

Affordances of social media in collective action: the case of Free Lunch for Children in China

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Abstract. *This paper studies the socialised affordances of social media in the processes of collective action, exploring the role of technology in the under-researched area of civil society. We examine the case of Free Lunch for Children (FL4C), a charitable programme in China based on the microblogging platform, Weibo. Adopting the perspective of affordances-for-practice, we draw upon the collective action model to better understand the sociomaterial practices and social processes involving social media, and seek to address the ‘when’ and ‘how’ questions of affordances. The study generates theoretical and practical implications for understanding the role of social media in social transformation.*

Keywords: social media, socialised affordances, collective action, NGO, China

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of social media, and in particular, the growing popularity of microblogging, grassroots NGOs in China have made early attempts to use the internet as a platform to operate and to organise for philanthropy or for social purposes (Luo, 2012). Examples of Chinese grassroots NGOs that emerged from the internet include ‘1 kg.org’¹ (Luo, 2012) and ‘Love Save Pneumoconiosis’.² Whilst many grassroots NGOs clearly demonstrated their awareness and capability to making use of the internet and social media for resources mobilisation (Luo, 2012; Hsu, 2010, 2011; Spires *et al.*, 2014), their scale and impact often remain at a local level (Spires, 2011).

In this paper we seek to show how social media may open new possibilities of meeting a set of challenges facing grassroots NGOs in China going far beyond resources mobilisation by

¹‘1 kg.org’ encourages backpackers to carry along 1 kg of stationary and/or books in their journey and donate to local schools and children in poor areas they travel to, and share they stories and photos online (Luo, 2012).

²‘Love Save Pneumoconiosis’ used Weibo to raise public awareness of, and funding for, the lethal occupational disease of pneumoconiosis which plagued 6 million Chinese patients, 90% of whom are peasants (<http://www.daaqingchen.org/list.php?fid=9>).

looking at the case of Free Lunch for Children (FL4C) in China, which effectively utilises Sina Weibo,³ a twitter-like microblogging platform, to enrol the public in a nationwide charitable programme. From April 2011 to February 2015, the FL4C charitable programme raised nearly 130 million yuan (21 million USD), setting up kitchens in over 440 schools and catering for near 130 000 pupils (FL4C, 2015). Both the programme and its founder Mr. Fei Deng received many national awards for innovative practices in poverty alleviation (ibid). FL4C is thus often considered one of the most successful NGO campaigns on social media in China to date in terms of scale and impact.

Launched and promoted on Sina Weibo (Weibo thereafter), FL4C enrolls and coordinates a large number of volunteers distributed around the country online, and raise funds successfully using Weibo and other technical platforms. FL4C was not created by a pre-existing organisation, but brought together a disparate network of actors whilst building a small NGO. For more than a year, FL4C did not have a dedicated office. More importantly, Weibo became part of the service model, namely, procedures and practices that FL4C created. To explore the possibilities for collective action emerging from social media and associated technologies, we draw upon the concept of 'affordances' (Gibson, 1977). This paper therefore seeks to explore (1) what are the affordances of social media in the collective action of FL4C; and (2) how did these affordances facilitate the success of FL4C?

Whilst IS scholars have been intrigued by the notion of affordances, most of their analyses reside at the level of functional affordances of technologies. In this paper, we investigate 'affordances-for-practice' rather than 'functional affordances' of social media, which will be delineated in detail in the next section, before the processes of collective action (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006) are introduced. After explaining our research methodology, the case study will be presented as a narrative guided by the collective action processes. We reflect on the question of 'when are affordances' in the Discussion section, and concludes with a summary of theoretical and practical insights from the case study.

ENACTING TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

The literature on technology in collective action has a rich and long history, although not well presented in the information systems discipline. Examples include the impact of fax machine photocopiers in the growth of the Soviet dissident movement (Brown & Duguid, 1996), texting (SMS) in the overthrow of political leaders in the Philippines (Rafael, 2003; Qiu, 2008) and the use of the internet, including BBS and blogs, in civil activism in China (Yang, 2009). ICTs are observed to have the effect of lowering the participation threshold (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002), connecting participants across time and space and providing a form of distributed

³Sina Weibo was launched in August 2009. With 500 million registered users, 176 million were active at the end of 2014, and more than 100 million Chinese microblogs published every day (Fan *et al.*, 2014). This is against the context that, as of the beginning of 2015, many international social media sites continue to be blocked in China, such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, and the press remains largely state-controlled. Another major Weibo platform in China is run by internet service giant Tencent, which also operates instant messenger QQ and WeChat. In recent years, after the relative demise of Weibo, WeChat arose to be one of the dominant social networking mobile phone applications.

intelligence (Deibert, 2000), blurring the boundary of public and private good (Bimber *et al.*, 2005), serving as a catalyst for online deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) or constructing a public sphere (Zheng & Wu, 2005). After the Arab Spring, the role of social media (in connection with other ICTs) in transforming ways of organising collective action has given rise to the concept of 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) which is based on personalised content and loose connections.

There has been interest on the affordances of social media in the IS literature. For example, Treem & Leonardi (2012) suggest four functional affordances that are shared among several types of social media: visibility, editability, persistence and association, which are closely coupled with the technical features of social media. On this basis, Mansour *et al.* (2013) considered affordances specific to Wikis: commenting, accessibility, viewability and validation, which are at an individual level. In comparison, Majchrzak *et al.* (2013) investigated social media affordances in relation to online knowledge sharing in terms of group level practices: metavoicing, triggered attending, network-informed associating and generative role-taking.

However, all of these studies focus on functional affordances of social media. In contrast, the motivation of this paper is to understand social practices in society beyond the immediate context of human–computer interaction. For this purpose, the concept of technological affordances needs 'socialising' (Costall, 1995). Affordances are not just about properties of artefacts and the perception of human agents, but more importantly about 'actions in the world that involve technology' (Faraj & Azad, 2012), shaped by the social, institutional and historical environment in which they are situated (van Dijk *et al.*, 2011). To establish this conceptual position we will present a detailed review of the concept of affordance next.

SOCIALISING TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES

Affordance was defined by Gibson (1977) in the field of ecological psychology as action possibilities for animals in relation to the properties of a given environment. The original concept of affordance views it either as properties of the environment (Turvey, 1992), or as the relationship between animal and the environment (Stoffregen, 2003). When applied to technology, the focus on animal vs. environment interaction is typically replaced by that of human vs. artefact. Markus & Silver's (2008) definition of 'functional affordance', for example, which has been widely adopted in the IS literature, describes it as 'the possibilities for goal-oriented action afforded by technical objects to a specified user group by technical objects (p.625).' The key implication is that, whilst the existence of technical objects is independent of users' perceptions, their affordances arise from users' perception, interpretation and appropriation of their properties (Hutchby, 2001; Markus & Silver, 2008; Leonardi, 2011).

