

Framing Corruption in the Chinese Government: A Comparison of Frames Between Media, Government, and Netizens

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The use of microblogging sites has increasingly posed a challenge to the Chinese Communist Party's ability to manipulate information and control its reputation in the face of malfeasance. Going beyond individual cases, this article uses framing theory and content analysis to examine and compare the four primary functions of frames employed by the news media, government, and netizens on the topic of government corruption. Results show partial differences in frames between netizens, government, and news media.

Keywords: framing, social media, microblogging, netizens, news media

In China, where the flow of information is tightly controlled and monitored, the popularity of microblogging sites presents a new challenge to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) stronghold on the creation and flow of information. As Abdelhay (2012) aptly observed, the prominence of social networking sites has resulted in users communicating and interacting in new ways, which can be potentially disruptive to current news and social structure. The cost of participating in online mass incidents is low for most netizens compared to the cost of traditional collective action (Bondes & Schucher, 2014), especially since there is a certain degree of safety in numbers when being involved in incidents that are critical of the CCP (Leibold, 2011). Consequently, China's netizens have readily seized upon the capabilities of microblogging sites to voice their opinions, expose incidents of, and engage in discussions about corruption and social injustice. More importantly, China's netizens have utilized the network capability of microblogging sites to spread information, news, and opinions more quickly than the government can censor. Such claims are supported by multiple incidents of netizen-initiated investigative journalism and exposé (Zheng, 2008), and numerous studies have documented the success of netizens in pressuring government officials to intervene and address incidents of corruption and injustice (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Hung, 2013; Qiang, 2011; Sullivan, 2014; Tang & Sampson, 2012; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012; Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007).

Traditional news outlets in China largely fulfill the role of a "party-assigned mouthpiece" (Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007, p. 91). Despite having some "flexibility" to report on topics that fall "within gray areas" (Y. Tong & Lei, 2013, p. 308), journalists normally have to toe the line and practice self-censorship when reporting on sensitive events that may challenge the legitimacy of the CCP, therein limiting their ability to

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respond to public opinion or hold the government accountable for its actions (Qiang, 2011; Tang & Sampson, 2012; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012; Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007). Therefore, the capability afforded by microblogging sites in the hands of a generation of technologically savvy online users has had a profound effect on traditional news media. By providing a readily available channel for information and public opinion, microblogging sites allow netizens to bypass traditional media outlets (Hung, 2013).

Consequently, microblogging sites pose a challenge to the party's ability to manipulate information and control its reputation in the face of malfeasance, a function that traditional news outlets typically serve. Therefore, this article investigates the similarities and differences between how microblogging sites and traditional news outlets discuss the topic of corruption in the contemporary political system of China, an issue that did and still can pose a threat to the legitimacy of the CCP. Corruption in contemporary China is "the use of public authority and public resources for private interests" and "private benefit [which] includes not only personal gains, but also the interests of work units, departments and regions when they are given priority over public interests" (He, 2000, p. 244).

Focusing on a broad topic like corruption within the Chinese government would allow for a more complete understanding of how it is treated in the media and by netizens in general, as opposed to being limited to and bounded by the unique circumstances surrounding individual incidents about government corruption. Furthermore, the comparison between mainstream media coverage and online discussion will provide an opportunity to examine the possibilities and limits of microblogging technology in a political environment where information is tightly controlled.

Microbloggers' online discussions on topics like corruption are especially sensitive to the government because of its propensity to challenge the party's legitimacy. The problem of corruption within the Chinese government has been rather pervasive as "public officials have been the main perpetrators of corruption in China for the past 20 years" (Guo, 2008, p. 350). As explained by He (2000), "the authority and legitimacy of public officials depends on their using their power properly for the public good" (p. 260). If public officials abuse their power for personal gains at the expense of public interest, their personal legitimacy and authority will be affected negatively. However, if corruption was to spread into all departments and levels of the government, the Chinese Communist Party's image would be tarnished, leading to a loss of public support for authority.

The sensitivity of this topic to the Chinese government has to be understood in the context of its recent memory—the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Public outrage and condemnation of rampant corruption within government institutions and organizations led to widespread support for and participation in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 (He, 2000; Sun, 2001), one of the largest protests in the history of China (Cheng, 1990; Mason & Clements, 2002) as well as one that significantly threatened the existence of the one-party system. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it is worth investigating whether online discussions of corruption on microblogging sites will differ between netizens and traditional news media in significant ways.

