

How Does the Chinese Government Construct Collective Memory through Strategic Communication on Weibo

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Abstract

In recent years, under the leadership of the Chinese government, the rising nationalism of the Chinese people has become an obvious fact, which has aroused discussion around the world. Shaping collective memory is an important means for the Chinese government to consolidate people's ideology and arouse people's nationalistic enthusiasm. In an era when digital media is widely used, Weibo has become the most important place for Chinese government authorities to shape collective memory. This report will analyze the agenda-setting of the Chinese government's Weibo accounts in the face of The 2021 #I Support Xinjiang Cotton nationalist movement, to find out how the Chinese government successfully guided public opinion and shaped collective memory to promote nationalism.

Keywords

Collective memory; Strategic communication; Media study.

1. Introduction

On March 24, 2021, an official Chinese government Weibo account, called the Chinese Communist Youth League, expressed a statement to criticize the announcement released by the famous clothing brand H&M in September 2020 that "H&M will refuse to purchase any Xinjiang cotton because there are human rights violations in Xinjiang, including 'forced labor' and 'religious discrimination'". The H&M's announcement is based on a survey of Xinjiang Cotton industry published in September 2020 by The BCI (The Better Cotton Initiative). Soon the critical statement began to circulate widely on the Internet and aroused huge public opinion. On March 25, Chinese netizens discovered that Nike, Adidas, and other companies that had cooperated with BCI had made similar announcements, which once again triggered heated discussions. Chinese celebrities have voluntarily terminated their contracts with these brands, and shopping platforms have removed these brands from their shelves. An online campaign has been launched to support Xinjiang cotton and boycott foreign goods. On March 24, 2021, stocks of H&M, Adidas, and Nike fell 5.30%, 3.45%, 2.89%, respectively. On March 25, when Chinese brand Anta announced it was withdrawing from BCI, its shares rose 8.4%, followed by other local Chinese clothing brands(Li et al., 2021).

This patriotic movement, which appears to have been initiated by the popular will but is actually led by the government, seems to have been very successful. However, the change of the commercial market is beyond the scope of the discussion in this article. We will focus on how the government has used Weibo to construct collective memory and promote nationalism.

2. Background

Xi Jinping, as 'China's most patriotic leader', 'vowed to realize the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation and called on people to foster patriotic pride in all aspects of life' (Deng & Lin, 2020). Collective memory is defined as a social 'reconstruction of the past shaped by concerns and needs of the present' (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992, p.34), and the shaping of collective

memory is a necessary means to strengthen a sense of nationalism and pride to the nation (Paez et al., 1997). With the rapid development of the Internet, the Internet era has changed the methods of collective memory construction (Hu, 2014). In the past, the collective memory at the nation-state level was dominated by the official government. In the Internet era, social platforms have given the public great discourse power, so the construction of collective memory is now dominated by public opinion (Hu, 2014). Therefore, to construct collective memory and promote nationalism, guiding public opinion has become the main problem that the government needs to solve.

Different from foreign open discourse systems, 'in China's public opinion system, the official opinion has always been the mainstream, and the channels for the public to participate in politics and express their demands are not smooth, so it is impossible to seeing different opinions against the mainstream in China.' (Jin, 2020, P.152). There are also studies that find that the Chinese government always control social media to guide the patriotic mood of Chinese young people (Li, 2019), in which Weibo, as the largest digital media platform in China, plays a huge role. The following analyses will examine in detail how the Chinese government constructs the collective memory of the 'Xinjiang Cotton' incident, as well as the ethical dilemmas that emerged.

3. Analyses

3.1. Why does the Chinese government use 'Weibo'

The 'Xinjiang Cotton' incident began with a statement of an official government Weibo account. With the development of the Internet, digital media has become an important way for governments of all countries to communicate. For example, 'the White House blog was the most effective digital communication agenda-building tool at the start of Obama's second term' (Kiousis et al., 2016, p.12). This is mainly due to the time interval for the agenda-setting taking effect on the Internet is significantly shorter than that on traditional news media (Roberts & Dzwo, 2020). Because 'the Internet allows people who are very interested in an issue to respond immediately' (McCombs, 2013, p.90). A study shows that:

'as a key information source for general publics after national crises occurred, the Chinese government mainly used crisis response frames of informing, corrective action, and crediting through Weibo and simultaneously narrated memories of national solidarity in response to national crises, so as to plausibly arouse nationalistic sentiments and foster social cohesion' (Zhang, Netmat & Chen, 2020, p.8).

In China, Weibo is an important place for the government to construct collective memory.

