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What is *Zimeiti*? The commercial logic of content provision on China's social media platforms

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ABSTRACT
"*Zimeiti*" (we media or self-media) is a buzzword in China that has never been clearly defined. It generally refers to non-institutional content providers on social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. I conducted a systematic analysis of metadiscourse about *zimeiti*, including industry reports and conference speeches by important figures in this community. I found that *zimeiti* is mainly seen as an emerging commercial sector monetizing user attention. Its boundaries are set loose enough to include any new forms of monetization on social media platforms, while at the same time strict enough to exclude discussions on social and political implications. To legitimize this industry, the community adopts depoliticization strategies that emphasize market mechanisms. Based on the findings, I propose a "push and pull" model to explain the variances in politicization/depoliticization across media types. The findings provide an important reality check on the *zimeiti* community and help us gain insights into China's restricted yet highly commercialized online content ecosystem.
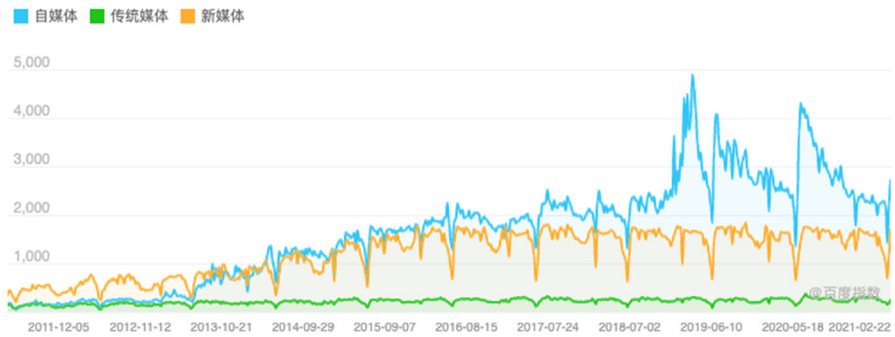
Introduction

"*Zimeiti*" (自媒体, often translated as "we media" or "self-media") has become a buzzword in China since the early 2010s. Data from the Baidu Index suggests that people have searched for it more frequently than "traditional media (传统媒体)" or even "new media (新媒体)" since 2013 (Figure 1). *Zimeiti* outlets, which reach their audiences exclusively via social media platforms, are not only frequently talked about, but also have a significant, if not dominant, presence in people's media diet in China. According to the *2020 Annual Report on Development of New Media in China* (Tang & Huang, 2020), 77.3% of Chinese internet users choose to use

Figure 1. Baidu Index of "Zimeiti (自媒体)" (Blue), "Traditional Media (传统媒体)"(Green), and "New Media (新媒体)" (Orange) from Jan 2011 to Feb 2021.
Source: http://index.baidu.com/.

WeChat as the major channel to get news content, followed by Douyin (39.0%), Jinri Toutiao (24.5%), and Weibo (24.0%), whereas only 6.1% and 0.7% choose television and print media, respectively. While institutional media still have an important presence on those social media platforms, more content consumed by audiences is the production of the army of *zimeiti* outlets.

This study endeavors to critically analyze the use of the term *zimeiti*. My goal was not to provide a comprehensive conceptualization of *zimeiti*. Rather, I aimed to use this term as a lens through which to gain insights into China's online content ecosystem. To achieve this goal, I systematically analyzed the metadiscourse of *zimeiti*, i.e. how self-labeled members of the *zimeiti* community talk about this term. Borrowing from Carlson's (2016) analytical framework on metajournalistic discourse, I paid specific attention to how they established definitions, set boundaries, and sought the legitimacy of *zimeiti* in their discourses. Analysis of these discursive processes could reveal how meanings of *zimeiti* as an industry and as a cultural practice are formed and developed. This study not only fills the gap between the prevailing use of this term and the lack of scholarly discussion around it, but also contributes to our understanding of China's digital media landscape, in which the community of *zimeiti* operates, provides content and services, and interacts with other actors. The findings indicate that the business nature and commercial logic promoted by platforms and start-up entrepreneurs are dominant in the *zimeiti* community. The democratic potential embedded in the infrastructure and practices of *zimeiti*, such as user-generated content and grassroots participation, is cited in hopes of legitimizing the for-profit business rather than promoting social justice. The metadiscourse of *zimeiti* provides an illuminating case of digital media

content provision in an authoritarian yet highly commercialized environment. It illustrates how the political economy context and media practitioners shape the media landscape together.

The sections below begin by reviewing the literature on the political economy and practitioners of media in China. I then situate *zimeiti* in the development of China's media landscape. After that, I introduce the analytical approach of this study and present the metadiscourse data and methodology. In the findings section, I discuss the discursive processes of definition making, boundary setting, and legitimization in the *zimeiti* community. I conclude by arguing that *zimeiti* at its core follows a commercial logic rather than political or journalistic ones, and I propose a "push and pull" model to understand how media lean toward politicization or depoliticization under the influence of various forces.

