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In what Forms and Patterns does Inequality Exist in the Weibosphere?

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MSc in Media and Communications

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Xiao Han

ABSTRACT

Weibo is the Chinese version of Twitter, which has experienced an explosive growth and development with recent years. It has been given hope of being a civil tool for China to improve civil participation and deliberative engagement, and it is considered to form discursive arenas labelled with “Equality”. The aim of this research is to explore the inequality in the Weibosphere, and inequality in this study is conceptualized as a procedural inequality, which is operationalized into two steps of measurements – the inequality of access and the inequality of discursive influence. Findings from content analysis in this research illustrate the existence of inequality in the Weibosphere. The inequality of access is a three-dimensional inequality, which embodies the inequality of gender distribution, the inequality of participants’ region distribution, and the inequality of stratum distribution. Further, the inequality of discursive influence is a two-dimensional inequality, which includes the inequality of influence on the public opinion formation and the inequality of influence on discursive construction within reposting flows. The results illustrate the hierarchy built on the users’ verification mechanism, to a large extent, contributes to the inequality in Weibosphere. Specifically, the hierarchy based on users’ identity leads to the hierarchy of discursive power with the asymmetry influence.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a multifaceted communication platform where various tasks within different dimensions, including information access, entertainment, commercial activities, opinion expression and exchange, and participation, could be completed. Since the early 1990s, China has experienced an explosive growth in the amount of Internet users and a speedy construction of Internet infrastructure. The Internet has become “information commons” in China (Ji, 2009:128). Unlike the one-way communication model offered by mass media that leaves little room for audiences to interact and participate, the Internet fosters a more free, flexible and multidimensional communicative space, in which “everyone is potentially a consumer as well as creator of information” (Tai, 2006:163). Further, the inherent feature of participation of Internet is believed to have potentials to invite the participation and interaction among huge amount of heterogeneous individuals. Scholars in China, to a large extent, tend to hold optimistic opinions about the empowerment functions of Internet. They believe that citizens are becoming more empowered to take advantages of ICTs to address their concerns and engage in public debates and participation (Hung, 2010:338), so that the bottom-up power encouraged from the Internet could make a balance with power from authority and government (Li, 2007). However, some critiques against these optimistic views argue that the Internet is just a reflection and reinforcement of ordinary politics and commercial activity, because cyber world is deeply embedded in the complicated sociopolitical structure of the real world (Margolis and Resnick, 2000:2; Tai, 2006:188).

It is unfair to simply draw a conclusion whether the Internet is delusion or enlightenment for civil participation, deliberation and democracy. Before asking the question whether cyber world could encourage a broader deliberation and participation, it is necessary to settle the specific Internet-based context that has the potentials and hope of democracy (Tai, 2006:181). In this paper, researches and discussions would be set in China’s Micro-blog sphere, which is a newly born cyber space experiencing a staggering growth. The nativity of Micro-blog could be regarded as the milestone of the development of Web 2.0, which not only could be labelled as a revolution of media and communication but also changes citizens’ participatory forms. Micro-blog, technically, is a platform based on users’ inter-relationship and user-generated contents that can be used for information sharing and broadcast (Zhang, 2011). Twitter is a perfect example of micro-blog in the western world, each twitter can only include 140 characters, in which people could post texts and images or ass URLs to their posts when they wish to send rich media, and interaction among users functions through following, re-tweets and comments (Diakopoulos and Shamma, 2010). China developed its own versions of Micro-blog, since access to Twitter has been blocked by Chinese censors because of some politically sensitive elements (Branigan, 2009).

The period from 2010 to 2012 is crucial for the swift growth in China's Micro-blog marketing. Statistically, in 2010, the overall amount of Micro-blog users is only 63 million, which accounts for 13.8 % of Internet users in China (CNNIC¹, 2011), and in 2012, the overall amount of Micro-blog users climbs to 274 million, which accounts for 50.9% of the whole population of Internet users in China (CNNIC, 2012). Sina Weibo², which undoubtedly could be regarded as the most popular micro-blog website in current Chinese micro-blog market, launched from August of 2009, and the total amount of users of has already reached over two hundred million until 2012. The social implication of Micro-blog in both China and the Western world is far more significant than its technical importance to the development of ICT. When numbers of politicians, celebrities and elites start entering into the Weibo world, a more open and democratic public sphere, apparently, has been created and reinforced. Following the basic communicative technology logic, Weibo is a highly socialized communicative platform for instant real-time sharing, which consists of three main parts: socialized media, socialized communicative tool, socialized space for participation (Lee, 2011). Lee (2011) probably makes an overoptimistic statement of Chinese micro-blog in his book *Micro-blog: changing the world*³ that Weibo is changing current China within various dimensions: it is changing patterns of daily communication and lives; it is improving the degree of civil engagement and participation in political realms and it is restructuring the society through the Cyber power. Both Weibo and Twitter could potentially push the social ,cultural and political change, as Pfeifle, who launched a public campaign to nominate Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize, argued "without twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy" (Pfeifle, 2009). However, Hamid Tehrani, the Persian editor of the blogging network Global Voices makes a sceptical voice that although twitter is momentous, but the role in the development of democracy is overemphasized (Morozov, 2011). Along similar lines, the question that whether the function of Weibo in current China is overemphasized requires reconsideration empirically, as well as theoretically.

Being witnesses in Weibosphere, people indeed hear how loud the voice from grassroots is making, especially on some issues relating to common interest. Additionally, people also can

¹ CNNIC: is short for China Internet Network Information Center, which render the official data of the development of Internet in China.

² Weibo: is the Pinyin of "Micro-blog" in Chinese. In order to distinguish Twitter and other micro-blog platform from Sina microblog, in this paper, "Weibo" is used for the general discussion of China's Microblog sphere, "weibo" refers to the single post. And the word "Weibosphere" is inspired from the definition of "Twittersphere" (Available from :<<http://computer.yourdictionary.com/twittersphere>>), and it refers to the total universe of Weibo users and their habits and interaction patterns

³ Micro-blog: changing the world: it is the first book that explain what is Weibo and also record the detail of the development of Sina Weibo.

feel how powerful Weibo is, when collective discourse begin to make pressure towards some political issues. However, Morozov (2011) evaluates the low degree of authoritarian states, China, for instance, is far away from the word “democracy”, even online. Further, he claims that, in fact, as has become obvious in too many contexts, internet empowers the strong and disempowers the weak. Weibo, offers a communicative platform for public discourse and public discussion, and people generally believe that the primary democratic characteristic of Weibo that differentiates from other online platforms is the equality created within the Weibosphere. An Equal and adequate opportunity to speak is a prerequisite of deliberation (Knight and Johnson, 1997). However, equality is not only how much speaking people make, but also how much speaking does account within the discussion. This research will explore equality within the open, deliberative public space in Weibosphere. Based on the open access in the Weibosphere, weibo-based discussion have potentials to involve a wide range of participations to qualify as democratic and deliberative, but if the debate is dominated by few voices, then deliberation has not engaged the views of the community widely. Whether equality could be improved and achieved in Weibosphere? If not, the further question would be inequality, to what extent, exist in Weibosphere, in what forms and patterns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review mainly focus on the following sections, the public sphere and deliberation, the deliberative standards within the deliberation, and their changes and applications in today's cyber world.

