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# The mediated and mediatised justice-seeking: Chinese digital vigilantism from 2006 to 2018

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## ABSTRACT

The Chinese Internet has developed rapidly in the past decade and given rise to many online phenomena, including digital vigilantism (DV). It refers to citizens' practice of weaponising online visibility for retaliation when collectively offended. In China, since the Cat Torture Case in 2006, DV has been widely adopted by citizens to defend social norms and values. With recent technological developments and socio-political changes in China, how Chinese citizens conduct DV and its influence have also changed along various dimensions. This research, therefore, identifies the historical changes of DV in China and situates these changes in relation to contemporary Chinese technological and socio-political development. The study constructs a database of 1265 Chinese DV cases that receive media coverage between 2006 to 2018 and conducts a thematic analysis to identify characteristics, changes, and trends of DV in China. The author argues that these developments demonstrate the mediation and more importantly, the mediatisation of justice-seeking on the Chinese Internet conditioned by the ubiquitous state power.

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Digital vigilantism; human flesh search; Chinese social media; Internet history; mediatisation

## Introduction

The 2006 *Cat Torture Case* marks one of the first efforts of online collective action against an individual citizen to protect a shared value (Han, 2018)—in this case, animal rights and welfare. A video clip of a woman crushing a kitten's skull with her high heels led to a large-scale campaign to expose her identity on an online forum, *Mop Forum*. The woman's personal information—including her name, job, address, and phone number—was published online after a four-day search (ibid.). Due to this campaign's social impact, some press followed the story and reported on the case, but only afterwards. The incident ended with the woman's resignation from her job but without the government's direct involvement or her employer's. This case's process is relatively straightforward with two major actors involved: the cat-torturing woman and the angered Chinese netizens.

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In November 2016, a Chinese female student, Jiang Ge, was killed in Japan. The killer was her best friend Liu's ex-boyfriend. Later on Sina Weibo, the victim's mother, Jiang Qiulian, published Liu's personal information, their private conversations and the phone call recording in which Liu's parents insulted her, and blamed Liu and her family for Jiang Ge's death and their indifference. Small-scale attention on this case and shaming on Liu was observed, but the incident did not make a nation-wide impact yet. However, in November 2017, after a commercial online media channel, *Jumian* [*The Situation*], made a special issue on this incident, interviewing and setting up a meeting for the two parties, the incident immediately became a national trending topic on various social media platforms, leading to later rounds and larger scale of shaming and harassment on Liu. Meanwhile, Liu and several public opinion leaders started to question Jiang's mother's motive, which triggered some netizens to shame Jiang's mother. People's Daily, the newspaper directly run by the Chinese government, also discussed the moral and legal implications of this case in a commentary (People's Daily, 2017). In January 2018, two public opinion leaders who supported Liu posted about disputes between them and Liu and exposed their previous attempt to sway the public opinion, which turned many former supporters against all three of them. This incident's process is complex, with various actors involved and controversies lasting more than one year on multiple social media platforms.

Netizens' practice of collectively naming and shaming targets in incidents similar to above-mentioned cases is often named as *wangluo zhengyi* [online justice] in China. Some influential cases of this phenomenon are studied through the concept *new media event/incident* (also as *Internet event/incident*) by Chinese media scholars (Fang, 2014; Zeng et al., 2014; Liu, 2015; Wu & Liu, 2018), which has been widely used since Qiu and Chan (2009, 2011) co-edited book *New Media Events Research*. In the early 2010s, this concept is usually broadly and descriptively defined as "public events where large numbers of citizens participate in often unorganised, autonomous online efforts to express their sentiments and opinions, address collective needs, or influence public opinion and policy" (Jiang, 2014, p. 211). However, this descriptive definition is unproductive in contemporary society since almost all influential public events are entangled with new media (Qiu & Miao, 2016). Therefore, scholars suggest using this concept as an analytical perspective to understand how power dynamics between social actors are formed in such cases (ibid.; Wu, 2014). Bearing this analytical perspective in mind, the author intends to study not only Chinese online justice cases that are historically significant as *new media events* (Dayan & Katz as cited in Qiu & Miao, 2016), but also common cases that demonstrate how Chinese citizens seek personal justice by retaliating individuals online. Hence, online justice in China is studied in this research as digital vigilantism (DV), a more specific concept coined by Trottier (2017), referring to citizens engaging in practices that weaponise an individual's online visibility as retaliation or punishment when they perceive the individual as breaking certain legal or moral boundaries. Three elements are crucial for defining DV: (i) the targets of DV activities are individuals, instead of social or state institutions; (ii) DV activities are primarily conducted for retaliating or punishing the targets, instead of only for truth-seeking or initiating social movements (despite the possibility of containing or further developing into truth-seeking or social movements); (iii) different from another

commonly-used concept cybersecurity vigilantism (Silva, 2018), which refers to non-state actors using informal means to counter criminal behaviours, digital vigilantism counters not only formal crimes but also any behaviours that are deemed offensive. The practices adopted by vigilantes to retaliate or punish perceived offenders—the *repertoire* (Moncada, 2017)—include recording and publishing evidence online, identifying and making individual's information visible online without his/her consent, shaming, physical violence, and/or the threat of using physical violence (Trottier, 2017).

