

Does Sina Weibo Promote Regional Discrimination Against Henan China?

Suqi Chen

*The Affiliated High School of Peking University, Beijing, China 100089
lisac337@163.com*

ABSTRACT

Regional discrimination is a disturbing factor that contributes to the disharmony of society. With the rise of the internet, more people can get to look at and discuss news. However, though the internet allows people to connect more conveniently, it also enables people to form negative reactions or stereotypes toward a specific region through reading others' responses or the negative news of a specific region, such as Henan. Thus, this study aims to examine whether Sina Weibo promotes regional discrimination against Henan China, using questionnaires, data collection, and analysis through perspectives of media, time, and audiences. The paper concludes that there is a negative relationship between Sina Weibo and regional discrimination since, the People's Daily, did not promote regional discrimination in both 2014 to 2015 and 2018 to 2019. And for the Sina News, even though it promoted regional discrimination from 2014 to 2015, it failed to promote it from 2018 to 2019.

Keywords: *Sina Weibo, social media, stereotype, regional discrimination, Henan China*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sina Weibo is one of the most commonly used social media in China. It provides a strong real-time platform for users to access all kinds of sources. However, in the screening of such a large amount of information, people may easily form a conformity behavior without digging the whole background information to a certain debatable event.

Regional discrimination is one of the universal issues in China, especially for people in Henan, which was the center of the history of ancient China. However, because of the implementation of some political policies and the outbreak of negative news about Henan at the end of the 1990s, Henan gradually lost its central position. In reality, some people tend to associate negative images on Henan and its people, worsening the images of Henan and lessening people's attention to the report itself.

Thus, this study aims to understand the relation between Sina Weibo and the regional discrimination of Henan China through questionnaires, data collection, and analysis. It is significant since, firstly, according to the "2018 Weibo Users Development Report" [1], in the fourth quarter of 2018, Sina Weibo's monthly active users reached 462 million and an increase of over seventy million for three consecutive years. This vast amount of

users must raise people's attention to the effect of Sina Weibo. To some extent, this question can help people to recognize the problems of the media, producing a more civilized online experience for people.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Regional Discrimination

2.1.1. Regional Stereotype Causes

Regional discrimination refers to a certain social group offended by a certain member or group in the society using unfair, negative, and exclusive social behavior or institutional arrangement [3]. According to a study[4], the researchers found that geographical prejudice often occurs when individuals lack comprehensive perceptions of others.

2.1.2. Reasons

With the acceleration of the urbanization process, a large number of surrounding rural populations have entered large cities to find jobs and better living spaces, causing dissatisfaction from the urban people due to the thinking that migrant rural workers took over their resources, thus creating regional bias [5]. Public opinion

and social media also play a role in geographical discrimination, in most reports on “vulnerable groups,” the content is often negative [6].

2.1.3. Impacts

Regional discrimination undermines the basic rules of justice, putting people in a vulnerable state, and directly or indirectly harming their dignity and feelings. This trend may cause a “self-fulfilling prophecy” effect for target groups [6].

2.2. Henan China

Henan used to be the political, cultural, economic, and military center of China. However, in the late 20th century, the negative news about Henan burst massively, take “AIDS Village” in Henan as an example. At that time, AIDS cannot be understood by many people. Subsequently, people criticized that Henan is dirty and disgusting [7].

2.3. Social Media

Social media, especially Sina Weibo, has become one of the most used applications in China. According to “Kantar China Social Media Impact Report in 2018,” [8] the number of internet users in China has exceeded 802 million. The opinions expressed by the audience are not only the reflection of their will, but also have a profound impact on society [9].

Besides, the pursuit of maximizing views of the report has led the media to gradually ignore the whole background information about the news itself [10]. Social media often spread incomplete information that makes it hard for the audience to obtain the authenticity of the event, so most of the audience are using their standards to evaluate the culture of other regions [2]. News in social media tends to lack diversity. Because people tend to connect with people who are similar to them, news or messages in social media are all related to people’s friends or personal interests [11].

Additionally, compared with positive news, people will pay more attention to some bad, novel, and even negative events that cause people’s discomfort, and these events will be especially impressive [13]. Once the press has gained attention, it is more willing to continue to spread the news in this form [2].

Moreover, in social media, aggressive behavior is a comparatively common phenomenon because of the low-cost situations [14]. Although most people believe online aggression often happen among anonymous account, it mostly happens among non-anonymous one because commenting anonymously is less credible and creates less awareness, and people believe they stand in higher moral ideals and principles by using non-anonymous accounts [16].

2.4. Gaps

Although the above articles provide various background information for the research study, there are still gaps that exist. Many articles showed limited data or evidence to support their argument. Furthermore, while comparing data, the media itself may only report negative news, presenting biased data. Therefore, the influence of comments should also take into consideration since people may change their opinions while scanning those comments. Therefore, it would be better to consider the factors of review the attitude of the comments and their influence. At the same time, the comparison between different media sub-different time periods needs to be considered.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Overview

Mixed-methods will be used in the study. Questionnaires will first be distributed to investigate people’s preferences when using social media as well as their opinions toward regional discrimination. Then, data collection and analysis will be applied. Focusing on the People’s Daily and Sina News, two verified influential accounts in Sina Weibo, it is more reasonable to get a more generalizable result.

