

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON SINA WEIBO SOCIAL NETWORK IN CHINA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM

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Abstract. With the development of technology, political propaganda on social media has received increasing attention from countries around the world. In China, this activity is more efficient in reaching a large number of people at a faster rate than traditional forms of propaganda. This study aims to analyze political communication activities on China's Sina Weibo social network and propose some implications for Vietnam. The study uses a document collection and analysis method to collect relevant documents from 2016 to 2024, including official documents, academic works, and policies of the Communist Party of China. Descriptive statistics are used to investigate the current situation of social media use in both Vietnam and China in 2023. Then, a comparative analysis is conducted to identify similarities and differences in political communication activities between the two countries. From the findings of the study, the author suggests some key recommendations for Vietnam.

Keywords: political propaganda, social networks, China, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

In China, political communication has received special attention from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the State. In addition to traditional media channels such as print, radio, and television, famous social media platforms like Sina Weibo, online social forums, websites, etc. are increasingly being invested in and developed by the Party and the Chinese government.

According to data from the China Internet Network Information Center, until June 2023, the number of Internet users reached 1.079 billion, recording an increase of 11.09 million compared to that in December 2022 [1]. Among these platforms, Sina Weibo is one of the most popular social media networks in China. Since Facebook and Twitter were restricted in China, Weibo was created as a replacement for these applications, with 586 million monthly users, of which 252 million interact daily [2]. Weibo is used not only by ordinary users but also by famous artists, the media, and government agencies or businesses due to its strict verification process. The CCP and Government have taken advantage of the popularity of this platform to reach many Chinese citizens conveniently. This requires the CCP to implement political communication on social media, including Weibo, to the people. At the Cybersecurity and Information Work Conference, General Secretary and President Xi Jinping emphasized, "Wherever the people are, our leaders must come". If political communication on social media is done well, it will significantly enhance China's cultural power and even make outstanding contributions to the political civilization of humanity.

This issue has attracted interest from scholars worldwide. Notable examples include Sun Jiaxu with the study "*Research on the Application of Social Media in Political Ideological*

Education for University Students” [3] and Li Yiguang with the article “*Recommendations on Uniting the Hearts of the Party and Winning the Hearts and Minds of the People on Social Media*” [4]. In Vietnam, prominent studies include Cao Thu Hang and Le Trong Tuyen (2022) entitled “*Enhancing the Effectiveness of Using Social Media in Political Communication in Vietnam*” [5] and Nguyen Thi Truong Giang (2023) “*China’s Experience in Promoting the Role of Propaganda in Protecting Ideological Platforms and the Political System*” [6] Other studies, such as Tran Thi Quang Hoa, Nguyen Duy Quynh, Nguyen Thu Trang, and Nguyen Duy Ha Ngan (2024), “*Political Communication on Online Platforms in Foreign Countries and Lessons Learned*” [7] also affirm the necessity of political communication on social media in the ideological work of the Communist Parties of Vietnam and China. Qin Gu (2014) in the article “*Sina Weibo: A Mutual Communication Apparatus between the Chinese Government and Chinese Citizens*” illustrates that deployed by both the Chinese government and its people, Sina Weibo is significantly changing the rapport between these two parties. Affording a bridge of mutual communication, Chinese microbloggers obtain more autonomy through actively engaging in social discourses on Sina Weibo, and in parallel, the government uses microbloggers' feedback on Sina Weibo to solve social issues promptly. All in all, Sina Weibo promotes the bilateral supervision and co-governance between the Chinese government and its people in various aspects of social and political affairs, forging a more efficient and vibrant China [8]. This article studies some activities related to political communication on Sina Weibo social media and references their value for Vietnam in political communication.

2. Content

2.1. Document collection method

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher collected officially published documents from 2016 to 2024, domestic and foreign scientific works related to political propaganda, documents of the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of Vietnam, and other policy documents and laws of the governments of Vietnam and China on cybersecurity and political propaganda.

2.2 Data analysis methods

The descriptive statistical method analyses statistical data to describe the current situation of social network use by Vietnamese and Chinese people in 2023.

The comparison method involves the comparison of political communication activities in China and Vietnam. The comparative method can reveal the similarities and differences in political propaganda activities between the two countries, and learn from each other's experiences.

