

“Life and Death” on the Internet: Metaphors and Chinese Users’ Experiences of “Account Bombing”

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“Account bombing” is the phenomenon in which Internet regulators permanently block some individual users’ social media accounts without the users knowing in advance. In this study, we frame account bombing as a form of user-targeted censorship by Internet platforms, which disrupts individual users’ daily routines. To understand how Chinese Internet users make sense of their experiences of account bombing, our study examines user narratives about this practice, paying particular attention to the metaphors they employ. Our findings suggest that users often use metaphors related to the body and death, such as “death sentence, ghosts, reincarnation,” and a person’s “will.” Overall, body-and-death metaphors reveal the irreversibility of account bombing and the uneven power relations of the Chinese Internet, which are heavily skewed toward regulators. These metaphors also establish the relevance of the seemingly individual, sporadic experience of account bombing to a broader audience, evoking affective and political sympathy.

Keywords: censorship, Chinese Internet, fear, Internet platform, media traces, social media, WeChat, Weibo

Since around 2016, narratives about a specific Internet censorship measure netizens call *zhahao*, or account bombing, have emerged on the Chinese Internet. Account bombing is a phenomenon in which individual users have their social media accounts permanently blocked by Internet regulators without the users knowing in advance.² This happens predominantly on social media platforms such as Weibo³ (微博), WeChat (微信), and Douban (豆瓣). Although blocking takes divergent forms on these platforms, its common feature is that users can no longer interact with others, either through public posting or private messaging. Reasons given by the platforms often relate to the spreading of inappropriate content (e.g., rumors,

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² On Chinese social media, user accounts can also be blocked temporarily. The duration of the block can be one day, three days, 15 days, or one month. “Account bombing” refers to permanent blocking.

³ Weibo is also known as Sina Weibo.

sensitive speech, violent content, pornography), malevolent marketing, reporting by other users, and so on. However, the platforms never tell affected users which part of their posted content was inappropriate.

Unlike "digital suicide," in which users actively disconnect themselves from social media (Karppi, 2011), account bombing as a type of Internet surveillance can be devastating for users, especially when the social media platform in question (such as WeChat) is significantly intertwined with their daily lives. Users who have experienced account bombing often have strong, mixed emotions, such as anger, anxiety, despair, regret, sadness, and surprise. Many have tried to recover their accounts by formally complaining to the media companies' customer services, and even by calling 12315, the customer complaint hotline set up by the Administration for Industry and Commerce. Their efforts have often been futile.

To understand how users who have experienced account bombing make sense of it and of Internet censorship in general, we explore users' narratives about their account bombing experiences. Notably, metaphors of the body and death (e.g., death sentences, ghosts, reincarnation) are commonly used in users' unsolicited online narratives. We analyze these metaphors in three steps. First, we identify the body-and-death metaphors and their systematicity. Second, we interpret these metaphors by associating them with relevant cognitive and pragmatic factors in cases of account bombing. Finally, we explore the user perceptions of social media use and Internet censorship that are constructed and reproduced by these metaphors, as well as the narratives in which they are embedded.

In the next two sections, we first position account bombing in the landscape of China's Internet censorship, framing it as a form of user-targeted censorship. Then we show how different sets of metaphors have been articulated in discussions about the Chinese Internet. We aim to situate this study within the wider context of a tradition of metaphor use associated with people discussing, and assigning meaning to, media technologies and the Internet.

User-Targeted Account Bombing by Internet Platforms

Account bombing should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as an integral part of China's Internet regulations and censorship. To retain control of Chinese Internet users' information access and opinion expressions, Chinese authorities have developed a sophisticated system with multiple layers and agencies, employing both direct measures and soft, covert strategies. The former include, but are not limited to, content removal, keyword blocking, search filtering, and conversion of posts from public to private visibility (Chen & Yang, 2019; MacKinnon, 2009; Pan, 2017), whereas the latter can be seen in the cases of "flooding"⁴ (Roberts, 2018). In some cases, the authorities may fine an Internet platform for releasing or allowing its users to release "illegal" content (e.g., Reuters, 2021) and even shut down a whole website or an application (Miao & Chan, 2020).

⁴ "Flooding" is defined as "the coordinated production of information by an authority with the intent of competing with or distracting from information the authority would rather consumers not access" (Roberts, 2018, p. 80).

Although the above-mentioned measures are all employed to impede the circulation of certain content, they are implemented on different levels. Measures like keyword blocking and search filtering directly land on content, without individual users and Internet platforms being punished. We frame these measures as *content-targeted censorship*, which can be carried out by either the authorities or the platforms themselves. In comparison, fining or shutting down a platform counts as *platform-targeted censorship* and is implemented only by the authorities. Since China's censorship system is one of intermediary liability whereby service providers are liable for the content on their platforms, Internet companies that run these platforms have to strike a balance between the market logic of satisfying user demand and the logic of control endorsed by the government, especially given that, to date, the dominant companies are domestic (Miller, 2019; Pan, 2017). To survive, platforms must abide by censorship guidelines and exert control over their content.

