Social media censorship and the public sphere

Testing Habermas' ideas on the public sphere on social media in China

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to apply the main conditions of Jürgen Habermas' public sphere, the disregard of status, common concern and inclusivity, on the censorship of expression that is visible on social media in China. The censorship that prevails on Chinese social media is understood through both conducting interviews with Chinese citizens living in Sweden and using secondary data from a Harvard study based on researching censorship on social media in China. On these results, the theoretical perspective is then applied to see how the censorship on Chinese social media can be analysed through the key elements of the public sphere. The paper uses both empirical and theoretical methods. The empirical methods include the interviews and the secondary data analysis and the theoretical method includes the testing of Habermas' theory on the results of the primary material. From applying the conditions of the theoretical framework in the analysis, conclusions can be drawn that the censorship of expression that exists on social media in China shows major setbacks in regard to the key elements of a public sphere.

ABSTRAKT

Syftet med denna uppsats är att tillämpa de viktigaste kriterierna för Jürgen Habermas teori om den offentliga sfären, som inkluderar åsidosättandet av status, gemensamt intresse och inkludering, på censurerandet av sociala medier i Kina. Censuren som råder på kinesiska sociala medier förstås genom utförda intervjuer med kinesiska medborgare som bor i Sverige och med hjälp av sekundärdata från en Harvard studie som är baserad på forskning av sociala mediers censur i Kina. På dessa resultat, appliceras därefter det teoretiska perspektivet för att se hur censuren på kinesiska sociala medier kan analyseras genom de centrala villkoren för den offentliga sfären. Uppsatsen använder både empiriska och teoretiska metoder. De empiriska metoderna inkluderar utförandet av intervjuer och en sekundäranalys och den teoretiska metoden omfattar prövandet av Habermas teori på resultatet av primärmaterialet. Genom att applicera de teoretiska villkoren i analysen, kan slutsatser dras att censureringen av sociala medier i Kina visar stora bakslag när man applicerar de viktigaste inslagen från Habermas offentliga sfär teori.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Social media have become one of the most important tools for many of the world's citizens to express themselves, communicate freely and share and receive information, opinions and news. Even in countries where freedom of expression may be a right that is denied, the accessibility and the extensivity of social media has provided a platform for more freedom of expression than ever before.[1] Social media have allowed people to both connect and come together for any cause including both political and social acts.[2] Social media platforms have a total of over two billion users worldwide, which portray the amount of space for discussion available on a higher scale than any form of traditional media.[3] Before social media, opinion sharing and information receiving was mostly done through more traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio and television. However, in the last decade, social media have created a worldwide forum for people to seek, gather, receive and share nearly anything possible. Unlike traditional mass media, the Internet (hereby mainly including social media platforms) allows individuals to communicate without having to get approval from media owners such as newspaper editors or television stations.[4] The rise of social media has also made it more difficult for States that have long censored their media, to censor the information that is shared. Information can more easily develop and circulate on social media without being as easily manipulated and censored by governments, in contrast to visual and print media.[5]

Social media can be defined as but not limited to blogs, micro-blogs, multimedia sharing services and social networking sites.[6][7] Although social media websites regulate

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[1] Center for Media, Data and Society, *Social Media: A Tool for Freedom of Expression in Southeast Asia,* https://spp.ceu.edu/events/2016-05-23/social-media-tool-freedom-expression-southeast-asia (accessed 23 June, 2016)

[2] K. Jaishankar and N. Ronel (eds.), 'SASCV 2013 Conference Proceedings', *Second International Conference of the South Asian Society of Criminology*, Tamul Nadu, India, 11-13 January 2013, pg. 388

[3] Statista, *Number of social network users worldwide from 2010 to 2020 (in billions),* http://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/ (accessed 27 June 2016)

[4] Y. Benkler, *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2006, pg. 9

[5] Information Resources Management Association, *Social Media and Networking: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, Hershey, PA, IGI Global, 2015, pg. 1232

[6] J.C. Bertot, P.T Jaeger and J.M Grimes, 'Using ICTs to create a culture of transparency: E-government and social media as openness and anti-corruption tools for societies', *Government Information Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2010, pg. 266

content, they also ease free expression more than any other type of media, especially in countries where traditional media is tightly controlled. Social media in comparison to traditional media also allow citizens to more openly examine public opinion. [89] Social media have not only provided easier access to share and receive information but have also allowed people all over the world to protest, leak information, organize demonstrations and criticize governments; one well-known example being the Arab Spring which started in 2010 and another the Million People March in the Philippines which took place in 2013.[10] They have also provided users to connect with each other and form social communities and share and publish information in real time, i.e. providing a platform to speak.[11]

However, the potential for the Internet to enhance free expression is definitely not universally welcomed.[12] In authoritarian regimes, social media are in a vast amount of ways a lot tighter regulated than in democratic societies.[1314] Countries such as China, Cuba, Iran, Syria, Turkey and Vietnam all actively block social media websites and censor online information. Out of all countries in the world, NGO Freedom House in 2015 rated China as the worst country in regard to Internet and digital media freedom.[15] With website censoring through "The Great Firewall of China" and keyword blocking which involves an immense number of words being banned online, expression is drastically censored and controlled in the country.[16]

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[7] H. Cohen, 'Social media definitions', *actionable marketing guide* [web blog], 9 May 2011, http://heidicohen.com/social-media-definition/ (accessed 17 June 2016).

[8] J. DeLisle, A. Goldstein and G. Yang (ed.), *The Internet, Social media, and a Changing China*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pg. 147

[9] Y. Zheng and G. Wu, 'Information Technology, Public Space and Collective Action in China', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 38, No.5, 2007, pg. 515

[10] C. Shirky, 'The Political Power of Social Media', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 90, Issue 1, 2011

[11] Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010, pg. 266

[12] W.H. Dutton et al., *Freedom of Connection, Freedom of Expression: The changing legal and regulatory ecology shaping the Internet,* Paris, France, UNESCO Publishing, 2011, pg. 12

[13] S. Kalathil and T. Boas, 'The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes', Working Paper, Global Policy Program, Carnegie Endowment for Peace, Washington DC, July 2001, pg. 2

[14] T. Boas, 'Weaving the Authoritarian Web' in J. Zysman and A. Newman (eds.) *How revolutionary was the digital revolution?* Stanford, CA, Stanford Business Books, 2006, pg. 4

[15] S. Kelly et al., 'Privatizing Censorship, Eroding Privacy, Freedom on the Net, *Freedom House*, 2015, pg. 21

[16] G. King, J. Pan and M. Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression', *American Political Science Review,* Vol 107, Issue 2, 2013, pg. 3

Nevertheless, China has a bigger online population than any other country in the world, with an estimate of 688 million users as of December 2015.[17] Social media use in China is widely spread and although Chinese citizens have no access to Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, the Chinese equivalents such as Sina Weibo, Ren Ren, QZone and Tencent Weibo have hundreds of millions of users.[18]

More than twelve government bodies control the information flow within, into and out of China.[19] It is estimated that the Chinese State and private companies employ around 100,000 people that are constantly controlling and censoring the Internet.[20]

The strict Internet censorship in China is a widely discussed topic and the rise of social media websites and their increase in users has opened up a vast space for discussion. Freedom of expression is very often discussed in relation to Internet and social media use in China as it is often questioned whether the mediums have had a positive effect on Chinese netizens' (Internet citizens) right to express themselves.[21]

Many academics have researched the relationship between the public sphere and the media, both traditional and new. Studies regarding the public sphere are often based on Jürgen Habermas' ideas of how a public sphere developed in the 18th century. Habermas' conception of the public sphere states that it was established at a time when people started to come together, mostly in coffee houses to debate over common concerns. He laid emphasis on the importance of areas being open and accessible to all, including public participation in political discussions to influence decision-making. He developed his concept of the public sphere in 1962 in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* first published in German under the name *Öffentlichkeit,* where he explained how public discourse took place between the public and the private and formed public opinion and debate.[22]

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[17] CCNIC, '37th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China', *China Internet Network Information Center.* 2016, https://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201604/P020160419390562421055.pdf (accessed 4 June 2016)

[18] C. Chiu, C. Ip and A, Silverman, 'Understanding social media in China' *McKinsey Quarterly*, 2012

[19] B. Xu, 'Media Censorship in China' *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7 April 2015, pg. 2, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/177388/Media%20Censorship%20in%20China.pdf (accessed 28 May 2016.)

[20] The Economist, 'How does China censor the Internet?', *The Economist Explains* [web blog], 21 April 2013, http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/04/economist-explains-how-china-censors-internet (accessed 3 June 2016.)

[21] For further information see chapter on previous research.

[22] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1991, pg. 27

Although public debate has modernized a lot since then through new media, his core ideas of the public sphere are still valued academically.[23]

Today, the debate on the public sphere is not only relevant but also often problematic. Boeder states that the existing post-modern critique of Habermas' public sphere is in many ways both valid and relevant, however the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is still very valuable for media theory.[24]

Since 1979, when Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, openness together with control has been a challenge for the party. The Internet is today a challenge for the Chinese authorities, which have adopted strategies such as promoting self-censorship and filtering content by blocking foreign news media and human rights organizations. However, despite the controlling measures against the Internet, social media in China have grown since 2005. Blogging sites are allowed to operate as long as each business includes censorship into their software.[25] Chinese social media users are subject to one of the world's biggest control efforts. The Chinese government has invested in a big way in software to both track and analyse online activities and public opinion that may be seen as a threat to the State. Nearly all social media platforms are registered in Beijing and are actively observed by the Beijing Network Information Office.[26]

The Chinese government's attempt to regulate social media content and freedom of expression through censorship, offers an interesting way of understanding Chinese social media through a Habermasian public sphere perspective. In regard to studying an online public sphere, China is an interesting case due to the combination of being an authoritarian regime, a leading market place and an important actor in world politics. This mixture makes it interesting to study the Chinese government and its efforts towards online censorship through limiting public debates and censoring information, in regard to the public sphere, a concept that stands for a non-hierarchal, open, inclusive platform.

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[23] P. Boeder, 'Habermas' Heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society', *First Monday*, Vol 10, no 9, 2005, http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1280/1200 (accessed on 1 June 2016)

[24] Boeder, 2005.

