

Mediatization of conflict in the social media era: A case study of Sino-Indian border crisis in 2017

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– A Case Study of Sino-Indian Border Crisis in 2017

Abstract

Inspired by the concepts of Arrested War and ANT (Actor-Network Theory), this study has traced and analyzed four main actors in the wars and conflicts in the social media age: social media platform, the mainstream news organizations, online users and social media content. These four human and non-human actors associate, interact and negotiate with each other in the social media network surrounding specific issues. Based on the case study of Sino-Indian border crisis in 2017, the central argument is that social media is playing an enabling role in contemporary wars and conflicts. Both professional media outlets and web users employ the functionalities of social media platforms to set, counter-set or expand the public agenda. Social media platform embodies a web of technological and human complexities with different actors, factors, interests, and relations. These actor-networks and the macro social-political context are influential in the mediatization of conflict in the social media era.

Key words: Actor-network Theory, mediatization, conflicts, social media, China

Today the media have become integral to the planning and conduct of war (Horten, 2011). Mediatization as a new and much-debated concept captures something of the more complex, active and performative ways that the media are involved in conflicts today (Cottle, 2006:9). Hoskins & O'Loughlin (2015) take 'mediatization' as the process by which warfare is increasingly embedded in and penetrated by media. It is a means of understanding shifting media power on and its use by a range of actors. They claim that the world is currently in the third phase of mediatization – Arrested War, meaning the professional media have arrested the social media dynamics and effectively harnessed them for their own ends (ibid).

However mediatized conflicts as a research field is still at an early stage, awaiting theoretical and conceptual development (Mortensen, Eskjaer, & Hjarvard, 2015). More empirical studies are also needed to de-Westernize the current studies on media and conflict relations. To fill in these research gaps, this study will use the recent Sino-India border crisis as a case to address mediatised conflict in the digital age from China's perspective. This project will contribute to developing the concept of mediatization of conflict by integrating actor-network theory (ANT) with Arrested War and providing up-to-date empirical evidence through non-Western lens.

This research will analyze the professional media's news coverage and users' comments on social media Weibo in China during the Sino-India border crisis in 2017. It will discuss and demonstrate how the professional media and online users interact with each other and use social media platforms for their own ends.

In this article, the concepts of mediatization of conflict will be explored, followed by research methods. Then four main actors namely the non-human actors Weibo as platform and social media content in the form of Weibo posts and comments as well as the human actors *Global Times* representing professional news outlets and web users will be examined. Lastly discussion and conclusion will be given.

Mediatization of conflict

Mediatization is about changes. It studies the roles of contemporary media and denotes the process of societal transformations driven by communication technologies. The concept of mediatization has been debated for long. Some scholars argue that mediatization describes a historical, ongoing and dynamic metaprocess, related to but distinct from globalization, that features the increased central role and influence of media in social life (e.g. Lundby, 2014; Hepp 2009; Hjarvard 2013). Others point out that the metaprocess view is so broad that the concept of mediatization 'may not be suitable to contain the heterogeneity of the transformations in question' (Couldry, 2008). 'Mediatization is an awkward term, but one that has gained terrain in academic discourse' (Lundby, 2014:3). To move forward the debate, Waisbord (2013) called scholars to go beyond the media dominance paradigm to assess drivers and consequences, to understand better the factors that bind, steer, and shape mediatization.

Though mediatization is a vague and contested term, there have been growing researches that adopt the concept of mediatization of conflicts/wars in recent years. In his book *Mediatized Conflict*, Cottle (2006: 8-9) used the phrase 'mediatized conflict' to 'emphasize the complex ways in which media are often implicated within conflicts while disseminating ideas and images about them'. He argues that the media-conflict relationship goes beyond the 'reflection' and 'representation' but focuses on 'media doing' or 'media performativity'. Morse (2017) argues that the study of mediatized war needs to extend beyond questions of control over information transmission and the military-media-audience power dynamics, and to include the moral and ethical responsibility to the suffering of distant others during wartime.

Other scholars studied media and conflict relationship from different perspectives. Maltby (2012) examined British army's media management strategies and argued that the military are increasingly 'mediatized' through integrating media in their operations and interacting with different actors based on the media logic. Horten (2011) argued that the mediatization of war has accelerated over the past fifty years and has established the media as the "fourth branch" of military operations beyond the army, air force, and navy. He emphasized the national particularities during the mediatization process including the cultural and historical circumstances. Kaempf (2013) argued that the rise of new media technology has led to a heteropolar global media environment in which the media-war relationship has been altered. 'Digital new media has introduced a wide range of voices into the mediatization of war' (ibid).

The most relevant work to this study is Hoskins & O'Loughlin (2015)'s 'Arrested war: the third phase of mediatization'. They argued that the process of mediatization is uneven as different actors employ different media for their own ends. They divide the process into three phases: Broadcast War, Diffused War and Arrested War. While the first phase features the stability and certainty with discrete and mono-directional media (the Big Media), the second phase refers to the Web 2.0 and new digital media ecology with connected, multi-directional media and chaotic dynamics. In the third phase, Arrested War is 'characterized by the appropriation and control of previously chaotic dynamics by mainstream media and, at a slower pace, government and military policy-makers' (ibid). Siapera, Hunt & Lynn (2015) argued that diffused war does not necessarily lead to a collapse of communication hierarchies, but may create new or modify

existing ones. There are various actors on the media platform and the media platform itself is an actor.