Literature Review

Aware that traditional media outlets are under the control of the CCP and may be subject to censorship, online media such as discussion forums, blogs, and microblogging sites are often the “first place people go to find the latest news and share experiences and opinions” when it comes to incidents that might portray the government in a negative light (Qiang, 2011, p. 56). Unlike traditional media outlets, which may be banned from reporting politically sensitive topics, online media often enjoy greater autonomy, circulating sensitive topics more freely (J. Tong & Zuo, 2013). Due to traditional news media’s inability to freely report on stories of public interest, citizens often have to turn to online media to share their stories in the hope of garnering enough online support to pressure the authorities to address or resolve the issue (Y. Zhang & Tomlinson, 2012). Even in the absence of widespread news media coverage, netizens have been known to pressure authorities to respond favorably to their demands (Hung, 2013; Qiang, 2011).

The obvious implications of online mass incidents on the state have piqued the interest of scholars. Beyond the traditional research on information censorship and control in China, a growing number of studies examine the role of the Internet on online public discussion about political and social issues. However, few studies have examined the new technology of microblogging (Hung, 2013; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012) and its relationship with mainstream news media in China. Current studies instead focus on forums, Web comments, and blogs to examine this dynamic, which is not surprising due to the fairly recent introduction of microblogging sites such as Sina Weibo to the Chinese online public.

Furthermore, as Sullivan (2014) observed, existing research on the impact of online public opinion and citizen journalism has predominantly focused on case studies of specific online mass incidents, which had been selected for their outcomes—such as authorities responding favorably to or meeting the demands of netizens (see Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012; Hassid, 2012; Hung, 2013; Li, 2010; Tang & Sampson, 2012; J. Tong & Zuo, 2013; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012; X. Zhou, 2009; X. Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008; Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007) instead of examining broader topics or issues. These studies of online mass incidents, particularly those on microblogging sites, have focused on the Internet’s ability to promote political participation online, shape public opinion, and exert pressure on the government to intervene and resolve matters of injustice (Bondes & Schucher, 2014).

What is striking about the affordances of microblogging sites is how netizens’ use of these sites has altered the dynamics between mainstream news producers and netizens who use microblogging sites to “counter, integrate or disseminate” mass media coverage of protests (Vicari, 2013, p. 475). In many instances, microblogging sites and traditional news outlets enjoy a symbiotic relationship. Research has found that, at times, netizens can provide leads and news stories for traditional news outlets through popular online discussions, and the involvement and support of mainstream news media can exert added pressure on the authorities to resolve issues (Tang & Sampson, 2012; J. Tong & Sparks, 2009; J. Tong & Zuo, 2013; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012; Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007). In addition, netizens can help sustain a news story or help it gain traction by sharing the story via their network of contacts (Hung, 2013; Tang & Sampson, 2012). Other times, traditional news media can lend credibility to netizen-led investigations by reporting on them (Xin, 2010).

Examining the characteristics of mass incidents on microblogs, Tong and Lei (2012) discovered that an important feature of microblogging is its close relationship with mainstream media outlets. Even though microblogging is itself able to garner immediate pressure from public opinion, the involvement of traditional media outlets can be beneficial (Y. Tong & Lei, 2012). Providing extensive coverage of the incident beyond the online media mainstream news outlets heightens pressure from public opinion and hastens the resolution of given incidents, and therefore has the power to force authorities to reverse decisions (Y. Tong & Lei, 2012). The mutually beneficial relationship between netizens and traditional news outlets is also bolstered in Tang and Sampson's (2012) discussion of the interaction between mainstream news media and online forums. Their study of three different online incidents led them to claim that "strong public opinion" provides "feedback" to traditional news media as a "strong collective voice," which in turn increases the "impact of public discussion" on news coverage (p. 464).

Crucially, netizens not only provide news topics for traditional news outlets to report on but offer journalists justifications to pursue politically sensitive issues. In fact, a strategy to avoid censorship and repercussions from the party is to leverage online opinion to justify journalists' news reports of the incident and how the incident is covered. This is exemplified by netizens' widespread interest in an incident, which leads to more critical coverage by traditional news outlets as politically sensitive topics or news angles can be legitimately taken up by the press (Tang & Sampson, 2012).

It must be noted that the differing relationship between traditional news outlets and netizens, as documented in current research thus far, is largely dependent on the specific incidents that the researchers chose to examine and how the incident is covered by the media. In a political climate where information is controlled and freedom of expression is limited, the interaction between netizens and traditional news media, as well as its outcome, is not always predictable. Of more relevance to our study is Y. Zhou and Moy's (2007) analysis of the interplay between traditional news media coverage and online public discussion, which found that netizens and traditional news media used significantly different frames to discuss issues of social justice—specifically during the "BMW case" (p. 84).

