

DIFFUSION VS. CENSORSHIP: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE USE OF SOCIAL  
MEDIA BY DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS IN MAINLAND CHINA

By

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDB	China Development Brief
CNGO	Chinese non-governmental organization
GONGO	Government organized non-governmental organization
INGO	International non-governmental organizations
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPO	Non-profit organization
PVO	Private voluntary organization

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The adoption of social media among organizations is a world-wide trend. Social media have increasingly been described as essential tools for activist and non-governmental organizations. However, little is known about whether the Chinese non-governmental organization sector has embraced this trend. Through a content analysis of 227 non-governmental organization websites, this study examines: (1) whether non-governmental organizations in China take this opportunity to adopt new media technology, (2) how they utilize social media, and (3) whether government Internet censorship affects the diffusion of social media. The results suggest that the social media adoption rate among Chinese non-governmental organizations is low and that Internet censorship has a negative effect on the diffusion. Moreover, this study sheds light on the Internet censorship strategies of the Chinese government and adds to the literature on the diffusion of social media in a hostile context.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Social media is being adopted around the world and this represents a growing trend. Previous studies (Avidar, 2009; Gillin, 2008; Ingenhoff, 2009; Seo et al., 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2008) demonstrate the diffusion of social media around the world. No longer a buzz word, social media is an accepted practice and strategic tool among public relations practitioners (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). This increase in popularity of social media is driven by its interactive and conversation-building features that assist practitioners to achieve communication goals (Waters, Burnett, Lammb, & Lucas, 2009), as well as to empower practitioners (Diga & Kelleher, 2009).

Social media are convenient contemporary communication tools among Chinese Internet users (Oshiro, 2009). As communication innovations, social media enable ordinary Chinese Internet users to circumvent the control of mass media and information by authorities. In fact, the diffusion of social media has had a direct impact on the spread of democracy in Chinese society; that is, the spread of new media technologies empowers grassroots organizations to bypass authorities and can facilitate the development of democracy and social change in China (Chow, 2006).

At this time, there are no empirical studies about the adoption of social media by Chinese communication practitioners, especially those who work for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). NGOs play a significant role in addressing social issues in support of the public good. Historically, NGOs were viewed as “financially powerless” (Naudé, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004, p. 88) because of their shortage of funds for mass communication strategies. However, the arrival of social media offers them a new opportunity to accomplish their goals as social change agents.

This study is guided by the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1995; 2003) to explore the adoption of social media by NGOs in mainland China and the impact of government censorship on the diffusion of these media. It contributes to enhancing our understanding of the role social media play in the day-to-day communications of NGOs in Chinese society. A comparative content analysis is conducted between international NGOs (INGO) operating in China as well as Chinese NGOs (CNGO) to assess: (1) the difference in rates of adoption, (2) the social media forms adopted, (3) the purpose of social media adopted, and (4) the impact of censorship on diffusion of social media.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Diffusion of Innovation**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the theory of diffusion of innovation. It refers to the spread of abstract ideas, concrete objects, or actual practices through certain channels over a period of time within a social system (Rogers, 1983; 1986; 1995). Rogers (1995) further states that diffusion is a “special type of communication process,” in which new ideas or technologies as communication messages can result in certain alterations or consequences “in the structure and function of a social system” (p. 6). The diffusion process occurs in any societal entity, such as individuals, families, communities, organizations, or nations (Wejnert, 2002).

The study of diffusion of innovations can be traced back one hundred years to Tarde’s 1903 book on *The Laws of Imitation* (Rogers, 1995). In the early stages of diffusion research, scholars from different backgrounds only focused on their own fields and paid too much attention to the distinctiveness of diffusion research. However, sixty years later, Rogers, in his 1962 publication, *Diffusion of Innovations*, suggested that most diffusion studies followed two principles: (1) the shape of the diffusion process over time approaches an S-shaped curve and (2) early adopters have an advantage over later adopters in terms of social or economic status (Rogers, 1995). From then on, the diffusion of innovation has gradually evolved into a more unified, concerted, and convergent approach (Wejnert, 2002). Diffusion research covers a wide range of fields, such as agriculture (Griliches, 1957), rural sociology (Ryan & Gross, 1943), education (Carlson, 1965; Mort, 1958), public health (Coleman et al., 1966; Menzel & Katz, 1955),

and political science (Starr 1991; Valente, 1993; Volden, Ting, & Carpenter, 2008), among other fields.

One of the most important research questions in diffusion research is whether an obviously beneficial innovation can be adopted spontaneously. Both empirical data (Dvorak et al., 1936; Molander, Reit, & Dahlen, 1996) and practical cases (David, 1986; Holloway, 1975; Mosteller, 1981) indicate that innovations do not sell themselves, and are sometimes resisted by potential adopters. For example, it took over 150 years for British authorities to adopt the use of citrus for scurvy prevention in British sailors (Mosteller, 1981). More recently, public health practitioners in Peru spent two years introducing a water boiling campaign, but only 5% of local households actually adopted this new healthy practice (Wellin, 1955). Therefore, the recognition of an innovation's advantageousness does not necessarily lead directly to its diffusion. Rogers (1995) suggests that three other elements should be taken into consideration in the diffusion process: communication channels, time, and environmental context.

Communication channels are crucial in the spread of innovations, as "the essence of the diffusion process is the information exchange through which one individual communicates a new idea to one or several others" (Rogers, 1995, p. 18). Wejnert (2002) emphasizes the media's effect on the diffusion process. He suggests that mass media, due to their broad coverage and high efficiency in reaching the greatest number of audiences and informing potential adopters about the existence of an innovation, are highly effective in creating public awareness of an innovation. Conversely, interpersonal channels are more effective in modifying the attitudes and behaviors that lead potential adopters to accept the innovation. Several diffusion investigations (Becker, 1970;

Carlson, 1965; Coleman, Katz & Menzel, 1966; Kearns, 1992) indicate that interpersonal networks are more effective than mass media in persuading individuals to accept innovations. For instance, a study of the diffusion of computers among the top administrators in Pittsburgh schools (Kearns, 1992) implied that opinion leaders play a more important role in shaping people's attitudes and decisions than mass media sources do. Networks trump mass media because of the very nature of diffusion, which is a social process, where potential adopters refer to and imitate their peers and those they perceive to be their superiors who have previously adopted the innovation (Rogers, 1995; Rogers & Kincaid, 1980; Whyte, 1954). The diffusion of interactive innovation, such as social media, can cause what Rogers (1995) called the critical mass effect. That is, the spread of interactive innovation occurs only if a sufficient number of individuals adopt it because the interactive quality determines that an innovation has no utility until other members in the group also adopt it. With the rising number of adopters, the utility of an interactive innovation increases for the whole system (Rogers, 1995). Thus, each individual's adopting decision depends on other members' willingness to do so.

The time factor in diffusion research can be measured in three different ways: (1) an individual's adoption decision process, (2) different adopters' adoption rates, and (3) an entire system's adoption rate (Rogers, 1995). Diffusion research surpasses other behavioral science research by including time as a variable, but the measurement of the time dimension is compromised by introducing the recall problem, in which respondents recall the time at which they adopted a new idea, which has a high rate of inaccuracy (Coughenour, 1965; Menzel, 1957).

Environmental context is a factor referred to as externality that “affects the practicality and benefits of adoption, as well as an adopter’s willingness and ability to adopt an innovation” (Wejnert, 2002, p. 310). James (1993) proposed that the presence or absence of externalities, to some extent, has a determinant effect on the adoption of innovations, because innovations are not independent of their environmental contexts. Instead, innovations evolve in certain cultural and social environments and their diffusion success relies on the harmony between the innovations and the contexts. For individual actors, the adoption of innovations is remarkably impacted by “a state’s ideological doctrine and political censorship” (Wejnert, 2002, p. 315). In Bulgaria, for example, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of economic and political pluralism, the changed social conditions led to individuals’ adoption of new communication technologies, such as home satellite TV reception equipment (Bakardjieva, 1992). On the collective level, political conditions, systems, regulations, and norms could inhibit or postpone the adoption of some innovations. For example, the former Soviet Union’s political conditions played crucial roles in hindering the introduction of democratic ideas and the alteration of the societal structure (Sedaitis & Butterfield, 1991).

