

## Evaluation the Impacts of Weibo Censorship

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### Abstract

**With the rapid development of mobile Internet, the traditional way of information transmission has changed. More and more people express their opinions through message transmission through self-media. Among them, microblog is a main scene where people express their opinions. Because of this openness and freedom, many people lack the ability to control their own opinions. For a time, rumors are rampant, which has had some impact on the health and stability of society. Gradually, the review mechanism of microblog began to improve gradually. From the perspective of development, this paper studies the impact of microblog censorship mechanism and puts forward my own views.**

### Keywords

**Weibo, Censorship, Evaluation.**

### 1. Introduction

With the advancement of digital equipment and information technology, the social media software has been influenced and changed the communication approaches. For example, Facebook and twitter as the mainstream communication tools, playing the significant role in people's daily lives. According to Statista, as of April 2018, the number of the monthly active Facebook user have been reached the 2.19 billion worldwide. At the same time, the Twitter has 336 million monthly active users. However, the Chinese government banned access to these two main social media platforms in 2009 (Wilford, 2017). Recently, China carried out an effort to completely bans Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), which can stop the users bypassing the "Great wall" to log in the the international social media sites (Wilford, 2017). Zhou states several reasons to clarify this phenomenon. "Firstly, without block the international mainstream social media, Chinese social media sites cannot succeed. Secondly, Chinese government will not receive economic benefits, because the global internet companies do not need to pay the tax to them. Thirdly, for Chinese government, it is complicated to control the arguments on the international website." Therefore, since August, 2009, the demand of Chinese Internet users for social media has resulted that a Chinese microblog, Sina Weibo, is developing overwhelmingly (Sina, 2011). It has been wildly used by Chinese users, as of April, 2018, the number of monthly active Weibo users was 411 million which is more than the Twitter's (Weibo, 2017). Although it has the huge user community and significant social influence, it still got the censored. As of 2017, the censor is mainly targeting on texts, about 5 percent published posts on the Weibo got the censored, and even be invisible (Jiang, 2017). The Chinese government will execute a measure to control the social media. "Every online argument or the online post is under the surveillance. To some extent, if they are related to disrespect state security, national unity and the social stability, they will be banned" (Jiang, 2017). Moreover, in this year, the government has commanded Sina to strengthen the censorship of its platform, including several functions, such as Hot search and Hot topics list (Xinhuanet, 2018). Based on the background of the Weibo censorship, this essay will focus on censorship of the Chinese social media, Sina Weibo, and discuss the profound impacts of it from two perspectives, including the right of free speech and the professional media practice.

## 2. Argument

### 2.1. The Press

The censorship could control the quality of the journalism, it can restrict the vulgar reported, such as some reports invade the celebrity privacy. Also, it can restraint the vicious competition, especially for the entertainment journalists, some of them aim for promoting the influence and gaining more followers, they will spread the news about the hot topics without investigating (China News, 2017). The censorship can filter the vulgar and pornographic news. Arguably, Bei (2013) indicates that nearly 90 percent of Chinese netizens have the microblog accounts, Weibo facilitated the media professors to discover the societal conflicts, newsworthy events and the official corruptions. Lu also indicates that the Weibo has reshaped the outlook of reporting news from the official news website to the social media platforms (cited by Bei, 2013). Therefore, the Weibo has the essential impacts on the journalism. Without the censorship, compared with posting news on the official news agency, posting news on Weibo is effective and convenient. Due to journalists could post their news on this platform without any restrictions. From another side, they could gather the controversial events to investigate, connecting the relevant persons to do the interview (Bei, 2013). However, the censorship could result the decline of the resources, which may influence the media practice. Also, all the posts are under the surveillance, and got censored. Therefore, the media professional practices also will be influenced. In my opinion, the censorship might limit the media practices on the social media.

### 2.2. Free Speech

In 1948, the “right” of free speech was stated in the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The detailed terms are as follows, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations). Therefore, the “right” of free speech is a part of free human’s rights. The Weibo censorship challenged this right. The reason is that the user’s posts might got deleted if the post contains the keywords, which are on the censor system blacklist. The censorship limits the internet users to free express their opinions.

However, YEO (2012) believed that the internet is not an absolute force for positive, it also could have the negative impact on the society. He explains the the censorship is mainly targeting on the hate speech of the national security and public. The number of the rumors, hate speech is increasing with the internet developing. Therefore, in my point of view, although the censor limited the free speech, it has the more serious impact on the unethical speech. Therefore, I think the appropriate monitoring and the censor is necessary to stabilize social harmony.

