
Social Inclusion or Exclusion? When *Weibo* (Microblogging) Meets the “New Generation” of Rural Migrant Workers

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of social media has had a profound impact on how people access and share information in China. Some researchers suggest that the new social media has broken through the monolithic propaganda of traditional Chinese media and brought a diversity of topics and perspectives into view. Others argue that platforms such as Weibo (microblogging) largely privilege the opinions of well-educated, middle class individuals, keeping working class industrial and rural workers' voices on the margins. The question remains: has the development of social media bridged or deepened the “digital divide”? In an effort to address this question, this paper explores the appearance of members of a “new generation” of migrant workers on Sina Weibo, the most popular microblogging service in China. Drawing on the results a study of Sina Weibo posts, reposts, and authors, this paper offers three main arguments: (1) Weibo is not only a means for sharing information and expressing opinions, it is also a platform where users mobilize to improve the lives of migrant workers in cities; (2) Weibo provides an emotional outlet, offering members of the “new generation” of migrant workers the opportunity to express dissatisfaction with the bitter reality of their lives and a longing for a better life; and (3) The most influential users of this microblogging platform tend to be media figures, scholars, government officials, and other individuals from outside the community. The author concludes that more effort needs to be made so that, instead of creating new inequalities, social media technology can be of assistance to members of socially marginalized groups.

INTRODUCTION

Rural migrant workers compose a significant majority of the working class in China. In 2009, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China 国家统计局, there were approximately 145 million rural migrant workers working in Chinese cities (All China Federation of Trade Unions, 2010). Their labor constitutes a major force in the maintenance of China's economic growth. Within this population is a large group (58.4 percent, a total of 85 million people) that belongs to the so-called "new generation" of migrant workers, born in the 1980s and 1990s to parents who were first-generation migrant workers.

This "new generation" differs from their parents' generation in several aspects:

- They are very young, just 23 years old, on average.
- They have a higher level of education than their parents; 30 percent have a high school education, compared to only 10 percent of the first generation.
- They have wider career choices: in addition to the construction industry, where most first-generation migrant workers work, they also work in manufacturing and service industries.
- They strive for better working conditions and wages and know how to fight for their rights and interests.
- They hope eagerly to be part of city life.

But despite their efforts to integrate into urban communities, these workers are still marginalized in urban communities and face housing, healthcare, and child education problems as well as unemployment. Meanwhile, they have lost connections to their prior rural lives; most young migrants come to the cities directly after graduating from middle or high school and have no farming experience, no land, and no intention of going back to their hometown (Wang, 2006).

Castells (2012a) notes the emergence of a "dual city," in which new information technologies and socioeconomic restructuring contribute to the polarization of urban populations; high-earners are far removed from members of devalued social groups. Meanwhile, rural migrants are drawn to the cities by new technologies and employment opportunities, becoming a mass of disposable labor that can be used, replaced, or reorganized. Many major Chinese cities are undergoing this type of restructuring process. Young migrant workers are, to a certain extent, the "disposable labor" to which Castells refers. Among other problems, many young migrants can find only temporary employment, depending on the needs and requirements of the market.

Other scholars have argued that access to and use of ICTs (information and communication technologies) determine many aspects of a person's

life, including personal fulfillment, social inclusion, and employment (van Dijk, 2005; Warschauer, 2003). People can use ICTs to avoid exclusion; social media and social networking may be able to expand one's social capital and enrich one's social relationships (Verdegem, 2011). Meanwhile, the development of the mobile Internet makes it possible to have Internet access without a computer or a smart phone. The 800 million low-tech mobile phone users in China have easy access to "the country's most important and transparent source of news and largest rumor mill (i.e., Weibo)" (Bristow, 2011). Recent surveys conducted in Guangzhou and Fujian Province showed that, for migrant workers, the Internet is second only to television as an information source; whereas 40 percent of new-generation migrant workers turn primarily to television for information, 30 percent use the Internet as their main source of information (Jia, 2012; Lin, Li, Weng, & Xiao, 2010). But very little research has been done the effects of microblogging—as both a social media and a social networking platform—on the status of "new generation" migrant workers.

