Managing Chinese Government Microblogs: Enablers and Barriers

Lei Zheng

Fudan University
NO.220,Handan Road, Shanghai, China
+86-21-55665676, 200433

zhengl@fudan.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the enablers and barriers for the effectiveness of Chinese government microblogs with regard to government information disclosure, public service and citizen participation, and then builds a theoretical framework.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4.2 [**Information Systems Applications**]: Type of systems – e-government applications

General Terms

Management, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Social Media, Government, China, Enablers and Barriers

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, a great number of government microblogs accounts have been opened and run by Chinese government agencies to foster government information disclosure, public service and citizen participation. According to the Chinese Government Microblogs Assessment Report of 2011, the total number of Chinese government microblog accounts have exceeded 50 thousand by the end of 2011 [1]. This paper examines the enablers and barriers for the management of Chinese government microblogs with an empirical study, and attempts to identify the social, economic, political, organizational and technological factors that could influence the effectiveness of government microblogs. It also explores the relationship among these factors and builds a theoretical framework. Based on the findings of the study, the paper also makes some recommendations to Chinese government agencies in order to improve the effectiveness of government microblogs.

As part of a research project on government microblogging in China [2], this paper conducts an empirical study on the factors influencing the effectiveness of Chinese government microblogs, and explores the interrelationship among these enablers and

barriers. This study employs two methods for data collection. One is focus groups carried out from April through June, 2011, with 78 civil servants from Shanghai Municipal Government agencies and county governments, using brainstorming method to collect various viewpoints. The other is in-depth interviews conducted from July through October, 2011, using semi-structured questionnaires with managers of nine popular and influential government microblogs in Shanghai, as well as managers who are responsible for government customers, in the two major microblogs operating companies in China. The author records and transcribes the data collected, and analyzed the data with qualitative approach under the guidance of grounded theory by using Atlas.ti software. The research findings are as follows.

2. FINDINGS

2.1 External Enablers for Government Microblogs

2.1.1 Growth in the Living Standards

In recent years, Chinese people's living standards have been greatly improved. The ownership rates of home computers and mobile phones are rising continuously, so is the rapid growth in microblog users. As interviewees mentioned, the increasing income of citizens has provided a basic foundation for the development and pervasiveness of microblogs.

2.1.2 Rising Citizen Participation

The rising intention of Chinese citizens to participate in public affairs in China has created favorable conditions for the development and management of government microblogs. Microblogs have gained wide public attention as a new tool of communication and interaction. Citizens use this platform actively to read news, express their opinions and participate in public affairs, which also propel government departments to open institutional microblogs to interact with the public. Therefore, some interviewees believe that it is the high time for government to operate microblogs.

2.1.3 Policy Support

Some civil servants pointed out that the existing national policy environment is also favorable for Chinese government to run microlbogs. In recent years, the government attaches importance to build a service-oriented government and harmonious society, and to achieve social management innovation. The central government introduces corresponding policies and regulations to promote government information disclosure. Overall, this policy environment promotes the disclosure of government information and citizens' interaction with government.

2.1.4 Technological Maturity of Microblogs

The microblog applications and platforms continue to mature, which guarantees the sustainable operation of government microblogs. Some interviewees pointed out that microblog platforms such as Sina and Tencent are easy to operate, stable in technology, and mature in functionality with friendly user experience. Therefore, the technological risks for the government to run microblogs have been minimized.

2.1.5 International Influence

In recent years, employing social media by government has become a global trend and has created huge impacts. In many countries, government agencies and senior officials use social media for political elections and political communication. Some interviewees in this research believed that this international trend has also influenced China to some extent, and propelled Chinese government agencies to run microblogs to interact with the public.

2.2 Internal Enablers for Government Microblogs

2.2.1 Leadership Attention and Supports

The rapid development of microblogs has gained great attention from many government leaders. Some government microblog accounts were opened at their direct requests. One interviewee mentioned, "The leaders in our bureau placed serious emphasis on government microblogs. The project was fully funded and staffed, while trainings and working sessions were held regularly. Leaders in various offices and institutions opened their own personal microblogs to interact with our institutional microblog."

2.2.2 Abundant Information Resources in Government

At present, government possesses a wealth of information resources to support the operations of government microblogs. As many civil servants mentioned, government is now the largest reservoir of authoritative, reliable and timely information in society, with strong potential to disseminate information, deliver targeted information services, and respond promptly to the public response.

