

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION  
*Transparency and accountability online*



# Global Information Society Watch

## 2012



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# CHINA

## MICROBLOGS: CHINA'S PRECARIOUS PUBLIC SPHERE



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### Introduction

With an estimated 300 million users, China's weibo microblogging services now serve as the country's de facto mechanism for enforcing local government accountability and increasing transparency. Though subject to censorship like all media in China, the speed of microblogs and creative workarounds employed by users to evade censors make the platform ideal for spreading breaking news and drawing attention to injustice, provided a story is sufficiently outrageous and does not implicate the central government.

The biggest incident of 2011 was undoubtedly the spread of images, information and outrage on China's weibo microblogs following the 23 July Wenzhou high-speed rail crash (see GISWatch 2011). But this was followed by a concerted government push-back against weibo's role as China's most free-wheeling public forum.

The recent fall of Chongqing Communist Party secretary and erstwhile aspirant to Party leadership Bo Xilai provides the best lens with which to inspect how weibo continues to influence government transparency and accountability in China. The scandal's combustive mix of corruption, conspicuous excess, catchy meme and massive scope provided exactly the kind of wave-making cannonball that officials had hoped to prevent after Wenzhou, and in the lead-up to the Communist Party's once-a-decade leadership change in October.

### Policy and political background

The official government report on the Wenzhou crash released five months after the incident may have done little to regain public trust. The report fingered lightning strikes as the cause of the incident, severely condemned the Railway Ministry and recommended punishment for 54 people. But it pinned most of the blame on the already disgraced previous railway minister, his vice minister, and the deceased CEO of the company hired as principal contractor for the Wenzhou high-speed rail line.

Long before the report saw daylight officials began calling for real-name registration to tie every weibo account to a government-issued identification

card, ending user anonymity. In mid-December Beijing authorities announced that all new users of locally registered microblog companies, including top dog Sina, would have to register using their real names to create an account. Although outside this mandate's scope, Sina's Guangzhou-based rival, Tencent, soon followed suit. In early February, as the first hints of trouble in Chongqing were still emerging, the four largest weibo providers – Sina, Tencent, NetEase and Sohu – announced a 16 March deadline for existing users to register.

### The falling fortunes of Bo Xilai

The first hints of scandal appeared on 2 February 2012 when the Chongqing city government announced that famed police chief and vice-mayor Wang Lijun had been shuffled to another position. It was a clear demotion for Wang, longtime right-hand man to Chongqing Party secretary Bo Xilai. Since being put in charge of the municipality Bo had drawn plenty of attention for his "smash black" anti-gang and corruption campaign and a controversial "red culture" initiative in which Chongqing residents were encouraged to belt out old tunes praising Mao Zedong and socialist values en masse. Along with heavy government involvement in local industry and extensive government spending on social issues like affordable housing, Bo's policies drew local praise both from citizens who felt left behind in China's drive to capitalism, and from other members of the Party's more conservative wing. Bo's so-called "Chongqing model", along with his bona-fides as the son of Communist Party general Bo Yibo, led some China watchers to mark him for a spot among the next group to be chosen for the Politburo's all-powerful nine-member standing committee in October 2012.

However, early on 8 February weibo users began to post pictures of police officers surrounding the US consulate in Chengdu, some speculating that Wang Lijun had fled there to escape Bo's grasp. The next day Chongqing's government published a weibo message claiming: "According to reports, because of long-term overwork, a state of anxiety and indisposition, Vice Mayor Wang Lijun has agreed to accept vacation-style medical treatment."

The announcement did little to quell speculation, and "vacation-style medical treatment" (休假式治疗) quickly became the year's first major

Chinese-language meme. The post has since been forwarded over 60,000 times on Sina Weibo and has received over 22,000 comments.

State news agency Xinhua confirmed on 9 February that before leaving, Wang had spent more than a day in the consulate with Chinese security officers and had been put under investigation. Later foreign press coverage indicated the source of Wang and Bo's falling out may have been a report that Wang gave consulate officials linking Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, to the death by poisoning (and subsequent cover-up) of British businessman and Bo family confidant Neil Heywood.

