

Relay activism and the flows of contentious publicness on WeChat: a case study of COVID-19 in China

Journal:	<i>Information, Communication and Society</i>
Manuscript ID	RICS-2021-1101.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	contentious publicness, WeChat, China, digital activism, censorship, covid-19

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Relay activism and the flows of contentious publicness on WeChat: a case study of COVID-19 in China

Abstract

This paper explores a case of public contention against the censoring of a feature article about a COVID-19 whistleblower on the Chinese social media, WeChat. Moving beyond the normative theory of the public sphere and publics, we draw on Kavada and Poell's theory of 'contentious publicness' which is flexible enough to capture the complexity, diversity and hybridity of digital contention in the context of China. Through a combination of textual analysis and participatory observation, this article analyses how citizens challenged the censorship system and attempted to keep Dr Fen's story online through what we call 'relay activism'. Informed by the three dimensions of "contentious publicness", we analyse the materiality of the communication infrastructure of WeChat and the temporal and spatial relations of the public contention (focusing primarily on WeChat and GitHub). In doing this, the paper contributes a more comprehensive approach to examining the social, structural and participatory characteristics of the contestation of censorship in China.

Keywords: contentious publicness, digital activism, censorship, WeChat, China

Introduction

In China, formal channels of political and collective action are prohibited, and widely censored online (King et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2009; Bamman et al., 2012). However, the focus on censorship and entertainment has created, according to Yang, (2009) a "misconception that because of governmental internet control, Chinese internet users do nothing but play. The real struggles of the Chinese people are thus ignored, and the radical nature of Chinese internet culture is dismissed." While influencers, activists and journalists do face significant censorship in China, the system is relatively porous for everyday citizens (Roberts, 2018) and this creates a space in which censorship is routinely challenged and contested such as via encoded public spheres in which images, puns, and word changes are used to evade keyword filters (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015), embedded texts in photos, and now changing photos (e.g. changing the angle) to avoid image matching (Sun and Zhao, 2021, p. 18) or by creating digital enclaves (Zhen, 2021). These creative approaches to challenging and circumventing censorship have reconfigured the boundaries of dissent, though they do not come without downsides and risks for activists (Brunner and Deluca, 2019; Deluca et al., 2016; Dodge, 2017; Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Link and Qiang, 2013; Mina, 2014; Roberts, 2018).

This article extends scholarship by analysing public contestation of the censoring of the story of COVID-19 whistleblower, Dr Ai Fen, which was published as a feature article on WeChat and detailed a cover-up by the government in Wuhan during the early days of the pandemic. The censorship provoked citizens' anger towards both the local government's response to the initial outbreak of COVID-19, and the censorship system itself – highlighting the risks of censorship for the CCP (Roberts, 2018). Through a combination of textual analysis and participatory observation, this article analyses how citizens challenged this censorship and attempted to keep the story online through what we call 'relay activism'. The analysis is informed by Kavada & Poell's (2021) theory of "contentious publicness", analysing the materiality of the communication infrastructure of WeChat and the temporal and spatial relations of the public contention (focusing primarily on WeChat and GitHub). In doing this, the paper contributes a more comprehensive approach to examining the social, structural and participatory characteristics of the contestation of censorship in China.

The Three C's: Communication, Censorship and Contention in China

Roberts' (2018) analysis of censorship in China delineates two approaches: porous censorship for the masses with stricter, fear-based rules for journalists and opinion leaders. Her work finds that the widespread censorship of everyday users can "counterintuitively decrease rather than increase control of information" (p. 115) in part because censorship can actually highlight issues of concern to the wider public – many of whom seem unbothered by attempts to signal sensitive information. In other work, Hobbs and Roberts (2018) found that the blocking of Instagram in China led to a significant uptake in VPN use, and these users often also signed up to Facebook and Twitter. Censorship can, quite simply, backfire and "create unrest that reduces the legitimacy of the regime" (Roberts, 2018, p. 115). This partly explains the more porous approach for lower-risk groups. We argue here that what we call 'relay activism' – the rapid and creative sharing and resharing of stories and other censored content to keep it alive - occurs through the interaction between the porosity of censorship for some, and censorship backfires that drive contention (see also Yang, 2022, who talks about online relays). The analysis builds on Yang (2022) who observed netizens describing themselves as participating in online relays to keep the whistleblowing story alive, deepening and extending this work theoretically and empirically. Relay activism is another example of the creative, sometimes camouflaged micro-political actions that many Chinese netizens participate in to maintain and expand the boundaries of political expressions in online spaces (Brunner and DeLuca, 2019; Dodge, 2017; Mina, 2014; Yang 2022).

Platform affordances impact how censorship occurs in China – whether it is at the government, platform, or individual level. The public nature of Weibo predicated the crackdown on Big V's (or verified users) in 2013 and the introduction of the rumour laws. These changes arguably made Weibo less interesting, and encouraged a shift to the more private – and less regulated – WeChat. WeChat is, of course, not immune from censorship (Zhang and Guo, 2021, p. 600), and it was subjected to stricter rules in 2014 (Hu, 2014). The number of Self-Media outlets published on WeChat public accounts have fallen as they became targets of official scrutiny (Tai, 2018). Nevertheless, studies have shown that the volume of censored comments is far higher on Weibo than WeChat (Bamman et al., 2012).ⁱ

The general view is that the relative privacy of WeChat – particularly beyond the official accounts – seems to undergird a more permissive space for political talk (Tu, 2016). The standard approaches for monitoring and censoring content such as keyword tracking, image matching, URL tracing, and the monitoring and potential removal of content marked as sensitive via the MD5 hash (a kind of digital fingerprint) apply more or less equally at the technical level (Kenyon, 2020; Knockel, 2020). However, in practice, each platform maintains its own sensitive keyword lists, and employs its own censorship staff, who have to make subjective judgements about where the boundaries are between an acceptable and an unacceptable story (Roberts, 2018). For this reason, a story might be blocked on one platform but allowed on another as part of the distributed, or delegated, censorship system (Sun and Zhao, 2021, p. 13). WeChat has an additional feature that can enable people to avoid censorship: audio messages. Audio content is harder to censor and has been used to encode sensitive news to keep it alive on WeChat (Olesen, 2014).

Contention of censorship in China occurs in myriad online spaces though. For example, GitHub, the US-based code-sharing platform widely used by developers, is home to a number of pages that collect and store sensitive articles through a mix of crowdsourcing and scraping. COVID-19 related examples include Terminus 2049, Lest We Forget and nCovMemoryⁱⁱ. GitHub users are likely to have the technical skills to create tools to circumvent and challenge censorship - and it is part of a wider trend of contention in Chinese hackerspaces (Lindtner,

2014). While China has cut off many western platforms via its “Great Firewall” (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) after creating Chinese versions, GitHub has been left largely untouched, perhaps because it is so important to the tech industry (Zhen, 2021). Instead, China has targeted some individual activists (Hollingsworth and Xiong, 2021; Liu, 2020), though a Chinese GitHub, Gitee, might impact this. While GitHub is a relatively niche space, it supports the contention of activism across a range of online spaces, including WeChat, by facilitating what we call ‘relay activism’.

Relay Activism

We use the term ‘relay activism’ to capture the technique in which a crowd of people use creative and collective means to contest censorship and keep a story public and online; an act of crowd-enabled connective action. It is like a “cat-and-mouse game between users and censors” (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015, p. 147) in which an often-unorganized crowd of netizens spontaneously and concurrently participate to quickly distribute and redistribute content that censors are attempting to remove – a relay race – to keep these stories alive (Yang 2022: 139-140). Netizens code the messages in different ways (e.g. cartoons, QR codes, audio) and use different metadata to avoid keyword and other automated removal techniques to disseminate the censored content. For instance, messages related to the human rights activist Chen Guangcheng were severely censored on the Chinese internet in 2011, but netizens created a series of Chen Guangcheng memes in coded metaphors, puns and visual language to keep the messages running ahead of censors (Mina, 2014). Over ten years later, relay races continue, but evolve constantly as new platforms and techniques emerge and as the mouse attempts to dodge the cat.