Previous researches have demonstrated the increasing and transforming role of digital media in contemporary wars and conflicts. However mediatized conflicts as a research field requires theoretical and conceptual development (Mortensen, Eskjaer, & Hjarvard, 2015). Hoskins & O'Loughlin (2015) also admit that the concepts and theory that are used to explain relations and interdependencies in the period of Arrested War remain uncertain. Hence, a conceptual and analytical model that delineate different actors (levels of analysis) as well as their relations is needed to unpack the complexities of mediatization of conflict. The model shall be feasible to be implemented and operationalized in the empirical research.

Hence the author proposes the following model (Figure 1) to study the actions, reactions and interactions of four main actors in the news network in times of conflict and crisis – social media platform (non-human actant), the news organization (human actor) and the web users (human actor) via texts-based discourses (non-human actant). This model integrates Arrested War phase of mediatization with the ANT. While Arrested War highlights professional media's usage of social media, ANT is a pragmatic sociotechnical process in which actors seek to build and maintain networks (Law, 1999; Heeks & Stanforth, 2015). Journalism takes place in increasingly networked settings involving a wide range of actors and actants. Digital media do not just offer professionals a new voice but the ability to build new linkages of institutions, individuals and machines (Turner, 2005). The significance of studying the four actors will be discussed below.

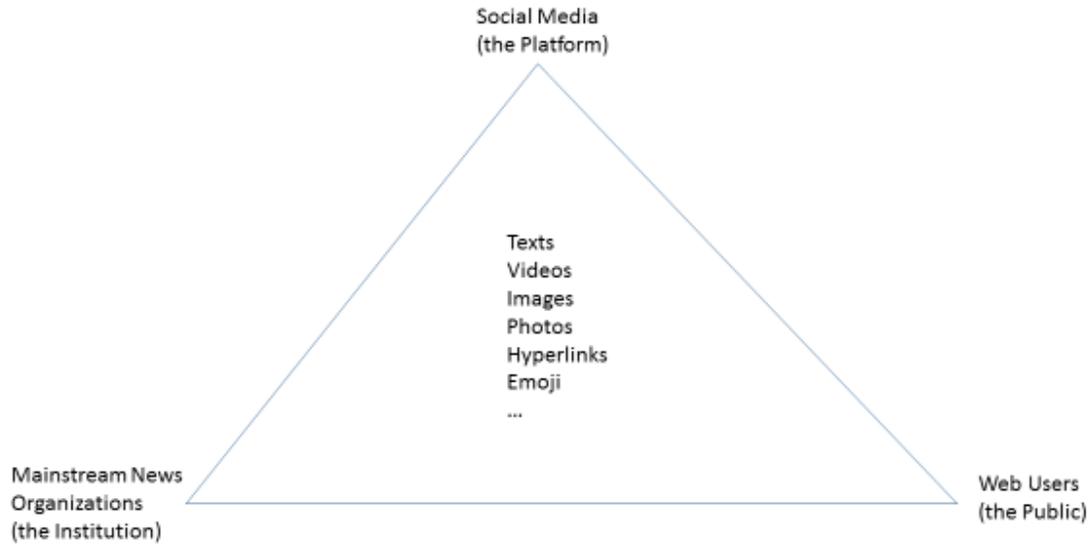


Figure 1: Integrating actor-network theory and the Arrested War phase to study the mediatized conflict in the social media era.

First, the social media platform. In journalism, technological artifacts are traditionally not considered as an actor and they have been treated as intermediaries or carriers only. But looking through the lens of ANT, technology can act as actors and mediators, transforming the news process (Primo & Zago, 2015). Today the digital and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Weibo are everywhere. Digitalization is changing journalistic practices, cultures and institutions. The new ‘news ecosystem’, ‘ambient’ and ‘networked’ journalism have emerged because of practices predominantly related to social media (Steensen & Ahva, 2015).

Second, the mainstream news organizations. In journalism, actors come in three flavors: sources, journalists and audience members. All are human and they are treated as analytically distinct (Turner, 2005). Through the ANT lens, news organizations and professional journalists need to act as hubs rather than destinations, engage in conversations and increase their reliability (Spyridou et al, 2013). As stated above, mainstream news organizations have appropriated social media and remediatated social media content during the Arrested War phase.

Third, web users (the public). In the news network, an important and diverse set of actants is the web users – ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen 2006). Digital technology creates new public spheres where the audience can interact, intervene and participate. Audiences are empowered to impact on the editorial agenda through likes and shares (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2017). As spatial metaphors such as networks, fields, or spheres indicate, the lines between professional and citizen, and between one organization and another have blurred (Reese, 2016).

Lastly, in the middle of the diagram are social media content including texts, videos, images, hyperlinks, and emoji. The assemblage of these elements is a nonhuman actor in the network. As Law (1992) claims, agents, texts, devices, architectures are all generated in, form part of, and are essential to, the networks of the social. Using the network approach, analysis of the actors’ discourses will reveal the actions, interactions and relations among various actors.

