The Digital Public Sphere in WeChat:

On the case of *College Daily* controversy on WOA Platform

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Abstract

To explore the role of social media in the contemporary public sphere, this study is designed to investigate the digital public sphere emerged on WeChat's Official Account Platform (WOA Platform). Through the theoretical lens of four-element social media logic, this study probes into the entanglement between digital technology and public participation in terms of programmability, popularity principle, connectivity tactic, and datafication mechanism. By employing digital ethnography as the research scheme, and discourse analysis as the analytical instrument, this study dissects the controversy-triggered public sphere on WOA Platform. Focusing on the case of "*College Daily* controversy" inflamed on the platform, this exploration departs from the "controversy page", to investigate the newly-launched function of the platform in the techno-cultural phenomenon "controversy". As to address the role of social media in the public participation, this study is unfolded from perspectives of ordinary users, official accounts, and the public intellectual. In specific, the study explores: 1) how ordinary users make sense of "College Daily controversy" with the "controversy page" and WOA Platform's search engine; 2) how official accounts participate in the "controversy" with discursive practices on the platform; and 3) how the public intellectual, as exemplified by Leung Man-tao, is enabled to perform and practice in the "controversy" on the platform. Drawing from the results, this study also proposes a "participation-triggering mechanism" as a part and parcel factor in addition to the four-element social media logic. It argues that the public participation on WOA Platform entangles users' participatory practices with data-driven algorithms underlying the digital public sphere.

Keywords: digital public sphere, public intellectual, Chinese social media, WeChat, controversy

Contents

1. Introduction

Katherine Viner, the editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, once remarked that "*social media has swallowed the news – threatening the funding of public-interest reporting and ushering in an era when everyone has their own facts. But the consequences go far beyond journalism*" (Viner, 2016). Resonating with her observation, such sociocultural issues as stigmatization, controversy, and conspiracy are gloomily meandering in the contemporary digital space. Particularly in the media-saturated public sphere today, it seems that social media is not only "swallowing news", but more obscurely, it is also digesting information and intervening in the public sphere through its opaque mechanism. Regarding the public deliberation on media platforms, the public sphere nowadays can be considered as multiple issue-triggered social spaces coalescing around self-images (McCallum, 2013). Among these images, public intellectuals are noticeable actors in the digital space with their influences on public opinions. Considering the "controversy" on WeChat's platform as a sociocultural phenomenon entangled with social media technology, the role of social media in the participation of the general public and public intellectuals in a "controversy' event hence deserves a critical investigation

1.1 Digital public sphere and WOA Platform

According to recent findings on the digital public sphere in western society, scholars are concerning about the problematic role of the social media in the configuration of the public sphere, including Internet inequality, fragmentation, consumerism, and the loss of deliberative and rational debates (Schäfer, 2015). Corresponding to the research findings in the western context, studies of Chinese digital public space also reveal similar concerns yet with the nuanced characteristics. Regarding the current configuration of the Chinese public sphere, WeChat appears as a major site for public deliberation in the digital space. Specifically, WeChat's Official Accounts Platform (hereafter WOA Platform) [1] is functioning as a main

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[1] This platform can be named differently in other researches. During the research period of this study, WeChat presents the platform as "Official Accounts Platform" in its English version. Hence, this thesis terms the platform as "WeChat's Official Account Platform", in line with WeChat's English version.

venue for public participation of WeChat users. Through this platform, both individuals and organizations can run their own accounts, generating contents (articles, images, audios, and videos) to the wider public. Examining this specific platform in the public discussion and deliberation, scholars found the application design of WeChat brings both agency and limitation for individuals' communication in the digital public sphere. On the one hand, studies found that accounts ran on WOA Platform are considered as a fount of 'grassroots media' (Hu, 2014; Tu, 2016), allowing individual users to generate content, circulate information, and communicate opinions in public discussions, regardless of generator's social status. On the other hand, due to the personalized networks and information cascade, studies resonating with Habermas' paradigm reveal that problems of homophily, echo-chamber, and rumor circulation are challenging the digital public sphere emerged on WeChat space (Tu, 2016).

As mentioned, researchers have found that the functionalities of social media adopted by users can increase their political engagement (Harris 2008; Östman 2012; Livingstone 2013). However, concerning the evolving designs of social media applications and their close infiltration into every aspect of contemporary social lives, this embracing view towards social media empowerment requires a critical re-examination. While previous studies map the technical features of social media onto the toolkits of democracy, few of them examined how users make use of the social media functionalities in situated communicative contexts, not to mention the evolving technologies and newly launched functions appeared in recent years. As to fulfill the lacuna in this research field, the four-element social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) could provide a theoretical prism to investigate the entanglement between digital technology and public participation in terms of programmability, popularity principle, connectivity tactic, and datafication mechanism Zooming in on the specific function of the "controversy flag" launched in 2017 on WOA Platform, this research attempts to discuss the social media technology entangled with the current communicative practices in the digital public space, revealing both consequences and potentials of the social media logic underlying today's digital public sphere.

1.2 Public intellectuals in the era of social media

In the current configurations of the public sphere, the group of public intellectuals are prominent actors on the stage of social media space, facing with both challenges and opportunities in today's media-saturated society. Particularly in the controversial issues, the unresolved public discussion often follows influential opinions and fragmented by social groups and niches. This controversy-triggered public sphere with prolonged disagreements thus provide public intellectuals with a stage to perform their roles, as knowledge producers and opinion leaders. This brings us to the four-level model of public intellectual (Heynders, 2016). According to Heynders, public intellectuals today are characterized by (1) possessing a cultural authority; (2) participating in public issues actively; (3) theatricalizing his/her public persona; and (4) being capable of performing among different media platforms (2006). Regarding the public intellectuals as the "big thinkers" responding to the social media environment, these four dimensions are also applicable to Chinese public intellectuals who are now facing with the challenge in today's media-saturated public space. Yet, the nuanced traits of Chinese intellectuals are indicated by the current studies, requiring further discussions.

To the general public in China, the concept of a 'public intellectual' was popularized by an article published on Southern People Weekly in 2004 as '*knowledgeable, progressive and critical individuals who actively engage in public affairs*' (Han, 2018). But in recent years, it's been observed that media celebrities and expertise are becoming dominant in the public (Xu, 2003). According to Xu, this tendency reveals that intelligentsia in China is influenced by media industries and commercialized culture in a threatening way, responding to the Habermasian paradigm. However, regarding Heynders' theory of public intellectuals, how the Chinese public intellectuals employ media platforms – like the official account platform of WeChat – is unfortunately overlooked in Xu's observation. In addition, the stigmatization of public intellectuals (Jun & Feng, 2014) in Chinese social media environment suggests an uncomfortable relationship between public intellectuals and the general public in the current Chinese society.

Regarding the public discussion inflamed by 'controversy' on WOA Platform, the function of 'controversy' opens a digital public space for intellectuals to contribute to the discussion. In this digital

space, how public intellectuals employ the application to participate in the digital public sphere could shed a light on the current studies of Chinese public intellectuals.

1.3 "*College Daily* controversy" on WOA Platform

The case of "*College Daily* controversy" has caught considerable attention in Chinese WeChat space in 2019 (figure 1 shows the trajectory of the event). The "controversy" is triggered by a report published on The New Yorker's website, "*The 'Post-Truth' Publication Where Chinese Students in America Get Their News*".[2] In this report, College Daily, [3] an official account on WOA Platform, is accused by The New Yorker of nationalism and misinformation. One day after, on August 20th, this report was "migrated" to WOA Platform by an official account Jianada he Meiguo Bidu (hereafter Jianada). However, Jianada not just translated the report into Chinese, but rather, it rearranged the content of the original report and posted it on the platform with the headline "*The New Yorker accuses College Daily of charging readers 'IQ tax' for its made-up stories*". [4] Regarding its numerous comments and views, Jianada's article seems provocative yet attractive for the public on WOA Platform. In the following days, many official accounts started to participate in the discussion by expressing their own opinions, re-posting Jianada's article, or posting different translations of the original report.

A turning point happened on August 21st when College Daily issued a refuting article on WOA Platform, "*How does western media distort China's image? You can find the answer from New Yorker's report* (or mischarge) *about College Daily*", as against The New Yorker's accusation. Though The New Yorker didn't response to College Daily's article, the official account Jianada, reacting as a "representative"

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[2] To read the original report by The New Yorker, see: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-post-truth-publication-where-chinese-students-in-america-get-their-news (Viewed on date August 19, 2019).

[3] The official account "College Daily" (also "北美留学生日报" in Chinese) literally means "daily newspaper for Chinese students in North America". It is funded in Beijing with headquarters in both Beijing and New York. Originally, its audiences are mainly Chinese students overseas especially those in North America. Today, it has become an influential official account on WOA Platforms among Chinese audiences.

[4] "IQ tax" (also "智商税" in Chinese) is a neologism in Chinese. "Charging IQ tax" is a sarcastic way to criticize the fraudulent deal that fools ignorant or naïve consumers. Hence, according to this headline, The New Yorker is accusing College Daily of fooling its readers by made-up stories and misinformation.
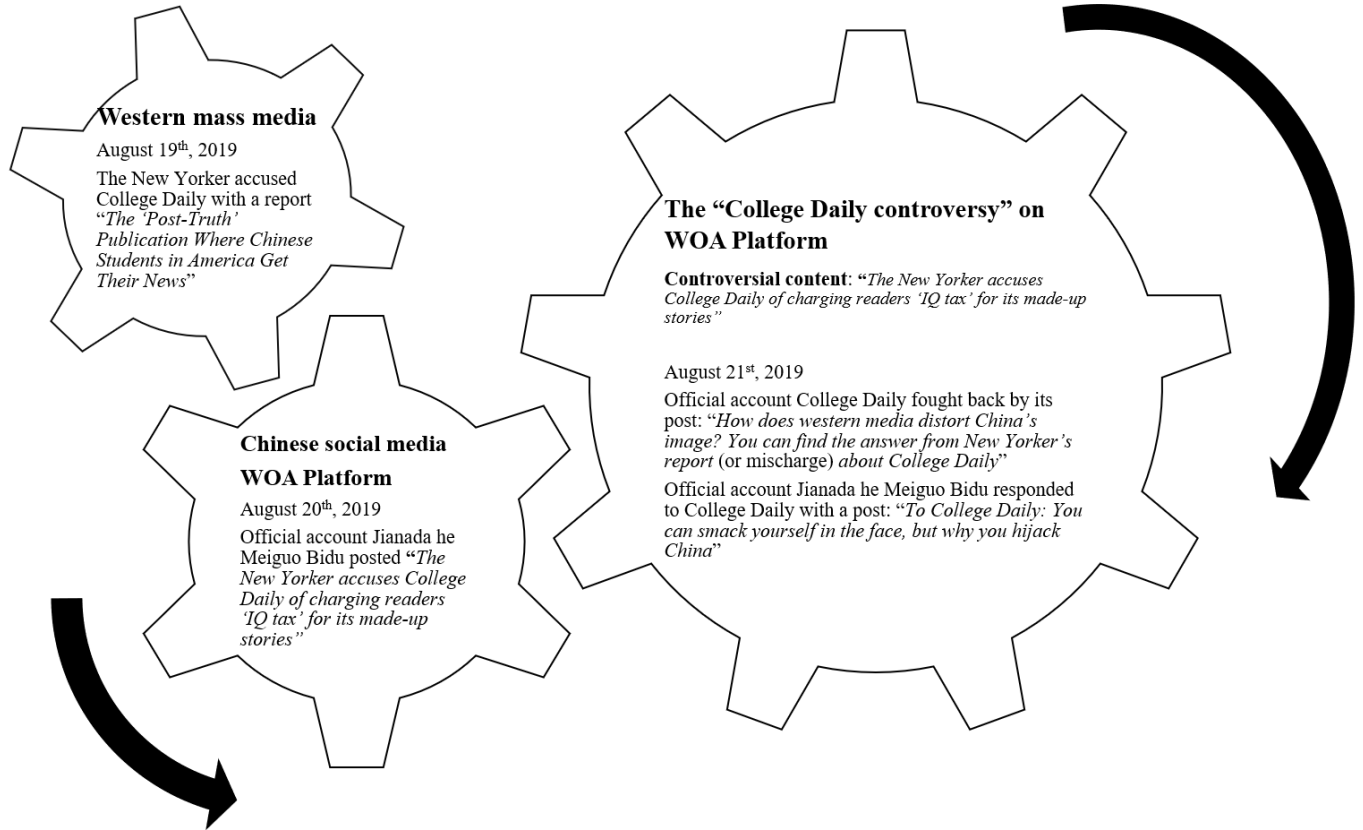
on behalf of The New Yorker, followed up the debate and disputed College Daily's argument with a post "*To College Daily: You can smack yourself in the face, but why you hijack China?*". Regarding this unsettled debate between the two accounts, a "*controversy page*" is flagged on WOA Platform. On this page, the provocative article published by Jianada is marked as the "*controversial content*", while the defending statements of College Daily and its counterargument from Jianada is labelled as the "*right holder's statement*". To date, users can still be channeled to the "controversy page" when clicking to these three articles posted on the platform (see figure 2 in section 4.1 on page 38).

The debate around the "College Daily controversy" was inflamed and lasted about two weeks, triggering multiple articles posted by official accounts, including the accounts of public intellectuals. What seems abnormal here is that when New Yorker firstly publish its report, it did not attract much attentions or public discussion on the issue not to mention the controversy around the official account College Daily. Besides, though this was not the first time when western media accusing Chinese media for fabricating information, this very case of College Daily is migrated from western mass media to Chinese social media. Moreover, it is dramatically turned into a public debate and a WeChat-defined "controversy" in Chinese digital public sphere. As presented by the figure 1, the trajectory of the controversy shows a gear-like development of the event. In this event, official account Jianada "migrates" the report into Chinese WOA Platform, causing the refutation from the official account College Daily, and thus triggering the "controversy" discussion.

In this heated discussion, numerous public actors, provocative opinions, and discursive battles on WOA Platform are composing a polyphony of public opinions and mapping toward the bigger canvas of the Chinese public sphere.

Figure 1

The trajectory of "College Daily controversy"

Western mass media
August 19th, 2019
The New Yorker accused College Daily with a report *"The 'Post-Truth' Publication Where Chinese Students in America Get Their News"*

Chinese social media WOA Platform
August 20th, 2019
Official account Jianada he Meiguo Bidu posted **"***The New Yorker accuses College Daily of charging readers 'IQ tax' for its made-up stories*"

The "College Daily controversy" on WOA Platform

Controversial content: **"***The New Yorker accuses College Daily of charging readers 'IQ tax' for its made-up stories"*

August 21st, 2019
Official account College Daily fought back by its post: *"How does western media distort China's image? You can find the answer from New Yorker's report* (or mischarge) *about College Daily"*
Official account Jianada he Meiguo Bidu responded to College Daily with a post: *"To College Daily: You can smack yourself in the face, but why you hijack China"*

Focusing on the '*College Daily* controversy', this study aims to explore social media's role in public deliberation. Particularly, this research takes WOA Platform as the focused locus to observe and analyze the situated actions and interactions in the controversy-triggered digital public sphere. As to answer the main research question of this thesis – **how do social media play a role in the public engagement in a "controversy" in the digital public sphere emerged on WOA Platform?** – three dimensions as the sub-questions of this research are unfolded:

1) with designs and functions of WOA Platform, how can the participating users make sense of the "controversy" on the platform?

2) how does WOA Platform enable and/or constrain participants' discursive practices in the discussion about "College Daily controversy"?

3) how do public intellectuals participate in the "controversy" event?

