

# Public Access to Government Information in the Digital Age: Findings from China

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Published online: 7 May 2014  
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**Abstract** The openness of government information is an unavoidable issue in the digital age. The Chinese government makes great effort to publish administrative information and seek advice on good governance from the general public, but is nonetheless unable to meet citizens' legitimate demands for the right to know and participate. This study analyzes this contradiction from four angles: the driving force, the type of information, the access platform, and the annual examination and supervision system for government information disclosure. The findings showed that (a) netizens' heavy pressure rather than Chinese authorities' strong leadership pushes forward the disclosure of government information; (b) administrative information concerning the public agenda rather than the policy agenda best meets the needs of the general public; (c) commercial Weibo websites are a more satisfactory channel than official government websites for practical requests; and (d) as a unique institutional arrangement for examination and supervision, the annual report on government information disclosure should be standardized.

**Keywords** Open government information · Proactive disclosure · Public agenda · Weibo · Annual report · China

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## Introduction

Chinese authorities are committed to open disclosure of administrative information, which originated at the village level in the 1990s. After 2000, governments at all levels faced increasingly severe public emergency challenges, including a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis, food safety incidents, and environmental pollution events, which speeded up the legislative process governing open information disclosure. In 2003, Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Government Disclosure (hereafter, *Regulations*) were put into the legislation plan of the State Council. It was subsequently issued by former premier Wen Jiabao on April 24, 2007, and became effective on May 1, 2008.

*Regulations* require that all administrative organs and organizations administering public affairs or providing public products and services, including schools, medical facilities, and utility companies, should proactively publish four types of administrative information: (a) that which concerns the vital interests of citizens, legal persons, or other organizations; (b) that which needs to be disseminated to or participated in by the general public; (c) that which shows the structure, function, and working procedures of any other matters relating to the administrative organ; and (d) that which should be disclosed by the administrative organ's initiative according to laws, regulations, and relevant state provisions. Citizens, legal persons, and other organizations may, according to the special needs of such matters as their own production, livelihood, and scientific and technological research, also file requests with departments of the State Council, local governments at all levels, and government departments at the county level and above to obtain relevant information.

Despite much effort, Chinese authorities are still in trouble because they are unable to meet citizens' growing expectations to know and to participate. The 2012 report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) cited five critical problems: disclosure delay, sketchy information, contradictory information, far-fetched excuses for withholding, and inconvenient access. In the past 5 years, many scholars have researched the causes of this lack of transparency. They offer four main viewpoints: (a) Chinese authorities only commit to open disclosure of administrative information, whereas what the general public really wants is democratic rights, therefore transparency without democracy is the fatal crux of China's problem (Horsely 2007; Zhou 2007; Zhou et al. 2007; Fung et al. 2008; Carter and Yanbin 2008; Tan 2014); (b) actual actions of all administrative organs and organizations lag behind their propaganda; however, citizens' awareness of their rights is rapidly growing due to the popularity of the Internet (Wang 2011); (c) *Regulations* in the legal sense can only restrict administrative organs and organizations, but other authorities, including the Communist Party apparatus, the People's Congress, the People's Political Consultative Congress, the People's Court, and the People's Procuratorate, are unrestricted (Zhou 2009; Sun 2009); and (d) *Regulations* gives administrative organs and organizations so much discretion that members of the general public tend to file an administrative lawsuit when their requests are rejected (Zhu and Yu 2012). The power to withhold the facts of government is the power to destroy that government.

This study systematically analyzes the root and solutions of the contradiction outlined above from four angles: the driving force, the type of information, the access platform, and the annual examination and supervision system for government information disclosure. Analytic narratives were adopted as methodology, and statistical data on 31 provincial governments and typical cases from 2009 to 2012 were analyzed. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. "What is the driving force behind government information disclosure?" section describes factors involved in both the demand and supply sides of

administrative information disclosure and their conflicts. “[What information does the general public really want?](#)” section analyzes the conflict among preferences regarding what information will be disclosed, from the perspective of agenda setting. “[Which information channel is the best?](#)” section discusses the conflict concerning channel choice on the basis of Arrow’s theory of information cost. “[What is wrong with the annual institutional report on government information disclosure?](#)” section dissects the defects of the existing institutional arrangement for examination and supervision according to official statistics. “[Conclusion](#)” section summarizes the results and develops issues for future research.

### **What is the driving force behind government information disclosure?**

*Regulations* designate two access modes, proactive disclosure and disclosure upon request. Many researchers believe that strong leadership and determination by Chinese authorities are the key factors in promoting government information disclosure (Duan and Wang 2005; Li 2011; Liu et al. 2012). Our point, however, is that the biggest obstacle to transparency comes from administrative organs and organizations.

Two cases illustrate this point (Xinhua News Agency 2011). One case concerns the proactive disclosure of the final accounts for budget implementation. The State Council executive meeting on March 3, 2011, required that by the end of June 2011, 98 central government organs should make three final accounts publicly viewable: funds for travel abroad, the purchase and operating costs of motor vehicles, and funds for official receptions. A subsequent meeting on May 4, 2011, required all local governments to do the same. One week after the deadline only the Ministry of Science and Technology had opened the three accounts; 2 months after the deadline 95 central government organs had obeyed the stipulation; but by the end of 2011, only four local governments had complied. Administrative organs and organizations in many areas, such as environment, healthcare, and education, are unwilling to make information public.

Another example concerns disclosure upon request (Zhao 2009). On January 7, 2009, a lawyer named Yan Yiming submitted a written request to China’s Ministry of Finance and the National Development and Reform Commission. Yan applied for information regarding the use of 4 trillion in extra-budgetary funds invested by the central government to stimulate the economy, including who used the funds and how they were used. But his request was rejected before the time limit prescribed by *Regulations*—15 statutory working days—and his subsequent administrative reconsideration request was not accepted. Similar cases emerge one after another. It was in this context that the Provisions of the Supreme People’s Court on Several Issues Concerning Hearings of Administrative Cases Related to Government Information Disclosure took effect on August 13, 2011.