The Public Sphere and Deliberation

The theory of deliberation is strongly tied with models of the public sphere and political thinking of rational political decision making. According to basic concepts, the public sphere is a discursive space in which social individuals and groups assemble to rationally and critically debate matters concerning public concern and mutual interest until final consensus reached (Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 1992). Within theoretical frameworks of public sphere, a public normative political discourse was envisioned, which is characterized by being equal, rational, and interpersonal (Dutwin, 2003). In short, the public sphere renders deliberation normative discursive settings and norms. Deliberation refers to a public discursive process that generates public opinions and decisions through public discussions and debates among equal citizens (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Elster, 1998). According to deliberative democracy theorists, the formation of deliberation has to adhere to three principles or conditions, namely, mutually reasoned and rational arguments, equality, and, lastly, common interest orientedness (Habermas, 1989; Knight and Johnson, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Sender, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 2000). It is easy to reflect conditions of the "ideal speech situation" from Habermassian, marked by rational thinking, equality of citizens and talk, and open access to engagement (Norris, 1985). However, like other theories in social science, theories on the public sphere and deliberation ineluctably receive arguments and critiques.

Firstly, Habermas's public sphere is criticized as a significant exclusion of bourgeois public sphere, Fraser argues that the public sphere itself under Habermas' conceptual framework is "a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class" (Fraser, 1990:62). And moreover, she claims that component elements of the public sphere should be pluralist and overlapping due to the complex structure of society, so that different genders, classes and races are allowed to gain the participatory parity into the discussion on public affairs in the public sphere. If applied to the online world today, obviously, the constitution of the online public sphere should follow Fraser's pluralist approach. Another main criticism focuses on the overemphasis of the consensus through rational and critical debate. Young (1996) argues that based on the political dissension and conflicting political interest existing in complicated social structure, the task of achieving political consensus is

an utopian goal. Along the similar line, but from a different angle, Mouffe (1999) further claims that the multiplicity of voices including various elements should be taken into consideration rather than the final single consensus.

Early critiques of democratic deliberation, mostly, concentrate on some physical conditions relating to constraints of time and distance for aggregation of the public (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). However, barriers of these conditions have been eliminated since the development of Internet, and there will be a further discussion of these changes brought by the Internet in next sections. There are two main arguments of democratic deliberation: the limit of public competence and the heterogeneity of engagement. Start from the limits of public competence, scholars cast doubts on whether the public is not intelligent enough to make their own decision and articulate democratic deliberation, most citizens, according to Dimock and Popkin, know extremely little about political structures and issues (1999). Thus, the general public lacks political knowledge that could be expected to deliberate about complex policy options (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:23). Switch to the critiques on the constitution of deliberative participants, Young argues that rational and critical arguments and deliberation always constrain the discussion results, and rather, emotional and vernacular forms of discourse should be allowed into the deliberation arena (Young, 2000). Further, following the logic of Mouffe's critique of Habermas's public sphere, she further criticizes the utopian idea of achieving a public rational and deliberative consensus, which is not beneficial for the democratic politics. Instead, she calls for the pursuit of "agonistic public sphere" for deliberation (Mouffe, 2005:3), which is believed to "rescue deliberative theory from an apolitical indifference to difference and an unhistorical belief in consensus as a form of hegemonic closure" (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:26).

Changes in the Cyber world:

With the development of new communication technology and the expansion of the penetration of the Internet, the cyber world has been given hope to generate a new form of the public sphere and encourage the quality of deliberation. Based on two radically divergent positions with regards to the possible democratic outcomes from online public sphere, Janssen and Kies (2004) generalize two categories of scholars on the study of the online deliberative democracy, namely cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists.

According to the overall opinions from cyber-optimists, there are two basic optimistic characteristics of cyberworld that could efficiently benefit the quality of online deliberation. Firstly, the internet-based communication fostered by the cyber world extends beyond social

relations bounded within the physical world and further redefines them. Because the Internet eliminates the barriers of geographic and time limits, which potentially lower the entrance threshold into the public discursive arenas for the disadvantaged people, for instance, women, the minority, and the disabled people (Grossman, 1995). Coleman and Gøtze (2001:17) claim that the Internet makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation. Based on these advantages, Putnam and Feldsteins (2003) further evaluate the primary value of Internet is its capability of broadening and strengthening traditionally physical communities. Secondly, the Internet fosters a social space, in which new pattern of social relationships and interactions occur and flexibly operate (Tai, 2006:164). Unlike the noninteractive and nonparticipative nature of one-way communication of the conventional mass media, the Internet offers a flexible communicative space that could be constructed by ordinary audience and users using its two-way communication (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004). Free and large-scale access to the Internet combined with the right of equally communication free from status constraints, the Internet introduce a decentralized, pluralist, and multidimensional social space (Hanson and Narula, 1990), and further Dahlgren (2001) sees the potential emergency of multiple microsphere that create a deliberative space for online individuals to exchange ideas and opinions.

However, cyber-pessimists offer contrasting views upon the role of functions of the Internet for the development of the online deliberation and democracy. They argue that online discussion spaces tend to trigger chaos and flaming rather than rationality (Davis, 1999). Further, according to Sunstein (2001), online discussion, to some extent, could lead to polarization of public opinions. Some radical arguments make claims that Internet has just created the politics as usual, which not only reflects the political structure in the real world but also reinforce the sociopolitical structure, so the online politic just makes itself adapt to the existing political culture (Margolis and Resnick,2000:2; McChesney,1996). However, it is a mistake of reductionism that simply stand on the same side of either cyber-optimists or cyber-pessimists. As Janssen and Kies's claims (2004: 4), "online discussion spaces are a complex reality of which the democratic and deliberative consequences cannot be explained by referring only to the technological characteristics of the medium, and to some largely unproven, natural inclinations of human behavior". Thus, before discussions of potentials of online deliberation and measurements of criterions of deliberation in the cyberworld, the context of the specific online public space should be pre-narrowed down.

Despite of some critiques on the role of Internet in the development of deliberative democracy, the Internet is undoubtedly changing the China society, and, to some extent, redefining existing social relationships under the new form of social settings "as an

empowering tool for Chinese civil society” (Tai, 2006:162). Considering the complicated structure of the cyberworld, every online discussion sphere, to a large extent, generates its own deliberative characteristic. Weibo is highly lauded by its characteristic of being a synthesized communicative platform that consists of the instant information source, the socialized community and a wide openness for deliberative engagement (CNNIC, 2011:37). The direct effect brought from Weibo is an improvement of equality of discourse in the open online deliberative settings (Deng, 2010). However, the concept of equality is so vague and complicated that need to be operationalized under some theory frameworks.

Equality as the Most Important Feature of Deliberation:

Two essentially distinct but thoroughly interdependent issues for ethical analysis of equality are: (1) why Equality? (2) Equality of what? For the first question, the theoretical and practical implication of studying equality should be clarified; for the second question, it is necessary to define equality within specific social settings before measurements and evaluations (Sen, 1992:12). Along the similar line, these two questions should be taken into deliberate consideration in the first place. Thus, start with the first question: why equality?

