

NEW MEDIA AND THE NEW(S) CIVIL SOCIETY:
A MULTIMETHOD APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S GROWING
ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Dedicated to Hongmei

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Abstract

Since the beginning of reform and opening up, Chinese society has gone from periodic upheaval to relative stability under China's one-party system. Parallel to this development is the steady growth of civil society organizations and state institutions for political participation. Looking beyond traditional neo-Tocquevillian links between formal civil society and democracy, this thesis investigates the role of informal, digital society in building a public sphere. Research is focused on developing empirical approaches to understanding China's online communities. This thesis employs survey methods, analysis of publicized electronic communications and NGO data, extensive reading of political microblogs, and social network analysis to address the size and political tendencies of digital communities. Given the realities of censorship and legal reprisal, much political speech occurs through selected retransmission of news stories. Additionally, the social network analysis approach developed in this thesis is able to identify ill-defined online communities for further research.

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List of Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party (abbreviated as CPC in China, also abbreviated herein as “the Party”)
CPPCC	Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress
CSO	Civil society organization
ENGO	Environmental nongovernmental organization
GMO	Genetically modified organism
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KMT	<i>Kuomintang</i> (Chinese Nationalist Party)
NPC	National People’s Congress
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China (also abbreviated herein as “China”)
RMB	<i>renminbi</i>
SNA	Social network analysis
SPC	Supreme People’s Court
SPP	Supreme People’s Procuratorate
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Chapter 1

Introduction

*When the country is ruled with a light hand
The people are simple.
When the country is ruled with severity,
The people are cunning.*

- Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching, ch. Fifty-Eight

On July 4, 2013, the city government of Heshan in the People’s Republic China (PRC or China) announced a plan to build a \$6 billion atomic fuel processing plant. Within two weeks, the plans were cancelled, after local residents gathered in a massive protest over concerns of the plant’s safety (*The Economic Times* 2013). To the Western reader, this may not seem like a rare occurrence. Protests are a common thing, and not-in-my-backyard politics regularly frustrate industrial development. But in China, one-party rule and effective restrictions on speech and assembly make this protest a curious case. How could people mobilize with enough support in such a short timeframe to reverse this decision? Also curious is the ineffectiveness (and existence) of recently established “social stability risk assessment” policies, which are designed to gain citizen input on large development projects through formalized hearings in order to avoid such protests.¹

This thesis presents an inquiry into the growing society of Internet and cell phone users in the PRC that are likely in part responsible for the development of democratic features—including “social stability risk assessment”—within the semi-authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, CPC, or the Party). China, it is claimed, has been undergoing an “associational revolution” in line with current global trends (S. Wang and

¹ Two primary legal documents requiring public consultation hearings—termed “social stability risk assessment”—are State Council Order No. 590 (2011), “Regulation on the Expropriation of Buildings on State-owned Land and Compensation,” and State Council Document No. 16 (2013), “Notice of the State Council on Issuing the Working Rules of the State Council.” Additionally, the SPC’s Document No. 1 (2011) “Notice of the SPC on Issuing the Work Outline for People’s Courts in 2011,” mentions the court’s goal to establish a mechanism for social stability risk assessment. Translations by www.lawinfochina.com.

He 2004). In spite of academic attention on China's formal civil society, little empirical research has focused on the digital world that is an equally prominent feature of China's civil society landscape. Research for this thesis was largely inspired by neo-Tocquevillian literature, which points to a positive connection between civil society and democracy (Putnam, Leonardi, and Rafaella, 1993; Putnam 2000), but it is also informed by critical works based on Gramscian (Berman 1997; Riley 2005) and corporatist (Ru and Ortolano 2008; Liu 2012) perspectives, which empirically reveal civil society's historical failings to create or strengthen a democracy. For this thesis, democracy is understood broadly to refer to features of government accountability to the will of the citizenry. More than regulated and institutional accountability, democratic accountability also includes the non-institutionalized or weakly regulated systems that limit and direct Party action in accordance with public will. While the CCP regime remains institutionally and functionally semi-authoritarian, rapid economic development of the country has changed the nature of the state-society relationship and opened up a vast new domain for civil society in new media.

At its core, civil society research is concerned with the role of the citizenry in determining the fate of a country. It addresses fundamental questions regarding the association of private individuals to create group identity and interests. Michael Walzer (1998) broadly defines civil society as “the space of un-coerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology—that fill this space” (123-4). The nature of these interactions and the design of relational networks play a key role in shaping the various interests to which a government must respond. Research into civil society is only natural to the study of democracy. However, civil society plays an equally important, though less researched, role in the politics of nondemocratic states. Even in a democracy, discontent is not always expressed through institutional channels; sometimes it takes the form of riots or protest; other times public opinions are slow to result in any responsive action, institutional or otherwise. Likewise, authoritarian regimes are not uniformly devoid of institutional mechanisms for citizen input. Ruling elites in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, much like their counterparts in democratic countries, are highly concerned with the retention of their power within the state, and it is because of this that civil society is so important a

topic. This thesis focuses primarily on communication, both within society and between citizens and state and party offices. Although this level of political involvement is the most basic (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 18-19), it is nevertheless essential for the formation of political values and shows greater critical tendency than other forms of political participation (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 16). The larger political conundrum driving this inquiry is the growing democratic responsiveness of the Chinese state despite uncontested one-party rule.

Background of Case

The CCP's rise to power was set against a backdrop of political turmoil that marked the first half of the 20th century. After the abdication of six-year-old Emperor Puyi in 1912, which was preceded by years of imperial weakness, the Qing Dynasty was ended, and the Republic of China was born. For the next several decades, power struggles, separatism, warlords, and the Japanese invasion made it difficult for any one group to claim total rule of the country, although the *Kuomintang* (KMT) was most prominent during the majority of this period. In the wake of political protests surrounding Japan's gains in 1919 of German concessions on the Shandong Peninsula, a collection of subnational communist groups met to create a unified CCP, which was accomplished in July 1921. After two decades of oscillating warm and cold relations, the CCP and the KMT fought a civil war that lasted from the end of World War II until Mao's announcement on October 1st, 1949 that the People's Republic of China was established.

The CCP's integration with society and the state in modern China often makes it hard to study as an isolated entity. As Albert Chen (2011) notes, "Under the current political system in the PRC, the state structure and the CPC structure are not only very closely connected with and integrated into each other, but are actually fused together at various junctures" (118). Senior leadership of the state and Party remain identical. Furthermore, the Party's leadership of the state is explicitly spelled out in the preamble to the PRC Constitution (1982). Thus, in the eyes of the people, Party and government are often one and the same. As such, references to the CCP, government, or state are

traditionally interchangeable when discussing relations with society, except for noteworthy recent developments. Specifically, as Peter Ho (2008) illuminates, there has been a certain separation between the Party and state in recent years for the sake of protecting long-term interests in Party power. Having this separation allows society to direct its complaints toward government policies without implicating the CCP as the source of the problems, thus protecting itself from Party reprisal. However, this separation is incomplete both in practice and in the eyes of the people. Not only is the system of Party reinforced in state institutions, but the prestige and privileges of Party membership also ensures the endurance of this elite group. This has led to widespread participation in the Party, which reached 82.6 million members by the end of 2011 (Xinhua News Agency 2012b). Although this number only accounts for a little over six percent of the total population, it still reveals the impressive extent of the Party's integration with society.²

As is often the case with authoritarian regimes, the CCP presents its legitimacy as arising from the interests of the people. The preamble to the Constitution of the PRC (1982) claims that “under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, ... the Chinese people of all ethnic groups will ... turn China into a socialist country that is prosperous, powerful, democratic and culturally advanced.” This is set against the popular narrative of the CCP that China had undergone a century of shame leading up to the establishment of communist rule, which will finally return the country and its people to greatness. While it is easy to brush this away as empty rhetoric, it is rooted in a deeper need of the CCP to earn the quiescent trust of the citizenry. Because the CCP places such a heavy ideological investment on its role as the people's party—Mao Zedong's iconic shibboleth “serving the people” captures this well—a minimal show of accountability is required.

This may seem in blatant contrast with reality, considering the recent history of CCP rule, significantly including the bloody end to the Chinese Democracy Movement

² According to the 2013 *China Statistical Yearbook*, the population of China at the end of 2011 was 1,347,350,000.

protests on June 4, 1989.³ However, while June 4 showed decisively the CCP would retain control of the state, it also exposed how traditional methods of Party rule in a developing country were not sustainable. This revelation was rather strongly confirmed in the fall of the Soviet Union shortly after the Chinese Democracy Movement. David Shambaugh (2008) succinctly summarizes the CCP's position that "this was probably *the* single most important conclusion the CCP reached in its postmortem analysis of the collapse of the USSR—that a certain recipe for collapse is an ossified party-state" (104; italics in original). In fact, contrary to the assumption that the Party's communist ideology has remained a stable foundation of rule throughout the years, social conditions have played a decisive role in the cyclical advance and retreat of economic and political reform, which followed a similar pattern pre- and post-1989.

The story of post-Mao *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening up) in China is one of capricious policy shifts rooted in elite politics and influenced by society's response. Richard Baum's (1997) comprehensive analysis of Chinese politics in the 1980s identifies three cycles of "relaxation and control, *fang* and *shou*" that both describe and explain the social turmoil leading to Tiananmen (341; italics in original). Baum is not the first to identify this cyclical pattern. Thomas Gold (1990) recognizes *fang* and *shou* as common terms for political extremes in domestic accounts of recent Chinese history (129), which closely relates to G. William Skinner and Edwin Winckler's (1969) early cyclical analysis of CCP rule in China. Baum's (1997) most significant contribution in his cyclical analysis, however, is the investigation into the struggle between political elites, grouped generally as either reformist or traditionalist. The relative strength of one group over the other depended largely on society's reaction to reforms. Thus, when "humanist" literature began to spread anti-Party democratic values after the passing of the PRC's 1982 Constitution, traditionalists in the Party were able to gain the upper hand and enact the anti-spiritual pollution campaign (Baum 1997, 351-3). In the wake of the anti-spiritual pollution campaign, however, a leftist surge in society threatened economic productivity and reformists again were put in the driver's seat (Baum 1997, 360-1). This

³ Richard Baum's comparison of multiple sources estimates that the total number of citizens killed by PLA forces is between 600 and 1,200. See Baum 1997, 456.

crude system of adjustments improved overtime, largely overcoming the uncertainties of the 1980s, but the reactionary *fang* and *shou* elements of CCP rule continue.

While *fang* and *shou* may only exist as generalities, they represent both real and perceived government capriciousness during reform. Any government charting new territory of reform will require corrections along the way, but the CCP's position is particularly unique, balancing the liberating power of reform with the imperative to retain nondemocratic legitimacy. This back-and-forth balancing act did not end decisively in Tiananmen Square in 1989. As long as societal demands are left unmet, there will be pressure for the CCP to engage in a loosening to appease those demands, but when signs of direct challenges to CCP rule exist, the natural reaction is to tighten the grip, and the cycle of *fang* and *shou* are repeated. Significantly, though, as the Party has moved forward from Tiananmen, it has done more to anticipate society's reaction so as to avoid so-called "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*). This cycle has important implications for collective action and the future of political reform.

The perception of *fang* and *shou* plays an essential role in mass mobilization. Baum's (1997) presentation of cyclical politics in the 1980s closely parallels collective action theories on threat and opportunity attribution, which contend that collective action is highly dependent on public perception of the political environment (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). *Fang* signals a political opportunity for society to satisfy latent desires, while *shou* represents state response to restrict public overreaction. The moves between periods of loosening and tightening may seem abrupt and arbitrary, but they have long-term implications for development. After Deng Xiaoping's famous southern tour in 1992, FDI as a percent of GDP spiked and remained above pre-1992 levels until 2008, and accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 led to the rapid expansion of export-oriented businesses that grew from 20% to over 35% of China's GDP in just five years (Han, Liu, and Zhang 2012, 289). In addition to lasting economic effects, these cycles have initiated the release of pent-up social tensions that have long-term political implications, such as the Democracy Movement protests and subsequent military crackdown in Tiananmen Square (Baum 1997). Recent analyses show a continuation of this pattern post-1989, although unlike Tang Tsou's (1986) recognition of parallel cycles

across many sectors, recent CCP management of *fang* and *shou* has led to isolated, asynchronous cycles within the bounds of economic, social, and political policies.

Economic reform in China was one of the first sectors of reform to resume after 1989. In spite of the social unrest manifested in Tiananmen Square, the imperative to improve upon China's poor economic performance from Mao's era (Riskin 1987) did not disappear. Deng Xiaoping's official retirement shortly after the Tiananmen Square incident from his final party position as Chairman of the Central Military Commission did not stop him from completing his southern tour in 1992 and publicly highlighting the economic successes of reform (Zhao 1993). In wake of the tour, the PRC enacted reforms to tax, banking, real estate, and international trade policy (Hou 2011, 423). At the time, Suisheng Zhao (1993) warned that Deng's tour "may once again result in high inflation and subsequent economic and political troubles," which proved to be an accurate prediction (756). In 1994, inflation in the PRC peaked at 24.1% (IMF 2014), leading to another wave of economic tightening and a halt on new reforms until the 1999 capital market reforms (Hou 2011, 425). More recently, property rights have been a source of economic *fang* and *shou*. Katherine Wilhelm's (2004) analysis of *chai qian* (demolition and relocation) in urban China shows a repetition of Baum's *fang-shou* model of economic growth at the expense of social stability, ultimately leading to public outburst. The ensuing *shou* was a toothless amendment to the PRC Constitution protecting private property rights (Wilhelm 2004, 231) and eventually the 2007 Property Law of the PRC.

Political reform proves more difficult to identify than economic reform. The CCP's natural imperative to keep power often results in an ambiguous sense of *fang* but a definitively felt *shou*. Tracing the activity of Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and laws pertaining to their activity is one practical measure of political *fang* and *shou* since 1989. In 2011, the National People's Congress (NPC) adopted the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, which outlines a positive though nonspecific future for CSOs. This brief loosening was offset by several high-profile scandals which triggered national and provincial policies requiring tighter financial accountability, mandatory auditing, and fundraising restrictions (Simon 2013, 325-330). Similar to economic policies, the political reform trajectory has not shaken this cyclical pattern, but contrary to economic periods of *fang*, which usually

benefit businesses and local governments vice the state and the individual, political loosening is often to the benefit of the individual and civil society. Consequently, tightening of economic policies has typically been a government response to social unrest of those adversely affected by reform, while political *shou* has been initiated in reaction to threats to Party power.

Aside from the freedom of CSOs, there are several commentaries about broader political rights that have been subject to cyclical empowerment and restriction by the state. Philip Pan's (2008) narrative account of activists and the struggle for a new post-Mao China captures some of the personalized accounts that define threat and opportunity perception but are often left out of strictly academic writings. Particularly, he notes the hopeful political atmosphere in 2004, the year after China's new president Hu Jintao had "ended the SARS cover-up and abolished the *shourong* detention system" (Pan 2008, 270; italics in original). Instead of following through, the CCP began a new push to limit critical voices, all the while focusing on continuing economic reform.

In a similar, more recent experience, China's new President Xi Jinping entered office boldly declaring his plans to curb corruption and cut government excess. This signaled a commitment to end collusion and protection among government officials engaged in predatory practices, which had been growing under President Hu Jintao. However, a legal interpretation issued by the Supreme People's Court (SPC) and Supreme People's Procuratorate (SPP) in September 2013, less than a year after Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Party, enacts stricter punishment for online "rumors," which often include sincere attempts to expose corruption (Xinhua News Agency 2013a). Although the spokesman for the court asserted that citizens are still encouraged to root out corruption, the interpretation is perceived by many Chinese citizens to be a message against vigilante investigations (Moore 2013). The ruling was followed a few weeks later by an article in the *People's Daily* presenting the Bo Xilai trial as an ideal case of the Party's use of law to punish corruption (Xinhua News Agency 2013b). The juxtaposing of rogue citizens versus the Party in fighting corruption sends a clear message of retrenchment from the hopeful tone first expressed by President Xi.

What has been shown in brevity here is that cyclical social, economic, and political tensions, much like those leading to the Beijing protests in 1989, have not been resolved. The military crackdown in June 1989 marked the beginning of a period of economic and political *shou* that was recognized by all, but it was not to last. Deng's southern tour marked the continuance of the CCP's methods of reform, subject to capricious corrections. The primary changes in the Party's *fang* and *shou* adjustments after 1989 are the desynchronized political and economic cycles and increased efforts to anticipate societal concerns. Economic reform, being more openly supported by the CCP, continues to be subject to substantial legal developments. Advancement in property rights, which went from a small amendment in the Constitution in 2004 to a comprehensive property law in 2007, a readjusted interpretation of the property law by the SPC in 2011, and Party promises in 2013 to include rural areas in market-based land development (China Copyright and Media 2013), reveal just one dimension of the late-term adjustments still being made as the PRC enacts necessary reform and reacts to the public will. While this represents a different economic challenge from the rapid inflation that burdened workers in the 1980s, the pattern of popular dissatisfaction and government intervention is recognizable.

Politically, reform is still masked by mysterious slogans, such as the 2013 launch of the CCP's "mass line" campaign, which the Party says is designed to encourage government responsiveness to the people. But when the CCP senses a power threat, political reform efforts by CSOs and anti-corruption vigilantes are quickly muffled. At the same time, the CCP's anticipation of society's interests allows it to prevent protests and public demonstrations that would harm its image as the legitimate ruler of the PRC. This is where it has found institutionalized methods of political expression to be useful. Recently, the PRC has been experimenting with a number of democratic features to allow for the public to have input on policy decisions without necessarily having the final say.

One such example is the establishment of public consultation hearings for major development projects, designed to gain citizen feedback before discontent breaks out in protest, although the fledgling system is still being refined. From a social movement theory perspective, the development of this system shows an effort by the Party to change

society's "repertoires of contention" (Tarrow 1994). These refer to learned habits of political involvement by society based on the outcomes of previous social movements. The application of this theory becomes even more relevant in China because of the historical absence of democratic institutions for voicing public opinion. Although citizen petitions to government offices have a long imperial tradition and are legally protected by the 1995 and 2005 Regulations on Complaint Letters and Visits, several journalists have reported on extralegal punishment of petitioners in so-called "black jails" (B. Chen and Wang 2012; Lan and Ren 2013). As such, citizens often withhold their individual complaints until they finally break forth in mass protests. Success of these protests, including the recent opposition to a nuclear fuel processing plant in the city of Heshan in July 2013 (X. He and Tian 2013), reinforces the usefulness of protests in the Chinese public's repertoire of contention and evidences the government's need to improve public consultations and other alternative methods of citizen feedback.

Public consultation hearings, letters and visits to government offices, and direct election of low-level People's Congresses—the primary government body of a locality—are all examples of CCP institutionalization of democratic features to preemptively receive citizen input relating to issues of concern. These mechanisms are promising for those who would like to see more government accountability in China. To be sure, the structural flaws in these institutions are glaring, and competing political interests within the state tend to limit their effectiveness. Irrespective of the Constitutionally bottom-up structure of China's electoral system, the integration of the CCP at various levels of government (A. Chen 2011, 118) means that elected government officials are beholden to the will of the Party, whose power is constituted from the top-down (A. Chen 2011, 112). While CCP certainly does not view its control of the government at each level as problematic, it becomes problematic when the People's Congresses' inclination to seek Party guidance on issues of public concern categorically trumps their ability to provide a voice for societal interests. From a broader perspective, however, one sees that in spite of the continuance of cyclical social tension during reform, the CCP has taken clear steps to improve its systems of accountability. What has yet to be explained, though, is the processes through which society has collectively organized and created a public will to which the CCP must account.

Literature Review

The issue of post-Mao governance and citizen involvement in China is addressed by a broad, multidisciplinary body of literature. In order to focus only on the most applicable concepts to this thesis, this literature review is limited to selected arguments representing two primary debates. The first is the issue of regime legitimacy in the PRC. Literature is divided into traditional views that see post-reform Party legitimacy as arising from economic performance and nationalistic discourse and modern critiques that recognize the more nuanced trend of flexible ideology. The second debate is on the influence of civil society on state policy. Perspectives on this issue range from pessimistic accounts of corporatism to optimistic identification of a powerful, independent, public political will.

The traditional view on Chinese reform is best represented by Carl Riskin (1987). While aiming to explain the economic changes that led to the rise of China as a global power, Riskin advanced a now popular perspective that the economic development of China fulfills the Party's imperative for power, not only state power in the international arena, but also domestic power of the communist regime. The change in economic approach allowed the communist government to be "the first Chinese government in a century capable of keeping the peace within its own borders" (Riskin 1987, 1). According to this perspective, the CCP's ability to satisfy the material interests of the people and the national pride associated with China's rise is sufficient to explain popular legitimacy.

Others have recently questioned the sufficiency of economic development in achieving the CCP's legitimacy goals. Shambaugh (2008) argues "the twin pillars of economic growth and nationalism" are insufficient in explaining sustained CCP rule (103). Rather, he sees the Party's continued success as being driven by its willingness to continually "rejuvenate" itself, taking extreme measures to "finesse and adapt the ideology to suit policy decisions taken on nonideological grounds" (105). In other words, it is not enough for the Party to behave in a way that suits the people, but it must be able to explain its actions as a continuation of the grand scheme of Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist development.

These ideological foundations then become contestable spaces, as Jiping Zuo and Robert Benford's (1995) analysis of the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement and infamous Tiananmen Square crackdown reveal. Because activists were able to frame their grievances in the common ideological terms used by the CCP to claim legitimacy, the movement not only found resonance among similarly situated citizens, but it also was resilient to counterframing by the state. That is to say, because the movement was able to identify itself with the revolutionary language of the CCP, the state's reactionary identification of the students as "counterrevolutionary" was not popularly received (Zuo and Benford 1995, 139). Contrary to the economic development argument, which could not explain the 1989 protests, Shambaugh's (2008) ideological flexibility perspective seems more suitable to explaining the cyclical politics of post-Mao reform as well as growing features of citizen input in the CCP's rule. Additionally, this approach is more amenable to answering the question of why the CCP has introduced several mechanisms of citizen participation in governance in recent years. Material-based legitimacy, in contrast, offers no explanation of why Chinese society is demanding a greater stake in political decision-making.

With respect to these mechanisms for citizen input, four popular models have emerged within the literature that offer differing explanations of the extent of citizen influence. The first is by Peter Ho (2008), whose argument for "de-politicized politics" recognizes the practical approaches used by NGOs and activist groups to achieve their political objectives. "Environmentalism has gained an increasing political leverage by avoiding any connotation with being a movement, by all means trying to appear small, low-key and localized, and acting as the state's partner rather than its adversary" (Ho 2008, 21). This approach shares similarities with Spires's (2011) identification of a "contingent symbiosis" between local officials and NGOs, which is built upon their mutual yet precarious need for each other. Both these models point out how activist society has been most effective when it avoids confrontation with core political interests of the Party or local officials and instead focuses on limited political goals. These same models can be applied to online society, which has learned to avoid direct confrontation with the Party and state, using instead indirect methods of critique.

The other two models explaining citizen influence take more extreme positions. Some argue pessimistically that the development of a collective political will, especially through electronic media, is the exception to the rule (Ru and Ortolano 2008, Leibold 2011, Liu 2013). From this viewpoint, ostensibly democratic features of Party rule are in reality mechanisms to reinforce the one-party system. Jiang Ru and Leonard Ortolano's (2008) analysis of corporatism in China's nonprofit sector makes the argument that environmental NGOs in China work more to serve the interests of the Chinese state than the interests of the people. Indeed, the state's power of censorship and encouragement of self-censorship through punishment of offenders is widely recognized even in more positive literature (Ho 2008, Spires 2011). Nonetheless, others have argued that civil society has succeeded in creating a public sphere capable of developing autonomous political thought to which the Chinese government is partially adherent (Yang and Calhoun 2008, Yang 2009, Yang 2011). While this thesis does not go so far as to argue that China's current political system is inherently accountable, it is in line with the more optimistic view that there exists a growing, autonomous political will to which the state must answer.

Theoretical Framework

Civil society is the natural place to begin an inquiry into the development of a public will. The concept of civil society, while certainly not new, readily provides new insights into state-society relations. Michael Edwards (2011a) captured the broad history of this idea when he wrote, "From the time of classical Greece, thinkers have returned to civil society as one way of generating new energy and ideas around old and familiar questions as the world has changed around them" (3). More specific to this inquiry is civil society's role in developing a public consciousness to which the Chinese state is held accountable. Two key concepts are central to what is here dubbed "the new(s) civil society." The first is that of the public sphere. The public sphere is most commonly regarded as a domain or space of civil society (Baynes 2002, Edwards 2011a), although it has sometimes been inappropriately conflated with civil society itself (Edwards 2004). It is in the public sphere that ideas and values are expressed, discussed, reshaped, and collectivized, which

makes it a crucial battleground for regime legitimacy. Furthermore, as citizens share news in the public sphere, the frame through which it is presented has important effects on state and societal response. The second concept is that of new media connections, which have formed a new space for the growth of civil society. The convergence of civil society's function as a vehicle for public discourse and its form in the virtual world of the Internet and cell phones has given members of the new(s) civil society unprecedented ability to form a public opinion on matters of government policy, which in turn empowers demands for government accountability.

The development of China's public sphere parallels Jürgen Habermas's (1991) account of the creation of a "bourgeois" public sphere in Europe, which identifies the clear role public wills have in reordering political power. Regarding the origins of the bourgeois public sphere, he notes,

On the one hand this capitalism stabilized the power structure of a society organized in estates, and on the other hand it unleashed the very elements within which this power structure would one day dissolve. We are speaking of the elements of the new commercial relationships: the *traffic in commodities and news* created by early capitalist long-distance trade. (Habermas 1991, 15; italics in original)

This model is, perhaps, more universal than Habermas realized. Liberalization of the Chinese economy through *gaige kaifang* presents a parallel story of strengthening the Party's legitimacy while adding to the number of societal problems it must address. Societal awareness of these problems encourages Chinese citizens to engage in a critical reading of state-sponsored news. Additionally, as the working class was categorically excluded from Habermas's public sphere, so are many Chinese migrant workers traditionally less able to engage in many of the leisurely activities through which public discourse occurs, but the ubiquity of communication technologies is doing much to improve their access.

This is where the addition of the second element of the new(s) civil society—new media associations—becomes vital. Within two decades of its introduction to the Chinese public, the Internet has become a pervasive feature of everyday life in China. The China Internet Network Information Center (2014) reported that Internet users in China had

reached 618 million by the end of 2013, driven primarily by growing mobile Internet users in recent years (6), and China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (2014) reported that by the end of 2013 there were 90.8 active cell phones for every 100 people in the country, which is comparable to the extent of cell phone use in the United States (Pew Research Center 2014), although it is uncertain how many people in China are using multiple cell phones. Irrespective of these staggering numbers, recent academic investigations of Chinese civil society have focused primarily on physical association with only secondary consideration for virtual communities. Such research has been productive in explaining China's emerging civil society, marked by growing freedoms of Chinese citizens to join associations that promote ideals, supplement government public benefit work, and represent a sphere of power outside the Party (Ho 2008; Spires 2011; Simon 2013), but the lack of focus on virtual associations needs to be addressed.