Although the notion of affordances is often acknowledged to be 'relational' (Hutchby, 2001; Zammuto *et al.*, 2007; Leonardi, 2011), '[a]ccounts of "affordances" often strip them of their relational character by identifying them as properties of the object and matching them to the "effectivities" of the subject (Bloomfield *et al.*, 2010, p. 417)'. Robey *et al.* (2012) distinguish between the 'realist' and 'relational' ontology of affordances. The realist perspective is

influenced by Gibson's emphasis on visual perception (Gibson, 1986) and assumes that affordances exist independently of the human agent and can be directly perceived by the observer. Such a view often implies a linear causality in the sequence of existence–perception–actualisation–effect (Pozzi *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, most research on ICT affordances is located at the level of properties and functionalities of technology, and conceives affordances as pre-existing and directly perceived and enacted by a human agent (Stoffregen, 2003; Leonardi, 2011; Volkoff & Strong, 2013; Pozzi *et al.*, 2014).

An alternative view is that affordances for a particular user arise from practices that involve artefacts. In fact, Gibson himself is noted to saying that '[the] transporting of things is part and parcel of seeing them as portable or not (p.235, cited in Costall, 1995).' In this case, one could argue that technological affordances, defined as possibilities for action, can be seen as emergent from sociomaterial practices that involve technology, which may include direct perception. After all, even direct perception of affordances is often contingent upon the experience, skills and cultural understanding of the user. For example, most Western people, upon the sight of chopsticks, would not think of using them to pick up food as the Chinese do. Affordances are thus necessarily 'socialised', as far as we are talking about a meaningful social action involving artefacts in a social context, instead of an animal acting in a physical environment. In a social context, as Bloomfield *et al.* (2010) argue, affordances of technological objects are 'not reducible to their material constitution but are inextricably bound up with specific, historically situated modes of engagement and ways of life (p. 415).'

A relational view of affordances thus necessarily entails the consideration of the socially constructed meaning ascribed to artefacts in a particular context (Zammuto *et al.*, 2007; Faraj & Azad, 2012). For example, the affordance of a post-box for letter mailing depends on the active maintenance of a postal system and the knowledge and experience of the actor in letter writing and mailing (Bloomfield *et al.*, 2010). In that sense the post-box's affordance for letter mailing is a socialised affordance, distinct from its functional affordance for storage or leaning against, for example. It is therefore necessary to look beyond the encounter between human and technology at the individual level, because technological affordances we are interested in are always situated in the 'co-presence' of other people and objects (Michael, 2000). Just as human agency is embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts (Garud *et al.*, 2007; Battilana & D'ahunno, 2009), technology is a 'sociohistorical material construct' (Groleau *et al.*, 2012). In short, affordances are relational and situated, and contingent upon the purpose of human agency as well as historical and socio-institutional settings.

On this basis, we draw upon Fayard & Weeks (2014) who develop an integrative practice-based view on affordance as both *dispositional* and *relational*, recognising both the materiality of technology and the social aspects of affordance, 'because such an interpretation allows us to describe organisational practices in a way that cuts across traditional subject-object dualities (p.243).' We thus take the mangle of human and material agency (Jones, 1999) as a starting point, and shift the analytical focus from technology to practices (Fayard & Weeks, 2014), because what we are really interested in is how sociomaterial practices change society rather than simply demonstrating the materiality of social life. As Faraj and Azad (2012, p. 255) argue, 'What becomes ontologically important is how the specific action unfolds in that unique moment and situation, whom and what it enrolls, and how it affects the world.'

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The perspective of affordances-for-practice is most relevant when we examine specific users, with certain needs, goals and practices, within particular social, cultural and historical contexts (Fayard & Weeks, 2007, 2014; Jung & Lyytinen, 2014), beyond the immediate context of so-called human–technology interaction. This may be facilitated by other mid-range theories related to the particular social practice and phenomenon, which, in our case study, are the collective action processes.

What is collective action? A concept originating from economics (Olson, 1965), collective action refers to ‘actions taken by two or more people in pursuit of the same collective good’ (Marwell & Oliver, 1993, p.4). Collective action ranges from collective activities that seek to extend the interests of a particular social group, for example, consumer rights or union strikes, to larger social movements with an ideological agenda, such as gender equality or global environmentalism. Collective action includes both persuasive actions (e.g. letter writing, lobbying) and confrontational actions (e.g. demonstration, boycotts) (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). The emphasis of collective action theory is in resolving the problem of ‘freeriding’ (Hardin, 1968), i.e. the need for formal organisation focusing on locating and contacting potential participants, motivating them and coordinating their actions (Bimber *et al.*, 2005).

Based on the theory of collective action, the literature of social movements focuses on the emergence of collective actors and seek to explain why and how collective actions succeed or fail. The key tenets of social movement theory include strategic framing processes, activist identities, mobilising structures, resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures and repertoire of contention (McAdam *et al.*, 1996; McAdam & Scott, 2005). In this paper we draw upon the collective action model by Hargrave & Van de Ven (2006) which is largely derived from the social movement literature. The model consists of four processes: *enacting institutional arrangement*, *framing interests*, *constructing networks* and *collective action processes*. Each is briefly elaborated below.

Enacting institutional arrangement refers to the process in which individual and collective actors (social activists and entrepreneurs) or repeal formal and informal institutions under a certain political opportunity structure (McAdam *et al.*, 1996) to challenge the status quo and instil institutional changes.

Construction of networks is key to the ‘mobilising structures’ (McAdam & Scott, 2005), namely, the resources and organisations through which people engage in collective action. McAdam *et al.* (2003) argue that ‘agents of change must either create an organisation or appropriate an existing one and turn it into an instrument of contention’ (quote from Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006, p. 871). Construction of networks is when key actors form alliances, enrol other actors and mobilise resources to achieve a certain goal.

Framing interests refers to the contested process of establishing collective understandings and discursive representation of the purpose, goals and significance of a social movement, which often emerges from political struggle among competing frames and draws upon existing discursive repertoires and cultural artefacts. Here we would like to highlight two relevant concepts, *framing* and *agenda setting*:

- Agenda-setting refers to the transfer of salience of public issues from news media to the public (McCombs, 2005; Weaver, 2007), i.e. what the public considers as important issues are greatly influenced by the coverage of news media.
- Framing, derived largely from Goffman (1974), is a key concept in social movement, referring to the construction of meaning and signification of events. Collective action frames perform 'by simplifying and condensing aspects of the "world out there"' (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614), with the intention 'to mobilise potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support and to demobilise antagonists' (ibid.).

The fourth process is named by Hargrave & Van de Ven (2006) *collective action processes* through which a political or technical innovation achieves legitimacy (including both cognitive and socio-political dimensions). Structural contradictions, power and the recursive and dialectical processes of institutional change are considered. Because for the rest of paper we will refer to all the four processes as 'collective action processes', to avoid confusion, we rename this last process as '*establishing legitimacy*', which is core to the original definition and highlighted in our case analysis.

