



**Micro-blogging as a Rapid Response  
News Service in Crisis Reporting:  
The 2011 Wenzhou Train Crash**

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## **Abstract**

This paper studies the role of *Sina Weibo* (a Chinese equivalent to Twitter) in disseminating vital information among the general public after the Wenzhou train crash in July 2011. Consuming low bandwidth while being capable of broadcast, information sent via micro-blogging can be quickly disseminated among a large population and provide first-hand accounts of the disaster. Micro-blogging seems therefore an ideal tool in the case of emergency news dissemination. Meanwhile, *Weibo's* social network nature enabled information sent via *Weibo* to be used in pleas for help, in searching for dislocated people, and in the coordination of rescue efforts, as well as in voluntary activities. During the Wenzhou train crash, due the political nature of the incident, *Weibo* was also used as a platform for channelling public opinion, and it featured criticism of the official rescue efforts. This paper argues that *Weibo's* strength in crisis communication lies in its real-time streaming of facts, perspectives and opinions, and in its reach. In this sense, *Weibo* adds new dimensions to the understanding of Web 2.0 technologies in emergency communication and shows potential for redistributing power among the government, the officially controlled news media, and citizen media.

## **Contributor Note**

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At 20:34 Beijing Time (13:34 GMT) on 23 July 2011, two high-speed trains crashed into each other near Wenzhou, a coastal city in Southeast China. Four train coaches fell off a viaduct after derailing, killing 40 and injuring 191.

The Wenzhou train crash quickly developed from a human-induced accident into a political crisis of public trust in political authority. The Ministry of Railways announced the completion of the rescue work at the crash scene at 4am on 24 July – a little bit more than 7 hours after the crash. However, 21 hours after the crash, the last survivor, a 2-year old girl, was saved by the SWAT. Journalists and the general public launched a torrent of criticism about the hasty claim to have completed the rescue work and also questioned the motivations behind the rushed burial of the wreckage by the Ministry of Railway at the crash scene. The State Council responded by setting up an investigation team, scrutinizing the cause of the accident. A 36,000-word report was released on the 28 December 2011 saying that ‘design flaws, sloppy management and the mishandling of a lightning strike that crippled equipment were behind a bullet train crash in July’ (China Daily 2011). A total of 54 people were held accountable for the fatal crash, including the former railway minister Liu Zhijun.

In the unfolding of the Wenzhou train crash accident, social media *Sina Weibo*, a Chinese equivalent to Twitter, played a key role in connecting people via networking and availing itself as an ideal tool for citizen reporting, grassroots

organization, and public opinion expression.

### **Crisis Reporting: News media and Web 2.0**

Media representation of disaster – in either natural or anthropological forms – has long been regarded as misleading and perpetuating erroneous beliefs, such as the community breaking down (Goltz, 1984; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1972; Quarantelli, 1985; Tierney et al. 2006; Mitchell et al. 2000).

Though news media is ‘the most important source of disaster related information’ (Goltz 1984), the news media’s heavy reliance on official sources has been regarded as contributing to the unfair presentation of disaster-related behaviour among the public and to the reinforcement of political and military authority. In covering domestic disasters, journalists rely on official sources for the majority of actions reported (Goltz 1984: 361). As a consequence, news media have featured the restorative actions of organisations being ‘swift and effective’ (Goltz 1984: 353) and have also created a ‘community breakdown’ myth, although such messages have been proved false in actual empirical research on disasters (Tierney et al. 2006: 59). The media’s heavy reliance on official sources, especially law enforcement and local officials is regarded as being responsible for a disproportionate representation of anti-social behaviours, such as fighting for limited resources or criminal activities like looting (Goltz 1984). Such

false representations arguably influence individual and organisational decision-making in disasters (Fischer 1998). In covering the damage wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for instance, the media's 'emphasis on lawlessness and the need for strict social control both reflected and reinforced a political discourse calling for a greater role for the military in disaster management' (Tierney et al. 2006: 57).

Under the Communist regime, Chinese media shunned any 'negative' reporting, including disaster reporting, before the media reform in 1978. Since the reform and China's 'opening up', media increasingly moved from 'leader-oriented' to 'reader-oriented' positions, and journalists started to emphasise 'truthfulness', 'brevity', 'timeliness', 'liveliness' and 'readability' in their stories (Zhao 1998:34). Disaster news and crisis reporting gradually became acceptable. However the heavy reliance on official sources and overarching censorship contribute to the limited value of news media in crisis reporting in China. During the SARS crisis in 2003, for instance, information about the virus and subsequent fatalities were largely delayed. Instead, as Luther and Zhou argue, state-controlled news media used this crisis situation as an opportunity for state propaganda. Chinese media coverage of the SARS crisis thus focused on 'the positive initiatives that the Chinese leaders were undertaking to curtail any negative economic impact of the disease' (Luther and Zhou 2005: 866).

Unsurprisingly, then, the role of ICTs in crisis reporting has been gaining academic interest. A growing body of

literature has focused on the potential of ICTs in providing first-hand citizen-reporting, as well as in connecting communities and other forms of public opinion expression, such as in an emergency response.