The most comprehensive analysis of the Internet using civil society perspectives remains Guobin Yang's (2009) *The Power of the Internet in China*. Other approaches have only partially incorporated civil society concepts into studies of the Internet. Yangzi Sima (2011) engages in a comparison of the two by showing how the Internet has enabled some NGOs to overcome resource mobilization challenges, but the intersection of the Internet and civil society in his analysis is limited. Other research has focused intently on the Internet with little connection to the broader theoretical literature of civil society. Similar to disagreements in civil society research, isolated studies of the Internet in China are rife with debate about the Internet's power to encourage democratic accountability of the government (Yang 2011) or anesthetize the public to authoritarian hegemony (Leibold 2011). But one must be careful to avoid simplistic equations of the Internet as facilitative of either transformative or divisive discourse. Instead of tending toward extremes, research must explain how it facilitates both one and the other. In this regard, there is a significant knowledge gap concerning China.

In order to fill this gap, this thesis investigates the size and politicization of China's electronic connections through the theoretical lens of civil society, particularly focusing on their role as a public sphere. Craig Calhoun (2011) calls "a vibrant public sphere ... the dimension of civil society [that is] most essential to democracy" (321). The

link between a public sphere and democracy is found in the public sphere's role to transform individual interests into collective wills. However, democratic outcomes are only truly witnessed when competing wills, what Nancy Fraser (1992) calls "subaltern counterpublics," are allowed to flourish. Otherwise, the "effects [of dominance in stratified societies] will be exacerbated where there is only a single, comprehensive public sphere" (Fraser 1992, 123). As Lincoln Dahlberg (2005) summarizes,

When talking of *the* public sphere, Habermas is not talking about a homogenous, specific public, but about the whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical communication of individuals, groups, associations, social movements, journalistic enterprises, and other civic institutions. (112; italics in original)

Thus, whether subnational publics are supportive of the current power structure or more closely approach Fraser's (1992) subaltern counterpublics, the public sphere represents the ability of citizens to engage in public discourse. While popular support or critical accountability of a government does not equate to the institutionalization of democratic features, democratic legitimacy cannot exist without it.

The public sphere concept is central to this research because new media networks in China provide a comparatively free space for the spread and discussion of news. This is a crucial task of civil society that has the power to work in support of or opposition to the current regime. As such, control of information becomes a factor in all major theories on civil society. Corporatist models look deeply into the state mechanisms for censoring information. To be sure, censorship is central to the CCP's rule in China, but censorship of ideas is never an easy task, as James Scott's "hidden transcripts" reveal (1990). Regardless of censorship, however, unbalanced distribution of discursive power may strengthen pro-hegemonic voices, as has been highlighted by Gramscian scholars of civil society. To borrow again from Habermas (1991), the public's strength found in the "*traffic in ... news*" can be used in favor of or opposition to the CCP (15; italics in original).

The introduction of *gaige kaifang* began the expansion of China's public sphere from a limited group of academics in the 1980s to a large, connected public in the current

day. While many scholars have already analyzed this public sphere, this thesis approaches the digital side of China's civil society to help explain its role in state-society relations. In this sense, the concept of the new(s) civil society is not based on any new theoretical position. Rather, it applies thoroughly developed perspectives of civil society and the public sphere to a specific community that is relatively unstudied through this lens. The nature of the domain of electronic communications gives it certain advantages and disadvantages when compared with physical associations. When direct action can be taken without state reprisal, the Internet is capable of quickly mobilizing protesters, as was the case in Heshan. When the sense of threat is greater, electronic communications have also provided a place of secrecy or anonymity for the advancement of hidden critiques of CCP rule. As such, this inquiry into the new(s) civil society looks not only at the extent of electronic connections but also at the type of discourse that is spread through them. Even when issues of political importance are not directly addressed, the framing of discourse reproduced in the public sphere has significant power to commend or condemn CCP rule.

Goals and Methods of this Inquiry

This thesis develops support for the argument that the informal, digital domain of civil society is a necessary part of the explanation of recent introduction of democratic features of Party rule. This inquiry is designed with two goals in mind. The first is to build an approach to understanding the size and spread of participation in various digital communication platforms. Understanding the size of China's online communities helps pave the way for more direct comparison with physical civil society. Furthermore, the design of these platforms can be qualitatively compared to help explain relative suitability for various forms of political communication. The second goal is to develop a better explanation of the success of activist microbloggers on Sina Weibo, China's largest microblogging platform. With this platform currently receiving much media attention, it is fitting to develop academic approaches to understanding how microbloggers have created a space of relatively free political speech compared under the CCP's semi-authoritarian rule.

This inquiry is developed using a hybrid qualitative/quantitative approach. The first goal is accomplished in a questionnaire distributed to residents of Guangdong and by comparing publicized participation levels in online social media and traditional CSOs. Reports by social media companies, news sources, and online traffic monitoring companies are compared to create a picture of where participation lies. Because social media and traditional CSOs represent very different ways of interacting, a qualitative analysis is used to create a more complete picture of how participation in these different groups occurs, which may allow for more comprehensive comparison.

The second part of this inquiry develops through a qualitative reading of microblog posts on Sina Weibo over six months and a social network analysis (SNA) of selected political microblogs. Extended observation of microblogs is used to develop a partial taxonomy of political microblogging, which is necessary to explain how an ostensibly entertainment focused platform has become politicized. The SNA then provides a descriptive analysis of a network of political microblogs, creating bounds for an otherwise ill-defined community, quantifying network properties, and identifying important members of the network through multiple measures of centrality. These network data explain how information spreads rapidly within this group and how the microbloggers have built a dense network, resilient to state reprisal. More detailed methodological considerations are outlined in the respective research chapters.

Overview of Chapters

The inquiry in this thesis builds from a theoretical position toward empirical approaches. Chapter 2 explores in depth the theoretical foundations of civil society research. It includes a review of the current literature on civil society and explains more fully the leanings of this thesis toward neo-Tocquevillian approaches, with some noteworthy deviations. Chapter 3 develops an empirical understanding of the size of China's online communities. It also reveals the challenges of survey methods in Chinese society and interdependence of digital and physical society. Finally, it offers qualitative assessment of the forces of participation, addressing the question why Chinese citizens are more

inclined to engage in a virtual public sphere than a physical one. Chapter 4 addresses the second goal of this inquiry, outlining the tactics used by microbloggers on Sina Weibo to advance contentious political goals within the limits set by the state. Furthermore, it provides an SNA of a community of political microbloggers, offering initial insights into the network design features that support this kind of political activism. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes this thesis with a summary of the findings.

Chapter 2

Civil Society: Concept and Approaches

Civil society is a notoriously slippery concept.

- Intro to *Civil Society* by Michael Edwards, 2004

Any researcher must be just a little foolish to approach the topic of civil society. On the surface, it seems simple and self-contained, but upon investigation it becomes something of a Pandora's Box. The definition of civil society given by Michael Walzer (1998) in the previous chapter, while preferred, is not the only definition. The rich debate within political science regarding the effects of civil society is plagued by an overly diverse range of conceptualizations. It could almost be said that with each new piece of research on civil society comes a new definition. Although it is rather uncontroversial to say that civil society exists somewhere in the realm of human interactions separate, to at least a minimal degree, from the state, not much else can be considered universally accepted. This chapter explores the theoretical foundations of civil society research and makes a case for a more universal conceptualization in empirical research. However, this conceptualization is only partially complete, and further work is required to bridge theory and empirics. Even within the empirical approaches in the following chapters, it is difficult to expand measurement models beyond the traditional focus on organized civil society.

Universally Conceptualizing Civil Society

Edwards (2004) identifies three popular categories of civil society conceptualizations: “associational life,” “the good society,” and “the public sphere.” Within these three schools, one sees a conflict between civil society as something that exists institutionally—most prominently found in associational life definitions—and as the normative product of human interaction, e.g., good society. Kenneth Baynes (2002) most

clearly articulates the conundrum when he states, “Within recent literature, civil society, whether it is considered as a normative ideal or an empirical reality, appears as an extremely paradoxical, if not simply contradictory (and hence impossible), phenomenon” (124). In order for this study of Chinese civil society and politics to be of any relevance, it is first necessary to provide some conceptual clarity to the topic of civil society.

It would be tempting—and academically lazy—simply to borrow from Walzer’s (1998) definition without providing a defense of the theoretical and empirical merits. In fact, much of the unresolved debate in civil society research has originated from repeated use of certain definitions of civil society without critical self-reflection. Edwards (2004) calls associational life definitions “the well-worn route of the revivalists,” and for good reasons (72). Some of the most prolific and praising research on civil society present the concept in terms of formal, politically conscious civic associations (Putnam, Leonardi, and Rafaella 1993; Putnam 2000; Alagappa 2004b). But this is only one form that civil society can take, as critics of the neo-Tocquevillian revivalists have been keen to point out (Berman 1997; Riley 2005).

On the other hand, if we accept the critics’ objection that civil society is too narrowly conceived, will the concept then become too vast to be of any value in empirical studies? Lucian Pye (1992) makes a similar argument regarding statist literature, which he claims opposes the “basic goal of contemporary scholarship,” namely “to disaggregate precisely such grand but abstract concepts as ‘the state,’ and to identify and analyze the actual forces, processes, and actors which operate behind the facade of these abstractions” (36). Keeping Pye’s lucid warning in mind, I would argue the concept of civil society faces a different problem: it has too often been too narrowly conceptualized in empirical research for effective disaggregation to take place. Instead, the concept is trimmed to the point where it can be, it would seem, analyzed as a whole. This is why there exists research into such grand ideas as the famous neo-Tocquevillian assertion that strong, associational civil society is central to and maybe a cause of democracy (Putnam, Leonardi, and Rafaella 1993; Putnam 2000; Alagappa 2004a). The point here is not to say that such research into the relationship between civil society and democratic governance is fruitless. On the contrary, this thesis advances a neo-Tocquevillian understanding of

civil society's democratizing power, but it does so by first accepting that civil society is much larger than pro-democratic civic life. Only once the concept of civil society is sufficiently expanded to include all its constituent parts can its unique manifestations in different sociopolitical landscapes be investigated and explained.

One fundamental trap for much of the civil society literature is that it confuses form and function, defining civil society both as a realm of human interaction and the normative products of that realm. Lawrence Cahoon (2002) intrinsically ties civil society with communitarian values, arguing that "the commitment to the moral value of civil society, hence solidarity, loyalty, and fellow citizenship, itself depends on comprehensive accounts of 'the Good'" (12). In this sense, civil society has no space for passive participation. Being a member of civil society means being a member of a group with at least some moral commitment to the local community. Expounding on this normative concept, he further argues that "civil society is a kind of order; civility is proper to it; it is lawful; and it evinces a kind of solidarity" (Cahoon 2002, 12). This perspective is problematic on two fronts. First, it assumes civil society exists only as formal, intentional associations. All informal, unintentional connections between people—meeting on a bus, bumping into someone on the street, stumbling across a comments section on a website—fail to meet the standard of commitment Cahoon lays out. This critique is more broadly applicable to all definitions of civil society that are overly concerned with formalized associations. Second, and more applicable to various normative understandings of civil society, it ignores a broad range of malevolent human interaction that is equally important in civil society research.

This critique is perhaps best supported by Ashutosh Varshney's (2002) research into ethnic strife in India. The key difference between communities plagued by ethnic violence and those not plagued was not the strength of associations within the community, but rather the type. Namely, regular associations between Hindus and Muslims in a community were much more likely to prevent ethnic violence than associations exclusively among Hindus or Muslims. This distinction has been generally labeled "bridging" versus "bonding" civil society (Gittel and Vidal 1998, 8). A more extreme example to counter normative definitions of civil society is that of social groups

that actively meet in order to strengthen the subjugation of others or dismantle democratic, communitarian principles. One could think of the Klu Klux Klan or political movements to establish authoritarian rule in Germany (Berman 1997) and Italy (Riley 2005) as meeting these criteria. These groups clearly fail to meet the normative requirement that civil society is inseparable from civic virtue.

Normative definitions similar to Cahoon's fall into a subcategory of civil society, which for lack of a current definition I will term "civic society." More precisely, civic society can be considered an ideal form of civil society marked by communitarian morals and engagement in a democratic public sphere. Much of the empirical research on civil society, especially from neo-Tocquevillian perspectives, focuses a great deal on civic society without adequately recognizing its place within the larger whole of civil society. Jean Elshtain (1998) conflates the two concepts when he argues that "by civil society we have in mind the many forms of community and association that dot the landscape of a democratic culture" (24). Similarly, in his consideration of civil society in Confucian cultures, Peter Nosco (2002) adopts a tailored definition of civil society equivalent to anti-Confucian civic society. To Nosco, civil society is "inseparable from voluntary associations" of the type that are "potentially destabilizing to the organic society envisioned in Confucian societies" (334-5). By equating civil society and the ideal civic society, these approaches ignore important ways in which free human interaction may work to support the cultural hegemony of an authoritarian regime, as Riley (2005) argues in his Gramscian perspective on interwar Italian civil society.

Other studies of civic society are more careful to identify the focus of their research as a subset of civil society, but often the relationship with the larger whole is left undefined. In his extensive empirical research into what he terms "civic engagement," Robert Putnam has rigorously shown links between this operationalization of civic society and democracy (Putnam, Leonardi, and Raffaella 1993; Putnam 2000). In the introduction to their research, Robert Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Nanetti Raffaella (1993) carefully outline the scope of civil society investigated:

We examine the link between [democratic institutional] performance and the character of civic life—what we term 'the civic community.' As depicted in Tocqueville's classic interpretation of American democracy and other accounts of

civic virtue, the civic community is marked by an active, public spirited citizenry, by egalitarian political relations, by a social fabric of trust and cooperation. (15)

However, the authors fail to then place this normative ideal within the larger realm that is civil society. In Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000), there is not even an index reference for civil society, although the term is sprinkled throughout the book. Without a clearer distinction in research between civil society as a realm of human interaction and civic society as an ideal form that can emerge within that realm, the bridge between empirics and theory will remain shaky at best.

Research that has taken the route of building theory from empirics has done a better job of accepting a conception of civil society that is less than ideal, but there are some constraints on empirical research that have also placed limitations on the definition. Namely, much empirical work on civil society centers on formal organizations, e.g., NGOs, clubs, and activist groups, to the exclusion of informal or weakly formalized associations. This is particularly true regarding works on China. Yangzi Sima (2011) approaches the issue of environmental activism from the perspective of NGO efforts and how the Internet has augmented their ability to evade corporatist control. From this point of view, Sima presents civil society as existing only in the formal realm as the NGO, while the Internet and larger discussion public discussion is a tool to be used rather than an additional domain of civil society. Jiang Ru and Leonard Ortolano's (2008) assessment of corporatism in China is equally narrowed by the perspective that civil society exists primarily as NGOs and formal associations. Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun (2008) expand their empirical focus beyond NGOs to include all public fora in which environmentalism and rights more broadly are discussed, but like normative perspectives of civil society, they fail to identify this public sphere in relation to the larger civil society that exists in China.

Perhaps the reason for the abundance of empirical research that only deals with the formal domain of civil society has to do with the nature of the data. Organizations are easy to identify, count, approach, consult, and investigate. They are the low-hanging fruit of empirical civil society research. However, the power of civil society is not vested entirely in formal, organized associations. As Judith Shapiro (2012) succinctly explains,

“Not all Chinese public participation is expressed through citizens’ groups ... Moreover ‘environmental mass incidents,’ as the government calls such protests, are astonishingly numerous” (104). Empirical research that does not place NGOs within the context of broader civil society risks forgetting that formal associations are one manifestation of a concept of human interaction that includes the formal and informal, the spontaneous and regular, the coherent and chaotic, and the public and private.

In spite of the surprising disunity among scholars of civil society as to what the concept actually includes, civil society has proven to be a powerful driver of politics. Scholars have shown the power of civil society to strengthen democracy (Putnam, Leonardi, and Raffaella 1993; Putnam 2000), quell (or intensify) ethnic strife (Varshney 2002), support authoritarian transition (Berman 1997; Riley 2005), and challenge an authoritarian party-state’s environmental policy (Ho and Edmonds 2008; Shapiro 2012). It is clear, then, that the concept of civil society should be broad enough to account for such divergent outcomes. Unfortunately, the limited perspectives contained in the “associational life,” “good society,” and “public sphere” definitions identified by Edwards (2004) are insufficient individually to explain all of civil society. Optimistically, though, Edwards asserts, “The good news is that there is no need to treat the civil society debate as a zero-sum game in which one model is accepted to the exclusion of others, and every reason to embrace a holistic approach that integrates the elements of all three schools of thought” (72). In fact, a holistic approach is necessary in order to reconcile the paradoxical outcomes identified by empirical researchers.

Surprisingly, hope for a more universal understanding of civil society can be found in more critical theories on the subject. John Ehrenberg’s (1999) extensive historical account of civil society’s conceptual development approaches the modern era with a critique of the neo-Tocquevillian praise of civil society at the expense of the state. Non-state associational life is such a popular political concept in America because, as Ehrenberg (1999) argues, “contemporary thought is characterized by a pervasive skepticism of the state and of the possibilities afforded by broad political action” (233). The skepticism Ehrenberg identifies in his critique was perhaps more pervasive at the time of its writing than it is today, considering the concurrent surge of market-driven

liberal democratic thinking. Nonetheless, Ehrenberg is right to identify that skeptical attitudes toward the state played a persistent role in forming the contemporary concept of civil society, which is often presented as antagonistic to the state. To counter this, Ehrenberg (1999) offers a now oft-referenced broader conceptualization of civil society, arguing,

The most productive use of the term [civil society] is to describe the social relations and structures that lie between the state and the market. Civil society delineates a sphere that is formally distinct from the body politic and state authority on one hand, and from the immediate pursuit of self-interest and the imperatives of the market on the other. (235)

Here, not only is civil society finally recognized as an inherently neutral source of power that can advance or attack democratic ideals, but it is also conceived of as broader than mere associations or a public sphere of discussion.

The idea that civil society is simultaneously public and private is not unique to Ehrenberg. In his defense of a Tocquevillian understanding of civil society, Elshtain (1998) argues that “civil society is a realm that is neither individualist nor collectivist. It partakes of both the ‘I’ and the ‘we’” (25). Similarly, Nosco’s (2002) Confucian perspective recognizes that civil society requires a balanced perspective that is neither wholly public nor private. He argues, “Where civil society has often been associated with the public sphere, we are more interested here in the development of a private sphere of the sort that enables individuals to associate in ways potentially destabilizing to the organic society envisioned in Confucian societies” (Nosco 2002, 335). However, both Elshtain and Nosco’s presentation are rooted in an understanding of civil society inherently conflicts with larger interests of the state. While Elshtain also sees civil society as the tool to resolve this tension, his and Nosco’s conceptualization of civil society still fail to acknowledge how certain manifestations of civil society may work to strengthen the state or authoritarian rule, whereas Ehrenberg’s three spheres of the market, state, and civil society present a more neutral, universal understanding.

Still, there are some shortcomings with Ehrenberg’s approach. Like any top-down construction of political theory, empirical application of the three spheres concept is not easily achieved, because it subtly assumes formal separation among the market,

government, and civil society, which is not always the case. In China, for instance, it would not be considered surprising to see a business owner meeting with a local government official over dinner to discuss future business plans and the development vision for the area. During the process, the two are developing *guanxi* (relationship) that may be useful in the future for helping the business owner navigate bureaucratic requirements. If we take a moment to ignore critiques of rent seeking and bribery and look solely at the type of relationship being developed between the two, it is clear that this relationship is simultaneously operating in the market and government spheres. Imagine also two business associates who take a Saturday to escape work and simply enjoy a round of golf together. While their time spent on the front nine might help strengthen their business relationship, the pure motive to enjoy shared recreation clearly fits within the civil sphere of human association. The point here is not to say the three spheres concept should be done away with. On the contrary, the three spheres are useful for conceptually dissecting complex relations, but it is important to keep in mind that these ideal distinctions are hard to find in the real world. As such, an accurate universal conception of civil society must be more flexible to deal with the presence of civil society within nontraditional arenas.

Other critical works have gone further in conceptualizing the theoretical independence but empirical inseparability of civil society and other spheres of human interaction. Baynes (2002) begins his conceptual unravelling of civil society by placing within a “fourfold classification: family, civil society, economy, and state” (125). However, he departs from Ehrenberg by emphasizing the inseparable relationship these spheres of human interaction share. His argument is presented from a perspective of “associative democracy,” which “points to the idea of a civil society, as more or less spontaneous source of public opinion, that necessarily maintains a degree of independence from the state, even if it is not completely immune from state action and regulation” (Baynes 2002, 131). Furthermore, while recognizing the role civil society plays in creating a space for public discussion that furthers democratic values, Baynes (2002) is careful not to fall into the old trap of presenting this function as the entirety of civil society. Rather, he aptly identifies the public sphere as “a domain within civil society,” as are civic associations and nonpolitical social life (129). This definition of

civil society as a distinct sphere of human interaction, not empirically separable from other spheres, and which is further divided into various domains, holds both theoretical and empirical value.

Through this inquiry, it has become clear that civil society, while ancient and timeless, is still a concept too large to fit into any one scheme. Although there are many normative products of civil society, one must be careful not to confuse the effects of civil society with the concept itself. Perhaps the difficulty lies in the fact that civil society is not an institution or set of institutions, and it is certainly not static. Rather, it is a set of human interactions; spanning the entire conceptual range of formality; theoretically separate from business interests or national workings of the state; that is by necessity changing and adapting according to the character of its constituent persons and the political, social, and economic environment with which it interacts. Few capture the breadth of the concept in so few words as Michael Walzer (1998), when he calls civil society “the space of un-coerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology—that fill this space” (123-4). Not only does he include the widest range of human interaction apart from the market and the state, but in recognizing civil society as a “space of un-coerced human association” Walzer also recognizes how civil society relations can be layered on top of other relations that are either coerced or are formed for the purposes of the market or the state. This crucially allows recognition of a free, though limited, civil society within corporatist authoritarian states. It is only with such a complete concept of civil society that one can finally accomplish the task of modern scholarship given by Pye (1992) to disaggregate this concept and study the forces at work with an eye to understanding how a given manifestation of civil society affects politics.

Operationalizing Civil Society: Tocqueville, the Revivalists, and the Critics

Neo-Tocquevillian perspectives have been discussed tangentially in the first section of this chapter, but here they will be more directly evaluated. Although this initial presentation may give the appearance of a general critical attitude, it is in fact the purpose

here to strip away the shortcomings of Tocquevillian revivalism in order that the most important contributions of the approach may be saved. At its core, the neo-Tocquevillian argument holds that effective democracy is dependent on a connected, group-minded, and civically engaged civil society. Where some scholars have focused on role civil society in overcoming political contention by bridging different groups within society (Skocpol 1998; Varshney 2002; DeVotta 2004), others have argued for civil society's function in building social capital and training civic behavior (Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000), still others have highlighted civil society's function as a public forum for voicing and discussion of ideas in democratic fashion (Elshtain 1998; Baynes 2002; Yang and Calhoun 2008). Most crucially, the neo-Tocquevillian school of thought sees formal associations in civil society as the necessary structure to support democracy (Alagappa 2004b, 41). This body of literature has done much to advance an understanding of the connection between civil society and democracy, but upon investigation of the mechanisms through which this connection is made, certain weaknesses are revealed. One particularly difficult concept within this perspective is that of social capital, which generally refers to the extent of social networks as well as the learned norms of human interaction, but the connection with democracy is not so straightforward.

Social capital, it turns out, is a term nearly as slippery as civil society itself. Putnam (2000) most inclusively calls it a "tool," analogous to physical capital and human capital, based on the idea that "social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups" (19). There are at list two distinct dimensions to social capital. On the one hand, it can be a morally neutral measure of the extent and design of social networks. All other things constant, larger social networks are considered more powerful because they can bring more people to act upon an issue. On the other hand, social capital includes a moral dimension of how people interact, implying learned norms of group behavior. Based on these two forms, social capital could be considered a two-dimensional trait of civil society. However, the distinction between these two dimensions has not been fully identified in social capital research. Indeed, Putnam (2000) recognizes that, while beneficial for group members, social capital can be applied toward malevolent ends (22). On the whole, however, neo-Tocquevillian scholarship has tended to emphasize the moral dimension of social capital found in civil society. Social capital, sometimes

broadly and naively equated with civil society, can train norms of reciprocity (Putnam 2000), “[habituate] citizens to democratic practices and civic virtues” (Yun 2004, 185), and “[form] human character, competence, and capacity for citizenship” (Glendon 1991, 109). This leads to trouble operationalizing the concept for scholarly research, since the delineation between its positive and normative qualities are unclear (Foley and Edwards 1999).

Similar to civil society itself, for social capital to be a useful analytical concept it must be disaggregated into morally loaded and neutral dimensions. This is not to say that these two classifications of social capital are grown independently. In fact, the skills of human interaction, art of negotiation, concept of civic responsibility, and any other normative manifestations of social capital must be trained within the context of some larger extant social network. However, just as preexisting, neutral social networks can train norms of harmonious democracy, they have also been used to train factionalism and domination. Varshney’s (2002) study of civil society in India lucidly reveals the truth that social capital can be leveraged against peaceful democratic participation. Studies of the Internet have also shown that oftentimes high levels of networked social capital without the restraining mechanisms of face-to-face interactions may at times do harm to the moral dimension of social capital (Fung and Kedl 2000; Dahlberg 2007; Leibold 2011). Without the distinction between these two forms of social capital, the neo-Tocquevillian argument is at a loss to explain why some civil societies support democracy while others are opposed.

Others have critiqued the civil society revivalists for presenting an ideal civic society as nondemocratic localism disguised as democracy. Ehrenberg (1999) is perhaps one of the strictest critics in this regard. He argues that

Intellectual and political elites earnestly promote local commitments and good manners. ... But moralizing clichés and less television will not be enough to reverse the civic disengagement of contemporary life ... Tocqueville is not particularly helpful in these conditions. Categories derived from face-to-face democracy of early nineteenth-century New England towns cannot furnish a credible model for public life in a highly commodified mass society marked by unprecedented levels of economic inequality. (234)

Cahoone (2002) apologetically counters Ehrenberg's argument by pointing out the flaw of extreme liberalism is that unrestrained pursuit of individual liberty ignores the normative, selfless good required to surmount social challenges. Instead of being antagonistic to the democratic state, Cahoone (2002) sees communitarianism as antagonistic to individualism. This form of civic society, Cahoone (2002) argues, "ought to serve as the basis for liberal republican politics" (11). Elshtain (1998) supports this communitarian view that civil society is not a guise for localism but rather a citizen support structure for the state. Other scholars of civil society have backtracked further from Tocqueville's romanticizing of the local community. More in the middle ground, Theda Skocpol's (1998) critique of localism in civil society literature documents the important ways in which civil society is both a local and national undertaking. While the presentation of local concerns to a national government is an important function of democracy, the vibrancy of local groups is only one piece of the puzzle.

The debate on localism points back to another area that needs addressing within neo-Tocquevillian arguments and their critics: the relationship between civil society and the state. Even when it is acknowledged that in reality these two spheres of human interaction are never truly separated, it is often difficult for neo-Tocquevillian arguments to acknowledge the mutually supportive role they can play, because it challenges the romanticized concept of a localized public standing up to the abuses of centralized government. Tocqueville (2004) himself presented social organizations as an alternative to the state when it comes to addressing social issues, most famously writing, "Wherever there is a new undertaking, at the head of which you would expect to see in France the government and in England some great lord, in the United States you are sure to find an association" (595). To be sure, civil society does fill important gaps left by the state. However, it is crucially important that civil society is not solely understood as antagonistic to central state power. Recent scholarship has shown greater readiness to highlight cooperation between civil society and the state, even in cases where authoritarian control is assumed to be at odds with the interests of civil society (Ho 2008; Spires 2011). Alagappa (2004b) further argues that the great shift from Tocquevillian to neo-Tocquevillian thinking is the role civil society plays in supporting democratic institutions of the state (41).

