The Use of Weibo to Connect Chinese Communities in Australia by Australian Politicians

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Abstract

Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website; it is one of the most popular sites in China. According to Oz Entertainment, Sina Weibo’s Australian business co-operator, there are around 500,000 Weibo users in Australia. What’s more interesting is that politicians across the three levels of government in Australia have also started joining Weibo. Scholars began debating the practical importance of using social media for politics years ago; some of them believe the uniqueness of social media will certainly bring about success for politicians. Others believe that social media hasn’t brought significant changes and, additionally, has caused danger to some extent. Grant’s research on Australian politicians’ use of Twitter has found that those who tweet to converse appear to gain more political benefit from the platform than others. However, no current research examines the usefulness of Weibo by Australian politicians. Therefore, for those Australian politicians who have decided to embark on a Chinese social media platform, are they conversing or simply broadcasting themselves? Is the existence of Australian politicians’ Weibo accounts providing a more effective political discussion platform, and encouraging more active political engagement of Chinese communities? What benefits has Weibo brought to politicians in Australia? With these questions in mind, this paper conducts the first analysis on Australian politicians’ use of Weibo. Based on the results collected from this research, this paper argues that Chinese Weibo could be beneficial for the development of effective personal public relations by Australian politicians.

Keywords: Weibo, Australian politician, Chinese social media, cross-cultural communication
Introduction

Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website. It is one of the most popular sites in China, in use by well over 30% of internet users in the world, with a similar market penetration that Twitter has established in the US. It has more than 400 million registered users as of December 2012 (Gao, 2013). According to Oz Entertainment, Sina Weibo’s Australian business cooperator, there are around 500,000 Weibo users in Australia, including Chinese international students, Chinese community organisations, Chinese commercial organisations, as well as official accounts of Australian commercial, educational and governmental organisations (China Economic Net, 2012). More importantly, some politicians across the three levels of government in Australia have also joined Weibo.

International scholars began debating the practical importance of social media for public relations practitioners years ago (Curtis et al., 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Jin & Liu, 2010; Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010; Toledano, 2010). However, no existing research examines the usefulness of Weibo for Australian politicians. Therefore, for those Australian politicians who have decided to embark on a Chinese social media platform, are they conversing or simply broadcasting themselves? Is the existence of Australian politicians’ Weibo accounts providing a more effective political discussion platform, and encouraging more active political engagement of Chinese communities? What benefits has Weibo brought to politicians? With these questions in mind, I started the first analysis on Australian politicians’ use of Weibo.

This article is a starting point of discussion indicating where further research can take place, it seeks to address three gaps in existing knowledge by empirical research. Firstly, at present, we simply do not know in a systematic sense what Australian politicians/agencies are doing on Weibo. We do not know who is posting on Weibo, how often they post, and what they are posting about.

Secondly, this article seeks to address the fact that we do not have a clear understanding of the benefit that Australian politicians are gaining from the Chinese online platform.

Finally, this article seeks to address the deeper question: what the uptake of Australian users of Chinese social media – and Chinese Weibo in particular – means for Australian politics. Does Weibo offer better ways for Australian politicians to communicate with potential Chinese migrant voters, or is it instead a ‘fragmentary, dangerous and disempowering distraction’ (Grant & Moon, 2010, p. 581)?
The aim of this paper is not to make any over-simplistic conclusions, it uses collected evidences to argue that Chinese Weibo could be beneficial for the development of effective personal public relations by Australian politicians. Its findings show that, aside from Kevin Rudd, Ted Baillieu is currently the most influential Australian politician on Weibo. This research also highlights that the Deputy Mayor of Sydney Robert Kok successfully used Weibo during his recent re-election.

Background

Chinese social media and Weibo

The social media landscape in China is very different from the rest of the world. While Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are regarded as the top three social media platforms in the world, none of these are available in China due to the country’s internet regulations. Instead, the three most popular social media in China are Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo and Renren Net. They will be introduced respectively in the following paragraphs.