[25] R. MacKinnon, 'Flatter world and thicker walls?', *Public Choice,* Vol. 134, No. 1/2, 2008, pg. 35

[26] Y. Wu, B. Qin and D. Stromberg, "The Political Economy of Social Media in China," *Invited submission to the Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2016, pg. 5

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

The overall purpose of this study is to apply Jürgen Habermas' theory on the public sphere on Chinese social media. Social media have grown and spread faster than any other type of media but with China's extreme control over the Internet, the censorship on Chinese social media can create an interesting discussion when drawing from Habermas' theoretical ideas of a public sphere. The public sphere is an interesting theory to use when contextualizing the role of government censorship on social media. Habermas' theory will be applied as a theoretical perspective in a study of censorship of expression of social media. Hence, the key theoretical and analytical concept is "public sphere". The material used in the form of interviews and a statistical research study, provides conclusions of how censorship on social media is portrayed in regard to netizens' right to free expression online. The aim is to put the results of the primary material that portray the online censorship situation on Chinese social media, under a public sphere looking glass to more clearly understand the situation from a Habermasian perspective. Hence, the aim is not to give a yes or no answer to whether Chinese social media promote a modern day public sphere but solely to test the theoretical key elements on the censorship of expression on social media in China that is portrayed by the results of the primary material. The results of the primary material show how censorship of expression online in China is viewed through different sources. Through these viewpoints it is easier to gather an understanding of how social media in China are perceived in regard to fulfilling users' right to freedom of expression despite the advanced censorship. Habermas' main criteria of his public sphere theory can be applied to the situation and provide an interesting analysis and discussion that step by step compares the social media situation to a the ideas of the public sphere.

The research question for this essay will therefore be:

- How can the censorship of expression on social media in China be analysed through the main conditions of the Habermasian public sphere theory?

2. Material and Limitations

2.1 Primary and Secondary Material

To be able to grasp a view over social media and their effect on freedom of expression in China, one first needs to understand what the situation looks like by gathering information from sources that shine light on the two concepts together and how they are viewed by Chinese Internet users. Therefore, an interview study constructed for the purpose of this essay will be used as primary material.[27] Eleven Chinese students studying in Lund, Sweden were interviewed during Summer 2016 regarding their viewpoints on freedom of expression online, with a focus on social media in China. To be able to gather a broader understanding of the subject and the situation in China, more interviews would have been needed. Due to the limited time span and scope of the essay there was only room to interview eleven students. The students interviewed were given the possibility to remain anonymous and all chose to not openly state their names for this essay. The principal importance of the interview answers is to present an image of the online situation in China and how Chinese Internet users perceive censorship and freedom of expression on social media.

The interviews included six questions, all of them relating to social media and the right to freedom of expression online. All six questions were answered by the students, which helped to gather a clearer picture of how freedom of expression on social media in China is perceived. Because of the limited amount of people interviewed for this essay, the social media study "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression" by Harvard scholars Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts[28] has been used as a complement to the interviews. Both the interviews with the eleven Chinese students in Lund and the study will act as primary material when applying Habermas' theoretical framework in the analysis chapter. By using an already conducted study of data for my analysis, the Harvard study acts as secondary data for this essay.

Habermas' theory on the public sphere will also be used as a primary source, due to it playing a large role in the analysis. As the purpose of this essay includes testing Habermas' conditions of the public sphere on the collected information from the interviews and the Harvard social media study, his theory is just as important as a primary source as the other primary material. The theory will be presented in detail further on.

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[27] See attached interviews.

[28] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013.

Quite a few studies have been orchestrated over the past years to gather and analyse information regarding online censorship and deletion of posts on social media. Zhu et.al analysed millions of posts by so-called "sensitive users" on the social media platform Sina Weibo, focusing on post deletion and censorship, concluding that around 12% of all posts get deleted.[29] Bamman, O'Connor and Smith analysed a sample of 1.3 million posts also taken from Sina Weibo, to uncover sensitive terms that led to post deletion.[30] There are other similar studies that have been carried out, all slightly different in regard to what has been the main focus and purpose of the research. Many studies choose to focus on one social media platform when conducting data research. However, the study that has been chosen for this essay differs from the other studies in regard to which social media platforms have been analysed. King, Pan and Roberts analysed 1382 different social media platforms in China, which included more than 11 million posts. They also chose to focus on not just the slightly bigger platforms, but also the smaller local sites from different parts of the country. Another factor of the research was to focus on social media sites that involved a larger amount of space for posts, instead of the micro-blogging platforms such as Sina Weibo, which limit the amount of characters allowed in one post.

I have deemed it important to use a study that analyses not only one, but several social media platforms to gain an understanding of the censorship of expression on social media in China. I believe that an analysis of a larger amount of social media platforms compared to an analysis of one single platform provides a broader insight to the subject. Including social media sites where more extensive messages can be posted provides more space for information of and discussion on subjects regarded as sensitive to the government. It can also be considered that a study of close to 1400 different platforms compared to the studies that solely focus on one platform may provide a less biased result.

Books, scholarly articles and reports relevant to the essay's subject have been used as secondary material. Most of the secondary material used can be found in the introduction and the previous research chapters. Many scholars have researched social media in relation to freedom of expression and the Habermasian public sphere both in general and in China. Therefore, I have deemed it important to include many different scholarly viewpoints to give

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[29] T. Zhu et al., 'The Velocity of Censorship: High-Fidelity Detection of Micro blog Post Deletions', 2013, pg. 3, http://arxiv.org/vc/arxiv/papers/1303/1303.0597v1.pdf (accessed 5 May 2016)

[30] D. Bamman, B. O'Connor and N. Smith, 'Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media', *First Monday*, Vol. 17, No. 3-5, 2012, http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3943/3169 (accessed on 24 June, 2016)

an insight to what has been researched concerning the topics through the years. Due to the subjects of the essay being so extensive and constantly topical, I have chosen to use a wide amount of different secondary material to form an extensive background before the analysis. The interview questions can be found as an attachment to this essay.

2.2 Criticism of sources

When using sources that address social media it is important to note that books and academic papers may discuss 'blogs', 'micro-blogs', 'weibo' and 'the blogosphere' in relation to social media use in China. This may be regarded as confusing. To clarify, blogs and micro-blogs and weibo (Chinese micro-blogs) are also social media, which makes the discussion on blogging in relation to free expression in China important for this essay, especially when considering micro-blogs are among the most popular form of social media platforms used in China.[31] Many scholars also discuss freedom of expression in relation to the Internet, both in general and in China. This is a lot more common than solely concentrating on the concept social media, although social media are a large source of outlet for freedom of expression on the Internet. The Internet therefore acts as an umbrella term for platforms such as social media sites. Therefore, I have chosen to include scholarly articles in my previous research chapter that also use the term "Internet" when discussing freedom of expression online, as I consider them equally important.

It is important to note that most data studies of social media censorship can be considered biased in some ways, due to the lack of studies that have been able to test enough keywords and monitor enough posts from enough platforms during such limited periods of time.[32] However, the study I have chosen analyses more social media platforms than any similar kind of study that has been published, and can therefore hopefully provide a broader, less biased overview of the situation. However, King, Pan and Roberts missed a number of posts that are censored due to the fact that they were not always able to obtain a post before it had been censored. The study does not analyse the direct effects of The Great Firewall, nor does it analyse keyword blocking in the sense of what exact keywords are

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[31] S. Millward, 'Check out the numbers on China's top 10 social media sites', *TechinAsia*, 13 March 2013, https://www.techinasia.com/2013-china-top-10-social-sites-infographic, (accessed on 4 June 2016)

[32] Zhu et al., 2013, pg. 2

blocked.[33] The study also refrains from studying the effects of violence, in the form of arrests or threats to social media users. It has gaps, but it provides enough information.

Regarding the theory chosen, it has been criticized for not including women, ethnical groups or the working class and being centred on the bourgeois public.[34] A public sphere can be understood as a space that is inclusive to the whole public, although not even Habermas' own explanation of the public sphere truly included the whole public. However, regarding this, Habermas' theory should not be interpreted one-sidedly. Although it has its weaknesses, the theory provides a good theoretical framework for understanding how a public sphere should be structured when applying it in the modern day. Habermas' theory has been considered one of the most important frameworks regarding the study of the public sphere.[35] The essence of this theory lies more in Habermas' grand generalization and abstraction than in the historical archives. Consequently, linked to the limitations of this essay stated below it is important to note that the analysis in this essay will not be limited to a study of a certain group in society, but to the public as a whole.

2.3 Limitations

Just like outside of the Internet, the international community has established laws and these laws need to be respected both online and offline. Although the Internet should allow the same amount of freedom of expression as in the offline world, there are certain types of expression that States are required to prohibit under international law. These include child pornography, incitement to terrorism or murder, national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, violence and incitement to commit genocide.[36][37][38]

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[33] J. Ng, 'Repository of censored and sensitive Chinese keywords', *Citizen Lab,* 10 December 2014, https://citizenlab.org/2014/12/repository-censored-sensitive-chinese-keywords-13-lists-9054-terms/, (accessed 22 May, 2016)

[34] N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, No. 25/56, 1990, pg. 116

[35] J. Matačinskaitė, 'The Internet as a Public Sphere', *Science Journal (Communication and information),* No. 4, 2011, pg. 92

[36] UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 9 December 1948, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 78,

[37] UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999

[38] UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577

Freedom of expression is therefore not an absolute right as it can be limited when it conflicts with other rights.[39]

This essay will not apply the public sphere theory in regard the freedom of expression concerning the types of expression that are globally prohibited. The focus of the essay lies solely on freedom of expression being a human right, in regard to International Conventions, meaning that all humans should be able to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers in consideration with international law.[40][41]

It is important to note that when applying elements of Habermas' theory in my study, the abstract theory and the historical stage from which the theory has been taken must be kept separate. There are other concepts together with the public sphere that can be used to analyse social media and their impact on freedom of expression, such as democracy and ideology but this paper is limited in the sense that it only focuses on the concept of the public sphere and its criteria that Habermas has laid forward.

Due to the digital divide in China, many citizens have limited or no access to the Internet. This is often the case in rural areas due to the lack of Internet infrastructure and economic development. Comparing Beijing, which has an Internet penetration rate of 76,5% to region Yunnan that has a penetration rate of 37,4%, shows a clear divide in Internet users in different parts of the country. The China Internet Network Information Center's (CCNIC) statistical report from 2016 shows that by December 2015, China's rural Internet users accounted for only 28,4% of the country's total Internet users, and that 75,1% of Internet users were aged between 10-39.[42] Although Habermas' definition of the public sphere is that it should be accessible to all, this study becomes too large if it starts focusing too much on the digital divide in China. Therefore when applying the theory's condition of accessibility to this study, it will be limited to mostly covering those that already have access to the Internet and are users of social media platforms. This is also in regard to having to limit the amount of primary material.

Habermas' theory was founded on a development of a public sphere in 18th century Europe, which was a very different era compared to today's China under authoritarian rule.

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[39] G. Crystal, 'The right to freedom of speech', *Civil Rights Movement, 25 July 2016,* http://www.civilrightsmovement.co.uk/right-freedom-speech.html (accessed on 29 July 2016)

[40] Article 19, *Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Responses to Conflict Situation*, 4 May 2015

[41] UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, 217 A

[42] CCNIC, '37th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China', *China Internet Network Information Center.* 2016.