Relay races against censorship can use the personal, the mundane, the collective and popular culture reference points, becoming “creative acts of citizenship” that may flow below the radar on the increasingly controlled internet (Yang, 2022, p. 141; Brunner and DeLuca, 2019). As noted earlier, this flow is facilitated by tools that are designed to collect, collate and preserve material that might be censored to make sure that the original messages are always retrievable – even if they may lose traceable meanings in interpretations, reappropriations and remixing over time, as discussed in the GitHub examples above. The main characteristic of relay activism is persistence. It emphasises participants’ sustained commitment to win the battle against censorship. Persistence and sustained participation are very important for the success of social movements and activism (Wang et al., 2021; XXX and Author 2020). For example, the persistent use of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter was successful in gaining media attention (Freelon et al., 2018), though this might not, by itself, achieve the desired objectives (Sommerfeldt and Yang, 2017). The persistence of relay activism is supported by a shared repertoire and the ritual of the relay race. By engaging in relay activism, loosely connected WeChat users may form a committed community, dedicating time and effort to keep communications of resistance going on.

While the continual process of sharing and resharing the encoded messages constitutes the source of power in relay activism, it also has potential limitations that must be recognised. The process of encoding messages may alter the meaning and impact of the message, transforming its discursive power and make it harder for people to both find messages and decode their intending meaning. The more subtle the message, the harder it is for people to find and understand, but if too obvious censors can target it more easily.

Relay activism can confound this analysis though. First, the relay race really starts once censors have identified their target. Second, building on Roberts’ analysis, the fact of the relay race serves to effectively publicise the content – possibly more widely than it would otherwise have been. Rather than suppressing content, it may serve to make it more widely known, at least in

shorter bursts. Third, we do not know the goals and motivations of the activists. In some cases, such as Dr Ai Fen, the goal is to publicise or share an important story. In many cases, however, the goal has a ‘fun’ element – memes such as comparing Xi to Winnie the Poo, for example. The creativity of the relay race ‘game’ seems to be part of that ‘fun’. This is not to deny that both have strong political elements – but the extent to which the nuance of the message being relayed matters can differ. Furthermore, relay racing is a direct challenge to censors and the goal may, in part, be to bog censors down. In turn, this might encourage activists to deliberately provoke censors by being less subtle. For some, it may be more about the game or the provocation rather than the actual content. If that is the case, decoding the nuance of message becomes less important.

The implication of all of this is that to fully understand the contention of censorship in China we need to include every day and niche online spaces using theories of activism that better reflect and capture the diversity of contention, and the ‘organisations’ that underpin this (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Author, 2012; Author, 2015). In the next section we outline Kavada and Poell’s (2021) theory of contentious publicness, which we believe provides an illuminating framework to help analyse such contention.

Contentious Publicness in China

Kavada and Poell’s (2020) theory of contentious publicness emerges in response to a critique of three interrelated literatures. First, they argue for a shift from the “the rather static notion of ‘the public’ that lies at the heart of the dominant concepts of ‘counterpublics’ and ‘networked publics’”. Such approaches tend to focus on the “public as an outcome of a process of publicness” rather than the process by which publicness is produced. This serves to “obfuscate much of the complexity and constantly evolving nature of today’s protest” as they “emerge and circulate around the globe” (p. 193) and a focus on organisations and actors rather than crowd-enabled connective actions (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) that can be virtual and diffuse rather than (or as well as) physically constituted in a locality (Author, 2012), flowing across different media and spaces in hybrid forms in constant motion (Chadwick, 2013; XXX and Author, 2020). Here they draw on Thompson’s (1995, p. 123) definition of public as “what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about.” (cited in Kavada and Poell, 2021, 191). The concept of publicness, we believe, is particularly suited to understanding Chinese activism, which has to be constantly moving and responsive to avoid censorship and regulation and may not cohere around a fixed public.

Second, they argue for a shift from counter (publics etc) to contention because contestation is often “distributed [...] transcend national spheres and spaces and [...] disconnected from established political arrangements and organizations” with the “most vibrant episodes of public contention” cutting across democratic and authoritarian political systems (Kavada and Poell, 2021, p. 194). While their focus is primarily democratic contexts, this does open up some space for non-democratic contexts such as China. However, their focus on “(a) processes of public claim-making, (b) legitimacy of claims and claim-makers, and (c) arenas and contexts in which claims are made” is somewhat limiting. In China, actions or contestations might not be in the form of public or political claims (Author A et al., 2021a; 2021b), at least in an explicit sense, and similarly claims about legitimacy take on a different meaning in the context of the CCP and may not be articulated at all. Finally, the contestation might be in private or semi-private spaces, and the contestation, as in our case, is actually about keeping claims public. It is a fight to *be public*.

Third, they argue for a shift from arenas to dimensions. Again, the idea is to move beyond geographic arenas to assess “the material, spatial and temporal dimensions of contentious

publicness.” (p. 196). They claim that how “mediated public contention affects the formation and character of social movements often remains unexamined” and studies “fail to consider how the media shape the claim-making process itself.” We would argue that this is based on a somewhat selective review of the literature. Research has considered how media shapes, and is shaped by, public contention (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Author, 2015; Cammaerts, 2012; XXX and Author, 2020) and there has been an intensive focus on this since Gillespie (2010) wrote his seminal politics of platforms, and how this shapes activism. Nevertheless, the argument is clearly important, and particularly in China, where platforms – often under the influence of government regulators – have a very important role in shaping political participation and activism via interface design (Author and, 2007) and content moderation (Li, 2019), but also in how users adopt, use and adapt platforms and whether they self-censor. These material and spatial dimensions also impact the temporal dimension of social media, which “affects the rhythms, speed, and degree of synchronicity of public contentious communication, as well as its timing and long-term horizon.” (Kavada and Poell, 2021, p. 197)

Bringing this review of the literature together, a number of observations can be made. First, earlier studies found that the Chinese internet was a space of significant contention and political participation (Damm, 2007; Yang, 2009). We contend that the porous censorship actually counterintuitively makes the censorship system a core and generative part of Chinese contention. As the space for contention online has become more constricted, and the risks of contention have increased, contention has continued to evolve and adapt, blurring the boundary between political expression and activism. This contention happens because the censorship system is complex, giving greater freedom to ‘ordinary’ citizens, in part because censorship can backfire (Roberts, 2018).

There has been a lot of research on how censorship works in China (e.g. King et al., 2013), and some scholarly attention paid to the contention of censorship (Brunner and DeLuca, 2019; DeLuca et al., 2016; Dodge, 2017; Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Link and Qiang, 2013; Mina, 2014; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015). Capturing such contention theoretically and empirically is difficult though. For example, the contention of censorship can involve relatively subtle acts; be hidden/coded; take place in private or semi-private spaces; can itself be censored in myriad ways; and it shifts quickly across sites and platforms at both the micro and macro levels.

To address the theoretical challenges, this study deploys Kavada and Poell’s concept of contentious publicness, which focuses on the material, temporal and spatial dimensions of public contention. We believe it provides a powerful framework for analysing contention in China because it is less constrained by models of the public sphere which were designed for democratic systems (see also critiques and approaches by Xin 1993; Herold and Marolt 2013; DeLuca et al., 2016); can capture the fluidity and diversity of contention on Chinese social media; and encourages us to assess contention at the interaction with platform design, regulation and user behaviour – particularly important when it comes to questions of censorship. We also draw on, and analyse, what we earlier conceptualised as ‘relay activism’. Specifically, we intend to answer the following research question:

How did the material, temporal and spatial characteristics and relations of Chinese citizens’ relay activism against the censorship of a Wuhan whistleblower on WeChat shape the formation and flow of contentious publicness during the initial outbreak of COVID-19?

We now turn to present the case study and methods by which we address the research question.

Methodology

This study deploys a mixture of textual analysis and participant observation and large scale quantitative data on posting behaviour to analyse the material, temporal and spatial dimensions of contentious publicness in China, using a case study of the censoring of a COVID-19 whistleblower, Dr Ai Fen, in March 2020 on WeChat. The case study will be used to inform wider debates about online civic engagement and contention in China. We will first outline the case, before presenting the method.

Case Study: Censoring the Wuhan Whistleblower

The events surrounding the initial Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan are without doubt some of the most significant moments in recent times, and provide a particularly interesting and important example of contestation in China. Dr Ai Fen, Director of the Emergency Department at the Central Wuhan hospital, warned officials of a new SARS-like virus that triggered pneumonia-style symptoms and deaths in late December 2020. Dr Fen circulated the report amongst the private WeChat groups and networks of doctors in the area. In response, the hospital disciplinary inspection committee reprimanded Dr Fen for ‘spreading rumours’ and ‘harming stability’ (Kuo, 2020). Another doctor at the hospital, Li Wenliang, shared the story amongst former classmates and from there it became widely shared on social media. Subsequently, he was warned by police to stop “spreading rumors” about the outbreak of COVID-19. On 7 February 2020, Dr Li died from COVID-19 while treating patients in Wuhan, which provoked a wave of grief among Chinese people.