The rapid development of social media and other Web 2.0 technologies has significantly shaped the ways in which Chinese citizens access and share information. Weibo 微博, or microblogging, has enjoyed a rapid growth in the past three years. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) 中国互联网络信息中心, by December 2011 microblogging sites were attracting 25 million users—an increase of 296 percent from the previous year. In total, about 48.7 percent of all Internet users in China use microblogging services. The three most-used of these services are QZone QQ空间, Sina Weibo 新浪微博, and Tencent Weibo 腾讯微博 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2012).

There has been a great deal of research on the role of ICTs in alleviating pervasive digital and social inequity (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Jia, 2011; Norris, 2001; van Dijk, 2005; Warschauer, 2003). Since the launch of Weibo in 2009, opposing viewpoints have been put forth about its widespread use in China. Some researchers suggest that the new social media has broken through the monolithic propaganda common in traditional media and made visible a diversity of topics and multiple viewpoints, representing the ideas of people from a range of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Zhang, 2010). Others argue that Weibo shuts out the voices of working class industrial and rural workers and represents only the opinions of the well-educated middle class (Zhao & Fu, 2010).

This paper examines the use of microblogging (i.e., Weibo) by and for new-generation migrant workers. In particular this paper investigates whether and how Weibo contributes to migrant workers' social inclusion. The research at the core of this paper was designed to address central questions:

- The content of messages: specifically, what types of messages do people post about the new-generation migrant worker community on Weibo, and what emotions are expressed with these messages?
- The influence of messages: specifically, whose messages have stronger influence, what characteristics do influential users have, and how do they achieve their influence?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: first, it reviews related literature in areas of ICT use, social networking, and social inclusion, with a special emphasis on research related to the use of ICTs by China's rural migrant workers; second, it reports the findings of a research study conducted by the author; and finally, it concludes with a summary and a discussion of these findings.

RELATED RESEARCH

ICT Use and Social Inclusion

Social inclusion, as Warschauer (2003) defines it, is the extent to which individuals, families, and communities are able to fully participate in society, taking into account economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement. Many factors contribute to social inclusion within a community—including access and use of ICTs (van Dijk, 2005; Warschauer, 2003). Norris (2001) argues that the root of the “digital divide” lies in broader patterns of social stratification that shape not only access to the virtual world but also full use of all sorts of information and communication tools. Further, researchers have noted that among the central problems confronting many members of disadvantaged social groups are those that are information-oriented. Such groups face obstacles in accessing, transferring, and applying information, which impedes their ability to collaborate with organizations and individuals. However, the flexibility of the Internet has proved to be useful for individuals seeking aid or partnerships (Mele, 1999).

Four types of resources determine how effective users will be in using ICTs to help them access, adapt, or create knowledge: physical, digital, human, and social (Warschauer, 2003). Digital inequity is measured not only in terms of technical apparatus (that is, hardware, software, and connectivity) but also in skill and availability of social support (DiMaggio et al., 2004). The unskilled and educationally ill-prepared are easily pushed to the margins of ICT access and use and thus excluded more profoundly from mainstream society. But different degrees of user participation exist even among people with a similar levels of access to information resources. For example, young people are quicker to adopt social media. Other socioeconomic variables—such as class and geographic areas (for example, the divide between Mid-West and East China)—may also explain the different rates of adoption and use.

Researchers believe that access to ICT is an important right of citizenship in the information age (Castells, 1996). But providing access requires more than just wiring schools and libraries in poor neighborhoods; it entails providing the training and education and a social support system to enable the effective use of ICTs.

Social Networks and Social Media

Among the most important of Web 2.0 technologies, social networking sites (SNSs) have spread rapidly, and on a global scale. SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, QQ, and Weibo are popular among youth around the world. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNSs are “networked publics” that support sociability.

