COVID-19 and Internet Self-censorship in China

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Abstract. Existing studies of online discourse in China had primarily focused on the government's control and censorship of online content and their sociological implications, and not enough emphasis had been placed on self-censorship, especially when it pertains to the individuals' interaction with the knowledge of censorship's existence. This study examines snapshots of two major platforms of online discourse in China: Weibo, a Twitter-like social media app, and Zhihu, a Quora-like Q&A platform's interaction with self-censorship surrounding discourse on Shanghai's Omicron outbreak. A survey and interviews are conducted on recurring users' experiences with self-censorship on the platforms. Individual instances of self-censorship and the lack thereof are analyzed through the lenses of Foucault's concept of "power" and Habermas' communicative rationality. The paper concludes that Weibo, as a social media platform, suffers two layers of censorship: one from the government, and the other from the users of the platforms themselves who restrict their own speech out of fear of censorship. Moreover, Zhihu, while not completely devoid of censorship, had demonstrated on multiple occasions that it is capable of supporting discourse in a degree of vitality uncommon in authoritarian China.

Keywords: Online discourse · Communicative rationality · Self-censorship · Weibo · Zhihu · COVID policy

1 Introduction

In *The Order of Discourse*, Michel Foucault famously referred to discourse as "the power to be seized" [1]. Indeed, from the salons of 18th Century France to the internet forums of 21st Century Middle East, civil discourse had always stood at the forefront of enlightened questionings of problematic status quos. However, the role that public discourse plays differs depending on the type of regime that it dwells in. Furthermore, the quality of discourse varies greatly across different societies. While the democratic tradition of the west had ensured the accruing of a healthy respect for the public sphere, countries with a more authoritarian history, such as China, tend to detest and actively prevent the formation of an independent public sphere. However, public discourse does continue to exist in these countries. Yet, due to the state's firm hold over official media and the press, dissenting narratives almost never make it to a large enough audience to engender any significant outcry. A shift came in the 1990s when the internet was officially created; all networks could now be connected by a universal language. For the

first time, a viable means for uncensored material to reach the masses. In the early years of the digital age, online discourse in China, conducted mostly through internet bulletin boards, was able to mobilize countless netizens to assemble and protest injustices. As information technologies advance and as the use of social media becomes commonplace, online discourse in China grew to resemble that of the west. Apps such as Weibo and WeChat function similarly to their western counterparts: Twitter and Facebook. Although official censorship still largely loomed over the type of acceptable discourse, outbursts of dissent and criticism against the government are now commonplace.

In 2020, the Chinese internet expressed in unison the indignation that they felt for the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, who alerted his peers to early COVID infection cases in Wuhan through WeChat group and was admonished by the local police for not keeping his silence on the internet regarding the virus. Again in early 2022, when a vast network of human trafficking that involved local authorities and spanned countless villages was uncovered in Feng County, the Chinese internet exploded in outrage. Before the public's ire subsided, a sudden outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in Shanghai and an inept handling of the outbreak by the local government plunged the city into complete chaos. As news of tragedies resulted from the zero-COVID policy implementation repeatedly evade censorship and reach the wider public, the indignation in the online public sphere continues to grow. It is in this state that the Chinese online public sphere finds itself as of *Voices of April*. Public outrage against the injustices that have been recently revealed is mingled with confusion and censorship.