There are many different categorisations of legitimacy in the literature. The case analysis adopts Suchman's (1995) concept of *moral legitimacy* in which legitimacy is derived from the judgement not about whether an organisational activity benefits the evaluator but whether it is 'the right thing to do'. For ease of reading, the four types of moral legitimacy – *structural*, *personal*, *consequential* and *procedural* – will be further explained when applied in the case analysis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is an interpretivist case study (Walsham, 1993). Table 1 details three sources of our data: virtual ethnography, secondary data and semi-structured interviews. The first author of the paper has been conducting virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) on Weibo since 2010 on civic activism in China. FL4C was one of the prominent examples of collective action on Weibo and intrigued her research interest. The researcher systematically followed key accounts of the FL4C programme on Weibo, including the personal account of Mr. Fei Deng, the official FL4C account and those of key members of the project. Regular online observation and note-taking continued from the early stages of FL4C in the summer of 2011 to early 2012. Conducting

Table 1. Research methods – data collection

Research methods	Examples	Data collection
Semi-structured interviews	Individual interviews with 16 key actors involved in the FL4C campaign	Audio-recorded, transcribed and coded
Secondary data	Media coverage of the FL4C campaign on 10 major news websites;	Frequent consultation, extracted and highlighted
Virtual ethnography	We have observed the emergence of FL4C by following Deng's Weibo, FL4C official Weibo, other relevant Weibo posts and comments.	Online observation and note taking.

virtual ethnography on Weibo means that the researcher was intensively immersed in the 'habitus' of Weibo and learned to make sense of the communicative and symbolic practices, linguistic patterns, norms and public emotions on Weibo. It also means that the researcher was situated and personally 'experienced' the public events and changes in the institutional environment simultaneously with members of the FL4C. For example, she witnessed the public outcry of the 'Guo Meimei' incident (Anon., 2011) that marked the legitimacy crisis of state-run NGOs in China, which was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews with FL4C members as a significant event in the inception of the campaign.

Furthermore, because of the openness of the Weibo platforms and its re-posting and commenting functionalities, information flows and communication networks tend to be spontaneous and dynamic, which provided a network view of FL4C that was constantly in flux. Even though a detailed network view could only be visualised with big data techniques which is beyond the scope of this study, direct participant observation as an ordinary Weibo user broke the spatial and temporal boundaries of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and provided multi-layered, rich and subtle sense-making by the authors with regard to the emerging and scaling of the campaign, underlining the criticality of situating FL4C in the broader and dynamic social context.

Secondary data from Weibo and media reports constitute another important source of our data. Because of Deng's background in journalist activism, the FL4C campaign has been widely covered in the press and media, as well as social media. We extracted media coverage of the FL4C campaign from 10 influential online media and the press. The vast majority of the material extracted seems to highlight Deng's leadership and the role that he played in precipitating central government's involvement in providing free lunch to schools in disadvantaged areas. However our analysis tried to unpack to the complexity, multiple dimensions and distributed agency that constituted the charitable programme.

Our first field visit to the FL4C programme's Beijing office in April 2012 revolved around the difficulties and struggle it went through. During the second field trip later in August–September 2012, we managed to conduct 16 semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face or by telephone, with the key actors involved in the campaign, including volunteers in FL4C's Beijing office as well as their focal points of contact in other provinces. Specifically, the interviews lasted between 32 min and 103 min. Sampling was based on functional groups of the campaign, ranging from co-founders to fulltime and part-time volunteers working in four major functions (marketing/branding/publicity, project management, strategic development, IT support), as listed in Table 2.

In the next section, we will first introduce the technological features and functionalities of Weibo and the conditions under which Chinese grassroots NGOs operate, before presenting a narrative of FL4C from the perspective of mobilising and organising collective action.

THE MICROBLOGGING SITE OF WEIBO

Sina Weibo functions in similar ways to Twitter. The relationship between followers and followees is unidirectional: one can follow an individual and read their tweets without being

Table 2. List of interviewees

Interviewees	Background	Roles in the FL4C collective	Full-time (F) or part-time (P)	Salary taking (Y) or not (N)
1	Journalist	Executive director	P	N
2	Officer in a government fund	Committee secretary	P	N
3	Deputy secretary in a government fund	Director/legal representative	F	N
4	Journalist	Fund-raising officer	F	Y
5	Sales in a technology firm	Facilitator of the volunteer group in Beijing	P	N
6	Shareholder of an advertising agency	Committee member	P	N
7	Ex-banker	Committee member	F	N
8	Student	PA to Fei Deng	P	Y
9	Military officer	Volunteer	P	N
10	Student	Volunteer	P	Y
11	Student	Weibo officer	F	Y
12	Civil servant in Hefeng county	Contact person/volunteer	P	N
13	IT support officer	Programmer	P	Y
14	Shop owner	Volunteer/donor	P	N
15	Real estate agent	Project officer	F	Y
16	PR officer in a media company	Volunteer	P	N

followed back. There is a 140 character limit to each post, which because of the nature of Chinese language, conveys much richer information than 140 English letters. External URL can be embedded in the microblog. Similar to Twitter, one can tag/notify individuals with the '@' sign, or tag a topic with the '#' sign. Liking was also later added as one of the functions.

In addition, the following technical features of Weibo are distinct from Twitter:

Threaded comment. Unlike Twitter where one has to use the hash tag or browse the @ mentions to find comments on a topic, Weibo collates all comments and retweets as two separate threads under each post which unfold at the click of a button.

Multimedia. Sina Weibo supports the integration of rich media formats like images, videos and emoticons. External URLs can be easily embedded in the microblog as a short string. Users can upload photos, screenshots, cartoons, pictures and even long articles compressed into an image file which opens up to full size. These features overcome the 140-character restriction, catering for rich content tailored to individual needs.

Identity verification and the 'hall of fame'. All China-based users have to register with real names but can choose to show only pseudonyms. Users who have their identity and job title verified by Sina are given a V sign next to their user name, indicating a higher level of credibility and status. The lists of verified members, especially celebrities, are ranked in number of followers and displayed on a dedicated webpage. These celebrities, including actors, singers, famous intellectuals, writers, artists and experts in various fields, are important attractors for users to join Sina Weibo.

Despite strong censorship by the government and by the service provider itself, Weibo offers ordinary Chinese citizens a platform where they can enjoy a relatively open public space

(Sullivan, 2012). Cyberactivism has flourished in recent years, such as environmental protests and online public events in the quest for government accountability (Zheng and Zhang, 2012; Hung, 2013; Huang & Sun, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014). Viewed in this light, Weibo is a highly politicised space of continuous negotiation between citizens and the state on what the boundaries are, and to what extent they can be stretched (Zheng & Wu, 2005).

Another major microblogging platform in China is Tencent Weibo, run by internet service giant Tencent, which also operates instant messenger QQ⁴ and WeChat.⁵ In recent years, after the relative demise of Weibo, WeChat arose to be one of the dominant social networking mobile phone applications.

