Social Media, Institutional Innovation and Affordances: The Case of Free Lunch for Children in China

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Abstract

This paper presents an interpretivist case study of an NGO innovation in China based on the Chinese twitter-like microblogging platform Weibo. We investigate the performativity of social media in generating innovative sociomaterial practices of an NGO campaign, embedded in a context where civil society is under-developed and politically restricted. We propose a situated perspective of technological affordances, and through the collective action model, explicitly take into account the enactment of, and potential changes to, institutional arrangements. Such an approach moves beyond the individual level of analysis both in ICT affordance studies and the institutional entrepreneurship, and considers technological affordances as relational to human agency, as well as institutional constraints and opportunities. The paper generates theoretical and practical implications in understanding the role of social media in social transformation.

Keywords: Social media, institutional innovation, affordances, NGO, China

Introduction

From April 2011 to October 2013, the Free Lunch for Children charitable program raised more than 6.8 million pounds, setting up kitchens in over 341 schools to provide cooked lunch for over 73,000 pupils (FL4C, 2013). FL4C is one of the pioneering and most successful charitable campaigns on social media in China to date. Not only was it launched and promoted on Weibo, China’s twitter-like microblogging platform, the program enrolls and coordinates a large number of volunteers distributed around the country online, and raise funds successfully using Weibo and other technical platforms.

To investigate the role of social media in facilitating this case of NGO innovation in China, we take an affordance perspective (Markus and Silver, 2008). However, most research on ICT affordances is restricted to examining the relationship between human agency and technological artefacts, i.e. at an individual level. 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 organizational and societal transformation. In this paper, we seek to investigate how actors situated in institutional conditions exploit technological affordances when mobilizing collective action to achieve institutional innovation. The collective action model of institutional innovation (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2006) as a way of incorporating the enactment of the institutional environment in NGO’s strategic engagement with social media.

The paper is organized as follows. We will start by discussing technological affordances, institutions and the collective action model of institutional innovation, before explaining research methodology. Research methodology is presented followed by the case study of FL4C using collective action model of institutional
innovation as an analytical framework. The affordance of social media will be then be discussed in relation to collective action, whereas contributions of the paper are summarized in concluding remarks.

**Theoretical Basis**

**Bringing Institutions Back in 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 concept has been adopted in information systems (IS) research to theorize technology in relation to social practices (Faraj and Azad, 2012; Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi, 2011; Markus and Silver, 2008). The key implication of the affordance concept is that, while the existence of technical objects is independent to users' perceptions, their affordances arise from users' perception, interpretation and appropriation of which their properties are necessarily constitutive but not determinant.

The original concept of affordance is either properties of the environment (Turvey, 1992), or relationship between animal and the environment (Stoffregen, 2003). However, in most IS studies, the “environment” has been replaced with the concept of technology or artefacts. In other words, the examination animal-environment interaction is replaced by that of human-artefact. Markus and Silver (2008) define “functional affordance” as “the possibilities for goal-oriented action afforded by technical objects to a specified user group by technical objects (p.625).” As Costall (1995) argues, the Gibsonian concept of affordances is in need of further socialization. Even though the notion of affordances is inherently “relational” (Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi, 2011; Zammuto et al., 2007), “[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 ).”

We follow the strand of research on technological affordances which takes a sociomaterial perspective (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Orlikowski, 2007), where 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 (Bloomfield et al., 2010, p. 415).” In other words, affordances are both relational and situated, and contingent upon the purpose of human agency as well as the “socio-historical” settings. Our perspective of technological affordances is well expressed by the following quote:

“We will also need to abandon the view that affordances are about technology or an object. They are about actions in the world that involve technology. Thus, the theoretical focus shifts away from the actor or the object or the interaction with the object. 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.” (Faraj and Azad, 2012, p. 255)