It is possible that SNSs have developed so rapidly because inclusion in a network is necessary for participation in modern society (Castells, 1996). In other words, social networks offer a kind of information-age social capital. Lin defines social capital as “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions,” (Lin, 2012, p. 33) and suggests that it relies on three fundamental elements: resources in one’s social network; access to these resources through relationships; and the use of these resources for action. A person’s chance of success, Lin contends, depends on the quality of their social capital. In offline settings, people tend to use even their weak ties to access people with better resources than theirs (Granovetter, 1973; Johnson, 2004). They communicate and interact more with similar people than with dissimilar people in their social networks—a phenomenon referred as *homophily* (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Some researchers argue that social media and SNSs provide a way to expand one’s social capital (Verdegem, 2011). However, more research is needed before we can accurately characterize the relationship between social media and the creation of new digital and nondigital inequalities.

Chinese Migrant Workers’ Social Networks and Internet Use

Sociologists who have studied Chinese migrant workers’ social networks and the dynamics of their social mobility (Huo, 2003; Li, 1996; Li, Yang, Yue, & Jin, 2007) note that when rural migrant workers relocate to cities, their support networks decrease in size. However, within these networks many ties remain strong. Li et al. (2007) found that a rural migrant worker living in a city has, on average, 1.65 ties for emotional support, 2.06 ties for instrumental support, and 2.45 ties for social companionship. Weak ties make up less than 40 percent of their social connections.

While weak ties are said to provide useful information and to explain vertical and horizontal mobility, Huo (2003) points out that in rural culture, the concept of “strong trust” is very important in explaining the high degree of *homophily*—that is to say, in explaining why so many peasant workers from one village or one place work in the same city, community,

or company. Job seekers rely heavily on strong ties composed of relatives and citizens from their hometown (Li, 1996). Traditional rural Chinese communities are organized around strong trust with in-groups; the lack of weak ties for information exchange and for extending social resources makes it very difficult for migrant workers to reach beyond their small social networks.

A few studies have investigated ICT and Internet use by migrant workers (Jia, 2011, 2012; Lin et al., 2010). These studies have found that the Internet is the preferred source of information for approximately 30 percent of these workers (Jia, 2012; Lin et al., 2010). According to another recent survey, 46 percent of new-generation migrant workers use the Internet to access information regularly (Lin et al., 2010). Instant messaging and social networking sites (QQ), search engines (Baidu), e-mails, and news portals are the most frequently used of these ICTs. The two main motives for using the Internet are social interaction and news updates.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The study at the core of this paper collected data from Sina Weibo (weibo.com). A keyword search with a phrase—"new generation migrant workers" (新生代农民工)—yielded 4,422 posts containing the search phrase over a three-month period (January 1, 2012, to March 31, 2012). Of these, 3,516 were original posts and 906 were reposts (the equivalent of "retweets"). A crawler program was used, together with Sina Weibo's API, to collect original microblog posts containing the key phrase. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these posts over this period of time:

As shown in figure 1, most of the posts (79.4 percent) were original posts. Only 20.6 percent were reposts (retweets). The peak on March 5, 2012, was due to the annual meetings of the National People's Congress

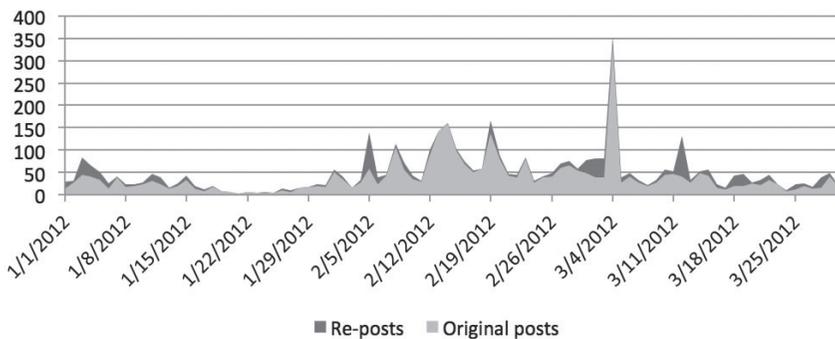


Figure 1. New Generation Migrant Worker Microblog Posts.

(NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), at which migrant workers were an important topic of discussion. The low point, on and around January 22, was caused by the Chinese New Year celebration.

