The Role of Social Networks as a Public Sphere During the Rise of Chinese Cybernationalism

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The nationalism is gradually expanding among the Chinese internauts, but few investigations about the Chinese nationalism's dissemination over social networks have been done. This study focuses on the structure of social networks used by the Chinese cybernationalists, and their contribution as a public sphere to the Chinese nationalism will be examined, which leads to the understanding of the informational attribute of the Chinese cybernationalism. Also, the communication model showed by the social networks will be defined, so the role of the opinion leaders during the rise of Chinese nationalism can be evaluated.

Keywords: social networks, public sphere, China, nationalism, cybernationalism, international communication, cyberculture, digital public opinion

Introduction

The nationalism, as Professor Ernest Gellner stated, is “primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent” (Gellner & Breuilly, 1983, p. 1). Its common accepted origin is the French Revolution (Dann & Dinwiddy, 1988). However, both as a concept and as a movement, nationalism was introduced to China only after the First Opium War (1840), and its influence over the Chinese people is often ignored before recent years. Like Professor Liah Greenfeld (2018) said:

In the last three decades, nationalism has finally taken root within China's large population, animating this previously inert, enormous mass of humanity with competitive, nationalist motivation. For the first time in its long history, China demands from the world the dignity due to it, and insists on being recognized by all as the Middle Kingdom.

The Western academia argued that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “was articulating patriotism as the main value system to delimit the legitimate boundaries of dissent” and “has placed nationalism at the center of its claim to maintain a monopoly on political power ever since the days of Mao Zedong's leadership” (Hughes, 2006, p. 6), some pro-Western Chinese scholars agree with that, according to them, the dissemination of nationalism among the Chinese people is a survival strategy of the CCP: “the CCP leaders began to wrap themselves in the banner of nationalism which, they found, remained the one bedrock of political belief shared

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by most Chinese people in spite of the rapid decay of Communist official ideology” (Zhao, 1998, p. 289). But from the perspective of the classic theories of nationalism, this argument is over-instrumentalism, which ignores the Chinese historical background and the social change during the last three decades, not to mention that the instrumentalism itself has already been criticized by many nationalism researchers (Smith, 2003). The grassroots Chinese nationalist’s narrative does not always coincident with the official one; in many cases, they are even in contrast (Deng & Valle de Frutos, 2019).

We should notice that, during the last three decades, the agricultural employment in China, according to the World Bank, has dropped from 59.7% (1991) to 26.77% (2017). Following the Ethno-Symbolism paradigm shared by many scholars, like Gellner and Breuilly (1983), Eric Hobsbawm (2012), and Anthony Smith (2003), this industrialization process will naturally result in a rise of the nationalism. However, this data may explain the social origin of the dissemination of the nationalism of recent year, but the nationalism still requires a channel to practice and maximize its potential influence. Considering the Chinese government controls all traditional news media, the only but also the best public space for the grassroots nationalist is the Internet.

One crucial fact is, besides the industrialization, in the last three decades that the informationalization also takes place in China. In 1991, with the help of their German counterparts, Chinese scientists registered the top-level domain of China, .cn, which was the beginning of Chinese Internet history. And till the end of 2018, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2019) confirmed that the Chinese internauts’ amount exceeded 800 million (p. 16). As these two processes are highly synchronized, and only 7.8% of Chinese internauts are of agricultural employment (p. 25), we can say that the Chinese internauts and the Chinese non-agricultural population are almost the same groups.

Therefore, to understand the rise of nationalism in China, a feasible way is the investigation of the social networks used by the Chinese nationalist, primarily through the perspective of its contribution to the communication among the nationalists. So, the objective of this study is set as: How the social network propels the Chinese nationalism as a communication channel?

