

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CCP MOUTHPIECE IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT WEIXIN COMMUNICATION DURING THE 2021 HEBEI COVID-19 OUTBREAK

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Hebei local governments use online statements on Weixin to legitimize their drastic measures during the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2021. By mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods, I adapted Critical Discourse Analysis to the social media environment. I found that the Hebei local governments legitimize their drastic measures during the outbreak on Weixin through a focus on law and order with a nationalist undertone. Through a strategy that can be seen as “occupying microblogs”, the PRC government shapes and alters discourse online for its own purposes, resulting in more traditional one-to-many information flows. This development follows a CCP tradition of mass persuasion in the traditional media paradigm. Currently, the PRC government applies mass persuasion strategies to the online environment and uses social media as a tool for government stability.

KEYWORDS: discourse analysis, social media, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a place for free speech and diverse information to many of us. However, non-democratic governments, such as the one found in the People’s Republic of China, use social media as a tool for government stability. Social media enables non-democratic leaders to gather information on public senti-

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ments, increase transparency of local officials' performance, shape and alter discourses, and mobilize their followers (Gunitsky 2015).

Mass persuasion communication strategies are engrained into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The driving idea behind these strategies is: if people think 'correctly', they will also act 'correctly' (Yu 1964, 3–10). The CCP communication strategies on social media fit into this tradition. The CCP has been able to maintain its hegemony during the emergence of social media through establishing institutional reforms and policies targeting individual users, and by encouraging official agencies to occupy microblogs. Moreover, the necessity of popular apps like Weixin for daily life driven by a mutually supportive relationship between the government and private internet companies creates the perfect environment for the Party-state to monitor its citizens. To some, society in the PRC can even be described as a panspectron: a situation in which monitoring activities are not conducted from a central point, but from a multitude of locations: in this case mobile phones of PRC citizens (De Landa 1991; Creemers 2017 & 2018).

Some researchers have covered the strategies of the central government of controlling and censoring content on social media (e.g. Lorentzen 2014). Additionally, other researchers have shown how social media protests in the PRC persist by circumventing government censorship (e.g. DeLisle, Goldstein, and Yang 2016; Mina 2014). However, few researchers focus on the presence and communication techniques of local official institutions on social media platforms. In this research I investigate the following research question: How do Hebei local governments use online statements on Weixin to legitimize their drastic measures during the outbreak in January 2021?

On Tuesday 5 January 2021, the PRC province Hebei reported 39 new cases of COVID-19. As this meant a first outbreak since the initial outbreak started in Wuhan, officials in Beijing implemented draconic measures putting Hebei in so-called "wartime mode". Travelling out of the capital city Shijiazhuang was prohibited and all gatherings were cancelled. Schools were closed and citizens were urged to stay at home for at least seven days (Liu and Suliman 2021). For examining the online statements of Hebei local governments in these circumstances, I use a mixed-methods approach, consisting of a quantitative and a qualitative research. In the quantitative research, I analyze a large amount of online statements by using an algorithm. In this process, I apply a topic classification method, which means that I classify the sentences of the online statements in categories. I define the categories myself and decide which sign element belongs to which category. In this context,

a sign element is a word or phrase that puts its sentence in a specific category. I input the content of the articles in a program which automatically splits the articles in sentences and tags each sentence with one or more categories. In the qualitative research, I select a small number of texts on the basis of the quantitative research. Subsequently, I perform a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as set out by Jäger (2012). In his view, the goal of performing CDA is to identify the often invisible relations between discursive practices and power struggles. KhrosaviNik and Zia (2014) have adjusted the CDA approach to the new social media environment. For example, CDA on social media should not only analyze plain text, but should also account for the use of images and videos on online platforms. For this reason, I include images in the qualitative analysis and apply the methodology of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). I pursue three steps in the analysis, looking at representational structure, interactive meanings and compositional system.

This article is structured as follows: firstly, I briefly discuss the theoretical background of the CDA approach as set out by Jäger and Maier (2016) by defining and connecting the concepts of discourse, power, and hegemony. Subsequently, I define social media and discuss the app Weixin. Next, I provide the results of the quantitative and qualitative research and discuss my findings, arguing that the Hebei local governments legitimize their drastic measures during the outbreak on Weixin through a focus on law and order with a nationalist undertone. Through a strategy that can be seen as “occupying microblogs”, the PRC government shapes and alters discourse online for its own purposes, resulting in more traditional one-to-many information flows.