Considered one of the most salient topics online, the BMW case was one of class warfare and differential treatment by the judiciary system because of the accused's alleged powerful political connections (see Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007).¹ Zhou and Moy (2007) found that in discussing the BMW case, netizens used "aggressive frames" and called for "social reform," whereas the traditional media used "mild but constructive" frames and called the incident a "crisis to government credibility" (p. 93). They discovered that, even though there was evidence of netizens setting news frames early on, there was no evidence of the reverse happening, showing that netizens' discussions and interpretations of the issue—at least in the BMW case—is independent of traditional news media.

¹ Su Xiuwen, the wife of a successful, well-connected businessman, reportedly lashed out at a couple for accidentally scraping her BMW sedan with their onion cart. She later drove her car into the crowd, killing one of the couple and injuring 12 bystanders. Despite the severity of her crimes, the local court sentenced Su to a two-year jail sentence coupled with a three-year reprieve (Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007).

What was also interesting about Zhou and Moy's findings was the discovery that different news organizations played different roles; some acted as a mouthpiece of the CCP, whereas others acted as a watchdog, criticizing the party for a lack of credibility and calling for "a more transparent and responsible government" (p. 90). The sometimes favorable reaction of traditional news outlets to online mass incidents should be seen in the context of economic reforms that has liberated news media from their role as purely mouthpieces of the government in favor of audience appeal (Tang & Sampson, 2012). Indeed, Stockmann (2011) found that the tone of reporting by different news organizations on the same news topic varied according to their dependency on government subsidies. Despite considerations to appeal to audiences for commercial gains (de Burgh, 2003), the fundamental role of the mainstream media in China remained the preservation of political stability and confidence in the CCP regime (X. Zhang, 2006).

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Hence, framing may provide a useful analytical lens for examining the differences in how corruption is discussed and treated on microblogging sites compared to traditional news media. Goffman (1974) refers to frames as the "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences (in Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007, p. 80). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explain that, at its core, a frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue. It is a process of "interpreting and expressing" a person's subjective understanding of an event or issue in relation to the person's "immediate environment" (Wang, 2013, p. 378). Rather than a single unified frame, frames often imply a range of interpretations, allowing for some extent of controversy among those who share a common frame (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Wang, 2013). Frames determine which aspect of an issue gains prominence, and which recedes into the background, leading to interpretations that benefit one side while hindering the other (Entman, 2003).

According to Entman (1993), framing involves selection and salience. To frame means to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In other words, frame settings are important because they guide the audience on how to interpret, remember, evaluate, and choose to act upon an event. Entman (1993) explained that the typical primary functions of frames are to "define problem," "diagnose causes," "make moral judgments," and "suggest remedies" (p. 52). These frames are embedded in the text itself, which are manifested by the inclusion or omission of certain keywords, images, and sentences that "reinforce clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Therefore, the words, images, and sentences that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the text by their ability to elicit support for or opposition to a particular side in an issue (Entman, 2003).

Frame Building

Frame building refers to the process of negotiating and creating frames under the influence of three major factors: journalistic practice, political influence, and cultural background. Therefore, a frame "might gain influence because it resonates with popular culture or a series of events, fits with media routines or practices, and/or is heavily sponsored by elites" (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 22).

Previous studies have suggested that five aspects of journalistic practice affect how news is framed in mass media: embedded social norms, internal pressures from the organization, external pressures from authorities, journalistic routines, and personal bias of journalists (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). Political actors such as elites, governmental officials, and interest groups are actively engaged in a frame-building process to push frames that support their interest. As acknowledged earlier, journalistic practices are under the pressure of authorities; various studies have found increasing force from interest groups and policy makers that influenced news framing (Andsager, 2000; Nisbet, Brossard, & Kroepsch, 2003). Frames are often negotiated under certain cultural contexts. In other words, frames have cultural roots and need to resonate with certain cultures to have meaning. However, since frame creators such as journalists are unconsciously influenced by the culture they live in, the impact of cultural context on frame building is usually unnoticeable.

Traditional frame-building research was more concerned with internal factors, such as journalistic routines, in influencing news frames (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). As a result, internal factors were believed to be more influential than external ones, such as political actors, in shaping media frames. However, Lim and Seo (2009) pointed out that frames promoted by government have advantages over news frames in terms of reach and resources. Frames constructed by the government, which can reach a wider public, can exert much influence on a state or national level. Political officials are often the major source for news media when it comes to policy-related issues, and this reliance on political officials has resulted in issues being framed by them. Since public officials control information flow and decide whether a policy statement can be made public, government frames are likely to guide news media frames (Lim & Seo, 2009).

