How far away are we from deliberative politics?

- Online authoritarian deliberation on Tencent Weibo in the PRC

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2014.09.02
Abstract

Emerging online discussions in a Weibo (micro-blogging) platform argue for the new possibility of online deliberation in Chinese cyberspace. In order to ascertain the extent to which this platform is being used, the author has conducted a case study to measure the quality of deliberation of an online discussion of genetically modified (GM) foods in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data, both methods of Discourse Quality Index (DQI) and interview have been used.

The findings of the research indicate that the online discussion fails to meet two necessary criteria of deliberation: rational and logical statements and consensus building. However, the study results are not totally negative, since the levels of interaction, information exchange, mutual understanding and neutral expression are relatively high.

According to the author, in the contemporary stage, online authoritarian deliberation faces many problems in the PRC. At micro level, first, online expression is irrational and illogical; second, it is hard to reach consensus building; third, participants are stubborn to their pre-given wills; forth, some people are indifferent to online discussions. At macro level, first, most of the online discussions have low external impact on decision-making; second, the strong government control may hinder the development of online deliberation.

Key words: deliberation, authoritarian, deliberative democracy, online discussion, Tencent Weibo, Discourse Quality Index, the PRC.
Acknowledgement

This paper was completed in August 2014, and I owe a great deal of thanks to many people. I will express my deepest gratitude and appreciation here to those who gave me assistance during this master research project.

First, I will give my appreciation to the net users on Tencent Weibo, who have given me much support both on interviews and data searching. They have helped me to make this research possible.

Second, I will thank my supervisor, Göran Svensson, a respectable and responsible scholar, who has provided me with valuable guidance in every stage of the writing of this thesis. Without his enlightening instruction, kindness and patience, I could not have completed my thesis.

I shall extend my sincere thanks to my examiner, Jakob Svensson, a respectable and rigorous scholar, who has given me constructive feedbacks and suggestions on my thesis, and who has helped me to do better.

At last, I will give my thanks to my parents and friends to their encouragement and support during the period of this research project.

Thank you so much!

Lu, Xinrui Uppsala University Sweden August 2014
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Lists of Abbreviations

GMO = Genetically Modified Organism

GM food = Genetically Modified food

DQI = Discourse Quality Index

PRC = People’s Republic of China

SARS = Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

CCTV = China Central Television

CPPCC = Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference
1. Introduction

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) first connected to the international networks through a special 64K line on April 20, 1994, thus beginning the era of the Internet in the PRC. According to statistics of the China Internet Network Information Center (2013), the number of net users in the PRC is over 0.59 billion, and the popularizing rate of the Internet is 44.1%.

In the past 20 years, the Chinese people have witnessed the development of the Chinese Internet. It has grown to be an irresistible power in the PRC (Xinhua Net 2014c). As a new force, it is one of the most important powers in promoting economic development (Xinhua Net 2014c). Moreover, according to the author, this new force has also changed the public opinion environment in the PRC. It has provided a new platform for Chinese people to express themselves.

The author considers that the appearance of Weibo (micro-blogging) indicates a new beginning of the social network site era in the PRC. Lei Haoping (2011) argues that Weibo has become one of the most heated dissemination platforms in the PRC, since it is small, fast and mobile. It has also become one of the most important platforms for online discussion and debate (Lei Haoping 2011). Hu (2013) considers that since 2003 the public opinion expressed online has continuously promoted social progress in the PRC. Moreover, He and Warren (2011) argue for the theoretical and practical possibility of authoritarian deliberation in the PRC.

In Western academic circles, discussions on online deliberation have been ongoing for years. Deliberative democracy has become the third choice of electronic democracy for those “who want to move beyond the individualism/communitarianism opposition” (Dahlberg 2001, Abstract). According to Kies (2010, 31-32), deliberative
democracy has three superiorities. First, deliberative democracy is “better adapted to plural and complex societies”; second, deliberative democracy “increases the acceptance and legitimacy of a collective decision”; third, deliberative democracy “increases the likelihood of developing a public spiritedness” (Kies 2010, 31-32).

Jurgen Habermas is the most prominent figure in this tradition. According to the author’s interpretation on Habermas’ works, deliberative politics is a procedural legitimacy, including: communication with equal and fair participation from all members; and deliberation is conducted through rational, reasonable discussion on public affairs in the public sphere; finally, a consensus is made and the government transforms it into legislation and administration.

1.1 Introduction of the online discussion of GM foods

The online discussion of GM foods has been studied in this research. Two celebrities, who have certain reputations, Cui Yongyuan and Fang Zhouzi, created the online discussion on this topic. Mr. Fang supports GMO, and he is famous for science popularization and has concentrated on anti-fraud in the PRC. Mr. Fang graduated from Michigan State University, and was awarded a biochemical doctoral degree in 1995. His research area was molecular genetics.

Mr. Cui opposes GMO. He is one of the most famous journalists and public speakers in the PRC and has worked in China Central Television (CCTV) for decades. His most famous TV show was Speaking Frankly. He left his position at CCTV at the end of 2013 and is now the supervisor of postgraduates in Communication University of China. Moreover, he is a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference1.

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1 Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is a political advisory group in the PRC. CPPCC consists of delegates from the Chinese Communist Party, several democratic parties, nonparty personages, The Mass Organizations and patriots of various circles. The aim of CPPCC is to deliberate on important national issues of state policy and public affairs, and to play the role of democratic supervision through suggestions and criticisms (CPPCC.com 2014).
On September 8, 2013, the official account of Tencent News posted a micro-blog and said “Mr. Fang suggested that the government should create conditions for letting people eat GM foods every day, and Americans have been trustingly eating GM foods for 16 years” (Tencent News 2013). On the same day, Mr. Cui forwarded the post published by Tencent News disagreeing with Mr. Fang’s discourses. Thus, the online debates over the safety of GM foods began.

Directly after the online discussion took place, Tencent Weibo conducted an online voting on net users’ attitudes toward GM foods. Over 90% of net users on Tencent Weibo were against the use of GM foods, and they supported Mr. Cui. Fewer than 5% of net users on Tencent Weibo supported Mr. Fang and the use of GM foods (Tencent Weiwei 2013). The screen capture and English translation of the voting are available in Appendix 5. It is apparent that net users on Tencent Weibo were divided into two opinion groups, GMO opponents and GMO proponents.

In order to find evidence to prove the danger of GM foods, in October, Mr. Cui went to Japan and the USA at his own expense to investigate the GM food issue in these countries. He also made a documentary of GM foods in the USA by interviewing experts, officials, and common people. In March 2014, he recommended regulating GM foods at the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. On the other side, Mr. Fang persistently refuted what Mr. Cui said by providing various evidence quoted from professional websites, and questioned the credibility of Mr. Cui’s investigations.

Net users on Tencent Weibo followed the two opinion leaders and discussed the topic with each other. Most of their discussions took place in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang. The online discussion lasted from September 2013 until the present time.
From October 2013 until May 2014, the Ministry of Agriculture of the PRC returned over one million tons of genetically modified corn to the USA (Xinhua Net 2014a). On May 28 the Ministry of Agriculture of the PRC announced that work was being assigned to the local governments to enhance supervision on the safety of GMO (Xinhua Net 2014b).

1.2 Introduction of Tencent Weibo

In the year 2010, a new word “Weibo” came to the forefront (Lei 2011, 5). Weibo is a Chinese word, which means micro-blogging. In the PRC, Weibo is the online platform based on the relationships among users, where users can post, share, browse, and receive private information (Lei 2011, 5). It has also become an important place for online discussions. There are several Weibo platforms in the PRC, for example, Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, Sohu Weibo, and so on.

Many people consider that Weibo is similar with Twitter. However, Weibo is different from Twitter. First, on Weibo, “discussion threats can be attached to individual posts” (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2014, 4). In other words, publicly turn taking and dialogue are possible. Second, similar with Twitter, the maximum character limitation on Weibo is 140 words. However, this limitation is solved by the tool “html to image” on Weibo. When users want to post a message using more than 140 Chinese characters, they can use the tool “html to image” to post long-text micro-blog. By using this tool, the long text is transferred into image form. The character limitation for long text micro-blog is 10,000 words (Tencent 2014b).

In this research, Tencent Weibo is studied, because this platform is where the online debate of GM foods first began on Tencent Weibo.

Tencent Weibo is a Chinese micro-blogging platform, which was launched by
Tencent Inc. in April 2010. Tencent, Inc. is one of the largest and leading information technology companies in the PRC. “Tencent’s leading Internet platforms – QQ Instant Messenger, WeChat, QQ.com, QQ Games, Qzone, 3g.QQ.com, SoSo, PaiPai and Tenpay – have brought together PRC’s largest Internet community in order to meet various needs such as communication, information, entertainment, e-commerce and others” (Tencent 2014a). Besides posting micro-blogs, users can share images, music and videos with friends and can call vote, create topics, etc. Moreover, users can comment, forward and like others’ posts.

Tencent Weibo is an open social network site. Everyone can access to it. However, unregistered user is not allowed to comment or publish post in the platform. On Tencent Weibo, users can publish a micro-blog using 140 Chinese characters; the message can be sent through the web, SMS, or mobile apps.

When users look at posts written by other users, they can see who has commented and the content of the comment. If they want, they can also respond to comments written by other users. Because of this design, many net users discuss issues in the comment section of the post.

1.3 Reasons of choosing the case

The reasons of choosing this case to study are as follows. First, two celebrites, Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang, created the online discussion. Mr. Cui is the member of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, and Mr. Fang is a biochemist. The political background of Mr. Cui and the scientific background of Mr. Fang make the online discussion stand out from the rest. Since in ancient China, deliberation was limited to national elites (Tan 2014, 90), it is valuable to examine the quality of deliberation of the online discussion put forward by two celebrities in the contemporary PRC.
Second, the topic of the online discussion is related to public affairs. According to the author’s understanding, deliberation is a kind of political communication concerning state policies and public affairs. Hence, in order to evaluate deliberativeness of online discussions in the PRC, it is necessary to study an online discussion regarding public affairs or state policies.

Third, the discussion is relatively heated in the case. The author thinks that the levels of diversity and representativeness in the online discussion would be high, since many people have participated in the online discussion.

Hence, the author considers the online discussion of GM foods is valuable for studying.

1.4 Research purpose and research question

In this research, the main purpose is to ascertain the extent to which online discussions in Chinese cyberspace are used for deliberative democracy. Moreover, the author will discuss the implications of the empirical results on the development of online authoritarian deliberation in the PRC.

The research questions in this research are:
-How can the deliberativeness of online discussion be best measured on Tencent Weibo?
-How deliberative is the online discussion of GM foods in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo?
-What problems do authoritarian deliberation face on Tencent Weibo? What can be done to overcome them?
1.5 Overview of the study

In order to answer this research question, the author has conducted a case study. In this section, the author will introduce an overview of the study and describe the content in each chapter.

The first chapter details the selected case. In the second chapter, why the contemporary social structure in the PRC is potentially adapted to carrying out the deliberative project has been answered.

Prior to introducing the theoretical framework of the thesis, previous empirical research in the field of deliberative democracy is described in Chapter 3. In this chapter, the implication of distinction between norms and facts on empirical research on deliberative democracy is given. Next, the author describes how the evaluating criteria have been developed in offline debates and how the criteria have been extended to online discussion. Then, previous research on online deliberation and Weibo are introduced respectively.

In Chapter 4, Theoretical Framework, the author introduces the concept of deliberative democracy by citing works from prominent scholars in this field, such as Habermas, Fishkin, Chambers, Steiner, Ferree and so on. Criticisms and advantages of deliberative democracy are also presented in this chapter. Later, key factors that may make online deliberation possible, is described after the introduction of criticism of online deliberative democracy. At last, the author introduces the concept of authoritarian deliberation in the PRC.

The methodology chapter addresses research strategy and research design. A single case study was conducted, during which time, 1200 messages were stratified randomly selected and 11 interviewees were randomly selected. According to Yin (2009), the method of analysis in case studies has been least developed. Hence, in this
research, an analysis of online discussion and interviews is supported with content analysis. The coding category of the online discussions is Discourse Quality Index (DQI). The design of DQI is based on the theoretical framework of deliberative democracy. Moreover, the representativeness and validity of the data collection and analysis are discussed. Additionally, the limitations of the research and ethical consideration are addressed.

Chapter 6 is the analysis section, where the study results have been analyzed. The results indicate that the online discussion is relatively far away from the deliberate model, because the online discussion fails to meet two necessary criteria of deliberation: rational and logical statements and consensus building. However, the study result is not fully negative, since the levels of interaction, information exchange, mutual understanding and neutral expression are relatively high. At last, the three research questions are answered.

Chapter 7 restates the conclusion and expectations on future studies is addressed.

### 1.6 Contribution of the thesis

The developing trend of electronic democracy has been heatedly discussed in the academic world, and more empirical research needs to be conducted to support the discussion. This research is one of empirical evidence, and its unique attempt is to assess the quality of online discussion in a Weibo platform, the contemporary dominant social network site in the PRC.

This research shows how participants behaved in the online discussion of GM foods in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo. Although the study results have not been generalized to a broader level of all net users in Chinese cyberspace, it provides valuable implications for the development of
online authoritarian deliberation in the PRC.

Steiner et al. (2009) hope that the coding categories of DQI can be enriched in future empirical research. They anticipate a time that the DQI will be applied in fields other than the parliamentary arena. The author has enriched the coding categories of DQI, and made it more suitable to measure the online discussion in the platform of Tencent Weibo.

This research can also provide a critical view on the empirical research of deliberation. The limitations of this research can inform future researchers in their research.
2. Background

The PRC is an authoritarian country leaded by the Chinese Communist Party. The developing history of the PRC can be divided into two phrases, and the boundary between the two phrases is the reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s (People.cn 2009). The reform refers to the reform of the economic system, in which there was a transfer from a highly concentrated planned economy to a market economy; the opening-up policy refers to both the internal and external opening up of the market (People.cn 2009).

Esarey and Qiang (2008, 770) indicate that “unlike Westerners, who commonly compare freedom of speech in China to freedom of speech in democracies”, Chinese net users compare their contemporary freedom to the more restricted environment in the past. According to the author, the contemporary online environment provides key premise for the possibility of online deliberation, since net users can access to uncensored information and can publish their critical view on the government.

In this chapter, the author intends to introduce that the existing social structure in the PRC is potentially adapted to carrying out online deliberation. The author will describe the potential in four aspects, which are cultural root of deliberation (Section 2.1), polarization in private and public realms (Section 2.2), the rise of public discussion (Section 2.3) and online censorship in the PRC (Section 2.4).

2.1 The Chinese cultural root of deliberation

In the history of Chinese politics, there has been a tradition of “yi” (Tan 2014, 90). “Yi” is a Chinese character, which means participating and deliberating in politics. Tan (2014, 90) indicates that in early Confucian time, yi “loosely understood as discussion and thought aimed at evaluation or choice, even though it need not result in
definitive evaluation or actual choice, is an acknowledged activity with varied political impact.” It is apparent that yi is similar with the concept of deliberation. Habermas (1987) defines deliberation as a mode of communication, which aims at generating persuasion by having reasonable discussion.

Tan (2014, 90) considers that the standards of yi are normative. In order to meet the normative requirements, yi “tends to become limited to persons who possess ethical qualities and are entrusted with social or political responsibilities” (Tan 2014, 90). Consequently, those who are qualified to participate in yi are “the ethically accomplished (exemplary persons and sages) or the political elite (rulers, ministers, magistrates)” (Tan 2014, 90). In the history of Chinese politics there was a tradition of deliberation; however, the political discussion was limited to certain elites.

2.2 Polarization in private and public realms

After the reform and opening-up policies occurred in the late 1970s in the PRC, the government control has been reduced; furthermore, the transformation has provided for the possibility of polarization in private and public realms (Hu 2013, 292). Before the reform and opening-up policies, the Chinese government mainly focused on political restructuring (People.cn 2009). Afterward, the Chinese government shifted its focus to facilitating economic growth (People.cn 2009). Sun et al. considered that the fundamental transformation of social structure in the PRC after the reform was from unification to differentiation, and institutional reform was the fundamental driver (Sun et al. 1994, 10).

Hu points out that from 1949 until 1976, Chinese political systems lacked a space for open discussion (Hu 2013, 290). He indicates that the transformation provided the possibility of polarization in private and public realms. The private realm refers to a space where individuals can rationally seek their own interests, and the public realm
refers to an open space for public discussion on national affairs where political justice is promoted and public opinion is expressed (Hu 2013, 292-293).

However, during the progress of polarization in private and public realms, Hu (2013) indicates that there were two adverse factors, which hindered the development. The first adverse factor is that the role of the market economy was too strong (Hu 2013, 293). In order to establish a powerful modern country, the Chinese government decided to sacrifice democracy for economic growth (Hu 2013, 293). There are both positive and negative sides to this decision. The positive effect “exists in the autonomy inside the financial market,” and the negative effect is that “material desire and consumerism might lead to the citizen culture of indifference (Hu 2013, 293).”

The second adverse factor is that the Chinese government has too much control over the public realm (Hu 2013, 293). According to Hu, the conversation in the public realm is more like a powerless discussion rather than criticism (Hu 2013, 293). Lagerkvist also considers that Chinese government “is among the most deaf government to the voices” of their people (Lagerkvist 2006, 40). In 2004, many news reports revealed how Yahoo and Google surrendered to the Chinese government’s demand.

2.3 The rise of public discussion in the Internet in the PRC

In the 1990s, Western scholars and politicians had already been convinced that “new information and communications technologies contributed to the emancipation of oppressed peoples all over the globe” (Lagerkvist 2006, 40). Moreover, it seemed that the Internet offered the most possible space for democratic public discussion in the PRC, since “Chinese government censorship and regulatory practices effectively control the traditional media” (Lagerkvist 2006, 47). Also, according to the China Internet Report conducted by Morgan Stanley in 2004, the Internet has provided more
and more freedom and space in the country where self-expression and communication is not so common (Morgan Stanley 2004).

Many people consider that it was in 2003 when the online public opinion rose in the PRC. In that year, online public opinion first undertook a role of supervision, and Chinese net users saw the significant impact of online public opinion in certain issues.

On April 25, 2003, *Southern Metropolis Daily* published a report entitled “The Death of Inmate Sun Zhigang.” It revealed the story of a law-enforcement officer who inflicted violence on an inmate, Sun Zhigang and assaulted him to death. This report was published together with the editorial, “Who Is Responsible for the Irregular Death of the Citizen?” The report and the editorial were forwarded in many websites, and garnered much online attention. There were more than 10,000 comments in a few hours after the exposition of the event. Net users not only strongly protested on BBS, but also established a website for Sun Zhigang, and named it “You were swallowed by the dark.” This online public opinion immediately prompted three attorneys and five legislators to hand over a suggestion to re-examine the Method for Internment and Repatriation for Homeless People and Beggars in the City to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress. On June 15, the legal case of Sun Zhigang called for a public trial together in municipal and provincial levels of the people’s court, and on June 27, Guangdong Province Supreme Court made the final judgment. On June 20, the State Council issued the No. 381 order to abolish The Method for Internment and Repatriation for Homeless People and Beggars in the City. The new Measurement for the Administration of Relief for Vagrants and Beggars without Assured Living Source in the PRC went into effect on August 1’ 2013. In the new legislation, the principle of voluntary salvage was raised and the enforcement was abolished (Hu 2013, 308).