The political economy and practitioners of media in China

This research is informed by and contributes to two perspectives in the study of Chinese media. The first one is the political economy approach, which in general seeks to "understand the way in which power is structured and differentiated, where it comes from, and how it is renewed" (Mansell, 2004, p. 99). In the context of Chinese media, there are two crucial developments that profoundly changed the power dynamic. The first was media commercialization, which emerged alongside China's economic reforms since the 1980s (Chan, 1993; Zhao, 2000). It dramatically changed the media landscape shaped by Mao Zedong's totalitarian policies, where party mouthpieces filled with propaganda were the only form of media outlet (Winfield & Peng, 2005). Thousands of newly launched, market-oriented newspapers and magazines were added to China's press during the 1980s and 1990s, eroding the party media's reader base and challenging their authority (Chen & Guo, 1998; C. Huang, 2001). It should be noted, however, that press commercialization does not mean privatization. The party-state still maintains full control of the commercial titles. Although they do not rely on government funding and have to compete for readers and advertising in the market, all of them are still state-owned, directed by the Communist Party, and operating within the party-state system. The licensing of print and broadcasting media is strictly controlled by the government.

The second crucial development was made possible by the popularization of the internet, especially social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat (Poell et al., 2014; Wu & Wall, 2019). The fact that everyone is now able to register a social media account and publish content online without state authorization means that the barriers to entering the media landscape

have been effectively removed. However, digital technologies have not changed the situation where political and commercial logics exert strong influence. The former is manifested in government censorship and crackdown on dissident voices (Svensson, 2014), the evolution and adaptation of party propaganda to the digital media environment (Repnikova & Fang, 2018, 2019), and the proliferation of pro-regime trolls (Han, 2015). For commercial interests, internet companies in China pursue traffic and engagement in the same manner as their Western counterparts (W. Zhang et al., 2021), but they are also under political pressure to collaborate with the state on issues such as suppressing dissent and facilitating surveillance (V. G. Huang & Wu, 2021). In short, the basic configuration of the political economy of digital media in China includes strong state intervention and the pursuit of commercial interests within political boundaries.

While the political economy approach highlights the structural constraints, the perspective on practitioners emphasizes their choice and agency. Studies on journalists in China's commercial media generally reveal a situation of "dancing with shackles." Pan (2009), argued that although "bounded" by the "state corporatist system" (p. 187), a group of professional journalists have pushed for breakthroughs and innovations without challenging the central authorities. Repnikova, (2017) described the relationship between journalists and the state as "guarded improvisation," where they constantly negotiate the boundaries of critical reporting. In this process, an equilibrium is achieved where the journalists push for critical journalism and the state restricts it without killing it.

As compared with research on the journalist community, how practitioners in the digital media industry navigate power relations and how power is embedded in the practices of digital media remain largely unknown. Do they also try to strategically push the envelope and negotiate with the authorities? This study aims to examine a particular group—practitioners in the *zimeiti* industry—from the perspectives of political economy and practitioners' agency.

Zimeiti in China's media landscape

The proliferation of the so-called *zimeiti* started as social media and began to gain popularity in China in the early 2010s. Naturally, a frequently seen conceptualization is that *zimeiti* is an umbrella term that refers to user-generated, non-official accounts on social media platforms (Creemers, 2017; Oakes, 2017). This approach conceptualizes *zimeiti* by negation, i.e. it is every account on social media *excluding* those set up by official media organizations. Another approach is to simply list the most popular types of *zimeiti* accounts: "verified celebrities, social media influencers, and

independent news accounts that produce original content" (Li & Luo, 2020, p. 781). There are also scholars who choose to narrow this term to only include "individuals setting up their own online dissemination channels" on social media platforms (Repnikova & Fang, 2019, p. 680), or to expand its boundary to include accounts that are affiliated with official media but use an unorthodox style that resembles non-official accounts (Neagli, 2021). The sometimes conflicting conceptualizations result from a surprising lack of theoretical discussions on this term. Almost all the scholars who mention *zimeiti* in English-language academic journals only provide a simple line or two to explain the term.

To date, the most significant scholarly discussion on this term comes from a paper published in a top Chinese-language journalism journal (Yu, 2017). The author followed Foucault's (1970) archaeological method and revealed that *zimeiti* in Chinese was translated from the English-language concept "we media," which was first seen in Bowman and Willis (2003) report *We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. Dan Gillmor, who wrote the foreword for the report, further developed this term in an article published in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Gillmor, 2004a) and his book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Gillmor, 2004b). As indicated by the book title, the term "we media" emphasizes the participatory and democratic nature of digital technologies such as blogs. "We" refers to grassroots groups whose voices used to be deprived, and "they" are the corporate media oligarchy who used to dominate the American media landscape. Yu (2017) found that, ironically, when this term was introduced to China and translated as "*zimeiti*" in the early 2010s, it no longer referred to citizen journalism and grassroots democracy. Quite the opposite, the company that brands itself as the pioneer of *zimeiti* in China and uses the English phrase "we media" as its name (http://www.wemedia.cn/) is actually backed by venture capital.