In the context of Chinese traditional news media, the CCP government may play a substantial role in influencing the types of frames that are adopted in the news media. Y. Zhou and Moy (2007) explained that journalists may experience external pressure from the CCP—for instance, political ideology, national interest, and political stability—which may play a greater role in news framing than the internal beliefs of journalistic values and practices. Hence, external pressure and fear of repercussion from the government are internalized in routine journalistic work, resulting in journalists adopting and promoting news frames that support and align with the government's ideals and expectations (Y. Zhou & Moy, 2007). Therefore, when studying news articles on *tanwu* (corruption) from a mainstream news agency, we propose:

H1: The primary functions of frames about corruption from solely governmental sources (i.e., government press releases) are similar to frames about corruption from mainstream media.

Reese (2007) developed the concept of a competing frame, defining it as a frame that contradicts the dominant frame in mainstream news media, which is compelling and hard to challenge. Wang (2013) expanded this idea and argued that in China, where mainstream media are tightly controlled by the government, there is a lack of voice that challenges the dominant frames in mainstream media; thus, social media provide a platform for competing frames to emerge and spread. Nisbet (2010) discussed the importance of studying framing in digital media as well. He believed that the focus of study in this area

would shift from the previous “transmission model of traditional news framing effects to a more interactive, social constructivist, and ‘bottom up’ model of framing” (p. 75).

Understanding the different mechanism between a transmission model and a bottom-up framing model, it is reasonable to assume that frames from a social media platform constructed by citizen journalists may be different from frames initiated by mainstream media or government. In China’s case, as Y. Zhou and Moy (2007) proposed, those public frames on social media may not only be different from but challenging to the mainstream frames. In this study, Weibo’s posts present an opportunity to test the differences and similarities between news frames and online public frames. To examine whether a difference in the frames on the politically sensitive topic of corruption exist between traditional news media and Weibo users in China, we propose:

H2: The primary functions of frames about corruption from microblogging sites are different from frames about corruption from mainstream media.

Method

To investigate the relationship between online public frames on microblogging sites and traditional news framing, we compared posts from Sina Weibo with Chinese language news articles from the Xinhua News Agency.² Considered the Twitter for Chinese users (Sullivan, 2014), Sina Weibo is one of the biggest commercial Internet corporations in China.³ As a popular microblogging service that has “monopolize[d]” the market (Y. Tong & Lei, 2012, p. 297) in China, Sina Weibo is a good platform to examine online public discussions. Similarly, the Xinhua News Agency is one of China’s largest traditional news organizations and is often known to be a party-controlled propaganda tool for the CCP (Hong, 2011; X. Zhang, 2006). As China’s official news agency, Xinhua sets the news agenda promoted by the government, and its news content is often distributed to other news publications in China (Cheng, Golan, & Kioussis, 2015, Keck & Tiezzi, 2015). Hence, it is an appropriate medium to assess what the party wants readers to know about government corruption.

A data-scraping tool was used to mine the keyword *tanwu* (“corruption”) from Sina Weibo during the period of September 1, 2012, to January 31, 2013.⁴ This time frame was chosen because it contained a particularly active discussion of corruption by public officials and civil servants. During this time period,

² Although Lu (2013) found that television is the dominant channel for Chinese citizens to acquire political news, the choice of newspaper was more appropriate for our study due to comparable demographics (e.g., age, literacy) between Weibo and newspaper users. In addition, our analysis of Weibo posts and news articles are primarily text-based.

³ Sina Weibo shares some similarities with Twitter, such as the 140-character limit, but it also has some differences. For instance, it combines “elements of bulletin board systems and blogs” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 27).

⁴ About 1,000 posts from the total number of posts with the keyword *tanwu* were first randomly selected for each month. A sample of 60 posts was then randomly collected from this sample of 1,000 posts for each month.

netizen-led investigations, speculations, and overall fervent discussions about corrupt public officials led authorities to further investigate these online public allegations, resulting in the arrests of several public officials. Instead of focusing on specific corruption-related online incidents that occurred during this time period, 60 posts were randomly selected from each month until a sample of 300 posts was collected. Because these posts were not collected in real time, there is a good possibility that the population of posts from which this sample is drawn may have already been subjected to censorship.

Similarly, 300 Xinhua news articles with the keyword *tanwu* were randomly selected from Baidu Search Engine for the same time period. The pool of 300 news articles on Baidu is the result of its automated random selection process.⁵ In total, 300 Weibo posts and 300 Xinhua news articles were coded by two coders: one of the authors and a second coder who was not familiar with the purpose of this study.