Also, in 2003, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), an acute infectious disease, exploded in the PRC. In order to avoid panic in Mainland China, the government
chose to block all relevant information about SARS. However, the control of information did not stop the spread of the SARS virus. Additionally, the lack of information made more people vulnerable to SARS, and they had no prevention measures. As a result, the virus spread quickly. During the most severe time in the SARS epidemic, in order to be free from infection, citizens in Beijing chose to stay at home and “met with other fellow citizens and exchanged their fearful thoughts in chat rooms and on online bulletin boards. And the subjects of the authoritarian state were not there in isolation. State officials also surfed the net for information on how to protect themselves from the disease” (Lagerkvist 2006, 42). In this case, both the Chinese citizens and leaders realized the power of the Internet. Moreover, this case changed the government’s attitude on information control that “all the international and domestic emergency issue should be reported immediately and accurately” (Hu 2013, 310), and this promoted the news reform in the PRC.

A survey made by the Chinese Academy of Social Science (2003) indicates that 61% of Chinese net users agreed that the Internet has provided more chances to criticize the government.

Hu (2013) argues that before the appearance of the Internet, there were only four ways for people to express their will the government in the PRC. The first one was supervisory and critical news from traditional media, for example, newspaper and magazine editorials. The second way was through documents given by lower levels of local government to the central government. These were written in the form of governmental documents. The third way for people to express their opinions was through internal government references, which were written by appointed state-owned newspaper offices, such as Xinhua News Agency. Only certain levels of government officials were allowed to read these internal references. The fourth way was through representative institutions, such as the State Council Ombudsman’s office. Chinese citizens could express their opinions to officials working in these institutions. It can be seen from the above four ways that information did not widely reflect the people’s
will. Compared to this, the Internet provided a much more comprehensive channel for reflecting people’s wills (Hu 2013, 310).

According to Hu (2013), there are two reasons why online discussions maintain a significant position in the PRC. First, a mechanism, which can reflect public opinion on policy-making and which can protect people’s right of appeal, has been missing for a long time in the PRC. Second, there is no tradition of freedom of the press in the PRC; instead, Chinese people are more familiar with public scrutiny, which refers to the fact that people appeal to the State Council Ombudsman’s office or other media institutions. However, some local governments have misused this authority to prevent appeals (Hu 2013, 310). As a result, most Chinese citizens are afraid of appealing (Hu 2013, 310). Through the Internet, people finally found an anonymous place without fear or limitation (Hu 2013, 310). This also reflects the political significance of the online activities under the special political environment in the PRC (Hu 2013, 311).

Tong and Zuo’s (2013) attitude towards the Chinese online public sphere is optimistic. They consider that “the use of the Internet may amplify the impact of social protests on government legitimacy (Tong and Zuo 2013, 67).” First, the Internet has provided a platform for social protest. Second, the emerging public discussions may encourage more people to reflect on state policy and public affairs.

Lagerkvist points out that today in the PRC, “the internet serves as an alternative means of agenda setting” (Lagerkvist 2006, 47). In recent years, many “critical, sensitive, controversial or political news” was first revealed on the Internet, such as Weibo or other Internet forums (Lagerkvist 2006, 47). Traditional media hardly provides primary news now. From this, it can be seen that the dominant role of traditional mass media has been weakened.

According to the author, there is no doubt that Chinese people have enjoyed much more freedom than before in many aspects, such as economy, knowledge, society,
personal life and so on. The status of previous gatekeeper on information and public discussion has been shaken and challenged. The public opinion reflected in online discussions has become a force that cannot be ignored. At the same time, the Chinese government’s censorship and surveillance are conducting on the Internet.

2.4 Online censorship in the PRC

The “Great Firewall” prevents Chinese net users to access sensitive information on foreign websites, like Facebook and Twitter (Rauchfleisch and Schafer 2014, 4). Censorship is common in the Chinese cyberspace, and it also applies to social media (Rauchfleisch and Schafer 2014, 4).

Approximately 20,000–50,000 Internet police and Internet monitors are hired to censor the online content in the PRC (King, Pan and Robert 2013, 326). Social media is controlled by the government-enforced content regulation policies (Chen, Zhang and Wilson 2013, 89). There are several governmental regulations on the Weibo platform, which are blacklists, search censorship and tweet censorship (Chen, Zhang and Wilson 2013, 89). Blacklists refer to words that are not allowed in tweets (Chen, Zhang and Wilson 2013, 89). Search censorship means that users are not permitted to search tweets containing certain words (Chen, Zhang and Wilson 2013, 89). Tweet censorship refers to the fact that some tweets may be deleted if they contain politically sensitive words, rumors and so on (Chen, Zhang and Wilson 2013, 89).

According to King, Pan and Robert’s (2013, 326) findings, the purpose of the Chinese government’s censorship program is “not to suppress criticism of the state or the Communist Party”. Instead, they find that it aims at reducing the probability of anti-government collective action (King, Pan and Robert’s 2013, 326). Additionally, their findings suggest that when the Chinese government allowed the social media to flourish, they also allowed “the full range expression of negative and positive
comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders” (King, Pan and Robert’s 2013, 339).

From the above, it can be seen that although the Chinese cyberspace is under the surveillance of the government, net users are allowed to speak critically on important policy issues. Lewis (2013) argues that the Internet has expanded the opportunity for rational-critical deliberation in the PRC.
3. Previous research

Till now, there has not been an agreement on the criteria that constitute the ideal public sphere to measure online discussions. Kies (2010, 41) considers that this absence of agreement reveals that “the empirical attempt for evaluating the deliberativeness of the debates are still at preliminary phrase.” Additionally, in this research, one of the research questions is how to establish a valid method to evaluate the deliberativeness of online discussion on Tencent Weibo. Thus, in this chapter, the author considers that it is necessary to introduce the evaluation method in previous research.

Moreover, since the author will discuss the possibility of online deliberation on Tencent Weibo in the PRC, it is also necessary to introduce previous research’s findings regarding online deliberation and Weibo.

Rather than directly introducing the previous research, the author will first introduce the theoretical implication of the distinction between the norms of deliberative politics and the facts of complex society on empirical research in Section 3.1. After that, the author will introduce the evaluating criteria in previous research in Section 3.2. Then, in Section 3.3, the author will describe previous findings relating to online deliberation. In Section, 3.4, previous research related to online communication on Weibo will be introduced. At last, the research gap will be addressed in Section 3.5.

3.1 Between norms and facts

Habermas (1996, 326) puts forward the model of deliberative politics, which assumes “a society without law and politics and projects the democratic idea of self-organization onto society as a whole”. In this kind of society, the institution of discursive opinion and will-formation is the mechanism of self-organization, and all
the conflicts in the society can be solved without violence (Habermas 1996, 323).

However, Habermas (1996, 326) denies the possibility of the fictive model in real-world society. He acknowledges that “even under favorable conditions, no complex society could ever correspond to the model of purely communicative social relations (Habermas 1996, 326).” Moreover, Habermas (1996, 326) points out that this model is a “methodological fiction intended to display the unavoidable initial features of societal complexity”, and as a result, the “underside of communicative social relation remains largely hidden in the shadow of the idealizing presupposition of communicative action.”

Moreover, Cohen indicates that,

“The notion of deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association precedes through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens.” (Cohen 1997, 72)

According to Cohen (1997), the notion of deliberative democracy is ideal. Similarly, Dryzek (1990, 36-37) considers that “the ideal speech situation does not exist, and clearly cannot exist in this world of variety in opinions and traditions.”

Although it is hard to realize the model in real-world society, Habermas (1996) still considers that it is not impossible to fill the gap between the normative idea of self-legislation and the complex fact. Habermas (1996, 326-327) argues that all institutional or organizational mechanisms can “reduce the complexity evident in the necessary deviation from the model of pure communication”, for the reason that positive law can reduce the complexity of society. However, all these mechanisms also have reflexive character that “infiltrates the normative presuppositions of government by law” (Habermas 1996, 327). Hence, the implementation of deliberative politics can be realized only if “it passes through the sluices of democratic procedure”, like election and voting, and only if it “penetrates the
constitutionally organized political system in general (Habermas 1996, 327).” And, Habermas (1996) argues that the discursive requirements should be limited to core political state institutions.

On the contrary, Dryzek (2000) holds an opposite view with Habermas, and he considers that the discursive requirements should take place within civil society. And Dryzek (2000) believes that authentic deliberation is impossible to happen within state institutions. Compared with Habermas (1996) and Dryzek (2000), Gutmann and Thompson (2004) hold a more flexible view. They consider that the discursive requirements not only should take place in state institutions, but also in civil society associations that has political impact on decision-making.

Kies (2010, 39) points out that these contradictory views to the operationalization of the deliberative theory are caused of empirical weakness. Then, how can we develop a valid method to evaluate deliberativeness of all public space, if the existing models are so divergent? Kies (2010) argues that no deliberative model should be used as reference in empirical research. Thus he points out that “the deliberativeness of public spaces should be evaluated on the basis of the same criteria independently of whether the debate take place in the area of parliament, media or civil society” (Kies 2010, 62).

In this study, the author has tried to study how the deliberative democracy can be measured on Tencent Weibo in the PRC, and how distant the debate of GM foods is from the deliberation ideals, and how to bridge the distance between norms and facts.

3.2 Evaluating criteria

In this section, the author will introduce how the evaluating criteria have been developed in offline debates and how the criteria have been extended to online
discussion.

3.2.1 Offline debates

Lascher (1996) offers some indicators of the empirical research on deliberation studies. He argues that the quality of deliberation might be measured, for instance, “whether arguments are framed in terms of some conception of the public goods,” or whether “participants are able to critique each other’s argument and respond to such criticism” (Lascher 1996, 501).

One important empirical attempt at measuring the quality of deliberation is the research conducted by Chambers on the referendum debates in Canada in 1992 on the question of Quebec. In 1992, many conferences were set up across Canada. However, in the debate, Chambers (1999) found that the expected situation of rational statements was replaced by the fear of being a loser.

Risse (2000) fills the empirical gap of studying deliberate politics for international negotiations. Risse investigated the international negotiations ending the Cold War in Europe, and he studied German unification. Based on his investigation, he concluded that the case he studied did not represent the ideal speech of deliberation; moreover, he claimed “that we cannot explain the cooperative outcome of these negotiations without acknowledging that argumentative rather than instrumental rationality prevailed during crucial phases” (Risse 2000, 28).

Research conducted by Chambers and Risse are qualitative research. The shortcoming of qualitative research is that the data interpretation is less reliable than quantitative research. There is also a need for quantitative measurement on the quality of deliberation in the academic world.
The first attempt at quantitative measurement was conducted by Gerhands (1997). He examined the discourse quality of articles in two German newspapers on the issue of abortion using three indicators in the research. The first indicator is the degree of respect expressed in the debate. The second indicator is whether a statement is justified. The third indicator is the level of rationality. By coding the articles based on the three indicators, Gerhands concluded that the debate is far from the ideal model of deliberation.

Later, Steiner et al. (2009) constructed a more systematic quantitative coding system to measure the quality of deliberation using the coding system, Discourse Quality Index (DQI). They considered that the deliberation in real life “can be placed on a continuum that runs from no deliberation, at one extreme, to ideal deliberation, at the other extreme” (Steiner et al. 2009, 55). They used it to measure the deliberativeness of the offline parliament discussions. The analysis unit of DQI is speech, which is “the public discourse by a particular individual delivered at a particular point in a debate” (Steiner et al. 2009, 55). There are five indicators in DQI, and they are based on Habermas’ model of deliberation. These indicators are participation, level of justification, content of justification, respect, and construct politics. According to this research, they concluded that discourse quality is a “complex cluster of elements.” In other words, by coding debate discourses in DQI, it is better to view the discourse quality by different individual elements rather than as a general whole. The level of different indicators differs in the same parliamentary session; hence, it is hard to look at the discourse quality of deliberation in general.

### 3.2.2 Online debates

Deliberative democracy proponents consider the Internet as “an exemplary medium for facilitating” the discursive space of a rational public sphere (Dalhberg 2001, 168). Entering of the Internet era, many scholars have become interested in measuring the
quality of online discussion. Kies (2010) suggests that researchers should try to evaluate deliberativeness of online discussion as comprehensive as possible.

In order to determine the usefulness of the online virtual sounding boards enabling deliberation, Wilhelm (2009) studied messages drawn from usenet political newsgroups and America Online’s “Washington Connection” by making a quantitative content analysis. The method of coding is similar to Gerhands’ (1997), which was introduced in the previous section. However, Wilhelm’s coding is more suitable for analyzing online discussions. He measures the messages using four aspects. The first aspect is the ratio of the amount of information providing messages to the amount of information seeking messages. He considers that it is important to examine how often the postings aim at seeking and exchanging information to gain a better understanding. The second aspect is how often the postings are responded to and answered. The level of deliberativeness decreases when some participants’ statements are unanswered. The third aspect is the homogeneity of political opinion in the usenet group. By studying this aspect, Wilhelm examined the level of political affiliation among the participants. The fourth aspect is rationality, which measures the whether the posting is supported by valid conditions and reasons.

Dahlberg (2010) has established a content analysis evaluating category to measure the possibility of deliberation of online discourses. There are six indicators in this category: exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, discursive inclusion and equality, and autonomy from state and economic power (Dahlberg 2010, 623). The category is based on Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy and surrounding debates.

The first indicator is exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims (Dahlberg 2010, 623). In the process of deliberation, statements need to be provided with reasons rather than being simply asserted. The second indicator, reflexivity, means that participants in online discussion must reflect upon their opinions and ideas,
like cultural values, social context and so on (Dahlberg 2010, 623). The third indicator, ideal role taking, refers to the fact that participants must try to understand statements from other participants, and listen to each other with respect (Dahlberg 2010, 623). Sincerity is the fourth gauge, and this means that participants have to provide all information relevant to the discussion with a genuine attitude (Dahlberg 2010, 623). In other words, participants should not lie to others. The fifth indicator is discursive inclusion and equality (Dahlberg 2010, 623), and this indicates that all participants in the online discussion have an equal right to express and to question, and there should not be exclusions. The sixth and final marker is autonomy from state and economic power, which means that participants’ discourse should not be driven by money or administrative control (Dahlberg 2010, 623).

There are nine indicators in Kies’ version, and they are inclusion, discursive equality, reciprocity, justification, reflexivity, empathy, sincerity, plurality, and external impact. Compared with Dahlberg’s criteria, Kies adds plurality and external impact. Plurality refers to that there should be plurality of voices (Kies 2010, 42). External impact refers to impact on “the opinions formed and decisions taken outside the context of the debate” (Kies 2010, 42).

In Kies’ (2010) study on the online forum of Radicali Italiani and the online campaign in the French town of Issy-les-Moulineaux, methods of content analysis, survey and interview are used.

The method of content analysis is not used by all the researchers. Berdal (2004) used observation, interview, and questionnaire to measure the speech situation, participation and access, and public will formation in three newspaper’s online forums.

It can be seen from the above that content analysis is adapted by most of the research. Only some of the researchers used interview or questionnaire.
3.3 Previous research on online deliberation

In this section, the author will introduce some representative empirical findings relating to online deliberation.

Sproull and Faraj’s (1995) study on six usenet newsgroups proves that the virtual group meets the metaphor of a gathering place, which describes a substantial social interaction in virtual space. In the findings, over one-half of the messages are replies to previous messages, and this proves active social interaction.

Berdal (2004) evaluated the speech situation, participation and access, and public will formation in three newspaper’s online forums. Regarding the speech situation, the three forums failed to facilitate free discourse, for the reasons that the rule enforcement was not transparent enough, and participants had less freedom in setting their own agenda (Berdal 2004, 116). Regarding participation and access, the three online forums excluded blind people; moreover, the real-name system reduced access of some kinds of users (Berdal 2004, 117). Regarding public will-formation, the three forums had external impact on other public areas, which enable transmitting “better arguments” in the online forums into “the decision-making core of societies” (Berdal 2004, 118). And the external impact was conducted through “members of political parties, and / or even in direct affiliation with decision making institutions” (Berdal 2004, 118).

Fuchs (2006) conducted a content analysis on political online debate in Politik-forum.at. in Austria. The empirical findings indicate that the levels of interaction and plurality are high in the online debate; however, the levels of justification and empathy are low.
In order to determine the usefulness of the online virtual sounding boards enabling deliberation, Wilhelm’s (2009) study on America Online’s “Washington Connection” indicate that the virtual sounding board fails to provide viable space for deliberative democracy (Wilhelm 2009, 319-321). There are two negative findings. First, participants in the online forum preferred expressing themselves than responding to others. Second, discourses in the forum were extremely hostile to the government. One positive finding is that the level of rational argument is relatively high. Moreover, Wilhelm (2009) related the findings to other characteristics of the public sphere. He indicates that universal participants cannot be guaranteed and the anonymous nature of cyberspace creates uncertainty for deliberative discussion (Wilhelm 2009, 334).

Contrary to Wilhelm’s conclusion, by assessing the online forum of Radicali Italiani and online campaign in the French town of Issy-les-Moulineaux, Kies (2010, 165) indicates that the evaluation results refute the statement that “the online debates cannot, by definition, be deliberative discursive contexts.” According to Kies’ (2010, 165) findings, the online expressions are justified, and the deliberation has not lead to polarization of opinions. Kies (2010, 165) concludes that “the online debates are just another discursive context that, like other discursive context, can in certain circumstances lead to deliberative debate.”

Kies and Wojcik (2010) made an evaluation on the online forum of The European Citizen’s Consultation project, which attracts “the attention of a rather high number of citizens and to favor numerous transnational exchanges and a good level of interaction (reciprocity)” (Kies and Wojcik 2010, 209). Moreover, online discussions in the forum were respectful and the expressions were justified. Only few participants put forward proposals, and the online forum only tended to attract people who were already interested in EU issues (Kies and Wojcik 2010, 209). Kies and Wojcik are satisfied with the research result, and they consider that the online forum could be improved in the future.
Xia, Chan and Peng (2008) make a quantitative content analysis on the Chinese online forum, *Guangzhou Daily* website. They have sampled 380 sets of posts drawn from 79,492 sets of posts from 2001 to 2006. The coding is based on four research queries. The first query is the quantity of participants and posts. The second query is the topic diversity. They argue that diversity of ideals is vital to the improvement of understanding in deliberation. The third query is critical-rational dimension of the posts. And the fourth query is the interaction among participants. According to their investigation, they found that Chinese net users have become more and more active; however, the level of topic diversity is low, and the discourses lack rationality (Xia, Chan and Peng 2008, 762-763).

From the above empirical research, it can be seen that researchers keep different attitudes towards this situation. Researchers, like Wilhelm, are relatively negative, while researchers, like Kies, are positive that “the online debates are just another discursive context that, like other discursive context, can in certain circumstances lead to deliberative debate (Kies 2010, 165).” Moreover, according to the study on the Chinese online forum, it can be seen that the Chinese net users has become more and more active.

Another kind of empirical research relating to online deliberation focused on exploring how to make online deliberation possible. More empirical research in this field will be introduced in Section 4.3.2.

By comparing discussions in 28 online forums, Karlsson (2010, 153) concludes that high level of engagement and conflicted opinions are two important factors for successful online deliberation. Moreover, some scholars argue that online voting may decrease the level of engagement in online discussion; however, in Karlsson’s finding, the level of deliberation is not related with the level of voting (Karlsson 2010, 153).

In order to make online deliberation more influential on policy-making,
Stromer-Galley, Muhlberg and Webb (2010, 238) argue that state and government agencies must become more interested and willing to hear deliberative comments from the public.

### 3.4 Online communication on Weibo

By introducing previous studies on online deliberation, the author will introduce previous research on online communication on Weibo in this section.