2.2.3 Advantages in Human Resources

Some civil servants pointed out that the government had considerable advantages in human resources, which could contribute to the operation of government microblogs. The advantages are generally twofold. One is the human resources within the government. "China has a large number of civil servants", an interviewee pointed out, "many of them are young and mastered with network technologies. They are potential microblog managers." The other is the human resources outside the government. "Government can also use external human resources, such as experts, scholars and overseas returnees. These people could be invited as trainers and researchers to enhance the operational capability of government microblog managers."

2.2.4 Secured Funding

The daily operation and management of microblogs require a certain amount of financial investment to cover personnel costs, training costs, equipment costs and communication costs. Many civil servants said, as long as the leadership paid attention to government microblogs indeed, funds would not be a big problem. Moreover, government microblogs are usually running on existing microblog platforms maintained by private companies. Given that ICT infrastructure had been considerably invested in many government agencies, there wouldn't be large additional equipment investment to run government microblogs.

2.2.5 Adequate ICT infrastructure in Government

Interviewees indicated that after years of e-government development, most government agencies has now possessed adequate ICT infrastructure, equipped with computers, servers, networks and other hardware facilities and software applications. The government's information security capabilities have also been greatly improved in recent years, and all these have provided a strong guarantee for the government to run microblogs effectively and safely.

2.3 External Barriers for Chinese Government Microblogs

2.3.1 Hackers and "Water Army"

The ecological complexity of Internet society barricades the development of government microblogs. There are both angels and devils on the Internet. Some interviewees pointed out that hackers were hard to defend on the Internet. Government microblogs are especially threatened by hacking. Once the accounts were broken through, the negative impact would be very serious. A microblog manager stated: "Although Sina and Tencent claimed that they would ensure the security of government microblogs, these accounts are still at the risk of malicious intrusion. The account security is difficult to be guaranteed. Recently, one government microblog in Dalian City has just suffered a hacker attack."

"Internet water army", a group of Internet also composes a challenge. The "army" refers to ghostwriters who are paid to post online comments with particular commercial or political intentions. These comments could manipulate, mislead and cover up public opinions for the benefits of special interest group, and make it hard for government to tell the true opinions of citizens and interact with citizens.

2.3.2 Low trust in government and disinterests

In addition, citizens' low trust in government and disinterests to politics also exist on the Internet. Some interviewees acknowledged that citizens' trust in government declines in recent years, and the government was facing a huge challenge. As for the posts published on government microblogs, "the public would hold a skeptical attitude. Thus government microblogs would not only have difficulties to play their roles, but also become the public laughingstock in some occasions, which couldn't worth the candle."

Due to either low interests in public participation or suspicion of the government's intention, some citizens don't have much interest in interacting with government microblogs. Some people believe that government microblogs were opened up just for a "show".

2.3.3 Lack of Regulations

Meanwhile, the ambiguity and absence of Internet regulations and policies also affect the performance of government microblogs. One interviewee pointed out: "The low threshold of posting information on microblogs and the inadequate review process make it hard to authenticate the information on microblogs. And there may be some 'Internet Water Army'. Thus, the effectiveness of the government microblogs would be undermined. "Another civil servant mentioned: "At present, speech on the Internet is relatively free in China. Without a sound regulatory mechanism,

due to their tremendous influence, government microblogs may become the target of malicious attacks."

2.3.4 Digital Divide

Some interviewees worried that the users of microblogs were mostly young people in middle class, while the elderly and poor could rarely use microblogs, not even use computers. This situation is unlikely to change in short term. After the opening up of government microblogs, non-users of micorblogs would be further marginalized and their interests might be ignored, which would exacerbate the digital divide.

2.3.5 Fast Technological Upgrading and Substitution

Some civil servants also doubted about the sustainability of microblogs and worried that they wouldn't be popular for long due to the rapid IT advancement and upgrading. "Government websites, mayor's mailboxs and the official blogs which were once hot for a time perhaps could be the lesson for government microblogs." "What if microblogs have been abandoned by Internet users after the government had put a lot of manpower and material resources on microblogs? Wouldn't it be worthless?"

As the future of government microblogs still lies in uncertainties, consequently, microblog management has not yet become a routine work in government agencies with designated and fixed posts. Some civil servants worried that if they were assigned to a full-time job on microblog management, once their superiors shift their attention on government microblogs, their positions will be removed. One microblog manager gave a vivid description: "No one wants to work full-time on the microblog, because no one wants to 'die' on it".

