Social Media as News Sources—A Content Analysis of the Use of SinaWeibo and WeChat as Sources in Chinese Newspapers

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Abstract: Social media have emerged as sources of news for people and news leads for journalist. Although there are lots of studies on social media, scholars have not reach consensus on how important they are as sources for traditional journalism. This study aims to assess the role of social media (Sina Weibo and WeChat in particular) as sources in Chinese newspaper coverage. Four Chinese daily newspapers were content analyzed for this purpose. Findings indicate that social media play a limited role as sources in newspaper coverage, and their usage as sources differs by newspaper and news type. Additionally, although social media broaden the range of sources to a certain degree, they do not overturn the principle of ‘hierarchy of credibility’.

Literature Review and Research Questions

News sources can be regarded as raw material for news, which to a certain degree dominates the quality of news and reflects the stance of journalists as well [1]. When social media engage with the process of news gathering, the boundaries between sources, produces, and consumers of news are eroding. Therefore, to investigate social media as sources for the newsroom not only shows the impact of social networks on traditional journalism, but also presents an outline of contemporary media ecology.

The emergences of social media changed the landscape of newsgathering and sourcing routines. Before entering the web 2.0, journalists heavily relied on traditional routines to get sources, such as press releases, spontaneous events and reports from other news organizations [2]. As a kind of user-generated content (UGC), a social medium enables everyone to post and share information as well as interact with each other, generating a huge pool of information and collective intelligence. At the same time, this mode of creation and interaction allows journalists to crowdsource these social networks to get news sources [3,4,5].

Despite the fact that social media are good channels for sourcing news, there is no unified answer to how important social media as sources are for newspaper journalism. Proponents have found that social media were increasingly used as sources for journalists [6,7], while skeptics have shown that limited news coverage referred to social media as sources [8,9,10]. Aside from the extent to which social media are used as sources, there is a key debate about whether social media challenge the traditional souring routine—‘hierarchy of credibility’. Social media optimists assert that social media broaden the range of sources and enable ordinary people’s voice to be heard and disseminated. Social media pessimists argue that journalists still follow the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ to use sources in social media.

Additionally, previous research has mainly focused on social media as sources in particular situations, such as disasters, politician campaigns, and protests, while few researches have paid attention to daily reporting so far [11]. Moreover, the literature review which was conducted as a preparation for this study showed that a majority of former studies tended to investigate impacts of Twitter and Facebook on western countries, while little attention was paid to the use of social media in non-western contexts. Even though some studies were conducted in China, they seldom
discussed the usage of social media as sources after 2013 when the whole media market was
reorganized by the government [12]. Thus, this research decided to explore how Chinese social
media are used as sources in daily news coverage after 2013, to enrich the study of ethnography in
media ecology.

Based on the above-discussed gaps in past research and the relevant existing literature and
theories that were introduced, the study poses the following research questions:

1) To what extent do Chinese newspapers mention social media (SinaWeibo and WeChat) as
news sources?
2) How does the use of social media as sources vary by newspaper type and by news type?
3) Do journalists still follow the concept of ‘hierarchy of credibility’ when they use sources from
social media?

**Methodology**

This study includes three aspects of the relationship between Chinese social media and
newspaper journalism: the extent of referring to social media as news sources in Chinese
newspapers; the similarities and differences between various newspapers and news on using social
media as news sources; and identities of sources from social media cited in Chinese newspapers. To
answer these questions, this paper employs content analysis of newspaper coverage.

**Sample Selection**

Previous studies indicate that different kinds of newspapers in different countries or areas adopt
various strategies to use social media as news sources in their coverage [13,14]. In order to reflect a
general situation of Chinese newspapers, this study selects *Beijing Daily* (北京日报), *Beijing News*
(新京报), *Yangcheng Evening News* (羊城晚报) and *New Express Daily* (新快报) as samples.
These four newspapers represent two models of the media (party newspaper and city newspaper)
from the north part and the south part of China respectively.

