

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Social Media: A Tool to Tackle Water Pollution in China?

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Key Points

- The Chinese social media landscape is becoming increasingly restrictive as Beijing cracks down on online dissent in a suite of new legal, regulatory and policy measures aimed at limiting the influence of social media activists.
- Most large protests or “mass incidents” are localised by the government to prevent culpability and the spread of dissent. Environmental protest outcomes are a mixture of success and suppression. Positive outcomes appear unsustainable given the new measures.
- There is a role for social media users working within government frameworks to monitor the delivery of government policies and report the corruption of local officials.
- The suppression of social media as a tool of social organisation and mass protest to demand action on issues of water pollution puts extra pressure on the government to successfully deliver upon its environmental policies.

Summary

China's policy of cyber-sovereignty has meant tighter controls for users of its social media platforms. Beyond its determination to reduce the influence of Western societies by blocking access to foreign websites, such as Facebook, Google and Twitter among others, it has degraded the ability of Chinese citizens to organise and popularise environmental protests. The large majority of environmental protests go unreported in the mainstream media and are heavily or completely censored on social media. Occasionally protests are able to force actionable outcomes where the effects can be localised and blame placed upon local officials, but success is hard to predict. As the legal, regulatory and policy measures regarding social media become increasingly restrictive, the prospects of successful social media campaigns around environmental issues diminish.

Analysis

The internet has shifted from being a novelty in the early 1990s to a fact of life for civil societies worldwide empowering a range of actors including citizens, businesses, activists, non-government organisations, telecommunications firms and governments. The internet continues to become increasingly ubiquitous as the network becomes denser, more complex and increasingly participatory due to the emergence of social media and the wellspring of opportunities it provides for public engagement across all sectors of society.

Social media has become a dominant factor in modern economic growth for corporate interests to target established, burgeoning and increasingly mobile internet populations around the world, with internet users now numbering in excess of three billion worldwide. Social media has also become indispensable and internationally popularised as a tool for awareness raising, social organising and public protest across a number of areas, such as the environment, social justice, corruption and other political issues. But how true is this true for China? There is growing concern about water quality, which, like air quality, has become an increasingly important and visible issue to the Chinese Government and its citizens. Social media organising around environmental issues, including water pollution, has not only played a role in the ongoing development of public environmental policies, but has also inadvertently shaped policy concerning social media usage itself.

The Chinese Social Media Landscape

When we talk about an age of social media in the West it is easy to overlook that globally, as of 2015, [three of the top five social media platforms by number of active users per month exist in China](#). Those three platforms are Tencent QQ with over 850 million active monthly users, WeChat with over 600 million and Sino Weibo with over 287 million. This makes China the largest social media population in the world and, controversially, excludes well-established social media platforms with an otherwise global reach, including Facebook, Twitter and Google. Behind the "Great Firewall" - in place since 2009 - China has been shaping the evolution of its internet and social media landscape while making it indispensable to its economic growth and increasingly consumer-driven society. The internet in China has thus become a significantly different network than the one most Westerners connect to on a daily basis.

The predominant reason for this difference was explained by President Xi Jinping at the Second World Internet Conference held between 16 and 18 December 2015 where he made it clear that China subscribes to, and pursues a strategy of, "Cyber-Sovereignty". First introduced by the Chinese Government in its [2010 White Paper on the Internet](#), "Cyber-Sovereignty", [according to Xi](#), is covered by the 'principle of sovereign equality enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations' and emphasises 'the right of individual countries to independently choose their path of cyber-development and cyber-regulation and participate in international cyberspace governance on an equal footing.' He also proclaimed that China's internet will 'balance both freedom and order' with [China's senior executive in charge of cybersecurity and internet policy Lu Wei contributing](#) that 'freedom is our goal, and order is the means to achieve that goal'.

[China's recently approved thirteenth Five Year Plan](#) further outlines its intention to 'expand its cyber economy through the implementation of its Internet Plus plan which includes increasing network speeds, lowering fees and supporting innovation in cyberspace related industries.' At the same time, China is determined to undertake online cultural building by 'encouraging positive culture in cyberspace and cleaning up the online environment.' While this is largely a reference to market-based access and controls, it signals the centrality of social media and internet culture to the continued growth of the Chinese economy and the strategic importance of expanding, improving and controlling the power of the internet as a means to further the national interest.

China's "cyber-sovereignty" represents one side of its internet coin. On the other side is a more influential civil society that is more informed, organised and willing to engage in public affairs than ever before. The emergence of social media has posed a threat to the tightly controlled news and information environment by providing an alternative source of news, information and social organisation.

China has a [long history of media censorship](#). It has historically channelled the majority of news through state-run media companies that regulate and censor publically accessible information in compliance with stringent government policies in the name of social cohesion and order. The same principles have been applied to the internet through a series of regulations, such as the [Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China \[sic\] Internet Industry](#), which requires internet companies to be self-regulating. This requires them to 'refrain from producing, posting or disseminating pernicious information that may jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability' and 'monitor the information publicized by users on websites according to law and remove harmful information promptly.' Furthermore, [China's 2010 White Paper on the Internet](#) states 'no organization or individual may utilize telecommunications networks to engage in activities that jeopardize state security, the public interest or the legitimate rights and interests of other people', which are defined by the ruling Communist Party.

