Social Media and China's Virus Outbreak

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Abstract: In the early stage of the coronavirus outbreak in China, social media were bursting with anger and desperation. Many pleaded for medical help, called for public attention to the unattended and asked for accountability for local officials who failed to respond to the public health crisis in time. But with the epicenter shifting to Europe and North America, a series of social media tactics, highlighting China's successful containment efforts, while disparaging foreign countries' responses, and spinning the origin of the coronavirus outbreak, facilitated a nationalist takeover of social media sites in China.

How China rewrites the narrative of the coronavirus pandemic on social media

Early in 2020, as COVID-19 infections soared in Wuhan, public anger and frustration spread on Chinese social media, with some suggesting that the coronavirus outbreak was China's Chernobyl moment. Yet months after the outbreak was first reported in Wuhan, with new confirmed domestic cases down to single-digits, and cases surging in other countries, triumphalist messaging on the superiority of the Chinese governance model cascaded on Chinese social media.

"The speed at which China responded to the coronavirus cannot be imagined by other countries," read one Weibo post with the hashtag "British scholar says the world has seen China's institutional superiority."

The British scholar that the post refers to is Martin Jacques, author of the book "When

China rules the world" (2009). In an interview with the state media CCTV, Jacques praised the Chinese government's crisis management capacity in the wake of the pandemic, saying that this, "can be a historic moment where people come to see what the strengths of the Chinese system are." (Tuwen Ouni 2020)

This marked a dramatic turnaround from the early stages of the pandemic when there was speculation about whether the Chinese government's legitimacy might be undermined by the pandemic. Public opinion in China on the government's handling of the crisis has also experienced a rollercoaster ride, dipping to the bottom in early February and gradually recovering as the pandemic was contained. The state emerged from the crisis stronger than ever, trumpeting that it had led the Chinese people to victory in the war against COVID-19.

Virus outbreak: Social media as mobilizing platform

For a long time, Chinese social media was flooded with angry posts from Fenqing, or Chinese youths with self-righteous and nationalistic tendencies. They policed sites like Weibo, Zhihu, or Hupu, ready to attack anyone who did not conform with the state line.

But as the coronavirus spread and the state's early missteps came to light, the angry youths suddenly became the silent minority. A collective anger at the state's secrecy became the dominant sentiment on Chinese social media.

On January 20, China's top respiratory disease

specialist Dr. Zhong Nanshan said that there was certainly human-to-human transmission and broke the news that 14 medical workers had already been infected, which confirmed widespread fears that the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak had been downplayed. Photos of Wuhan hospitals flooded with patients were shared widely, as were desperate calls from hospitals pleading for donations of medical supplies. One post, in particular, made national news. Wuhan Union hospital, one of the first designated hospitals to treat patients infected with the coronavirus, sent a plea for donations on January 30 proclaiming, "We don't run short of medical supplies. We have no medical supplies." (*Qianjiang Evening News* 2020)

For Chinese social media where an orchestrated "positive energy" has long prevailed, such a frank admission of the desperate situation on the frontlines was a rarity. Significantly, social media sites were turned into platforms for mobilizing donations and volunteerism.

Citizen journalism thrived on social media. Many Wuhan residents documented their lives amid the lockdown on social media sites. One Weibo user who received much attention is a vlogger called Lin Wenhua. His 20-episode video series, Wuhan Diary 2020, featured images of a grieving daughter who lost her father, medical workers who went to work with no protective gear and patients with no access to medical care. (Zhizhuhou Mianbao 2020)

Many of his videos received more than 10 million views and were also posted on YouTube. He is among many who volunteered to offer free rides to medical workers in Wuhan in the early stages of the lockdown, when all public transportation was shut down and even medical workers were left with no means to go to the hospital.

Volunteers sprang up everywhere on social media. Youth in their early 20s, who were

brought up in a relatively well-off environment, and once considered apathetic, mobilized quickly on the internet. They set up platforms updating the amount of the money they had raised or protective gear they had managed to secure. In addition, many overseas Chinese students used their language skills to connect foreign dealers of protective gear with hospitals in need of help.