**Timeframe**

Comparing to simple random or consecutive day samples, former studies suggest that constructed
week(s) is a more reliable way to sample traditional media, especially daily newspapers because of
their cyclic nature [15,16,17].

According to the data of CNNIC, after a period of rapid development, a turning point of Chinese
social media emerged in 2013. After 2013, the situation has not been changed significantly so far.
Besides, there are many special events in the first half of a year, such as Spring Festival and the
annual sessions of CPPCC (the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) and NPC (the
National People’s Congress), which may affect routine reporting. Thus, this study chose to analyze
coverage during the second half year of 2014.

It selected the 4th July as the first day of a constructed week, and then selected every 15th days
thereafter to construct a whole week. Specifically, the constructed week consisted of 4th July
(Monday), 22nd July (Tuesday), 6th August (Wednesday), 21st August (Thursday), 5th September
(Friday), 20th September (Saturday), and 5th October (Sunday). This constructed week included
coverage in four months during the second half year of 2014 which can reduce monthly bias.

**Text acquisition**

For the sake of limited time, this study narrowed the number of news articles down to 1,000. It
selected three articles instead of all articles in each section to analyze. Besides, this study aims to
analyze daily news articles, so weekly news, news reviews, letters to the editor and columns by
outside people are excluded. Web news, which indicates the tendency of referencing news sources
from the Internet, are included in the analysis.

In sum, the final sample consists of 659 news articles, including 163 from *Beijing Daily*, 139
from *Beijing News*, 182 from *Yangcheng Evening News* and 175 from *New Express Daily*. The
unbalance of news articles drawn from each newspaper is because different newspapers have
various numbers of pages and sections. All articles were coded and arranged in terms of newspapers and chronological order.

**Coding scheme**

In order to address research questions, the coding takes place at three levels: newspapers, news articles, and news sources. The level of newspapers includes two variables: the region of newspaper (North China and South China), and the type of newspaper (party newspaper and city newspaper). There are also two variables in news articles level: the type of news stories (hard news and soft news), and the geographic focus of the news item (regional, national and international). Additionally, the number of all news sources, and the number of news sources from each social medium need to be coded respectively. What is more, top five news sources from social media are also coded for their identities. As a result, eleven variables are assigned to be coded in this study.

On the basis of former relative studies [18,19], this study groups identities of social media sources into eight categories: official/government organization, academic/expert, business leader/organization, celebrity, the public (verified), the public (non-verified), media staff/organization, unclear. In this coding scheme, the identity of the public is divided into verified account or non-verified account, because scholars considered that the verified account is regarded more reliable than non-verified account [20,21].

In order to enhance the quality of the coding scheme, pilot and final reliabilities were assessed in the content analysis. The result showed that Cohen’s kappa scores were between 0.97 (for the variable ‘news genre’ and ‘source identity’) and 0.99 (for other variables), which indicated that this coding scheme was relatively accurate and consistent.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Extent to which social media are used as sources**

In general, the extent of social media used as news sources in newspapers can provide a snapshot of the impact of social media as news sources on newspaper journalism. Figure 1 shows that 63 articles referenced social media as news sources, which constitutes 9.56 percent of all 659 articles. It indicates that social media were seldom cited as news sources in newspaper coverage in 2014. Generally speaking, it can be concluded that social media play a subordinate role as news sources in newspaper coverage.

![Figure 1. The Proportion of Articles Using Different Sources.](image)

Besides of the overall situation, this study also measures the proportion of using social media as a sole source. Figure 2 shows that there are 193 articles using only one source, and 11 of them referenced the only source from social media, taking up 5.70 percent.
Both phenomenon imply a loss of professional journalism in China. Kovach and Rosenstiel point out that journalism is not the profession to provide citizens with only authoritative or recreational information, but to ‘provide the information they need to be free and self-governing’ [22]. Only relying on one source is hard to present the truth and interpreter the fact for the audience. It can bring about a loss of the lifeblood of journalism - the credibility, and lead to the distortion of people’s sense making.