Different from the censorship that targets content and platforms, account bombing belongs to what we call *user-targeted censorship*: Individual users are directly punished for their online speeches.⁵ Existing literature shows that user-targeted censorship in China is implemented mainly by the government, directed at high-profile journalists, academics, and social media users (Roberts, 2018). Accordingly, punishments are enforced at the administrative level (Roberts, 2018). Account bombing, however, is carried out directly by Internet platforms instead of the authorities. It also broadens the target range of censorship, involving common social media users who are not so influential.

The phenomenon of banning user accounts may have emerged in the era of online forums. Nevertheless, account bombing on a large scale rises in tandem with the Chinese government intensifying Internet surveillance and governance through cooperating with big Internet companies in the process of platformization, and with the "infrastructuralization" of Internet platforms in China (de Kloet, Poell, Zeng, & Chow, 2019; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018). As Internet platforms get infrastructuralized and become essential to daily lives, account bombing bears new implications that cannot be seen in the early day cases where user accounts of niche online forums got permanently blocked. Notably, it causes inconvenience for users, especially when the social media in question has been interwoven into the fabric of users' daily lives. Signing up for a new social media account, in particular, is an irritating inconvenience, because of China's real-name registration policy (Fu, Chan, & Chau, 2013; Jiang, 2016). Therefore, the consequences of censorship, which are directed at the shaping of public opinion, have spilt over into individuals' private lives through account bombing.

The rise of user-targeted censorship by platforms renders the question of how users react to censorship more relevant. So far, individuals' reactions to censorship remain underresearched (Zhu & Fu, 2021): What has not received much attention is users making meaning of their experiences of being censored, much less their experiences of account bombing. This study thus fills in the gap by examining users' own narratives about account bombing. We pay special attention to users' affective reactions, as we have noted that their narratives are charged with strong emotions. About the affects

⁵ In some cases, it is after one account's posts were deleted several times that the account got bombed. A user may have already experienced content-targeted censorship when they become a victim of user-targeted censorship.

related to censorship, many scholars hold the view that censorship functions through fear (Chen & Yang, 2019; Wacker, 2003). It is often assumed that the threat of content removal, being "invited to tea," or even being detained (Han, 2018) may induce self-censorship among Internet users (Zhong, Wang, & Huang, 2017). Nevertheless, Roberts (2018) argues that fear is not that effective. Through surveys, online experiments, and social media data, Roberts (2018) finds that users who report having experienced censorship are "more likely to report being unfazed or angry about censorship than fearful or worried" (p. 19).

While Roberts's (2018) methods comprise online experiments, Zhu and Fu (2021) argue that experiments "can hardly replicate a natural environment with stringent censorship"; neither can the one-off treatments "fully solicit authentic fears, angers or other threat-driven reactions to censorship" (p. 3650). Following this line of thought, the present study examines users' reactions to censorship that exist in a natural setting, focusing on the technobiographies (Kennedy, 2003) of those users whose accounts were bombed. Specifically, it sheds light on how users actively make meaning of their experiences of being censored or, specifically speaking, their accounts of account bombing.

Metaphors for the Chinese Internet Regulations

Users' narratives about account bombing are full of metaphors of the body and death. Metaphors are essentially about "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 5). For a long time, they were regarded merely as poetic linguistic expressions until contemporary theory proposed that metaphors are a matter of thought and reason (Lakoff, 1993). As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue, our conceptual system is largely metaphorical; metaphors play a central role in the construction of social and political reality.

Metaphors are widely employed when we talk about digital artefacts, Internet practices, and related social arrangements. As van den Boomen (2014) maintains, metaphors are "the keys to the black boxes of software and machinery"; they are "able to open up the black box and reveal its insides" (p. 189). In discussions about regulations and censorship on the Chinese Internet, one commonly used metaphor is the "Great Firewall." This term was first used by Western media to describe China's Golden Shield Project, which began in 1998 (Li, 2009). For instance, one magazine article says:

A computer engineer in his late 30s, Comrade X [. . .] is overseeing efforts to build a digital equivalent to China's Great Wall. Under construction since last year, what's officially known as the "firewall" is designed to keep Chinese cyberspace free of pollutants of all sorts, by the simple means of requiring ISPs [Internet service providers] to block access to "problem" sites abroad. (Barme & Ye, 1997, para. 29)

This well-accepted spatial metaphor categorizes online space into an inside that needs to be guarded and an outside that contains dangers, assuming that censorship is aimed only at controlling the information flow from the outside the firewall (Tsui, 2007). Accordingly, the Internet has been regarded by Chinese dissidents as "the seeds of destruction for China's resilient autocratic tradition—the final frontier for the Great Wall mentality" (Lovell, 2006, p. 346).