Weibo has the advantages of 'simple writing form, One To N To N propagation, and bidirectional interaction' (Jin, 2020, p.160). As the largest social platform in China, Weibo can be regarded as the public sphere in essence, and the government attaches great importance to it as a place for generating public opinions. To effectively control public opinion, under Xi Jinping's leading, the neutralization of Weibo and other social media has been shifted, as they are 'platforms with the power to drive the public agenda' (Bandurski, 2015). Therefore, the communication of government affairs is more and more biased to digital media (Xu, 2018), and more and more biased to Weibo. According to 2017 Government Index - Weibo Impact Report (PeopleUN Public Opinion Data Center, 2018), in 2017, the total number of followers of government Weibo accounts reached 2.46 billion, the total number of readings was 330.3 billion and the total number of interactions was 5.45 billion. After 2017, the number of government affairs Weibo still increased rapidly. And the government Weibo has a significant effect on information transmission, far exceeding the traditional media in terms of transmission speed and coverage breadth and creating a new record on the Weibo platform (Li, 2018).

Besides, the government tightly controls other elements of the press release. On the one hand, the commercial media has been banned from news gathering and reporting, the government official news has been taken as the only news source (Deng & Lin, 2020), 'commercial media as a progressive force have been effectively eliminated'(Bandurski, 2015). On the other hand, by revising the code of ethics to control journalists. The Professional Code of Ethics for Chinese Journalists was revised in 2019 which been added and emphasized that Chinese journalists should 'actively publicize policies and the Party's policies and ideology' and 'play the role of a bridge between the Party and the government and the people'(All-China Journalists Association, 2019). All this has laid a solid foundation for the government to shape the collective memory of the event and promote patriotism.

3.2. How Does The Government Do The Agenda-building

Considering the factor of different Weibo accounts have different influences and the time effect of the news, this study mainly chose three Chinese government official Weibo account that each has more than 100million followers: 1) the Xinhua News Agency -- official Weibo account of Chinese state news agency; 2) the People's Daily -- official Weibo account of the newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party; 3) CCTV news -- official Weibo account of CCTV news center. In addition, all the blog posts about the 'Xinjiang Cotton' incident published by these three accounts within a week after the occurrence of the incident on March 24 were extracted, and qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative analysis were combined to study the government's communication strategy.

First of all, each of the three accounts published more than three blog posts reporting and commenting on this incident on March 24. This follows the communication theory that 'when a negative public opinion event occurs, the party concerned must respond immediately at the first time'(Zou, 2018). Meanwhile, on March 25, attention to the 'Xinjiang Cotton' incident was visible on all three Weibo accounts. Xinhua News Agency published 25 blog posts throughout the day, among which 11 were related to 'Xinjiang cotton'. People's Daily published 35 articles throughout the day, of which 22 were related to 'Xinjiang cotton'. CCTV news published 36 posts and 15 related to the incident. At any moment in a society, there are limits to the agenda of public issues. All of these limitations can be reduced to a zero-sum game in the agenda-setting process. The zero-sum view emphasizes that issues compete fiercely for media and public attention and that the rise of one issue mostly comes at the expense of the decline of another(Zhu, 1992). We can find that this strategy, as the first-level agenda-setting(Kiousis et al., 2016) of the government, transfer object saliences and draws the public's attention to this event.

Secondly, through the discourse analysis of all the blog posts, we can find that the contents published by the three official government accounts can be summarized into three aspects: 1) Xinjiang cotton has high quality, and the mechanization level of cotton picking is high; 2) The racial issue is a rumor designed by foreign governments to restrict China's economic development; 3) Chinese people spontaneously boycott 'China-insulting' brands out of patriotic enthusiasm. In more detail, from March 24 to March 31, the three accounts published a total of 158 posts (Xinhua: 36; People's Daily: 66; CCTV: 56) related to the 'Xinjiang Cotton' incident in which mentioned other countries 59 times (Xinhua: 12; People's Daily: 27; CCTV: 56). Among the posts mentioned other countries the most frequent, the word with the highest co-occurrence rate words were 'rumor/smear'(48times) and 'boycott'(46times), and Xinhua News Agency mentioned 9times that China would impose sanctions on these countries. The People's Daily, which published 22 blog posts about praising and supporting Xinjiang Cotton, launched an online patriotic campaign on March 25 through a microblog called 'I support Xinjiang Cotton'. By April 15, 2021, the post, which only had a picture saying 'I support Xinjiang Cotton', had been read 7.9 billion times, reposted about 40 million times, and discussed 42 million times. It was a

very successful patriotic movement, and one of the reasons for its success was that 'posts with pictures on social networks are more likely to be spread'(Luo, 2019). The three accounts mentioned that boycotting foreign brands is the 'popular will' of Chinese people 40 times (Xinhua: 7; People's Daily: 14; CCTV: 19). The news sources included singers, actors, hosts, Hong Kong students, Xinjiang doctors, and celebrities who were the most common (11 times). The Chinese government has always controlled what some celebrities say on social media because "these influencers, who on Weibo became known as 'Big V's, had the power to drive the agenda in completely unexpected ways" (Bandurski, 2015).

