

Revisiting Agential Realism: How Does Social Media as an Apparatus Assemble People's Reality About COVID-19?

——In the Chinese Context.

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COVID-19 has been troubling people's lives for several years, eroding people's hearts and spirits. Meanwhile, while protecting people, masks have also become one factor that separates people. But it seems interesting that people on different social media have different attitudes towards China's anti-COVID-19 measures. In an era where travel or going out is not free due to the epidemic, social media has become rather than an imperative way of seeing and understanding the outside world, and that is also an apparatus for assembling reality. The most important truth is that social media as an apparatus break the myth of the Chinese government continually making people believe their anti-COVID-19 measures are the best in the world and using COVID-19 to control people. Following I would like to find out how social media breaks the myth, based on the Shijiazhuang incident.

Break This Myth:

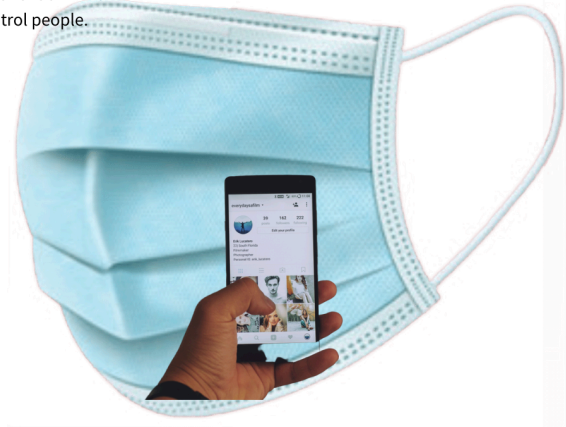
Chinese government continually making people believe their anti-COVID-19 measures are the best in the world and using COVID-19 to control people.

COVID-19

COVID-19 and mask have been troubling people's lives for several years.

Social Media

Social media has become rather than an imperative way of seeing and understanding the outside world, and that is also an apparatus for assembling reality.



Shijiazhuang is the provincial capital of Hebei province, China. The Shijiazhuang incident is that this city was trying to liberalize prevention and control of COVID-19, which is opposite to the central government's policy, and it wants to normalize people's life like foreign countries without thinking about COVID-19.

Agential Realism

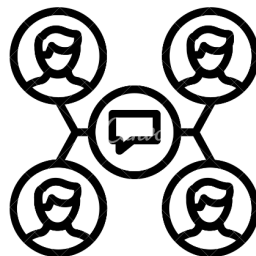
A theory proposed by Karen Barad.

Female, Scientist, Technology, Instrument.



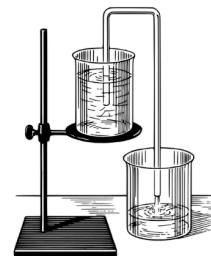
Intra-action

Intra-action happens between person and person, and nothing can be separate from anything else, finally, they create a reality.



Apparatus

Apparatuses are **not passive** observing instruments but **productive** of phenomena, just like **social media**.



I will use the theory named agential realism which was proposed by Karen Barad in her article as my theoretical framework. In this world, all things and people are within intra-

actions.¹ Intra-action happens between person and person, and nothing can be separate from anything else, finally, they create a reality belonging to their relationship, so this group of people construct an assemblage. In this light, it is helpful for us to understand how culture and so-called common sense make something visible and something invisible or not easier to be found.² Apparatuses are not passive observing instruments but productive of phenomena, and social media which has been playing a role as an intersection and transmitter to shape reality can also be called an apparatus in this context.

Social media takes many various forms, according to the user's situation and the level of freedom of expression when using social media, I would like to argue within three different social media: WeChat, the Chinese version of TikTok and Twitter.

WeChat

In the mainland of China, WeChat is undoubtedly the most private social media for everyone and most individuals start a relationship by asking for someone's WeChat, which implies that the people in WeChat are whom the user trusts or knows relatively better.

¹ John Shotter, "Agential Realism, Social Constructionism, and Our Living Relations to Our Surroundings: Sensing Similarities Rather than Seeing Patterns," *Theory & Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2014): 305-325.

² Mario Biagioli, *The Science Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999).



WeChat

Private

Here people approximately have similar interests or world views.

Whatever users post on “moments” is shaping their public image.



Digital Surveillance

People are **monitored** on the internet.

They only repost and thumbs-up but rarely output their own words, which is due to digital surveillance everywhere on the internet.