It is under this context that this paper begins its analysis. It seeks to examine the degree of freedom that the netizens of Weibo and Zhihu enjoy when contributing to the discourse on Shanghai's zero-COVID policy, its enforcement and implications. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework of communicative rationality, conceived by German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas believes that production and organization are not the only aspects of society that became institutionalized and rationalized. The possibility of public discourse is boosted. Habermas' communicative rationality is meant to examine the state of public discourse in a country. It measures discourse with four different validities: intelligibility, truth, moral rightness, and sincerity. Intelligibility simply refers to the comprehensibility of an utterance. Truth refers to the accuracy of the information uttered. Moral rightness refers to the appropriateness of the utterance at the occasion in which it was uttered. Sincerity refers to whether the values carried by the utterance match the values of the speaker. Habermas further proposed an ideal type known as "the ideal speech situation", which is a state of discourse in which the force of the superior argument alone rules [2]. Although this concept had subsequently been challenged for failing to consider the different conventions for superior argumentation across different cultures, it is still a workable concept for this paper. Habermas' work on deliberative democracy, unlike his opinion on *Constitutional Patriotism* has been noted to largely stay within the level of the nation-state [2]. Given the fact that this research will stay within the border of a single country, the lack of a shared convention for superior argumentation that results from cross-cultural differences should not be a problem. The following sections will evaluate the empirical situation on Weibo and Zhihu, and argue, through an incorporation of observed phenomena and interview results that while both Weibo and Zhihu are subjected to censorship, both the

self-imposed type and the official kind. Zhihu is ultimately a much freer platform than Weibo in terms of COVID-related discourse.

2 Weibo

2.1 History of Self-censorship on Weibo

Sina Weibo (literally translated as "Micro Blogging") is a Chinese microblogging platform whose role is analogous to that of Twitter in the western world. Launched by Sina Corporation on 14th August 2009, it is one of the biggest social media platforms in China, with over 445 million monthly active users as of Q3 2018 [3]. A spinoff of Sina Weibo was announced in March 2014 by Sina Corporation. "Weibo" became a separate entity since then and an IPO was filed under the symbol WB. As a platform for sharing, disseminating, and receiving information, Weibo is built around encouraging user interactions and relationship building. Users can publicly post photos and videos for quick sharing through the website and its mobile app, and other users can respond with text, photos, and videos or by using a multimedia instant messaging service. Weibo has many features that are similar to Twitter's. A user may post with a 140-character limit (increased to 2,000 as of January 2016 with the exception of reposts and comments), mention or talk to other people using "@UserName" formatting, add hashtags, follow other users to make their posts appear in one's own timeline, re-post with "//@UserName" similar to Twitter's retweet function "RT @UserName", select posts for one's favorites list, and verify the account if the user is a celebrity, brand, business or otherwise of public interest [4]. As of the end of 2021, Weibo has an active monthly user base of more than five billion, more than a third of the entire population in China.

In cooperation with internet censorship in China, Sina sets strict controls over the posts on its services. Posts with links using some URL shortening services (including Google's goo.gl), or containing blacklisted keywords, are not allowed on Sina Weibo [5–8]. After human review, comments on politically sensitive themes are removed. Bloggers with fewer followers may be able to enjoy relative freedom on contents of their posts, while bloggers with a critical mass of followers will be subjected to enhanced scrutiny on their posts. More than five billion people were actively using Weibo per month as of the end of 2021, which accounted for over a third of China's population. Weibo is believed to employ a distributed, heterogeneous strategy for censorship that has a great amount of defense-in-depth, which ranges from keyword list filtering to individual user monitoring. Nearly 30% of the total deletion events occur within 5–30 min, and nearly 90% of the deletions happen within the first 24 h [8].

2.2 The Fear of Censorship

Weibo's censoring mechanism is extensive, but not omnipotent. The strength of its censoring mechanism varies depending on the popularity of the user, content, or third party. Though there are times when the censoring machine proves to be capable of cleansing the entire internet of discourse surrounding a sensitive subject, such occasions are rare and only occur during periods of intense political instability, unusually active political

dissent, or a combination of both [9, 10]. In most cases, the censoring machine's reach is limited, and mild forms of political dissent can exist on the internet for extensive periods of time. However, though the censoring machine is limited in its capability, its reputation echoes far and wide among the population [11]. Speaking about the government could lead to the deletion of posts or even the levying of charges, and so, a culture of self-censorship has arisen among the population to avoid punishment. Two types of self-censorship are common on the internet: the use of homonyms and symbols to substitute politically sensitive words and comment section wars, and conclude their implication as it relates to Foucault's panopticon.