2.3.6 Technological Risks

Some civil servants also worried that, as a new phenomenon, microblog was not yet mature, and some risks were still unknown. For example, some interviewees said that "government microblogs were operated on external platforms, and the platform's operation faults may lead to system errors and even crashes, resulting in unexpected consequences."

2.4 The Internal Barriers for Chinese Government Microblogs

2.4.1 Lack of Institutions and Guidelines

Because microblogs are new tools for government, some interviewees indicate that the government still lacks adequate institutions for the operation of government microblogs. In addition, in lack of effective and specific guidelines, microblog managers are confused with conflicting issues and hesitate to take measures. As results, the effectiveness of government microblogs is seriously affected.

With regard to which department within the government should be responsible leading and managing government microblogs, there are no existing policies or regulations to follow in most government agencies. Nowadays, most leading departments of government microblogs are in the charge of Party Committees or publicity departments, and specific management teams and coordination teams for microblogs are quite different. In most occasions, government microblogs are operated by either the Internet Management and Publicity office, or General Administrative Office, or the Communist Youth League, or related functional departments. Both advantages and disadvantages are found with these different arrangements.

Besides, the interviews discovers that Chinese government agencies now mainly adopts two forms—part time jobs and shifts—to assign staff to the daily operation and management of government microblogs. The size of the operating teams ranges from one person to as many as ten members, and few departments introduce full-time posts for the management of government microblogs. A microblog operator mentioned, "We do our job in shifts. From Monday to Friday, the one who has spare time can post service tips or something at his or her convenience." And due to the special nature of microblogs, the peak time of usage are the 30 minutes before work in the morning, the lunch break and the evening session, while most civil servants work from nine to five, some of the microblog managers have to work overtime.

Owing to the feeling of uncertainty towards government microblogs, some civil servants worried that once they worked on government micorblogs full time, their original jobs would be affected. Therefore, workers in some departments take shifts for the daily operation of microblogs. The shift lasts from three months to six months. The shift is temporary for a specific operator so that their original post won't be influenced, and the operatoe on the shift is not required to work on other tasks until the shift is over. With this arrangement, the experience that a certain government microblog operator accumulated during his or her shift would hardly pass on to his or her successors. With their varied personal styles of different operators, the management stability of government microblogs is also jeopardized.

2.4.2 Low Attention from Leadership

Some government microblog managers mentioned that although their leaders requested them to open and run government microblogs, they didn't pay attention to them fundamentally. That is to say, they just stress the importance orally, but do not provide matching personnel, financial and material resources. Some leaders did nothing more than coping with a task assigned by leaders in higher levels. In addition, the attention of the leadership frequently shifts, which would also affect the stable and sustainable operation of government microblogs.

In particular, many civil servants pointed out that under the existing Chinese administrative system, the attention and support of superior leadership is extremely important to the development of government microblogs, and is the key to success. "The reason why some government microblogs are abandoned was that they didn't earn full attention and support from the leadership." Therefore, a lot of microblogs have become an object of "display" of the government, a microblog manager mentioned, "Currently, what concerns us most is the support of higher authorities."

2.4.3 Lack of Resources

Many government departments reported that in spite of the increasing tasks and workload of government microblogs, the necessary funds and resources still fell behind. As mentioned above, a good support of human, financial and material resources mainly depended on the attention earned from the leadership. At present, most government microblogs have no specifically allocated funds. The facility investment, daily operation expenses, communication costs, training fees, and personnel expenses (work allowances and bonuses) are not secured financially. Some departments stated clearly: "Our human and material resources are limited. We lack funds, equipment and professional supports."

Without secured specially allocated funds, the expenditures on government microblogs in many departments were mainly

appropriated from the budget for general administrations or other purposes. A government microblog manager illustrated: "The Bureau of Finance said that they haven't listed this item in their budget in advance, so they could not allocate any fund for us. Therefore, this year we used the overhead cost, which is from the General Administrative Office's expenditures." "Other costs such as training and activities are not funded at all. Even our own finance staff wouldn't approve them, not to mention the Bureau of Finance. "

2.4.4 Conservative and Closed Organizational Culture

The study finds out that many government agencies shows apprehension towards external barriers and attacks. The government microblog managers worried that when the Internet users and opinion leaders questioned the contents on government microblogs, the government's authority would be directly challenged. "Government microblogs might be taken advantage of by interest groups, resulting in social discord. They may also give a vent for disadvantaged groups to show their angers and be threatened by malicious comments, which would pose negative impacts on the image of government."