THE CREATION OF THE FL4C PROGRAMME ON WEIBO

Malnutrition among children in poor areas of China has been a persistent problem. In a government report published in 2012, the height and weight of average rural boys and girls in the western and central parts of China were respectively found to be 11 and 9 cm shorter, and 10 kg and 7 kg lighter than their urban counterparts (CDRF, 2012). Malnutrition is particularly grave in rural villages in the mountains, where children usually walk for hours to school and stay there with little food throughout the day. FL4C seeks to address this problem by setting up kitchens in the schools in poor areas to provide fresh hot meals on school days, and calling for the public to donate 3 yuan/day (0.5USD) for each free lunch.

In the rest of this section a narrative is given using the collective action processes (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006) as a guidance. The first process – enacting institutional environment – does not feature technology as a central actant, but is important to illuminate how FL4C was situated, conditioned and enabled by the institutional environment, why certain aspects of social media were more important than others in the formation, scaling and achievements of FL4C, and how the way Weibo is used for collective action arose from the particular temporal–spatial setting.

Enacting institutional arrangements

In the last 10 years, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of grassroots NGOs in China (Spires *et al.*, 2014). They face a number of challenges. First, the challenge to establish legitimacy, both with the State and the public. As an authoritarian regime, the Chinese party-state has remained vigilant about potentially subversive forces even as it encourages the involvement of NGOs in the provision of social welfare (Tai, 2015). To keep the influence of NGOs in check, the central government imposed extensive administrative and regulatory restrictions.

⁴QQ is similar to MSN and appeared in the early 2000s, the oldest and most widely social networking application in China, especially among young people and lower income groups (Sullivan, 2012). As of January 2015, there are 829 million active QQ accounts. QQ supports both one to one chatting and group chats (for up to 2000 people depending on membership status), file sharing, personal homepage and email account, and a number of other functions.

⁵WeChat caters for sharing and communication among private social circles, both one to one and group chat.

For instance, NGOs must be registered with a 'unit in charge'⁶ to attain a legal status, namely a government partner that is supposed to play a supervisory role (Ma, 2002) and facilitate NGOs in managing funding and donations (Hildebrandt, 2011). Most unregistered NGOs exist in the grey area and rely on the whims and interests of particular government connections they informally seek.

Many registered NGOs are government-organised nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs) or quasi-governmental organisations (He & Wang, 2008). The public has little trust in state-run charities because of a series of corruption scandals in the last two decades. Most recently, the so-called 'Guo Meimei Incident' (Anon., 2011) – a young lady who claimed to be associated with the state supported China Red Cross charity showed off her extravagant life style on Weibo, which outraged the public and reinforced the impression that large charitable organisations are contaminated with bribery, embezzlement and fraud (Hsu, 2010).

Second, resource constraint remains a serious problem for grassroots NGOs in China. Restrictive fundraising regulations prevent many grassroots NGOs from engaging in public fundraising activities, in part because of the political sensitivity of fundraising under an authoritarian state (Spires *et al.*, 2014), especially in relation to cross-national funding. Most independent NGOs have to register as non-profit enterprises, thus having no income from membership fees and cannot offer their donors any tax benefits. Meanwhile, low income and harsh working conditions in NGOs make it difficult to recruit and retain volunteers (Spires *et al.*, 2014).

Third, the lack of media freedom also affects the survival and growth strategies of grassroots NGOs (Spires, 2011). On the other hand, many small grassroots NGOs seek security by keeping a low profile and operating at a local level (Spires, 2011). With limited scale and publicity, grassroots NGOs are unable to communicate their values and goals to the public, or to engage with various stakeholders and social groups (Svensson, 2014). The lack of visibility may also deepen grassroots NGOs' dependence on the informal and precarious ties that they try to build with particular government officials, thereby contributing to the unequal power relation between NGOs and the state (Spires, 2011).

FL4C therefore had to overcome several challenges: obtaining institutional legitimacy (aligning with the authority), gaining trust from the public and mobilising resources. Meanwhile, the institutional challenges outlined above are also opportunities. With the near bankruptcy of the credibility of state-run charities, Deng, an investigative journalist who was well known for his anti-corruption reports and online activism on Weibo (e.g. before FL4C he was leading an anti-child-smuggling campaign), was easily perceived as a more trustworthy alternative (Zhang, 2012).

It should be noted that the Chinese government exercises 'graduated control' (Kang & Han, 2008) over different types of social organisations. For example, politically antagonistic organisations are under strict surveillance and control, or sometimes directly prohibited, whilst many official and grassroots NGOs are considered important in providing social goods and receive little state interference (*ibid.*). FL4C falls into the second category. By working on an issue on the central government's agenda, such as child poverty, FL4C occupied a relatively safe position

⁶By the end of 2013, pilot programmes have been launched in China to enable social services NGOs or non-advocacy NGOs to register directly with the government (Tai, 2015).

in the field. Moreover, one of the founders of FL4C, who served as Deputy Secretary General of the China Social Welfare Foundation (supervised by the Ministry of Civil Affairs), acted as an 'institutional insider' (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008) and bypassed official procedures to speed up the registration of the FL4C as a charitable organisation, thereby giving it a legal legitimacy elusive to many grassroots NGOs in China.

Scaling a network and mobilising resources

Compared to most resource-poor charity programmes, FL4C was effective in enrolling other actors, individuals and organisations, and mobilising multiple forms of resources, e.g. financial and material donation, human capital and publicity to expand the scale of the programme. Weibo, connected to other technologies like online payment system, e-shop, blogs, news websites and traditional media, opens up a plethora of channels to promote FL4C, to encourage participation and to mobilise resources from all corners of society. Three affordances-for-practice were derived from the data (Table 3): *mobilising resources*, *enrolling participant* and *distributed collaboration*. We will discuss each of these below.

Mobilising resources

FL4C's network expanded rapidly to other sectors which provided technical solutions and support, channels of resources, material supply and publicity promotion. One of the most important alliances was with Alibaba, the world's largest e-market platform, which provides an online payment system, Alipay (akin to Paypal), for direct online donation. Alibaba also set up a charity e-shop for FL4C on its B2C/C2C platform taobao.com where customers could donate easily by purchasing virtual Free Lunch tokens. The shop now also includes a range of FL4C merchandises. These technical solutions lowered the barriers for ordinary citizens at all income levels to participate in the campaign, ensuring flexibility and sustainability of donations.

It did not take long before the broader business sector joined in, from individual entrepreneurs to enterprises contributing in financial or material terms, such as kitchen appliances and cooking oil. For example, after the campaign was launched on Weibo, an entrepreneur in Guangzhou re-posted the message and announced that he would donate 9 yuan (1.5 USD) for each repost. The message was passed on for over 100 000 times and he donated 900 000 yuan (150 000 USD). Online and offline charity auctions also became one of the major

Table 3. Affordances for practice of social media in scaling a network

Affordances	Elaboration
Mobilising resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming alliance with a wide range of actors to construct and expand network across time and space; • Mobilising resources through a variety of channels, often mediated by Weibo;
Participant enrolling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective online campaign; • Lowering participation threshold for various types of citizens and organisations;
Distributed collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolling volunteers online from all over the country; • Discussion and coordination on social media chat groups; • Sustaining a low cost and largely virtual organisation;

sources of fundraising for FL4C drawing in new donors and alliances, including celebrities and firms who auctioned goods. A coordinator at the Strategic Development Division within the FL4C campaign explained,

'Because the FL4C is a charity brand now, most our business partners found us on Weibo and then came to our doorways seeking for collaboration opportunities...Last April, we decided to do Weibo auctions...this is different from asking money out of one's pocket directly...The donors discovered they could put something nice that they no longer need on Weibo for auction and attract lots of reposts. It generates a great satisfaction and a sense of participation, so they will continue to follow our campaign ... the most successful case was our collaboration with Walmart, the auction post was reposted 400,000 times and in the end Walmart donated part of their sales profit to us'.