A user search was conducted with the same phrase—"new generation migrant workers" (新生代农民工)—to identify users who had the search phrase in their nicknames, tags, or introductions. The 226 users retrieved were manually examined, and irrelevant users were removed from the list. Seventy-seven users were identified as related to new-generation migrant workers.

Data Analysis: Content

The content of retrieved messages was analyzed around three key measures: the type, the topic, and the emotional nature of the post. Two coders manually examined 1,550 original posts (44 percent of all original posts), and coded the type of posts according to the following coding scheme (table 1):

For the first three types of messages, the coders were instructed to assign between 1 and 3 subject words for each post, and between 0 and 3 words describing the emotions expressed therein. First, we coded 150 (about 10 percent) of the sample data. Then we compared analyses for intercoder agreement in this data set. We found that for type of posts, Cohen's Kappa was 0.62 (simple agreement percentage was 72 percent)—a good agreement rate. For subject and emotional terms, agreement was considered to exist if one of the assigned terms matched. The agreement rate was 82 percent for subject terms and 76 percent for emotions. The two coders then discussed and resolved the conflicts, revised the guidelines, and continued to code the remaining 1400 microblog posts. Each coder coded 700 posts.

Data Analysis: Social Network

Weibo users, much like tweeters, are connected through a one-directional "following" relationship. To identify the most influential users on the topic of new-generation migrant workers on Weibo, posts were ranked by how frequently they were reposted. In our sample, fifty microblog messages, authored by forty unique users, received more than ten reposts; these were

Table 1. Types of Posts

Code	Type	Meaning
IN	Information-related	Providing factual information about news or events
OP	Opinion-related	Commenting on certain issues or news, expressing personal opinions
AC	Action-related	Call for proposals or actions on certain issues
OT	Other	Messages that are not related to new-generation migrant workers

considered to be “influential.” After collecting information about the “following” relationships of the forty influential users whose posts were most reposted, we identified writers according to five categories: individual users (I), traditional media (T), new or Internet media (N), governments (G), and other organizations (O). We were further able to identify some of the individuals as new-generation migrant workers themselves. Next, we used a software tool (NodeXL) to construct a network of “following” relationships for these forty users and examined their social relationships. The “reposting” networks for selected microblog messages were constructed to understand the propagation process of the messages.

FINDINGS

Types of Messages

The typology described in the methodology session was applied manually to 1550 messages, divided into 4 major types: *information*, *opinion*, *action*, and *other*. Table 2 shows the result of classifying all messages as well as the 50 most reposted messages.

Table 2. Category Distribution of All Messages and 50 Most Reposted Messages

Type	All Messages (N = 1550)	50 Most Reposted Messages
Information-related	48%	50%
Opinion-related	42%	28%
Action-related	3%	18%
Other	7%	4%
All	100%	100%

We found that microblog posts are used to share information-related news and reports, make comments or express opinions, and to call for actions or make proposals to help new-generation migrant workers. Forty-eight percent of all messages and 50 percent of reposted messages were *information* related. Meanwhile, 42 percent of all messages—but only 28 percent of the most reposted messages—were *opinion* related. Finally, only 3 percent of all messages, but 18 percent of the most reposted messages, were *action* related. Although less frequent overall, action-related messages were much more likely to be reposted than other message types.

Information-related messages included both news and first- and secondhand reports. Both traditional and new media release news and events about new-generation migrant workers. Sometimes a newspaper or TV channel has a Weibo account and releases the news simultaneously on Weibo and its regular news channel (that is, firsthand news). Sometimes users on the Weibo platform saw a news report in the media and

posted the news on Weibo (that is, secondhand news), often with a link to the original source. More interestingly, individuals can themselves become news producers on Weibo. For example, individual user I4 observed the strike at OHMS Electronics and then posted the following:

Third day of strike at Panasonic OHMS Electronics. Workers were blocked after entering the manufacturing factory. During the talks, management promised to raise wages only for twenty or so worker-leaders. Feeling betrayed and outaged, workers rushed out of the factory and decided to continue with the strike! @关注新生代农民工 (message 1)

This is a firsthand situation update from the factory where the migrant workers were on strike to fight for better wages. The author (I4) used the “@” sign to bring this message to the attention of another user @关注新生代农民工 (concerning new-generation migrant workers), a joint Weibo account of nine well-known scholars who reposted this message to others who, in turn, reposted it again.

