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The Pandemic across Platform Societies: Weibo and Twitter at the Outbreak of the Covid-19 Epidemic in China and the West

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies occupy a central position in the Covid-19 pandemic. Public response has been deemed extremely important, with social media platforms playing a key role in both institutional and bottom-up information sharing processes. The emerging field of platform studies has shown that platforms increasingly influence how society works; however, such studies often adopt a highly Western-centric approach. By focusing on Twitter and Weibo use in the early stages of the pandemic, the paper presents an exploratory study that comparatively explores the role of the two platforms for both Western and Chinese publics. Our findings indicate that during the Covid-19 outbreak, Weibo worked as a propaganda tool to unite the Chinese people and promote public policies under the control of the government and the guidance of the mainstream media. Twitter functioned more like a public discourse platform open to personal expression, often showing the influence of defined partisan political discourses. We argue that the participatory dynamics characterizing Weibo and Twitter conversations at the outbreak of the pandemic at least partially mirrored the different 'platforms societies' currently developing in China and the West.

KEYWORDS

Platform studies; Covid-19; Twitter; Weibo

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic that emerged at the end of 2019 was defined as a severe global threat by the World Health Organization (WHO), one which the whole world is currently fighting. This is not just a war in the field of medicine and public health, but also in the field of information and communication (Cinelli et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). As WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus observed, "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic", referring to an excessive volume of information about the problem that makes finding a solution more difficult (Zarocostas, 2020).

During a pandemic, people use social media platforms to acquire information (Burnap et al., 2014), but also to engage in participatory dynamics, expressing opinions and commenting, for instance, on local or international pandemic response strategies (Li et al., 2020). However, social media platforms, as embedded in different sociocultural contexts, may shape these dynamics in different ways. To explore these differences – and contribute to research interested in the 'regionality of platforms' (Steinberg & Li, 2017) – this paper presents an exploratory study of Covid-19-related content on Weibo and Twitter.

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The following two sections review research developed from platform studies approaches, with a specific focus on studies stressing the need de-westernize the field. We then focus in on work looking at social media as participatory spaces and review research specifically focused on digital platforms at times of crisis before introducing this research's data and methods. Finally, the paper discusses how, at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Weibo and Twitter reflected different platform societies.

Platform society

Digital platforms are not neutral: their governance, values, norms, and vernaculars influence how and what content is shared on them (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The emerging field of platform studies – a body of research focused on the norms and values embedded in digital media platforms (Gillespie, 2010; Van Dijck et al., 2018) – has shown that platform devices (e.g. hashtags and @ mentions) and mechanisms (e.g. engagement metrics and metadata) increasingly affect how stories are told, information is circulated, and connections are made. These devices and mechanisms characterize the current 'platformization' of the web – the increasing influence of social media platforms on web data flows and online user practices (Helmond, 2015), with online content acquiring value for both platforms and public and private services (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Platform studies, however, as a field of inquiry, tends to offer a Western-centric theorization of platform roles and values. Van Dijck et al. (2018) 'platform society', for instance, is intrinsically a Western one, dominated by the 'Big Five platform corporations' (Alphabet Google Inc., Amazon Inc., Apple Inc., Facebook Inc., and Microsoft Inc.). Several scholars have discussed platforms' various societal functions – such as promoting democratization processes, providing the public with a wider space for engagement, and coordinating conflicts between different areas of society – from a Western perspective (see Beer & Burrows, 2007; Helmond, 2015; Sobré-Denton, 2016). Such views are often taken to be universally applicable, without considering the impact of different sociocultural contexts on the roles and values of social media platforms. The 'digital universalism' underlying these views is being increasingly called into question by a new wave of research directly interested in the 'regionality of platforms' (Steinberg & Li, 2017): how platforms – with their uses, cultures and values – are shaped by different regional settings. Willems, for instance, has recently introduced the concept of 'relational affordances' to shed light on the need to overcome the limitations of current academic debates that 'focus on the intrinsic features of technology […], thereby neglecting the way in which broader environments and contexts shape the use of technology' (2020, p. 4).