While these regulations have been relatively successful in monitoring and censoring websites, there has been a distinct correlation in recent times between increased civil protests, including environmental protests, and the emergence of social media. This has, in turn, led to the tightening of the legal and regulatory frameworks governing social media in China. The traditional proclivity of the Chinese Government towards state-controlled media and censorship to control public opinion is being adapted to the rapidly innovating social media landscape. This environment has resulted in complicated and varied governmental responses to protests involving social media, including issues that concern water pollution.

Environmental Protests and Social Media

The Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Law accepts that environmental pollution has been a major driver behind public dissatisfaction in China as it [accounts for 50 per cent of mass incidents](#) (any event that poses a threat to public order or public security). There are anywhere from [less than 1,000](#) to [130,000 mass incidents a year in mainland China](#), the lower figure coming from China's Communist Party, the other being a broad consensus among international academics. The importance of social media to both protesters and

government can be demonstrated and contrasted in the examples of the Shifang protest in 2012 and the protests in Inner Mongolia in 2015.

From 2 to 3 July 2012, the residents of Shifang, a city in China's western Sichuan province, organised protests in opposition to potential environmental damage to waterways from a proposed molybdenum-copper factory. As expected, traditional media did not report on the protest due to existing strict state information controls, only mentioning the incident via a reference to the rising stock price of the tear gas company that manufactured the product that was used on protesters, before the story was censored. Social media platforms, on the other hand, such as the [Weibo microblogging platform, were able to generate over 5.25 million](#) posts that contained the term Shifang, including 400,000 images and 10,000 videos. A notice from the Shifang Government saying that local police had dispersed over-excited crowds using stun grenades and tear gas was also widely circulated on Weibo.

By the afternoon of 3 July, the Shifang Government announced the termination of the proposed project, but this was also not reported by the traditional media. This response indicates the central government is determined to localise and compartmentalise such incidents and prevent environmental protests, like those at Shifang, from becoming part of a larger, national anti-government movement that might threaten the legitimacy of the Communist Party. It also indicates that the government is willing to listen to significant public concerns regarding environmental issues and take action, most likely in an attempt to save face, limit dissent and promote a narrative of a proactive and responsive government.

In Shifang social media activists evaded censors, who soon blocked keywords like Shifang across social media platforms, by uploading photographs of their messages rather than letting it be searched in text format. Such tactics provide a window through which the online protesters were able to spread their message before it was shut down and contained. Attaining a successful outcome, through protest, demonstrates that engaged and organised citizens can force the government's hand. Forcing the hand of government is a success not tolerated by the Communist Party and regulatory authorities have since sought to remedy the situation.

Since 2012, [Weibo has seen a rapid decline](#) in usage and popularity, losing 56 million users in 2014, as new legal frameworks and initiatives enable authorities to target social media activists. In 2013, a judicial interpretation by the Chinese Supreme People's Court, under article 246 of China's Criminal Law, formally [defines online versions of crimes](#) including defamation and creating disturbances. It is an offense to 'disseminate information that harms others ... on information networks, or organizing to incite others to disseminate harmful or fabricated information.' Offenders are subject to criminal penalties of up to three years imprisonment if material considered defamatory is viewed over 5,000 times or reposted over 500 times. This legal interpretation has been called the legalisation of China's internet crackdown and has provided the ruling party with the means to punish and deter its critics.

In addition, social media platforms began [upgrading their real-name verification systems](#) by the end of 2012, leading to a more comprehensive legal framework being established in 2015 that punishes users who adopt misleading account names and handles. This scare

campaign is supported by intermittent crack downs on prominent bloggers and activists, often [popular and verified account holders known as “Big V’s”](#), to maintain a culture of fear, which has resulted in a culture of self-censorship. The Chinese Government has also started cracking down on virtual private networks that allow Chinese internet users to access the greater global internet network, blocking the minimal access to Facebook and Twitter acquired by those determined to “climb the Great Firewall”.

As a result of these crackdowns, information about protests has become harder to come by. For instance, in April 2015, when more than 2,000 riot police were deployed to disperse approximately 1,000 people from local rural villages in Inner Mongolia who were protesting the pollution originating from the Naiman Chemical Refinery Zone, we heard much less about it. That is because during the protest the internet and mobile phones were completely cut off. As 70 people were arrested, 170 were hospitalised and one person died after riot police crushed the protest it was of a large enough scale to be reported on. The project being protested was ordered to be shut down and relocated by the government, with sceptical locals proclaiming that this was not the first time the government had made such a promise. While it is difficult to find detailed information regarding protests, it is even more difficult to find details regarding the aftermath of these actions.