However, the Habermasian ideas drawn from his public sphere theory are used as a framework in this essay and are separated from the historical attributes. The ambition has been to discuss the public sphere from a more fluid and changeable perspective giving it a stipulated meaning considering it a stage in which opinions are expressed in various public media. Regarding the interviews, due to the fact that a small sample of eleven people were interviewed, a detailed explanation of each individual's six answers will not be given, as the scope of this essay is limited and it would become to long to describe each answer separately. However, many answers were very similar regarding certain questions and therefore it has been easier to gather an overall viewpoint on the situation including the students' opinions on the matter. The answers that differ immensely from each other will be touched upon separately, including important individual viewpoints that arose from the participants' answers.

The access to primary material that is deemed relevant to this essay is also limited. Due to the research in the article "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression" being conducted in 2011 it clearly does not make it the most up to date research on social media censorship. However, compared to, for example, a newer study from 2015, "Politics, Rumors and Ambiguity: Tracking Censorship on WeChat's Public Accounts Platform"[43] (which only analysed 36,000 social media posts from one single social media platform) the amount of posts analysed is of a much larger scale than other, more recent studies. Again, the newer study also only focuses on one social media platform. There is an evident lack of newer, more extensive research concerning social media censorship. Social media are still in an evolving process, which continue to change the landscape of Chinese society. No study has yet been able to track a large enough amount of posts for long periods of time on a broad range of social media platforms in China. However, there are more and less extensive studies that have been conducted, but with such a limited choice of studies available I have considered a slightly older study more substantial than the few more recent available studies.

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[43] J. Ng, 'Politics, Rumors and Ambiguity', *Citizen Lab,* 20 July 2015, https://citizenlab.org/2014/12/repository-censored-sensitive-chinese-keywords-13-lists-9054-terms/, (accessed 22 May, 2016)

3. Theory and Method

3.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this essay is founded on elements of Jürgen Habermas' study of the development of a public sphere. Before going into depth with Habermas' public sphere theory and its core elements, it is necessary to understand the ways in which the term "public sphere" has been generally conceptualized and used in academia.

3.1.1 The Public Sphere

There is no single specific conceptualization of the term "public sphere" to be found in dictionaries, which makes it necessary to separate the two words and individually interpret their meanings. When searching for the meaning of the word 'public' the most relevant explanation given related to this essay is "something accessible to or shared by all members of the community". A relevant definition of the word 'sphere' is "an area or range over or within which someone or something acts, exists, or has influence or significance". The public sphere can therefore through these two definitions be interpreted as an area that is accessible to all members of the community i.e. the public. Many scholars have individually defined the public sphere and given the concept multiple meanings. Gerard Hauser, Professor of Communication and the University of Colorado, is one of them. He defined the public sphere as "*a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and where possible reach a common judgement about them*".[44] To be noted is that Hauser's definition does not state anything about the framework of such a "discursive space".

Before Habermas' significant work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was published, Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition,* published in 1958 discusses what can be regarded very similar to a public sphere. However, she instead uses the definition 'the public realm'. Arendt explained the public realm as:

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[44] G. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres,* Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1999, pg. 61

> "[…] *the common world, which gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be   entirely un-related to each other by anything tangible*".[45]

Most research on the public sphere today is linked to Habermas' definition of the term, which seems to have become one of the most influential concepts to be used in modern media studies. Although the theory is built up on the bourgeois public sphere in Western Europe in the 18th century, his core criteria about society and open debate have led to many debates in academia around the world.[46] Although there is more than one public sphere theory available, Habermas' understanding may be the most developed theory of the public sphere that there is today.[47]

3.1.2 Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere

Since Jürgen Habermas' work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* was published, scholars have criticized, analysed and compared his theory in their literary work and even today, as stated above, his theory is often used as a theoretical framework in many academic articles and books.[48][49] Habermas defined his idea of the public sphere as "*a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed and access is guaranteed to all citizens*".[50]

Habermas' theory is based in the 18th century, when a space emerged amongst private people and became known as the public sphere were individuals were free from the State. The public sphere was a place where people could share their opinions and discuss important

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[45] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1956, pg. 52-53
[46] D. Kellner, 'Habermas, the Public Sphere and Democracy: A Critical Intervention' in L.E. Hahn (ed.) *Perspectives on Habermas*, Chicago IL, Open Court Publishing Company, 2000, pg. 1-285
[47] Boeder, 2005.
[48] Boeder, 2005.
[49] A. Fulya Sen, 'The Social Media as a Public Sphere: The Rise of Social Opposition', *International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design*, Istanbul, Turkey, 9-12 May 2012
[50] J. Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', *New German Critique*, No. 3, 1974, pg. 1

issues. It was a place where people were able to criticize and influence decisions separate from the State and the economy; in other words, a space in which a public opinion could be formed freely. Most public spaces such as coffee houses and salons became the centre of public debate through which the public sphere was formed.[51]

Habermas explains in his work that in the 18th century a new political class, the bourgeoisie, emerged and opened up a space for public opinion. The bourgeois public was mainly composed of European, educated men, prejudiced to the interests of those that were not officially included.[52] The bourgeoisie created both institutions and launched several newspapers, providing a space for which private thoughts could more easily become public. The public sphere was considered open to all despite it only including the elite thinkers, and was protected both from the power of the church and the State.[53]

Three main criteria can be drawn from Habermas' theory, which define the conditions for the emergence of a public sphere. The first condition is the disregard of status. The public sphere only existed independent from an authority of rank or status. Status was to be disregarded all together. If status were disregarded there would be no influence of rank, which held a better argument against the social hierarchy that was imposed by society. What mattered instead was the authority of a better argument. The second condition is common concern. Before the public sphere arose in the 18th century, the State and the church had authority of interpretation and public critical attention was cut back. When the development of capitalism started, more information became available and art, literature and philosophy started to become more accessible to private citizens. Private citizens started communicating the works with others until they could claim authority. Information started to become the common concern of citizens, which led to many issues of common concern becoming topics of deliberation.[54]

The final condition is inclusivity. The public sphere was never able to be fully closed and disallow participation. It was to be inclusive of all private individuals without discrimination. Everyone had to be able to participate in discussed issues. All discussed issues became general, both in significance and accessibility. Conditions of the public sphere were thus that all citizens should have access (i.e. the public sphere should be universally accessible), be able to debate freely, form a public opinion and not have their freedom of

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[51] Habermas, 1991, pg. 30
[52] C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT press, 1992, pg. 3
[53] Habermas, 1991, pg. 33
[54] A. Fulya Sen, 2012.

assembly, association or expression restricted.[55] In other words, Habermas believed that the public sphere was built up through debate and discussion, which was accessible to every citizen and where people could freely form their opinions.[5657]

To summarise Habermas' core ideas in his theory, specific groups were not to be excluded, as it would lead to an incomplete public sphere, in other words, not a public sphere at all. Everyone should have the possibility to participate in the issues discussed and the public sphere was to be autonomous.[58] This meaning that no economic dependencies should have influence and it should be free from State censorship and private ownership. Habermas also meant that the public sphere was created as a sphere of criticism of public authority.[59] Privacy was also an important building block for the public sphere to exist, private people were to be able to discuss their opinions openly and freely form public opinions. The public sphere was best maintained by acts of speech, such as through discussion.[60]

Although Habermas based his theory in a study of a different era, it has created an understanding for today's media role in public communication. Reading his ideas, one can draw the conclusion that the media should be a free space for public opinion and include political debates and expression.[61]

Although Habermas' theory may one of the most important contributions to the theory of a public sphere,[62] it has also received a fair amount of criticism by scholars. The New School Professor, Nancy Fraser, revisits Habermas' theory of the public sphere in her article "Rethinking the Public Sphere", and argues that the bourgeois public sphere was composed of a number of exclusions. She means that although Habermas asserted disregard of status and inclusivity, the public sphere actually discriminated against women and the lower classes of society. Fraser also means that the public sphere was mainly built up of bourgeois men

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[55] Habermas, 1991, pg. 227

[56] Ibid. pg. 36-37

[57] A. Fulya Sen, 2012.

[58] L. Dahlberg, 'The Habermasian Public Sphere: A Specification of the Idealized Conditions of Democratic Communication', *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, No. 10, 2004, pg. 2

[59] Habermas, 1991, pg. 51

[60] M. Sani, *The Public Sphere and Media Politics in Malaysia*, Newcastle, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pg. 23

[61] C. Tsekeris, 'The Public Sphere in the Context of Media Freedom and Regulation', *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal*, No. 3, 2008, pg. 1

[62] S. Littlejohn and K. Foss (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Communication Theory,* London, UK, SAGE Publications, 2009, pg. 814

who saw themselves as a "universal class" and constituted the hegemonic class. This further led to the precluding of other groups in society and their concerns.[63]

Dr. Simon Susen, a sociologist at City University in London also highlights the critical sides of Habermas' theory and lists a number of critical points similar to Fraser's ideas towards Habermas' definition of the public sphere. Susen believes that the theory does not provide an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the public sphere in modern societies. He also means that it focuses mainly on the ruling class and therefore underestimated the significance of an alternative public sphere. A theory that is limited to the bourgeois public sphere automatically risks excluding other public spheres. Habermas' public sphere is also gender-blind and can be interpreted as a male-domination social theory. It is based on a universal conception of public interests and assumes that the bourgeois public sphere represents the public sphere as a whole, which Susen considers to be reductive. Susen believes that modern society contains a number of already existing and often competing public spheres. These public spheres are not solely based on the bourgeois but include different social groups, related to such as the working class, political, religious, sexual and ethnical minorities.[64]

Despite existing critique of the public sphere, Habermas' theory remains as a valid, important theory to many in academia, most specifically amongst those focusing on communication theory.[65] As previously noted, the theory will be separated from its focus on a historical stage and be used as a framework i.e. a perspective to look at a modern day issue. By separating the theory's building blocks from a historical stage and only using the conceptual framework, it provides the ability to more clearly understand social media's relation to free expression from an interesting, prominent, theoretical viewpoint.

To conclude, the main conditions of the theory, which are the disregard of status, common, concern and inclusivity are the most important elements of the public sphere theory when testing them on the censorship of expression that is visible on Chinese social media. It is these conditions when applied to the phenomena that serve to fulfil the purpose of the essay.

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[63] Fraser, 1990, pg. 60

[64] S. Susen, 'Critical Notes on Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2011, pg. 55

[65] A. Bruns and T. Axel, 'Is Habermas on Twitter? Social Media and the Public Sphere' in Bruns, Axel, Enli, Gunn, Skogerbø, Eli, Larsson, Anders Olof, & Christensen, Christian (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics,* New York, NY, Routledge, 2015

3.2 Method

For this essay I have used a dual approach with two combined types of research methods, both empirical and theoretical. The empirical research can then in turn be divided into two categories, qualitative and quantitative.[66] First I conducted in-depth interviews with eleven Chinese students living in Sweden. The interviews fall under the category of qualitative research as they collected qualitative data in the form of text. This was followed by searching for fitting academic research, which would be considered important in further understanding the censorship on social media in China. The academic study that was deemed as fitting was King, Pan and Robert's research study on censorship and social media in China. The study was acquired through secondary research, implying that I was the secondary user of the data that already had been collected through quantitative methods. Conducting secondary research and using data that already exists was necessary in the process of generating new ideas by using the study's results and applying a theoretical perspective on them.[67] A secondary analysis was then deemed necessary to use the results when adding another dimension to the study's outcome. A secondary analysis involves using already existing data that has been collected for the purpose of a prior study to then use for a different purpose differentiating from the questions asked in the original work. I conducted a secondary analysis on the results of the data of the Harvard study by applying Habermas' public sphere theory to be able to pursue my own research interest which differs from the original work of King, Pan and Roberts study and instead builds upon their results. This to provide an alternative perspective on what could be drawn from the material and used in a different form of research.[68] Both the results of the interviews and the Harvard study will be explained before the analysis chapter. However, an in-depth analysis will not take place until the theoretical perspective is applied.