Opinion-related messages are comments made about certain social phenomena related to migrant workers or opinions expressed on certain issues. For example, user I2, a social-science scholar, authored the most reposted message, questioning the supposed increase of the urbanization rate:

Problems with rural migrant workers have existed for thirty years, which suggests that the increase in the urbanization rate is a fake phenomenon. The Census Bureau includes people who live in the cities for over six months as city residents. By that measure, they found there was an urbanization rate of 50 percent for 2011. However, first-generation migrant workers will eventually go back to rural areas. The new generation of migrant workers are marginalized in both urban and rural areas. China’s most urgent issue is still farmers. If farmers are not able to choose to live a good life, threats and crisis will never disappear. (message 2)

In contrast to news and reports, where grassroots individuals sometimes produced an influential piece of news, in the area of opinions it was the voices of celebrities that gained traction.

Action-oriented messages were those that called for mobilization against the social exclusion of new-generation migrant workers. These included general calls—for instance, one writer noted that “migrant workers have a harder time than others buying [train] tickets” and called for a mobilization of “college students and other volunteers to help migrant workers buy tickets” (message 3). Or they might be more specific. Some messages, for instance, featured requests on behalf of individual migrant workers: “Somebody sent me a private message through Weibo and he seemed quite worried. I called back and found out that a migrant worker is looking for a job. He is 28 years old, a high school graduate, has type A2

driver's license, and is looking for a driver job in Beijing. . . . Please help!" (message 4).

Messages 1 and 4 used "@" signs to bring the message to the attention of three specific other users. As noted earlier, action-related messages received more reposts compared to other message types, possibly because viewers of the messages made efforts to involve more people in helping migrant workers.

Topics

Table 3 shows the frequently mentioned topics on Weibo according to the subject terms assigned by the two coders. (Synonyms and quasi-synonyms are combined as one term.)

According to Jia (2011), the top five topics on migrant workers in official government news media (*China Daily*) are

- wages and income (including unpaid wages) (36 percent);
- shortage of labor and short-term employment (21 percent);
- child education (10 percent);
- social security (9.1 percent); and
- protection of rights and interests (6.5 percent).

"Wages and income" appears in both lists (36 percent in official newspapers and 5 percent on Weibo). "Temporary employment and unemployment" was the most-talked-about topic on Weibo; it also appeared on the official news list. Other frequent topics on Weibo were messages related to social inclusion: job and skill training, integration into city life, and discrimination.

Emotions

On average, 29.6 percent of all relevant information-, opinion-, and action-related messages contained emotional expressions; 70.4 percent did not express any emotion. More specifically, 49 percent of opinion-related posts contained emotional expressions, whereas only 12.6 percent of information-related posts expressed emotions. Table 4 shows the emotional and emotionless posts by message type.

Table 3. Frequent Migrant Worker-Related Topics on Weibo

Topic	Frequency	Percent
Short-term employment, unemployment	170	12.1%
Spiritual and cultural needs	167	11.9%
Job and skill training	148	10.6%
Integrating into city life	137	9.8%
Wages and income	69	4.9%
Discrimination	60	4.3%

Table 4. Emotional Expressions by Message Type

Message Type		Information-related		Opinion-related		Action-related	
With emotion	29.6%	86	12.6%	285	48.9%	16	39.0%
Without emotion	70.4%	598	87.4%	298	51.1%	25	61.0%

A possible explanation for this categorical difference may be that people tend to express an opinion or make a comment when they feel strongly about something, regardless of the type of emotion felt. When sharing factual information, people tend to be neutral and would like to appear objective without showing personal feelings.

Microblog writers expressed both positive and negative emotions. The classification of emotions by Parrott (2001) was used to group emotions into six major categories. Figure 2 shows the range of emotions on Weibo about “new generation” migrant workers.