Svensson (2014, 179) considers that at the cognitive level, the greatest impact of Weibo might be that “it has enabled people to share sentiments and concerns which used to be hidden from the public view”. According to Svensson’s (2014, 173) study on the demography of Weibo, micro-blog users are “mainly young, urban, and middle class, and geographically concentrated in the coastal regions”. Moreover, some topics, like corruption, right defense, power abuse, and environmental issue, have attracted a lot of attention in recent years on Weibo (Svensson 2014, 178). Additionally, compared with opinion leaders, including critical journalists, lawyers, public intellectuals, bloggers and businessmen, ordinary citizens and marginalized groups do not have the same kind of impact on Weibo or in society (Svensson 2014, 180). In order to make ordinary citizens and marginalized groups’ voice to be heard, opinion leaders need to speak for them (Svensson 2014, 180). Conclusively, Svensson (2014, 180) argues that the Chinese cyberspace is “dynamic and rapidly changing”, and Chinese net users adopt new technologies “for both personal communication, professional use and public debate”.

By studying the moral discussion, the death of Xiaoyueyue, on Weibo, Wang (2013) finds out that participants in the discussion are rational and are able to negotiate. In Wang’s research, the online discussion happens in the comment section. Wang (2013, 386) argues that “commenting allows Weibo users to experience and interact with
alternative (and often different) views and perspectives.” Wang has adapted frame analysis to interpret the comments. And he has coded the comments in four frames, which are rescue frame, social responsibility frame, polling frame and expression frame.

Tong and Zuo (2013) studied communication about two “mass incidence” on Weibo. They indicate that there are two modes of online communication on Weibo, which are one-way communication and two-way communication (Tong and Zuo 2013, 66). The former mode is initiated by local residents; the latter mode is initiated by both local residents and national elites (Tong and Zuo 2013, 66). They consider that the latter mode has more impact on decision-making than the former one, for the reason that national elites act as important leverage (Tong and Zuo 2013, 81). Additionally, they argue that “the more resonance with the events the national public and intellectuals have, the bigger impact online communication has on government legitimacy in general (Tong and Zuo 2013, 82).”

By studying the communication on Weibo, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2014, 13) conclude that “Weibo communication fulfills some of the core criteria of a public sphere such as open debates about issues of common concern, continuous debates and a large number of participants.” They argue for seven kinds of public sphere on Weibo, which are thematic public sphere, short-term public sphere, encoded public sphere, local public sphere, non-domestic public sphere, mobile public sphere, and meta public sphere (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2014, 13). Moreover, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2014, 13) indicate that Chinese net users are aware of the censorship from the government, and they react to it in creative ways, like using metaphors, insider jokes and so on.

According to the above empirical findings, net users on Weibo are active (Svensson 2014) and rational (Wang 2013), and they are interested in topics, such as corruption and environmental issue (Svensson 2014). Moreover, Weibo communication meets
some of the core criteria of a public sphere ((Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2014). Although the previous research argues for the possibility of deliberation Weibo, the real situation of online deliberation has been less studied.

### 3.5 Research gap

It can be seen from the above that the method of conducting empirical research in this field is a topic of discussion among scholars. It is still in the development phase (Kies 2010). Thus, future researchers’ aims should include improving the coding categories that measure the deliberativeness of discussions or debates in the real world, and applying this information to discussions and debates in various fields.

Yang (2014, 136) points out that although research on the Chinese Internet is thriving, the understanding of “its multidimensional character, its diverse forms and actors, and the complex and fluid dynamics of contestation surrounding it” is limited. This is due to two reasons. First, rather than focusing on meaning and people, more focus has been put on technology development (Yang 2014, 136). Second, there is a bias towards “sweeping and dichotomous analytical categories, such as state vs. netizens, politics vs. entertainment, and authoritarian vs. democracy” (Yang 2014, 136). Yang (2014, 136) considers that it is unnecessary to discuss the assumption of a black-or-white world with no grey zone, for the reason that the era of moral purity is gone. Instead, Yang (2014, 141) emphasizes that studies regarding “people’s practical, perceptual and moral experiences as well as in the context of institutions and policies” call for deeper analysis.

Moreover, the Chinese political context is different from the Western’s. How possible is online deliberation on Weibo in the PRC? What problems does online deliberation face in the PRC? What are the possible solutions? Answers for the above questions remain unknown. This research aims at exploring these answers.
4. Theoretical framework

In Chapter 2, the author answers why the contemporary Chinese social structure is potential for adapting online deliberation. In Chapter 3, some previous research argues for the possibility of online deliberation on Weibo. In this chapter, with the focus on ascertaining the extent to which the online discussion on Tencent Weibo platform in the PRC is being used for deliberative democracy of online discussion, the theory section will concentrate on deliberative democratic theories, which highlight the deliberative public discussion in virtual public space. Moreover, since the Chinese political context differs from that of the Western. He and Warren (2011) argue for the theoretical and practical possibility in the PRC.

In this chapter, the author will first introduce the concept of deliberative democratic theory in Section 4.1. Criticism and advantages of deliberative democracy are described in Section 4.2. Later, Section 4.3 offers situations of deliberative democracy in the Internet. At last, the new concept of authoritarian deliberation in the PRC is introduced in Section 4.4.

4.1 Normative theories of deliberative politics

Habermas puts forward a procedure for deliberative politics, and the process is based on the presumption that “reasonable and fair results are obtained” (Habermas 1994, 6).

“Practical reason withdraws from universal human rights, or from the concrete ethical substance of specific community, into the rules of discourse and forms of argumentation. In the final analysis, the normative content arises from the very structure of communication actor.” (Habermas 1994, 6)
According to Fishkin (1992), there are three important processes of face-to-face deliberation, which are information exchange, reflection on information in the discussion, and interactive rival arguments. Fishkin (1995) also points out that the process of discussion or debate will be less deliberative when arguments offered by some participants are unanswered and some participants are unwilling and unable to weigh some of the arguments.

Moreover, Chambers (2003) argues that deliberation is a reasonable and well-informed high quality discussion in which participants are willing to rethink their opinions. Moreover, deliberate democratic theory aims at exploring debates or arguments’ quality, substance and rationality.

In order to describe what the ideal type of deliberative politics precisely means, it is necessary to reconstruct its key elements. According to the author, there are six key characteristics of the deliberative model.

The first characteristic is equal participation of all citizens without constraints. As mentioned previously, Habermas (1994, 6) considers that practical reason is withdrew from “universal human rights or from the concrete ethical substance of specific community”. This indicates that those who are interested or are affected to one issue should be capable to participate in the discussion. Moreover, Habermas (1996, 299) argues for communicative freedom of citizens, which is supposed to have equal political influence with money and administrative power. At this normative situation, citizens are able to discuss with other citizens at any time and are able to express their attitudes, desires and needs freely.

The second characteristic is valid and logical justification. That is, participants present themselves in a logically coherent way. According to Habermas (1996, 322), “communicative action refers to a process of argumentation in which those taking part
justify their validity claims before an ideally expanded audience”. Sebeok’s interpretation on the process of argumentation is that “someone tries to convince someone of something by citing evidence and drawing, or suggesting, inferences from the evidence and from other beliefs and assumptions (hypotheses)” (Sebeok 1986, 50–51). For Sebeok, inference refers to certain connection between premises and conclusion (Sebeok 1986, 51). The tighter the connection is, the more coherent and reliable the justification is. Steiner et al. (2009, 21) argue that only when participants present their argumentations in logically coherent way, other participants can understand what the argumentations mean. It can be determined that “logical coherence is the basis for true deliberation” (Steiner et al. 2009, 21).

The third characteristic is reciprocity. That is, participants listen and react to argumentations presented by others. Wilhelm (1998, 329) indicates that there must be reciprocity in desired democracy. Kies (2010, 44) defines reciprocity as a basic condition for deliberation.

The fourth characteristic is mutual respect. That is, participants treat others with equal respect. According to Orlie (1994), all of us have our own standpoints, and it is hard for us to understand others’ positions. However, we should try to understand and respect each other. In other words, when facing opposite opinion, participants should keep favorable attitudes and maintain constructive interactions. Moreover, in the ideal deliberate mode, participants are willing to entertain opposite opinions by providing valid reasons and justifications (Ferree et al. 2002, 219). In return, other participants do not ignore but actively rebut (Ferree et al. 2002, 219). It can be determined that mutual respect promotes consensus-seeking discussion. In this process, the ability of rationality is needed; otherwise, consensus-seeking discussion can hardly become possible.

The fifth characteristic is the willingness of consensus building. That is, all participants are open-minded and can be persuaded by a better argument. Habermas
(1999, 940) speaks of “the forceless force of the better argument”. According to Steiner et al. (2009, 23), the better argument is considered as a common good in deliberative democracy. Additionally, the goal of ideal deliberation is to reach a consensus (Steiner et al. 2009, 23).

The sixth characteristic is sincerity. That is, participants present in a truthful way. Every participant must be willing to show his or her true preference and not mislead others in regard to their intentions (Steiner et al. 2009, 20). Kies (2010, 52) points out that “communication action requires sincerity and banish rhetorical forms of speech to the realm of strategic action”.

Briefly stated, according to the author’s interpretation on Habermas’ and other deliberative theorists’ works, deliberative politics is a procedural legitimacy, including: communication with equal and fair participation from all members; and deliberation is conducted through valid and logical discussion on public affairs in the public sphere; finally, a consensus is made and the government transforms it into legislation and administration.

4.2 Criticism VS. Advantage

From the above section, it can be seen that deliberative democracy provides equal opportunities for all members in a heterogeneous community to elucidate their opinions, needs and desires on public issues. Deliberation aims at morally reaching a consensus or a common good. However, the deliberative model has been criticized by many scholars. In Section 4.2.1, the author will introduce four main criticisms on deliberation. Then in Section 4.2.2, in order to explain why the deliberative model has been chosen to study, the author will introduce the advantages of deliberative democracy.
4.2.1 Criticisms of deliberative democracy

Some critics question whether deliberative democracy appeals to ordinary citizens. Sanders (1997) indicates that, in reality, to argue both equally and rationally is difficult for everyone to achieve. This is because some people have better argument skills, and some people are more easily persuaded. Moreover, there are certain groups of disadvantaged people that are already underrepresented in formal politics, such as women, children, and racial minorities. In order to reach deliberation, equal resources and guarantees for equal participation are needed. However, this is rather difficult to achieve, and, consequently, it discredits the ground view of deliberative democracy that everyone can equally argue rationally and reasonably. Hence, Sanders considers that another more plausible and reachable model, instead of deliberation, needs to be envisioned.

Gabardi (2001) maintains the same position as Sanders. Deliberative democracy focuses more on the equal communication process than the results. However, Gabardi argues that deliberate models privilege formal and argumentative and dispassionate speech, which separates from the ascriptive characteristics of race, class, gender, lifestyle, and religion. Hence, it discriminates against less educated people. As a consequence, for Gabardi, deliberation does not have any contribution to redress social injustice.

Both Sanders and Gabardi question if deliberative democracy has positive influence on social justice. According to the author, the answer of this problem can only be found in empirical studies.

Another kind of criticism indicates that deliberative model is not suitable for “large-scale societies in which the political system is required to take numerous and urgent decision (Kies 2010, 33)”. Since there is no enough time for deliberation, these critics consider that the deliberative model is not feasible in reality. On the contrary,
Gutmann and Thompson (2004) consider that debate should not only be taken in the form of deliberation; instead, other decision-making process, like bargaining and secret political decision, should go together with deliberation. They emphasize that the decision-making process “should be justified at some point in the deliberative process (Kies 2010, 33).” According to Kies (2010, 33), this viewpoint is shared by most of the deliberative theorists, for the reason that they agree with the fact that “deliberation is considered to be a process aiming at a decision that is binding for some period of time.”

The third kind of criticism on deliberative democracy is that the model of deliberative democracy is an illusion, and the critics doubt the very ground of deliberation. Mouffe (1999) bases her criticism of deliberative democracy on her reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Lacan. According to Wittgenstein (1969), the procedure of reaching agreement is not neutral, for the reason that agreement is based on shared forms of life rather than neutral rules and principles in discussion. Thus, Mouffe (1999) considers that the persuasion in deliberation is more like power game. Moreover, According to Mouffe’s interpretation, Lacan points out that “only through the intervention of a master signifier that a consistent field of meaning can emerge” (Mouffe 1999, 751). And Mouffe (1999, 751) argues that this opinion undermines the very basis of Habermaian view of ideal speech situation. Hence, Mouffe questions the possibility of deliberation. Furthermore, Mouffe (1999, 753) points out that the linkage between legitimacy and power is weak in deliberative model. She considers that “democracy requires that the purely constructed nature of social relations finds its complement in the purely pragmatic grounds of the claims to power legitimacy” (Mouffe 1999, 753). In other words, there should not be a gap between power and legitimacy in democratic politics. That is why Mouffe considers that the deliberative democracy fails to provide an adequate model in democratic politics.

Additionally, Sunstein (2002) and Shapiro (1999) argue that deliberation might not bring people together; instead, it is more possible that deliberation may increase
polarization. However, both Sustein and Shapiro’ criticisms are not based on empirical findings.

Steiner et al. (2009, 39) consider that whether it is possible to have any degree of deliberative politics is an empirical question. The author agrees with Steiner et al. that this discussion should be supported with empirical findings.

4.2.2 Advantages of deliberative democracy

After introducing some representative criticisms on deliberative democracy, the author will discuss the advantages of deliberative model by comparing it with liberalism and republicanism.

According to Chambers (2003, 308), unlike other traditions of democracy, such as liberal democracy, deliberative democracy focuses more on accountability and discussion rather than voting. It is more talk-centric. Accountability in deliberative democracy refers to “publicly articulating, explaining and most importantly justifying public policy” (Chambers 2003, 308). Moreover, in voting-centric views, democracy is the competition of fixed preference and interests via fair mechanism of aggregation. On the contrary, “deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precedes voting” (Chambers 2003, 308).

In the tradition of liberal individualism, the expression of private interests is considered to be the core value. On the contrary, rather than self-seeking in liberal individualism, in deliberation, “private individuals become public-oriented citizens” (Dahlberg 2001, 167). Deliberative tradition “assumes that an ideally conducted public discourse should produce a gradual consensus over time” (Ferree et al. 2002, 221). In other words, participants are encouraged to think in terms of common good rather than private good.
In the republican tradition, “the citizens should ideally be involved in all of the decisions that concern the state (Kies 2010, 22).” Habermas (1998, 244) considers that republican democracy has the advantage of preserving “the radical meaning of a society that organizes itself through the communicatively united citizens.” However, this idealistic advantage of republicanism may lead to the situation that “the democratic process dependent on the virtues of the citizens devoted to the public wealth” (Habermas 1998, 244).

Moreover, republicanism purely depends on the communitarian approach (Kies 2010, 22). While in communitarian tradition, “dialogue is intended to help discover an already existing common good”, democrats consider dialogue as “helping participants move towards understanding and agreement despite their differences” (Dahlberg 2001, 167). However, such communitarian approach is not adapted to the complex society (Kies 2010, 23). Compared with republicanism, deliberative model is measured by “presuppositions and procedures which for their part are in need of rational, indeed normative, justification from the standpoint of justice (Habermas 1998, 245).”

The above three approaches lead to different understanding of the democratic process (Kies 2010, 22). And all the three democratic models have been criticized in different ways. Here, the author will introduce why deliberative model is more desirable than others.

First, compared with republicanism and liberalism, deliberative democracy is more suitable for the complex society. Kies (2010, 31) argues that “the deliberative model does not require a purely direct form of sovereignty (republicanism) nor does it require a purely representative form of democracy (liberalism).” The author agrees with Kies that deliberative model promotes the decentralized communication between the “legally institutionalized will-formation and mobilized culturally mobilized publics” (Kies 2010, 31).
Second, the acceptance and legitimacy of a collective decision are increased in deliberative democracy. People who are unsatisfied with what they get have the opportunity to discuss and to modify (Kies 2010, 31). The author agrees with Kies that because of the virtues of equal participation and valid arguments in deliberation, deliberative democracy increases the acceptance and legitimacy of collective decision.

Third, deliberative democracy increases the possibility of developing a public spiritedness. The process of deliberation not only encourages participants to “take broader perspectives on questions of common interests” (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, 11), but also “can expand their knowledge, including both their self-understanding and their collective understanding of what will best serve their fellow citizens” (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, 12). The author holds the same opinion with them that participants can learn from online discussion.

The above three reasons explain why the author consider deliberative democracy is more desirable than others.

4.3 Deliberative democracy in the Internet

Schikler (1994) determined that different kinds of media systems can produce different types of political participation. Newspapers, phones, broadcasting, television, and computers all have different influences on “the modes and the results of political interaction” (Buchstein 1997, 248).

According to Street (1997, 36), debates about electronic democracy “are debates about information, about how it is distributed and how it is used.” He argues that citizens’ ability to make rational political judgment depends on “the way in which
political information is delivered and received” (Street 1997, 37). Moreover, electronic democracy cannot exist by itself. It is necessary to place it in “accord with the way in which representation and legitimization operate within the wider political system” (Street 1997, 37). In other words, both the design of the online forum and the political system are essential for electronic democracy.

A key question of electronic democracy is, “What kind of democracy is being sought?” (Street 1997, 37). Many deliberative democracy proponents consider the Internet as the exemplary medium for facilitating the discursive space in which deliberative democracy relies (Dahlberg 2001, 168). They consider that online discussions in virtual communities, like usenet groups and online forums, involve rational and critical discourses expected by the deliberative model (Dahlberg 2001, 168).

### 4.3.1 Criticisms of deliberative democracy in the Internet

The possibility of online deliberation is a controversial issue. While some scholars believe that the Internet has brought hope to online deliberation, other scholars question the Internet’s ability in promoting online democratic discourse.

Habermas, one of the foremost representatives of deliberative democracy, maintains a rather skeptical attitude toward the Internet. He points out that the Internet has reactivated “the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers” (Habermas 2006, 423). Furthermore, he considers that the Internet “counterbalances the seeming deficits that stem from the impersonal and asymmetrical character of broadcasting” (Habermas 2006, 423). However, while admitting that online discussion has “subversive effects under authoritarian regimes,” (Habermas 2006, 423) he further points out, “Its structure is not suited to focusing on the attention of a dispersed public of citizens who form opinions simultaneously on the same topics and contributions which have been scrutinized and filtered by experts” (Cited from
Habermas (2006) thinks that the web forums and usenet groups fragment people into separate groups, and this presents no help in establishing a consistent integrated public sphere guided by experts.

However, some younger theorists disagree with Habermas’ skeptical attitude on the Internet. Bessant argues that although the political usages of the Internet “do not always confirm to the account of the ‘public sphere’ proposed by Jurgen Habermas, they do point to new kinds of public sphere” (Bessant 2014, 38).

Albrecht (2006, 64) argues that there are many obstacles for equal participation in online deliberation. The first kind of obstacle is “digital divide” (Albrecht 2006, 64). The second kind of obstacle is the unequal chance to be heard online, for the reason that “the discourse online is constrained in ways similar to the offline world (Albrecht 2006, 64).”

Online deliberative democracy proponents consider that the Internet provides multiple channels for people to get information. And this is advantageous for online deliberation. However, Wisniewski (2013, 254) argues that the digital technology cannot provide net users with diverse ideas, for the reason that the new technology tends to provide “individually filtered information- and new-streams.” Moreover, Wisniewski (2013, 252-253) considers that “the Internet is used more as an entertainment medium than as a civic tool” and there is no evidence to prove “that the Internet increases cross-cutting exposure to diverse political ideas for a large percentage of the public.”