In fact, civil society has at times worked to strengthen the state apparatus. Two current examples of this in China are environmental protection and anti-corruption efforts. The CCP has a clear interest in environmentally conscious development that stems from the need to maintain popular legitimacy as well as achieve long-term developmental success. Still, it has much catching up to do after decades of rapid, unchecked industrial growth. To this end, it has shown increased willingness to work with civil society organizations. Shapiro (2012) summarizes this unique relationship:

Yet even as there are tremendous changes with respect to the environment from the top down, as well as new demands for pollution controls and food safety from influential middle class consumers, the grass roots are feeling their power and becoming active, often forming a partnership with the upper reaches of the bureaucracy in order to pressure corrupt developers, self-interested local officials, lower- and middle-level bureaucrats and polluting factory operators. (103)

Similarly, civil society organizations (CSO) and especially online bloggers have been keen to point out corruption in local government while navigating the murky waters of reprisal. Central state power, while not always supportive of vigilante exposure of corruption, has shown a consciousness of this problem and allows for some public discussion of corruption, often taking the opportunity to present itself as the rescuer of Chinese citizens from local abuses. The interests from the top to maintain single-party rule in a rapidly developing state are maintained, and the state administrative apparatus is strengthened by inputs from NGOs and community organizations that help it monitor corruption and polluting activity.

Some scholars may argue that this is not free civil society at all, but rather these are corporatist entities being manipulated for the ends of the state (Ru and Ortolano 2008; Liu 2012). Such arguments seem to support the popular neo-Tocquevillian perspective that a free, communitarian, civic-minded society is needed for democracy. But this argument shuts out the ways in which civil society may freely develop certain interests which are harmonized to a limited degree with those of a nondemocratic state. Cooperation is possible in these areas in spite of the contentious politics that surround conflicting interests. Spires (2011) gives the term “contingent symbiosis” to this phenomenon. At its core, contingent symbiosis recognizes that the spread of power

between a state and civil society is not a zero-sum exchange. While Spires is hardly the first to advance a more nuanced understanding of state-society power exchange (Alagappa 2004b, 36-7; DeVotta 2004, 294; Yun 2004, 186), his analysis uniquely documents how the various interests represented by grassroots NGOs, local government officials, and national bureaucrats have converged in areas of cooperation that simultaneously strengthen the state and give freedom to the grassroots groups to advance their political goals.

In addition to overlapping interests, there are more nuanced understandings of power itself that also allow for a theory of civil society that is not fundamentally at odds with the state. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall's (2005) taxonomy of power is particularly applicable here. With respect to power expressed through interactions, the authoritarian state can be considered much like the democratic state; both have a great deal of power to compel and limit action through laws, police, and institutional distribution of resources. As Max Weber (1965) famously remarks, regardless of regime type, "the state ... claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory" (2; italics in original). In spite of this, democratic and authoritarian states often do not equally rely on constitutive power, which "concerns the determination of social capacities and interests," either narrowly through structures or broadly through discourses (Barnett and Duval 2005, 53). Regardless of the state's interactive power over citizens' action through censorship, legal restrictions on assembly, or even terror, society retains the constitutive power to legitimate or condemn this behavior through discourse. Naturally, expectations of reprisal often limit expression of sentiments against authoritarian power, but one should not assume that the absence of pro-democratic discourse is explained solely by political threat. Indeed, contrary to Tocqueville's idealistic presentation, civil society has often supported nondemocratic states. This is where corporatist and Gramscian arguments have most challenged neo-Tocquevillian democratization arguments.

Rather than an alternative theory on civil society, corporatism is best understood as a description of a civil society whose formal organizations are insufficiently independent from the state. In a corporatist system, civil society is depoliticized and

associations are limited (Gallagher 2004; Ru and Ortolano 2008; Liu 2012). This does not necessarily conflict with neo-Tocquevillian theory on democracy, since civil society in a corporatist system fails to meet the neo-Tocquevillian criterion of independence. Gallagher's (2004) delineation of the two is most insightful, recognizing the neo-Tocquevillian perspective—what she calls the “civil society” framework—is “an analytical model of social change.... State corporatism, in contrast, is a descriptive model of state-society relations” (421). More to the point, corporatism is often offered as an explanation why civil society has failed to support democracy as expected in neo-Tocquevillian theories. To be sure, the state plays an important role in safeguarding the rights of individuals to assemble and communicate within civil society. But even in situations of extreme dominance, people find ways to express counter-hegemonic ideas and experience solidarity (Scott 1990). Thus, even when democracy is hindered by state corporatism, complicity of civil society cannot be ignored.

This is where a Gramscian argument provides some insight. By placing focus on discourse, civil society becomes more responsible for political outcomes, even when its freedoms are limited by the state. Gramscian perspectives on hegemony and discourse are useful to escape reductionist accounts of corporatism, but rather than excusing actions or inactions of civil society, they are more appropriately understood as providing a sense of agency to the individual and society. Alagappa (2004b) argues that a Gramscian understanding of civil society adopted by the New Left sees civil society as superior to the state (43). While not inherently democratic, civil society enhances democracy by challenging certain structures of state power that may limit democratic voice. Taken to its extreme, though, this society-first perspective can also endanger the important functions the state plays in ensuring protected participation in civil and political society (Anderson 1990). In a contrasting understanding of civil society based on Gramscian thought, Berman (1997) and Riley (2005) argue that civil society can even reinforce the state while supporting an authoritarian system of governance. This perspective shows more clearly the importance of civil society in advancing hegemonic or counter-hegemonic messages. While incomplete themselves, corporatist and Gramscian understandings of civil society can and should be incorporated into research from a Tocquevillian perspective.

What is left, then, is a body of neo-Tocquevillian research which has identified many essential functions through which civil society supports democracy, but which also offers an incomplete explanation as to why or when exceptions occur. This is partly due to the difficulty in clearly operationalizing social capital as a research concept. Further problems include unclear relations with the state. Where Tocqueville saw civil society as being an alternative to strong state power, recent revivalists have shown important areas where the state and society provide necessary mutual support. New Left theories ignore this support completely, seeing the state and society as existing in a fundamental opposition. This is understandable, given that the historical emergence of Western civil society's power through public discourse came at the expense of the state (Habermas 1991). Nonetheless, the expression of personal interest through civil society is more nuanced than either of these extremes; it has been known to simultaneously strengthen certain state institutions while weakening others, both directly through action and indirectly through discourse. Failing to fully address the role of discourse in civil society is perhaps one of the most blatant shortcomings in much of the neo-Tocquevillian literature to date. Critics adopting a Gramscian perspective have reintroduced discourse to argue that extensive associational networks can serve as unconscious voices reinforcing the cultural hegemony of the authoritarian regime, while corporatist critiques look deeply into the state mechanisms for censoring information. In contrast to these two theoretical models, civil society can also serve as a repository of counter-hegemonic discourse in spite of corporatist mechanisms.

Although critics have pointed out these weaknesses, their own weaknesses remain. The Gramscian New Left, as presented by Alagappa (2004c), sees civil society as democratizing through de-institutionalization and localization, which ignores the mutual constitution of the state and society. This is the same problem that traditional Tocquevillian thought ran into, which is why neo-Tocquevillian approaches are more focused on the strengthening of democratic institutions through civil society. While the neo-Tocquevillian approach has a larger empirical body of research, neither of these theoretical understandings is comprehensive enough to explain the variety of ways in which civil society may advance or hinder democratic rule.

Moving forward with a synthesis, this thesis incorporates a Gramscian understanding of discourse into neo-Tocquevillian explanations of the democratizing effects of civil society. Namely, contrary to apparent corporatism, Chinese society has used discursive tactics to ridicule abuses of government power as well as to advocate for specific policies, both of which contribute to the introduction of more democratic elements of rule within the PRC. Although this political speech does not necessarily translate to more direct political action, its discursive power cannot be ignored. The CCP's early commitment to flexibility in order to keep power has helped it remain responsive to this discourse (Shambaugh 2008), showing civil society's power to influence democratic outcomes without necessarily pushing for democratic regime change. This has been accomplished both by working within the state system through "contingent symbiosis" (Spires 2011) and by discursively discrediting the state through "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990). Throughout this process, state institutions are changed and the government and society must readjust. There is no illusion of perfect democracy achieved through civil society's discursive assertion of power. Because of the private nature of many civil society interactions, representation before the state in a public sphere is only a rough approximation of societal will, and the party-state is often left with the difficult task of assessing how strong expressed sentiments are. Understanding the capabilities of the Internet and new media associations in this process is the task of the following chapters.

Chapter 3

Mapping the Landscape of Chinese Civil Society

I have spent over two years on Weibo, had countless words and letters proscribed, and often had friends kindly advise me that some words shouldn't be spoken by people in the system. But as a legal worker, the thirst and pursuit of a legal democracy has long since permeated my blood and fused with my spirit. One person's voice is weak, but here there are countless people like me. If you are willing, together we can cry out for fairness and righteousness and work hard in the fight for power.

- Post by Sina Weibo user Inspector Lu Wei

One of the core questions relating to the new(s) civil society is the pervasiveness of the electronic communities that substantiate it. Civil society, as was shown in the last chapter, manifests itself in numerous forms, whether through formal membership in clubs and associations, spontaneous meetings with friends, or online chat rooms. Participation in different forms of civil society naturally leads to different though often overlapping outcomes. Resident's committees gather to manage issues related to local city residents, while business associations deal with the marketplace, and journalism associations meet to discuss issues related to their profession. In the electronic world, platforms of social connection are similarly predisposed to fostering certain communities. Similarly, participation in these different groups sometimes represents different levels of political participation according to Milbrath and Goel's (1977) taxonomy. This chapter makes headway into the investigation of the extent of participation in the communications level, which is foundational to other forms of political participation. It introduces approaches to the study of this level of participation in digital civil society, which may be useful for future comparison with physical civil society. At the same time, this chapter presents a qualitative understanding of the types of communication fostered by these electronic communications media. Certain electronic platforms are more suited for public discussion, while others are better at assisting people in keeping counterhegemonic speech hidden. Because of the different potential of each type of association, it is critical to understand where participation is concentrated and what mechanisms are pushing

Chinese citizens toward participation in some groups and away from participation in others.

The ideal goal for this investigation is to create comparable measures of participation in political communication for electronic and physical civil society. However, the vastly different nature of these two forms of human association as well as missing data on physical civil society prevent this goal from being fully realized. Ideally, a random sample of all Chinese citizens could be surveyed to measure breadth and depth of associations, but given the infeasibility of such an undertaking, research proceeded with a two-pronged approach. First, a questionnaire was distributed in China's Guangdong province to provide at least some empirical evidence of current participation levels. While insufficient response levels made this questionnaire generally ineffectual for its original purpose, the survey process provided insights that may be useful for future survey research in China. The second prong of this approach was to qualitatively interpret publicly available membership data for electronic communications media and civil society organizations (CSO). Because these are two altogether different arenas of human interaction, qualitative judgment is needed to explain the largeness of digital society and its reliance on the efforts of physically based social organizations.

Survey Design and Methodology

The questionnaire used in this research, included in Appendix B, was created after consultation of several survey design resources addressing broad design considerations, specific issues related to China, and sampling (Converse and Presser 1986; Rao 2000; Q. Li 2001; Rea and Parker 2005; Stoop 2005; Guarte and Barrios 2006). Its general purpose is to comparatively measure participation in traditional civil society organizations and electronic communications communities. This is done in four primary sections. The first involves questions about use of electronic communications platforms and frequency of use. The second section is comprised of questions relating to participants' membership in organized civil society, most of which are physical associations, although some online groups are included. The third section is designed to seek respondents' qualitative

assessment of civil society, which provides insight into trends and sources of participation. Finally, the questionnaire concludes with a section on perceptions and preferences of news sources. Because the presentation of news stories along a given theme has much power to advance collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000), the power to choose alternate news sources, is an indicator of public sphere freedom.

Participation in civil society is here theorized as two-dimensional: extensive and intensive. Measuring extensive participation is rather straightforward. Questionnaire respondents are simply asked to check all the digital platforms they use regularly to connect with other people. Intensive participation is a much more difficult concept to measure, because people are not often conscious of how much time they spend in various digital communities. On top of that, adding detailed questions about intensive involvement in each category would be quite demanding on participants. Instead, the survey only indirectly addresses intensive participation, which is supplemented by a qualitative explanation of what participation in these various communities tends to look like. However, the development of comparable measures of intensive participation would greatly aid future comparative research of digital and physical civil society.

Designing a survey for a Chinese sample population has unique challenges based in the current political environment as well as cultural tendencies. Li Qiang (2001) summarizes many of the problems social scientists encounter in China through his analysis of “two regions of the mind” (81). The two regions represent the public and the private self, which can either be in relative harmony or in total discord. Q. Li (2001) summarizes that while people in Western culture tend to fit a majority of their life into the public region, in China the opposite is often true, but this does not necessarily mean the two are in contradiction. Rather, it means there is often a hesitance in China for people to express directly their true feelings on an issue. In addition to the cultural tendency for a more prominent private self, there are political pressures to give the “right” answer in public. Q. Li (2001) calls this the “two discourse system,” citing the PRC’s history of political pressure for society to agree with Party plans as the source of these two discourses (82). However, Q. Li also recognizes that even as of 2001 there was a noticeable willingness to escape from this once dominant system, especially in closer

circles of familiarity, although many Chinese are still hesitant to give honest opinions to political science researchers (83).

This was very evident during the recruitment portion of this research. On Tianya, a well-known discussion forum in China, a new forum thread was created in the Guangdong local section of the website to post a recruitment flyer. In spite of Tianya's focus on bringing together strangers from faraway places to discuss a topic—the forum's name literally means “on the other end of the world”—few were willing to participate, much less respond to the post. In spite of 78 views within the first week of the flyer being online, only three viewers participated, and only one viewer left a comment on the post. With xenophobic humor, the comment read, “Foreigners have come to study us.”¹ Even in a public forum such as Tianya where the expectation is to meet strangers and discuss current events, the openness to outsiders was limited. Because of these constraints, the survey was designed in large part to avoid opinions in favor of facts, allowing little room for personal interpretations of current social conditions in China. There were by necessity, however, a few questions that dealt with perceptions of social groups and of Guangdong citizens in general. These questions were intended to support the qualitative analysis of the influence of participation, but responses may have been biased by the two discourse system (Q. Li 2001).

There were three primary reasons for selecting Guangdong province as the general population for this survey, not the least of which is the difficulty in finding a representative sample for a nation as large as China. Additionally, previous work has shown more openness in Guangdong to Western research of associational life (Spire 2011). Given Q. Li's (2001) warning about nonresponse rates and inaccurate responses in foreign-based research projects, this is a critical consideration. Finally, recent loosening of registration requirements for social organizations means participation in traditional civic associations is more likely (Simon 2013). Thus, Guangdong is a logical place to test proportional involvement in civic and new media associations because it is most likely to contest the assumption of a large digital public sphere and small physical one.

¹ Original text in Appendix D under user lishuo2010.

Additionally, since Guangdong has loosened registration laws for CSOs ahead of national loosening (D. He and Huang 2012; D. He 2014), participation levels are likely to be predictive of national trends.

Survey Response Rate and Results

Recruitment occurred from February 1 to April 11, 2014, coming from three primary sources. Responses from each source were recorded separately, and are presented in Table 3.1. The first and most productive source was a convenience sample spread by word of mouth through relatives, friends, and academic contacts to people they know in Guangdong. Although this method was more productive than the other two methods combined, it was not a random sample and could not be used for inferential statistics. Because there is no concrete data on how many friends of friends were contacted this way, the response rate is unknown. The second source was a random sample of Guangdong users of the Chinese Tencent QQ messenger service. QQ allows for searches of users based on region and will produce a randomly generated list of users based on the search criteria. This feature is popularly used to meet new friends at random, but is equally useful in producing a random sample to be contacted for research participation. A noticeable proportion of accounts generated in these lists had privacy settings in place that prevented communication with strangers. These data are included in the response rate data in Table 3.1. Although survey results are obviously skewed in favor of Internet users, QQ is one of the most ubiquitous communication platforms in China. In October 2013, Tencent reported that there were over 815 million monthly active accounts. This number approaches the pervasiveness of cell phones in the country. Unfortunately, the response rate was very low, and those who participated in the survey only did so after several days of correspondence. Some QQ users selected for participation indicated their fear of malware, which likely contributed to the lengthy conversations participants wanted to have with the researcher before completing the survey. Finally, the recruitment flyer attached in Appendix A was posted in the Guangdong local section of a popular web forum known as Tianya. Although this approach was much less time-consuming than contacting potential respondents on QQ, overall participation was also low, and it

was not possible to repeat the post to gain more views without violating the forums' spamming rules.

Table 3.1. Response Rate of Potential Survey Participants by Recruitment Source.

Recruitment method	Tencent QQ	Tianya	Interpersonal connections
Number of respondents	8	6	19
Total number identified for participation	80 (64)*	94**	--
Response rate	10% (12.5%)*	6.4%	--

*Excluding accounts unreachable due to privacy settings. **Indicates number of views of the recruitment flyer during recruitment period as reported by Tianya.

In spite of efforts to encourage maximum participation through limiting the questionnaire to 20 questions, collecting responses anonymously, and avoiding sensitive topics, participation rate was exceptionally low. Ironically, the most common feedback received by respondents was that the questionnaire was too simple, indicating questionnaire difficulty is not the most significant barrier to participation. The overall response rate of 8%, not including the convenience sample, indicates a strong self-selection bias in survey results. Furthermore, responses from the random sample of QQ users is well below the mark of 97, which is considered to be the smallest useful sample size for inferential statistics of variables expressed as proportions in large populations (Rea and Parker 2005, 147). Although it is possible to continue to seek out more participants on QQ, the problem of self-selection remains. Given these problems and the extensive time spent discussing the project with each of the eight respondents from QQ before they agreed to participate, it was decided more worthwhile to focus on other measures of participation in physical and digital civil society.

Nonetheless, while the responses are too few in number to determine what is typical among residents of Guangdong, at a minimum they reveal what *may be* typical. That is to say, while the survey data cannot be used to make any conclusive assertions about Chinese participation in civil society, unexpected responses reveal new areas to be

investigated. One of the areas highlighted through this survey as meriting further research is the dichotomy between participation proportion and interest in social organizations. Another surprising trend is divided opinions on the use of unofficial online news sources. A summary of closed-ended responses for the 33 participants is included in Appendix C.

Upon initial glance of the survey results, it would appear as if this group is more connected in the digital world than in the physical one. All 33 respondents indicated regular use of digital media for communication. Tencent's QQ chat app was the most popular choice, as expected based on reported membership levels. Of the five who did not indicate QQ as a regular means of communication, four were recruited through Tianya, hinting that communication through forums might be considered an alternative to traditional messaging apps. In contrast with these high levels of digital communication, only 20 respondents indicated participation in any organization or group, the most popular group being the CCP, including the Communist Youth League. However, simple comparison of membership numbers in social organizations with use of electronic communications media does not answer the question of individual trends. Unfortunately, a much larger sample would be needed to correlate individual use of electronic communications media with participation levels in social organizations.

One interesting trend was observed through this survey and should be further investigated is the disconnect between membership breadth and membership depth. The group or organization with the highest respondent membership is the CCP, including the Communist Youth League, which was selected by 9 of the 20 respondents who indicated participation in any group. However, when asked to select the group that was most important to the individual, only 1 of the 17 respondents who answered the question selected the CCP and Communist Youth League. By contrast, the category of "other online associations" had the fourth highest participation rate among respondents, along with "public benefit organizations" and "organized hobby groups," yet it was the most frequently selected as the group most important to respondents. These groups were not the only ones whose participation rates did not match the interest levels of respondents, and future research could investigate if this trend is the norm.

One final result that was unexpected was the division among respondents concerning preference for reading news from unofficial online sources. Respondents were asked to rank news sources twice, once based on reliability of information and once based on personal preference. Most news sources showed a relatively normal distribution around an average rank—“relatively normal” is used liberally here because of the small sample size. However, the preference of “other websites” by respondents had two peaks, one as the most preferred category and one the least preferred category. It is possible that this is indicative of a larger split among Guangdong residents or Chinese citizens, but such a conclusion cannot be made confidently through this survey.

Other Approaches to Understanding Participation: Publicized Participation Rates

In addition to using sampling techniques to measure participation in physical and electronic civil society, it is possible to measure participation through public reports and web analysis services. Several of China’s largest Internet companies make periodical reports on user activity levels. Membership data along with qualitative variables comparing the design of major communications media in China is included in Table 3.2. Overall participation data is useful in addressing the question of how involved the average citizen is in digital civil society, but the lack of data on individual users means it is not possible to measure correlation between extensive or intensive membership in electronic and physical civil society. To provide more meaningful results, raw membership data must be compared with current political and legal trends to explain whom these membership numbers are representative of. As was suggested at the beginning of this chapter, different new media platforms build and are built by different kinds of communities. Some services are more private than others, some more organized, and some more censored. The distinction between private and public communication methods is a particularly relevant one. Closed communications give users the benefit of more intimacy with the receivers without the fear of the criticisms of observers. On the other hand, while private communication is important for deeper discussion of sensitive issues, it is equally important for discussion to move out of the private realm and into a public one. The ongoing shifts in membership across platforms makes it difficult to

Table 3.2. Qualitative Properties and Reported Number of Users of Prominent Electronic Communications Media in China.

Type of Media	Instant Messenger	Microblog	Social network site	Cellphone	Land Line	Phone messenger	Blog	Forum
Biographic focus	Medium/low	High	High	Low	Low	Medium	High	Low
Public discussion	Medium	High	High	Low	Low	Medium	Low	High
Interest focus	Medium	High	High	Low	Low	Medium/low	High	High
Isolating	High	Low	Medium	High	High	High	High	Low
Top provider in China	Tencent QQ	Sina Weibo	Tencent Qzone	China Mobile	Various	Tencent WeChat	Various	Various
Number of active accounts/lines reported by provider (date)	808 million (Q4 2013)*	60.2 million (Nov 2013)**	625.2 million (2013)*	1.22 billion (Dec 2013)†	267 million (Dec 2013)†	355 million (Q4 2013)*	Unknown	Unknown
Number of mobile users who accessed the site in March 2014***	331 million	122 million	146 million	--	--	306 million	--	--

*Source: Tencent 2013. **Source: Millward 2013. ***Source: Enfodesk 2014. †Includes all providers. Population based on 2013 China Statistical Yearbook. Source: MIIT 2014.

determine the redundancy of membership in these various media, but overall participation remains high.

As Table 3.2 reveals, China hosts a vast world of electronic space which is used to build communities, communicate, discuss events, play games, and build one's personal and professional network. In order to make sense of these different platforms, they were assigned a qualitative value for four different properties. Biographic focus refers to the attention placed on individuality. Blogs, microblogs, and social network sites score the highest, because they are built around personal expression by an individual through text, pictures, and video to be viewed by the public or a limited public. By contrast, forums and telephones score the lowest, because use is built around discussion. Telephones do not provide a place of public presentation of the individual, while forums tend to limited profile personalization for the sake of keeping focus on discussion.

Public discussion refers to a platform's suitability as a place for many people to come together and engage in public discourse. Some platforms, such as instant messengers, have group chat capabilities, but the number of users in a given chat is limited because of the speed at which new content is created in the chat room. Blogs are also limited in this category, because they focus on production by an individual and consumption by the public. Even though many blogs include a bulletin board service to allow for feedback, this function is secondary and minimal.

Interest focus refers to a platform's usefulness in creating or hosting communities based on certain interests. Platforms with high biographic focus and high suitability for public discussion tend to be more effective at gathering people based on common interests. Although blogs may be issue specific and attract a following based on the issues and interests addressed, their lack of usefulness for hosting public discussion makes it difficult for two followers of a given blog to connect with each other. Microblogging, by contrast, places producers and consumers on the same level. Followers of a given microblog account must also have an account. Interactions among microbloggers is publicly posted, allowing other interested microbloggers to join the conversation, follow either of the original two microbloggers, and repost the original transaction. The public space in which microblogging occurs along with its biographical focus on users makes it

a highly valuable tool for the natural creation of interest groups. Social network sites are similarly situated, but they provide a greater expectation of privacy, slightly limiting usefulness in this area. Other electronic media, such as forums and messenger services often provide areas for people of like-interests to connect with each other and discuss issues, but unlike social network and microblogging sites, these groups are often formally defined by users or administrators, forcing more conscious decisions of group membership.

Finally, isolating refers to a given electronic media's tendency to create closed groups, whether by design or otherwise. Media without spaces of public viewership generally rank high in this category. While this variable may appear at first glance to be the inverse of a given electronic medium's suitability for public discussion, there is a slight but important difference. Whereas the public discussion variable refers to a medium's ability to be used as a public space of discourse, the isolating variable refers to how closed these public spaces are. For example, although social network sites provide a space where users can function equally as producers and consumers of content, the content is often intended for a limited network of personal or professional contacts rather than the Internet at large. By contrast, while microblogs provide a similar equality among users as both producers and consumers, posts are generally visible to all. Thus, the public design of the microblogging platform means social groups are less isolated from each other than are groups within social networking sites.

While Table 3.2 shows high variety and use of electronic communication media available in China, what is not represented is the current changes in use levels as well as diversity of services offered by a single provider. In spite of the few big names that dominate the Chinese Internet based on a single service, many technology companies are branching out and building platforms to compete with other companies. Tencent, for example, while most well-known for its QQ instant messenger service, now offers its market-dominating cellphone messaging service known as WeChat, a microblogging service similar to Twitter, a personalized web space known as Qzone which is best analogized with Facebook, a web portal, a search engine, news services, and email. While Tencent's staple service remains QQ, which boasted over 808 million monthly active

accounts by the end of 2013, the expansion of Tencent's services are just one area where one sees increasing opportunities for communities to grow, merge, and shift based on platform opportunities (Tencent 2013). Some of the peculiarities of these platforms and what their use implies are laid out in detail here.

Tencent's QQ instant messaging service is perhaps the most well known in China, but just because nearly everyone is on QQ does not mean everyone is welcome to connect with each other. In fact, during the recruitment portion of this chapter's survey research, many potential participants contacted on QQ did not want to be bothered by someone they do not know. Similar to the telephone, QQ is not entirely designed to be welcoming of unsolicited communications. In spite of the numerous features that Tencent offers to make it easy to find contacts based on age, place of birth, place of residence, languages spoken, gender, and horoscope, there are also features to automate the process of sifting out unwanted contact requests. Challenge questions can be required before requests are made, ensuring that only people who actually know the person may even send a contact request. A more popular choice, though, is to require contact requesters to write a short explanation for the request before it can be sent.