Administrative organs and organizations are the biggest obstacle to government transparency for three reasons: (a) keeping secrets had always been the basic principle of public administration in China before *Regulations*; (b) there are conflicts between *Regulations* and other laws, including the State Secrets Law and the Archives Law; and (c) administrative organs and organizations have infinitely elastic discretion concerning work secrets and, therefore, could easily concoct excuses to avoid disclosure. If the sensitivity of the information is used as a shield, the applicant becomes thoroughly stuck in ridiculousness, akin to the famous “catch-22” in Joseph Heller’s dark novel. The applicant bears the burden of proof, but has no way to find evidence to support the argument that the sensitive information is not a secret. Whether the applicant chooses to insist on disclosure

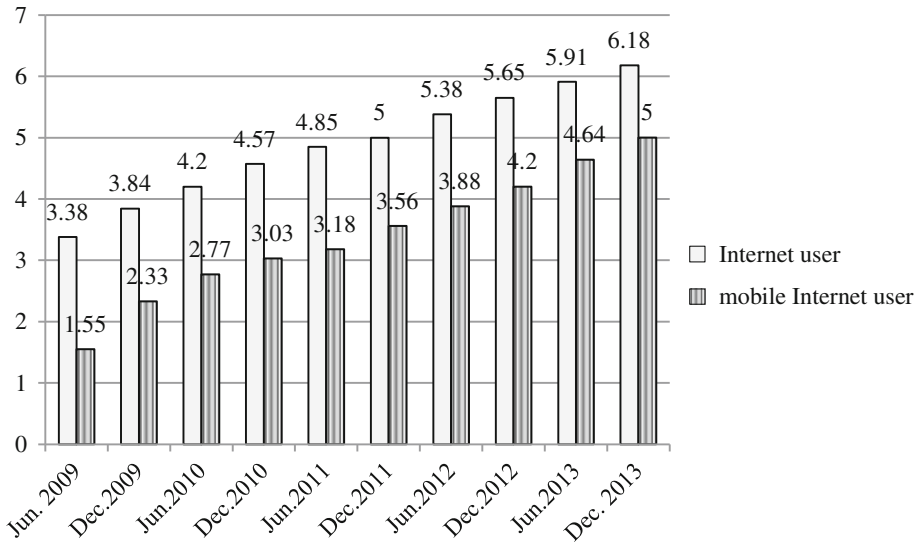
or to give up, he or she will still never gain access to the desired administrative information.

The popularity of the Internet, in particular Web 2.0 tools and applications, is quietly breaking the deadlock. Chinese authorities increasingly find themselves in an embarrassing position, under scrutiny by netizens through the expression of public opinion online. More and more public events reveal not only the influence of public opinion expressed online, but also the emergence of a government crisis resulting from rejecting disclosure. Under this heavy pressure, the spirit of transparency is gradually seeping into administrative organs and organizations. In 2012, all 98 central government organs and 31 provincial governments quickly released not only the final accounts of the three stipulated funds, but also their budgets at the middle of 2012. Moreover, the accounting is more detailed and accurate.

Analysis of the scale and structure of Chinese netizen participation would explain why netizen oversight of governmental actions and decisions has become the driving force of government information disclosure. According to data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 31, 2013, the number of Internet users in China was 618 million, and the number of mobile Internet users was 500 million, indicating that approximately 80.9 % of Chinese netizens use a mobile device. Figure 1 shows the increase in the number of Chinese netizens since mid-2009. Although China has an Internet penetration rate of only about 45.8 %, which is far lower than that of Korea, Japan, and the United States, netizen supervision of government through public opinion expressed online is the most powerful driving force behind government transparency. In this context, Chinese netizens have become known as the “new pressure group.” There are three main kinds of influential netizens: (a) the lower class, including average blue collar and white collar workers, freelancers, and the jobless; (b) the highly educated elite; and (c) Internet thugs and the Internet water army.<sup>1</sup> Those of (a) are accustomed to venting their anger online because they face many problems caused by social injustice, including rich–poor conflicts, capital–labor contradictions, urban housing demolition and relocation, rural land transfers, and difficult access to quality medical services. Those of (b), who tend to have a strong sense of responsibility, rationality, and participatory citizenship, are accustomed to speaking out online on behalf of those of (a). Those of (c) are largely habituated to adding fuel to the fire when it comes to government transparency-related discussions (Sun 2013).

Chinese authorities could easily guide public opinion online through Internet control in the digital age of Web 1.0; however, they failed to anticipate the extent of the public right of free expression empowered by Web 2.0 tools and applications. Although some popular social networking sites, including Twitter and Facebook, are blocked in China because they may allow the posting of politically sensitive and anti-government content, Chinese native network platforms and applications, such as Weibo and WeChat, play an active and increasingly important role in government information disclosure. According to data from China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, by the end of 2012, the number of Sina Weibo (the Chinese Twitter) users was over 500 million, about 75 % of whom used a mobile device to access the application. According to data from Tencent, the number of Wechat (a Web 2.0 application from Tencent Corporation) users was over 600 million by the end of 2012. These Web 2.0 tools and applications connect individuals anytime and anywhere. One of the consequences of this unconstrained connectivity is that netizens of each kind listed above firmly believe that through the process of sharing and participating

<sup>1</sup> A group of Internet ghostwriters paid to post online comments with particular content.



**Fig. 1** Chinese Netizen growth (Unit: one hundred million; Data source: CNNIC)

in discussions online they become like-minded people sharing information to strengthen their social glue (Dutton 2007).