Thus one of the challenges of applying the affordances theory is to move beyond the focus on individual level of analysis that comes from its origin in ecological psychology, and to “scale up” to describe the relationship between aggregated technologies and larger social collectives” (Robey et al. 2013, p. 391). In other words, how can affordances be conceptualized at multiple levels? Leonardi (2013) differentiates individual affordance, collective affordance and shared affordance, the latter two applying to the group level. Volkoff and Strong (2013) also define affordances as existing at multiple levels, e.g. organizational affordance, and point out that affordances could be both enabling and constraining. The concept of “institutional logics” has been taken up to extend the analysis of affordances from situated practices to “the regularities across these practices” (Seidel and Berente, 2013). For example, Hultin and Mähring (2013) integrates institutional logics with the affordance lens to examine how sociomaterial practices of visualization artefacts draw upon and influence competing institutional logics.

Drawing upon the above development of affordance work, we take the position that the possibilities for action arising from the relationship between human-technology are not only shaped by properties of artefacts and human agents, but also by the conditions of the institutional environment in which sociomaterial practices are situated (Dijk et al., 2011). In this study, the incorporation of institutional arrangements is realized through the adoption of the collective action model of institutional innovation, which effectively addresses the structure-agency paradox of institutional innovation associated with the overall focus on institutional entrepreneurs in the literature. This will be discussed next.
The process of collective action for institutional innovation

As a whole, institutional theory tends to focus on stasis and continuity, and falls short in generating insights about sources of institutional change and innovation (Lawrence et al., 2010). Theoretical attempts to explain non-isomorphic change of institutions include the rapidly growing literature of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007; Leca et al., 2008). A concept initially introduced by DiMaggio (1988) as an attempt to account for actor’s agency in institutional analysis, institutional entrepreneurship refers to the “activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire et al., 2004). However, this perspective tends to view individual or collective institutional entrepreneurs as powerful actors, invoking a “hero imagery” (Garud et al., 2007; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007) or as phrased by Suddaby (2010), that of “hypermuscular supermen”. There is therefore again a need to incorporate the structural aspect of institutional context and the interaction between structure and agency.

Hargrave and Van de Ven (2006) suggest a “collective action model” which accounts for the context in which institutional entrepreneurs act, and argue that the stabilization of institutional arrangement is an outcome of dialectical struggle, a contested process in which actors mobilize resources and alliances to compete with “alternative framings” which withhold potentialities of alternative institutional change. Four institutional change processes are identified under the collective action model (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2006): enacting institutional arrangement, framing interests, constructing networks and collective action processes. Each is briefly elaborated as follows:

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

Construction of networks is key to the “mobilizing structures” (McAdam and Scott, 2005), namely, the resources and organizations through which people engage in collective action. McAdam et al. (2003) argue that “agents of change must either create an organization or appropriate an existing one and turn it into an instrument of contention” (quote from Hargrave and Van de Ven 2006, p. 871). Construction of networks is when key actors form alliances, enroll other actors, and mobilize 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.

Finally, collective action processes are political processes through which a political or technical innovation achieves legitimacy (including both cognitive and socio-political dimensions). Furthermore, the collective action process should take into account structural contradictions, power, and the recursive and dialectical processes of institutional change.

Institutional Innovation and Affordances

Based on the above discussion, we propose a model of institutional innovation based on the above theoretical perspectives. The enactment of technological affordances and institutional arrangements are constitutive of the process of collective action mobilized by institutional entrepreneurs to achieve innovation.

There are four main elements in this model:

1) Institutional entrepreneurs. Institutional innovation is usually initiated by institutional entrepreneurs who, notwithstanding stability and pressure for conformance of the existing institutional forces, are able to take advantage of opportunities arising from existing institutional arrangements. The ability of institutional entrepreneurs to detect opportunities and take advantage of technological resources is important, but not determinant, in achieving institutional innovation.
2) Institutional environment, more specifically, the constraints and opportunities that individual and collective actors perceive and enact within the current formal and informal institutional arrangements for institutional innovations to occur.