Figure 1 shows an indicative network of FL4C which connects various stakeholders, participants and other resources. The dotted lines indicate online connections through Weibo whilst the black ones are offline interactions. The connections are not just communicative, but also action oriented. It is clear that a large part of the network is mediated through Weibo, and there are strong overlap and connections between offline and online networks. The graph certainly omits some complexities, such as the overlapping roles of some volunteers, donors and management team members, as well as the evolution of these roles over time.

It is important to note that there may also be secondary effects on the livelihood of local residents. An example is indicated in the diagram as 'local supply chain'. As explained by one of the volunteers, *'Once you have set up the project (school kitchen), several hundred people need to be fed every day. You can tell the villagers to provide meat and vegetable to the schools instead of selling in the market... We can even teach them how to do pig farming or grow vegetable... Some schools tell us that they no longer have to hire a truck and shop in the market in town. They can just call the farmers at the foot of the mountain to carry up a few hundred kilos of vegetable.'*

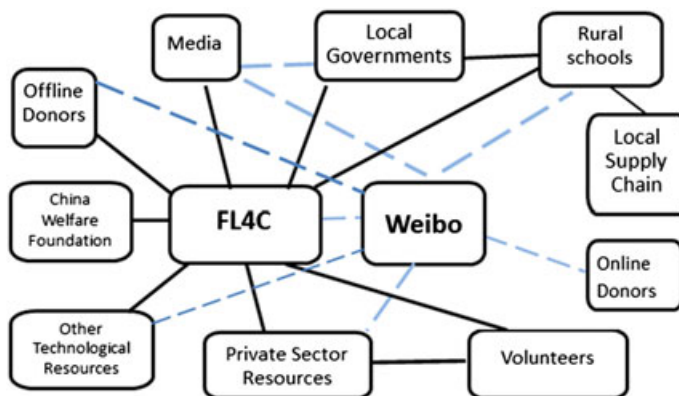


Figure 1. Stylized network of FL4C.

Enrolling participants

The initial FL4C campaign was driven by an alliance of press elites. The first microblog from the FL4C Weibo account announced the launch of the campaign by Deng with the support of 500 professionals from dozens of media organisations. It was an extensive network to start with, generating wide publicity for FL4C from the start. As a volunteer described, *'At the beginning there was intensive media promotion, driven by the founder (Deng) and the media institutes. It was a period of energetic expansion. Many schools in different regions were enrolled within a short period of time, thanks to the effort of the founders.'*

The '@' sign allows senders to notify specific receivers to their posts on Weibo, thereby raising their attention and signals an invitation for participation. Tagged users are then able to respond to and/or re-post the message to their own followers, using the Comment and Repost functions. Members of FL4C consciously utilised these material features to enrol people with public influence and large crowd of followers, such as members of the press, intellectuals, opinion leaders and celebrities, converting them into donors or campaigners. Deng recounted that he was pleasantly surprised by what appeared to be a 'self-reinforcing mechanism': *'It occurred to me that many donors actually became our allies: when they posted how much they donated on their Weibo pages, they became our messengers and helped us attract more donations. It was an ongoing process which took us by great surprise ... I did not realise this effect at the beginning... now I spend almost all my time on Weibo'.*

The Alipay application, circulating as a URL link on Weibo, lowers the transaction cost of individual donation thereby encouraging more direct donation. Online donation is a recent phenomenon in China. In the past, individuals make donations through donation boxes provided by fund raisers, bank transfer or via the post office, all of which inconvenient and time consuming.

To date, FL4C has developed a set of digitised procedure. Schools can apply to be a recipient of Free Lunch by filling in one of the digital forms on the official website. Donations can be made via a dozen of online and offline payment channels, and the donor will receive an invoice and even a digital certificate of the donation where applicable.

Distributed collaboration

Without the resources to manage and retain fulltime volunteers which require substantial planning, formal education and training, FL4C uses Weibo and other social media platforms to recruit a large number of regular and *ad hoc* volunteers all over the country, each, depending on their availability and skills, contributing various amount of their time and energy, and often working from a distance. The vast majority of volunteers were recruited through Weibo, many of whom started as Weibo followers of Deng. Most were unpaid or worked as part-timers. As a volunteer remarked, *'I think the success of FL4C lies with the fact that it attracts people from across all walks. For example, I am in marketing and have advantage in outdoor advertising... One of the founders is a lawyer... XX used to be in catering and worked as a CEO in many places...she brought with her lots of knowledge and experience in running a catering project.'*

The social media platforms also enabled volunteers to self-organise themselves on a daily basis. For instance, volunteers in Beijing created their own QQ chat group (see Footnote 4), in which they constantly share project related information, brainstorm creative practices, prepare for fundraising events and recruit new volunteers locally. These technical platforms blur

the boundary between work and life and significantly reduce the operational cost for FL4C. Despite its rapid growth, FL4C worked as a virtual organisation that required minimal face-to-face transactions. As an IT specialist who works for FL4C put it: '*Our volunteers do not have an office to interact with each other face to face, but we have a line of network products that reduce our interaction costs, as well as digitalised documents for future evaluation and integration.*' In short, social media like Weibo and QQ, together with other technologies, serve to facilitate the distributed collaboration and coordination among formal and informal members of the FL4C.

Framing collective actions

FL4C framed the programme by focusing on the problem of child hunger, an issue of social injustice that easily invoked emotional linkages with many ordinary Chinese people. Most Chinese people above the age of 40 have to various extents experienced some sustained periods of food deprivation for various historical reasons, and still retain the bodily memories of hunger. It is also a topic popular in contemporary Chinese literature. The framing of child hunger in China today simplified complex socio-structural problems of inequality to one single issue, effectively focusing people's attention and motivating public participation. Such a framing was by and large both a deliberate tactic and a choice out of necessity.

The three co-founders, for example, have been aware of 'how to make things work' in the political context in China: when social problems receive public attention, the focus should not be on the problem but on solutions (Gleiss, 2015). Exposing the socio-structural problems of inequality is a politically sensitive topic in an authoritarian state, yet feeding hungry children by soliciting care and love from the public would fit in well with the party-state's official discourse of building a harmonious society.⁷

In the case of FL4C, Weibo, websites and other cyberspaces such as image and video sharing applications to a significant extent afforded actions of *agenda-setting* and *framing* similar to traditional media, as outlined in Table 4 and elaborated below.