3.2. Questionnaires

Two different questionnaires are generated through wjx.cn. One is a questionnaire that focuses on people’s views on regional discrimination, including people’s views on the possible causes, effects, and effects of regional discrimination. Then another survey focused on people’s preferences when using social media and Sina Weibo, including the behavior of participants when they encountered posts or comments that they agreed or disagreed with.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

First, a list of posts that the People’s Daily and Sina News posted throughout March 31, 2014 to March 31, 2015 and February 1, 2018 to February 1, 2019 would be generated through WebCrawler. Next, all the posts about Henan in the People’s Daily and Sina News between those time periods would be collected separately, and analysis would be done on the use of language in the content of each post and categorize the post into positive, negative, and other news. For the post that contains any criminal or law-against news happened in Henan will count as “negative news.” For the post that talks about the positive side of Henan will count as “positive news,” ranging from social events, political news, educational notices, to environmental improvements. The rest of the posts will categorize into “other news.”

Then, the top 15 comments in each post in the “negative news” would be analyzed and categorized into three boxes — “attacking,” which attacked Henan and its people and used stereotypical language, “neutral,” which only looked at the news itself and the people involved, and “unrelated,” which responded with no correlation with the news.

After categorizing those comments, the comments and likes that responded to attacking comments (AC) would be collected and categorized. If there were more likes than people who defend for Henan or there were only likes in

AC, the post that contained AC will count as promoting. If there were more people defended or only responses that defend for Henan in AC than likes, the posts that contained AC will count as not promoting.

Next, the total number of posts that count as promoting and the total negative news towards Henan in one official account in either March 31, 2014 to March 31, 2015 and February 1, 2018 to February 1, 2019 would be collected and compared. Detailed analysis will be made based on Table 1.

Table 1. Categorizations of the Official Accounts

	Categorization 1	Categorization 2	Categorization 3	Categorization 4
Percentage of posts that talked about the negative news of Henan	≥50%	≥50%	<50%	<50%
Percentage of posts that promote regional discrimination in all the negative news of Henan	≥50%	<50%	≥50%	<50%
Promoting or not	Promoting	Not promoting	Promoting	Not Promoting

Finally, it can compare the posts of the same official account in different periods. If promotion happened from 2014 to 2015 and 2018 to 2019, it can be concluded that Sina Weibo is indeed promoted regional discrimination against Henan. If there is promotion in 2014 to 2015, but no promotion happened from 2018 to 2019, it is determined that Sina Weibo does not promote regional discrimination against Henan. If a promotion did not happen from 2014 to 2015, but there is a promotion in 2018 to 2019, then it can be concluded that Sina Weibo does promote regional discrimination against Henan. If promotion did not happen from 2014 to 2015 and 2018 to 2019, then it can be determined that Sina Weibo did not promote regional discrimination against Henan.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Questionnaires

For the first questionnaire which examines people’s opinions toward regional discrimination, there were 126 people who participated. As shown in Table 2, there were generally more participants who think that regional bias or discrimination is common online, specifically 44.44% for “sometimes” and 38.1% for “always.” According to Table 3, about 81.75% of participants agreed that social media is the most common way to promote regional discrimination.

Table 2. The Question about Whether Regional Bias is Common Online or Not

	Number of Responses	Proportion %
Always	48	38.1
Sometimes	56	44.44
Few	14	11.11
Never	8	6.35
Other	0	0

Table 3. The Question about the Ways that May Spread Regional Discrimination

	Number of Responses	Proportion %
Friends	70	55.56
Family and Relatives	81	64.29
Social Media	103	81.75
Readings	24	19.05

Others 5 3.97

For the second questionnaire, which examines people's preferences for social media, 123 participants participated. Sina Weibo is the second most commonly used social media since 61.79% of participants chose this option. Among 61.79% of the participants, 84.21% of the participants will log in to Sina Weibo every day to receive information. For posts and comments, they are interested in, 84.21% of them will like the posts or comments, and 78.95% will do nothing to the comments that opposed their views.

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

According to the posts and comments that talked about Henan in the People's Daily on March 31, 2014 to March 31, 2015, it published 45 negative posts in the overall 134 posts related to Henan, accounting for 33.6% of negative posts in the overall posts. Among the 45 negative posts, three posts contained regional attacking language, which only likes with no people responding, concluding these posts as "promoting." Therefore, the 3 "promoting" posts take up 6.67% of the total negative posts. Thus, from March 31, 2014 to March 31, 2015, the People's Daily did not promote discrimination in Henan, since there were over 50% of positive news about Henan and over 50% of posts that did not promote regional discrimination in Henan..

According to the posts and comments in Sina News from March 31, 2014 to March. 31, 2015, it published six negative posts in the overall seven posts that related to Henan, accounting for 85.7% of negative posts in the overall posts. Of the six negative posts, three posts contained regional offensive language, which were all counted as "promoting" since more people liked the attacking statement than defenders. Therefore, from March 31, 2014 to March 31, 2015, Sina News promoted regional discrimination of Henan since more than 50% of negative news about Henan and 50% of the posts that do promote regional discrimination.