3) Technology affordances, that is, the opportunities arising from the sociomaterial practices, i.e. human-technology interactions, in relation to the properties of technological platforms and devices.

4) Collective action processes of institutional innovation, namely, purposive actions taken by individual and/or collective actors to achieve institutional changes. These processes are conditioned and shaped, and in turn shape, institutional and technological affordances.

![Figure 1 Institutional Innovation, Collective Action & Affordances](image)

**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 (Zheng and Zhang, 2012). The 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 program on Weibo, including the personal account of Deng Fei, 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 virtual ethnography on Weibo means that the researcher was intensively immersed in the habitat of Weibo and able 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 of the institutional environment simultaneously with members of the FL4C. For example, she witnessed the public outcry of the “Guo Meimei” incident 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, due to the openness of the Weibo platforms and its powerful re-post and comment functionalities, information flows and communication networks are highly spontaneous and dynamic, which provided a network view of FL4C that was constantly in flux. Even though such a network view could only be visually presented with big data techniques which is beyond the scope of this research, direct participant observation as an ordinary Weibo user breaks the spatial and temporal boundaries of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and provides multi-layered, rich and subtle understanding about the emergence and scaling of the campaign, as well as the importance of situating FL4C in the broader and dynamic social context.

Secondary data from Weibo and media reports constitute another important source of our data. Due to its own origins from journalist activism, the FL4C campaign has been widely covered in the press and media. We extracted media coverage of the FL4C campaign from ten influential online media and press. The vast
majority of the materials extracted seemed to highlight Deng’s leadership and the role that he played in precipitating central government’s investment.

Our first field visit to the FL4C program’s Beijing office in April 2012, revealed “backstage stories” about the campaign including many difficulties and struggles it went through. The second field trip later in 2012 consisted of 16 semi-structured interviews between with the key actors involved in the campaign. Specifically, the interviews lasted between 32 minutes and 103 minutes. Sampling was based on functional groups of the campaign, ranging from co-founders to full time and part time volunteers working in four major functions (marketing/branding/publicity, project management, strategic development, IT support), as listed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Methods</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Ethnography</td>
<td>We have observed the emergence of FL4C by following Deng Fei’s Weibo, FL4C official Weibo, other relevant Weibo posts and comments.</td>
<td>Online observation and note taking;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Data</td>
<td>Media coverage of the FL4C campaign on ten major news websites;</td>
<td>Frequent consultation, extracted and highlighted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Individual interviews with 16 key actors involved in the FL4C campaign</td>
<td>Audio-recorded, transcribed, coded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Research methods - data collection

Data analysis consists of two parts. The first was interpretivist analysis of all the data from the theoretical perspective of the collective action model, which was selected as the most appropriate framework that 1) moves beyond the individual focus of institutional entrepreneurs; 2) allows us to analyse the process of collective action mobilization and provide explanation to its rapid success. The second part of data analysis was grounded coding of the interview transcription to generate insights of the affordances of Weibo in the FL4C campaign. Coding followed procedures of open and axial coding (Glaser, 1992).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Roles in the FL4C community</th>
<th>Full-time (F) or Part-time (P)</th>
<th>Salary taking (Y) or not (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Fei Deng</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Executive director</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 DJ</td>
<td>Officer in a government fund</td>
<td>Committee secretary</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 XLJ</td>
<td>Deputy secretary in a government fund</td>
<td>Director / Legal representative</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 HCL</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Fund-raising officer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 LX</td>
<td>Sales in a technology firm</td>
<td>Facilitator of the volunteer group in Beijing</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 LMZ</td>
<td>Shareholder of an advertising agency</td>
<td>Committee member</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 GHY</td>
<td>Ex-banker</td>
<td>Committee member</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 TSY</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>PA to Fei Deng</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Creation of the FL4C Program on Weibo

“Everything started from a coincidence. In his role as an awarded journalist, Deng Fei attended the annual event hosted by the online community of Tianya.cn in February 2011. He was allocated a seat beside Cai Jiaqin, a voluntary schoolteacher who came from the remote mountain area in Guizhou province and was named ‘the most beautiful voluntary teacher” by Tianya netizens. In their chitchats, Cai mentioned to Deng that she could not meet her students’ eyes who were too poor to have any lunch at school … Deng was moved and said to her: ‘let’s go there and build a canteen for your students’” (ifeng.com, 2012).