### **Non-governmental Organizations**

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is the term describing different types of groups and agencies that are independent of government control, such as charities, research institutes, professional associations, and so on. The United Nations Department of Public Information (2006) suggests that a non-governmental organization is a non-profit and voluntary citizens’ group that promotes social well-being and common good. NGOs have made valuable commitments to the resolution of world

problems in a variety of fields, ranging from poverty reduction to encouraging civic engagement (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2006; Willetts, 2002). The general aims of NGOs are to bring about political change, social well-being, economic justice, or environmental sustainability (Shaw, 1996). Minear (1987) adds that development education, value promotion, and policy advocacy are primary missions for NGOs.

Two terms — private voluntary organization (PVO) and non-profit organization (NPO) — need to be clarified since they can be used interchangeably with NGO. Gorman (1984) defines PVO as “nongovernmental (private), tax-exempt, non-profit agencies engaged in provision of relief and development purposes” (p. 2). He suggests that two terms, NGO and PVO, are equivalent, except that the first is more commonly used in the United States, while the second prevails in the European context. Salamon and Anheier (1992) classify NPOs into various subcategories, such as charity, foundation, social welfare organization, and professional and trade association. They suggest that NGO is actually one type of NPO, which aims to bring about economic and social change. Badelt (1999) suggests that NGO and NPO can be used interchangeably and their only difference lies in the fact that the term NGO is mostly used in an international organizational context to make a distinction between government organizations and private organizations, while the term NPO “has a strong background in the Anglo-Saxon world, where the choice of terminology has expressed the difference between a non-profit and a for-profit world” (p. 12). In summary, this study adheres to Badelt’s (1999) and Vakil’s (1997) suggestions that those three terms — NGO, NPO, and PVO — are equivalent and alternative.

The emergence of NGOs in mainland China is the result of the fast development and evolution of Chinese society in recent decades. The number of NGOs has increased from about 6,000 in 1978 to about 400,000 by the end of 2007 (Lu, 2009). Generally, Chinese NGOs, like their counterparts in Western countries, represent numerous fields, including child welfare, environmental protection, labor and migration, HIV/AIDS, women's rights, and the like.

Due to China's particular political climate, however, NGOs in China, to some extent, are different from those in Western countries. NGOs in China are not typical non-governmental organizations because they are usually not independent from the Chinese government. According to Gordenker and Weiss (1995), NGOs in China tend to be government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), which are founded by developing nations' governments in order to manage aid and funds donated by other states to the domestic NGO sector. NGOs in China are an extension of the government because these organizations need government financial and political support, and at the same time, have to accommodate the demands of the Chinese government. Chen (2009) summarized the particularity of NGOs in China by asserting that "a few organizations are founded and run by independent individuals while most receive financial and policy supports from government at different levels" (para. 2). Consequently, the relationship between NGOs and the Chinese government is described as "dependent autonomy" (Lu, 2009, p.10). There are both merits and disadvantages to government control over NGOs (Chen, 2009). The tasks of NGOs in China are limited to information and education, rather than facilitating political or social movements, because NGOs have to adhere to the requirements of the Chinese government. However, the underlying merit

of this mechanism is that government control increases the credibility of NGOs since the Chinese public tends to have more faith in government credibility than other institutions or groups (Chen, 2009). Given the close relationship between NGOs and the Chinese government, this research divides NGOs in China into two categories: international NGOs operating in China (maintaining a high-level of autonomy) and Chinese NGOs (low-level autonomy due to their being directly managed by the Chinese government).

## **Social Media in General**

### **Definition**

While there is no universally accepted definition of social media, most researchers agree that the following features can be used to conceptualize it: digital media, user-generated content, and interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Marken, 2009; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009; Tredinnick, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Xiang and Gretzel (2009) agree that social media evolved from Web 2.0 technology is a group of Internet-based tools. Moreover, Marken (2009) and Tredinnick (2006) both highlight social media's user-oriented nature. Marken (2009) defines social media as "all about people, where people share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with others" (p. 10), while Tredinnick (2006) emphasizes that the essence of social media is user participation and user creation. In addition, social media's interaction feature lies in its "participatory and collaborative fashion" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 10), which enables users to share and exchange information or experiences with others. Interaction is seen as an essential feature of social media, as it facilitates two-way communication and dialog building (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). This study follows Kaplan & Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media as "digital communication

applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p. 10).

## **Form**

Social media exist in different forms. According to “social presence and media richness,” Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) divide social media into three levels: (1) “collaborative projects,” such as Wikipedia, are at the lowest level, through which users can only share text-based information; (2) “content communities,” such as YouTube™ and Facebook®, which enable users to share multimedia content, and (3) “online games” and “social worlds,” the highest level, which can create virtual worlds that imitate “all dimensions of face-to-face interactions” (p. 4).

Eyrich et al. (2008) in trying to find out which ones are most popular for public relations practitioners identify eighteen types of social media. The eighteen types are “blogs, intranets, podcasts, video sharing, photo sharing, social networks, wikis, gaming, virtual worlds, micro-blogging/presence applications, text messaging, videoconferencing, PDAs, instant message chat, social event/calendar systems, social bookmarking, news aggregation/RSS, and e-mail” (p.413). Survey results show that email, intranet, blogs, videoconferencing, podcast, and video sharing are the most popular applications that public relations practitioners actually use. Seo et al. (2009) examine how transnational NGOs use social media in their public relations activities. They only investigate six types of social media — intranet, blog, podcast, video cast/vlog, and wiki — and find that intranet is the most commonly used type by NGOs.

## **Purpose**

Social media serve numerous purposes for non-profit and for-profit organizations alike. As adaptations of World Wide Web technologies, social media contain high-

speed, low-cost, and widespread features. Eyrich et al. (2008) indicate that the largest benefit of social media lies in its potential to accelerate the speed of communication. They suggest that social media allow organizations to better target selected audiences, which make communication efforts more effective and efficient.

Social media differ from traditional websites in that they can better engage in dialog and conversation between organizations and publics. The interactive and relationship-building features are core values of social media (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). Several studies show that users employ social media in different ways to become involved with organizations (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2007; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lammb, & Lucas, 2009). Naudé, Froneman, and Atwood (2004) suggest that applying the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to Internet-based technologies can help non-profit organizations build and maintain long-term and dialogic relationship with publics. They name these new communication technologies “cyberbridging” tools, which are used to overcome such gaps as “information gaps,” “equality gaps,” “time gaps,” and “symmetry gaps” (Naudé, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004, p. 88). Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) propose that new media technologies allow organizations to establish “effective, ethical, and two-way symmetrical relationship with publics” (p. 229). Waters et al. (2009) stress that public relations practitioners use social media’s interactive nature to cultivate relationships with key stakeholders. They identify three strategies in relationship cultivation that are helpful for establishing ongoing relationship with stakeholders — disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement.

Another merit of social media is the potential they offer for empowerment. Empirical studies (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Porter, Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007) support that digital media use, such as blogs and Facebook®, can affect public relations practitioners' power, roles, and expertise in organizations. Porter et al. (2007) studied public relations practitioners' blog use and find it to be a gradual process from the lowest level, seeking information, doing research, and identifying issues, to the highest level, building relationships. They suggest that public relations practitioners become increasingly active within organizations as their blog usage evolves. Diga and Kelleher (2009) survey 115 members of Public Relations Society of America and discover that frequent use of social media improves public relations practitioners' reputation, enhances their prestige, and impels some practitioners to establish their own companies and even achieve industry leadership.

Social media's empowerment feature has greater meaning for individuals than for corporations. The vital benefit of social media is to empower under-represented groups or individuals politically, as well as financially. Wattam (2010) suggests that social media contribute to individual empowerment through any or all of three manifestations of power: psychological power, economic power, and political power. Regarding psychological empowerment, he argues that social media use can help individuals make new friends or get better involved in communities, which enable them to build self-confidence and overcome senses of isolation or depression. Concerning economic empowerment, he suggests that social media use can encourage individuals to pursue employment or to further education. Regarding political empowerment, he states that using social media enables grassroots organizations to influence the decision-making

process, to challenge authorities, and to participate in massive mobilizations to bring about social changes.