In recent years, Chinese authorities have developed a multiplicity of approaches to regulate users and information inside the firewall. Adopting a discourse of “civilization” characterized as proactive and preventive, they have claimed to “purify” the Internet (Yang, 2018). The “Sapling-Protection Campaign”, launched in 2016, was intended to guard juveniles against online content deemed harmful to them, such as pornography. Moreover, Provisions on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content, which came into force on March 1, 2020, follows the civilization discourse, defining its goal as “controlling the weeds” on the Internet and “giving a bath” to cyberspace (see Liu & Zhang, 2020). The implication of such metaphors is that subject matter that is identified as threatening to the ecology of the Internet (e.g., rumors, pornography, violent content) is supposed to be removed to maintain order online. In other words, the reality constructed through these metaphors legitimates online censorship practices such as account bombing on social media.

However, users who have encountered account bombing would probably reject these official metaphors, in which their banned accounts are weeds to be removed and dirt to be washed off. This study demonstrates that they have created an alternative metaphorical system to the official one for Internet regulations and censorship. Constituted by various metaphors of corporeality and death, this system competes with the official one in the discursive arena, allowing users to speak for themselves in their own words.

In sum, this article addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do users employ body-and-death metaphors to construct their own narratives of account bombing?*
- RQ2: What are the cognitive and pragmatic factors that determine these metaphors?*
- RQ3: How do users perceive user-targeted censorship and react to it?*

Methods

To address our research questions, we identify, analyze, and compare the metaphors that many Chinese users employed when they discussed their own experiences of account bombing. It is not our intention to make claims about the representativeness of the examined metaphors and narratives, although they were indeed outstanding in online discussions. Instead of giving a representative overview of public attitudes toward account bombing, we examine how particular attitudes—in this case, the attitudes of those who actively use metaphors of body and death—are “shaped, reproduced and legitimized through the use of language” (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 253).

Our data-collection period was from August 2019 to October 2020. Account bombing reached a peak in early 2020 during the outbreak of coronavirus in China, which contributed to the abundance of account-bombing cases available for study. The cases of account bombing we learned of were mainly related to three platforms: (a) Weibo (微博), the most popular microblogging platform in China; (b) WeChat (微信), a multifunctional app that features instant messaging, social feeds, mobile payment, and

other functions; and (c) Douban (豆瓣), an anonymous social networking site where one can find various forms of content produced by other users, such as social feeds, blog posts, and reviews of movies, books, and music albums. Other platforms were occasionally mentioned, including YHTT BBS (一塌糊涂 BBS), Zhihu (知乎), and bilibili (哔哩哔哩).

Our data set is twofold. First, we collected 56 blog posts on account bombing, using search terms like *zhahao* (account bombing), *fenghao* (account blocked), and *fengjin* (blocking) on various Chinese platforms. Most blog posts were found on Douban, which enjoys significant popularity among intellectuals. Its blogging function allows users to discuss issues in depth. Some posts were from the news website Inition Media, the online forum Matters, and the news aggregation website China Digital Times. Matters and China Digital Times feature discussions about China's Internet censorship; the latter also gathers and presents blog posts from ordinary Chinese citizens. Only a few posts were from other sites, such as Weibo, Zhihu, and Huxiu.com (虎嗅). All these unsolicited blog posts were analyzed as technobiographies. The blog posts we collected were not necessarily published originally on the aforementioned platforms, as they usually circulated among different platforms. Since the bloggers' genders are rarely indicated in their blog posts or personal profiles, when referring to any of these bloggers, we use the singular "they," a generic third-person pronoun.

Second, we contacted 39 social media users who had recently experienced account bombing via Douban, Weibo, and Zhihu. However, the platforms on which they wrote about their account-bombing experiences were not necessarily the same platforms on which the experiences had taken place. For instance, many users who had experienced account bombing on Weibo complained about it on Douban. We interviewed users with 13 open-ended questions. Because of intense online censorship, we risked the "bombing" of our own social media accounts, through which we contacted interviewees for this study (see Ruan, Knockel, & Crete-Nishihata, 2020; Zhang, 2020). To minimize this risk, we did not publicly recruit interviewees. Instead, we found potential interviewees by searching posts that tell stories of "account bombing." Then we contacted them via online private messaging.⁶ Depending on interviewee preference, interviews were subsequently conducted either by private messaging or by phone. In the former case, the interviewees' genders often remained unclear. Again, in this study, we use the singular "they" when the gender of an interviewee is unknown.