As stated earlier, Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website, in use by well over 30% of the world's internet users, with a similar market penetration to that of Twitter in the US. Although the most recent China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) report announced that there are 309 million Weibo users in China (CNNIC, 2013), the announced numbers of Weibo users provided by each Weibo service provider are much higher than the figure this official report disclosed. This is probably due to the competition between Weibo service providers, but scholars and journalists in China often use the estimation of more than 400 million, which is somewhere between CNNIC’s official report and commercial Weibo service provider statistics.

It is important to note that when Chinese people say 'Weibo' they commonly mean Sina Weibo. However, Sina Weibo is just one of the various Weibo service competitors. Sina Weibo claims it has around 500 million registered accounts as of December 2012 (Gao, 2013). Other services include Tencent (the owner of QQ.com), which also alleged having a microblog site with 400 million registered accounts; and Sohu Weibo with over 100 million registered accounts (Chen, 2012). Therefore, it is more accurate to say ‘Tencent Weibo (Tenxun Weibo)’ and ‘Sohu Weibo (Souhu Weibo)’ to differentiate from ‘Sina Weibo (Xinlang Weibo)’.

Due to its success of overseas users’ penetration, Sina Weibo is still the most known Weibo service; therefore, the term Weibo used in this article refers to Sina Weibo.
Weibo, similar to Twitter, is more ‘conversational’ than many other social media platforms. Weibo users can use 140 characters to share what’s happening with others. The core element of Weibo is based on the model of human relations (Porter, 2009). One doesn’t need to become friends with others to be able to read each other’s posts. One might follow 10,000 users while only 50 users follow oneself; one might only follow five users but have 10,000 users following one’s own account.

China also has Renren Net, equivalent to Facebook in the West; neither allows ‘conversation’ between non-friends. So if Renren and Facebook are viewed as a lounge room in someone’s house, Weibo and Twitter would be a bar or street plaza, because anyone who is interested in the topic can join the conversation (Raymond, 1999; Grant & Moon, 2010). Therefore, Weibo and Twitter are closer to a public space, and have unique advantages to becoming effective communication tools for reputation management and community engagement. According to the 2010 statistical results published on WebBizideas.com, 26% of American corporations would pay for business functionality on Twitter (Hwang, 2012). Celebrities in the world have also embraced this social media to gather more ‘followers’ (Faina, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2012).

Weibo, like Twitter, restrict posts to a maximum of 140 characters. However, it is over-simplistic to define Weibo as a ‘Chinese version of Twitter’. Both Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo are providing more complex and advanced services than Twitter; for example, allowing users to add comments when retweeting. Due to the blockage of Twitter and Facebook in China, the social media landscape there is dominated by domestic brands rather than international big names. Chinese domestic companies such as Sina and Tencent are intent on developing more complex hybrids that build on their respective advantages as multi-faceted web portals (Dashan, 2012). Thus, it would be more accurate to say that Weibo refers to Chinese microblogs that are hybrids of both Twitter and Facebook (Dashan, 2012).

**Australian Weibo users and Chinese communities in Australia**

Oz Entertainment in Melbourne is Sina Weibo’s Australian business co-operator. According to it, there are currently around 500,000 Weibo users in Australia. Weibo users in Australia include Chinese international students, Chinese organisations with an Australian focus and Australian organisations relating to Chinese communities. Chinese communities in Australia are the largest overseas Chinese community in Oceania, many of them immigrants along with their descendants from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, as well as a handful of other countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Among those 500,000 Weibo users in
Australia, the majority are migrants and international students from mainland China. But Chinese international students and migrants are not the main focus in this research. This article focuses on a specific group of Weibo users in Australia – politicians from the three levels of government in Australia who have Weibo accounts.

Method

To address the above issues, I first gathered a list of Australian politicians on Sina Weibo. For the purpose of this study, and to maintain the consistency with Grant’s study of Australian politicians’ use of Twitter in 2010, the definition of Australian politician refers to politicians from federal, state and local politics. It doesn’t include candidates for seats in upper or lower houses of parliament or councils. Politicians were included regardless of whether their Weibo posts were updated by themselves or by their Chinese-speaking staff, as long as their account was certified by Sina Weibo as a personal Weibo ‘celebrity’ account.