Apart from using traditional media, FL4C strategically adopted Weibo, news sites, their own official website and other linked platforms to promote the issue of child hunger to the public external to the monopolised agenda-setting scheme of the press. Weibo and other social media platforms in China have changed the communication landscape for news and challenged the agenda-setting power of state-controlled traditional media (Fu & Chau, 2014) by diversifying, fragmenting and reconfiguring information flows (McCombs, 2005). Cross-fertilisation between social media and traditional media (Meraz, 2009), namely, drawing upon information from other channels as sources for news and commentary, has become common practices in China (Wang *et al.*, 2014). For example, high profile public incidents on social media are frequently turned into press headlines. Elites and activists such as the founders of FL4C are thus able to perform agenda-setting by enacting the viral information diffusion function of the internet, in particular the interactivity and connectivity of Weibo. On social media, users are not only receivers of information, but more importantly active

⁷People's Daily editorial (23 April, 2005), for example, has the title 'Harmony, stability and faster reform is the consensus of all Chinese People'.

Table 4. Affordances for practice of social media in framing collective action

Affordances	Elaboration
Agenda setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Proposing child hunger as a salient issue to the public</i> • <i>Breaking and competing with monopolised agenda-setting power of the state-controlled press</i> • <i>Linking, interacting and cross-fertilising with traditional media</i>
Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Generating and circulating symbols and labels of FL4C (e.g. crowdsourcing the FL4C logos, suggesting phrases like 'strategic philanthropy')</i> • <i>Making emotional appeals through discursive and cultural artefacts (e.g. images)</i> • <i>Presenting, magnifying and disseminating the FL4C frames</i>

transmitters, diffusors and sometimes generators. For example, adding one's own comments to a piece of information or opinion serves to advertise and draw attention to the importance of the item. In this sense, Weibo was more effective in raising public awareness of social problems, such as child hunger, than traditional media channels with closed communication loops targeting mostly passive receivers.

The framing of FL4C was achieved mainly in two ways: discursive strategies and invoking imageries. Framing usually involve deploying various condensing devices such as catchphrases, taglines, exemplars, metaphors, depictions and visual images, as well as reasoning devices such as causes and consequences, and appeals to principles or moral claims (Gamson, 1992; Weaver, 2007). The FL4C website presents a simple mission statement, '*to enable children in school to be free from hunger and to support their healthy development both physically and emotionally* (FL4C, 2015).' This message is likely to appeal to many Chinese people who seem to have a collective memory of hunger, which is a common theme in contemporary Chinese literature (Yue, 1999). Although most of the young volunteers of FL4C had never experienced hunger, when asked what motivated them to participate, many of them recalled being moved by one of FL4C's photographs showing children's happy faces over a rice bowl. Searching for FL4C images on the Web generates many photos of this type, many of which were circulated via news websites and Weibo. The crowd-sourced FL4C logo is also an image of a girl holding a big heart-shaped bowl over their face with a pair of chopsticks in hand. As our interviewees suggested, many volunteers felt that they were brought together by a common goal of feeding hungry children in China.



Furthermore, FL4C not only sought to address a social issue, but also presented themselves as a model for 'civic philanthropy' (*minjian gongyi*) which evolved over time. Going through the official website of FL4C, we note that the framing of FL4C started with an emotional appeal to the public, focusing on the issue of child hunger in July 2011.⁸ In September 2011, FL4C defined itself as a multilateral, cross-platform alliance supporting decentralised 'collaborative action', emphasising its crowdsourcing characteristics and distinguishing itself from the state-run charity programmes and most existing grassroots NGOs.⁹

In June 2011 news came out that the central government was to start piloting their own 'free lunch project' in Ningxia province covering 260 000 pupils in rural schools (NXTV, 2011). Deng posted this news on Weibo, and commented that '*if the State takes over, (we) media people can return to our watchdog role*', implying that FL4C has set a precedent leading to a government action. In an online magazine article published in November 2011, a member of FL4C used the term 'strategic philanthropy' to suggest that the ultimate goal of FL4C was to influence public policy and to institutionalise the provision of free school lunch. Furthermore, the same person suggested that the FL4C model, which incorporates commercial channels, could become a standard model for civil philanthropy in China.¹⁰ FL4C was thus frequently credited for creating a replicable model (Ma, 2011), influencing public policy and changing government behaviour, thus extending its claim of impact beyond philanthropy to a more progressive objective for the civil society. This framing of FL4C was widely circulated through social media corroborated by the press^{11, 12}

However, such a framing disguised the fact that the central government started the research and preparation for the state-run Free Lunch project several years prior to the inception of FL4C. It is our understanding that the above claims made by FL4C raised some concerns among some government officials, which were communicated to the Managing Board of FL4C who subsequently adjusted their claims. In one of our interviews, a manager described FL4C as '*probing the pathway for the government*'. This indicates that the framing process in collective action is a contested and dialectic process underlined with competing frames and power struggle.

Establishing legitimacy – transparency enforcing

As discussed in the section of 'enacting institutional arrangement', the NGO sector in China faces a major challenge in establishing its legitimacy, both with the State and the public, where the public has little trust in state-driven charity. Also mentioned earlier is that we will explore the issue using Suchman's (1995) four types of moral legitimacy: *structural*, *personal*, *consequential* and *procedural*. This section discusses how FL4C achieves these four types of legitimacy via Weibo, and presents the relevant affordances-for-practices in Table 5.

⁸http://www.weibo.com/2058877932/xfAZabq0D?type=comment#_rnd1426182828095.

⁹http://www.weibo.com/2058877932/xfB3cb2EL?type=comment#_rnd1426182825014.

¹⁰<http://www.nbweekly.com/news/special/201110/27758.aspx>.

¹¹http://www.weibo.com/2058877932/xxglAgrIC?type=comment#_rnd1426182536161.

¹²http://www.weibo.com/2058877932/xFU801NRC?type=comment#_rnd1426187236878.

Table 5. Affordances for practice of social media in establishing legitimacy

Affordances	Elaboration
Enforcing transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclosing organisational account information and expenditure of donation; • Providing daily information of food expenditure of each school; • Presenting photo evidence of food security and services delivered
Enhancing accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recording history of personal and organisational statements; • Establishing personal image and legitimacy; • Invoking responsibility of recipients (schools) through self-reporting expenditure;
Enacting public scrutiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening to and responding to public enquiry and inquisition; • Receiving feedback to improve organisational practices; • Building trust with the public through interactions;

FL4C had a rather subtle relationship with the government. As an NGO, FL4C works in one of the least sensitive areas from a political point of view – child poverty, an area endorsed by government policies. Being registered under a state-run foundation granted FL4C a type of *structural legitimacy*, which was not based on its competence or performance but on its ‘structural characteristics’ or ‘organisational identity’ (Suchman, 1995). In the case of FL4C, structural legitimacy mainly comes from State recognition which was important for its survival and further development.