Positive emotions (red)—love, joy, and surprise—appear in approximately 35 percent of the messages. Negative emotions (blue)—fear, sadness, and anger—were expressed in about 65 percent of the messages. Love and fear were the two most-expressed emotions. Table 5 shows the secondary emotional categories and their frequencies.

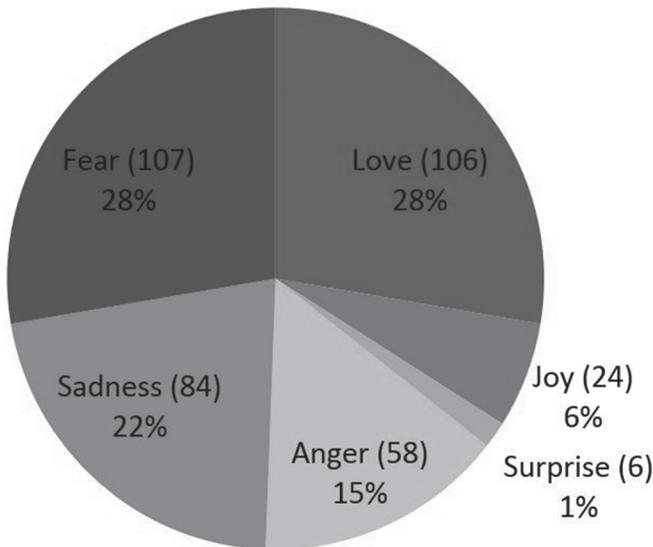


Figure 2. Types of Emotional Expressions on Weibo.

Table 5. Emotional Categories of Microblog Messages

Primary Emotions	Secondary Emotions	Frequency
Love (106)	Longing	32
	Tenderness	18
	Caring	16
	Love	4
	Love, other	36
Joy (24)	Joy, delight, happiness	11
	Enthusiasm, passion	5
	Joy, other	8
Surprise (6)	Surprise	6
Anger (58)	Dislike, bitter	29
	Disgust	11
	Anger, outrage	8
	Anger, other	20
Sadness (84)	Disappointment, unhappiness	29
	Hurt	17
	Sadness	11
	Neglect	7
	Sadness, other	20
Fear (107)	Distress	39
	Worry, fear	21
	Anxiety	20
	Fear, other	27

Many posts expressed complex emotions that spanned multiple primary categories. For example, one new-generation migrant worker's post presented a complex emotional picture of disappointment, fear, and longing for a better future:

Working in Shanghai, I have begun to realize that although our lives are better than those of our parents, we may still face the same fate . . . Coming from a rural family, I face so many disappointments every day in this modern society. I am unsure and worried about the future, but I will still work hard for a better life! (message 5)

This post exemplifies the most frequently mentioned secondary emotions that new-generation migrant worker microbloggers expressed: distress at the bitter reality of life, disappointment at being marginalized, and longing for a better life.

Influential Users and their Social Connections

Users whose posts received ten or more reposts were considered influential. There were a total of forty users who had at least one post that was reposted at least ten times. Table 6 shows the composition of the forty most influential Weibo users: fourteen individuals and twenty organizations (including twenty media outlets, three government offices, and three other organizations) are on this list.

T1, the most reposted Weibo author, was a traditional news media source, *China News Weekly*, whose news reports sometimes featured stories

Table 6. Types of Influential Weibo Users

User Type	Number of Users	Percentage	Labels
Individual users	14	35%	I1-I14
Media	13	32.5%	T1-T13
Traditional media			
New/Internet media	7	17.5%	N1-N7
Government organizations	3	7.5%	G1-G3
Other organizations	3	7.5%	O1-O3

about rural migrant workers. The next two most influential authors were two individuals. I1 is a government official in Shaanxi Province. He is concerned with “San Nong” 三农 (agriculture, farmers, and rural areas) issues and uses Weibo as a platform to get suggestions from the public and to answer policy questions. I2 is a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who is concerned with “social justice.” She had the most reposted message, one that questioned the supposed increase in the “urbanization rate” (message 2).