On February 1, 2020 public donations exceeded 600 million yuan. Goods, including 9,316 masks, 74,522 medical protective suits and 80,456 goggles were sent to the Wuhan Red Cross. (*CNN* 2020) Anger flared up when it was reported that many of the donations were stuck at the state-run Red Cross Society of Wuhan. When a man was caught placing sought-after 3M masks into the trunk of a government official's vehicle, outrage erupted on social media. (*Nanfang Metropolitan* 2020)

In the early stages of the outbreak in Wuhan, the local and central governments were very responsive to emotions running high on social media. Quickly after social media users started to call for an investigation into the Wuhan Red Cross, the Hubei Red Cross apologized on its official Weibo account for its mismanagement of donations. (Hubei Provincial People's Government 2020) But demands for accountability were still largely limited to the local level. Derision and dissatisfaction expressed by social media users targeted mostly local officials from Wuhan. They mocked the then Wuhan mayor for wearing his mask upside down. (Daoyi Cuncun 2020) They also expressed dismay when the Hubei provincial governor misstated three times how many masks were manufactured in Hubei province every day. (Xiyang Simu 2020) "It was such a misfortune that we have leaders like him in China," read one Weibo comment. (Xiyang Simu 2020)

Anger and frustration: the death of Dr. Li

Wenliang

In early February, the number of those killed by the novel coronavirus reached a record high in China, with the daily death toll rising to over 50 and the number of confirmed cases increasing by thousands per day. With the media reporting that coronavirus patients were denied medical services, and rumors flying about dead bodies piling up in Wuhan hospitals, anger steadily escalated on social media sites, peaking on the night of Dr. Li Wenliang's death. Li was one of the eight people who first warned others in a WeChat group about a mysterious virus spreading in Wuhan. Li, a doctor at Wuhan Central Hospital, was detained by police for "spreading rumors." He was forced to sign a document acknowledging that he had breached the law and "seriously disrupted social order."

In a February 1 Weibo post, Li said that a nucleic test result showed that he had contracted the coronavirus. (Li Wenliang 2020) This came at a time when hard-hitting reporting revealed government cover-ups in the early days of the coronavirus outbreak.

Dr. Li

In a ground-breaking report, Caixin, one of the very few independent news outlets in China, found that China's National Health Commission ordered health institutions not to publish any information related to the then mysterious viral

pneumonia on January 3, and ordered labs to transfer samples of the virus to designated testing institutions, or to destroy them. (Gao 2020) A handful of commercial news outlets, like Sanlian Lifeweek and Yicai, have all published investigative reports that deviate from the official line on coronavirus. Many of the reports were uploaded by Chinese internet users to GitHub, a U.S.-based software development website, to prevent censorship. (Li 2020) However, this project, titled "#2020 nCov memory", has been inaccessible since April.

On the night of February 6, rumors began to spread on social media sites that Li was critically ill. Around 9: 30 pm, a reporter from Life Times, who was at the hospital where Li was hospitalized, said he passed away. At 3:48 AM on the morning of February 7, Wuhan Central Hospital announced on its official account that Li died at around 2:58 due to the coronavirus. (Wuhan Central Union Hospital 2020) Li's death crystallized the anger that had been brewing on social media over the government's mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak and a lack of transparency about the public health crisis. Weibo was overwhelmed with posts of grief and disbelief. Some openly called for freedom of speech in their posts.

When news of Dr. Li's death came, many were still asleep. When the morning arrived, anger mounted on social media. Wuhan residents flared lights to the sky for five minutes that night, followed by whistleblowing for another five minutes. In front of the hospitals where Li passed away, volunteers blew whistles in his memory. (*Feng Mian News* 2020) For many in China, that day became a day of national grieving. On WeChat moments, people from all walks of life were posting messages in commemoration of Li. Many reposted a profile piece of Dr. Li written by the magazine *People* titled, "An ordinary man: Li Wenliang". The piece is a moving, heartfelt portrayal of this extraordinary young man in his 30s, who

expressed his sorrow and rang the alarm only to succumb to the coronavirus. "Li was an ordinary man...he saw something unusual and alerted people around him to pay attention; but when he saw the encroachment of authorities, he took a step back," wrote one social media user who stayed anonymous. (Matters 2020)

But because the tragedy of Li is that of an ordinary man, the essay continues, it is a reflection of our fate, as ordinary people caught in the maelstrom of uncontrollable forces. Across social media sites in China, similar pieces in commemoration of Li were posted and shared widely. His death marked a turning point, as criticisms of the government escalated on social media, normally a tightly controlled space carefully monitored and censored by state authorities.