As mentioned in the previous section, there are several basic criteria for deliberation: mutually reasoned and rational arguments, common interest orientedness, and equality, which among the requirements of deliberation, is concerned as the most crucial element in the discursive deliberation (Sanders, 1997). According to Dutwin’s perspective, “without equality, we cannot say that the supposedly informed public opinion produced by deliberation is truly public” (Dutwin, 2003:240). Paradoxically, from the practical perspective, the emphasis on equality, in most cases, turns itself to the study and analysis of inequality, because equality is a utopian concept, when the plurality of social settings taken into consideration (Sen, 1996:23). Rae (1981) along with other scholars, make similar arguments that the idea of equality is overfull, and it is an empty idea, since it has no substantive content of its own (Westen,1982). Admittedly, conceptual frameworks of equality could be interpreted in various ways, which hardly could reach a truly unified and substantive demand. However, the question about whether it is requisite to build up a unified and substantive concept for equality receives doubts. Equality should be defined within a specific space, rather than substantively formalized in a general theoretical background (Sen, 1992:15). In this paper, the concept of equality need to be reconstructed, especially under the newborn communicative online social space, and the normative concept of equality could be used to evaluate the inequality in this realm. Both individual and social factors could latently affect the quality of the equality principle in deliberation. Thus, it is vital to understand some

online social characteristics might affect the power structure of public discourse (Dutwin, 2003:242), especially in the apparently equal discursive environment – Weibosphere.

The heart of the equality principle of deliberation, generally, refers to the equal opportunity of discursive participation that could eliminate the exclusion of races, genders and classes (Habermas, 1989; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Dutwin, 2003). However, Sanders, further, added that equality of deliberation requires not only the participatory parity but also equal “epistemological authority”, which means “the capacity to evoke acknowledgement of one’s arguments” (Sanders, 1997:349). According to arguments from Dutwin, the propensity to make a contribution in the deliberation is a critical gauge of the equality principle, thus, “if some individuals speak out significantly more than others, or if the conversation is dominated by a select few, deliberation in practice does not attain this principle” (2003:242). Obviously, Dutwin introduces the possible measurement approach on equality of deliberation combined the consideration on the quantity as well as the quality. However, he makes a separation between quality and quantity in the contribution of deliberation, the quantity of contribution to deliberation has to be combined with the quality of discourse, because speaking, to a large extent, is not equivalent to being heard, especially in the instant information exchange environment.

Additionally and crucially, real deliberation should not leave room to prejudice and privilege. Many theorists emphasize the importance of free and equal access to deliberative arenas for “all” without exclusion (Manin, 1987; Knight and Johnson, 1994). However, Sanders (1997:353) argues that even if the equality of access principle is achieved, some individuals’ arguments may still count more than others, and this phenomenon, to a large extent, back to class, gender and race again that associated with social hierarchy and patterns, which further may incline participants to hear some arguments and not others. Inspiring autonomy and generating the sense of communities are crucial facets of functions of deliberation, yet this goal may be hampered by social hierarchy and patterns of oppression, so that participants within deliberative arenas are stills restricted by latent rules of social alienation and exclusion (Sanders, 1997:369). Knight and Johnson (1997) develop a relatively exhaustive conceptual framework of equality from procedural and substantive perspectives, and both focus on the equal political influence relating to social distribution of power and resource besides equal access or opportunities to deliberative arenas. Most of these theories and concepts are formed in the western world, especially developed under the democratic voting culture, which could not be applied directly to explain the Chinese society under the cyber social context. However, deliberation is “talk-centric”, rather than “vote-centric” (Chamber,

2003:38). Thus, a conceptual reconstruction of equality in Weibo's discursive settings is required before getting into the next section of measurement.

The Operationalisation of Equality in the Weibosphere

Based on previous literature, following the procedural perspective of equality from Knight and Johnson (1997), the equality in Wei sphere should also be defined as a procedural one. In other words, the equality of deliberation in Weibosphere should be studied within deliberative processes, which contain different discursive stages based on its communicative characteristics. The first stage of equality refers to equal opportunity of access to deliberative arenas, which guarantee the participatory parity regardless of difference within genders, races, social strata (Habermas, 1989; Knight and Johnson, 1994; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Dutwin, 2003). Weibo is a public discursive space that contains numerous contents and topics including sports, fashion, politics, economy and so forth, so the discursive space that could induce deliberation is limited that not every individual could efficiently engage. However, the equal access is not sufficient to guarantee the equal quality of deliberation, because disadvantaged groups might lack power and confidence to make efficient and influential voice towards the public deliberation (Sanders, 1997; Millers, 2002). Even if individuals post weibo in the deliberative areas in Weibosphere, weibo could easily be buried within the tremendous information flow if it does receive comments. Thus, the second stage of equality is the equality of discursive influence after getting access to deliberative arenas, which refers to the equal distribution of the discursive power towards participants' opinions forming and the equal discursive engagement within the process of deliberation. This definition is borrowed from Cohen's definition of "substantive equality", which means "participants in deliberative arenas are substantively equal in that the existing distribution of power and resources does not shape their chances to contribute at any stage of the deliberative process, nor does that distribution play an authoritative role in their deliberation" (Cohen, 1989:33). The equality in the second stage of the conceptual framework in this research refers to the substantive discursive equality, which builds a connection between the structure of discursive power and the outcome of deliberative influence.

The research question of this paper is "In what forms and patterns, does inequality exist in deliberative arenas in China's Weibosphere?" Interactions in the Weibosphere are based on many-to-many information exchange and diffusion, within which inequality takes place. As mentioned, the study of inequality has to borrow the measurement standards of equality. The equality in this research could be understood within a procedural conceptual framework as discussed above. Further, the detailed measurement standards will be listed based on the basic theories in the previous sections.

- 1) Equality of access into deliberative arenas:
 - a) The equal gender distribution of engagement in the deliberative arenas.
 - b) The equal social status distribution of engagement in the deliberative arenas.
 - c) Other social elements' distribution of engagement in the deliberative arenas.

- 2) Equality of discursive influence during deliberative discussion:
 - a) The equal discursive contribution in the public opinion.
 - b) The equal consideration of arguments in the deliberative arenas.
 - c) The equal discursive construction within the deliberative discussion.

Current Studies on Weibo:

Studies on micro-blog in China still stay in the primary stage, and current researches and literatures mainly focus on its marketing values, its basic operating mechanism and the influence towards the changes of daily communication (e.g. Wang, 2011; Ji, 2011). One approach relating to research in this paper is the study on public opinion leaders and public opinion formation in the Weibosphere. Li (2012: 11) states the significant existence of opinion leaders in the Weibosphere, and among them, media people and celebrities accounts for the largest portion. Further, Bi (2011: 13) generalizes the changes among opinion leaders reveals the trend of “institutionalization”, that is to say, opinion leaders in the Weibosphere gradually take place of the role of news source from the traditional media, and moreover, he states the that public opinion is largely determined by opinion leaders. From another positive perspective, Lei (2011) analyzes the benefits of opinion leaders on the motivation of civil participation.