NGOs and activist groups witness their power growing due to the arrival of new communication technologies (Li, 2001). Historically, NGOs were labeled “financially powerless” (Naudé, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004, p. 88) compared to big corporations because of their shortage of funding for investing in a wide range of advertising or public relations measures. However, new media technologies have changed this situation. The advancement of communication technology increases “the power resources available” to activists (Coombs, 1998, p. 290); that is, by using new communication technologies, NGOs can empower themselves to be “more widely heard, more visible, and able to interact with potential sponsors, as well as the public, without spending a lot of money” (Naudé, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004, p. 88). Naudé et al. (2004) investigate how NGOs in South Africa with limited resources employ new communication technologies in their public relations efforts. They suggest that new communication technologies can be used for environmental scanning, client research, issue management, and relationship-building. A survey conducted by Seo et al. (2009) reveals that social media as inexpensive and interactive communication channels can help transnational NGOs better fulfill the following objectives: (1) improving organizational reputation, (2) fundraising, (3) publicity, (4) interacting with the general public, and (5) building relationships with other NGOs. Waters et al. (2009) argues that non-profit organizations use social media for three purposes: disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement. Concerning these three purposes, they suggest that social media’s

interactivity encourages publics to get involved with the organization, which is the most important reason for NPOs to engage in social media use.

Nonetheless, social media utility has a negative side. Gorry and Westbrook (2009) suggest that digital media can bring “unsettling consequences” to both Internet users and organizations (p.195). On the one hand, by using social media, users are often overwhelmed with a vast amount of information, facts, reviews, and ratings, which wastes their time and may distract them from the useful messages (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). On the other hand, social media can increase an organization’s cost to manage its online information. Social media’s widespread and high-speed features are vulnerable to spread rumors or negative comments that may threaten an organization’s reputation and image.

### **Social Media Adoption**

Social media adoption is a worldwide trend. In the U.S., Wright and Hinson (2008) find that 61% of public relations practitioners believe that the “emergence of blogs and social media have changed the way their organizations (or their client organizations) communicate” (p. 18). In Gillin’s (2008) survey, 57% of the respondents reported that “social media tools were becoming more valuable to their activities,” and 27% reported that “social media is the core element of their communication strategy” (p. 7). For non-profit organizations, Curtis et al. (2009) found that among 409 respondents, nearly all (n = 404) indicated that they used at least one of the 18 types of social media that were identified in the study. In summary, the acceptance ratio of social media has witnessed a steady growth among U.S. communication practitioners.

From a global perspective, surveys have demonstrated organizations’ widespread adoption of social media. Avidar (2009) investigated the situation of Israeli public

relations practitioners' use of social media. A web-based survey revealed that Israeli practitioners were familiar with social media — among 400 respondents, 78% used social media — but the application was still at a low level since 60% of respondents only had limited experience using social media. As for non-profit organizations, Seo et al. (2009) surveyed 230 communication representatives of transnational NGOs, finding that 54.7% of participants said that they used social media, and that promoting an organization's image and fundraising were the two most important functions for social media usage.

### **Social Media in China**

Although the exact date of social media emergence in China cannot be identified, for most Chinese, 2005 represents the beginning of the social media era. This is the year when two important websites — Xiaonei.com® (China's Facebook® replica) and Sina™ Blog (the most famous blog site in China) — were established (Rand, 2009). The birth of these two platforms implies that social media were no longer buzz words in China, but communication tools accessible to the general public.

Chinese social media, like their counterparts in Western countries, exist in a wide variety of categories: social networking sites (Xiaonei.com®, Renren.com®), video sharing (Tudou.com®, Youku.com®), microblogging (Fanfou®), photo sharing (Yupoo.com®), blogs (Sina™ Blog), etc. Meanwhile, social media's popularity in China is no less than in other countries. China has the greatest number of Internet users (360 million), accounting for 31.6% of the Chinese population and 21.4% of the world Internet user population (Internet World Stats, 2010). According to Oshiro's survey (2009), "up to 90% of Chinese netizens report they use social media compared to 76% of US netizens," and "Chinese are twice as likely to use a chat room and three times more

likely to micro-blog, blog and use video conference than American users” (para. 1). Another example showing the prevalence of social media in China is that the Chinese Facebook® — Xiaonei.com® — has over 40 million registered users and 22 million daily visits (Rand, 2009).

## **Social Media and Internet Censorship**

### **Internet Censorship in General**

Attempts to censor media have existed throughout the history of human civilization. Almost all types of media, ranging from printed to digital, are subject to censorship to some extent. Cyberspace is not exempt from the practice of censorship. In fact, Internet censorship is a globally prevalent phenomenon, not just limited to certain countries, such as China and Iran. Villeneuve (2007) argues that “the number of countries that censor and monitor their citizens' use of the Internet has increased” (p. 71). He identifies three mechanisms by which Internet censorship is practiced — legal and regulating mechanisms, filtering and blocking technologies, and Internet surveillance — and suggests that most governments strategically combine these three methods to execute Internet censorship.

Internet censorship exists for several reasons. These include social support, maintaining a nation's culture and value independence, economic concern, and legal and political reasons. First, from the perspective of the general public, Internet censorship acquires certain social support. Public opinion surveys (Anderson & Reinhardt, 1987; Erskine, 1970; McClosy & Brill, 1983; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007; Zellman, 1975) have repeatedly demonstrated that while “Americans strongly support free expression in the abstract” (Lambe, 2004, p. 279), many accept censorship as appropriate in specific situations, such as pornography, cyberbullying, and hate

speech. Lambe (2004) suggests that attitudes toward censorship are influenced by demographic, psychological, and sociopolitical variables. For example, older people are more likely to agree with censorship in the case of pornographic content, whereas young people are more willing to support censorship of hate speech (Lambe, 2004).

In addition, media censorship can be used to protect and maintain developing nations' culture, values, and independence. Some developing countries, including China, believe that media are the key culprits in promoting Western popular cultures that harm the country's traditional values and cultural identity (Ambekar, 2008). Therefore, media censorship is considered to be a useful tactic to prevent communication imperialism and cultural synchronization (White, 2001).

Another reason that Internet censorship occurs is economic. Digital space is an enormous big market. For instance, YouTube™'s 2010 annual revenue is estimated to exceed \$1 billion (Kafka, 2010). However, this thriving market is dominated by Western countries, especially the U.S., as most digital applications originate in and are owned by U.S. interests. Limiting certain international applications' accessibility in China enables domestic alternatives to gain market share, which is just like using tariffs to control import to protect domestic markets. The Google™-China standoff is a good example. When Google™ announced that it would exit China, plenty of Chinese search engine companies lined up to replace Google™. Baidu™, the Chinese version of Google™, is one of the biggest winners, as its stock price soared 50% after Google™'s announcement, and its third-quarter revenue increased by 124%, reaching \$165 million (Zhou, 2010).

Some who study the topic (Gelb, 2010; Grijpink & Prins, 2001; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007) argue that governments should employ legal means to regulate cyberspace and punish those who cause harm. Thompson (2007) suggests that the need to protect individual privacy is the primary reason to legislate and censor cyberspace. He states that information published online can affect a person's public persona and career, and that it is the responsibility of government to protect individuals' privacy. The second reason is the effort to create a safe Internet environment, as online harassment, cyber-hate, and cyberbullying are becoming increasing dangers for Internet users. Cyber-hate is always described in the context of political extremist groups that encourage anti-social engagement. Online harassment refers to any online misbehavior that hurts or embarrasses another person, while cyberbullying focuses on school-related incidents (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). The detrimental effects of these three phenomena are evident not only in the large number of victims, but also in the frequently severe cruelty of these acts. A survey (Zhu, 2010) conducted among over 600 Hong Kong elementary school children reveals that about half of them said they were victims of cyberbullying. In America and China alike, there are known instances where young people have killed themselves due to cyberbullying or online harassment (Fang & Yu, 2009; Gelb, 2010).

Given that the reasons given above are positive aspects of Internet censorship, in the final analysis, the negatives outweigh the benefits, because political concern is the primary consideration for governments, which can suppress freedom of speech and society as a whole. Callamard (2006a) argues that "freedom of speech is an empowering human right which allows individuals to obtain other rights", such as rights

to satisfy physiological or psychological needs (p. 3). Therefore, he suggests that freedom of speech must be unconditionally protected regardless of whether or not this freedom is practiced ethically or responsibly, because limiting this right can damage freedoms pertaining to human rights.