As the seriousness of the coronavirus became clear, the initial handling of the outbreak came into focus. Dr Fen went public about her treatment and the truth about Li Wenliang’s death in an interview with China’s People magazine, published on 10th of March 2020. The story, headlined “The Whistle-Giver” (发哨子的人), was quickly censored by authorities, causing a huge public outcry and only served to intensify support for the doctors. Activists quickly moved to challenge this censorship, using relay activism to continue sharing the article on WeChat. Perhaps in part because of the public reaction, Dr Li and several other whistleblowers were subsequently recognized as ‘martyrs’ – the highest honourable title awarded by the Communist Party. Having outlined the case, we now turn to the method by which we addressed the research question.

Method

First, to get an overarching picture of the scale of citizens’ contention of the censorship, the study tracked articles published by WeChat public accounts that mentioned the keywords “发哨人” and “发哨子的人” which both mean “whistle-giver” in Chinese and “艾芬” (“Ai Fen”) on WeChat using the web crawler “Qingbo Big Data” (www.gsdata.cn). This collection focused on articles published by WeChat public accounts between 10 March 2020 and 20 March 2020. The time span allows us to capture the interactions between citizens, censors and the government during the key period of activity. These keywords identified a total of 15, 806 WeChat articles that were published during this period. Based on our close reading of a random selection of roughly 10% of the posts (1,600 posts), we found that 80.94% of the selected posts were directly associated with the event. We read the title and abstract of each article to identify the relevance of the posts with our topic. When we were not able to determine the relevance clearly by reading the title and abstract only, we went further to read the content of the article. However, if an article was removed by censors we could not read the whole article and so we did not count it as relevant with our topic.

Second, guided by the theoretical lens of contentious publicness, the article employs textual analysis of the collected data to delineate the material, temporal and spatial dimensions of the relay activism. During what we identify as a cat-and-mouse game with censors, a number of WeChat public account articles were deleted. Being aware that these public account articles might be removed, we manually downloaded the most popular posts and saved them on a laptop during the participatory observation of the online contention. Nevertheless, it is likely that many messages were removed before they could be collected, and we cannot be sure how frequent this was. As well as downloading articles, we took screenshots of posts and comments by acquaintances and friends in WeChat Moments (*pengyou quan*) and Wechat groups (*weixin qun*) during the contestation to document their own living history of COVID-19. Before using the data of participants from the WeChat groups, we informed all the engaged WeChat users and got consent from the WeChat group owner and all the people who joined relevant discussion. We have also deleted identifying information to protect their privacy. Taking an inductive approach to analysing the public account articles and relevant comments reflecting on one author's participatory experiences and observations, this study identifies citizens' patterns of participation on WeChat. We organise our analysis of the relay activism using Kavada and Poell's material, temporal and spatial distinctions in their theory of contentious publicness.

Materiality of Relay Activism

The technical features and algorithmic environment of social media play an ever-increasing role in shaping social actions (Milan, 2015a; Gillespie, 2010, 2018). The "material arrangements" including "data, algorithms, interfaces, as well as devices—smartphones, laptops, tablets—and infrastructures—mobile telephone masts, Wi-Fi hotspots, Internet servers" impact the political implications of public contention (Kavada and Poell, 2021, p.196). This section analyses the infrastructure of WeChat, and how the material properties of the platform influenced the adoption and subsequent dynamics of what we call relay activism. These very practices closed off, or at least constricted, other potential actions – alongside the wider regulatory environment. Our case is particularly interesting because the activism was being directed, in part, at the material infrastructure of WeChat – its censorship processes and practices – and trying to circumvent and challenge them. This does not mean that the materiality does not matter – far from it – but it highlights how users reshape, reinterpret and repurpose design choices. Materiality is dynamic and contested. Activists prod, push (playing edge-ball, Simons et al., 2017) and at times such as these – outright challenge and confront – the boundaries of the censorship system in their contention. This can come at great personal risk, with some high-profile activists detained and others missing (Hollingsworth and Xiong, 2021).

Arguably the most prominent material feature of WeChat that supports digital activism is the digital traces –clicking (page views), shares, likes and top Wows (a newsfeed based on friends' recommendations) – that WeChat collects and makes public. In doing this, WeChat made visible the micro activities and activism in support of Dr Fen, which can be building blocks for digital meaning-making (Milan, 2018; Kavada and Poell, 2021, p. 193). Table 1 shows that 867 articles that shared or recreated the story about Dr Fen received over 10,000 page views. Recommending the article by clicking top Wows can also raise its prominence in the Top Stories section, where the follower's friends can then read the article. Table 1 also shows that 1,655 posts or reposts of the censored article received more than 100 top Wows.

Table 1 about here

The scale and visibility of such metrics is important for contention because experiments have shown that people are more likely to engage with an action (e.g. sign a petition) if they see that other people are participating in large numbers (Hale et al., 2018; Yasseri et al., 2014). It

1
2
3 appears that participation breeds participation – a form of popularity cue - via the social
4 information communicated in platform metrics (Porten-Cheé et al., 2021; Hagen et al., 2016) in
5 a similar manner to the logic of numbers in protest participation (Della Porta and Diani, 2006,
6 p. 171). Turning specifically to censorship in China, such metrics might lead people to perceive
7 an element of protection because the crowd is large; or that crowd-level contention against
8 censorship feels less personal and less threatening than being ‘invited to tea’ with the
9 government for a personal ‘chat’ about online behaviour (Roberts, 2018, p. 119).

11
12 The WeChat timeline (Moments, *pengyouquan*) was another material feature that supported the
13 relay activism. WeChat is as a “shuren guanxi” or “familiar, non-stranger social relational”
14 network (Peng and Wang, 2020, p. 7) and this familiarity is likely to impact how people
15 participate (author, 2012). After the article was blocked, citizens immediately reposted over 100
16 versions¹ of it. The networked practice of sharing the feature article - passing the whistle - was
17 practiced as a form of civic ritual that spread to tens of thousands of ordinary citizens through
18 their personal social networks on WeChat. Moreover, through and with the technical operations
19 of the WeChat timeline, which connects everyday citizens through its close personal networks,
20 the personal and the mundane could be incorporated into the action repertoire, mediating the
21 creative rituals of resisting against censorship and the local oppression of whistle-blowers.
22
23

24
25 We identified (Image 1) activists using a range of techniques to navigate (and attempt to
26 circumvent) the social-technical affordances of WeChat. This included creative reposting of the
27 article in QR codes, ancient Chinese calligraphy, braille, emoji, morse code, foreign languages,
28 and other symbols often embodying a personal frame of the connective action (Bennett and
29 Segerberg, 2013). For instance, the remixed article titled “Don't stop her whistling: update on
30 the relay of voice” has received 100,001 page views and 14,743 Top Wows (recommending the
31 article in the reading space). These personalised practices not only helped shelter the texts from
32 censorship but also made it fun and entertaining, helping to mobilise the crowd to engage in the
33 networked practice.
34
35

36 **Image 1: About here**

37
38 Examples of activists circumventing the materiality of the platform to continue posting the
39 story may indicate that materiality matters less. However, we argue that the material
40 infrastructure is still crucial: it ultimately offers affordances to enable the relay activism and
41 allows a space for this contention to unfold. The technical operation of the social media
42 platforms and their architecture explicitly shapes the practice of relay activism. At the same
43 time, the materiality of the platform is also shaped by – and responsive to – such activism.
44
45

46
47 In addition, the large-scale public contention against the censorship system was not only
48 facilitated by the technical operation of the WeChat timeline, but also catalysed by the use of
49 private WeChat groups. These groups function like an online community that “forges members
50 to develop a sense of closeness and connectedness with each other” (Peng & Wang, 2020, p. 8).
51 The group’s architecture (technical and social) constitutes the social conditions for their
52 engagement in the relay of voice; groups may have their own rules and norms. The social
53 connectedness and mutual trust fostered among the ‘regulars’ in the private chat group may
54 form a social structure that can motivate and mobilise citizens to take part in public contention
55
56

57
58 ¹ A hundred and eight versions of the censored article on whistle-giver Dr Fen
59 <https://www.ershicimi.com/p/d4962e760b713e763907284ee61908e7>
60

(Author, 2012). For example, as shown in image 2, participants in one chat group repeatedly shared links of the reposted versions of the censored article and joined discussions about this activity.