However, the author disagrees with Wisniewski. Although individuals may receive individually filtered information, individuals are different from each other. There still will be diverse opinions when different individuals come together and deliberate. Moreover, the positive influence of the Internet on political participation cannot be
denied, such as easy access to information, space of flow and so on.

Some scholars find out that the online debates can lead to deliberative debates in some circumstances. In the following section, the author will introduce key factors that may make online deliberation possible.

**4.3.2 How can online deliberation be possible?**

First, the author will introduce key factors, which may make the online deliberation possible, in micro level. These factors are obtained through empirical studies.

Kies (2010, 165) argues that social-demographic characteristics of the participants, the participative culture of the online forum, the discursive architecture, the nature of the topic and the external impact of the online debate are the key circumstances that lead to the successful deliberation in the research. Moreover, Kies (2010, 165) emphasizes that the external impact is the most prominent factor among them. Kies’ finding suggests that “the forums that are perceived as having a strong political impact are more likely to be characterized by respectful and reciprocal exchanges and to encourage its active and passive users to revise critically their own opinions and beliefs” (Kies 2010, 165).

Cindio and Peraboni (2010) propose three necessary dimensions for designing deliberative digital habit. The first one is participatory contract that the social actors commit to follow (Cindio and Peraboni 2010, 43). The contract rules “the ongoing interplay between online and offline activities (Cindio and Peraboni 2010, 43).” The second one is social structure, which decides the roles and policies of online discussions (Cindio and Peraboni 2010, 43). The third one is in the dimension of technology. The designer of online deliberation “has to choose the technologies to be
adopted for enabling the envisaged social environment” (Cindio and Peraboni 2010, 43).

Regarding digital platform of online deliberation, Liddo and Shum (2010) have used planning theory to guide their design on online deliberation. They argue that,

“Supporting deliberation across communication time means enabling synchronous and asynchronous communication in the same deliberation process, that is to say using information gathered with online deliberation tools to inform face-to face deliberation meetings and vice-versa. Supporting deliberation across communication modes means enabling both co-located and dispersed stakeholders to be involved in planning discussion and to be informed on results of planning conversations. Finally supporting deliberation across communication environments means enabling integration between online and offline deliberation spaces i.e. using face-to face meeting results to inform web-consultation experiences and vice-versa.” (Liddo and Shum 2010, 30)

In their research, in order to fulfill the above three criteria, Liddo and Shum (2010, 33) have developed a hypermedia tool called FM, which is “an integration between Compendium and a videoconferencing tool.” According to their result, hypermedia tool successfully makes the online discussion more persistent, coherently structured and participatory.

From the above, it can be seen that in order to make online deliberation possible, efforts need to be done in various aspects, such as design of the online platform, design of deliberative digital habit and so on. In the following part, the author intends to introduce other factors in the macro level by citing works from Habermas (2006) and Dahlberg (2010).

Habermas (2006) argues for two critical conditions for mediated political communication that can facilitate deliberate legitimate process. For Habermas, the media for mediated political communication include not only the Internet, but also
television, broadcasts, newspapers and so on. The first necessary condition is: “A self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments. The second condition is that “anonymous audiences grant a feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society” (Habermas 2006, Abstract).

Regarding the first condition, the media should not be controlled by any economic or administrative power; instead, a responsible press should provide the public with “reliable news and alternative interpretations through channels of an intermedia agenda setting” (Habermas 2006, 421). For the second condition, the public sphere needs a voice from citizens regarding social problems and responses from elites to these social problems. Habermas considers that in the deliberation process the interaction between the public and elites is necessary.

Dahlberg argues that “significant intervention, funding, and support from government and public interests” are needed to put online deliberation into practice (Dahlberg 2010, 629). “Significant intervention” refers to the fact that the online space for discussion should be free from economic and administrative power and should be protected by regulations to ensure participants’ rights to deliberation. “Funding” is needed to establish the online space. A new web-based system for online deliberation needs to be founded. Moreover, sufficient funding enables the space to resist incorporation of economic and administrative power. “Support from government and public interests” is essential for the establishment of the online space for deliberation, because it “not only secures this regulatory and financial support but also helps with the development and improvement of deliberative spaces” (Dahlberg 2010, 629).

**4.5 Authoritarian deliberation in the PRC**

The political tradition of deliberation in the Chinese history has been introduced in Chapter 2. However, compared with the ancient China, both social and political
backgrounds have changed in the PRC. Is deliberation still possible in the new social and political context? Moreover, the government’s role in the authoritarian PRC is different from that of the Western countries. Thus the procedural legitimacy of deliberation in the PRC is different from how the Western scholars suppose in the Western political context. In this chapter, the author will introduce how He and Warren (2011) argue for the theoretical and practical possibility of deliberation in the authoritarian country, the PRC.

4.5.1 Deliberation and democracy

According to He and Warren (2011, 270), “the linkages between democracy and deliberation are contingent rather than necessary.” He and Warren (2011, 269) consider that although deliberation and democracy are always connected to each other, they are distinct phenomena.

Democracy “involves the inclusion of individuals in matters that potentially affected them, realized through distributions of empowerments such as votes and rights (He and Warren 2011, 271).” In democracy, decisions are the consequence of voting or vote-based authorization of representatives, not deliberation (He and Warren 2011, 272). In other words, voting has an implicit role in the democratic process.

Based on He and Warren’s interpretation of Habermas and Goodin, although deliberation often leads to a decision, deliberation “is about discovery and persuasion, and is not in itself a decision-making procedure” (He and Warren 2011, 272). In other words, in deliberation, discussion occurs prior to voting.

Comparing the concepts of democracy and deliberation, deliberation is a mode of communication involving persuasion-based influence, while democracy refers to distribution of the power of decision-making.
In the above, the differences between deliberative influence and decision-making are shown. Moreover, it becomes clear that deliberation and democracy are different in theory.

4.5.2 The concept of authoritarian deliberation

The concept of authoritarianism is opposite to the concept of democracy. Rather than deliberation, command is the ideal mean of authoritarian rule (He and Warren 2011, 271). He and Warren (2011, 271) consider two reasons why those ruled accept commands from the ruling class when authoritarian rule exists. The first reason is that authoritarian leadership originated from traditions; the second reason is that the ruled accept the reasons provided by the ruling class. They consider that when the ruling class decides to use deliberation as “a means to form performances and policies (He and Warren 2011, 271),” deliberation is theoretically possible in an authoritarian country.

Practically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has adapted the concept of deliberation.

“In 2005 Li Junru, Vice President of the Central Party School, openly advocated deliberative democracy—as did the Central Party School’s official journal, Study Times, which published an editorial endorsing a deliberative polling experiment in Zeguo, Wenling. In 2006, ‘deliberative democracy’ was endorsed in the People’s Daily, the official document of the Central Party Committee, as a way of reforming the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). And in 2007, the official document of the 2007 Seventeenth Party Congress specified that all major national policies must be deliberated in the CPPCC” (He and Warren 2011, 276).

It can be seen from the above that, in 2005, 2006 and 2007, articles regarding the application of the deliberation process were published in the guiding journals and official documents of the CCP.
Different from democratic deliberation, under authoritarian conditions, “deliberation should identify persuasive influence about matters of common concern under a wide variety of non-ideal settings” (He and Warren 2011, 272). Furthermore, unlike democracy where the power of decision-making is distributed, in authoritarianism, the power of decision-making is concentrated among the ruling class (He and Warren 2011, 272).

Authoritarian deliberation is a process in which participants “deliberate on an issue, influencing one another through persuasion and generating a common position which all find acceptable”, then political authorities “make a decision that reflects and accepts” the substance of the deliberation” (He and Warren 2011, 273). In other words, the power of decision-making is in the hands of authority, but the decision is borrowed from deliberation.

However, by evaluating six deliberative meetings in the Price Public Hearing Meeting, Zhang (2013, 159) indicated that although “the state’s hegemonic articulations are questioned and challenged”, the deliberation capacity was low in the six meetings, for the reason that the meeting has no binding effects on policy making, and the meeting serves more like a consultative meeting.

The author considers that Zhang’s empirical finding is a positive sign that “the state’s hegemonic articulations are questioned and challenged” (Zhang 2013, 159). According to the author, this is the premise of authoritarian deliberation. And the author believes that the problem of low binding effects on policy making can be solved as long as the PRC government is willing to do so.

4.5.3 Authoritarian deliberation on the Chinese Internet

Jiang (2010) argues that the PRC is an interesting case through which to examine
public deliberation online, since the net population is huge. By using the concept of authoritarian deliberation, Jiang (2010) proposes four types of online spaces of authoritarian deliberation: central propaganda spaces, government-regulated commercial spaces, emergent civic spaces, and international deliberative spaces.

Central propaganda spaces refer to “online spaces where the Chinese government asserts its presence through government websites and other official online media” (Jiang 2010). Central propaganda spaces include official government website and other official online media, for example, the Chinese e-government website, Xinhuanet, China Central Television online, China National Radio online and so on. According to Jiang (2010), the state control on these websites is easier to achieve. The content is under control by the “guidance of public opinion,” and is filtered by state employed “Internet police.”

Government-regulated commercial spaces refer to “commercial websites (which) have been inconsistently regulated by Internet companies following government directives” (Jiang 2010). This kind of website includes blogs, online forums, and social network sites, like Tencent Weibo. Compared with central propaganda spaces, these commercial spaces are much more open because regulating a tremendous number of websites is relatively difficult (Jiang 2010). According to the report made by China Internet Network Information Center in 2009, these Internet companies are ordered to follow state directives such as the Administration of Internet Electronic Messaging Services Provisions and Administration of Internet Information Services Provisions (both issued in 2000) and the Administration of Internet News and Information Services Provisions (effective in 2005). However, although commercial Internet firms have kept a watchful eye over users, “the finer details of how to interpret and implement government filtering directives are left to the companies themselves” (Jiang 2010).

Emergent civic spaces refer to “online spaces where NGOs, civic groups and
organizations deliberate and coordinate collective actions around shared interests and values, relatively independent of the state and the market” (Jiang 2010). Compared with the above two kinds of spaces, emergent civic spaces are weak sectors.

International deliberate spaces refer to spaces that have not been blocked by the Chinese government and which “bridge China and the outside world and mediate public opinion between them” (Jiang 2010).

The author argues that the government-regulated commercial spaces are the most possible spaces for online deliberation. First, according to the author, net users are more active in the government-regulated commercial spaces, like Weibo. Second, compared with central propaganda spaces, the censorship in the government-regulated spaces is relatively weak.

Jiang (2010) considers that “online public deliberation may improve civil liberties and political participation”, since participants acquire “knowledge, skill, and experience sharing information, building connections, and engaging in collective actions.” Moreover, Jiang (2010) believes that the online deliberation may flourish to improve governance in the PRC.
5. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology of the research will be introduced. In Section 5.1, the author explains why a single case study has been conducted in this research. Then in Section 5.2, the research design of this study is discussed in detail. How data are collected and analyzed will be shown. After introducing the data collection and analysis, the representativeness of the data will be discussed in Section 5.3, and the limitations of the research will be addressed in Section 5.4. Finally, the ethical considerations of the research are provided in Section 5.5.

5.1 Research strategy

5.1.1 A case study

In the research, the author has used the methodology of a case study, which is “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context.” (Creswell 1998, 61)

Yin proposes two critical features of a case study: “A case study is an empirical inquiry that 1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life situations, especially when 2) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2009, Chap.1). According to Yin, conducting a case study is an in-depth study on a real-life phenomenon within the contextual conditions. In this research, the author has studied the online discussion of GM foods in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo. (The case was introduced in Section 2.2.2)

Furthermore, the focus of the method of case study is “the nature flow of behavior without controls or manipulations by the researcher” (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 111).
In the case study, the author has no control on the discussion behavior. The research aims at measuring how deliberate the online discussions are.

### 5.1.2 Single case study

There are always risks in conducting a single case study. First, a single case study always reflects the uniqueness and artificial conditions surrounding the case (Yin 2009, Chap. 2). This may lead to misinterpretation in generalization. Second, analytic conclusions arising from a single case study are less powerful than that from multiple case studies (Yin 2009, Chap. 2). However, this does not indicate that it is not worth doing a single case study.

The first rationale for choosing a single case study is that the selected case is unique. Nowadays, millions of online discussions or debates are taking place in the PRC; however, other cases are not as meaningful as the one the author selected. The case has successfully aroused the Chinese government’s attention. Only a few online discussions have such a significant effect. Hence, the author considers this to be a unique case.

Second, although the case is relatively unique, it is also representative. In recent Chinese online society, large numbers of online discussions take place every day in a Weibo platform. The discussion in the case is one of them.

The third rationale of conducting a single case study is that the case is revelatory. In previous sections, the inquiry of empirical study on deliberative democracy has been emphasized. Only a few studies have assessed the quality of deliberation on online discussions in the context of Chinese society. Moreover, no study has been conducted to measure online discussions in a Weibo platform. In order to provide empirical evidence for the discussion of deliberative democracy in the PRC, more empirical
studies need to be done.

5.2 Research Design

A research design refers to a logical model that leads “the investigator in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting observations” (Nachmias and Nachmias 1992, 77-78; Yin 2009, Chap. 2). For empirical studies on deliberation, the study focus is “at what quality of deliberation such talks occur” (Steiner et al. 2009, 47). In order to meet this target, two kinds of data have been collected in this research, online discussion and interviews. In this section, the author introduces the data collection and analysis of the online discussion in Section 5.2.1; next the author introduces the data collection and analysis of the interviews in Section 5.2.2.

5.2.1 Data collection and analysis of the online discussion

In order to clarify the processes of data collection and analysis, the method of observation is introduced in Section 5.2.1.1. Subsequently, the sampling process is shown in Section 5.2.1.2, and finally, the coding category of Discourse Quality Index, which is used for data analysis, is displayed in Section 5.2.1.3.

5.2.1.1 Unobtrusive observation

During the process of data gathering, the author has played as an unobtrusive observer, who “tries to avoid influencing the participants” (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 120). The reason of doing unobtrusive observation is to minimize the influence of the author.

5.2.1.2 Sampling of the online discussions

The research aims at measuring how deliberate the online discussions are. However,
because of the limitation of time and human resources, it is impossible to study all the online discussions. Hence, it is necessary to determine a research sample of the online discussions.

As previously mentioned, in this case, the author has no control over the online behaviors of the discussions. In this kind of situation, in order to improve the levels of confidence and generalizability of the findings, the selected sample should be as representative as possible (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 122).

According to Graziano and Raulin in the sample selection, researchers must distinguish between the population and the sample, and distinguish among general population, target population and accessible population (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 183).

According to Graziano and Raulin,

A **population** is the larger group of all people or objects of interest from which the researcher selects a sample. A **sample** is a smaller number of people or objects selected from the population and used in a study if the sample adequately represented the population... The **general population** is the group of all organisms, events and things in which we are interested. The **target population** is the subset in which the researcher is primarily interested... Target populations are not easily available...The **accessible population** is the group that you as a researcher can access (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 183).

**General population**

As mentioned in Section 2.2.1, the comment section of posts on Tencent Weibo is very similar to an online chat room; public discussions take place in these comment sections.

Wilhelm (1998, 329) indicates that there must be reciprocity in desired democracy, and reciprocity is less likely to occur in forums where participants do not respond to
others. The right to a response is necessary when democracy is desired. Net users who have commented on messages left by others are those who have responded to others. The messages include both posts and comments, and this is the premise of reciprocity. It is quite possible that democratic discussions take place in such websites.

Hence, in this research, according to the above definition, the author defines the general population as all the comments written by registered net users on Tencent Weibo.

**Target population and accessible population**

Since the author is particularly interested in online discussions of GM foods, in this research, the target population refers to all the comments related to the topic of GM foods written by registered net users on Tencent Weibo. However, the target population is still very large, and it is impossible to assess all the comments.

In this case, Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang put forward the online discussions. They have published many posts related to the topic of GM foods. According to the observations, there are large numbers of comments on posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang. Moreover, it is easy to access these comments. Hence, the author defines the accessible population as comments written by registered net users on posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo.

**The sample selection**

In this research, the method of sample selection is stratified random sampling, which means that researchers “draw separate random samples from each of several subpopulations” (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 185). The aim of stratified random
sampling is to compare differences among subpopulations, because “small variations in the distribution of these variables in a sample can have a large effect on the results” (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 185).

In this case, the online discussion was prompted by two celebrities, Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang. In order to see if the online behaviors of the participants would differ in the comments section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang, the author separated discussion behavior into two groups. The first group was comments in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui; the second group was comments in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Fang.

According to the above guidelines, 200 comments were selected from six posts from Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang, and three from each. The selection criterion of the six posts is random. And the topic of the six posts is GM foods. In total, 1200 comments were selected as the samples for this research.

According to Graziano and Raulin (2010, 123), when sampling behaviors, it is inadequate to have “single observation of behavior in a particular situation;” instead, the researcher should repeatedly sample behaviors in each situation. In order to improve the representativeness of the sampling, the sample of 200 comments has been repeatedly selected three times in each situation of online discussion under posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang.

The six posts are available in Appendix 1.

5.2.1.3 Online discussion analysis – Discourse Quality Index

In the theoretical framework section, it was indicated that the model of deliberative democracy is an ideal type. In order to connect the theory with empirical studies, a
measurement bridge between them is needed. Steiner et al. argue that such measurement should meet four criteria:

“(1) It should be theoretically grounded, (2) it should tap into observable phenomena, (3) it should be general, and (4) it should be reliable” (Steiner et al. 2009, 53). In order to have reliable data and to convince both theorists and empirical scholars, the measurement needs to be theoretically grounded and should tap into observable discourse behavior. Moreover, Steiner et al. point out that “an ideal measure of discourse quality should be general, so that it can be transported from one research domain to another” (Steiner et al. 2009, 53).

Steiner et al. constructed an instrument to meet the four criteria that measures the discourse quality, the Discourse Quality Index (DQI). Steiner et al. view deliberation as a “continuum,” and the “real act of deliberation can be placed on a continuum that runs from no deliberation, at one extreme, to ideal deliberation, at the other extreme” (Steiner et al. 2009, 55). By using this instrument, the answer to how closely the real act of discussion is to the ideal speech act can be measured.

In this research, the author has used the method of Discourse Quality Index from Steiner et al. to measure the online discussions of GM foods in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo. The DQI is used for measuring the offline parliamentary discussions. The sample in this research is the online discussion, and its form of participation and discussion platform are rather different from offline parliamentary discussions; hence, the DQI is not that suitable in this research. In order to make it more suitable for analyzing the sample in this research, the author has adjusted the coding categories.

The design of the coding category is based mainly on the six characteristics of the model of deliberation; moreover, in order to make the coding category more suitable for measuring online discussions, the author has combined ideas in Section 4.4, the third trend of electronic democracy, with the coding system. However, two
characteristics of the model of deliberation have not been chosen as indicators in DQI for the following reasons.

First, the level of equal participation has not been measured. In the chapter on theoretical framework, equal participation is one of the six key characteristics of the deliberation model. Equal participation refers to providing people with equal opportunity to participate in online discussion. On Tencent Weibo, as long as one is a registered user, opinions and comments on other’s discourses can be made. Therefore, the design of Tencent Weibo already meets the requirement of equal participation. As a result, the author will not use this angle to measure the online discussions.

However, this does not indicate that the platform of Tencent Weibo entirely meets the requirement of equal participation. The exclusion group consists of those who are not registered on Tencent Weibo. But these people are not the target group in this research.