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Karl Deutsch has studied a lot about the communication and the nationalism. In his book *Nationalism and Social Communication*, Deutsch (1966) proposed a functional definition of nationality that “Membership in a people essentially consists in wide complementarity of social communication. It consists in the ability to communicate more effectively and over a wider range of subjects, with members of one large group than with outsiders” (p. 97), in order to test the level of the complementarity, or in other words, in order to develop the complementarity, Deutsch mentioned three nuclear factors: velocity, accuracy, and complexity of the communication (p. 96). Although this book was written more than 60 years ago, its theory, especially those three factors are still very inspirational for a study about the group identification and forms of communication.

But this social communication requires a platform for its happening, so the theory of the public sphere of Jurgen Habermas can be introduced here. According to Habermas, S. Lennox, and F. Lennox (1974), the public sphere:

...means first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly

and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. (p. 49)

Some scholars may question the implementation of the public sphere theory in China for: “The Public Sphere of Habermas is of the Bourgeois; it highly depends on the liberalism idea and the Western civil society concept” (Wang, 2010, p. 143). However, Professor Mary Rankin (1993) argued that:

Even if the details of the bourgeois public sphere do not fit Chinese history, the idea of intermediate arenas in which open, public initiatives are undertaken by both officials and the populace seems useful in understanding relationships between the two. Such spheres require a state presence, a degree of autonomous or voluntary social involvement, some social impact on policy, and a legitimizing idea of the common good. (p. 160)

So even the public sphere in China may heavily be influenced by the “state presence”, but the “voluntary social involvement” still guarantees its “public” attribute.

However, when some small and elite groups control all traditional news media, like newspapers, radio, and television, the state presence will overcome the voluntary social involvement and danger the public attribute of these news media, especially in modern China, these elite groups are acting in two similar faces—the CCP and the state. Things changed after the expansion of the Internet because the majority of citizens acquired a more openly and anonymously information channel, a sphere much more public than any before, even under the censorship. In his book *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991), Habermas proposed nine normative features to value a specific public sphere, which are: inclusiveness, accessibility, autonomy, rationality, interactivity, criticalness, commonness, privacy, and social integration.

Combining the nine features with those three factors from Deutsch’s theory—velocity, accuracy, and complexity—and taking into account the context of China, here we propose five fundamental standards to evaluate the Chinese social network’s structural features as public sphere:

- (1) Complexity—The form and quantity of virtual content published by internauts, especially the amount of each publication, as some social networks limit the length of each publication while some others do not.
- (2) Interactivity—The frequency of interaction inside and outside of the virtual community highly depends on the form of participation of different social networks.
- (3) Accessibility—The requirement to join a virtual community and participate in the discussion.
- (4) Autonomy—The ability to confront the censorship from the government, the Internet service provider (ISP) and Internet content provider (ICP), also including the ability to preserve its own agenda against other groups.
- (5) Agenda setting—How the conversation topic has been built? How an internaut acquires the awareness of an issue? And how the information flow moves inside the community?

The last standard is what we should pay special attention to because it directly influences the content of the information spread among the internauts and determines the interaction structure between them. On this topic, Deutsch also discussed how is the direction of communication determined with his cascade model of five levels:

The political stratification system consists of a series of interconnected pools of opinion. Within each level, information and persuasion flow more freely than between levels. Usually, the communication flow is easier from levels of

higher prestige and power to lower levels than vice versa. At the top are the socioeconomic elites (2 to 3 percent of the population) followed by the political elites. Just below, opinions are represented by mass media. Between mass media and ordinary citizens, the “net of opinion leaders” (5 to 10 percent of the population) is situated. The last level of the cascade is the “political relevant strata of society”, i.e., the political effective part of the population (60 to 90 percent of the adults). The communication flow is more intense and more open within each level as compared to communication between levels. (Deutsch, 1968, pp. 147-159, as cited in Wessels, 1992, p. 4)

In Deutsch’s model, the information flow is unidirectional and mainly vertical, although within these upper classes, the horizontal communication is feasible, for the lowest class, due to its vast number, high dispersion level, and scarcity of communicative resources, the horizontal communication is almost nonexistent. Besides, Deutsch focuses too much on the manipulation of opinion by the elite group, which was common before the information era. As the expansion of the Internet, the monopolization of news media by upper class seems is broken now, and the bubble-up model takes up, according to Professor Giovanni Sartori:

From time to time the public raises and reacts in unexpected, unforeseen and undesired ways by those in the upper basins. Therefore, there are “tides of opinion” that actually manage to go up the course of the waters. Only by leaving this question clearly and well clarified can one agree with the thesis that the normal, or most frequent, processes of genesis of public opinion are at scale. (Sartori, 2007, p. 79, as cited in Ferreres, 2009)

The bubble-up model does pay attention to the ordinary people, but like the cascade model, it also lacks discussion on the horizontal information flow. With the expanding of Internet access and developing on communicative infrastructure, not only the cost of communication has been decreased to a shallow level, but also the efficiency of communication has been improved impressively. In the era of the Internet, the communication between different classes and inside those classes themselves is much more complicated than ever before.

Therefore, after combing all these theoretical backgrounds with the Chinese context, three hypotheses are proposed for this work:

- (1) The social network in China can be classified as the public sphere.
- (2) The communication model of social networks’ usage among Chinese nationalists is a typical bubble-up model.
- (3) The social network propels the rise of the Chinese nationalism.

Methodologies

The qualitative methodology will be used throughout this work: First, we will check the structure and organization of different social networks, which is about their openness, accessibility, and form of participation. This information will reveal the structural feature of social networks used as public sphere. Second, some personal experience from the Chinese researchers will be introduced, and their words will supplement our understanding of the operational/organization structure of the social networks.

The quantitative methodology will be applied in this work through a case study about the Internet forum. First, with the specific web crawler tool, Bazhuayu (八爪鱼), developed by the Skieer Company, we will collect public data from the social network, including content information, the user’s ID, the text of the comment, the number of upvotes, the number of replies to the comment, and the number of reposts. Based on this basic information, we can classify the data by user’s ID, and combined with a sample standard deviation’s calculation on the upvote of comment; it is possible to reveal the public opinion’s dispersion degree.

Structure of Typical Social Networks Used by Chinese Cybernationalist

According to CNNIC's report of 2016, social networks in China can be classified into six types: the instant messaging application; the comprehensive social network; the image-video social network; the online-dating application; the virtual community; and the working social network (p. 5). Because the core factor of this study is the nationalism, so mainly three typical social networks will be reviewed: the Internet Forum as the virtual community; the Group of Instant Messaging (GIM) as the instant messaging application; and the Twitter of China—Weibo (微博, literally: Microblog) as the comprehensive social network.

Internet Forum

The Internet forum is an online discussion site where internauts can start a conversation in the form of posted messages; it is originated from the Bulletin Boards System (BBS). In China, although the BBS had already declined a lot before the massive expansion of the Internet in 2002 (CNNIC, 2019, p. 19), Chinese internauts sometimes still refer to the Internet forum as BBS.

A funder could design and construct a forum all by his programming skill, but in many cases, funders prefer to use a pre-designed template, for example, in China, one of the templates most used is the Discuz!, developed by the Comsenz Technology Company. A typical Discuz! Forum has a tree-like structure, from forum to board, to section and till subsection. The Northdy Forum (北朝论坛) will be investigated as an example of Internet forum's structural features.

Northdy (<https://bbs.northdy.com/>) is funded in the year 2011 as a result of the dysfunction of another forum, the Sonicbbs. Until July 15th of 2019, it has six boards and 26 sections, with 11,590,400 posts and 125,359 registered accounts in total. The daily average new-posted discussion number of Northdy is around 3,800-5,000, while the most popular section occupies 3,000-4,200.