The role of the internet in providing essential information for the residents in the disaster-hit area has been documented in various studies. ICT facilities have been used to search for news and information, for updates about conditions in the communities that were evacuated, to search for missing or displaced family members, and to communicate with friends and relatives (Jaeger et al. 2007). Examining the coordinated online relief activities following Hurricane Katrina in the US, Torrey et al (2007) found online communities to play an important role in information access and trust development:

small blog communities used a centralised authority structure that was more immediately successful in managing information and developing trust, but over time, blog communities were difficult to sustain. Larger and more decentralised forums had greater difficulties focusing the community's communication and developing trust but sustained themselves over a long period of time (Torrey et al. 2007: 1).

More recent studies focus on Web 2.0 applications in disseminating real-time updates of crises, and in providing valuable information for the authorities as well as the public. Vieweg et al (2008) argue that social networking sites play a key role in collective sense-making and



show the potential of collective intelligence in problem-solving. Virginia Tech students and family used Wikipedia collectively and generated an accurate list of 32 victims before the university released such information following a shooting in 2007. Sutton's (2008) study revealed that the general public uses both low-tech (phone lines) and high-tech communication tools (such as web forums, photo-sharing sites Flickr/Picasa, Twitter, and Google Mashup), seeking and sharing all types of information sources available.

In China, due to the largely restrictive news media environment, ICTs and web 2.0 technologies play an important role as alternative information sources. During the SARS crisis, Chinese citizens actively sought alternative resources via mobile phone text messages and the internet (Tai and Sun 2007; Wu 2007). Wu observes that during the SARS information scarcity stage (08/02/2003 – 02/04/2003), postings from web forums revealed the SARS crisis and netizens called for information transparency concerning public health. Online discussion within web forums also demonstrates users' community bonding behaviour such as the sharing of humour and emotional support (Wu 2007). Online forums such as *Tianya* are believed to provide information, construct a communication network, coordinate rescue and voluntary action, and hence to connect communities in post-disaster communication (Qu et al. 2009).

As the newest addition to the web 2.0 application, Twitter and its Chinese equivalent *Weibo* (Micro-blogging) have

gained increasing importance in post-disaster communication. Because of its low bandwidth and broadcast-ability, Twitter can be used as an ideal communication tool in the post-disaster area. Information disseminated on Twitter demonstrates qualities such as timeliness, accessibility, accuracy, completeness and collective intelligence (Li and Rao 2010). Web 2.0 technologies are also used as a form of collective intelligence in facilitating problem-solving and coordinating voluntary rescue activities. Online communities responded to Katrina Hurricane by facilitating the distribution of donated goods from ordinary people to hurricane victims (Torrey et al. 2007).

As the leading micro-blogging platform service in China, *Sina Weibo* combines multiple functionalities such as posting (text, photos, videos, audio clips), 'following' other users, reposting, commenting, following a threaded public discussion (#topic#), initiating polls and casting votes, and initiating online collective activities, etc. Similarly, Chinese new media companies have developed interfaces that allow mobile users to interact with multiple micro-blogs at once (Farraer 2009). Such technological features blur the boundary between the private and the public use of *Weibo* and make it a suitable tool for personal broadcasting and citizen reporting.

It is generally believed that compared with Twitter, *Sina Weibo* is easier to use, can contain more content, and is friendlier to multi-media information. IT specialist Kai-Fu Lee argues that *Weibo* is more efficient because 140 characters in Chinese can contain five times more

information than in English. With 140-Chinese characters, Lee argues, 'users can post the abstract of a news article' (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

*Weibo's* design could also be a response to the Chinese market's high receptiveness to text-based web 2.0 communication oriented towards news consumption. Though Chinese media has undergone significant changes in recent decades and has achieved a certain degree of independence and autonomy, the overall restrictive media environment in China makes digital media an alternative form for the general public to seek information and express public opinion (Wu 2007). According to the official survey statistics provided by China Internet Network Information Centre (2010, 2011, 2012), 307.69 million Chinese internet users identified reading news as their primary online activity (80.1%) in 2009. This number rose to 353.04 million in 2010 and 366.87 million in 2011. Meanwhile, *Weibo* users in China have grown at a phenomenal rate. By the end of 2010, there were 63.11 million *Weibo* users in China and the number jumped to 249.88 million by the end of 2011 with an annual growth rate of 296% (China Internet Network Information Centre 2012).

In China, the rapid economic development, deteriorating environment, ineffective crisis-security management and official censorship over news media make China vulnerable to disasters and other critical contingencies (Zhong 2007). At the same time, more and more of the public is increasingly turning to new media technologies for news information. Research into Web 2.0-enabled

communication for grassroots emergency response in China has not been identified. It is therefore on this premises this paper aims to provide the first account of this emerging topic.

## Research Methods and Data Gathering

Using 'netnography' as the key method, this study investigated how microbloggers based on *Sina Weibo* responded to the Wenzhou High speed train crash in July 2011.

Netnography is an extension of the traditional ethnographic methods from physical locations into computer-mediated environments and is often used in online marketing studies. Netnography is a term coined by Robert V. Kozinets (1999; 2002) and is used to describe the study of online communities informed by the methods of cultural anthropology. The merit of it being 'faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews' makes it an ideal tool in providing information on the symbolism and meanings of online groups (Kozinets 2002: 61).

The naturalistic approach requires that the researcher be a culturally informed observer of the community under study. This is particularly important for the study of communities formed on Twitter or *Weibo* because:

[T]weets tend to be stream of consciousness fragments and lack the structure of a cogent argument or description. Moreover, even more so than blogs, tweets are directed at



friends and family who share a common frame of reference. Many things can therefore be said or implied without being explicitly spelled out – including place names and times (Banerjee et al. 2009).