Since this study focuses on news network, Figure 1 only delineates four actors and their linkages. It is a simplified version of a complex web for analysis purposes. As a flexible and elastic model, other influential actors such as governments, militaries, business institutions, think tanks, computers, mobile phones as well as other intertwined networks can be added to this diagram. For instance, the social media platform itself can be a network involving social media company, software, hardware, programmers, engineers, etc. The news organization is also a network that connects journalists, editors, managers, sources, audience, government, etc. And web users form their own network. As Primo & Zago (2015) explained, ‘Each actant, human or non-human, is a network within other networks.’

In addition, studies of mediated conflict in the digital age shall be de-Westernized. McQuail (2006) claimed that ‘Western “communication science” does not offer any clear framework for collecting and interpreting observations and information about contemporary war situations’ and ‘largely neglected were the colonial wars of post-Second World War and the many bitter conflicts that did not directly impinge on western interests or responsibilities’. His statement still stands today. The existing researches in media and conflict are mostly confined to the western democracies. With the US’ global pre-eminence ebbing away, concerns have increasingly

centred on China's ability to move from economic power to political leverage in global geopolitics (Brevini & Murdock, 2013). It is important to study mediatized conflict within the actor-networks in China. Three research questions are raised:

RQ1. How do the mainstream media outlets cover the conflict/crisis on social media in China?

RQ2. How do the web users respond to the professional media's coverage on social media?

RQ3: How do the actors in the news network interact with each other?

Research methods

This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research approaches on the basis of case study, content analysis and textual analysis.

The Sino-Indian border crisis in 2017 is selected for case study because on the one hand, it renders up-to-date empirical data about the crisis/conflict for social media analysis; and on the other hand, the short time period of this particular crisis makes the project manageable. It is a recent case appropriate to try out the newly proposed analytical model. This crisis refers to the Sino-Indian standoff in the Doklam region of the Himalayas where the borders of China, India and Bhutan converge. It started in mid-June when China attempted to build a road in an area it believed to be under its sovereign control, provoking Indian authorities to block the construction by crossing the Sino-Indian border with troops and bulldozers (Zhang, 2017). On 28 August, India withdrew all its personnel and equipment back to its side of the Sino-Indian border after a 10-week intrusion into China's Donglang area (China Daily, 29 August 2017).

The target research subject is *Global Times'* (GT) news posts and users' comments on Weibo. *GT*, a commercialized nationalist tabloid affiliated to China's flagship Party paper *People's Daily*, was founded in 1993 with a circulation of 2.4 million copies. It specializes in international news coverage. By the time of writing, GT's Weibo account has about 15 million followers. Due to its influence, GT's Weibo account is an ideal venue to trace how a state-owned mainstream media outlet cover the conflict and interact with the web users in China.

Quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis are conducted to examine the patterns of GT postings and users' comments on Weibo. The unit of analysis is each post/comment. The sampling time period was set for two months from 26 June to 28 August

2017. Four undergraduate student interns formed two teams. In each team, two students collected data for 15 days separately. Guidelines were provided to all interns beforehand. They accessed Weibo and collected posts and users' comments from GT's Weibo account using the key words 中印 (Sino-India). Students collected data and conducted preliminary coding based on the following categories:

For posts: date/time, topic, content, news/views, news source, theme, format (texts/video/photo/hyperlink), number of forwards, number of comments, number of shares

For comments: Date/time, post topic, users' comments/replies, use of languages, use of emoji/emoticons

As a result, a total of 71 GT posts and 1,409 users' comments were collected. The trend/patterns of GT's online news coverage and the users' reactions will be presented and discussed later. Then five posts with the highest number of likes and shares as well as their corresponding users' comments were selected for textual analysis with an aim of identifying key themes, frames, and use of languages/emojis. Frame analysis was conducted to identify frames using inductive approach. Framing refers to the way news reports emphasize some aspects of an issue and make them salient to promote certain interpretations or public perceptions of events (Entman, 1993; 2004). As a dynamic process, framing involves frame-building and frame-setting (de Vreese, 2005). Inductive approach means frames emerge from the material during the course of analysis without prior defined news frames in mind (ibid).

Weibo: the platform

Social media platforms have become a significant participant in China's politics, culture and society. As Rauchfleisch & Schäfer (2015) noted, China has established its own microcosm of social media. Launched in 2009, Weibo (Sina Weibo) is a leading and largest microblogging site in China. According to Weibo Financial Report (2018), Weibo's MAUs (monthly active users) and DAUs (daily active users) reached 431 million and 190 million respectively in June 2018. About 93% of users accessed Weibo through mobile devices. Weibo's transformation, technical features and usability, users culture, and self-censorship practices will be discussed next.

Weibo emerged in August 2009 as the microblogging service of Sina.com in the aftermath of the riots in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. At that time, Twitter was blocked and some domestic microblog services were also shuttered in China. Since then, Weibo has played an essential part in the public life of the Chinese people, reflecting China's socio-political transition in the post-Olympics decade (Guo & Jiang, 2015; Han, 2018). Han (2018) divides Weibo's transformation into three stages: collective witness, ideological contention, and networks of expertise. They 'reflect a major transformation of social media and digital culture in China, from the civic-minded public engagement and activism to the celebration of individual online fame and monetization of content creation' (Han, 2018). On July 22, 2012, the official Weibo account of the *People's Daily* (@renminribao) posted its first Weibo when a thunderstorm and flooding in Beijing killed 77 people. This event marked that official media stepping in the realm of social media. These official media not only incorporated Weibo in news production but took lead in public debate with their ideological stances. Since 2012, Weibo's influence started to decline with the rise and competition of WeChat as well as the tightened state control in the digital media space. In 2014, Weibo was listed at Nasdaq, marking its step into the global market (ibid).