After conducting the empirical research, I used a theoretical method for the analysis.

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[66] D. Moody, 'Empirical Research Methods' [lecture notes], Research Methods Class, Melbourne, Monash University, delivered 8 March 2002, http://folk.uio.no/patrickr/refdoc/methods.pdf (accessed 1 June 2016)

[67] S. Crouch and M. Housden, *Marketing Research for Managers*, Oxford, UK, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003, pg. 18

[68] P.S. Hinds, R.J. Vogel and L. Clarke-Steffen, 'The possibilities and pitfalls of doing a secondary analysis of a qualitative data set', *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1997, pg. 408

The theoretical method used is the testing of Habermas' main conditions of the public sphere on the results that can be drawn from the material. The three conditions were tested individually on the conclusions drawn from the material to show how the attributes of the public sphere from the 18th century could be understood when applying them on a modern day phenomena.

The role that the public sphere theory takes in the analysis is a theory-testing role. The main conditions of the public sphere theory will be applied on the censorship of social media in China by analysing how each condition can be applied on the situation and how it can be understood through using Habermas' ideas as a perspective. His ideas that portray how a public sphere should be in the sense of being universally inclusive, disregarding all status and rank and allowing free debate and an open flow of information are core ideas to what will be applied in relation to what is being studied. The interviews act as material that beyond the results and conclusions of the Harvard study gives additional information on Chinese social media and the censorship of expression that is visible.

For the interviews I used Steinar Kvale's seven stages of a research inquiry. His stages include formulating the purpose of what is being investigated, planning the design and taking moral conditions into consideration, preparing the interview material for analysis, deciding which type of analysis should be conducted, ascertaining the validity and reliability of the answers and communicating the findings of the results.[69] The purpose of the interviews was to understand how a sample of Chinese students looked upon censorship and freedom of expression on social media in China. When planning the design and the setup of the interviews, I chose to focus on grasping how the individuals portrayed the censorship of expression on social media and how they perceived freedom of expression in China. When it came to the moral implications, I made sure not to coerce any of the interviewees into answering a question they seemed to not be comfortable with. Also, it was important for the interviewees to remain anonymous, which was also taken into consideration by guaranteeing the interviewees that their anonymity would be secured.

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[69] S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, London, UK, SAGE Publications, 2007, pg. 36

The interviews were conducted individually and took around 15 minutes in total. Each interviewee was notified that they did not have to answer something they were not comfortable with. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to written text. When deciding which mode of analysis was appropriate for the interview material, I decided to apply and test the public sphere framework on the results. The theory was applied to the interviews to analyse the results in regard to the main conditions of the chosen theory. Regarding the reliability and validity, there is always a risk that interviewees give biased answers, leading to the questioning of their reliability. However, the answers gave the information that was intended for the research and there was no reluctance in answering any of the questions asked. The interviewees all agreed upon giving their honest opinions, and therefore the findings can be considered as trustworthy, especially when taking into account that most of the interviewees had the same opinions, and they were interviewed individually. The interview subjects did not have the need to change their answers and there is no evidence that they answered differently in other interviews. Each answer was consistent with the other. Each interviewee had similar answers to each question, giving a sense of valid and convincing answers in regard to the validity of the interview answers. However, due to the lack of proof of the reliability of the answers, the Harvard study that is also used as primary material is even more important for an analysis. Both the description and the meaning of the interviews were conducted in a way to obtain an understanding of different perspectives and ideas but with respect to interpretation.[70] Through the examination of the individuals' answers I could draw information from their different experiences and outlooks.

4. Previous Research

Many academics have researched the relationship between the Internet and the authoritarian ruling system in China with focus on the public sphere. This chapter will address previous research on social media and the Internet's role in China in relation to freedom of expression. It will also include previous research from scholars that have researched the relationship

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[70] S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, London, UK, SAGE Publications, 2007, pg. 11

between the Internet and social media as a public sphere from Habermas' ideas. This is to show how much of the research conducted on this subject, touches the subject of whether social media can become a modern day public sphere. Firstly previous research that has been conducted on the Internet and social media as a public sphere in general will provided, followed by how this applies in China.

4.1 Social media and the Internet as a public sphere

As mentioned earlier in this essay, Habermas' theory is often used in modern media studies when discussing social media and the Internet and whether or not they can be seen as a public sphere. There are a large number of scholars that have discussed the Internet and social media in relation to the public sphere using Jürgen Habermas' core ideas as a framework.

Firat University Professor A. Fulya Sen holds a positive outlook in regard to the Internet being similar to a Habermasian public sphere. She argues that the Internet has helped marginalized groups that normally would be excluded from the mainstream public sphere to more easily debate and interact with others online. In that sense, she argues, the Internet provides the public with the possibility to communicate openly and reaches both politically diverse and geographically spread publics, helping them to participate in discussion. However, although the Internet provides opportunities that fit some of the criteria in Habermas' theory, Sen still notes that an ideal model of the public sphere does probably not exist. Only in modern democracies do the media have the potential to provide a forum for public debate. The media must be able to structure public discussion for it to contribute to the public sphere. Therefore, for a public sphere to be able to exist in any way, according to Sen, it must happen in a deliberative democracy.[71]

Dr. Kasun Ubayasiri from Griffith University draws similarities between the Internet and Habermas' definition of the public sphere. He agrees that the Habermasian 18th century public sphere excluded many groups in society from participating. The sphere focused mainly on the bourgeois class and men even though Habermas argued that a public sphere should include the possibility for everyone to participate. Ubayasiri states that the Internet is quite similar to the public sphere in the sense that it provides a forum for people to

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[71] A. Fulya Sen, 2012.

participate in debate, but does not guarantee that all users will actually engage in it. However, he also argues that the Internet has the potential to create public spheres through creating a space for individuals to share ideas, which in turn leads to the maintenance of a true public sphere.[72]

Zizi Papacharissi, Communication Professor at the University of Illinois, also compares online technologies today to the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere theory, arguing that the technologies are only accessible to and used by a small part of the world's population, creating an electronic public sphere very similar to Habermas' public sphere which also was exclusive and elitist including only a small fraction of people. However, Papacharissi also believes that the Internet cannot yet be regarded a proper public sphere. Due to online political discussions being dominated by a few, there are little representative indicators of public opinion. Hence, she believes the Internet can be regarded as a public space, but does not yet create a public sphere. Being a public space, the Internet provides a forum for political thought. The public space in hand does in ways facilitate a public sphere but does not guarantee it. Paparazzi means that although the Internet may provide cheap, fast and convenient access to information it does not provide information to all citizens nor does it make them willing and able to participate more often in political discussions, which in turn hinders the Internet being regarded as a public sphere.[73]

Christian Fuchs, Professor at the University of Westminster, believes that social media could have the potential of becoming a public sphere. However, today the possibility of social media being a public sphere is limited due to corporations owning and controlling social media and the State monitoring users. Therefore, due to this, Fuchs believes that social media cannot fully form a public sphere.[74]

It can be noted that it is not always clear whether or not similarities from Habermas' theory can be drawn in regard to modern media. However, although a number of scholars deem the public sphere as important, and consider the Internet to adhere to certain criteria of the Habermasian model, it is not all straight forward. It is considered easier for a public sphere to exist in a democracy, and therefore there may not be a possibility for an ideal public sphere to exist everywhere online. Yet, when considering Habermas' theory, which only included a small fraction of the population, the same similarities adhere to the Internet

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[72] K. Ubayasiri, 'Internet and the Public Sphere: A glimpse of YouTube', *Central Queensland University*, 2006, pg. 9, http://ejournalist.com.au/v6n2/ubayasiri622.pdf (accessed on 28 June 2016)

[73] Z. Papacharissi, 'The virtual sphere: the Internet as a public sphere', *New Media Society*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2002, pg. 13-14

[74] C. Fuchs, 'Social media and the public sphere', *ripleC: Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2014, pg. 89

today. The Internet does not guarantee all users to engage in debate, nor does it provide the possibility to all the world's citizens to take advantage of, much like Habermas' 18th century limited public sphere. In consideration of the world's population it is only used by a small fraction of citizens. On a more critical note, it has been discussed that the possibility for social media and the Internet to be a public sphere is very limited when large corporations and the State own, control and monitor users online. Moreover, not everyone may be willing to participate in political discussion, nor is there a large enough indicator of public opinion online, creating the idea of the Internet being more of a public space than a public sphere.

4.2 Social Media and Internet Freedom in China

Rebecca MacKinnon, American author and currently the director of the Ranking Digital Rights Project, is one of many scholars who has researched Internet freedom in China and who is positive towards the Internet's effect on greater amounts of expression. She coins the term "networked authoritarianism" which she explains as the result of when a political party remains in control but still allows for a range of conversations about the country's problems on social networking sites. Mackinnon argues that China is a networked authoritarian State, which results in the average person online having a much greater sense of freedom than under classic authoritarianism. However, she does also recognize that in networked authoritarian states there is no guarantee for rights or freedoms.[75] Although MacKinnon is aware of there being a limited amount of rights and freedoms in China, she believes that China's Internet users today are a lot more free than they were a decade ago. The Internet has enabled Chinese citizens to speak the truth and fight for justice in ways that were not possible in the pre-Internet age. However, Mackinnon also states that the Internet is still in need of being transparent, accountable and open to reform. Without those conditions, argues Mackinnon, dissident movements will continue the battle against censorship and surveillance, which have become even more innovative.[76]

Assistant Professor at Kyung Hee University, Jongpil Chung, holds a positive opinion on how the Internet has improved Chinese citizens' online freedoms. He notes that the

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[75] R. MacKinnon, 'Networked Authoritarianism in China and Beyond: Implications for Global Internet Freedom', *Conference on Liberation Technology in Authoritarian Regimes,* California, US, 11 October 2010, pg. 3-4

[76] R. MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle For Internet Freedom,* New York, NY, Basic Books, 2012.

political and social implications of the Internet depend on the decisions made by the policy makers in China, but that the Internet has also allowed dissemination of information through social media sites and made it easier and quicker to organize and transmit information today than ever before. Micro-blogs have helped Chinese citizens to more easily participate in public affairs and demand change from the government. Moreover, online interaction and communication have proven how the Internet and social media have expanded freedom of expression under the authoritarian rule.[77]