The Chinese government had absolute authority in both cyberspace and real-world society under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the digital age of Web 1.0, but is being gradually pushed aside in cyberspace by grassroots opinion leaders in the digital age of Web 2.0. With Web 2.0 tools and applications everyone is theoretically an information source, although, in fact, few grassroots opinion leaders have a greater say in cyberspace than real-world society. According to incomplete data from 2009, the number of original posts by netizens was 1.13 billion, and 10 % of the netizens created 80 % of the original content, attracting the other 90 % of netizens. Almost all grassroots opinion leaders in China come from category (b). When those of (a) complain about something unfair or upload what they see and hear, grassroots opinion leaders capture and quickly comment on those issues. Thus, routine matters of government or public employees' personal affairs could quickly become a public crisis with the help of the grassroots leaders' fans and followers and the netizens of category (c). Administrative organs and organizations face greater pressure to disclose information because of the uproar created by netizens. Thus, the balance of information power in cyberspace starts to shift, regardless of whether Chinese authorities like it or not. All administrative organs and organizations, especially governments at the local level, have been under unprecedented pressure for information disclosure.

We consider that proactive disclosure, rather than a tight rein, is a smart approach for all administrative organs and organizations. They must be the first to respond and quickly release an official announcement in the event of a crisis. It is a long-term challenge for Chinese authorities to construct an interactive mechanism between administrative institutions and the general public in both cyberspace and real-world society, especially when dealing with an ill-motivated bureaucracy, traditional administrative culture, and selfish departmentalism. It is particularly gratifying that the new leading collectives of the CCP

are trying to change. Recent decisions, such as giving Bo Xilai a public trial, showed determination by Chinese authorities to establish a more transparent government. We believe that proactive disclosure will gradually become a routine part of governmental work, as a result of sustained netizen pressure for government to recognize and respond to citizens' right to know and participate.

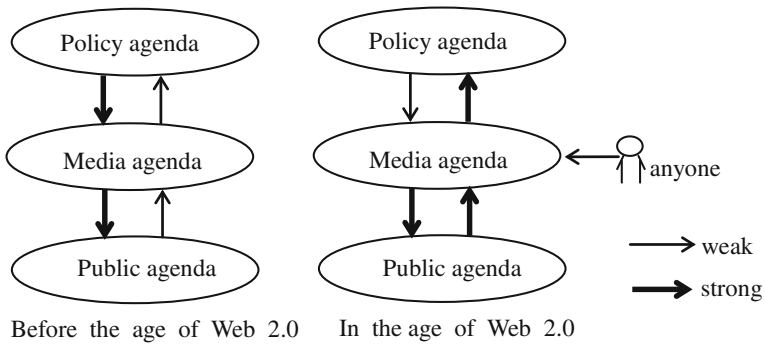
### What information does the general public really want?

*Regulations* prescribe that all administrative information shall be disclosed or provided upon request, except for information that should be kept secret under law. Article 9 is a principle statement of proactive disclosure. Articles 10, 11, and 12 enumerate detailed items categorized by administrative level. Article 13 specifies which types of information are to be provided upon request. *Regulations* thus clearly state what information must be made publicly available. In practice, however, problems are encountered. The core problem is that the general public is indifferent to the information published by administrative organs and organizations, but is intensely concerned about the hot issues publicized by grassroot opinion leaders through social media.

Why do *Regulations* not meet the public's needs? Some scholars conclude that the declining credibility of government is the major reason (Chen 2009b; Qian and Zhao 2012; Zhu 2012; Nie 2013; Zheng 2013). Others state that it reflects the structural imbalance of information supply and demand (Chen 2009a; Zhou and Zou 2009; Zhang 2012). In our opinion, the different understanding of democratic values such as the "right to know"—the theoretical base and conceptual foundation of *Regulations* in the public policy agenda—between Chinese authorities and the general public is the primary cause of increased tensions in the digital age. Public policy agenda can be subclassified as policy agenda, media agenda, or public agenda, among which policy agenda is an issue concerning the government, media agenda is an issue that the media are focused on, and public agenda is an issue that the general public pays much attention to. Each can be converted to each of the others (Wang 2006). From the perspective of Chinese authorities, the right to know means that the general public receives official information; but what the public really wants is the freedom to seek, obtain, and deliver information, whether it is official or unofficial. The populace wants to take part in the decision-making process for issues concerning their daily food, clothing, shelter, and transportation, but Chinese authorities hope that the policy agenda will be made a matter of great concern for the general public via the media.

Before the age of Web 2.0, Chinese authorities had no difficulty in implementing their ideas. They curbed the media, diffused the policy agenda, attracted public attention, and controlled public opinion. It was not difficult for them to guide the public agenda according to their interests. They decided issues, and the populace cared about what it cared about. Of course, the general public could also express demands, but their voices could hardly be heard and their influence was weak. Chinese authorities have long been accustomed to publishing information according to their own needs without worrying about its effect. A casual look at the "information disclosure" column on any current government website reveals that universal trait (Fig. 2).

In age of Web 2.0, information and communication technology empower everyone to express themselves to a public audience, thus changing the situation dramatically. Anyone can raise an issue in cyberspace with Web 2.0 tools and applications, and if the link is clicked, the post retweeted or shared, or the hashtag used repeatedly, even if only by the Internet water army or an automatic program, the issue could become part of the media



**Fig. 2** Feedback mechanism of agenda transition

agenda. If the issue is raised or discussed by a grassroots opinion leader, this transition process is accelerated. Under great pressure from the media agenda, Chinese authorities have to integrate a matter of public agenda into the policy agenda. The abolition of the detention and repatriation system that had existed for 21 years is a case in point, and is seen as an important milestone in China's social development.

When administrative organs and organizations publish information concerning the policy agenda, the typical response from the general public is indifference. But if they were to publish information concerning the public agenda, it would attract the public's attention and encourage active participation. Public attention is a scarce and short-lived resource, but the media have the ability to both arouse it and manipulate it. Although Chinese authorities request that the media accept government censorship, Web 2.0 technology weakens governmental control over the media. At this moment, the general public can selectively pay attention to issues related to their vital interests or pressing concerns. Web 2.0 tools and applications solve the problem of public absence from the forming of public policy, and this digital-age medium has become the portal for agenda transition. Thanks to Web 2.0, any issue in the public agenda has the potential to become part of the policy agenda.