The Chinese digital ecosystem has so far offered the most fertile ground for the growth of non-western centric platform studies. In their analysis of the infrastructural turn of the Chinese platform WeChat, Plantin and de Seta offer an observation that is particularly representative of the growing 'de-westernization' of platform studies and of the increasing interest in the Chinese 'platform model': 'Chinese internet companies that own the country's largest digital platforms have tight (albeit sometimes conflictual) relationships with national policy-making and regulatory authorities. These relationships […] result in a platform model that is simultaneously shaped by the characteristics of Chinese national media regulations and allowed to flourish as a vector of infrastructure building' (2019, p. 267). In line with this work, Wang and Lobato have called for a 'spatialized platform theory' – one that pays attention to platforms' historical and contextual trajectories and assesses how these trajectories influence platform designs within frames of reference that may not align with the liberal democratic model of free speech and free markets (2019, 367). Wang and

Lobato (2019) accent on democratic ontologies sheds light on how the contemporary call for relational and contextual approaches to digital platforms is also central to our understanding of participatory dynamics across contemporary 'platform societies'.

Platforms and participatory cultures

Since its inception, the digital media environment has been considered to have the potential to enhance democratic exchanges of ideas and opinions (Papacharissi, 2002). Adapting or reformulating Habermas' ideal type of media and the public sphere, several studies have investigated the emergence of critical public opinion within the networked publics developing on social media platforms. The focus of these studies is often on discursive dynamics developing on Twitter around the use of issue or activist hashtags (Papacharissi, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015). In more specific terms, research has shown that Twitter's socio-technical infrastructure – especially its affordances enabling bottom-up curation practices – has allowed the coming to prominence of actors who have been traditionally defined as 'non-elite', namely ordinary users (Hermida, 2015; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Reilly & Vicari, 2021; Vicari, 2017; Vicari et al., 2020). These dynamics have then brought changes to traditional gatekeeping practices, with citizens often becoming primary sources of information, or gatekeepers, for both traditional non-elites (i.e. other citizens) and elite users (i.e. legacy media). These changes have not entirely suppressed traditional power structures; they have turned traditional media systems into 'hybrid' (Chadwick, 2017) ecosystems.

The 'public sphere' constructed by Chinese digital media has however been shown to hold completely different characteristics from those found in Western society (Shao & Wang, 2017). In their early Internet research, Kalathil and Boas (2001) highlighted the impact of authoritarian regimes on Internet use, drawing attention to how, in those contexts, digital media have often been used to both extend authoritarian reach and push forward national development. According to the authors, in China – a one-party regime – the absence of ideational pluralism has characterized both offline and online contexts. In the environment of 'party-managed media', the Chinese government has been proactive in exploiting the reach of digital platforms to guide public consensus and strengthen the Chinese state (Barmé, 2009; Huang & Yu, 1997; Kalathil & Boas, 2001). One of the most common strategies has been to establish government propaganda centers to distribute online propaganda and engage in 'thought work' (Kalathil & Boas, 2001; Weber & Jia, 2007).

Contemporary social media in China does not play the same role in relation to participatory practices as Western platforms do (Bomsel, 2014) – even in a context where the political function of Chinese media is in dynamic development, and gradually playing an increasingly important role (Yang, 2003; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). These differences stem from local dynamics that influence user practices related to, for instance, how opinions are expressed, what content is being produced, distributed and used, and which users become influential in gatekeeping dynamics – in selecting what becomes visible on social media platforms (Yang, 2016). Han (2018), for instance, has traced three phases in the evolution of Weibo as a Chinese microblogging medium – from one prioritizing civic-minded public engagement, a second celebrating individual fame and a third foregrounding the monetization of user-generated content. Ultimately, this work shows that the Chinese platform ecosystem has developed through the tightening of China's state control over digital media and at the intersection of corporate and public interests.