For users, this is a space to construct their self-identity.³ Because here people approximately have similar interests or world views – people just provide their contact information to those whom they are interested in – and whatever users post on “moments” is shaping their public image.⁴ “Moments” is a function of WeChat to post text or images to other people, just like Instagram where you can express your feelings at any time. WeChat is playing the role of a stage that creates a limited cultural space where you could render your opinions about the trifle of life to national issues. When Shijiazhuang began this attempt, some people forwarded news or article pertaining to this incident to express themselves (Figure 1; Figure 2). They supported Shijiazhuang’s approach which is completely contrary to the policy of the Chinese government, but we can note that they only repost and thumbs-up but rarely output their own words, which is due to digital surveillance everywhere on the internet. Digital surveillance means that you are monitored on the internet. The government and censorship have the authority to judge if you do the right things and consider whether they would give you punishment, such as several friends of mine have been banned to post and speak one or two days.

³ Ugur Gunduz, “The Effect of Social Media on Identity Construction,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 5 (2017): 85.

⁴ Raz Schwartz and Germaine Halegoua, “The Spatial Self: Location-based Identity Performance on Social Media,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 10 (2015): 1643-1660.

Additionally, people in modern society are lonely, so they need others' resonance, which makes them more aggressive, radical, and critical about social news. Even if they will probably be punished, they are trying to do that. Another factor is that this is a private space, and the punishment will be lighter than another application I will mention later. Thereby, through such a performance, WeChat creates a space for people to shout out and affect the myth.

The Chinese Version of TikTok (Douyin)

The Chinese version of TikTok acts like a platform assembling a plethora of people from the whole country, which breaks the internet boundaries between users and affairs outsides. The users here are more discreet to post their opinions due to the more rigorous digital surveillance.⁵

The Chinese Version of TikTok (Douyin)

Platform

Assemble a plethora of people from the whole country - break the boundary.

Algorithm (A kind of technology)

Push videos that correspond with users' interests to them.

Digital Surveillance

Under digital surveillance, most people fear speaking too aggressively for avoiding being punished.



More significantly, the algorithm, a kind of technology, which enables the Chinese version of TikTok to push videos that correspond with users' interests to them, is the most prominent feature. And under digital surveillance, most people fear speaking too

⁵ Brooke Duffy and Nagi Chan, " 'You Never Really Know Who's Looking': Imagined Surveillance across Social Media Platforms," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 1 (2019): 119-138.

aggressively for avoiding being punished, so as a generator they just produce videos commending the Chinese government and its anti-COVID-19 measures. Moreover, with censorship, the powerful will eliminate videos which are negative towards the government and the official account usually post information that is favourable to the government. At the beginning of COVID-19, people saw how well a job the government and medical staff were doing, and with the two points mentioned above, people gave thumbs-up to such videos. Again, because of the algorithm, the likes are followed by more similar videos, and it becomes a closed loop that forms a reality making people just see the world on one side.⁶

However, in the Shijiazhuang incident, this myth is inclined to break. The Chinese version of TikTok is like a chaotic salon with people presenting various opinions, and there are two completely different voices in the comments section of the same video (Figure 3). But generally, most people choose to support Shijiazhuang's measure this time (Figure 4). And due to the official account having modified the data and disseminating them using social media to cheat people, which aims to convince people to believe in the central government all the time, users are showing their disbelief in the government and their desire for freedom (Figure 5).

At the beginning of COVID-19, the people on the Chinese version of TikTok showed a strong nationalistic and even chauvinistic which is extremely patriotic tendency to defend everything the Chinese government did, and the government's public credibility has also risen sharply as a result of effective anti-COVID-19 measures. But now, after a long period of physical and mental torture, people are eager for freedom. The government's control of public opinion via algorithms and data, as well as the inconvenience of people's life due to the health code system's random alerts (Figure 6; Figure 7), has caused the government's public credibility to plummet again. Most

⁶ Zhengwei Zhao, "Analysis on the 'Douyin (TikTok) Mania' Phenomenon Based on Recommendation Algorithms," *EDP Sciences* (2021): 03029.

people have been waking up to the “reality” created by social media before.

Twitter

Besides its algorithm, Twitter as an application created by America has a high level of freedom of expression and users here are from all over the world.⁷ This is the most aggressive platform where diverse users bring diverse perspectives for people to understand the world, so it also requires users to enhance their judgment when facing eye-catching information.



Twitter

Freedom of Expression

Besides its algorithm, Twitter as an application created by America has a high level of freedom of expression and users here are from all over the world.

Diverse Perspectives

Diverse users bring diverse perspectives for people to understand the world, so it also requires users to enhance their judgment when facing eye-catching information.