In terms of technical features and usability, Weibo, similar to Twitter, provides real-time information and it is characterized by three components: it enables users to post 140-character messages, address others with '@' symbols, and use hashtags to topically mark Weibos, repost messages and answer them. A distinct feature of Weibo is that users are allowed to include URLs in their messages and to attach images, music, and video files to their posts. Comments to a post are displayed right below the post itself (Poell, Kloet & Zeng, 2014). In recent years, online content in video format becomes prevalent. Weibo has developed new features such as short videos and interest-based information feeds (Weibo annual report, 2017). Meanwhile, Weibo faces copyright and technical issues (ibid).

As for Weibo's user and comment culture, 'long weibo', data monitoring and commenting practices as well as hyperlinks are special features. A long weibo means the users attaching a picture/image that contain an article to their weibo to work around the limitation of 140 characters (Poell, Kloet & Zeng, 2014). Weibo's real-time character also allows its users to monitor countless data streams that run across multiple online platforms but converged on

Weibo. Visual trickery, symbolic manipulation, parody, humor, and intense interaction have become key practices on Weibo. Weibo's comment culture increases 'the sense of shared joy' and 'strengthens the articulation of an issue-specific public' (ibid). Hyperlinking refers to the practice of linking to an external website (Fu & Lee, 2016). Weibo users' practice of hyperlinking has 'extended the public and circulated content across the media landscape' (Poell, Kloet & Zeng, 2014).

Turning to Weibo's censorship practices, the Internet companies in China are held responsible for the content and behavior of the users on their sites (Poell, Kloet & Zeng, 2014). The Sina Corporation 'must conform to the communications regulations set by the state, and the state constantly pressures Sina to ensure its censorship compliance' (Guo & Jiang, 2015). Weibo employs about 1,000 full-time editors to monitor and censor users (Poell, Kloet & Zeng, 2014). Meanwhile Sina's censorship is mitigated by the company's commercial interests, and it therefore aims to remain as open as possible. Weibo content is neither entirely apolitical nor it is fully government-controlled or censored in all instances (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). Guo & Jiang (2015) also argued that both transparency and tight political control coexist on Weibo, which forms the paradox of Weibo. Weibo is free, open and highly monitored.

All these features of Weibo are essential in the way different actors mediate, interact, associate and negotiate with each other on the platform. As Poell, Kloet & Zeng (2014) argued, 'Weibo is not one thing, but rather constitutes a techno-cultural assemblage which becomes entangled with a wide variety of other actors in the course of contentious episodes.'

Analysis of *Global Times* posts

In this section, results from the content and textual analysis will be presented and discussed on the basis of GT's posts on Weibo pertaining to the Sino-Indian border crisis.

GT disseminated a total of 71 posts on its Weibo account @Huanqiushibao during the sampling time period, of which 53 are coded as news and 18 are views. It suggests that GT's posts are dominantly news items rather than views on Weibo. As for the format of posts, the majority of posts contain texts, hyperlinks, photos, and/or videos. Three posts are texts only. It reveals that

GT, as a newspaper-based media outlet, has fully employed Weibo's multi-media technological features to disseminate news and views on the social media platform.

In terms of news sources, more than half of the posts, 54% (38 out of 71), are taken from either GT's print edition or GT's website. However, while examining the sources within the texts, only six news posts clearly show elements of in-house reporting. It reflects the common way of how Chinese newspapers do international news. Editors usually start with selecting and taking information from external sources and then do follow-up interviews with Chinese experts and scholars to solicit their comments or views on the news events. In other cases, journalists may make phone calls or go online to check and verify related information. One post dated on July 7 was an exception. It was titled 'This is the corridor, which makes India live in the hypochondria that their throat is locked by China'. It indicates '...staff correspondent(s) recently went to this area with strategic importance (Siliguri corridor) that bears the 'geographical curse', and made investigations...'. This is the only investigative news report in which GT journalists conducted on-the-spot investigations on their own.

Five main news sources were identified: 1) Chinese media such as *People's Daily*, China Central Television Station, Xinhua net, Ministry of Defense website; 2) foreign and global media such as *The Times of India*, *Indian Express*, Dunya Pakistan online, Himshikhar Television of Nepal, *The Australians*, Reuters, CNN, and *New York Times*. 3) Chinese political elites such as spokespersons from Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, military experts, research fellows, etc; 4) foreign political elites such as officials and diplomats from India, USA, Bhutan, Japan, Russia, etc.; and 5) Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of GT.