2.3. Results and analysis

2.3.1. Strengthening the Communist Party's Leadership Role and State Management of Political Communication on Social Media

Since its establishment, the Chinese Communist Party has paid special attention to political communication in the Party’s work. Chairman Mao Zedong once pointed out that “tightening control of the media is a prerequisite” for maintaining political stability, comparing the act of “controlling the pen” to “controlling the gun” [9]. Throughout its hundred-year history, the Chinese Communist Party has always considered communication and information management as top priorities, allocating significant material resources and manpower to propaganda work. Given China's strong economic development and its rise to a leading global power, communication, and ideological work have become even more important to the Chinese Communist Party.

Regarding the Party's management leadership, China has implemented numerous policies and measures to increase the Party's direct control over propaganda. The Chinese government no longer manages film, journalism, and publishing activities, as these sectors are directly led by the Chinese Communist Party under the management of the Chinese National Film Administration and the Chinese National Press and Publication Administration, which are under the Central Propaganda Department. Major state broadcasting entities, such as Chinese National Radio, Chinese International Radio, and Chinese Central Television (including its international branch, China Global Television Network), have merged into the China Media Group (CMG), with over 14,000 employees. This media group operates as a ministerial-level organization directly under the leadership of the Central Propaganda Department of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since 1970, state oversight of journalism and publishing, and since 1949, the film industry, has been transferred to direct Party management. Thus, the state's responsibility for managing journalism, publishing, broadcasting, and film has been handed over to the Party's Central Propaganda Department, which directly implements the communication work of the Chinese Communist Party.

On August 31st, 2019, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee issued a notice on the Party communication work regulations, emphasizing that communication work is an important task of the Party and a long-standing political advantage for leading the people to continuously achieve victories in revolution, construction, and reform. The issuance of these regulations highlights the Central Committee's great emphasis on propaganda, marking a new step in standardizing, systematizing, and institutionalizing propaganda work. The notice called for all Party committees (Party organizations) at all levels to study and implement these regulations as a crucial political task, aiming to ensure that the Central Committee's major communication decisions are effectively implemented in practice.

The Chinese government has recognized the potential of using social media in the propaganda and educating ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party. The Party's ideology has been regularly supplemented and developed. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of PRC affirmed that "the Scientific Outlook on Development is the collective wisdom of the Communist Party of the PRC and the Party's long-term guiding ideology: 'Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development are the guiding principles for the actions of the Communist Party of China.'" By the 19th National Congress, the Communist Party of China had added Xi Jinping Thought and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era to its ideology, becoming the guiding principles for the Party along with Marxism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development [10].

Since 2016, the State Council of China has issued the requirements in which "the Internet combined with government services" is considered an "essential tool" for the government to improve and reform the public service system. As soon as the requirements were implemented, Chinese ministries and government agencies at all levels created their own accounts on Sina Weibo. By the end of 2018, China had 138,253 Weibo accounts belonging to state agencies, including central ministries, departments, and local governments. This is seen as a decisive change, demonstrating that the Chinese government recognizes the important role of social media in understanding and connecting with public opinion, thereby influencing the public in line with the Party and State's orientation. By choosing which information is prioritized and how frequently it appears, the government can attract attention and guide the public on what is necessary and important at each stage. Additionally, through vividly reflecting the achievements of the Party and the Chinese government in the country's development, communication activities have built and reinforced the public's trust in their leaders [11]. However, since social media also carries

risks from unauthorized and false information, the Chinese government has implemented strict management measures, including restricting internet access and requiring users to register with real names. Moreover, the National Cybersecurity Law passed in 2016, stipulates that creating or disseminating false information on social media is classified as a type of crime. Regulations issued by the State Council in 2017 require social media platforms to only link and repost articles from registered news sources. Since 2018, the State Council has required microblogging platforms to refute false information on their platforms and to warn users about such news. Additionally, China has introduced an application allowing citizens to report information that may be fake or misleading. This app is also integrated with platforms like Weibo and WeChat to enhance the ability to detect fake news on a broad scale.

Thus, China's political communication through social media has been given significant investment and is carried out systematically across the political system. This work focuses mainly on ideological education for the people, while prominently highlighting the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party and government to increase the public's understanding and trust in the Party's chosen path.