Based on the Shijiazhuang incident, we can find that all sorts of comments on Twitter mock the Chinese government and support Shijiazhuang. For instance, some people said that hope everyone can remember that Shijiazhuang fired the first shot at coexisting with the epidemic in China, putting an end to this stupid dynamic zero-COVID policy, as well as saying that the Chinese government always win and never lose, which sounds sarcastic (Figure 8). Even a group of people dare to define the Chinese government’s repression of Shijiazhuang’s measure as a new and real “Cultural Revolution” (Figure 9), and the opposition between the government and the people is more and more severe (Figure 10).

⁷ Nakia Stevens, “Facebook and Twitter Have Become a Third Space for Citizens to Have Freedom of Expression on Political Views,” *Debating Communities and Networks* 12, (2021).

Under the umbrella of “personal freedom of expression”, even if Twitter detect false information, they can only tag or delete these comments, and at most impose short-term or long-term suspension penalties on relevant accounts but do not have the right to hold these users accountable.

Therefore, personal freedom of expression and diverse perspectives both enable people here to speak freely and aggressively, escaping from myth.

Conclusion

Above all, social media is like a filter that refracts reality, and it is absolutely an apparatus permeated with power relations. Social media also can be a tool that allows us to speak out. Once we go outside, we became isolated, and it is through the internet we can be linked together. It is necessary for us to know that social media is one of the most important things in our life nowadays, which can produce nationalism and even chauvinism for people to trust the government, and it can also be a knife that breaks the myth. The nature of social media changes with specific events, and we are supposed to treat them rationally so that we are more likely to find out the so-called truth vaguely in a complex and complicated world.

Reference

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Appendix

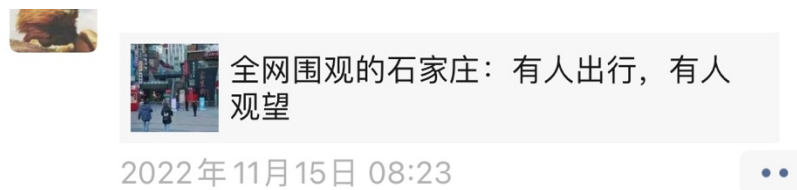


Figure 1

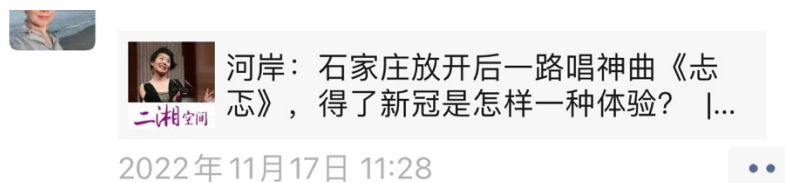


Figure 2



Figure 3

-  忆城
有的人想放开，有的人不让放开，石家庄敢于挑战，压力不少啊
昨天 08:26·山东 回复  7690 
-  果丽成
总有先行者，意味着牺牲和奉献，给石家庄加油👍不要喷，对这样的城市我们应该给予尊重
昨天 08:57·海南 回复  1782 
- 展开 1 条回复 ▾
-  Bruce Wayne
石家庄只要你能撑下去，全国就有放开的希望了
昨天 09:24·山东 回复  848 
-  青宄
好难啊！正确的一步走得如此艰难！
昨天 09:04·山西 回复  973 

Figure 4







-  食品袋
一个市新增的还没我们村多😂
8小时前·河北 回复  288 
- 展开 27 条回复 ▾
-  孤者为王
好在石家庄仁字还是真实的
8小时前·河北 回复  522 
- 展开 38 条回复 ▾

Figure 5



你没事吧，上次回珠海已经是去年四月，本来还以为是东莞发癫乱赋码，骂了一顿之后发现是你小子犯贱😓



1小时前



Figure 6



几时去过厚街😓😓



09:14



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

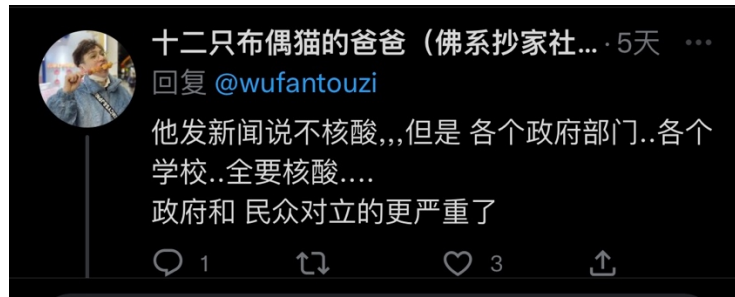


Figure 10