Five main themes are generated from the GT posts. First, China condemned Indian troop's illegal intrusion and demanded India to withdraw its troops. For instance, on 25 July, the post was titled 'Wang Yi (China's Foreign Minister): Indian troops shall withdraw honestly'. Second, India's changing attitude from confrontation to appeasement. For instance, the post dated on 6 July indicated, 'India claims China's road construction on the border posed severe security risks. China: what about India's deployment of troops and building fortresses?'. About one month later, the 28 July post indicated, 'Want to cool down the situation? Indian Ministry of Foreign

Affairs reiterates “developing partnership” with China’. Third, third party countries’ involvement and attitudes towards the dispute. For instance, on 9 August, the post indicated, ‘Slapped in the face! Bhutan claims Doklam is not their territory. Surprised why India entered China’s territory’. Fourth, military confrontation, military power, deployment and maneuver. For instance, on 11 August, the post was ‘Indian media: India gets upper hand than China in terms of air strikes. (Chinese) experts: hitting airports is China’s strength’. Lastly, fake news and media hypes. For example, the 18 July post accused the Pakistan Dunya news network’s coverage of China’s rockets killing 158 Indian soldiers of fake news.

Based on the themes, five main frames are identified: China’s foreign policy, India’s foreign policy, military confrontation, third party involvement, and fake news. Some posts contain more than one frame, for instance, it may illustrate both India’s attitude/policy and China’s response and policy. In these cases, both frames will be noted down. Table 1 below shows the spread of frames.

Frames	Number	Percentage
China’s foreign policy	27	38%
India’s foreign policy	11	15%
Third party countries’ involvement	16	23%
Military confrontation	15	21%
‘Fake news’	7	10%

Table 1: Distribution of frames in GT posts on Weibo. ($N=71$)

Table 1 reveals that China’s foreign policy is the most dominant frame (38%). Third party involvement (23%) and military confrontation (21%) are strong frames.

Turning to the popularity of GT’s posts, Figure 2 below shows the trend/pattern of forwards (shares), comments and likes. The horizontal axis indicates the serial number of posts and the vertical axis indicates the number of shares/comments/likes on Weibo. The peak time occurred

on 4 and 5 August with posts No. 34 and No. 35 (See Table 2 for details), a few days after China’s military parade in Inner Mongolia on July 31, 2017. The parade was seen to ‘show off its might’ (Lockie, 2017) and ‘reaffirm the CPC’s absolute control over the army’ (Gao, 2017). In the aftermath of the parade, Chinese government reiterated its stance and kept demanding the Indian government to withdraw its troops. At other times, there are small rises and falls but the pattern is generally stable.

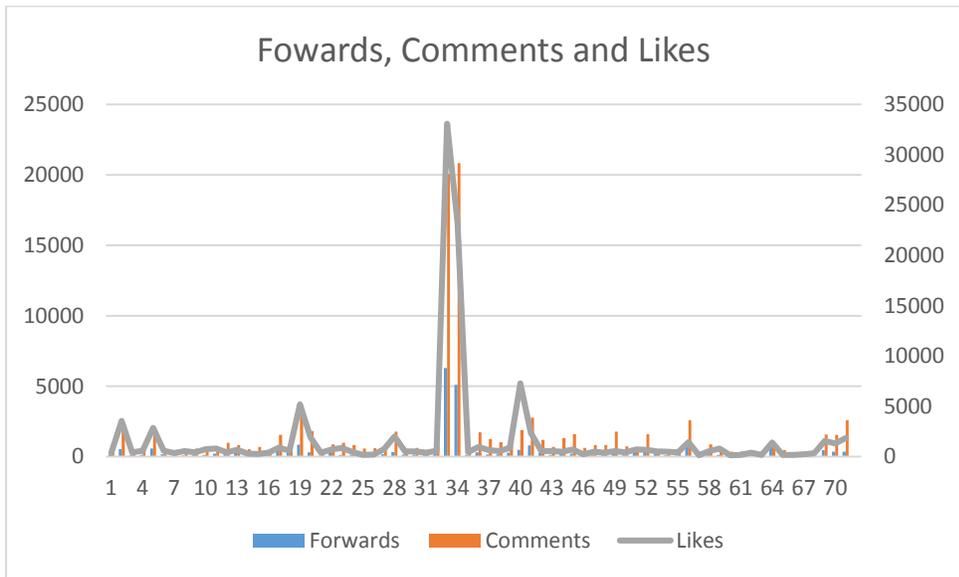


Figure 2. The trend of shares (forwards), comments and likes of GT’s Weibo posts

Based on the level of popularity, five posts were then selected for further textual analysis (see Table 2 below). It can be seen that the top two posts, the editorial about Modi administration on 4 August and the CNN video report on confrontation on 5 August, were the most popular posts that engaged deeply with the web users. Both have achieved the highest number of shares, comments and likes. The other three posts topped in either shares, or comments or likes respectively. However, the degree of these three posts’ popularity or users’ engagement has dropped greatly in comparison to the top two posts.

Serial No.	Date/Time	Topic	Forwards (shares)	Comments	Likes

34	4 Aug, 15:44	Editorial: Modi administration shall not be a sinner to start Sino-Indian war	6281	20073	33084
35	5 Aug, 10:30	CNN discloses confrontation videos on Sino-Indian border: Indian artillery-carriages run on roads of the front line	5102	20834	23170
57	19 Aug, 20:30	Suspected videos on Sino-Indian soldiers' confrontation at Bangong Tso, throwing rocks at each other	1033	2592	1434
20	23 July, 19:00	Finally Indian authoritative expert speaks the truth: we are in the wrong, we have to withdraw troops!	857	3381	5204
41	9 Aug, 16:50	Two big institutions of Nepal strongly support China: 'Doklam belongs to China. India shall withdraw troops unconditionally'	476	1892	7284

Table 2: Five *Global Times* posts that have the largest number of shares, comments and likes.