Stockholm University Professor, Johan Lagerkvist states that the blogosphere and micro-blogging are important arenas of expression for the public in China. His opinion is that the belief many have about free expression being promoted through blogging and social media can be proved right. Lagerkvist argues that the blogosphere is today a platform where accountability is demanded. Bloggers demand that power holders in China be held accountable for their actions. Therefore by spreading information, opinions and criticism, Lagerkvist's idea is that Internet and social media can change society in China. He also notes that the Internet and social media are breaking news that can be understood as a way towards the future of unlocking the public sphere in China. Many cases that reveal misconduct of government officials have been voiced by bloggers online. Interactivity, Lagerkvist says, has actually been more of an advantage to the expansion of free speech in China. Online freedom of expression is currently greater than in any traditional media outlet, despite the freedom being constantly under pressure by the government.[78]

Stanford University scholar, Larry Diamond argues that although tight controls exist, netizens and activists in China do still believe that digital technology, such as social media, is a tool for publishing opinions and communicating more freely that otherwise would be unimaginable in the country. It is not the Internet or social media itself that is seen as a threat by the Chinese government, but the way citizens can use it for political activism and other ways of sharing information that the government prefers to silence. Since the use of liberation technology began, dissidents in China have been able to become more visible and have collaborated online into a force against the Chinese government.[79]

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[77] J. Chong, Weibo and 'Iron Curtain 2.0" in China: Who Is Winning the Cat-and-Mouse Game?' *EAI Issue Briefing No. MASI,* 20 December 2011, pg. 4

[78] J. Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before democracy: competing norms in Chinese media and society.* Bern*, Switzerland, Peter Lang AG, 2010, pg. 78-175

[79] L. Diamond, 'Liberation Technology'*, Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2010, pg. 75

Min Jiang, Associate Professor of communication studies at University of North Carolina, is known for her theory on what she defines as "authoritarian informationalism", an Internet model that combines elements of capitalism, authoritarianism and Confucianism, which she considers will continue to be reflected by China's Internet policies. Jiang explains how China's cyber approach is grounded in the interest of maintaining regime legitimacy and promoting the economy, culture, governance, nationalism and ideology. Jiang believes that China's government's view of the Internet is an utilitarian one, considering the Internet important in driving China's economy forward, instead of the Internet being an extension of freedom. Therefore, speech rights in China are still very limited. Although still under authoritarian rule, Jiang means that the sophisticated censoring techniques and technologies have led to a modern type of authoritarianism, differing from the classic authoritarianism. The modern authoritarianism grants more freedom to citizens, including political freedom, compared to before. Jiang believes that although the government's claim to national sovereignty puts netizens at a disadvantage, it would be wrong to state that netizens are not free. Freedoms have improved since the pre-Internet era and Internet users have a larger amount of freedom than before and can sometimes even influence policymaking.[80]

4.2.1 Social Media and the Public Sphere: China

Communication professors Chunzhi Wang and Benjamin Bates in their joint paper "Online Public Sphere and Democracy in China" believe that the Chinese government underestimated the Internet already in 1996, at the beginning of its introduction. A large amount of free web space was provided early on and became important towards the creation of an online public sphere. However, with development, the Chinese State became more aware of the influence the Internet could have. New laws and regulations have since then been implemented, amongst other things censorship systems, which have negatively influenced the development of a public sphere. However, Wang and Bates mean the Internet was primarily developed in China to use for business, entertainment, information and education and in this sense it does provide the ordinary citizen with a public sphere to discuss public affairs.

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[80] M. Jiang, 'Authoritarian informationalism: China's approach to Internet sovereignty', *SAIS Review of International Affairs,* Vol 30, No. 2, 2010, pg. 83

Wang and Bates draw on the case of Sun Zhigang, a young Chinese migrant worker who was beaten to death by Chinese police in 2003 due to not being able to present his temporary resident card. The news of the case spread rapidly and online debates regarding the incident were at that time happening all over China. Wang and Bates state that the incident was one of many that showed how the Internet provided citizens to both share opinions on a specific issue, discuss public affairs and more easily participate politically. The incident also provided a positive path towards the development of an online public sphere. The authors conclude that online platforms, even in China, could in fact act as a public sphere, which would allow people to discuss public affairs and form a public opinion. This has been shown in many cases and is according to Wang and Bates a big step towards the creation of democracy.[81]

Wang and Bates are not alone to draw conclusions about an online public sphere in China regarding the Sun Zhigang incident. Lina Liu also acknowledges how the same incident showed how online media created a public sphere that proved potential and power in socio-political matters. Social media in China, such as Weibo, have allowed similar important incidents to create public debates with a large number of participants online. However, Liu also believes that although the Internet and Weibo help the development of a public sphere, there are also many confines with its development. This is mainly due to government censorship and the absence of trust between people from different social classes. Because of this and due to the increase of class structures and conflict, the public sphere in China will not be able to be formed soon.[82]

Jingrong Tong, lecturer in Media and Communication at Leicester University, argues that the interaction between the Internet and the news media in China takes place in a public sphere, although not in the Habermasian version of a public sphere. This is mainly due to individual's emotional expression about private issues online becoming more important and common than debates on public matters. Rationality and publicity are central elements to Habermas' idea of the public sphere whereas emotions and private interests are not. In addition, Tong suggests that although it is a lot easier to access information today than it has been before, there is still a vast amount of political control online. Inequality online is also a major issue, considering most Internet users live in large cities, are educated and have well

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[81] C. Wang and B. Bates, 'Online Public Sphere and Democracy in China', *IAMCR*, Stockholm, July 2008, pg. 12-13

[82] L. Liu, *Public Sphere, Politics and The Internet in Mainland China*, MA diss., Oslo, University of Oslo, 2011, pg. 98

paid jobs. This together with the government's censorship controls and newer, harder measures being imposed since president Xi Jinping came into office, points to the existence of a public sphere being unstable.[83]

5. Interview study

As noted before, all eleven participants in the conducted interview chose the option to remain anonymous regarding their responses. The questions asked were shaped in a way to more clearly understand the relation between social media and freedom of expression in China. The focus areas of the questions were freedom of expression and censorship on Chinese social media platforms. All questions indirectly highlighted the main topic of the essay. The purpose and the research question of this essay have tightened in the process and therefore not all questions or answers will be relevant for the purpose of the essay. The answers that will be used for the analysis will be the answers that provide information necessary for the theoretical framework to be applied upon.

5.1 Interview study: questions and answers

The six questions were formulated to capture an understanding clear enough of the situation on social media in China regarding free expression and censorship. The overall understanding of the subject, drawn from the interview answers, give a portrait of the situation in which I will apply the Habermasian public sphere theory upon.[84]

The questions included asking the participant whether they ever felt that their freedom of expression on social media in China was restricted, whether they ever experienced censorship on social media and whether they believed everyone in China to have the freedom to post their opinions on social media. The participants were also asked to give examples of words and subjects that they understood to be censored on social media in China and to answer whether they believed themselves that all social media users have the freedom to post their opinions online. Two questions were asked regarding social media use in China

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[83] J. Tong, 'The formation of an agonistic public sphere: Emotions, the Internet and news media in China', *China Information*, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2015, pg. 341-342
[84] See attached interviews.

compared to other parts of the world. These questions included whether the participant felt differently about the right to freedom of expression since coming to Sweden and whether they believed that social media in China are more censored compared to other countries.

All interviewees aside from one stated that they felt their freedom of expression on social media was restricted in China. This was due to certain websites being blocked, not being able to utter thoughts on politics and not successfully being able to post text, which would be regarded as too sensitive by online censors. Those interviewed that had personally experienced censorship on social media admitted that they had failed to post certain posts and statuses on social media. They also stated that it was often not possible to post certain words that were considered to include "sensitive words" which at times did not even have to be considered political or sexual. Even religious posts were regarded to be cautious with when posting content online, in fear that police would appear. Despite this, most interviewees had never experienced their own posts online being censored. This was mainly due to their usage of social media being limited to their personal life and not being aimed at the government in any way.

All interviewees agreed that Chinese social media users do not have the right to freedom of expression online. There was a big risk that what was posted could be considered 'dangerous' and may be disliked by the government which could cause negative consequences. One of the interviewees was strongly determined that the right to freedom of expression should never be sabotaged due to the excuse of maintaining political legitimacy. However, the freedom should not be misused if it would mean harming others. Although the interviewees believed that there was not much space for freedom of expression online, a couple did not see this as a problem and even agreed that freedom of expression needed to be restricted by the government.

One interviewee argued that all citizens in China know that certain things should not be posted online and certain questions should not be asked. This was however not to be considered as something negative. Another interviewee argued that although one should have the freedom to post everything online, it was also the Chinese State's responsibility to create a positive environment for its citizens.

Regarding what the interviewees considered as commonly censored on social media platforms, anti-government posts can be concluded as the main answer given. Opinions against the communist party, inflammatory speech, negativity against the leadership and certain events such as the Tiananmen Massacre that were preferred by the government to be

silenced were all included in the answers regarding the main topics of censored words on social media.

The question on whether the interviewees felt differently about the right to freedom of expression since coming to Sweden was met in a number of different ways. More than half of the respondents admitted they felt differently on free expression since moving to Sweden. Social media were considered to be freer in Sweden compared to China and social media users had more rights to post opinions online. It was considered that Swedish citizens had an easier time criticizing policies, opinions and theories and that without a firewall as the one existing in China, more voices could be expressed in Sweden compared to in China. However, the rest did not believe they felt differently about freedom of expression since arriving in Sweden. One interviewee argued that nobody from the Chinese government could ever silence them even if they tried. The others argued that Swedish society, just like Chinese, is sensitive to certain topics due to Swedish people being very politically correct, not accepting negative opinions on topics such as refugees and easily accusing what is said as racist. However, although the respondents believed Swedes to be prejudice about many opinions, those opinions where not actively blocked on social media or other online platforms. Although half of the respondents did not feel differently towards the right to freedom of expression since arriving in Sweden, all agreed that social media and the Internet are a lot more censored in China compared to other countries. The answers expressed that the Chinese government does not allow free thought, foreign sites are blocked, the political regime differs from other countries and China is seen upon as a dictatorship. Nearly all interviewees agreed that China censored social media more than other countries. However, there were mixed answers regarding the respondents not feeling that they could access their right to freedom of expression and how extreme censorship was considered to be.

6. Harvard Social Media Study

King, Pan and Roberts for their study "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression" formed a system which was used to locate, download and analyse millions of social media posts from 1382 different social media platforms around China. The system was constructed in a way that it was able to locate and download as many posts as possible before the Chinese government was able to find them and delete them. The study was based on two theories, which the researchers used when

analysing the gathered material. The first theory, the State critique theory, entailed that the goal of the government was to subdue expression that threatened the Chinese State. The second theory was the collective action potential theory, which was based on censors targeting posts where people join together to express themselves over a potential event.