As the repeated self-determination by its founder—Dangrenbei (党人碑), Northdy is just a teahouse for his acquaintances (熟人茶馆), especially those refugees from Sonicbbs. And according to a senior user, the co-founder and one of the general administrators—Sikaoderen (思考得人), Northdy is “A coalition for opposing idiot, pro-Western intellectual, reverse nationalism, and extreme environmentalist, a hodgepodge of both left and right” (一个为了反对脑残、公知、逆向民族主义和环保厨的联盟 这个从左到右无所不包的大杂烩).

Under this sprite, Northdy limits its accessibility: Almost half of all boards and sections are invisible for the non-registered visitor, and only permit the registration by invitation, except some national celebration days when it allows public registration. And even after the registration, Northdy sets different authorization levels among its members, to enjoy an average navigation experience including search posted thread and other members, a new beginner has to post 400 times at least.

Limited accessibility means a limited possibility to attract advertisements, which is the most crucial fund source to pay the server cost and maintenance for many Internet forums. To solve this problem, administrators of Northdy called up for donations from members. Although only a unique mark above the user's ID will be given for this donation, Northdy still successfully raised enough money. Some members with programming ability also voluntarily take the responsibility of daily maintenance; they even had developed a mobile application of Northdy for android users. Due to all these efforts, Northdy is a quite autonomous community.

Censorship is a problem of all virtual communities must face in China. In the case of Northdy, principally because it is a semi-public forum, partly because of its dominated ideology, Northdy maintains a quite open

environment, no stop word list is applied, and administrators adopt a post-censor tactic and mainly intervene after complaints.

In Northdy, like many other Internet forums, within the sections or subsections, users can start a discussion—a so-called thread—with a “starter posting” (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012, p. 55). Topics of these discussions form the main body of each section with pagination of every 30 topics, and users must click on a topic to view the whole content of the discussion.

Inside a discussion, the length of each post has a minimum requirement but without a maximum limit, that is to say, Northdy encourages a longer post. Also, under the Discuz! System, it is easy to enrich the form and the content of posts: Users can change the font and format of the message to stress the key point; it is also possible to attach some multimedia contents to the post, like image, music, and video. These contents can be uploaded from local documents or directly be stuck with an Internet link; in both situations, the multimedia content is supposed to be viewed directly inside the Internet forum. But due to the copyright and format support problem of Discuz!, minimal usage of videos is common while text and image are highly used; users prefer to paste the original link of the video, so other members can watch it on outside websites.

Users can reply to the starter posting or other users' comments. On Discuz!, every post occupies a unique floor in time sequence, with pagination of every 30 posts. The time sequence and the pagination system help users to understand the ongoing process of the discussion, but because the latest post is shown in the last page, it reduces the desire of participation for later joiners, as their message could be ignored by other users, especially when too many posts have been stacked in one discussion. Besides, the separate stratification strategy heavily weakens the possibility of outside understanding of interactions between two or more specific members; non-participant users have to pay more attention to catch up the interaction while being distracted by other irrelevant posts, but still not entirely impossible. Therefore, as every post is archived and the total amount of posts is considerably limited, users tend to treat their posts with a serious attitude.

To find out the Agenda Setting of Northdy, a search with keyword “trade war” (贸易战) inside the forum is made, and the data of 314 discussions are collected on 15 of July 2019, as showed in Table 1, our findings are:

(1) Internet forum users' awareness still heavily depends on the institutional information source: 305 (97.13%) of these discussions were posted after (or around) the United States trade representative announced approximately \$50 billion in proposed tariffs on imports from China (Trump, 2018, April 5), and 151 (48.09%) starter postings are a repost of information from institutional news media. This might because the trade war is an issue between two politic entities, which is beyond the information receiving range during the daily life of an internaut.

(2) Compared with the traditional centralized and vertical information flow, the self-generated communications inside the internauts are more and more possessing a vital role. These 151 official-originated discussions received 5,236 comments with an average of 34.6 comments for each discussion, while 163 self-generated discussions received 5,768 comments with an average of 35.3. Not just the amount of discussion but also the reaction received from the self-generated discussion are as important as the official-generated one now, even on a state-led issue.