Content Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is Weibo posts and Xinhua news reports. Only articles and posts that were about corruption related to the Chinese government and party officials were coded. Because we were primarily interested in Weibo users' comments toward government corruption rather than using Weibo to acquire political information, we only coded the text of the posts and not links shared by Weibo users. Following Entman's (1993) definition of the four primary functions of frames, we developed a code book that guided the analysis of the data. Coders were asked to thoroughly review each article and tweet and were instructed to categorize the tweet and article based on the text's four primary functions: frames that define problem, frames that interpret causes, frames that make moral evaluations, and frames that suggest treatment recommendations. Entman (1993) suggested, "A single sentence may perform more than one of these four framing functions, although many sentences in a text may perform none of them. And a frame in any particular text may not necessarily include all four functions" (p. 52). Based on this understanding, the coders were asked to code for all four primary functions. In other words, if a tweet or news article had more than one primary function such as problem definition and casual interpretation, these two categories would be selected.

In addition, as Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explained, frames typically include a range of positions rather than a single one. Consequently, coders were also asked to categorize which specific frame was used to fulfill the four primary functions. For instance, if there was more than one possible cause of corruption mentioned in the article or tweet, coders were asked to code the article or tweet according to the predominant cause. Due to the close relationship between the CCP and mainstream press such as Xinhua news, the coders were also instructed to code for government-only news articles.⁶ For the

⁵ Baidu Search Engine uses its own automated selection process to randomly return a maximum of 300 articles during the time frame studied based on the specific keyword *tanwu*. The 300 articles were checked for reliability over several days to ensure that the articles retrieved by Baidu did not differ from day to day, and that Baidu showed the same 300 articles for the time period studied.

⁶ The Chinese government website (www.gov.cn) lists various sources for information about corruption, and a substantial number of articles about corruption from the Xinhua News Agency are listed (<http://new.sousuo.gov.cn/s.htm?t=gov&q=贪污>).

purpose of this study, these government-only news articles are termed *governmental press releases*. Governmental press releases are marked by their characteristic of solely providing information and/or quotes from government sources. They can be distinguished from other news articles, because they are copies of fact sheets from the government with no interpretation or editing by the journalists. A typical article of this kind often begins with an opening sentence such as, "According to the central government . . ." and contains quotes from government sources.

After a period of training and pretests, the two coders independently coded 60 randomly selected posts and 60 news articles (20%) to test for intercoder reliability. The pretest samples were external to the actual samples analyzed. The percentage of agreement ranged from 93% to 97% for Weibo posts and from 97% to 100% for Xinhua news articles. Controlling for chance agreement using Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007), coefficients ranged from 0.89 to 0.95 for Weibo posts and from 0.94 to 1.00 for Xinhua news articles (see Table 1). Disagreements were resolved by reaching consensus through discussion. After testing for intercoder reliability, the two coders divided the remaining posts and Xinhua news articles, each coding 120 posts and 120 news articles.

Table 1. Intercoder Reliability.

Categories	Weibo posts		Xinhua news articles	
	Percent agreement	Krippendorff's α	Percent agreement	Krippendorff's α
Problem definition	93%	0.89	100%	1.0
Causal interpretation	95%	0.92	100%	1.0
Moral evaluation	97%	0.95	100%	1.0
Treatment recommendation	93%	0.89	97%	0.94
Governmental press releases			97%	0.94

Results

Of all the Weibo posts ($n = 300$) and Xinhua news articles ($n = 300$), over half were posts ($n = 166$) and news articles ($n = 161$) about corruption in contemporary Chinese government. This refers to party members, staff, or public officials belonging to or working for the CCP (i.e., judiciary, police department, and legislature). The remaining posts and news articles were about corruption in corporations or foreign countries, and these were excluded from the analysis. Additionally, of all the Xinhua news articles that were about governmental corruption ($n = 161$), 53 articles were identified as governmental press releases, and 108 articles were identified as conventional news articles (i.e., nongovernmental press releases).

Media and Government Frames

We found partial support for hypothesis 1, which postulated that the primary functions of frames about corruption from governmental sources are similar to frames about corruption in mainstream media (see Table 2). Frames about problem definition and casual interpretation were not significantly different between the news articles and governmental press releases. Both Xinhua news (95%) and government press releases (100%) defined the problem of corruption in contemporary Chinese government predominantly as an individual incident—an isolated case that is not related to the broader political environment in China. Similarly, both Xinhua news (95%) and government press releases (100%) blamed the cause of corruption on the public official's individual flaws such as personal greed.

The Xinhua News Agency employed significantly different frames from governmental press releases for frames about moral evaluation and treatment recommendation. However, the distribution of specific frames used to fulfill the primary function of moral evaluation showed similarities between the frames rather than differences. Both sources framed the actions of the government in addressing the problem of corruption positively. Both Xinhua news (90%) and governmental press releases (100%) evaluated the problem of corruption as one in which the government has already taken or is taking measures to solve the problem. In other words, the government was framed as being effective in curbing the problem of corruption—at least in terms of individual incidents of corruption committed by public officials. Ten percent of Xinhua news articles did not have the moral evaluation frame in their articles, which resulted in the overall primary function frame as being significantly different.