Furthermore, except for post 34 that is editorial (views), the other four posts are news pieces but they mostly sourced from CNN and Indian media outlets. All the five posts used the multimedia format namely texts with hyperlinks, videos, and photos. They all used either frames of supporting China's foreign policy (Post 34, 20 and 41) or military confrontational (conflict) frames (Post 35 and 57).

Put in nutshell, the traditional division of views/news as well as internal/external news sources do not matter much on the social media platform. With the dividing line between views and news being blurred, both views and news items as well as in-house reporting and edited news reports can attract audience's interests. What really matters are the use of particular frames that are either supportive of China's foreign policy or conflict frames, as well as the use of multimedia format, videos and photos in particular, at time of crisis.

Analysis of web users' comments and replies

Corresponding to the above-mentioned five most popular posts of *GT*, a total of 42 pieces of comments and replies were selected for textual analysis. Themes, frames, peer-to-peer interactions, the use of languages and emoji/emoticons will be discussed below.

Five main themes are generated from web users' comments and replies. First, Web users criticize Chinese government as well as China's domestic and foreign policies. Netizens often expand the discussions and relate the current Sino-Indian border crisis to other border disputes, history and domestic issues. For instance, one user commented: 'Diaoyu island, Spratly island, Sino-India border ok the only thing left is for Mongolia to take Inner Mongolia back...'. This quote suggested that Chinese government was weak and incompetent, getting itself into border disputes with almost all neighboring countries. Another user made more direct and harsh comments: '...this country has no dignity or integrity...It's totally no different from Qing dynasty, seeking peace with payment. Pity the 1.4 billion housing slaves who have to pay for mortgages, traffic fines, forced insurance, higher oil prices compared to overseas...'. These comments show the users' discontents towards the government as well as its domestic and foreign policies.

Second, pro- or anti-war debate. On the one hand, some web users claim that China shall fight against India. For instance, they commented: '(We) shall use actions to tell India what to do, rather than having a spat fight!'; 'Motherland needs a war to comfort the world's unsettled heart'. On the other hand, some voiced their opinions against the war for different reasons: 'Hope it can be solved peacefully. Don't want to fight a war. But if other countries come to invade us, we will show them a lesson!! China will win!'; 'Give money if they want money. Give land if they want land. Or give them beauties. Don't fire canons. The rich and the powerful

all went to USA! What can the poor do.’ These comments show that the heated debate is on among online users about fighting or not fighting a war with India.

Third, provide suggestions on China’s strategies/tactics. For instance, one user commented: ‘(I) heard Doklam will become the firing range for China’s artillery and rocket army! But before the strike, (we) shall evaluate the reliability and precision of navigation function of Beidou (Northern Dipper) satellite system. In case of power-off or network breakdown, the commander shall have other means to continue with the fight.’

Fourth, comment and evaluate India and other countries. Regarding India, comments include: ‘India has the ambition to seek hegemony. It does not have the wisdom and capability to seek hegemony. India thinks it can dominate the region because its population surpasses that of China’; ‘Play cheap in face of defeat. That’s certainly India’. Regarding Nepal’s support of China, comments include: ‘Nepal used to be close to India when the Maoist party was in power. Later the Indian National Congress came to power... getting even closer to India’; and ‘Nepal’s economy, 70% 80% comes from Brother Three (India)’.

Fifth, joke about and make fun of the news content. In response to the GT’s post about soldiers throwing rocks, web users joked: ‘(They) can have a snowball fight in two months’; ‘Who did the kick? Fantastic!’

Based on these themes, the following frames can be identified: comments on Chinese government, domestic and foreign policy; pro/anti-war debate; comments on India and third party countries; comments on China’s military strategies/tactics; and joke/humor. In comparison to the themes and frames of GT’s posts, despite some similarities and overlapping, web users’ comments have demonstrated much more diverse, different and critical voices. The scope of themes and frames are wider than that of the GT posts.

Peer-to-peer dialogues/interactions dominate the commentary area on Weibo. Netizens either indicate agreement with certain comments, reinforce and expand the ideas, or they disagree with the comments, criticize and abuse the users. Two examples are given below.

Example 1:

GT's Post: Finally Indian authoritative expert speaks the truth: we are in the wrong, we have to withdraw troops!

Users' comment: Indian public intellectual

User's reply 1: Chinese public intellectuals must have had the climax

User's reply 2: You are slandering this Indian expert. He is not public intellectual – what he said is true. He did not attack or smear his own country either. On the contrary, he is saving India.

In this example, the peer-to-peer interactions showed different attitudes towards the Indian expert. When one user called the Indian expert 'Indian public intellectual', one respondent used sexual language to allude it to Chinese public intellectuals. The term 'public intellectual' in Chinese has negative connotations. It suggests that the well-educated Chinese who are active on the web and who enjoyed high social status slander and smear history. 'They use some groundless historical facts as evidence and draw a conclusion: China will lose' (JingshiVyan, 2017). In view of this, another respondent disagreed with the labelling and defended the Indian expert.