Image 2 About here

As the examples in Image 2 show, when someone shared a link in the group chat, other participants commented and celebrated the ‘carnival’ of sharing, mobilising other members to take part in the contention. One participant shared a PDF file version of the article in the chat room and then encouraged others to save the PDF on their own laptop to fight against the censorship. The semi-public or private community-based groups that the WeChat interface allows create a stage for the performance of self and for the construction of a community akin to a ‘third space’ in which political talk and action emerges from within a non-political space, typically bridging the personal and political (Author, 2012).

Temporality of Relay Activism

The complex interplay between communication technology, user practices and discourses shapes how meaning-making activities unfold in time (Kavada & Poell, 2021). In the digital environment, social media activism shows “a strong-orientation towards the present, towards the event” – the temporality is in real-time (Poell, 2020, p. 7). As users’ experiences are increasingly quantified and datafied, social media becomes a highway of data flows that speeds up information exchange and can accelerate activists’ communicative practices. The quick and real-time forms of communication on social media not only shape the dynamics of online contentions but also influence flows of publicity.

During the event, Chinese citizens continuously engaged in creative reposting and sharing of Dr Fen’s feature story. In doing this, they were both contesting the censorship and the cover up, but in terms of temporality, they were literally in a race against the censors – constantly posting the story in different forms in an attempt to bypass the system and keep the story alive. This race involved tens of thousands of citizens and its name invoked a folk gaming tradition: “击鼓传哨” (*Jigu Chuanshao*), meaning ‘passing round the whistle while someone is drumming’ - mimicking the traditional folk game 击鼓传花 (*Jigu Chuanhua*) in China, originally meaning ‘one is drumming while the others pass round a spray of blossom’.

The examples in Table 2 further highlight citizens’ active participation in the relay of voice (passing round the whistle) by recreating the censored article in different languages, remixing the sound and photo versions, writing funny, humorous and eye-catching titles and boldly sharing the recreated text on WeChat. This helped to make the action entertaining and engaging, and involved teamwork in their sustained race to beat the censors.

Table 2 about here

While this appears spontaneous, it is worth noting that many Chinese citizens are watching out for censorship. In Chinese terms these people might be defined as activists, but in a Western sense they might be understood as monitorial citizens (in part because activists face greater censure – King et al., 2013; Roberts, 2018). On top of this, GitHub hosts pages that are constantly collecting and preserving content from some websites, while others are reactive to events and more targeted. This is still a race, but the preserving of content takes us from the temporal moment to the temporal record.

1
2
3 As Figure 1 demonstrates, the creative, real-time posting and reposting of the censored article
4 by WeChat public accounts reached a peak during the 3-day period between 11 March 2020
5 and 13 March 2020, which was followed by continuous posting until 20 March 2020. This
6 was a sustained act of contention, with short bursts of more frequent activity too. The real-
7 timeness of the reposting and sharing encourages citizens to pay attention to the event, which
8 helps to boost the publicity of the contention. The continuous flow of contentious publicness
9 helped the event to become a trending topic on WeChat (another material feature), and thus
10 arguably both more likely to be targeted by censors, but also more difficult for the authorities
11 to control. It embodies the activists' social-technical appropriation of "the networked social
12 media logics" (Klinger and Svensson, 2015; XXX and Author, 2020). Also, because the
13 wider story of the novel Coronavirus was not being completely censored in China at this
14 point, Chinese people would be looking for information on this, making it easier for them to
15 find stories about the whistle-blowers. It was, as Yang (2022, p. 142) has argued, an
16 exceptional time that created "new openings" in part because "the censorship apparatus
17 behaved unpredictably" (p. 144).
18
19
20
21

22 **Figure 1 About here**

23
24 An advantage of digitally enabled relay activism is that it can be both "based on personalized
25 content sharing" at the heart of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013, 739) and
26 also a relatively low cost and fast participatory act (liking, sharing) that can be done by
27 individuals on their own (and at any) time - driving participation beyond activists to a
28 scattered, larger crowd – some of whom also made more creative posts. One participant, for
29 example, used their digital cartoon drawing skills to communicate the censored story of Dr
30 Fen (Image 3) and shared this on WeChat. While this does not share the whole story, it gets
31 across the point that Dr Fen was disciplined – which speaks to how different versions of a
32 story communicate it in different ways.
33
34

35 **Image 3 About here**

36
37 In addition, the novelty of the action repertoire, *Jigu Chuanshao*, also affected the
38 temporality of citizens' engagement. Image 4 is a screenshot of one author's WeChat
39 moments on 11th March 2020, showing the real-time sharing and re-sharing of the censored
40 article by WeChat friends.
41
42

43 **Image 4 About here**

44
45 As noted earlier, the volume and diversity of posts about Dr Ai Fen, highlights the
46 effectiveness of the relay activism in generating a continuous and creative flow of
47 contentious publicness.
48
49

50 After five days' intensive participation in the resistance, citizens won a temporary victory for
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

the freedom of expression, with tens of thousands of reposts². From the 15th March, the government eased the censorship of the article. The central focus of the contention and posting evolved to call for an investigation of Cai Li, the Party chief of Wuhan Central Hospital, for silencing and humiliating the whistle-giver and whistle-blowers. From 14-20 March 2020, we observed that a large proportion of the articles were exposing Cai Li's alleged history of corruption and abuse of power, and calling for the government to remove Cai for her handling of the initial outbreak. Although the networked activism helped to pressure the government into subsequently dismissing Cai Li in August 2020, it failed to generate long-term attention to the wider issue of censorship and information control as the focus changed rapidly. The solidarity and publicness developed in the short-term temporality largely fell apart as users gravitated towards new trending topics. It may be that the decision to honour the whistleblowers helped to placate some of the anger or that wider attempts to muddy blame successfully confused the picture.

Spatiality of Relay Activism

Kavada and Poell ground their approach to spatiality in the work of Lefebvre, arguing that this is “‘produced by’ and ‘producing’ social relations. Rather than thinking of space as the container of social action [...] space is generated through the interaction between the ‘designers,’ ‘regulators’ and ‘users’ of space” (Kavada and Poell, 2021, p. 196). Spatiality is particularly important in this case, as the users were actively contesting the material design features and the censorship – a form of regulation. As has emerged through the previous two sections, spatiality was at the heart of the contention.

Chinese contention “disperses” across platforms (Kavada and Poell, 2021, p. 202), but more than this it appropriates “the networked opportunities” (Cammaerts, 2012) in hybrid forms (XXX and Author, 2020), adapting to (and shaping) the materiality of the platforms. Concurrently, activists (and academics – e.g. King et al., 2013; Author, 2006) develop tools and techniques that seek to circumvent and/or surface censorship by using automated methods to scrape posts and store them offline – or at least out of reach – such as the GitHub examples. Relay activism is another technique, albeit labour intensive, that draws on the power of the crowd.