Current Key Work Arrangements for Open Government Information, issued by the General Office of the State Council on July 1, 2013, conveyed a welcome signal. This circular accelerates the reform of government information disclosure in some areas, including the budget and final accounts, affordable housing, food and drug safety, environmental protection, safety in production, prices and charges, and land acquisition. Administrative organs and organizations will proactively disclose government information related to the public agenda.

Members of the general public have two primary means by which to express their dissatisfaction with government performance: "voice" and "exit." They can speak up and thereby participate in the process (voice), or they can withdraw (exit). "Voice-exit" plays an important role in feedback mechanism of agenda transition. Voice helps to maintain vibrant and positive political order, but exit might cause destruction (Hirschman 1970). Public policy cannot work well without wide public attention and active public participation. If Chinese authorities are not sensitive to the public's voice, policies that do not gain public trust and support will encounter indifference and apathy among the populace. In order to ensure the efficiency of public policy, all administrative organs and organizations must pay more attention to public and media agendas than to policy agenda when

disclosing information. If they continue as they have been, it will not only be detrimental to the interests of the general public, but also reduce government credibility.

As a case in point, on October 14, 2008, the National Development and Reform Commission (hereafter, the Commission) published the draft of Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Medical and Health Care System on its website, and solicited public comment for a month. Data from our longitudinal study show that 505,000 related web pages existed during this month, but the Commission announced it received only 27,892 comments. Approximately only 5 % of public opinion about the matter was noticed by the Commission, which caused widespread public complaint. The result is that the complication and intensification of the conflict between patient and doctor has become a problem for Chinese authorities.

In the long run, to attract public attention to the policy agenda and reduce the risk of social instability, we suggest that (a) the government information disclosure catalogue should be amended in accordance with not only the policy agenda but also the public agenda, and (b) all administrative organs and organizations should have an independent policy window on the Internet that serves as a sensitive collector of public opinion, as a bridge to connect public agenda and policy agenda, and as a weather vane of social expectation.

### Which information channel is the best?

Under Article 15 of *Regulations*, all administrative organs and organizations are required to offer a convenient means of public access to administrative information. In practice, various means are provided—such as government gazette, government website, text message, press conference, and print and broadcast media reports—among which the public is free to choose. The theoretical issue is whether one information channel is better than the others.

An information channel can be not only created, but also discarded. The Nobel Laureate Kenneth Arrow pointed out in his famous book *The Limits of Organization* that the choice depends on the rational person's cost–benefit comparison of each channel. Since the use of information is subject to the law of increasing returns, the only factor influencing channel choice is information cost, which can be defined as the investment in establishing and running the information channel. The information cost typically represents an irreversible investment and includes information coding as well as the channel infrastructure. Only by mastering the coding can a rational person identify, receive, classify, and use the information. The rational person's information literacy and attention limit are fixed influence factors in this process. Channel change cost and daily usage habits mean that there is “path dependence” in personal channel choice. Even if the initial choice is not smart, a rational person would find him- or herself being locked into his or her first choice. It is, therefore, important for Chinese authorities to guide the initial choice. According to some metrics, including breadth and depth of information spread, timeliness, efficiency, interaction, traceability, and accumulateness, the Internet is an overwhelmingly superior information channel.

In the digital age of Web 1.0, the government website was the preferred channel, but it did not work as desired and was not as effective as a commercial portal, such as Sina, Tencent, Sohu, and Ifeng. The website of China's central government (<http://www.gov.cn>), launched on January 1, 2006, demonstrates the ambition of the CCP to reform the government information disclosure system and the systematic mechanism of civic participation. The CCP claimed that the government website would be a key channel for disclosure of government information; administrative information would be published on it in a



timely and accurate way. Beijing Guomai Internet Information Consultants conducted a study on the Internet presence of all levels of Chinese government at the end of 2009. The results showed that all provincial governments, autonomous regions, municipalities under the central government, special regions, and provincial capitals had a website. In total, 98 % of municipal governments and 96 % of county governments had a website. Almost every governmental entity at every level had an official website. Each website contained an “information disclosure” column, but this column got very little attention from the general public, or even from civil servants.

Shortly after the launch of government websites, public attention was overtaken by Web 2.0 tools and applications, which have had a profound impact on information consumption and on communication. Members of the general public obtain information and communicate with each other via social media websites, such as Weibo and Wechat. A report quoted by the Beijing-based newspaper *International Herald Leader* stated that more than one-fifth of the 50 most discussed public events in China in 2011 were first reported on Weibo (China Daily, *August 14, 2011*). For example, information about the Wenzhou train crash and the rumblings of dissent in the days that followed was distributed first and expressed more forcefully on Weibo than on any government website. Web 2.0 tools and applications help to push information into a person’s circle of connections, which can produce a viral effect when a specific topic captures the interest of the general public. The government website is an important Internet-based platform, on which Chinese authorities attempt to publish information and communicate with the general public quickly and effectively, but it is technically not the best way—a reality that they have acknowledged. The following two statements best sum up their attitude to Web 2.0:

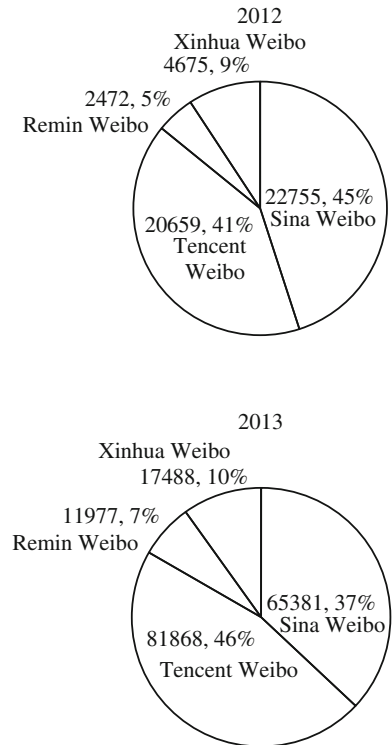
If governments can correctly and properly guide public opinions, use microblogging as a good platform to learn about public opinions and the wisdom of the people, and find and solve problems as soon as possible, forming an orderly and highly participatory microblogging public opinion environment is completely possible. Microblogging will also become a “release valve” of social emotions and the “lubricant” of government–public relations. (China Daily, *July 2, 2011*).