In line with research highlighting the need to regionalize platform studies approaches and challenge digital universalism, in this paper we explore digital participatory cultures across platform societies. We do so by focusing on discursive practices emerging on Weibo and Twitter at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participatory dynamics are particularly salient at times of crisis, with digital platforms having both positive and negative societal effects. On the one hand, social media discursive practices have been shown to improve the relationship between the government and the public (Palen, 2008), help effective information transmission (Austin et al., 2012; Roshan et al., 2016), reduce the spread of false information (Jennex, 2010), contain uncertainty (Lachlan et al., 2014), mobilize the public's enthusiasm (Lachlan et al., 2016), and increase public cohesion (Alexander, 2014). On the other hand, findings also show that social media can facilitate the dissemination of rumors (Liu et al., 2014), generate public panic (Depoux et al., 2020; Ng & Lean, 2012), and increase the public's burden of screening effective information (Heverin & Zach, 2010).

In the specific context of health crises, social media interactions have been studied as a means to predict epidemic outbreaks (Kostkova et al., 2014; St Louis & Zorlu, 2012), monitor public behavior (Broniatowski et al., 2013), provide telemedicine assistance (Lee et al., 2014), and build mutual help communities (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010). During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital platforms have become a site to communicate concerns regarding health, illnesses, and treatments (Ahmad & Murad, 2020), but also a means to share personal opinions and political views on the handling of pandemic response strategies by national and international authorities (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021; MacDonald, 2020; Vicari et al., 2020). Most of the existing platform studies interested in the public response to the pandemic have analyzed Western social media. To address this limitation and, more broadly, to contribute to the 'de-westernization' of platform studies, this paper presents a comparative exploration of participatory dynamics developing on Weibo and Twitter when the Covid-19 pandemic started, respectively, in China and the West. We explore these dynamics by specifically addressing three research questions:

RQ1: What sentiment characterised Weibo and Twitter content at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, respectively, in China and in the West?

RQ2: What topics circulated on Weibo and Twitter at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, respectively, in China and in the West?

RQ3: How did gatekeeping dynamics unfold on Weibo and Twitter at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, respectively, in China and in the West?

Data and methods

This exploratory study focuses on the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – in China in early February 2020 and in the West one month later – to investigate the roles of Weibo and Twitter in enhancing the emergence of participatory dynamics. As the most prominent microblogging services respectively in China and the West, these two social media platforms are considered to have similar characteristics (Bolsover & Howard, 2019), with some scholars defining Weibo as the 'Chinese Twitter' (Jiang et al., 2015). Existing research shows that their public nature and microblogging infrastructure make these platforms particularly suited for enhancing participatory practices within discourse communities emerging around issue hashtags (on Twitter, see Highfield & Bruns, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015. On Weibo, see Han, 2018; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015; Yang, 2016). Hence, the two platforms are suitable objects of investigation to

provide comparative insights into participatory dynamics in both Western and Chinese contexts (Bolsover & Howard, 2019).

We collected Covid-19-related Weibo posts and tweets published respectively on 4th and 5th February, and on 1st and 2nd March 2020. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the short time frame was assessed as being long enough to provide a picture of user practices in the early phase of the pandemic in both contexts. We used Python to collect Weibo posts via six keyword queries based on what Weibo identified as the top trending coronavirus hashtags: "#新冠" (Covid-19, xinguan), "#新冠肺炎" (Covid-19 pneumonia, xinguanfeiyan), "#新冠疫情" (Covid-19 epidemic, xinguanyiqing), "#新冠病毒" (Covid-19 virus, xinguanbingdu), "#新型冠状肺炎" (Novel coronavirus pneumonia, xinxingguanzhuangfeiyan), "#新型冠状病毒" (Novel coronavirus, xinxingguanzhuangbingdu). 301,000 individual posts were randomly collected from Weibo. The text in these posts was segmented using the Python-based open-source toolkit 'Jieba'.[1]

We then used the Twitter Capture and Analysis Tool (TCAT) to run a live tweet collection via keyword queries based on the top trending Covid-19 Twitter hashtags in early March 2020: #COVID, #COVID19, #Coronavirus, #SARSCoV2, #WuhanCoronavirus, #WuhanVirus, #CoronavirusOutbreak, #nCoV19, and #nCoV2019. These hashtags were identified using the Symplur Healthcare Hashtag Project (Symplur, 2020). We limited the collection to tweets in English to make the study more manageable. Out of the 2,830,052 tweets returned by TCAT, we randomly selected 301,000 tweets to match the volume of the data collected from Weibo.