Being a Mandarin-Chinese native speaker and a *Weibo* user since January 2011, I am familiar with the terminologies and codes shared by the Chinese *Weibo* population. Meanwhile, I have been following and recording the Wenzhou train crash reporting and discussion formed on *Weibo* since the crash took place. The unobtrusive nature of netnography as a research method is particularly important for the study of the post-disaster population.

Between 23 July 2011 (when the train crash took place) and 22 August 2011, there were in total 2,030,809 'tweets' about the Wenzhou High Speed train on *Sina Weibo*. To better understand the nature of Web 2.0 technologies as a rapid response to disaster, news reporting about the train crash from state news agency Xinhua is used as a comparative benchmark. To make the study both manageable and systematic, I chose to study the following micro-bloggers over the period of this study:

- Survivor *Yang Juan Juan Yang* who sent the first *Weibo* about the crash (Yang hereafter);
- Eye witness photographer Xiaodao who provided the first news photo (Xiaodao hereafter);
- Eight news aggregators (News Aggregators hereafter): Since the train crash took place, eight

microbloggers started using 'Wenzhou high speed train' (温州动车) as (part of) their *Sina Weibo* username. This gesture itself shows the *Weibo* users' commitment to the topic. These eight users produced 354 *Weibo* postings in a month, with 330 postings directly relevant to the train crash. Overall, they attracted 166496 followers, as shown in table 1.

### **Micro-blogging as a Rapid Response to the Disaster**

During the Wenzhou train crash incident, the user-generated content on *Sina Weibo* includes a vast array of sources and allows ordinary people to record their real life stories and share it across networks online. The network created via *Weibo* replicates the real life social networks as well as expanding the connection among ordinary people across geo-spatial and social boundaries otherwise impossible to overcome. Communication for community building is evident in the post-disaster area. Meanwhile *Weibo* also provides a platform for the formation and expression of public opinion.

### **Citizen Reporting of the Crisis**

Compared with the news coverage from the state media, citizen reporting of the train crash via *Weibo* shows propensities of timeliness, intensity of reporting and strong attachment to the reported.

Figure 1 shows that in the month immediately after the train crash, both official news media Xinhua News Agency and *Weibo* users actively covered the train crash. Within the first week after the crash, train crash reporting from both Xinhua and *Weibo* reached its peak. Xinhua produced 260 stories in total regarding the disaster. Among the citizen microbloggers, survivor Yang wrote 22 posts; eyewitness Xiaodao 156; while eight citizen news aggregators produced 308 Weibo posts, with the highest number of 104 on 27 July. *China Daily* also report that in the week following the train crash, there were 10 million messages about the crash on *Sina Weibo* and 20 million on *QQ Weibo*, the other major Chinese microblog (Yu 2011).

Timeliness is one key news value used in news selection and production. In crisis reporting, timeliness is regarded as having extraordinary significance because the dissemination of information during the crisis could play an important role in crisis management and in shaping the response of those involved. Web 2.0 technology via mobile technology has the unbeatable advantage of providing the most up-to-date news regarding the development of a crisis.

The first citizen reporting of the accident came in the form of a *Weibo* message 13 minutes after the train crash (20:47 Beijing time). This message was sent from Yang, a university student on her journey home from Beijing:

Help! High Speed train D301 derailed near Wenzhou South Station! Children

are crying in the car! We can't find any crew members! Help us please!

This first *Weibo* post was reposted more than 100,000 times within 10 hours, according to the state media *China Daily* (Yu 2011). Worrying that this message failed to send, Yang re-posted her own message 18 minutes later with an update, which was reposted 3894 times:

Help us! The train carriage is tilting. It is concealed. There was a crash between the carriages ahead.

The first eyewitness report of the train crash is from a *Sina Weibo* user Xiaodao, a fashion photographer who lived in the vicinity of the crash scene. At 21:35pm the first news photo from Xiaodao showing the wreckage of a derailed train coach lying on the ground was posted on *Weibo* – just an hour after the crash took place. More photos then followed showing fire-fighters and local residents pulling injured passengers out of the coaches. These photos were later widely used by mainstream media such as Xinhua News Agency and China News Agency.

Eyewitness reporting and testimonial photos have been used extensively in communicating the unspeakable scene of the disaster. Traditionally, providing the first account of the disaster is a privilege belonging to the professionals. A journalist is to this extent the gatekeeper 'who filters the floods of information into an orderly stream of news' as well as 'the "broker of social consensus" who shapes a community's attitudes' (Lewis 2003: 101).

Name	Start Date	No. of posts	Location	Followers	Following
Wenzhou High Speed Train Live Broadcast on the Spot	14-11-2010	42	Wenzhou	128	91
Wenzhou High Speed Rescue Team	20-03-2011	155	Jixi	154089	23
Wenzhou High Speed Train	05-07-2011	4	Wenzhou	59	116
Wenzhou High Speed Train News Aggregator	23-07-2011	156	Wenzhou	534	1167
Wenzhou High Speed Train Derailing (Accident) Truth Seeking	24-07-2011	123	Wenzhou	78	120
Wenzhou High Speed Train Crash and Derailing Accident	26-07-2011	24	Wenzhou	100	63
Wenzhou High Speed Train 723	30-07-2011	86	Wenzhou	766	1932
Wenzhou High Speed Train: the league of defending Civil Rights	31-07-2011	48	Beijing	10742	10

Table 1. Sina Weibo News Aggregators with 'Wenzhou high speed train' in username.