(3) Although the informative channel shows a tendency of decentralization and diversification, the local opinion leader recentralizes users' attention again. Those 151 official-originated discussions have a various information source, including Chinese official agencies, like China Central Television, Xinhua News, and

People Daily; and also foreigner agencies, like Associated Press, Radio France Internationale, Bloomberg News, New York Times, British Broadcasting Corporation, etc. Besides, as only 78 users reposted official information while 123 users started an original discussion, users show an obviously higher passion for starting a self-generated discussion. However, internauts' attention is limited, so among these 123 users, the sample standard derivation of total comments they received is quite high, reaches 133 while the median is 25. The most outstanding data comes from the user Gougoudetuba2 (狗狗的兔爸2), he has started four discussions, all of the self-generated type, while respectively received 1,053, 206, 175, and 32 comments, which in total occupies 25.41% comment for self-generated post type and 13.32% comment of all discussions.

Table 1

Comparison of Different Type of Discussion Over the "Trade War" Issue

	Total discussion	Total comments	Average comments	Starter user	Median of comment per starter user	Sample standard derivation of comment per starter user
Total	314	11,004	35	179*	29	127
Official-originated	151	5,236	34.6	78	42	87
Self-generated	163	5,768	35.3	123	25	134
Scale factor**	107.95%	110.16%	102.02%	157.69%	59.52%	154.02%

Notes. * Some users had both posted official-originated thread and self-generated thread; ** self-generated/official-originated.

Chinese researchers Bo and Xia Zhengyou (2009) also had undertaken a similar investigation on a virtual forum, their main finding is that 60% interactions/comments on the virtual forum take place under discussion started by a tiny group of hyperactive users (less than 0.1% of total users). That is to say, although the traditional upper class of the information pyramid lost its dominant position as opinion leader over the common people, the internauts still tend to gather together to form a grassroots communication center.

Group of Instant Messaging (GIM)

In China, there are two popular Instant messaging programs, QQ and WeChat. Both are developed by the Tencent Company. Although their primary purpose is individual communication, these two programs also offer the group chatting service.

On the QQ platform, the GIM is more stable, every group has an independent number as its ID, and a formal name is required. To join a GIM of QQ, while the invitation is a more convenient form, a QQ user also can search the ID or the name of the group to send the request. The membership could be totally public without any requirement, but under most circumstances before the permission, administrators of GIM would like to make some identification check, from a simple question of intention to a series of questions linked with the GIM's theme, sometimes a 100% exact answer is the only way to join the GIM. On the WeChat platform, the GIM is more like a temporary chatting group, no ID and no formal name, the invitation is the only way to join a GIM on WeChat.

A GIM is always founded by an account of QQ/WeChat; the founder can choose some members to form the administrator team, so the GIM is much more like a "teahouse for acquaintances" compared with the Internet forum. Because technically the GIM totally depends on the service of Tencent, so the supreme authority of a GIM is under the control of Tencent Company, in a sense, also under the control of the government; this means GIM's administrators tend to apply a strict censorship code. However, even a GIM was banned by the superior authority, the cost of its reconstruction is nearly zero and the main lost for the user is the chat record. Therefore, a subtle balance is built between the GIM and the censorship system.

Unlike the Internet forum, GIM is a group for chatting, which means everyone can speak at the same time in the group and the messages are automatically updated, so users' attention can be easily distracted by the flooding information. As the topic of discussion is developing rapidly, the longer preparation of one message takes, the more likely to be out of sense with the current topic is. In order to catch up with the rhythm and gain more attention during the discussion, short sentences and radical expressions are more welcomed among the GIM users. For the same reason, the use of meme is also popular because "visual images retain more impact and are far more engaging than text alone" (Abbott, Donaghey, Hare, & Hopkins, 2013, p. 3). Besides, thanks to the advance both in ISP and ICP, nowadays GIM is not only available on mobile devices like smartphone but also efficiently support multimedia contents. The combination of smartphone, camera, and microphone boosts the interactivity and the complexity to an unprecedented level.