To address the research questions, three analytical techniques were employed: sentiment analysis, semantic network analysis, and repost/retweet network mapping. Sentiment analysis computationally identifies and categorizes the opinions expressed in a piece of text to determine whether the writer's attitude is positive, negative, or neutral (Serrano-Guerrero et al., 2015). This technique was applied to uncover attitudes and emotions expressed by Chinese and Western publics about the Covid-19 epidemic on Twitter and Weibo (RQ1). Twitter and Weibo data were respectively analyzed with SentiStrength and NLPIR sentiment analysis software.

Semantic network analysis combines text analytics and network analysis to provide quantitative and qualitative insight into processes of meaning production. It measures and maps the co-occurrence of words in a text, so that researchers can provide insight into the semantic features of the text itself (Drieger, 2013). In this study, semantic network analysis helped to explore the topics discussed in relation to Covid-19 on the two platforms (RQ2).

Finally, we used repost/retweet network mapping to investigate gatekeeping dynamics (RQ3). This is a technique commonly used to identify prominent users in social media interactions (see Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Reilly & Vicari, 2021; Vicari, 2017). All the network visualizations presented in this paper were produced with Gephi 0.9.2, a network analysis and visualization software. For ethical purposes, in the next sections the handles of all Weibo and Twitter accounts not directly associated to organizations or public figures have been anonymised.

Findings

Platforms and sentiment

The visualization of sentiment analysis results (Figure 1) shows that the highest percentages of Covid-19 posts in the Weibo dataset are concentrated in the lower left (1, −4 and 1, −5) and upper right (4, −1 and 5, −1) corners of the chart. Authors of these posts used evaluative expressions, including extremely positive (15.9%) and extremely negative (28.83%) ones. The proportion of posts showing similar dynamics in the Twitter dataset, whether positive (10.03%) or negative (7.5%), is smaller.

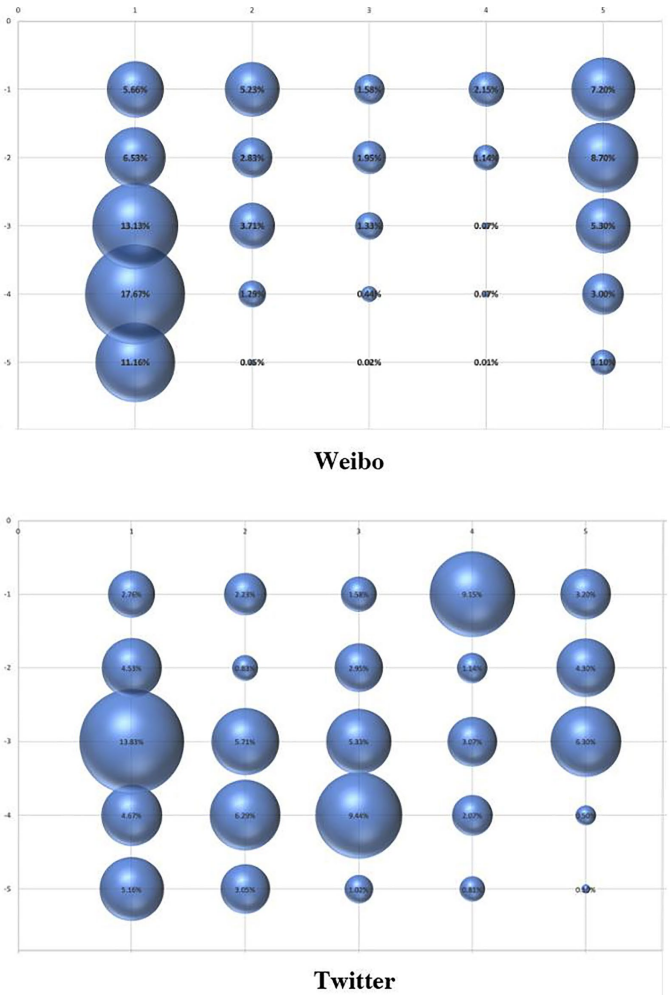

Figure 1. Sentiment analysis of Covid-19 posts on Weibo and Twitter.