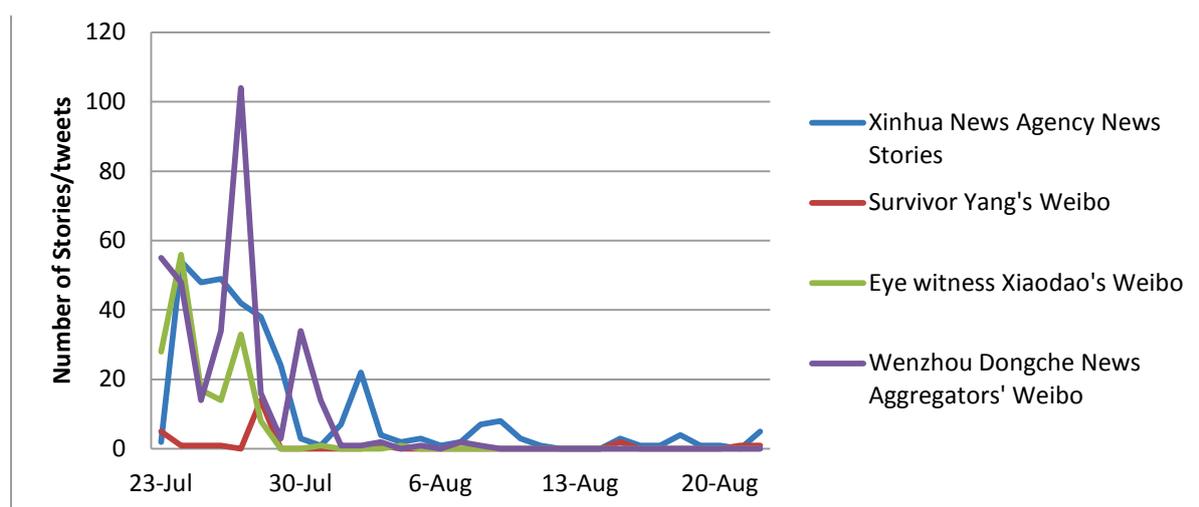


Figure 1. A comparison of Xinhua News Agency coverage of Wenzhou Train Crash and Weibo Reporting.



However, the availability of digital cameras, including mobile phones equipped with cameras, 'make opportunistic eyewitness photography easier than it has ever been' (Liu et al. 2009: 43). Crisis reporting by such opportunistic citizen reporters who themselves might be directly affected by the crisis does not necessarily abide by professional ethics as advocated by journalists, such as objectivity and impartiality. For citizen reporters, 'during times of crisis, some people feel compelled to take photos to document events as they unfold. Sharing photos in such situations can be informative, newsworthy, and even therapeutic' (Liu et al. 2009: 43).

Compared with micro-blog postings, the official news media was slow in covering the train crash. The first mainstream media report came from Xinhua News Agency at 23:16 Beijing Time – 2 hours and 40 minutes after the train crash. This 29-word (Chinese character) text-only news reads:

Breaking News: 11 died and 89 injured in the Wenzhou high speed train crash accident.

Compared with this detached news agency writing style, citizen reporting showed a strong attachment and personal involvement. Objectivity, as one key element of modern journalism, implies that messages from the subjects of the news events and key actors are not supposed to speak to the general public directly. Communication between the news maker and the public is mediated and thus a gate-keeping role is inserted between the news actors and

the public. Citizen reporting via *Weibo* provides on-the-spot reporting; while at the same time, citizen reporters themselves are deeply embedded in the incident they are covering. Xiaodao news photos showed the terrible crash scene and rescue work being undertaken. Short captions show a strong sense of urgency and a high degree of involvement:

Rescuing.

Praying.

I can only upload these photos now.  
I'll see how I could help...

One constant criticism of the news media's crisis reporting is its lack of follow-ups. 'Disasters, even major ones which claim thousands of lives and cause extensive damage, are newsworthy [only] for only a few days' (Goltz 1984: 363). The trend of the citizen reporting of the Wenzhou train crash, however, shows a surprising parallel to the Xinhua News Agency's coverage. *Weibo* users' interest in the train crash remained high for about a week before gradually decreasing. The first eyewitness reporter Xiaodao, for example, started a photo-taking tour with friends around the country from 3 August and his postings from that date were mainly about his tour and had little reference to the train crash.

### **Community Building**

The community-building capacity of *Weibo* could be detected from the following evidence: firstly *Weibo* was used for the coordination of voluntarily services in Wenzhou; secondly, *Weibo*



users drew on collective intelligence in searching for dislocated family members and in putting together a list of casualties; thirdly, the community that formed via *Weibo* continued to provide post-disaster emotional support among its users.

*Weibo* posts can spread further when users repost the original message through their own accounts. This practice, similar to 'retweeting' on Twitter, can introduce content to new audiences (Marwick and Boyd 2010). While the majority of *Weibo* micro-bloggers use '@username' to cite the original author, reposted messages are often altered or given additional information, interpretation, or comments. Meanwhile, it is common for Weibo users to re-post a Weibo message via email or an instant messaging application (such as MSN or QQ, an instant messaging service popular in China). Furthermore, various online tools allow *Weibo* users to repost the original message to blogs or social media such as *Renren* (a Chinese equivalent to Facebook). Considering the various ways in which people can receive and disseminate information via *Weibo*, it is practically impossible to draw a clear picture of the audience of one particular *Weibo* account as *Weibo* posts could be seen by virtually infinite numbers of people.

