

# Political Communication Chinese Style: The Elite Network in State-Regulated *Sina Weibo*

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## Background

### Previous Studies on Chinese Political Online Communication

- Chinese netizens as the "new opinion class" (Zhou, 2009; Shao, 2009), "politically opinionated, supportive of democratic rules and critical about party-state" (Lei, 2011)
- Capacity of social media to express collective discontent in Chinese cyberspace (Carnesecca, 2015)
- Chinese cyberspace as a "cat and mouse game" (Jiang, 2014), a constant interplay of state regulation and bottom-up activism

## Conceptual Framework

### Microblog platform as a social field in Bourdieusian sense (Figure 1)

- A multidimensional space constructed by distribution of properties between or among the agents (Bourdieu, 1985)
- Sina Weibo as a new social field interconnected with existing social, political and economic fields within the Chinese regime
- Chinese State regulates Chinese cyberspace (Internet sovereignty, Jiang, 2010)

### Digital Capital and Elite-Grassroots Division in the Social Field (Figure 2)

- Booming social networking creates room for bottom-up activism (grassroots)
- Elite agents, however, possess digital power, which distinguishes them clearly from the bottom-up grassroots users
- Microblog elites vs Opinion Leaders (Issue-specific) vs Big Vs (non-academic, negative connotation)

### Digital Elites and Political Discourse

- Political discourse as organized speech that reflects certain implicit or explicit assumptions about the power relations pertaining to the field
- Elites coming from different fields tend to strategically utilize digital capital to present world views in their own favor.
- Culture politics, power politics (Kelly & Etling, 2008), and apolitical agendas.

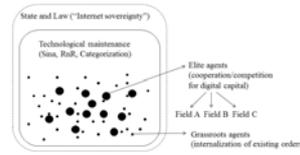


Figure 1: Sina Weibo as a social field. This graph shows the environment in which elite and grassroots agents are embedded, i.e., the regulatory context as well as the entry and network conditions.

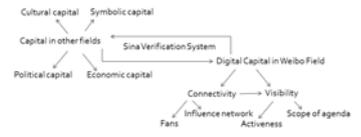


Figure 2: Reproduction of capital through Sina verification. This graph illustrates the genesis of digital capital and how it can be transferred back to the original field. The central mechanism is the Sina verification system.

## Research Questions

- How can the digital capital of microblog elites be understood?
- Which agents belong to the Weibo elite and how do they differ from each other?
- What kind of political discourses do they engage in?

## Methodology and Methods

### Explorative Social Network Analysis (Borgatti et al., 2013) of the elite on China's largest microblog platform

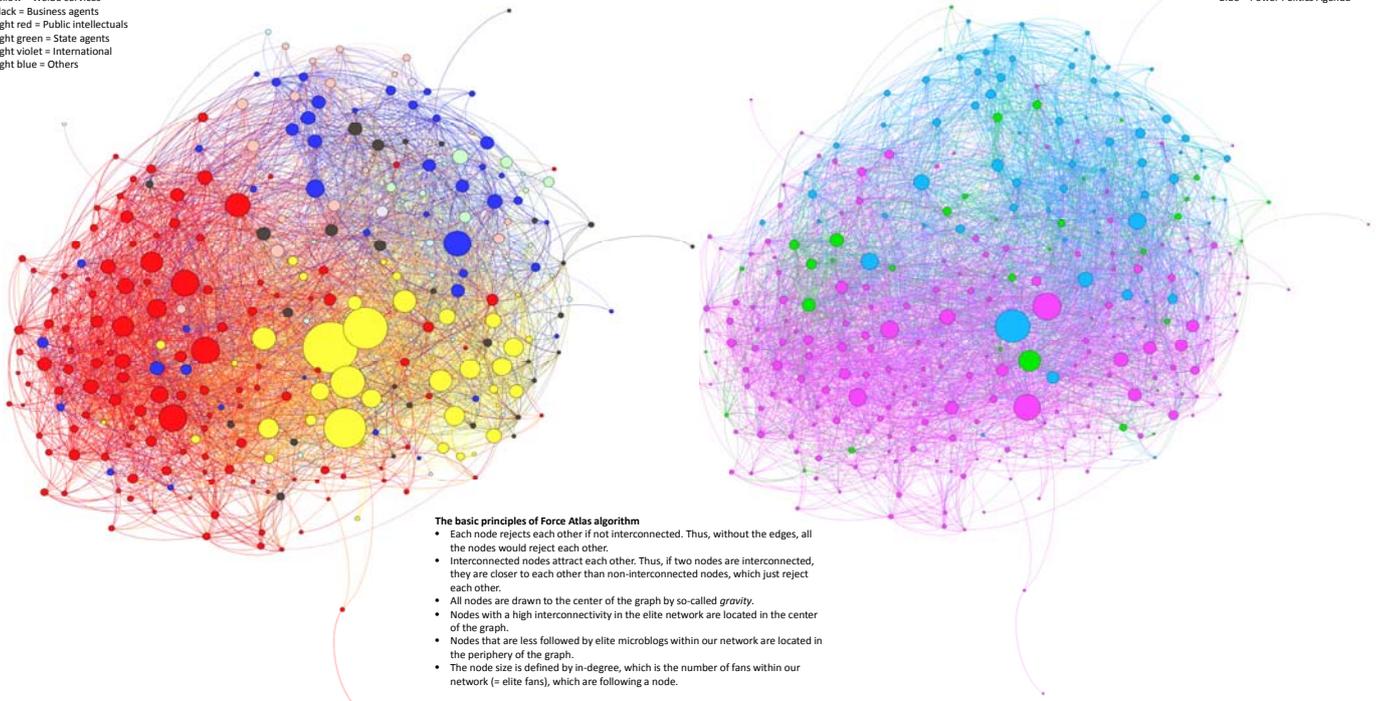
- Creation of social network visualization based on starting points from various agent categories
- Elite criterion: more than 1 million fans on Weibo
- Content analysis of timelines of microblog elites with a political agenda (Figure 5)
- Collecting of profile data (number of fans, Weibo posts, followings, etc.)