In addition, Internet censorship blocks the free flow of information, which, in the long term, damages the advancement of technology and information exchange. Jimmy Wales (2007), the founder of Wikipedia, indicates that there are increasing challenges imposed on the Internet industry concerning the implementation of censorship by governments worldwide. In his opinion, the Internet offers users various advantages, which include easy access to information and informal education, and Wikipedia is one of the numerous services established in cyberspace that offer opportunities for individuals to acquire information for free; however, actions carried out by governments to limit Internet access will hinder the public from accessing free information.

Furthermore, censorship can be used by governments to watch over Internet users. Although some scholars insist that reasonable regulations on freedom of expression are necessary to prevent disseminating unfair discrimination, pornography or hate speech (Anderson & Reinhardt, 1987; Lambe, 2004), the question is, what is “reasonable”? For example, the definition of cyber-hate varies from country to country, making it impossible to reach a consensus, let alone a universal agreement on Internet content regulation. Therefore, governments may misuse cyber-hate regulations to exercise censorship. Article 19, an international NGO against censorship, suggests that “restrictions on freedom of expression are usually and effectively used to muzzle

opposition and dissenting voices, silence minorities, and reinforce the dominant political, social and moral discourse and ideology” (Callamard, 2006b, p. 4).

Governments can also use Internet censorship for information control and to persecute activists. Activists historically have been labeled as “powerless” stakeholders (Naudé, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004, p. 88). But their contributions should not be ignored. They raise public awareness, shape public opinion, and encourage actions against authorities. With social media, activists have new tools that can make their message more potent. Coombs (1998) has used stakeholder theory to explain how Internet-based communication technologies empower activists to work to change what they perceive to be irresponsible behavior by big organizations. Zheng (2008) suggests that new media technology provides new sources of information and an environment for civic engagement, and the linkage between new media and civic engagement is a good example of participatory communication, which can bring changes to a society. There is, however, a negative side to all this communication. For instance, if governments were entitled to regulate hate speech, an often nebulous concept on the Internet, some activist organizations would be deliberately categorized as “illegal” or “dangerous” groups. Then, communication practitioners who post anti-government materials on the Internet, especially those who work for human rights organizations, could be harassed, arrested, interrogated, or even jailed on the grounds of cyber-hate regulations.

### **Diffusion of Democracy and Government Internet Censorship**

Diffusion of innovations is not limited to the dissemination of concrete objects, such as certain technologies. Rather, abstract ideas, models, values, and even ideologies can also be widely introduced and adopted. Democracy exemplifies this kind of innovation. The diffusion of democracy occurs when the concept of democracy

spreads from a “reference society” (Uhlin, 1995, p. 41) to other countries or societies. And when successful democratization is established in one nation, this may encourage democratization in other countries (Uhlin, 1993). Democratic diffusion has been given various labels, such as “demonstration effect,” “contagion,” “emulation,” or the “domino effect” (Uhlin, 1993, p. 521). The United States has been studied several times (Huntington, 1991; Ray, 1995) as “the source of democratic ideas” and the “reference state” (Uhlin, 1995, p. 41).

Media play an important role in the process of diffusing democracy. Historically, social-movement groups have incorporated a wide variety of communication technologies, ranging from newspapers and radio, to television and film, into their social-change struggles (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Since the mid-1970s, a steady growth has occurred in information and communication technologies and their application in development (Rogers, 1986). In the 1990s, Internet technology was extended to developing countries, including China. Digital media promoting civic engagement and participation in activism have become a new communication opportunity for NGOs, because cyberspace, in many countries, is under less strict government control and censorship (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Recently, the number of Chinese Internet users has soared to the highest in the world, reaching 338 million (China Internet Network Information Center, 2009). With the rising popularity of the Internet, many new terms have risen up in Chinese cyberspace, including digital democracy and cyberdemocracy, as the result of “[binding] the Internet and democracy closely together and implying that the two have mutually reinforced each other” (Zheng,

2008, p. 15). That is, the digital media per se can be regarded as the catalyst for democratization.

More recently, social media have asserted their rising power around the globe. For example, real-time communication platforms such as Twitter™ and Facebook®, have begun to demonstrate their political impact, as they played significant roles in the election of Barack Obama, the Iran election crisis, the Haitian earthquake, and the China-Google™ standoff. The CNN journalist Ben Parr (2010) comments that “social media have spread the word about what's happening within these nations, long before the mainstream media prints the story. These tools have also created a level of awareness we've never seen before” (para. 15). Social media come from Web 2.0 technology invented by Western countries, which maintain ideologies and political systems that are distinct from those of Chinese society. The interactivity, quickness, and omnipresence of social media make them beneficial communication tools for ordinary Chinese to challenge authorities' control over media, which in the long term can undermine the Chinese government's position as “the sole agent controlling the production and the dissemination of information” (Chow, 2006, p. 8). Thus, the spread of social media in Chinese society has encouraged the adoption of new media technology, as well as the diffusion of democratic practices.

When studying social media adoption in mainland China, it is inevitable that the topic of Chinese government's Internet censorship comes up. According to diffusion theory, the diffusion process does not occur in a vacuum, but in complicated social contexts, and its success depends on the cooperation between the environment and the innovation (Wejnert, 2002). The government's Internet censorship can increase the cost

of adopting social media, and even renders social media unavailable in specific regions or during certain periods of time.

In the past, the Chinese government completely controlled the production and the dissemination of information because the government owned all media institutions. Since 1994, the introduction of media commercialization to mainland China has given people hope of reducing the government's control over most or all media. However, the process has failed to change the passive role of the media, which still need to adhere to government requirements and demands. Nowadays, China is undergoing a cyberspace revolution. The huge number of Internet users who have unprecedented access to worldwide information inevitably exerts a tremendous impact on the evolution of civil society in mainland China by creating "a bottom-up force against the top-down propaganda and censorship" (Chow, 2006, p. 9). By acknowledging the enormous powers and potential threats of social media, the Chinese government has implemented a series of measures and techniques to enhance Internet censorship.

The government blocks websites that discuss the Dalai Lama, the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest, and certain spiritual movements (Lee & Wang, 2009). Zhao (2008) analyzes the Chinese government's pragmatic approach, which is guided by the principle of "guarded openness" towards regulating the Internet (p. 37). He reviewed the history of the Internet's development and the history of Internet regulation in China, and states that "the government on the one hand seeks to benefit from the economic advantages offered through openness to the global information, on the other hand it intends to guard against the harmful influences that the [digital media] may have upon social values and national integrity" (p. 37). Two events — the Green Dam Censorware

Incident and the Urumqi Riot — that took place in 2009 represent the Chinese government's intensified efforts to exert control over cyberspace.

### **The Green Dam Censorware Incident**

On June 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, the Chinese government announced that a censorware system would be mandatory on any new PCs sold in mainland China. The system, called Green Dam Youth Escort, helps to filter out what the government deems unhealthy information from the Internet, such as pornography and violence. Although the government insisted that the censorware aimed to prevent youth from accessing unsavory information online, many voiced the criticism that the software was a government effort to extend its political control into people's living rooms because the filter — automatically updated by the government — seemed to target political topics more than pornography (Rebecca, 2009; Wolchok, Yao, & Halderman, 2009).

Soon after the government's announcement, strong public resistance took place domestically and internationally. Online polls conducted by the top four Chinese web portals, including Sina™, Netease™, Tencent™, and Sohu™, all revealed Chinese netizens' strong objections to the censorware. For instance, 85% of the respondents who participated in the online polls on Sohu™ said they would never consider using the software (Weng, 2009). Meanwhile, international concerns were aroused. The U.S. government delivered a formal criticism on the compulsory installation of the system, and big transnational corporations, including Microsoft™ and Google™, expressed their concerns about the censorware (Claburn, 2009).

Finally, on June 30, China's industry and information technology minister, Li Yizhong, said that “the Green Dam Youth Escort software would now be voluntary,

leaving users free to decide whether or not to install it” (McEntegart, 2009). In August, the Chinese government indefinitely delayed the compulsory installation of the filtering software.

### **The Urumqi Riots and the blocking of social networking sites**

On July 5, 2009, riots between Uyghurs, an ethnic Muslim minority, and Han, the ethnic Chinese majority, broke out in Urumqi, a sizable city in northwestern China. The riots left 197 people dead and more than 1,700 injured (Hu & Lei, 2009).

After the July 2009 Urumqi Riots, the Chinese government blocked access to several social media networking sites, including Facebook® and Twitter™, because Facebook® was regarded as the trigger for the riots.