But this inability to know the exact audience does not mean that communities cannot be formed via *Weibo*. Social media is organised around people's social relations. However, in the post-crisis period, social networks formed via *Weibo* became both people-oriented and topic-oriented. By following

a focal news figure (@username) or joining a threaded discussion (#topic#), communities can be formed in a short span of time.

A few hours after the train crash, two loosely connected communities were quickly formed on Sina *Weibo*. The first was a locale-oriented community consisting mainly of microbloggers living in Wenzhou or neighbouring cities. This community was more directly affected by the train crash and consequently directly involved in post-disaster restorative activities. The second community was a nation-wide virtual community. Sina headquarters in Beijing played a key role in coordinating the collective intelligence via threaded discussion. The first is a virtual community closely tied to the offline real world community; while the latter largely remained a loosely connected interest group across the country.

Within hours of the accident, hospitals in Wenzhou started receiving injured passengers, and local residents in Wenzhou started to exchange important information regarding rescue work via *Weibo*.

No. 23 Middle School now provides asylum for the passengers overnight (24-07-2011)

There are more than 100 injured in local hospitals and blood is still in need. Please help. Locations for blood donation are ... [the names of four blood donation sites in Wenzhou] (24-07-2012)

Via *Weibo* and other media forms, voluntary activities were coordinated. Thousands of local residents in Wenzhou



turned up at the blood donation centres in Wenzhou within hours of the train crash. Eyewitness photos showing long queues of voluntary blood donors were widely circulated on *Weibo*, prompting more people to give help. 'I've never felt so proud of being a Wenzhou citizen. We are all united as we do our best to help those injured and victims of the accident', read one *Weibo* message (Yu 2011). Members of the Wenzhou Motor Club organised to provide voluntarily transportation services to those families who were affected by the train crash. Local taxi companies also offered to provide free transportation to those affected by the train crash searching for their family members. 'Look out for the red ribbon on cars', read one *Weibo* message: 'volunteers drive a car/taxi with a red ribbon!'

*Weibo* was used as an information hub for searching for the dislocated family members or friends after the train crash:

Ms Zhang Binglian has not seen her daughter since the accident. The girl's name is Huang Yuchun, 12-years old. She's 1.50 meter high and with short hair. Fair-skinned.... (24-07-2011)

The following passengers were sent to Wenzhou Kangning Hospital for emergency treatment.... [24 names] Please repost (so that their families could find them) (24-07-2011)

Photographic-based information proved to be a quick and reliable means of communication. *Weibo* users in Wenzhou uploaded photos of the local hospitals' reception list, aiming to reach the family members of those injured passengers. Eyewitness Xiaodao posted photos of a

middle-aged man who lost consciousness in the accident. The photo of him that circulated on *Weibo* helped his family members to identify him and finally to locate him in the hospital.

Vieweg et al. consider microblogging as 'a place for "harvesting" information during a crisis event to determine what is happening on the ground' (2010: 1079). The growing ubiquity of *Weibo* in China makes it an ideal tool to draw on the collective intelligence of *Weibo* users in the post-disaster search. Within four minutes after Yang's first SOS *Weibo* post, *Sina* set up a Wenzhou train crash page with related information including search notices for missing passengers, casualty numbers, and the conditions of the injured. A staff member from *Sina* informed *China Daily* that *Sina* had a 24-hour working team for the micro blog. 'The names of injured passengers sent to hospitals were updated regularly [on *Weibo*], which is much faster than the official figures released by authorized news agency and local government' (Yu 2011).

Comparing with the loosely connected online communities based on web forums, wikis and listservs, social network sites relations are 'organised around people' (Christakis and Fowler 2010: 269). Such a people-orientation combined with the communication rapidity makes *Weibo* an ideal tool for emotional support among its users. *Weibo* played an important role in coordinating public mourning of the dead across the country. The online post-disaster sense-making and emotional support among *Weibo* users are never



separated from the offline grassroots mourning activities. *Weibo* users initiated activities such as wearing black t-shirts and holding candle vigils in dozens of cities in China. Photos of flowers and candle vigils were circulated via *Weibo* and prompted further similar mourning activities to take place in many other cities.

Emotional support via *Weibo* took various forms, from following, re-posting, and commenting, to private messaging. A recipient of emotional support on *Weibo* could see a sudden expansion of his/her social relations in the growing number of followers. Since the 'followed' and 'following' relationship is not reciprocal, the recipient of large following could be alleviated to a status almost equivalent to celebrity due to the significant amount of public attention via *Weibo*.

Train crash survivor Yang started her *Sina Weibo* activities on 1 May 2010. She had about 400 followers before the train crash.<sup>1</sup> However, the accident thrust her into the media spotlight and hundreds of thousands of well-wishers started following her. She rose to having 26,944 followers by 24 February 2012.