Most of the Weibo posts showing positive sentiment revolved around support, understanding and praise for the Chinese government's epidemic response measures, as well as praise for some heroic characters, such as Zhong Nanshan, a Chinese pulmonologist who played an important role during the epidemic.

> *I am really touched that the first batch of medical supplies has already been shipped to Wuhan. I am so proud of my country and its quick countermeasures facing the Covid-19 epidemic. (04/02/2020)*

> *I personally firmly support the Chinese government's decision on the epidemic in Wuhan, and I will never go out and cause any trouble for the government and my motherland. (04/02/2020)*

> *Mentioning the word hero, I immediately think of Zhong Nanshan. His stalwart image in our hearts cannot be forgotten. (04/02/2020).*

Content expressing negative sentiment most often related to 'the epidemic' or 'the virus' itself, with only a few negative comments about the Chinese government and its actions, or the lockdown policy in Wuhan.

> *The coronavirus is really abominable, hateful and also fearsome. (05/02/2020).*

The outbreak of this terrible epidemic caused panic among the whole Chinese people. The sharp increase in the number of infections every day makes people more and more afraid, and dare not go out or socialize. (05/02/2020)

The different expressions of sentiment on Weibo and Twitter provides initial evidence that the two platforms might have played different roles during the Covid-19 outbreak in China and the West. The results of sentiment analysis will be combined with the results of semantic analysis and report/retweet mapping in the following subsections.

Platforms and semantics

The visualizations of Weibo and Twitter semantic networks (Figure 2) show clear differences between the content of Covid-19 Weibo posts and tweets. First, the Weibo semantic network is more centralized than the Twitter one, with the density of lines (i.e. relations of co-occurrence) between Weibo nodes (i.e. words) being denser than those between Twitter ones. Degree centrality measures were used to identify the top ten semantic nodes, namely

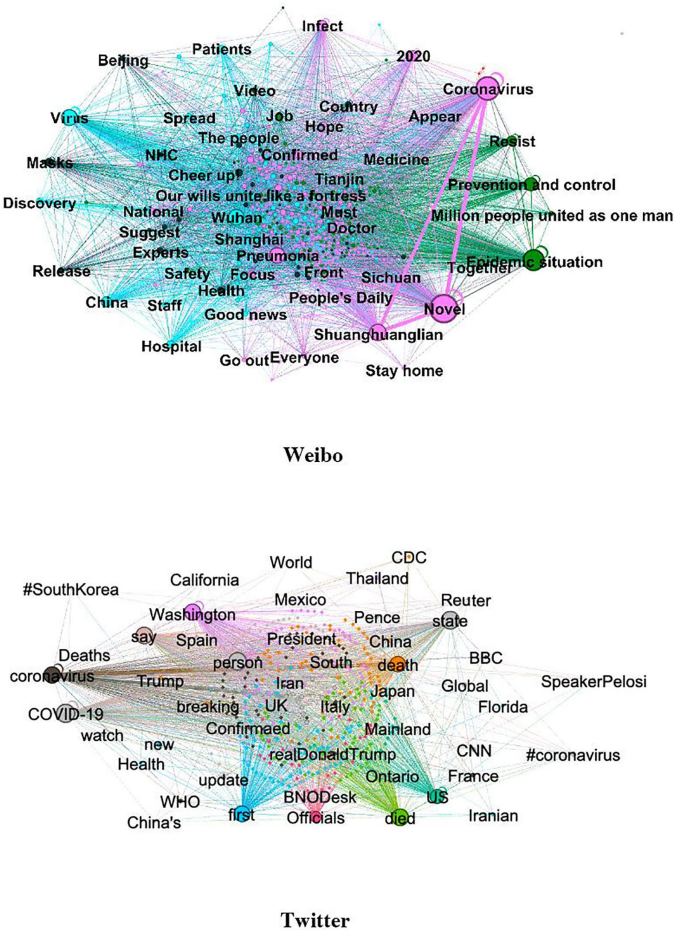

Figure 2. Semantic network of Covid-19 posts on Weibo and Twitter (Node size based on indegree centrality; Node color based on clusterization; ForceAtlas2 layout algorithm applied).