Nevertheless, some theoretical flaws make these theories unpersuasive. Firstly, the standard of defining opinion leaders lacks a systematical and theoretical framework. Most Chinese scholars use the definition from Lazarsfeld (1968), however, whether the definition of opinion leader in early time's election settings could be used within the Weibosphere is doubtful. Secondly, the most serious problem of studies on Weibo is the shortage of empirical study, because theories cannot stand steadily without the empirical support and demonstration. Thirdly, the apparent existence of opinion leaders is embedded within the unequal discursive structures and patterns of Weibosphere, and the study on the inequality in the Weibosphere, unfortunately, remains empty.

The aim of this research is twofold. Firstly, this research is aimed to investigate the discursive form and pattern of inequality in the Weibosphere, which could potentially fill the gap

between the phenomenon of existence of opinion leaders and the latent operational mechanism embedded within the information flows in Weibo's deliberative arenas. Secondly, this research not only concludes the theoretical background, but also applies an empirical study to illustrate the theoretical questions. Thus, the deficiency on the gap between theories and empirical research in previous studies on Weibo could be made up. Lastly, this study is capable to make a connection between theories on deliberative democracy fostered from the western world and the theoretical appliance to the most popular Chinese online community.

METHODOLOGY

The key methodology applied in this research is content analysis, mainly based on considerations of online discursive settings in the Weibosphere and requires of answering the research questions. Content analysis is the research technique "for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969:14). In this section, advantages and potent issues of applying content analysis in this study will be discussed.

Platforms in the cyber world are complicatedly structured, and additionally, they are rapidly changing. "The Internet is so fluid as to be rendered meaningless as a storage medium; it is never constant, never fixed, no matter that the textual traces left there seem to give it form" (Jones, 1999:12). Based on these online features, the basic principle of doing online surveys is increasing the sampling population as well as minimizing intervention, because "the more you squeeze, the more it changes shape" (ibid, 12). One of the most prominent reasons of applying content analysis in this study is its unobtrusive characteristic (Kriooendorff, 2004:18; Bryman, 2008: 289). In the field of social science, direct and indirect interactions with research subjects and data involved in most social research methods, consciously or unconsciously, have impacts on the objectiveness of data collection, and it is the main reason of rejection on other methodologies including survey, interviews and discourse analysis. However, content analysis could avoid the risk of distorting data (Bryman, 2008) and enable to "preserves the conceptions of the data source" (Kriooendorff, 2004:41), because the analyzing unit of content analysis generated from social settings rather than researchers' design. This research aims to explore the forms and pattern of inequality in the Weibosphere, which require the objective and unobtrusive collection of online data. Further, an analysis of Weibo, which only contains 140 characters, could lead to reduction of personal bias from researchers.

Content analysis offers an outstanding research technique for the comparative content-analytic approach based on large-scale contents (McTavish, and Pirro, 1990). Inequality, in most cases, is studied and measured within different groups rather than intergroup comparison (Sen, 1992:12). Thus, content analysis is suitable for the comparative measurement on Inequality in the Weibosphere in this study. In doing group analysis, the classification should be precisely made under some specific theoretical frameworks. According to literature on inequality in previous sections, the classification, the most widely used, is gender and economic class-based, which, however, cannot be applied appropriately to the cyber world where the economic identification is eliminated from the online personal capital. In the Weibosphere, the identification information of users cannot be traced by some traditional standards and measurements, so the classification can be reclassified flexibly based on personal information from Weibo website. The essential classification standard of weibo is a binary standard based on whether a Weibo user is verified or not. Verified users are users who are celebrities and organizations that have influence on public in various realms of real society, including the field of showbiz, sports, media, finance, technology, government officials, cultural, arts, fashion and so forth. This binary standard is the most implicit classification of users in the Weibosphere.

Another significant advantage of applying content analysis in this research is its ability to construct unstructured large-scale data and content into new forms and structure that are available for analyzing (Kriooendorff, 2004). Content analysis is labeled as “a highly flexible method” by Bryman (2008:289), and it is always associated with study of media and communication on the media output, its applicability, nevertheless, goes far beyond this since the new media comes has become the leading role in the media world. Information and data in the Weibosphere updates in an astonishing speed, and the information flow structure presented in a fragile form, which triggered by the complicated self-generating discursive power structure (Bi, 2011). In this research, content analysis could assist researchers to reconstruct information flows in the Weibosphere into an analyzable discursive structure through a coding framework.

However, there is hardly perfect methodology for answering any theoretical research questions in social science. Choosing an appropriate methodology for research questions is just a judgment of balancing its disadvantages and advantages. There are two latent issues or difficulties of applying content analysis in this study. Firstly, although content analysis is a preferred research technique for descriptively exploring content patterns and structure. However, it cannot be designed to answer some in-depth questions that tend to explore associations between media content and social implication, in other words, content analysis

is incapable to answer “why” questions (Hansen, et.al, 1998; Bryman, 2008). Fortunately, research questions in this research tend to answer “what” and “how” rather than “why”. However, from my perspective, whether content analysis could explore the causal question, to a large extent, depends on the designing of coding, if dependent variables and independent variables are well sampled and coded, there is a great considerable potential for content analysis to make an efficient explanation to “why” questions.

Secondly, content analysis offers a research technique of systematic study of a large body of text-based data (Krippendorff, 2004). However, paradoxically, it is an advantage of systematically handling data, at the same time, the biggest difficulty for efficiently sampling in the stage of practical operation. Unlike the mass media, information contents and flows in the online media keep changing without a one-second stop, how to obtain a representative sampling pool is the first and the most important issue that should be taken into consideration. The following section will introduce details of the sampling and methodology design in this research.

The Sampling Strategies

The possible and potential deliberative arenas in the Weibosphere are fragmentarily structured, because some deliberative arenas are formed under some topics and, on the other hand, are induced by some posting weibo. Based on this characteristic combined with two diverse and interdependent research questions in this research, two diverse sampling pools are designed to explore the questions of Inequality on access and discursive influence separately. The sampling strategy in the whole study, generally, consists of two steps: the first step is purposive sampling, which refers to sampling under the principle of theoretical purpose (Neyman, 1934), and the main function of purposive sampling applied in this study is to filter population into a new narrowed sampling pool; the second step is further random sampling in the already filtered sampling pool after the first step of purposive sampling.

Sampling for the Study on Inequality of Access

For the research question on Inequality of access, sampling follows the strategy of topic focus. As discussed in the previous section, the room for deliberative arenas in the Weibosphere is limited, because only topics or issues relating to the public interest and public life could potentially trigger a public deliberation. Thus, topics have to be carefully selected from the massive topic pool. Three latest hot topics relating to the public interest and lives were collected within the time range, starting from July 01, 2012 to August 10, 2012, from the

official hot topic ranking list of Sina Weibo website (<http://topic.weibo.com/hot>). These three tops are 1) the adjustment of the water price; 2) the proposed extension of the retirement age; 3) issues on food security.