### Coloration by categories

- Red = Entertainment
- Blue = Media
- Yellow = Weibo services
- Black = Business agents
- Light red = Public intellectuals
- Light green = State agents
- Light violet = International
- Light blue = Others

### Coloration by agenda

- Pink = Apolitical Agenda
- Green = Culture Politics Agenda
- Blue = Power Politics Agenda



### The basic principles of Force Atlas algorithm

- Each node rejects each other if not interconnected. Thus, without the edges, all the nodes would reject each other.
- Interconnected nodes attract each other. Thus, if two nodes are interconnected, they are closer to each other than non-interconnected nodes, which just reject each other.
- All nodes are drawn to the center of the graph by so-called gravity.
- Nodes with a high interconnectivity in the elite network are located in the center of the graph.
- Nodes that are less followed by elite microblogs within our network are located in the periphery of the graph.
- The node size is defined by in-degree, which is the number of fans within our network (= elite fans), which are following a node.

Figure 3: Findings – The Weibo Elite Network. 291 elite agents are collected to fulfill the elite criterion of having more than one million fans on the Weibo platform. Graph is created with Force Atlas algorithm by Gephi.

## Findings

Considering the categories, the elite network consists of three main areas: the red entertainment/arts, the blue media and the yellow Weibo services. Nevertheless, single nodes from each of the categories are scattered over the other two areas. Generally, we find agents from the **entertainment/arts field as the dominating elite group** (125 of 291 nodes). However, the state actors (13 nodes) and media (45 nodes) are revealed to be the most active and assertive in online discussions, both having averagely published 20,000 posts each. In comparison, the average number of posts per elite agent is roughly 11,200. Combining the two network graphs, the majority of the entertainment/arts agents are not found to publish contents with any political opinion. The **agents publishing political contents on Weibo are mostly state actors and public intellectuals**. The media agents form two groups: one is spreading political contents (upper part of the network), and the other stays apolitical in their posts (among the red area). Generally, the distribution of the agents' agendas is creating two poles: one power political pole and one apolitical pole. However, the border between them is not sharp, nodes with power politics agendas reach far into the apolitical area and vice versa. Agents with a culture politics agenda are scattered over the whole network without a distinctive pattern (Figure 3).

We explored a **new category – Weibo services** (39 nodes) – that possesses a high interconnectivity (= in-degree) and some of them a central position in the elite network.

For all microblog elites, an **asymmetric input-output relation** is detected: on average, the analyzed elite channels follow 602 users, whereas they have nearly 10.8 million fans. The most followed agent is a Weibo service channel, @Official Weibo of Fans' Headlines (Chinese: fensi toutiao guanfang weibo) which has nearly 191.6 million fans (= more than one tenth of China's population). Except of seven, all microblog elites passed the verification process.

## Interpretation and Discussion

We have examined an emergent Weibo elite network that is created of a complex spectrum of channels that influences millions of grassroots users. We reveal that the **Chinese state plays a multifaceted role in the field of Weibo**. On the one hand, it is the *judge*, shaping the entry permission and regulatory rules. On the other hand, it is part of the *players* in the field, building nodes in the network and interacting with other agents.

The Weibo services as a group of agents has not yet been addressed in current literature, but their noticeable existence as well as their striking influence is intriguing as they take up a core spot in terms of bridging agents from different fields. Following our observations, the **agenda of the Weibo services is highly influenced by the Chinese state**.

We argue that on Weibo, a **profound distinction between elite and grassroots agents is institutionalized** by the real-name registration as well as the Sina Weibo verification system (Figure 1). The high number of verified elite agents supports this hypothesis. Elite agents make use of their capitals from the offline world in the online space. On Weibo, they seek to maximize their digital capital, which can be transferred back to the offline world (Figure 2). Therefore, **microblog elites are highly interconnected**; regardless of their initial field they form communities with each other. Due to the hierarchical network structure depending on digital capital, **grassroots users have a low capability to impact online discussions**. They rely on the microblog elites to set the agenda.

The three political discourses of the microblog elites indicate that **regime supporters and the state-critics are diverging and constantly in competition with each other** (Figure 6). Being an escapist in the digital field, however, means making use of existing rules while not challenging them. This becomes visible in the large, isolated, and broadly apolitical entertainment/arts field in our network.



Figure 5: Political agenda topics. This graph shows a word cloud based on a frequency analysis of the keywords (= the bigger, the more frequent). It displays the topics that channels with power or culture politics agendas have communicated about.

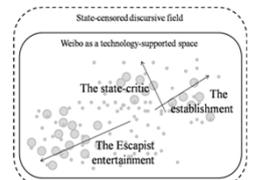


Figure 6: Three political discourses of elites on Sina Weibo. From the content analysis as well as from the elite network graph, we interpret three mutually exclusive driving forces on political discussions on Weibo: (1) escapist entertainment, (2) establishment, and (3) state-critical.