Table 1. Nodes with top degree centrality in the two semantic networks.

Weibo		Twitter	
Node	Degree Centrality	Node	Degree Centrality
Health	1,137	person	454
Shuanghuanlian	664	Washington	451
Coronavirus	622	state	445
Novel	603	COVID-19	444
2020	553	died	436
China	524	say	424
Epidemic situation	494	coronavirus	389
Masks	403	death	365
Pneumonia	396	first	362

the words that were most frequently mentioned (Leydesdorff, 2007; Opsahl et al., 2010) (Table 1). The top ten nodes in the Weibo semantic network have higher centrality than the corresponding nodes in the Twitter semantic network, which means that meaning production on Weibo was more centralized: Weibo users were likely to produce content on a smaller number of 'hot' topics.

At the semantic level, the discussion of Covid-19 on Weibo focused more on government-led behavioral measures: verbs or verb-object collocations occupy a great proportion of core nodes in the Weibo semantic network, such as 'suggest', 'prevention and control', 'must', 'go out', 'stay home', 'release', 'resist', and 'masks'. In other words, the Weibo semantic network suggests that the narrative most likely to circulate on Weibo was that relating to the efforts of the Chinese government's 'prevention and control' of the epidemic, 'experts' 'suggest' that the public should not 'go out', try to 'stay home' as much as possible, and wear 'masks' if they 'go out', to 'resist' viruses. The Weibo semantic network also shows a large number of military metaphors commonly used in the Chinese government's epidemic prevention directives, such as "million people united as one man" (万众一心) or "our wills unite like a fortress" (众志成城). Overall, the diffusion of government educational propaganda thus seems to have played a core role in the discussion of Covid-19 on Weibo.

The Twitter semantic network is looser than the Weibo one, which means that the discussion was more diversified. Proper nouns, especially the names of countries, institutions, organizations and public figures, occupy an important part of the main nodes in the Twitter network, such as 'China', 'mainland', 'US', 'Japan', 'WHO', 'BBC', and 'CNN'. Evidence seems to suggest that the Twitter discussion of Covid-19 functioned more like a transnational live stream of the events, with key Western figures (e.g. such as then-US President Donald Trump) clearly emerging in the discussion. Events and response measures in different countries and regions, as well as reports released by different international organizations and news agencies, were all within the scope of attention of Twitter users.

Platforms and gatekeeping

The differences between the sentiment and semantic aspects of Covid-19 discussions on Weibo and Twitter are also reflected in the gatekeeping practices on the two platforms (see Figure 3). Our analysis shows that the top reposted sources on Weibo were official news organizations controlled by the Chinese government, such as @Peoples Daily, @CCTV, and @Xinhua Viewpoint. The fact that gatekeeping dynamics were highly influenced by mainstream, state-controlled news organizations further explains why many propaganda slogans with military metaphors appear in the semantic network of the Covid-19 discussion on Weibo. Chinese mainstream news organizations, such as People's Daily, endorsed the response measures adopted by the Chinese government and further foregrounded them on Weibo.