This is one of the many media reports about the start of FL4C and its key champion, Mr. Deng Fei director of the journalist department at Phoenix Weekly, who has a track record of deep investigative reports on controversial social problems. One of the typical media representations of the campaign is: “thanks to one man’s micro-blogging, it soon becomes a nationwide charity program” that “changes the government's policies” (China Daily, 2011; China Times, 2011).

However, if we zoom out from the “heroic image” of Deng, one could see that FL4C arose from a heterogeneity of structural conditions within the Chinese society: widespread distrust of state-run organizations (including charities) due to fraud, rent-seeking and other forms of corruption (2010, 2008); a phenomenal growth in Internet accessibility in the last decade providing new channels to engage the public (Luo, 2012); and internal concerns within the nongovernmental sector itself highlighting the importance of transparency, accountability, and governance issues (Sidel, 2010).

In the rest of the section, we present the collective action process of FL4C in engendering institutional innovation, in particular, the creation and design of new institutional practices and norms which, if adopted and diffused, could lead to field level change in China’s NGO sector.

Enacting Institutional Arrangements

More than 30 years after the Chinese economic reform in 1978, the development of diversified interests in the contemporary Chinese society becomes increasingly evident (Xu and Ngai, 2011). Alongside the country’s massive development schemes, non-governmental organizations, ad hoc charitable organizations focusing on the environment, healthcare, and education issues, become an important partner to the central government in terms of addressing social problems and improving global governance. Nonetheless, the government is also mindful that empowered nongovernmental organizations could threaten its political monopoly (Hildebrandt, 2011).

Unlike in the West, where voluntary service was a grassroots initiative, the emergence of contemporary Chinese charitable organizations was largely government-driven (Minister of Civil Affairs of the People’s
Republic of China, 2005). To keep the influence of NGOs in check, the central government imposed extensive administrative and regulatory restrictions. For instance, NGOs must be registered with a ‘unit in charge’ to attain legal status, which is in effect a government partner that is supposed to play a supervisory role (Ma, 2002). Thus NGOs without a government partner may have difficulty attaining official support, launching projects, and accessing financial and operational resources externally (Xu and Ngai, 2011; Hilderbrandt, 2011). Most NGOs in China are thus severely limited both in scale and influence. In recent years, the rise of social media has opened up new channels and opportunities for grassroots charity activities. Free Lunch 4 Children, started by a group of journalists, exemplifies how effective use of social media could enable the “exponential growth of a grassroots charity program” (“The ‘Free Lunch’ Production Line: Exponential Growth of a Grassroot Charity Program,” 2011).

In 2011, China’s state-run Red Cross charity experienced one of the most serious credibility crisis in its history - the so-called “Guo Meimei Incident” (Hexun.com, 2011) - a young lady who claimed to be the Director of China Red Cross Commerce showed off her extravagant life style on Weibo, leading to the collapse of public trust China Red Cross and plummeted donation level. Deng Fei, an investigative journalist who was well-known for his anti-corruption reports and online activism on Weibo - before FL4C he was leading an anti-child-smuggling campaign - was thus perceived as a more trustworthy alternative to ill-reputable government officials and stat-run charities.

Another favorable institutional condition was evident from a government report Deng and other founders of FL4C mentioned in the interviews, concerning child development in rural areas. It was published by the China Development Research Foundation, a think tank sponsored by the Development Research Centre of the State Council. Sensitive to policy orientations, the “institutional entrepreneurs” sensed a political opportunity from the state’s intention to address child poverty, which indicating implicit approval of the FL4C campaign from central authority.