On the second day after the train crash, Yang wrote in her *Weibo* and thanked those who relayed her SOS message: 'I'm thankful to all of those who care about me. I'm truly grateful' (24-07-2011). On 28 July, Yang posted 14 continuous messages (overall about 1,400 Chinese characters) detailing her ordeal in the train crash and her experience of being

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<sup>1</sup> Private message exchange with Yang Juanjuan Yang; 24-02-2012.

rescued by the SWAT soldiers. Comments on her micro-blogging messages changed from initial worries over her safety to well-wishing and emotional support. *Weibo* users wrote:

I read your post (before the train crash) expressing the excitement of seeing your mom in two hours. I'm glad you still have the chance to continue your blog. I hope you could leave the shadow behind soon. RIP – to those who lost their lives (30-07-2011)

Let the deceased rest in peace; let the survivors be strong! (26-07-2011)

According to Qu et al, although web forums are frequently used as a place for members to let out feelings, forum participants rarely use it for mutual emotional support (2009). The reason is mainly that of the lack of close-knit social networks among forum participants and the lack of multimedia content such as member avatar and emoticons (Qu et al. 2009: 4). Web 2.0 media incorporates both offline social relations among people and multimedia content, which enables it to be used as a place for expressing feelings. However, I argue, the autobiographical nature of *Weibo* posting makes it an ideal tool for giving and receiving emotional support.

The autobiographical nature of *Weibo* presents the Weibo users' daily life as a stream of happenings. 'Ordinary' people, as long as they have a *Weibo* account, can autonomously assume the author's position in constructing text as well as meaning. In emergency communication, the dramatic effects of the tragedy on people's lives is not observed and



mediated by professional media practitioners, but by the people themselves. The tragic effect on people's lives was exhibited in people's own narratives on *Weibo* in first-hand testimonial accounts. It therefore becomes an anchorage for congregating public emotion.

The most telling case is that of the various *Weibo* users who became casualties in the train crash. The streaming of their life stories was suddenly suspended and was intervened into (usually by close family members) with a publicized announcement of the unexpected departure of the authors. These *Weibo* sites became as important as the physical locales for public mourning. One victim, Yu'an Xiang's last post was reposted 9,667 times and received 63,484 comments. Comments came from Yu'an's friends, colleagues, as well as tens of thousands of *Weibo* users he had never known. Most comments use emoticons such as 'crying', 'candle', 'tears', or 'broken heart'. The absence of *Weibo* posting since 23 July became symbolic. The absence of the author and the void left by the cessation of the streaming of their life form a stark contrast to the constant updating on *Weibo* and heighten the hollowing effect of death as both private and public.

### **The Train Crash as a Political Crisis: Weibo and Public Opinion Expression**

News aggregators' *Weibo* posting consists mainly of the re-posting of news from mainstream media, celebrity (including mainstream journalists), and other citizen journalists. In fact, only 18

out of 330 *Weibo* from the news aggregators were original during the period of this study. Nonetheless, re-posting does not imply the passive passing on of information. While re-posting, Weibo users often add additional information and comments. These news aggregating microblogging sites resemble the opinion pages from traditional print media and thus provide an ideal platform for public opinion expression.

A content analysis of the total 330 posts from eight news aggregators on *Sina Weibo* revealed the following eight themes (as illustrated also in Figure 2):

- Criticism directed towards the Ministry of Railways (and the Chinese government in general) over the rescue efforts and compensation (124 posts);
- Discussion of the casualty numbers and the expression of sympathy towards train crash victims (62 posts);
- Criticism towards the government's media and information control (54 posts);
- Political parody (26 posts);
- Questioning the real motivation of the Ministry of Railways' decision to bury the train wreckage immediately after the crash (25 posts);
- Coordinating activities (such as wearing black t-shirts in mourning) (16 posts);
- Applause towards citizen heroes (such as volunteers) (12 posts);
- *Weibo* Poll (11 posts).

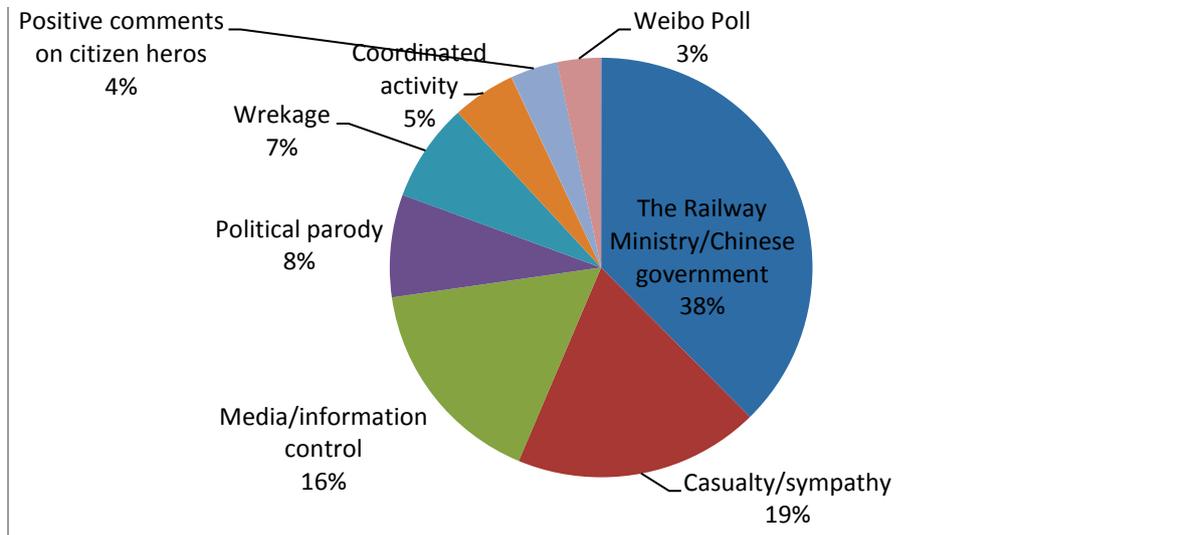


Figure 2. *Sina Weibo News Aggregators' posts by topic*

It is evident that, in the narrative constructed by the news aggregators, the train crash is largely represented as a political crisis instead of a human-induced accident. The long-held public scepticism towards the government has its roots in various occasions, such as the 2003 SARS crisis, when the government's secretive attempts to cover up caused severe delays in crisis management. Zhong says, 'The [Chinese] government's failure to release information in a transparent and timely manner is not only intensifying the efforts and the impact of non-mainstream media reporting on public events but is making the government more vulnerable to attacks from critics' (Zhong 2007: 101).