FL4C also built upon *personal legitimacy* which was mainly related to the credibility and charisma of Deng. In his previous career as an investigative journalist he had established a track record of publishing investigative articles on corruption cases and controversial social problems. Before starting FL4C, for example, he shot to fame by giving a live broadcast¹³ on Weibo, whilst talking on the phone to two sisters who were hiding in a female toilet from a group of men sent by the local government to stop them travelling to Beijing to petition against the forced demolition of their house. Subsequently Deng became an outspoken opinion leader and activist on Weibo with a large group of followers, frequently commenting on public issues, and started an anti-child smuggling campaign on Weibo.¹⁴ Many volunteers learned about and were inspired by Deng through Weibo before participating in FL4C. A charismatic leader and skilful public speaker, Deng was often considered the spokesperson and the core of FL4C.

The most critical affordances-for-practice of Weibo were related to the *procedural* and *consequential* legitimacy of FL4C by enforcing transparency, demonstrating evidence, facilitating public inspection and supporting interactions between FL4C and the public, which are also critical elements in trust building. FL4C invented creative practices to enforce transparency and accountability of the expenditure of donations, thereby achieving *procedural legitimacy*. FL4C’s official Weibo displays the work flow and procedures to apply and become one of the FL4C

¹³<http://view.news.qq.com/a/20100919/000001.htm>.

¹⁴<http://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/system/2015/01/29/020488689.shtml>.

schools, as well as requirements for food security.¹⁵ Critical to the procedure was that each enrolled school had to post the daily expenditure of the school kitchen on Weibo. Schools were provided with training and had to pass the Weibo trial, namely, posting on Weibo for 10 consecutive days, before they were formally enrolled in the programme. They then continued to be monitored by the public via Weibo, supplemented with unannounced inspections by *ad hoc* visitors and FL4C auditors (mostly volunteers). These disclosures of daily expenditure remain online as historical records of compliance for the school.

As one of the FL4C school liaisons explained: *'The schools began to use Weibo before launching the project and they kept updating information ever since... Weibo is convenient for public monitoring and inspections. We revealed accounting information on Weibo. Internally, we also have a supervision committee consisting of parents and teachers. Their names and telephone numbers were displayed on Weibo and this allowed whoever wanted to check details or contact them to do so'*. Schools that fail to meet the requirements of FL4C in terms of hygienic conditions, quality of food and transparency of expenditure would be dropped out of the programme immediately, until they manage to meet the standards.

Photos from the schools provide firsthand evidence of results delivered by FL4C thereby contributing to *consequential legitimacy*. With Weibo, this kind of evidence is abundant and widespread. An example was given by a volunteer, *'On the first day the school lunch was provided, I told the headmaster to post (photos of) the content of the lunch on Weibo, or let the children write some posts. In this way, each child comes across as a lively individual being, and donors can feel it realistically.'*

Indeed, donors felt reassured by the information provided via Weibo: *'At the beginning I was mostly concerned with where the money comes from and how it was spent. Sina Weibo is a very good platform...I think it is impressive that the school teachers in remote areas managed to learn how to use Weibo under adverse conditions ... This must have been the result of a huge amount of time and energy from the volunteers, teaching each of them individually.... I am convinced that this project is based on real substantive effort. You can also see the schools are improving over time... And I can trust where the money is spent.'*

Meanwhile, the high degree of publicity and transparency also created some pressure on FL4C which had to spend a significant amount of time responding to enquiries, questions and criticism from the public about their operations. Responses to enquiries often involved supplying evidence through photos from the schools.

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown that the affordances-for-practice of internet platforms like Weibo constitute an intrinsic part of the collective action. Unlike the relatively decentred and rhizomatic forms of cyberactivism (Zheng and Zhang, 2012), the case of FL4C represents a type of strategic action led by a small group of activists, deploying collective action strategies that focus on

¹⁵<http://card.weibo.com/article/h5/s#cid=1001593833007214620659&vid=&extparam=&from=&wm=0&ip=61.164.119.27>.

motivating and recruiting participants, mobilising resources, forming alliances and establishing legitimacy. On the other hand, compared to more conventional forms of collective action, the organising of FL4C is more personalised and digitally mediated, scaling up more quickly and more open to institutional and technological opportunities. As FL4C does not represent a pre-existing group with established legitimacy, it cannot be simplified or explained merely as the expression of an identity *a priori*, or a mobilisation of resources, nor can it be reduced to pre-existing social factors, structures or systems (Rodríguez-Giralt, 2011) often presented in earlier studies of social movement. The mainstream literature of social movement and collective action is largely anthropocentric (Rodríguez-Giralt, 2011), whereas an affordance perspective of collective action allows us to take technology seriously in social movements, not in a deterministic manner but in examining sociomaterial practices in collective action.

Socialising affordances

The concept of affordance is useful in highlighting the possibilities for actions enacted by technological adoption. One of the challenges of affordance research in information systems is to understand technological practices as situated in broader social contexts and their effect on organisational and societal transformation (Robey *et al.*, 2013). This paper does not focus on the functional affordances of Weibo, namely those tightly coupled with features and functionalities of the technology, as they are not what motivated the research in the first place. We were drawn to the case by the unusual scale and impact of FL4C under the particular institutional setting of China, and by its use of the internet. What interested us were the novel possibilities for collective action made available by social media in this case, the social processes enacted and how the sociomaterial actions were performed. This is not to say that functional affordances of social media are irrelevant, but that they do not offer sufficient explanatory power for the transformative capacity of social media in organisations and society.

In this paper we build upon the perspective of *affordances for practice* (Fayard & Weeks, 2014), which sees affordances as both dispositional and relational, and explore the affordances of social media as embedded in and emergent from social processes within and beyond organisational boundaries. The analytical focus is therefore not on social media *per se* but on the assemblage of sociomaterial practices entangled with technology. To recognise the dispositional aspects of affordances, for analytical purposes, we identify a list of functional affordances from the literature which are related to Weibo in the case, as presented in Figure 2. They are not meant to be comprehensive but to serve as examples. As Mansour *et al.* (2013) suggest, functional affordances are multiple, situated, communal and referential. Therefore, the same functional affordances could give rise to different affordances-for-practice under different circumstances and in different social processes.

As shown in Figure 2, the examples of functional affordances of Weibo are 'socialised' through the processes of collective action, as described in the case, giving rise to the affordances-for-practice in FL4C. By 'socialising' we mean being enacted in the social practices performed in the collective action processes. Some functional affordances are more prominent in a particular process than others, depending on, e.g. the purposes of the human actors and the presence of other technologies. For example, in the 'framing collective action' process,

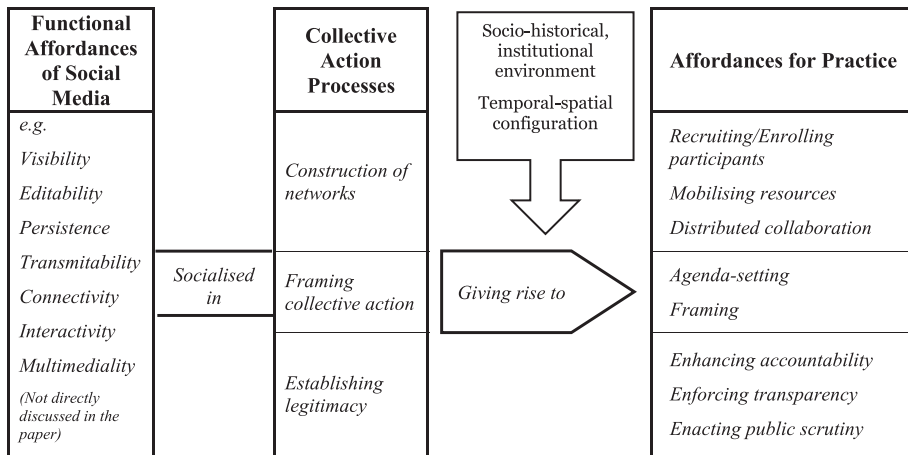


Figure 2. Affordances of social media in the collective action of FL4C.