While environmental protests are allowed in China, they are situated within the broader protest movement of labour disputes, corruption and transparency, pro-democracy, land rights and ethnic movements. Inner Mongolia is an autonomous region in northern China, bordering Mongolia, which experienced ethnic [protests involving over 2,000 students in 2011](#) when a Mongol herdsman was killed by a coal truck driver. Clashes are common in Inner Mongolia between the herding communities contesting government policies, such as forced resettlement and coal mine developments, and government authorities. The April 2015 protests, constituted by an intersection of land rights, ethnic minorities, corruption and environmentalism, presented the authorities with the risk of escalation and increased organisation against the government in the region. It is exactly this type of risk that Beijing would like to mitigate and its actions, policy and rhetoric have successfully limited the capacity for dissident resistance. In its attempts to deny its opponents a platform and ensure its own legitimacy, Beijing has limited the public agency of environmental activists to raise awareness of water pollution and other issues online.

The moderate success of the protests in achieving positive environmental outcomes in both Shifang and Inner Mongolia has come with the cost of waning personal liberty and internet speech. The outcomes indicate that the government is not unsympathetic to the concerns of its citizens, however, it prefers that the public does not engage in civil protests, but rather within government organised frameworks. There is perhaps a role for social media and activists to increase the effectiveness of monitoring and reporting violations of environmental law in accordance with the [Measures on Public Participation in Environmental Protection](#) published by the Ministry of Environmental Protection in July 2015. These measures outline a clear role for citizens, legal persons and other organisations to participate in and supervise environmental protection measures, albeit in close communication with local government.

The issue of water pollution will not subsist. According to the *2014 State of the Environment Report*, 61.5 per cent of groundwater and 28.8 per cent of key rivers were classified as not suitable for human touch, which gives an indication of the water security challenge China faces. In April 2015, China outlined its most comprehensive water policy to date. Its “Water Ten Plan” outlines ten key measures to transform the water environment and is paired with harsher punishments for non-compliance under the revised Environmental Protection Law and a steady increase in funding to address its water pollution problem. Such actions demonstrate that environmental agencies, which had previously acquiesced to the frenzied economic growth and development of the past two decades, are now being equipped with the tools and authority to have an impact on environmental outcomes.

Conclusion

In 2015 the number of online users outnumbered offline users for the first time in China with its enormous and growing [internet population surpassing 700 million users](#) - approximately 20 per cent of the world’s total. This massive demographic allows China to localise the otherwise international effects and economic benefits of the internet within its own sovereign borders and regulatory authority, allowing stricter regulation and a lower opportunity cost of pursuing a cyber-sovereignty strategy. Further growth in density, increased numbers of engaged users and improved services will only serve to strengthen China’s relative position to pursue this strategy over time and improve its ability to delimit the boundaries of its network jurisdiction. This has been conducive to the establishment of a controlled internet environment that can be utilised by the government as an instrument for feedback, observance, compartmentalisation and control in civic affairs. Beijing has been relatively successful in its attempt to tame the “wilder” Western attributes of the social media landscape.

The varied government responses to environmental social media related mass incidents seem to incorporate a real consideration of the economic and social costs of pollution, but also the management and placation of public expectations leading to the containment of the social organising potential of activists. Productive outcomes, including improved legislation and discourse regarding actions on environmental issues, can be taken as endorsements of such protests, while increased arrests, harsher penalties and legislation against social media organisers disenfranchises them. Locally organised protests framed around local issues and authorities that have actionable outcomes are more likely to succeed than those that criticise the central government. This is largely due to Beijing’s ability to adeptly deflect criticism and blame towards local officials and state-owned enterprises that operate at arm’s length from the central government, while seizing the opportunity to promote its own policies, initiatives and public standing.

While the West likes to promote the idea of “The Great Firewall”, it is more accurate to describe the Chinese internet environment as less of a wall and more of a maze. Not only does it bar entry to foreign interests, it forces those within it to navigate a myriad of barriers and take increasing risks to access the opportunities for civic engagement that social media provides. An increasingly compartmentalised system of censorship, the threat of arrest, self-censorship and channelling public opinion through state-controlled media has limited the

opportunities to use social media as a reliable platform in the fight against water pollution. Furthermore, any future social media-based protest success is likely to be met with even more stringent measures to curtail its influence.

In defiance, Chinese citizens continue to be creative in their approach to social media protest. An example is the ban on any mention of Tiananmen Square on social media being overcome by using Taylor Swift's *1989* album, which shares the initials and year of the Tiananmen incident (TS 1989), as a proxy to critique the government. Regardless of whether creativity alone can reliably outmanoeuvre the censors and inspire citizen action the government is under increased pressure to deliver upon its upgraded environmental policies. Eighty per cent of Chinese citizens see pollution as more important than economic growth which is also comparable with public support for the central government.

As the central government takes control of social media content in combination with its longstanding information policy, it can better ensure its public legitimacy at the cost of its opponents who it degrades and punishes under regulations and legal measures. In so doing, Beijing has taken ultimate responsibility upon itself to tackle the issues of pollution and environmental degradation. As a result of its actions in the social media environment, Beijing faces a decreased threat from social media activists but now must deliver upon its upgraded environmental policies or risk confrontation with an increasingly dissatisfied and concerned population. In this sense, the placation of the threat of social media activists and protests has been replaced by the threat of not delivering on its promises to address growing public concern over the environment.

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