To gather this list I mainly used one simple method: trawling for known politicians through Sina Weibo’s celebrity plaza (Mingren Tang), where celebrities are categorised by their countries and professions. This is another function Twitter doesn’t have, which makes research on foreign Weibo users more convenient. In so doing, I gathered a list of existing Australian politician users. Numerical and descriptive data (self-biography, representative avatar, number of friends, number of followers) were collected for each examined user. Further descriptive data (electorate, party, position) were collected and archived with both text and time/date posted. In order to analyse a similar series of Weibo posts, analysis was limited to a twelve-month period between 2012 and March 2013. Borrowing the method used by Leavitt and colleagues (Leavitt et al., 2009), I then categorised each of the Weibo posts in the twelve-month sample as one of our four basic types: ‘broadcast’, ‘broadcast mention’, ‘reply’ and ‘retweet’. Here a ‘broadcast’ is an isolated statement without reference to any other Weibo or Weibo user. A ‘broadcast mention’ is also an isolated statement, but one which mentions another Weibo user. A ‘reply’ is a reply to the post of another Weibo user, with that user listed at the start of the tweet. Finally, a ‘retweet’ is the quoting and re-posting of another user’s Weibo in order to pass that Weibo on, usually in the form ‘RT @username text’. These were collectively treated as either ‘broadcast’ (broadcast + broadcast mention) or ‘conversational’ (reply + retweet). This categorisation is also consistent with the method used in Grant’s recent study (Grant & Moon, 2010).
Results

Who is on Weibo, how often do they post, and what they are posting?

As at 1 March 2013, six Australian politicians have Weibo accounts. These six politicians range from federal to state to local councils. John Alexander and Kevin Rudd are labeled as federal politicians; Daniel Andrews, Meifeng Lin and Ted Baillieu are registered as state politicians; while deputy-mayor of Sydney, Robert Kok, is known as a local politician on Weibo. Not surprisingly, Kevin Rudd has the most followers (358,169) due to his existing China connection. Robert Kok has 103,318 followers, about three times more than the third-placed politician, Ted Baillieu. These six politicians’ names, political titles, number of followers, number of followings, number of posts and key contents of their posts are categorised in Table 1.

Statistics on ‘conversational’ communication

Following the widely used categorisation method of Twitter posts, I categorised ‘reply’ and ‘retweet’ as conversational, ‘broadcast’ and ‘mentioning broadcast’ as broadcasting, and the level of each politician’s conversational communication degree on Weibo is then presented in Figure 1. While each politician has more ‘broadcasting’ posts (red) than ‘conversational’ posts (green), Victoria State Premier Baillieu and Deputy Mayor of Sydney Kok have more ‘conversational’ posts than the rest of the politicians (see Figure 1).

Statistics on Weibo influence

The influence of each politician on Weibo can be assessed by calculating the number of comments on their posts and the number of retweets of their posts by others. After analysing the number of comments and retweets each politician received on Weibo from March to September in 2012, I have gathered the following results: Kevin Rudd has the highest ratio of retweets and comments. But it’s worth noting that most of Kevin Rudd’s posts are about practicing his Chinese, and the majority of comments he received were critiques and advice for his Chinese expressions. Therefore, if we see Kevin Rudd as an exceptional case, the Australian politician who has the highest influence on Weibo is Ted Baillieu (see Figure 2). In fact, the recent resignation of Baillieu has disappointed many of his Chinese supporters on Weibo.
TABLE 1: STATISTICS ON AUSTRALIAN POLITICIANS’ WEIBO ACCOUNTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Daniel Andrews</th>
<th>Mei Feng Lin</th>
<th>Ted Baillieu</th>
<th>Robert Kok</th>
<th>Kevin Rudd</th>
<th>John Alexander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of government</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>Federal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of followers</td>
<td>18,905</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>33,427</td>
<td>103,318</td>
<td>358,169</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of following</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key contents of posts</td>
<td>Questioning the state premier’s policies Chinese communities</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Policy explanation Chinese communities</td>
<td>Chinese international students Election volunteering encouragement</td>
<td>Grandchild, son-in-law learning Chinese Chinese international students</td>
<td>Chinese internationals students Chinese migrants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1: STATISTICS ON AUSTRALIAN POLITICIANS ‘CONVERSATIONAL’ COMMUNICATION ON WEIBO
Discussion

Who are the Australian politicians on Weibo?
What are they doing on Weibo?

