

# Sina Weibo of China: From a Copycat to a Local Uptake of a Global Technology Assemblage

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## ABSTRACT

*In this essay the author presents an expanded genre view to examine global diffusion of interactive technologies in this increasingly globalized world. Through an analysis of its generic features, the author explores how Sina Weibo, a technology considered as a copycat of a Western technology, arises as a local uptake in a discourse of global technology diffusion. In studying its struggle and resistance, the author shows how a local uptake is shaped by the implicit value and ideology of the technology it imitates from. Meanwhile, this diffusion process is also a process of enacting the emergent structure of local technology use. The dynamic and dialogical structuring process behind genre formation worldwide manifests the complex interactions of technology and culture in our contemporary conditions.*

*Keywords:* Assemblage, Culture, Genre, Sina Weibo, Technology, Twitter, Uptake

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## INTRODUCTION

At the night of July 23, 2011, two high-speed passenger trains had a rear-end collision in eastern Zhejiang province of China. Four cars from the front train called *Harmony* derailed and fell off from an elevated bridge, killing 38 people and injuring more than 200. It so happened that I was visiting my parents who lived two hours away from the site of the accident. After I heard the news from TV, my first reaction was to use VPN (Virtual Private Network) to scale “the Great Firewall of China”—a system of Internet censorship ran by the Chinese government that blocks access to the websites with

sensitive political information—to assess what was happening from the overseas media. My past experiences told me that the state media of China tend to cover this type of accidents. I also opened a browser window to follow posts on Sina Weibo, a popular social media service that was perceived as a Chinese copycat of Twitter by many Western observers.

What was happening on Sina Weibo was remarkable. I saw pictures of passengers trapped inside trains at dark night, derailed car dangling off the bridge, mighty tractors crushing mangled cars on the ground to bury the wreckage on site and therefore cover up the tragedy, and so on. I witnessed personal reports from miserable

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passengers and their concerned relatives. I read poignant and often witty commentaries about the Railway Ministry and the government, circulated among Weibo users—thanks for the unique feature of rich media invented by Sina, Weibo users were able to post much longer posts than 140 characters in a picture format. For the first time, I did not want to scale the Great Firewall to get truthful information as the depth and authenticity of news coverage from overseas media was hard to compete with the immediacy of the first-hand information and pictures posted by common Chinese users. Indeed a Sina Weibo user in one of those two trains broke the news first on the site.

I was not alone: Many Chinese citizens devoured the information about the accident on Sina Weibo as earnestly as I did. As time passed, the informed public got more and more upset about the ways the Railway Ministry handled the accident and eschewed their responsibilities. People were agitated and furious when the spokesman used bureaucratic rhetoric to diminish the consequences of the accident at the first press conference 26 hours after the collision. Almost 10 million pieces of online criticisms were posted during the following five days (Anti, 2012), ultimately resulting in a reversed official stance and a more thorough investigation.

The above episode sounds like another Twitter-like success story after *Arab Spring*. However, at the time when Egyptian activists are still fighting for democracy and freedom on the Tahrir Square two years after the so-called Twitter revolution, a new policy issued by the highest court of China this fall rules that a message of online rumor and slander “forwarded more than 500 times or read more than 5,000 times could earn convicted offenders up to three years in prison” (Buckley, 2013). As a result, hundreds of “outspoken” Chinese microblogs users were detained (ibid). In both cases, the phenomenon of the social media revolution and its aftermath clearly shows the complicity of technology diffusion and use characterized by local cultural, political, and sociotechnical

conditions. A simplistic view that celebrates the instrumentality of a social media technology would be too hasty and naïve here.

With the fast development of digital networks in the age of globalization, emerging technology use practices in one locale have been diffusing rapidly across the globe. During the last two decades, we have seen the global expansion of new technology use practices such as instant messaging, text messaging, blogging, social network services, and microblogging. The emergence and arising of Sina Weibo takes place in this wide context. This essay examines the genre formation process of Sina Weibo as an answer to the call raised by Coakes (2012) to understand “the essence of technology and its impact on us.” It follows the discussion of the special issue of “What do we mean by technology?” (2012).