Mastering the use of the internet shows a leader’s quality and ability. We hope that more and more leaders show their capacity for speech on the internet and on microblogs, and find popularity. We hope that more and more leaders address the conditions of the people in the real world through real actions (People’s Daily, *August 2, 2011*).

All administrative organs and organizations are increasingly using Weibo to engage in conversation with the general public. Data from the Chinese Academy of Governance (CAG) show that 176,714 official accounts had been registered at Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, People Weibo, and Xinhua Weibo by the end of 2012, over twice the total of the previous year. Figure 3 shows that more than 80 % of official accounts were opened on a popular commercial platform, such as Sina Weibo or Tencent Weibo, while the rest (14–17 %) were opened on the official platform. Administrative organs and organizations also pay close attention to Wechat, and more than 1,000 official accounts had become operational by June 2013.

Data from third-party institutions on public opinion expressed online show that commercial Weibo platforms are more popular than official Weibo platforms. Of the two biggest commercial Weibo platforms, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, the former has more middle-aged users, including celebrities of every variety; while the latter has relatively young users, and most of them are the generation after the 1980s or 1990s. Although the latter has more users than the former, users on Sina Weibo are more active than those on Tencent Weibo in discussing public crisis incidents. Popular topics on Sina Weibo are academic matters, political news, films and television shows, and life philosophy with

**Fig. 3** The number and proportion of official accounts on the top four Weibo (Data Source: CAG)



more emphasis on spatiality; posts on Tencent Weibo tend to concern actual life with more emphasis on timeliness. Tencent Corporation also owns another Web 2.0 application, WeChat. But from a technical standpoint, Weibo and WeChat have different social properties. Weibo is already a public space, whereas WeChat is still a small circle and lacks transmissibility to form a public space. If the expressing of Chinese public opinion online were to shift from Weibo to WeChat, there would be more problems with social opinion liquidity, leading to more severe social exclusion.

We think that the popular commercial Weibo platforms are the best choice as information channels. Their huge user base and user stickiness are essential for effective disclosure of government information. Chinese authorities need to not only open accounts on popular commercial Weibo platforms, but also become opinion leaders. They should provide via Weibo a flow of information not only about political news, but also about public services, which would do much to attract public attention. At the same time, we also suggest that those online communities that are neutral, objective, and fair need to be brought into the official media system during the expansion of China's state media.

### What is wrong with the annual institutional report on government information disclosure?

Articles 31 and 32 of *Regulations* provide for self-supervision and a public oversight system. *Regulations* require that all administrative organs and organizations should publish their annual report on government information disclosure before March 31 each year. The

report should include six elements: (a) information on government information disclosed on the administrative organ's own initiative; (b) information on government information disclosed upon request and on denied requests for government information; (c) information on fee collection and fee reductions and exemptions concerning open government information; (d) information on applications for administrative reconsideration and filing of administrative lawsuits in respect of open government information; (d) major problems in making government information open to public dissemination and information on improvements thereof; and (e) other items that need to be reported.

Since it is specifically designed for examination and supervision of government information disclosure in China, the publishing and publicizing of this report not only help all administrative organs and organizations perform self-reflection, but also greatly increase the possibility of public supervision. Analysis of these annual reports conducted by third-sector organizations would warn about potential problems concerning government information disclosure, and urge further improvement. But an analysis of 31 provincial reports from 2009 to 2012 exposes problems in the implementation of the annual institutional report.

Firstly, it is hard to collect the annual report of all provinces. There is no unified online publishing platform to present the annual report of various regions from year to year in real time. Some are on the provincial government website, and others are on the provincial information disclosure website. Some are clearly visible on the first page of the website and some need to be retrieved using a search engine. But the 2008 annual reports of Hebei, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang, Henan, Gansu, and Ningxia provinces cannot be found on the Internet, nor can the 2009 annual report of Zhejiang.

Secondly, the vast majority of these reports are merely a kind of qualitative description of the basic situation and existing problems and countermeasures, which reads almost exactly like red tape. The reader could not accurately get detailed information about what the government actually has done in terms of disclosing information. The numbers of proactive disclosure items and access requests are provided, but no details are given. Some regions have gone one step further in releasing the number of disclosures upon request, and a few provinces, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guizhou, and Yunnan, do more than that—classifying the results of all access requests. A more comprehensive analysis of these areas is given below.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, the discrepancies in statistical caliber cause a series of problems, such as serious misunderstandings of the current situation and of tendencies, making a comparative analysis between provinces impossible.

Table 1 shows the number of proactive disclosure items and the number of access requests in various provinces from 2009 to 2012. The quantity stated in the reports of Jiangsu, Guangdong, and Sinkiang is much lower than for other provinces, but is that really so? A closer inspection of each region's annual report reveals the truth. Only information actively disclosed by the provincial government office is covered by the annual reports of Jiangsu and Guangdong, because all sectors and all regions of these two provinces release independent annual reports. But the statistics for all other regions are province-wide. What, then, is the case with Sinkiang? Are the provincial authorities unwilling to disclose administrative information? The data for Sinkiang only cover proactive information disclosure by the autonomous regional government via the government website. In general, the basic status of proactive disclosure is that (a) there is a variance in quantity among provinces according to administrative size; (b) it seems to have remained stable with progressive improvement in each province over the past 4 years, but the question of why Inner Mongolia is the exception remains unanswered; and (c) the data volatility of some

provinces is probably caused by the arbitrariness of the chosen statistical objects. In some years, the report only covers the information items disclosed via the provincial government website; but in other years, the report may cover all channels.