The data for the study was collected during the first half of 2011 from social media blogs, which differ from the micro-blog services and allow an unlimited amount of characters in a post, which in turn allows a user to express themselves in longer messages. 3,674,698 posts were gathered in total and out of these, 127,283 were randomly selected for the analysis. King, Pan and Roberts then chose 85 sensitive topic areas, which they divided into three hypothesized political sensitivity categories: high, medium and low. Each topic area was then defined by a set of keywords that were considered fitting for each category. The topics within the different categories were chosen through consulting China specialists, studying current events and reviewing literature. The high sensitivity category included keywords such as Ai WeiWei, Mass Incidents, Taiwan Weapons, Unrest in Inner Mongolia and Zengcheng Protests. The medium category included keywords such as Angry Youth, Death Penalty, People's Liberation Army, Xi Jinping and Vietnam and South China Sea. Finally, the low category included keywords such as Traffic in Beijing, World Cup and Health Care Reform.

Each post that was organized into one of the 85 topic areas was then examined and identified in regard to real world events. The events were also categorized, this time into one of five categories: collective action potential, criticism of the censors, pornography, government policies and other news.

The study found that most of the highly censored posts did not include criticism of national policies but were related to collective expression, which threatened or represented group formation. Some of the most censored posts to be found were those about protests in Inner Mongolia, the Zengcheng Protests and Collective Anger at Lead Poisoning in Jiangsu. Out of 13 events shown in the study regarding high censorship magnitude, seven were in the collective action category, four in the criticism of censors category and two in the pornography category. The data collected showed that 13% of all social media posts were censored. In the low category 16% of posts got censored, in the medium 17% and in the high 24% of all posts got censored.

The study also found that the censors seemed to offer the freedom to social media users of criticizing political leaders, policies and censors. Regarding posts about the Chinese State, it was found that if the posts had collective action potential, around 80% were censored. This

however went for both posts that criticized and supported the State. Posts that criticized or supported the State but did not have collective action potential only had a censorship rate of 10%.

The final results of the Harvard study showed that a lot of expression was possible on social media both regarding negative and positive comments about the State, policies and leaders as long as they did not have collective action potential. The Chinese censorship program therefore seemed to allow a wide array of criticism of the government. Primarily censorship was aimed at restricting information that may have a chance of leading to collective action. This result showed that the first theory, the State critique theory, was not valid but the second theory, the collective action potential theory, was deemed correct.[85]

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Analysis

This chapter will focus on applying the three main criteria of Habermas' theory to the results of the primary material to gain an understanding of how the online censorship of expression on social media in China can be seen in relation to the three main conditions of the public sphere. The conditions will be applied individually on the primary material, to more easily grasp a view of how the different attributes of each condition can be compared to the results. Some interview questions will be touched more than others, due to their answers being more useful and current in regard to the information needed for testing the conditions of the public sphere.

Habermas' first condition of the public sphere theory, the disregard of status, implies that the public sphere can only exist independent of the authorities or the State. In other words social hierarchy is to be non-existent. The Harvard study portrays three different methods of censorship online in China, the first being China's censorship and surveillance project, The Great Firewall, the main reason for the blockage of foreign social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter.[86] When drawing from the interview results, a large number of the interviewees unintentionally criticized the firewall by admitting how they felt

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[85] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, pg.3
[86] Ibid. pg. 3

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their freedom of expression on social media was limited in China due to the fact that certain social media websites are blocked and nearly impossible to access.[87] These results that can be drawn from the primary material that foreign social media sites are blocked by the Chinese government point to an existing social hierarchy and a non-independent social media, which goes against the first condition of the public sphere. In other words, through choosing to ban Internet users from accessing certain websites, the Chinese authorities have the power over users' free and open access to all social media platforms. In comparison to the public sphere and its condition of disregarding status, the lack of independence from the State when using social media portrays a social hierarchy. The other two methods of online censorship explained in the Harvard study include keyword blocking and censorship and deletion of posts.[88] The interview results show how the subjects felt their freedom of expression on social media was restricted due to all three methods of government censorship.[89] The three major methods of the Chinese State's censorship program seen both through the Harvard study and the interviewees' answers show clear signs of the government's higher self-given status and hierarchal position. The results of the Harvard social media study's research portrays the higher ranked status the Chinese State takes when silencing a large number of posts which represent social mobilization which may risk exposing the government.[90] The interviews also illustrate opinions on censorship in regard to how it hinders social resistance events, anti-government and anti CCP statements from existing.[91] The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident is experienced by some of the interviewees to be one of the main censored topics, together with posts that voice negative opinions, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan not being part of China. Other subjects experienced by the interviewees to be censored include posts threatening the authorities or the leadership, or any type of opinion against the communist party.[92] When the interviewees were asked whether their freedom of expression was restricted online, the answers given pointed to an overall understanding of how the Chinese authorities have the upper hand in the online and offline word. The results of the first question gave insight to how citizens should know that one should not criticize the Chinese government and that there are risks when doing so. The answers portrayed that the

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[87] See interview questions 1 and 6
[88] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, pg. 3
[89] See interview question 1.
[90] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, pg. 1
[91] See interview question 6
[92] See interview question 4

government chooses what can and should be discussed openly on social media and that citizens need to be careful when expressing sensitive topics on politics that would not be in accordance to the government's preferences. The interviews also shed light on how the government controls posts deemed serious with a negative effect on the general public and how a level of fear is created in regard to what can be posted.[93] The results of the first question portray how free opinion and debate is controlled online. The government's control and creation of fear is a clear indication to holding a higher rank than the country's citizens and hindering the ability to openly debate without taking the government's measures into consideration.

Although the purpose of this essay is not to draw comparisons between China and Sweden, the question asked on whether the interviewees felt differently about the right to freedom of expression in Sweden compared to China provided interesting insight into China's restrictions of free speech. The results of question 5 of the interview showed that the majority of the interviewees felt the difference between freedom of expression in Sweden compared to China. Answers included thoughts on how Sweden allowed for free discussion both in traditional and online media. It was voiced how in China there are sensitive topics that should not be discussed but in Sweden it was easier to voice one's opinions. One interviewee stated that Sweden was a democracy, which China is not, which in turn allowed for greater freedom of expression in Sweden.[94] Drawing from these answers, it can be noted that the interviewees agreed upon that freedom of expression was very limited in China compared to a democratic country such as Sweden. Again these results in relation to the public sphere condition of the disregard of status portray how the Chinese government limit freedom of expression in media leading to the media being run by a higher rank of authority. For the disregard of status to be visible on social media, the Chinese government would not be able to possess the control and authority over what is shared and posted online.

This censorship of expression experienced online shows the Great Firewall of China's ability to control information, and its power over free expression. This again limits social media from existing independent from the Chinese authorities in a great way, as there is a clear influence of hierarchy showing the lack of disregard of status on social media. This illustrated hierarchal position of the Chinese State in the form of the different methods of

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[93] See interview question 1
[94] See interview question 5

online censorship, shows how social media are not independent of the authorities, again disrupting the Habermasian view on the disregard of status.

In the second condition of the public sphere, common concern, Habermas describes how before the public sphere emerged, the church had the authority of interpretation and public critical debate was cut back. To compare this authority in regard to China, the church must be replaced by the State, as it is the State that holds the authority online. When drawing from the results of the interviews and the Harvard study it can be concluded that the Chinese State holds a similar position to how things were before the public sphere arose in the 18th century in Europe. However, just like the emergence of the 18th century public sphere when more information became available and accessible to citizens, social media have opened up a space for more easily accessible information and communication, despite the barriers set up by the government as well as the digital divide. King Pan and Roberts's research found through analysing social media messages that posts with comments about the Chinese State, policies and leaders were both often available and accessible. Before social media the State controlled the traditional media heavily, but social media's power of opening up a medium for freer debate changed the landscape of expression in the country. In this sense, social media do not have the same limitations as other types of mass media. The Internet and social media platforms, compared to radio, television and newspapers, can in this sense be regarded a more flexible medium of public discourse on issues related to common concern. The Harvard study shows how Chinese social media platforms allow most users to freely both access and provide information. Their research portrayed how a large amount of expression is actually possible on social media. Only 10% of the posts relating to critical debate that did not have collective action potential were found censored during the conducted research. Although the blocking of keywords online disallows for certain events and words to be posted, King, Pan and Roberts mean that the censorship methods have very limited effect on freedom of speech as there are several analogies, metaphors and satire that are used instead, to easily get around the blocked words. The Chinese language also makes it easier for netizens to substitute characters to create words that sound alike to those that are banned.[95] The many ways around keyword blocking can therefore take a large part in allowing critical debate, something that is vital for a Habermasian public sphere to exist. Although most of the interviewees considered the space for public critical debate as limited in the sense of keyword blocking of sensitive topics, many also admitted that they had never

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[95] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, pg 3

themselves experienced censorship on social media. One interviewee even mentioned that a friend had posted ambiguous anti-CCP words on social media, but did not meet any trouble. Another interviewee touched the subject on keyword blocking and admitted to using other words with the same pronunciation to replace the banned words.[96] To draw conclusions, most of the interviewees agreed on expression being limited online due to sensitive words being censored, but in practice and with regard to the Harvard study results, apart from posts with exact words that are censored by the government, most seem to remain online. One interviewee who was more positive towards expression on social media, admitted that the Internet and social media have led to an expansion of information provided, and has provided more flexible ways of allowing Chinese citizens to experience freer expression. Through the participation on social media platforms, individuals get given the opportunity of identifying with and sharing common values. The results of the Harvard study, which illustrate how easy it can be to get around the blocked keywords and conclude that individual critical posts are rarely censored, allow for netizens to participate in critical debate online and opens doors to more accessible information. When comparing the results of the Harvard social media study and the interviews to Habermas' second condition, critical debate does not seem to be something that is strictly hindered. This goes in line with Habermas' second condition, which was met during the 18th century public sphere through information becoming more accessible and critical debate being allowed. Although it can be argued that many issues of common concern can be discussed on social media, social media in China do not exist independently from the State, making it problematic for the condition of common concern to be fully met.[97][98]

Inclusivity, Habermas' final condition, meant a true public sphere would never disallow participation. Social media in China are, in regard to inclusivity, a relatively open space for individuals to participate and do not hinder accessibility to those who have the option to use it apart from, as discussed previously, the accessibility to foreign websites. If citizens have the socio-economic possibilities and the skills to access the Internet and the available access to the needed network infrastructure, most can then use the Internet and in turn access social media. In regard to the condition of inclusivity from a Habermasian perspective, this could be seen as a barrier to the ability for full accessibility.

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[96] See interview question 1
[97] See interview questions 1 and 2
[98] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013

However, as stated in the limitations, the limited accessibility due to the digital divide will not be further analysed and will therefore not act to hinder the analysis of social media being accessible in regard to Habermas' condition of inclusivity. However, in a public sphere, there will always be some level of exclusivity. The digital divide in China, which creates an exclusivity of citizens accessing the Internet and social media, is very similar to the bourgeois public sphere that excluded women and lower social groups.