It is reported that the Central Propaganda Department issued directives to Chinese media on 24<sup>th</sup> July

concerning reporting about the Wenzhou train crash (Reuters, 2011).

In regard to the Wenzhou high-speed train crash, all media outlets are to promptly report information released from the Ministry of Railways. No journalists should conduct independent interviews. All subsidiaries including newspaper, magazines and websites are to be well controlled. Do not link reports with articles regarding the development of high-speed trains. Do not conduct reflective reports.

Additional directives for all central media: The latest directives on reporting the Wenzhou high-speed train crash: 1. Release death toll only according to figures from authorities. 2. Do not report on a frequent basis. 3. More touching stories are to be reported instead, i.e. blood donation, free taxi services, etc. 4. Do not investigate the causes of the accident; use information released from

authorities as standard. 5. Do not reflect or comment. (China Digital Times, 2011)

Such directives do not prove that the Chinese government learnt a lesson from its handling of the 2003 SARS crisis. The

difference, however, is that this time, the directives themselves are made available to citizens and discussed among citizens on *Weibo* as shown in the following figure.

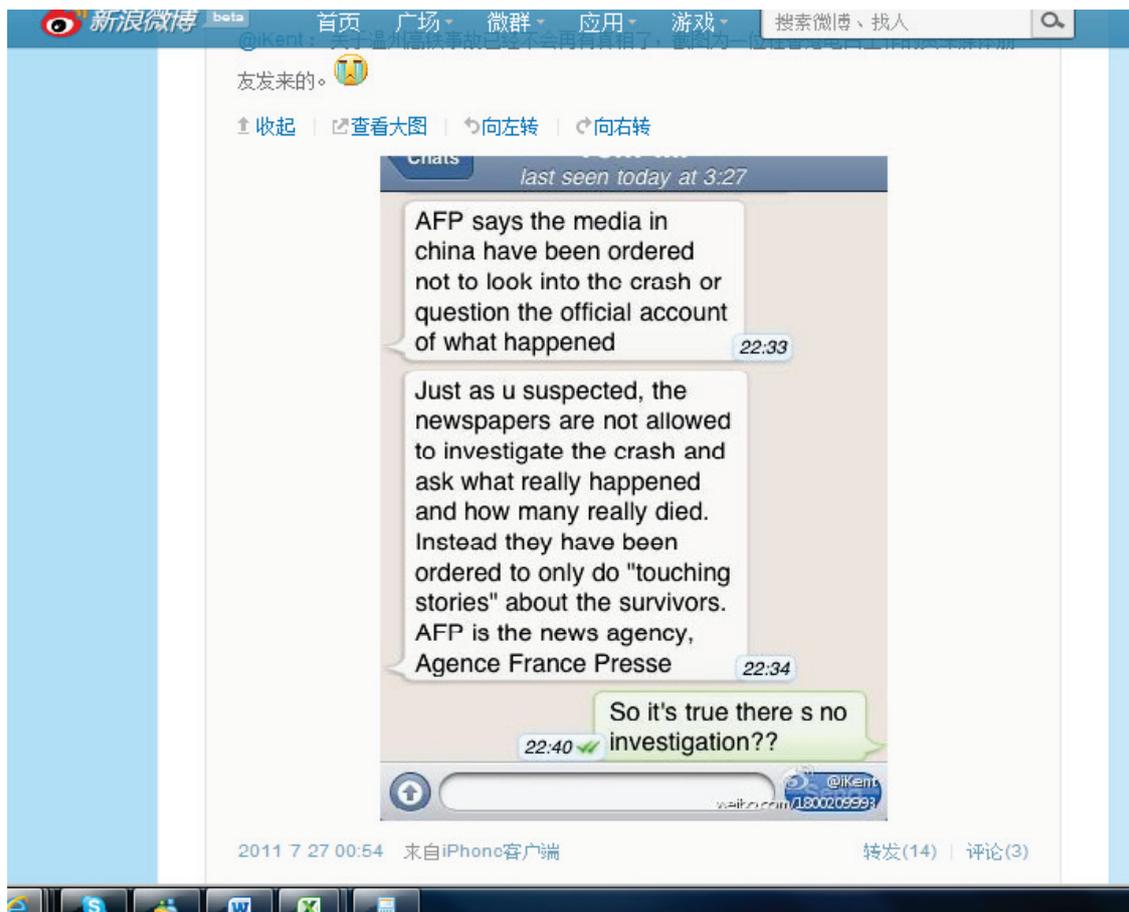


Figure 3. Screen shot: an iPhone chat record between two anonymous citizens about information control during Wenzhou train crash.