By combining the theories of the second-level agenda-setting and the third-level agenda-setting(Kiousis et al., 2016), we find that in addition to the government's tendency to 'adopt the narrative of nationalism to reiterate the nation's coordinated responses, as well as the wide social support, received in the aftermath of national crises'(Zhang, Nekmat & Chen, 2020, p.8), and it will also increase people's sense of unity and nationalism by portraying other countries in a negative light as 'aggressors'.

3.3. Ethical Dilemma

According to the negative blog posts about other countries published by the three accounts mentioned above, we found that news related to the USA accounted for a large proportion. Xinhua mentioned other countries 12 times, including the USA 9 times; People's Daily mentions the USA 20 times in 27 blog posts related to other countries; The USA was mentioned 16 times out of 20 posts on CCTV News. The specific contents can be summarized as 1): the USA government is the leader of this 'China-insulting' incident; 2) The USA government maliciously spread rumors about China's racial issues in order to interfere in China's internal affairs and restrict China's economic development; 3) Racial problems are more serious in the USA; 4) China imposed sanctions on the USA. After analyzing all the blogs, we found that 10 news were published by all three accounts. Two of the posts said that China would impose sanctions on the UK and the USA, and four posts criticized the USA for its negative actions such as forcing black slaves to pick cotton, disrespecting human rights, and spreading rumors. During this period, the three accounts all published several negative news in the US that had nothing to do with the 'Xinjiang Cotton' incident. For example, the 'US police threatened and arrested minority children'(People's Daily, 2021), and 'the death toll of the epidemic in the US increased significantly'(CCTV News, 2021).

According to previous research, Baker including 'spinning news events', 'objectivity versus advocacy in news releases', 'partial (vs. full) disclosure' in ethical issues, and ethically challenging activities in the practice of public relations(Baker, 2009, p.121). Such agenda-building and press release methods can easily lead to the ethical dilemma of extreme hatred of the USA by the Chinese. In the study of the values of Chinese and American news, it was found that 'international relations ranked first among China's news, indicating China's attention to the world situation'(Zhang, 2009, p.88). Meanwhile, research shows that in reality, China-US relations have been under tension due to such reasons as 'cognitive gap', 'security conflicts', and 'economic conflicts'(Liu, 2020, p.449-451). Other analyses of the image of the USA in Chinese news also found that the USA was always described as 'hypocritical, hegemonistic and biased'(He, Chen & Xing, 2012, p. 676). Some studies believe that "Chinese people always place 'American hatred' in the first place among national hatred"(Daily Digest, 2020). The news about the USA released by the Chinese government in recent years has mainly intensified ethnic contradictions and portrayed the USA as an enemy and aggressor. Meanwhile, with the strengthening of social media platform control and public opinion control (Bandurski, 2015), the ethical dilemma of ultranationalism has emerged.

Like the xenophobic movement that emerged in Japan in the mid-2000s, which right-wings uses the Internet to publish hate speech 'against ethnic minorities, foreigners, and countries

perceived to be a threat to Japan's sovereignty'(Yamaguchi, 2013, p.98). At that time, even if someone mentioned the good things in foreign countries such as animal protection, they would be attacked by the Japanese right-wing as destroying Japan (Yamaguchi, 2013). Similarly, there is a degree of ultranationalism in some parts of China today, where 'angry mobs online have swarmed any criticism of China's leaders or a perceived lack of loyalty to the country. Targets are being harassed and silenced. Some have lost their jobs'(Deng & Lin, 2020).

4. Conclusion

'The change of the mechanism of collective memory inheritance and construction by the Internet started from the breakthrough of the space-time boundary'(Hu, 2014, p.99). We can find that both H&M's announcement and BCI's report reposted by the government Weibo were published in September of the previous year. There has been speculation that the reason for the government to guide the public opinion on March 24, 2021, is to take measures to deal with the announcement on March 22 that the EU, the UK, the US, and Canada had imposed sanctions on officials of China over human rights violations of the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang. But the negative news of the sanctions against China was not reported in all Chinese media. At the same time, through a series of agenda building by the government, the collective memory has been successfully shaped into the story that "because the USA government wants to restrict China's economic development, so it spreads rumors and dominates the dispute over ethnic issues in Xinjiang, and the Chinese people spontaneously boycott the USA and 'China-insulting' brands out of patriotic enthusiasm", so as to control public opinion and promote nationalism.

However, the news should ensure objectivity and fairness. It is understandable to conceal some news that is unfavorable to the Chinese government, but it should not deliberately create ethnic conflicts and worsen international relations. Also, nationalism should not propagandism from the top down, but open channels for democratic political participation and supervision, and improve citizens' right of speech and political participation, so that all citizens can deepen their sense of national responsibility.

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