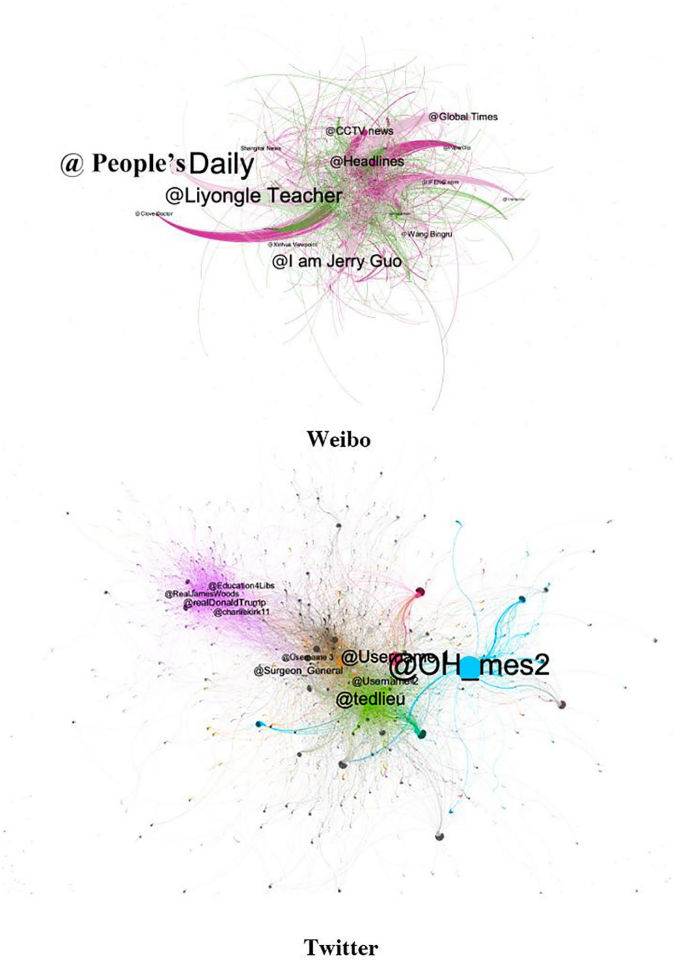

Figure 3. Weibo repost network and Twitter retweet network (Node size based on indegree centrality; Node color based on clusterization; ForceAtlas2 layout algorithm applied).

Eventually, through the megaphone function of these official news organizations, the platform became a powerful propaganda channel for the Chinese government in response to Covid-19. Looking closely at the most frequently reposted accounts in the Weibo network, it is also possible to notice a small number of individual users, who might be considered 'Internet celebrities', such as @Liyongle Teacher and @Wang Bingru. It is important to highlight that in the Weibo environment, these are not typical Internet celebrities, who are mostly young Chinese entertainment stars (DeLisle et al., 2016). However, @Liyongle Teacher and @Wang Bingru – each having more than two million followers – stood out in the discussion because they closely followed the Chinese government's propaganda strategy and actively endorsed its response measures. In sum, China's official news organizations – along with a small number of minor Internet celebrities – formed a propaganda alliance that became the main information source for the wider discussion about Covid-19 on Weibo.

Figure 3 and Table 2 show that the top retweeted sources on Twitter were more diverse than those on Weibo. Apart from a small number of prominent US public figures, such as Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), democratic congressman Ted Lieu (@Tedlieu) and actor James Woods (@realJamesWood), a variety of other users turned into key informers.

Table 2. Nodes with top indegree centrality in the Weibo repost network and Twitter retweet network.

Weibo		Twitter	
Node	Indegree	Node	Indegree
@People's Daily	19,565	@OH_mes2	8,005
@Liyongle Teacher	9,033	@tedlieu	4,787
@Global Time News	8,472	@Username1	4,589
@I am Jerry Guo	8,191	@Username2	2,774
@Headlines News	6,965	@Surgeon_General	2,693
@CCTV	5,477	@realDonaldTrump	2,531
@CCTV news	4,984	@charliekirk11	2,292
@Wang Bingru	4,082	@Education4Libs	2,274
@CCTV.Net	3,484	@RealJamesWoods	2,191
@Xinhua Viewpoint	2,445	@Username3	2,151

For instance, @OH_mes2 – a news aggregator account mainly sharing reports from South Korean news outlets – became the top retweeted account of our two-day observation period. A number of 'ordinary users' also became prominent sources of information in the discussion of Covid-19. These – unlike the Internet celebrities on Weibo – had very different attitudes and views about Covid-19 and the response measures of different countries. For instance, Twitter users @Username5 and @Username6 held contrasting views on Trump's policy measures against Covid-19. These were further retweeted and commented on by other users who might support or oppose them. The lack of official sources of information further expands the possibility of diversification of public discussion on Covid-19 and on different countries' response measures. Therefore, compared to Weibo, which seemingly had a 'propaganda' role, Twitter acted more like a 'messy public square' where a number of diverse users (e.g. media, politicians, citizens) were actively engaged in – and in some cases highly influenced – the discussion.