The next step of sampling targets to sampling of weibo. The population of weibo under each topic is enormous, so Weibo's advanced searching engine was used to select weibo samples under the conditions of being original and within the time span from July 10, 2012 to August 5, 2012. After the filtering, the population of weibo under the topic of retirement age is 53,668, and the population of weibo under the topic of water price is narrowed down to 67,269, and under the topic of food security, the population is 34,954. Further, under each topic we randomly choose 100 weibo⁴.

Sampling for the Study of Inequality of Discursive Influence

Reposts and comments of weibo are the most significant measurement standard of weibo influence (Liu and Liu, 2011). Reposts, unlike the comments, indicates the influential range and the span of dissemination. Thus, the sampling strategy for the second research question is reposting focus. Three hot weibo (the most frequently reposted ones) on the same topic were selected from the official hot weibo ranking list of Sina Weibo website on August 19, 2012 (<http://hot.plaza.weibo.com/>). The chosen topic is the latest and hottest public topic relating to Anti-Japan demonstrations and boycott of Japanese goods, and these three hot weibo hold different attitudes towards the topic, namely radically support⁵, neutrally report⁶ and rationally criticize⁷.

Among all reposts from the original three weibo, the second layer of sampling is applied following the random selecting rule, which is choosing the first repost containing more than once reposting every ten pages. The amount of sample from each original weibo is one hundred, and three hundred reposts, in total, are collected into the sampling pool.

⁴ As mentioned, speaking does not refer to being heard. Thus, the weibo sample we collected should contain at least one comment, or has been, at least, reposted once. The random sampling is choosing the first weibo that meet the above deliberative principle every ten pages.

⁵ Weibo Link: <<http://weibo.com/1760741224/vxSbj8QXg#1345400347660>> [Accessed on 19 August 2012].

⁶ Weibo Link: <<http://weibo.com/2760655144/vxStmoO9G#1345407145848>> [Accessed on 19 August 2012].

⁷ Weibo Link: <<http://weibo.com/1648664373/vxUhYrOLE>> [Accessed on 19 August 2012].

Coding Frames and ICR

The coding of the inequality of access is consist of two parts – characteristic of Weibo users (gender, location, classification, status, follower and following number), and characteristics of weibo (the amount of comments and reposts, total words, tone, statement category, whether contain flaming, whether contain rational argument). The coding of the inequality of influence contains three parts, briefly, the basic characteristic of original weibo and its user (gender, status, statement and tone), the characteristic of the latest repost⁸ and its user (gender, status, amount of followers, reposting frequency, whether reposted directly from verified users...) and the influential relationship among the former repost and the original weibo (the degree of the position among former repost and the original weibo, and the characteristic of statements).

The second coder, who has the academic background of sociology, was introduced to the process of coding, and the coding has been revised for two times in order to increase the ICR (Inter-code Reliability), and the ICR tests were conducted on a randomly selected sub-sample of 100 weibo representing 33% of the whole sampling pool within each research question. Generally, the ICR of the coding of inequality of access is higher than which of inequality of influence, because of the coding of inequality of access, to large extent, describe objective features rather than measure the characteristic of the inter-relationship of discursive influence. In specific, the overall average ICR of inequality of access coding frame is 0.936, and the overall average ICR of inequality of influence coding frame is 0.886.

Figure 1: The posting flow in Weibo

The image shows a Weibo post by user 梁树新 (Liang Shuxin) with a green '+ 加关注' (Follow) button. The post text is enclosed in a red box and reads: '今天发生在深圳等地的砸车反日事件，仔细分析，原是必然。因为我们从来没有进行过公民社会建设，政府讳莫如深，民间混沌迷茫。在一个经历过十年浩劫，法治精神游离的社会，民间所有行为都缺乏价值观的指引。于是，出现扛着毛像游行的场面便不足为奇。成熟的公民社会是怎样的，看看香港便知。' Below the text, it says '8月19日 18:55 来自iPhone客户端 | 举报' and '转发(9733) | 收藏 | 评论(2645)'. A large black arrow points from the text to the label 'The Original weibo'. Below this are buttons for '评论(2645)', '转发(9733)', and '转发到微博 | 转发到私信 | 转发到微群'. A text input field for reposting is highlighted in green and labeled 'The list of reposting flows', with a '转发' (Repost) button to its right. Below the input field is a checkbox for '同时评论给 梁树新'. The bottom section, enclosed in a red box, shows a list of reposts under the filter '全部 | 关注的人 | 陌生人'. The first repost is by 莫小山 (Mo Xiaoshan) with the text '我极力回避看这样的报道，因为我为他们感到无地自容，恰恰他们打着“爱国”的旗号，这更让我感觉蒙羞。(今天 20:57)'. The second repost is by 乐观的里卡鲁多 (Le Guan De Li Ka Lu Duo) with the text '// @Ellie-吴爱丽: 何必呢~咋就不能理智点呢?// @akid: 黑头套这么出名? // @吴渣-猪草团: 本次保钓证明了日本已是现代文明国家 🤔 插旗者高叫反日口号没挨打，没被套上黑头套，喉咙没被割一刀，在拘留所没被躲猫猫，在海上没有丢下水被自杀 🤔 我们革命同志和爱国青年 (今天 16:24)'. The reposts are labeled 'The latest repost' and 'The former repost'.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Data results from SPSS, to large extent, could answer the research questions on inequality in this paper, both on the inequality of access and the inequality on deliberative influence.

Inequality of Access

The inequality of access could be interpreted from the following dimensions, including gender, region and online stratum.

Inequality of Gender Distribution

The gender distribution of access into public deliberative discussion presents a serious trend of asymmetry, and specifically, males accessed in the deliberative discussion constitute 64.7% of the total samples, which is 29.4% higher than the proportion of female.

Table 1: the frequency of gender distribution

	Frequency	%	Valid%	Cumulative%
female	106	35.3	35.3	35.3
male	194	64.7	64.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Crosstab of gender and verification

			Gender		Total
			female	male	
User verification	not verified	Count	93	126	219
		% within userverification	42.5%	57.5%	100.0%
		% within gender	87.7%	64.9%	73.0%
	verified	Count	13	68	81
		% within userverification	16.0%	84.0%	100.0%

		% within gender	12.3%	35.1%	27.0%
Total		Count	106	194	300
		% within userverification	35.3%	64.7%	100.0%
		% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

From the above crosstab, another inequality on gender is associated with the identity verification of Weibo users could be observed. Among samples, verified users take up 27%, within which males predominantly occupy 84%, while females only take up 16%. Further, the Chi-Square Tests (.000*** < .05) illustrates the strong association between gender and Weibo identity of verification.

Inequality of Region Distribution

From the basic descriptive statistic analysis, another aspect of inequality of access could be obviously found. According to the frequency table, Weibo users who get access into the public deliberative discussion, to a large extent, come from four provinces and cities among the overall 34 regions in China, namely, Beijing (19.7%), Guangzhou (13.7%), Shanghai (10.3%), and Zhejiang (8.3%). The distribution of these four regions in total takes up 52% of the overall engagement in the discursive arena.