While Yu (2017) has convincingly traced the origin of the term and revealed the ironic turn of its meaning in the Chinese context, what remains unknown is how *zimeiti* as an industry or institution, without any official backing, defines and establishes itself as a widely recognized, rightful player in China's digital media landscape. We also know little about how people in this industry perceive and interact with political and commercial power. While some scholars expect *zimeiti* to provide diversified content to challenge official narratives and even contribute to social and political changes in China (e.g. Creemers, 2017; Tu, 2016), there is little examination of whether the *zimeiti* community sees itself as a change maker. By answering these questions, we can gain valuable insights into not only the *zimeiti* industry itself, but also the overall digital media ecosystem in China.

Metadiscourse in media and journalism

The analytical approach through which I examined how *zimeiti* has been defined and legitimized is metadiscourse analysis. Discourse can be understood as a form of social interaction (van Dijk, 2011) and a site for creating and recreating shared cultural understandings. With the prefix "meta-" (about oneself), metadiscourse could be simply understood as "talk about talk" (Craig, 2008). In the area of media and journalism studies, metadiscourse usually refers to how relevant actors within the field comment reflexively on the forms and practices of media (e.g. Aitamurto & Varma, 2018).

The concept of "metajournalistic discourse" developed by Carlson (2016) is a useful framework for understanding how actors inside and outside journalism "publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). Researchers have used this approach to study the metadiscourse about a variety of media forms and practices, including newly emerged journalism forms such as digital news start-ups (Carlson & Usher, 2016), constructive journalism/solutions journalism (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018), engaged journalism (Ferrucci et al., 2020), and gaming journalism (Perreault & Vos, 2020), specific journalistic practices such as hyperlinks in news articles (De Maeyer & Holton, 2016), as well as challengers and critics of journalism such as right-wing populism (Krämer & Langmann, 2020). In all these cases, metajournalistic discourse plays an important role in understanding certain practices of journalism, as well as in developing the meanings and values of certain journalism forms.

The role of metadiscourse in defining and legitimizing *zimeiti* is apparent as it is a newly emerged construct seeking recognition and facing challenges from legacy media and a restrictive regime. In this study, I also drew from the analytical approach of metajournalistic discourse. Although *zimeiti* is not necessarily a form of journalism (in fact, as I will discuss below, the *zimeiti* community deliberately distances itself from journalism), it is an emergent media form that produces and disseminates content and thus could be examined through the same lens as journalistic practices. Following Carlson's (2016) three-process framework of definition making, boundary setting, and legitimization, the following research questions (RQs) were proposed and guided the inquiry of this study:

RQ1: What are the defining features and shared concepts of *zimeiti* according to proponents and members of the *zimeiti* community?

RQ2: How does the *zimeiti* community construct boundaries around questions including which actors are acceptable, what practices are appropriate, and what normative commitments are relevant?

RQ3: How does the *zimeiti* community legitimize the industry in the digital media landscape in China?

Data and methods

Previous studies on metajournalistic discourse often rely on analysis of relevant articles in trade publications (e.g. Ferrucci et al., 2020; Vos & Singer, 2016). To date, there is no dedicated journal on *zimeiti* in China, but there are several well-known annual reports published by major actors in this community. In addition, four annual national conferences on *zimeiti* were held from 2014 to 2017, in which dozens of key figures within this community gave speeches. This study collected data from these two kinds of sources.

More specifically, I collected 19 annual reports published by 7 different organizations from 2015 to 2020 (see the detailed list in Table 1). The reports either contained "*zimeiti*" in their title or devoted a significant part of the work to discussing issues related to *zimeiti*. The seven publishing organizations can be categorized into two types: one is platform companies and their affiliated institutions, such as Jinri Toutiao and the Tencent Research Institute; the other type is third-party companies that provide service to the *zimeiti* community, such as Newrank, which provides data analytics and advertising services, and Topklout, which ranks *zimeiti* accounts according to their commercial values and provides copyright licensing services. The list of organizations and reports was informed by the author's personal communications with three highly experienced observers in this field. They helped make sure that no major *zimeiti* reports were missing.

The annual conferences on *zimeiti* were held by the WeMedia.cn company, which was founded in 2014 as an "alliance of *zimeiti*" and later evolved into a company running hundreds of social media accounts that boast a total of 300 million followers on various platforms.[1] The company was a major promoter of *zimeiti* in China. Its annual conferences were attended by high-profile individuals in the *zimeiti* community and were widely watched. Speakers included successful owners of *zimeiti* accounts such as Wu Xiaobo, a financial writer whose *zimeiti* account Wu Xiaobo Channel was valued at RMB 2 billion (USD 309 million) in 2017,[2] and platform founders such as ByteDance's creator Zhang Yiming. I retrieved the transcripts of the speeches from the websites that covered the conferences. The total word count of the transcripts was more than 75,000 Chinese characters.

Following previous studies on metajournalistic discourse, I conducted qualitative textual analysis using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Drawing from Emerson et al. (2011) analytical approach, I read the texts several times. On the first readthrough, I took notes of the information relevant to the three research questions. The notes were mostly keywords and phrases that frequently appeared in the texts. Examples included "monetization (*bianxian*)," "traffic bonus (*liuliang hongli*)," and

Table 1. Data sources.