As for the status of disclosure upon request, the problem of statistical caliber is more obvious in Table 1. In theory, the number of access requests is closely related to the information requirements, participative consciousness, and information literacy of the demand side and the open consciousness, responsiveness, and propaganda efforts of the supply side. If administrative organs and organizations do poorly at responding to access request, a vicious cycle of “voice-exit” could easily begin. But the annual report figures shown in Table 1 do not tell the full story, because (a) the data from Beijing, Tianjin, Anhui, Shanghai, Shandong, Fujian, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Hubei, Hunan, Henan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Gansu, and Qinghai represent the number of access requests on the demand side, but the remaining statistics represent the number of access requests accepted by the supply side; (b) the data from Jiangsu and Guangdong only represent the number of acceptances by the provincial government office; (c) the data from Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing, and Liaoning sometimes represent only the provincial government office, but sometimes represent all province-wide administrative organs; and (d) the data from Ningxia for 2010 only cover the number of requests accepted through the provincial government affairs hall. The need to establish uniform statistical standards for the annual report is urgent. It is also unclear why the number of access requests in Tibet in 2012 shows a sharp increase from previous years.

The controversy over which quantitative data should be included in the annual report and how to keep the statistics caliber consistent has just begun to heat up. As mentioned above, some provinces have put transparency into practice. We can classify these provinces as follows: (a) classifying the result of access request into three types—disclosure upon request, partial disclosure upon request, denying access, and other situations without detailed explanation, and (b) detailing all results. Type (a) covers Shandong, Anhui, Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Tibet, and Qinghai. Table 2 provides more details. Type (b) covers Beijing, Shanghai, Yunnan, and Guizhou. Yunnan province and Shanghai municipality use the same statistics caliber to report, so we focus on Guizhou, Shanghai, and Beijing for the following analysis. Tables 3, 4, and 5 show a detailed breakdown of the result of access requests in these regions. All data show that most access requests result in the disclosure of requested information, but the reason for the denial of some requests is not given.

In a deep analysis of the last three tables, the problem of statistical caliber again occurs. The “denied access” column in Table 3 covers five subclasses: no information, unclear request, beyond the scope of acceptance department, exemption for disclosure, and other situations. But in Table 4 it covers six other subclasses: “state secret,” “trade secret,” “personal privacy,” “information involving the administrative process,” “disclosure would be a threat to security and stability,” and “other situations forbidden by law.” The “denied access” column in Table 4 is equivalent to the “exemption for disclosure” column in Table 3. Similarly, “no information,” “unclear request,” “beyond the scope of acceptance department,” and “other situations” become the equivalent of “denied access.” In addition, Shanghai municipality provides data on two additional classifications: “beyond the scope of *Regulations*” and “repetitive application.” Beijing municipality (Table 5) does not specify why access was denied, nor does it include data on “partial disclosure,” “beyond the scope of *Regulations*,” and “repetitive application,” but it does provide data on two additional classifications: “non-governmental information” and “records transferred to the archives.” The biggest characteristic of the data from Beijing is the refining of the “request” column into “items involved in the request,” beginning in

**Table 1** The number of proactive disclosure items and the number of access requests as stated on annual provincial government information disclosure reports

| Province       | Proactive disclosure (unit: item) |           |           |           | Access request (unit: piece) |         |         |        |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|
|                | 2009                              | 2010      | 2011      | 2012      | 2009                         | 2010    | 2011    | 2012   |
| Beijing        | 101,076                           | 99,560    | 113,900   | 172,000   | 6,889                        | 6,996   | 11,811  | 15,729 |
| Tianjin        | 30,312                            | 62,777    | 73,581    | 90,569    | 2,270                        | 1,562   | 3,129   | 3,726  |
| Hebei          | 159,187                           | 128,444   | 258,245   | 470,000   | 732                          | 703     | 1,463   | 979    |
| Shanxi         | 499,000                           | 614,000   | 732,000   | 746,000   | 23,810                       | 15,895  | 14,175  | 8,437  |
| Inner Mongolia | 605,620                           | 437,372   | 365,002   | 292,000   | 1,291                        | 375     | 521     | 246    |
| Shanghai       | 82,714                            | 138,955   | 157,812   | 175,020   | 11,773                       | 12,006* | 19,758* | 18,945 |
| Shandong       | 1,011,231                         | 1,190,377 | 1,449,113 | 157,5305  | 25,097                       | 12,262  | 30,156  | 31,077 |
| Jiangsu        | 373                               | 356       | 405       | 435       | 50                           | 76      | 79      | 103    |
| Anhui          | 617,400                           | 895,000   | 1,177,200 | 1,550,000 | 7,934                        | 9,389   | 10,409  | 2,236  |
| Jiangxi        | 1,459,203                         | 1,171,095 | 1,304,500 | 1,694,200 | 3,031                        | 854     | 1,192   | 1,307  |
| Zhejiang       | –                                 | 1,354,000 | 1,213,399 | 1,800,446 | –                            | 32,033  | 4,967   | 8,073  |
| Fujian         | 282,966                           | 311,420   | 308,665   | 333,870   | 4,878*                       | 3,122*  | 2,924*  | 2,897* |
| Hubei          | 1,501,700                         | 1,462,500 | 1,642,700 | 1,724,600 | 21                           | 367     | 317     | 4,321  |
| Hunan          | 7,615                             | 27,770    | 52,579    | 668,711   | 117                          | 21      | 551     | 6,638  |
| Henan          | 469,645                           | 921,318   | 1,225,026 | 1,901,707 | 83,054                       | 16,991  | 28,167  | 18,411 |
| Guangdong      | 1,459                             | 1,678     | 2,163     | 3,386     | 31                           | 85      | 73      | 158    |
| Guangxi        | 2,308,522                         | 4,144,699 | 5,609,400 | 8,180,000 | 11,079                       | 8,642   | 6,270   | 1,998  |
| Hainan         | 15,636                            | 90,200    | 91,264    | 140,417   | 2,995                        | 7,417   | 3,092   | 1,105  |
| Chongqing      | 1,045,000                         | 1,112,800 | 1,345,000 | 1,059,500 | 1,100                        | >1,100  | >1,300  | 93     |
| Sichuan        | 2,768,800                         | 3,253,149 | 3,630,845 | 5,517,915 | 11,169                       | 6,210   | 3,553   | 7,092  |
| Guizhou        | 647,698                           | 7,850,107 | 5,209,060 | 2,588,602 | 5,776                        | 4,267   | 11,961  | 16,590 |
| Yunnan         | 1,985,555                         | 2,457,181 | 1,415,904 | 1,956,635 | 22,618                       | 23,314  | 12,498  | 26,213 |
| Tibet          | 29,091                            | 39,891    | 53,019    | 174,776   | 2,184                        | 769     | 284     | 31,418 |
| Shensi         | 376,611                           | 757,709   | 813,406   | 935,591   | 3,972                        | 4,672   | 4,527   | 3,627  |
| Gansu          | 202,000                           | 337,000   | 619,000   | 800,000   | 1,236                        | 21,649  | 5,094   | 3,052  |
| Ningxia        | 1,068                             | 18,000    | 52,748    | 28,000    | 3,824                        | 30      | 4,000   | 2,031  |
| Sinkiang       | 341                               | 294       | 536       | 7478      | 3                            | 12      | 6       | 41     |
| Qinghai        | 131,000                           | 114,924   | 172,400   | 196,800   | 9,858                        | 8,311   | 7,303   | 5,696  |
| Heilongjiang   | 236,000                           | 501,000   | 548,000   | 855,000   | 758                          | 1,436   | 8,453   | 6,842  |
| Jilin          | 1,472,900                         | 967,916   | 653,863   | 890,903   | 99,318                       | 17,352  | 16,533  | 14,403 |
| Liaoning       | 86,339                            | 387,331   | 330,558   | 463,744   | 1,198                        | 1,391   | 1,650   | 3,271  |

