# The Role of Weibo in Social Public Events

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**Abstract.** This paper questions how social media, particularly Weibo plays a part in social public events, focusing on two events, namely, the "Chained Women" and the Covid-19 pandemic. Both of them had become top trending topics on Weibo. Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Foucault's power theory are combined to analyze them and comparison is applied to see the similarity and differences between a short-term individual event and a long-term social event that covers many people. From the materials, it can be seen that social media can act as a discoverer and push the event to be more widely known. The emergence of Weibo provides another way of thinking about the solution to the incidents and can act as a supervisor to give warning effects. Understanding the role of Weibo in social public events can help people to take a glance at the situation of social public events on social media and the importance of public sentiments.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Public Opinion, Information Dissemination, Social Public Events.

## 1    Introduction

In contemporary society, there is a large number of netizens and the internet has become an extension of the real world. According to the data from iResearch, Weibo is the most popular social network platform and about 560 million devices have this app. The age of users ranges from under 18 to over 60. Most users are from 18-35, which occupies 50.92% of total users [1]. Many public authorities and news media have accounts on it, and people get and spread messages and information on it. Weibo, as the biggest social network platform, has played an important role in some social events. This paper discusses the roles played by Weibo in various social public events, where these roles have been played by other parties or did not exist before.

There is much research on message propagation, and one of the research has shown that the forward proportion has reached up to 47.8% [2]. Chinese scholars have already begun to notice that Weibo plays an important role in public events. Xin Xu analyzed the Guo Meimei event in June 2011 and raised the idea that Weibo has provided a new model of public participation in social events. He pointed out that the formation of public pressure will lead to the issue solution [3]. There are also scholars who did research on how different traditional media on Weibo reports on Covid-19 [4]. The re-

search about the public sentiment on Weibo during Covid-19 shows how small incidents had pushed up the clout [5]. However, there is no research yet about the "Chained Women" and the event under Covid-19, and there is no comparison between a social event concerned with an individual and a social event concerned with the public.

This paper mainly focuses on two social public events. The "Chained Women" is one of the most watched events in 2021. As a social event concentrated on the unfortunate experience of an individual, this event lasted for a long period of time. The official got involved for two months, and this event has followed-up attention and discussions. Compared to the "Chained Women", the situation of the Covid-19 epidemic is a long-lasting event composed of many events. In the midst of the pandemic, this paper mainly focuses on what happened to Shanghai in March 2022. These materials are analyzed textually to see which part has Weibo come into play. Goffman's dramaturgical approach and Foucault's power theory can help to analyze the texts deeper. The mismatch between the front stage and backstage can trigger one event while the power relationship between netizens and the public authority is essential on Weibo which serves as a supervisor. The mechanism of Weibo also enables it to spread information faster than traditional social platforms. By comparing the two events, it can be derived that Weibo is a platform where people can speak out and solve a problem in another way. Although the trend of discussion will decrease over time, some events will have a long-lasting effect.

## 2    Weibo in the Case of Short-Term-Individual Social Event

In 2021, Dong became known on Douyin as the father of eight children, attracting bloggers to donate money and supplies which can show their kindness and love. In January 2022, a blogger on Douyin posted a video of a woman with messy hair who is actually Dong's wife and is chained by him in a dark hut. From this video, netizens began to pay attention to the event, and the video spread quickly on Douyin and Weibo (a Chinese version of Twitter). Public opinion erupted, and netizens began to question the origin of the woman. A month after the outbreak, under the pressure of public opinion, the local authorities where the event took place issued statements on 28th January, 30th January, and 7th February, respectively. They denied the existence of the trafficking phenomenon of the woman on 28th January and identified the woman as actually a lost person in another province [6-8]. On 10th February, the official issued the fourth notice, reporting that Dong had taken criminal measures. However, netizens were dissatisfied with the criminal details and the legal sentence. On 17th February, a provincial investigation team was set up to investigate the woman's life experience, and the last notice was issued on 23rd February [9].

### 2.1    Social Media as Discoverers

Weibo and Ticktock played an important role in this case. From the discovery to the outbreak, and finally, to the outcome, people have been participating in this event

through these social media. This event, which was spread through Douyin, was discovered by accident by a blogger in Douyin who wanted to attract followers to donate things to Dong. In the publicity, Dong was highlighted as the father of eight children, as a representative of having many children and striving hard to make a living for the whole family. However, after the video about the mother of the children was exposed, the positive image was shattered, and this led to a heated discussion on Weibo. In Goffman's dramaturgical approach, people self-position themselves by performances. People perform at the front stage and prepare at the backstage, where they adjust themselves. As Patric and Filipe said, "Goffman argued that, in interaction, humans are ending to their own actions while adopting other people's views" [10]. When people perform in front of others, in order to maintain a good image, it is common to act or present themselves in accordance with certain social rules and social norms. In this case, Dong exposed a part of his life on social media and posted a part of his life from the back stage to the front stage, creating an image that he struggles with life to attract compassion and this is considered to be a positive image on social media. On Douyin, his account name, a father of eight children, has more than 60,000 followers and more than 200,000 likes in total. Douyin, as a link between the front stage and the back stage, brought this event to the public. It helped Dong to attract attention, and he also became a helpful assistant to some bloggers to establish a good image on the internet. After people found the mismatch between his front stage and back stage, Dong's image collapsed. The event erupted initially at this point, and Douyin acted as a discoverer in this event.