	Organization	Year	Title
Reports			
TK-1	Topklout (克劳锐, topklout.com)	2016	White Paper on China's Zimeiti Industry (中国自媒体行业白皮书)
TK-2		2018	White Paper on China's Zimeiti Industry (中国自媒体行业白皮书)
TK-3		2019	White Paper on the Development of China's MCN Industry (中国MCN行业发展研究白皮书)
TK-4		2020	Report on the Influence of Zimeiti (自媒体影响力报告)
NR-1	Newrank (新榜, Newrank.cn)	2015	White Paper on Content Entrepreneurship (内容创业白皮书)
NR-2		2016	Report on the Development of Zimeiti (自媒体发展现状调研报告)
NR-3		2017	White Paper on Content Entrepreneurship (内容创业白皮书)
NR-4		2018	Annual Report on Content Entrepreneurship (内容创业年度报告)
NR-5		2019	Annual Report on Content Entrepreneurship (内容创业年度报告)
NR-6		2020	Annual Report on Content Industry (内容产业年度报告)
PI-1	Penguin Intelligence (企鹅智酷, re.qq.com)	2016	Report on the Statistics and Trends of China's Zimeiti Content Entrepreneurship (中国自媒体内容创业数据及趋势报告)
PI-2		2017	Report on the Comprehensive Trends of China's Zimeiti (中国自媒体全视角趋势报告)
PI-3		2020	Report on the Trends of Digital Content Industry (数字内容产业趋势报告)
TR-1	Tencent Research Institute (腾讯研究院, tisi.org)	2016	Report on Statistics of China's internet Content Industry (中国互联网内容产业全景数据解读)
TR-2		2016	Report on the Commercialization of China's Zimeiti (中国自媒体商业化报告)
TD-1	Talking Data	2016	Report on the Development of China's Zimeiti Industry (自媒体行业发展报告)
TD-2		2016	Report on the Insights of China's Zimeiti Industry (自媒体行业洞察报告)
JT-1	Jinri Toutiao (今日头条)	2020	Report on the Trends of Content Creation (内容创作发展趋势报告)
WB-1	Weiboyi (微播易, weiboyi.com)	2020	White Paper on the Commercial Value of Zimeiti (自媒体商业价值白皮书)
Conference speech transcripts			
WM-1	WeMedia.cn	2014	Annual Conference of China's Zimeiti (中国自媒体年会)
WM-2		2015	Annual Conference of China's Zimeiti (中国自媒体年会)
WM-3		2016	Annual Conference of China's Zimeiti (中国自媒体年会)
WM-4		2017	Annual Conference of China's Zimeiti (中国自媒体年会)

"platform empowerment (*pingtai funeng*)." On the second time through, I looked for emergent themes or patterns in the data. For example, a theme of "expanding the boundaries of *zimeiti*" emerged when a series of

previously identified keywords referring to specific *zimeiti* practices showed a longitudinal trend of appearance in the reports. On the third readthrough, with these themes in mind, I paid special attention to the texts that could further validate or contradict the discursive themes that had emerged and adjusted the findings accordingly.

Findings

Defining zimeiti: commercialization as the ultimate goal

In conference speeches, *zimeiti* was often described as an all-inclusive concept. Speakers frequently claimed that "everybody is *zimeiti*," suggesting that anyone who signs up for an account on Weibo or WeChat Public Platform could be considered a member of *zimeiti*, because they could make themselves heard and be their own "*meiti*" (media). This rhetoric helps promote an optimistic image of the development of *zimeiti* and the importance of this concept.

However, reports on the *zimeiti* industry generally adopt a much more restrictive approach to the definition. For example, Topklout's 2016 *White Paper on China's Zimeiti Industry* defined *zimeiti* as:

> Individuals or groups who create various forms of widely disseminated content to express their values, build their own images and brands, and ultimately achieve commercialization (TK-1, p. 4).

The White Paper undoubtedly claimed that all *zimeiti* should set commercialization as their goal. According to the reports, the commercialization of *zimeiti* is mainly achieved through selling audiences' attention to advertisers. For example, Weiboyi's 2020 report considered *zimeiti* to be "the new medium for commercial brands to reach consumers" (WB-1, p. 2). It suggested that *zimeiti* accounts could reach a wide audience and build trust with them—methods that were effective in helping to promote products and brands. Newrank's 2016 *Report on the Development of Zimeiti* bluntly argued that "Renminbi is the major motivating factor for the *zimeiti* community" (NR-2). This statement was based on the result of a survey among members of the *zimeiti* community that indicated that 51% of the respondents came for money, as compared with 28.5% for interest and 18% for fame. The same report also summarized three key trends of the industry: professionalization, standardization, and commercialization. Based on these three trends, it is suggested that "setting up companies to operate *zimeiti* is the inevitable result" for the community (NR-2). This was in direct contradiction to the claim that *zimeiti* belongs to everyone. Following a similar logic, the Tencent Research Institute's 2016 *Report on the Commercialization of China's Zimeiti* claimed that "mature *zimeiti* generate

commercial revenues from publishing advertisements and paid content"
(TR-2). By building a hierarchy within the *zimeiti* community, it regarded
those with commercial success as more advanced and role models for
others. Talking Data's report also suggested that for *zimeiti* to grow, it
should "actively explore business models" instead of simply focusing on
content (TD-1, p. 33).