Even though Western governments and other international organizations protested that blocking social networking sites represented a violation of freedom of expression, the Chinese government insisted that the action was necessary to maintain security and peace in Urumqi. The BBC News commented that “the Chinese government has made good use of its control over the nation's technological infrastructure to stop the spread of information about events in Urumqi” (Ward, 2009, para. 1) As of October 2010, Facebook® and Twitter™ are still not available in mainland China.

### **Research Questions**

Previous literature suggests that the adoption of social media among organizations is a worldwide trend (Avidar, 2009; Gillin, 2008; Ingenhoff 2009), but very little research has investigated social media adoption in the context of strong government censorship. In order to examine the adoption of social media by the Chinese NGO sector, the following research questions are proposed to explore the following: (1) the adoption rate of social media, (2) how NGOs use social media, (3) if there are any differences

between international NGOs and Chinese NGOs, and (4) the impact of censorship on social media diffusion:

RQ 1: What percentage of international NGOs in China adopt social media?

RQ2: What percentage of Chinese NGOs adopt social media?

RQ 3: What forms of social media are they using?

RQ 4: Are there any differences in social media forms between international NGOs in China and Chinese NGOs?

RQ 5: For what purposes do they use social media?

RQ 6: Are there any differences in purpose of social media use between international NGOs in China and Chinese NGOs?

RQ 7: What forms of social media used by NGOs are censored by the Chinese government?

RQ 8: What kinds of content present in the social media tend to be censored by the Chinese government?

RQ 9: What NGO sectors tend to be censored the most?

Past research suggests that the diffusion of innovation is dependent on the environment in which the innovation spreads (James, 1993; Wejnert, 2002). Chinese society exists in a strong government-censored context, which is a crucial element that may inhibit the adoption of social media. Domestic NGOs and international NGOs differ in the independence level. All domestic NGOs are under the direct management of the government, whereas international NGOs may have more freedom. Thus, the following hypothesis is developed to examine whether NGO type is a reliable factor to predict the social media adoption rate.

H 1: International NGOs have a higher adoption rate of social media than Chinese NGOs.

## CHAPTER 3 METHDOLOGY

Research indicates that not only is social media adoption a growing trend all over the world, but that this trend is of particular importance for those NGOs that aim to bring about democracy and social change to Chinese society. In addressing this issue, content analysis, which refers to “a systematic, objective, and quantitative technique to examine the content of recorded information” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 150), is used as the research method. On the one hand, analyzing information and content present in NGO websites can easily determine: (1) what forms of social media NGOs use, (2) for what purpose they use social media, and (3) what forms or content are blocked. On the other hand, Internet censorship is such a sensitive subject in mainland China that other research methods, such as surveys and interviews, cannot guarantee a sufficient number of respondents or reliable results.

### **Sampling**

The sample of Chinese NGOs has been selected from China NPO.org — one of the largest and most reliable government-run evaluators of NPOs in China. According to the China NPO.org, there are 2,025 government-certified NPOs in mainland China. Among these, 144 are foundations and 42 are privately run NPOs that get no funding or direct management from the government. These 186 organizations have been chosen as the sample because, in accordance with the concept of an NGO, they are non-governmental organizations that aim to promote the public good with no direct control from the government, whereas the remaining 1,839 organizations are atypical NGOs excluded from the sample because they are either trade or professional associations that promote business or professional interests of an industry or are under direct

government management. This study examines NGOs' social media use, so only organizations with websites are included in the final sample. Consequently, only 110 organizations — 96 foundations, plus 14 non-government-funded organizations — that have websites are included in the Chinese NGO sample.

The sample of international NGOs operating in China is drawn from the China Development Brief (CDB). Established in 1996, CDB is an independent, non-profit publication organization devoted to strengthening constructive engagement between China and other countries (CDB, 2009). It publishes the China Development Directory, a database of international NGOs operating in China, which is the most comprehensive web-based index for searching international NGOs (CDB, 2009). According to the China Development Directory, 232 international NGOs are operating in China, but only 186 have websites that can be accessed in mainland China. The 117 organizations compose the samples because they either have Chinese language websites or at least have a specific web section or web page presenting their programs and events in China.

### **Coding Categories**

In general, there are five main coding categories and 33 variables (see Appendix). The five categories are: (1) general information, (2) social media placement, (3) social media form, (4) social media purpose, and (5) the accessibility of social media.

General information is the category that comprises such information about an NGO as NGO name, URL, type (domestic or international), and sector.

The Directory (CDB, 2009) classifies NGOs in China into 17 sectors which include: child welfare, disaster prevention and relief, education, environment, ethnic minorities, gender, health, HIV/AIDS, labor and migration, law and rights, microfinance, NGO

development and capacity building, older people, rural and community development, sexuality and reproductive health, social needs/disability, and volunteerism. In fact, the directory's classification is to some extent confusing, as several sectors overlap, such as health, HIV/AIDS, and sexuality and reproductive health. Some American fundraising professionals (Charity Navigator, 2009; Salamon & Anheier, 1992; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009) suggest that non-profit organizations should be classified into six categories (arts/humanities, education, healthcare, human services, public/society benefit, and religion). Combining the American non-profit classification system and the Chinese NGO classification system, this study categorizes NGOs into ten sectors:

- Culture and recreation
- Education and research
- Health
- Social services
- Environment and ecology
- Development and poverty reduction
- Law, advocacy and politics
- Voluntarism
- Religion
- Multiple purpose

Social media placement is used to determine: (1) the location and the transparency of social media, (2) whether they are located in obvious places such as a homepage or a specific social media section, or (3) whether the social media locate on certain platforms, which are independent from the NGO website, which can only be found using search engines.

Social media form, the variable to determine what kinds of social media are used by NGOs, has two dimensions: social media platform and social media type. Social media platform differs from social media type because it is the name of a concrete content provider. For instance, YouTube™ is a specific platform of multimedia sharing,

while multimedia sharing is a social media type. The literature review suggests that 18 types of popular social media are commonly used in the U.S., which include “blogs, intranets, podcasts, video sharing, photo sharing, social networks, wikis, gaming, virtual worlds, microblogging/presence applications, text messaging, videoconferencing, PDAs, instant message chat, social event/calendar systems, social bookmarking, news aggregation/RSS, and e-mail” (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008, p.413). In order to obtain information about Chinese NGOs’ preferences, a pilot study has been conducted by the author. A content analysis of 40 NGOs’ social media use suggested that among these 18 types, NGOs in China prefer only seven types, which are: blog, comments, email, social networking site, microblogging, multimedia sharing, and news aggregation/RSS. The several others categories are added to guarantee that no form of social media will be overlooked.

Social media purpose is the variable that examines how NGOs use social media. Drawn from the literature review, there are five main purposes for which NGOs are most likely to use social media: (1) informing and educating, (2) getting involved, (3) donation, (4) organization publicity, and (5) establishing stakeholder relationships. Also, several other categories are added to guarantee that all purposes will be covered in this study.

The final part of the codebook is the variable of social media accessibility, which examines which types and platforms of social media are not reachable by the general public in mainland China, as well as what kinds of content in social media are censored.

## **Analysis**

This study focuses on the use of social media by Chinese and international NGO websites at several levels. It explores the presence, form, and function of social media, and the level of censorship imposed. In order to determine the level of censorship,

social media used by NGOs need to be viewed by two coders — one in China and the other in the United States, who can examine which forms of social media are not accessible in mainland China, and what kinds of contents are censored. The unit of analysis in this study is an NGO's website. The unit of observation is the social media that an NGO uses.

### **Coding and Reliability**

Coders from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders are desirable for inter-coder reliability. However, since this study is a dual-language content analysis, language ability becomes one of the priorities for choosing coders. Moreover, the coder's location is another factor that should be taken into consideration. As a result, a female Chinese graduate student located in mainland China was included as the coder.

To determine the overall agreement among variables for this study, a four-hour training session was conducted, and a random sample of 10% of the organizations was coded to establish the inter-coder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha was used to assess the reliability of each variable. Four variables — social networking sites (0.648), stakeholder relationships (0.679), organization publicity (0.537), and getting involved (0.648) were below 0.7. Discussion among the coders followed regarding the choices coders made, and final corresponding revisions were made to the codebook. Then, twenty-five additional randomly selected organizations from the sample were coded.