(a) *Data source* the annual report on government information disclosure of each province; (b) – annual report has not been retrieved; (c) \* unit = item

2011. All of these differences in statistical classification make cross-regional comparative study infeasible. We consider that Shanghai's classification system is theoretically more scientific and rational. But the boundary of each category needs to be stated more clearly, such as how "unclear request" and "other situations" are identified, and how "no information" is distinguished from "beyond the scope of acceptance department."

Regardless of the problems, the beneficial effects of quantitative statistics have become clear, such as enhancing oversight of governmental actions and decisions, inspiring the

**Table 2** The result of access requests in some provinces/autonomous regions (unit: piece)

| Province/<br>autonomous region | Year | Request | Acceptance | Disclosure | Partial<br>disclosure | Denied<br>access | Other<br>situations |
|--------------------------------|------|---------|------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Shandong                       | 2009 | 25,097  | 25,097     | 21,506     | 777                   | 1,170            | 1,674               |
|                                | 2010 | 12,262  | 12,262     | 9,667      | 952                   | 656              | 987                 |
|                                | 2011 | 30,156  | 30,156     | 27,675     | 947                   | 747              | 787                 |
|                                | 2012 | 31,077  | 31,077     | 27,637     | 1,327                 | 747              | 1,366               |
| Anhui                          | 2009 | 7,934   | 7,934      | 7,605      | 76                    | 20               | 233                 |
|                                | 2010 | 9,389   | 9,345      | 8,495      | 200                   | 137              | 513                 |
|                                | 2011 | 10,409  | 10,270     | 9,610      | 290                   | 14               | 356                 |
|                                | 2012 | 2,236   | 1,850      | 1,079      | 177                   | 45               | 549                 |
| Fujian*                        | 2009 | 4,878   | 4,689      | 3,326      | 387                   | 346              | 630                 |
|                                | 2010 | 3,122   | 3,195      | 2,180      | 188                   | 65               | 762                 |
|                                | 2011 | 2,924   | 2,937      | 2,021      | 143                   | 85               | 688                 |
|                                | 2012 | 2,897   | 2,889      | 1,900      | 182                   | 81               | 726                 |
| Jiangxi                        | 2009 | 3,031   | 3,031      | 2,606      | 195                   | 230              | 0                   |
|                                | 2010 | 854     | 854        | 749        | 1                     | 17               | 87                  |
|                                | 2011 | 1,192   | 1,192      | 1,000      | 25                    | 53               | 114                 |
|                                | 2012 | 1,307   | 1,307      | 1,106      | 37                    | 69               | 95                  |
| Guangxi                        | 2009 | 11,079  | 11,079     | 10,661     | 283                   | 55               | 80                  |
|                                | 2010 | 8,642   | 8,642      | 6,953      | 760                   | 647              | 282                 |
|                                | 2011 | 6,270   | 6,270      | 5,186      | 857                   | 160              | 67                  |
|                                | 2012 | 1,998   | 1,944      | 1,675      | 90                    | 59               | 120                 |
| Tibet                          | 2009 | 2,184   | 2,177      | 1,773      | 244                   | 160              | 0                   |
|                                | 2010 | 769     | 769        | 343        | 362                   | 64               | 0                   |
|                                | 2011 | 284     | 272        | 204        | 25                    | 43               | 0                   |
|                                | 2012 | 31,418  | 31,418     | 31,139     | 76                    | 66               | 137                 |
| Qinghai                        | 2009 | 9,858   | 9,858      | 8,424      | 383                   | 831              | 220                 |
|                                | 2010 | 8,311   | 8,311      | 8,158      | 92                    | 61               | 0                   |
|                                | 2011 | 7,303   | 7,303      | 7,122      | 165                   | 16               | 0                   |
|                                | 2012 | 5,696   | 5,696      | 5,236      | 190                   | 80               | 190                 |