We used qualitative data analysis software to code our data and examine the patterns in users' metaphor practices. Our data coding was inspired by Charteris-Black's (2004) use of critical metaphor analysis to examine metaphors at work. To reveal how metaphors construct "whole ways of viewing the world" (Charteris-Black, 2019, p. 16), researchers can conduct a three-stage analysis: (a) identification; (b) interpretation; and (c) explanation. In the first stage, researchers identify candidate metaphors through a close reading of collected samples. The second stage, interpretation, involves extracting conceptual metaphors and "establishing a relationship between metaphors and the cognitive and pragmatic factors that determine them" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 37). The stage of explanation would further analyze how

⁶ Note that our interviewees are not necessarily the authors of the blog posts we collected.

people's perceptions and actions are constructed and constrained by metaphors based on the results of the earlier two stages.

In line with the three stages of analysis, our results are thus presented in three sections: (a) body and death metaphors for account bombing; (b) cognitive and pragmatic factors in metaphor adoption; and (c) perceptions of social media, power, and censorship.

Metaphors of Body and Death for Account Bombing

Users commonly employ metaphors when they describe the censorship system, social media platforms, and the statuses of social media accounts before and after being blocked. A set of body-and-death metaphors stands out throughout the narratives. In this system of metaphors, the personal social media account is envisaged as a body, and account bombing is the execution of a death sentence on that body (Table 1). This resonates with Karppi's (2011) argument that since our lives are interconnected with networks, we tend to embody our interactions with technology with notions such as "life, death," and "suicide." For example, after being informed that their account had been blocked because their post on Weibo violated laws and regulations, one user wrote calmly:

I feel anger, repression, and fear. In the Information Age, social media is the field where we exist; it's our body. The loss of voice is no different from the loss of life. Is this a return to what Agamben called "bare life" in the face of the Leviathan? I don't know if this is the end. Although they are of little value, the nearly 8,000 micro-blogs recorded in eight years of life are falling apart in [the notification which says] "the content can't be loaded." (Saintdump, 2019, para. 3)

The systematicity of metaphors, suggested by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), is also found in the narratives about account bombing. It guides an analogical inference that allows us to comprehend aspects of account bombing in the way we understand the death of human beings. The platform thus becomes a site of "slaughter," of "execution," or, in the case of temporary blocks, an "online prison." The causes of death are also metaphorically described: "being murdered, shot to death, fallen in battle"; even the phrase "account bombing" per se is a metaphor:

Undoubtedly, the word "account bombing" is a product of the age of social media. Specifically, the word "bombing" creates a vivid image, as if a cannonball landed and the bustling world was thus razed to the ground. It comes without any warning, eradicating all traces of your presence on social platforms, easily and violently. (Daomengshenqie, 2020, para. 4)

Table 1. Examples of Body-and-Death Metaphors.

Subject	Metaphors
Censorship	Wall, the sword of Damocles, iron hoof
Social media platform	Slaughterhouse, online prison, pigsty
Social media account	Diary/notebook, backyard, soul fragment, life, body, mate, homeland, spiritual habitat, lamb to be slaughtered
Account bombing	Cloud massacre, capital punishment, being killed, shot to death, death sentence, sealed in a coffin, in captivity, died in battle, Auschwitz, clenched throat, locked up in a small dark room
Personal status after account bombing	Ashes to ashes, dead, wandering ghost, phantom, vampire, corpse, invisible man, firework, unregistered household
Coping strategies after account bombing	Reincarnation, rebirth, suicide, corpse fraud, guerrilla warfare, swimming outside the wall

In further elaborations on the status of an account and their coping strategies after account bombing, users employed some traditional Chinese notions of death and the afterlife. "Ghost" was a frequently invoked metaphor, as it is closely linked to death in Chinese culture (Cheung, Chan, Fu, Li, & Cheung 2006). Another example was the "seventh day" (头七) after death, a key notion related to traditional Chinese funerals. One user said,

I think I am in the state of a wandering ghost shortly after death. I can see the world of the living, but I am no longer able to participate in it. After the seventh day, I will leave this world completely. (fateface, 2018, para. 5)

The "dead," however, still need to take care of their own "posthumous affairs" (后事). Weibo users may use a Web-scraping tool to extract their data from bombed accounts, as Weibo allows users to access their posts after account bombing. Users of WeChat tend to rely on its digital payment service in their daily lives. They must withdraw any money from their WeChat wallets after account bombing. Furthermore, the "dead" may sign up for new accounts, which is referred to as "rebirth" and "reincarnation." After "rebirth," one interviewee replicated the posts from their bombed Weibo account in a new account by copying, pasting, and posting. They said they were reborn without "drinking the Meng Po soup" (孟婆汤). In Chinese folklore, the souls of the dead people must drink Meng Po soup before reincarnation so that they will forget everything from their past lives. This reference to Meng Po soup highlights the role social media play in the practice of "remembrancing," a process of active memory work concerning ourselves, those around us, and our environments, constituted in part by the media traces we create or use (Humphreys, 2018).