2.3   Discreet Dissent: The Symbolization of Words

To avoid Weibo's censoring mechanism, which detects problematic content through keywords, netizens have taken to replace certain politically or otherwise sensitive words with symbols and homonyms. These substitutes may convey completely different meanings on their own, but when used appropriately and read in context, unmistakably convey the intended idea. Perhaps the most popular instance when this technique is practiced is the replacing of the Chinese word for "government": to "zheng fu" with the initial letters of the two words that make up the name: "zf". Another rather comical instance of homonyms being used involves the referring to the word "politicize" (in Chinese: zheng zhi hua) using the name of a Taiwanese singer whose name is pronounced in an identical manner. Such a symbolization of sensitive content aptly avoids detection by censors, while accurately conveying its message. While such behavior appears harmless enough, its significance, and the disproportionality of its scope when compared to the scope of official censorship shed light on it as an important social phenomenon. Weibo's user base is aware of the threat of censorship and punishment, though they do not know when such punishment will befall them. As a result, like an online panopticon, the netizens seek to avoid the gaze of censors, so that should its gaze fall upon them, they would not be punished.

2.4   Comment Section Wars: When the Prisoners Become Wardens

The second phenomenon involves the self-censoring of comment sections on Weibo. Using this paper's interview, 80% of respondents had replied that their online activity had been unjustly criticized [12]. The interview found that criticisms for the posting of content online often center around patriotism, national security, and ignorance. The results shed light upon the fact that facets of the civil discourse surrounding Shanghai's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak involve irrational criticisms and silencing that ultimately trace their roots back to the central authority. Legitimate calls of concern are being silenced by censors, who fear the disruption of civil stability and the loss of national solidarity. Of the subjects surveyed, a whopping 90% concluded that the unjustified (and often provocative and insulting) replies that they had received on the internet had discouraged the posting of future posts. This displays the self-censoring potential of comment wars.

3   ZHIHU

3.1   Censorship on Zhihu

Zhihu (literally, "know") is a Chinese Quora-like Q&A app founded in the early 2010s. It is a discussion-based platform on which questions of all natures can be posted by any users, whose posts would then receive answers from other users. The questions posted range from a variety of subjects, and the responses and subsequent discourse are often lengthy and thorough. Criteria for registering an account were once cumbersome but were reduced to a minimum in 2013. Many prominent public intellectuals and entrepreneurs have established a presence on this nascent platform. Beginning as a place for high-quality discourse between professionals, Zhihu had steadily become a general platform for online discourse with a user base of more than 200 million [12]. COVID-related discourse on Zhihu began at the same time as the pandemic, and had remained one of the most hotly debated subjects. However, these debates are not free from the influence of official censorship. Indeed, like any other Chinese online platform app, Zhihu faces extensive pressure on the type of content that is allowed to promote on its platform. The free expression of opinion is consequently inhibited. The following section will briefly explore censorship on Zhihu.

Like all Chinese online platforms with a notable user base, Zhihu is subjected to heavy censoring by the state's censorship machine. The platform uses a similar censoring mechanism as Weibo, filtering out politically sensitive words and deleting the content that contains them. Notably in 2018, the platform underwent a period of severe censorship after the announcement that Chinese President Xi Jinping had abolished the country's executive term limit and could potentially go on to rule for life. During this period, words and phrases such as "indefinite rule", "emperor" and "Winnie the Pooh" (a cartoon figure often said to resemble the president) were removed from the platform. However, aside from moments of extreme activity in the public sphere, the censorship that Zhihu experiences is relatively mild when compared to Weibo. Dissent is allowed on the platform to an extent, and there are posts on controversial subjects that are capable of creating real debates. The subsequent section breaks down two instances when the civil discourse on Zhihu demonstrated a degree of vitality uncommon in authoritarian China by following the communicative rationality theory of Habermas.