The Hubei Province Health Commission and Wuhan city government quickly offered their condolences for Dr. Li's death. But that did not dispel the mounting anger and demands for accountability. Widespread public anger prompted the central government to send a team from China's anti-corruption agency to Hubei to investigate the death of Li. (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection 2020) In a few days, two senior officials in Hubei, including the Hubei party secretary and the Communist Party leader of the city of Wuhan, were fired. (*Xinhua* 2020)

Chinese social media users getting creative

The tightening of information controls did not start with the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, but the intensification of censorship after his death sparked widespread anger. In a notice on media coverage of the virus published on February 5, the Cyberspace Administration of China named a few websites, including Baidu and Huxiu for failing to regulate users over the publication of illegal information or carrying out reporting activities illegally. A few social media accounts on Tencent and Weibo, were also closed for spreading false information. (Cyberspace Administration of China 2020) The notice ended with the statement, "Local cyberspace administrations should play their supervisory role well, and create a good internet environment for battling the coronavirus."

Content targeted for deletion included journalistic investigations of how the epidemic first started and was covered up in late 2019, and live accounts of the suffering and pain in Wuhan in the early days of the city's lockdown. (Yuan 2020) It was not just news pieces that were being censored, as WeChat accounts were also shut down and key words on livestreaming platforms censored. (*Freedom House* 2020)

Shortly after Dr. Li's death, accounts from another whistleblower, who was one of the eight doctors reprimanded for "spreading rumors" about the novel coronavirus, drew public attention. Ai Fen, head of Emergency Services at Wuhan Central Hospital, said in an interview with *People* magazine, that officials warned her not to disclose anything about the disease in early January. (Medium 2020) "If I can rewind the clock, I would disclose the situation publicly and say it out loud. I would tell it every time people ask me," she said, after Li's death. (Medium 2020) The article immediately sparked discussion. In grieving over the death of Dr. Li, the accounts from Ai gave people in China another reason to question if the initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan was botched. The interview was quickly deleted by the WeChat account of *People* magazine where it was first posted, but Internet users kept on posting screenshots of the article on social media sites. Many found creative ways to avoid censors, e.g. turning the entire piece into English, French, Morse code, even emojis. (Pincong 2020)

Even parts of the diary of Fang Fang, a writer

from Wuhan, who documented her life under lockdown, became partly unavailable as the situation intensified. Her diary was read widely by Internet users in the early days of the pandemic and served as a reliable source of information for residents outside Wuhan to glimpse into the epicenter of the outbreak. She is at times mildly critical, e.g. pointing out the unpreparedness of Wuhan local officials during press conferences and writing about the suffering of vendors at the abandoned Huanan Seafood Market. News of the publication of her translated diary in English inflamed some Chinese social media users. Some accused her of profiting from the misery of Wuhan and defaming China in the English-speaking world. (Muzijing 2020)

In an interview published on Caixin's website, Fang Fang called the derision and public condemnation against her a reflection of the division within China. "If they cannot tolerate even such mild criticism, that is truly frightening." (Fang 2020)

Epicenter shifts: disinformation on the pandemic situation abroad

As the epicenter of the pandemic shifted to countries outside China, there was a gradual shift in people's attitude, led by a flurry of nationalistic media reports that selectively highlighted the suffering in foreign countries while downplaying that in China.

The Trump administration's bungling of the coronavirus response has been at the center of that media campaign. Initially, it was the lack of access to nucleic testing in the U.S. that drew the most attention. Trump's statement at a news conference that it may be "the story of life" that the well-connected get testing first sparked derision on social media. One wrote, "in the U.S., valuable resources only work for the interests of the upper-class." (Communist Youth League of China 2020)

The pandemic witnessed the rise of a new form of media strategy on the part of Chinese media: employing English-speaking online celebrities to praise China. Jerry Kowal, a New York-based Vlogger, became the new sweetheart on Chinese social media with his Chinese-language videos chronicling the dire situation of his home state of New York. In a video that received more than 150,000 likes, Kowal documented the frenzy shopping at stores all over New York as people prepared to hunker down at homes. (CCTV 2020) The original post did not say a single word about the superiority of the Chinese system, yet in the comment section, many expressed sentiments along the lines of, "I am proud of being Chinese."

It is not just foreign vloggers, but anyone in position of authority who acknowledged China's achievement in containing the virus, was quoted by Chinese media as "proof" of the superiority of the Chinese system. A video clip of Rachel Maddow talking to New York Times reporter Donald McNeil was reposted around 3,000 times on Weibo. In the video, McNeil praised China's containment measures, e.g. building up temporary hospitals, remodeling hospitals etc. with many commenting that, "China's superior system can save the world." (CCTV 2020)

Many Chinese social media users, who do not have the language skills or access to foreign websites, rely on Chinese media coverage, but it tends to distort the situation, pandering to nationalist sentiments by highlighting the suffering of people overseas and the incapability of foreign politicians in contrast to China.