Second, the level of sincerity has not been measured. “To judge if a speech act is truthful is to make a judgment about a person’s true versus their stated preferences” (Steiner et al. 2009, 56). However, it is extremely difficult to measure because true preferences can hardly be directly observed. Moreover, indirect observation is also not suitable. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) argue that the assessment of truthfulness can be done by measuring the level of consistency and coherence. If a speech lacks consistency and coherence, then the speech has a low level of truthfulness. However, Steiner et al. (2009) questioned this alternative, because low education background and other factors can also decrease the level of consistency and coherence. Since the level of truthfulness can hardly be observed from both direct and indirect ways, it has not been measured in this research.
Coding category of the Discourse Quality Index

The category of DQI includes the following dimensions: interaction, information distribution and use, rational and logical expression, mutual respect, and consensus building. Examples of the five indicators are shown in Appendix 4.

Unit of analysis

According to Steiner et al. (2009, 55), the unit of analysis in DQI is “speech,” which refers to “the public discourse by a particular individual delivered at a particular point in a debate.” In other words, a “speech” is a series of discourses on specific topics made by one debate participant.

In this case, the online discussion is performed in the form of comments, and the comments meet the standard of “speech.” If one comment includes more than one topic, different topic units are coded separately.

As mentioned above, deliberation is considered as a “continuum” and real speech can fall anywhere in the continuum. By studying the comments in the case, the author is able to analyze where the online discussions fall on the continuum.

DQI

Reciprocity

The first indicator of the coding category is interaction among participants, which measures the responsiveness in the discussion. According to Fishkin (1995), the process of discussion or debate will be less deliberative when statements offered by some participants are unanswered and when some participants are unwilling and unable to weigh some of the statements. This indicator assesses the level of genuine activeness.
The two codes are:

1) Comment on the post: a message that is responding to and commenting on posts written by Mr. Cui or Mr. Fang.

2) Comment on others’ comments: a message that is responding to and commenting on comments written by other participants in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui or Mr. Fang.

**Information distribution and use**

For Street (1997, 36), debates about electronic democracy “are debates about information, about how it is distributed and how it is used.” He argues that citizens’ ability to make rational political judgment depends on “the way in which political information is delivered and received” (Street 1997, 37). Furthermore, Arendt (1977) points out that political discussion involves receiving as well as expressing. Expressing refers to providing information.

When seeking information, people only gather information that is necessary to make reasonable decisions (Wilhelm 1998, 319). The act of seeking information can help participants to gain better understanding on one issue or one topic, and to make reasonable decisions. It can be determined that the act of seeking information is rather important for reasonable decision making.

In the ideal model of deliberation, information provided in the discussion is enough for participants to gain a better understanding of the issue or topic. Steiner et al. (2009, 21) argue that “argumentation” in deliberation is a process in which “someone tries to convince someone of something by citing evidence and drawing, or suggesting, inferences from the evidence and from other beliefs and assumptions (hypotheses),” and the “argumentation” in form of counterfactual presuppositions helps participants gain better and broader views on public affairs.
Hence, to measure the acts in online discussion, it is important to discern how many of the postings are aimed at “seeking out, acquiring, filtering and exchanging information to increase awareness and understanding” (Wilhelm 1998, 319).

In order to measure both receiving and providing information, the codes are defined in the following way.

The two codes are:
1) Providing information: a message that is providing information to other participants, and the information can be facts, opinions and the like.
2) Seeking information: a message that includes evidence of information seeking in the form of queries, open-ended remarks and the like (Wilhelm 1998, 325).

However, in normal life, there are various ways of seeking information, such as reading, watching TV, surfing on the Internet, discussions with others and so on. Gathering information through discussion is one of the methods of information seeking. In order to better understand the act of seeking information, during the interviews, related questions were asked.

**Rational and logical expression**

The third dimension is rational and logical justification. Rationality means that participants’ expression should be based on solid cognitive reasoning (Dryzek 1990, 218) and participants can discuss with each other rationally. Moreover, good cognitive reasons refers to logical expressions enabling participants to understand each other in the right way. Hence, in order to measure rational and logical expression, the author will determine how often the expressions are supported with logical and rational reasons.

The three codes are:

65
1) Valid claim: a message, like an agreement, disagreement, criticism, that is supported with logical reason(s). For example: A participant says that X should (not) be done, and reason Y is given as to why X should (not) be done. Additionally, there is a logical connection between X and Y. If both X and Y are given, however, and there is no logical connection between X and Y, then it is an inferior claim. Also, the reason should not be subjective (Steiner et al. 2009, 57).

2) Inferior claim: a message, like an agreement, disagreement, criticism, that is supported with reason. However, it is not logical or rational, but rather subjective. For example: A participant says that X should (not) be done, and reason Y is given as to why X should (not) be done. If there is no logical connection between X and Y, then it is an inferior claim (Steiner et al. 2009, 57).

3) Non-valid claim: a message, like a compliment, scolding, or agreement, disagreement or criticism without providing any reason(s).

**Mutual respect**

The fourth dimension is mutual respect, which means that participants keep favorable attitudes and have constructive interactions when reading feedback, like disagreements or criticisms. In order to measure respect for each other, the author measure the expression to determine whether it included positive or negative content.

The three codes are (Steiner et al. 2009, 58):

1) No respect: a message that only includes negative statements, like scolding and the like.

2) Neutral: a message that neither includes positive nor negative statement.

3) Explicit respect: a message that includes at least one explicit positive statement, like a compliment.

In the ideal deliberate mode, participants are willing to entertain others’ opposite opinions by providing valid reasons and justifications. Hence, mutual respect is also
associated with rationality. The second indicator reflects both aspects, which is the dimension of mutual respect concerning counterarguments, and this type is only coded when and if there are one or more counterarguments (Steiner et al. 2009, 59).

The three codes are (Steiner et al. 2009, 59):

1) Counterargument included but degraded: speaker acknowledges the counterargument, but responses to it with no positive or negative statement, like a scolding.

2) Counterargument included – neutral: speaker acknowledges the counterargument, and responses to it with neither explicitly positive nor explicitly negative statement.

3) Counterargument included – valued: speaker acknowledges the counterargument, and responses with valid reasons, regardless if it includes positive or negative statements.

The two types of codes are quoted from Steiner et al.’s DQI, and for that reason, they are applicable in discussions taking place on Tencent Weibo. Unlike offline face-to-face debate, which is based on oral communication, online discussion is based on the written text. However, this difference does not influence the expression of respect. Hence, the author considers that the two indicators in the dimension of mutual respect can be quoted from Steiner et al.’s work.

Consensus building

The fifth dimension is consensus building, which means that participants are open-minded and can be persuaded by better decisions (Steiner et al. 2009, 23). Moreover, the aim of the participants is to reach consensus. In order to measure this, the following three codes are used (Steiner et al. 2009, 59):

1) Positional politics: speaker is unwilling to compromise or make consensus
building.

2) Alternative proposal: speaker proposes a mediating proposal that does not fit the current agenda.

3) Mediating proposal: speaker proposes a mediating proposal that fits the current agenda.

This code is also quoted from DQI and is similar to that of mutual respect. The author considers that it is applicable for measuring the online discussion.

In the above, the DQI in this research has been introduced. In the analysis section, data will be analyzed according to the DQI.

5.2.2 Data collection and analysis of interviews

The second kind of data is in-depth semi-structured interviews, which are conducted in online chat-rooms. Interviews are used as complementary data for the analysis of the online discussions. Some dimensions of the deliberation cannot be thoroughly examined by DQI; for example, the act of seeking information can be better analyzed with the support of interview materials. Hence, the interview is considered as an alternative method to compliment the shortages of DQI.

Moreover, by studying interviews, the author can understand net users’ perceptions on the online discussion, mainly in the aspect of the influence of discussion on personal preference, and participants’ attitudes toward net users who hold the same and different opinions.

In this section, the author first introduces the interview guidelines in Section 5.2.2.1, and then the selection of interviewees in Section 5.2.2.2. This section concludes with the analysis process of interviews in Section 5.2.2.3.


5.2.2.1 Interview guidelines

The interview guidelines are based on the ideal model of deliberative democracy. There are mainly four aspects to the questions, which are information use, attitudes toward other participants, the influence of the online discussion on self-preference, and the significance of the online discussion.

Information use

In DQI, the aspects of seeking and providing information have been analyzed. In the interviews, another two aspects were studied. The first one was how interviewees received information from other participants. The second one was, besides gathering information in discussion, other ways of seeking information. The following questions were asked during the interviews:

Q1. Have you looked at participants’ discourses in the opposite groups?
Q2. Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Q3. Have you looked at discourses from participants of the same group?
Q4: Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Q5. Where do you actively search for information on GMO?

Attitudes toward other participants

The mutual respect was coded in DQI. In interviews, the author investigated why the participants remained neutral, appreciative or impolite in the discussions. The following interview questions were asked:
Q6. When did you use neutral expressions? Why?

Q7. When did you use appreciative expressions? Why?

Q8. When did you use impolite expressions? Why?

Q9. How do you feel when others respond to you with neutral language?

Q10. How do you feel when others respond to you with appreciative language?

Q11. How do you feel when others respond to you with impolite language?

**Influence on self-preference**

In DQI, it is relatively difficult to examine the influence of the discussion on self-preference on GMO, because such influences can hardly be seen through simply discourse coding. Hence, in order to study the mental changes, the following questions were asked in the interviews:

Q12. Have opinions from the opposite attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?

Q13. Have opinions from the same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?

Q14. Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?

Q15. Will you compromise? Why?

**The significance of the online discussions**

To study the political potential of deliberation in online discussions, it is interesting to see how the online participants view it. The following questions were asked:

Q16. Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government’s decision? Why?
Q17. How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Q18. What are the advantages of online discussion on GMO?
Q19. What are the disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?

Question 16 aims at understanding how interviewees see the external impact of the online discussion.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and a translation of the interviews is provided in Appendix 3.

5.2.2.2 Selection of interviewees

The selection criterion on interviewees was that they had to be the writers of the selected 1200 comments. In total, 11 interviewees were randomly selected from the writers of the 1200 comments. Six of them were against of GM foods, and five of them supported GM foods. Information of interviewees is shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Information of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>Opinion group</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Far123a</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Anti GMO</td>
<td>2014-03-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu Bingyan</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Anti GMO</td>
<td>2014-04-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bard in Dawn</td>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Anti GMO</td>
<td>2014-04-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yangchunbaixue</td>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Anti GMO</td>
<td>2014-04-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailihe</td>
<td>A5</td>
<td>Anti GMO</td>
<td>2014-04-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangping</td>
<td>A6</td>
<td>Anti GMO</td>
<td>2014-04-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dou Zhiqiao</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Support GMO</td>
<td>2014-03-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PX</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Support GMO</td>
<td>2014-03-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liangzi</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Support GMO</td>
<td>2014-03-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinshi</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Support GMO</td>
<td>2014-03-27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the interviewee selection, the author ignored their education background, gender, and age. This does not mean that the author considers these offline backgrounds as unimportant factors. However, because of the word limitation, these factors will not be discussed in this research. This can be considered as one limitation of this research. However, in future research, the author will take these offline factors into consideration.

5.2.2.3 Interview analysis

In previous sections, the interview guidelines and selection of interviewees were addressed, and in this section the method of interview analysis will be presented. Analysis of interviews with participants was conducted by coding. This involved a total of four steps.

Step 1. Since the interviews were semi-structured, in order to make it possible for coding, the author first classified the information into 19 questions provided in the interview guideline.

Step 2. The author coded the interviewees’ answers to each question into different topic units, and repeated the step question by question.

Step 3. The author separated the units of question into three groups.

Step 4. The author identified connections and patterns among the categories.

5.3 Representativeness and reliability of the data

This section will address the representativeness of the sample collection (Section 5.3.1) and the reliability of the data analysis (Section 5.3.2).
5.3.1 Representativeness of the sample

The sample collected for online discussion analysis includes 1200 comments under the posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang. At first glance, 1200 comments might be a large sample; however, compared to the total number of the online comments from the general population, it is relatively small. There are over 300 million net users on Tencent Weibo, and countless online discussions took place every day. Moreover, compared with the total number of net users on Tencent Weibo, the number of interviewees is also small.

Hence, the author decided not to generalize the results in the sample to the general population; instead, the author the results were generalized to the accessible population, which are comments written by registered net users on posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo.

5.3.2 Reliability of the coding process

The author used the coding method of Discourse Quality Index to measure the sample of online discussion, and used the qualitative coding to analyze the interviews. During the coding process, the problem of subjectivity is unavoidable. Usually, in order to decrease the level of subjectivity, the coding needs to be done by more than one researcher. However, in the research, because of the human resource limitations, the author conducted the research alone.

5.4 Limitations of the research

The limitations of this research include shortcomings related to the aspects of single case study (Section 5.4.1 data collection (Section 5.4.2), the Discourse Quality Index (Section 5.4.3) and the coding process (Section 5.4.4).
5.4.1 Limitations of a single case study

One of the limitations of single case study is that the results can hardly be generalized to a broader level, because it is easier to have misinterpretations and less evidence than in studies using multiple cases (Yin 2009). In order to circumvent this limitation, the author did not generalize the study results to a broader level.

5.4.2 Limitations of data collection

As mentioned above, compared to the general population, the sample size is relatively small. This has decreased the representativeness of the sample. This is one limitation of the data collection in this research, which has influenced the potential generalization. The author decided not to generalize the results of the sample to the general population.

Moreover, in this research, the author only studied the participants of online discussions. This excludes the population who are unable to access the Internet. In the ideal model of deliberation, there should not be any population exclusions. However, to study the whole population was beyond the scope of this research.

Additionally, in this research, during the interviewee selection, the author disregarded educational background, gender, and age. This is the fifth limitation of this research, and in future research, the author will take these offline factors into consideration.

5.4.3 Limitations of DQI

One limitation of DQI is that it is taken from Habermas’ theory. Not every theorist accepts this theory’s framework. Many criticisms on the model of deliberation have been listed in the theoretical framework section of this thesis.
The second limitation of DQI is that it cannot examine every aspect of the model of deliberation, since deliberation is a more complex process than discursive discussion. The answer of how to establish a better and more thorough method needs to be determined in future research. In order to avoid this limitation, the author has used the method of interviews.

5.4.4 Limitations of the coding process

As discussed in Section 5.3.2, subjective interpretation in the coding process is unavoidable. Using more than one researcher can decrease this limitation. However, because of human resource limitations, the coding was only done by the author. This is one criticism of the empirical research on deliberation.

5.5 Ethical considerations

In this research, the author has conducted an unobtrusive observation, which means that “participants are not aware of being observed” (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 127). Ethical demands in this kind of research are as follows. First, it is researchers responsibility to assure that the observed must be protected from harm (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 127). Second, it should be able to give informed consent (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 127).

In order to evaluate the deliberativeness of the online discussion, two kinds of data have been collected, and they are online discussions and interviews. During the process of data collection, ethical issues were considered.

Graziano and Raulin (2010, 127) argue that some observation research “is so innocuous that consent may not be necessary”, for the reason that “people have no expectation of privacy in public setting”. Tencent Weibo is open to all net users. Thus, this research is innocuous, since it aims at observing behaviors in online public space.
Moreover, observation in the research do not make the observed uncomfortable.

However, Markham and Buchanan (2012) argue that people still have strong perceptions and expectations of privacy when operating in public spaces. Hence, Markham and Buchanan (2012) consider when collecting data in public areas, researchers need to protect the privacy of the target group.

In this research, the comments are public data on Tencent Weibo. Both registered and unregistered users can gain access to all comments. When the author entered the Tencent Weibo platform, she published a post, and stated that she was going to conduct research on the online discussion of GM foods. Moreover, in order to avoid potential harm from the third party, the content of the 1200 comments collected for the online discussion have not been revealed in this paper. In Appendix 4, some of the comments are displayed as examples of the coding. In order to protect the participants’ privacy, the names of the participants have not been shown.

Before doing interviews, the author have obtained the informed consent from all the interviewees. The author gained permission from all the interviewees to allow the content of the interviews to be used in this academic research. Moreover, interviewees’ real identities have not been revealed.
6. Analysis

In this chapter, the findings are introduced. Data collected from DQI and interviews have been analyzed together in similar terms. There are four units of analysis, which are interaction (Section 6.1), information distribution and use (Section 6.2), consensus building (Section 6.3), and mutual respect (Section 6.4).

According to the observation and data analysis, the situation of one comment including more than one topic did not appear in the sample. Hence, during the coding process, each comment is considered as one small unit of analysis.

Moreover, differences among the discussions in the comments section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang are not significant; hence, they have not been analyzed separately. All the 1200 comments in the sample have been analyzed holistically.

Additionally, according to the observation, in the research sample, Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang did not participate in the online discussion.

6.1 Interaction

The level of interaction of the participation needs to be examined, which is to say that the number of comments that were responded to needs to be determined. Relative statistics are shown in Table 2.
From Table 2, it can be seen that both the percentages of comments on post and on others’ comments are around 50%, and the percentage of comments on others’ comments is slightly higher than that of comments on the post. However, this situation does not indicate that all the comments on post were responded. Of the 634 comments, half of them responded to comments made by others. In other words, half of them are in the second or third round of counterargument. Hence, many comments on post were not responded to or answered.

### 6.1.1 Conclusion

The result is close to the findings of Sproull and Faraj (1995). In their analysis of six usenet groups, over one-half of the messages were replies to previous postings. This demonstrates social interaction, and they consider this to be the evidence for the
metaphor of a “gathering place” (Sproull and Faraj 1995, 69). The statistics shown in the sample also indicate that the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang is a good gathering place.

Wilhelm (1998) argues that there must be reciprocity in desired democracy. From the above findings, the level of response in the sample is moderate. Although not all the messages were aimed at responses from other participants, there were still considerable messages to which people did respond.

Fishkin (1995) indicates that the process of discussion or debate will be less deliberative when statements offered by some participants are unanswered and some participants are unwilling and unable to weigh some of the statements. Based on Fishkin’s view, the level of deliberativeness in the discussion decreased, because some statements were not answered. However, the situation is not negative, since there are still a considerable number of interactions in the comment section.

It can be concluded that the level of interaction was relatively high; however, the level of deliberativeness decreased in the aspect of interaction, since some of the statements were not answered.

6.2 Information distribution and use

It was previously stated in Chapter 5 that debates about electronic democracy “are debates about information, about how it is distributed and how it is used” (Street 1997, 36). Street argues that citizens’ abilities to make rational political judgments depend on “the way in which political information is delivered and received” (Street 1997, 37). In order to examine how political information is delivered and received in the discussion, information distribution and use will be analyzed together with rational
and logical expression.

6.2.1 Information distribution

The author will first analyze how the information was delivered in the online discussion. In the following Tables 3 and 4, information distribution in the sample is shown.

Table 3 Providing information and seeking information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Providing information</th>
<th>Seeking information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1024</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1219</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C0104</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1024</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1110</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1229</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1041</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3 it can be seen that the percentage of providing information is nearly 6.5 times the percentage of seeking information. Eighty-seven out of 100 comments in the sample provided opinions and information, leaving only 13 comments that were posing questions or seeking information. According to the statistics, most participants were providing and expressing their own opinions.

What was the quality of information provided by the participants? Was this information valid or reliable? By coding the messages in the sample of “valid claim,” “inferior claim,” and “non-valid claim,” the answers to the above questions become
crystalized. The relative statistics about rational and logical expression are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Rational and logical expressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Valid claim</th>
<th>Inferior claim</th>
<th>Non-valid claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1024</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1219</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C0104</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1024</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1110</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1229</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage (of the 1200 comments)</td>
<td>2.75%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>83.25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the statistics in Table 4, the percentage of non-valid claims is significantly higher than that of valid claims and inferior claims. Most of the comments are considered as invalid in that the expressed opinions have not been supported by reasons or references.