2.3.2. Increasing Investment and Resources for Social Media Communication

According to a report by the Financial Planning Department of Yunnan Province (dated February 8th, 2024), the total budget of the Propaganda Department of the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China for 2024 is 351,418,112.55 yuan, with most of the budget allocated to personnel [12]. China is mobilizing resources for social media communication. The Chinese Ministry of Public Security has established "Internet Police" and "Internet Volunteer Police" teams to strengthen the censorship of sensitive content that negatively impacts society. There are approximately 50,000 internet police managing online content and investigating fraud, pornography, and particularly preventing cybercrime and terrorism. Additionally, there are nearly 2 million Internet volunteer police monitoring and guiding the use of the Internet by the public, helping cybersecurity agencies identify vulnerabilities, prevent harmful topics and images, spread positive information, and support the police in safeguarding cybersecurity. The volunteer Internet police force includes a large number of Internet users, especially university students through the "Rise of Internet Civilization" program. They are present on various forums and social media to control and guide Chinese people to use the Internet, including professional staff abroad. The Ministry of National Security of China has also established cybersecurity units at major internet service providers and important websites such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu to help these companies manage cybersecurity. The Chinese government also recruits many experts to monitor and supervise media, and social networks and regularly sends reports on online content, popular search keywords, etc. The entire Internet system in China has become a "Chinternet" with strict state control over content, network connections, applications, and communication channels. The Great Firewall is effective in blocking access to prohibited content and supervising and censoring internet users. China is also increasingly using KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) such as politicians and legal experts to communicate, discuss, and guide public opinion on forums and blogs to create "self-discipline" among internet users.

2.3.3. Innovation in Propaganda, Education, and Public Engagement

In 2013, China popularized political animated films on social networks. Among them, the first animated film titled "How Leaders Are Trained" compared elections in China with those in Western countries, such as the US and the UK, and attracted over 10 million views within five days of being posted online. In 2014, the Beijing Municipal Committee's Propaganda Department released a series of animated films titled "How Chairman Xi Jinping's Time Has Passed," featuring activities such as state visits, meetings, learning, and personal interests like reading, hiking, and playing soccer. This series was later upgraded into interactive and visually appealing forms, with large-scale investment, allowing users to view Xi Jinping's schedule at important

foreign events. The success of this animated series encouraged media and communication professionals to be creative in presenting the images of leaders. This demonstrates the continuous improvement in how Chinese communication approaches the public through various methods, media, and messages.

The Chinese government views social media as an effective and efficient tool for propaganda. General Secretary and President Xi Jinping once stated at the National Ideological and Propaganda Work Conference: “Social media has become the main battlefield for public opinion struggle.” These statements reflect the innovative approach of the Communist Party of China in its communication work to achieve the goal of “telling China’s story well, communicating China’s voice effectively, and showcasing China’s characteristics.”

2.3.4. Establishing a Flat Communication Mechanism on Social Media

The flat communication mechanism has existed since the establishment of the Communist Party of China. Flat communication is distinguished from the pyramid or tower model – in those models, information from leaders, when passed through multiple intermediaries, can be altered, edited, or distorted, leading to misinformation. The core of the flat communication mechanism is to center the communication around the people, allowing the Party and the government to directly dialogue with the people. Particularly, the highest leaders of the Party directly communicate with the public through modern media, conveying what they wish to say both internally and to the Party, forming a flat, direct two-way information network between the Central Party and the people. By establishing a flat information exchange mechanism between the Central Party, Party members, officials, and the public, misinformation created by the Central’s dissemination can be reduced. The Committee aims to prevent some media and networks from providing incomplete coverage of high-level officials' speeches.

Officials and Party members are required to provide truthful information on social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. If each Party member connects online with two non-Party individuals via social media, each branch secretary connects with 5 non-Party individuals, and each Party committee secretary and Standing Committee member connects with 10 non-Party individuals, what would the online public opinion environment look like? Branch secretaries, Party committee secretaries, and communication ministers at various levels can create a powerful and unstoppable force on social media by publicly opening WeChat and Weibo accounts in their real names and publicly communicating on WeChat and Weibo daily. The public would not only understand the Party's and government's policies and guidelines through the daily posts of these Party members and officials on WeChat and Weibo but would also be able to monitor the personal work and ideological style of these Party members and officials. Party and government agencies and officials at all levels can monitor the public through social media, promptly receive constructive feedback, assist the public when facing difficulties, clarify misunderstandings if necessary, and address public concerns and complaints in a timely manner. By doing so, social media has become a new means to understand, connect with, and address the public, a new channel for exercising people's democracy and accepting public supervision.

2.3.5. Reference values for the application of artificial intelligence in political education on social networks in Vietnam

China's experience in managing political communication on social media platforms, particularly Sina Weibo, offers valuable insights for Vietnam. The rapid digitalization of information exchange has enabled China to blend traditional governance with modern technology, thereby strengthening the influence of the Chinese Communist Party. This paper explores how Vietnam can adapt and apply aspects of the Chinese model by analyzing the cultural, political, and social factors involved. The key areas of focus include strengthening party leadership, enhancing state management, increasing resource investment, innovating propaganda efforts, and establishing a flatter communication mechanism on social media.