Word of Wang's flight spread quickly on weibo and, censored only in fits and starts, cast doubt on Bo's ascent. (Over the following months accounts surfaced in the foreign press of Bo's ruthlessness as Chongqing Party secretary, corruption in local government-sponsored business dealings and an extensive wiretapping project used to spy on top Party officials – including President Hu Jintao.) On 21 February searches on Baidu for the phrase “Bo Xilai tenders resignation” (薄熙来 请辞) began to be censored following weibo rumours to that effect. Microbloggers continued to discuss the issue by adopting code words. In a sign of trouble for real-name registration, Sina chief executive Charles Chao told *The Wall Street Journal* on 28 February that more than 40% of new users had failed verification screenings. Chao warned that the registration requirement could hurt activity on Sina Weibo.

Bo remained quiet in the lead-up to the national legislature's annual Two Meetings, and was the only member of the 25-person Politburo absent on 8 March. The absence prompted a flurry of speculation that Bo had fallen from power and coincided with a peak in registered post deletions on Sina Weibo according to an MIT study of microblog censorship<sup>1</sup> in China from 28 January to 20 May. The next day Bo held a press conference defending himself and accusing enemies of “pouring filth” on him and his family. Days later Premier Wen Jiabao used his annual press conference on 14 March to call for political reform lest China repeat a “historical tragedy” like the Cultural Revolution – a clear attack on Bo's red revival.

On 15 March, the day before the deadline for existing weibo users to register, state news agency Xinhua announced that Bo had been removed from his position as Chongqing party chief. The news correlated with another spike in registered post deletions and, although the real-name registration deadline came and went, many users found they could continue to post without registering or that Sina had suddenly recognised their accounts as fully registered. Then on 18 March pictures of an early morning Ferrari crash

in Beijing prompted speculation – and another spike in registered post deletions – that the driver killed in the accident was the son of an important government official. (Recent coverage by *The New York Times* indicates that the driver was the son of Hu Jintao's protegee, Ling Jihua, who then hid the death from both the public and the Party and in so doing may have seriously damaged Hu's influence on the November selection of the Party's incoming leadership.)<sup>2</sup>

The next day financial journalist Li Delin posted on Sina Weibo about a heavy security presence on Chang'an Boulevard – the first in a series of weibo posts from that day which, after being re-tweeted and sometimes combined with completely unrelated posts, set microblogs abuzz with rumours of a supposed coup attempt in Beijing by domestic security chief Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and ally of Bo.

At first neither microblog companies nor the government seemed to clamp down on these rumours, but on 30 March Xinhua announced that authorities had closed 16 websites and detained six people for “fabricating and disseminating online rumours.” Later that evening the government announced a 72-hour ban on using the “comment” function on Sina and Tencent's weibo services from 31 March to 3 April. This meant that users could only respond directly to other users or re-tweet posts (like Twitter) instead of commenting in easy-to-read threads. Xinhua also announced that Beijing police had arrested over 1,000 people on suspicion of spreading “harmful” online messages as part of a nationwide crackdown. Days later on 6 April authorities shuttered Utopia, a Maoist discussion forum and locus of vocal support for Bo. (The site had already been taken down once following Bo's dismissal.)

On 10 April rumours again began to circulate online, this time claiming that Bo's expulsion from the Party would be announced that night on CCTV. State television also featured pledges that day from Sina, Tencent and search engine giant Baidu supporting the government's efforts to crack down on online rumours. That evening Communist Party members posted on their weibo accounts about summons to attend urgent Party meetings at 9:00 p.m., and at 11:00 p.m. Xinhua and CCTV announced that Bo had been dismissed from the Communist Party and his wife, Gu Kailai, detained as a suspect in the murder of Heywood.

In compliance with ongoing censorship of Bo and Gu's names, Sina initially censored Xinhua's weibo post announcing Bo's ouster. The two were joined that night on the censorship whitelist by their son, Bo Guagua. The youngest Bo's high-profile lifestyle as a

1 [www.niemanlab.org/2012/05/reverse-engineering-chinese-censorship-when-and-why-are-controversial-tweets-deleted](http://www.niemanlab.org/2012/05/reverse-engineering-chinese-censorship-when-and-why-are-controversial-tweets-deleted)

2 [www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/world/asia/how-crash-cover-up-altered-chinas-succession.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/world/asia/how-crash-cover-up-altered-chinas-succession.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)



hard-partying student at Oxford and then at Harvard had become emblematic of the privilege afforded to the children of central Party elites following a November *Wall Street Journal* story on China's "princelings". The story claimed (incorrectly) that in early 2011 Guagua had picked up the daughter of then-US ambassador John Huntsman for a night out in a red Ferrari.