The closed feeling of QQ is exactly opposite of Sina Weibo's, which is built on a very public-feeling platform of comments and discussion, with the exception of its blacklist feature. However, becoming a blacklist user of Sina Weibo prevents anyone, even friends, from seeing ones posts. Thus, using the feature is much like not having an account at all, except for the purpose of browsing others' posts. In spite of Weibo's openness, it remains more popular as a place for the public to follow celebrities than to post their own political opinions. Fu and Chau's (2013) random sample of 29,998 microblogs showed that over 50% were completely inactive, and of the accounts with any activity, 4.8% were responsible for 80% of original posts within a seven-day study period. Furthermore, Fu and Chau (2013) reveal that posting activity is directly correlated with the size of one's followership. Although their research clearly shows that content consumption is astronomically more important to users than content production, the platform itself is based on features of public openness and equal voice. Equally significant is Sina Weibo's now precarious situation as a host of much political

discussion in spite of its rapid rise as China's primary microblogging platform. Sina launched its Weibo platform in 2009. While the most recent data from Sina shows increased membership and growing advertising profits (SINA Corporation 2014), the recent crackdown on Internet users and specifically Weibo users has encouraged politically active users to seek new platforms.

The level of state corporatist involvement in Sina Weibo does not appear to be any secret in the country, as it has been addressed in academic and popular circles alike. In addition to built-in tools that prevent users from publishing banned words or phrases, deletion of sensitive posts is a common occurrence. On May 29, 2012, the government introduced a five strikes rule, suspending accounts that have been found to post on sensitive subjects five times (Moore 2013). Additionally, T. Zhu et al. (2013) showed that the state apparatus for censorship is very efficient, executing nearly 90% of all observed deletion events within 24 hours of posting. In spite of government heavy-handedness, users sometimes publicly address the issue of deletion on Sina Weibo. On November 21, 2013, a moderately popular (46,000 followers) microblogger under the account name Inspector Lu Wei wrote the post that this chapter began with. She then "pinned" the post, making it an indefinite feature of her public homepage. Given that the post has already remained affixed for six months, it seems that the fact of censorship is not itself a sensitive topic. Finally, Western journalists and Chinese bloggers alike have long been addressing the issue of the "50-cent party," who are government workers originally reported to earn 0.5 RMB per post in favor of the Party or its policies (Bristow 2008; Boke Tianxia 2011).

In spite of these limitations, the number of Sina Weibo microbloggers, including politically active ones, continued to grow. However, recent events may have slowed this growth and encouraged more divergence among politically active Internet users. Specifically, a new legal interpretation by the SPC and SPP in September 2013 seems specifically targeted at microbloggers. The interpretation identifies blogs that spread rumors in posts that are shared at least 500 times may be classified as serious and receive heavier punishment (Xinhua News Agency 2013a). The act of sharing posts is specific to the microblogging platform, which signals a targeting of these microbloggers versus

other Internet users. After this interpretation was released, a number of influential microbloggers saw their accounts deactivated or willingly left Sina Weibo in response to government pressures. Influential Peking University law professor He Weifang was one such political microblogger to make an emotional exit. On New Year’s Eve, 2013, he posted his farewell with remorse that “within the last year, my eyes have seen one familiar blog after another disappear” (W. He 2013). However, the convenience and capabilities of Sina Weibo’s platform are not easily parted with. Professor He began posting again ten days later.

Tencent’s WeChat, it appears, is the platform that Sina Weibo users are using instead of or in tandem with Sina Weibo (Kuo 2014; Skuse 2014). Although the service was only launched in 2011, WeChat now boasts over 300 million users (Tencent 2013). Indeed, many of the politically active microblog accounts that are the subjects of next chapter’s social network analysis (SNA) included a link to the user’s WeChat account. Some celebrity accounts go beyond including a link, and they use their Sina Weibo homepage to advertise their other social media accounts, including a QR code that links to their WeChat account. An example of this is shown for Sina Weibo account A Word of Truth (*yiju shihua*) in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. Screenshot of Sina Weibo User A Word of Truth’s Homepage Displaying QR Code for His WeChat Account.



*Screenshot captured on April 10, 2014.

The strength of WeChat as a platform for politically active communities seems paradoxically tied to its less-than-ideal suitability as a platform for group discussion. Whereas Sina Weibo is designed for community and public visibility, WeChat is designed for private messaging with some social networking capabilities added as secondary features. But unlike most social network systems, including Facebook, that began as a social network and then added a mobile chat function, WeChat is primarily a mobile messaging app with an integrated social network system. Following a social network design, WeChat users must confirm friendship with each other before they can message or see each other's posts. This creates a much more closed environment which puts activists out of the spotlight but still allows for connection with a larger group.

In addition to fostering more private communities, WeChat lacks the relative equality of users that is present on Weibo. Although some Sina Weibo functions are limited by a user's membership level, all users have access to the same fundamental microblogging tools. Any user can reply to or comment on a celebrity's post, and interactions between celebrities and followers are seen by all. In WeChat, however, followers have much less access to each other. Celebrities, including many activists and political bloggers, are added as "subscription accounts" rather than "friend accounts," meaning communication is directed one way, and the only way followers can share their reaction to a message through this platform is by messaging their WeChat contacts. The stratification of WeChat accounts and privacy of messaging prevents new activists from rising to fame through WeChat, which is quite opposite of the experience on Sina Weibo.

However, because WeChat provides more closed communities, it is seen as a safer alternative for political bloggers. People whose blogs might incite criminal investigation under the 2013 SPC and SPP joint interpretation are protected through WeChat's private platform. Although it now appears WeChat users are not protected from censorship, as many recent account deletions have been reported (Roney 2014), their place in a more private space of the Chinese Internet means the ongoing discussions of news stories and political opinions are less likely to be seen by the general public, which weakens the state's censorship imperative.

These two platforms seem to be best suited to work in tandem. Sina Weibo's early release to the public allowed many microbloggers to earn a name for themselves and develop a community of like-minded people. When state pressures began to mount, community leaders began to retreat into the more private space later offered by WeChat. In spite of this, most political microbloggers kept their Sina Weibo account active, with a few noteworthy exceptions. The public visibility of Sina Weibo allows communities to grow and divide as like-minded microbloggers find each other, discuss issues, and form sub-communities. However, WeChat also appears to be a necessary platform for these communities to discuss more sensitive issues. Furthermore, because messages remain on a user's mobile device and not only in a publicly hosted space, after-the-fact censorship is not as easy as on Sina Weibo. Finally, the larger user base of WeChat means that there is more potential for popular political messages to be spread around, but doing so requires active forwarding by users.

Posts by certain well-known political microbloggers on Sina Weibo seems to support the idea that activists are choosing to use these platforms in tandem. On April 6, 2014, Zhu Dake, a professor of literary criticism at Tongji University, sent an old essay of his on the subject of informants to his WeChat followers. However, some of the recipients quickly reported the message as offensive, and it was blocked. It is important to note that the content was not blocked by the state, but by the WeChat system because users found it offensive. Professor Zhu then turned to Sina Weibo, posting a link to the article and commenting with academic curiosity that an article on informants was blocked by informants who reported the article as offensive (D. Zhu 2014). Because the article itself is not banned, interested followers are still able to access it. This kind of cross-platform political commentary allows users to access the strengths of each when needed.

Participation in the new(s) civil society is a moving target. Users can adapt quickly to government censorship, moving between platforms based on perceived threat of criminal punishment. This adds a significant challenge to the task of measuring participation, but overall user data can set bounds on where membership lies. Reported membership levels in Tencent's services are likely inflated, since a single user account is often integrated with several services, even though users may primarily use a fraction of

the services for which they have an active account. By contrast, Enfodesk (2014) reported that the number of mobile phone users who accessed Sina Weibo in a single month is over twice the number of accounts with regular posting activity reported by Sina executives (Millward 2013), supporting Fu and Chau's (2013) findings that most Sina Weibo users are spectators. Nonetheless, in light of astonishingly high membership in the digital communities shown in Table 3.1, not counting membership in secondary and tertiary providers of these social media, it is safe to conclude that Chinese citizen participation in digital communities is substantial. With more individual data, measures of intensive participation could be developed, which could then provide more concrete assessment of how large the political discussions are within these social media platforms.

Comparison with Physical Civil Society: Drivers of Participation

The state of physical civil society is similarly hard to measure without survey data because of shifting conditions in the country. Shapiro (2012) highlights this fact through reference of an NGO directory in Yunnan that saw 70 percent listed NGOs close their doors within two years (107). One of the greatest challenges faced by CSOs is government registration and fundraising requirements. People may often be willing to contribute toward a cause, whether it is community development, healthcare, pollution, or any other issue, but lack the institutional channels to funnel their efforts. This too is changing in China. New laws have been put in place to simultaneously encourage more freedom and accountability in the Chinese nonprofit sector. Of course, CSOs represent only one of the physical forms civil society may take, and they can only partially be considered representative of the larger realm of human associations in China that constitute civil society. Aside from these formalized organizations, though, there is not much space left in Chinese civil society that has not already become digitalized. The increased convenience and prevalence of electronic communications media have forced nearly every aspect of urban Chinese life online.

While it is hard estimate the number of Chinese CSOs actually operating, the number of registered social organizations is currently in the neighborhood of 553,000, up

42,000 from the third quarter of 2013 (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2014). This number is growing rapidly compared with the recent past. Xinhua News Agency (2012a) reported in March 2012 that the number was approaching the 500,000 mark, growing from 354,000 to over 460,000 over the previous five years. In spite of these figures, it is unsure exactly how many unregistered NGOs exist as a result of barriers to fundraising and registration requirements. Many CSOs instead function dually as registered businesses. In 2003, M. Wang and Jia estimated the current number of unregistered NGOs to be ten times higher than those registered, but improvements in registration seem to be helping that number drop. Statistical analysis of a sample of 368 CSOs in 2010 by H. Li et al. found that a little over one in three were registered. Adding to this number the 683,000 state organized resident and village committees, the total number of CSOs in any form would add up to just over 2.3 million: roughly 1.8 organizations for every 1,000 citizens. The lack of membership data makes it uncertain how many people are participating in these organizations, but even with an assumption of 50 members per CSO and no membership overlap, participation in any form of CSO, including those organized by the state, would only amount to 117 million. Compared with the currently active 808 million QQ accounts, 625.2 million Qzone accounts, and 355 million WeChat accounts, participation in social organizations appears to be lagging behind participation in social media. Of course, there are many missing crucial data, including reliable estimates of unregistered CSOs, membership levels in CSOs, and the type of political participation fostered through physical and digital communities alike. Clearly participation in social organizations would rank higher on Milbrath and Goel's (1977) hierarchy of political involvement. Nonetheless, as a tool for political communication, the size of social media cannot be ignored.

The barriers to registration of formal CSOs are weakening, however, which is resulting in a larger, or at least more visible, network of CSOs. The first sign of relief came in 2008, when experimental regulations allowed additional CSOs other than trade associations in Shenzhen to register directly with the local civil affairs department without backing from a government department (D. He and Huang 2012). Before then, CSOs were required to find a local government department to provide official endorsement before they could legally register as nonprofits. The odd pairing of local

government offices and mismatched NGOs often had more to do with personal relationships or blind phone calls than overlapping functional concerns (Spires 2011). Finally, in March 2013, new laws came into force that allowed certain social organizations elsewhere in the country to directly register with the local civil affairs department (D. He 2014). Financial barriers have gone through a similar process of loosening, although high-profile scandals have also led to more government oversight of nonprofits' finances (Simon 2013, 325-330).

However, with the central government's trend to push management of CSOs to lower levels has come greater assertion of local government power over CSOs. Hsu and Hasmath (2014) have dubbed this phenomenon the "local corporatist state." NGOs operating under these local corporatist measures have found themselves in need of either a high-level government official to serve as a patron or a clear function that helps local officials improve the conditions of their locality, improving their chances of promotion within the government (Spires 2011). Thus, even in loosening national regulations over CSO freedoms, the state is remaining proactively in control of the nonprofit sector. This traditionally translates to a services-focused nonprofit sector with little advocacy capabilities. China Development Brief's (2013) report on the diversity of advocacy organizations reached this same conclusion. However, the report also noted a marked change after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan, showing an increased willingness of civil society to engage in advocacy work, citing three primary causes. "Specifically, the development of the advocacy functions of civil society and NGOs has benefited from a more developed legal system, greater awareness of citizen rights and responsibilities, and the rise of social media coming to the fore" (China Development Brief 2013).

Comparison of participation in physical and digital civil society is not straightforward because of the comingled nature of the two. While it appears that overall use of online social media far exceeds participation in formal civil society, the two cannot be equated so easily for comparison. It is clear that the digital world has opened up new avenues for CSOs to engage in advocacy work, but it is also important to recognize how social media has changed the ways interactions with advocacy groups happens, creating

new opportunities to attract otherwise politically uninvolved members of society. The convenience of electronic media forces many people into new digital spaces. Their reasons for joining these electronic communities are numerous, ranging from shopping, to communicating, to doing business. Many Chinese companies provide professional services through QQ in addition to or in place of telephone lines. Other chat programs such as NetEase CC have been used as teaching platforms for English language classes. Proponents of social change are no exception to the forces of digitalization (Yang 2011), which has brought about new connections and a new self-sustained, politically active online civil society.

Conclusion

Although it was the hope in this chapter to design comparable measures of participation in digital civil society and physical civil society, the truth that has been revealed in this inquiry is that the very different nature of the two makes them difficult to compare. While it is unlikely formal social organizations have achieved the same impressive membership levels as online social media, many of these media are used to add convenience of communication to preexisting relations rather than connect with new communities. Still, the online communities that exist share an important symbiosis with physical civil society. In addition to addressing the question of participation, this inquiry has also illuminated the usefulness and challenges of social survey research in China.

Survey research was largely ineffective because of low participation rates. The relative unwillingness to participate in the survey matched Q. Li's (2001) warnings of suspicion of outsiders, even though he argued that conditions are improving. However, there also seemed to be a tipping point where participants were very willing to help once they felt relationally connected. The eight participants from QQ all wanted to get to know the researcher and the project well before participating, but after a few conversations their trust and willingness was exceptionally high, even offering to help find other participants and asking for updates on the project. Similarly, participants from the convenience sample who were contacted through relationships with friends or colleagues displayed the

same willingness to help for the sake of their relationship. Although this cultural aspect kept participation rates low and required much time on behalf of the researcher, the survey approach was able to highlight previously unexpected trends that might prove valid with further research. Finally, this experience also revealed the practicality of interview and ethnographic approaches to the study of Chinese society. The willingness of potential participants to discuss issues interpersonally far surpassed their willingness to formalize their experience in a questionnaire.

In contrast with the survey approach, analysis of published data was able to reveal more concrete evidence regarding use of electronic communications media and membership in social organizations. However, the lack of individual data makes it impossible to confidently assert where membership overlaps and where it diverges. This is where a qualitative assessment was required to help understand what is driving participation toward physical or digital communities. Staying in touch with friends, shopping, reading the news, and most aspects of everyday life have become increasingly digitalized, and formal civil society is no exception. CSOs that were born in the physical world find themselves connected to the Internet out of an equal sense of need and practicality. However, where networks of civil society are easy to identify in the real world, often conveniently taking the recognizable form of NGOs, sport clubs, religious groups, or other formal community, it is hard to distinguish based on the data available where digital connections represent an indigenously electronic community and where they have been grafted from preexisting networks.

Regardless of the level of overlap between digital and physical communities, there still exists a symbiosis that makes each of these realms invaluable to the other. Much political discourse on the Internet owes its source to NGOs and activist networks that predate the Internet. Yang and Calhoun (2008) call Environmental NGOs “the discourse-producing publics of the green sphere” (73). The large majority of online greenspeak is based in collective frames that are strategically created and promoted by these NGOs (Benford and Snow 2000). However, once online, the discourse takes on a life of its own, as society translates it into its own personal experiences. Online engagement is equally vital to NGOs, because it validates their work and generates public

approval, or at a minimum public attention. Other interest groups, including those with pure recreational purpose, have been able to reach out to a larger community through online engagement. Thus, the mutual reinforcement by formal civil society and online communities that makes separation of the two for comparison so difficult is the same reason why participation levels in one and the other are so important for the study of the news-sharing networks that make up the new(s) civil society.

Although the physical and digital realms of Chinese civil society remain largely codependent, online groups retain advantage in freedom of participation when compared with the physical world. In China, social organizations, including organized sports groups, still need to register with the government, and until 2013 they also required a government office to be their official sponsor before they could register. In contrast, people in online discussion forums and microblogs have the freedom to meet and discuss news and issues of political importance without the need to register or identify themselves formally. Censorship is still an issue of concern, but the freedom of assembly online remains largely unchallenged, which cannot be said of China's physical spaces.

Chapter 4

Sina Weibo: A Politicized Digital Community

Get reported. Refute the rumor. Get investigated. All surrounding Song Lin, the chairman of the board of China Resources. Barely three days and he's again on the stage of a brilliant, ongoing, Chinese-style drama, exactly like the not-to-distant story of Li Tienan, only this time the interval is even shorter. At the same time, the usefulness of Weibo in fighting corruption is again being demonstrated. It seems like corrupt officials really aren't getting with the times. They still don't understand how to handle the modern mobile Internet crisis. Everybody hurry and buy WB stock. When Weibo lives well, corrupt officials live in hell!

- Post by Sina Weibo user Old Xu's Commentary

As the last chapter revealed, the size of China's online population is staggering. With a single messaging app boasting over 800 million active accounts, it is important to be able to differentiate between Internet users whose use is limited to maintaining personal connections and passing time—what Leibold (2011) calls “shallow infotainment” (1025)—and active citizen involvement to encourage a transparent, responsive government. This chapter focuses on members of the latter group who have used China's premier microblogging website, Sina Weibo, to create a space of political public speech. The primary purpose of this portion of the inquiry is to investigate possible explanations as to how activist microbloggers have successfully used this platform to transmit political messages. Through this investigation, basic social network analysis (SNA) tools are used to identify potential members of this group. Further development of this SNA approach may help develop measures of intensive participation that differentiate casual observers from political communicators in China's digital communities. Furthermore, observed microblog posts are used to build an initial taxonomy of political microblogging in China. While the experience on Sina Weibo cannot be equated with all digital civil society in China, the existence of political speech and the substantial user base of this platform confirm that a significant portion of China's online civil society is politically active.

Unlike formal civil society organizations (CSO), whose membership is easy to recognize, membership in online activist communities is ill defined, adding a layer of difficulty to the study of this group. Political use of social media is intermingled with the day-to-day entertainment that Leibold (2011) decries. SNA proves to be an effective tool in creating bounds for an ill-defined community within an otherwise unbounded network. Furthermore, SNA naturally leads to insights into the functions and potential of a civil society group. It can help determine who key individuals or associations are within a network as well as the network's density and redundancy. Protest mobilizations can use extant networks to spread information quickly from sources to the masses. In the 2013 Heshan nuclear processing facility protest, preexisting online social networks were leveraged to spread facts regarding the development's true purpose, propagate anti-nuclear thought, and mobilize villagers and city residents to protest (X. He and Tian 2013). In other issues of national concern, such as corruption or pollution, social networks are equally important to inform the public of the general conditions surrounding the issue, new developments, and means of participation in solutions. New media social networks form the substance of the new(s) civil society, and network design is one determinant of actions and inactions of the general public.

The focus of this SNA is a network of nine political microblogs (egos) and selected alters on Sina Weibo. These nine egos are part of a group of microbloggers that has received much media attention recently, popularly dubbed the "big Vs" based on the "V" icon on their account representing a verified account of a well-known person. Many social media platforms now offer such verification services to differentiate between authentic and fan-created celebrity accounts. These celebrities, including lawyers, journalists, scholars, and businesspeople, leverage their microblogging fame to support political and social agendas and to generate awareness about commercial or government abuses of power. They are important drivers in the new(s) civil society. Although their importance is popularly recognized, their reach, connectivity, and relative influence have not received sufficient academic attention. The inclusion of this chapter's SNA highlights the importance of elite participation in digital society.

There are two goals of this SNA. The first is to use built-in Sina Weibo features combined with SNA tools to identify a larger network of influential political microbloggers on Sina Weibo beginning with knowledge of only a few. The second is to learn how influence within this group is distributed, allowing for follow-on research of the most important network members. While some of the conclusions are less applicable to the study of digital civil society than to the general study of ill-defined communities, this chapter highlights the effectiveness and weaknesses of certain approaches used and considered in researching this network of political microbloggers and selected alters. The SNA approach in this chapter is equally applicable to a wider range of ill-defined communities on social media networks.

Partial Taxonomy of Political Microblogging

Research into activism in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states is continually faced with the question of how activists weigh their political goals against the threat of state reprisal. While there are certainly cases where activists remain true to their cause no matter what the cost, other political activists work within state limitations to achieve their goals. Ho (2008) argues that in China, the emergence of “de-politicized politics” has allowed NGOs and other social organizations to work towards limited goals within the limits set by the Chinese state while avoiding direct conflict over political power. In similar fashion, Spires (2011) recognizes the complex network of local and national interest that allows NGOs to work as brokers while advancing their own interests. Contrary to Ho’s (2008) assessment of the physical landscape, political microblogging on Sina Weibo seems to have turned a depoliticized public space into a politicized one. Furthermore, while microbloggers certainly exercise great finesse, they also show willingness to target wrongdoers with their posts in a way that does not fit within the precariously harmonious politics of Spires’s (2011) “contingent symbiosis.”

This section highlights some of the microblogging approaches observed over six months of reading “big V” Sina Weibo microblogs that reveal the direct politicization of this public space. Of particular note was the tendency to spread contentious ideas

indirectly through the sharing of news, whether through the creation of unofficial news stories or selected retransmission of stories from official sources. Activism through the spread of facts is a safer alternative to unsupported accusations, which are often punished under libel laws. Political opinions could be directly expressed when they fit with official Party ideology, such as the elimination of corrupt officials (*tangguan*), but these posts stop short of directly accusing the Party of a lack of commitment to its stated goals. Such accusations were instead subtly embedded in fact-based retransmission of news stories.

One of the areas where microbloggers have shown great acumen is with regard to framing. Challenged with the task of promoting a political ideal without giving the appearance of anti-Party sentiments, microbloggers must carefully select how they frame their messages. Zuo and Benford (1995) concluded that one of the great successes of the 1989 Democracy Movement was its ability to create a collective action frame that would both resonate with the population and be resistant to counterframing by the Party as “counterrevolutionary” (139). Injustice was a particularly powerful frame, which Benford and Snow (2000) later stated is “fairly ubiquitous across movements advocating some form of political and/or economic change” (616). It should come as no surprise then, that the majority of political posts read throughout this research were also focused on injustice. Particularly striking was the applicability of Moon’s (2012) three discursive tactics of human rights reporting—statistical, legal, and testimonial—to this analysis.

Microblog posts presenting injustice in statistical terms were not as mathematically focused as the professional human rights reports to which Moon (2012) refers, but there was still a number of posts that spoke about broad-ranging threats to Chinese people. One of the most popular areas of discussion right now is corrupt officials, who are often characterized as womanizing, rent seeking, and generally prone to many other character flaws. Often, microblog posts discuss this problem in broad terms, citing the various estimates of money illegally syphoned out of the country so officials’ families could live comfortable lives abroad. One post by an account titled Fact Focus (*shishi jujiao*) (2013c) characterized the problem as Chinese officials “tell[ing] us to live the ‘Chinese dream’ while you let your family live the ‘American dream.’” Another similar post about a broad-ranging threat was posted by user A Word of Truth (*yiju*

shihua) on October 6, 2013. The subject of the post was popular stone bracelets that are, according to A Word of Truth's research, made using dangerously radioactive materials and other harmful chemicals. Images of the manufacturing process were included with the posts as evidence of this hazard. Because no specific wrongdoer or victim is cited in these kind of posts, they work in a similar fashion to statistical reporting in that they warn people of a general threat or problem that needs to be addressed.

Use of Moon's (2012) second tactic—legal reporting—was not identified independently, but was rather observed as part of other posts. For example, in Wuhan, a meat merchant was reported as rubbing pork chops with lamb fat to sell “secret recipe lamb chops” at a severely inflated price (Fact Focus 2013b). When Fact Focus shared the story, it did so using testimonial tactics of the harm caused by this merchant. However, it also framed the problem in legal terms, implicating the vendor for breaking Chinese commercial laws and including a link to the story as reported by China's *Legal Daily*. One of the risks involved with using legal reporting is that if one cites too many failings in the law, it could be construed as directly blaming the government, which puts the microbloggers in a place of vulnerability to reprisal. This appears to be the case with the 16-year old netizen in September, 2013 who used Sina Weibo to question the police statement that a local Gansu club owner's suspicious death was because of suicide. The high school student was reportedly the first person arrested under the SPC and SPP's new interpretation on the spread of rumors online (Moore 2013). Other posts that frame a given injustice in legal terms were often based in posts that discussed a vague, broad-ranging threat or used testimonial tactics to identify a specific perpetrator other than the state.

Posts using the testimonial approach appeared to be the most popular among microbloggers. These posts are often based in a specific scenario with which the microblogger is personally familiar or they are reposted stories by news agencies. One of the microbloggers, when sharing a news story on a recent break-in at a government official's office, highlighted that the official asked security not to report the incident to the police (Xu 2013). The post also quoted the official's statement that no brand-name tobacco and alcohol products—often considered the staples of Chinese bribery—were

stolen. While Xu did not directly question validity of the statement, its inclusion carries the assumption of his doubts. The post content was all selected from a published news video, protecting Xu from reprisal based on the spread of “rumors.” At the same time, the choice to highlight the official’s denouncement of any missing tobacco and alcohol products carried heavy accusatory connotations that the official was indeed hoarding bribes in his office. Another post using this testimonial approach shared a copy of a contract of support between a government official and his mistress (Fact Focus 2013a).

Other microbloggers use their own experiences to express an injustice frame through testimonial tactics. One example of this occurred in April 2014 when a lawyer posted a picture of a hospital report of a CT scan of his chest, humorously commenting, “Anyone who hasn’t had a rib broken is embarrassed to call himself a human rights lawyer.” Legal reporting tactics are clearly ineffective when a legal worker feels threatened because of his work. In fact, the post itself was deleted within a week, either through censors or by self-censorship. But the lawyer’s testimonial approach still proved effective. Because of the network available through Sina Weibo, his post was forwarded to an activist microblogger with over 250,000 followers, quickly expanding in influence before deletion.

Whether statistical, legal, or testimonial tactics are used, microbloggers appear very careful when presenting the perpetrator of these injustices. Even if the injustice arises directly from action or inaction of the government, political microbloggers are not as willing to implicate the government, much less the Party, likely due to the threat of reprisal. However, through the presentation of these many injustices, a larger narrative is built which implies the necessity for China to improve upon its political system to prevent these issues.

Other more direct forms of political engagement were also witnessed on Sina Weibo. With the popularity of Sina Weibo, social elites and government bureaus have opened accounts on this microblogging service, opening the door for public political debates among elites and for elites and common citizens to directly address grievances to Party and state organs. These forms of public political engagement through microblogging were found to exist on Sina Weibo.

Although the elites on Sina Weibo are not the same Party elites who are deciding national policy, they nonetheless hold significant influence over public will, and their political debates over Sina Weibo have drawn quite a crowd of spectators. For instance, Cui Yongyuan, a longtime television host known for being a ruthless investigator, was recently a representative at the Chinese People's Consultative Congress (CPPCC), a consultative body of political parties ostensibly intended to provide multiparty feedback on CCP rule. Lately, he has been hosting a number of projects aimed at generating public awareness about genetically modified organisms (GMO). However, his addressing of the topic was rebutted by Sima Nan, another well-known social commentator, as rumormongering. While the debate that took place rapidly slipped away from policy issues and into ad-hominem attacks, it nonetheless brought an intra-elite debate on an important policy issue into the eyes of the public.