Among the three kinds of claims, valid claims are the smallest proportion with only 2.75%. Only a few comments included references or logical and objective reasoning. In the sample, the number of inferior claims is four times larger than valid claims and five times smaller than the non-valid claims. It can be determined that participants in the sample did not always use rational and logical expression.

Among the 1041 comments, which aimed at providing information, only 27 were valid claims; 131 of them were inferior claims; and the remainder were non-valid claims. From the statistics, it can be seen that only a few comments (2.6%) delivered
in the discussion were valid and reliable. The percentage of inferior claims was only 12.58%.

Deliberative democracy proponents consider that online discussions in virtual communities, such as usenet groups and online forums, involve rational and critical discourses expected by the deliberative model (Dahlberg 2001, 168). However, according to the statistics, the number of valid statements with logical and rational expression is relatively small. It is true that few of the statements in online discussion involve rational and critical discourse expected by deliberate model; however, the number is small. By measuring the online discussion in the aspect of rational and logical expression, the level of deliberation is low.

6.2.2 Receiving and use of information

According to Street (1997), making rational decisions is based on both how information is delivered and how information is received. Hence, it is needed to see how the participants received the information.

According to the interviews, there are five ways for participants to receive information: online websites, online discussions, offline discussions, books, and Weibo. The online website has become the dominant way of information searching, because all the interviewees have searched GMO information on the Internet. Four of the eleven interviewees indicated that they had asked online friends to learn more about GMO. Three of them said that they looked up information in books when necessary, and all three interviewees are GMO supporters.

The above section addresses how the interviewees received information. Since the research aim is to study online discussions, the way in which interviewees received and used the information will be described in the following information.
According to the interviews, all 11 interviewees read posted opinions from both sides of the argument. Nine of them reflected upon the discourses from the opposing side during the discussion, and all interviewees reflected upon the discourses from their side of the debate.

From the above, it can be determined that most of the interviewees have discussed information they received from the discussion with other participants. This concurs with Street’s (1997) opinion that electronic democracy should not just increase access to information, but it should also allow for discussion.

### 6.2.3 Conclusion

The above section describes how information was delivered and used in the sample. Over 80% of messages were opinions and ideas provided by participants; however, among them, only 2.7% of the messages were logical and rational claims. This result fails to meet the requirement of deliberation that indicates that a statement should be logical and rational.

It is hard to imagine that the participants were able to make rational choices based only on information received from the online discussion. According to the interviewees, online discussion was not the dominant information resource.

Most of the interviewees reflected upon information received from the online discussion. This is in accordance with Street’s (1997) opinion that the space should allow for discussion on the received information. There should not be any barriers to a person’s discourse. Dahlberg (2010, 623) argues that in deliberation “participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other’s perspective.” According to the above statistics, all the interviewees tried to understand statements from the same
side, and most tried to understand statements the opposite point of view. This is a positive implication that they were willing and did attempt to understand the statements provided by others.

It can be concluded that on the one hand, the information distributed in the online discussion has low levels of rationality and logic; on the other hand, the level of deliberativeness increased, because most of the participants reflected upon the information they received and attempted to understand the statements from the others’ perspective.

6.3 Consensus building

Consensus building is the goal of deliberation. This assumes that participants are open-minded, and can be persuaded by others’ arguments. Moreover, the process of consensus building involves not only persuasion and open-mindedness, but also decision making.

According to Street (1997, 38), “the point of deliberate process is to allow people to form opinions, rather than just to express them.” People have to make decision, not just exchange ideas, and such decision needs to be legitimate and rational. Furthermore, the decision depends on “the deliberate process by which everyone’s will is formed,” and it does not rest on “the expression of pre-given wills” (Dahlberg 2001, 168). It also means that deliberation helps participants move toward understanding and agreement despite their differences.

In order to examine the level of consensus building, the author will first analyze if online discussions had ever helped the participants to gain a better understanding of GM foods and the influence of the online discussion on participants’ self-preference (Section 6.3.1). The author will then determine the participants’ motivation toward
consensus building (Section 6.3.2).

6.3.1 Influence of online discussions on the understanding of GM foods

According to the interviewees’ responses, only two of the eleven interviewees admitted that opinions from both the opposite and the same groups influenced their understanding of GMO. Three of the eleven interviewees denied the influence of opinions from both the opposite and the same groups.

Regarding the influence of opinions from the opposite group, eight of the eleven interviewees denied its influence. Here are some examples of interviewees’ answers.

A5 indicated: “No, I don’t believe what the opposite group says, so they cannot influence me” (Bailihe/A5, personal communication).

S5 said: “They are not rational people. They just know to resist GMO, but they do not know why” (Xiaoguizi/S5, personal communication).

A3, A4, A6, S1, S2, S3, and S4 expressed the same feelings as A5 and S5.

Regarding the influence of opinions from the same group, six of the eleven interviewees admitted its positive influence. Here are some examples of interviewees’ answers.

A4 said: “Opinions from the same attitude group make me feel more confident in my position” (Yangchunbaixue/A4, personal communication).

S4 indicated: “Yes, I met some professional people in the GMO field, and they gave me a lot of information. They have convinced me” (Jinshi/S4, personal communication).

A5, S2, S3 and S5 also expressed the same feelings as A4 and S4.

Conclusively, only two interviewees considered that information from both opinion
groups helped them to gain a better understanding of GM foods, while three interviewees denied the influence of both opinion groups to their understanding. Eight of the eleven interviewees were reluctant to be influenced by the opposite group, because they considered the opposite group to be unreliable and irrational. Six of the eleven interviewees were influenced by opinions from the same group, which helped them to gain knowledge and feel more confident in their position.

Online discussions did help some participants to gain a better understanding of GM foods; however, only two interviewees tried to understand information received from both sides with an open mind. Furthermore, information provided by the same group had more influence than information provided by the opposing group, indicating that interviewees were more willing to view a similar point of view.

Only three of the eleven interviewees were persuaded by other participants and these were people from the same opinion group. Most of the interviewees were stubborn, and maintained their original idea. They were not really open-minded to ideas from the opposition. The interviewees’ understanding on GM foods were consolidated and improved by participants from the same opinion group.

6.3.2 Motivation for consensus building

After examining the influence of the online discussions on self-preference, the author will determine the participants’ motivation for consensus building. The following analysis is based on information collected both from DQI coding and interviews.

All the comments have been coded in three categories: positional politics, alternative politics and mediating proposals. “Positional politics” means that a participant is unwilling to compromise or yield toward consensus building. “Alternative proposals” refer to participants who propose a mediating proposal that does not fit the current
agenda. “Mediating proposals” occur when a participant proposes a suggestion that fits the current agenda. The statistics about for these three categories are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Consensus building

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Positional politics</th>
<th>Alternative proposals</th>
<th>Mediating proposals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1024</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1219</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C0104</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1024</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1110</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1229</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1184</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage (of the 1200 comments)</td>
<td>98.67%</td>
<td>0.92%</td>
<td>0.42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the statistics in Table 5, the percentage of positional politics is significantly higher than the percentage of alternative and mediating proposals. The percentage of positional politics overwhelmingly takes the first place among the three, and it is 98.67%. Moreover, in the sample, both the mediating proposal and alternative proposal were ignored and neglected by other participants. These proposals were not responded to.

It can be determined from the sample that only a few participants proposed mediating proposals for consensus building, and most of the participants were persistent and unwilling to compromise in the discussions.

According to the interviews, six of the eleven interviewees were willing to
compromise as long as it was beneficial for all the people. Two were reluctant to compromise, and three were undecided. Although three interviewees gave uncertain answers, they do have the potential to compromise. Therefore, most of the interviewees were willing to find a better solution.

6.3.3 Conclusion

Combining with all the above statistics, the interviewees were rarely influenced or persuaded by the opposite side. Their understandings on GM foods were more likely to be consolidated and improved by participants from the same opinion group. It can be determined that participants were not very open-minded. They are stubborn and hold steadfastly to their original position.

Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) found that people prefer to talk to and be with others with whom they agree; this is known as homophily. Yzerbyt, Leyens and Bellour (1995) argue that in-group members are less likely to judge than out-group members. In other words, members favor people in the same opinion group. According to Kelly (1989), homogeneity can improve unity and strength, which explains why interviewees are more willing to be influenced by participants of the same opinion. This homogeneity confirms their original position.

However, this unity and strength among the same opinion group does not lend itself to consensus building, since people are reluctant to be persuaded. Only three of the eleven interviewees were persuaded by other participants, and they were persuaded by participants from the same opinion group.

According to interviews, almost half of the interviewees were willing to compromise with other’s arguments as long as they were beneficial for all people. However, in the online discussions, very few participants tried to propose a better statement, and participants neglected the 16 mediating and alternative proposals. Although the results
indicate that half of the interviewees were willing to compromise, the statistics show that most of the participants did not take practical action.

Both Street (1997) and Dahlberg (2001) argue that participants’ wills are formed in deliberation, and the discussion process should not rest on “the expression of pre-given wills” (Dahlberg 2001, 168). According to the statistics, the real situation does not meet to their expectations. Apparently, online discussion has a low level of influence on self-preference. It is more likely expressing pre-given wills than forming ideas through the discussion. It can be concluded that the online discussion failed to achieve consensus building and no agreement or decision was ever reached.

6.4 Mutual respect

Mutual respect is the last analysis dimension of the deliberative nature of online discussions. Mutual respect means that participants are willing to listen to others and treat others with equal respect (Steiner et al. 2009, 22). The measurement of the level of mutual respect is based both on DQI coding and interviews.

The author will first analyze the statistics from DQI coding using two coding dimensions to measure mutual respect among participants. The first dimension (shown in Table 6) aims at measuring all 1200 comments, and to evaluate the politeness of the expression in the online discussion. The second dimension (shown in Table 7) especially aims at measuring the politeness of counterarguments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>No respect</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Explicit respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1024</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1219</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C0104</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 indicates that the percentage of neutral expressions is much higher than the percentage of no respect expression and explicit respect expression. Seven of ten comments were expressed in a neutral tone. The percentage of expression with no respect takes second place among the three, and represents nearly 3.5 times of the percentage of expression with explicit respect. Compared to using words with explicit respect, such as compliments, participants used more words showing no respect.

Table 7. Mutual respect for counterarguments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Counterargument includes degraded responses</th>
<th>Counterargument includes neutral responses</th>
<th>Counterargument Includes valued responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1024</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1219</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C0104</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1024</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1110</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1229</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of all counterargument</td>
<td><strong>22.56%</strong></td>
<td><strong>67.19%</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.25%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage (of the 1200 comments)</td>
<td>11.92%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the statistics in Table 7, in counterargument, the percentage of neutral responses takes the first place (67.19%), and is followed by the degraded responses (22.56%). The number of valued responses in counterarguments (10.25%) is the lowest.

Based on the above statistics, it can be determined that when facing opinions from others, participants usually use neutral responses. Compared with giving valued responses, participants using more degrading responses, such as scolding and profanity. Only 10.25% counterarguments included valued reasons to support their responses, and this percentage is relatively low. This result meets the findings in rational and logical expression that participants rarely use logical and rational methods to debate.

Combining the above two coding results, participants’ attitudes are relatively neutral.

Based on the statistics of DQI coding, the level of mutual respect was medium high in the online discussions.

The analysis result of the interviews is similar with that of DQI coding. Ten of the eleven interviewees answered that they used neutral expressions most of the time. Seven interviewees admitted that they had used impolite words during the online discussion. Five of the seven interviewees explained that the reason why they used impolite expression was to retaliate. Only one interviewee used appreciative words, and this was done to encourage others.

None of the eleven interviewees reported having a special feeling when others responded to them with neutral words. Half of the interviewees had the experience of being responded to with kind words. They felt supported and encouraged when answered with appreciative expressions.

All interviewees had experienced responses with impolite words. When facing such
replies, they unanimously reported negative feelings. They felt angry, unhappy, and sad. They admitted that such negative feelings always generated impolite words of their own.

According to the above data, it can be determined that interviewees’ attitude toward other participants was relatively neutral. However, when having negative feelings or facing impolite words, it became difficult for them to control their choice of words.

6.4.1 Conclusion

Combining all the data collected from DQI coding and interviews, participants in the online discussion showed a certain degree of respect toward each other. However, not using impolite expression to respond to others did not indicate that they were rational and logical participants, as they became easily enraged and few of them responded to others with valued reasons.

6.5 Interviewees’ perspectives on the significance of the online discussion

In this section, the author will introduce interviewee’s perspective on the significance of the online discussion. In section 6.5.1, the external impact of the online discussion would be introduced. In section 6.5.2, different ideas on the advantages and disadvantages of the online discussion would be introduced.

6.5.1 The external impact of the online discussion on the government’s decision-making

Eight of eleven interviewees believe that the online discussion has impact on
decision-making. The rest hold opposite opinion.

A1 said, “It is unwise for the government to promote what the people cannot accept” (Far123a/A1, pers. comm.).
A2 said, “The government will not be a good one if they ignore the people’s voice. They will not risk its reputation” (Liu Bingyan/A2, pers. comm.).
A3 said, “I believe in our government. They will not obey the willingness of the people” (Bard in Dawn/A3, pers. comm.).
A6 said, “I believe in Xi’s government. But I know it takes time. The government will not risk the life of our offspring” (Jiangping/A6, pers. comm.).
S1 said, “the public opinion put great pressure on government’s decision” (Dou Zhiqiao/S1, pers. comm.).
S2 said, “they cannot make decision without considering the public opinion” (PX/S2, pers. comm.).
S4 said, “Of course the government will take the public opinion into consideration. However, this will not influence the trend of the development of GMO” (Jinshi/S4, pers. comm.).

From the above, it can be seen that eight interviewees believe in the PRC government, since they believe that the government will take people’s will into consideration.

A4 said, “I do not really believe in the government. Our government supports the research on GMO. If they really want to promote GMO, we can do nothing about it. And the government still imports GM corn” (Yangchunbaixue/A4, pers. comm.).
A5 said, “In the issue of GMO, the Chinese government has invested billions of RMB. They support it. The online discussion will not change their decision. Maybe they will delay it” (Bailihe/A5, pers. comm.).
S3 said, “GMO is the trend of the agriculture development. Maybe the government will delay the promotion of GMO, but it cannot change it” (Liangzi/S3, pers. comm.).
It can be seen that the reason why they deny the external impact of the online discussion is that they do not believe in the government.

6.5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of the online discussion

According to the interviewees, the main advantage of the online discussion is that in the online discussion, participants can hear more than one voice and learn from them, since more and more people are willing to discuss online. Moreover, S3 considers that the online discussion is good for democracy (Liangzi/S3, pers. comm.).

On the contrary, some interviewee value disadvantages of the online discussion over advantages. S1 and S2 consider that what people learn from the online discussion is not reliable, since there are many rumors (Dou Zhiqiao/S1 and PX/S2, pers. comm.).

6.6 Research questions

In this section, the author will answer the research questions based on the findings.

-How can online discussion’s quality of deliberation be better measured on Tencent Weibo?

Kies (2010, 41) considers that “the empirical attempts for evaluating the deliberativeness of the debates are still at preliminary phrase.” It is suggested that researchers should try to experiment with different methods to find a proper one (Kies 2010, 41). In this research, the author has tried to establish an adaptive method to reveal the deliberativeness of the online debates on Tencent Weibo.

In order to evaluate the online discussion of GM foods on Tencent Weibo, the author has used two methods, which are DQI and interview. The design of DQI in this
research is based on Steiner et al.’s DQI, which is established for evaluating offline parliament discussions. The author considers that Steiner et al.’s version is not suitable for analyzing online discussion. Hence, the author has adjusted the category of DQI. And the category of DQI in this research is reciprocity, information distribution and use, rational and logical expression, mutual respect, and consensus building. The indicators of the latter three remain the same with Steiner et al.’s DQI category, for the reason that they are still suitable in evaluating online discussion.

When Steiner et al. evaluating the parliament discussions, they did not use the method of interview, for the reason that they “feared that the responses would be strongly influenced by what is socially desirable (Steiner et al. 2009, 54).” However, the author disagrees with them.

First, DQI has its own limitation. According to the author, DQI aims at measuring online behaviors, and it cannot measure all the aspects of deliberation model. Second, the author considers that it is not enough to just evaluate participants’ online behavior. In this case, it is necessary to understand how participants think about the discussion and other participants. By doing interview, researcher is able to learn “the ideas, knowledge, feelings, opinions, attitudes, and/or self-reported behavior of a defined population” (Graziano and Raulin 2010, 289). The author can gain a more comprehensive understanding on the deliberativeness of online discussion in the case.

Thus, the author has chosen the method of interviewing, even though there exists the concern that "the responses would be strongly influenced by what is socially desirable" (Steiner et al. 2009, 54). In this case, interview is a valuable method to evaluate, and to complement DQI, which cannot measure all the aspects of the deliberation model. Although interviewees may behave what is socially desirable, it is still worth knowing how they think by directly asking them.

By following this intention, the interview questions consist of four aspects:
information use, attitudes towards other participants, the influence of the online discussion on self-preference, and interviewees’ perspectives on the significance of the online discussion.

Although the author cannot guarantee that the evaluation model in this research is perfect, the model is advisable to some extent. Moreover, the author considers that this evaluation model used in this study could be improved and developed in future research.

-How deliberative is the online discussion of GM food in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang on Tencent Weibo?

According to the empirical findings, it can be determined that the online discussions in the selected cases do not meet the ideal type of deliberation.

The interaction among the participants was relatively active, because more than one-half of the messages were replies to previous messages. However, many messages were not answered, thus decreasing the level of deliberativeness in the aspect of interaction.

Regarding information distribution, 86.75% of the information in the discussions were opinions or ideas provided by participants. Among them, only 2.6% were valid claims supported with rational and logical reasoning. All participants read messages posted by both the same and opposite groups, and most of them reflected upon this information during the discussion. This meets Street’s (1997) opinion regarding the space allowed for discussion on the information they received. The level of deliberativeness increased, since the participants were open to and attempted to understand the statements from the others. Moreover, the degree of information exchange was relatively high in the selected case.
Has this relatively high degree of information exchange helped the participants to gain a better understanding on GM foods? According to the findings, nearly half of the participants were influenced by opinions from participants of the same opinion group, and most of the participants were reluctant to be influenced by the opposite group. Participants were not that open-minded, and they were persistent in sticking to their opinions. Most of the participants were reluctant to be persuaded. However, according to the interviews, more than half of them were willing to compromise based on stronger arguments as long as it was good for all.

In the aspect of mutual respect, participants in the online discussion showed a certain degree of respect toward one another. However, not using impolite expressions to respond to others did not indicate that they were rational and logical participants, because they were easily enraged and few of them responded with valued reasons.

Additionally, most of the interviewees believe in the PRC government, since they believe that the government will take people’s will into consideration. Moreover, interviewees consider that the main advantage of the online discussion is that participants can hear more than one voice and learn from them in the online discussion, since more and more people are willing to discuss online. On the contrary, two interviewees value disadvantages of the online discussion over advantages. S1 and S2 consider that what people learn from the online discussion is not reliable, since there are many rumors (Dou Zhiqiao/S1 and PX/S2, pers. comm.).