Of the six Australian politicians on Weibo, three are from Victoria (Andrew, Lin, Baillieu), two from NSW (Alexander, Kok), and one is from Queensland (Rudd). This is consistent with each state's activeness of engagement with China. Comparing with other states, Victoria and NSW have more China links, while Victoria has been the leading state in engagement with China. Ted Baillieu, as Premier of Victoria, won Chinese investment of AUD200 million during his China trip with 650 delegates from Victoria in September 2012 (MacArthur & Rolfe, 2012). Looking at the number and diversity of politicians on Weibo, the percentage of Australian politicians using Weibo to communicate with Chinese communities is significantly low, given there are more than 800 politicians across federal and state levels (6 among 800 is not even close to 1%). Therefore, this discussion section serves as a starting point indicating the possibility of future research in this area; the author doesn't attempt to draw a simple conclusion on the basis of such a small number of Australian politicians using Weibo.

Of the politicians' Weibo posts, overlapping content often involves the interactivity with Chinese communities in Australia. Because posts are written in Chinese, mostly by these politicians' Chinese-speaking assistants, this has given the Chinese communities a better platform to...
engage in political activities, particularly for those who have limited English abilities. For example:

**Post by Alexander on 5 July 2012**

Two weeks congress meeting has finished, my proposal on ‘Chinese Communities Contributions’ to Australia has been passed by parliament! I will be visiting premises in Eastwood commercial streets, to meet up with residents face to face. There will be Chinese speaking staff present, I welcome your comments or advice, or even just drop by to say Hi.

(Alexander’s Weibo page, 2012; translated from Chinese by the author)

**Post by Baillieu on 27 June 2012**

Earlier, I announced that the Victorian government will lead a large trade delegation to visit China, the trip has been scheduled for September 17 to 21 this year, and is now open for online registration. We will arrange package tours for more than 400 companies from 13 different areas. Enterprises eligible can obtain up to $3,000 Australian dollars travel fund. The registration shall be accompanied by proposals, the deadline is July 20, welcome to participate.

(Baillieu’s Weibo page, 2012; translated from Chinese by the author)

Weibo has also offered Chinese international students a more direct communication channel with Australian politicians. A Chinese student in Victoria has successfully applied for a tuition fee refund after the State Premier Baillieu sent the university a direct email, according to this student’s Weibo post (see Figure 3).
FIGURE 3: CONVERSATION BETWEEN AN OVERSEAS CHINESE STUDENT AND TED BAILLIEU ON WEIBO

留学生在异国求学，很不容易。在你们需要帮助的时候，我和我的团队，包括 International Student Care Service 会尽力帮你们解决问题。现在正是学期末的考试复习阶段，希望同学们好好努力读书，加油！👏🏻/@今日墨尔本：微博非常强大

Original post by Chinese international student @Biyun Yan on 18 May

With the help from State Premier, I have now received my tuition refund…

Retweeted by ‘@Today and Recent Melbourne’

Weibo is very powerful!

Retweeted by Baillieu on 23 May

Overseas students face lots of difficulties. My team and myself, including International Student Care Service will try our best to solve your problem when in need. It's final exam preparation period at the moment, I hope you work hard, come on!

(Baillieu’s Weibo page, 2012; translated from Chinese by the author)
Deputy Mayor of Sydney Robert Kok has explored Weibo’s micro-interview function, allowing Chinese international students to ask him questions directly and publicly via Weibo by simply posting an entry mentioning Robert Kok’s Weibo account, and replying to all of them publicly, a couple of weeks before his re-election (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 : DEPUTY MAYOR OF SYDN EYE ROBERT KOK’S MICRO-INTERVIEW ON WEBIO

跨文化的交流是一个很重要的方面，不仅仅是在恋爱关系中。这是双向的。双方都要互相理解，才能让关系维持。这就是为什么，跨文化的交流在任何关系中都很重要。

Original post by Chinese student
@wodebaobaohaomilihaomili on 3 September

asking @RobertKok: Greetings, I would like to ask you whether cultural clashes are really hard to overcome? I am dating an Aussie guy at the moment, we both have feelings but often end up in arguments due to cultural differences, do you have any tips?