DISCOURSE

Link (1983, 60) defines discourse as an “institutionalized way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power”. Jäger and Maier (2016, 111) complement Link’s definition, introducing an image of “flows of knowledge throughout time and space”. According to them, knowledge consists of “all elements of thinking and feeling in human minds” (110). It is not the individual that determines what a discourse looks like. Instead, the production of discourse is supra-individual (Jäger 2001). Subjects can co-create discourse together with other subjects. Consequently, discourses continue to evolve on their own. Foucault put this into words fittingly: “people know

what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does' (personal communication; quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 187). Therefore, the initial motivation for a subject to change discourse might not have the expected result. But still people are able to alter discourse. This ability is a mechanism of power, because discourse institutionalizes and regulates the ways people think and act (Jäger and Maier 2016). Discourses especially can have far-reaching consequences on power relations when a certain group in society is able to hegemonize a discourse of which the power works in their advantage. The CCP has been able to do so in recent Chinese history, for example on social media (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The goal of CDA is to unravel these relationship between discourses and power.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media operate at the intersection of mass media and interpersonal communication (KhosraviNik 2017). Schneider (2018, 165–195) identifies three politically relevant elements of the social media paradigm as opposed to the traditional media paradigm. Firstly, the distinction between producer and consumer of media fades. Or, as KhosraviNik (2017) clarifies, the unidirectional mass media flows are replaced by many-to-many social media flows. Secondly, social media enable the creation of network architectures such as news feeds and personal walls. Thirdly, users of social media bring their personal information onto social media platforms in exchange for their services.

Weixin is one of the most popular social media apps in the PRC: almost 8 out of 10 smartphones have Weixin installed (Statista 2022). The app has multiple functionalities and is mostly used for private communication or small group conversations. However, over the years the app has gained many more functionalities, making Weixin an integral part of the day-to-day lives of the people in the PRC (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018, 18–31). The function that is of interest for this research is called 'official accounts' or 'public accounts'. It enables companies, governments, or individuals to interact with their respective audience directly (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018, 32–49). PRC citizens mostly turn to Weixin for government information and services, even more than to government websites (China Internet Network Information Center 2016). Schlæger and Jiang (2015) examined the goals of local government presence online. In their research they focused on the microblog

website Weibo. They found that governments use microblogs to cater to the pressure from microblog account users, or for crisis management and government decision-making.

THEME DISTRIBUTION

In this section, I present the results. Firstly, I show the frequency of categories in all articles. The categories and some examples of phrases belonging to these categories are visible in table 1. In this research, I refer to the categories by their number. Secondly, I analyze four selected articles based on the framework of legitimation.

Number	Name	Phrase examples
1	Tough situation	复杂 ('complex'), 关键时期 ('critical period')
2	Resolute	果断 ('resolute'), 全面 ('totally')
3	Goal of measures	维护安全 ('to safeguard peace'), 人民群众身体健康 ('good health of the masses')
4	China is doing good	取得重大战略成果 ('acquired huge strategic results'), 来之不易 ('hard-earned')
5	Measures by government	全员核酸检测 ('mass-testing'), 引导大家 ('guide everyone')
6	Measures by public	戴口罩 ('wear a face mask'), 自我防护 ('protect oneself')
7	Consequences of bad behaviour	依法依规追究责任 ('to be held accountable according to laws and regulations'), 问责 ('accountability')
8	Lunar New Year	春运 ('transport during the Spring Festival period'), 节日 ('holiday')
9	Information	新增 ('newly added') 累计 ('add up')
10	War language	打赢 ('win'), 进入战时状态 ('enter war-time mode')

Table 1: Categories for quantitative analysis

From the results of the sentences of all posts combined (as presented in figure 1) it is evident that categories targeting government policy are by far the most common. Category 2 'resolute' and category 5 'government measures' are both present in one third of the total amount of sentences. Categories focusing on the public are less common. Category 6 'public measures' and category 7

‘consequences of bad behaviour’ are present in six and two percent of the total number of sentences respectively.