## 3. Quality Research

### 3.1. Regulation Comparison

It is efficacious to compare the regulations in terms of the “right” free speech among the different national systems. The research subjects are the Australian and the Chinese regulation, because Australia is a capitalist country, whereas, China is a socialist country.

In Australia, in the article 19 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Australian Human Rights Commission declare that “everyone has the right to hold the opinions without interference. Besides, everyone has the right to freedom of expression”, this right should include the freedom to seek, receive and spread all kinds of information and ideas, irrespective of their boundaries, regardless of the forms, in orally, in writing or in print, in art form or through any other media of his choice.

The exercise of the rights provided for this article carries special obligations and responsibilities. Therefore, certain restrictions may apply, but these restrictions can only be stipulated by law and are necessary. They are the following articles.

Firstly, should respect of the rights or or reputations of others, secondly, should protect the national security or public order or public health or moral.

In China, The Constitution is the fundamental law of the China. It is the general statute of administering the country, and it applies to all citizens of the country (gov. cn, 2015).

The Article 33 of The Constitution states that all Chinese citizens shall have freedom of speech. Chinese citizens has the right of free press, the citizens have the freedom of assembly, citizens have the right of freedom of association, procession and demonstration. The Constitution states the regulation of citizen's basic rights, at the same time, it also makes a clear regulation, the Article of 32 of The Constitution states that citizens of the People's Republic of China exercise of freedom and rights, at the same time, they shall not harm the interests of the country, society, collectives, other legitimate freedom, rights and interests. While citizens using the provided rights, they must fulfill the obligations prescribed by the constitution and the law (gov. cn, 2015).

Although these two countries are belonging to the different national system, they still have the similar regulations, both of them admit and protect the right of free speech for the citizens, also when the citizen use the right, they need to fulfill the relevant obligations.

In Australian Press Council, there is a Charter of free press. It states that the free press is a symbol of a free people. The Australian citizens have the right to free speech and to seek and receive the different opinion and information, the following principles are the basic guidelines for an unrestricted circulation of news and opinions within the Australia and across the country. Freedom of the press means that people have right to be informed the matter of public interests by the press so that as a citizen, they could use their rights and fulfill their duties. News is not controlled by government, also the government officials should not intervene the content and the sources of the news. The media practitioners have the responsibility to be responsible for self-monitoring to the public, and provide the mechanisms for dealing with issues of public concern. They should maintain the ethical standards and the professionalism. The press has the responsibility to protect the people's right to know and to debate the invasion upon that right by government, groups or individuals.

However, there is no single law and principle for press in China, but in The Constitution of the People's Republic of China. It generally states that the Chinese citizens have the right of the freedom of press. In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping states the several missions for party's media. The press should guide the public, also they should serve the country's overall interests. The press need to unite the general public, and tell the right from wrong, also the press should connect the China to the world.

Compare the Australian press regulation, the Chinese press guideline is relevant immature, in terms of the free press, the Australia has the clear regulation to illustrate the duty and rights. In comparison, the specific right of free press in China is vague, the duty of the press need to serve the overall interest of public and government.

### **3.2. Cases Studies**

In the Chinese media history, the media is under the government controlled, since the post-Mao Zedong era, the newspaper industry added the new topics, new report styles. After Mao's era, Deng Xiaoping reformed the society and the economy (Bei, 2013). From 1979 until 1996, the amount of newspapers company has been increased 10 times, from 283 to 2,163. The trend of the press development means the Chinese Communist Party could no longer provide subsidy for press production. Although the press was continually developing and they got more freedom of reporting news, it still cannot independents of the government and censorship (Bei,