In total, 20% of the sample was coded to establish inter-coder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha and Cohen's kappa were used to establish the final inter-coder reliability. For each variable, Krippendorff's alpha ranged from 0.702 to 1.00, and Cohen's kappa ranged from 0.731 to 1.00.

After establishing the inter-coder reliability, the author and the coder worked together on variables 28 to 33 and coded all 227 cases to explore the accessibility of social media in mainland China.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

### Organization Profile and Social Media Placement

Before addressing the research questions, a descriptive review of organizations and their websites that comprise the sample used for the content analysis is helpful. A total of 227 NGOs, 117 international NGOs (INGO) and 110 Chinese NGOs (CNGO) were analyzed for this research. Table 5-1 provides a breakdown of the various NGO sectors. Health (23%), environment (18%), social services (17%), and education and research (14%) are the most common sectors for international NGOs that operate in mainland China; while education and research (32%), social services (20%), culture and recreation (15%), and health (15%) are the top four sectors for Chinese NGOs. No Chinese NGO focusing on religion was identified.

Table 5-1. NGO sectors categorized by NGO type

NGO sectors	INGO <sup>1</sup>	CNGO <sup>2</sup>
Culture and Recreation	3 (2%)	16 (14%)
Education and Research	16 (14%)	35 (32%)
Health	27 (23%)	16 (14%)
Social Services	20 (17%)	22 (20%)
Environment & Ecology	21 (18%)	4 (4%)
Development & Poverty Reduction	9 (8%)	10 (9%)
Law, Advocacy & Politics	6 (5%)	2 (2%)
Voluntarism	2 (2%)	1 (1%)
Religion	2 (2%)	0
Multiple Purpose	11 (10%)	4 (4%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>117 (100%)</b>	<b>110 (100%)</b>

<sup>1</sup> International NGO

<sup>2</sup> Chinese NGO

The content analysis reveals that less than 38% of the 227 organization websites display social media on their homepage. For 32 CNGOs that actually use social media, all integrate social media into their homepage. While 54 out of 65 INGOs display social

media on their homepage. Further, the majority (63%, N = 227) of these organizations do not yet have a separate section that display social media. Finally, based on this content analysis, it takes an average of 0.25 clicks to reach the first appearance of social media among the 97 organization websites that utilize social media.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1 and RQ2 explored the adoption rate of social media by NGOs. The results show that 56% INGOs (n = 65) use social media versus 29.1% CNGOs (n = 32). Going beyond testing to identify significant relationships, H1 asked how well the NGO type predicts their social media adoption rate. Chi-square analysis supported this hypothesis that the media adoption rate differ by NGO type,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 227) = 16.226, p < 0.01$ , that is, INGOs have higher adoption rates than CNGOs.

RQ3 addressed what forms of social media are used by NGOs. As discussed previously, in this study, two dimensions, type and platform, have been applied to explore social media form. Generally speaking, 227 NGOs applied 11 types (see Table 5-2) and 22 platforms (see Table 5-3) of social media. The types used by CNGOs are more text-based, such as comments (23.6%, n = 26) and blogs (8.2%, n = 9); while INGOs are more apt to use content-community level social media, such as social networking sites (33.3%, n = 39) and multimedia sharing (33.3%, n = 39). In reference to social media platforms, CNGOs are more reluctant to utilize them, as only 7.3% of CNGOs (n = 8) use four platforms. In comparison, the international NGOs' use of platforms is more diverse, as 46.2% of INGOs (n = 54) use 20 platforms.

For RQ 4, this question asked if there was any difference between CNGOs and INGOs in the average number of social media forms used. T-test analysis indicates that they differ in media types,  $t (225) = 6.272, p < 0.001$ , with INGOs using more types than

CNGOs. On average, each CNGO uses 0.43 types of social media (SD = 0.829), whereas the mean of INGOs is 1.86 (SD = 2.263). Concerning platform number, t-test analyses also suggests that there is a significant difference between them,  $t(225) = -6.444$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with INGOs using more media platforms than CNGOs. The average platform number for a CNGO is 0.08 (SD = 0.307), while the mean for an INGO is 1.09 (SD = 1.606).

Table 5-2. Number of social media types used by INGOs and CNGOs

Social Media Types	INGO <sup>1</sup>	CNGO <sup>2</sup>
Blog	23	9
Comments	13	26
Multimedia sharing	39	5
Social networking sites	39	2
RSS	37	1
Email	32	2
Microblogging	27	1
Game	0	1
Intranet	2	0
Smart Phone	5	0
Wiki™	1	0

<sup>1</sup> International NGOs

<sup>2</sup> Chinese NGOs

RQ5 addressed the functionality of social media. For both international and Chinese NGOs, the majority use social media for information and education purposes (37.9%,  $n = 86$ ) (CNGO 20.9% vs. INGO 53.8%), followed by encouraging involvement (27.8%,  $n = 63$ ) and building stakeholder relationship (24.2%,  $n = 55$ ). However, there is a little difference in the sequence of the other two purposes. Donation (5.5%,  $n = 12$ ) has a higher percentage than organization publicity (3.6%,  $n = 4$ ) among CNGOs, whereas INGOs pay more attention to publicity (33.3%,  $n = 39$ ) than encouraging donations (21.4 %,  $n = 25$ ).

RQ 6 asked if there were any difference in the purposes for which NGOs use social media. T-test analyses indicates that CNGOs and INGOs differ in the number of purposes for usage,  $t(225) = -5.729, p < 0.001$ . On average, each INGO uses social media for 1.83 purposes (SD = 2.069), while each CNGO uses social media for 0.57 purposes (SD = 1.036).

Table 5-3. Social media platforms used by INGOs and CNGOs

Social Media Platforms	INGO <sup>1</sup>	CNGO <sup>2</sup>
Facebook®	37	0
YouTube™	27	0
Twitter™	27	0
Sohu™ Blog	3	1
Sohu™ Microblogging	2	0
Flickr™	9	0
Youku®	5	4
MySpace™	4	0
Google™ Friends	0	0
Google™ Group	1	1
Tudou®	2	0
LinkedIn®	1	0
Photo Shelter	1	0
Blog Bus	1	0
iPhone™	3	0
Sina™ Space	1	0
Sina™ Video	1	0
BlogSpot	1	0
Wiki™	1	0
Type Pad	1	0
QQ™	0	2
Sina™ Blog	1	0

<sup>1</sup> International NGOs

<sup>2</sup> Chinese NGOs

RQ 7, RQ 8, and RQ 9 focus on social media censorship. Analysis of social media use by 227 organizations suggests that Chinese government censorship is focused more on certain platforms instead of media types or content. That is, the government blocked three social media platforms — YouTube™, Facebook®, and Twitter™ —

regardless of content and usage. As no CNGOs used any of these three platforms, there was no censorship of CNGOs. However, as the three platforms were the top three most used platforms among INGOs, 41 INGOs (35%) were censored by the Chinese government. Since the government only blocked three platforms, regardless of what kinds of content are on them and what NGO sectors use them, this content analysis found no evidence to answer RQ 8, what kinds of content are blocked, and RQ 9, what NGO sectors are censored most.

## CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION

This study examined the websites of 227 NGOs in China and their usage of social media for the purpose of determining: (a) the adoption rate of social media by NGOs in China, and (b) the impact of government censorship on the diffusion of these media. A comparative content analysis was conducted between INGOs and CNGOs to assess any differences between them. The websites of each of these organizations were then content analyzed to assess the presence or absence of a series of social media, as well as the level of government censorship among them. Basic demographic information, such as organization type and sector, was also collected for each NGO.

Previous literature suggests that the number of NGOs has surged in recent years and that Chinese NGOs, like their counterparts in Western countries, represent numerous fields ranging from child welfare to HIV/AIDS (Lu, 2009). The study demonstrates that CNGOs, like INGOs, address various issues, including education, health, social services, culture, and so on. However, CNGOs and INGOs differ in their emphasis on environmental issues. Environment protection is a heated topic among INGOs (18%), while only 4% of CNGOs address this issue. Jiang (2006) argues that the environment has traditionally been neglected in China as great attention has been devoted to industrial development. The results of this study show that CNGOs do not take environmental sustainability as seriously as other issues, such as education (32%), social services (20%), and health (14%). Given that pollution is one of the biggest problems and one of the most negative consequences of China's rapid economic rise, as the top ten developed cities in China are also the world's most polluted cities

(Malone, 2006), more and more concentration should be given to addressing environmental issues.