3.2   An Uninterrupted Forum

As China's relentless pursuit of its zero-COVID policy enters its third year, voices of opposition began to surface over the internet. One of the key subjects of these internet debates is the appropriateness of continuing down the road of "dynamic clearing" (the official name of the country's zero-COVID policy). While many argue that the increased virulence and decreased case fatality rate of the Omicron variant had rendered dynamic clearing both impossible and unnecessary, Beijing insists on the superiority of its policy on the basis that China's largely unvaccinated elderly and minor population would suffer the brunt of the virus should lockdowns ease. As the latter is the official position on the pandemic, it enjoys the benefit of all of the state's media resources, and becomes the dominating narrative throughout the civil sphere. Oppositions to the policy, especially

in places where lackluster executions of lockdown policies had resulted in excruciating tragedies and frustrated masses, periodically surface on platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, an instant messaging app, only to be removed by online censors or censored by the speakers themselves. Even in the few instances when dissents on Weibo are not immediately removed, their brief nature renders them vulnerable to criticisms of being sensationalist and taken out of context.

The educated public demands a lengthier form of discourse, which Zhihu's Q&A style of interaction is capable of providing. Though Zhihu's platforms are patrolled for problematic content, such efforts cannot completely eradicate dissenting opinions. Posts that digress completely from the national narrative exist on the platform without being taken down [13]. Heated debates also exist under certain posts on the appropriateness of strict lockdowns, and these discussions sometimes stretch into lengthy philosophical debates on the moral values upon which different governments are formed and operated [14]. An indication of vital discourse is reflected in the comment section of a specific post on whether or not "dynamic clearing" should be kept. Underneath the post, which was written by an academic, a comment was made that "we should sit tight and wait for the debate to start", which indicates the sophisticated level of discourse that Zhihu users had come to expect of this platform. Such an expectation stands in stark contrast to user behavior on Weibo, where individual users' every word was chosen with care, and politically charged terms were not even safe from the grasps of censorship when turned into euphemisms or code words. Applying a Habermasian lens towards the discourse, and several posts on the platform stand out as places of surprisingly liberal discourse. In one post of heated debate, which began as a debate on the appropriateness of dynamic clearing and progressed into one on the nature of government and the civic duties of citizens, the users engaged in discourse on empirical information as well as moral codes [15]. This indicates an adherence to both material facts, and more importantly, the unrestrained exercise of discourse on morality. During this debate, multiple "red lines" of the government had been crossed, when death tolls of disastrous lockdowns and some of the values of the state had been brought up outright and criticized. However, barring from the reducing of extremely sensitive phrases and words like "one-party rule" into code words, the entire discourse was sophisticated, civilized, and done in good faith without any deliberate attempt to restrict speech. Such an effective forum offers refreshing insight into the potential of Zhihu.

4   Conclusion

This paper tried to add insight into the degree of self-censorship on two prominent online platforms in China by examining the vitality of the discourse that they support. Its examination of a part of these platforms had found that self-censorship had indeed become a prominent part of online discourse in China. Part of the reason for that is the anticipation of censorship from the government. While both platforms displayed potentials for dissenting opinions to thrive, it is the vigorous debates that Zhihu offers that have proven to be capable of supporting that demonstrated true potential. Due to the limitations of words and available tools, large sweeping generalized conclusions about the discourse on these platforms were unable to be made. Future research should

specifically examine Zhihu's potential for the spreading of discursive rationality. Also due to the constraint of words, WeChat, another social-media app, was left out of the discussions of this paper. While it is traditionally not a place of vigorous discourse due to the limited number of audiences an individual can reach, the addition of the new "channels function", where the entire user base can interact without the constraint of having to become contacts of one another, had sparked a new vigour in discourse. Future research should direct their attention upon the censoring mechanisms of this new feature as well as the quality of discourse that it holds.

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