Habermas did not only mean for the public sphere to be inclusive in the sense of citizens being able to access it. The ability to debate freely, form a public opinion and not have one's freedom of assembly, association and expression restricted which he regarded equally important in his third condition, is a problem that is faced in China. Nearly all interviewees agreed on the fact that freedom of expression was restricted on social media. The interviewees' perception of restricted freedom of expression online included unsuccessful posting of messages, banned sensitive words, restricted religious expression and the monitoring of dissidents. However, the Harvard study points the other way in concluding that freedom of expression in the sense of government, policy and leader criticism if not associated to collective again is very slightly restricted. Compared to the interviews that only focus on eleven social media users in relation to the Harvard study that included millions of users, the study may give a less biased answer. If primarily leaning on the Harvard study when applying the inclusivity condition of the public sphere, restriction of freedom of expression seems to be quite small for an individual social media user who discusses individual opinions online without leaning towards collective action. However, it is still a partly restricted right if focusing on the fact that most posts with collective action potential are censored by the government, which leads to a violation of Internet users' freedom of expression.

The restriction of posts with collective action potential goes hand in hand with the freedom of assembly. Here, the Harvard study shows how social media restrict freedom of assembly, due to the amount of collective action posts being heavily censored and deleted, a whole 80%. The same applies to the restriction of freedom of association. The Harvard study's conclusion that the Chinese people are, so to speak, collectively in chains and are often unable to post messages involving or even hinting towards collective action, provides an image of how the right to come together and express or defend one's ideas, is violated. The right to freedom of association often entails taking collective action as a group, similar to

the right to freedom of assembly. In regard to the results showing that collective action online is highly restricted, both human rights can be seen as violated by the Chinese State. When drawing from the Harvard study's conclusion, it can be considered that two out of three of Habermas' human rights included in his condition inclusivity are largely restricted. Freedom of expression could be considered a semi-fulfilled condition, as the study is positive towards the individual person's ability to form public opinion and freely debate on social media. It is important to note that the interviews did not touch the subject of collective action as it was focused on individual expression online. Therefore the right to freedom of assembly and freedom of association online in regard to the public sphere cannot be analysed based on the interview answers. Due to this, the analysis of Habermas' third condition in regard to the social media environment in China is mainly based on the Harvard study's results.

7.2 Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this essay was to first understand the censorship of expression on Chinese social media by interviewing eleven individual Chinese social media users about online censorship and their opinions on freedom of expression on social media in China. To study the censorship of expression online even further, secondary data from a Harvard social media study focused on Chinese social media was used in the analysis. Secondly, I wanted to extract the main criteria from Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory that laid out building blocks necessary for a public sphere to be able to exist. The three main conditions that Habermas himself explains in his work include his ideas of how a public sphere should be constructed. After extracting these conditions from his theory I wanted to apply them to my primary material. My primary material that portrayed the censorship of expression on Chinese social media, both through personal opinions and secondary statistical data, showed interesting results that I wanted to apply my chosen theory on. Previous research that can be found that focuses on social media as a public sphere is both interesting and current, but often attempts to answer the question whether social media are an actual public sphere. My aim was not to answer whether or not Chinese social media could be called a modern public sphere but to draw conclusions from the censorship of expression on Chinese social media platforms in relation to the public sphere conditions. I wanted to gain an understanding of how the results of my material that portrayed censorship of expression on social media could be put into perspective based on the public sphere theory. I wanted to test the theory on the material results to gain

an understanding of how the public sphere conditions can be understood when applying them to my chosen phenomena and how the censorship of expression on social media compares to Habermas' conditions of inclusivity, common concern or disregard of status.

Through the analysis it has been interesting to see how complicated it can be to test the public sphere conditions on Chinese social media when censorship halts users' freedom of expression online. When understanding Habermas' first condition of the disregard of status it is immediately considered that due to the hard censorship of users' expression online, which is conducted by the Chinese authorities, that there are no similarities at all between the Habermasian public sphere and the chosen theme of investigation. The fact that the authorities in China block many foreign websites could be considered a breaking point for Habermas' first condition when comparing it to the condition of disregard of status. On the other hand, the amount of Chinese social media platforms is immense and widely available to China's citizens. However, for this essay, I wanted to concentrate on the censorship of expression that exists on Chinese social media platforms which would in which case make the fact that foreign social media platforms are blocked, less relevant.

The more relevant issues, when applying the conditions of the public sphere to how censorship of expression is visible on social media in China, are the blocking of keywords which censor expression of certain topics and the actual deletion of posts. The interviewees were very clear in stating how they experienced the censorship on social media and how it led to perceptions of limited freedom of expression online. The Chinese authorities clearly have the upper hand when it comes to the control of the Internet and it is the Chinese government that has implemented the Great Firewall of China, which includes government bodies that control the information flow online.[99] It is therefore easy to say that there is no disregard of status online. Nearly all social media platforms are constantly under inspection by the Beijing Network Information Office, which is an agency under the Ministry of Information Industry, which in turn is part of the government.[100] It is due to this control by the government that there are no similar attributes between the censorship of expression on social media in China and Habermas' first condition of the public sphere. One can understand the censorship on social media as fully due to the hierarchal control implemented

by the Chinese authorities. The social hierarchy that exists on social media is exactly the opposite of the public sphere's first condition, so when testing the first condition on the

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[99] Xu, 2015, pg. 1
[100] Wu, Qin and Stromberg, 2016, pg. 5

results of the material it fails. When there is a governmental body that censors expression, it is clear that those under the body, i.e. common individuals, in this case social media users, have no full independence. This is the case on social media in China and it is what makes it so interesting to understand the online hierarchy, the reason for the censorship of expression, through a public sphere perspective.

Even though Chinese Internet users know that their freedom of expression is limited online, social media users often seem to only share private matters and interests online. Like some of the interviewees stated, they mostly used social media for discussing private interests and connecting with friends, instead of discussing politics and/or criticism of the government that they knew was subjected to censorship.[101] In accordance with Jingrong Tong, social media users often share their private interests online, which makes it hard to compare to Habermas' view of a public sphere, which does not touch the subject of emotions and private interests.[102] The lack of political discourse on social media by the interviewees, which would be able to show whether they had experienced censorship online, makes it difficult to test the theory on these results and compare them to the condition of common concern. Therefore, the Harvard social media study is important when the interview answers cannot provide all the results necessary for testing the conditions of the theory. The secondary data of the Harvard social media study used for this essay, focuses on millions of posts, including posts on political discourse. Critical debate from this data was shown to be possible on Chinese social media and when applying the condition of common concern on the Harvard social media study results there were both similarities and differences. Critical debate was very important in Habermas' eyes for a public sphere to exist. King, Pan and Roberts from their data research could draw conclusions that public debate including topics on the government was not impossible in Chinese social media.[103] Just like the 18th century public sphere when critical debate became more accessible than when the church had the authority over what could be expressed and discussed, one can draw comparisons to social media use in China and test the second condition on this proven information. Yes, the censorship of expression on social media is a large factor that hinders free debate, but other forms of media that existed before social media were a lot more controlled. The fact that social media, despite their censorship provides more accessible information and easier access to debate is most

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[101] See interview question 2
[102] Tong, 2015, pg. 340
[103] King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, pg. 14

definitely a positive factor when looking at the case from a Habermasian public sphere perspective. It can be viewed as progress, just like the public sphere that emerged in the 18th century that allowed for critical debate and opened up the access to information was progress. However, despite this progress, there is still censorship on critical debate, which can be seen when drawing from the interview answers. This in hand does not provide positive results when testing the condition of common concern.

The last condition that was tested on the material to understand whether censorship on social media could be considered inclusive provided a more interesting debate for analysis as the condition includes three vital human rights that Habermas considered had to be held by individuals. Although I did not want to discuss the condition of inclusivity regarding the digital divide in China, which excludes many citizens in accessing the Internet, it was interesting to draw a quick comparison between the digital divide and the public sphere. The public sphere, which has been criticized for solely including bourgeois men and excluding women and lower classes, is similar to the digital divide in China, which excludes certain groups that do not have access to devices that can access the Internet. If testing the theory in regard to inclusivity, the exclusion of these groups in China that have no access to the Internet is exactly alike the exclusion of certain groups from the public sphere. However, I chose to mainly test the condition of inclusivity and its elements on the censorship that exists on social media. The elements included in Habermas' condition of inclusivity which stated that freedom of assembly, association and expression were not to be restricted, provided a more interesting understanding of the social media censorship when applying these elements on the material. It was difficult to test this condition on the answers provided by the interviewees as they not only both agreed on the fact that freedom of expression was restricted online but also admitted that they had themselves not experienced their freedom of expression restricted when posting on social media. This made the answers slightly difficult to prove how freedom of expression was actually heavily restricted on social media. Another factor that made it difficult to test the condition on the interview material was the fact that the interviews did not ask questions based on the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of association. This in retrospect can be considered a fault in my construction of the interview questions as I did not take into consideration the two other human rights and solely focused on the right to freedom of expression. However, the majority of my study was based on the right to freedom of expression and how this is censored on social media so I did not consider the other elements as important. Especially since the condition of inclusivity covers several

elements than just the point of adhering to the freedoms of assembly and association.

Although the Harvard study results showed that a large amount of freedom of expression was offered on social media excluding the posts with references to collective action, freedom of expression can still be considered as quite restricted. To not be able to post messages with collective action potential is also a limitation of one's freedom of expression. So although freedom of expression for an individual user who posts critical posts was deemed to be quite unrestricted, the restriction is still there when posting information that may be considered as a threat to the government. This restriction also threatens the two other human rights. The interviewees' personal experiences that perceive how freedom of expression on social media is limited, differs from the Harvard study as the study is based on data and not on personal occurrences. However, both show the lack of full freedom of expression online but in different ways.

It can be concluded that when testing Habermas' theory of the public sphere and applying the three main conditions on the censorship of expression on social media, that there are not many factors that are similar. The public sphere conditions hardly apply to the censorship that is visible on Chinese social media. Applying and testing the public sphere conditions on the censorship that can be experienced on social media did however provide an interesting analysis and gave an understanding of how difficult it can be to test the public sphere theory on social media in an authoritarian State. The analysis provided an insight into how social media in China with their extensive censorship of freedom of expression can be understood through the core conditions of the public sphere theory and in turn how Chinese social media do not exactly hold many elements of the public sphere when testing Habermas' ideas. Maybe if and when the Chinese government loosens its reigns on its censorship on social media, the theory could be tested again and show more positive results. However, these conclusions I have drawn are based on my way of analysing the phenomena and may be understood differently if analysed from another perspective and through drawing different conclusions from the results of the material or by using other forms of material.

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Interviews

Q1. Did you ever feel that your freedom of expression on social media in China was restricted? How and Why?

1. To some degree, yes. For example, if one would post a message, which would be considered too sensitive, then the message would never post successfully due to it being censored immediately.