Such direct political exchanges on Sina Weibo are not exclusively between social elites. The recent popularization of microblogging has forced many Party and government offices to create their own Sina Weibo accounts, allowing elite activists to question their operations in public view, as was seen on March 2 and 3, 2014. It began with the *People's Daily* writing a microblog post about the upcoming dual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC) and CPPCC. The *People's Daily*, being the Party's official newspaper, aggressively blamed the passivity of representatives at these two congresses for China's social woes. Such blaming puts a better light on the CCP, considering the CPPCC is the primary political body where political parties other than the CCP have representation. In making this post, the *People's Daily* framed democratic representation as an insufficient solution for China's current problems. The unstated conclusion of the post is that there is no strong leadership for the country to be found outside of the Party. Cui Yongyuan, himself a representative in the CPPCC, artfully reframed the problem of democratic representation in China's government bodies as one of Party censorship rather than weak democratic leadership. In direct response to the post, representative Cui asked, "Spoken very pleasantly. If we dare to speak up, will you dare to publish it?" (2014). Another activist microblog known as Fact Focus echoed this reframing, demanding, "First publish Representative Cui's statement, then we'll talk" (2014). This type of activism through discussion in public view is a common feature of

the Sina Weibo public sphere. Because much of the activist voice is expressed through the ongoing framing and reframing of issues between activists and Party supporters, the discussion naturally tends toward a representation of multiple publics rather than domination by only one.

More direct engagement with government offices has also taken place on Sina Weibo. While government office visits are a legally protected right, the practical ability of people to make these visits is lacking. In this area of direct engagement between the people and the government, Sina Weibo also allows for a more transparent discussion. On March 4, 2014, a microblogger writing under the name Dian Zizheng shared a recently reported news story about a self-identified off-duty police officer attempting to gain access to a gated neighborhood. When he was refused for not being a resident, he used his position as a police officer to threaten the gate manager. Being again refused, he broke the gate arm and drove away, returning later in a police vehicle. He then left the vehicle parked in the entrance for several hours, blocking all entering traffic, before returning and driving the police car away. In sharing the post, Dian Zizheng tagged the provincial Public Security Bureau and city Propaganda Office, demanding an investigation. The propaganda office replied directly to the post, asking the city public affairs bureau to launch an investigation.

Sina Weibo's public space of discussion shows clear politicization. Not only are activists using it as a platform for the documentation of injustices, whether by government officials or private individuals, but it has also become a place of direct political engagement among societal elites, Party and government offices, and the citizenry. Although injustice reporting tends to avoid direct blaming of China's one-party rule, it is nonetheless much more open to identify other individuals whose wrongdoing in a way that challenges the political interests of bureaucratic elites. This strays from the "contingent symbiosis" that Spires (2011) recognizes has allowed NGOs to operate with relative autonomy. Like "contingent symbiosis," activist microblogging is sensitive to the political interests involved, refraining from direct challenge of Party rule or of the political system. At the same time, the advancement of limited policy agendas, including a more responsive government, GMO openness, more effective anticorruption

mechanisms, and rule of law, have been sustained through the microblogging tactics outlined above. For a further investigation into this politicized community, this chapter now turns to an analysis of the network of “big V” microbloggers who lead much of the political discussion.

Sina Weibo and SNA

Much of China’s online civil society is found in social media, and as was explained in the previous chapter, each form of social media has certain design features that shape the type of communication occurring on the network. Sina Weibo was selected for this SNA based on its blended focus on the individual and the community, usefulness for subsequent content analysis, and practical concerns of data collection. Sina Weibo is best described as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, but two noteworthy characteristics separate the two platforms. First, the 140 character limit on Twitter and Weibo is much less restrictive when the 140 characters are written in Chinese. Thus, Weibo posts may convey more complex thoughts. Second, Weibo allows users to post multiple pictures in one post. This feature is often used when sharing news stories or current events, as several images of an event are shared in a single post. Sometimes essays and news articles are also included as images in posts, circumventing the 140 character limit. Thus, Weibo posts are able to share much more content using the same general microblog format as Twitter, allowing for more elaborate commentary.

In addition to being content rich, the microblogging format is both personal and interactive. Other online social media, such as full-length blogs and discussion forums, tend to be one or the other. Blogs have a heavy focus on the individual with little or no space for comments and discussion. They allow people to express their views to the public, but they are primarily a one-way form of communication that provides no data about the receivers. Forums, by contrast, are highly interactive, allowing users to discuss and debate issues in a highly public online community. However, forums place little to no biographical focus on users. The anonymity that dominates forums makes it difficult for famous personalities to leverage their greatest asset, and there is less personal data

available for SNA. Unlike either of these two social media forms, Sina Weibo encourages users to make their account more personalized, including biographical data and photos of the user. While the lack of anonymity may deter users from posting some of their more extreme opinions in Weibo, this inhibition also helps to prevent some of the radicalization, bullying, and trolling that occur on social media.

Finally, data collection on Sina Weibo is much more amenable to SNA than many other social medial platforms. While online forums have been used for SNA research, explicit relationships in microblogging are much easier to identify. A Weibo microblogger may follow, be followed by, or have no explicit relationship with another microblogger. Sina Weibo makes followership information mostly public unless a microblogger chooses to create a hidden account using the “blacklist” feature or chooses to “secretly follow” other microbloggers. Given that this SNA is focused on the public activities of well-known persons, the absence of these hidden relationship data is not a primary concern. Another measure of relationship that was not used in this SNA but may be useful for future research is “mentions” of other microblogs in posts. Followership provides unweighted relationship data that does not reflect the strength of certain ties over others. “Mentions” of other Sina Weibo accounts by a microblogger is another explicit measurement of relationship that may be weighted based on the total number. Sina Weibo offers search tools that could be used to count the number of times an account is mentioned in another microblogger’s posts.

In spite of these benefits, there are also noticeable limitations to Sina Weibo’s uses for SNA. The first limitation is the size of the network that can be researched. Sina Weibo only allows a user account to follow 2,000 other users, unless the account is a “VIP” account, in which case depending on membership level the account can follow up to 3,000 other Sina microblogs. Although one does not need to follow an account to see its explicit connections with other microblogs, there are some useful tools that can only be leveraged if one follows the microblogs in a given network. For instance, if one follows all the members of a network of interest, one can easily see all other members of the network who follow or are followed by a given microblogger through Sina Weibo’s “people I follow also follow him/her” (*wo guanzhu de ren ye guanzhu ta*) and “people we

follow in common” (*gongtong guanzhu*) features. Having this data available through Sina Weibo allows researchers to code data into an SNA tool much more quickly than if one had to search through an account’s followers to look for ties. But this is only possible if the network is limited to 2,000-3,000 microblogs.

The second—and more crippling—limitation to Sina Weibo is that it prevents users from seeing all the microblogs a given microblogger follows or is followed by. In the design of this SNA, the original intention was to model egocentric networks of certain political microblogs to search for overlapping microblogs that are important to these microbloggers. However, this approach quickly met a dead-end when Sina Weibo produced an error message mentioning system restrictions on viewing other accounts’ relations. For any account examined, only the first ten pages of accounts a microblogger follows could be seen, with each page showing up to 20 accounts. Given the potential of Sina Weibo microbloggers to follow up to 2,000 microblogs without a member account, this means that as few as ten percent of the other accounts a microblogger follows may be viewable. This ten-page limit is also present when looking through a microblog’s followers. In the FAQs section of the website, Sina explains that this limitation is designed to prevent spam and harassment. Given the wide commercial uses for SNA, especially targeted advertising, it is no surprise Sina keeps some of these network data proprietary. Whatever the reason, this feature means one is unable to build an egocentric network based on a microblogger’s interest in other microblogs. Nevertheless, this limitation encouraged more creative uses of SNA and Weibo’s built-in features to discover important political microblogs. In spite of the two issues mentioned, the rich content of Weibo posts, the balance of personal focus and public discussion, and the availability of data, make Sina Weibo a suitable platform for SNA research.

Identifying a Larger Network of Political Microbloggers

The first step in this process was to build a network of political microbloggers for analysis based on an initial group of nine political microblogs that I had been following on Sina Weibo. NodeXL was chosen as the SNA software for this analysis due to being

open source and integrated with the familiar Microsoft Excel. Because Sina Weibo hides followership information necessary to model a complete egocentric network, another method of building the network was necessary. Sina Weibo offers a tool that makes recommendations based on common followership. Using these implicit ties of common followership rather than explicit ties to create the network has the advantage of casting a wider net: two microblogs with no explicit ties can still have strong common followership. This opens up the network to include more subgroups within the network connected to each other through common followership. The pitfall with this approach is that it could open up the network to include microblogs with very little relationship to the original group. For instance, one of the microblogs included in the network through Sina Weibo's recommendations is called World Alcohol Culture, which was ways removed from the type of microblogs desired. However, such unrelated microblogs are easily identifiable through measures of centrality.

One of the greatest challenges in conducting this SNA was defining a partial network that included microblogs of interest. Specifically, determining where and how to create bounds was no easy task. While the original approach of creating egocentric networks of each of the nine original political microblogs based on explicit relations of followership would have avoided this problem, there are limitations to such an approach aside from the already stated blockage by Sina Weibo. The initial nine microblogs follow between 109 and 2,709 other microblogs. Since there is no tool compatible with NodeXL or any other SNA software of which I am aware that will automatically code data from Sina Weibo, and once these egocentric networks are build they would have to be combined into a larger network, more efficient means was needed to identify potential political microblogs. Therefore, it was more practical to directly build this larger network based on Sina Weibo's recommendations. However, the question of network bounds remained troublesome. Knowledge of Sina Weibo's process of choosing microblogs to be recommended would allow for a more concrete determination of what this network represents.

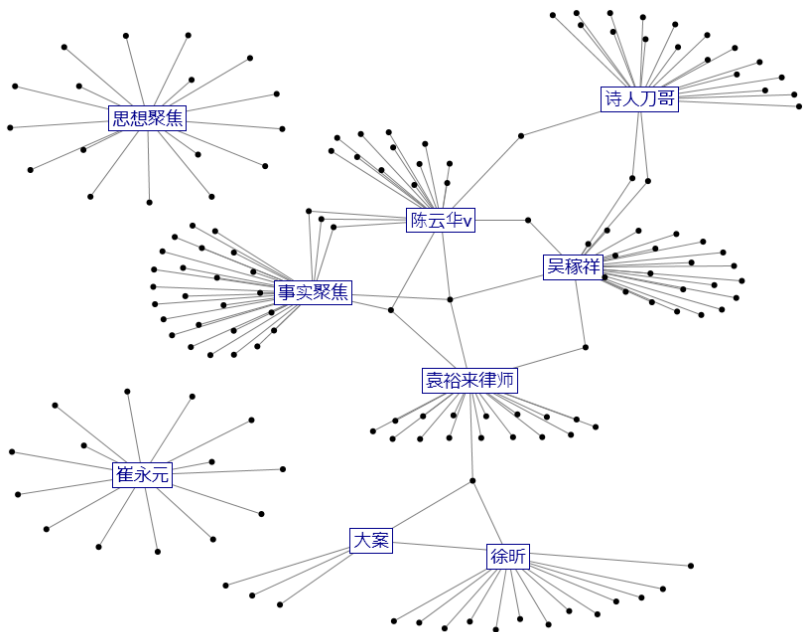
Because Sina Weibo does not publicize any information about how these recommendations are made except for the fact that they are based on common

followership, the recommendations themselves were analyzed using SNA tools. After several observations, it became clear that the list of recommendations on a microblogger's account page would vary several times in a single day. When a microblogger's recommendation list changed, the same few microblogs tended to remain at top, whereas the microblogs near the bottom of the list were more likely change. From these observations, it was hypothesized that Sina Weibo keeps a list of all alters with which a given ego shares a minimum threshold of common followers, and recommendation lists are generated from these larger lists. The stronger the implicit tie, the more likely an alter is to be included in a recommendation list. If this is true, then only a few of these recommendation lists should be needed to include all the alters with the strongest implicit ties to the ego.

In order to test this hypothesis, recommendation lists were recorded on March 29, April 2, and April 3, 2014. These three lists were then used to generate graphs of implicit ties based on common followership. Because this SNA is intended to target influential microbloggers, accounts with less than 100,000 followers were not included in these networks. Anonymous microblogs without the verified "V" marker were included if their followership met the threshold, even though they do not meet the traditional requirement to be considered "big V." The resulting network graphs, shown in Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, reveal similar patterns of connection despite the changes in recommended alters.

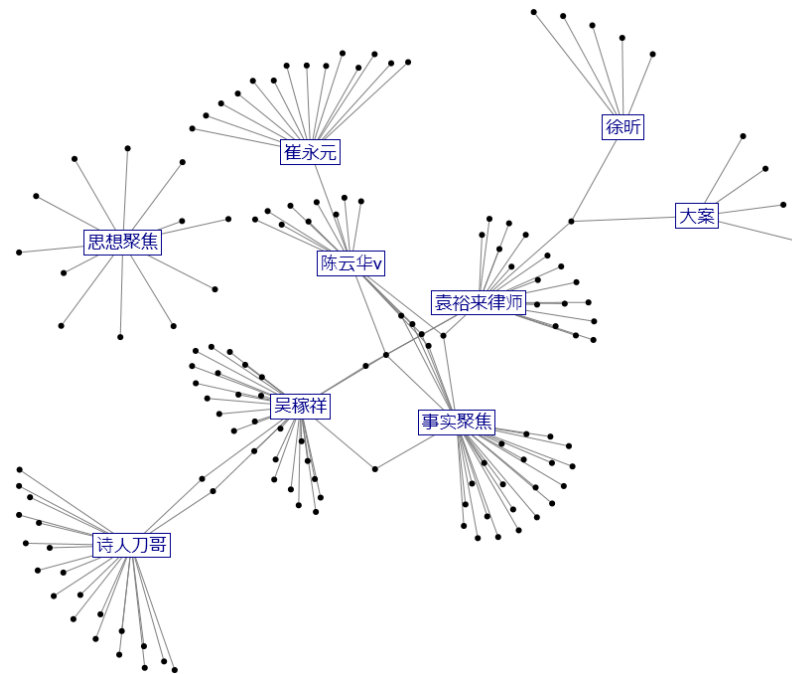
After these three networks were analyzed individually, their edge and vertex data were compared for variation. As expected, the number of newly recommended microblogs decreased noticeably after the first iteration. The first network identified a total of 150 alters; the second network added 39 alters that had not been previously included; and the third added 38. A fourth network graph combining the previous three was created to visualize these changes. Identical edges were combined and given an edge weight based on the number of edges combined. The combined network graph is shown in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.1. Network Graph of Original Nine Political Microblogs (Egos) and Alters Recorded on 29 March 2014.



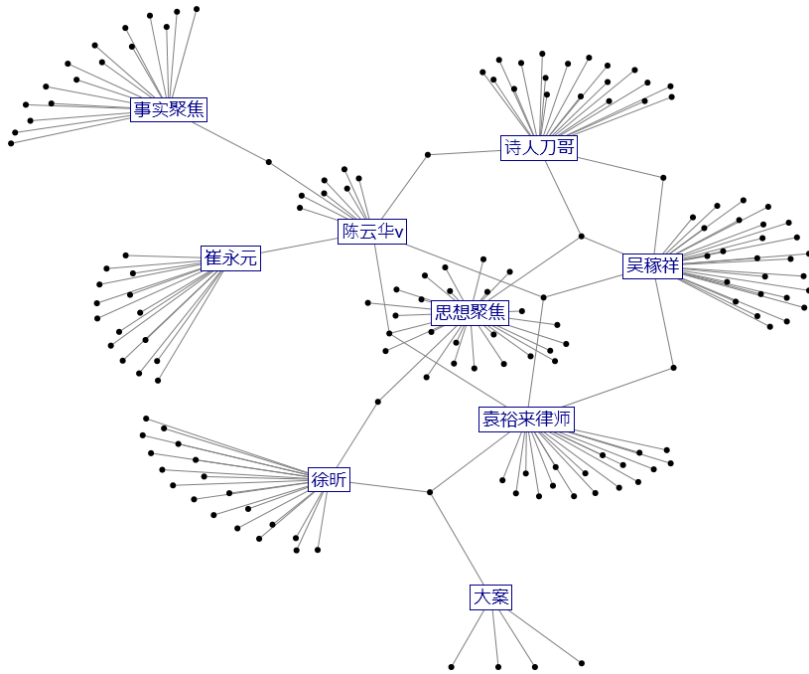
Edges represent implicit ties based on Sina Weibo's common followership recommendations. Graph layout was determined using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm.

Figure 4.2. Network Graph of Original Nine Political Microblogs (Egos) and Alters Recorded on 2 April 2014.



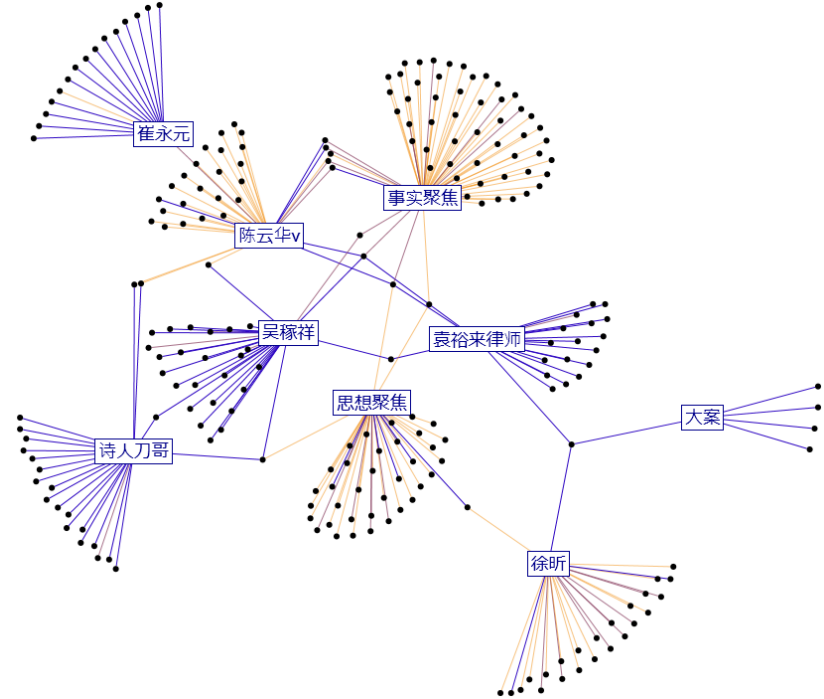
Edges represent implicit ties based on Sina Weibo's common followership recommendations. Graph layout was determined using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm.

Figure 4.3. Network Graph of Original Nine Political Microblogs (Egos) and Alters Recorded on 2 April 2014.



Edges represent implicit ties based on Sina Weibo's common followership recommendations. Graph layout was determined using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm.

Figure 4.4. Combined Network Graph of Original Nine Political Microblogs (Egos) and Alters.

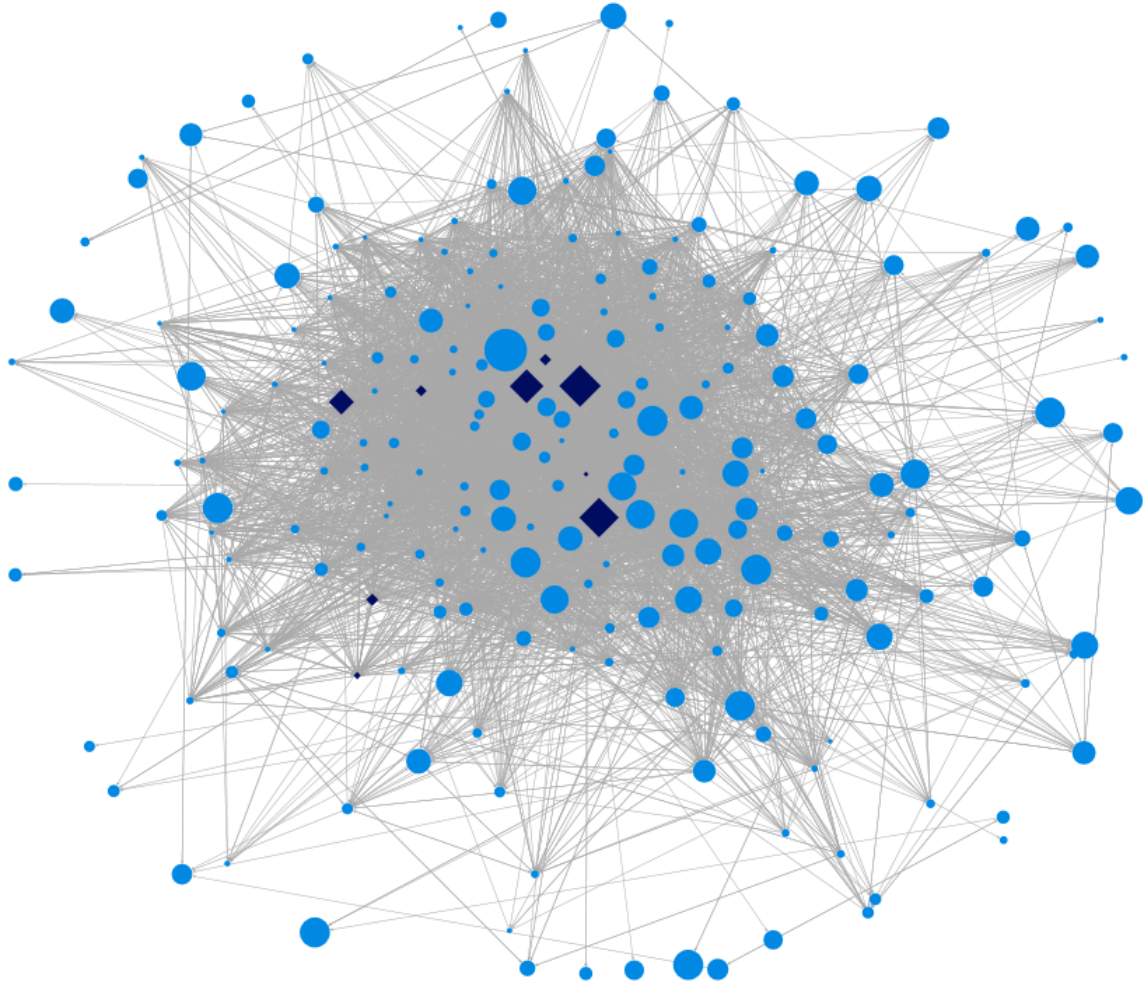


Edges represent implicit ties based on Sina Weibo's common followership recommendations. Graph layout was determined using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale algorithm. Darker, bluer edges represent greater edge weight.

Edge weight data reveal that 39.8% of alters appeared in all three iterations, 15.1% appeared in two iterations, and 45% appeared only once. This new network also highlighted the separation of the initial nine microbloggers into two groups based on the consistency of repeatedly recommended alters. Five of the microblogs had at least 86% of alters appear in all three observations, while the remaining four microblogs had less than 15% of alters appear all three times. However, at least 23% of each microblog's recommendations appeared more than once, and repeated recommendations often appeared at the top of the recommendation lists. The number of total followers as well as the number of alters recommended by Sina Weibo did not show any relation to the variations in recommendation lists. These data are congruent with the hypothesis that recommendations are selected from a larger list based on the strength of the implicit tie, and the chance of being repeatedly recommended is also linked to the strength of the tie. This also means that as this process is repeated, newly recommended alters are less likely to have strong common followership with the ego. Therefore, the 236 microblogs identified in these three iterations, counting the original nine microblogs, were considered adequate for subsequent analysis, since they likely include all alters with strong implicit ties.

After the members of this network were identified, the final task before analysis was to remap the connections, replacing implicit ties with explicit ones. On April 3 through 8, 2014, data on the explicit followership ties among these microblogs were recorded from Sina Weibo alongside total follower count and total number of microblogs followed. Of the 236 microblogs identified for inclusion in the network, 13 were not followed by any of the other microbloggers and were thus removed from the group. An additional seven microblogs were found to be in isolated networks and were also removed from the analysis. The remaining 216 Sina Weibo accounts was coded into NodeXL as a unimodal network, with vertices representing microblog accounts and directed edges representing followership. A total of 6,751 edges were coded into NodeXL, and data regarding each microblogger's number of followers and number of microblogs followed were included for each vertex. Once the data were coded, NodeXL produced network and vertex metrics and a graph of the network shown in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5. Network Graph of Explicit Relations among 216 Sina Weibo Microbloggers.



Original nine microblogs are represented as dark blue diamonds. Other microblogs are represented as light blue circles. Vertex size is proportional to followership. Graph layout was determined using the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm.

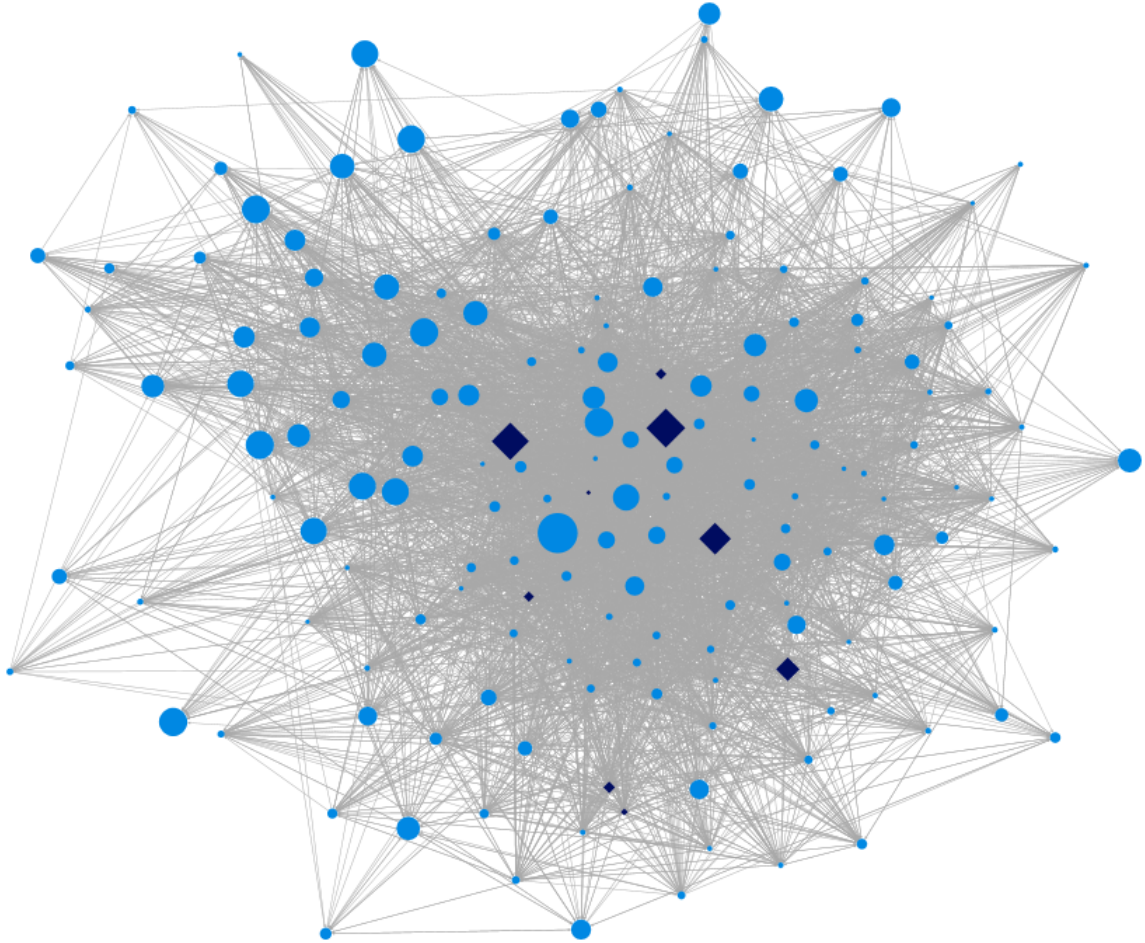
Measuring Success

The network graph and metrics produced by NodeXL were useful not only in determining the success of this approach in identifying a network of political microblogs, but they also provided new descriptive information about this network and identified several important microbloggers who may be of interest in future study. While the original nine microblogs remained relatively central, other accounts were also found to be highly central to the network. Through the use of multiple measures of centrality, these microblogs could be differentiated based on their contribution to the network, allowing for targeted case study follow-on research.