It should be noted that the discourses in *zimeiti* conferences were actu-
ally very similar to those in annual reports. Although speakers used phrases
like "everybody is *zimeiti*" as an inspirational quote, most of them still
focused on topics such as how to achieve a higher valuation, how to mon-
etize attention, and where the next big business opportunity would be.

Carlson (2016) suggested that to study definition making in metajournal-
istic discourse, it is useful to examine the "shared lexicon of concepts and
symbols for the actors involved" (p. 359). Below is a list of commonly dis-
cussed concepts in most of the *zimeiti* reports and speeches, through which
we could gain more insights into how this community defined itself.

I categorized the popular concepts into three groups. The first are con-
cepts directly related to business opportunities, which include—

Content entrepreneurship (neirong chuangye). "This is a spring for content
entrepreneurs," claimed Newrank's 2015 *zimeiti* report (NR-1). From the
beginning, *zimeiti* has been considered an industry providing business
opportunities for start-up companies.

Place where wind blows (fengkou), which refers to important business
opportunities. It came from a widely shared sentence "even pigs can fly
when there is favorable wind blowing from behind," suggesting that the
internet, and more specifically *zimeiti*, provides valuable opportunities for
those who look for commercial success.

The second category is actors (both human and non-human) in this
industry, which include—

Platforms (pingtai). Zimeiti accounts are operating on platforms such as
WeChat Public Platform, Weibo, Jinri Toutiao, and Douyin, which benefit
from the large amount of content produced by *zimeiti* as well as the traffic
and attention they generate. The reports and speeches frequently men-
tioned the "incentive plans" offered by the platforms, which provided sig-
nificant subsidies to popular *zimeiti* accounts. For example, Jinri Toutiao's
plan in 2015 promised that at least 1,000 *zimeiti* accounts on its platform
could earn at least RMB 10,000 (USD 1,550) per month. Similarly, Tencent
provided a total subsidy of RMB 200 million (USD 31 million) to *zimeiti*
accounts in 2016. Platforms used these plans to compete with each other
and attract more *zimeiti* to sign up and provide content.

A related concept is traffic (liuliang). Zhang et al. (2021) called China's
digital media platforms "traffic media" because they rely on traffic as their

business model. As content providers on these "traffic media," *zimeiti*'s business model is also based on traffic, which is a key focus in almost all reports and speeches. The discussions on traffic have grown increasingly sophisticated. An example is "private traffic (*siyu liuliang*)," which refers to followers who have been added to *zimeiti* owners' contact lists and private group chats. Private traffic is believed to be more reliable and less susceptible to influence from the adjustments in platform algorithms, and as such could bring steadier revenues (PI-3, p. 37).

Key opinion leaders (KOLs). This is a concept very similar to "influencers" in the Western social media ecosystem. KOLs were considered by the analyzed texts to have a significant influence on users' opinions and especially their consumption decisions. The authors and speakers mostly talked about how to use the power of KOLs to generate more revenue and how to build KOLs from the *zimeiti* teams.

Key opinion consumers (KOCs). These are mini-influencers who only have thousands or hundreds of followers on social media platforms, but they can wield great influence on their followers through product reviews with a personable, friend-like appeal. Newrank's 2020 report encouraged advertisers to look for a great amount of small *zimeiti* accounts as KOCs to sell their products in a more cost-effective manner (NR-6, p. 20).

Matrix (juzhen). This refers to the common strategy that a *zimeiti* company runs not only one account, but dozens or even hundreds of accounts across different platforms to maximize traffic and revenue.

Multi-Channel network (MCN). MCN originally referred to companies that worked with multiple YouTube channels (Lobato, 2016). In China's *zimeiti* industry, MCN refers to companies that run KOL accounts across text-based and video platforms. By 2018, there were more than 5,000 MCN companies in China, and they owned about 60% of the traffic on platforms (TK-3, p. 12).

The third category of commonly discussed concepts is verbs that describe desirable actions, which include—

Growing followers (zhangfen). Strategies to grow followers were frequently discussed in the reports and speeches, as the number of followers is a key factor in determining the scale of traffic and revenue.

Monetization (bianxian). This refers to the various ways of turning traffic into monetary revenue. According to Newrank's 2020 report, *zimeiti* had an increasing number of ways to monetize traffic, including advertisements, subscriptions, and most recently, e-commerce livestreaming (NR-6).

