activists spread anti-Japan statements through online public forums and agitated for public protests against any Japan-related businesses and people. Moreover, anti-Japan activists arranged violent events through social media like Weibo (a Chinese version of Twitter). However, during the same period of the time, the Chinese state news media portrayed the demonstrations as fairly small, each involving fewer than 200 people, and not extending to inland provinces. But photographs posted on Sina Weibo suggested that the crowds had been far larger. In this case, the Internet became another source for Chinese citizens to seek information that was excluded from the state media. Nowadays, there were more people than ever criticizing the daily newscasts produced by China Central Television including biased news coverage – airing only positive coverage of domestic news while only negative coverage of international news. When people talked about this, they always spoke with irony. Deep in the public's heart, they have lost the established trust on the state media, especially members of the younger generation, who have gained their knowledge from more than just textbooks, including more from the vibrant Internet--especially the foreign media. With destroyed trust of state media coverage, these young Chinese tend to trust more foreign media coverage, although considering them not always fair and objective. Because of this, the state media is also trying to balance the news for the good of the governance. In Yuan Lihai's case, one state-run media (Xinhua Agency) publishing articles criticizing another state-run media (*People Magazine*) was a supportive example of news diversity for the political good. With the involvement of social media, traditional media and the government are no

longer the two major players of information formation and dissemination. Chinese citizens are a rising force with their increasing participation via social media. The rise of social media will inevitably weaken the role of government monitoring and censoring the information delivery. Journalists, government and the people are the three big players that need to find a balancing point under the new media era.

Conclusion

By comparing the frames used by social media and traditional media overall, it could be concluded that the social media can hardly substitute the role of social responsibility of traditional media in defining the problem and issue treatment, even if the traditional media are partially free and under the government control. Social media are playing more of a balancing role for the social discussion and providing the public a more democratic and more convenient place for discussion. From another perspective, reporters working for traditional media outlets should take social media platforms as a resource for their reporting and provide another side of the story itself.

Moreover, social media and traditional media are independent from each other in choosing frames when the case just happened. However, when the traditional media contributed the cause of the case to Yuan, a non-privileged Chinese citizen, the social media discussion went towards an opposite discussion to protect Yuan as a grassroots citizen just like everyone else. At the same time, there are a few people got influenced by the negative criticism and trusted the source from traditional media. Thus traditional media still have influence on what people believe, but the influence is limited and sometimes generates opposite reactions.

Lastly—but importantly--the government is experimenting with new strategies to utilize media as tools to work together with its people. In many cases, like Yuan Lihai's case, either coincidentally or by design, not all media outlets delivered the same message with same tone. If by design, it might be a sign that the central government was depicting the image of allowing diverse messages in the society. But no matter what, the criticism still remained on the local level, not the state level. Only local government officials have

been investigated or punished as an answer to the public. If not by design, this might be a risk management case for the government to calm down those online citizens who were furious about the investigative piece on Yuan run by *People* magazine. No matter what, the China's media industry no longer falls into the authoritarian category, but under a new and positive transition. Social media platforms are one of the best motivations on this journey of media transition.

This research has only studied the coverage on one social issue that occurred in local level of China. It is not sufficient enough to generalize the interaction between social media and traditional media coverage on all social issues in China. Further studies could be done by looking at other cases that happened in national level where Chinese government high officials are more likely to get involved. It is worthwhile knowing how state-run media will react differently when the issue has a negative influence on the state government, how the information dissemination on social media will potentially be controlled and censored by the government, and also how the change in the roles of social media and traditional media will influence the interaction in between. Similar studies could also be conducted in other countries where the Internet and social media forums are thriving as a new way of distributing and getting information in additional to traditional media.

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