Inequality of Online Stratum

The following linear regression models can be considered as the linking section between the study of inequality of access and inequality of discursive influence. In the first section of statistic analysis, the inequality of gender distribution not only presented in the general engagement in the deliberative discussion, but also illustrates the asymmetry gender distribution on online identity verification. The group of verified users is a minority among overall Weibo users, however, do they control the majority of discursive power and influence? Weibo influence is settled as the dependent variables composed of two dissemination factors – comments and reposts, and gender, followers, verification and classification (individual users or organizational user) are put into independent variables.

Table 3: Linear regression model on comments

	Unstandardized		Standardized		
	Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-91.284	26.652		-3.425	.001
gender	-.140	14.464	.000	-.010	.992
userverification	10.764	18.703	.029	.575	.565
userclass	93.152	24.805	.196	3.755	.000(***)
followors	.000	.000	.779	16.829	.000(***)

Dependent Variable: comments. *, $p < 0.1$; **, $p < 0.05$; ***, $p < 0.01$

The adjusted R square of the linear regression model on comments is 0.506, which means the model could give explain 50.6% of the factors that might affect the amount of comments, and the statistically significant F value ($.000^{***} < .05$) further illustrate the availability of this regression model.

Among four independent variables, the user's classification variable (individual user or organizational user) and the amount of followers statistically affect the amount of comments received in Weibo. Specifically, the amount of comments of weibo posted by organizational users is averagely 19.6% higher than which of personal users. The effect from the amount of followers towards the amount of comments reveals the trend of positive correlation. Statistically, one unit increase of followers of Weibo users could induce 0.779 unit growth of amounts of comment. These affect factors in the below linear regression model of the amount of reposts follow a similar pattern.

Table 4: Linear regression model on reposts

	Unstandardized		Standardized		
	Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-225.070	68.540		-3.284	.001
gender	-8.642	37.196	-.011	-.232	.816
userverification	64.937	48.100	.078	1.350	.178
userclass	233.356	63.792	.218	3.658	.000(***)
followors	.001	.000	.654	12.364	.000(***)

Dependent Variable: reposts. *, $p < 0.1$; **, $p < 0.05$; ***, $p < 0.01$

The adjusted R square (0.355) and the significant value of F value (.000***<.05) demonstrate the availability of this regression model. The classification of users still significantly affects the dependent variable – the amount of reposts, in detail, weibo from organizational users is 21.8% frequent reposted than individual weibo. Additionally, every one unit increase of followers could give 0.654 unit of growth in repost amount.

However, there is a strong association between Weibo users' classification and users' verification. The organizational users in the sampling pool only occupy 14.0%, among which 88.1% are verified. Further the Chi-square tests (.000***<.05) prove this strong association between the identity verification and user's organizational class.

Table 5: Crosstab of user's classification and verification

		userclass		Total	
		organization user	individual user		
userverification	not verified	Count	5	214	219
		% within userverification	2.3%	97.7%	100.0%
		% within userclass	11.9%	82.9%	73.0%
		% of Total	1.7%	71.3%	73.0%
	verified	Count	37	44	81
		% within userverification	45.7%	54.3%	100.0%
		% within userclass	88.1%	17.1%	27.0%
		% of Total	12.3%	14.7%	27.0%
Total		Count	42	258	300
		% within userverification	14.0%	86.0%	100.0%
		% within userclass	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	14.0%	86.0%	100.0%

From the results of ANOVA tests of the amount of follower and users' verification (Sig. of F value is .000***<.05), it could further demonstrate the obvious difference of the amount of followers between the verified Weibo users and unverified Weibo users.

In conclusion, the Weibosphere, although has been given hope of generating a free and all-inclusive deliberative sphere, still throw gloom over building the ideal deliberative arenas for equal distribution of deliberative engagement. The inequality of access to deliberative discussion in the Weibosphere is the inequality within diverse dimensions including gender dimension, regional dimension, and online stratum dimension.

According to the latest report from CNNIC (2012), the gender ratio of Chinese Internet users stays stably in recent years. Until June 2012, among the population of Internet users, males account for 55.0%, females account for 45.0%, and among the total users in Sina Weibo, the gender distribution is extremely close to this ratio, which is 53.0% to 47.0% (Sina Weibo statistic, 2011). However, the asymmetry distribution of gender in the deliberative arenas in Weibosphere illustrates the inequality of access on gender. In the Weibosphere, the exclusion of disadvantaged social groups does not exist, because it offers an equal opportunity of engagement and participation. Nevertheless, getting the equal opportunity differentiates from equally engagement. Unlike the traditional social filtering mechanism towards gender in the deliberative arenas, the access to deliberation in the Weibosphere is based on a self-filtering mechanism. In other words, Weibo is an open and mixed sphere combined with the public sphere and private sphere (Sang and Lin, 2011), and also the topic choosing largely depends on personal interest, which could induce the topic chosen bias between male and females that mightily result in the inequality of access to the deliberative discussion. Back to theories from Sanders (1997) and Millers (2002), the equal opportunity is not enough for deliberation, because diffidence of making arguments from disadvantaged people is the obstacle for efficient deliberation. The basic frequency description of gender inequality in this paper is only the first step of exploration on inequality of gender in the Weibosphere, and more methodologies need to be applied to make further exploration on individual and social reasons behind this inequality

Secondly, imbalance of regional distribution is another dimension of inequality of access to the deliberative arenas. From the statistic results, it is obvious that four advanced regions in China, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Zhejiang have the absolute discursive contribution in the public discussion space. This dramatic asymmetric regional distribution proximately can mirror to the regional inequality of development in China after Mao's age. Economic reforms, particularly coastal development strategies, together with open-door policies towards the coastal economic development, have made significant contributions to the prosperity of provinces and cities located in the eastern coastal areas while the interior regions have lagged far behind. Gaps between the costal and interior regions are reflected

from economy, education, politics, and other facets of distribution of capital (Wei, 1999). Thus, besides the conditions on gender, class, status that affect the ability of obtaining access to deliberation, the geographical location could be added as the new element into the study of deliberation in China's society. However, the inequality of regional online engagement is resulted by composite factors including distribution capital distribution, education, and regional culture that need further deep exploration and study. The inequality of regions is a complicated research question triggered by economic, capital structure and culture factors, which require further deep study from other viewpoints of social science.

Lastly, online stratum is the third dimension of inequality. The Weibosphere is not vacuum space for the existence of hierarchy, and rather, the hierarchy in Weibosphere is built on the identity verification mechanism. What should be stressed is that the online hierarchy, to a large extent, is simply a reflection of the hierarchy embedded in the real world, because only individuals who already obtain some social status and organizations could get verified. The "V" sign besides the Weibo user's name already put the dividing line between elites (including the celebrities and organization) and the general public, and this mechanism directly contribute to the inequality of gender and the inequality distribution of discursive power and influence. From the general trend observed from this section, verified users, especially organizational users, have the large volume of audience (followers), which is the essentially demanding factor of obtaining more comments and being more reposted. Thus, the hierarchy of identity verification in Weibosphere, to a large extent, gives birth to the hierarchy of discursive power and influence, which will be further explored in the next section.