Nine out of the fourteen individual users (64.3 percent) were verified (VIP) users as recognized by Sina Weibo. Among them were three media professionals (I5, I6, and I14), two scholars (I2 and I13), two directors (I8, I10), one government official (I1), and the CEO of an IT company (I7).

Among the five unverified individual users (35.7 percent), two were self-identified as rural migrant workers (I3 and I11), one was a college student (I14), and 2 were unidentifiable (I9 and I22).

Figure 3 shows the network of “following” relationships of the forty us-

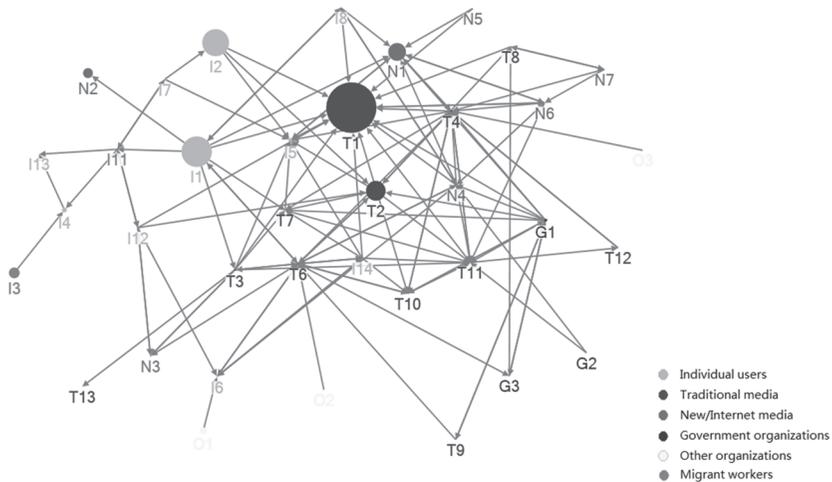


Figure 3. Following Network of 40 Most Re-posted Users.

ers. The node size is relevant to the total number of reposts a user received for all his or her posts in this data set, which is an indicator for how influential the user was on this topic.

Traditional media (T1–T13) were very influential, partially because of the number of followers they have for regular news updates. As figure 3 shows, the most traditional media users have a high number of in-links, even if their posts are not widely spread. For example, the scales of the sub-networks of traditional media sources T3, T4, T6, T10, and T11 are all larger than those of the most influential individual users. These media outlets are thus potentially sources of help with regard to the social inclusion of migrant workers.

New media (N1–N7) play an increasingly important role. However, their influence is limited compared to traditional media, partially because they usually do not produce any firsthand news but rather report news from traditional media.

Individuals also have strong voices, thanks to Web 2.0 technology. In addition to verified government officials, scholars, and media professionals, the voices of grassroots individuals were also widely heard. Figure 4 shows the spreading (reposting) paths of message 1.

The original message 1 written by author I4 was reposted by eleven us-

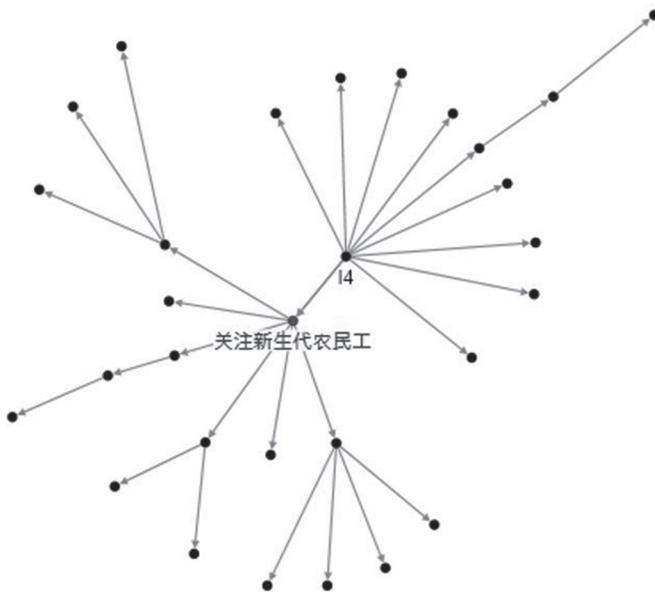


Figure 4. Re-posting Path of Microblog Post P1.