In sum, to answer RQ1, the definitions of *zimeiti* and the shared lexicon of concepts point to a clear direction: *Zimeiti* is considered a content business in the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2002). It has been made possible by the proliferation of digital media platforms, which look for

zimeiti accounts to provide content and attract traffic. Its major feature is a profitable business model that relies on gaining and monetizing traffic on digital media platforms. Members of this community are eager for suggestions on business strategies that could help grow more traffic and maximize its commercial value.

Setting boundaries for zimeiti: flexible but rigid

RQ2 asked about the boundary work in determining which actors, practices, and normative commitments are acceptable in the *zimeiti* industry. Analysis of the reports and speeches revealed that the boundary is at the same time highly flexible and strictly rigid.

On the one hand, the boundaries of *zimeiti* have continued to expand over the years. During the early years of *zimeiti*, attention was almost exclusively placed on WeChat Public Platform, Weibo, and Jinri Toutiao, all of which are text-based platforms. Starting in 2016, short videos became one of the focuses of the *zimeiti* industry, which expanded the boundary to include short video creators and livestreamers on digital platforms. Around the same time, "paying for knowledge" (*zhishi fufei*) became an important business on China's internet,[3] and the *zimeiti* industry quickly embraced this trend and included those who sold their knowledge online as successful examples of how *zimeiti* could monetize its influence. Since 2019, when e-commerce livestreaming became extremely popular and profitable, *zimeiti has* also adopted it as a main business strategy and regarded the popular e-commerce livestreamers as celebrities of this industry. As claimed by Topklout's 2019 report, "communication, marketing, content, traffic, e-commerce, entertainment, WeChat public accounts, Weibo, livestreaming, short videos … *zimeiti* has filled almost all of the information channels we can reach" (TK-3, p. 2). This longitudinal process of boundary expansion shows that the *zimeiti* industry has taken a very loose and pragmatic approach in determining the appropriate actors and practices—any new ones are acceptable as long as they can bring business opportunities for companies running social media accounts on platforms.

On the other hand, the *zimeiti* industry has maintained a strict boundary in terms of normative commitments. Achieving commercial success was considered the ultimate and only goal for *zimeiti*. The boundary was never expanded to include social justice, political participation, or media activism, as Gillmor (2004a, 2004b) originally envisioned in his concept of "we media." Such topics were not mentioned in any of the reports or speeches at all, which contradicts scholars' attempts to understand the role of *zimeiti* in promoting civic participation and democratization (e.g. Tu, 2016; Wang et al., 2020). In fact, the democratic elements embedded in the

infrastructure and practices of *zimeiti* are cited as evidence for a promising for-profit business rather than tools for promoting social justice. For example, the Tencent Research Institute's report argued that the *zimeiti* feature of grassroots content production and dissemination was significant mainly because "it opened a giant market with hundreds of millions of users" (TR-2).

Of course, the absence of discussions on the social and political roles of *zimeiti* does not mean that such roles do not exist. The rigid boundary on normative commitments as reflected in the texts tells us more about how *zimeiti* was *imagined* than about how it actually *operated*. The most likely explanation for the boundary work is that due to the strict political control in the authoritarian regime, the *zimeiti* industry has to stay away from political risks and is only allowed to pursue commercial returns. Breaking such boundaries would potentially cause serious damage to the industry. As the director of the Cyberspace Administration, China's top internet governance body, warned during an official conference in early 2021, "there is a need to focus on the regulation and control of *zimeiti*" because some *zimeiti* accounts have been publishing news content without a license to report news.[4] It is against this background that most *zimeiti* deliberately distance themselves from journalism by avoiding original reporting, especially of hard news, and instead focusing on soft content and aggregation.

Legitimizing zimeiti: strategies of depoliticization

Although commercialization was considered the ultimate goal, money alone was not enough to justify *zimeiti* and promote a favorable image of it among the general public. To answer RQ3, the following strategies were identified in the reports and speeches.

The first strategy was claiming official recognition. The *zimeiti* community argued that they were actively responding to government policies. Many reports and speeches mentioned the "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" (*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*) policy proposed by Premiere Li Keqiang in 2014 to boost employment and stimulate economic growth. Practitioners in the *zimeiti* industry often suggested that they were working on content entrepreneurship projects, which was considered one of the major categories of business start-ups encouraged by the government (Tong, 2019). The official policy was believed to grant legitimacy to the industry.

The second strategy was highlighting benefits for both the supply side (practitioners) and the demand side (readers). *Zimeiti* was claimed to serve readers and users better than legacy media. A report by the Tencent Research Institute argued that *zimeiti* had challenged the monopoly to

explain news events held by legacy media. It claimed that content produced by tens of thousands of *zimeiti* accounts responded to the changes in the audiences' demand for content. "The post-'90s generation seldom watch TV, and the post-'00s seldom read newspapers. The new generation of content consumers' habits are drastically different from the previous generation, but many legacy media have not acted quickly enough to catch up with the changes, which leaves room for *zimeiti* to develop." (TR-2) As reflected in this argument, the *zimeiti* industry tried to establish its authority by both criticizing legacy media's failure to adapt to the changes in the digital media environment and claiming its own success in meeting audiences' new demands and consumption habits. Newrank's 2015 report argued that *zimeiti* enabled a "highly efficient match" between niche content and users' long-tail demands (NR-1). "Efficiency" in matching information with audience was also highlighted as a key feature of *zimeiti* by Zhang Yiming, founder of ByteDance (WM-1).