The initial FL4C campaign was driven by an alliance of media elites internal and external to the state system. The first microblog from the FL4C Weibo account announced the launch of the campaign by Deng Fei and 500 professionals from dozens of media organizations, building high profile publicity of the FL4C from the very beginning. Another founder, XLJ, the deputy secretary general of the China Social Welfare Foundation (supervised by the Ministry of Civil Affairs), bypassed official procedures to speed up the registration of the FL4C as a charity fund under his foundation, whereby ensuring the legal legitimacy of FL4C (a status aloof to most grassroots NGOs in China). “9pm on that day, we registered the FL4C Weibo and revealed the fund raising account to the public...”, said XLJ in the interview.

**Constructing a Network and Mobilizing Resources**

As mentioned before, FL4C was launched by Deng and 500 media peers. It was a powerful network to start with. The 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 Alibaba, the world’s largest e-market platform, which provides the online payment system, Alipay (akin to Paypal) for direct online donation, and a charity e-shop on its extremely successful B2C platform taobao.com (later renamed tmall.com) where customers can easily donate by purchasing a number of the virtual Free Lunch token at 3 yuan (30 pence) each – the estimated cost of a school lunch. The shop now also includes a range of FL4C merchandises for charity sale. These technical solutions significantly lowered the barriers for ordinary citizens at all income level to participate in the campaign, ensuring flexibility and sustainability of donations.

The broader business sector very quickly joined in, from individual entrepreneurs to enterprises contributing in financial or material terms, such as kitchen appliances and cooking oil. After the program was launched on Weibo, an entrepreneur in Guangzhou re-tweeted the message and announced that he would donate 9 yuan (1.5 USD) for each retweet. The message was passed on for over 100,000 times and he donated 900,000 yuan (150,000 USD). Online and offline charity auction has also become one of the major sources of fundraising for the FL4C campaign and continuously draw on new donors and alliances, including celebrities and/or firms who auction their goods for donation. HCL, 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...
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Auctions...this is different from asking money out of one’s pocket directly...the donors discovered they could put something nice but 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 re-tweeted 400,000 times and in the end Walmart donated part of their sales profits to us”.

The “@” sign allows senders to notify specific receivers to their posts on Weibo, thereby raising their attention and signals an invitation for participation. The receivers are then able to respond to and/or re-tweet the message to their own followers, using the Comment and Repost functions. Deng consciously utilized these material features to enroll people with public influence, such as his media friends, intellectuals, opinion leaders and celebrities of his acquaintance. He was pleasantly surprised by what appears 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 realize this effect at the beginning... now I spent almost all my time on Weibo”.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of volunteers were recruited through Weibo. Many of them started as Weibo followers of Deng Fei. The volunteers are located all over the country, and communicate via online forums like QQ, one of the earliest social media platforms in China. Figure 2 shows an indicative network of FL4C which connects various stakeholders, participants and other resources. The dotted lines indicate online connections through Weibo while the black ones are offline interactions. The connections are not just communicative, but also action-oriented. One could see that a large part of the network is mediated through Weibo, and there are strong imbrications between offline and online networks. The graph of course omits significant amount complexities, including the overlapping roles of some volunteers, donors and management team members, as well as the conversion of these roles over time. It also does not show that the registration under the China Welfare Foundation symbolize State recognition hence institutional legitimacy.

Framing Interests

As Hsu (2008) points out, the relationship between NGOs in China and the state is muddy. NGOs need a state-approved legal status to pursue financial opportunities externally; yet wary of their associations with potentially problematic state-related institutions. Since its conception, FL4C has a rather subtle relationship with the government. It is careful to tread within legitimate boundaries while actively trying to engage public emotions, inspire public trust, mobilize resources for collective action, and inevitably to make claims on the impact of FL4C on social change.