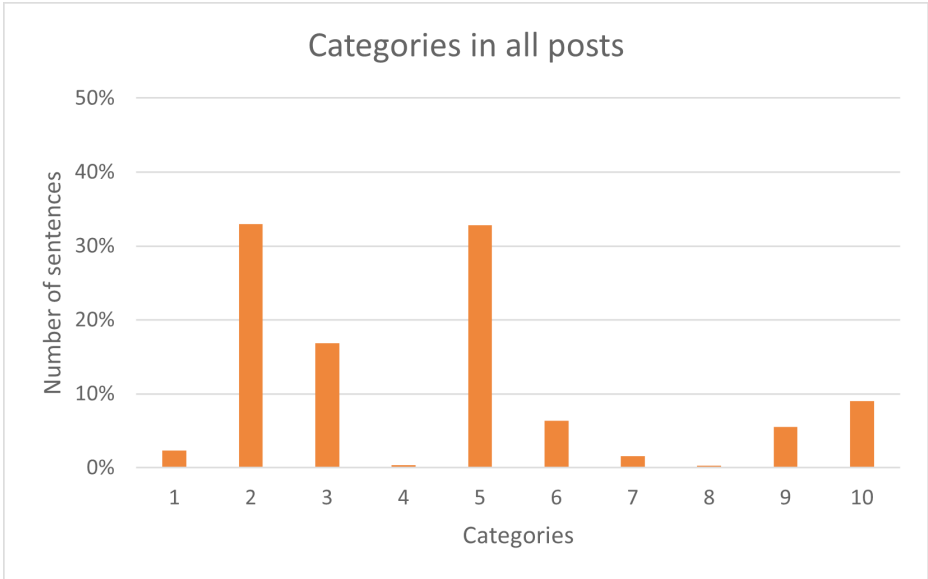


Figure 1: Categories in all posts (graph: author).

Through my analysis, I found a clear distinction between articles targeted at the government, and articles targeted at the general public. The content of the former involves government measures (category 5), their aims (category 3), and it often contains resolute language (category 2). The content of the latter is related to public measures (category 6) and these articles often contain many images. Based on these findings, I selected two discourse fragments per targeting category for my qualitative analysis. In the following sections, I refer to the public targeted articles as p1 and p2, and to the government targeted articles as g1 and g2. Furthermore, I numbered the sentences and images in the articles myself, and I refer to the content within the articles by their sentence or image number. To receive the full thesis including the selected discourse fragments and other appendices, it is possible to send a request to the editorial board of *Shilin*.

LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES

I structure the qualitative analysis around the framework of legitimation as set out by Van Leeuwen (2007) and Vaara, Tienara and Laurila (2010). Berger and Luckmann (1966, 111) define legitimation as follows:

Legitimation provides the 'explanation' and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. [It] 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings and (...) justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives.

The framework distinguishes four key legitimation categories: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and narrativization. In each subsection, I provide the definitions of the category, showing how often and in what ways the legitimation strategy appears in the research materials.

AUTHORIZATION

Authorization is legitimation by reference to authority. This authority can be a person, but it can be impersonal as well. In the textual elements of the articles, there is only one direct reference to the authority of persons, namely “the superiors” (上级, g2 sentence 41). On the other hand, one could argue that imperative sentences indirectly refer to the authority of the author, because they feel they have the power to impose certain behavior on the reader. This type of personal authorization occurs often in the research material: 43 times in total. Moreover, in the visual elements of the government-type articles, personal authorization is evident. The two images of the articles are very similar. Both images are taken from a low angle, so that the viewer of the image looks up at the officials, which creates an impression of power. Furthermore, the image is a long shot. Long shots oftentimes convey a certain respect for the authorities (Van Leeuwen 2007, 126).

Seven sentences refer to law or regulations as an impersonal authority. These sentences are all found in the government-targeted articles. G1 sentence 59, for instance, emphasizes the citizens' legal responsibility to cooperate in epidemiological survey work: “Actively cooperating with the epidemiological survey work is the obligation of every citizen and a legal respon-

sibility that should be fulfilled.” (积极配合流调工作是每一位公民应尽的义务，也是应当履行的法律责任。).

SOCIAL MEDIA

This category of legitimation refers to the purpose or function of actions. In other words, the statement must provide a reason for the action. In combination with moralization, this is the most used legitimation strategy in the texts. Two types of rationalization can be found in the texts. The first group is about the epidemic spread. In g1 sentence 139, for instance, the goal is to “resolutely and effectively prevent the second wave of the virus” (坚决有效防止病毒二次传播). Moreover, in g2 sentence 42, the goal of the measures is even to “stop the spread of the virus” (阻断疫情传播扩散). The second group is about the lives of PRC citizens. In g2 sentence 67, for instance, the goal is to “fulfill to the greatest extent the needs of the masses” (最大程度满足人民群众需求).

MORALIZATION

This category of legitimation refers to specific values. In the research materials, I found two modes of moralization strategies, one through morally correct imagery, and the other through analogies of war and science. The morally right images are present in both public-targeted articles. In p1, the images show how people should put on a face mask, wash their hands, behave in the metro etc. All these images are low in modality – degree of reality or truth, as they are sketched in comic style. This style generalizes the agents in the image, so that all viewers can identify with them. This is especially the case in image 2, as young and old, men and women are all represented in the image. In p2 image 1, see figure 2, all kinds of people serving the country are visualized. They are sitting on a cloud as if they are in heaven, a symbol for their heroism. Moreover, the raised fist and the heart-shaped Chinese flag refer to the hard but loving work they do for the country.