Retweeted and answered by Robert Kok on 3 September

Cross-cultural communication is a very important aspect, not only in love relationships. This is a two-way communication. Both sides need to understand each other to maintain the
relationship. This is why, cross-cultural communications are important in all sorts of relationships.

(Kok’s Weibo page, 2012; translated from Chinese by the author)

For Australian politicians, what are the benefits of using Weibo to communicate with Chinese communities in Australia?

In a democratic nation, the ultimate benefit for a politician perhaps lies in the number of votes. Has the interaction with Chinese community via Weibo brought Australian politicians any increase in votes? All six politicians in this study opened their account around March 2012; therefore, the most suitable case by which to measure benefits is Robert Kok’s re-election in September 2012.

During his re-election, Robert not only actively posted daily entries, but also used Weibo’s micro-interview function to have a closer conversation with Chinese communities. Some of Robert Kok’s Weibo followers actively volunteered in Robert’s election campaigns, and Kok finally won his position as Deputy Mayor of Sydney.

Figure 5 shows Robert Kok’s Weibo page displaying his celebration with Chinese volunteers after his successful election.

**Weibo entry broadcasted by Robert Kok on 8 September**

Good news! We won! I have been re-elected after local government election 2012! Although the votes are still in the process of counting, we are leading the way with an absolute advantage! Thanks for all the hardwork and support of our volunteers! You are the best! Enjoy the after party!

(Kok’s Weibo page, 2012; translated from Chinese by the author)
Has Weibo meant better communication between Australian politicians and their potential Chinese Australian voters?

What does the uptake of Australian politician users of Chinese social media – and Chinese Weibo in particular – mean for Australian politics?

Based on the number of comments and retweets, and the contents of comments and retweets, it is arguable that Weibo has allowed effective communication between Australian politicians and the Chinese community. It has also arguably encouraged the Chinese community to participate in political discussions as well as protect their own rights by using Weibo. For Chinese international students, they could now seek help from the above
politicilians directly by using @ their names in Weibo. Compared with other communication platforms, Weibo is outstanding in its efficiency and effectiveness, due to its multiple broadcasting ability and wide penetration in Chinese communities.

The successful cases of Weibo use by Australian politicians might attract more politicians who are interested in gaining more votes from Chinese communities, particularly those politicians who already have Chinese-speaking assistants. It might also generate more working opportunities for Chinese speaking and writing positions in each level of government in Australia.

Concluding remarks

At the moment, Weibo is only used by an extremely small number of Australian politicians but, due to its nature, its influence extends far beyond this readership (Glance, 2005, p. 2). The six examined politicians are pioneers in embarking on Chinese social media for public relations; they certainly offer an example to other politicians who might have a focus on local Chinese communities. Additionally, Australian politicians’ use of Weibo also provides an example for many other Western countries with Chinese residents. Although different countries face different agendas, communication is the key to any misunderstandings between government and citizens with various ethnic backgrounds. Among available online platforms, Weibo is certainly the most effective one for governments and Chinese communities.

Australia’s new National Security Strategy (NSS), *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia’s National Security*, states that Australia must and will cope with a rising China. Australia and almost all other countries in the Asia-Pacific region are assessing how to understand a rising China, as they consider national security priorities for the coming decades (Bower, 2013). Australians have become more engaged with their Asian neighbours and migrants, and politicians in Australia would also benefit if they find ways to communicate with their migrant constituents in language and terms they understand.

Given the cases in this research were selected up to March 2013, future research could look at the increasing or decreasing use of Weibo by Australian politicians, as well as by other Western politicians who are seeking support from the local Chinese communities. Future research could also look at the demographics of existing Australian Weibo users, to find out how many are overseas students, how many are temporary residents and permanent residents who don’t have voting rights, and how many are Australian citizens.
References