Steiner et al. (2009) points out that it is better to look at the discourse quality by different individual elements rather than in general. Conclusively, on the one hand, in the aspect of rational and logical expression and consensus building, the online discussion is relatively distant from the standards of deliberation; on the other hand, in the aspect of interaction, information exchange, mutual understanding and neutral expression, the online discussion is close to the standards of deliberation.
-What problems do authoritarian deliberation face on Tencent Weibo? What can be done to overcome them?

Although the results of this research only generalize to the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang, since the case is revelatory and representative, the author considers that the empirical findings are able to shed light on the development of authoritarian deliberation on Tencent Weibo. The author will answer the two questions at both micro and macro levels.

Before answering the questions, it is necessary to review the differences between democratic deliberation and authoritarian deliberation. In democratic deliberation, the power of decision-making is in the hand of the public. In authoritarian deliberation, the power of decision-making is in the hand of political authority, but the decision is borrowed from deliberation (He and Warren 2011, 273).

At micro level, the author considers authoritarian deliberation faces four problems on Tencent Weibo. The first problem is low level of rational and logical expression. According to the findings in the research, participants fail to use rational and logical expression to communicate with each other. The author considers that this may affect the validity of information distributed in online discussion. Furthermore, according to the author, since the level of information exchange is relatively high, low validity will have negative influence on participants’ judgment, since they exposed with irrational and illogical messages.

The second problem is low possibility of consensus building. It can be seen from the findings that participants in the online discussion of GM food fail to reach any consensus, and only few participants have put forward proposals. According to the author, if no decision has been made through the online discussion, it serves more like a consultative meeting.
The third problem is stubborn participants. According to the findings, it can be seen that participants were not very open-minded, and they were stubborn to their pre-given will. Maybe, this situation is because of that few better arguments have been proposed. However, in the research sample, the only mediating proposals and alternative proposals were ignored and unanswered by other participants. This indicates that the participants were not interested in reaching better argument.

The forth problem is indifferent participants. Hu (2013) argues that materialism may lead to people’s indifference to politics. According to the interviews, some interviewees indicate that their friends or families are not interested in the discussion. Interviewee A3 indicates that his families do not care if the food is genetically modified and they consider discussing online is waste of time (Bard in Dawn/A3, per. comm.). Although there is no specific data to measure how many people are indifferent to the online discussion, the interview’s answer reveals that certain people are not interested in the online discussion.

The author argues that the above problems can be solved if we put efforts in education, regulation and technology. First, the author considers that the situation can be changed and improved by educating citizens how to deliberate. Dewey (1930, 401) argues that “since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another”. Furthermore, the knowledge’s educational equivalent is “the connection of the acquisition of knowledge in the school with activities, or occupations, carried on in a medium of associated life” (Dewey 1930, 401). The author agrees with Dewey that education can give direction to citizens. Thus by teaching citizens how to deliberate, they can learn how to adopt deliberative attitudes.

Second, the author believes that establishing regulation is necessary. Cindio and Peraboni (2010, 43) argue that social structure, which decides the roles and policies of
online discussions, is necessary for designing deliberative digital habit. The author considers that the social structure can be built through regulation.

Third, the author believes that technology support is indispensible. The designer of online deliberation “has to choose the technologies to be adopted for enabling the envisaged social environment” (Cindio and Peraboni 2010, 43). Also, Liddo and Shum (2010, 33) prove that hypermedia can improve the quality of online discussion. According to the author, if it is convenient to debate with valid reasons and reference, there is no reason for participants not to do so. The author suggests to have recommendation link related to the typed-in content near the input box.

The author considers that if we can achieve the above suggestions, not only the quality of online discussion will be increase, but also the level of engagement will be increased.

At macro level, the author considers that there are two problems. The first problem is low external impact of civil online discussion.

Kies’ finding suggests that “the forums that are perceived as having a strong political impact are more likely to be characterized by respectful and reciprocal exchanges and to encourage its active and passive users to revise critically their own opinions and beliefs” (Kies 2010, 165). In other words, the external impact of online discussion is one of the most prominent factors for successful deliberation (Kies 2010, 165).

In authoritarian deliberation, the power of decision-making is in the hand of political authority (He and Warren 2011, 273). The author considers that if an online discussion is held by a political or governmental institution, then the online discussion will not face the problem of low impact on decision-making, for the reason that the political or governmental institution directly participates in the online discussion. However, if an online discussion is initiated by civil citizens, their voice will be
hardly heard. Compared with opinion leaders, ordinary citizens and marginalized groups do not have the same kind of political impact on Weibo or in society (Svensson 2014, 180). In order to make the voice of ordinary citizens and marginalized groups to be heard, they need opinion leaders to speak for them (Svensson 2014, 180).

Tong and Zuo (2013, 66) indicate that there are two modes of online communication on Weibo, which are one-way communication and two-way communication. The former mode is initiated by local residents; the latter mode is initiated by both local residents and national elites (Tong and Zuo 2013, 66). They consider that the latter mode has more impact on decision-making than the former one, for the reason that national elites act as important leverage (Tong and Zuo 2013, 81).

Berdal (2014, 118) proves that the external impact can be conducted through “members of political parties, and / or even in direct affiliation with decision-making institutions.” In this case, Mr. Cui is the important figure to fulfill external impact on policy making, for the reason that he is the member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

However, according to the research, Mr. Cui has not participated in the online discussion with net users on Tencent Weibo. Instead, his role is closer to host. He publishes posts, and lets net users discuss in the comment section of the posts. Since the author has not interview Mr. Cui, it is hard to conclude if Mr. Cui has looked at all the comments in the comment section of his posts. One positive thing is that Mr. Cui has used Tencent Weibo to collect the public’s will. Before he wrote the proposal of GM foods to CPPCC, he published a post,

“The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is coming soon. Please inform me the situations of GMO in your hometown. I will report all of them to the government. Please send them to my email address.” (Cui 2014b)

After the CPPCC, the government has made official statement on the regulation of
The author considers that when online discussion is not held by political or governmental institution, the external impact of the online discussion can only be conducted through national elites in the PRC.

The second problem is strong government control from the PRC government. Hu (2013) considers that strong government control from the PRC government may hinder the polarization in private and public realms. Moreover, both Habermas (2006) and Dahlberg (2010) argue that the government plays an important role in making online deliberation possible. Habermas (2006, Abstract) considers that “a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments” is necessary. However, the author believes a self-regulating media system is impossible in the PRC. Social medias, including Tencent Weibo, are under the surveillance of the PRC government (Le, Chi and Wilson 2013, 89). Moreover, the reason why deliberation is possible in the PRC is that the government decide to use deliberation as “a mean to form performances and policies” (He and Warren 2011, 271). In other words, in order to make deliberation possible in the PRC, the government support is indispensible.

Instead of having a self-regulating media system in the PRC, the author considers to gain the government support is more possible. Tong and Zuo (2013, 82) point out that “the more resonance with the events the national public and intellectuals have, the bigger impact online communication has on government legitimacy in general.” According to Tong and Zuo (2013), online discussion is influential on government legitimacy, as long as the online discussion has big social impact. Hence, the author considers that as long as the public has strong intention to have online deliberation, the government will support it.

Moreover, the author considers that the government support brings many benefits.
First, the four problems in micro level will be solved easier on a national scale with governmental support. The government could introduce some policies to promote the changes in education, regulatory and technology, which aims at improving the quality of online deliberation. Second, the central government could introduce policies to encourage local and central governmental institutions to organize online deliberation, and to transmit the decision to policy making.

Above all, the author considers that online authoritarian deliberation faces a lot of problems in recent PRC. However, this predicament can be overcome as long as we can gain government support.
7. Conclusion

Discussion about the development of electronic democracy has been ongoing for years in Western academic circles. Deliberative democracy, which focuses on the facilitation of rational discourse in the public sphere, has become the third promising alternative for electronic democracy (Dahlberg 2001, 158-168).

On the other side of the world, the rise of the public discussion in Chinese cyberspace argues for the possibility of electronic democracy. The influence of online public discussions has become more and more powerful. At times, state policies have been changed because of the public opinion expressed through online public discussions. The story of Sun Zhigang mentioned in Section 2.1.2 is one of the most representative cases. Online censorship in the PRC does not aim at controlling criticisms on the state or the leaders. Additionally, in the history of Chinese politics, there is a tradition of deliberation. That are the reasons why the author consider deliberation is possible in the Chinese context.

Since the concept of deliberative democracy is put forward in western context, He and Warren (2011) consider the concept is not suitable for the PRC. And they propose the concept of authoritarian deliberation instead. Jiang (2010) argues for the possibility of online deliberation in four kinds of websites, which are central propaganda spaces, government-regulated commercial spaces, emergent civic spaces, and international deliberative spaces. The author considers that the government-regulated commercial spaces, including Weibo platform, have the most possibility of online deliberation. Hence, a case study of evaluating deliberativeness of the online discussion of GM food in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang has been conducted.
In order to ascertain the extent to which the online discussions are being used for deliberative democracy, the author conducted empirical research by measuring the quality of deliberation of the online discussion of GM foods on Tencent Weibo. Two kinds of data were collected, incorporating 1200 stratified randomly selected comments and interviews. The 1200 comments were analyzed by DQI, which is based on the characteristics of the model of deliberation. Interviews were also analyzed using a coding method. The author argues that in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the deliberativeness of online discussion, both methods of DQI and interview should be adapted.

According to the research results, online discussion is still distant from the model of deliberation. Although the levels of interaction, information exchange, mutual understanding and neutral expression are relatively high, participants in the online discussions have not used rational and logical expression, and they have failed to reach the goal of consensus building.

The findings indicate that no decisions or agreements have been made in the online discussion. Participants place more emphasis on expressing themselves rather than on consensus building. The participants in the online discussion have not been united as one yet. Moreover, only few participants have been open to opposing proposals, and most held steadfastly to their original positions. Clearly, consensus building was not the participants’ aim.

In the contemporary stage, online authoritarian deliberation still faces many problems in the PRC. At micro level, first, online expression is irrational and illogical; second, it is hard to reach consensus building; third, participants are stubborn to their pre-given wills; forth, some people are indifferent to online discussions. At macro level, first, most of the online discussions have low external impact on decision-making; second, the strong government control may prevent the development of online deliberation.
Fortunately, the predicament of online deliberation in the PRC can be overcome. At micro level, as long as we can gain the government support, we can improve the situation by making efforts in education, regulation making, and technology. Moreover, at macro level, if the central government can introduce relative policies to encourage local and central governmental institutions to have online deliberation, the situation will be improved.

### 7.1 Expectation on future research

Here, the author will discuss the expectations for future research based on the empirical research on deliberative democracy. In Section 3.5, the research gap in this academic field was introduced. This research was planned to fill these gaps; however, this research has its limitations. The author hopes that in future research, these limitations can provide critical views to bridge these gaps.

First, the coding category of DQI needs to be improved for measuring online discussions. The coding category in this research cannot entirely examine the quality of deliberation. Although the research is complemented by interviews, the author cannot claim that this research design has absolutely measured what philosophers understand as deliberation.

Second, in this research, because of the time and human resource limitations, the author has not taken the offline identity factors of participants into consideration, including education, occupation, and gender. In future research, these aspects need to be considered, since culture views, education background, gender, occupation and other factors might influence the level and quality of deliberation.
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Appendix 1 (Six posts)

The six posts written by Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang

Coding name: C1024


English translation: “In USA, I met at least ten people today, both American and ethnic Chinese. They are interested in my investigation on GMO food, they even hope that I can popularize the knowledge (in USA), and I find their sentences funny and annoying. If these people can represent the majority of America, I just want to say that ‘American has been trustingly eating GMO food for over 10 years’ is a rumor, for the reason that they even do not know what GMO food is. What they trust is the food quality supervision in USA.”

3.08 million people read it. The total number of comment and forward is 12490, the number of comments is 1961.
English translation: “In order to promote GMO food, Fang and his followers falsely represented that corn was American’s staple food. According to sales data, red meat, chicken and wheat are at the top of the list. Even professor who support GMO food said, ‘I haven’t heard of edible genetically modified sweet corn.’ And there is even mark of Non GMO on popcorn in USA. Unless, Fang has ate genetically modified fodder when he was down and out in USA.”

2.15 people read it. The total number of comments and forwards is 3493, and the number of comments is 1119.
"Slapping Fang 3: Why is Fang out of favor? Because of that virtuous people finally find out that he is the most hypocritical person. He is full of loopholes in every field that he has opened his mouth. The reason why he is good at cracking down on counterfeit good is that he is professional in forging. Fang let us know: shamelessness can make up the deficiency of knowledge, as long as one is cheeky enough."

1.08 million people read it. The total number of comments and forwards is 1808, and the number of comments id 820.

Coding name: F1024


"Cui said that American hadn't heard of GMO food and they wanted him to popularize the knowledge. He also said that what American trust was the food quality supervision. They eat what the food quality supervisor let them eat. GM food has been on the food market massively for over 10 years, and we can conclude that 'American has been eating GM food trustingly for over 10 years'. But he said that it is a rumor. How a mess logic of the famous presenter!"

510 thousands people read it. The total number of comment and forward is 1656, the number of comments is 453.
Cui wanted me to prove that the cause of death of Chinese who died from diseases had no relationship with GMO food they ate. Don’t he know that it is him who raise the proposition to provide evidences? It was his responsibility to prove that the cause of death was related to GMO food. As long as there was no proof, we can consider that there is no relationship between them. Otherwise, according to his logic, we can also let him to prove that the cause of death of Chinese who lying in the hospital and died of diseases have no relationship with watching his program.”

0.47 million people read it. The total number of comments and forwards is 2426, the number of comments is 1605.
English translation: “Under the situations that GMO food has been demonized for over a decades, the public has a relatively low scientific literacy, and Cui has a good reputation, it is impossible to change the majority’s attitude through this argument. If we make a survey again, there still will be a lot of people who are opposite to GMO food and support Cui. However, I believe, there are people who were opposite to GMO food in beginning and turn to support it now, and there is no the other way around. There are people who admired him at beginning and turn to despise him because of the online argument, and there aren’t any people who supported me at
first and turn to despise me because of the online argument. To applying an old sentence here, after this online argument, Fang is still whom he used to be, but Cui is no longer whom he used to be. For me, that is enough. I should keep this mood to popularize GMO food and criticize traditional Chinese medical science. What we are doing now is to change people’s idea, so we should not bother about the number of supporters, and we should pay attention to those who changed their mind. If the majority turns to support us, there is no need for us to continue doing it anymore. We are not politician, and our aim is not to gain support from the majority.”

0.65 million people read it. The total number of comments and forwards is 1973, and the number of comments is 1180.
Appendix 2 (Interview guideline)

Interview question:

Q1. Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite groups?
Q2. Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Q3. Have you looked at discourses from participants of the same group?
Q4: Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Q5. Where do you actively search information of GMO for?
Q6. When did you use neutral expressions? Why?
Q7. When did you use appreciative expressions? Why?
Q8. When did you use impolite expressions? Why?
Q9. How do you feel when other responds you with neutral language?
Q10. How do you feel when other responds you with appreciative language?
Q11. How do you feel when other responds you with impolite language?
Q12. Have opinions from the opposite attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Q13. Have opinions from the same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Q14. Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Q15. Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Q16. Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government’s decision? Why?
Q17. How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Q18. What are the advantages of online discussion on GMO?
Q19. What are the disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Appendix 3 (Interview translation)

Interviews

The Interviews were conducted in Chinese. The author has not translated the whole interviews. Only the useful parts, which have answered questions in interview guideline, have been translated.

Far123a (A1)

(Far123a. 2014. Interviewed by author, March 27. Online chat room in Tencent Weibo.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes, I have, recently, almost everyday, I read Mr. Cui and Mr. Fang’s posts, and comments on the posts.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes. I question all the discourse from those who support GMO. But since many things of GMO are still unknown, it is hard to say that they are totally wrong. It is nature that different people hold different views. Also, I do not 100% believe discourses from those who are anti GMO. But I agree with their idea of questioning the safety of GMO. Because of these feelings, I always discuss with other participants of ideas that I have read.

Where do you actively search knowledge or get information of GMO for?
Answer: The main information resource is media, like the website. I also learn some information of GMO by discussing with other net users.

When did you use neutral expression? Why?
Answer: I always use neutral languages. It is unnecessary to use extreme discourse. I don’t want to behave like a crazy dog.

When did you use adorable expression? Why?
Answer: I don’t use adorable words.

When did you use impolite expression? Why?
Answer: When they using dirty words to insult me, sometimes, I will fight back with dirty words too. But mostly, I ignore them.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite
language?
Answer: Nobody has adored me online. But I did feel encouraged by seeing similar opinions with me. I ignore those dirty words. They are madman.

Have opinions from the opposite attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: No, they can’t, since I don’t believe them at all.

Have opinions from the same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: Yes, I have heard a lot of opinions that are anti-GMO from media, Mr. Cui and other people. And my attitude towards GMO becomes more careful. I know many disadvantages of eating GM food. When purchasing food in supermarket, now I will look if there is a label of Non-GMO ingredient.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: No. But I like to discuss, it is good for the society. The truth becomes clearer during the discussion.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: I don’t know. But I think the most important issue now is to establish a sound supervision regulation on GM food.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why?
Answer: Of course, it will influence the government’s decision. It is unwise for the government to promote what the people cannot accept. There are so many doubtful voices among the people. The information is not transparent, and people do not believe in the government. Hence, the decision of the government must be affected.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: I think the online discussion is good. Unlike before, there could only be one voice. Now, there are various voices. And things can become clearer during the discussion.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: Because of the online discussion, the public knows that GMO is a controversial thing. The era of what the government say is the truth has gone. It helps the public to know more about GMO.

Liu Bingyan (A2) 2013-04-01
(Liu Bingyan. 2014. Interviewed by author, April 1. Online chat room in Tencent
Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups? Answer: Yes, of course.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion? Answer: Yes. I always do it. I have discussed with others why GMO supporters behave in this way. We consider that they (those who support GMO) are in the same benefit chain. There are slightly differences between their attitudes. For example, some of them are researchers, some of them are GMO seed seller, and some of them are officials in the government. The reason why they support GMO is that they earn benefit from it.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO? Answer: In a lot of ways, I search information on the Internet, I also watch relative TV program, read newspaper, and so on. But my opinions towards GMO are from my own understanding, not from the superficial information.

Why don’t you search for GMO information during the discussion? Answer: I think it is more reliable to search information on professional website or newspaper website.


How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language? Answer: I feel happy when seeing people agree with my opinions. I get use to the impolite languages. There are many online.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why? Answer: Opinions from both sides help me to gain better understanding on GMO. But I have my own understanding on GMO.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion? Answer: No. Since there is no sufficient scientific research to prove if GMO is safe or not, I will not be persuaded until there is convincible evidence.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why? Answer: Only if there is reliable and convincible scientific evidence to prove GMO is safe, then I will compromise.
Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why?
Answer: To some extent, it will influence. The government will not be a good government if they ignore the people's voice. They will not risk its reputation.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion? Answer: The online discussion has revealed many questions, like the poor supervision regulation, the bad protection of people's consumer right, and so on. I think debate itself is good, since it not will influence the national security.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: People began to know the disadvantages of GMO, and the benefit chain became clear. Who is bad is clearer.

Bard in Dawn (A3) – 2014-04-18
(Bard in Dawn. 2014. Interviewed by author, April 18. Online chat room in Tencent Weibo.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups? Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion? Answer: Yes. Reading and discussing their opinions have exposed these people's dark sides.

Where do you search knowledge or information of GMO for? Answer: Mainly from the Internet. I search for relative information when I think is necessary.