The other mode of moralization strategies is through analogies of war and science. In the PRC official context, fighting for the country stirs up moralizing nationalist feelings. A typical example in which war language and nationalist feelings are combined is p2 sentence 15–19: “We are experiencing a prepared battle, a battle we will surely win, let us cheer for Hebei together,



Figure 2: p2 image 1 (Zhao Ruoyun 赵若云 2021)

cheer for Shijiazhuang!” (我们正在经历着一场有准备的战斗，一场定能胜利的战斗，让我们一起为河北加油！为石家庄加油!). The discourse of science, contrastively, is valued as precise, correct and true. For instance, in p1 sentence 5, the author writes: “the masses should wear a face mask scientifically” (公众应科学佩戴口罩). In other words, the masses should wear their mask correctly, and should follow the scientific rules.

NARRATIVIZATION

The fourth and final legitimation category involves storytelling. Moral tales are stories that show what happens when one engages in legitimate practices. These moral tales are not present in the research materials, but g1 sentence 36 urges government agencies to “thoroughly tell the touching story of Shijiazhuang” (深入讲好感人的石家庄故事). Cautionary tales are stories that show what happens when one engages in illegitimate practices. In g2 sentences 31–36, for instance, a high government official violates regulations, epidemic prevention and control. Although he made his apologies and although he was forgiven, he was still detained for five days and received a serious warning from within the party.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of law, efficiency, correctness and order frequently occur throughout the legitimation strategies. Law is referred to as an authority, efficiency as a goal, correctness as a positive value, and order as a story. In the eyes of the CCP, these four concepts are the pillars of a utopian society: the political leaders make the rules, officials implement these rules efficiently, and the public follows these rules correctly. Although this pattern is not uncommon in hegemonic discourses, its ubiquity is remarkable. I think this is because of two reasons. Firstly, the COVID-19 crisis demanded governments around the world to impose strict measures on the public. These measures will only have the desired effect if the public follows them correctly. Secondly, the time and place of the outbreak increased the need for quickly stopping the spread. The outbreak took place only a few weeks before Lunar New Year in a city close to the capital. The common good and nationalism are also frequent in the legitimation strategies. The common good is referred to as a goal, and

nationalism takes on the role of a positive value in the form of images and war-language.

DISCUSSION

This thesis has explored how Hebei local governments use online statements on Weixin to legitimize their drastic measures during the outbreak in January 2021. I found that governments use Weixin to target officials as well as the general public. Government-targeted articles are predominantly about government measures and their goals, whereas public-targeted articles are predominantly about public measures and the consequences of disobedience. Furthermore, I found that the legitimation strategies in the posts often involve concepts of law, efficiency, correctness, and order. These concepts symbolize the ideal society of the CCP.

By mixing two different methodologies, I have been able to adapt CDA research to the social media environment. Because of the huge amount of data, the quantitative method was especially useful for selecting the most relevant posts for the qualitative analysis. In the qualitative analysis, I included both textual and visual discourse analysis methodologies. Including the latter in my research has been useful, because of the high degree of multimodality.

In the articles, government agencies frequently use typical CCP concepts, for example law, efficiency, correctness and order. Disseminating these ideas is one thing, but making these resonate among the general public is another. Therefore, further research could be conducted to scrutinize individual citizens' behaviour on the platform. To accomplish this, it would be necessary to look at Weixin groups, because that is the most commonly used function of the platform among individual users.

Furthermore, the initial results of three city governments in Hebei and the Hebei provincial government were very similar. This finding, combined with the result that CCP concepts are ubiquitous in the posts of the Shijiazhuang government, raises the suspicion that social media posts of local government agencies are coordinated by the central authorities. In order to investigate this issue, power relations between local and central authorities would need to be explored when it comes to social media: to what extent can local agencies choose their content for their social media pages?

Notably, this study has implications for academic research on the flow of information on social media platforms. Through its strategy of “occupying microblogs”, in combination with policies targeting individual users and institutional reforms, the Party-state shapes and alters discourse online for its own purposes. It strengthens its online presence and produces the majority of social media content, affecting one of the core characteristics of the social media paradigm: many-to-many information flows (KhrosaviNik 2017). The information flows shift to more traditional one-to-many ones. This development follows a CCP tradition of mass persuasion in the traditional media paradigm. Nowadays, the PRC government applies mass persuasion strategies to the online environment and uses social media as a tool for government stability. The current study provides one piece of the puzzle when it comes to understanding how the Party-state applies mass persuasion strategies to the online environment.

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