Since 2006 when the *Cat Torture Case* marks the national influence of this phenomenon, DV has been widely adopted by Chinese citizens to defend social norms and values shared by groups and communities. Through comparing the above two cases, some changes of Chinese DV practices seem to emerge: (i) the process is longer and more complex; (ii) more actors and stakeholders are directly involved in the development of cases, especially key opinion leaders, professional media, and the state; (iii) DV incidents are fermented on multiple social media platforms simultaneously with more significant social impact; (iv) the justifications of DV incidents can spark more controversies. Even though the comparison based only on these two cases is insufficient for a direct conclusion, it warrants further investigation on the historical development of DV incidents in China.

When discussing the relationship between DV activities and society, Trottier (2020) proposes a tentative DV model explaining the dynamics: on the one hand, DV activities are conditioned by many aspects of society, such as morality, group identity, confidence in the state, platform settings, legislation, and media cultures; on the other hand, mediated policing and denunciation in DV cases can in turn shape and influence these social conditions. Based on this model, changes observed in DV practices can provide a window to see which and how social conditions have changed in China from 2006—especially the (media) technological, social-cultural, and political ones. This research, therefore, aims to address the historical changes of digital vigilantism in China and situate these changes in relation to contemporary Chinese technological and socio-political development by adopting the concepts of *mediation* and *mediatisation*. The author argues that these changes can be understood as a demonstration of the mediation and mediatisation of justice-seeking in China. The former concept analyses the immediate and concrete impact of communicating via a medium, while the latter focuses on the long-term and structural impact of media as an independent social institution (Hjarvard, 2008), both of which will be further discussed in later part of this article.

## Understanding digital vigilantism in China via human flesh search

The concept of digital vigilantism has not been widely applied in empirical research in the Chinese context. However, in addition to previously mentioned general concept new media events, another concept *human flesh search* (HFS)—also often called *Internet crowdsourcing*—that closely resembles DV has been extensively studied. It refers to the voluntary online participation that attracts and demands citizens' collective efforts to conduct a people-powered search to identify a target or reveal the truth (Heng et al., 2019). Unlike DV, HFS can sometimes be triggered by non-offence-based

reasons—such as identifying an attractive person—and it only refers to one repertoire (Moncada, 2017) of DV, which is seeking and publishing individuals' personal information (doxing). Therefore, HFS cannot be regarded as equivalent to DV. However, the HFS literature is still relevant for studying Chinese DV given that most HFS research focuses on cases triggered by perceived offences, and most of the participants in HFS cases also resort to other DV repertoires in addition to doxing.

Researchers have approached HFS from various perspectives. A significant proportion of HFS research emphasises the legal and ethical implications of HFS in cases that target civilian individuals. Cheung (2009) examines the legal case in which Wang, whose personal information was made public on the Internet due to his infidelity, sued websites for a privacy violation, and suggests an urgent need to reform personal information and privacy laws. Examining the same case, Bu (2013) advocates for more specific regulations and laws and suggests that the rise of HFS as a form of online vigilantism will lead to dramatic restrictions imposed by the government. In addition to above-mentioned points, Zhang and Gao (2016) also consider the self-regulation of Internet service providers and social campaigns of privacy protection and morality as potential solutions. When approaching HFS from a legal perspective, the implied normative judgement is mostly negative, with concerns on privacy and violence.

Another group of scholars mainly discusses the social and political implications of cases that target government officials. They argue that anti-corruption HFS shows the awakening of Chinese civic consciousness (Cheong & Gong, 2010) and helps to hold officials and government accountable for their behaviours and claims (Gao & Stanyer, 2014). While most research demonstrates a cautiously positive attitude towards such cases targeting officials, some scholars also take its complexity into accounts. Gorman (2016) points out that while HFS targeting officials damages the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s legitimacy, it also acts as a safety valve for social frustration and a channel to gather and evaluate public opinions. The nuances between the central government and local government also determine how these incidents develop: citizens are relatively free to criticise the local government, while attacks on the central government are largely suppressed (Herold, 2008).

When the cases are not chosen discriminatively based on their targets, most of the research ends with the argument of HFS being a double-edged sword. Chen and Sharma (2011) argue that HFS both fight and deter illegal and unethical behaviours, and invade individuals' privacy and potentially discourage Internet usage. A similar conclusion is provided by Chang and Leung (2015), arguing that HFS can both help punish bad behaviours and maintain social justice, as well as damage people's lives and reputation. This type of research provides a sound basis for studying HFS and DV in China, yet hardly taps into a more in-depth analysis.