The relay activism was facilitated by the material features of different platforms. First, the material characteristics of GitHub created a safe storage space to preserve the original article on Dr Fen. The article was preserved as archived snapshots in the folder named *2019ncovmemory*³. The snapshot technology provided advanced data protection, securing access to the original article under the heavy censorship. With the original article preserved on GitHub, this record could be used as a script for citizens to create new texts and versions of the story – supporting the flows of contentious publicness on WeChat. From here, ordinary citizens customized their personal involvement into public experiences of protesting against

² This article finally survived censorship. [这篇文章终于不被删了, 看哭了!] <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?biz=MzU0MzY2MzkyMw==&mid=2247492923&idx=1&sn=ee8fb540577eb381d3e8000ec629a239&scene=0>

³ <https://github.com/2019ncovmemory/nCovMemory/blob/master/archive/jpg/3142.jpg>

1
2
3 the censorship system, fostering an ad hoc third space (Author, 2012). Sharing the story on
4 WeChat offered opportunities to engage millions of everyday citizens in the relay, thus it
5 created a bridge from the social life to public life, from the private to the public (or semi-
6 public) sphere. The story provided a collective and social frame of reference. It appears that
7 group members developed a collective sense of belonging, driven by the feeling of anger and
8 sadness caused by Dr Li Wenliang's death and strong empathy towards Dr Fen. The
9 emotional ties among participants not only steered the virality of the relay activism, but also
10 contributed to the formation of collective identity and collective expression (Milan, 2015b).
11
12

13
14 It is worth noting that many of the original posts were made on WeChat – whose relative
15 publicness can facilitate widespread awareness and rapid diffusion which is then carried on
16 across other platforms such as Weibo. We found a lot of articles published on WeChat were
17 reshared and reposted on Weibo, spreading the censored messages to a broader public realm.
18 The material infrastructure of Weibo not only enabled citizens to share links to the articles
19 reposted on WeChat but also provided a space for citizens to interact amongst themselves. In
20 2016, Weibo expanded its 140-character limit to 2,000 characters⁴. This new design feature
21 afforded users the space to write long comments allowing citizens to efficiently exchange
22 ideas via commenting on each other's posts. Through comments, citizens could make claims,
23 set new agendas and shape the focal points of the issue. Image 5, for example, shows a
24 Weibo user shifting the focus of the discussion to pressure the government to punish the
25 officials who covered up the initial outbreak of COVID-19.
26
27

28 29 **Image 5 about here**

30
31 Facing large-scale censorship, citizens moved back and forth across platforms (see examples
32 from Weibo, GitHub, WeChat), making strategic use of the affordances of each technology to
33 strengthen the resilience of their fight against COVID-19 censorship. Connecting across
34 different platforms also expanded the spatial relations formed in citizens' practices and
35 extended the boundaries of contention, making it harder for censors to stem the flow of
36 contentious publicness.
37
38

39 **Conclusion**

40 This article has analysed how Chinese citizens contested the censoring of Wuhan
41 whistleblower, Dr Ai Fen, on WeChat. The analysis is informed and structured by the
42 material, temporal and spatial dimensions of Kavada and Poell's concept of contentious
43 publicness. The article finds that activists battled to keep the story alive, racing against the
44 censors who were attempting to shut it down. This race included collecting and preserving
45 stories to create a record; creatively reworking the story into new forms from cartoons to QR
46 codes to avoid the censors; and the rapid relay of reposting, sharing and re-sharing the
47 different stories – again to beat the censors but also to ensure the story was visible and
48 trending. We have coined the term 'Relay Activism' to capture this dynamic. It draws on
49 existing concepts such as Earl's (2010) flash activism, but we believed that the act is more
50 akin to a relay race in that it can occur in short bursts but also sustained over days. This
51
52
53

54
55 ⁴ <https://www.scmp.com/tech/social-gadgets/article/1903451/chinas-weibo-follows-twitter-controversial-move-ditch-140>
56
57

1
2
3 analysis is informed by the activist's appropriation of the Chinese folk gaming tradition *Jigu*
4 *Chuanshao*, meaning 'passing round the whistle while someone is drumming'.
5

6
7 The article finds that the relay activism was shaped by the material affordances of WeChat,
8 alongside that of the censorship system itself, with activists exploiting 'gaps' or
9 'opportunities' to keep the story alive. In this case, activists were helped because authorities
10 did not censor all stories relating to the novel Coronavirus, meaning that the public knew of
11 the wider story and were motivated to search for information on this. Activists tweaked their
12 approach to suit different platform dynamics (e.g. Weibo) and this was supported by
13 platforms such as GitHub, which activists used as a space to collect and store stories – though
14 there have been repercussions and reprisals since. It is not clear how widespread the
15 awareness of activities on GitHub were – it seems other activists were doing similar activities
16 via WeChat groups and there was some repetition of labour. This can happen when
17 participation is what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe as self-organising connective
18 action – though we identify informal organisation via the WhatsApp groups and certain key
19 actors that speaks to potential issues in the Bennett and Segerberg approach (Trott, 2018;
20 Author, 2015). Nevertheless, the key point here is that it was used to preserve stories that
21 could then be creatively remade, personalised and spread on the widely used platforms such
22 as WeChat. We also observed activists working as a collective in WeChat groups and that
23 there was a sense of collective identity. This was a crowd-enabled connective action.
24
25
26

27
28 At the spatial level, the content dispersed across platforms, adapting to the materiality of
29 each. Platforms were strategically used at different points, but also specific functions within
30 each platform. This insight leads us to argue that to understand how the materiality of a
31 platform shapes activism (or not) this must be understood in the context of the other
32 platforms and tools in play. A second important spatial element was our observation that an
33 ad hoc third space formed within some WeChat groups and there was a group of regulars
34 who were actively engaged, encouraging each other and working as a kind of team or
35 community to advance the cause.
36

37
38 At the temporal level, the activism was very rapid during the race phase, and had elements
39 of what Earl (2010) has described as flash activism in that actions were often quick,
40 temporary (or fleeting) and were influential without developing into a long-term social
41 mobilisation. However, the relay race was also sustained over days as the crowd kept on
42 creating and circulating the stories at speed. The fact that the Whistleblowers were
43 subsequently honoured (possibly to help quell very widespread public anger caused in part
44 by the death and coverup), and local party officials were removed, would suggest that the
45 role of the whistleblowers will not be covered up going forward.
46
47

48
49 Finally, we turn to reflect briefly on the theory of contentious publicness. We found that this
50 was a helpful analytical prism for this research. It provides clear conceptual areas or themes
51 that are also flexible enough to capture hybridity. Moving beyond the prisms of democracy
52 and the public sphere, the theory also works well in the Chinese context, which is quite rare.
53 We would encourage scholars to deploy this theory in other non-democratic contexts and in
54 other Chinese case studies. Future research might also use interviews with activists to explore
55 the motivations and hidden practices that were in play, though interviews might be too risky
56 in the Chinese context.
57

References

- And Author B 2016
And Author B 2017
And Author B 2020
Author A. et al 2021a
Author A et al 2021b
Author B 2005
Author B and 2007
Author B 2006
- Bamman, D., O'Connor, D., & Smith, N. A. (2012). Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media. *First Monday*, 17(3). Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3943/3169>.
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, communication & society*, 15(5), 739-768.
- Brunner, E. A., & DeLuca, K. M. (2019). Creative Confrontations: Exploring Activism, Surveillance, and Censorship in China and the United States. *IAFOR Journal of Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences*, 5, 75-88.
- Cammaerts, B. (2012). Protest logics and the mediation opportunity structure. *European Journal of Communication*, 27(2), 117–134.
- Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., & Markham, T. (2007). *Media consumption and public engagement: Beyond the presumption of attention*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dodge, P. S. W. (2017). Imagining dissent: Contesting the façade of harmony through art and the internet in China. *Imagining China: Rhetorics of nationalism in the age of globalization*, 311-338.
- Deluca, K. M., Brunner, E., & Sun, Y. (2016). Weibo, WeChat, and the Transformative Events of Environmental Activism on China's Wild Public Screens. *International Journal of Communication*, 10(2016), 321-339.
- Damm, J. (2007). The Internet and the fragmentation of Chinese society.” *Critical Asian Studies* 39(2), 273–294.
- Earl, J. (2010). The Dynamics of Protest-Related Diffusion on the Web. *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(2), 209-225.