According to the posts and comments in the People's Daily from February 1, 2018 to February 1, 2019, it published 33 negative posts in the overall 77 posts, accounting for 42.9% of negative posts in the overall posts related to Henan. Among 33 negative posts, seven posts contained regional attacking language. Among them, five posts counted as "promoting," accounting for 15.2% of the overall negative posts. Thus, from February 1, 2018 to February 1, 2019, the People's Daily did not promote regional discrimination of Henan since there was less than 50% of negative news about Henan and less than 50% of the posts that promoted regional discrimination.

According to the posts and comments in Sina News from February 1, 2018 to February 1, 2019, Sina News

published 96 negative posts in the overall 162 posts, accounting for 59.2% of negative posts in the overall posts. Among the 96 negative posts, 18 posts contained regional attacking language. And 9 of the 18 posts promoted regional discrimination. Thus, from February 1, 2018 to February 1, 2019, Sina News did not promote regional discrimination of Henan since there were over 50% of negative news about Henan yet less than 50% of the posts that promoted regional discrimination.

5. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Sina Weibo does not promote regional discrimination since, for People's Daily, it failed to promote regional discrimination between 2014 to 2015 and 2018 to 2019. And for Sina News, even though it promoted regional discrimination from 2014 to 2015, it failed to promote discrimination in 2018 to 2019 in which social media has generally larger influences compared to the previous time period. However, limitations still exist. Firstly, by only looking at two of the most influential accounts, the result might not be comprehensive enough since people may react differently toward different media or platforms, influencing the accuracy and reliability of the datasets. Also, because of tens of thousands of data that needed to be sorted out by individuals, some of the data might be neglected or miscounted, thereby reducing the credibility of the final results. Furthermore, this study did not count into the effect of randomness since people would not read every single post that was sent out by the accounts. Thus, the results of the study are not reliable enough since it did not count into the probability of each post appearing to every user. Therefore, it is a crucial and emergent task for Sina Weibo to improve their policies to reduce regional stereotypes and discrimination comments that happened online and more research has to be done to yield a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of social media on regional discrimination due to the mentioned limitations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my great gratitude to Mr. Berry for his constructive advice and encouragement. Also, thanks to Mr. Ren for his help in collecting the data for the project.

REFERENCES

- [1] Sina Weibo Data Center. (n.d.). 2018 Weibo Users Development Report. Retrieved from <https://www.3mbang.com/p-3508308.html>
- [2] Zhang, A. L., & Lu, S. N. (2018). The Dissemination of Regional Discrimination in the Post-Truth Era—Northeastern People as an Example, Suihua University. Website: China National Knowledge Infrastructure

- [3] Huang, G. P., & Yao, B. X. (2006). Regional Discrimination and the Construction of a Harmonious Society. *Science of Social Psychology*
- [4] Li, B., Li, Y., & Huang, S. C. (2018). Regional Attacks on the Internet: Manifestations, Causes, and Reflections—A Case Study of the Netizens in Chengdu, Southeast Communication. Website: China National Knowledge Infrastructure
- [5] Zhao, Y., Pu, J., & Ding, M. G. (2008). Analysis of Network Regional Slander Phenomenon. *Science of Social Psychology*. New West.
- [6] Xu, W. Q., & Tan, W. (2013). Realistic Interpretation and Rational Reflection on the Discrimination of Geographical Discrimination in Internet News, E-government. Website: China National Knowledge Infrastructure
- [7] Song, L. (2017). A Study on the Stigmatization Image of Henan People in New Media. Heilongjiang University. Website: China National Knowledge Infrastructure
- [8] Kantar China. (2018). Kantar China Social Media Impact Report in 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.360vc.org/vc/5002624/20181107A0GQEL00.html>
- [9] Shen, Y. P., and Zheng, B.Z. (2010). Analysis of Media Discrimination from the Perspective of Media Discourse Rights. *Culture Journal*.
- [10] Zhang, D. (2017). Media Bias Research in the Environment of New Media Communication. *New Media Research*.
- [11] Pfeffer J, Zorbach T. & Carley K. M. (2014). Understanding online firestorms: Negative word-of-mouth dynamics in social media networks, *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20:1-2, 117-128. doi: 10.1080/13527266.2013.797778
- [12] Sunstein, C. (2001). "The Daily We." In Boston Review New Democracy Forum: Is the Internet Bad for Democracy? Retrieved from: <http://bostonreview.net/BR26.3/contents.html>
- [13] Wu, H. S. (2018). The Construction and Dissemination of Stereotypes of "Henan People" by Media Weibo—Taking "People's Daily" and "Headline News" as Examples. Bohai University. Website: China National Knowledge Infrastructure
- [14] Rost K, Stahel L, Frey BS (2016). Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media. *PLoS ONE* 11(6): e0155923. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0155923
- [15] Elster J. (1989). Social Norms and Economic Theory. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 3(4):99–117. DOI: 10.1257/jep.3.4.99