“Weibo” is the Chinese word for “microblog(ging)”. Sina Weibo was launched in August 2009 to fill the void after Twitter was blocked by the Chinese government since the Ürümqi riots that July. With more than 500 million registered users and 54 million daily active users in fall 2013, it is ranked as the No. 2 active social network in China (Buckley, 2013; Kemp, 2013; Ong, 2013). Sina Weibo has a very fast development trajectory: While it took Twitter five years to have around 100 million tweets per day by January 2011, it only took Sina Weibo half of the time length to reach the same benchmark by March 2012 (DeWoskin, 2012). For outsiders, the scale of Weibo is astonishing. “On Twitter something might get retweeted 50 times. On Weibo it’s 1,000 times” (ibid). Recently the British Prime Minister David Cameron opened a Weibo account before his diplomatic visit to China in December 2013, and he attracted 194,000 followers within three days. In contrast, he has 500,000 followers for his Twitter account opened for one year (McCormick, 2013). Cameron was not the first Western celebrity who joined Sina Weibo; the American movie star Tom Cruise started his account in 2011.

From the beginning Sina Weibo was regarded as a Chinese copycat of Twitter. Later it was ridiculed as the illegitimate child of Facebook and Twitter as it imitated features from both sites that are banned in China. In fact one could find the traces of almost every successful American social network sites and apps in Sina Weibo, including Foursquare, Pinterest, and many others. On the other hand, it has developed many distinctive features originating from Chinese Internet culture, including rich media, threaded comment, private chat, microgroup, microevent, and so on. And some of these features found their way back into the later versions of Twitter. Indeed it would be highly doubtful whether Twitter would have succeeded similarly in China if not banned.

Opposing a naïve view in favor of the instrumentality of a social media technology, I present in this essay an expanded genre view to examine global diffusion of interactive technologies in this increasingly globalized world to understand the complicity of technology use. I first describe the framework of a technology as a genre (Sun, 2012), and I argue this framework will bring valuable insights to approach cross-cultural technology design issues. Then I look at the two aspects of the genre formation process surrounding Sina Weibo. The first aspect is the development of its generic features. With a close analysis, I show how Sina Weibo, a technology considered as a copycat of a Western technology, arises as a local uptake in a discourse of global technology diffusion. The second aspect is various forms of struggle and resistance surfacing from the process of structuring, through which I illustrate how a local uptake is influenced by the implicit value and ideology of the technology it imitates from. Meanwhile, this diffusion process is also a process of enacting the emergent structure of local technology use. In the end I maintain that the dynamic and dialogical structuring process behind genre formation worldwide manifests the complex interactions of technology and culture in our “technological culture” (Slack & Wise, 2005).

## UNDERSTANDING TECHNOLOGY AS A GENRE

Regarding technological artifacts as a genre sounds like an adventurous idea, but it is not new at all in the field of technology design. Two decades ago Brown and Duguid advocated that “designed, communicative artifacts” (1994, p.10) to be broadly interpreted as genres. They characterize genres as “socially constructed interpretive conventions,” which is not confined to textual artifacts. They envision designers working as writers, who “try to invoke a particular genre, to establish the conventions they are putting into play,” and users responding to the designed artifact as readers who “try to recognize what has been invoked, what conventions are in play so that they might respond appropriately.” For example, people behave differently in a music hall as they do in a dining hall based on their understandings of expected conducts in these two different settings.

“The socially constructed interpreted conventions” have been closely examined by the school of rhetorical genre theory for the past thirty years. Rhetorical genre theory studies typified human activities through the distinctive textual features of genres, and many of the studies in this line illustrate that those generic features represent accepted social practices in particular cultural contexts. Bazerman describes genres this way: “Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. . . . They are locations within which meaning is constructed” (1997, p.19).

In my research on cross-cultural user experience design I found a genre view of technological artifact illuminating for exploring local technological use practices deeply rooted in peculiar cultural contexts (Sun, 2012). One of the major problems in cross-cultural design is the disconnect of *action* and *meaning*: A technology introduced to a new local context is usable, but it is often not meaningful for local users. Why would this happen? While action and meaning is connected in the original design