Inequality of Discursive Influence

Discursive Influence in the Weibosphere has been already operationalized into a quantitative measurement towards reposts, which includes not only the counting of the total amount of the reposting but also the relationship of inter-influential between reposting weibo and the original weibo. Additionally, some elements, for instance, discursive characteristics and the verification of Weibo users' identity should be taken into consideration.

The Basic Characteristics of the Reposting Flow

From the descriptive tables differences among the general reposting pattern could be observed. To be specific, the reposting flow generated from the neutrally report weibo contain the smallest part of verified Weibo users (25%), on the contrast, the amount of verified users engaged in the reposting flow from these original weibo that contain radically supporting

language and rationally analysis is larger (1.35 and 1.47). Additionally, only 11% of reposting weibo from the neutral original weibo is directly reposted from verified users. On the other hand, almost half of samples under the radical and rational original weibo are directly from verified users (0.46 and 0.49). Lastly, what is intriguing is that the reposting range (the frequency of being reposted within reposting flows) from the radical and rational original weibo is nearly twice larger than which from the neutrally reporting weibo. Averagely, the reposting range from the neutral original weibo is 1.25, which means the original weibo has been reposted 1.25 times before until the latest repost, and the average reposting range of radical and rational original weibo is 2.64 and 2.21. The ANOVA tests further improve the significant difference of reposting range, the amount of verified users included, and the direct disseminating influence of verified users is strongly associated with the statement categories and tone expressed from the original weibo.

In addition, the structural characteristic relating to the engagement of verified users embedded within reposting flows is another facet of the characteristic within reposting flows. The overall ratio of users' verification in the sampling pool is 10%, and in general, 35.3% of Weibo users repost the original weibo directly from verified users. However, different tone and category of statement of the original weibo throw a diverse picture towards this structural characteristic. Based on the statistic results from the multilayer crosstab, a trend of tremendous heterogeneity is presented. Only 11.0% of weibo reposts of the objective and neutral original weibo are reposted form verified users, on the contrary, 46.0% of reposts of the radical original weibo and 49.0% of reposts of the rational weibo are directly reposted from verified users. And in details, within the reposting flow generated from the objective original weibo, 6.4% of unverified users directly reposted the weibo from verified users and 83.3% of verified users access to the reposting flow from verified users; within the reposting flow from the radical original weibo, 34.6% of unverified users reposted weibo from verified users, while 94.7% of verified users reposted from verified users; while within the reposting flow triggered from the original with a rational analysis and critique, 46.3% of unverified users has the direct reposting relationship with verified users, and all verified users repost the original from verified users. Additionally, all the Chi-square tests are statistically significant (.000***, .000***, .025***<.005), which illustrate the difference of structure on the engagement of verified users within different reposting flow.

The Inter-influence of Agreement within Reposting Flows

Reposting flows are capable to indicate the latent inter-influential relationship among reposts and the original weibo. Based on the measurement system of agreement among the latest repost weibo, the former repost weibo and the original weibo, we would like to obtain the difference of inter-influential relationship based on the distance between repost and the original weibo.

According to the statistic output from these Crosstab, a brief trend of inter-influential relationship could be concluded. Since the neutral original weibo leaves a little room for the measurement of attitude, so the comparison of the agreement is applied to the radical original weibo reposting flows and the rational original weibo reposting flows. The correlations among the latest repost, the former repost and the original weibo reveal a direction of positive influential relationship. That is to say, the position of original weibo, to a large extent, demands the position of reposting weibo. 40.2% of the latest reposting weibo, and 42.4% of the former reposting weibo totally agree with the original weibo in the radically supporting tone, and the totally agreement rate between the latest and former repost 42.3%. And the agreement rate under the rational statement original weibo is averagely higher than which under the radical one, in detail, 59.8% of the latest repost and 56.8% of the former repost totally agree with the original weibo, and the total agreement between the latest repost and the former repost is 43.4%.

However, the inter-influential relationship is strongly correlated with the reposting distance from the original weibo. Pearson Correlation Coefficients give us a strong evidence to illustrate the influence of the original weibo towards the repost, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient of inter-agreement between reposts (including the latest and the former repost) and the original weibo is 0.855 (Sig.=.000***<.05), and it means the position or tone of reposting weibo is extremely and positively correlated with the original weibo's position and tone. On the other hand, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient of inter-agreement between the latest reposting weibo and the former repost weibo is 0.390 (Sig.=.000***<.05). Thus, although the trend of positive correlation between the latest repost and the former repost is statistically significant as well, however the correlation among reposts is much weaker than the correlation between the original weibo and reposts.

The Inter-influence of Discursive Construction within Reposting Flows

The second dimension of inter-influence is the inter-influential relationship on discursive elements within the reposting flow. Again, analysis based on the crosstab is applied to explore potential pattern and trend of inter-influential relationship among weibo reposts and the original weibo. From the outputs of the descriptive crosstabs, a general discursive inter-influence embedded within reposting flow could be directly generalized. In specific, the discursive content in the reposting flow of the objective and neutral original weibo leaves little room for rational analysis and radical statements. A large proportion of content of reposts is lack of comments and self opinions expression, and statistically, 27.0% of the latest reposts and 28.0% of the former reposts are in the simplest reposting form without additional contents included. As for the radical original weibo, it leads not only the main position but also the category of statement within the reposting flow, specifically, 35.0% of the latest reposts and 41.0% of the former reposts give out radically supporting views. Intriguingly, within the reposting flow from the original rational weibo, the content of the latest reposts, 52.0% of which, is in the form of simple reposting without comments, while the largest portion (41.0%) of content in the former reposts weibo is simply reposted followed by 32.0% of rational statement.

More importantly, when the layer of users' verification was put into the previous crosstabs, the discursive characteristics between verified and unverified users present a remarkable difference, especially for the rational original weibo. In its reposting flow, whether the former user is verified seems has become a condition of making rational statements. 53.1% of verified users make reposting with rational statement. On the other hand, unverified users, mostly, failed to make rational statement, rather they tend to simply repost (43.1%) the original weibo without comments, and the Chi square tests further demonstrate these association of different elements within the reposting flows.

Lastly, flaming and reason giving contained in the latest reposts is, to some extent, related to the quality of deliberation from the former reposts. According to the frequency, flaming, mainly, is caused by the radical original weibo, 37.4% of the former reposting weibo and 32.3% of the latest reposting contain flaming in their statement, and moreover, within these flaming contained reposts, 62.2% of flaming appeared in both the latest reposts and the former reposts. On the other hand, reason-giving, largely, is triggered by the rational original weibo, 11.0% of the latest reposts are reasons-included, and 36.4% of the former reposts contain reasons-giving, however, 21.9% of former reposts weibo induce the further reason-giving within the reposting flow.

The inequality of discursive influence, compared to the inequality of access, to a large extent, plays a more essential role in the study of online deliberation, because the inequality of access could be considered as the measurement of basic conditions and structures of online deliberative settings. However, the deliberation, based on its original conception, is a form of interaction among participants. Thus, our research on discursive influence and the inter-influential relationship within reposting flows and Weibo users, render a quantified method to investigate characteristics of inter-influential discursive patterns embedded in the mass and complicated information flow in the Weibosphere. The research, so far, has already explored the inequality of discursive influence within reposting flows in the deliberative arenas of the Weibosphere. The understanding of discursive influence could be divided into two dimensions: first, the unequal inter-influence on agreement within reposting flows; second, the unequal inter-influence on the discursive structure within reposting flows.