As the pandemic situation intensified in the U.S., and as the Trump administration came to adopt more aggressive measures to contain the outbreak, e.g. advising people to wear masks and practice social-distancing, social media users in China quickly targeted his erratic policymaking. A hashtag called "The

MetamorphoTrump", has attracted over 400 million views on Weibo. A short video under the hashtag compiled clips of Trump contradicting himself on coronavirus containment measures, highlighting the fact that Trump came to realize only belatedly the magnitude of the coronavirus outbreak and flipflopped repeatedly on dealing with it.

Apart from Trump, social media lambasted U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who is among the most strident proponents of the Wuhan lab theory—that the coronavirus originated in a lab in Wuhan. CCTV ran a commentary titled "evil Pompeo is wantonly spewing poison and spreading lies", accusing Pompeo of "rushing to shift the blame, cheat votes and suppress China when their own domestic anti-epidemic efforts are a mess." (*Aljazeera* 2020)

On Chinese social media, the conspiracy theory that U.S. athletes brought the virus to Wuhan while attending the Military Games went viral. The theory cited a news clip from TV Asahi that says many Americans who died of flu may have contracted the coronavirus long before the outbreak in Wuhan, signaling that the coronavirus may have originated in the U.S. Other seemingly credible evidence that bolstered this theory came from a video clip aired by a Taiwanese news program. The program, citing experts' analysis, says since there are five strains of coronavirus in the U.S., and only one in China, the U.S. must be the place where the virus originated from. (*Tencent News* 2020)

Similar vague "evidence" suggesting the coronavirus may have originated outside China, was frequently reposted on Chinese social media. Even China's top epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan was cited by many social media users who quoted him saying that the origin of the coronavirus may not be from China. In response, he denied having suggested that the virus came from abroad. (*People's Daily* 2020) Such theories based on seemingly credible

scientific evidence, and cherry-picked experts' quotes, conferred a veneer of legitimacy on nationalistic allegations on Chinese social media. These got a boost from China's foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian when he tweeted "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan." (Zhao 2020)

Though misinformation about coronavirus has been rife on Chinese social media since day one, never had it been so politicized, at a point when the U.S. and China were trading accusations against each other for failing to contain the virus. While the U.S. doubled down on China's early missteps in handling the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China responded with more coverage of America's failed efforts to contain the escalating outbreak. Unfortunately, hardliners in China and in the U.S. have hijacked the coronavirus debate.

Wuhan lockdown lifted: China as a model for the world

On April 8, the city of Wuhan reopened. And as China has largely contained the coronavirus outbreak, it started positioning itself as a global leader in the fight against the pandemic. China's active "mask diplomacy" appears to have targeted the domestic audience, rather than international opinion. While some in Europe say China's aid was an extension of its geopolitical ambitions, Chinese social media users were busy sharing a video of the Chinese national anthem played in a balcony concert in Italy to thank China for sending a team of experts and medical supplies to Italy. (New China TV 2020) This was a feel-good moment for the Chinese public, gaining acclaim for pandemic assistance, but this coverage didn't have any bandwidth for criticisms about the poor quality of masks and PPE provided.

The global tit-for-tat war over the origin of coronavirus, and foreign countries' accusations

that China concealed information of the outbreak, all served to strengthen a victim narrative on Chinese social media, highlighting that its people have suffered and endured. Moreover, social media postings highlighted that there was little global appreciation for China's unprecedented quarantine measures that bought time for the world to prepare. The government's way of handling the virus is portrayed as a model for the world. On Weibo, state media published slick videos and graphs that highlighted the Chinese government's quick containment response and the slow reaction from the Trump administration.

A short animation produced by the state news agency Xinhua called Once Upon a Virus, mocked the U.S. response to the coronavirus. (*Once upon a virus* 2020) A Lego figure of a terracotta warrior, wearing a face mask, is seen saying "we discovered a new virus", to which a Statue of Liberty-like figure replied, "It is only the flu." The warrior is then seen issuing several warnings about the coronavirus that were all dismissed by the Statute of Liberty. At the end of the animation, as the coronavirus spread rapidly among Americans, the Statue of Liberty stubbornly maintained that, "we are always correct, even though we contradict ourselves." The animation drew quite significant attention on Chinese social media; and on Weibo alone, more than 30,000 people liked the video, with the top-rated comment saying, "we need to have more outspoken media reports like this."