In the next chapter, I will review the theoretical background and previous researches on the digital public sphere (Schäfer, 2015) and the public intellectuals in the current Chinese society. As for the public intellectuals in Chinese digital space, I will discuss the current tendencies techno-specialization and mediatization (Xu, 2003) and the stigmatization of public intellectuals in China (Jun & Feng, 2014). In addition, the four-level frame of the public intellectuals in the era of social media (Heynders, 2016) will be introduced as a research lens to anzlyze the intellectuals in WOA Platform. Regarding a limited theoretical approach effected from the "digital orientalism" paradigm (Schneider, 2018, p.18), and the literature gap out of lagged empirical studies behind the evolving technology, this research introduces the four-element social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) as the main theoretical frame in order to address the current challenge to the research topic as well as to serve as the analytical lens for answer the research questions. Following the literature review, the third chapter will introduce digital ethnography (Varis, 2016), and discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005; Jones et al., 2015) as the analytical instruments for this research and further explain how they are used for my data analysis. Based on the theoretical discussion and the methodological guidelines, the case "College Daily controversy" will be analyzed in the fourth chapter, ordered in line with the three sub-questions. Finally, the last chapter will conclude and discuss the result of this research Also, the final chapter will demonstrate the limitations and the potentials for the future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the theoretical background and previous researches on the digital public sphere and the public intellectuals in the current Chinese society. Regarding the limitation of the current theoretical conceptualization due to the "digital orientalism" (Schneider, 2018, p.18), and the literature gap because of lagged empirical studies behind the evolving technology, this research introduces the four-element social media logic (van Dijck, 2013) as the main theoretical frame in order to address the current challenge to the research topic as well as to serve as the analytical lens for answer the research questions.

2.1 Digital public sphere of China and WOA Platform

Habermas defined the public sphere as "a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate" (Habermas, 1991, p. 389). Living in the age of thriving mass media, Habermas criticized that mass media, especially commercial mass media, as a problematic and power-influenced ('vermachtet') forum of public communication. He further pointed out that because the mass media's way of selecting and presenting issues are biased by economic pressures and political preferences, powerful and institutionalized actors are privileged while smaller institutions and civil society are excluded (Habermas 1989; Schäfer, 2015). But today, in the era of social media, the emergence of digital public sphere seems to dispel this Habermasian worry – social media appears to keep the promise of a deliberative and vigorous public sphere. Despite the several labels proposed such as 'digital', 'online', 'virtual' public sphere, researchers regard the digital public sphere as

> *[a] communicative sphere provided or supported by online or social media – from websites to social network sites, weblogs and micro-blogs – where participation is open and freely available to everybody who is interested, where matters of common concern can be discussed, and where proceedings are visible to all.* (Schäfer, 2015, p. 1)

Resonating to Habermas' ideal public sphere and his concerns about mass media, many scholars, positively, believe that the Internet is providing a digital public sphere for relatively spontaneous, flexible, and self-

governed public debates for individual citizens (Dahlgren, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002; Chadwick, 2008). Particularly, researchers have found that the functionality of social media adopted by users can increase their political engagement (Harris 2008; Östman 2012; Livingstone 2013). However, with the increasing mobilities and availabilities of information online through globally prevailing social media, numerous studies, revealed concerns and disputable issues generated in the digital public sphere. To be specific, concerns are raised including but not limited to – the excluded by Internet inequality, the danger of fragmentation, the influence of consumerism, and the loss of deliberative and rational debates (Schäfer, 2015).

Seeing the internet as the infrastructure, digital technologies such as mobile phones (Guo & Wu 2009; Liu 2014), blogs (Giese 2003; Esarey & Qiang 2008), and microblogging services (Huang & Sun 2014; Tong & Zuo 2014) also afford the Chinese public with the contentious and diverse interactions in "the citizen's discourse space". Netizens challenge the perceived social injustice, criticize environmental problems, and political failings, whether through subtle acts of resistance or high- profile protests. (Yang, 2009). However, it is also pointed out that the Chinese public, albeit being provided with channels and opportunities for political engagements by the internet technology, is yet lack of effective mechanism of communication for negotiating political issues between different interested parties. This is due to the underdevelopment of the Chinese public sphere before the era of Web 2.0, which hence hinders the digital public sphere nowadays regarding the political facet (Xiong, 2011). Besides, though the digital public sphere seems to be independent from the state, it is remained heavily intervened and influenced by the government's media policy. Due to this lack of effective political engagement and the regulation of media policy the digital public sphere of China reveals a strong concern for practical problems in daily life (Xiong, 2011). In this sense, China's digital public sphere is relatively more active and expressive about everyday societal concerns, and less about formal politics.

Nonetheless, a media-hype manner of discussing public concerns and current affairs is seemingly occupying Chinese public sphere due to the vast use of social media. Since the mobile phone becomes a

major device for Chinese to reach the Internet [5], social media applications installed on mobile phones, such as Sina Weibo and WeChat, are becoming a major channel for Chinese people to participate to the public deliberation on social issues (Tu, 2016). Specifically, it's reported that the number of monthly active users of WeChat has reached to over 1 billion. And about 80% of WeChat users subscribed official accounts on WeChat's Official Accounts Platform (hereafter WOA Platform) to obtain and search for information (Yang et al., 2019). WOA Platform is an "embedded platform" (Liu, Wang & Ma, 2019), combining the functions of online blogs, microblogs, and search engine, similar to social media platforms of Twitter and Sina Weibo. With this embedded channel, WeChat users including individuals, organizations, and commercial enterprises can register official accounts on the platform. With the registered official account, users can generate and spread contents such as articles, text messages, images, audio messages, and video clips to the public. As for audiences, or the ordinary WeChat users, they can subscribe the official accounts in a similar way of "following" on Twitter through the channel "subscription", by which they are able to receive and respond to the contents issued by the subscribed official accounts. As such, WOA Platform aggregates the official accounts, audiences and information into a WeChat afforded digital public sphere where people can share and exchange opinions on diverse issues.

Resonating with the Habermasian concerns, while the social media such as WOA Platform is enabling different social groups to express and exchange opinions, it is problematic when the polyphony is threatened by cyber violence, emotional blackmail, polarization of opinions, spiral of silence, and misinformation (Zhao&Han, 2013; Lan&Zeng, 2016; Jiang, 2017). While it is concerning when the problems are remained unsettled in the digital public, the technology of social media is evolving at the same time. In the year of 2019, Tencent, the producer of WeChat, proposed its new vision that "Tech for Good" [6], claiming the "neutrality" of social media technology in people's everyday life, updating and optimizing

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[5] According to the annual report of 2020 by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), over 650 million netizens in China use mobile phones to obtain news and search for information through mobile phones (CNNIC, 2020).

[6] "Tech for Good" is the new vision launched in 2019, advocating that "technology is a tool, the use of technology for good is a conscious choice". For more information, see: https://www.tencent.com/en-us/articles/2200913.html (Viewed on May 20, 2020).

functions of WeChat and its embedded platforms. Yet, the existing researches are lagged behind the evolving design of the WeChat, especially in the realm of digital public sphere. Considering newly launched functions and the features such as "controversy" of WOA Platform, it thus deserves an investigation to the role of social media technology regarding its promise of neutrality and contribution to today's public sphere.

Meanwhile, much of the western scholarship rarely notice the dynamics of the digital space in China, but are often confined within a conceptual framework that merely focuses on the "democratization" potential of the internet and the subversive agency of netizens (Herold, 2012; Schneider, 2018). As Leibold (2011, p.1036) and Morozov (2011, p.241) remarked, many of the English- language scholarship is bogged down in a pervasive "digital orientalism" – regarding the digital process of China as a unique case in which the Internet is ought to be facilitating the democracy and the subversive power against the nation state (Schneider, 2018, p.18). Within this digital orientalism, some western scholars argue that 'domestic tug of war between the Party- state and society in China' is playing itself out on the internet (Lagerkvist, 2010, p.20), and that this struggle is "facilitating normative change, and transforming China towards its ultimate horizon-inclusive democracy" (Lagerkvist, 2010, p. 39). Similarly, regarding the "democracy" addressed in the mechanism of the digital public, some researchers also argue that the digital space of China is characterized by "the paradoxical combination of draconian government control and vibrant online activism" (Yang, 2006). This paradox refers to the energetic but covert online activism – such as the cultural practices of infrapolitics (Yang, Tang & Wang, 2015) – coexisting with the repress from the authorities and the government. Such claims imply assumption that Chinese public is in the desire for, and will transition to, a liberal democratic system. However, this assumption exposes a misrepresentation of how political and digital technologies intersect in today' digital China (Schneider, 2018, p.11). More specifically, with the internet as the infrastructure, the cyber public of China is not a theatre of the antagonistic struggle between citizens and the state. Instead, the mechanism and the infrastructural function of the internet technology opens multiple channels for the communication between the people and the state, breeding the dynamic of digital China where the public sphere emerges from and amalgamated with various facets of the society.

Based on the overview and discussion on the previous researches on Chinese digital publics, it needs to be pointed out that a large part of the previous studies have bluntly reduced or generalized the role of social media technology to a catalyst for democratization in Chinese society, assuming a confrontational relationship between the state and the people as the sole force underlying and mobilizing the digital public sphere. This reductionist and orientalist view, as aforementioned, severely overlooked the diversity and dynamics of the emerging public sphere of multi-facets of China, and it needs to be carefully revised from beginning question: instead of asking how technology democratizes China, the question should be put forward as what the role of digital technology plays in Chinese public life, and how it works in the digital public sphere. In addition, considering the evolving designs of digital technologies, empirical researches should take a close look at newly launched features and functions of Chinese social media, in order to give a dynamic and situated view on the contemporary Chinese digital public sphere.

To fill the gap between the rapid evolving technology and the lagged academic attention, as well as to revisit the relationship between technology and the politics, this study pays attention to how current digital technology of social media enables and/or constrains the public participation in the Chinese digital public sphere. In addition, considering the intertwining between globalization and digitalization in contemporary societies, this exploration could shine a spotlight on the social and political implications of digital communication within and beyond China.

2.2 Public intellectuals in the digital public sphere

Before the theoretical introduction to the social media technology, the discussion on the contemporary public intellectuals needs to be elaborated first. The contemporary researches have illustrated that, in the era of social media, the public sphere is fragmented as multiple micro public spheres and "coalescing around issues and self-images" (McCallum, 2013, p. 170). Among these images, the visibility of intelligentsia is worth discussion from the perspective of "self-promoting media intellectuals" (Judt, 2009, p. 104). It's also been observed that diverse strategies that are used in the media-saturated public sphere where intellectuals are influenced by a "vertical engagement with the public" (Baert & Shipman, 2013, p. 44). This implies a

two-direction communication mechanism between the audiences and public intellectuals, assigning a new role for today's public thinkers in the social media environment: not only to speak but also to listen, and to perform.

Regarding the two-direction communication between intellectuals and the public in the digital sphere, the researches on contemporary intellectuals in the western public highlight two theoretical perspective. One is the "collision point" that contributes to the becoming of public intellectuals in public discussion. It is suggested that the opinion articulated by intellectuals to the public is seemed as an empty vessel which various audiences could project their own ideas upon (Berman, 2010; Heynders, 2016). It can be observed in today's public space that opinions of public intellectuals are often received at the same time filtered by the public, becoming an uptake for the participation of wider public and, in many cases, for opposing arguments or personal attacks targeted on the intellectuals. By virtue of this "collision point", ideas lead to multiple responses that re-triggers reactions, while the public discussion can become a theatre of farce or chaos of unsettled controversy. The other theoretical position is to see public intellectuals as "big thinkers (Heynders, 2016, p. 2)" who are intellectuals as celebrities characterized by the theatricality of their public performance among multiple media platforms, deploying strategies of celebrity behavior in their intellectual practices, especially in their writing and thinking (Hynders, 2016).

As to the two perspectives mentioned above, public intellectuals can be seen as a double-layered actor who brings knowledge at the same time trigger public attention and discussion. The latter layer here unveils the meaning of being "public" – an ability of attracting attention especially media attention, and thus interacting with social media and the public audiences. This ability of being public intellectuals also suggests a blurred boundary between fame seekers and intellectual speakers. On the one hand, how the public value and define knowledge is changed, which in turn change the attitude and view on public intellectuals. On the other hand, as mentioned before, public intellectuals are becoming celebrities who breed by fame, highly aware of their visibility and audiences' responses. This thus brings us to *the four-level frame of public intellectuals* according to which the public intellectuals today are characterized by (1)

possessing a cultural authority; (2) participating in public issues actively; (3) theatricalizing his/her public persona; and (4) being capable of performing among different media platforms (Heynders, 2006).

In the Chinese context, the four-level frame is also applicable to Chinese public intellectuals. Yet, the nuanced characteristics require situated empirical researches and discussions. To the general public in China, the concept of a 'public intellectual' was popularized by an article published on Southern People Weekly in 2004 as 'knowledgeable, progressive and critical individuals who actively engage in public affairs' (Han, 2018). But in recent years, it's been observed that public intellectuals in China are characterized by the tendencies of techno-specialization and mediatization (Xu, 2003). In addition, the stigmatization of public intellectuals in Chinese social media environment (Jun & Feng, 2014) reveals how the identity of public intellectuals is understood with different meanings, suggesting a complicated relationship between public intellectuals and Chinese digital public sphere.

According to Xu, specialized expertise and media celebrities are becoming dominant in the public due to mediatization and commercialization. Firstly, the recognizability of intellectuals nowadays has become more dependent on the specialization and authority in fragmented social groups and micro public spheres. In the media-saturated public space, the employment of different social media platforms increases visibility of experts and thinkers in separated niches of audiences on different social media venues. Meanwhile, traditional public intellectuals like writers and scholars who are not active among media platforms are now becoming less visible in the general public discussion (Cao & Zhang, 2017). In addition, communes or social groups with different interests may have their own standards or norms of recognizing authorities and public intellectuals. And these standards or norms are also intertwined with the way of performance and mediatization of public figures. Thus, the influence and visibility of intellectuals are varied among niched public spheres, conditioned by different media platforms (Wang, 2014). Secondly, Jameson' once remarked that "the ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society is precisely the image itself" (Jameson, 1979, p.132). Accordingly, the public intellectuals are required to employ the logic of commercialized and mediatized culture to make themselves visible and recognizable

to the general public. In other words, public intellectuals are performed and recognized as consumable images for audiences. Regarding the commercialization of public intellectuals, Xu also argues that media and culture industries encourage critical public intellectuals to express dissent voice since "the dissention and the extreme opinion are regarded as scarce commodity with huge profit" (2003, p. 46). In Xu's argument, though he pointed out the passivity of today's public intellectuals when they are facing with the logic of media and cultural industries, he unfortunately overlooked the agency of intellectuals and the "transition" of their role in the networked digital society. In this research, a close analysis on the participation of public intellectuals in "College Daily controversy" can be seen as a vantage perspective to see their roles in the digital public sphere emerged on WOA Platform. Regarding the participating intellectuals as both the commodity for audiences' consumption and active users of the platform, the study examines how digital technology contributing to and/or constraining public intellectuals' performance in the "controversy" event.