A heightened tension can be observed in the Wenzhou train crash incident between a government determined to control the flow of information and a public that is increasingly information savvy. During the 2003 SARS crisis, Internet-based web forums were regarded as revolutionizing the free flow of information and in making it difficult for the Chinese authorities to manipulate situations of crisis. However, the

structure of the web forum makes it possible for officials to exercise administrative surveillance. In the case of Wenzhou train crash, *Weibo* further unleashed the potential of citizen-to-citizen dialogue. The Chinese government is facing an increasingly diffused online population that is resourceful in seeking and disseminating information and imaginative in expressing and exchanging opinions.



On *Sina Weibo*, anyone can initiate an opinion poll. One of the many polls made immediately available to the public after the train crash aimed to extrapolate public opinion on the Ministry of Railways. The question reads:

Which of the following is the real reason for [the Ministry of Railway's] hasty burial of the train wreckage?

A To fill in the pond (according to the official news media yesterday)

B To help with rescue work (QQ news as of this morning)

C To prevent the leak of the technological secrets of the high speed train (as reported by the *Metropolitan Express*)

D To destroy evidence!!!!!!!

(*Sina Weibo* 2011  
<http://vote.weibo.com/vid=694805>  
Author's translation)

By 1 August 2011, 88,478 people had cast their vote. The results show that the vast majority of the *Weibo* users (94.9%) chose D as their answer.

Such a polling exercise and its results suggest the presence of contempt for authority and a distrust of official media, at least among from an initial online public congregation. Before the Web 2.0 technology, it was difficult to measure the efficacy of online resistance. On *Weibo*, the discrepancies between the official discourse and public opinion take a visual form.

Political parodies are also well circulated among *Weibo* users. Kavita Kulkarni (2004) argues that humour is an effective

method for initiating political engagement and resistance: 'the use of irony and parody promotes negation, critical thinking, and scepticism, all of which are important tools for invalidating the ideological dominance of those in power' (2004: 17). With the popularisation of image editing software, it becomes increasingly easy for anyone with basic computer knowledge to create a politically-infused satirical image. One of the many images that circulated after the train crash was a manipulation of the train crash scene news photos by showing Godzilla destroying a train carriage with the caption 'I'd rather believe this than the official explanation for the train crash (i.e., lightning strike)'. The use of parodies as a response to the train crash indicates the ways in which a younger generation of internet users in China engage with politics.

### **Evaluation of *Weibo* as a Rapid Response News Service**

*Weibo* has added new dimensions to the understanding of web 2.0-enabled communication for grassroots emergency response in China. *Weibo's* immediacy in communication and its capacity for connecting people via networking make it an ideal tool for citizen reporting, grassroots organization, and public opinion expression.

The ubiquity of *Weibo* usage in China makes it possible for the general public to offer first-hand accounts of events they were involved in without having the intention of practicing citizen journalism. These opportunistic 'citizen reporters' are



not necessarily motivated by the prospect of having their photos, videos, and other newsworthy material 'published' by mainstream media outlets. Instead, they 'broadcast' their news to families, friends, or whoever connected via the intricate social networks. Social media technology supports spontaneous ways of communication and therefore tests 'conventionally understood boundaries between informal and formal crisis response activities' (Liu et al. 2009). In this sense, web 2.0 technology diversifies the means and multiplies the possibilities of citizen crisis reporting.

In a country with such a restrictive media environment as China, the social network formed on *Weibo* has been widely used for information gathering, aggregation, and dissemination. The official report on internet development in China acknowledges the force of *Weibo* in driving news production and consumption: 'via the use of *Weibo*, the general public becomes the key force in disseminating news information events and pushing news events forward... Social Networking Service platforms enhances the speed, breadth and depth of news' (China Internet Network Information Centre 2011: 32,33).

In reporting the Wenzhou train crash, *Weibo* also provides a platform for coordinating pro-social activities within a hastily connected community. Members of the public behaved proactively in assisting each other and provided emotional support to those affected in the post-disaster period. *Weibo* played a critical role in establishing, maintaining and developing social networks online while bridging the online community with

the offline community. Residents in Wenzhou, for example, performed many critical disaster tasks, such as searching for and rescuing victims. Information dissemination on *Weibo* is not only informative but also therapeutic. Differing from the 'objective' and detached stance journalists adopt, *Weibo* reporting of the crisis reflects people's emotional reactions to the disaster and what people feel about other's feelings. This therapeutic nature of *Weibo* posting seems to be the natural outcome of people-centred social media, while at the same time raising the question of what counts as 'news' for professionals.

Meanwhile, due the political sensitivity of the train crash, *Weibo* is used as a platform to channel public opinion, and a significant amount of micro-blogging postings demonstrate a highly sceptical public attitude towards the authority and official media. *Weibo's* strength lies in its real-time streaming of facts, perspectives and opinions and its omnipresent reach. Government controlled news media lost its pivotal role in setting the public agenda and becomes just one of the many competing influences in shaping public opinion. In this sense, *Sina Weibo* shows great potential for redistributing power among the government, officially controlled news media, and citizen media.

However, such an argument does not suggest that the traditional news media's agenda-setting power has been taken away by web 2.0 technology and other forms of citizen media. Though 'facts' regarding the train crash were provided and relevant issues were debated on *Weibo*, serious large-scale investigation

into the cause of the train crash could not be coordinated among opportunistic citizen reporters. It proves to be unlikely for opportunistic citizen journalists to focus on one single news event over a longer period of time. *Sina Weibo* reporting of the Wenzhou train crash

reached its peak in the week following the crash and significantly decreased within a month. Traditional news media's agenda-setting power still remains dominant in many cases.

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