Besides, the current messages and posts in government microblogs are too official, formal and rigid, and present themselves as government "bulletin boards". "In the long run, government microblogs would inevitably lose their attractiveness and vitality, and ultimately become useless things." a civil servant noted, "The current 'leader first' culture prevails within the government, forming an arrogant attitude of government on the Internet as well. It would inevitably intensify the tension between the government and the public, which would worsen the communication between them."

2.4.5 Bureaucratic Review Process

As a novelty, government microblog is however restrained by the traditional bureaucratic review process currently. In fear of making mistakes when posting information and interacting with citizens, some government microblogs still adopt traditional review process and thereby reduce the speed and effectiveness of response. A government microblog manager pointed out: "the review process is also where the contradiction lies. If we response every microblog in accordance with the full-process review, timeliness will be hurt. With this process, we then could only take official and diplomatic phases to answer them."

Moreover, the leadership often lacks a thorough understanding of the features of microblogs and the way of managing them. Some leaders still adopts old ways to superintend government microblogs, and some of them are even blind commanders. Under their improper leadership, some microblog managers are very confused and frustrated. A government microblog manager mentioned "The leader who is responsible for government microblogs doesn't have a good knowledge of them. He views operating microblogs as the same way as publishing a newspaper, and holds editing assemblies every morning and night."

2.4.6 Inadequate Personnel Capabilities

Since managing government microblog is a fresh new task for agencies, many managers still lack management experiences and capabilities. For an instance, some civil servants worried about answering questions in specialized field raise by the public. "If you respond with insufficient or inaccurate information, you could

not satisfy the public needs; if you put aside questions, people would feel ignored. So it is quite a dilemma."

Therefore, many government microblog managers reflected their urgent need to receive professional trainings, particularly in the skills of attracting attentions and response in emergencies. "If you want to attract public attention, professional media packaging or trainings are very much needed to improve our management capabilities." "I hope there are regular trainings, and show us how to deal with unexpected things. In addition, when a government microblog is just opened, it is actually our own staff who initiates the participation in the microblog. Therefore, these people must also be trained in dealing with complex situations."

Many government microblog managers also mentioned that the original workload for some civil servants was already very heavy. In microblog management, they felt hard to balance their new task with the old one. They were unable to response quickly or manage government microblogs at any time. A government microblog manager pointed out clearly: "there are only six people in our office. In order to take care of all the tasks, we could only take turns to work part-time on microblogs. Gradually we feel exhausted."

2.4.7 Lack of Cross-boundary Collaborations

The study has found that most government microblogs are unlinked with each other, without information sharing or operational collaborations. Especially in dealing with emergencies, there are no joint efforts among institutions and individuals to enhance information dissemination and interaction. A microblog manager from the railway station cited an example: "our services are information-based. The source of information is rather important, but very often in emergencies the information from other transport units is way beyond our grasp. The customers were very confused and failed to receive information from our service counters. The truth is that we didn't know the information they asked either, because we didn't have any sources of information. Talking about this accident on high-speed railways, we didn't receive any notifications from the dispatch center and other transportation partners. Actually, we knew about this accident by searching content by ourselves through other microblogs. Without any information provided by our partners in transportation, it is not surprising that we couldn't serve the passengers well. All complaints are pointed to the front desk, because we are the service terminal. However, we have no partnership with other units."

2.4.8 Information Confidentiality

The government has considerations for security and confidentiality towards the information published by microblogs. Some microblog managers worried that "Once the government's confidential information was revealed on the Internet, the situation would be difficult to restore". This would make the government hesitate to publish information on microblogs.

2.4.9 Information Accuracy

Besides, some interviewees also worried that the limitation of 140 characters for each message may result in information inaccuracy and ambiguity. "Different people have different interpretations of the contents, which would affect the accuracy and authority of the information published by government microblogs."

3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

4. REFERENCES

[1] China National Academy of Governance (2011). Assessment Report on Chinese Government Microblogging.

[2] Zheng, L., et al (2011). Studying the Management Mechanism of Government Microblogs in China: A Research Plan. Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance, ACM Press.