To sum up, death metaphors are a critical theme in account-bombing narratives. Unlike the weed metaphor adopted by authorities, death metaphors highlight the brutality of Internet censorship and the suffering of the individual users whose social media accounts have been permanently blocked.

Cognitive and Pragmatic Factors in Metaphor Adoption

After identifying the death metaphors that emerged in the technobiographies, we investigated them as a central focus of our interviews, exploring the relationship between death metaphors and the cognitive and pragmatic factors that construct them (Charteris-Black, 2004). We found that the emergence of death metaphors is related to two factors: (a) the status of the social media account after being bombed, and (b) perceived ambiguity in the experience of account bombing.

First, the status of a social media account after being bombed contributes greatly to the adoption of death metaphors. Blocked accounts on different platforms vary in interface and functional status (Table 2),⁷ but have in common the suspension of social functioning on mainstream Chinese social media: posting, reposting, commenting, or clicking likes. After their account was blocked, a Douban user wrote:

It has been four days and my sighs per day only increased. I thought I would adjust my mood soon, but I didn't. It's like a piece of my heart has been ripped out. My posts are gone, and I can't see the photos I stored on Douban anymore. I don't even bother to mark after I have listened to a song or watched a movie. It's so frustrating. (Tashigou, 2020, para. 4)

Many people used metaphors to describe the status of their blocked accounts and how they felt about them. One user described the experience after their WeChat account had been blocked:

As long as there is money in your WeChat wallet, you'll still be able to log into the blocked accounts. Once you have logged in, you'll be able to receive group chat messages, open public posts, and check social feeds. But you can't do anything else. You can even see the group chat talking about the account bombing that happened to you, but you can't make a sound, it feels like your body is dead, but your soul is still watching everyone talk. (chengeladi, 2020, para. 14)

A similar analogy can be seen in a narrative about account bombing on Weibo:

It was like I was suddenly sealed into a transparent coffin. From the inside, I was still able to see what was going on in the world. But I was unable to participate in any way and make a sound. No matter how hard I waved my hand, people would not notice. I didn't panic about it. Actually, I was intrigued, because the account bombing I had imagined was a direct blast to the ground, erasing all existence. (Linguaishou, 2018, para. 12)

⁷ This figure was made in June 2020. Note that regulations of these platforms may have changed when this study gets published.

Table 2. Functions of Social Media Accounts After Being Permanently Blocked.

Functionalities of the social media platform	Weibo	WeChat	Douban
Login	√	Only temporary login for withdrawing or transferring money.	×
Posting	×	×	×
Reposting	×	×	×
Commenting on other users' posts	×	×	×
Clicking "like"	×	×	×
Sending private messages to other users	×	×	×
Receiving private messages from others	×	Only possible during temporary login.	×
Viewing one's own posts	√	Only possible during temporary login.	Not possible. However, reviews on movies, books, and music albums remain on the pages of the corresponding items and remain visible to other users.

Second, the opacity of official reasoning behind account bombing, and the futility of complaints, may reinforce the feeling of having been "killed." Although in most cases, users whose accounts had been bombed were informed that they had violated community rules, they found this explanation unconvincing and unbelievable. Informant 30 said:

I couldn't figure it out, and I must find out the reason. I can't die without knowing why. [. . .] Even if I did violate the rules, please let Sina [Weibo] point out in detail which posts of mine violated the rules and how, instead of making such an ambiguous statement. (Personal communication, March 17, 2020)

In the Chinese context, the blurred boundaries of censorship have surpassed conventional measures of Internet governance by combining the powers of punishment and deterrence (Li, 2009):

Imagine this: When you speak on Weibo, you fully know there is someone watching you in the dark. He has a broadsword in his hand. Whenever your words cross the line, the broadsword will cut you. He will never tell you where the line is, nor will he give you the opportunity to explain. (Zhou, 2019, para. 78)

Customer service is the immediate channel for appeals from users, though such appeals rarely work. Some WeChat users were even notified by the platform that if, during the appeal process, it was found that the violation had been serious, this could lead to further punishment for their accounts. After making

several calls to the Sina customer service, one interviewee eventually found that speaking to a human representative was out of the question:

With a little common sense and the advice of friends, I turned to the Shanghai Consumer Protection Commission, Shanghai Citizens' Mailboxes, Beijing Consumer Protection Commission, State Administration for Market Regulation, People's Government of Beijing Municipality, and channels for complaints against third-party sellers. One by one, I filed the complaint to them and uploaded money-related proofs such as the record of purchasing the Weibo VIP membership, hoping to open a channel of communication. (Informant 31, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

Perceptions of Social Media, Power, and Censorship

The metaphors we have examined do not appear as discrete, isolated words that stand alone in the online discursive environment. Instead, they are embedded in narratives about account bombing, which convey and reproduce certain perceptions and beliefs. These perceptions and beliefs pave the way for the adoption and circulation of the metaphors; they are also constructed and consolidated by these metaphors in turn. Informed by the unsolicited blog posts studied, we have noticed that account-bombing narratives often encompass perceptions of the roles of social media and users, inequality in power relations, and Internet censorship. Therefore, we asked questions about these three aspects during our interviews. The findings presented here are thus organized around these aspects.

