

How can social media reshape power relations in urban planning?

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Discover how social media transforms power relations in urban planning as Dr Yanliu Lin examines its impact on government-society relations and collaborative practices in the Chinese context.

In recent years, social media has opened up a new public sphere for diverse communication, critical debates, social interaction and public protest. They profoundly impact society, governance and planning in many countries. However, the extent to which social media platforms can shape or reshape the power relations between government and society in planning practices remains unclear. In particular, the impact of social media is relatively complex and challenging in the Chinese context, where there were traditionally hierarchical political systems and asymmetric power structures.

The ERC Starting Grant project CoChina examines several case studies of Chinese planning practices for urban regeneration, water management, community gardens and environmental protection. We combine multiple data sources such as social media data, interviews and surveys to understand the influence of social media on power relations in planning practices.

Some scholars argue the limited efforts of social media in authoritarian contexts because of government control and internet censorship. However, the case studies show that social media can empower citizens, professionals and third parties to challenge existing power structures, resulting in more communicative and collaborative planning practices.

Some environmental protection topics could be sensitive and subject to censorship, but most discussions of the selected case studies still exist on Chinese social media platforms. One of the reasons is that collaborative planning is more of a local governance matter that challenges regime stability less. Local governments even use social media as a smart tool to support participation and communicate with the public. Another reason is that many third parties and professionals are familiar with the Chinese political culture and strategically use framing and tactics for communication with governments.

In the case studies, we identify two power patterns raised in Chinese social media platforms: empowerment and leadership.

Empowerment

Empowerment is related to the extent to which social media can increase the number of participants, enhance different levels of citizen power and promote the degree of influence on decision-making in planning practices. As a low-cost and open platform, social media has the potential to engage the majority of citizens and a wide range of actors in the planning process.

In our case studies, we identify both government-led approaches and bottom-up initiatives for social media participation. On the one hand, local governments create public social media accounts on Weibo and WeChat to inform and consult with citizens or collect feedback for spatial plans and policies. The power of citizens could be low because governments determine whether and how much to consider the outputs of citizen participation in decision-making. On the other hand, citizens, professionals and the third sectors use social media to establish new networks, facilitate public debates and challenge the existing power relations between governments and society. For instance, civil society, journalism and professionals used Weibo to create large networks that reached thousands of citizens in urban renewal

projects such as the regeneration of the Bell and Drum towers square in Beijing city and the regeneration of Enning Road in Guangzhou city. The networks mobilised public debates and pushed local governments to change large-scale demolition projects into micro-regeneration projects.

In this regard, the networks carry new forms of power. Social media generate open and flexible networks in which any citizen could become a node of the network. The power of participants is mainly determined by their positions in the network rather than their political and societal positions (which may influence but not determine). Some actors become the key nodes of the network and control information flows, thereby having a more influential role in communication. These key actors could be civil society, journalism and professionals, but also normal citizens. The communication in the network forms counterpower that could be used to challenge existing power structures and influence offline decision-making. To some extent, they empower the powerless and the third parties to express their voices and organise collective actions, improve the accountability of local governments, and facilitate communication and interaction in planning practices.