Deliberation in the Weibosphere occurs in the form of reposts and comments, and reposts nevertheless could more precisely describe the range of engagement, changes of discursive influence, and the structural characteristic of information flows. According to the last part in the previous research question, the difference of influence between verified Weibo users and unverified Weibo users has already shown the significant trend, which has been further improved in the study of this section, that identity verification is strongly positively associated with the influence in the Weibosphere. Micro-blogging, itself, is just a new form of information flow, nevertheless, the functioning mechanism behind it is the potent asymmetric relationship consisted of “following” and “followed” (Bi, 2011). In other words, the asymmetric following relationship in the Weibosphere, in general, does not require bilateral following, which essentially realize the hierarchy of not only online status but also the discursive influence. The correlation results of agreement among reposts and the original weibo in the above finding section illustrate that the original weibo from verified users, to a large extent, possess the determining position and tone within the whole reposting flows, and moreover, the discursive influence is not weakened further disseminating, contrarily, it reveals a gradually strengthening trend.

Additionally, the reposting flow generated from objective and neutral original weibo failed to trigger a wide-range of participation of deliberation among Weibo users. On the other hand, a clear position-given in the original weibo from verified users could attract more participation into the reposting flow. Back to the theoretical framework, similar to the findings of online opinion polarization in online deliberation from Sunstein (2001), the polarization of public opinion in the Weibosphere is significant. However, the polarization of public opinion in

Weibosphere is based on two factors: first, the unique asymmetric identity verification structure; second, the degree of opinion clarity in the original weibo. What is more, these two factors have the interdependent influence on the polarization of public opinions in Weibosphere. To sum up, opinions with an unambiguous position from verified users in Weibosphere most likely become into public opinions through reposting flows, within which the polarization of public opinions tends to present a tendency of strengthening with the engagement and participation of other verified users. Furthermore, discursive interactions among verified users and unverified users in the Weibosphere also manifest a structure of hierarchy within reposting flows, that is so say, verified users mostly repost weibo directly from other verified users rather than unverified users. Thus, verified users in the Weibosphere not only render the opinion position as the opinion source, but also, strengthen the position and lead the tone within the reposting flow.

The second dimension of the inequality on influence is the unequal inter-influence on the discursive structure within reposting flows. Firstly, verified users, compared to unverified users, frequently make opinion expressions. Secondly, unverified users tend to make more radically statement with flaming rather than rational arguments. Thus, reflected to the findings from Davis (1999), online discussion space could easily induce flaming and extreme ideologies other than equally rational arguments. The free “fissionlike” pattern (Li, 2012) of reposting flows has been given hope of free expression and a wide range of deliberative participation. However, the free and equal pattern of technology does not equal to the free and equal pattern of speech. In the Weibosphere, based on the asymmetric following interrelationship triggered by the identity verification hierarchy mechanism, the discursive influential structure significantly presents a trend of “recentralization” both on the public opinion forming and discursive structure. However, unlike the manifest towards the public opinion by mass media, influence in Weibo follows a self-generating and spontaneous discursive filtering system embedded within reposting flows.

There are several limitations in this research: firstly, the theoretical framework in this study is mainly based on deliberative democracy rooted in western political world, so there still remain some problems of the theoretical applicability in consideration of the specific social background of China. Although potential online deliberative arenas could be considered as the theoretical linking between the western theories and Chinese social settings, however, some logic flaws of theories could not be eliminated. Secondly, as for the methodology, the sample size and sampling strategy remain some problems and need further improvements. The sampling strategy in this research is a two-step sampling combined purposive sampling and random sampling. Although purposive is necessary for the online study based on the

tremendous population, the doubt that whether samples filtered under the principle of purposive sampling that built on our framework is overdone could have impacts on the representativeness of the population. Thus, so how to increase the portion of randomness under the purposive sampling strategy is the main direction in the methodology part in further studies. Lastly, the general trend and pattern of inequality of deliberation and the asymmetry hierarchy embedded within information flows in the Weibosphere has been concluded. Nevertheless, describing the interior discursive inter-influential pattern of the deliberation in the Weibosphere is only the first step for the study of online deliberation in the Weibosphere, and reasons and deeper exploration behind the hierarchy should be further studied applied with other methodologies, for instance, surveys and interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

The key findings in this research strongly indicate the existence of inequality in the Weibosphere. The inequality of access and the inequality of discursive influence constitute the integral conceptual framework of inequality in the Weibosphere. Start with the inequality of access, the findings demonstrate that the inequality of access is reflected from various dimensions. Firstly, the distribution of genders into the deliberative arenas is dramatically asymmetric, and it might be generated from the self-filtering system of engagement in the Weibosphere. Secondly, the distribution of regions of Weibo users in the deliberative arenas presents a tremendous difference. Users from the most advanced regions in China, for instance, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, account for the most proportion of engagement in the deliberative discussion. The study of inequality of regions is a prominent and complicated research topic relating to politics, economics and culture in China, which, however, has not been applied to study in the cyber world. Thus, this finding could potentially contribute to the online deliberation theory within China's social settings, which requires further deep study. Thirdly, online stratum is the third dimension of the inequality of access. The findings in the study show that Weibo does not eliminate hierarchy, and it, on the contrary, brings the hierarchy of the real world to the Weibosphere through the users' verification mechanism, which has immense impacts on the equality of access and influence. Following the pessimistic opinion of the Internet from Margolis and Resnick (2000), what could be concluded is the sociopolitical hierarchy online is just a reflection of the hierarchy embedded in the real society.

Findings on the inequality of discursive influence reveal a two-dimensional inequality: the inequality of inter-influence of opinions' formation within reposting flows and the inequality

of discursive construction within reposting flows. First and foremost, the formation of public opinions is extremely determined by original opinions with clear positions from verified users, and more importantly, the participation of verified users within reposting flows could efficiently reinforce the original opinions. Thus, the opinion polarization exists not only in the blogosphere (Sunstein, 2001), but also in the Weibosphere. Thus, the discursive power presents the trend of influential hierarchy, which is strongly associated with the hierarchy based on the asymmetry following relationship (Bi, 2011) triggered by the users' identity verification mechanism in the Weibosphere. Last but not least, verified users are better capable to make rational statements and arguments than unverified users, while verified users tend to frequently make radical arguments with flaming included.

However, the research remains problematic in two ways. Firstly, there might be a gap of theoretical linking between the western democratic culture rooted theories and its research application to China's social settings. Secondly, the representativeness of samples is latently defective, due to the potent overdo of purposive sampling strategy and the limited sample size. Based on the consideration of these limits, further studies could be improved in two ways, first, applying more methodologies, for instance, surveys and interviews, for in-depth exploration of the social and personal reasons behind the pattern findings of this research; secondly, increase the sample size and make balance well in the purposive sampling and random sampling.

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