Agenda setting in GIM is hard to be investigated, or even the existence of any agenda setting is still suspicious. But some evidence shows that the GIM is widely used as a coordination tool during the Chinese nationalist's activity. For example, after the pro-independence candidate, Tsai Ing-wen won the 2016 general election of the Republic of China (Taiwan), numerous cybernationalists from mainland China decided to launch a "Holy War" over Tsai's Facebook to show their determination in the unification of Taiwan. But to achieve this goal, first cybernationalists need to solve many problems, for example, technically cybernationalists have to overcome the block of Facebook in mainland China, and also they have to build a system to organize themselves. The GIM of QQ played a nuclear role during this process.

Table 2

Task Distribution on GIM During the 2016 "Holy War"

ID of GIM (Number on QQ)	Task of each GIM
Headquarter (80149962)	General coordination between different GIMs and also with other social networks, command department of the "Holy War".
Frontline (292280956)	Directly engage in Facebook: comment, repost, "like" ally's post, and "dislike" the rival one.
1st Route (364207102)	Collect information about Taiwanese Separatism, including data, news, and images.
2nd Route (136070807)	Recruit new participants among others social networks, spread information about the "Holy War".
3rd Route (367082592)	Prepare anti-separatism content, including slogan, poster, and meme.
4th Route (339864386)	Coordinate abroad Chinese students' actions; translate anti-separatism content into foreign languages.
5th Route (434253247)	Dedicate in the action of "like" and "dislike" on Facebook, also assume the responsibility of "Report Abuse".
Cantonese group (369704483)	Specialize in Cantonese content to convince Hong Kong and Macau internauts.

In Table 2, we can see a clear task distribution of the "Holy War", features of GIM mentioned before allow these groups operate with a high organization and fast respond, and the same determination shared among the users minimizes the dispersed discourse defect of GIM. Besides, as one GIM can be divided into many "temporal discuss teams" on QQ, the distribution of tasks can be most detailed and avoid useless work, for example, in the 4th route, users were further subdivided into teams of different languages.

Although there was a headquarter, according to the young researcher Lin Suzhen's who participated in the "2016 Holy War" master thesis, the structural relationship between these GIMs rather be a circle than a pyramid. The headquarter GIM did connect with all others GIMs, but a special connection between GIMs also was established if necessary, for example, the Frontline directly exchanged information with the 3rd Route for

“ammunition supply”, while the 3rd Route also highly cooperated with the 1st Route for “material preparation” (Lin, 2017, p. 25).

Weibo

Weibo is an open virtual community launched by the Sina Company, and the name Weibo is the direct translation of Microblog in Chinese, one similar Internet product we can find in the Western Internet world is Twitter. According to the official report of Sina, the daily active user of Weibo reached 200 million in 2018 (Sina, 2019, p. 5). CNNIC also confirmed a 37.1% usage of Weibo among Chinese internet users in 2016 (CNNIC, 2017, p. 6).

Like Twitter, there are three basic mechanisms of Weibo: The blog, the follow, and the trending. A Microblog can be total public or only visible among a specific group, and its length is normally limited under 140 words. While the length is limited, but Weibo offers high compatibility with video and image, and allows users to express themselves with multimedia content. On the other side, to import information from other social networks is as easy as possible on Weibo, while the direct export of a Microblog is considerably hard, this turns the Weibo into a reservoir of information. Inside Weibo, other users can comment or repost the Microblog, or left a “like” on it, the comment and the repost are also in the form of Microblog which means they can be commented and reposted once again.

Weibo will automatically recommend some accounts to the new starter, but a better way to receive information is following other accounts, like friend, celebrity, news agency, or the official department; by this way, a user can establish a particular informative channel, and a small virtual community is also feasible through the mutual followership. If enough participants finally have gathered in this virtual community, its core speakers will turn to be the opinion leader of this group.