At the same time, many of the reports and speeches argued that *zimeiti* empowered individual practitioners, especially at the grassroots level, by providing a great opportunity for upward mobility in Chinese society. As Newrank's 2016 report suggests, "One after another, grassroots individuals become KOLs chased by millions of followers" (NR-2). Practitioners of the *zimeiti* community were described as incredibly diverse. Newrank's 2020 report contained a survey result that indicated that only 20% of the individuals in the *zimeiti* industry had previous experience in the media industry, while more than 40% had careers completely unrelated to media and internet before joining the *zimeiti* industry. "All professions have their popular *zimeiti* creators who document their professionalism, showcase the beauty of their work, and earn money and fame." (NR-6, p. 17).

The third strategy was naturalization. *Zimeiti* was portrayed as a natural product of the development of technology. The increase in the value of *zimeiti* was claimed to be associated with "the advancement of mobile internet technology" (TK-1, p. 4) and "the revolutionary changes in the production methods of the global content industry" (TR-2). In addition, some suggested that *zimeiti* was so attractive that many of its critics ultimately became members of the community. For example, Qinglong Laozei, founder of WeMedia.cn, responded to skeptics during the first annual conference on *zimeiti* by saying, "some said *zimeiti* had no future, but I believe no one says it anymore, because those who said so are now working in the *zimeiti* industry" (WM-1). Such claims tried to build the legitimacy of *zimeiti* on its popularity and the irresistible attraction of the affluent industry.

To sum up, the legitimization strategies show a clear pattern of depoliticization. The claimed official recognition is based on its contribution to mass entrepreneurship and employment. The alleged major benefits are

based on the market logic of supply and demand. It is also portrayed as a natural result of technology advancement and market selection. Public interest and social impact are seldom mentioned by the community.

Conclusion: the push and pull toward depoliticization

Social media platforms have provided unprecedented opportunities for individuals and non-official groups in China, as they can bypass the licensing system of the traditional media era and launch their own "media" through social media accounts. As Penguin Intelligence's 2016 report argued, "*Zimeiti* has become a new pole of China's media ecosystem" (PI-1). The democratic potential of this digital technology, however, is seldom discussed by the community self-labeled as *zimeiti*. Instead, the prevailing discourse is to consider *zimeiti* an industry based on the attention economy model and a significant business opportunity for start-up companies.

In this study, I have analyzed the metadiscourse about *zimeiti*, including annual reports published by major actors in the industry and speeches at the annual *zimeiti* conferences. I found that commercialization is regarded as the defining feature of *zimeiti*, and that the boundaries are set to be loose enough to include any new forms of monetization on social media platforms, while at the same time strict enough to exclude any discussions of social and political implications or any journalistic elements. To legitimize this industry, the community resorts to strategies that focus on market mechanisms rather than social impact. There is a clear pattern of depoliticization and absence of normative appeals in the metadiscourse of *zimeiti*.

As an illuminating case of digital media content provision in an authoritarian yet highly commercialized environment, *zimeiti* shows how digital technology is imagined and discussed by practitioners under China's strict political control and booming market. It exemplifies an important pattern of the recent development of internet and digital technology in China: a subdued role in promoting democratization and a significant engine for economic development.

Based on the findings of this study and previous works, I propose a "push and pull" model that explains why some media are politicized while others are depoliticized (Figure 2). Forces from inside the industry (i.e. practitioners) are pushing the media, while external forces (i.e. the state, businesses, and civil society) are pulling them. In the case of "we media" in liberal democracies, both practitioners and civil society are driving them toward politicization, while the state and businesses largely remain ambivalent. In the case of China's traditional commercial media, as discussed in the literature review, although political and economic powers are generally pulling them toward depoliticization, practitioners (professional journalists)