Weibo serves almost as a media platform similar and complementary to the press, yet with less control from the State and more participation from the public. FL4C was thus able to perform agenda-setting, framing and mobilising support in a fashion similar to resource-rich public campaigns.

Social media affords visibility, yet does not automatically afford transparency by design. We have tried to unravel the processes and practices through which transparency is achieved with Weibo in FL4C. From the case it could be argued that the affordances for enforcing transparency and accountability were channelled through the functional affordances of visibility, accessibility, persistence, editability and interactivity of Weibo, which made possible the processes of ensuring food security, daily expenditure of each supported school and opportunities for public enquiries and scrutiny. It was *only when* creative routines and practices of self-publishing expenditure were instilled, volunteer inspectors involved and public scrutiny invoked, that these functional affordances were enacted in institutionalising the practices of FL4C, and gave rise to the affordances-for-practice such as transparency and accountability. In this sense, these affordances-for-practice of Weibo emerge *when* the technology meshes with other actors in the network represented in Figure 1 and becomes part of the sociomaterial assemblage.

When are affordances

Following the above discussion, we have attempted to answer not just the *what* but also the *when* and *how* questions. As Bloomfield *et al.* (2010) suggest,

'One way of approaching the analysis of affordances is to ask: how, and under what circumstances are particular 'affordances' made present? How and when are different action possibilities made available – or unavailable – to specific actors in particular settings (p.420)?'

In a broader sense, the 'when' of the 'affordances for collective action' of Weibo also refers to the institutional and political environment, the availability of technological options and the level of public participation during the period when FL4C was launched and scaled up. It is embedded in particular structural conditions within the Chinese society: widespread distrust of state-run organisations (including charities) (Hsu, 2008, 2010); the difficulty in mobilising resources; the absence of free press in the country; a phenomenal growth of internet accessibility in the last decade providing new channels to engage the public (Luo, 2012) and weaknesses within the NGO sector in terms of transparency, accountability and governance (Sidel, 2010).

The credibility crises of large state-controlled charitable organisations highlighted the need to establish transparency and legitimacy, which was made possible by Weibo and arguably critical to the success of FL4C. The possibility for organising collective action on Weibo was also contingent upon both technological features and the social context. Similar to Twitter, all the posts on Weibo are publicly visible and accessible. This is distinct from applications like WeChat where posts are only visible to personal contacts or subscribers. The openness of Weibo and the high level of public participation between 2011 and 2013 rendered it one of the largest public space in China, generating rich opportunities for various forms of coordinated or decentred collective action (Zheng and Zhang, 2012). The achievements of FL4C in the public campaign, mobilisation of resources, enrolment of participants, forming alliances and obtaining public trust, were closely linked to the gigantic scale of Weibo and dynamic flows of information on the platform, shaped not only by the features of Weibo but also the users, communities, the vast volume of information as well as the activities and discourses emerging from Weibo.

Technologies thus always operate in the presence of other technologies, human actors and other social, institutional, cultural elements, namely, a sociomaterial assemblage. The composition and configuration of the sociomaterial assemblage, and the positionality of the actants in the assemblage, i.e. how they are connected to other actants, often affect what affordances-for-practice are made available and how they are actualised. Affordances-for-practice are thus emergent, in flux, and change in the flow of practices.

Therefore, we are not so concerned with the 'agential cut' between human and material agencies as mindful of the heterogeneity of components, multiplicity of relations, the becoming or dynamism of the assembly and the openness and indeterminacy of outcome (Bennett, 2005; McFarlane & Anderson, 2011; Lamprou *et al.*, 2014). As Orlikowski (2007) puts it, '[t]he performativity of the sociomaterial assemblage is thus fleeting, fragile and fragmented, entailing uncertainty and risk, and producing intended and unintended outcomes (p. 1445).' Such a perspective helps us steer away from technological determinism whilst acknowledging the differences and possibilities made available by technological artefacts in social life.

Both the number of 'highly active users' and the number of 'posts by higher active users' showed a steep decline in activity starting in July 2013,¹⁶ around the same period when the Chinese government began the so-called 'crackdown on rumours' leading to a series of high profile arrests targeting users who are prone to raise grievances towards the government (Svensson, 2014). With stricter political control, many users switched to WeChat. The latter

¹⁶More details see: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10608245/China-kills-off-discussion-on-Weibo-after-internet-crackdown.html>.

quickly became one of the most popular social media applications in China. We believe it would have been less likely for FL4C to achieve the same level of impact in the latter environment with lower level of activism and public participation on Weibo.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper explores the role of technology in societal transformation (Avgerou, 2010) that transcends organisational boundaries and explores the 'the relationship between aggregated technologies and larger social collectives' (Robey *et al.*, 2013, p. 391). We examine the role of social media and associated technologies in collective actions. It contributes to an emerging, albeit minor, stream of IS literature related to collective action and social movements in recent years (Ameripour *et al.*, 2010; Cardoso *et al.*, 2013; Tim *et al.*, 2013; Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015).

The paper also seeks to enrich the perspective of technological affordances in IS literature. The existing literature on affordances mainly focuses on functional affordances, which we argue are insufficient in understanding the role of technology in organisational and societal transformation. This is an early attempt in the IS literature to adopt the perspective of affordances-for-practice (Fayard & Weeks, 2014), and seeks to answer the 'when' and 'how' questions of affordances. Furthermore, we argue that affordances-for-practice are emergent from sociomaterial assemblages and embedded in complex, multi-dimensional and contested social, institutional and political processes. The case study was thus presented with heterogeneous 'contextual' elements, e.g. the institutional environment, the challenges faced by the NGO sector in China, the collective action possibilities made available by social media and the practices and processes where technology was entangled, all of which are considered part of the sociomaterial assemblage of FL4C.

The case of FL4C offers rich practical insights for practitioners in the NGO sector. The innovative success of FL4C is significant in the development of civil society in China, which has always had a complicated relationship with both the authority and the public. The emergence of social media, however, opens up alternative channels to organise civic movements and re-negotiate relationship with multiple stakeholders. The case study, we hope, sheds lights on how social media could contribute to social movements and the development of civil society in other contexts.

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