- 1
2
3 Esarey, A., & Xiao, Q. 2008. "Political expression in the Chinese blogosphere: Below the
4 radar." *Asian Survey* 48 (5), 752-772.
5
6
7 Freelon, D., McIlwain, C., & Clark, M. (2018). Quantifying the power and consequences of
8 social media protest. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 990–1011.
9
10 Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms'. *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347-364.
11
12 Gillespie, T. 2018. *Custodians of the Internet*. Yale University Press.
13
14
15 Hagen, L., Harrison, T. M., Uzuner, Ö, May, W., Fake, T., & Katragadda, S. (2016). E-
16 petition popularity: Do linguistic and semantic factors matter? *Government Information*
17 *Quarterly*, 33(4), 783–795.
18
19 Hale, S.A., John, P., Margetts, H. & Yasseri, T. (2018). How digital design shapes political
20 participation: A natural experiment with social information. *PLoS ONE* 13(4).
21
22
23 Herold, D. K., & Marolt, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Online society in China: Creating, celebrating,*
24 *and instrumentalising the online carnival*. New York, NY: Routledge
25
26
27 Hobbs, W.R. & Roberts, M.E. (2018). How sudden censorship can increase access to
28 information. *American Political Science Review*, 112(3), 621-636.
29
30
31 Hollingsworth, J. & Xiong, Y. (2021). The truth-tellers: China created a story of
32 the pandemic. These people revealed details Beijing left out. *CNN*. Available at:
33 [https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/02/asia/china-wuhan-covid-truth-tellers-intl-hnk-](https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/02/asia/china-wuhan-covid-truth-tellers-intl-hnk-dst/)
34 [dst/](https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/02/asia/china-wuhan-covid-truth-tellers-intl-hnk-dst/)
35
36
37 Link, P., & Qiang, X. (2013). China at the Tipping Point?: from "fart people" to
38 citizens. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(1), 79-85.
39
40
41 Mina, A. X. (2014). Batman, pandaman and the blind man: A case study in social change
42 memes and Internet censorship in China. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 359-375.
43
44
45 Kavada, A., & Poell, T. (2021). From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the
46 Temporal, Spatial, and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social
47 Media. *Communication Theory*, 31(2), 190-208.
48
49
50
51 Kenyon, M. (2020). *WeChat Surveillance Explained*. Available at:
52 <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/05/wechat-surveillance-explained/>
53
54
55
56 King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M.E. (2013). How Censorship in China Allows Government
57 Criticism but Silences Collective Expression. *American Political Science Review*,
58 107(2), 326–343.
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
273
274
275
276
277
278
279
280
281
282
283
284
285
286
287
288
289
290
291
292
293
294
295
296
297
298
299
300
301
302
303
304
305
306
307
308
309
310
311
312
313
314
315
316
317
318
319
320
321
322
323
324
325
326
327
328
329
330
331
332
333
334
335
336
337
338
339
340
341
342
343
344
345
346
347
348
349
350
351
352
353
354
355
356
357
358
359
360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390
391
392
393
394
395
396
397
398
399
400
401
402
403
404
405
406
407
408
409
410
411
412
413
414
415
416
417
418
419
420
421
422
423
424
425
426
427
428
429
430
431
432
433
434
435
436
437
438
439
440
441
442
443
444
445
446
447
448
449
450
451
452
453
454
455
456
457
458
459
460
461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
494
495
496
497
498
499
500
501
502
503
504
505
506
507
508
509
510
511
512
513
514
515
516
517
518
519
520
521
522
523
524
525
526
527
528
529
530
531
532
533
534
535
536
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
544
545
546
547
548
549
550
551
552
553
554
555
556
557
558
559
560
561
562
563
564
565
566
567
568
569
570
571
572
573
574
575
576
577
578
579
580
581
582
583
584
585
586
587
588
589
590
591
592
593
594
595
596
597
598
599
600
601
602
603
604
605
606
607
608
609
610
611
612
613
614
615
616
617
618
619
620
621
622
623
624
625
626
627
628
629
630
631
632
633
634
635
636
637
638
639
640
641
642
643
644
645
646
647
648
649
650
651
652
653
654
655
656
657
658
659
660
661
662
663
664
665
666
667
668
669
670
671
672
673
674
675
676
677
678
679
680
681
682
683
684
685
686
687
688
689
690
691
692
693
694
695
696
697
698
699
700
701
702
703
704
705
706
707
708
709
710
711
712
713
714
715
716
717
718
719
720
721
722
723
724
725
726
727
728
729
730
731
732
733
734
735
736
737
738
739
740
741
742
743
744
745
746
747
748
749
750
751
752
753
754
755
756
757
758
759
760
761
762
763
764
765
766
767
768
769
770
771
772
773
774
775
776
777
778
779
780
781
782
783
784
785
786
787
788
789
790
791
792
793
794
795
796
797
798
799
800
801
802
803
804
805
806
807
808
809
810
811
812
813
814
815
816
817
818
819
820
821
822
823
824
825
826
827
828
829
830
831
832
833
834
835
836
837
838
839
840
841
842
843
844
845
846
847
848
849
850
851
852
853
854
855
856
857
858
859
860
861
862
863
864
865
866
867
868
869
870
871
872
873
874
875
876
877
878
879
880
881
882
883
884
885
886
887
888
889
890
891
892
893
894
895
896
897
898
899
900
901
902
903
904
905
906
907
908
909
910
911
912
913
914
915
916
917
918
919
920
921
922
923
924
925
926
927
928
929
930
931
932
933
934
935
936
937
938
939
940
941
942
943
944
945
946
947
948
949
950
951
952
953
954
955
956
957
958
959
960
961
962
963
964
965
966
967
968
969
970
971
972
973
974
975
976
977
978
979
980
981
982
983
984
985
986
987
988
989
990
991
992
993
994
995
996
997
998
999
1000

- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
- Knockel, J. Parsons, C., Lotus Ruan, L., Xiong, R., Crandall, J. & Deibert, R. (2020). *We Chat, They Watch* How International Users Unwittingly Build up WeChat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus. Available at: <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/05/we-chat-they-watch/>.
- Kuo, L. (2020). Coronavirus: Wuhan doctor speaks out against authorities. *The Guardian*. March 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/coronavirus-wuhan-doctor-ai-fen-speaks-out-against-authorities>
- Li, L. (2019). *Zoning China: Online Video, Popular Culture, and the State*. MIT Press.
- Lindtner, S. (2014). Hackerspaces and the Internet of Things in China: How makers are reinventing industrial production, innovation, and the self. *China Information*, 28(2), 145-167.
- Liu, Y-L. (2020). In China, GitHub Is a Free Speech Zone for Covid Information. *Wired*. Available: <https://www.wired.com/story/china-github-free-speech-covid-information/>
- MacKinnon, R. (2009). China's censorship 2.0: How companies censor bloggers. *First Monday* 14(2). Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/2378/2089>.
- Milan, S. (2015a). When algorithms shape collective action: Social media and the dynamics of cloud protesting. *Social Media+ Society*, 1(2).
- Milan, S. (2015b). From social movements to cloud protesting: the evolution of collective identity. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(8), 887-900.
- Milan, S. (2018). Political agency, digital traces, and bottom-up data practices. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 507-525.
- Olesen, A. (2014). *China's New Media Species, Now Endangered?* Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/16/chinas-new-media-species-now-endangered/>
- Peng, W. & Wang, W.Y. (2021). Buying on Weixin/WeChat: Proposing a sociomaterial approach of platform studies. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(5), 945-956.
- Poell, T. (2020). Social media, temporality, and the legitimacy of protest. *Social Movement Studies*, 19(5-6).
- Porten-Che , P. Marlene Kunst, M., Vromen, A. & Vaughan, M. (2021). The effects of narratives and popularity cues on signing online petitions in two advanced democracies." *Information, Communication & Society*.
- Roberts, M.E. (2018). *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*, Princeton University Press.

- 1
2
3 Sommerfeldt, E., & Yang, A. (2017). Relationships as strategic issue management: A model
4 of activist issue network strategies. *Public Relations Review*, 43(4), 829–839.
5
6 Sun, T. & Zhao, Q. (2021). Delegated Censorship: The Dynamic, Layered, and Multistage
7 Information Control Regime in China. *Policy & Society*.
8
9
10 Tai, Z. (2018). Social Media and Contentious Action in China. In M. Graham (Ed.), *The*
11 *Routledge Companion To Media And Activism* (pp. 97-107). Routledge.
12
13
14 Trott, V. (2018). Connected feminists: Foregrounding the interpersonal in connective action.
15 *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 53(1), 116-129.
16
17 Tu, F. (2016). WeChat and civil society in China. *Communication and the Public* 1(3), 343–
18 350.
19
20
21 Wang, L., Yang, A., & Thorson, K. (2021). Serial participants of social media climate
22 discussion as a community of practice: a longitudinal network analysis. *Information,*
23 *Communication & Society*, 24(7), 941-959.
24
25 Xin, G. (1993). Review article: A civil society and public sphere in post-Mao China?: An
26 overview of Western publications. *China Information*, 8(3), 38–52.
27
28
29
30 Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. Columbia
31 University Press.
32
33 Yang, G. (2022). *The Wuhan Lockdown*. Columbia University Press.
34
35
36 Yang, F. (2016). Rethinking China’s Internet censorship: The practice of recoding and the
37 politics of visibility. *New Media & Society*, 18(7), 1364-1381.
38
39 Yasseri, T., Hale, S.A. & Margetts, H.Z. (2014). Modelling the rise in Internet-based
40 petitions. Available at: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1308.0239.pdf>.
41
42
43 Zhang, Y. & Guo, L. 2021. “‘A battlefield for public opinion struggle’: how does news
44 consumption from different sources on social media influence government satisfaction in
45 China?” *Information, Communication & Society* 24 (4): 594-610.
46
47 Zhen, L. 2021. Social Coding Platform as Digital Enclave: A Case Study of Protesting “996”
48 on GitHub. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 886–904.
49
50
51

52
53 ⁱ According to Bamman et al. (2012), 16.25% of Weibo posts were deleted, while on WeChat
54 1.5% of public accounts’ posts were censored with 2.44% self-censored.