It was apparent based on the initial graph that some vertices exist on a loosely connected periphery. This comes as no surprise, since some of the recommendations by Sina Weibo, including World Alcohol Culture, share few core interests with original nine political microbloggers. In order to eliminate microblogs that are least likely to engage in political speech, the 51 accounts with a rounded eigenvector centrality of 0.001 or less were removed from the network. By eliminating these less-connected microblogs, network density increased from 14.5% to 23.4%, maximum geodesic distance decreased from 6 to 3, and average geodesic distance decreased from 2.00 to 1.69. The resulting network of 165 microblogs produced a much more connected network graph, shown in Figure 4.6, which is more likely to represent the network of “big V” political microbloggers on Sina Weibo.

With this new reduced network, the first task was to judge the effectiveness of this SNA in achieving its first goal: finding important political microbloggers. After eliminating the 51 least central microblogs, the resulting 165 were sampled to measure the proportion of political microblogs. A random sample of 61 accounts was identified, and the sample accounts' homepages were examined for two kinds of posts. The first kind includes political commentaries related to current events, government policy, or political issues. The second kind is activity related, asking followers to participate in a social or humanitarian activity. Sina Weibo homepages only include the five most recent posts plus a “pinned” post if the user chooses to keep one. Choosing only to read these homepage posts tells us if the microblog appears upon first glance to be concerned with

Figure 4.6. Network Graph of Explicit Relations among 165 Sina Weibo Microbloggers.



Original nine microblogs are represented as dark blue diamonds. Other microblogs are represented as light blue circles. Vertex size is proportional to followership. Graph layout was determined using the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm.

sociopolitical issues. Microblogs run by companies, were counted as apolitical, even if their posts focus on current events. In total, 35 microblogs included these posts. Assuming normality and applying a finite population correction, we can be 95% confident that the true proportion of microblogs with these posts on their homepage is $57\% \pm 10\%$. Considering that this test only considered the five most recent posts, this statistic likely underrepresents the true number of political microbloggers in the network, and a second visit to several of the microblogs in the sample supported this assumption. In fact, even though four of the nine original egos were included in the sample, only two were counted as political according to this test.

Although this network represents a community of people whose microblogs are likely to include posts on political issues, it is much more useful if we can identify subgroups of important microbloggers based on certain traits. Follower count could be used to measure influence, but a more practical measure should take into account influence within *this* community of political microbloggers. This could be measured through centrality within the network. If microbloggers other than the original nine are found to be highly central to the network, it means this approach has successfully identified other important political microbloggers. It was expected that the initial few activists would remain relatively central to this network. Indeed, four of the original nine egos are among the ten microblogs with the highest eigenvector centrality, three of which are also in the top ten for betweenness centrality. More significantly, however, several new microblogs were identified as being highly central to this network both in terms of eigenvector and betweenness centrality. These microblogs are identified in Table 4.1.

Using both these measures of centrality helped to identify more total microblogs of interest, but it is important to recognize the characteristics of these measures to identify the ways in which these microblogs are important to the network. Eigenvector centrality is particularly useful in follower networks like Sina Weibo, because it highlights individuals whose followers have many followers. Not only is the individual microblog important, but the microbloggers who follow it are also important. This measure is considered most practical measure of influence in this network of political microbloggers, but influence is not everything.

Table 4.1. Top 10 and Bottom 10 Microblogs by Eigenvector and Betweenness Centrality.

Rank	Blog Name	Eigenvector Centrality	Rank	Blog Name	Betweenness Centrality
1	信力建	13.6 x 10 ⁻³	1	信力建	890.3
2	慕眼	13.1 x 10 ⁻³	2	慕眼	826.9
3	_冰翼_	12.6 x 10 ⁻³	3	思想聚焦*	791.7
4	思想聚焦*	12.2 x 10 ⁻³	4	_冰翼_	731.2
5	徐昕 (Xu Xin)*	11.9 x 10 ⁻³	5	大案 (Big Cases)*	717.0
6	大案 (Big Cases)*	11.4 x 10 ⁻³	6	于海青	467.8
7	于海青	11.0 x 10 ⁻³	7	徐昕 (Xu Xin)*	432.2
8	周泽律师	11.0 x 10 ⁻³	8	杨锦麟	372.0
9	袁裕来律师*	11.0 x 10 ⁻³	9	封新城	365.4
10	杨锦麟	11.0 x 10 ⁻³	10	王利芬	359.5
~~~~	~~~~~	~~~~~	~~~~	~~~~~	~~~~~
207	<b>环球杂志</b>	2.1 x 10 ⁻³	207	李银河	6.9
208	<b>方泉</b>	1.9 x 10 ⁻³	208	媒体微博头条	6.8
209	李响	1.9 x 10 ⁻³	209	<b>陈默</b>	5.4
210	<b>张五常</b>	1.8 x 10 ⁻³	210	<b>张五常</b>	5.3
				申冤公益律师林	
211	环球人物杂志	1.8 x 10 ⁻³	211	波	5.2
212	北京江荣生	1.6 x 10 ⁻³	212	北京江荣生	4.2
213	龚文祥	1.6 x 10 ⁻³	213	张怡筠	3.1
214	<b>讽刺批判语录</b>	1.6 x 10 ⁻³	214	<b>讽刺批判语录</b>	2.9
215	刘惠璞_河马哥	1.6 x 10 ⁻³	215	<b>环球杂志</b>	2.0
216	<b>陈默</b>	1.5 x 10 ⁻³	216	<b>方泉</b>	1.2

Microblog names that appear in the top or bottom 10 of both measures are bolded. Microblogs from the original group of nine are marked with an asterisk (*).

Using both these measures of centrality helped to identify more total microblogs of interest, but it is important to recognize the characteristics of these measures to identify the ways in which these microblogs are important to the network. Eigenvector centrality is particularly useful in follower networks like Sina Weibo, because it highlights individuals whose followers have many followers. Not only is the individual microblog important, but the microbloggers who follow it are also important. This measure is considered most practical measure of influence in this network of political microbloggers, but influence is not everything.

Betweenness centrality's focus on information flows is equally useful, even though microblogs that are highly between are not necessarily influential in the network. The measure is derived from the number of shortest paths between network members that pass through a given vertex. Because of the power embedded in discursive choice in the framing of news, being the first to share or discuss a news story has significant benefits. However, having high betweenness does not necessarily mean the microblog itself is particularly influential. This is demonstrated by the case of Big Cases and Xu Xin in Table 4.1. Big Cases has a greater betweenness than Xu Xin, because Big Cases follows a more diverse group of microblogs in the network. However, Xu Xin's in-degree was over three times that of Big Cases, indicating many more in the network are paying attention to his posts. The use of these measures, then, is not as an absolute indicator of relevance in political microblogging, but rather an indicator of which microblogs are more likely to be important. Qualitative judgment is still necessary.

Another way important political microbloggers may be identified is through normalized and weighted measures of centrality, as shown in Table 4.2. Certain famous microblogs are more likely to appear in this network because of their overall fame, but they may in fact not be very interested in this network. Similarly, network members may be interested in these famous microblogs for pure amusement and not in connection to their political microblogging. This may skew the centrality measures in favor of more popular microblogs even if they are not necessarily important to political microblogging. In order to compensate for this, a normalized measure of in-degree was created by dividing each vertex's in-degree by its total number of followers. The resulting number

Table 4.2. Top 10 and Bottom 10 Microblogs by Normalized In-Degree (left) and Weighed Out-Degree (right).

Rank	Blog Name	Number of Followers	Rank	Blog Name	Number of Followers
1	信力建	126,066	1	思想聚焦*	6,658,022
2	孙海峰	106,229	2	徐昕 (Xu Xin)*	7,323,182
3	童之伟	120,503	3	袁裕来律师*	4,862,720
4	刘苏里	138,660	4	赵晓	7,720,195
5	刘晓原律师	118,631	5	封新城	3,909,088
6	朱大可	117,335	6	慕眼	1,798,850
7	隆裕太后	146,227	7	姜岚昕	3,525,297
8	作家陈岚	155,976	8	正和岛刘东华	2,922,397
9	叶匡政	260,687	9	倪正东	2,934,123
10	章文的文章	177,097	10	创业家杂志	3,074,459
~~~~	~~~~~	~~~~~	~~~~	~~~~~	~~~~~
207	棋哥	1,836,859	207	任卫新	121,064
208	沈宏非	3,422,299	208	胡紫微	447,144
		2,674,810		申冤公益律师林	
209	聚美陈欧		209	波	115,818
210	滕泰	2,578,496	210	押沙龙	130,677
211	孔庆东	2,756,966	211	克里斯托夫-金	195,724
212	李响	1,953,085	212	讽刺批判语录	151,374
213	叫兽易小星	3,629,163	213	邱毅台湾	1,651,516
214	媒体微博头条	3,883,175	214	方泉	124,351
215	张怡筠	3,521,316	215	叶檀	528,288
216	环球杂志	2,387,606	216	张五常	318,575

Microblogs from the original group of nine are marked with an asterisk (*).

tells the proportion of a given microblogger's followership that comes from this group. It is biased against microblogs with high total followership, so it was able to identify lesser-known microblogs that are important to this network despite their relative lack of fame. This measure proved very effective in identifying less well-known yet politically active microblogs. All ten of the microblogs with the highest normalized in-degree had posts relating to issues of politics, society, and current events, some of them quite passionately.

While this normalized measure helped identify less well-known microbloggers who are nonetheless important to this network, the opposite question was also asked. Which of the celebrities and otherwise well-known microbloggers are interested in this group despite their fame? This was measured through multiplying a microblogger's out-degree in this network by their total number of followers on Sina Weibo. The resulting measure is a weighted out-degree that is biased against less-famous microblogs. Of the ten highest ranked accounts, three of them were the microbloggers from the original group with the highest total follower count. Other microblogs in the top-ten group for this measure had at least 1.8 million followers, well above the network average of 1.2 million followers.

In addition to meeting the two original goals, this SNA led to the discovery of other network parameters that are useful in describing the process of political microblogging in China. Two noteworthy discoveries are the relative equality among microbloggers and attention paid to the group by news media. Network metrics revealed that 52.7% of follower relations are reciprocated, showing that interest within this group tends to flow in both directions. Furthermore, four magazines and news-related microblogs were included in this group, with out-degrees ranging from 2 to 52, indicating that many of the microbloggers in this larger network are receiving media attention in addition to their political following. Other famous personalities were also found to pay attention to this group. One of the most noteworthy is Li Kaifu, the former president of Google China and one of the most popular microbloggers on Sina Weibo. His followership exceeds 51 million, yet 45 of the microblogs he follows are among the 165 in this network, accounting for 8.5% of everyone he follows. The tools available through SNA open the door for these and other serendipitous discoveries.

Conclusion

Sina Weibo continues to be a relevant space of politically charged public speech. Although government censorship and punishment of microbloggers who push the envelope is still a reality, activists have nonetheless found ways to advance democratic political goals through indirect blaming; targeted injustice reporting; and public dialogue among elites, citizens, and government and Party offices. Furthermore, the community has been able to engage in digital mobilizations to protect its own members—the 16 year-old microblogger arrested under the new SPC and SPP interpretation was released after communities of microbloggers released an outpouring of complaints against his harsh treatment. Still, there is relatively little we know about why this politicized community has successfully lobbied for policy outcomes in spite of state restrictions. Here, SNA was able to answer some basic questions about the design of the Sina Weibo’s digital public sphere that has contributed to this success.

Both initial goals of this SNA were achieved, as was measured by the overall proportion of political microblogs in this larger network and identification of four groups of important microblogs. Of the sample taken, 57% (95% CI 47%, 67%) had posted about a political topic within the last five posts. Furthermore, it was possible to target microbloggers in the network based on influence, relevance to the fast spread of news, connectedness despite low overall fame, and celebrity attention paid to the group. The success of this approach in identifying a large network political microbloggers based on an initial few suggests that this process could be repeated with other political or issues-based microbloggers to find additional networks of interest.

Even with Sina Weibo’s restrictions on viewing followership data, it is possible to use SNA to find where political microbloggers are concentrated and how information is likely to flow through these networks. Identifying these microbloggers also helps to measure the connection between online political discussion and the Chinese population at large. While the most central microblog, as measured by eigenvector centrality, has only 126,000 total followers, the average followership of each microblog identified through this SNA is 1.2 million. Although these numbers might not be on the same level as the

tens of millions followers other microbloggers have, their influence within Sina Weibo has repeatedly been demonstrated.

This chapter has highlighted tactics and network properties of an observed group of microbloggers who have successfully and repeatedly used Sina Weibo to spread contentious political messages. Although there is much more about activists on Sina Weibo to be studied, including more complex questions of group leadership, membership, and methods of involvement, the taxonomy of political microblogging and SNA developed herein provide initial empirical data for comparison with other digital communities as well as physical civil society. The SNA was conducted with a specific focus of finding microblogs for follow-on study, yet the additional potential of this approach quickly emerged. Network metrics reveal that this group is relatively well connected, equal, and resilient. Other possibilities that could be explored in future research is correlating network metrics with the type of microblog. The “big V” political microbloggers that make up this group are known for their fame as lawyers, journalists, scholars, businesspeople, entertainers, writers, and social commentators. Identifying these subgroups might be useful in studying the spread of political discourse across professional circles.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

China's "associational revolution" (S. Wang and He 2004) is not limited to the physical world. Through survey research, analysis of publicized participation data in online communities and physical organizations, qualitative readings of Sina Weibo microblog posts, and an SNA of influential Sina Weibo microbloggers, this thesis has advanced several empirical approaches that help explain the size and political activity of China's digital public sphere. China's nonprofit sector is growing and expanding its ability to engage in service provision as well as limited advocacy work. However, civil society is not only constituted by formal organizations, and it is in the informal realm of human interactions, particularly online, that China's public sphere has seen its greatest freedom. Although this inquiry has been limited by its specific focus on political communication, which is merely precursory to meetings, institutional political involvement, and protests that give civil society political force, it nonetheless opens the door for future research on the connection between online political communication and political action in China. Furthermore, the political speech occurring on China's digital public sphere has caught the attention of journalists and CCP leaders alike. Not only are people more connected through the Internet, but social media has become truly politicized, giving an outlet for citizen voice that does not exist to the same extent in China's physical landscape.

In understanding this new(s) civil society, it is important to remember that civil society as a concept is big—too big to fit easily into any one scheme of understanding. It exists not only in the associations that have to register with the government, but also in the interpersonal connections among individuals at the workplace, on the bus, and online. While it is theoretically separate from other spheres of association, namely the market and government, such a separation is impossible to identify in the real world, because people never exist exclusively in any of these three spheres. This is even truer in China, where corporatism and heavy state involvement in business enterprise makes the three spheres more interconnected than in liberal democracies. Understanding the digital and the unorganized aspects of civil society is crucial to recognizing the power of online

groups in local and national Chinese politics. It is in these networks that the communicative power of the public sphere is largely developed and exercised.

Building an empirical understanding of this digital public sphere must begin with an understanding of its size, which may then be compared with the real-world connections that are traditionally understood to constitute the public sphere. While it is challenging to separate and study these two realms of association, public participation data show that the extent of online connections has likely grown well beyond the size of physical organized society. Survey results also pointed to the relative largesse of social media in China; however, survey methods proved ineffectual for drawing conclusions with any measurable confidence. Nonetheless, this does not negate the usefulness of questionnaires for exploratory research. Furthermore, the survey process revealed the willingness of participants to engage in deeper discussion, which indicates interview methods might be more fruitful in future Chinese social research. Publicized data and previous research also confirmed the reality that most physical connections are now represented digitally, allowing people to easily transition between the two domains. As Yang and Calhoun (2008) aptly note, physical civil society is an important driver of the online public sphere, because it provides “discourse producing publics” that give tools to extant digital communities (73).

Being a part of China’s vast population of netizens does not automatically equate to participation in the digital public sphere, however. For this reason, it was necessary to look for indicators of political communication. These may help us develop a more rigorous comparison of China’s physical and digital civil society. It turns out, citizen activism has transformed an ostensibly entertainment-based platform into a politicized one. The activism tactics witnessed on Sina’s microblogging platform are diverse, flexible, and sensitive to state interests. One of the most observed self-protecting methods was the retransmission of published news stories with emphasis on implicit underlying causes of a dilemma that might be otherwise risky to directly address. As for the actual network of activists, they show high interconnection and equality, with 23.4% density and 52.7% followership reciprocation in the network of 165 microbloggers analyzed. They also represented a diversity of opinions, backgrounds, and tactics. Famous lawyers

and social commentators alike were observed voicing disagreements with each other's positions on political issues as well as sharing their viewpoints with government and Party offices. Significantly, these political discussions are all happening within public view. The pressure on government and Party offices to make Sina Weibo accounts and engage with the people also supports the neo-Tocquevillian idea that strong civil society creates avenues for more democratic governance, although the Chinese government has also taken advantage of discursive power to employ pro-Party bloggers. While Weibo democracy can hardly be compared with the consistency and security of institutional democracy, it is nonetheless an area where democratic voice is strengthened.

Civil society, one must remember, is not only what exists in the formal clubs, associations, and NGOs that inhabit physical spaces, but rather it is the larger realm of human interaction that exists for reasons beyond those of the state or of the market. It is not always democratic or democratizing, but it has enormous capacity to support democracy through the empowerment of citizen voices. The public sphere—not only the limited, bourgeois public sphere identified by Habermas (1991), but also the larger space of public and counterpublic discourse—is an inseparable domain of civil society that works to create, reshape, and aggregate political thought into a coherent discourse to which a government is held accountable. Governments, even in institutionally democratic states, make efforts to regulate this process, either by providing protections for minority voices or by punishing “dangerous” political opinions. In China, regulation of the public sphere has been a primary concern for the CCP, and its censorship capabilities remain unparalleled, but online communication technologies have nonetheless greatly strengthened the average citizen's ability to engage with their government, discuss political happenings, and form an independent political will. Institutional democracy may still be a distant dream for many Chinese citizens, but the dream of a government responsive to the public will is being realized increasingly with each day.

Appendix A Recruitment Flyer

Slight changes were made to the appearance of the recruitment flyer when it was made available online through Tianya, but differences remained minor. An English translation is included after the original.

夏威夷大学

参加研究邀请：中国广东省社会关系

你好！我名叫 Michael O’Kelley（中文名字：欧克雷）；我姓 O’Kelley。目前就读于夏威夷大学，是政治系研究所的学生，最近正在进行一项硕士研究，研究主题为考察中国广东省社会组织的情况「参加与不参加社会组织人有什么差别，特别是搜集新闻，分享新闻有什么习惯，有什么偏好」。无论您参加或不参加社会组织我都诚心的邀请您参与本此研究。参与者仅要在网上填写一份调查表。参与者都应该是十八周岁以上的广东省公民。

若您想参与或更多了解本研究，请与我联系。

QQ 号：

电话号：

电邮：

University of Hawai‘i

Research Project Questionnaire:
Social Connections in Guangdong, China

Hello! My name is Michael O’Kelley (in Chinese: *oukelei*). I am a master’s student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. I am conducting research for my master’s thesis on social organizations in Guangdong, China.

Specifically, I am researching the differences between participants and non-participants in social organizations with regard to how they research and spread news. Whether or not you are a member of a registered social organization I sincerely welcome you to participate in my research project. Participants will only be asked to complete an online questionnaire. All participants must be at least 18 years old and residents of Guangdong.

If you would like to learn more about this research project, please contact me.

QQ:

Telephone:

Email:

Appendix B Survey Questionnaire

Slight changes were made to the appearance of and instructions for the questionnaire when it was made available online through surveymonkey.com, but differences remained minor. An English translation is included after the original.

夏威夷大学

研究调查表：中国广东省社会关系

研究员：Michael O’Kelley

填写指南：请您仔细填写以下的问题。请在绿色栏里填写您的答案。大部分的问题是多项选择。为了注明您的选择，请在相应绿色栏里打 X。除非问题有其他的要求，请仅选一个选择。如果以下任何问题不适用与您，或者您不方便回答，可以跳过不填。您结束之后，请将答完的问卷调查发送给我。调查表一共有 20 个问题，完成了应该不到十五分钟。

请先填写个人信息，先介绍一下自己。

1) 性别

男性	女性

2) 您属于哪个年龄段？

18~30 周岁	31~40 周岁	41~50 周岁	51~60 周岁	61 周岁以上

3) 您是城市户口还是农村户口?

城市户口	农村户口

4) 您一个月的工资大约是多少? (请在下面填写您的答案)

--

5) 您所住的地区是否属于经济特区?

是经济特区	不是经济特区

6) 请注明您上网的频率。

最少每天几次	最少每天一次	最少每周一次	不到每周一次

7) 请选择您经常使用的与人交流的方式。(可以有多个选择)

<input type="checkbox"/>	腾讯 QQ
<input type="checkbox"/>	腾讯微信
<input type="checkbox"/>	新浪微博
<input type="checkbox"/>	手机短信
<input type="checkbox"/>	电邮
<input type="checkbox"/>	博客
<input type="checkbox"/>	MSN
<input type="checkbox"/>	Skype
<input type="checkbox"/>	打电话
<input type="checkbox"/>	邮件
<input type="checkbox"/>	网易 CC
<input type="checkbox"/>	串门
<input type="checkbox"/>	其他方式

8) 您对哪位微博人物最感兴趣? (请在下面填写您的答案)

--

9) 下部分是为了多了解您个人参与社会群或组织的习惯。(可以有多个选择)

<input type="checkbox"/>	共产党或共青团
<input type="checkbox"/>	环保组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	商业协会
<input type="checkbox"/>	在线游戏社群(仅限您的固定网友朋友)
<input type="checkbox"/>	网上论坛
<input type="checkbox"/>	博客
<input type="checkbox"/>	有组织的体育
<input type="checkbox"/>	新闻工作协会
<input type="checkbox"/>	文化组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	学生会
<input type="checkbox"/>	居委会或村委会
<input type="checkbox"/>	慈善组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	公益活动
<input type="checkbox"/>	志愿者组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	民间组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	政府组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	嗜好组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	宗教组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	其他的网上群体组织
<input type="checkbox"/>	其他的社会组织

10) 关于以上您所参与的社会群或组织, 对您来说哪一个是最重要的? 请注明群或组织类型和您的参与程度, 如领导人、很活跃、有点活跃、不活跃。

组织类型	参与程度
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11) 因为社会在不断的变化, 所以社会总是会有新的问题需要人们去面对解决, 对于您所参与的群或组织, 以下哪个句子更能准确的描述出成员们对社会出现的新问题的观点?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
对大部分的社会问题, 成员们的观点相似	对大部分的社会问题, 成员们能代表不同的观点

12) 根据您的亲身经历，您所认识住在广东省的人会注意时事新闻吗？

一般来说，他们会注意新闻	一般来说，他们不会注意新闻

13) 根据您的亲身经历，您所认识住在广东省的人分享新闻的时候容易彼此相信吗？

一般来说，他们比较容易彼此相信	一般来说，他们比较不容易彼此相信

14) 您在网上购物吗？（若是，可以列出三个您所购物的网站）

15) 您对网上的商店信任有多少？

大部分信任	只有知名商店可以相信	即使有些知名商店也不可相信	所有的都不可相信

快完成了！只有五个问题还要填写。

在以下两个问题当中，请根据指定的要求来给新闻的来源排序。不要担心，答案没有对错。重要的是了解您个人的经历。

16) 根据您的亲身经历，请给以下 6 个新闻来源从最可靠的到最不可靠的排序。（数字 1 最可靠，数字 6 最不可靠，也就是数字越小越可靠。每个数字只能使用一次！）

	电视
	同事/同学
	新闻通讯社网站
	报纸出版
	亲人/朋友们
	其他的网站

17) 根据您的亲身经历，当您搜集新闻故事时，请给以下 6 个信息来源从最喜欢的到最不喜欢的排序。（数字 1 最喜欢，数字 6 最不喜欢，也就是数字越小越喜欢。每个数字只能使用一次！）

	电视
	同事/同学
	新闻通讯社网站
	报纸出版
	亲人/朋友们
	其他的网站

18) 为了搜集新闻，哪个网站，电视台，或方式是您最喜欢的？（请填写您的答案）

--

19) 以下新闻种类中，最吸引您的 3 种是哪些？（请在相应的 3 个选项旁边打 X）

	政治
	商业
	国际
	体育
	名人新闻
	本地新闻
	科技新闻
	学校新闻
	旅游新闻
	生活
	文化
	法律
	环保新闻
	宗教新闻

20) 在以上所有的调查中，您还有其他的评论吗？（如果有，请在以下栏填写您的意见）

--

我要衷心的感谢您的参与，请将答完的问卷调查通过 QQ 或者电邮发送给我。谢谢！

University of Hawai‘i

Research Project Questionnaire:
Social Connections in Guangdong, China

Researcher: Michael O’Kelley

Instructions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. All answers may be marked in the green boxes of this questionnaire. For multiple choice questions, please mark your answer by typing an X in the green box below or beside your choice. Please only select one answer unless directed to do otherwise. For all other questions, extra directions will be included. If any question does not apply to you, or if you do not feel comfortable answering the question, you may skip it. When finished, please return a completed copy of the questionnaire. In total, there are 20 questions. It should take less than 15 minutes to complete.

First, please help me to learn a little about yourself.

1) What is your sex?

Male	Female

2) What is your age group?

18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61+

3) Are you a resident of the city or countryside?

City Residence	Countryside Residence

4) Approximately how much money do you earn in a month? (Please type your answer in the box below)

--

5) Do you live in a special economic zone?

I live in a special economic zone	I do not live in a special economic zone

6) How frequently do you connect to the Internet?

Many times a day	At least once a day	At least once a week	Less than once a week

7) What means do you regularly use to connect with people? (Multiple answers are allowed)

	QQ
	WeChat
	Sina Weibo
	Cellphone text messages
	Email
	Blog
	MSN Messenger
	Skype
	Telephone
	Mail
	NetEase CC
	Home visits
	Other

8) Which Weibo microblogger most interests you? (Please write your answer in the spaces below)

--

Next, I would like to learn about your participation in social groups or organizations.