The treatment recommendation frame, on the other hand, showed significantly different frames between Xinhua news and governmental press releases, and the distribution of specific frames used to fulfill that primary function were also different. Most news articles (81%) mentioned punishment of public officials as a solution (either proposed or already enacted) to address the specific problem of corruption in the Chinese government. The remaining news articles (19%) proposed or wrote about solutions at a policy and law enforcement level to address the problem of corruption. Conversely, governmental press releases predominantly framed the solution to the problem as one that is targeted at a policy and law enforcement level (62%). The remaining press releases (38%) mentioned solutions aimed at the individual level such as punishment of public officials.

Media and Netizen Frames

We found support for hypothesis 2, which postulated that primary functions of frames about corruption from microblogging sites are different from frames about corruption from mainstream media (see Table 3). There were significant differences among all four primary function frames employed by Xinhua news articles and netizens. For instance, netizens tended to focus more on the problem of corruption than on solutions, and they are more critical of the government than the Xinhua News Agency. However, it is important to note that the distribution of frames showed similarities in the dominant frames used to define the problem and interpret the causes. The frames constructed by the Xinhua News Agency to fulfill the primary functions were largely consistent and showed clear dominance of one frame over another. On the other hand, netizens employed a wider variety of frames to fulfill the primary functions.

Table 2. Media and Government Frames.

Frames	Xinhua news article	Governmental press releases	χ^2
Problem definition (%)			$\chi^2 = 2.532, df = 1, p > 0.05$
Organizational case			
Individual case	95%	100%	
Not defined ^a	5%		
Causal interpretation (%)			$\chi^2 = 2.532, df = 1, p > 0.05$
Political environment			
Individual flaws	95%	100%	
Not mentioned ^a	5%		
Moral evaluation (%)			$\chi^2 = 5.794, df = 1, p < 0.05$
Government taken or is taking control	90%	100%	
Government lacks political will			
Not mentioned ^a	10%		
Treatment recommendation (%)			$\chi^2 = 29.244, df = 1, p < 0.01$
System level			
Policy and law Enforcement level	19%	62%	
Individual level	81%	38%	
Not mentioned			
Number of news articles	108	53	

Note. Fisher's Exact Test for the problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation variables yield $p > 0.05$. Due to the lack of variability in the moral evaluation variable, we combined the categories *government taken or is taking control* and *government serving own interests* since these two categories are closer in meaning than *government serving own interests* and *lacking political will*. This also applies to the media and netizen frames.

a These cells have an expected count of less than 5. This is because none of the governmental press releases fit in more than one category.

Even though both Xinhua news articles (95%) and posts (52%) largely classify individual public officials as the problem for corruption (see Table 3), one that is not related to the broader political environment, 34% of posts also defined the problem as an organizational problem. This proportion of posts considered corruption a systemic problem; most government officials are seen as corrupt, and the problem is defined as an issue not with individual public officials but with the larger political structure or environment in China. Similarly, when interpreting the cause of corruption in the Chinese government, the majority of news articles (95%) and many posts (44%) assigned blame to the individual public official, framing the cause as a weakness in character or personal flaws. This is in contrast to 34% of posts that considered the broader political environment, such as lack of transparency and an effective regulation mechanism, as reasons for corruption.

In terms of moral evaluation, the majority of Weibo posts (54%) did not include this primary function. The posts that did, interestingly, framed the government as being effective in controlling or solving corruption (35%), a frame that is similar to the majority of Xinhua news articles (90%). Eleven percent of posts framed the government as lacking political will to control the problem. About half of the posts (49%) also did not employ the treatment recommendation frame. When that frame was used, the solution (both proposed and enacted) was to punish individual public officials (34%), a dominant frame that was also employed by Xinhua news (81%). Fourteen percent of posts recommended or wrote about policy changes as a solution to address the problem of corruption, and only 2% of posts called for solutions to be implemented on a system level such as broader political party reform.

Table 3. Media and Netizen Frames.

Frames	Xinhua news article	Weibo posts	χ^2
Problem definition (%)			$\chi^2 = 60.536, df = 2, p < 0.01$
Organizational case		34%	
Individual case	95%	52%	
Not defined	5%	14%	
Causal interpretation (%)			$\chi^2 = 75.286, df = 2, p < 0.01$
Political environment		34%	
Individual flaws	95%	44%	
Not mentioned	5%	22%	
Moral evaluation (%)			$\chi^2 = 79.376, df = 2, p < 0.01$
Government taken or is taking control	90%	35%	
Government lacks political will		11%	
Not mentioned	10%	54%	
Treatment recommendation (%)			$\chi^2 = 82.887, df = 3, p < 0.01$
System level ^a		2%	
Policy and law Enforcement level	19%	14%	
Individual level	81%	34%	
Not mentioned		49%	
Number of news articles	108	166	

^a This cell has an expected count of less than 5, because none of the Xinhua news articles fit into this category.