Besides, the stigmatization of public intellectuals is a noticeable phenomenon that accompanied by their expanding influence among the general audiences (Jun & Feng, 2014). A body of researches contend that the stigma of the public intellectuals in Chinese society is due to provocative opinions threatening the privileged and disturbing the social stability (Cao, 2016). Some scholars also argue that the reputation of public intellectuals in China are now blurred with the public attitudes toward so-called online critics (Zhan, 2016; Fang,2017) mitigating the authority of traditional intellectuals. What is noticeable in the phenomena is the vernacular label "gongzhi" of the public intellectual in current Chinese public, which has become an umbrella term covering all kinds of opinion makers including irresponsible and commercialized media celebrities, and thus incurring criticism and stigmatization upon the identity of public intellectual (Zhan, 2016). As such, the stigma of public intellectuals could cause and deepen the loss of social trust and faith to the intelligentsia, intensifying the chaos in the public discussion (Guan, 2007). Nevertheless, the stigmatization of public intellectuals is not all harmful or damaging. Some researchers argued that the process of stigmatizing constitutes a form which consumers in knowledge consumption area can contend

for power and profit against intellectual elites, shaking the established power relationship between intellectuals and grassroots (Wen & Luo, 2014). In addition, the phenomenon also unveils the concerning problem of the role of social media in the public sphere – though every user is entailed with the ability to express, not every one share the equal right of speech (Fang, 2017). As such, the stigmatization phenomenon described in the previous studies could disclose the inequality in the current digital public sphere and the market of ideas.

Seeing the digital public sphere as a multiple space intertwining with "macro, meso, and micro public sphere" (McCallum, 2013, p.169), Chinese public showcases a polycentric compound amalgamated with various communes that may operate in different patterns and rules. Public intellectuals – as a long-tradition and influential role in public opinion – in today's media-saturated public are thus facing challenges of transitions and stigmatization in the multi-facet public sphere. With this regard, the *four-element social media logic* (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) could navigate this research to discuss the role of Chinese social media and its mechanisms underlying the digital space where intellectuals and the general public are negotiating and reshaping the current Chinese public sphere.

2.3 Social media logic: Revisiting public participation

As discussed in the previous sessions, the technological shaping and mapping of the digital public sphere are changing in the era of social media. "No form of online communication is possible without the affordances offered by the technology shaping the online sphere of social life" (Blommaert et al., 2019, p.8). If we regard culture as "an emergent, historically and materially contingent process through which understandings of self and society are formed and reformed" (Cohen, 2012), then a close look at the conditions of social media technology in the formation of the public participation could help us to grasp better understanding of today's digital public sphere.

Zooming in to the digital public sphere emerged through the affordance of WOA Plarform, how technology enables public engagements of multiple social niches and individuals demands we take a revisit

on the notion of "participation" in today's digital environment. It's been demonstrated that "concepts like 'participation' and 'collaboration' get imputed a peculiar new meaning in the context of social media". Social media users, the users of content, are "supposed collaborators" co-developing products and thus enriching "communities" (van Dijck, 2013, p.12). In this sense, the action of "participation" becomes an assigned social action and duty to users determined by the infrastructure dimension of social media technology (Blommaert et al., 2019). Considering the promise of social media platforms as more egalitarian and democratic than mass media in a sense that all users could equally participate in the online space, how social media logic exactly operate for individual's participation and the public sphere's formation is remained under-theorized. Thus, the four-element social media logic could serve as a theoretical prism to investigate the mechanism of social media technology underlying the digital public sphere, examining and explaining how today's users participate in public discussion.

According to Van Dijk and Poell, social media logic refers to "the processes, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally, how they channel social traffic" (2013, p.5). In the similar vein with the mass media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979), social media logic is characterized by two main tactics: the claim of neutrality regarding the content production and the position of the media institution, and the ability to glue audiences by capturing their attentions. In addition, social media have the ability to transport their logic outside of the platforms that generate them, while their distinctive technological, discursive, economic, and organizational strategies tend to remain implicit. In order to explicate social media logic as a particular set of strategies and mechanisms, four elements – programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication – are identified. This four-element social media logic enables to examine how the relationship among the private, the corporate, and the state are shaped and affected by social media. Accordingly, the four dimensions are elaborated with the 'controversy' case as the following.

2.3.1 Programmability of Social Media

Resonating with the editorial process in the mass media realm, the programmability of social media enables an obscured strategy to curate and manipulate content in order to frame the information and the user's experience. It's deeply grounded in computer code, data, algorithms, protocols, interfaces and the platform organizations that are responsible for programming (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). However, programmability, unlike the traditional one-way traffic in mass media mechanism, is a two-way flow between users and programmers affecting both the technological and the social mediation of content. This "two-way traffic" means that, by digital programming, social media can trigger users' creative or communicative contributions, while users may in turn influence the flow of communication and information through their interactions with the coded environment. Though the technological facet of the programmability is often invisible to the users as well as to the researchers, interfaces of social media applications curated by the algorithm could navigate the interaction between users and the social media, enabling the continuous negotiation on users' participation. As such, social relations and communications such as "friending" "following" and "sharing" are not just a user's action performed on the screen, but rather, they are coded and feeding to the social media database and output as for "optimizing" users' experience and for "indicating" social-cultural event such as the current affairs in the public sphere.

Regarding the "*College Daily* controversy" on WOA Platform, programmability provides a starting point to analyze the platform interface of a "controversy event", so as to the interaction between the application functions and the participants. In addition, it's been pointed out that programmability could incur severe socio-cultural consequences due to its entanglement with the social activities and institutions in the online-offline nexus. Particularly, when social issues are intertwined with social media discussion and the offline social structures and orders, a critical discussion is demanded to address the responsibility of public opinion leaders and social media platform operators. Thus, this research will discuss how the factor of programmability in the "*College Daily* controversy" shapes (power) relationship and distributes discourses by its specific interface design. By observing users' actions under such design, this study will

take a step further to illuminate the entangle of programmability and social institutions outsides the social media context, and how it influences participant's understanding and experience in the public deliberation.

2.3.2 Popularity Principle

Similar to mass media's ambition of capturing and maintaining public attentions, social media also develops its principle of boosting popularity of people and ideas. Particularly conditioned by both algorithmic and socio-economic components, popularity principles in the social media logic is mostly measured in quantified terms, positioning the social media as neutral and data-based. The most salient mechanism of the popularity is the algorithms that design and measure the popularity or influence metrics. Similar to the mechanism of programmability, popularity boosting is also a two-way traffic in which algorithms automatically assign differentiated value, such an "trending" and "most viewed", but users themselves may also engage in concerted efforts to lift certain topic's and people's visibility. However, the principle of popularity is often problematic due to its invisible process where social media measures at the same time influence and manipulate the metrics. As such, social media could empower themselves or certain social organizations to use and even manufacture popularity to raise a public wave which promotes a particular item or ideology such as the hashtag hijacking in commercial campaigns (Xanthopoulos et al.,2016).

Considering the college daily controversy on WOA Platform, principle of popularity illuminates how the media distribute visibility and voice to different interested parties – such as the public intellectuals, influencers, and idea-savvy journalist. It also unveils how the involved users interact with the metrics in their participation. Some researchers pointed out that the key metrics of the influence of a WeChat Official Account is the number of readers who have subscribed the WeChat Official Accounts, which is of great importance to both enterprises and self-media practitioners (Liu, Wang & Ma, 2019). However, due to the interface design of WeChat, the number of subscribers is only visible to the account owners and the data analysis agencies. This design thus leaves a challenge for the research, since the researcher is not available to the number of the observed accounts. However, it also opens an opportunity of an emic perspective to experience how the popularity is measured and made sense by the general public with the absence of key

metrics. By observing and explaining the presentations of the platform interface with the regard to the popularity principle deployed by both users and the programmers, the study can explicate the orders of visibility and the discursive hierarchies on the platform.

2.3.3 Connectivity Tactic

Connectivity is originated as a hardware term, refers to the "socio-technical affordance" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p.8) of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers, contributing to and incorporating with the current culture of connectivity. According to van Dijck, the culture of connectivity is emerged and evolved with an age-old recommendation culture (2013). In the context of social media technology, the recommendation culture is renewed by the strategy of connectivity mechanisms underlying the social media algorithms for connecting individual user's needs, advertisers' interests, and the social media platform owners' intentions.

Resonating with the "two-way traffic" operated in the previous two mechanisms, the connectivity strategy is deployed by programmers to rule the game at the same time it is providing opportunities for users. On the one hand, algorithms steer new connection among users, contents, and platforms based on the data collected from users' behaviors. On the other hand, users can evaluate and select from the pushed connection to choose what they want to be connected with. However, when it comes to the realm of public sphere, this two-way traffic of connectivity could lead to problematic results. Firstly, since the connectivity is entangled with the recommendation culture, the public participation in public opinion might be shaped and operated through networked individualism (Wellman, 2001), leading to concerning consequences such as echo chambers and information bubbles. The second issue is the invisible data processing behind the screen. This invisible procedure, aiming to create connectivity, not only mediates users' activities, but more profoundly, trigger the interaction between the private and the public, and those between the commercial and the political. In addition, it is also been pointed out that the connectivity derives from a continuous pressure – both from peers and from technologies – to expand through competition and gain power through

strategic alliances. Similar to the principle of popularity, a sense of neoliberalism reveals the ideology of the connectivity culture that values competitions, resources gaining, and hierarchies.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it's been observed that public space emerged on WOA Platform has aggregated considerable users to receive and exchange public opinions. When investigating the formation of such digital public sphere, how the connection is formed and the connecting node is linked could disclose the underlying mechanisms of the connectivity culture incorporated with the digital public sphere. As for this research, "controversy" flag can be seen as a triggering node deployed by the connectivity tactic for activating the compound gear of the participation of wider public, directing this study to disclose the underlying operation of the connective "controversy" and the hidden relationship underneath the connected "controversy".

2.3.4 Datafication Mechanism

Theoretically, datafication refers to the ability of rendering, or, quantifying as many as facets of society into processable data (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). When it comes to the realm of social media, users' behaviors such as friending, commenting and sharing, as well as the contents created and presented on screens such as articles, images, and videos, are identified as data that can be harvested, repurposed, and monetized through social media mechanism (Pariser, 2011). Regarding the datafication operation, social media logic is occupying the online public discussion from the following two dimensions. On the one hand, microblogging tools like Twitter is incrementally enhance their ability to mine online social traffic for identifiers and indicators of trending keywords and items, positioning themselves as the replacement of offline opinion polls (Andrejevic, 2011). This also implies the role of "neutrality" and "independence" of social media technology as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. On the other hand, based on the data mining, online discussion is becoming "measured" and "molded" as for formalizing users' participation (van Difck & Poell, 2013, p.13). Further, this formalization that mediates and quantifies sentiments and opinions could manipulate the general understanding of the topic. In other words, datafication can be used for attributing meaning in specific (institutional) contexts. In the case of "College Daily controversy", these

two dimensions – the neutral measurement of public opinions and the formalization of a "controversy" – could be analyzed from how the WOA Platform presents and regulates or frames a "controversy" with numbers and specific terms. Also, how official accounts owners reacts to the "controversy" can be observed to see how datafication formalized and steer users' participation in the public discussion.

Despite the meaning making of data as mentioned above, a third dimension can be added to the datafication mechanisms, the database logic (Manovich, 2001). It's been argued that when individual is confronting with the magnitude and high speed of networks on a daily basis, the processing capacities of addressing and interacting with big data increasingly relies on the "counting", which is "replacing the way of comprehending" (van de Ven, 2019, p.48). However, it's not necessarily to say counting has "replaced" human's comprehension. Rather, we are comprehending the information society not only by *counting* but also by *selecting* in the databased social life. The datafication of social media logic in a way provides a databased interpretation of our society. With this databased social life, participants in online space may tend to a, as Manovich termed, "database logic" for understanding and narrating our experience of the world (2001, p.219). By virtue of the database logic, contents on social media can appear in the form of ordered collections of items or key words. Besides, user can perform various actions with the databased contents: to view, to re-construct, to search, and to give meaning. Resonating with the remark of Louise Amoore, datafication provides a version of the reality that less about ourselves but more about "what can be inferred about who we might be" (2011, p.24). As for the study of public opinion in the digital public sphere, this dimension of "database logic" derived from datafication implies that the order of the database could indicate different or equal significance assigned to each item or piece of information. In this research of "controversy" discussion, I will thus take a close look at the databased narrative in the observed articles, in order to explore the order of significance emerged among massive information in the public discussion.

According to the theoretical discussion above, o it can be further observed that social media logic has been entangled with the contemporary socio-political structure and the economic forces, scaffolding the cotemporary configuration of the participation in digital public space. As for investigating the digital

public sphere operated on Chinese social media platform, this study would use social media logic as a theoretical prism to identify and explain the mechanism of the digital technology in a "controversy" event on WOA Platform. To take a step further, it attempts to examine how different parties such as the public intellectuals and the social groups deploy the social media logic to interact with each other, so as to explore the dynamics of the social order and discursive hierarchies reshaped and emerged in the current digital public sphere.

3. Methodology

The last chapter reviews the theoretical background of the research topic. In order to address the research question, this research adopts digital ethnography (Varis, 2016) as the methodological scheme for approaching the research field. Data collection and storage are conducted with digital devices complying with ethical regulations. In terms of analysis, discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005; Jones et al., 2015) serves as an analytical instrument to dissect and investigate the data. In this chapter, I will justify methodological tools I employed for this research. Besides, I will explain how I applied them to this case study. As followed, the collected data will be presented in graph. In addition, ethical concerns regarding this research will be specified and discussed in the end of the chapter.

3.1 Digital ethnography

This study adopts digital ethnography as an approach to explore the digital public sphere on WOA Platform. From the ontological perspective, ethnography sees human actions as entangled with social meanings, intentions, motives, attitudes and beliefs (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007); while epistemologically speaking, ethnography enables a descriptive account of cultural practices grounded in data attained through situated context and field work and with broader theoretical frameworks (boyd, 2008). In other words, ethnography is applied to study human behaviors in situated context, set against the interdisciplinary or multiple theoretical backdrops. Since this study is designed for exploring the public sphere and the meaning-making of social media users, an ethnographic scheme enables me to investigate the phenomenon from a contextualized perspective with a systematic theoretical frame of social media logic as introduced in the previous chapter.

Regarding the social interactions and cultural practices carried out in online space in the contemporary society, digital ethnography provides ethnographic research with new tools and forms to explore "present-day digital communication environments and digital culture(s)" (Varis, 2016 p.55). As for examining the digital experience and practices, digital ethnography provides a methodological scheme that

focuses on specific social contexts, platforms and semiotization (Varis, 2016). Since this study is designed for examining the role of social media platform for public engagement, the three dimensions mentioned above enables researchers to approach the case in question as a situated and contextualized phenomenon in the digital environment afforded by WOA Platform, inquiring to the discursive practices and semiotic products produced by the participants. Regarding the "College Daily controversy" phenomenon in this case study, the three focuses thus directing this project to the three specific dimensions: 1) the contextualized "controversy" on WOA Platform, 2) the conditions afforded by the platform, and 3) the meaning-making practices of participants with all kinds of semiotic materials such as written texts, images, videos, and audios. As such, the digital ethnography scheme can pave way to the analysis of the role of social media platform in discursive practices, mapping to further investigation in the public participation in the digital public sphere.

Additionally, digital ethnography can illuminate and dissect the power relationships underlying the digital public sphere in the social media environment. Since ethnography has the capacity and the potential of challenging established norms which govern the social dimensions of meaningful behaviors (Blommaert & Dong, 2010), it could help the current research to further the exploration of how social media logic is "reshaping social hierarchies" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In this sense, a digital ethnography approach thus enhances this research with a critical strength of not only examining the public engagement, but more crucially, of questioning and dissecting the techno-social structure and order emerged from social media technology in the current public sphere.