Roles of Social Media and Users

Experiences of account bombing prompt users to reflect on the role of social media in their lives, as well as their own roles in the social media ecology. As far as we know, this reflection has not been discussed in the literature on China's Internet censorship. Notably, account bombing often makes users aware of their dependence on social media. This was especially prominent in WeChat users' accounts. Fateface (2018) wrote: "How did we let such a chatting tool invade our lives and work step by step? Why did I spend so much time on WeChat? Was that really necessary?" (para. 6). Linguaishou (2018) talked about social media in general: "It [account bombing] forced me to think about the significant meaning of social media accounts for humankind. They have become an indispensable organ for everyone" (para. 44).

Narratives about account bombing construct a plural role for social media: *personal archives*, *public spheres*, and *content factories*. First, users rely on the archiving function of social media to store the content they produce, leaving media traces they may want to retrieve at a later point in time (Humphreys, 2018). Thus, users may liken social media to storage devices. For instance, Linguaishou (2018) said:

I was calm at that moment [when realizing the account was banned]. After all, I had experienced a hard disk crash. I had felt the pain of losing digital data. Although there are some differences between social media accounts and storage devices, in essence they serve the same goal. (para. 20)

Given the archival function of social media, it is unsurprising that some users used Web crawlers to extract data from their banned accounts. Accordingly, users regarded themselves as the owners of their own data and expressed concerns about data protection. Account bombing denied them access to their data and made them feel helpless. Fang (2018) wrote: "Why can't we own the data created by ourselves?" (para. 4).

Second, many users also framed social media as a public sphere in which societal issues should be discussed and citizens should voice their opinions. Informant 31 made a comment to this effect about Weibo:

Weibo is the most widely used social platform and has the most diverse communication modes and content in this country. Netizens pay attention and discuss all sorts of public affairs. It is supposed to be an open, free platform. Unfortunately, it has lost this property because of many reasons. (Personal communication, February 16, 2020)

From this perspective, account bombing restricts online expressions and citizen participation in discussions on public affairs. One user gave an interpretation of the intent behind account bombing: "I know WeChat wants us to be 'benign subjects,' to close our eyes, go after bread and circuses, discuss no domestic issues, and turn a blind eye to all public affairs" (historicize, 2018, para. 13).

The third perspective resonates with the digital labor theory, which frames users as content producers: The content they produce is consumed by other users, benefiting social media platforms (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). After account bombing, some content remains on the platform and can still be seen by other users. For instance, on Douban, reviews of movies, music albums, or books remain after the account that posted them has been bombed, and are still visible to other users. One user viewed this as "seizing the surplus value created by an extinguished person" (Xiaohun, 2020, para. 17). Another said: "Account owners [who have had their accounts bombed] are denied access to the content they produced themselves. [. . .] Douban, however, keeps the content produced by them, letting other users consume it. This behavior is like prostituting someone without paying" (Waishi, 2020, paras. 23–26).

Inequality in Power Relations

Different from content-targeted and platform-targeted censorship, user-targeted censorship exerts control over users themselves. Account bombing is imposed on users by social media companies, which conform to the rules of Internet regulation set up by the government. Account bombing victims find their complaints to social media companies futile. Therefore, the significant inequality in power relations between the government, social media companies, and users is a prominent theme in narratives about account bombing.

The fact that social media companies carry out account bombing, its arbitrary implementation, and the uselessness of filing a customer complaint or asking for an explanation made users feel powerless in the face of social media companies. One said:

Facing the Internet giants that ban social [media] accounts again and again, I deeply feel how weak and helpless individuals are in front of big companies. The whole process [of account bombing] is unreasonable and unlawful, and there's no way to deal with it. (historicize, 2018, para. 8)

Some users went further, claiming that the government was also responsible. They pointed out that social media companies succumb to governmental pressure. However, not everyone saw the government as a facilitative factor in account bombing. Informant 26 attributed account bombing on Weibo to manipulation by capitalist social media companies, a result of a lack of government intervention. They directed their anger at Weibo: "I'm very angry, because I'm a patriot and I don't deserve account bombing. [. . .] I hate Weibo more than before, because there is no way to file a complaint. [Weibo's power] is the might granted by capital" (Informant 26, personal communication, March 17, 2020). According to them, state connivance allows capital to manipulate public opinion, "letting the enemies infiltrate into the people."