2013). However, Weibo transformed a new pattern for the press. Han (2016) believes that when Weibo in the early stage of the development, the government did not comprehensively understand about the influence of this. "In the absence of government 'guidelines' and censorship," users on Weibo could obtain a relatively free environment. Meanwhile, the traditional media professors have used this temporary freedom to investigate and publish the critical news on Weibo. Furthermore, the journalists can receive the firsthand sources from the public. Therefore, the connection and cooperation between the internet users and the media professors are beneficial for investigating and revealing the social issues, also "this practice could assist the journalists to clarify the social turmoil." (Han, 2013). Without the Weibo censorship, it is possible to circumvent the government control and even help the government pursue accountability. For some cases of news reporting, some news stories are challenging the government. Such as, the irresponsible government behaviors (Bei, 2013). For example, the 7.23 train crash is regarded as the "first major disaster of the Weibo era," because discussion of this topic challenged the government (Han, 2016). On 23 July, 2011, two high speed trains collided on a viaduct when they were moving. This crash caused 40 passengers died and at least 200 were injured. On 29 July, the spokesperson, from the Ministry of Railways, states "that train wreckage was buried without further attempts at search-and-rescue" (cited by Han, 2016). When this news published, it intensified the citizen's dissatisfaction and anger in terms of this statement. Internet users, including the journalists and the ordinary people, put their anger on the Weibo. Furthermore, when the spokesperson of Minister of Railways states the disrespectful comments to the victims and their families on the press conference. The public posts their feelings about this issue, also the journalists criticized the safety regulations of Minister of Railway. The government responds this phenomenon, they implement a measure for all the media about banning the news report of this topic. Besides, "7.23" became a censored topic. However, after this event, the government issued stricter safety regulations. Under the situation of without the censorship and guideline, the social media provide a free platform for Chinese journalists and ordinary people.

Arguably, these two articles partially illustrate that the positive impacts about Weibo without the censorship. They ignored the negative impacts of uncontrolled social media. The China Daily posts an articles to highlight several issues of the journalism in the social media. It states that with the development of social media, effectiveness has been magnified, lots of journalists pursue the speed of reporting news rather than quality. In order to attract audiences, some journalists report the news without investigating, even publish the fake news. Some of them focus on the entertainment news and cover celebrity privacy. Without the principles to regulate the social media, the unethical issues are seriously happening with social media developing. Dwyer states that the notion of "human flesh search engines" is emerging in China. Dwyer also provides an example to illustrate this point. A short video was widely spreading on the microblogs, the video recorded a stylishly dressed woman, standing on the bank of a river, she is smiling and carrying with two small cats. Then, she tramples one of the white cat to death by using her her silver heels. This short video gains the extensive attention, the most of commends are the invective and threatening words. Also, her detail is available on the internet, including her name, phone number and other privacy information. Later, the woman lost her job and receive the threatening messages. This cases explains that posts on the social media may invade the personal privacy, it also may have the significant influence for person's life. Therefore, censorship and the regulation are the effective measures to control unethical issues, such as the privacy invasion and the threatening texts.

#### **4. Findings & Conclusion**

Based on the scholar articles research and the regulation comparison. I noticed that China is absent of the press regulation and laws. Only in The Constitution states that every Chinese

citizens has the right of free press. The relevant influential press guidelines are raised by the national leaders. Due to the history of Chinese press, the media industry is supported by government. It experiences the process from state ownership to private ownership. Besides, in the beginning step of the Chinese media development, the role of Chinese press is helping government to delivery the information for public, it shapes the fundamental role of the press in China. To some extent, the right of free press could help the Chinese media professors to fulfill their obligations and missions more efficiently. If the journalism is not limited by the Weibo censorship, they could investigate the social issues in depth. For example, they can disclose the events about the corruption of government officials. This effort is beneficial for government to build a clean and efficient official team. Beside, for the public, this measure could help them to know the truth. Therefore, without the censorship, the press could better serve the overall interests for public and country. However, the journalists should enhance the professionalism, and they need to maintain the moral standards.

For the public, in despite of social media brings a free platform for internet users to share their information and arguments, it still has the unethical risks. Comparing the Australian and the Chinese regulation, both of these two countries states that the citizens have the right of the free speech. Also, the obligations should be involved when the citizens using their rights. However, some internet users ignore the obligation, they still spread other's privacy. Besides, some of the users publish the hate speech about the country and society. Weibo censorship can fundamentally stop the dissemination of these speech and opinions. It also could have a positive impact on public. The censorship can avoid the privacy invasion and the defamation. Therefore, it can promote the social stability. However, sometimes, when controversial news got the extensive attention on Weibo. The government utilized the censorship to ban these news and hot topics instead of publishing the official declaration. This behavior will stimulate the public's anger. Government should engage with the journalists for giving the quick responses about the people's concerned issues. The important function of Chinese social media is changing the tradition relationship between government, journalism and the public. "Social media helps the Chinese society to overcome an age-old issue about poor feedback of the ordinary people to the central government" (Gu, 2012). The social media provides an opportunity for public to express the opinion and give feedback about national events. Also, it provides a platform for government and journalists to connect with the public. Therefore, the government need to looking for a balance between the censorship and the public interests. As Gu (2012) states "that the constant monitoring is necessary, too much intervention is bad as too little."

Word Account: 2831.

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