## 2.2    The Mechanism of Weibo and its Role in the Explosion of Social Events

According to Lixiang Yuan, in Social Network Service (SNS) like Facebook, users may be restricted from forwarding and commenting on posts if they do not follow the bloggers [11]. On social media like Weibo, users can forward and comment on all the posts they see. Under this system, Weibo can form a reticular structure where the information can be spread explosively. Without the restriction of SNS, Weibo can thus achieve the phenomenon of fission of information by spreading information. A graph by Shandong Sun Law Firm shows the trend of information dissemination between 20th January 2022 and 23rd February 2022 [12]. According to this graph, after the event came to the public, the information exploded very fast in the beginning and reached its climax on 14th February 2022. Another graph is about the dissemination trend of public opinion between 28th January 2022 to 19th February 2022 [13]. From the data in this graph, it can be seen that public opinion peaked on 18th February 2022. Together with the trend of public opinion dissemination, data from the same source also show the classification of the content of public opinion. According to the data, sensitive information accounted for 94% [13]. Therefore, the time interval between the spread of information and the explosion of public opinion was very short. Combined with the timeline of trending topics on Weibo, public opinion promoted people to seek more information which further led to the explosion of public opinion. Under the explosive communication, once this event became a trending topic on Weibo in one day, this event began to be known

by people who were concerned about trending topics. Further, it could be widely published on social media other than Weibo. The mechanism of Weibo has helped this topic to explode initially.

## 2.3    Weibo as a Supervisor

In the "Chained Women" event, it is worth noting that the public authorities issued five announcements from 28th January to 23rd February, starting with the county-level authorities and ending with the provincial investigation teams. The five announcements were closely linked to the public, where the pressure on the local government from Weibo led to further investigations. The total page view of the previous four original announcements from the county authority was more than 290 thousand [6-8]. When state media announced that the Jiangsu province set up a provincial investigation team, this single post on Weibo had 657 thousand forwards, 170 thousand comments, and 1480 thousand likes. The trending topic of the setup of a provincial investigation team had 330 million hits until August 2022 [14]. In this case, public attention on Weibo played an essential role in the investigation process and pushed the authority to put attention on this event.

The event was driven by the power relationship between Weibo users and the governmental authorities. The word power may cause a lot of misunderstandings, but in Foucault's words, it is a forced relationship. In the field of networks, people interact with each other and generate power in the relationship. A variety of force relationships will form a network on the internet. According to Foucault, "Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" [15]. It is often assumed that on social media people are disciplined under big data and policies, however, power circulates, and people accept and operate power at the same time. In the case of the "Chained Women", all the Weibo users and the government authorities played a part in the power network. When the vet exploded, people discussed it and demanded to find out more truth. Once the announcement was made, some people were not satisfied and tried to find evidence by themselves, focusing on the contradictions among announcements. On the power network, Dong and the government authorities were the central points where people's power was targeted. Under such circumstances, the government authorities were under the supervision of all the Weibo users, and Weibo users thereby played a role in promoting investigation and supervision.

## 3    The Covid-19 Pandemic on Weibo

Similar to the event of the "Chained Woman", from the outbreak of the covid-19 to the present where people attempt to coexist with the pandemic, Weibo has also played an important role during the whole event. There are similarities and differences between these two public events. The following part compares these two public events and analyzes the role played by Weibo.

On 8th December 2019, officials first reported the illness of a patient with pneumonia of unknown cause, and by 9th January 2020, the virus was first identified as a coronavirus. On January 23rd, 2020, Hubei, the province of the outbreak, began to shut down the city, affecting the lives of many people. People were even restricted from going out to purchase necessities, and their work and study were also affected. Until 8th April, the lockdown was lifted [16]. Until now, China has kept the pandemic under control, requiring the infected persons to be quarantined and those who come into contact with them also to be controlled. From the beginning of the pandemic, Weibo users have been following this issue in real-time, with a wide range of concerns, including the lives of people under lockdown, the work of medical workers, the material donations of public welfare organizations, and the impact of the excessive pandemic prevention on people's lives.

Similar to the case of the "Chained Woman", the situation of the pandemic is also fermenting through Weibo and has been followed by many people on the platform. However, different from the case of the "Chained Woman", as Covid-19 is a public health problem, the pandemic is something that all people need to face. From the early stage of Covid-19 to the later stage, the official has been involved. A special pandemic zone was developed on Weibo, through which people could learn about the real-time progress and news. In addition to their different content, the two events also differ in their timelines. the "Chained Women" event is initially a personal event and relatively short in duration, while the Covid-19 outbreak is long in duration. Although the Covid-19 pandemic is much longer in duration, as it is a huge event made up of countless small events, these two events can also be juxtaposed and compared to some extent.