Discussion

Reports on Corruption Present a Strategic Opportunity

Recognizing microblogging's potential challenge to mainstream news sources and its contribution to the understanding of online public discussion about corruption, this study compares frames that are salient on governmental press releases, Xinhua news articles, and Sina Weibo posts on the issue of corruption in China. Both governmental press releases and Xinhua news articles share the frame of defining the problem of corruption as an individual issue, a strategy that arguably benefits the party. By defining the problem of corruption as an individual rather than organizational problem, the media and government are both able to shift the blame away from the one-party system and onto the individual public official, in turn attributing the causes of corruption to personal reasons such as character weakness rather than a weakness in the system. This strategy employed by the government and mainstream media has to be understood in the context of how power is structured within the CCP government. Cai (2008) explained that the central government has delegated power to local governments, which also means shifting responsibility and blame to local government and public officials. Hence, "the central government holds local governments accountable by assigning responsibility directly to local leaders" (Cai, 2008, p. 416).

This power structure within the CCP government provides an explanation for the government's tolerance of corruption-related Weibo posts and news articles as well as punishment of public officials, in part because the government has anticorruption policies and has been making strides to reduce corruption. This is not surprising since the prevalence of corruption within the Chinese government is alarming to the extent that it is seen as the "greatest public concern behind unemployment" (He, 2000, p. 243). Hence, the Chinese government has a vested interest in controlling and deterring future corruption. Therefore, while it may appear counterintuitive to raise the salience of corruption as a problem by allowing the mainstream news articles to report on cases of corruption committed by public officials, the legitimacy of the central government may in fact be reinforced with increased media attention to corruption cases. Focusing attention and directing the public's anger toward local public officials has provided the central government an opportunity to demonstrate its effectiveness in punishing local officials for their wrongdoing (another dominant frame in both governmental press releases and media). Hence, the central government is able to construct an image of reform as well as reduce and redirect the social grievances of the people away from the government (J. Tong & Zuo, 2013).

Limited Role of the Press in China

It is worth noting that the news articles differed from the government press releases in a significant way when it came to recommending solutions to the problem of corruption. While the government releases overwhelmingly proposed or mentioned solutions targeted at the policy and legal level, such as implementing tougher sentences and stricter regulation (a proactive measure), most news articles emphasized punishment of individual public officials (a reactive measure). This difference could be explained by the role of mainstream media in China. Unlike media in democratic countries, the role of the media in China is to serve the interests of the CCP government in maintaining political stability and

reinforcing authority. As a result, mainstream media in China may be limited in its ability to make any suggestions on policy changes. In the case of addressing corruption, they may be limited to merely reporting the results (i.e., punishment) of public officials who have been found guilty of corruption instead of proposing recommendations on policy or legal change.

Framged (Online) Public: Competing Frames

While the frames employed by both the media and governmental press releases remain fairly consistent across our sample, the frames employed by netizens had a wider variation, reflecting what Wang (2013) conceptualized as a fragmented public in contemporary China. Yu (2011) argued that today's media system in China has been diversified by advanced media technology and is no longer "an organic whole" that merely functions as the mouthpiece of the CCP government (p. 70); and neither are the Chinese media audiences the "passive Mao-indoctrinated masses" Western scholars once thought them to be (p. 68). This diversity was a result of a fragmented society, further intensified by China's marketization that unequally benefited one portion of the population over another. Since online frames constructed by netizens are impacted by one's personal experience, education level, and other factors related to the broader social, economic, and political environment, Wang (2013) argued that the inequality and fragmentation in society "translate into the uptake and penetration of digital media" (p. 377).

Among the diverse frames reflected in the Weibo posts were prominent competing frames against dominant frames employed by the media and governmental press releases—frames that directly challenged the authority and legitimacy of the CCP government. As Y. Tong and Lei (2012) acknowledged, the government is often viewed with skepticism and negativity by the general Chinese public to the extent that as long as an incident is related to the government, the public has come to believe there must be some form of injustice involved. As seen in the results, there were clear sentiments of netizens' cynicism toward the actions of the central government presented in many frames, accusing the CCP government as a whole of being corrupt and lacking political will to solve the problem of corruption.