Example 2:

GT's Post: Suspected videos on Sino-Indian soldiers' confrontation at Bangong Tso, throwing rocks at each other

Users' comment: I feel that India acts like a great power, though being elusive and speaking few words. It acts strong and does what it is supposed to do. Looking back on China, it has been invaded by others for about two months. Chinese citizens either abused India or abused each other. Media made presumptions. Some departments gave warnings or they were busy looking through the historical documents and 1962. It sucks!

User's reply 1: In the video, the way your father, the Indian soldier, rolled down the rocks was amusing!

In this example, one web user praised India as a great power while criticizing China, Chinese government, Chinese netizens and Chinese media. The respondent who disagreed with him humiliated and abused this user referring to footages in the post.

In sum, textual analysis reveal that GT's posts have set the users' agenda with its ideological stance and caused heated debate among web users on Weibo. GT does not moderate or directly involves in the debate. The online debates including comments and replies are a hybrid of information/opinion, rational/irrational, abusing/amusing, agreement/disagreement voices. While the online users' comments are somewhat in alignment with the general themes and frames of GT posts such as China and India's policy, third party involvement and military confrontation, online users generated new themes and frames such as criticizing China's domestic policy, foreign policy and societal issues, abusing, joking and making fun of India and other countries, making fun of the video footages in the news, peer-to-peer interactions, and so on. The themes and scope of the peer-to-peer dialogues are much wider, personalized, opinionated and diversified than that of the mainstream media. The mainstream media such as GT mainly plays the role of initiating, informing, enforcing and reviving the online debate. Online users share their opinions, emotions and participate in the debate, rationally or irrationally.

Regarding the usage of languages and emoji/emoticons, in comparison to the official and formal use of languages by GT, web users have employed the functionalities of Weibo such as anonymity and emoji/emoticons to express themselves, make comments, and/or have a spat fight with other users. Table 3 below shows categories of some languages and emoji/emoticons used by Chinese netizens.

Use of languages	Examples
Affirmative	Unconditionally support our motherland, Chinese Communist Party and People's Liberation Army of China
Racist	Can't you just play with snakes, A San (India)?
Sarcasm	I think we can form a keyboard army. Let the keyboard heroes who commented on the national issues go to the frontline...
Metaphor	Actually it is only the urban management officers (UMOs) who can and dare to fight the war in China. Americans are even afraid of China's UMOs. UMOs are China's most elite troops who can fight a real fight.
Parody	Nepal: Big Brother, I'm running out of money

Humor	What do you know, this is India's tactic – making the Liberation Army laugh to death and then inherit our land
Use of emoji/emoticons	Examples
 Smile	Which country in the world is not eyeing China with hostility?
 Laugh-Cry	Nothing wrong. You are not qualified to be the imaginary enemy of the USA.
 Spread out hands	They are scared by road construction?!!! Nobody else can do that
 Doge	Seems the Indian experts have brains compared to Indian army
 Angry	If we are not worried about the Belt & Road initiatives being screwed up, India would have already surrendered

Table 3: Online users' usage of languages and emoji/emoticons on Weibo

Table 3 shows that the online users use a great variety of languages and emoji/emoticons to express their opinions, attitudes and emotions towards the border crisis and beyond. Since GT is a nationalist tabloid, it is not a surprise that many users use Weibo to stir up the nationalist sentiment, or to vent their anger using offensive languages, or to abuse others to achieve self-satisfaction. Some users make rational and insightful comments while others participate in the debate for fun or revealing certain sentiments.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has traced and analyzed four main actors in wars and conflicts in the social media age: social media platform, the mainstream news organizations, online users and social media content. These four actors associate, interact and negotiate with each other in the social media network surrounding specific issues. Based on the content studies of Sino-Indian border crisis in 2017, the central argument is that social media is playing an enabling role in contemporary wars and conflicts. Both professional media outlets and web users employed the functionalities of social media platforms to set, counter-set or expand the public agenda. Social media platform

embodies a web of technological and human complexities with different actors, interests, and relations. Four conclusions can be drawn.

First, the mainstream media have appropriated social media to cover the conflict/crisis, set the public agenda and influence public opinion. News outlets such as GT have incorporated Weibo in its news production. They post news updates and views regularly and lead public debate with their ideological stances. The content study reveals that the traditional division of news/views and in-house/external news sources are not so important on the social media platform. The professional media's use of foreign policy and conflict frames as well as the use of multimedia format are most important at time of crisis to attract the attention of and engage with the web users.

Second, online users have created new frames, counter-set and expanded the public agenda. Professional media outlets initiate and set the tone of the debate. Meanwhile, the web users use variety of languages and emoji/emoticons to freely express their views, opinions, attitudes and emotions. In comparison to the mainstream media, the themes and scope of the peer-to-peer dialogues are much wider, personalized, opinionated and diversified. In the new social media-enabled public sphere, the heterogeneous publics interact and participate in the debate. They also impact on the editorial agenda through likes and shares (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2017).

Third, contemporary wars and conflicts are mediated via social media platforms. Figure 3 delineates the dynamics and interactions of four actors within the network.