FL4C has 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, 2011).” This message appeals to many Chinese people, especially those who still have the “hunger memory” from their own childhood. However, some may argue that the success of FL4C goes further. In June 2011 news came out that the central government would start piloting in the autumn 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, media people can go back to our watchdog role”, implying that FL4C sets a precedent which leads to state action.
An interviewee believes that “if a child is willing to return to school just to have lunch, it might change their life... FL4C is thus indirectly supporting rural education, and helping more girls to go to school”. Indeed, there are many examples where drop-out children started coming back to the classroom after the school kitchen was in operation. This may also produce further social impact in the local community, as explained by another interviewee: “In this way, you could address some of the problems of left-behind children. If people can make a living in the village, they might stay home to take care of their children. It will also provide some cohesion and sustainability in the local community, with a school which children happily attend. I believe there could be a rippling effect from the school kitchens.” Of course, this is a vision yet to be realized.

The interpretation that FL4C led to the government project of the same name was much more prominent among the comments of Deng’s post. For example, one person wrote “Deng Fei’s Free Lunch managed to achieve the mobilization from individuals to crowds, from crowds to society, from society to the government, gradually diffusing the Free Lunch project to the whole country, turning grassroots charity into sustainable welfare. The deep insight and grand achievement will leave an indelible mark in history (Anon, 2011).” After that, FL4C was frequently applauded for inducing the state-run project of Free Lunch. However, such a framing disguises the fact that the central government started the investigation and preparation for their Free Lunch project several years prior to the inception of FL4C, as indicated by the government report on malnutrition among rural children that Deng and his colleagues referred to. It is our understanding that this presentation raised some controversy and FL4C adjusted accordingly. In one of our interviews, a manager described FL4C as “probing the pathway for the government”.

Establishing Legitimacy

As an NGO, FL4C works in one of the least sensitive areas from a political point of view, child poverty. As mentioned earlier, it is an area endorsed by government policies. Being registered under a state-run foundation also grants FL4C its institutional legitimacy, i.e. recognition by authority. More importantly, FL4C set as priority to gain trust from ordinary people, that is, to achieve socio-cognitive legitimacy. This was crucial given the credibility crisis in the Chinese NGO sector mentioned at the beginning of this section. To achieve public trust, FL4C set up a range of creative mechanisms on Weibo to ensure transparency, accountability, and to enable public supervision of expenditures.

FL4C introduced both online and offline routines to enhance transparency. One of the most important methods is the self-reporting requirement: each enrolled school has to post its daily expenditure of the school kitchen on Weibo. Schools are provided training and have to pass the Weibo trial before they are formally enrolled in the program. They then continue to be monitored by the public via Weibo, combined with unannounced visits by voluntary visitors and auditors. As explained by one of the school liaisons: “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 consists 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”.

Photos from the schools provide direct evidence of where donors’ money is spent. With Weibo, this kind of evidence is abundant and widespread. An example is provided 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”. Meanwhile, the high degree of publicity and transparency also created some pressure and FL4C had to spend a great deal of time and energy responding to enquiries, inquisitions and criticism. As commented by another member of staff, “… only when you are aware of public supervision, you will discipline yourself. Our responses to those questioning voices helped us gain more attention... in the end it strengthened our Free Lunch brand”.

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Discussion: The Affordances of Weibo in FL4C

In this paper, we are interested in the affordance of social media, in particular, the Chinese twitter-like platform Weibo, in the collective action of institutional innovation. It is important to note that the affordance of technology is not only constituted by its technological characteristics. It is only sensible to talk about the affordance of Weibo in a specific context of FL4C, including the agency of distributed actors and the social institutional conditions under which sociomaterial practices are performed. Table 3 summarizes key aspects of the affordance of Weibo in the collective action process of FL4C: network scaling, public enrolling, agenda framing, and legitimacy building.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>The affordance of Weibo in FL4C</th>
<th>Elaboration (Codes)</th>
<th>Corresponding Section in Findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Network Scaling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Enacting Institutional Arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Forming alliance with a wide range of actors to construct and expand network across time and space;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mobilizing resources through a variety of channels, often mediated by Weibo;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Scaling up the project (in terms of participants, resources, alliances, and impact) in a very short period;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Enrolling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Constructing a network and mobilizing resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Significantly lower participation threshold for types of citizens and organizations;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Blurring the line between public and private good;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encouraging public participation in social issues;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agenda Framing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Framing interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Problematizing child poverty and hunger;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Proposing solution via Weibo;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Defining shared goal and scope;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparency Enforcing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing legitimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creative practices to enforce transparency and accountability;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enacting agency of recipients (schools);</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Participatory supervision by the public;</td>
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</table>