Firstly, a cornerstone of China's political communication model is the consolidation of the Chinese Communist Party's leadership in controlling and directing online discourse. The Chinese government effectively leverages social media to disseminate its messages while maintaining control over content and interactions. Vietnam can strengthen the Communist Party of Vietnam's role in managing political communication by enhancing oversight of online platforms. The Vietnamese government can implement guidelines that promote party messaging while balancing public engagement and maintaining the party's legitimacy. By mirroring China's approach, and integrating party narratives with public participation, Vietnam can create a controlled yet engaging online political environment. However, Vietnam must be mindful of cultural differences. While Chinese communication is characterized by a top-down approach, Vietnam's political culture, rooted in communitarian governance, may benefit from a more participatory and consultative approach to social media. Rather than strict control, encouraging positive but guided discussions could help the CPV better respond to public concerns.

Secondly, China's political communication model also demonstrates the importance of state investment in social media infrastructure and resources. China has developed sophisticated systems to monitor and guide online conversations, allocating significant resources to ensure that party messages are disseminated across multiple platforms. Vietnam could learn from China's establishment of government-run accounts and influencer networks to disseminate approved content. Furthermore, Vietnam could focus on developing AI-powered tools to monitor social media in real-time, allowing for rapid responses to negative or destabilizing content. However, unlike China, where the state tightly controls the entire digital ecosystem, Vietnam could benefit from a more flexible approach that allows for a mix of state-controlled and semi-independent voices. This strategy can promote public trust, avoid perceptions of overreach, and promote a sense of transparency.

Third, China's success in political communication also lies in its ability to innovate propaganda techniques, making them more interactive and engaging for younger generations. Weibo serves as a vehicle for state narratives to reach millennials and Gen Z in China, using multimedia, humor, and influencers. Vietnam could adapt these strategies to its own social media landscape, creating engaging content that resonates with its increasingly digitally savvy population. Innovation in Vietnam could take the form of integrating social media into traditional patriotic education and public awareness campaigns. Developing content that combines national identity with contemporary issues, such as environmental protection and technological advancement, could foster a sense of pride and duty in younger generations. Additionally, Vietnam could partner with influencers who share state values, helping to spread pro-government messages organically through popular social media personalities. Vietnam must ensure that this engagement is inclusive of different social groups and regions. Tailoring communication strategies to reflect the preferences and concerns of different ethnic and regional groups could foster a more cohesive national identity and reduce social divisions.”

Finally, establishing a flat communication mechanism on social media. Vietnam can adapt this model by fostering more direct interaction between government officials and the public through social media platforms. To increase trust, Vietnam can encourage government officials to maintain active personal social media profiles and respond promptly to citizen concerns. Such openness can create a perception of transparency and accountability. While Vietnam must maintain control over the narrative, allowing a limited space for public feedback will enhance the legitimacy of state media. However, Vietnam should approach this cautiously, ensuring that public engagement does not devolve into uncontrollable debates. The balance between openness and control is delicate; Vietnam can learn from China's censorship model, ensuring that while citizens can express their opinions, harmful content or dissenting views are promptly moderated without hindering legitimate public discourse.

3. Conclusions

Political communication is used via many different methods. With the characteristics of rapid information and widespread dissemination, social media plays an increasingly important role in communicating the Communist Party's views, accounts, policies, and laws. The State, if utilized appropriately, will contribute to creating social consensus and the development of the country.

New developments and reforms in communication work show that there have been changes in the Chinese Communist Party's perception of the effectiveness of the unidirectional flow of information from the State to the public. The efforts and success of the Chinese Communist Party's use of new media have created a new dynamic in political communication, including not only the Chinese Communist Party organs but also the media. Commerce, independent new media companies, and netizens all join hands to promote mainstream values and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Vietnam stands to benefit significantly from China's social media political communication model, but any adaptation must be carefully tailored to Vietnam's unique political, social, and cultural context. Strengthening the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam, increasing resource allocation, innovating propaganda strategies, and providing seamless communication mechanisms are all strategies that Vietnam can adopt from China's experience. However, Vietnam should pursue a more participatory and inclusive approach, leveraging its cultural values of community engagement while still maintaining the Communist Party's control over broader narratives. By learning from China's model and adapting it to its own context, Vietnam can enhance its capacity to engage citizens, manage online discourse, and ensure political stability.

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