Although different political stances lead to differing interpretations of account bombing, users commonly felt angry about the unfairness of account bombing. This feeling was perhaps even stronger in those who deemed themselves progovernment. Informant 28 explained why he was extremely angry:

I'm relatively conservative. Sometimes I even agree with the measures of the so-called "stability maintenance," and I don't have radical opinions to express. [. . .] I consider myself a rational, impartial, and even pro-government speaker. Still, I got the ban. (Personal communication, February 20, 2020)

Apart from anger triggered by perceived unfairness, feelings of humiliation were also prevalent among users, especially when they realized they could not challenge the significant inequality in power relations. One said:

When the account was banned, [I was] not surprised or flurried. However, because [I] can't file a complaint and [I] wasn't told about the criteria and the reason, [I] have a strong sense of humiliation: My social life is sentenced to death, but I can't appeal against it. (Ooer, 2020, para. 4)

Similarly, another said:

More trauma came from the fact that the arrogant power always gets its way and doesn't pay the price. Because of that, more and more people have to throw their precious lives into the humiliation of this ridiculous process [account bombing] again and again. (Mimiyana, 2020, para. 55)

Facing "arrogant power," many users feel they have been treated rudely and even dehumanized. One said: "I don't know what I can do. [I am] like the tamed livestock. Facing all sorts of humiliation and unfairness, [I] don't know how to revolt" (Jiayin, 2019, para. 5).

Unpredictable Internet Censorship

Since account bombing takes place without any explanation from social media moderators, users must speculate on the reasons behind it; some have no clue. In their eyes, account bombing is unpredictable, and the rules of Internet censorship set up by the government are opaque. As Saintdump (2019) wrote: "No clear rules. There are only intentions from the top, or even just the [social media companies'] speculation of intentions. The intentions are the knife, and the algorithms are the chopping board. Together they cause endless self-censorship" (para. 4).

During our interviews, most participants said they knew little about censorship policies. The knowledge they had was mostly based on their observations and experiences, or those of other individuals. Some doubted that social media companies were following specific instructions from the government. They thought that regulative measures implemented by social media companies may be an overreaction, based on overly zealous interpretations of general, undetailed policies. Informant 19 said: "According to the general trend in recent years, Internet regulations do not always have clear criteria. In my opinion, they are mostly based on performers' one-sided judgment" (personal communication, March 10, 2020). Informant 38 said: "I think the policies may not be so detailed. But the [social media] platforms implement strict censorship to avoid risk" (personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Overall, users found it hard to know where the boundaries of Internet censorship lay. Account bombing intensified this feeling. During our interviews, we invited participants to comment on Internet censorship. Opinions were divergent. Some simply seemed to be against it. Informant 17 said: "Fundamentally speaking, there shouldn't be censorship" (personal communication, February 17, 2020). On the other hand, a few thought that although account bombing is overdone, Internet censorship is necessary. Informant 28 said:

I think policies in this country are hypercorrect, including those of Internet censorship and media regulations. On the one hand, we all know that such censorship and regulations have constrained individual freedom; media and public opinion can't perform their supervisory function. On the other hand, we see in many cases how destructive rumors brought by social platforms can be. After all, many people are still unable to make [the] right judgment. (personal communication, February 20, 2020)

Disappointed by account bombing, Informant 28 further elaborated: "I understand it's hard to keep censorship and regulations in a proper range. But it is distressing when they are done so badly" (personal communication, February 20, 2020). Sharing this reasoning that platform censorship is "doing wrong for a good cause," Informant 37 argued that account bombing should be more precise:

It should be aimed at the reactionary force, imperialists that intend to subvert our country, spies, or people who have evil intentions and agitate for chaos. In fact, most people hope their own country will get better. They are hurt by accident. (Informant 37, personal communication, February 28, 2020)

In a nutshell, account-bombing victims perceive China's current Internet censorship as unpredictable and problematic, although they may hold different opinions about whether Internet censorship is justifiable.

Conclusion

Account bombing is a trending measure of Internet censorship in China, bearing new implications for individual users in a context where Internet platforms become infrastructuralized. We frame it as a new form of user-targeted censorship, as individual users are directly punished for their online speeches. It differs from content-targeted and platform-targeted censorship: The former aims only to render certain content invisible, and the latter disciplines Internet platforms. Carried out by Internet platforms, account bombing is also set apart from government-implemented user-targeted censorship with administrative penalties. Through account bombing, the consequences of censorship spill over into individuals' private lives, causing inconvenience for users in their daily routines.