3.2 Data Collection

Following the methodological scheme of digital ethnography discussed above, this research thus regards the WOA Platform as both the "place" and the "text" (Androutsopoulos 2013, p. 240) of digital practices in the "College Daily controversy". In other words, I set my research site on the WOA Platform to conduct my observation and data collection, demarcating the boundary of my research field.

As for data collection, I relied on WOA Platform's own search engine (similar to Twitter's own search engine) to elicit data. As a search activity, this method could help me to collect the data in different order such as time period, ranking, and popularity. Besides, information searching on social media's search engine is also one of the crucial behaviors and types of social interaction that ordinary users engaged with in everyday life (Zappavigna 2015; White, 2016). In this way, I am not only searching for information retrieval, but also for gaining the experience with an emic perspective in order to grasp how ordinary users obtain information in the "controversy". For this study, I limited searches with the keyword "College Daily" and "New Yorker", narrowing down search results to the articles issued by official accounts. By doing so, articles and the comments, metrics, and the official accounts are gathered as data for this research. Based on the results ranked by "post date", I confined the period of data collection from August 19th to September 4th, 2019.

For this research, data are collected by mobile phone's supporting tools of screenshot, screen recorder, and recording. All data is stored in local discs of credential protected mobile devices. As presented in the following, Table 1 summarizes the time period, official accounts with pinyin, contents, and metrics of the data I collected for this project.

Table 1

Data collection of "College Daily controversy" on WeChat's Official Account Platform (WOA Platform)

Duration	Observed public accounts		Contents (posts and comments)		Metrics (views and wows/likes)	
August 20-September 20, 2019	Official accounts	(presented in this thesis as pinyin)	Posts (titles of articles)	Comments	Views	"Wows" (likes)
August 20th	加拿大和美国必读	(Jianada he Meiguo Bidu)	纽约客起底北美留学生日报如何收取智商税	93	100k+	3397
	楼台 post	(Loutai post)	北美留学生日报，这个猪一样的队友	0	6891	83
August 21st	背锅娘	(Beiguo Niang)	从北美留学生日报事件看西方意识形态斗争路径	1	420	4
	Daily Inch	(Daily Inch)	年度最佳编制女工：北美留学生日报	0	2,815	144
	洛城标叔	(Luocheng Biaoshu)	《纽约客》起底北美留学生日报：靠编故事收"智商税"	0	471	11
	嘎知	(Gazhi)	"北美留学生日报"的创始人是什么来头	42	79,000	1,055
	记者站	(Jizhe Zhan)	"北美留学生日报"的创始人是什么来头（this a re-post of Gazhi's article）	0	3,487	44
	北部湾 ing	(Beibuwan ing)	北美留学生日报的生财术	0	145	2
	北美留学生日报 (College Daily)	(College Daily)	西方如何歪曲报道中国？你能从纽约客对留学生日报的报道找到答案	97	100k+	4,984
August 22nd	余晟以为	(Yusheng Yiwei)	从二战救援，到鲁迅"横站"，到杠精，到北美留学生日报	13	3,019	87
	人物	(Renwu)	"北美留学生日报"的创始人是什么来头（this is a re-post of Gazhi's article）	0	23,000	61
	加拿大和美国必读	(Jianada he Meiguo Bidu)	北美留学生日报，你打自己的脸可以，为何要拉上中国	94	59,000	1,256
	非凡小人物	(Feifan Xiaorenwu)	为什么要批判北美留学生日报	0	970	28
	海归时代	(Haigui Shidai)	致北美留学生日报：出来混总是要还的	0	776	9
	一小时爸爸	(Yixiaoshi Baba)	纽约客 VS 北美留学生日报，八卦一次有趣的媒体交锋	37	27,000	165
	乘海书屋	(Chenghai Shuwu)	纽约客起底北美留学生日报如何收取智商税（this is a re-post of Jianada he Meiguo Bidu's article on August 20th）	0	18	0
			西方如何歪曲报道中国？你能从纽约客对留学生日报的报道找到答案(this is a re-post of College Daily's article posted on August 21st)	0	559	3
August 23rd	加中国际	(Jiazhong Guoji)	【加中生活】美媒称北美留学生日报炮制假新闻！社交媒体战开打	0	74	0
	看理想	(Kanlixiang)	梁文道(Leung Man-tao)：北美留学生日报，只是"后真相时代"的产物	34	100k+	3,487
	舆是说	(Yushishuo)	北美留学生日报：你的世界出自我手	0	79	2
	致申教育	(Zhishen Jiaoyu)	北美留学生日报的真实身份到底是？	0	76	0
	加拿大和美国必读	(Jianada he Meiguo Bidu)	"北美留学生日报"的创始人是什么来头（This is a re-post Gazhi's article）	9	2,681	36
August 24th	WeAreAlive	(WeAreAlive)	北美留学生日报：后真相时代下的产物	0	1,090	1
August 30th	卓越移民	(Zhuoyue Yimin)	北美留学生日报 VS 纽约客：海外华人圈假新闻有多严重	0	42	2
September 3rd	纽约情报局	(Niuyue Qingbaoju)	北美留学生日报，知识"后真相时代"的产物（this is a re-post of Leung's article on the official account Kanlixiang）	0	3,775	40

3.3 Discourse analysis

As aforementioned, this research collect data specifically for user's digital practices with semiotic materials on social media platform. With the aim to address social media's role in meaning-making and public participation in socio-cultural phenomena, this research adopts discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005; Jones et al., 2015) as an analytical instrument for analyzing the data.

By defining "discourse" as the ways how people "build and manage their social worlds using various semiotics systems" (Jones et al., 2015, p. 4), discourse analysis in digital environment is utilizing for understanding the way of users organizing and deploying semiotic elements and resources in their digital practices of participating in the digital public sphere. Regarding this case study, the discursive practice of users is the core focus of the data analysis. Discursive practices, a notion developed by Foucault, is referring to the formations and production of knowledge such as claiming facts and truths (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). By analyzing the discursive practices of users, it could illuminate how participants including social media platforms and public figures claimed truth and facts in the controversy issues. As such, discourse analysis for this research thus serves as an analytical prisms to see how WOA Platform as a "technology of entextualisation" (Jones et al., 2015 p.10) affects 1) users understanding of "College Daily controversy", 2) their actions and interactions in the contexts, 3) roles or characters they can perform, and 4) social orders or relationships they can build in such situation. Accordingly, discourse analysis emphasizes on the following four dimensions: texts, contexts, actions and interactions, and power and ideology.

First of all, the focus of discourse analysis on "text" guides my research to observe and analyze the discursive construction and formation of knowledge in the "College Daily controversy". Defined as the "aggregate of semiotic elements that can function as tool for people to take social action (Jones et al., 2015, p.5)" the focus of text of this research pays specification not only on the content created by users such as articles, images, audio messages, and video clips, but also includes the on-screen texts such as metrics, hyperlinks, and interfaces. These elements generated by social media technology thus can provide an analytical angle to examine the social media mechanism underlying the socio-cultural event. Besides,

discourse analysis also emphasizes the "texture" of texts, that is, the way of connection and organization of texts in order to achieve recognizability and meaning-making. For this research, focuses on texts and textures guide the data analysis to investigate how "College Daily controversy" is understood on the WOA Platform. Particularly, with the theoretical prisms of social media logic, this research pays specific attention to the interface of the "controversy page" and the patterns of how participants organize semiotic resources and elements centering on the phenomenon.

Regarding context as conditions for meaning making and discourse production, it can be analyzed from two levels. One is the "demonstrable" contexts, including situated interpretation, dialogical conversation, intertextuality, and entextualisation; the other one is the "forgotten" contexts – the contexts of larger economies of communication such as semantic resources allocation, trajectories of discourse shifts, and the history (or the sociopolitical environment) of discourse data (Blommaert, 2005). As for this case study, since one of the main tasks is to explore the meaning making and discursive practices of social media users in the situated context of "College Daily" controversy, analysis of contextualization thus requires attentions to both demonstratable context presented on WOA Platform and the forgotten contexts that underlying and influencing the digital public discussion and communication. Accordingly, these two dimensions orient my research to the three analysis focuses as the following: 1) to investigate how WeChat users make sense of the "controversy" in their participation and communication, 2)to analyze how users, especially the official account owners, "uptake" and produce meaning from the contextualized "controversy" in their participation, and 3) to explore how the public discussion is influenced by obfuscated ideas from larger socio-cultural situations and the developers of the social media platform. By doing so, this investigation not only maps out the meaning of "College Daily controversy" for the WeChat users, but also leads to the dissection of the order of discourse and knowledge production.

In addition to the digital practices and the contextualization of controversy on WOA Platform, digital discourse analysis also enables this research to focus on the group of public intellectuals. As mentioned in the previous chapter, public intellectuals are prominent and highly visible actors in today's

digital public sphere, characterized by the cultural authority, the active engagement into the public discussion, the theatricalization of a public persona, and the performance on multiple media platforms (Heynders, 2016). These characteristics suggest that public intellectuals in the digital space are not only social media users who deploy the technology to fulfil their practical needs and socio-cultural role, but also public figures who are visible and discussible for the public. Besides, in Chinese digital public sphere, the images of the public intellectual reveal a complicated attitude towards the identity as mentioned before. Particularly, the stereotype and the commercialization of public intellectuals are highlighted in the current public sphere. With the analytical lens of discourse analysis, public intellectuals are thus analyzed as both the "actor" interacting with the social media logic on WOA Platform, and the "text" being utilized in the discursive practices of the wider public. By doing so, this direction of the data analysis could illuminate the interplay between social media and the public participation, centering on the production of public intellectuals and the knowledge formation. As such, how public intellectuals performed and how they were presented in this controversy event could not only address the literature gap on the public intellectual issues, but also further the exploration to uncover the underlying dynamics and relationships between social media technology and the digital public sphere.

Also, discourse analysis strengthens this research with a critical perspective of probing into ideological agenda and power relationship that often unexpressed on texts (Jones et al., 2015). The inquiry to ideology in digital society asks what "versions of reality" are constructed, or, in other words, how social media users understand the world. Very often, ideological agenda can be analyzed as the promoted value achieved by digital interface and applications "channeling" (Jones et al., 2015, p.14) users into certain online and/or offline actions and interactions. In terms of power relationship, discourse analysis in digital era has bears an aim to explore how digital technology affects human relationship and how social goods like knowledges and material resources are distributed, questioning the established social order and revealing the underlying inequality in the current society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, social media logic is occupying multiple facets of today's society, provoking concerns about and questions on the

role and impact of social media technology. Discourse analysis in this regard thus provides a critical perspective for this case study, not only to observe the "College Daily controversy" as a socio-technological event in the digital public sphere, but also as a mediated phenomenon embedded by unseen mechanisms and organized by obscured "powerful players". In order to address this task, this study takes a close look at the WOA Platform's interface, rules and regulations, metrics, and the curation of information, aiming to see how users are "channeled" and to reconstruct the controversy event in a digital environment. Besides, by paying specific attention to the practices of public intellectuals and official accounts in this phenomenon, this research dissects and examines what and how knowledge is constructed in their discursive practices. Also, by investigating the communicative practices among the audiences and public intellectuals, this study uncovers the emerged orders of visibility in the reshaped social order of authority and knowledge, mapping to the larger canvas of the public sphere in China.

3.4 Ethical Concerns

The data collected for this study is considered as the collection of "what people choose to make public about themselves" (Varis, 2016, p.59) on WeChat, since the WeChat's official account platform is a public online space where contents are publically available. In this sense, the data collected are not violating the privacy of the observed participants such as the information of commentators and account owners. As an observational research conducted in a digital public setting, this research is designed for observing public behaviors including the comments of articles and communications among commenters in the digital public sphere. In other words, the focal unit of the project is the forms of actions and practices of commenters in the public space. In this sense, this project did not ask for informed consent from the large amount of the commenters. In addition, the informed consent could make participants aware of the presence of researchers. This awareness, as suggested by the Economic and Social Research Council, can alter the phenomenon being studied (ESRC, 2015).

In principle, the data containing individual information, such as screen names, user names, profile content, personal references, etc., are anonymized to the uttermost extent. However, contents and on-screen

information of public figures and institutions were maintained in their original forms, as they are publicly recognized, and provided with the sources.

In terms of the 'searchability' or 'googleability' (boyd 2008; Varis 2016), though this research anonymizes the identity of participants, they can still be identified online by searching the contents of the discourse. Albeit the identity and of the identity is at risk, this research does not paraphrase or interpret the participants' online comments and replies for the following reasons:1) some analysis focuses on the discursive characteristics of the contents produced by participants including comments and posts; 2) to date, there has no evidence showing that the comments of the WeChat users are searchable by the search engine. Nevertheless, since this study is engaged with non-sensitive materials, the presentation of the data will not put participants in risky circumstances if their online identity is revealed.

4. Data Analysis

With the aim to explore the role of social media in the formation of digital public sphere, this chapter will present the analysis of "College Daily controversy" with the lens of four-element social media logic (van Dijck, 2013). In line with the three sub-questions of the main research aim, the following analysis of this chapter will be unfolded from the perspectives of three types of participants in the "controversy": ordinary users, official accounts, and the public intellectual. Firstly, this chapter will explore how users make sense of the "controversy" event with WOA platform's "controversy page". From an emic perspective, I will also investigate the role of platform's search engine in user's meaning-making actions. Secondly, this chapter will probe into the discursive practices of official accounts participating in the "controversy", examining how WOA Platform conditions and enables user's participation. Following the specific case of Leung Man-tao, a well-known public intellectual in China, and his official account Kanlixiang, this chapter will finally address the role of WOA Platform in the public intellectual's performance and participation in the "controversy" event.

4.1 Contextualized by social media: Controversialization on WOA Platform

Unlike scandals and fake news which are often identified and debunked by grassroots, journalists, and governmental institutions, a "controversy" on WOA Platform, however, is identified by a digital interface, the "*controversy page*". It is an interface designed for channeling the WeChat user to controversial contents. Usually, once a posted article is flagged as "*controversial content*", the controversy page is created. As to present the controversy, this specific page displays the posts in question as "*controversial content*" and the "*right holder's statement*". Additionally, a small signal on the upper-left of this page can lead users to the policy definition of "controversy" on WOA Platform. In the similar way of how Facebook redefines "friends" complying with algorithmic rules (Blommaert, 2018, p.28), the "controversy page" algorithmicalizes and further institutionalizes the understanding of a "controversy" on the platform. As such, the "controversy" phenomenon on WOA Platform can be regarded as both a genre in online social interaction and also a genre ascribed by the platform algorithm.

Besides the controversy page, WOA Platform's own search engine serves as a convenient tool for WeChat users to make meaning of the event. As an embedded function of WeChat, it enables users' agency to search for information like posts and official accounts on WOA Platform. At the same time, it is also a databased program, feeding users with the output data processed by an invisible algorithm. In the "College Daily controversy", my interaction with WOA Platform's search engine as a user can provide an emic experience to investigate how ordinary WeChat users can obtain the information and thus make sense of the phenomenon apart from the controversy page. In addition, regarding the results of the search engine, it may disclose an order of visibility based on the socio-technical mechanism of WOA Platform.

Navigated through the two perspectives described above, in the following section, I will dissect and analyze the contextualization of "College Daily controversy" from both the "controversy page" and WOA Platform's own search engine.