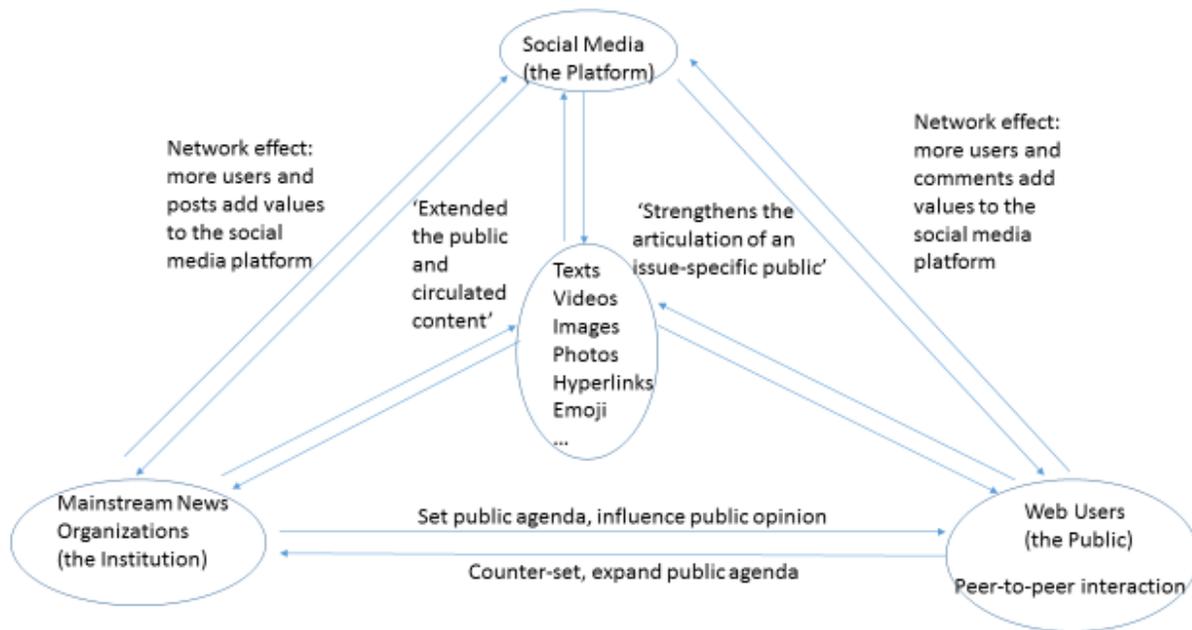


Figure 3: Actor-network in mediatized conflict

As Figure 3 indicates, social media platform and social media content are closely linked. Social media content are part of Weibo's comment culture. Weibo with its technical features, functionalities and user cultures have afforded news outlets and web users (individuals) an extraordinary networking power. For news outlet, the platform has extended the news media's reach and facilitated public participation in debate, thus 'extended the public and circulated content' (Poell, Kloet & Zeng, 2014). For web users, the platform's comment culture 'strengthens the articulation of an issue-specific public' (ibid). In this case, the web users' wide use of abusive, provocative, racist languages as well as criticisms about Chinese government and its policies suggest that Weibo presents an open and free platform when it comes to the border crisis.

On the downside, the constraining force of the social media platform is embodied in the online echo-chamber effect and chilling effect. Web users re-enforce their ideas and views about the on-going crisis by the means of sharing, commenting and interacting with other users, whereas those who make different voices encounter abuses and bullying, thus may be unwilling to participate in the debate any more.

In reversed direction, both news organizations and web users post news, views, comments and interact with each other, consequently add values to the platform and lead to network effect. Network effect refers to ‘the more users who can communicate with one another on a network, the more valuable the network is’ (Hayes, 2005). The value of social networking sites greatly increase with the number of users. Law (1999) claims, ‘Yes, actors are network effects. They take the attributes of the entities which they include. They are, of course, precarious.’

Fourth, the network approach shall integrate the social context and macro-structural factors into the analysis (Micó, Masip & Domingo, 2013). Nationalism is an important macro factor in studying contemporary wars, crisis and conflicts. As Montiel and colleagues (2014) argued, during international conflicts, domestic media can churn out news accounts that are not only morally ascendant but also entitle their homeland to clash with the other country. In China’s particular social and cultural context, nationalism is one of the key enduring driving forces which have shaped Chinese foreign policy as China increasingly integrates itself into the globalized and interdependent world, the so-called ‘positive nationalism’ (Chen, 2005). The Internet brings profound changes to the power relations between state and popular players. It creates a space for ordinary Chinese to take active roles in shaping Chinese nationalism by circulating their own nationalist narratives, interpretation and voices (Ma, 2018). This study has provided empirical evidence to demonstrate that both professional news media and the online publics in China produce, disseminate and mobilize popular nationalism via social media platforms.

In sum, the network approach is useful in tracing different actors and revealing their interactions in the digital public sphere. This study has proved the synergies between mainstream media, social media platforms and user contents (Siapera, Hunt & Lynn, 2015). Social media platform has empowered the mainstream media and web users to communicate, interact and influence each other. In return, increasing number of media outlets and users add values to the social media platform, leading to network effect. This research has implications for the study of mediatization of conflict especially in non-democratic countries. These actor-networks and the macro social-political context are influential in the mediatization of conflict in the social media era. In the future, cross-cultural comparative analysis of media, conflicts and digital technologies can be conducted using semi-structured interviews and social media analysis.

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