Another aspect that deserves our scrutiny is that CNGOs cover almost all fields except religion. Among 110 CNGOs, not one is funded by a religious group, and none work for religious causes. In comparison, among 117 INGOs, there are ten organizations related to religion, with eight of them funded by religious groups, such as Islamic Relief and Hong Kong Christian Service, while the other two organizations directly perform missionary work in China. Despite the government's declarations on freedom of religious belief (Eckholm, 1998) beginning in 1997, religion is still a sensitive topic in mainland China, as the Chinese government has been accused of engaging in campaigns to harass or arrest certain religious participants (Myers, 2008). While on one level, the absence of any CNGOs working for religious causes raises questions about the autonomy of CNGOs and whether CNGOs are subject to certain restrictions from government policy that prevents the public from enjoying real religious freedom, at another level, there are still ten INGOs that can be used as communication channels for the general public to access certain religious information. For the Chinese public, half a loaf is better than none.

While social media have generated significant buzz among communication practitioners all over the world, fewer than 43% of the 227 NGOs in China have adopted this trend. Among CNGOs, only about 29% have adopted it compared with 55% of INGOs. Previous studies provide empirical data to help us understand the social media adoption rate in various contexts. The study by Curtis et al. (2009) suggest that among 409 American NGO respondents, nearly all (n = 404) indicated that they used at least

one of the eighteen types of social media. From a global perspective, Seo et al. (2009) surveyed 230 transnational NGOs, and found that the social media adoption rate was 54.7%. American adoption rate is almost 100%, while internationally it is 55%. By comparison, in mainland China it is just as low as 29%.

In addition, besides adoption rate, Chinese NGOs are also limited in social media types and the platforms they use. Among the thirty-two CNGOs that actually incorporate social media, the majority (n = 26) prefer comments, the type that include forums, BBS, or other kinds of online interactive posts, and nine of them utilize blogs. Multimedia sharing, microblogging, and social networking sites, which are the top types among American practitioners (Curtis et al., 2009) and in international contexts (Seo et al., 2009) are seldom incorporated by CNGOs. Concerning platforms, CNGOs seem to be reluctant to use them, as the platform adoption rate is as low as 7%. For those who have actually utilized social media platforms, the majority of them prefer domestic ones, such as Youku® (the Chinese version of YouTube™) and QQ™ (the Chinese version of Messenger) to popular international platforms, such as YouTube™, Twitter™, and Facebook®.

The results of this research concerning INGOs are similar to those of previous studies (Eyricej et al., 2008; Seo et al., 2009) in the following ways: (a) the social media adoption rate of international NGOs is about 55%, (b) multimedia sharing, email, microblogging, blog, and social networking sites are the most frequently used social media forms among communication practitioners in organizations regardless of whether they are for-profit or non-profit, and (c) stakeholder relationship building and fundraising are important functionalities social media serve.

Nonetheless, in this study the findings concerning social media functionality are not in complete agreement with diffusion theory and previous social media literature. First of all, diffusion theory indicates that mass media are highly efficient at informing and creating awareness for a great number of potential adopters about the existence of an innovation, while interpersonal networks are more effective at modifying the attitudes and behaviors that lead potential adopters to accept the innovations (Rogers, 1995; Wejnert, 2002). However, the results of this study suggest that both Chinese and international NGOs use social media for informational and educational purposes the most (37.9%, n = 86), which is the original key function of mass media, followed by encouraging involvement (27.8%, n = 63), then relationship building (24.2%, n = 55), which interpersonal networks are particularly effective in delivering. The fact that NGO communication staff devote more energy to using social media to disseminate information and education instead of other purposes does not support the diffusion theory.

Second, even though many researchers (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2007; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamb, & Lucas, 2009) acknowledge that interactive and relationship-building features are essential values of social media, the usage of these features by communication practitioners working in the Chinese NGO sector is still in its initial stages, and its potential has not yet been realized because social media have most commonly been used to distribute information or educate the public about certain issues.

The empowerment and relationship-building potentials of social media can help NGOs better enroll volunteers and raise funds. Social media, such as blog,

microblogging, and social networking tools, also provide new ways for organizations to connect and build relationships with their stakeholders. However, the results of this content analysis of 227 NGOs in China indicate that the majority of organizations (57%) are not enthusiastic about embracing the social media trend. Even worse, Chinese domestic organizations lag far behind not only the United States, which is the main source of popular social media technology and the reference society, but also the global average level.

The analysis reveals that 18% of NGOs in China ( $n = 41$ ) are affected by Internet censorship, and all of them are INGOs. These NGOs' use of social media is blocked because of their usage of three platforms, consisting of Facebook®, YouTube™, and Twitter™, which CNGOs do not utilize. That is, NGOs in China will be censored as long as they use any of these three platforms. For example, two INGOs, Environmental Defense and International Bridge to Justice, post YouTube™ videos on their homepages, but only the author in the U.S. can actually see the videos, while the coder in mainland China just sees white boxes in the Web page layout. The results of this study are consistent with news reports about the Chinese government's Internet censorship (Ansfield, 2010; Helft & Barboza, 2010) claiming that the three major social media platforms are inaccessible in mainland China.

Internet censorship as an inevitable aspect in Chinese cyberspace plays a significant role in the diffusion process of social media. According to the theory, the diffusion of innovations depends on the harmony between the environment and the innovation (Wejnert, 2002). Government Internet censorship, as an irresistible force, has detrimental effects on NGOs' use of social media in China, because it makes social

media unavailable in specific regions or during certain periods of time. Hence, given multiple factors contributing to the low adoption rate of social media among NGOs in China, government Internet censorship has severe negative effects on the adoption process. Therefore, the results of this study support the diffusion theory that a hostile environment greatly hinders the diffusion of innovations.

The strategy that the Chinese government uses to censor NGOs' websites is interesting. Due to the overwhelming amount of information available through social media, the Chinese government does not waste energy on filtering content; instead, it implements a more pragmatic approach that blocks major social media platforms. News reports (Ansfield, 2010; Helft & Barboza, 2010) suggest that Chinese officials consider social media tools, including social networking sites, microblogging, and video-sharing sites, which are major channels for the proliferation of subversive information. They attempt to suppress these platforms while promoting the use of domestic alternatives that they believe are more cooperative with authorities' needs, such as Youku® (Chinese version of YouTube™), QQ™ (Chinese version of Messenger), and Sina™ Microblogging. This study demonstrates that the Chinese government has blocked the use of the three major U.S. platforms, which helps the domestic alternatives gain popularity among NGOs. Although some news agencies suggest that the Chinese government has implemented mechanisms to police unregulated comments online, this study fails to find any evidence of the government's censoring of content, because all content that is available in the U.S. can also be accessed in mainland China, except for those three major platforms. For example, three CNGOs and two INGOs have an abundance of harsh-worded comments in their online forums expressing citizens'

displeasure toward government injustices, and three INGOs use Flickr to show the misery in which the poor in China live or the highly polluted environment. Authorities dislike all these contents, but none of them are subject to any blocking. However, it is questionable to conclude that the Chinese government does not monitor content, because perhaps these contents have not reached the government tolerance red line, or perhaps what we see on NGO websites is already filtered by certain mechanisms that we are unaware of. In addition, whether or not NGO staff members are subject to cyber-attacks on their email accounts or even Internet surveillance is also beyond the scope of this study. Future advocates could interview and survey those NGOs' communication representatives to help us truly understand the impact of Internet censorship on them and their social media utility.

NGOs in China, especially INGOs, are facing tough choices. They could follow Chinese government suggestions to use domestic alternatives to converse with the public, or they could maintain their autonomy and dignity by continuing to use the three global platforms, but at the expense of their ability to communicate with Chinese Internet users. An INGO offers a solution to this problem. Action Aid's strategy is to use both domestic and global platforms and let Internet users choose which one to use. For example, Action Aid posts videos on its website, and users can decide to watch the video either on YouTube™ or Youku®. This strategy guarantees the delivery of information and, at the same, makes Chinese users aware of government Internet censorship.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As social media have increasingly been described as one of the essential tools for activist and non-governmental organizations (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lammb, & Lucas, 2009), this content analysis is an exploratory study that examines: (1) whether NGOs in China take this opportunity to adopt new media technology, (2) how they utilize social media, and (3) whether government Internet censorship affects the diffusion of social media. This study provides a fact sheet (see Table 7-1) for communication practitioners to better understand the status quo of social media utility in the Chinese NGO sector. Furthermore, it provides insight for diffusion researchers by helping fill the gap regarding the diffusion of social media in a strong Internet censorship context — a hostile environment. Meanwhile, the findings of this study may directly help social media providers who wish to do business in strong censorship contexts, because this study sheds the light on pragmatic strategies employed by the Chinese government to censor cyberspace — blocking major international platforms while promoting domestic alternatives.