Media Environment in China

It is important to recognize that the existence of competing frames online bolsters the argument that online public dissent is sometimes tolerated to a certain degree in China. Cai (2008) explained that the response of the state to popular online dissent often relies on the government's perception "of the costs and benefits associated with the choice of a particular response" (p. 414). The government recognizes that excessive repression or force will be counterproductive in a digital era when online popular dissent cannot be easily controlled and may have the countereffect of fueling resentment and damaging the legitimacy of the CCP (Cai, 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that the CCP government would allow the Internet to serve as a channel for netizens to express their resentments and opinions in a nonthreatening manner to the government as long as they are contained online and do not threaten to lead to organized opposition off-line. MacKinnon (2011) called this phenomenon a "networked authoritarianism," where "an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes" brought by the Internet (p. 33).

However, as MacKinnon (2011) pointed out, while netizens may feel less oppressed online, the government's strategy of monitoring netizens' activity online, censoring and manipulating online conversations, has impacted netizens' ability to organize a substantial movement against the CCP. Other scholars have also observed that the Chinese government has adapted to the technological changes brought forth by the decentralized control of the Internet and has employed various forms and tactics of control and censorship in response to online political dissent as well as to direct public opinion (Abbott, 2012; Hung, 2013; Li, 2010; MacKinnon, 2011; Qiang, 2011; Sullivan, 2014; Tang & Sampson, 2012; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012; Y. Zhang & Tomlinson, 2012).

According to the results of our study, despite the variation of frames, there were still large percentages of frames employed in Weibo posts that were similar to frames in Xinhua articles and governmental press releases, such as defining the problem of corruption at the individual level and believing that the government was effective in controlling the problem. This may be the result of online censorship, which not only blocks but guides online public opinion. Therefore, highly contentious posts may not have been captured in our sample due to censorship. King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) estimated that the central government employs between 250,000 and 300,000 commentators commonly known as "50 cent party members" to manipulate online discussion (p. 326). In addition, government institutions and officials have developed an extensive Web presence to communicate directly with netizens. Numerous studies have shown that online portals often have to stick to the official government reports and delete information or block accounts that are perceived to be harmful to the government (Qiang, 2011; Tang & Sampson, 2012; Y. Tong & Lei, 2012). Such media strategies adopted by the government may limit the diversity in netizens' opinions (Lu et al., 2014). This is especially true when the government fears that online dissent can no longer be contained online. Therefore, the proportion of Weibo posts within each frame may not fully represent online public sentiment.

On occasions where the government sees the threat of mobilization off-line, netizens have been arrested for encouraging subversion of state power (Sullivan, 2014). Other times, the government stamps out any potential for a rebellion by limiting and controlling its ability to gain momentum online (Leibold, 2011). It may be that netizens are aware of online censorship and surveillance, and this awareness may temper their actions on Weibo. For instance, a number of Weibo posts were ambiguous in their description of corruption and avoided using the words associated with the CCP government, which may be the result of fear of repercussion. In addition to the fear of repercussion, the lack of alternative information sources may make it difficult for the public to think beyond what is presented in the news media and challenge the dominant frame or interpret the incident differently.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our study yielded interesting results, our sample size of Weibo posts and news articles is but a tiny drop in the population of posts and news articles about corruption in the Chinese government during the time period studied. In addition, without being able to collect Weibo posts in real time, our sample may not accurately represent online public sentiment about governmental corruption, and results should be interpreted with caution.

While this study focused on the comparison of frames among government, media, and netizens, future research could attempt to explain why such variations exist. For instance, surveys could take into account the diverse media sources that netizens use to acquire political information (see Lu, 2013) to infer frame differences by matching results with Weibo posts. Additionally, time-series analysis could probe into the effectiveness of news frames in shaping netizens' frames of government corruption.

In this study, government press releases were separated from news articles even though they were selected from the sample of news articles. This was done to distinguish information provided solely by government sources and other types of news writing due to the role of the press as political mouthpieces of the Chinese government. Future research can investigate government frames that are directly analyzed from government official statements, documents, and announcements.

Conclusion

Even though the affordances of innovative technologies such as microblogging might present a challenge to the legitimacy of the CCP government, in the case of articles and posts about corruption in the Chinese government, our study found few differences in frames between netizens and news media. It is likely that external forces such as governmental control and censorship may continue to shape and guide online public opinion as well as mainstream media frames. This is not to imply that microblogging sites have not changed the dynamics between state and mainstream media. As previously mentioned, many studies have shown instances of netizens circumventing online censorship to broadcast cases of social injustice as well as mainstream news media leveraging netizens' online opinion to report cases not sanctioned by the CCP government. Because those instances were often bounded by their unique characteristics, our study attempts to go beyond individual cases and focus on the broad topic of government corruption to illuminate frame differences and similarities between netizens, government, and news media.

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