Comparison between Social Media Platforms: Twitter and Weibo

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Detailed Analysis on Social Media Platforms: Twitter and Weibo

Introduction

This aim of this research project is to examine the functionalities and usages of two popular microblogging platforms with different cultural backgrounds - Twitter and Weibo. Due to the rapid development and expansion of the social media industry, social networking sites have quickly turned into such a vital part of modern social interaction. Among different types of social media interactions, microblogging has firmly established itself as one of the most popular forms. This phenomenon not only happens in the US, but it also occurs in other countries. There are two major elements that contribute to the emerging prominence of microblogging, the shortness of content and relation among users (Ma, 2013). And this emergence is supported with the trend of social media development, which is the demand and competition for a more “in-the-moment” experience (DeMers, 2015). While these are some of the key factors that lead to the popularization of microblogging, another important quality must be taken in consideration – culture.

Research Questions and Analysis

Research Question 1: “Why did you choose the two media for your analysis?”

We decided to choose Weibo and Twitter because that they are both microblogging platforms and have a lot of similarities in functionalities such as retweet (repost), hashtag and @mention. More importantly, they are both capable of creating dialogic online communication which contributes to public relationship building (Rybalko et al., 2010). Weibo and Twitter were born in different cultural backgrounds, but both are popular in their own culture contexts. We think it will be interesting to see the differences and similarities between them.

Twitter was created in March 2006 and spread rapidly in global range. By May 2015, 302 million out of 500 million users were active users (Wiki-Twitter, 2015). In the early stage, the
number of users and posts on Twitter, as figure 1 shows, increased dramatically (Kwak et al., 2010).

![Figure 1: Users and Posts Growth Rates](image)

Weibo grew in a similar fashion as Twitter did. Weibo was officially launched in April 2009 in China. By 2012, the number of users has already reached 503 million (wiki-Sina Weibo, 2015). Weibo in China has a surprising power in social events. For example, in 2010, a severe earthquake happened in Yushu, Qinghai. China International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR) posted real-time information via Sina Weibo in the situation that the earthquake just happened and most media like newspaper and TV stations have no accessibility. Their posted about how many people injured; how many people were found; how about the food supply and traffic situation. CISAR posted news frequently giving confidence to the public. For people who have relatives or friends who in that area, it was good for them to know something about the rescuer’s progress.

As we live in an era where people are heavily exposed with various forms of social media, we wonder why both of these social networking sites could be so popular among such a big number of populations. Media platforms just like information windows which allow people to gather, exchange and store information. Users on both platforms include the general public, public figures, and official organizations, which makes the information stream much more pluralistic. Do people care about the same type of news on both Twitter and Weibo? Do those similar functions real
function in the same way? What the different culture backgrounds mean to Twitter and Weibo? We will compare both similar and different features of them to find the answers.

**Research Question 2: “What are some notable similarities and differences between the two platforms?”**

Twitter and Weibo are similar in most aspects. Both platforms allow users to set up a profile and use the site to microblog, share and comment. Both platforms limit posts to 140 characters and allow the use of #hashtags, @mentions, and reposting content (retweet for Twitter and repost for Weibo). Users can attach pictures and videos, as well as using emojis on both sites. Both platforms can be viewed through third party applications. Celebrities can have a verified account, which allows users to easily identify the real account. Users can also follow other users and favorite posts they like.

Twitter and Weibo have a few differences that set them apart. The biggest difference is that Twitter is available in 34 languages, while Weibo is currently only available in Chinese with limited access in English. Another difference between the two platforms is how the two sites handle users viewing posts and comments without an account. Twitter allows users to view any profile, as long as the profile is set to public. Weibo limits the number of posts and comments users can view without an account and restricts viewing to verified accounts only. Hashtags are slightly different between the two platforms. Weibo has a closing tag on the #hashtag# due to the lack of spacing between Chinese characters, while Twitter only has one tag on the #hashtag. Moreover, Weibo has instant messaging capability built on top of it.

Apart from the Twitter-like functionalities, Weibo’s capabilities of allowing rich media uploads into user feeds, providing threaded comments, and supporting a variety of applications, such as games and trend categorization, broaden the platform’s perceived usability. By offering
these different features, it could lead to different user motivations and usage patterns when comparing Twitter and Weibo (Zhang, Pentina, 2012).

**Research Question 3: “What are some key features/functions that make the two media SOCIAL?”**

When it comes to social media platforms, one of the most significant aspects to consider is the platform’s ability of allowing people to engage in interactions; in another word, the qualities that make a platform social. Since Twitter and Weibo share so many similar features and functions, the qualities that make the two media social are nearly identical.

According to Boyd and Ellison’s definition on social network sites, such platform should allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd, Ellison, 2007). Both of the two platforms enable users to focus on creating short contents and encouraging other users to engage in interactions. Twitter and Weibo both features reposting, @mentioning, liking and replying as the basic functions. By applying and utilizing these functions, the user-generated contents would be viewed, and the audience can decide whether or not to participate in further actions. Particularly, the reposting (retweeting) allows users to participate in different forms of social interactions, parasocial and ortho-social interactions, when communicating with different people. And more importantly, the concept of social currency can be applied when it comes to interactions on social networking sites. The activities on Twitter and Weibo are designed to motivate users in becoming part of a community.

**Research Question 4: “What do you wish each of the two platforms had? What are some aspects that need improvement?”**
Although Twitter is older than Weibo, we all agree that Twitter has a lot to learn from Weibo. For example, while reading a retweet/repost, you can see a clear boundary between the retweet/repost content and the original post. But in Twitter, the retweet content and the original tweet usually mix with each other and sometimes cause confusion. Moreover, Weibo uses trend categorization to catch users’ attention. It has the “Hot Search List” updates every 10 minutes, where users can see what other users are interested in. Of course, as a younger version of Twitter, Weibo need to improve as well. The biggest problem of Weibo is its lack of regulation. As reported by BBC China, around 60% of the fake news are first posted in Weibo. Because of the huge population and limited educational resources that China has, users are more likely to act inappropriately online such as spreading fake rumors and personal attacks. Weibo needs to do more to regulate those behaviors.

Discussion

By analyzing the two different social media with different cultural backgrounds, we found that they share many similarities such as platform and technical features. They all allow people to build and maintain relationships online. But with different cultural backgrounds, there are still various differences between the two media. Twitter is a social media facing the whole world while Weibo targets specifically Chinese users. Besides, Twitter users can view any public profile while Weibo has limitations to the number of posts and comments. Weibo also combines rich media such as game applications to enrich the perceived usability. To better understand the two social media, we found that the foundation of Twitter was really different from Weibo’s. Just like Facebook, Twitter was created by several programmers and entrepreneurs back in 2006. They have their company founded after the creation of Twitter. On the other hand, Weibo is more like a separate business line within a company called Sina. Sina is a Chinese online media company founded in
1998, who has great experience on both traditional media and new media. To Sina, Weibo is more like a marketing tool. More companies want to cooperate with Sina after the breakthrough of Weibo. Users consider Weibo as a more entertainment platform while companies use Weibo to conduct commercial speculations.

Although both of these two media considered social media, they have different functions, purposes and target audience. There are still more phenomena and rules behind these two media we haven’t discovered yet. For now, what we know is that people use them to present themselves, interact with others and become a part of the online community. No matter what their initial purposes are, they have become a part of the technology innovation and have seeped into people’s daily lives.

Reference