Why don’t you search for GMO information during the discussion? Answer: I have never thought about to search information during the discussion.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why? Answer: I will not use adorable words, but I do express my agreement by sending a “thumb-up”. I do not use impolite words. We should set forth the facts and discuss them rationally.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language? Answer: Of course, I feel supported when seeing compliment on my comments. But I ignore impolite expressions. I don’t want to talk to these impolite people.
Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer:

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: No, unless they can provide enough evidences.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: As long as it is for the common good.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why?
Answer: I believe in our government. They will not obey the willingness of the people. But I hope that the government can be much more careful on the issue of GMO.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: I think all the net users did nice job in the online discussion. It shows our concern on the country. If we do not care about ourselves, then who will cares. We care for the politics, the food and the country. Unlike my families or friends in real life, they are indifference about GMO. They said that, "others can eat it, why you can’t". And they think that what our discourse online will make no differences. However, if we do not speak, then who will speak for ourselves? The Chinese net users are heroes. Without them, the government would not take notice on people’s voices.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: It is needless to say the advantages of the online discussion that more and more people know about GMO. But I think the disadvantage of it is that some net users bring shame to the opposite side intentionally. This will influence the harmony of our country.

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**Yangchunbaixue (A4) – 2014-04-18**
(Yangchunbaixue. 2014. Interviewed by author, April 18. Online chat room in Tencent Weibo.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes, I have.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes, since I do not understand them why they support GMO. It is harmful to our health. It will even lead to infertility. By talking with others, I
knew that they must get some benefit from doing it.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?  
Answer: Mainly from the Internet. Sometimes, I talk with my online and off friends, and we will exchange our opinions.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?  
Answer: When arguing with those who support GMO, in order to pour cold water on them, I use some impolite words.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?  
Answer: I feel angrier when seeing those who support GMO using dirty words to scold me.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?  
Answer: Opinions from the opposite side haven’t influenced my opinion. On the contrary, their discourses make me dislike GMO more and more. Opinions from the same attitude group make me feel more convinced on my position.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?  
Answer: No, I have my own opinions.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?  
Answer: I will not compromise to those who support GMO.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government’s decision? Why?  
Answer: I do not really believe in the government. Our government supports the research on GMO. If they really want to promote GMO, we can do nothing about it. And the government still imports GM corn.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?  
Answer: More and more people are willing to express themselves online, and criticize other’s points. That means a lot for the political expression.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?  
Answer: There are still many people haven’t realized the disadvantages of GMO. But as the online discussion goes further, more and more people become to know it. It is a good thing.
Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups? Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion? Answer: Not really, since it is waste of time to discuss opinions of the opposite side. But I have communicate with other participants about opinions spread in the same opinion group.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO? Answer: I mainly get information from online discussion,

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why? Answer: I don’t use impolite words online. But I will express my agreement if I see something I really agree with.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language? Answer: If others respond me with impolite words, I will fight back.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why? Answer: Yes, opinions from the same group make me feel more confident on my opinions. But I don’t believe what the opposite group say, so I they cannot influence me.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion? Answer: Yes, I think most of my opinions are gathered from different net users.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why? Answer: Maybe, I am not sure.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why? Answer: No, I don't think so. In the issue of GMO, the Chinese government has invested billions of RMB. They support it. The online discussion will not change their decision. Maybe they will delay it. I hope that our government can do what the Russian government did.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: I think the opinions expressed in the online discussion represent the will of all the Chinese. Hence, the online discussion is an important platform for expressing people's will.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: I don't know how the government thinks about the public opinion on GMO. At least, the online discussion let them know how the public thinks about GMO. Moreover, during the online discussion, people know better about the current situation in China.

**Jiangping (A6) – 2014-04-16**
(Jiangping. 2014. Interviewed by author, April 16. Online chat room in Tencent Weibo.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes, it is unavoidable.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Not really, I listen to opinions from the opposite side, but I don't want to discuss them with members in the same opinion group. Instead, if I have the opportunity, I try to persuade the GM supporters with opinions I learned from the GM opponents. It is a big issue related to our health, and I hope that all of us can unit together and fight against those who support GMO.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?
Answer: Many ways, like Weibo.

Why don't you search for GMO information during the discussion?
Answer: I don't think the information in the discussion is reliable. It is more like argument.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?
Answer: I always use neutral words. It is enough to use neutral words, as long as I can clearly state my ideas. But I will use adorable expressions when I feel it is necessary to encourage others. I think the positive energy need to be spread. Only when the positive side is strong enough, the negative side will fade away quietly.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?
Answer: When they respond me with impolite expressions, I ignore them. It is waste of time to argue with those people. It is helpless to use extreme expression.
And I feel encouraged and warm when other support or agree with my idea.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: All the ideas, suggestions, news about GMO cannot change my mind on GMO, for the reason that they are not reliable. Since they are not 100% reliable, I keep conservative attitude towards GMO. It is unknown, then why should we eat it.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: No. Since GMO is still unknown, no one can really convince me. Even discourses from those who are anti GMO are doubtful. No one can 100% prove if GMO is safe or not. My attitude is that since it is unknown, it should be closed in lab.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: I think I will, if it is reasonable and reliable, and is for the common good.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why?
Answer: Yes, I think so. I believe in Xi’s government. But I know it takes time. The government will not risk the life of our offspring.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: I think the political meaning is the exchange of ideas. Most of the net users are willingly to listen to others. That’s good. Also, I think we are fighting for our rights and interests. The power of unity is immeasurable.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: The good thing is that we can use our voice to mention the public that GMO is unknown or harmful. We should keep cautious attitude. Moreover, we are much more united than before. Additionally, I know that some scientists are immoral.

Dou Zhiqiao (S1) – 2014-03-27
(Dou Zhiqiao. 2014. Interviewed by author, March 27. Online chat room of QQ.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes, I have. It is interesting to discuss with others on these opinions and ideas.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?
Answer: I have various resources, like books, the Internet, TV, and so on. I also talk with some biology experts I met online, and they told me a lot. Of course, I do think. I am a skeptics and I doubt all the things.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?
Answer: At the beginning, when I feel exhausted talking with someone, I use some impolite expressions. But mostly, I use neutral ways to communicate. Now, I will not use impolite words at all, since I seldom talk with those idiots.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?
Answer: I feel supported when seeing others support me. When seeing those who are anti GMO using impolite words, I feel powerless.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: I should say that no one has influenced my attitude. I could understand the principles written in general scientific articles; even there were risks, (I believed that) it was controllable. Instead, it confirms my attitude. Before, I just generally knew the technology. When the discussion turned white-hot, I searched many materials with deep understanding of GM food, and I turned to believe to a higher degree that all the risks could be easily controlled. I was also really looking forward to the development of GM food technology.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: I am not professional in GMO area. And I have talked to some experts in GMO. They have convinced me that GMO is safe.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: Maybe. But GMO is the trend of the agriculture.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government’s decision? Why?
Answer: Yes, the public opinion put great pressure on government’s decision.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: It is good to debate online. However, our voices can hardly be heard. Most of the net users consider us as guilty. According to the online survey made by Tencent Weibo, more than 90% people object to GM food. This is populism. This is not an equal discussion.
What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: Many people believe that the controversy raised by Cui is very meaningful, for the reason that it makes more and more people pay attention to the technology. However, according to me, now, the disadvantages far outweigh its advantages; because of that Cui still holds on firmly despite extreme adversity and spreads the rumors. But if Cui really has a sense of social responsibility, he should demonstrate again what he spread before and tell the public which are truth or false. Only in this way, his participation can be valued meaningful.

PX (S2) – 2014-03-27
(PX. 2014. Interviewed by author, March 27. Online chat room of QQ.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes. Sometimes. I like to discuss and debate with others why some opinions are right and some are wrong.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?
Answer: My work is related with GMO. I am really familiar with it. My knowledge is mainly from books and research.

Why don't you search for GMO information during the discussion?
Answer: I don't think that the other participants in the online discussion are able to provide professional knowledge on GMO than books or professional website.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?
Answer: I don't use any adorable or impolite expressions. Facts are facts, and they need to be expressed in neutral way.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?
Answer: I feel sad when seeing so many people cannot understand GMO. But now I get used to it. Seldom anyone has responded me with adorable words.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: No. Since I can be considered as an expert in GMO field, many people come to me and ask relative knowledge about GMO. And I try my best to explain to them.
Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: No, I always try to persuade others.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: Why should I compromise? How to deal with GMO is the problem of the government.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government’s decision? Why?
Answer: Yes, they cannot make decision without considering the public opinion.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: I don’t know. If the discussion is helpless for the development, then it is useless.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: Before, many people don’t really know about GMO. It is true that because of the online discussion, many people began to know it. However, they tend to believe in rumors. That’s sad. I think the government should popularize the knowledge of GMO in right ways that the public can accept it.

Liangzi (S3) – 2014-03-26
(Liangzi. 2014. Interviewed by author, March 26. Online chat room of QQ.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes, others’ discourses are the resources of the discussions.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?
Answer: From many ways, I mainly search relative information on the Internet. However, since I am not the student of GMO, I can hardly find the authoritative statistics. The reason why I believe in Mr. Fang is that his discourses are supported by statistics and include references. His discourse seems reliable.

Why don’t you search for GMO information during the discussion?
Answer: There are so many rumors during the discussion; I think it is not wise to search information during the discussion.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?
Answer: I only use neutral expression to discuss with others. If we act in crazy way, they will consider us as truly insane.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?
Answer: I feel sympathetic of those who use dirty words. They do not really hate GMO. They are just using this way to abreact their angry on their life. And I feel happy if other responds me with adorable words.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: When I see so many people say GMO is harmful and bad, I feel very sad. They do not know what GMO is. So their opinions cannot influence my attitude. But opinions from the same attitude, I am glad to talk with them. Sometimes, I can learn something from them.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: No. Before the online discussion, I already had my position.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: I think I will if the better argument is better for all of us.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why?
Answer: Not really. GMO is the trend of the agriculture development. Maybe the government will delay the promotion of GMO, but it cannot change it.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: I think the online discussion is good for democracy. However, till now, it is not good for the development of GMO.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: People learn from online discussions. The more discussion one participates in, the more the one know about how to think and talk. But the discussion impedes the promotion of GMO.

Jinshi (S4) – 2014-03-27
(Jinshi. 2014. Interviewed by author, March 27. Online chat room of QQ.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes. I have tried to discuss with and persuade the opposite side. Although they can understand the scientific regulations; however, they still question the safety of GMO. I understand them that they are afraid of the unknown. But I still try my best to persuade them.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?
Answer: First, I know GMO from biology book. After the online discussion happened, I realized that I was lack of knowledge on GMO. Hence, I searched a lot of relative knowledge and information on the Internet, like relative scientific website from USA and so on. I also learn it from discussion with some experts online.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?
Answer: I have always asking others to use polite expressions. However, when I facing the situation by myself, I loose my patient. When I cannot control my feelings, I use some impolite words. Now I seldom debate with them, since I do not want to scold others online. Moreover, I feel that I can never persuade them.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?
Answer: Of course, I feel supported with compliment. At first, I felt angry about the dirty words, and I fought back. But now, I try to ignore them.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: Yes, I met some professional people in GMO field, and they told me a lot of relative knowledge. They have convinced me.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: No, I don’t believe in anyone’s discourses. But I will gather all different speeches, and analyze them together.

Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: If it is needed for the common good, I think I will.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government’s decision? Why?
Answer: Of course the government will take the public opinion into consideration. However, this will not influence the trend of the development of GMO.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: By looking at the online discussion, we can see problems of the current society, like poor credibility of the government, and unenlightened people. If we
want to convince them, these problems need to be fixed.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: The online discussion has slowed down the development of GMO. That’s not good.

**Xiaoguizi (S5) – 2014-4-16**
(Xiaoguizi. 2014. Interviewed by author, April 16. Online chat room of QQ.)

Have you looked at discourses from participants of the opposite/same groups?
Answer: Yes.

Have you reflected upon these discourses in the discussion?
Answer: Yes, I have. If I saw some rumors, I would tell my friends that they were not true and why. If they did not agree with me, I would debate with them.

In which ways, do you learn knowledge or get information of GMO?
Answer: I mainly learn the information of GMO from the online discussion. Before the discussion, I knew GMO. After the discussion, by talking with some professional people in the field online and searching information online, I know more about GMO.

When did you use neutral/adorable/impolite expression? Why?
Answer: When I criticize those who are anti GMO, I sometimes use impolite ways of expression. Mostly, I use neutral expression to tell them the facts.

How do you feel when other responds you with neutral/adorable/impolite language?
Answer: Of course, I feel insulted when they respond me with dirty words. The reason why they scolding me is that they cannot find facts to debate with me. They are not rational people. But my aim is to let them know what truth is. My attitude is not important. The fact is more important.

Have opinions from the opposite/same attitude group influenced your understanding on GMO? If yes, how? If no, why?
Answer: Opinions from the same group has influenced my opinions, and they convinced my ideas. Opinions from the opposite side will not affect me. They are not rational people. They just know to protest, but they do not know why.

Have you ever been persuaded by other participants in the discussion?
Answer: Yes, by people from the same attitude group.
Will you compromise to better argument? Why?
Answer: I will, I think. The current situation of GMO is so bad, and I hope there will be a better argument on the solution of GMO.

Do you think that the online discussion can influence the government's decision? Why?
Answer: I think it will.

How do you look at the political meaning of the online discussion?
Answer: Many people consider that the online discussion is the symbol of democracy. However, I think it is a joke. If the public does not know the fact or the truth, what they say shouldn't be considered. If the public is easily affected by rumors, then the online discussion and the so-called democracy is a joke. It is helpless and harmful for the scientific development.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of online discussion on GMO?
Answer: Although most of the people tend to be anti GMO, there are still many people tend to support GMO. To persuading the public is a hard process. But as long as we are on the way, it is a progress. The disadvantage is that the online discussion may have bad influence on the research on GMO.
Appendix 4 (Coding scheme)

Coding Scheme and examples of DQI

Interaction

1) Comment on the post: a message that is responding and commenting on posts written by Mr. Cui or Mr. Fang.
2) Comment on other’s comment: a message that is responding and commenting on comments written by other participants in the comment section of posts written by Mr. Cui or Mr. Fang.

Information distribution

3) Providing information: a message that is providing information to other participants, and the information can be facts, opinions and the like.
4) Seeking information: a message that includes evidence of information seeking in the form of queries, open-ended remarks and the like. (Wilhelm 1998, 325)

Example:

Providing information:
The chaotic situation of the country is caused of these people (who support GMO) (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Please take notice on the Zhang Ye’s (provincial governor of Gansu province) attitudes towards GMO. It is heard that he is looking for the image ambassador for organic food. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

I support Cui Yongyuan! (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Please look at this document! How do Americans think about GM food? 28 experts have explained the answer for us. Please click the following link!
http://url.cn/WidfMC (Commenting on Fang’s post of 20131024)

Seeking information:
Could you publish the original English conversation? Do not create new words that nobody understands. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Do you mean that you are quite familiar with melamine? (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

I felt chest-ache when I have eaten GM oil. I will not feel it when I did not eat it. What’s the reason? (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Can you prove that you have never eaten GM food? (Commenting on Fang’s post of 20131110)

Rational & logical expression
5) Valid claim: a message, like agreement, disagreement, criticism, that is supported with logical reason(s). For example: A speaker says that X should (not) be done, and reason Y is given why X should (not) be done. And there is logical connection between X and Y. If both X and Y are given, however, there is no logical connection between X and Y, then it is not a valid claim. Also, the reason should not be subjective.

6) Inferior claim: a message, like agreement, disagreement, criticism, that is supported with reason. However, it is not logical or rational, but rather subjective.

7) Non-valid claim: a message, like compliment, scolding, or agreement, disagreement and criticism without providing any reason(s).

Example:

Valid claim:
Do not know GMO dose not mean that they have not eaten GM food. The USA government hasn’t forced to label GM food, so it is nature that Americans do not know GMO. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Cui lacks the ability of writing. There is no picture, no reference, and there even is not any professor’s name. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131219)
It is not the matter that they haven't done it better. It is the matter that they even haven't done it yet. If you say that they have done it, then who did it, in which lab, when, where is the report? (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131219)

Because that I do not know much, so I need to listen to authoritative institutions. (Commenting on Fang’s post of 20131229)

**Inferior claims:**
The chaotic situation of the country is caused of these people (who support GMO) (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

If Americans have eaten GM food for over ten years, they must know what GMO is. They have to know it even if they didn’t want to. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Please look at this document! How do Americans think about GM food? 28 experts have explained the answer for us. Please click the following link! http://url.cn/WidfMC (Likexin commented on Fang’s post of 20131024)

You are so naïve that you say what the newspaper write. (Commenting on Fang’s post of 20131229)

**Non-valid claims:**
There must be some people who sacrifice first. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

I support Cui Yongyuan! (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

**Mutual respect**
8) No respect: a message that only includes negative statement, like scolding and the like.

9) Neutral: a message that neither includes positive nor negative statement.

10) Explicit respect: a message that includes at least one explicit positive statement, like compliment and the like.

**Examples:**

No respect:
Fang must die one day! (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131219)
Neutral:
I believe more in the frontier interviews rather than reports made from the so-called professional institutions. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Explicit respect:
Good job! Cui! (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Mutual respect for counterargument:

11) Counterargument included but degraded: speaker acknowledges the counterargument, but responds to it with no positive or negative statement, like scolding.

12) Counterargument included – neutral: speaker acknowledges the counterargument, and responds to it with neither explicitly positive nor explicitly negative statement.

13) Counterargument included – valued: speaker acknowledges the counterargument, and responds with valid reasons, regardless if it includes positive or negative statements.

Examples:

Counterargument included but degraded:
You can eat more GM food, and then you will become “healthier”! (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Counterargument included – neutral:
There must be some people who sacrifice first. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Counterargument included – valued:
You can hardly say that you have not eaten any GM food, since many restaurants use GM oil. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

That’s right. It is like hydrogenated vegetable oil. Without the witness of the time, nobody knows that it can cause cardio-cerebral diseases. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

Because that I do not know much, so I need to listen to authoritative institutions. (Commenting on Fang’s post of 20131229)
**Consensus building**

14) Positional politics: speaker is unwilling to compromise or make consensus building.

15) Alternative proposal: speaker proposes a mediating proposal that does not fit the current agenda.

16) Mediating proposal: speaker proposes a mediating proposal that fits the current agenda.

**Example:**

**Positional politics:**
I believe more in the frontier interviews rather than reports made from the so-called professional institutions. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

You can eat more GM food, and then you will become “healthier”! (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

The chaotic situation of the country is caused of these people (who support GMO) (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

**Alternative proposal:**
The best way to test whether GM food is safe or not is let the supporter to eat it for five or six years. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

I support brother Cui. Let them (those who support GM food) to eat the GM food. We will not them in China. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

**Mediating proposal:**
I think Chinese should not indulge in GM food itself; instead, the most urgent issue is to establish an efficient supervision mechanism on food. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20131024)

I think it will be better to provide evidence during the debate. Otherwise, the debate is useless and meaningless. (Commenting on Cui’s posts of 20140104)
Appendix 5 (Voting result)

Figure 1: Online voting on preference on GM food made by Tencent Weibo in September


English translation:
Alternative 1: Supporting Mr. Fang and GMO;
Alternative 2: Supporting Mr. Cui, and keeping conservative opinion towards GMO;
Alternative 3: Supporting neither Mr. Fang nor Mr. Cui, and keeping indifference attitude towards GMO.

Totally, 3144 net users (4.7%) chose Alternative 1, and 62012 net users (92.74%) chose Alternative 2, and 1711 net users (2.56%) chose Alternative 3.