(a) *Data source* the annual report on government information disclosure of each province. (b) \* unit = item. (c) Shandong's data in 2009 shows an error in the statistics. The sum of the "disclosure," "partial disclosure," "denied access," and "other situations" columns is 25127, 30 items more than the total given for all requests

classification and allocation of government information, and reducing the number of repetitive and invalid requests. We appeal to administrative organs and organizations to strictly enforce annual institutional reporting, because examination and supervision need the guarantee of rational institutions. In addition to creating a uniform set of statistical standards, special effort should be made to perfect the annual report. Other urgent issues include (a) the need to report on staffing and funding of government information disclosure, so as to estimate whether administrative organs and organizations regard information disclosure as a routine work; (b) the need to hold accountable administrative organs and organizations that do not prepare and release the annual report on time, or that include

**Table 3** The result of access requests in Guizhou province (unit: piece)

| Year                                      | 2009  | 2010  | 2011   | 2012   |
|---|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| Request                                   | 5,776 | 4,267 | 11,961 | 16,590 |
| Acceptance                                | 4,570 | 4,267 | 11,961 | 16,548 |
| Disclosure                                | 4,426 | 4,151 | 9,781  | 13,941 |
| Partial disclosure                        | 139   | 97    | 1,450  | 822    |
| Denied access                             |       |       |        |        |
| No information                            | 0     | 19*   | 53     | 172    |
| Unclear request                           | 2     |       | 563    | 162    |
| Beyond the scope of acceptance department | 3     |       | 6      | 880    |
| Exemption for disclosure                  | 0     |       | 1      | 281    |
| Other situations                          | 0     |       | 107    | 290    |

(a) *Data source* Guizhou annual report on government information disclosure. (b) \* No sub-classification

**Table 4** The result of access requests in Shanghai municipality (unit: piece)

| Year   | 2009   | 2010   | 2011   | 2012   |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Request  | 11,773 | 12,006 | 19,758 | 18,945 |
| Acceptance   | 11,137 | 11,197 | 18,586 | 18,438 |
| Disclosure   | 5,731  | 6,131  | 7,425  | 7,520  |
| Partial disclosure                                     | 238    | 247    | 334    | 250    |
| Beyond the scope of <i>Regulations</i>                 | 550    | 418    | 523    | 707    |
| Non-existence information                              | 1,761  | 1,514  | 3,709  | 2,874  |
| Beyond the scope of acceptance department              | 1,489  | 1,422  | 2,318  | 2,086  |
| Unclear request  | 441    | 711    | 2,027  | 2,386  |
| Repetitive application                                 | 224    | 179    | 405    | 546    |
| Denied access  |        |        |        |        |
| State secret   | 152    | 81     | 114    | 107    |
| Trade secret   | 64     | 118    | 108    | 70     |
| Personal privacy                                       | 11     | 37     | 24     | 14     |
| Information involving the administrative process       | 23     | 35     | 67     | 260    |
| Disclosure would be a threat to security and stability | 33     | 6      | 15     | 2      |
| Other situations forbidden by law                      | 154    | 89     | 962    | 478    |
| Other situations                                       | 266    | 209    | 555    | 1,138  |

*Data source* Shanghai annual report on government information disclosure

falsifications in their annual report; and (c) the need to establish a uniform online platform to present the annual reports of all regions from year to year in real time, thus making the reports conveniently accessible to the general public.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The “annual report on government information disclosure” column was opened on homepage of the new version website of China’s central government after the paper was finalized.

**Table 5** The result of access applications in Beijing municipality (unit: piece/item)

| Year                                      | 2009  | 2010  | 2011    | 2012    |
|---|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| Request                                   | 6,889 | 6,996 | 11,811  | 15,729* |
| Items involved in the application         | –     | –     | 12,544* | 17,017* |
| Acceptance                                | 6,637 | 6,460 | 12,034* | 16,468* |
| Disclosure                                | 3,974 | 3,986 | 5,459*  | 8,631   |
| Denied access                             | 199   | 237   | 1,403*  | 421*    |
| No information                            | 1,739 | 1,240 | 3,179*  | 4,130*  |
| Beyond the scope of acceptance department | 377   | 652   | 1,217*  | 2,016*  |
| Unclear request                           | 179   | 229   | 520*    | 864*    |
| Non-governmental information              | 150   | 90    | 218*    | 297*    |
| Records transferred to the archives       | 19    | 26    | 38*     | 109*    |

(a) *Data source* Beijing annual report on government information disclosure, (b) \* Unit = item

## Conclusion

Despite diverse actions that have resulted in varying degrees of success, Chinese authorities still cannot escape facing the huge pressure of citizens' increasing demands for the right to know and participate. Nonetheless, in the digital age, efforts toward disclosure are a step in the direction of transparency, and this must be acknowledged.

Four principles were expounded in this paper: (a) netizens' heavy pressure rather than Chinese authorities' strong leadership push forward government information disclosure; (b) administrative information concerning the public agenda rather than the policy agenda best meets the needs of the general public; (c) commercial Weibo websites are a more satisfactory channel for practical requests than official government websites; and (d) as a unique institutional arrangement for examination and supervision, the annual report on government information disclosure should be standardized.

After 5 years of active but slow development, public access to administrative information is now at a crossroads. It has already provided an effective forced mechanism for transparency, but the need for Chinese authorities to be smart in the democratic process is an urgent problem. In the digital age, the government, the private sector, communities, and civil society all play important roles in agenda setting (Buchanan and Congleton 2008; Stoke 1999). Some issues still trouble Chinese authorities, primarily (a) how to handle the relationship between Internet governance and civil participation, (b) how to handle the relationship between governmental authorities and grassroots opinion leaders, and (c) how to handle the relationship between virtual space and real-world society. These questions have caused socially widespread argument, and there are as yet no obvious answers. We have reason to expect that efforts accordant with the new round of administrative reform are likely to encourage the birth of a new relationship between government and society in China, according to the public agenda in the digital age.

**Acknowledgments** This paper was revised according to its presentation at the World Social Science Forum, October 13–15, 2013, in Montreal, Canada, as part of the panel titled "Transformation of Public Policy and Governance in the Digital Age," convened by the Korean Social Science Research Council and the Korean National Commission for UNESCO. The contribution of Professor Qin Hai on drafts of this paper is acknowledged.



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