Table 3. The affordance of Weibo in FL4C

Network Scaling

FL4C has set an unprecedented example of initiating and scaling up collective action to address a social problem at a remarkable speed, from none-existence to providing over 70 thousand students with cooked school lunch in 2.5 years. This exceeds the performance of many grassroots NGOs in developed countries in terms of growth and impact, and is significant particularly considering the long term structural constraints of China’s civil society. The social media platform of Weibo, connected to other technologies like online payment system, e-shop, blogs, news websites, and traditional media, open up a plethora of channels to mobilize resources from all corners of society. Compared to most resource-poor charity programs, FL4C is extremely effective in enrolling other actors, individuals and organizations, and mobilizing multiple forms of resources e.g. financial and material donation, human capital, and publicity to substantiate and expand the scale of the program.

Public Enrolling

The original collection action theory (Olson, 1965) centres on the “freeriding” problem and the importance of formal organization in motivating and co-ordinating participants (Bimber et al., 2005). However, social movement scholars have long noted the effect of ICTs in blurring the boundary of public and private good (Bimber et al., 2005) and lowering the threshold for participation (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). While most people use social media mainly for social networking and entertainment, it is fairly easy to integrate chatting with friends and shopping on taobao.com with reposting a Weibo about FL4C, buying some virtual Free Lunch tokens or related merchandises, or to participate in online charity
auctions. As Weibo is a hugely popular application that already covered over 200 million users in 2011 (CNNIC 2012), most urban residents have the application installed on their mobile or computer, providing widespread accessibility for the FL4C.

**Agenda Framing**

The concept of framing, derived largely from Goffman (1974), is a key concept in the social movement literature, 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 and Snow, 2000, p. 614), with the intention “to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow and Benford 1988:198, quoted in Benford and Snow 2000, p.614).

FL4C identified the problem of child hunger, an issue of social injustice that easily invoke emotional linkages with ordinary Chinese people, by microblogging and sharing images of hungry school children in remote areas. They then proposed a practical and actionable solution based on the Weibo platform which allows most individuals and organizations to easily participate. This framing strategy simplified complex socio-structural problems of inequality in the Chinese society to one single issue and effectively focused people’s attention and motivated public participation.

**Transparency Enforcing**

The biggest challenge for the NGO sector in China is establishing legitimacy. FL4C achieves cognitive legitimacy (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), namely the recognition that the project is desirable, appropriate and viable, largely through the framing of FL4C as collective action to address child hunger. To achieve socio-political legitimacy, that is the endorsement of key stakeholders, FL4C invented creative sociomaterial practices to enhance transparency and accountability of the expenditure of donation. The enforcement of self-reporting on Weibo by enrolled schools is not only novel and sets a new bar for transparency, it also enacts the critical agency of participating schools, constructing their identities not only as recipients of aid but also as accountable actors in the FL4C. Schools that fail to reach the standard are dropped out of the program. The fact that donors and other members of the public can visit the schools themselves to inspect the school kitchens and quality of food was critical to establish trust with the public.

**Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of social media in a case of NGO innovation. It constitutes an attempt to explore the role of technology in societal transformation (Avgerou, 2010), in particular, the under-researched area of civil society and social movement. We draw upon, and develop, the concept of affordance in relation to technology as a way to generate deeper insights on the performativity of social media in social transformation. We argue that technological affordances are constrained and enabled by institutional conditions, which may include organizational rules and norms, or configurations of an institutional field (Bourdieu, 1993). Just as human agency is embedded (Battilana and D’aunno, 2009; Garud et al., 2007) in social, cultural, and historical contexts, technological affordances as an outcome of sociomaterial practices are inevitably shaped by socio-historical contexts. In this paper, the discussion of the affordances of Weibo is situated within the heterogeneous sociomaterial assemblage (Orlikowski, 2007) of FL4C, including the agency of distributed actors and the social institutional conditions under which material practices are performed.

In this paper, the discussion of the affordances of Weibo is situated within the heterogeneous sociomaterial assemblage (Orlikowski, 2007) of FL4C, including the agency of distributed actors and the social institutional conditions under which material practices are performed. The affordances of social media are therefore specific to the context of the case, rather than universal. For example, we do not suggest that social media automatically affords transparency by design. Indeed, the TripAdvisor study by Scott and Orlikowski (2012) points to the opposite effect. It is how the material features of social media are enacted in a given context that is important.
Furthermore, we are not only interested in technological affordances as performed in an institutional field, but also how changes to the field might occur as a result. Although some studies of technological affordances start to integrate the concept of institutional logic (Bernardi and Sarker, 2013; Seidel and Berente, 2013; Thornton et al., 2012), they tend to emphasize the taken-for-grantedness of institutions, the institutional effects of regularities, routines and how they shape identities of actors. In this paper, institutional logics and structure are considered both constraints and opportunities to be enacted or exploited by strategic actors - or as phrased by Dijk et al. (2011), “institutional affordances”. Technological affordances are performed by enacting “institutional affordances” to produce transformations in an institutional field. Underlying our view of technological affordances is thus a structurational ontology of social life (Giddens, 1984) where agency is embedded yet transformative. On this basis, the collective action model is a useful meso-level conceptual device to explore under what circumstances, and how, changes in an institutional field take place, in spite of the conforming and stabilizing effect of institutional forces. It can also to a certain extent explain why some sociomaterial practices produce more significant and endurable impact in society.

To summarize, this paper makes the following contributions:

Firstly, Free Lunch for Children represents a highly successful grassroots NGO innovation in an institutionally restrictive environment, through social-media-based collective action. The case could easily be framed as the story of an institutional entrepreneur, Deng Fei, as portrayed by most press coverage as a heroic figure who constructed FL4C. While Deng’s personal charisma and activism are undeniably important factors to the success of FL4C, this is merely one dimension. Analyzed as a collective action process of institutional innovation, the case demonstrates the power of social media in constructing networks, motivating participation, mobilizing resources, framing and scaling collective action, and establishing legitimacy.

Secondly, the combination of the sociomaterial perspective of affordance and the collective action model contributes to affordance studies in IS by explicitly taking into account the constraining and enabling effects of the institutional environment, thus moving beyond the individual level analysis of affordance as emergent from human-technology interaction. This perspective also enriches the study of social media by analyzing its affordance as contingent upon socio-institutional dynamics and the agency of actors. Just like in most other countries, the dominant activities on Chinese social media platforms are entertainment, consumption and social networking, rather than organizing collective action. While Weibo has witnessed waves of cyberactivism in the last few years (Zheng and Zhang, 2012), it has suffered severe political crackdown in 2013 and significantly declined. In other words, to avoid deterministic accounts of technology in society, the affordance of social media on social transformation has to be considered as embedded in complex, multi-dimensional and contested social, institutional and political processes.

Thirdly, while the collection action model avoids the pitfall of reducing institutional change to either pre-existing structural conditions or the individual agency of institutional entrepreneurs, this paper enriches the collective action model of institutional innovation by integrating the role of technological artefacts in social change. The mainstream literature of social movement and collective action is largely anthropocentric (Rodriguez-Giralt 2011). A sociomaterial perspective of collective action allows us to take materiality seriously in social movements and social transformation, not in a deterministic manner but in examining sociomaterial practices and possibilities that artefacts afford.
References