Depoliticization   Politicization
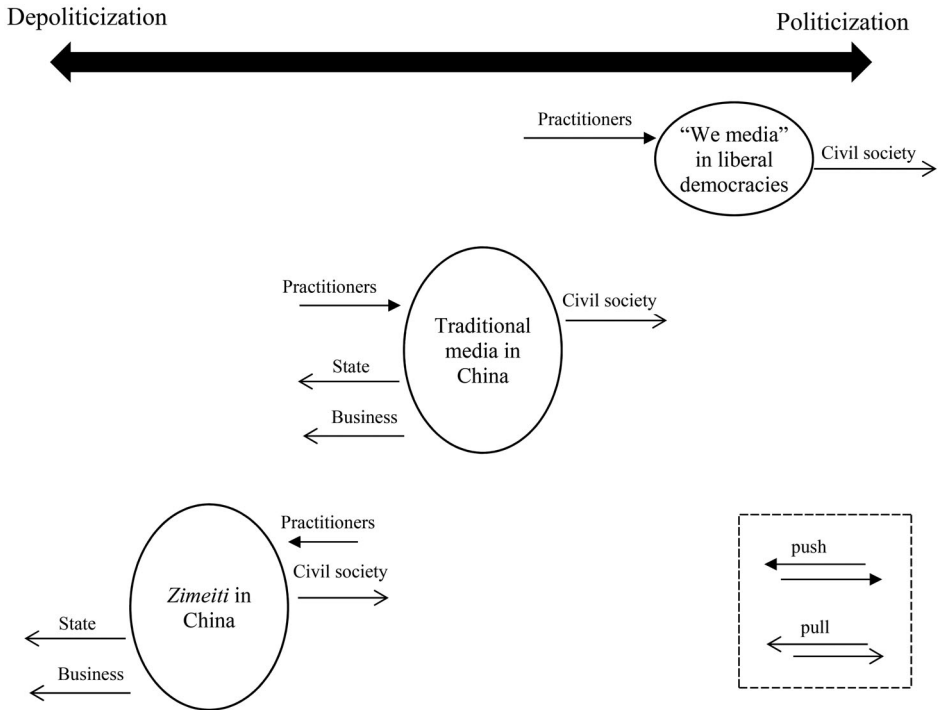

Figure 2. A "push and pull" model of politicization/depoliticization.

and civil society are pushing/pulling them toward politicization. As a result, they stay in the middle of the continuum. In contrast, *zimeiti* practitioners, as revealed in this study, deliberately choose to push the industry toward depoliticization. The consequence is that *zimeiti* outlets in China engage far less in politics and public affairs than traditional journalism.

There are some possible explanations for the difference between practitioners of China's commercial media and *zimeiti*. First, as mentioned earlier, journalists in commercial media are still embedded in the political system, which restricts their autonomy but also provides some protection for them. However, *zimeiti* practitioners are operating in the purely commercial sector and lack political protection. Second, Chinese journalists have developed a professional community and share ideas and values, including journalistic professionalism, whereas the young *zimeiti* industry has not developed a similar professional ideology. Third, *zimeiti* is an industry closely connected with and promoted by Chinese internet companies, which are abundant in capital and have the tradition of following the commercial and depoliticization logic.

It should be noted that in this model, civil society is still pulling *zimeiti* toward fulfilling their social and political roles. For example, non-governmental organization (NGO) practitioners and activists may discuss how

zimeiti can be used to promote social justice and call for collective actions. Not all *zimeiti* accounts are aiming for commercialization. However, this study reveals that the dominant discourse from within the *zimeiti* industry follows a purely commercial logic. It is an important reality check on the actual state of *zimeiti* in China.

One important limitation of this study is that the scope of empirical data is restricted to trade publications and industry reports. Future research could investigate how this dominantly commercial metadiscourse interacts with other more civically oriented discourses. For example, how do activists think of traffic and attention? Have they tried to adapt to this logic and ride on the wave of *zimeiti* commercialization to promote discussions on social issues?

Another possible direction of future research is to conduct comparative studies and examine the relationships between *zimeiti* and other relevant concepts in Western contexts, such as content farms, online entrepreneurship, and social media influencers. The *zimeiti* industry bears similarities with the creator economy promoted by platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, which commodify creators and their content and have built massive commercial ecosystems (Kopf, 2020; Lobato, 2016). However, there are also significant differences between *zimeiti* and businesses on Western platforms. For example, the early *zimeiti* projects were mostly text-based, whereas video and images were at the center of creator economy in the West. YouTube and other Western platforms also used different discursive strategies to promote the creator economy. Such comparisons could also help us gain insights into the differences between Western and Chinese digital media ecosystems.

In addition, future research could also examine the influence of the highly commercialized *zimeiti* industry on China's media landscape. Mainstream media may adopt some content strategies of *zimeiti* to attract more traffic, which in turn might erode journalistic professionalism. As Tong (2019) argued, the prevalence of tabloidized infotainment and voyeuristic content on *zimeiti* might have fostered "the sensational tastes of readers, who are interested in apolitical and entertainment content rather than serious reports on social and political issues," which would have negative consequences among the public (p. 87). Empirical studies are needed to substantiate this argument. Furthermore, as China's propaganda machine has become more and more savvy in exploiting the fuzzy boundary between official media and *zimeiti* to produce more informal and playful propaganda content (Oakes, 2017; Repnikova & Fang, 2018), and as an increasing amount of *zimeiti* have started to toe the official line in exchange for a safer position in the business (H. Zhang, 2019), scholars could investigate the possible convergence of official propaganda and the *zimeiti* business.

Notes

1. See http://www.wemedia.cn/.
2. See https://www.caixinglobal.com/2019-03-18/popular-wechat-account-valued-at-2-billion-yuan-snapped-up-by-education-firm-101393812.html.
3. "Paying for knowledge" (*zhishi fufei*) refers to a popular business model in the Chinese internet. Users pay for quality content such as summaries of books and online courses. See https://www.ft.com/content/add21080-0ace-11e7-97d1-5e720a26771b.
4. See http://tech.china.com.cn/internet/20210201/374143.shtml.

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