### 3.1    Weibo as Another Way to Solve the Problem

Although both events gained great attention on Weibo in the beginning, the difference is that the case of the "Chained Women", broke out accidentally. When people used Douyin to gain popularity, their eyes naturally focused on Dong's family, and the platform of discussion quickly shifted to Weibo, attracting a lot of attention. In contrast, in those small incidents during the Covid-19 period, it was people who took the initiative to vent their emotions or seek help through Weibo. This is because, in the previous event, the victim of the main body is the chained woman found by netizens and she does not have the ability to post what happened to her. Therefore, when netizens found out about the existence of this phenomenon, they took the initiative to speak for her, questioning the whereabouts of the money, materials they had collected for Dong's family before, and the official's inaction. As a result, 17 government officials related to this event were punished [9].

In the Covid-19 pandemic, Shanghai had more than 600,000 cases at the end of February due to improper management of Covid-19 in the beginning [17]. After the outbreak of the pandemic in Shanghai, people in Shanghai re-entered the quarantine period and faced the situation of no supplies under the lockdown in the city. Gradually, some people made active posts on Weibo, saying that they had difficulties buying necessities such as food and they needed to get up very early to buy food and sometimes still could not get deliveries. In response, the government stepped in and gradually centralized

procurement and distribution of supplies, though not all problems were solved. There are still many problems in the Shanghai pandemic which were discussed by people on Weibo, arousing the empathy of people in more provinces in the context of Covid-19. Although sometimes the problem could not be completely solved, people outside Shanghai could clearly understand the situation there and provide possible help under the attention, and people's heated discussion would also attract the official attention to a certain extent. For example, on March 30, 2022, a post with the title "Anxiety of grabbing food under the pandemic in Shanghai" became a trending topic on Weibo, gaining 240 million views and 48,000 discussions [18]. In a summary of a trending topic collection engine, on Weibo, there were 22 trending topics about the Shanghai epidemic. The most popular topic was read 1.19 billion times, discussed 164,000 times, and covered by more than 100 media outlets [19]. In such cases, people took the initiative to post about their problems and demands, attracted people with the same problems as them, gained attention, and thus promoted the official solution to the problem. Although the subjects of voice were different in the "Chained Woman" event and the COvid-19 pandemic, Weibo provided a platform for people to call for help, speak for themselves and others, and solve problems.

## 3.2 The Lowered Clout and the Subsequent Warning Effect

After an event breaks out for a period of time, the clout will gradually decrease, which is also one of the characteristics of Weibo. The top trending topics change constantly every day. In the explosion of information, people's attention is easy to be diverted to other things. As an individual event, the "Chained Women" has lasted for a longer time compared with other similar events. Among the existing 12 trending topics, the earliest appeared on January 28th, 2022, and the latest was on February 24th, 2022. Some tags have already expired. Until now, some details of the event are still unclear, although people still talked about this event and the attention has been much less than at the beginning. The same tag about the progress of the investigation has 960,000 reads and 20,000 discussions on February 8th, 2022, when it was still the top trading topic. Now it has about 8,000 reads and more than 20 discussions on September 15th, 2022. For comparison, as a long-term event, there are 4,212 taps related to the Covid-19 pandemic, spanning the period from 29th February 2020 to the present day, when the latest tap appeared [19]. In the small events that appeared within the pandemic, the clout also follows the same trend as the "Chained Women". However, even though the clout is down, these things can have long-term effects to some extent. One reason is that in both cases, there were people who remembered the event afterward and continued to pay attention to them. Nevertheless, because the crowd was smaller, the effect was small. The main reason is that the following processing of an event can serve as a warning for subsequent events of the same type. In the case of the "Chained Woman", the explosion gained attention and discussion and forced the authorities to respond and punish the relevant personnel and departments. In the case of COVID-19, after the pandemic in Shanghai, people's dissatisfaction on Weibo gained a lot of discussion, and they had doubts about Shanghai authorities related to this issue. On the one hand, Shanghai will

pay attention to similar incidents in the future, and on the other hand, it will also serve as a warning for other provinces to prevent similar incidents from happening.

## 4    Conclusion

To summarize, social media provide an effective way of discovering social events, either passively or actively. Through Weibo's mechanism, it can achieve the fission of information and make the event further explode. In the case of injustice, people can speak out for those who are involved, which supervises and promotes the action taken by public authorities. When people actively speak out for themselves, it can be seen as a new way to solve the problem. Also, as clout would fade, people would not keep concentrating on one event, but a warning effect brought by public attention can prevent similar events from happening. This paper shows the importance of Weibo in promoting the development of social events, both long-term and short-term events. However, this warning effect may vary in different content and be affected by many elements, which have not been discussed in this paper.

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