4.1.1 The "Controversy page": The onstage feud and the backstage rules

Usually, WeChat users can reach posted articles on WOA Platform through a simple action of clicking the post. However, if the article is involved in a "controversy", as the "controversial content" or the "right holder's statement", the clicking will directly lead users to the "controversy page" rather than the intended article. As such, for ordinary users, the "controversy page" can be seen as a front stage, presenting disagreements, and enabling the public to hear arguments from both sides instead of a one-side story. From this perspective, the "controversy page" seems to provide a comprehensive and an omnipotent view for the audiences. But as a digital media afforded interface, this front-staged controversy is in fact screened and mediated: it is the output from algorithms and programs underlying the platform. In other words, this invisible, algorithmic formation of the "controversy page" can be seen as the unseen rule of processing the controversy on WOA Platform, the "backstage" of a "controversy". Goffman once explained a "backstage" as a place where "the suppressed facts make an appearance" (2002, p. 53). Intertwined with both algorithms and socio-political components underlying the social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), the "backstage"

set for marking and judging a controversy thus becomes problematic due to its invisible and unreachable procedure for the public.

Taking the "controversy page" of the "*College Daily* controversy" as the focus (see figure 2) , it is observed that the presentation of a "controversy" on WOA Platform reveals a user-triggered algorithm beneath the "controversy page": it is initiated and performed by users and, at the same time, it is operated by the WOA Platform policy and organized by the algorithm underlying the "controversy page". Following these two dimensions, the meaning making of the "*College Daily* controversy" will be explained and analyzed from 1) the front-stage structure and affordance of the "controversy page" and 2) the policy definitions of a "controversy" event provided by WOA Platform.

Figure 2

The "controversy page" of the "College Daily controversy" (See translation on the right).

From a glimpse at the "controversy page", we can observe an arrangement of three posts: one is the article marked as "controversial content" taking the largest part of the page with its cover image, and the other two are labelled as "right holder's statement" below the "controversial content". Besides, we can also notice the date and time of posting. As such, the "College Daily controversy" is organized and presented on the page with a specific time-space. Regarding this arrangement it distinctly frontstages the subject of this controversy event: the report with the headline "*The New Yorker accuses College Daily of charging readers 'IQ tax' for its made-up stories*". This position of the article can be seen as questioning

and judging upon The New Yorker's accusation. As such, by controversializing the accuser, The New Yorker, this arrangementthus reverses the accuser to the accused, and the accused accuser: *The New Yorker*'s report becomes questionable, while *College Daily* might be framed and it deserves a fair judgement.

Besides, a contextualized understanding of the controversy event can be made from the multimodality enabled by the "controversy page". Similar to traditional mass media production of news with photos, the controversy page also contains both headlines and images. As we can see on the page, the eye-caching cover of the controversial article shows an eerie image of a crowd of skeletons under American national flag. Combining with the headline, the "controversial content" could thus trigger an appalling and provocative feeling of the issue. Apart from the "controversial content", the "right holder's statements" supplements the meaning-making of the event and constitute a comparation among these posts in terms of wording and visual effect. Compared to the eerie image above, two argument-like articles are listed below as "right holder's statement" attached with less dramatized effects. The first one is the defending argument published by the *College Daily*, with the headline "*How does western media distort China's image? You can find the answer from New Yorker's report* (or mischarge) *about College Daily*". As a defending article refuting against The New Yorker's report, it uses a third-person point of view to position the involved parties while addressing directly to the audiences by talking to "you". In other words, it presents an omnipotent perspective to describe the incident, at the same time it switches the interlocutor to the attending audience. Contrary to the sensationally provocative image of skeletons, a portrait of a contemplating male is attached to this defending article, suggesting a gesture of the calm and the rational. What noticeable here is that, according to the headline of College Daily's statement, it is directly pointing to western media with the discourse of the confrontational relationship between western media and China. As such, the focus of the controversy is subtly reaccentuated and recontextualized to the questionable operation of western media based on a patriotic stance.

Based on the above analysis, we have seen the two protagonists in the "controversy", The New Yorker ad College Daily. However, as described in the Chapter One, the The New Yorker did not take part in the debate on WOA Platform. Instead, an official account *Jianada* (literally meaning "Canada and America must read" in Chinese) took the role of confronting against College Daily. In this "controversy", it not only migrated The New Yorker's report to WOA Platform, but further, it continues the debate with College Daily. At the bottom of the "controversy page", audiences can see the response posted by Jianada two hours after College Daily's statement. With the headline that *"To College Daily: You can smack yourself in the face, but why you hijack China?"*, it maintains its poignancy contrasting to College Daily's rational perspective. However, contrary to the appalling images of the skeletons it deployed in its first post, Jianada chooses the profile image of *College Daily*, the logo with yellow colored "C", for the responding statement. This slight change of the visual presentation might suggest its intention to dial down its provocative rhetoric and sensational effects. At this moment, the controversy is no longer one specific article but rather, it is relocated from the confrontation between The New Yorker and College Daily to the debate between two official accounts on WOA Platform in Chinese digital space - the debate between official accounts Jianada and College Daily. Further, the controversy itself is reaccentuated on and recontextualized as the public discussion on the credibility of the western media regarding China.As such, this shift of the discourse and discussion of the controversy could add more volume to the discursive vortex, and thus reaching to the wider public sphere in WeChat space.

As mentioned above, though *The New Yorker*'s report is the trigger of the controversy, it is in fact voiceless in the debate on WOA Platform Regarding the present absence of *The New Yorker*. This might imply both a limit and an openness of the WOA Platform in a controversy: it is not always possible to present the actual accuser and accused on a "controversy page", such as the absence of The New Yorker in this case; but it is always open to any official account whoever is able to grab the opportunity to become a valid "right holder" to speak in the debate. And this very "validation", such as the validity of Jianada in this case, leads us to question how the "controversy" is operated on WOA Platform. Specifically, it deserves a

careful observation on the "controversy page" to find the cues for a shared or publicized understanding of the "controversy", and to examine the underlying procedure of marking a "controversy", and judging the involved parties

Take a closer look at the "controversy page", a green information signal is attached to the controversial contents on the upper-left of the page. Cueing readers of the deeper layer with un-showed information of the "controversy page". By clicking this green signal, audiences are channeled to the page of "policy description of controversy". As we can see in the figure 3 , it described a four-level guideline for the agency of official accounts in a controversy: 1) the definition of controversy, 2) the procedure of initiation and certification of a controversy, 3) neutrality and disclaimer of the platform, and 4) mandatory rules in accordance with legal system and the WeChat's standards.

Figure 3

The page of "policy description of controversy" (see translation on the right).

As such, this page can be regarded as a staged "backstage" of the controversy event on WOA Platform, unveiling certain imperceptible "facts" of the mechanisms of a controversy event. With a legal document format, it presents the platform as a neutral and legitimized coordinator for the public value of freedom of speech and "fair dialogue". It steered the agency of official accounts including individual users and organizations to report controversies as for protecting their right and contesting against misinformation. But this agency is structured and confined by the platform since a "reported controversy" needs to be "submitted" to the platform for further procedure, and the right holders need to be "verified" and "notified" by submitting required documents such as evidences and defending arguments. All this institutionalized procedure is, after all, proceeded by the platform operators, which is not transparent nor responsibility-free or unbiased. As such, the agency is in fact programmed agency, conditioned and legitimized through the deeper layer underlying the covert "backstage" us audiences can neither reach nor see through. This deeper lay to the "controversy" event is as editorial room to the "breaking news", yet intertwined with the algorithms and digital metrics.

4.1.2 Searching in a "controversy": Curated information and filtered answers

As aforementioned, WOA Platform provides users with its own search engine, enabling user's agency to search for information. But at the same time, it is also a databased program, feeding users with "answers" that is in fact the algorithmic output from the datafication of users' searching behaviors. In addition, these results can be ordered or ranked by both users' choices and the platform's program. Particularly, when a large number of users are searching similar items or key words in the same time period, a "popular topic" can be algorithmically identified and programmed. Though the process of datafication is invisible for the ordinary users, the results of WOA Platform's search engine are "transparently" presented to users including the number of views and likes. Seeing search engine as a "two-way traffic" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p.5) mechanisms embedded in everyday life, Haider and Sundin once argued that the activity of searching information through search engine should be regarded as part of "social practice (2019, p.92)" by which users are not only obtaining access to knowledge but also participate in "establishing an order of

knowledge" (2019, p.93) through the order of visibility. Thus, in the "College Daily controversy", users' interaction with WOA Platform's own search engine and the results of the search engine could illuminate how public participation is contributing and conditioned by the visibility order in the meaning-searching of a "controversy" on WOA Platform. In the following analysis, I will present how WOA Platform's search engine enables and conditions users' agency to search for meaning of the "College Daily controversy".

From an emic perspective, I use "College Daily" as the keywords to see how the wider public participated in the discussion on the WeChat official account platform (see figure 4). With the default mode of WeChat search engine, "overall ranks" and "all results", the response of Jianada is ranked as the first among others. Besides, the article ranked top five are all marked by WeChat as "I recently viewed". As such, what is "overall ranks" becomes a vague category that suggested the WeChat is curated the results based on its own algorithm, and this algorithm is partially fed by my personal data and user behaviors history.

Figure 4

The search results on WOA Platform

Despite the results out of the default searching conditions described above, WOA Platform provides users with "ranks" and "filters" to tailor or customize search results. As we can see in the figure 5, the output of WOA Platform's search engine can be ranked by "*overall rank*" "*post date* (from the latest to the earliest)" "*numbers of views* (from the most viewed to the least)". At the same time, it can be filtered by "*all results*" "*recently viewed*" "*followed accounts*" "*shared by friends*". As such, WeChat users can set the mode by themselves to select or narrowed the range of information for their needs. However, these "needs" are originally algorithmically programmed cultivating users' agencies. To be specific, it seems that users own different modes to filter and rank the information, yet these modes are designed by the platform itself. Furthermore, we users are not able to see if the results are actually reflecting the real ranking or filtering according to users' demands.

Figure 5

WOA Platform's search engine provided different ranks and categories by "sort" and "filter"
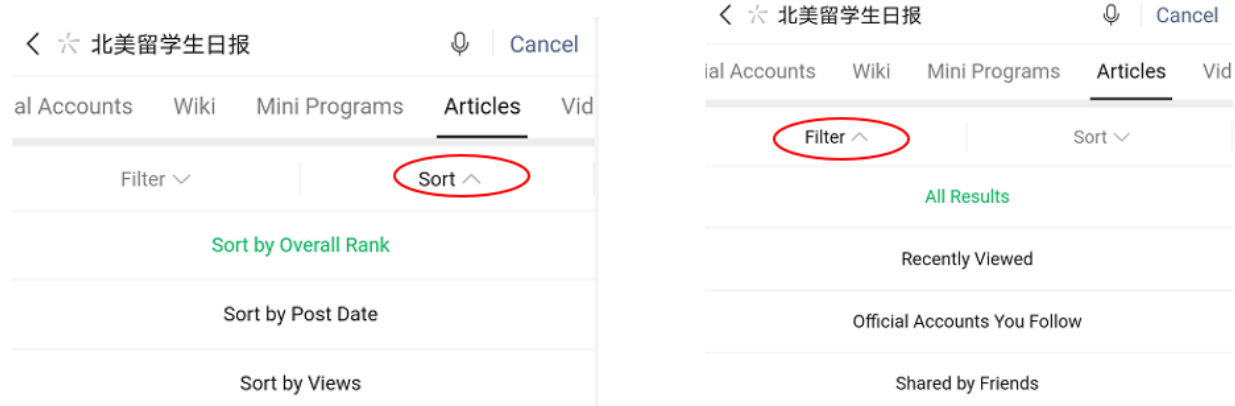
Here, we are not aiming to diagnose how exactly the algorithm is, but rather, we should notice how this programed curation transforms the controversy to a popular topic with its metrics and indexes. Regarding categories of the filter designed by the platform's search engine, the relatively important factors are the time span (*post date*), popularity (*the number of views*), recommendation-worthiness (*shared by friends*), and personal taste (*issued by followed account*). All four factors together construct an algorithmic

preference for information, a preference for a media hype (Vasterman, 2005) that is happening recently, reaching to and shared by a large audience. It also unveils a personalized network designed by the search engine, steer users to see if the information has the "shareworthiness" among his/her personal social network. Further, the value or usefulness is also framed by the personal taste which suggests a polycentric public sphere. In other words, the deployment of its own search engine suggests a tacit socio-technical function of a "controversy" beyond the opposing parties involved, fragmented the wider public sphere on WOA Platform. Specifically, the filtering choice of "*issued by followed account*" may encourages users to see the attitudes of the followed accounts in this controversy event. By doing so, on the one hand, the official account could become preferable and thus more visible to their subscribers whenever audiences want to searching for information about a trending topic on WOA Platform. On the other hand, users who are subscribers of the same official accounts are more easily or conveniently to be gathered by the filter, exchanging ideas by commenting to the posts of the same official account. As such, they are constituting a micro public sphere centered by the subscribed account.

4.2 Writing with social media: Framing the significance

In the previous section, I discussed how the "controversy page" and the search engine of WOA Platform condition and contribute to the meaning making of a controversy event. Zooming in to the participation and practices of the wider public on the platform, it is found that official accounts of individuals and organizations are actively engaged in the event by writing and posting their opinions on WOA Platform. Considering this participation as afforded by a "controversy"-triggered media hype, it leads my observation to how official accounts "reproduce" and "relocate" the public attention into the "new context" (Urban 1996, p.21; Blommaert, 2005, p.48). Regarding this "College Daily controversy", a number of articles posted by official accounts on the platform is highly visible with the keywords such as "post-truth" and "facts of College Daily" (see table 1 in the section 3.2 on page 29). As developed by Foucault, these articles characterized by practices of debunking, facts exhibiting, and knowledge producing, can be seen as the discursive practice that unveils the "knowledge formation" (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014, p.174).

With the lens of discursive practices, I observed that these official accounts, the "online idea-savvy journalists" or "online critics", share a similar pattern of framing significance with algorithmicalized agencies in their practices. This salient pattern can be described as the flowchart below:

Figure 6

The pattern of framing significance
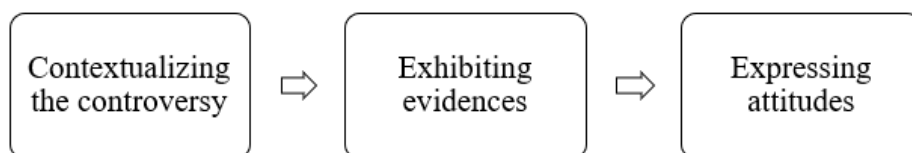
To fill in the formula, three discursive strategies are observed in the posts: contextualized significance, filtered evidence, and popularized attitudes. In the following discussion, I will dissect and analyze these four discursive strategies of framing significance based on the 25 articles I collected (see table 1 in the section 3.2 on page 29).

4.2.1 Giving the context: Socio-political components and big numbers

In terms of the contextualizing the controversy, two themes are noticeable: the socio-political situation and the datafied significance. In the participant's posts, this socio-political situation is specifically referred to two public issues. One is the scrutiny on provocative speech of commercial official accounts on WOA Platform, the other one is the tension between China and the Western on the issue of Hongkong Protest. In the following analysis, I will discuss how official accounts give the context from the articles posted by *Yixiaoshi Baba, Beiguo Niang, and Yushishuo*.

Among the participated official accounts, *Yixiaoshi Baba*, post its opinion toward the "College Daily controversy" on August 22nd, explaining the particularly crucial timing for social media as the following,

"在咪蒙，HUGO 先后阵亡的新时代，营销号们总有兔死狐悲的感觉并不意外，'北美'的

这次强烈求生欲也是让作为媒体同行的我们唏嘘不已。也许如果不是在这个时间点，

《纽约客》的这篇文章估计很难引起'北美'如此大的反应。"

Translation:

"in the new era of the fall of Mimeng and HUGO [7], influencers and marketing accounts such as College Daily are struggling for survival. If not for this specific timing, The New Yorker's article would not have triggered such strong reaction of College Daily."