However, a monotonous information source may lead to a narrow mind, so Weibo also offers the “Explore System”, where users can view those hottest Microblogs of the day, the week, or the month. The Explore System of Weibo is different from Twitter, rather than offers the users the hottest tags as the trending (issue-orientated); Weibo directly shows the most liked, reposted, and commented Microblogs (opinion leader-orientated). This means the effort one opinion leader has dedicated to the Weibo career, which determinates the number of followers, will affect the possibility to maximize his/her visibility and influence over the whole Weibo platform. Of course, the friendship with other opinion leaders also matters; the reaction from other opinion leaders will directly foster the dissemination of a Microblog. As this type of bond deepens among some opinion leaders, a more significant but may be looser virtual community is formed up. And when a consensus is shared by this community about a specific issue, it could mobilize massive participation from its followers, and naturally with more possibility to be noticed in the Explore System.

Like GIM, Weibo is a product technically controlled by the Sina Company and the Chinese government, but as the registration of Weibo requires a mobile phone number and all Chinese telecom companies apply the Real-name system, so a Weibo account is much more valuable than a GIM. However, the censorship on Weibo is not as strict as the GIM, dissidents, and disagreements with the government are not uncommon. According to Professor King, “(the government) allowed the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders” because “this ‘loosening’ upon the constraints on public expression may, at the same time, be an effective governmental tool in learning how to satisfy, and ultimately mollify, the masses” (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013, p. 14). Another semi-censorship measure might take by the Chinese

government and cause concerns from outsider researchers is public opinion rigging, for example, through automation—use bots as part of the propaganda strategy. However, a recent work done by two Oxford researchers negates this speculation; they have

collected data to examine whether automation was present in hashtags associated with Chinese politics on Twitter and in comments on official news information on Weibo. These data indicate that the Chinese state is not using automation as part of either its domestic or international propaganda efforts. (Bolsover & Howard, 2018, p. 12)

Apparently, Weibo is more like a public plaza of all type information; the following is the leading information source of a user and profoundly influences user's attitude towards an incident, so in order to gather a maximum attention from this virtual community, an incident need to be commented or reposted by a user with enough followers. Not just because an influential user plays as the opinion leader for his followers and encourages more participation, but also because the information flow between two opinion leaders is much more smooth than the information flow from a common user to an opinion leader, the exchange between two opinion leaders will obviously expand the receptor scale of the incident. Evidently, if an incident was directly blogged by an opinion leader and intentionally spread to the starter's influential friends, the dissemination process will be dramatically accelerated. That is to say, although Weibo is a public plaza where everyone has his own speaker, only these opinion leaders are the real presenters and coordinators of information. And in many cases, the influences of these opinions leaders are so strong that even the traditional new media have to cooperate and seek ally with them (Deng & Valle de Frutos, 2019).

Comparison of Three Social Networks

After analyzing these five fundamental standards of three typical social networks, now it is possible to present an overview of their structural features as public sphere:

Table 3

Structural Features of Social Networks

	Internet forum	Group of Instant Messaging	Weibo
Complexity	High complexity of information with medium usage of multimedia content	Low complexity of information but high usage of multimedia content	Medium complexity of information with medium usage of multimedia content
Interactivity	Medium internal Interactivity and low external interactivity	High internal Interactivity and medium external interactivity	High internal Interactivity and high external interactivity
Accessibility	Low , often requires special qualification for registration, and different authorization level is applied	Medium , the registration of QQ/WeChat is open, but the membership of GIM may require verification	High , open account registration
Autonomy	High , self-funded and technically independent, censorship relies on the administrators	Medium , free cost but relies on platform's technical support, triple-censorship: administrators, platform and government	Low , real-name registration system applied, dual-censorship from both platform and government
Agenda setting	Information source relies on official media, but users tend to create own discussion, and local opinion leaders control the node of information	Not exists a formal agenda setting, but quickly respond in a live interaction	Exist two information community: the private circle and the public plaza, in both communities, and opinion leaders are the center of communication