**Differences by newspaper type and news type**

Besides of general situation mentioned above, the second research question is related to specific circumstances – different habits of using social media as news sources in different newspapers and various news.

**The use of social media sources in different newspapers**

From newspaper perspective, Figure 3 shows that regarding to the location of newspapers, the proportion of articles mentioned social media as sources in Beijing Daily and Beijing News were 4.29 percent and 5.76 percent respectively, which were both lower than that of Yangcheng Evening News(N=11.5 percent) and News Express Daily (N=14.29 percent). It indicates that southern newspapers are more likely to use social media as news sources than northern newspapers. In regard of the type of newspapers, Figure 3 also presents that no significant differences were saw between party newspapers and city newspapers in the same cities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Northern newspaper</th>
<th>Southern newspaper</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party newspaper</td>
<td>7 (4.29%)</td>
<td>21 (11.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City newspaper</td>
<td>8 (5.76%)</td>
<td>25 (14.29%)</td>
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Figure 3. Articles Mentioned Social Media Sources in Different Newspapers.

Based on relevant studies, this study supposes that these differences are mainly caused by two factors: the degree of marketability and target audience.

First, the unbalance of marketability degree can lead to these differences. Winfield and Peng pointed out that the marketability degree could affect the content of media [24]. Based on his investigation, Chen claims that the Chinese newspapers are in unbalanced development of marketability. In general, city newspapers are in higher degree of marketability than non-city newspapers; in specific, newspapers in Guangdong province are in the highest marketability degree than other areas, followed by Beijing and Shanghai [25]. These arguments are consistent with the result of this study, which can explain a reason that southern newspapers use more sources from social media than northern newspapers.
Besides, the variation of target audience can also cause these differences. In media market, target audience has a great impact on editorial principle of a newspaper. Take these four newspapers for example. *Beijing Daily* is a Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) regional press organ. Its target audience are politician leaders, officials and government staffs. Though *Beijing News* is a city newspaper, it aims to be a quality and serious newspaper focusing on politics and economy, and it targets on elite readers which are in high position and status in China society. *Yangcheng Evening News* is one of the pioneer party newspapers which engaged in reforming itself as a market-oriented and reader-oriented newspaper in the early 1980s. *News Express Daily* is a city newspaper of *Yangcheng Evening News*. According to its official website, its target audience is white collar and middle class in Guangdong Province who are also regarded as the major user groups of social media. Therefore, it is not difficult to figure out that these market strategies make *News Express Daily* rank the first in using social media as news sources, followed by *Yangcheng Evening News*, *Beijing News* and *Beijing Daily*.

**The use of social media sources in different news**

From news perspective, Figure 4 reveals that the proportion of soft news referred to social media as sources was four times more than that of hard news. It implies that soft news are more likely to use social media sources.

![Figure 4. The Percentage of Social Media Sources in Different News.](image)

This finding is consistent with previous studies. In Yin et al.’s viewpoint, this phenomenon is closely linked to Chinese political context. They deem that most of the hard news topics are related to politics, business, science, culture and education, which are firmly connected with public policy. To the contrary, entertainment news, soft news and human interests are seen as soft news which are not in overall importance, so it is more flexible for these news to use social media as news sources [26].

Regarding to the geographic focus of news items, as shown in Figure 5, only 2.19 percent of sources (N=16: 732) in local news was from social media; national news were quite distinctive, holding 11.14 percent of sources (N=77: 691) from social media; while none of international news used any sources from social media. All the data imply that national news are apt to use social media sources, while international news are reluctant to use them.
This finding also supports the result of Yin’s et al. research. They suggest that it is common for Chinese press to recopy global news from news agencies instead of other channels; and regional city newspapers are less flexible on reporting local news than national news [27].

Another explanation is how difficult for journalists to get access to original sources. Specifically, the more easily journalists can get access to original sources, the less social media sources are used in their coverage. This point has been proved by Skogerbo and Krumsvik [28].