According to its explanation, the controversy is contextualized by the specific "timing" when "influencers and marketing accounts struggling for survival". This "timing" thus indicated the socio-political background of China where the government is collaborating with social media platform to regulate the digital space regarding sensational contents and misinformation from influencers and marketing accounts. Within this context, the issue of misbehaviors of official accounts, such as the outrage caused by Mimeng's fake story, on WOA Platform is constantly discussed in the public sphere. These discussions are entangled with the datafication and popularity principle, programming the public concerns into the discussable, shareworthy, and popularized contents. Regarding Yixiaoshi Baba's contextualization, on the one hand, the "College Daily" is portrayed as an influential account struggling within "*the new era of the fall of Mimeng and HUGO*". By providing contents aligning with the mainstream political opinions, College Daily is fighting back against The New Yorker in order to avoid the "mistake" of Mimeng and HUGO. Hence, the significance of its battle against the The New Yorker is indicated as a public concern considering the social media environment and socio-cultural consequences. On the other hand, the co-presentation of

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[7] "Mingmeng (咪蒙 in Chinese)" and "HUGO" were two official accounts on WOA Platform. Mimeng was once seen as "social media queen" in Chinese social media. However, due to the public outrage over her fake stories and WOA Platform's policy, she closed the official account in February, 2019. For more information, see https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-social/article/2187225/chinas-social-media-queen-closes-wechat-account-13-million (Viewed on August 23rd, 2019). Similarly, another influencer, HUGO, on WOA Platform closed its account in July, 2019, trigging public discussion and concerns on the provocative contents generated by official accounts.

"Mimeng" and the "College Daily controversy" in Yixiaoshi Baba's article algorithmically become two searchable keywords for increasing its visibility on WOA Platform, reaching to both audiences who is following Mimeng incidents and the viewers who is interesting in the College Daily controversy. As such, the contextualization of significance with current affairs indicated the agenda of selecting and pushing contents for framing audience's understanding and gluing audience's attention, contributing to the algorithmicalized significance of the event.

Besides Yixiaoshi Baba's post, the article of *Beiguo Niang* posted on August 21st also contextualized the timing but with the specific political background of Hongkong protest, which has been on public focus for months. In Beiguo Niang's article, it uses bold font in its text to highlighted the significance of the historical timing (see figure 7):

Figure 7

Screenshot from Beiguo Niang's article (see translation on the right)

媒体界的社会敏感性应该是最高的，现在是什么时候？是中国香港事件内忧外患的时刻。

英、美、加轮流发布不恰当的干涉性言论，西方主流媒体歪曲事实，刻意遮掩香港暴徒的暴力行径。

Translation:

The sensitivity of the media towards socio-political issues ought to be the strongest. What is the socio-political situation now? **It is the moment when China facing with domestic strife and foreign threat in this Hongkong issue.**

The UK, the US, and Canada are making injudicious and meddling remarks. Western mainstream media is distorting the facts and deliberately covering the violence of Hongkong thug.

Regarding this narrative, the College Daily controversy is recontextualized in the time-space of the Hongkong protest, relocated to the confrontation between western media and Chinese media when it accusing western mainstream media of *"distorting the facts"*. Also, this narration re-accentuated the discussion on the patriotism discourse by contextualizing the socio-political background as *"the moment*

when China facing with domestic strife and foreign threat in this Hongkong issue." Again, "timing/moment" is indicated as the most crucial element in the controversy, it is the timing bearing socio-political significance which can embody the "*the sensitivity of the media*" and thus contribute to the credibility and authority of opinion makers, or the official accounts such as Beiguo Niang in this example.

In addition, this narration also highlights the morality charged position of media by assigning it with "*the strongest sensitivity towards socio-political issues*". This "*sensitivity*" further suggests a tacit but also tricky relationship between social media and the social issues. On the one hand, the role of content creators on social media, such as the official accounts, are enabled to play with the algorithmic public sphere to build up their visibility and credibility by using certain keywords. On the other hand, their visibility and influence are in return datafied and feeding to the socio-technological environment and contributing to the meaning making in a digital social space. Regarding the "*College Daily* controversy", it unveils that the number of followers and views, or in other words, the visibility, are considered as a parameter to measure the significance of this controversy. In this case, the significance is framed with the consideration of datafication. According to my observation, most official accounts present vague numbers as for indicating the severances or significance of the controversy. According to the article of the official account *Yushishuo* posted on August 23ʳᵈ, it is illustrated that,

"在没'出事儿'之前，北留公众号文章阅读量日常10w+，活跃粉丝有100w，虽然长久以来就'劣迹斑斑'，但仍有相当一部分受众，其中大部分还是海外留学生群体。"

Translation:

"Before it (here, 'it' refers to the 'College Daily controversy') *happened, the number of views of College Daily's article was 10w+ on daily basis, with 100w active fans. Though it has been accused of misbehave for a very long time, it still holds a considerable amount of audiences. Particularly, the majority of the audience is Chinese students overseas."*

In its narration, "10w+" and "100w" indicate that College Daily owns over 100,000 views on daily basis and 1,000,000 active fans. By presenting this number, the popularity and the significance is tacitly assigned to the College Daily. In other words, numbers are presented as datafied or measured popularity of College Daily, in order to heighten the public attention to the controversy issue. As van Dijck once argued, datafication can be used for attributing meaning in specific (institutional) contexts. As illustrated in the example of Yushi Shuo's narration above, when the mechanism is intertwined with the popularity principle and occupying into the online journalist writing, the accuracy of number would give way to creating the feeling of number, the feeling of significance, hence to attract the public attention.

### 4.2.2 Showing evidences: Filtered archives and selected quotations

Following the contextualization of public concerns, the second component of the framing significance is the exhibition of evidence. In this section, I will discuss how the evidence rhetoric plays with social media logic, and how a database-oriented narrative can produce knowledge with filtered archives and selected quotations. Specifically, narrations of *Jianada* and *Gazhi* will be demonstrated in the following analysis.

Among the article about the College Daily controversy, exhibiting the "digital trace" is frequently used as way to present evidence. This social media afforded database and searchability can be seen in the responding article of Jianada (see figure 8). According to the list, it can be observed that Jianada collects evidence on *College Daily*'s account by searching with the keywords "*The New Yorker*" (which can be identified by the font color of green). However, the result articles on the list with keyword "*The New Yorker*" are not necessarily supporting Jianada's arguments. But rather, they are explained and even misinterpreted as the evidence in the argument. According to Jianada, College Daily is accused of self-contradiction when it is condemning western media yet it has a history of admiring The New Yorker. Despite the argument, the digital trace of College Daily listed below only shows the re-post or quote of the phrase "*The New Yorker*". It is a list of College Daily's use of "*The New Yorker*", rather than the evidence of College Daily's admiration or appreciation towards The New Yorker. Besides, the list of digital traces is filtered results by Jianada's deliberate searching practices – the frequency of a phrase, "The New Yorker" in this case, is

explained as attachment or admiration. As such, the digital trace is not the evidence, but rather explained as the evidence. In addition, the search engine in the article is positioned as an omnipotent database and neutral tool by default, regarding the search results as unquestionable evidences.

Figure 8

Screenshot from Jianada's article (see translation on the right).

有趣的是，在北留的文章中，他们"严重谴责西方无良媒体这种行为"，但是，《纽约客》也曾经是他们的心头所爱呢。

搅乱好莱坞，专注性侵30年，他还雇佣间谍来杀人灭口
头一个曝光温斯坦性侵事件的记者,在《纽约客》再爆猛料:温斯坦去年砸血...
北美留学生日报 2017-11-10

底层美国人如何改变命运？被我们批判的应试教育，却在纽约受到追捧
在《纽约客》记者的走访观察下,成功学院处处诠释着奖惩和纪律,以此激励学...
北美留学生日报 2019-5-3

三胞胎分别被贫穷中产富裕家庭领养，19年后重逢揭开残酷真相
经过《纽约客》记者劳伦斯的深入调查,唯一能够确认的是,当年被动参与这项...
北美留学生日报 2018-11-28

Translation:

It is interesting that though College Daily 'severely condemning the misbehave of western media', it used to admire The New Yorker.

Note. As illustrated in the screenshot, a list of College Daily's posts is presented in the article as evidence below its argument.

In addition to the databased evidence, quoting other's opinions is also presented as evidence when claiming facts or making judgments in "College Daily controversy". One participated official account, *Gazhi*, uses the tweet of Fang Zhouzi [8] as a tacit strategy to support the judgment upon *College Daily*. As

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[8]Fang Zhouzi (方舟子 in Chinese), or Fang Shimin, is a popular but also controversial science writer in China. He is primarily known for his campaign against pseudoscience and fraud. See more information: https://www.scmp.com/article/705031/lie-detector (Viewed on April 20, 2020).

we can see in the figure 9, Gazhi argued that "*the most ironical is that, when College Daily is speaking sarcastically of western media's bias, it is at the same time use unexamined or unchecked information in its article.*". Below the argument, Gazhi put a screenshot of Fang Zhouzi's tweet which depicted the CEO of *College Daily* as a joke, criticizing him of fabricating news.

Figure 9

Screenshot from Gazhi's article
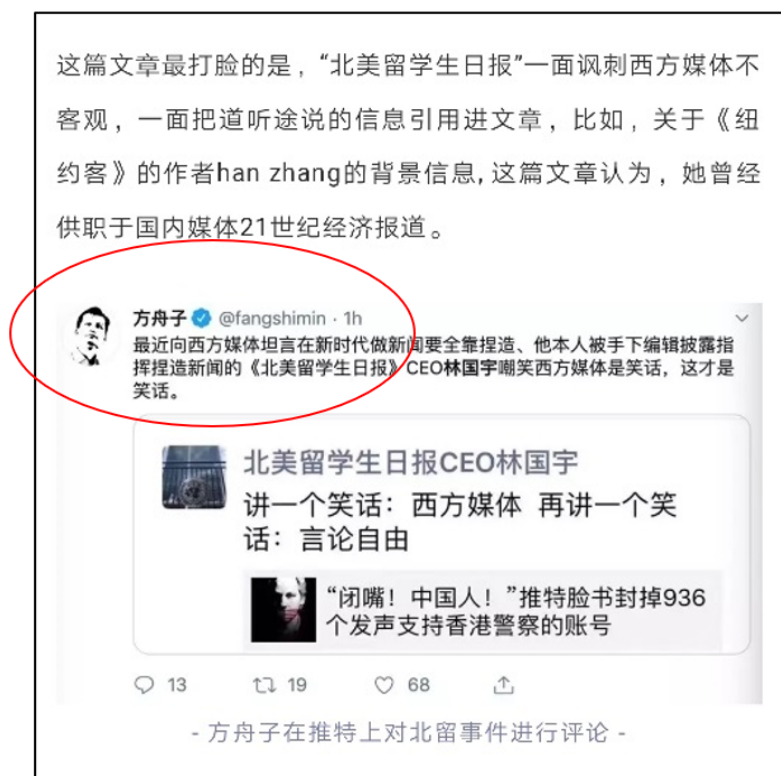
Note. In Gazhi's article, it presents a screenshot of 方舟子 (Fang Zhouzi)'s tweet in its argument.

In this segment, Gazhi accuses *College Daily* of misinformation and self-contradiction with a reference to Fang Zhouzi's post on Twitter. What Fang Zhouzi tweeted is in line with Gazhi's argument, poignantly disclosed the malpractice of *College Daily*. Here I would like to highlight one characteristic which are shared among many official accounts on WOA Platform including Gazhi. This characteristic is the construction of knowledge by referencing. A related notion is the order of visibility (Hanell & Salö,

2017, p.155). Along with the Foucault's notion of "order of discourse", the order of visibility reveals that some people have more power to speak about certain subjects than others and some types of knowledge is more open to be negotiated. Regarding Gazhi's reference, we can sense a knowledge structure is formed where Fang Zhouzi's words are considered as self-evidenced common sense, positioned as the unquestionable "knowledge" or "truth".

4.2.3 Expressing attitudes: The patriotic narrative and the "gongzhi" discourse

The third component of the framing significance is the strategic expression of attitudes towards the controversy. To be specific, a patriotism narrative and an antagonistic attitude against "gongzhi", the vernacular label of the public intellectual in Chinese, appear noticeable in their arguments. In the following discussion, I will present examples from the article posted by *Beiguo Niang*, demonstrating how an official account express attitudes of patriotism and stating anti-gongzhi arguments in the "College Daily controversy"

In the article posted by Beiguo Niang, it narrated that "*Chinese students overseas for the first time become the voice distinct from the mainstream media and the Sinophobia groups in western society*" (see figure 10). By attaching a photo of national flag below the statement, it shows a strong patriotist emotion underlying the article. Regarding it as a strategy for contextualizing and framing the significance, this patriotism charged message shows Beiguo Niang's tactics to deal with the tricky relationship between social media writing and the specific socio-political context as aforementioned. Specifically, it adopts the socio-political context and the controversy as an uptake, using keywords such as "*Chinese students overseas*" "western society" and "*the Sinophobia*" to enable the account's visibility in the media hype of "*College Daily* controversy". [9]

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[9] The official account "College Daily" ("北美留学生日报" in Chinese) literally means "daily newspaper for Chinese students in North America". Specifically, "北美" means North America, "留学生" means "students overseas", and "日报" means "daily newspaper". Therefore, theses recognizable labels such as "留学生", the group of Chinese students overseas, appear as keywords on WOA Platform.

Figure 10

Screenshot from Beiguo Niang's article

留学生，头一次成为了西方除主流媒体和反华势力外
的第二个声音。

Note. The text above the picture can be translated as "*Chinese students overseas for the first time become the voice distinct from the mainstream media and the Sinophobia groups in western society.*"

Besides the patriotism narrative in the attitude expression, the theme of "anti-gongzhi" is also noticeable in the observed posts. As pointed out in the second chapter, "gongzhi" is a vernacular label for the public intellectuals in China, bearing polarized attitudes of both authorization and stigmatization In the examples of Fang Zhouzi as mentioned before, we can see that the public intellectual such as Fang Zhouzi is positioned as an authoritative and credible figure in the public sphere. However, in the Beiguo Niang's article, public intellectuals are presented with an "anti-gongzhi" narrative, a narrative of being antagonist against public intellectuals. According to Beiguo Niang's article, its attitude is expressed as the following:

"除了西方媒体外，暴露的还有一批亲美公知，和潜意识亲美的所谓'自由民主'群体。"

Translation:

"Besides western media, a bunch of gongzhi – who are pro-America, and subconsciously pro-America and believing in so-called 'freedom and democracy' – are also exposed (in the 'College Daily controversy')."

Contradicting to the celebrative attitude towards Fang Zhouzi in the *Gazhi*'s article mentioned in the last section, this narration of *Beiguo Niang* portrayed the group public intellectuals as "*pro-America*" who are "*exposed*" by the controversy. This portrait suggests a stereotyped image of the public intellectual: an image of being Americentric and hiding in the public sphere. Besides, the "*subconsciously pro-America and believing in so-called 'freedom and democracy'*" implies a stigmatized label on the group of public intellectuals: they are not self-identified as "*pro-America*" but they are described as "*subconsciously pro-America*". Moreover, by using the phrase "so-called", public intellectuals in Beiguo Niang's portraying are tagged with a questionable belief of "*freedom and democracy*". As such, through the combination of the narrative of patriotism and anti-gongzhi, *Beiguo Niang* recontextualized the "College Daily controversy" to questioning and criticizing on the public intellectuals, expanding the discussion outward to the public interested in or related to the intelligentsia.