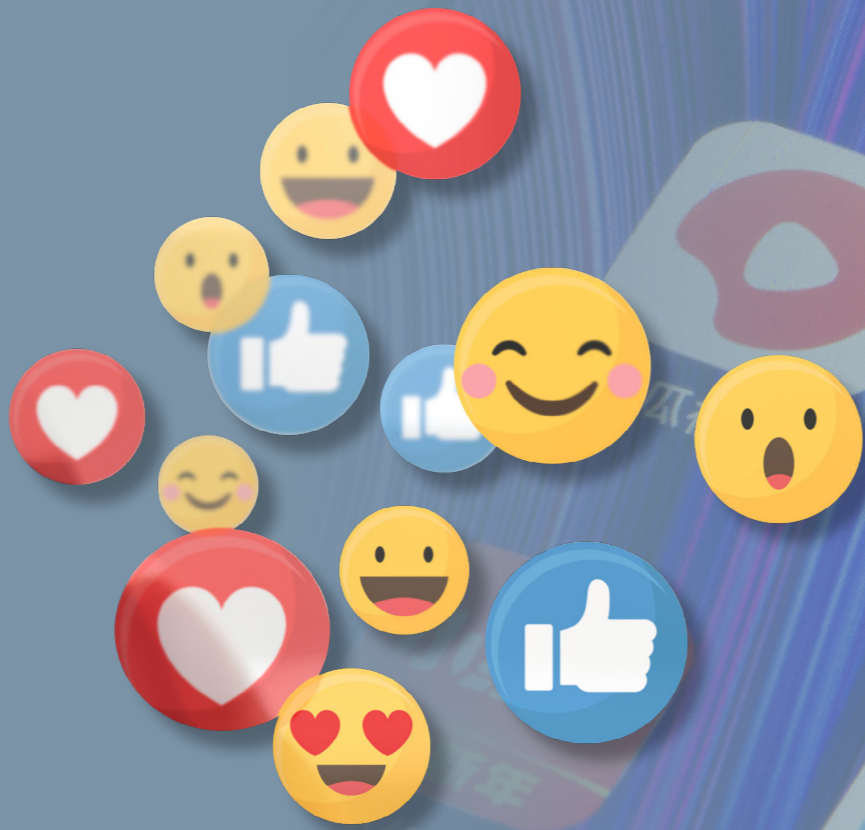
Leadership

Leadership refers to the ability of leaders to use social media to expand their networks that engage a wide range of participants, facilitate information flows, communication and knowledge sharing, and mobilise resources and actions.

The network generated by social media is open to everyone and flexible to incorporate new members in real time. It creates new relations and forms key actors, who are the keynotes of the network and at the centre of information flows. But key actors don't autonomously become leaders who can mobilise collaboration and resources to facilitate effective collective actions for problem-solving in planning practices. Online leadership also differs from traditional leadership embedded in hierarchical organisations or social/political relations. It is more flexible and open to incorporating new leaders and members into the network, but it could also be unstable and marginalised in practice. It needs to increase social acceptance and legitimacy of their actions and gain government support, especially in the Chinese context.

The case study of the community garden movement in Shanghai and many other Chinese cities shows that social media play an essential role in fostering leadership. Civil society organisations have used social media platforms to expand their networks by engaging many participants (e.g. professionals and citizens). They have shared digital materials and practical experiences with their members, new leaders and the general public. They have also used online platforms and offline channels to obtain financial resources, such as crowdsourcing from residents and diverse funds to construct community gardens. Furthermore, they have negotiated with the local government regarding land provision and finance, which are crucial resources for their actions. Moreover, online participation has interacted with offline efforts such as onsite workshops and garden activities. Online leadership becomes effective when online networks interact with offline actions to affect planning processes and outcomes.

However, there are some limitations to social media's influence on planning practices in the Chinese context. Whether the power that arises in the network can affect offline power depends on some conditions. Not all networks can impact decision-making in planning practices. They may have an influence when key actors could use different resources and opportunity structures (e.g. existing policies and social capital) and when online debates could interact with offline actions. Governments (who may collaborate with private sectors) still have strong resources and power to shape decision-making processes and planning outcomes. But effective leadership from non-state sectors can bridge the gap between state and society and facilitate collaboration for problem-solving in planning practices.



PROJECT NAME
CoChina

PROJECT SUMMARY

This ERC Starting Grant project CoChina examines the impact of new media on power relations and public spheres in collaborative planning in China. It aims to have a new understanding of collaborative planning in China and a reconceptualisation of collaborative planning theory. The research employs an innovative mixed methods approach to research a wide range of case studies.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Dr Yanliu Lin is an associate professor in spatial planning and digitalisation at the Department of Human Geography and Planning, Utrecht University. She is interested in collaborative planning theory/practice and planning support science for inclusive and sustainable development. In 2020, she received an ERC Starting Grant to investigate collaborative planning in China with the impact of new media.

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