9) Of the following social groups and organizations, please indicate which ones you participate in. (Multiple answers are allowed)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Communist party/youth league
<input type="checkbox"/>	Environmental organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business association
<input type="checkbox"/>	Online gaming association (only if you regularly play with the same people)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Online discussion forums
<input type="checkbox"/>	Organized sports
<input type="checkbox"/>	Journalism association
<input type="checkbox"/>	Culture organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Student organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Neighborhood committee
<input type="checkbox"/>	Charity organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public benefit organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Volunteer organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	NGO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Government organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Organized hobby group
<input type="checkbox"/>	Religious group
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other online community organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other social organization

10) Of the above groups or organizations in which you participate, which is the most important to you? Please indicate the type of group and your level of involvement. Involvement should be listed as either “leader,” “very active,” “somewhat active,” or “not active.”

Type of group or organization	Level of involvement
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11) Because the world is constantly changing, there are always new social challenges for people to overcome. For the group or organization you identified in the previous question, which answer better describes the group members’ view toward social issues?

<input type="checkbox"/>	The members tend to share the same viewpoint on most of society’s issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	The members tend to represent many viewpoints on most of society’s issues
--------------------------	--	--------------------------	---

12) Would you say that the people you know in Guangdong generally are or are not well informed of the news?

They generally are well informed of the news	They generally are not well informed of the news

13) Would you say that people you know in Guangdong relatively easily trust news they hear from each other?

In general, they easily trust news they hear from each other	In general, they do not easily trust news they hear from each other

14) Do you shop online? (If yes, please list up to three websites you use to shop online.)

15) Are online merchants trustworthy enough to do business with?

Most are trustworthy	Only well-known merchants are trustworthy	Even some well-known merchants are untrustworthy	They are all untrustworthy

Almost done! Only five more questions.

For the next two questions, I am going to ask you to rank news sources based on certain qualities. Please remember, there are no wrong answers. All that matters is your personal perception.

16) Based on your experience, please rank the following 6 sources from **most reliable to least reliable source of news**. (1 represents the most reliable, 6 represents the least reliable. In other words, lower numbers represent more reliable sources of news. Please only use each number once.)

	Television
	Coworkers/classmates
	News agency website
	Print newspaper
	Family and Friends
	Other website

17) Based on your experience, please rank the following 6 sources from **most preferred to least preferred for staying informed of news**. (1 represents the most preferred, 6 represents the least preferred. In other words, lower numbers represent more preferred sources of news. Please only use each number once.)

	Television
	Coworkers/classmates
	News agency website
	Print newspaper
	Family and Friends
	Other website

18) Which website, television station, or other method is your favorite for receiving news? (Please type your answer in the box below)

19) Which three of the following news categories most interest you? (Please only mark three choices with an X)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Politics
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business
<input type="checkbox"/>	International
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sports
<input type="checkbox"/>	Celebrity News
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local news
<input type="checkbox"/>	Technology news
<input type="checkbox"/>	School news
<input type="checkbox"/>	Travel
<input type="checkbox"/>	Life
<input type="checkbox"/>	Culture
<input type="checkbox"/>	Law
<input type="checkbox"/>	Environmental news
<input type="checkbox"/>	Religious news

20) Do you have any final comments about any of the subjects covered in this questionnaire? (Please write them in the box below)

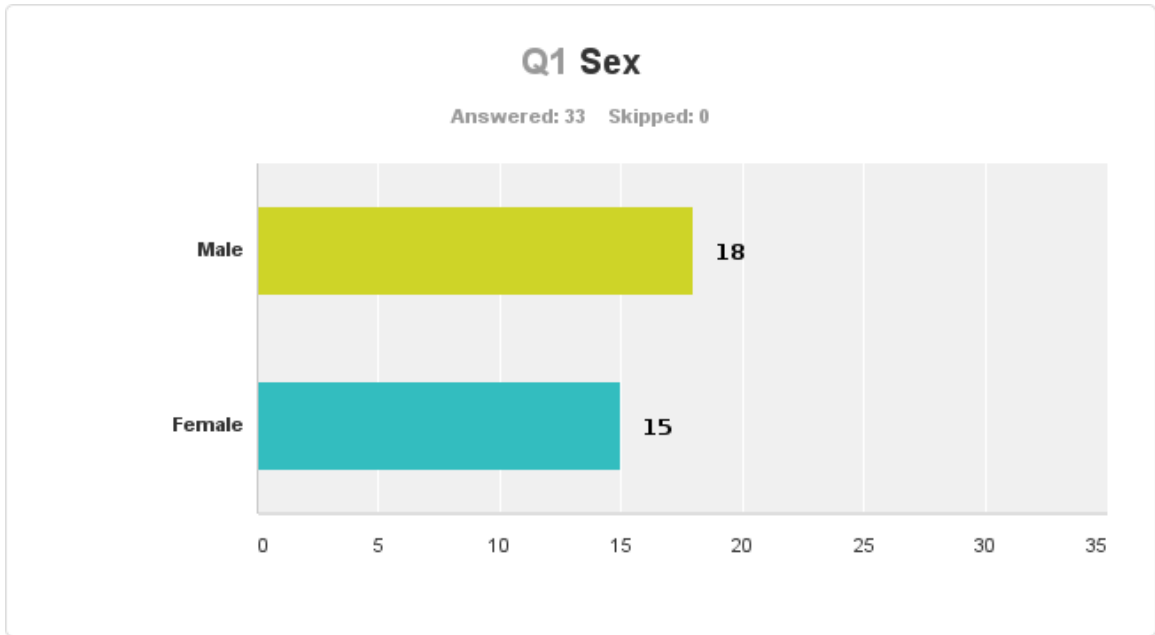
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I would like to sincerely thank you for your participation in this research questionnaire. Please return the completed questionnaire to me via QQ or email.

Appendix C

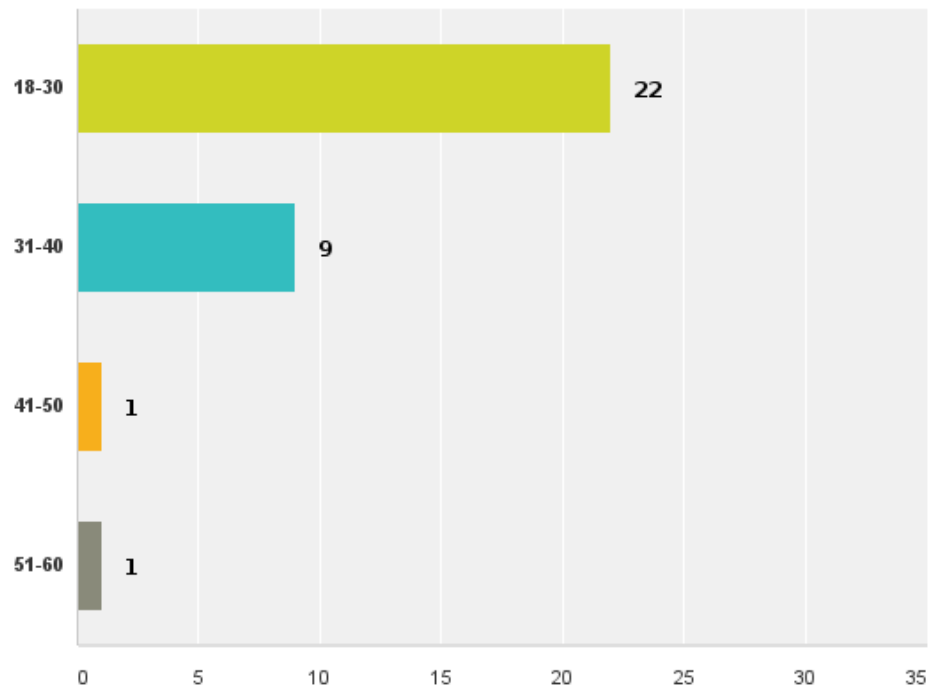
Summary of Closed-Ended Survey Responses

Graphics generated by www.surveymonkey.com.



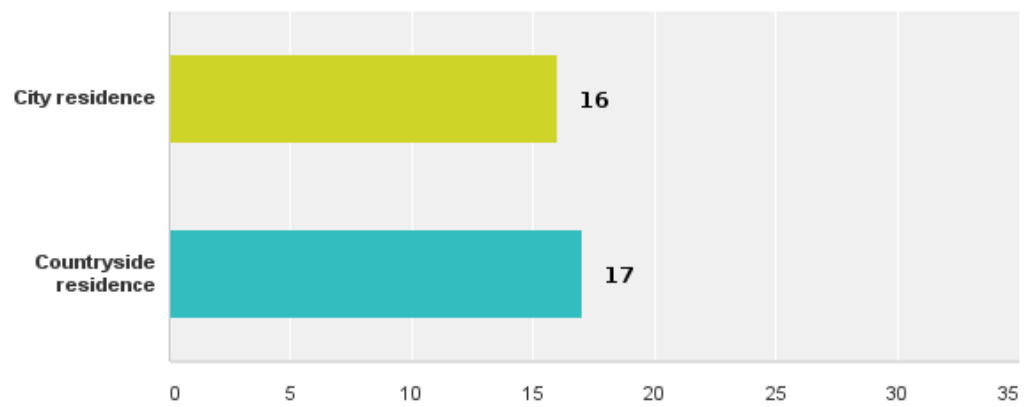
Q2 Age group

Answered: 33 Skipped: 0



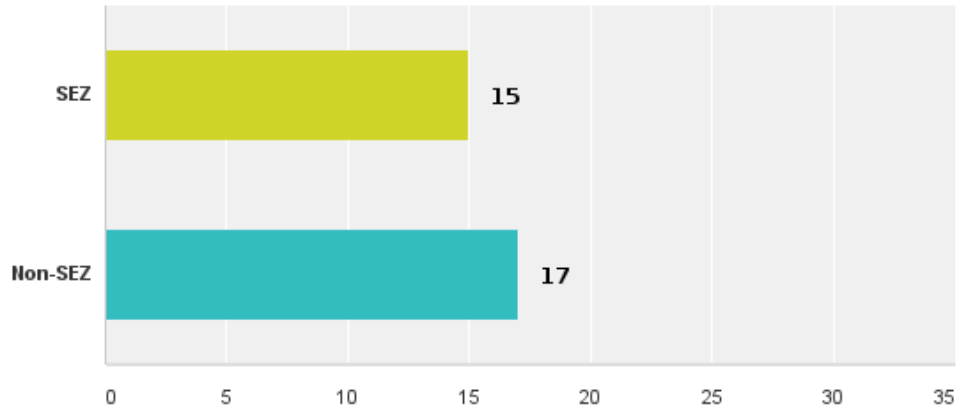
Q3 City or countryside residence

Answered: 33 Skipped: 0



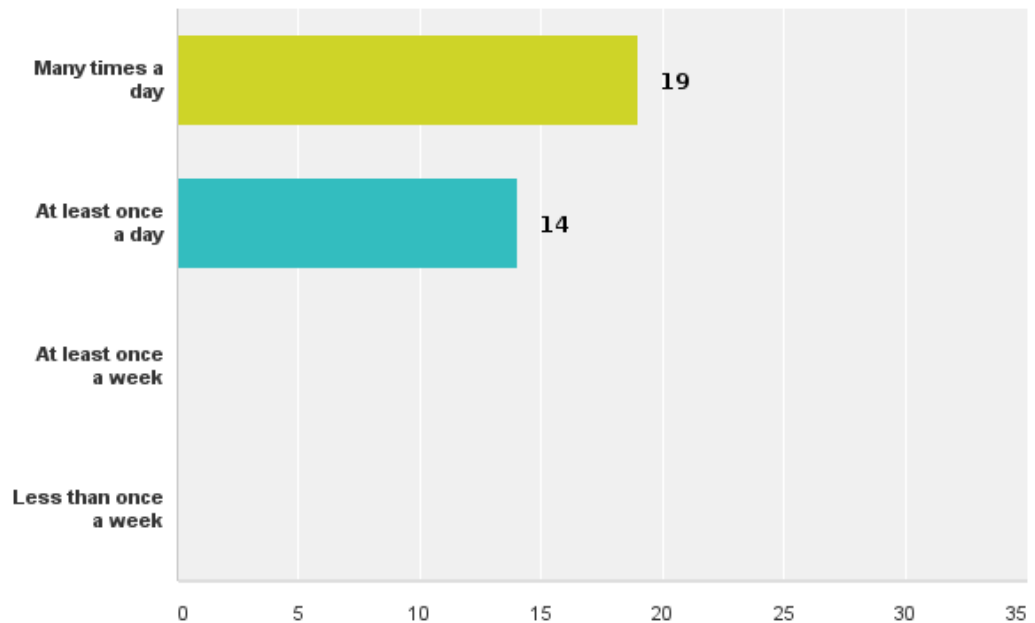
Q5 Do you live in a special economic zone (SEZ)?

Answered: 32 Skipped: 1



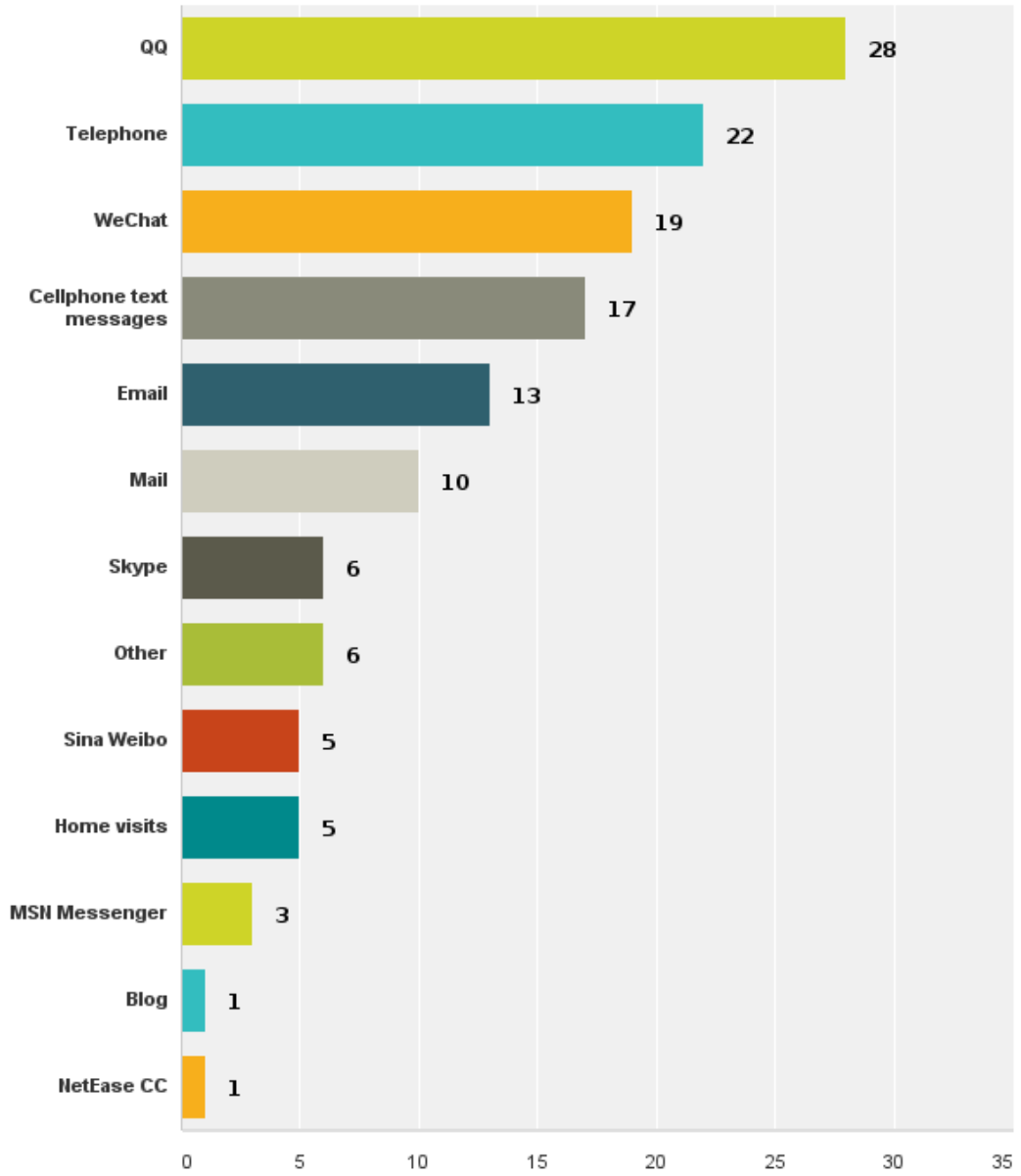
Q6 How frequently do you connect to the internet?

Answered: 33 Skipped: 0



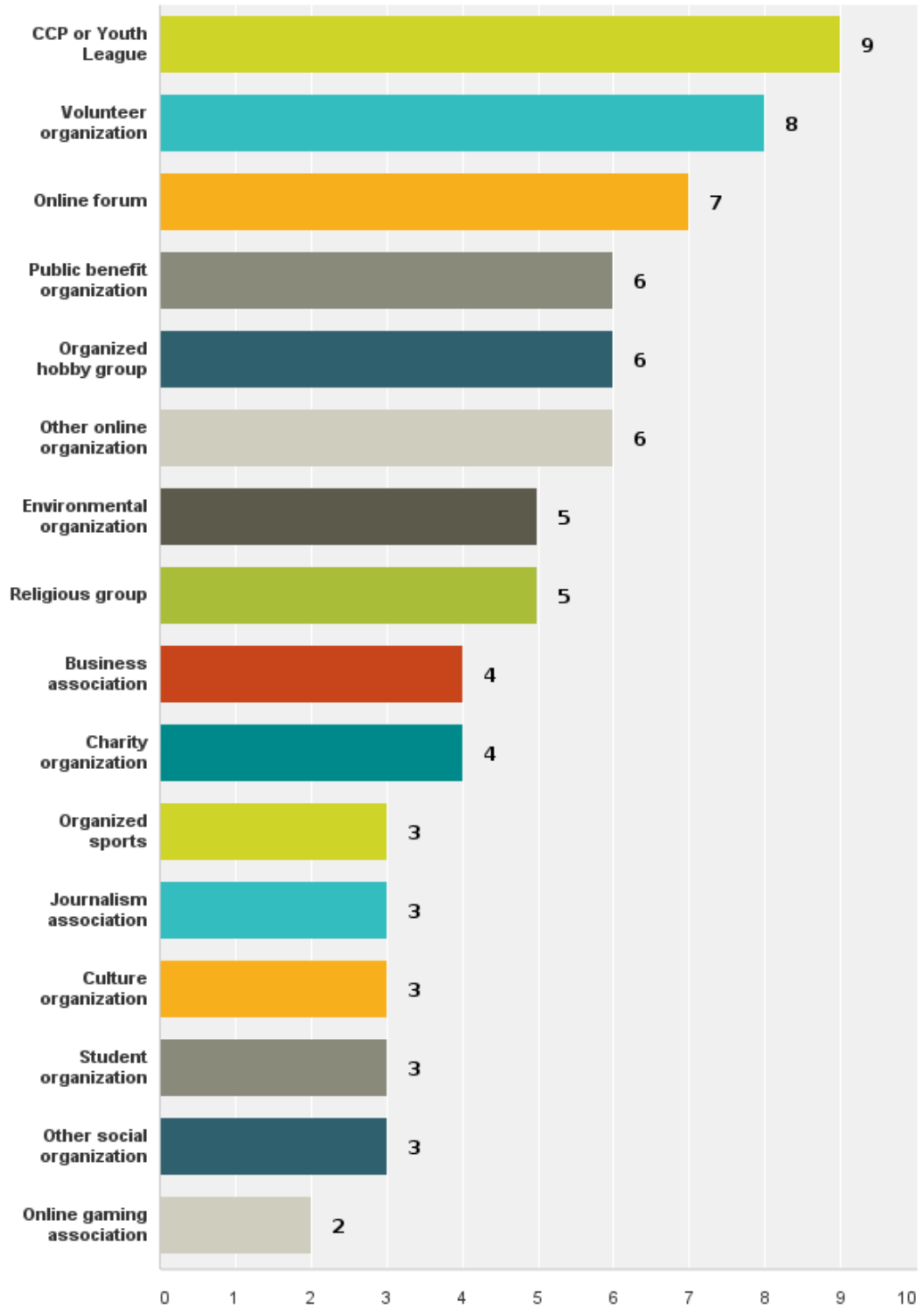
Q7 What means do you regularly use to connect with people?

Answered: 33 Skipped: 0



Q9 Of the following social groups and organizations, please indicate which ones you participate in.

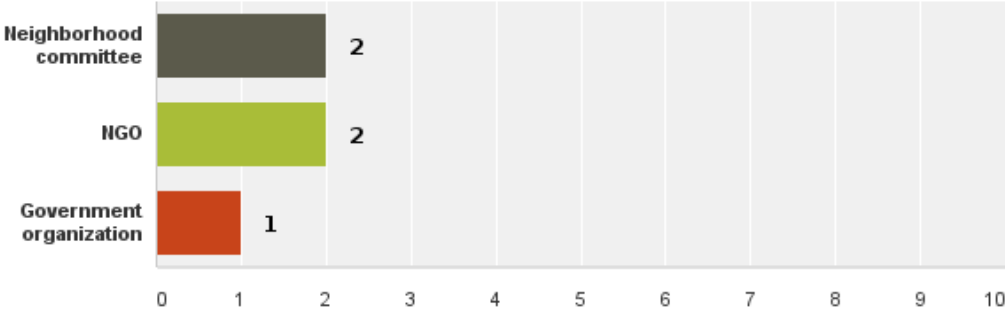
Answered: 20 Skipped: 13



Q9 Of the following social groups and organizations, please indicate which ones you participate in.

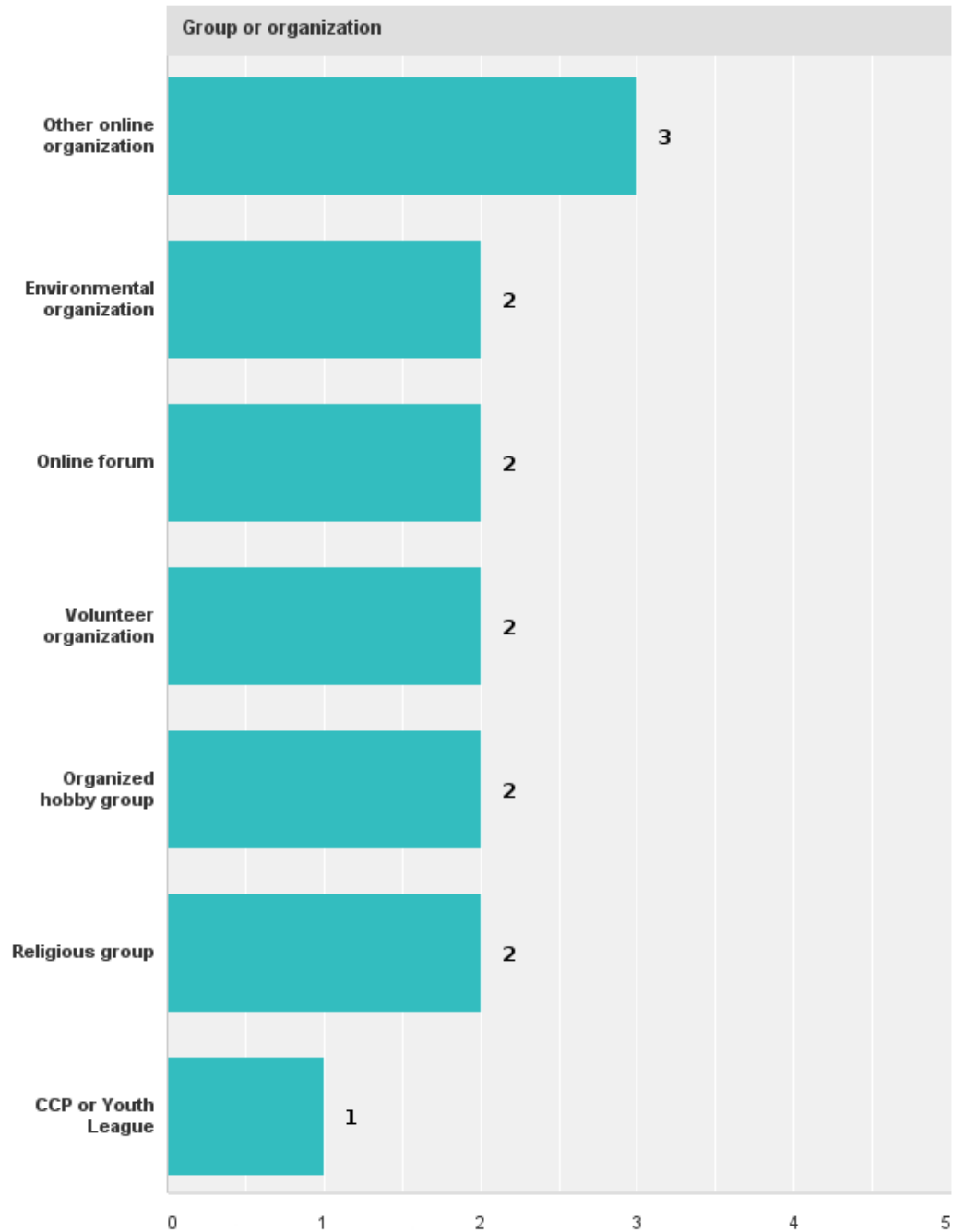
Answered: 20 Skipped: 13

(Continued)



Q10 Of the above groups or organizations in which you participate, which is the most important to you? Please indicate the type of group and your level of involvement.