Regarding this theme of "anti-gongzhi", I argue it is neither contingently selected nor politically charged. Rather, it could be seen as the result from the interaction between datafication and macro structures of socio-political environment as mentioned in the previous analysis. However, it would be simplicist to see the patriotism discourse merely as antagonism towards Sinophobia opinions. In the case of "*College Daily* controversy", this theme can be regarded as a part of social practices similar to the information searching on WOA Platform's engine. It is served as an uptake for "online critics (Zhan, 2016; Fang,2017)" for producing a discourse and increasing visibility. Further, it can also be seen as the confronting agency against the privileged such as public intellectuals. Despite the "anti-gongzhi" discourse in the controversy,

according to my observation, Leung Man-tao, a well-known public intellectual in contemporary China, is instead highly ranked on WOA Platform's engine results with considerable amounts of views and likes, showing a popular image of the public intellectual among WeChat users. This leads us to the following discussion on the public intellectuals in WOA Platform.

4.3 Performing as public intellectuals

In the last section, I analyze how official accounts participate in the "College Daily controversy" with a formula to frame the significance of this controversial event from different perspectives. By dissecting the discursive in this frame, a paradoxical image of public intellectuals is revealed as both authoritative and stigmatized. Among others, Leung Man-tao, and the official account, *Kanlixiang* (also "看理想" in Chinese, meaning "to see utopia"), ran by his media team, together make a noticeable case due to his outstanding visibility and popularity on WOA Platform. According to the result of WOA Platform's search engine, an article titled by "*Leung Man-tao: 'College Daily', just a production of the 'post-truth era'*" was posted by the account Kanlixiang on August 23rd, attracting over 100,000 views and over 3,000 likes (see table 1 in the section 3.2 on page 29).

In this section, I will take a close look at Leung's article and his official account Kanlixiang, to analyze the public intellectual Leung Man-tao with the lens of four-level frame of the public intellectual (Heynders, 2016). With the aim to explore how public intellectuals' role in this "controversy", the following analysis focuses on the public persona of Leung and the interactive action of the official account Kanlixiang, investigating the interplay between public intellectuals and social media logic in the "*College Daily* controversy" on WOA Platform.

4.3.1 Leung in the "controversy": A performer, a dealer, and a networked brand

Leung Man-tao (also 梁文道 in Chinese) is a widely known in Chinese public sphere as a writer, a cultural critic, and media intellectual. Growing up in Taiwan and studying in Hongkong, Leung is self-identified as "the last-generation Hongkong Cultural Critic" (Leung, 2008, p.28) who is now actively engaging in the

public sphere of Mainland China [10]. In 2015, he with his team launched a Beijing-based social media platform *Vistopia* [11] with its official account *Kanlixiang* on WOA Platform, channeled to numbers of intellectuals and media professionals engaged in the contemporary China. In my observation, Leung participated in the "College Daily controversy" not only by expressing his opinion, but also by performing himself with an image of the avuncular, the erudite and the sober. His public persona is staged by the official account Kanlixiang on WOA Platform, choreographed by his audio performance, opinion on the controversy, and his audiences' responses. Besides, the "controversy" provides a venue for Leung to practice as a knowledge dealer to recommend purchasable cultural products through his participation in the event. In addition, Leung's role is also observed as a node connecting audiences to a larger group of media intellectual. The following analysis will dissect Leung's participation in the controversy in terms of multimodal performance, commercialization of knowledge, and networked branding afforded by the "controversy" on WOA Platform.

In the beginning of his article, an audio recording is attached above it with an argument-like caption that "*the limit of your understanding of the world is from the friend circle*" [12] (see figure 11). The article serves as the script for the audio performance, providing multimodal experiences and choices for the audiences to enjoy Leung's performance. Besides, the role of "narrator" marked below the audio recording suggests an objective or outsider perspective of Leung's opinion. Specifically, in Leung's narration, audiences would notice his middle-aged, slow paced male voice. with a recognizable accent mixed by Cantonese and Taiwanese in his Mandarin[13]. These vocal and phonetic characteristics are partially due to

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[10] During this research, Leung resigned from *Apple Daily*, a Hongkong based newspaper, due to his opposition against 2019 Hongkong Protests. For more information, see https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3044602/local-star-critic-answers-call-conscience (Viewed on May 20, 2020).

[11] "*Vistopia*" is a digital extension brand of "*Imaginist*", an influential publisher in the contemporary China. Both of them are dedicating to building a community of intellectuals and scholars in the field of literature, art, and humanities. See official website of "*Vistopia*": https://www.vistopia.com.cn/index. For English introduction, see http://www.ilixiangguo.com/portal/index/about (Viewed on May 20,2020).

[12] "*The friend circle*" in this captain is also referred to an embedded function of WeChat, which channels users to see the updates of WeChat friends.

[13] To hear the audio, visit the article on WOA Platform: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ze8iLoolAiFMjgZ_5gha3w (Viewed on August 24, 2019).

Leung's personal background, as mentioned at the beginning of this section. But as a part of his performance towards audiences, these elements are unveiling an image of a peripheral, nostalgic thinker who is claimed to be "the last-generation Hongkong cultural critics". When Leung starts to narrate, audiences can also hear a background music – an uncanny, gothic-style melody – dimly played with Leung's narration. Though it only lasts less than one minute in the beginning of Leung's talk, it could attract audiences' attention by creating a dramatized experience. Through an avuncular tone and the theatricalized opening music, Leung presented his opinion to the public with a disarmingly, didactic, but also well-wrought speech. This style of communication can be related to the genre of 1930s American radio talk such as Roosevelt's "fireside chat" (Loviglio, 2005, p. xiv). In the same vein with the fireside chat, Leung's audio track afforded by WOA Platform creates an intimate public space with his audiences. In this intimate public space, Leung is enabled to narrow the distance between audiences and himself, gluing the attentions of the listeners and steering audiences' interactional or communicational response to the issue.

Figure 11

The audio recording attached to Leung's article

Note. In Chinese, "讲述" means to narrate and to tell. "梁文道" is the Chinese name of Leung Man-tao.

Regarding the article, his suggests a critical attitude towards media-saturated society nowadays, arguing that social media and globalization is conditioning individual's ability to perceive and understand the world in *the era of "post-truth"*. However, a strategy of detouring the controversy can be observed in

Leung's construction of the article. This detouring strategy can be observed when he narrated in the article that

"然而我必须承认的是，我有一定偏见，我更倾向于相信《纽约客》的报道。我并非是信任《纽约客》本身，而是更信任其背后新闻规范的操作。[...] 不过，具体的是非对错并不是今天的重点，我想从几方面来谈论这场 '后真相' 时代里的媒体对抗。"

Translation:

"Yet I must admit that I have prejudice to some degree. I think The New Yorker's report is more credible. I am not saying I trust The New Yorker itself, but rather, I give more credibility to the standard operation underlying its report. [...] However, right-or-wrong evaluation is not the point regarding this controversy. I would rather to discuss it from different perspectives, seeing it as a confrontation between media in the era of 'post-truth'."

According to his narration, though Leung clearly states his attitudes by admitting his own prejudice and bias in favor of The New Yorker rather than College Daily, he was in fact aimed to detach his discussion away from the controversy itself, as for producing a different topic that deserves or matches to his intelligence and public persona. In the rest of his article, an academic narration is observed as a crucial component in his detoured discussion and front-stage participation in the "College Daily controversy".

Particularly, the reference to Appadurai's book in Leung's argument (see figure 12) is noticeable for its discursive contribution to Leung's position of authority and credibility. In his article, after a brief understatement of his personal attitude towards College Daily, he highlighted academic concepts from Arjun Appadurai's book "*Modernity at Large*" to his audiences. In my analysis, I am not suggesting to judge if his explanation of Appadurai' theory is correct or misleading, but rather, I mark Leung's reference to Appadurai as a resource deployed by Leung to legitimize his position as an intellectual. In addition, this action of referencing can be seen as a discursive strategy to build his intellectual and erudite image in the

discussion. Regarding this example, we may also notice a social structural of knowledge and a hierarchy of discourse. Appadurai's theory, "a big book", or a classic, written by western academia, is presented and mediated by Leung as the privileged and authoritive in the discussion. Besides, by reaccentuating the "College Daily controversy" from "*right-or-wrong evaluation*" to "*a confrontation between media in the era of 'post-truth'* ", Leung detours away from the College Daily controversy itself to the academic discussion about media and globalization, engaged in the controversy event with a detached and rational attitude, suggesting a soberness in the emotion-charged discussion of the controversy.

What is also noteworthy here is how Leung presents the book. Though he narrates it with an academic perspective, he appropriates a visual language of book dealers: introducing the book with its significance, exhibiting its cover image, and providing the information of its publisher. As figure 12 illustrated, the book is being advertised rather than being discussed in the controversy event. Let's not forget that Leung and his team is managing a digital media platform for a printing publisher (as circled in the figure 12). Therefore, a reference to a book could serve as an opportunity to make it purchase-worthy. At this moment, "College Daily controversy" becomes a valid and also detouring path for Leung to commercialize knowledge: his article about the "controversy" becomes a venue for marketing "big books". However, this commercial action is obscurely conducted in Leung's article, with no demonstrated intention to sell the book, remaining his sober and erudite persona intact.

Figure 12

Leung's introduction to Appadurai's book

有一位非常重要的研究全球化问题及全球化现象的人类学家，叫做阿尔君·阿帕杜莱（Arjun Appadurai），在90年代中后期，他曾出过一本非常重要的著作，即《消散的现代性》（*Modernity at Large*）。

消散的现代性
全球化的文化维度

Arjun Appadurai

MODERNITY AT LARGE

《消散的现代性》/ 阿尔君·阿帕杜莱
上海三联书店

Resonating with the soberness, a highly noticeable nickname "Daozhang (also 道长 in Chinese)", meaning Taoist Priest, is appeared frequently on the comment wall under the article. This nickname reveals the public persona of Leung, a sober, detached, and guru-like intellectual. As the comment showed in the below (see figure 13), the commentator A shows his gratitude toward Leung for his intelligence helping the commentator to resolved the confusion. Despite this piece of comments, many commentators also share opinions similar to the commentator A, addressing Leung as "Daozhang" and expressing their agreements with the article (as circled in the figure 13). As such, though the physical image of Leung is not presented on the WOA Platform, he is depicted and represented through the comments accompanied with his own

performance. In addition, regarding this piece of the comment, we can see a popularity metrics on the right, indicating 141 likes to the comments, showing the highly popularity of the comments, suggesting a potential echo chamber emerged in this micro public sphere centered on Leung.

Figure 13

Commentator A's comment to Leung's article
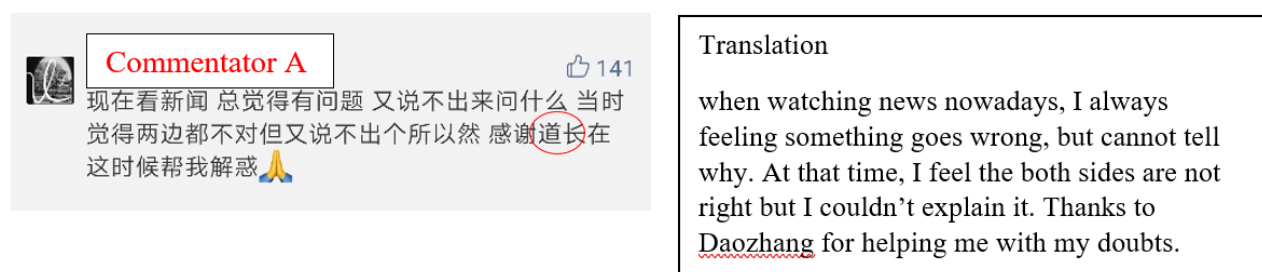
So far, the persona created by Leung may imply a two-way traffic of the programmability (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) underlying the performance of Leung. On the one hand, it shows a programmed agency of Leung to perform himself with the possible tools and functions provided by the platform. On the other hand, his performance is combined with the audience's reactions, processed as data feeding to the algorithm of the platform, serving for the optimization of WOA Platform itself.

Despite the public persona presented to the audiences, Leung is also presented as a network node for connecting to other content creators and promoted digital applications. As we can see in the figure 14, in the end of Leung's article, there is an advertisement for the app "看理想 (meaning "to see utopia", same as the official account Kanlixiang on WOA Platform) and the program "八分 (meaning "eight minutes")" broadcast through the app. Both of them are operated by Leung and his team. Below the advertisement, we can see a QR code attached with the brand, "看理想". In addition, the QR code can be scanned directly to subscribe the official account Kanlixiang. As for readers, "Kanlixiang" at this moment becomes a networked platform operated by Leung and his team, connecting with a group of similar writers and public figures and providing contents with shared values or visions to the wider public. As such, Leung's

performance in the controversy discussion thus "channels" (Jones et al., 2015, p.14) audiences to the commercialized network of intellectual celebrities. Regarding to the example, we may observe that the connectivity of social media logic is intertwined with the interactional relationship between Leung and his audiences. This connectivity is technologically afforded by WOA Platform, enabled by the social capitals and algorithmic agency of Leung and his team. With this commercialized and algorithmicalized mechanism, WOA Platform, Leung and his official account, and the audience together constitute a connected, intimate, and intellectual-centered public sphere.

Figure 14

The advertisement for the app "看理想" and the program "八分"

### 4.3.2 Beyond an intellectual: An empty vessel or an echo chamber?

Berman once observed that (2010) the opinion articulated by intellectuals to the public is seemed as an empty vessel where various audiences could project their own ideas upon the intellectual. This trajectory explains the mechanism of how intellectuals become public and how public opinions are triggered by intellectuals. On WOA Platform, while public intellectuals such as Leung is participating to the controversy event by posting articles through official accounts, the subscribers of these accounts are enabled to participate in the event by responding to the newly updated article. In the case of "College Daily controversy", Leung's public participation ought to be an empty vessel for his followers to present and express themselves in this controversy-based "micro public sphere" (McCallum, 2013, p. 169). However, I observed that WOA Platform is cultivating a fragmented public sphere where an account-centered or writer-centered micro sphere is largely controlled by the social media manager. In the following analysis, I will focus on interactions between Leung's official account and his audiences in the discussion of "controversy" triggered by his article. With the lens of programmability of WOA Platform, I will analyze how the empty vessel is worked through Leung's participation and the platform's design. By doing so, I will further dissect the power structure of the micro public sphere emerged through Leung's action, examining the imbalanced agency between audiences and Leung's role as both a public intellectual and an official account owner.

Regarding the comment wall below Leung's article, the power relationship between commentators and the public intellectual/account owner can be firstly observed by the design of WOA Platform. As we can see in the below (see figure 15), the comments are ordered primarily by the metrics – more "thumb-ups" the comment obtained, higher position it will be ranked. In this sense, the public participation in the micro space does not render all opinions equal opportunities and visibility, but rather, comments of audiences are in fact ordered in a datafied hierarchy based on popularity principle. This is similar to the order of visibility aforementioned in the previous section. This design of WOA Platform not only suggests a data-driven, algorithmic structure of the public sphere. but more profoundly, it could encourage audiences

and Leung, as well as his team, to pay specific attention to the top comments. As such, a preference of opinions can be emerged in the micro public sphere afforded by WOA Platform and Leung's official account.