In the days following Bo's dismissal anti-rumour rhetoric reached a fever pitch: a Xinhua editorial referred explicitly to the March coup rumours and announced that over 1,000 suspects had been arrested since February for spreading rumours online. Adding to the commotion was the unexplained temporary loss of access on 12 April to all foreign websites from the mainland. Later that month Sina admitted in an SEC filing that it had not fully complied with real-name registration requirements. Later scandals, including the flight of blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng to the US Embassy in Beijing, also saw extensive censorship. Finally, on 29 May, Sina Weibo rolled out new "user contracts" to launch a system in which points are subtracted whenever a user posts rumours or sensitive content.

The Bo Xilai scandal contained the elements from previous stories that had elevated those incidents to long-term infamy among both weibo users and less net-savvy citizens: it featured extensive corruption and flagrant abuse of power by privileged elites, and cracked the façade of a much-vaunted China success story – in this case, Bo's so-called "Chongqing model" of development. The Bo scandal managed to outstrip the Wenzhou crash in terms of size and scope on weibo. Unlike Wenzhou, the government more carefully managed discussion on weibo through extensive keyword filtering and post deletion and did not allow for a short free-for-all period of coverage by traditional media as was seen in July of 2011.

Bo's position as a political heir-apparent in the grey area between local and central government provides a glimpse at the hard limits on how much influence the public can hope to exert through the medium of the internet. When the Party's interests outweigh the public's, the latter seems bound to lose. The three-day ban on comments for Sina and Tencent's weibo platforms served as a clear reminder to the companies, users and the public at large of exactly who is in charge.

## Conclusion

The level of public influence exerted through China's microblogs on the handling of the Bo Xilai scandal is unprecedented. The Chongqing government's attempts at glossing over Wang's escape to the US consulate quickly became a laughingstock online, with netizens' suspicions soon officially confirmed by Xinhua.

However, in the absence of official information from the government and facing extensive censorship, netizens were forced to rely on rumours and code

words to learn anything at all as the scandal continued to unfold behind closed doors. Most information on the "coup" was pure fiction, meaning the government's lack of transparency in handling the Bo case actually provided kindling for the rumours it supposedly sought to snuff out with a real-name policy. These rumours in turn served as additional justification for further government regulation of microblogs in the name of preventing the spread of "harmful" information.

Beyond the initial three-day ban on comments for Sina and Tencent it remains unclear which censorship measures were carried out on government orders and which originated at the company level as self-preservation measures. The instance of Sina censoring Xinhua's weibo announcement of Bo's ouster stands out as an example of confusion in the ranks, while Sina's new points-based regulation of microblog content may well have been a completely in-company response to government demands.

The early uneven effort to clamp down on weibo discussion of the Bo scandal may also indicate that he was left to hang by Party rivals uneasy with his populist brand of self-promotion. This highlights the potential of weibo as a political tool rather than as a consistently effective mechanism for enforcing accountability. Still, Bo's connections to the Party elite and his proximity to a seat on the Politburo Standing Committee also meant that uncensored online discussion could not go on forever.

## Action steps

The following key points are instructive when evaluating the potential spread of information on sensitive events in China's current microblog environment:

- When an issue approaches the grey area between central and local governments, as with Bo Xilai, an initial period of light or limited censorship may be possible if deemed politically expedient by the former.
- A lack of transparency in how the government handles unfolding scandals in China can provide further justification for a crackdown on free speech as specious online rumours become the only news source for information-hungry citizens.
- How companies like Sina and Tencent handle government demands for content regulation will have lasting influence on the role of microblogs as tools for enforcing transparency and accountability at the local levels. Special attention should be paid to the actual effects of Sina's points-based content regulation system.
- China's weibo platforms can expect to see further regulation in the wake of the Bo Xilai scandal and a continued increase in censorship as the October 2012 leadership transfer approaches. ■