ers through his or her own network of followers and also by the verified user @关注新生代农民工 (“concerning new generation migrant workers”) through the use of the “@” sign. After being reposted by the verified user, the message was reposted by seventeen more users. These reposters may have thousands of followers who will see this post. This also explains why posts from rural migrant workers (I3 and I11) who only had a few followers could also reach a large audience. Both I3 and I11 were connected with I4, who knew how to use social media to attract the attention of users with more influence.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper offers an analysis of the appearance of new-generation migrant workers on Weibo in an effort to investigate how Weibo contributes to the social advancement of this community. Results show that Web 2.0 and microblogging precipitate both the social inclusion and social exclusion of new-generation migrant workers.

Weibo supports the social inclusion of new-generation migrant workers by

- providing a platform through which users (for example, for job seekers) can seek help that is unavailable through the strong ties in the small social network and support system of the migrant workers (Lin et al., 2010; Zhao & Fu, 2010);
- providing an outlet for emotional expression and support; and
- helping migrant workers reach out to influential people to whom they would not have easy access in offline situations.

According to Cartier, Castells, and Qiu (2005), Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers, categorized as the “information have-less,” differ from the “information have-nots” in that they use inexpensive low-end ICTs to form a “translocal network” that is an important socioeconomic asset to this marginalized group. Our results further show that microblogging enables migrant workers to reach out to more influential people to whom they are not closely connected. Although heard less frequently, the voices of young migrant workers, characterized by purposive and horizontal communications (Castells, 2012b), seem to be able to research a critical mass that is otherwise unreachable in offline situations. The translocal social networks formed through Weibo enable both physical and social mobility. Because action-related messages are reposted much more often than other types of messages, it also seems that the microblogosphere, as a whole, is especially fertile in terms of mobilizing for change.

The emergence of mobile Internet, which makes low-cost ICTs such as Weibo available to a vast number of users, including young rural-to-urban migrants, offers opportunities for solidarity and cooperation and for people to pool their resources for survival (Castells, 2012b). Grassroots elites

among the young migrants (Qiu, 2006) may play a critical role in using these opportunities to help their communities integrate into urban life.

That said, there are signs that Weibo has also caused migrant workers to be further excluded from opportunities. Media sources (traditional, Internet, or new media) and verified (VIP) users (media professionals, scholars, and government officials) seem to be the opinion leaders of the Weibo community. Indeed, in our study, we found that only two out of the top forty influential users on the topic of new-generation migrant workers were actual migrant workers. Although it is possible for migrant workers to get online in Internet bars and via mobile phones, several factors—including cost, lack of time, lack of skill, and interest—are hurdles to their effective use of ICTs (Lin, Li, Weng, & Xiao, 2010). Moreover, although Weibo helps to make the voices of new-generation migrant workers heard, in real life they are still at the margins of urban society. The issues they face—temporary employment, unemployment, discrimination, unpaid wages—show no sign of being resolved soon. The mixed emotions associated with the microblog posts shown in the results (about two-thirds of which were the negative emotions of fear, anger, and sadness as opposed to the one-third that were positive emotions of love, joy, and surprise) reflect very well their life situations, struggles, and hopes for a better future.

It would be simplistic to conclude that Weibo, as social media and a social networking site, uniformly either “bridges” or “deepens” the digital divide. As Norris (2001) pointed out, even if the Internet is accessible to 85 to 95 percent of the population, there are still multiple levels of access and use. Just because it is possible for low-tech mobile users to access the Internet does not mean that they will be able to enjoy the same conveniences that the technology brings to users who have more resources. For the same reason, it would be naïve to assume that donating computers to public libraries and schools in poor rural and urban areas will entirely ameliorate the digital divide. As suggested by Qiu (2006), agency—the human capacity to make choices and act—is crucial for urban-to-rural migrants. Amid the industrialization and urbanization of modern China, digital equality is a requirement for agency. So it is important for scholars and others to work to enable migrants’ agency through accessible ICTs.

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