Content analysis, however, does not provide insight regarding the effects of social media censorship on Chinese Internet users. Future studies that give Internet users a voice regarding how Internet censorship influences their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors should be developed and administered. In addition, multiple research methods, including surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, should be involved in investigating whether there are other strategies that the Chinese government uses to censor the Internet. For instance, researchers could interview NGO staff members to examine whether they are subject to cyber-attacks or surveillance. Moreover, this study

Table 7-1. INGOs social media use fact sheet

Insights	<p>Twice the adoption rate of CNGOs</p> <p>More forms used</p> <p>More purposes served</p> <p>Are more likely to use the three major social media platforms</p>
Challenges	<p>Are more vulnerable to government Internet censorship</p> <p>The use of the three major U.S. social media platforms is blocked</p> <p>Are facing the difficult choice of whether to follow the Chinese government's move to block international platforms while promoting domestic alternatives</p>
Strategies	<p>Use international social media platforms as well as domestic ones</p>

is a one-shot research project, but future work could be extended to longitudinal studies that include time as a variable to measure the spread speed of social media among NGOs and which NGO sector adopts social media first.

Social media offer NGOs good opportunities to empower themselves, to express themselves, and to challenge government control. As social media gradually become the world's preferred mainstream communication vehicles, the NGO sector in China should take advantage of this trend. If Chinese NGOs do not move aggressively to embrace this trend, they could end up marginalized and isolated from the rest of the cyber communities.

In sum, despite social media's prevalence among the general Chinese public, who use them for information or entertainment, the NGO sector in China has not embraced the trend and still engages in one-way online communication, as the adoption rate of CNGOs (29%) is only about half of that at the international level (55%). In addition, CNGOs are also limited by the media forms and the purposes for which they use social

media. With the popularity of social media rising in academic research, as well as in the communication industry, governments tend to be more vigilant and alert. As the Chinese government has steadily toughened its Internet censorship, the digital space in which social media diffuse is becoming harsher. Therefore, communication practitioners and media researchers need to pay more attention to the use of social media to better build dialog with the Chinese public, and to help reduce the impact of Internet censorship on their organizational communication efforts.

## APPENDIX CODEBOOK

### **Introduction**

1. Coder Number: numeric
2. Coding Date: mm/dd/yyyy

### **NGO Profile**

3. NGO Name: string
4. NGO URL: string
5. NGO Type:

CNGO — 1: organizations selected from CNPO.org

INGO operating in China — 2: organizations drawn from China Development

### Directory

6. NGO Sector:

Culture and Recreation — 1: organizations and activities in general and specialized fields of culture and recreation. NGO's mission statement or title includes the following key words: arts, communication, museum, media, sports, promotion and appreciation of the humanities, preservation of historical and cultural artifacts, and commemoration of historical events, which includes historical societies, language associations, reading promotion, war memorials, and commemorative funds and associations.

Education and Research — 2: organizations and activities administering, providing, promoting, conducting, supporting and servicing education and research. NGO's mission statement or title includes the following key words: literacy, primary or

secondary education, teaching, study, science, technology, learning, scholarship, research, etc.

Health — 3: organizations that promote disease prevention, sexual and reproductive health, anti-HIV / AIDS, etc.

Social Services — 4: organizations that advance human rights and welfare for the following groups: children, ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, laborers and immigrants, elderly, special needs / handicapped, etc.

Environment and Ecology — 5: environment and animal protection

Development and Poverty Reduction — 6: organizations promoting programs and providing services to help improve communities and the economic and social well being of society, including: rural and community development, NGO development and capacity building, microfinance, employment and training, etc.

Law, Advocacy and Politics — 7: organizations that advocate civil rights, justice, political relationship among countries, and public safety.

Voluntarism — 8: promoting volunteerism and enrolling volunteers.

Religion — 9: promoting freedom of religion and freedom of religious practice.

Multiple Purposes — 10: any combination of these sectors.

Other: write down the sector name.

### **Social Media Placement**

7. Homepage: indicate the presence or absence of social media, interactive services or similar applications located in the homepage of an NGO website.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

8. Web section: indicate the presence or absence of a separate section in the NGO website dedicated to introduce and display social media.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

9. Click depth: numeric. Indicate the number of times you have to click (once you are in the homepage of the NGO website), in order to reach the first mention or appearance of social media. 0 means it is on the homepage itself. If no social media, leave blank.

### **Social Media Form**

a. Social Media Type

10. Blogs: a blog is a website, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

11. Comments: including forum, BBS (bulletin board system), and all kinds of online interactive posts.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

12. Multimedia sharing: including photo sharing, video sharing, audio sharing, or link sharing.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

13. Social networking sites: Internet- and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information. Examples of social media include Facebook®, MySpace, Xiaonei and similar media.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

14. RSS: note the absence or presence of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is an addition to Internet technology that is used to keep people updated on their favorite websites. RSS works in conjunction with XML code, which continuously checks the contents of a website for updates. If updates are found, they are broadcast to all the subscribers of the website through a feed.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

15. Email: email can be used in marketing, campaigns, and/or advertising communications.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

16. Microblogging: micro-blogging is a form of multimedia blog that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group, which can be chosen by the user. Twitter™ and Sina microblogging are two the most mentioned micro blogs in China.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

17. Other: write down the name(s) of any other type(s) of social media mentioned.

b. Social Media Platform: indicate if NGO's social media use is on a specific platform.

18. Facebook®:

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

19. Twitter™:

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

20. YouTube™:

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

21. Several others: write the names of specific social media platforms

### **Social Media Function**

22. Informing and educating: indicate if social media are used to brief, inform and educate the public about certain issues, to publish event or activity information, or to call people's attention to a group of people.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

23. Getting involved: indicate if social media are used to encourage volunteering and event participation.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

24. Donation: indicate if social media are used to encourage money donation, fundraising, and clothes, as well as giving of goods.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

25. Organization publicity: indicate if social media are used to disclose the NGO's missions, history, organizational structure, personnel, etc.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

26. Building stakeholder relationships: indicate if social media are used to build or maintain relationships with stakeholders. Stakeholders include: media, government, other NGOs, customers, clients, and companies.

Absence — 0

Presence — 1

27. Other: any other purposes that social media serve.

### **Accessibility of social media**

28. Visitability of social media: indicate if the social media an NGO uses is accessible in mainland China. Code 0 if all types of social media are accessible. Code 1 if any types or platforms of social media are not accessible.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

29. Number of types that are inaccessible: numeric. Write down how many types of social media the NGO uses which are not accessible in China. 0 means all social media are accessible.

30. Number of platforms that are inaccessible: numeric. Write down how many platforms of social media the NGO uses which are not accessible in China. 0 means all social media are accessible.

31. Inaccessible types: indicate which type(s) of social media are not accessible in mainland China.

(1) Inaccessible type I: indicate whether microblogging is blocked.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

(2) Inaccessible type II: indicate whether social networking sites are blocked.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

(3) Inaccessible type III: indicate whether multimedia sharing is blocked.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

(4) Several others: write down the names of social media types that are not accessible.

32. Inaccessible platforms: indicate which platform(s) are not accessible in mainland China.

(1) Inaccessible platform I: indicate whether Twitter™ is blocked.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

(2) Inaccessible platform II: indicate whether YouTube™ is blocked.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

(3) Inaccessible platform III: indicate whether Twitter™ is blocked.

Accessible — 0

Inaccessible — 1

(4) Several others: write down the names of social media platforms that are not accessible.

33. Inaccessible content: indicate what kind of information is censored.

No information is censored — 0

Informing and educating — 1

Getting involved — 2

Donation — 3

Organization publicity — 4

Building stakeholder relationships — 5

Other: write down the name.

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