2. No, not for me. This is however probably due to the fact that I don't talk about the government or any politics on social media.

3. I do. The overall understanding is that you should not criticize the Chinese government. It's not worth the risk unless you are really willing to cause disruption. This restricts a lot of use for posting what we would like to post. Also the inability to use for example Google and Gmail and Facebook oppresses our freedom of expression online.

4. Yes I definitely do, but mostly because I could never access foreign websites such as Facebook and Twitter to talk to my international friends.

5. Yes, it was often that social media websites were shut down and no one could access them, especially when something the government considered as bad happened.

6. Yes. There are many sensitive words that are banned on social media sites. Those words won't be displayed in your comments or your entire comment will basically not be approved. The words are also constantly changing depending on incidents and events that the government consider "sensitive". Therefore I view is as the government choosing what they want people to discuss openly on social media. However, to get around it we often use other words with same pronunciation to replace the banned words in our comments.

7. Yes. I find it hard that I can't access to certain websites such Wikipedia, Google maps, Gmail, YouTube and Facebook. This makes me feel as if my freedom of expression is limited.

8. It is hard to describe how I feel about that question. There isn't an amount of freedom of expression in China as in for example Sweden but I think in my case, I'm not that interested in politics so I don't have that problem of lack of free expression on social media.

9. Yes. You cannot say sensitive things about politics. Once you say something negative, the censors who in charge of Internet safety and deletion of posts will take it away immediately.

10. Yes to some extent, we have to be careful when we are expressing ideas about any religion (i.e. preaching). However most of the time in China I did not feel restricted on social media.

11. Well yes. In some sense freedom of expression is restricted online. Anti-government and anti-CCP expressions are treated as posts with low tolerance from the censors. Also, many online dissidents that are known to the government are often monitored more closely to make sure they do not post serious enough to affect the general public. This situation often generated a certain level of fear of expressing oneself freely. However, on a lighter note, with the expansion of Internet and social media, more channels of information were provided instead of unitary information by the government through traditional media. Chinese Internet citizens have adopted more flexible tactics of expression.

Q2. Have you ever experienced censorship when you have posted things on social media in China? If no, do you have friends/family that have experienced censorship through posting on social media in China?

1. Not exactly, because I never post anything related to politics. I'm not that interested in using social media. My family and friends who use social media have never experienced censorship. I think it is because they make sure to not be careless.

2. No. I've not experienced censorship on social media. I don't think I have any friends of family who have either.

3. I never experienced it but many friends had difficulties. More regarding overall communication and trying to access western media and social media channels.

4. No, not direct censorship of my posts, but I did get my social media page blocked after posting a lot about sensitive topics.

5. No never. I don't know anyone who has had their posts censored either.

6. Yes I have. On Weibo some of my comments or status updates have just failed to send, which is due to the censors censoring what I've written.

7. I have never experienced it myself, however I've often heard from others that comments regarding so called "sensitive topics" often disappear a while after posting.

8. No but I don't use social media that often and nor does my family. So I can't really answer that.

9. I've heard from friends that they have experienced censorship, but I don't post about things that would be censored, so It has never happened to me.

10. Yes well firstly, I experienced it once long time ago. About 4-5 years ago. It was something that I wanted to send, but it wasn't even about politics or sexuality. However it somehow contained some sensitive words, I don't really know what was considered sensitive, but I couldn't send the post. Secondly, my friends often tell me that they experience censorship problems when they are posting religious views or talking about events. They are also often scared of posting certain things in case the police would look into it.

11. Personally, I haven't experience censorship. But all my posts on Chinese social media are related to my personal life and not political criticism. However one of my undergraduate friends from university did post a lot of ambiguous anti-CCP words and messages on social media, but it turned out that he was fine.

Q3. Do you believe that everyone should have the freedom to post their thoughts on social media in China? If no, please explain why.

1. No. Definitely not. Especially not when it comes to the people that have lots of followers on social media. They influence people too much making people believe what they say. I don't think that's right.

2. No. A lot of famous people post comments about events and their thoughts, which badly influences society and may lead to other people following their beliefs blindly. I don't think it is always good for people to have the total freedom of posting what they want online.

3. Of course I do. But the Communist Party is very afraid of disruption and new ideas and movements popping up. They seek to stabilize the country and therefore no criticism is aloud.

4. Yes I do, but right now that is not the case. Dangerous posts and thoughts risk getting you into a lot of trouble.

5. Yes of course but I don't know if that will ever be possible. The government dislikes sensitive posts too much; I don't know how that will ever change.

6. Yes definitely. I believe that all people should have freedom to both talk the truth and state facts. Freedom of expression is extremely important.

7. I'm not sure… Everyone knows that censorship exists in China. Everyone also knows that there is certain events we shouldn't talk about and certain questions we should never ask. And that's OK. That is just the way it is. It doesn't have to do with freedom to me. Some things have to be restricted.

8. No I don't, because China is a complicated nation with so many different nationalities. Because of this many ideas go in different directions and people don't

agree with each other. If everyone had the right to always posting about their own opinions if would just cause a lot of trouble in society. I think it is good that certain things are censored.

9. I think everyone should have the freedom of posting what he or she wants but as long as it doesn't oppose the political party.

10. I'm not totally sure. I mean I definitely think posts with a lot of swearing or sexuality should be banned. But of course it is important to have the freedom of posting what you want. I also think it is a state's responsibility to create a responsibility for its citizens, but of course without hiding the truth about events or news. However, in many parts of China the education is at a low level. Therefore I also feel like the censorship is important to protect large parts of China so that the less educated people don't believe in everything they read online.

11. Yes. I do believe everyone should enjoy the right and freedom to post their thoughts on social media. Free expression is one of the fundamental rights of being a human being in the world. This right should not be sabotaged by any excuse of maintaining the political legitimacy. But I also believe that the freedom should not be largely exaggerated or misused, especially when your right to freedom of expression may cause potential harm to others.

Q4. Please give one or more examples of what is censored on social media in China (words, subjects, etc.)

1. Words such as anti-central government. Or posts that support violent events or the independence of regions and provinces.

2. Insulting the government without reason and inflammatory speech

3. Just any negativity towards the communist party I would say

4. I have no idea - I have never had a problem on social media so I don't now what is censored.

5. I don't know. I've never used words that may be considered censored in my posts online.

6. Well right not for example there has been an incident of a female judge in Beijing been shoot to death. This topic has been largely censored. But on a constant basis, every year certain events and keywords are censored. Fore example before June, '6,4' and anything related to 1989 Tiananmen is censored.

7. It is censored to express any opinion against the Communist party for instance about topics such as Tiananmen events, Tibet situation, the Cultural Revolution and all other actions of the government.

8. I don't know exactly, but I know that certain things I've written on WeChat, the social media app, my messages have been deleted in less than 24 hours.

9. Most comments about the leadership. Also any words that threaten the authorities.

10. Posts about religion. Comments against the Republic party or against the opinion that Hong Kong or Taiwan is part of China. Discussion about global politics. Also a lot of other sensitive events that differ from month to month.

11. A whole lot of words are censored. I can't even list that many because it is hard to keep up. But definitely posts regarding the Tiananmen Square Massacre or Liu Xiaobo.

Q5. Since coming to Sweden, do you feel differently about the right to freedom of expression? How?

1. Frankly speaking, I can feel the difference here in freedom of expression. Comments both in newspapers and online have a larger variety here. Both good and bad opinions are allowed to exist.

2. Yes I do. I feel so much freer than back in China to voice my opinions.

3. Well I mean yes. It's totally different here. Here it's the right of law and people are used to express their political views and thoughts in many different forms.

4. Definitely. The Swedish government does not suppress people like the Chinese one does.

5. I don't know. I feel that nobody from any government could silence me so I don't care that much what country I am in.

6. Not really to be honest. Anything negative about for example the refugees coming into Sweden I feel are kind of forbidden to talk about, as people will consider you racist. I think you have to be very careful of what you say as Sweden is too politically correct. That doesn't make me feel that free to express myself either.

7. Well I do feel free to access any kind of social media here in Sweden and I also have full rights to post my opinions online. However I still feel that Swedish society doesn't accept all opinions. Like in China there are certain sensitive topics that shouldn't be talked about. People are too politically correct and get accused of being this and that for the tiniest little things they voice their opinions about.

8. Yes of course. Here people can discuss everything freely. I notice in class at university, students can criticize anything from politics to the professor's opinions and theories without getting in trouble.

9. Definitely. Sweden is a democratic country. China is not. There is a big difference.

10. Yes I am fond of the way that the majority of the Swedish citizens respect people with different opinions. No one gets you into trouble like back in China. There is more respect towards free expression here.

11. It was not a matter that coming to Sweden meant more freedom of expression for me. It was more a matter of free access to social networking sites such as Facebook and Google without being monitored. In China, for example our social media sites such as Weibo are extremely monitored by government. In Sweden, without a firewall like in China, I notice that more voices can be expressed on social media sites that exist here. And there is not real concern about what one posts on Facebook or Twitter.

Q6. Do you think that social media and the Internet are a lot more censored in China compared to other countries? Why?

1. Well that depends on which countries. Compared to the developed countries, I assume yes. I am not so sure why, perhaps because of our culture. And because of the amount of power our government has over people. That's different from a lot of other countries.

2. Yes of course, we cannot use Facebook or Google in China. Not being able to access foreign sites that other countries can is a sign of us being extremely censored as a country.

3. Yes I do. And it has to be according to China. The Chinese Communist party are too afraid of democracy and freedom of speech and what it would do to the regime.

4. Yes. The Chinese government does not allow free thought. The authorities believe that if they did, the whole system would break.

5. Yes China is so much more censored than many countries. They check every single thing we write online.

6. Yes, compared to other countries definitely. We are obviously more censored when our country doesn't allow us to browse any foreign sites or servers.

7. I would say compared to European countries it is definitely more censored. There are other countries in the world that are censored just like China.

8. Yes I get angry that China is so censored that we cannot use Facebook, Bloomberg or anything similar in China. The system just blocks are foreign websites and it censors our ability to reach out into the world.

9. Yes. China is a dictatorship. The government is so afraid that they have to censor everything. Most countries are not dictatorships and most countries aren't as afraid as the Chinese government are when it comes to criticism of posting about events or news.

10. Yes I do but the political regime and the strategies taken by the government is needed because of China being such a big country with a big population. I believe that a strong government with rules is essential for our development. Therefore I don't think it is fair to compare a developing country with such a big population with the developed western countries. But yes of course, compared with India, China needs to have more democracy. India is a lot freer and isn't as censored at all. Compared to that country, a developing one, I can state that China needs to be less censored.

11. Yes, I do. But I have to say that even so, social media in China has become a very important platform for information flow and free expression. Although a lot of social resistance events and speeches about anti-government and anti-CCP are filtered, social media in China has become important tool for exposing official scandals. Expression is a lot more open now than before with I can only see as positive, even in regard to other countries that have less or no censorship.