55 ⁱⁱ <https://github.com/2019ncovmemory/nCovMemory>
56 <https://github.com/lestweforget/wuhan2019>
57

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

For Peer Review Only

Appendix

Table 1. The number of page views and Wows that a post or re-post achieves

The number of page views	The number of posts
> 100,000	113
> 10,000	867
> 1,000	4041
> 500	5445
> 100	8702
The number of Wows	The number of posts
> 1,000	256
> 500	478
> 100	1655

Table 2. Examples of creative reposting of the censored article on March 11, 2020

Title in Chinese	English Translation of The Title
一次力量渺小的接力(我发声只为悲剧不再发生。)	A small but not negligible relay of voice (I spoke out the truth to prevent future tragedy)
我把《发 XX 的 X》发上区块链了，永远无法删除	I uploaded the article "fa XX de X"(coded title of the article) to blockchain, then it will never be removed!
持续接力：《发哨子的人》德文版	Sharing the German-language article of the Whistle-giver: keep updating on the relay of voice
接力，别让她的哨声停下	Don't stop her whistling: update on the relay of voice
《人物被删文章》：发哨子的人（这号随便吧，接哨测试微信的和谐速度）	"The deleted <i>People Magainze</i> article": the whistle-giver (let's test the speed of harmonizing Wechat by passing round the whistle! Feel free to shut down my account!)
甲骨文接力哨	Sharing the rewritten version in oracle bone script(jiaguwen):update on the relay of voice
击鼓传哨：中文编码哪家强，出门左转找贰条！	Jigu Chuanshao (passing round the whistle): here is the best Chinese-language coded version of the article!

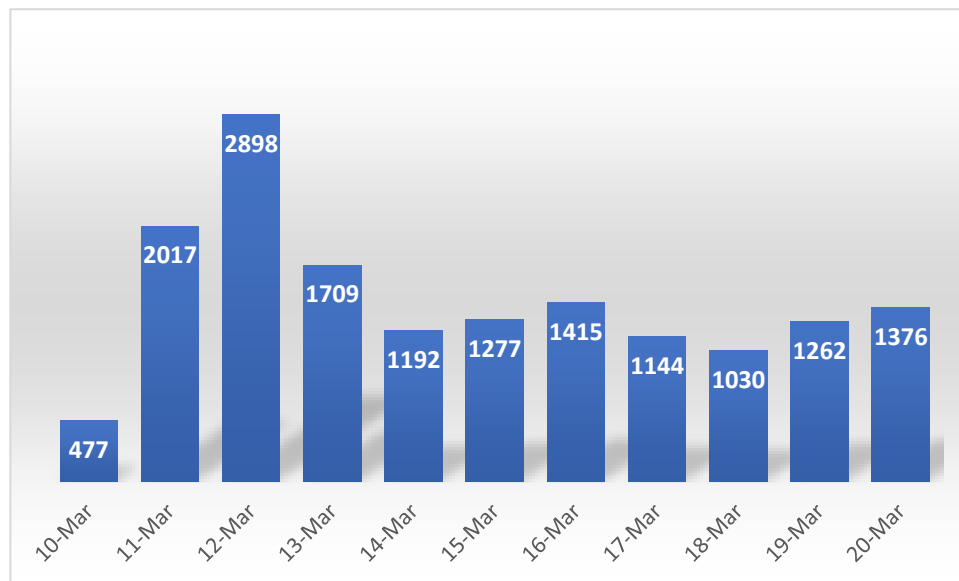


Figure 1. The number of WeChat public account articles reposting the story and talking about the issue



Image 1: Examples of Popular Reposted WeChat articles in support of Dr Ai Fen

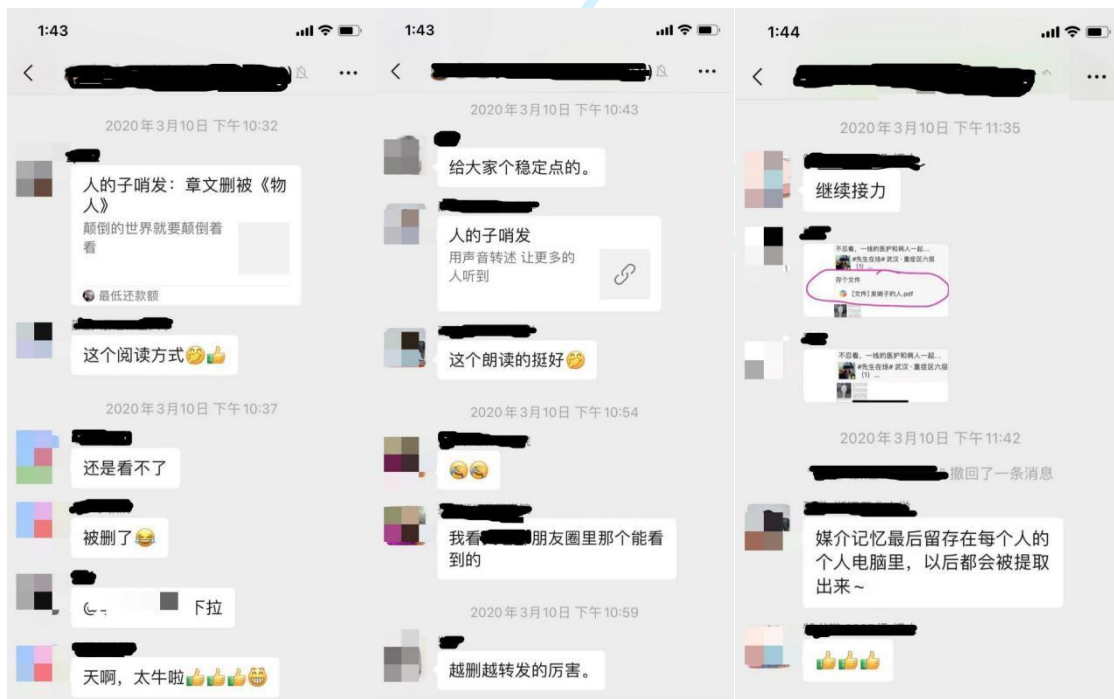


Image 2: Example of discussions about relay activism in a WeChat private chat group



Image 3: A digital cartoon picture uploaded by a WeChat public account, showing the Hospital Central Commission for Discipline Inspection scolding Dr Fen for warning colleagues of the Coronavirus.



Image 4: Real-time Updates on one of the author's WeChat Moment

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

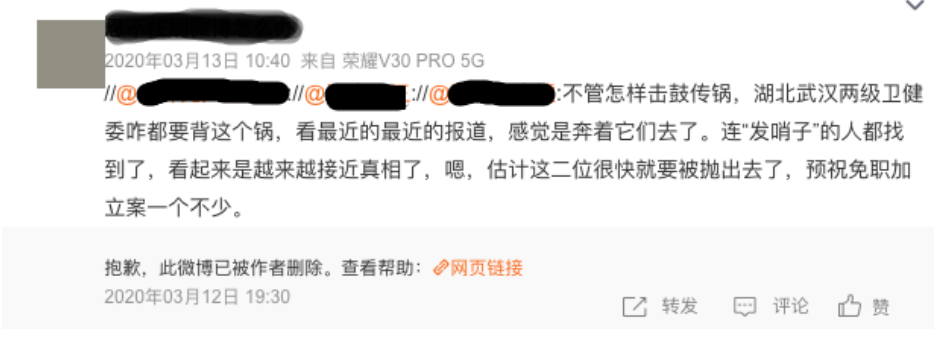


Image 5: User's comment

For Peer Review Only

Table 1. The number of page views and Wows that a post or re-post achieves

The number of page views	The number of posts
> 100,000	113
> 10,000	867
> 1,000	4041
> 500	5445
> 100	8702
The number of Wows	The number of posts
> 1,000	256
> 500	478
> 100	1655

For Peer Review Only

Table 2. Examples of creative reposting of the censored article on March 11 2020

Title in Chinese	English Translation of The Title
一次力量渺小的接力(我发声 只为悲剧不再发生。)	A small but not negligible relay of voice (I spoke out the truth to prevent future tragedy)
我把《发XX的X》发上区块链了 ，永远无法删除	I uploaded the article "fa XX de X"(coded title of the article) to blockchain, then it will never be removed!
持续接力：《发哨子的人》 德文版	Sharing the German-language article of the Whistle-giver: keep updating on the relay of voice
接力，别让她的哨声停下	Don't stop her whistling: update on the relay of voice
《人物被删文章》：发哨子 的人（这号随便吧，接哨测试微 信的和谐速度）	"The deleted <i>People Magainze</i> article": the whistle-giver (let's test the speed of harmonizing Wechat by passing round the whistle! Feel free to shut down my account!)
甲骨文接力哨	Sharing the rewritten version in oracle bone script(jiaguwen):update on the relay of voice
击鼓传哨：中文编码哪家强 ，出门左转找贰条！	Jigu Chuanshao (passing round the whistle): here is the best Chinese-language coded version of the article!