By identifying metaphors in narratives about account bombing, this study explores how Chinese users make sense of account bombing. Although Chinese authorities have adopted metaphors such as "controlling the weeds" and "giving a bath" to legitimate Internet censorship, users have developed an alternative metaphorical system to highlight strict censorship's devastating consequences for online expression, as well as for daily lives. Notably, metaphors of body and death, which liken social media accounts to bodies and account bombing to execution, are frequently used. This suggests how authorities and users frame social media accounts: The former treat them as public affairs that need to be governed, and the latter highlight their nature as private belongings, just like users' own bodies. Constituted by various metaphors of corporeality and death, the metaphorical system of account bombing competes with the official one in the discursive arena, allowing users to speak for themselves in their own words.

Body-and-death metaphors, together with the narratives in which they are embedded, embody and reproduce certain perceptions of the role of social media, power relations in the Chinese Internet ecology, and the blurred boundaries of China's Internet censorship. Three perspectives exist in user narratives: Users may regard social media as a personal archive, a public sphere, or a content factory; account bombing can be problematized from any of these perspectives. The significant inequality in power relations between users, social media companies, and the authorities is manifest in the way account bombing is implemented, adding to users' sense of unfairness and humiliation. Interestingly, unpredictable account bombing is also imposed on those who take a progovernment stance. Although such users may not agree with the liberalists who challenge the legitimacy of Internet censorship, they also see this form of censorship as problematic, calling it "hypercorrect."

How should we understand the power of body-and-death metaphors? According to Wittgenstein's (1986) language game theory, that is, the use of specific forms of language as a form of social activity and a method of practice: "Words are also deeds" (p. 146). As a resource of language, body-and-death metaphors may carry a wide range of illocutionary forces (Skinner, 2002), whether intentionally or otherwise. The body-and-death metaphors in public technobiographies reveal the irreversibility of account bombing and the unequal power relations of the Chinese Internet, which are heavily skewed toward

regulators. Often emotionally charged, they establish the relevance of this seemingly individual, sporadic experience to a broader audience, evoking sympathy both affectively and politically.

Indeed, many users sympathize with those who have had accounts bombed and are angry about Internet censorship. This was seen in the case of Cloud Five, a Douban user who experienced consecutive blocking of several accounts on Douban. To support Cloud Five, other users launched an online campaign, which Cloud Five called "Cloud for Vendetta," referencing the movie *V for Vendetta*, directed by James McTeigue. The organizer wrote:

I would like to organize an online campaign in solidarity with Cloud Five to protest extravagant censorship. There is only one way to show solidarity: Change your username to the Cloud series (Cloud + numbers). If you can't change your name, you can change your avatar to Cloud Five's avatar and repost this post to call for more people to get involved. ("Wo Xiang Zuzhi Yichang," n.d., as cited in Yunwu, 2020)

According to Yang (2009), in online collective actions in mainland China, the emotions that most inspire netizens to engage in protest are anger, sympathy, and playfulness. The appeal to fight against account bombing is also expressed angrily and sympathetically, which could effectively be transformed into a kind of contentious conversation (Tilly, 1998), especially given the dysfunctionality of the regular channels of appeal.

Therefore, our findings resonate with Roberts's (2018) backfire effect hypothesis that censorship can trigger complex affects beyond fear and backfire against the government. Nevertheless, we would like to complement Roberts's claim by making two points. First, we should not equate fear of censorship with fear of administrative penalties that researchers used to focus on. With the rise of account bombing, more and more individual users may start to experience the fear of losing their social media accounts, which are likely to constitute a significant part of their self-identities (Humphreys, 2018). This fear may induce self-censorship in a larger range of Internet users than the fear of administrative penalties does, since the penalties are often targeted at a small group of influential users. Second, apart from anger, sadness is also a prominent affect that user-targeted censorship can trigger. Data gathered by Roberts (2018) have already shown the prominence of sadness, although she has not discussed why. We argue that sadness is closely related to a sense of loss. For users, especially those who have invested a lot of time and effort in their social media accounts, to lose their posts and even their social media accounts is to lose their belongings they perceive to have personal meanings and hold dear.

This study has some limitations. Given the constant evolution of online censorship measures, our account of the types and circumstances of account bombing is not exhaustive. The changing forms of online censorship are also worth monitoring. An additional uncontrolled factor is that several interviewees avoided expressing attitudes toward, or commenting on, Internet censorship. This was because of the lack of safety they perceived in the online interviews, as these were mediated by social media platforms on which account bombing often happens. We recommend that future studies related to Internet censorship are conducted in offline settings to reduce interviewees' concerns.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study offers insights into China's Internet censorship from the perspective of users. To comprehensively understand account bombing, future studies might explore the mechanism of account bombing, social media companies' management of the bombed accounts, and the dynamic between market and government actors (Miller, 2019).

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