Table 3 presents a comparison of those three social networks with each one shows an advantage in different aspects. A simple but scientific conclusion of their public sphere features can be: The Internet forum is the digital salon, where opinion leaders can primarily develop their narrative and gain the first support from a

group of internauts with a common ideology. Weibo is the digital public plaza and also the battlefield of the discourse power; opinion leaders from an Internet forum with preparation can widely spread their ideas here, they can launch a discussion by themselves, or they can seize the opportunity when some incidents happen. In both situations, when the event attracts sufficient attention and gathers massive participation, opinion leaders and their core supporters need to use the GIM as the digital Walkie-Talkie to coordinate the movement.

In fact, except those features mentioned before, what should be noticed here is the diversity of social networks used by cybernationalist. Without a comprehensive perspective of the cooperation between different social networks when investigating the Chinese cybernationalism, researchers can be easily distracted by the vast amounts of information and conclude far from reality. For example, the work of Zhang Yinxian, Liu Jiajun and Wen Jirong of the year 2018, as they only checked the Microblogs from a limited group of opinion leaders On Weibo, while ignored the interaction between Weibo and other social networks, they draw a hasty conclusion state that the nationalist opinion leaders/ideology has a smaller popular base than the non-nationalist opinion leaders/ideology.

Conclusions and Discussions

The motivation of this study is to examine the features of the social networks used by Chinese cybernationalists. It has consisted of two main parts: the measure of three typical social networks as the public sphere in the Chinese context; and the comparison between these three social networks.

First, Internet forum, Group of Instant Messaging, and Weibo, all these three typical social networks are highly digitalized public sphere. There are advantages and disadvantages between them; however, compared with the traditional news media, they are more superior in complexity, accessibility, interactivity, and autonomous. The traditional media may still be influential in the agenda setting, but social networks have already shown a vital trend in changing this situation. On the other hand, while the state presence dominates the traditional media, in these social networks, we can see relatively proactive voluntary social involvement. So, our first hypothesis is confirmed here.

Second, communication on the Internet does show a trend of decentralization. However, this decentralization is more like a decentralization from the traditional informative nodes, for example, the government or the press. After stripping themselves from the traditional media, Internauts and their attention over a specific issue have not been completely Atomized, but quickly the new and grassroots informative node, or the opinion leader, is formed up. It looks like a typical bubble-up model, but there is a significant difference: The tools and channels of communication among the public are unprecedented enriched, and make the upper class more like acceptable rather than essential for the communication process; this means the traditional information pyramid no longer exists. The communication model in the Internet age, we would like to suggest it as a flashlight-mirror type, the individual attention as the flashlight while the opinion leader as the mirror. The flashlight can freely choose a mirror to irradiate, and as more light already received by a mirror, the more possible it to be noticed and irradiated. Of course, the critical problem for the mirror is to set up the cause for being irradiated, especially when it tries to stay bright as long as possible. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the bubble-up model is refuted.

At last, the social network's usage by the Chinese nationalists is never monotonous and different social networks are used for different purposes, although the delimitation is not insurmountable. Generally speaking, with social networks, Chinese cybernationalists can develop their theory preparation in their semi-public

Internet forums while avoiding direct interference from outside. They can preach their theory and disseminate it to a big scale on the Weibo platform, or even attract massive attention by catching up on the trendings of social networks. And when the Chinese cybrenationalists need to participate in some concrete actions or movements, the GIM offers an operational instrument for their coordination. Therefore, the social network does propel the rise of Chinese nationalism.

In interpreting the results of this study, one must pay attention to several limitations. First, although some data analysis has been implemented, the comparison of the three typical social networks is still an empirical study; in future investigations, more data should be collected and analyzed to further understanding on this topic. Second, the social networks' contribution to the Chinese nationalism is separately investigated in this study; a better and more convincing way is to conduct a nationalistic case study where all three social networks are used in the same time.

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