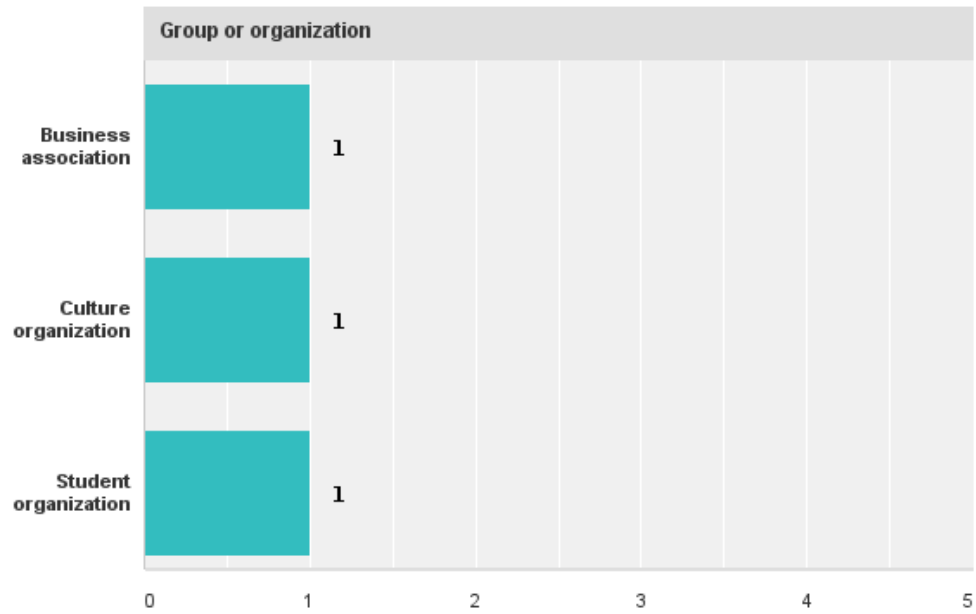
Answered: 17 Skipped: 16

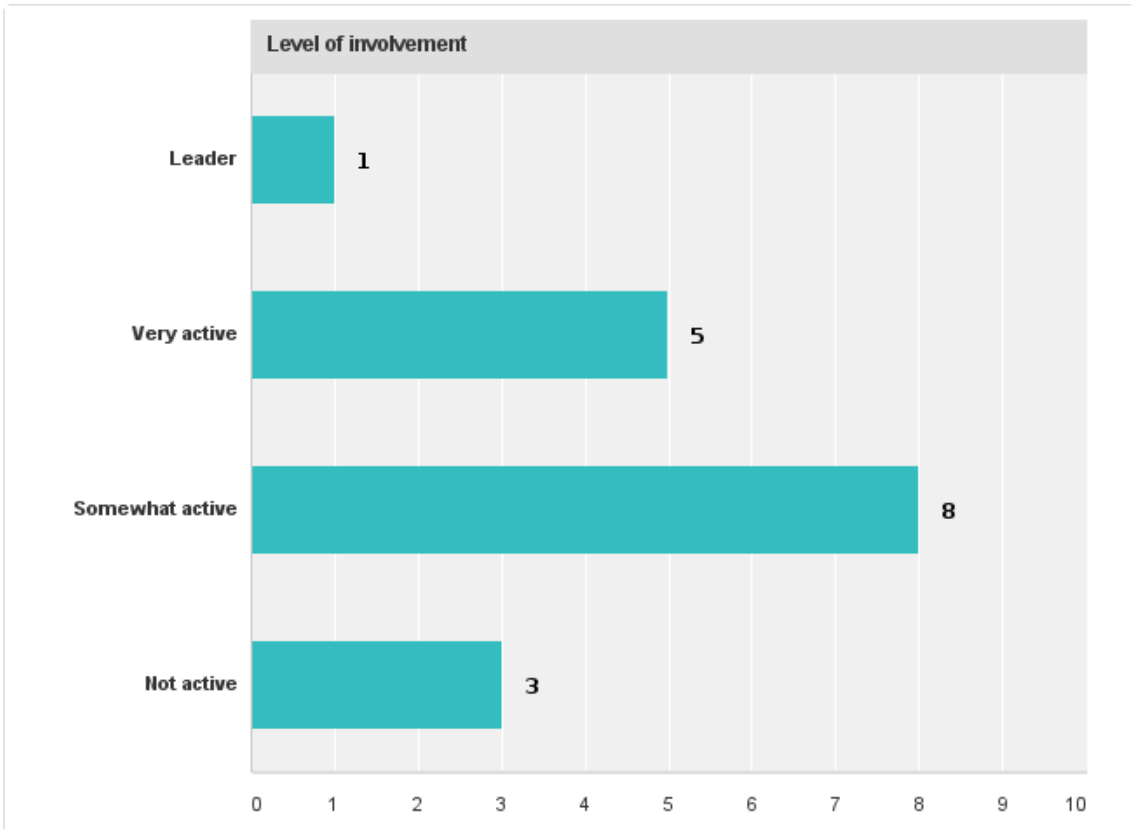


Q10 Of the above groups or organizations in which you participate, which is the most important to you? Please indicate the type of group and your level of involvement.

Answered: 17 Skipped: 16

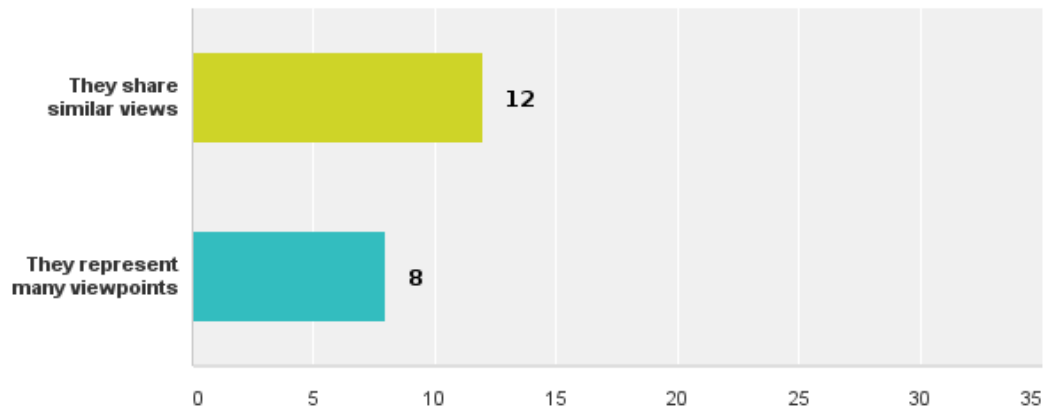
(Continued)





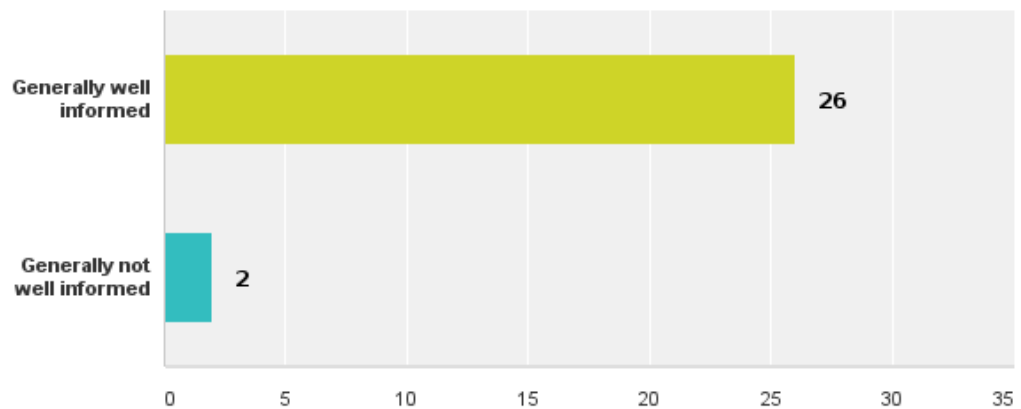
Q11 Because the world is constantly changing, there are always new social challenges for people to overcome. For the group or organization you identified in the previous question, which answer better describes the group members' view toward social issues?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 13



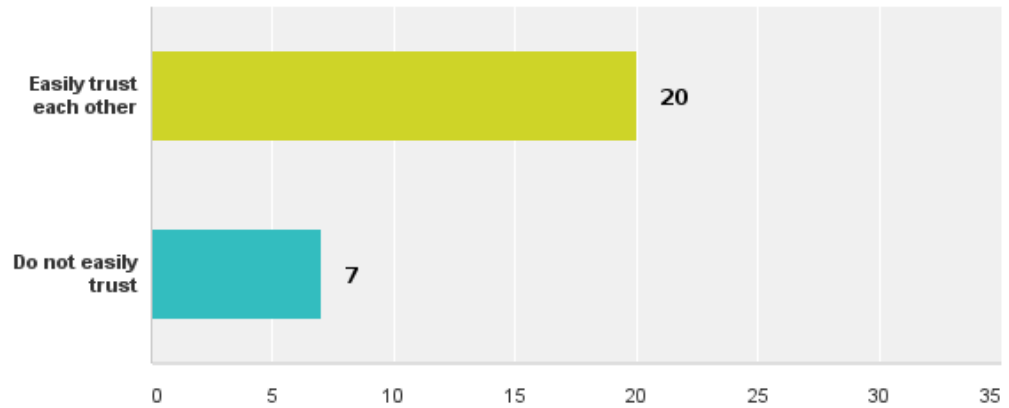
Q12 Would you say that the people you know in Guangdong generally are or are not well informed of the news?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 5



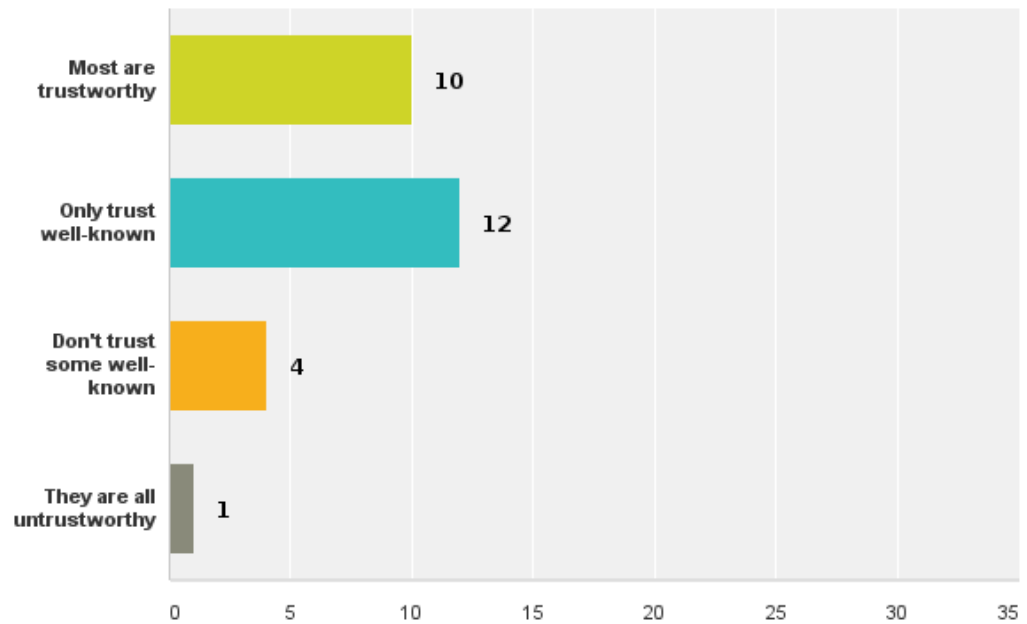
Q13 Would you say that people you know in Guangdong relatively easily trust news they hear from each other?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 6



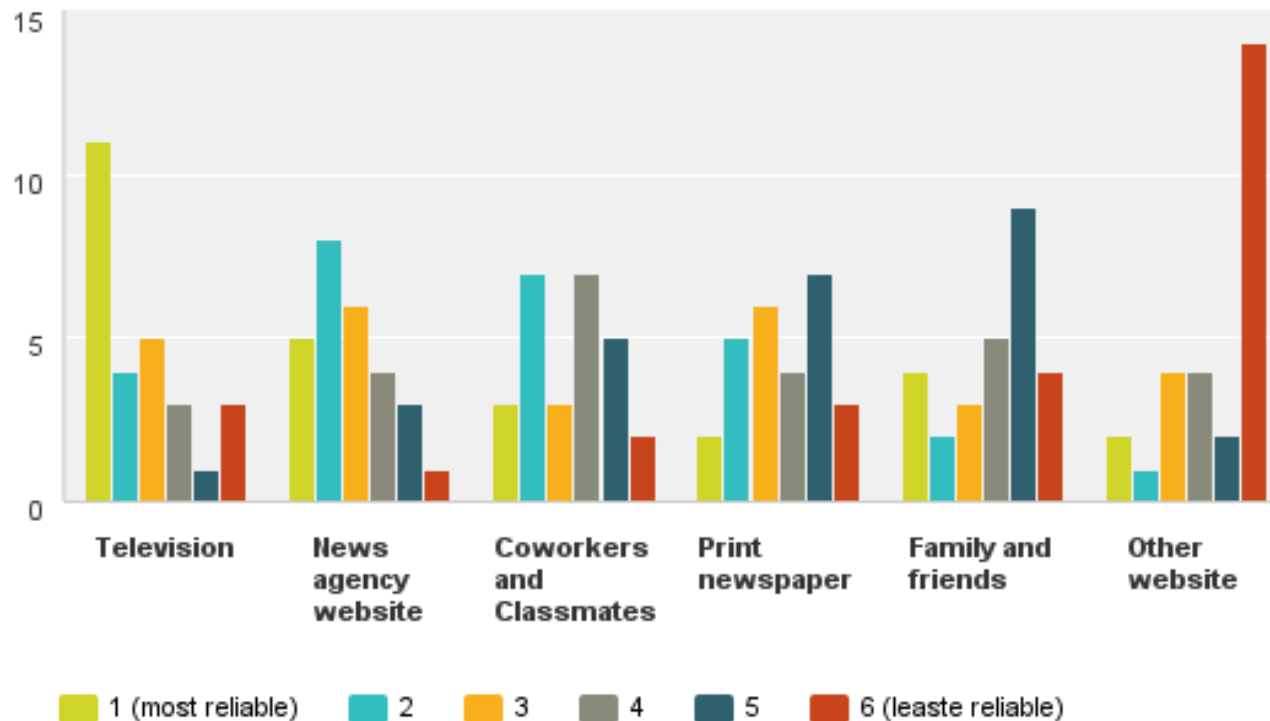
Q15 Are online merchants trustworthy enough to do business with?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 6



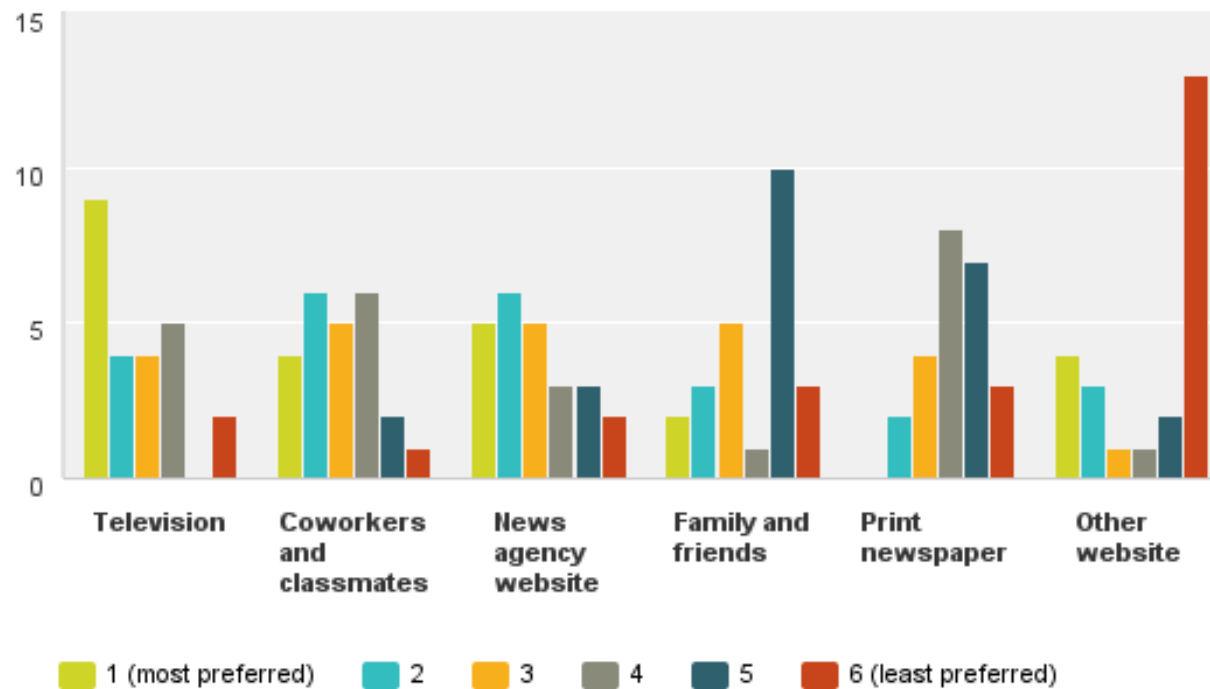
Q16 Based on your experience, please rank the following 6 sources from most reliable to least reliable source of news.

Answered: 27 Skipped: 6



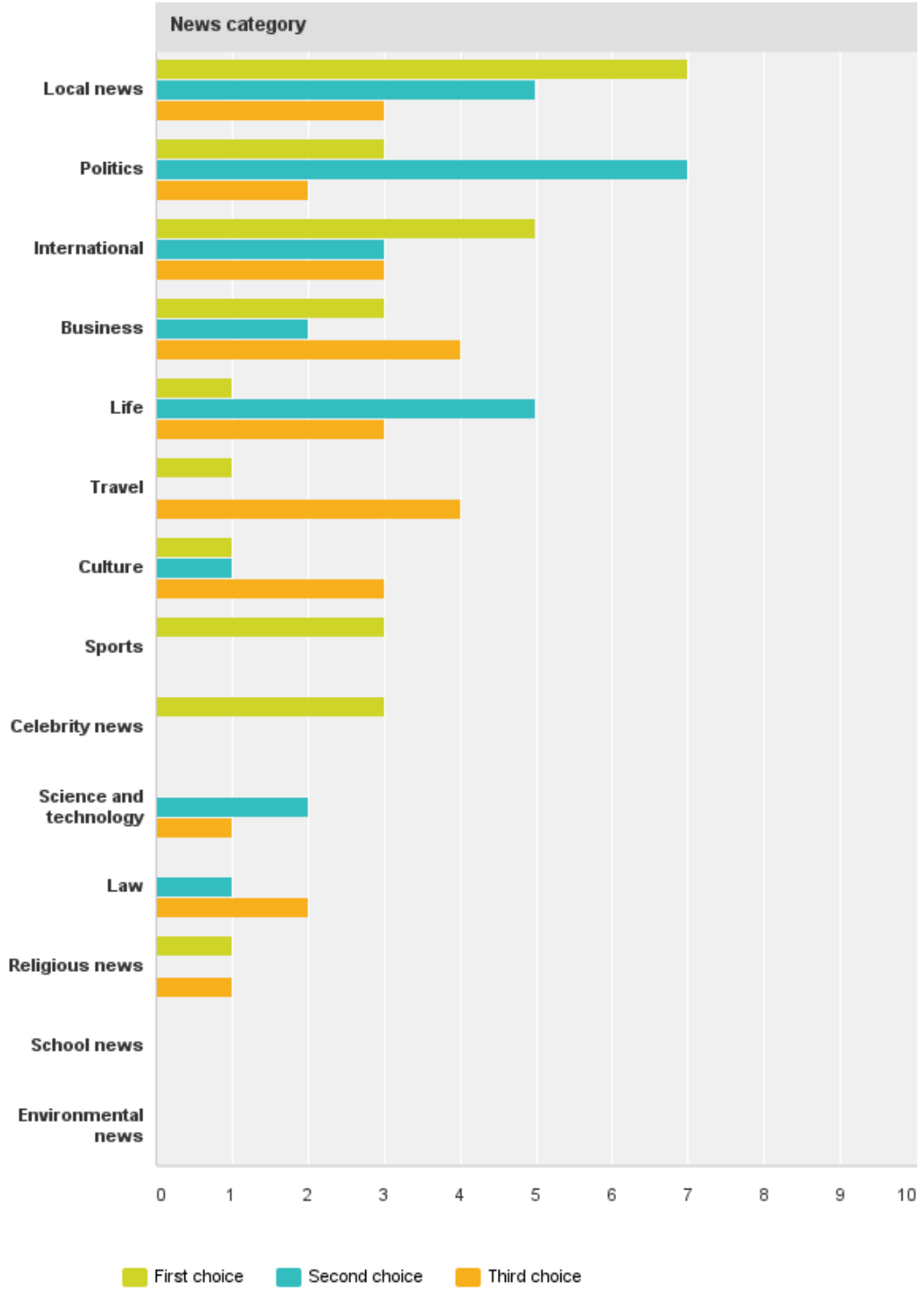
Q17 Based on your experience, please rank the following 6 sources from most preferred to least preferred for staying informed of news.

Answered: 24 Skipped: 9



Q19 Which three of the following news categories most interest you?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 5



Raw Data for Q19. Percentages reported per news category.

News category				
	First choice	Second choice	Third choice	Total
Local news	46.67% 7	33.33% 5	20.00% 3	15
Politics	25.00% 3	58.33% 7	16.67% 2	12
International	45.45% 5	27.27% 3	27.27% 3	11
Business	33.33% 3	22.22% 2	44.44% 4	9
Life	11.11% 1	55.56% 5	33.33% 3	9
Travel	20.00% 1	0.00% 0	80.00% 4	5
Culture	20.00% 1	20.00% 1	60.00% 3	5

Raw Data for Q19 (Continued). Percentages reported per news category.

News category				
	First choice	Second choice	Third choice	Total
Sports	100.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	3
Celebrity news	100.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	3
Science and technology	0.00% 0	66.67% 2	33.33% 1	3
Law	0.00% 0	33.33% 1	66.67% 2	3
Religious news	50.00% 1	0.00% 0	50.00% 1	2
School news	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0
Environmental news	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0

Appendix D

Original Chinese Text of Quoted Materials

Fact Focus, 2013c.

【同床异梦】你说中国人民从此站立起来了可我们却跪着，你说要让一部份人先富起来可先富起来的是你们，你说要把权力关进笼子里可被关进笼子里的是我们，你要我们做“中国梦”可却让你们的家属做“美国梦”。终于我明白了：原来你们和我们不是一家人，你们和我们一直是同床异梦。@袁腾飞@任志强@丁来峰

Cui Yongyuan, 2013.

说得很中听。我们敢发言你敢发布吗？

Fact Focus, 2014.

先把崔委员这句话发表了再说！ //@崔永元:说得很中听。我们敢发言你敢发布吗？

He Weifang, 2013.

【祝新年】各位本微博之友：新年来临之际，谨表达真诚的祝福和感谢！三年里，你们给了我很多鼓励，从评论中我也学到不少新知。美好的交流让我在虚拟空间里寻觅到真实的情感。过去一年里，眼看着一个又一个我熟悉的博主从这里消失，心中不免怅然。于我，是将本微博告一段落的时刻了。再见！

Inspector Lu Wei, 2013.

微博做了两年多，被禁过言封过号，也常有朋友好心劝我，身为体制内的人有些话不该说。可是，作为一个法律工作者，对法治民主的渴望和追求早已渗入我的血液，融入我的灵魂。一个人的声音是微弱的，但在这里，有无数跟我一样的人。如果你愿意，请关注我，我们共同为公平正义呐喊，为争取权利努力。

lishuo2010. Tianya. March 4, 2013.

老外来研究我们了

Old Xu's Commentary, 2014.

被举报、辟谣、被查处，围绕着华润集团董事长宋林，仅仅三天时间就再次上演了

中国式的精彩连续剧，与前不久的刘铁男一模一样，只不过间隔的时间更短。同时也再次显示了微博在反腐中的作用。看来贪官们真的没有与时俱进，也不懂移动互联网时代的危机处置。都赶紧去买 wb 股票吧，微博活得好，贪官过不好！

People's Daily, 2014.

【人民微评：代表委员沉默，就是人民失语】两会召开在即，代表委员纷纷抵京。在人民大会堂共商国是，这是荣誉，更是责任。如果只知道热烈鼓掌、点头称是，人民民主如何体现？质询政府，请动真格；会场讨论，何惧观点交锋？代表委员当铭记：你沉默，就是人民失语；你认真，民主才能运转起来！@人民网

Note on Translated Text

To preserve consistency, translated titles of legal documents were obtained from www.lawinfochina.com, which retains exclusive copyright over its translations. All other translations not otherwise noted in references are my own. For more difficult texts, translations were checked by a native speaker of Chinese. Generally speaking, preference was given to preserving meaning over exact wording.

Chinese Glossary

<i>chaiqian</i>	拆迁	demolition and relocation
<i>cui yongyuan</i>	崔永元	Cui Yongyuan (TV personality, representative at CPPCC, and Sina Weibo microblogger)
<i>da'an</i>	大案	Big Cases (Sina Weibo microblog)
<i>dian zizheng</i>	点子正	Dian Zizheng (Sina Weibo microblogger)
<i>fang</i>	放	to release
<i>gaige kaifang</i>	改革开放	reform and opening up
<i>gansu</i>	甘肃	Gansu (province)
<i>gong'an jiguan</i>	公安机关	Public Security Bureau
<i>gongtong guanzhu</i>	共同关注	people we follow in common
<i>guanxi</i>	关系	relationship or personal connections
<i>guoyou tudi shang fangwu zhengshou yu buchang tiaoli</i>	国有土地上房屋征收与补偿条例	Regulation on the Expropriation of Buildings on State-owned Land and Compensation
<i>he weifang</i>	贺卫方	He Weifang (Chinese microblogger and legal scholar)
<i>hei jianyu</i>	黑监狱	black jails
<i>heshan shi</i>	鹤山市	Heshan city
<i>jiancha lu wei</i>	检查露薇	Inspector Lu Wei (Sina Weibo microblog)
<i>laoxu shiping</i>	老徐时评	Old Xu's Commentary (Sina Weibo microblog)
<i>li kaifu</i>	李开复	Li Kaifu
<i>liang tao huayu tixi</i>	两套话语体系	two discourse system
<i>qingchu jingshen wuran</i>	清楚精神污染	anti-spiritual pollution campaign
<i>quanguo renmin daibiao dahui</i>	全国人民代表大会	National People's Congress (NPC)
<i>quntixing shijian</i>	群体性事件	mass incident
<i>qunzhong luxian</i>	群众路线	the mass line
<i>remnin daibiao dahui</i>	人民代表大会	People's Congress

<i>rendao zhuyi</i>	人道主义	humanism
<i>renmin ribao</i>	人民日报	People's Daily
<i>renminbi</i>	人民币	RMB (Chinese currency)
<i>shehui wending fengxian pinggu</i>	社会稳定风险评估	social stability risk assessment
<i>shijie jiu wenhua</i>	世界酒文化	World Alcohol Culture (Sina Weibo microblog)
<i>shou</i>	收	to restrain
<i>shourong qiansong</i>	收容遣送	custody and repatriation
<i>sixiang jujiao</i>	思想聚焦	Thought Focus (Sina Weibo microblog)
<i>tangguan</i>	贪官	corrupt official
<i>tengxun kongjian</i>	腾讯空间	Tencent Qzone
<i>tengxun QQ</i>	腾讯 QQ	Tencent QQ
<i>tengxun weixin</i>	腾讯微信	Tencent WeChat
<i>tianya</i>	天涯	Tianya
<i>tongji daxue</i>	同济大学	Tongji University
<i>toutiao xinwen</i>	头条新闻	headline news
<i>wangmin</i>	网民	Internet user or “netizen”
<i>wangyi CC</i>	网易 CC	NetEase CC
<i>wei renmin fuwu</i>	为人民服务	serving the people
<i>wo guanzhu de ren ye guanzhu ta</i>	我关注的人也关注他/她	the people I follow also follow him/her
<i>xinlang weibo</i>	新浪微博	Sina Weibo
<i>xinli erchong quyue</i>	心理二重区域	two regions of the mind
<i>xuanchuan</i>	宣传	Propaganda (Office)
<i>yi guan zhiku</i>	易观智库	Enfodesk
<i>yiju shihua</i>	1 句实话	A Word of Truth (Sina Weibo microblog)
<i>zhongguo gongchandang</i>	中国共产党	Chinese Communist Party (CCP or CPC)
<i>zhonghua renmin gongheguo</i>	中华人民共和国	People's Republic of China (PRC)
<i>zhu dake</i>	朱大可	Zhu Dake (professor and Sina Weibo microblogger)
<i>zuigao renmin fating</i>	最高人民法院	Supreme People's Court (SPC)

<i>zuigao renmin fayuan guanyu yinfa 《2011 nian renmin fayuan gongzuo yaodian》 de tongzhi</i>	最高人民法院关于 印发《二〇一一年 人民法院工作要 点》的通	Notice of the Supreme People's Court on Issuing the Work Outline for People's Courts in 2011
<i>zuigao renmin jianchayuan</i>	最高人民检察院	Supreme People's Procuratorate (SPP)

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