The war of words between the two superpowers underlies the growing competition between the two, not just over technological dominance, economic power or military strength, but over "the superiority of institutions". After the coronavirus was contained, China actively reached out to foreign countries to share its coronavirus containment lessons to boost its soft power. Chinese social media sites frequently publish news reports of Chinese medical teams sent to

aid the containment work in Italy, Iran and other virus-stricken countries. These often feature short videos showing the "gratitude" of foreigners for China's help, e.g. saying thank you in Chinese. (Qing, 2020)

Overseas Chinese students also uploaded photos of the health packages they received from the local embassies, with words like "thank you, my mother country." Unlike in early 2019 when social media was filled with messages pleading for help, or demanding accountability, a great sense of triumphalism emerged.

The bilateral rivalry has embroiled the World Health Organization in controversy. Soon after the virus was reported in Wuhan, the WHO lauded China's efforts to share the genetic sequence of the virus and allow a WHO mission of international experts into the country. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director general, said that he had "no doubt about China's commitment to transparency." (WHO 2020) WHO's lavish praise of China has been cited widely by Chinese media. In a commentary titled "Supporting WHO is unquestionable", Xinhua wrote that supporting the WHO is to empower each country's ability to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, and to support multilateralism. (*Editorial: Supporting the WHO is our responsibility* 2020) In contrast, Trump announced he would halt U.S. funding and membership in WHO over its response to China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and accused the organization of being "funded largely by the U.S., yet very China centric." (Trump 2020) Dr. Tedros was caught in the crossfire between the two superpowers. In an interview that drew much attention, Dr. Tedros said he was leading global efforts to contain the coronavirus pandemic, but was subject to unfair criticisms of bias and even racist comments that he attributed to Taiwan's government. (*CNBC* 2020)

The Chinese media covered the issue, but

coverage soared when Aaron Yan, a Taiwanese pop star popular in mainland China, weighed in. In a Facebook post he addressed to Dr. Ghebreyesus, Yan said he was surprised that the head of the WHO had "...the nerve addressing your own personal shit on an international organization conference." (Yan 2020) A screenshot of the post was quickly shared on social media sites in mainland China. Social media users quickly jumped to the defense of the WHO director and condemned Yan, with many calling for him to be blacklisted from appearing on television. (Wu Xiaojie 2020) The Internet, yet again, was turned into a patriotic battleground to root out the unpatriotic.

Danger of over-politicizing the pandemic

The Chinese government deserves credit for flattening the curve of transmission so quickly. Aggressive social distancing measures allowed the government to change the course of coronavirus within a couple of weeks. (Lee 2020) Moreover, China has helped other nations containment efforts by sending medical teams to countries suffering from a lack of medical care and donating masks and test kits. Although motivated by a combination of humanitarian concern and geopolitical ploy, the consequences were nonetheless positive. Some of the ways in which China responded to the pandemic successfully are too easily brushed aside by critics in the West as "authoritarian." As Ian Johnson put it in a *New York Times* op-ed, "there is nothing authoritarian about checking temperatures at airports, enforcing social distancing or offering free medical care to anyone with COVID-19." (Johnson 2020)

In response to the accusations that some western politicians launched against China, instead of embracing transparency and accountability, Chinese officials and netizens resorted to conspiracy mongering and ridiculing U.S. efforts to contain the outbreak.

The crisis provided an opportunity to assert China's institutional superiority and regain control of the narrative at home, shifting from demands for accountability to patriotic triumphalism.

One significant casualty of the coronavirus pandemic is U.S.-China relations. The coronavirus pandemic has sent the already strained bilateral relationship into a downward spiral. With travel bans and visa restrictions, hundreds of thousands of Chinese students cannot travel back to their schools in the U.S., and families who live across the Pacific are torn apart due to visa restrictions. Trump's choice to label the COVID-19 the "China virus" fueled nationalism in China, and his slow response to the pandemic gave Chinese social media users reasons to believe that democracy is inefficient and ineffective in dealing with a crisis. The high death toll in the U.S. stands in sharp contrast to China's effective containment efforts, and many attributed the sharp contrast to institutional strength, what is often termed authoritarian governance outside China.

China has rewritten the coronavirus narrative, at least for its domestic audience. Moreover, the U.S. failed to show Chinese netizens that there are better alternatives than the "China model", lending credence to Beijing's propaganda efforts to extoll its virtues.

Perhaps just like in every other crisis in China, no matter how much the state gets battered by overwhelming calls for accountability on social media, it eventually manages to batten down the hatches and weather the storm. This perhaps is a core strength of the Chinese model, an ability to outlast its critics, muddying the waters and stoking nationalist sentiments to regain control of the narrative.

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