**The priority of identities cited from social media sources**

In previous studies, scholars assert that mainstream media tend to cite sources with higher position and status because these people are considered more credible [29,30,31,32]. This is the concept ‘hierarchy of credibility’. By analyzing the priority of identities cited from social media sources, it can tell us whether social media break through the conventional routine of news gathering.

As shown in Figure 6, the celebrity (N=30.77 percent) was the most popular identity of sources that newspapers tended to reference from social media. Officials and government organizations (N=24.18 percent) ranked the second, followed by the public (non-verified) (N=13.19 percent), the public (verified) (N=10.99 percent), and unclear identity (N=7.69 percent). Business leaders/organizations and academics/experts, and media staff/organization were less referred to as sources from social media in news coverage. In specific, the data also reveal that when the only one source in a news story was from social media, Chinese journalists also gave the priority to celebrities.

These series of data indicate that the order of referring to social media as sources is different from journalists’ traditional newsgathering routines. Namely, in social media context, officials are no longer the first sources they tend to reference, while the ordinary people sources seems more powerful than they are in real society.
In addition, Figure 7 reveals that the distribution of social media identities was various in different newspapers. Basically, besides of the majority proportion of celebrities, the categories of identities cited in southern newspapers were much more than those cited in northern newspapers. Especially regarding to the public, southern newspapers used a large proportion of non-verified public sources, while northern newspapers used none of them. Meanwhile, in northern newspapers, official sources still occupied a big percentage.

On one hand, the results suggest that social media do not subject to typical ‘hierarchy of credibility’ in sourcing routines; instead, they provide more opportunity to ordinary people than known people. On the other hand, the findings cannot prove that officials and governmental sources are no longer the most important sources for journalists. First of all, officials and government organizations losing the first place in social media sources is not because they are powerless, but because they are less active and less attractive than celebrities in social media in China. In addition, Skogerbo and Krumsvik’s study illustrated that when journalists used official sources, they tended to get sources from routine channels, such as press conferences and press release, instead of social media. It is similar to the situation in China [33].

Based on the analysis, this study argues that although social media do not subject to the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ and provide more opportunities for the public, it cannot say that the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ is broken down in newspaper journalism. Since the criteria of assessing news value have not changed yet, it supposes that officials and governmental sources are still primary sources, and the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ still dominates the process of news gatherings.
Conclusion

This study explored how and the extent to which mainstream media in China cite social media as sources in news coverage, which can further indicate the impact of social media as news sources on traditional journalism. To get a good general picture, four newspapers (Beijing Daily, Beijing News, Yangcheng Evening News, and News Express Daily) were selected and analyzed, and it arrived at the following conclusions: 1) social media are regarded as alternative sources instead of primary sources for newspaper journalism; 2) From newspaper perspective, southern newspapers are more likely to cite social media as sources in news articles, while not obvious differences are found between party newspapers and city newspapers in the same region; From news perspective, a majority of social media are emerged as sources in national news rather than local news; 3) Social media favor unofficial sources over official sources, challenging the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ in certain degree.

This research fulfills the gap of present studies on Chinese social media as sources in newspaper coverage. The summary of pervious literature presents that most studies on social media are focus on news items which happened before 2013, and many of them tend to adopt interview as their research method. This research not only examines whether the influence of social media as news sources has been changed or not after 2013, but also provides a new angle to assess the impact of social media as sources on traditional journalism through content analysis. Besides, differences between Chinese social media and non-Chinese social media as sources in news coverage are observed in this analysis, which broadens the landscape of social media’s impact on newspaper journalism and gives an in-depth understanding of social media as sources in global context.

In addition to the contributions, two main limitations are identified in this study: first is the limitation of sample size, and the second is that it used intra-coder instead of inter-coder to assess its reliability. However, these limitations also suggest several directions for future research. First of all, future research can examine different kinds of newspapers and their various sections to extend the study. Besides, future studies can adopt multiple methods to do the research. Additionally, it can be a new aspect to analyze the daily pattern of using social media as sources in newspapers.

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