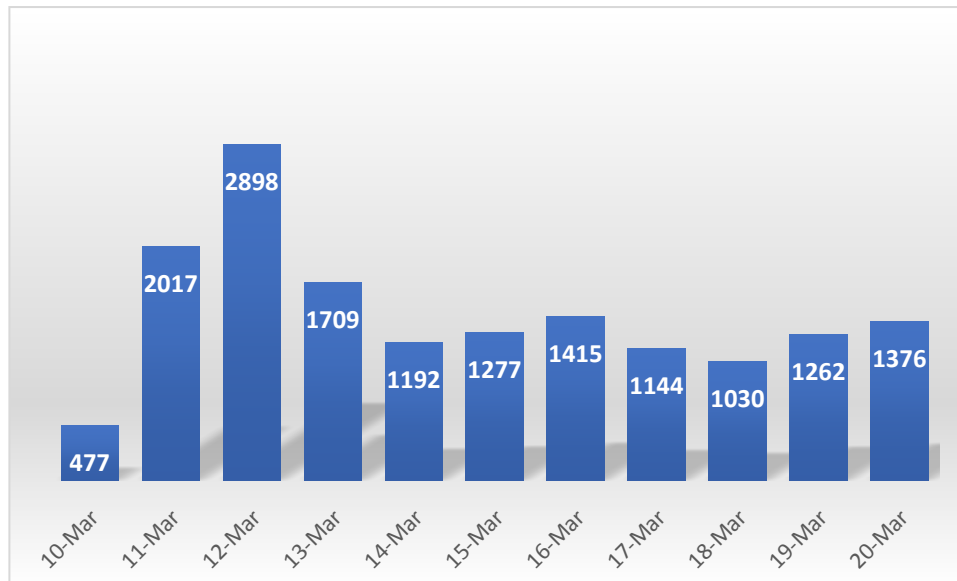


Figure 1. The number of WeChat public account articles reposting the story and talking about the issue

《发哨子的人》全文复活版接力



发口哨の人

2019年12月30日，芬兰曾有一份关于肺炎病毒检测的报告，她用红色标出「SARS冠状病毒」字样，当她分享给同学时，她的一份报告传给了同学，同学分享给同学。当晚，这份报告传遍了芬兰学生。转发这份报告的人包括8人被警方训诫。

持续接力：《发哨子的人》德文版

Am 30. Dezember 2019 erhielt Affin einen Virustestbericht für Patienten mit unbekannter Lungenentzündung. Sie umkreiste das Wort "SARS Coronavirus" in Rot. Auf Nachfrage eines Studenten nahm sie den Bericht und verteilte ihn. An diesen Kommilitonen, der auch Arzt ist. In dieser

[四十日谈] 意大利文接力-Colei che disturba i fischi



Image 1: Examples of Popular Reposted WeChat articles in support of Dr Ai Fen

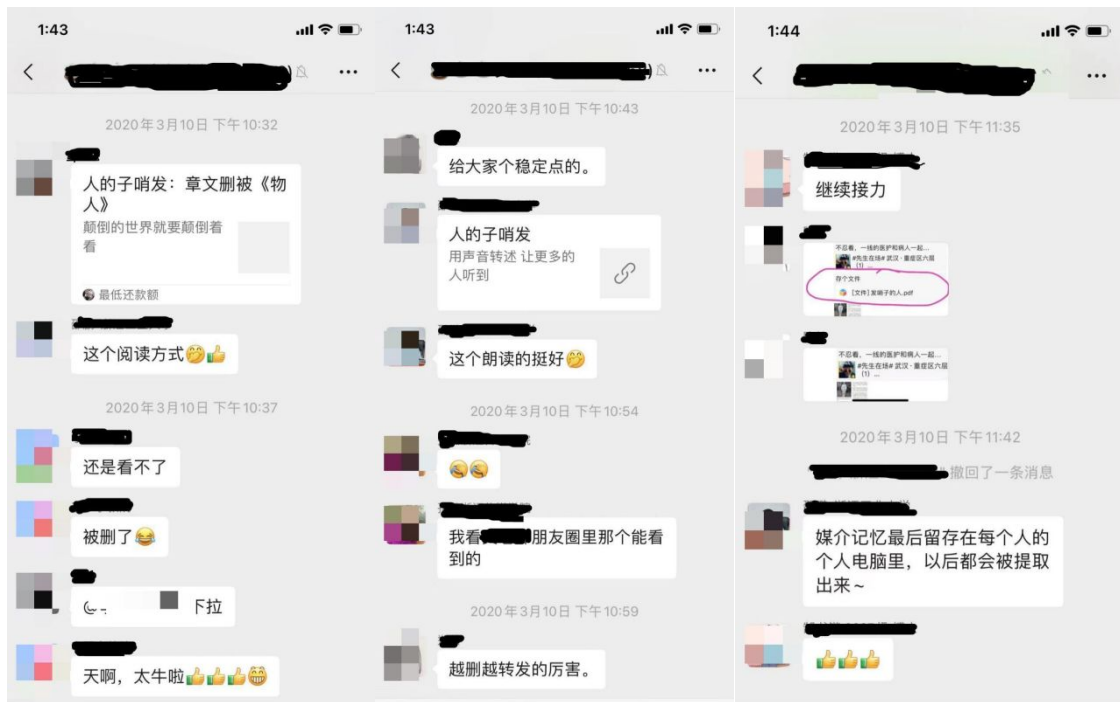


Image 2: Example of discussions about relay activism in a WeChat private chat group



Image 3: A digital cartoon picture uploaded by a WeChat public account, showing the Hospital Central Commission for Discipline Inspection scolding Dr Fen for warning colleagues of the Coronavirus.



Image 4: Real-time Updates on one of the author's WeChat Moment

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

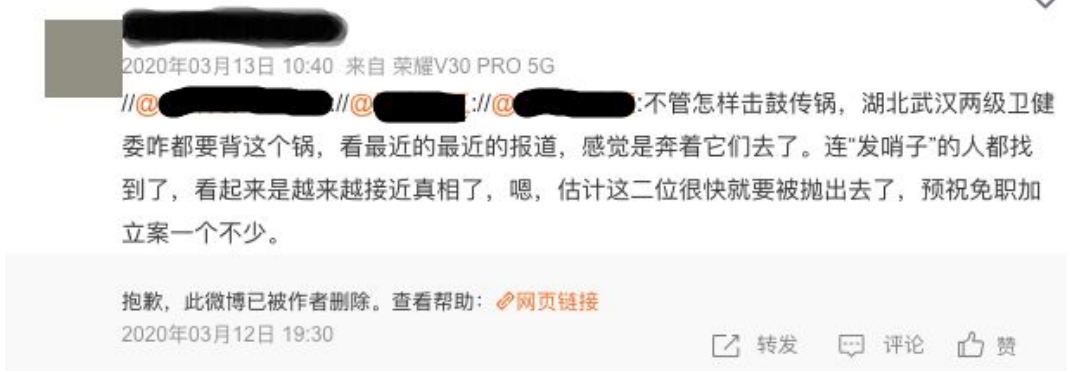


Image 5: User's comment

For Peer Review Only