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings show that at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in China and in the West, Weibo and Twitter played very different roles as participatory platforms embedded in different sociocultural contexts. As shown in previous research on the Chinese digital ecosystem during epidemics (Dodson, 2010; Weber & Jia, 2006), authoritarian propaganda mechanisms clearly emerged on Weibo, with the accounts of major official media like People's Daily engaging in 'thought work' (Kalathil & Boas, 2001). However, our findings also show that, not only did state propaganda nudge behavior change through key national media outlets, it also developed propaganda networks through individual 'Internet celebrities'. For instance, propaganda slogans with clear nationalist tendencies, such as "million people united as one man" (万众一心) and "our wills unite like a fortress" (众志成城) not only appeared widely across official media Weibo accounts – such as People's Daily, CCTV, Xinhua Viewpoint – they were also forwarded, absorbed, re-created and disseminated by individual 'Internet celebrities'. It is these 'propaganda' mechanisms that most likely also led to polarizing sentiment in Weibo conversations about the pandemic. These dynamics did not apply to the 'democratized' Western world where other forms of influence were exerted. Contrary to previous work highlighting the emerging prominence of non-elite gatekeepers in Twitter networks (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2017), our exploratory investigation indicated that elite accounts – which can affect the political agenda – probably played a more central role than non-elite accounts. It is likely that these elite

accounts also influenced the overall framing of the events on the platform – foregrounding messages not necessarily in line with public health policies or scientific evidence. This was signaled, for instance, by the centrality of then-US President Donald Trump's account in the retweet network.

In conclusion, Weibo and Twitter enhanced very different participatory dynamics at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The two platforms hosted different forms of sentiment expression, meaning production and gatekeeping dynamics. Weibo displayed more 'top-down' processes while Twitter content incorporated a range of dynamics: elite influence, horizontal flows, conflicting opinions, and political framings of the events. In their being embedded in wider socio-cultural contexts, political economic frameworks and social structures, these platforms can then be seen as reflecting the different 'platforms societies' currently developing in China and in the West. In China, platforms can become 'propaganda tools' used to unite and promote public policies under the control of the government and the guidance of state-controlled mainstream media. In Western societies platforms can work as 'public squares' that allow the expression of different personal opinions, though under the influence of elite media – legacy news media outlets – and public figures with different political agendas. Democratic governments often find themselves struggling to impose effective regulation on platforms that have grown rapidly without their immediate oversight (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Unlike authoritarian states that make every effort to use a variety of reactive and proactive strategies to control digital media use (Kalathil & Boas, 2001), Western countries – and platform companies – are increasingly struggling to control dynamics that make platforms unfit for public discussion and enhance democratic development (e.g. bots, flaming, disinformation, hate speech).

Ultimately, this study advances a twofold contribution. First, it provides evidence of the limitations in framing contemporary societies as beholden to a monolithic 'platform society' (Van Dijck et al., 2018) model as this model fails to map dynamics that are developing in non-Western contexts (Steinberg & Li, 2017). In fact, it points to the need to further develop platform studies that take into account the local contexts in which platforms are developed, used and regulated (Willems, 2020). Second, it calls for further comparative work aimed at investigating platform participatory dynamics, and their implications for society, at times of global crisis.

It is important to highlight that this study is affected by several limitations. First, the analysis focused on dynamics at the center of Weibo and Twitter conversations about the pandemic – those around polarizing sentiment, most frequently used content, and top gatekeepers – skimming over what was happening at 'the periphery' of these conversations. Also, our quantitative approach did not allow us to focus on these conversations and explore less explicit dynamics of meaning production, like the ironic or sarcastic exchanges that have been shown to be particularly relevant to Chinese social media publics (see, among others, Yang, 2016). Future research could address these limitations by developing mixed-method approaches incorporating small data analyses of Weibo and Twitter content.

Note

1. Chinese text is formed by characters, with two or more characters forming a word; individual words are joined together in a sentence without natural segmentation.

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