CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
香港城市大學

A Longitudinal Analysis of the Dynamic Agenda-setting Process in the Social Media
社交媒体中議程設置動態過程的縱向分析

Submitted to
Department of Media and Communication
媒體與傳播系
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
哲學博士學位

By

Wang Pianpian
汪翩翩

January, 2017
二零一七年一月
Abstract

This study attempts to examine the dynamic agenda-setting process in the social media through an analysis of a set of big data over a span of 12 months in China’s popular Sina microblog community.

Traditional studies of agenda-setting effect have focused primarily on the relationship between the mass media and the audience in a vertical communication mode. They have often investigated such a relationship in a static section of time through two-point cross-lagged analyses. Their predominant findings are that the mass media set the agenda for the audience.

As the social media gained popularity in most of the industrialized societies, they have significantly expanded the traditionally limited horizontal communication mode and empowered citizens with unprecedented opportunities of providing and sharing information. Those popularized “new media” and the corresponding horizontal communication mode have raised two important questions about the traditional wisdom of the agenda-setting process: 1) who sets whose agenda in the social media? and 2) how dynamic the agenda-setting process is in the social media?

To answer those two questions, this study designs a conceptual framework that assumes a dynamic process in which both the “information elite” and the “information commoners” reciprocally set the agenda for each other over time. The “information elite” in the social media are defined as those who have rich information resources and enjoy an “authority” status, such as the mass media and VIP posters. The “information commoners” are defined as those who have scanty information resources and participate in the social media communication as ordinary posters.
The study has collected all the posts from October 1, 2013 to October 31, 2014 on the Sina Weibo, the most popular microblog community in China. Those posts have been classified into 12 salient issues over time, which have then been ranked according to the volume of each issue. The data have been examined through a series of multiple-point cross-lagged correlational analyses and Granger causality analyses.

The major findings of this study include: 1) The agenda of the information elite is highly correlated with that of the information commoners as measured by the overall ranking of issues; 2) the information elite can not only lead the attention of the information commoners on unobtrusive issues, but also their attention on obtrusive issues; 3) the agenda-setting role played by the information elite and the information commoners rotates according to the sensitiveness of events as measured by rank order of the 12 salient issues at multiple points in time; 4) external traditional media coverages can barely influence the amount of discussion volume of social media users; and 5) the elite-leading effect persists longer than the commoners-leading effect in the social media. Implications on agenda-setting effect in China’s context and on communication study using “big data” in the social media era are discussed in details in the current study.