Figure 15

The ordered comments on the comments wall of Leung's article
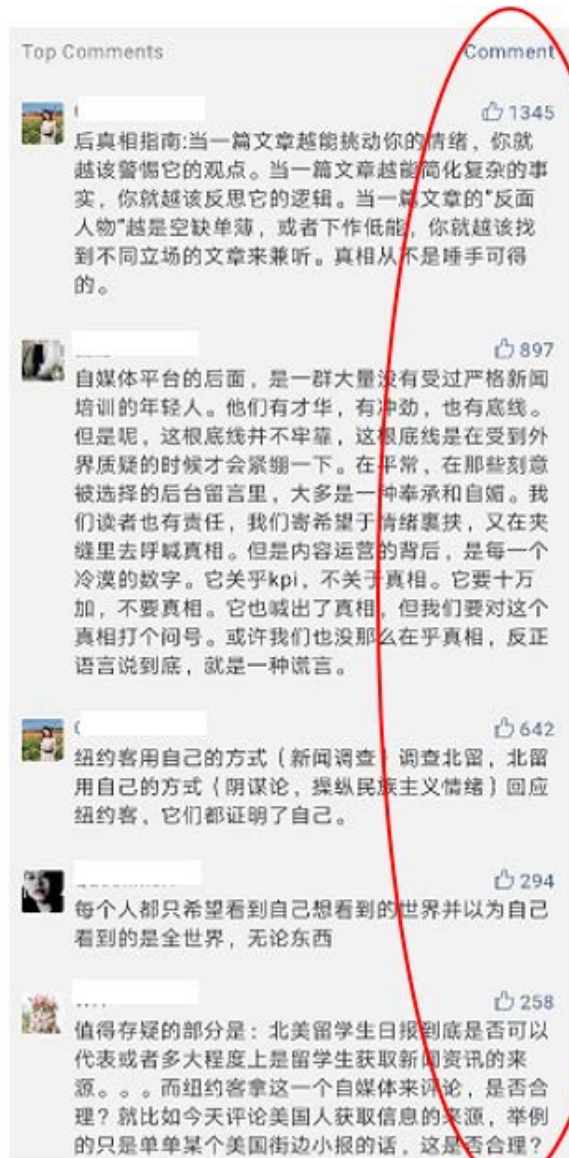
Besides the order of comments, the design of WOA Platform also provide an algorithmic agency in account owners' favor to select and interact with the comments., As demonstrated in figure 16, comments are in fact selected by the account owner, instead of automatically appearing on the comment wall. As such, Leung and his team are able to filter out and ignore the different or opposite opinions, making them invisible to the audiences.

Figure 16

Comments need to be approved by Official Accounts
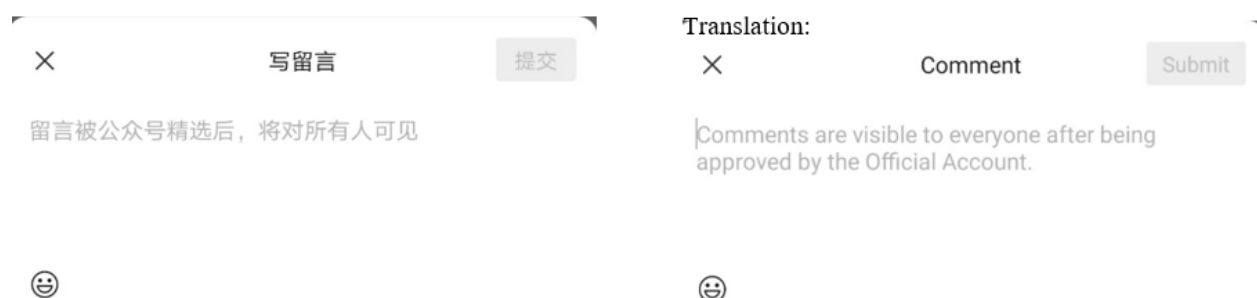
In terms of communicative actions between commentators and Leung, commentators on WOA Platform are not able to reply to the author once their comments are responded by Leung and his team. This constrain upon commentators thus gives an advantage to Leung to reframe and control the comments with a privilege of ending the conversation. Regarding this design, it seems to be beneficial for the account owner or the public intellectual to protect themselves from verbal violence online such as trolling. However, this programmed agency, cultivated by popularity principle and driven by datafication, is in fact transforming the "public" into a customized public. To be specific, the public opinion on the comment wall is filtered by account owner's subjective choices in the favor of the public image of the public intellectual. As such, it can cause a spiral of silence and cultivate an echo chamber in the micro public sphere, muting the opposing opinions.

Regarding the comment wall under Leung's article, a "soberness" and "ration-worship" appeared as salient theme among the comment of his audiences. As the example below (see figure 17), the commentator B shares the appreciation towards the calmness, or soberness, while criticizing the "*out-of-control*" discussion of the "College Daily controversy". In line with the attitude of Leung, this kind of commentators express a similar "engaged detachedness" in the controversy event.

Figure 17

Commentator B's comment to Leung's article

Commentator B

👍 37

愿意冷静下来说话的人，越来越少了。
世纪初的教育，如今果然看到成效。不同以往的是，新兴媒介为了收割流量，在这次事件中发挥着令人咋舌的作用。
总之，失控。

Translation:

Less and less people are willing to talk with calmness.

The education started in the early 21st century has been paid off today. What's different from the past is that the new media, in order to increase online traffic, is functioning in an unexpected way in this controversy event.

In a nutshell, it's out of control.

Though the empty vessel of Leung is structured by imbalanced agency between commentators and official account, nonetheless, it creates an opportunity for certain social group to become heard. In Leung's case, a group of *the detached* among Chinese society can be observed. This group is characterized by performing calm and detached from the irrational or "*out-of-control*" public discussion; and they are seemed to hold relatively better knowledge in terms of media literacy and internet savvy.

Regarding the communicative action of Leung and his audiences, it showcases a power relationship between commentators and the public intellectual/account owner. It suggests that, in the "College Daily controversy", Leung Man-tao participates in the event with dual roles. On the one hand, he performs as public thinker, conveying his opinion to the public with authoritative knowledge. On the other hand, he practices as an account owner, or a professional user on WOA Platform, adopting the design and mechanism of the platform for branding his account and strengthening his influence through his participation in the micro public sphere. Though Leung is embodied or visible only through the official account Kanlixiang on

WOA Platform in this "College Daily controversy", his visibility and influence, in return, is datafied and feeding to the algorithm to increase the platform's traffic. In addition, as a key figure of an intellectual community, his participation in the controversy becomes a key node to channel the WOA-based digital public to a larger network beyond the platform.

5. Conclusion and discussion

A general purpose of this study is to understand the role of social media in the digital public sphere. With this study aim, a "controversy" case on WOA Platform is taken as the research locus to examine how the platform condition and contribute to the public engagement**.** The theoretical discussion and the data analysis of the case "College Daily controversy" unfold three dimensions of this exploration: 1) how ordinary users make sense of "College Daily controversy" through the "controversy page" and WOA Platform's search engine; 2) how official accounts participate in the "controversy" with discursive practices on the platform; and 3) how the public intellectual such as Leung Man-tao is enabled to perform and practice in the "controversy" on WOA Platform. With the theoretical lens of social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), this study takes a close look at the interplay between WOA Platform and its users in the "College Daily controversy". The following will present and discuss the finding of this research from three dimensions as described above. Also, the limitation of this study will be demonstrated with suggestions for further explorations.

Firstly, it is found that the "controversy page" provides both an onstage dispute between official accounts in question and a backstage procedure for validating a "controversy". As for meaning-searching actions on WOA Platform, its own search engine enables ordinary users to search for information about the "College Daily controversy". However, as a two-way traffic mechanism, the searching actions is in return datafied and feeding to the algorithms. On the one hand, the "controversy page" and its own search engine renders the platform neutral by gathering and presenting different opinions instead of a one-side story. On the other hand, it forms a "controversy"-triggered media hype (Vasterman, 2005) by a backstage procedure of validating controversies and the data-driven curation of search results. This media hype becomes an uptake for the users, especially official account owners, to adopt the algorithmic agency and take part in the public discussion about "College Daily controversy".

Secondly, the discursive practices of official accounts in the "controversy" reveals a pattern of framing significance in their participation to the event. It is found that official accounts in the "controversy"

discussion frame the significance of the event differently. Nonetheless, based on the observation of this research, it is found many of them share a pattern of narrating the significance. This pattern can be formularized as "***contextualizing the controversy → exhibiting evidence → expressing attitudes***" (see figure 6 in section 4.2 on page 46). Particularly, the discursive strategies of socio-political contextualization, evidence rhetoric, and patriotic narrative are performing crucial roles in their practices. And they are entangled with the social media logic to fill in the formula of the significance framing. In the contextualization, the specific "timing" of social-political situation suggests the agenda of the controversy event, while the big yet vague numbers presented in the narration shows a tendency of datafication and popularity principle in defining significance in the current public sphere. In regard to the evidence exhibition, an order of visibility is unveiled in the evidence rhetoric as entangled with curated visibility and datafied popularity and. Besides, it is also observed that the reference to the public intellectual in the evidence exhibition, suggesting a knowledge order in the current public sphere. However, this research also noticed a paradoxical attitude towards public intellectuals particularly in the articles posted by Gazhi and Beiguo Niang. It is found that, while public intellectuals such as Fang Zhouzi are positioned as the authoritative and trustworthy with an embracing attitude, they are at the same time targeted and criticized by the public with an "anti-gongzhi" narrative. Considering the vernacular label of public intellectuals in Chinese, "gongzhi" discourse in the discussion on "College Daily controversy" discloses a challenge upon the public image of today's intellectual in Chinese public sphere. Regarding this "controversy" event, Leung Man-tao, a well-known media intellectual in the contemporary China, showcase a emerging path of currently active public intellectuals in Chinese digital public sphere.

Thirdly, by focusing on the case of Leung and his official account Kanlixiang, this study analyzes how a public intellectual can play with and perform on WOA Platform by adopting the platform's functions and designs. In Leung's case, the "controversy" serves as an uptake for Leung to achieve his engagement in the issue while detouring away from the controversial parties of the event. By adopting the algorithmic mechanisms of WOA Platform's search engine, he uses the uptake to increase his visibility in the general

public sphere, potentially breaking the barrier between stratified recommendation circles and reaching to the wider public on the platform. Considering the paradoxical label of "gongzhi", the public intellectual, what makes Leung impunity of the stigmatization is partially because the way he performs himself as a Taoist priest, with a sober, guru-like persona. Through his well-wrought, disarmingly avuncular talk and his detour away from the controversy itself, Leung shows his engaged detachedness in the "out-of-control" discussion. In the similar vein of *fast thinkers* (Bourdieu, 1998) responding to the mass media logic, and the *big thinkers* (Heynders, 2016) to social media era, Leung can be seen as what I called "detouring thinkers" on WOA Platform.

In addition, regarding the performance of Leung in the "College Daily controversy", it is illuminated a four-fold role of Leung in his participation in the "controversy" event. Leung not only performs as a *detouring thinker*, but also, he practices as a knowledge dealer, a networked brand, and an official account owner. This quadruple role could unveil an reciprocal relationship between Leung and the platform: the popularity principle of WOA Platform increases Leung's visibility and influence, while his influence is in return feeding to the database and algorithm of the platform, connecting the digital public sphere to a larger market of idea and knowledge emerged in the contemporary social space. In addition, an inquiry to the "micro public sphere" (McCallum, 2013, p. 169) of this research founds an intellectual-centered public space is emerged on the comment wall under Leung's post. It further reveals that WOA Platform is cultivating a polycentric public sphere, providing users with algorithmically conditioned agency that contributes to an imbalanced relationship between attending audiences and official account owners/public intellectuals.

In this empirical case study, my research departs from the understanding of social media "controversy" on WOA Platform, and arrives at the point where a digital public sphere is found occupied by the social media logic. This controversy-triggered digital public sphere is emerged through the interplay between users' agencies (reporting, searching, and content creating) and technologic conditions (algorithms, interface, search engine, and metrics). At this moment, we need to come back to the four-element social

media logic, to further the theoretic discussion on the field of Chinese digital public sphere. In line with the social media logic, we now have observed a mechanism of the "controversy" institutionalized by the logic of WOA Platform. This logic is not only operated through the entanglement of four basic elements of social media logic – programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. But also, based on the case study of "College Daily controversy", it is operated with a participation-triggering mechanism. To be specific, the logic of WOA Platform is particularly designed for steering and conditioning all kinds of participatory practices among users – to view, to search, to make sense, to discuss, to communicate, to share, and to evaluate the controversy. Meanwhile, similar to other four elements of the social media logic, participation-triggering mechanism also worked as a "two-way traffic" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p.5). In other words, the participatory practices of users in return become datafied and feeding to the algorithm of the platform for evolving the functions and designs for users' participation. As such, the participation-triggering mechanism is working with the popularity principle and connectivity strategies, contributing to the database of the platform. Further, these elements of WOA Platform's logic can cultivate new models for the public participation in the digital space.

The main limitations and weakness of this study are related to 1) the limited accessibility to the observed participants and 2) selected data from the excessive content. In terms of the contact with the participants, this research would be benefit from the participant's experience if the researcher could conduct interview with the participants. Any ethnographically informed research online ought to be seen as a "learning process (Blommaert and Dong 2010)", in which researchers are requires to learn from both the digital technology but also the participants in the observed phenomenon. Regarding the case "College Daily controversy" as closely entangled with the offline social-political situations, how participants personally experienced the "controversy" event could serve as valuable data for deepening the analysis of the online-offline facet afforded by social media technology in the digital public sphere. However, due to the unavailability to the contact information of account owners and the commentators, which is limited by WeChat design, I was not able to interview the participant in the case. The other weakness of the research

is the selected data. Since this research has collected the excessive content for data analysis, an amount of important materials collected online was not able to be presented in the analysis, but chosen in order to analyze them in terms of the focused topic and theoretical frames effectively within the limited time give.

The persistence and ubiquity of social media contribute to a "platform society" nowadays, where social media is becoming a global infrastructure reshaping the public and private communication. When it comes to the digital public sphere, how social media conditions Chinese society in the conjuncture of digitalization and globalization awaits more critical investigation. In this research, it is disclosed that intellectuals' online public intervention is occupied with but also affording public participation in the digital public sphere. In addition, the vernacular label and the controversial identity of the public intellectuals in current digital China also suggests a challenge towards the established order of knowledge and the socio-cultural structure of authority. As such, I suggest further researches to focus on the social group of public intellectuals as a vantage point, to examine their roles and practices in the configuration of the digital public sphere. Beyond controversies about journalism, contemporary China's public sphere witnesses the discussions of everyday life issues where a wider spectrum of specialized experts with media influence, such as biomedicine scientists and practitioners, also conduct the public intervention and speak beyond their specialized disciplines.[14] Since the beginning of the year 2020, when this research was conducted, the world has witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic affecting people's everyday life. In this global crisis, experts of medicine and public health are highly visible and influential in the public opinions towards socio-cultural issues related to the pandemic. In this circumstance, it deserves researchers to probe into the pandemic-related public deliberations in today's media-saturated social space, to examine the public intellectuals in the contemporary order of knowledge and the digital public sphere.

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[14] Examples can be seen in recent controversies about traditional Chinese medicine. For instance, in December, 2017, a pharmaceutical controversy of Chinese traditional medicinal wine, '鸿茅药酒 (Hongmao Medicinal Wine)' , was inflamed on WOA Platform. The controversy was provoked by an article wrote by an anesthesiologist, Tan Qindong. In this article, he accused Hongmao Medicinal wine of misinformation and poisonous ingredients. After his post, Qin was arrested by the local authority. This script of whistleblowers being thrown to jail soon became a viral topic in the Chinese public sphere.

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