Compared to various scholars' historical approach to study the broader new media events (Fang, 2014; Zeng et al., 2014; Liu, 2015; Wu & Liu, 2018), HFS researchers usually refer to HFS as a monolithic and continuous phenomenon without change. This tendency leads to a partial picture of HFS as the ever-changing social conditions in contemporary China are not accounted for. One research that bridges this gap is Feng's (2012) quantitative empirical research. He concludes that HFS incidents before 2007 are mainly triggered by unethical acts, while concerns about public interests

become the dominant causes after that year. Feng's research on HFS illustrates the need to look into and contextualise potential fundamental changes in Chinese HFS. While useful, Feng's data include HFS cases not triggered by offensive conducts, meaning that they are not all DV cases. Moreover, his data collection ends in 2011, which makes his findings and arguments not directly applicable to this article's scope. Besides, China has experienced many technological, political, and societal changes since President Xi took power, especially in relation to media, including the fast development of digital technologies, the increasing ideological propaganda, and the tightening control over public opinions (Repnikova, 2017). These call for in-depth research on historical changes of DV, a form of mediated collective action, in relation to the current social conditions in China.

In the previous HFS literature, discussions on social media platforms are provided only in a more general manner, with insufficient attention to specific technological features related to netizens' practices. Meanwhile, computer science scholars provide analyses on how specific platform features and networks enable fast and large-scale dissemination of information (Cheng et al., 2012; B. Wang et al., 2009; F. Wang et al., 2010) while leaving socio-political factors out of consideration, which is understandable given their disciplinary focus and approach. However, to address the research question of this article comprehensively, both aforementioned perspectives should be considered. This need can be addressed by introducing the concept of *platform affordances*. First coined by Gibson (1979), *affordance* refers to the possibility of action offered by a given technology, which is later applied to media studies as the possibility provided by media's technological, aesthetic, and social characteristics that enable, limit, and structure social communication and interactions (Hjarvard, 2014). By using the term *affordance*, researchers can include analyses of both the materiality of technology (Hutchby, 2001) and the perceived affordances (Norman, 1999), enabling discussions on how technological characteristics—platform features in the case of studying social media—create possibilities for users, as well as how users' agency impacts these possibilities.

Therefore, inspired by the historical approach taken by Feng and above-mentioned new media events scholars, and adopting the concept of media affordances, this article sets out to identify historical developments of Chinese DV by constructing and examining a database of empirical DV cases from 2006 to 2018, and then develop an in-depth analysis of the dynamics between DV activities, technologies, and the Chinese society.

## Methodology

The research first constructs an empirical Chinese DV case database for the years 2006 to 2018. Because DV cases depend on weaponising the target's online visibility, they can be collected based on the amount of media attention the incidents acquire. Therefore, cases that gain coverage from major news outlets from 2006 to 2018, including traditional and social media, are collected. The collection is conducted through theory-driven keyword searches mainly in WiseNews Database, supplemented by Sina Weibo searches. WiseNews Database is chosen because it is the world's largest database for Chinese news coverage ranging from print to the web and social media content at the amount of over 470,000 sources dating back to 1979 (Wisers, 2018).

Even though the search results on Sina Weibo are incomplete due to deletion and censorship, data collected on Sina Weibo can serve as a verification of previously-collected WiseNews data as well as a [supplementary dataset](#) due to the platform's central role in presenting public opinions in China (Jiang, 2010). Based on the definition of digital vigilantism and the term human flesh search that is often used by Chinese media, the following combination of keywords are used: (i) “fennu” [angry], which indicates being collectively offended, AND “wangluo baoguang/wangbao” [online exposure] OR “wangyou bao” [netizens report on someone], which refer to rendering targets visible online; (ii) “fennu” [angry] AND “renrou” [human flesh] OR “renrou sousuo” [human flesh search].

The constructed database includes 1265 popular Chinese DV cases occurring between 2006 to 2018. Cases are coded thematically and inductively in the following categories: *initiator(s)*, *platform(s)* used by the initiator(s) and participants, *target*, *repertoire(s)*, *justification(s)*, and *outcome*. *Initiator(s)* is coded into organised/existing groups or individuals. The *platform(s)* used by DV participants includes foreign platforms, forums/Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), personal blogs, video-sharing platforms, Sina Weibo, WeChat (incl. Moments, group chat, and public account), and others. The *target* refers to the individual who is perceived to have violated certain formal or informal rules, such as laws, regulations, moralities, or some orders that are established by various non-state actors (Moncada, 2017). In this research, the *target* (deemed by participants) is coded into civilian, government personnel, and celebrity. *Repertoire(s)* refers to the practices that vigilantes utilise to retaliate against others (ibid.), which in this research is coded into publishing visual evidence, seeking and/or publishing personal information (doxing), boycotting, harassing, physical harm, and reporting to the institution(s). *Justification(s)* looks at the way vigilantes publicly legitimise their activities (ibid.), which is coded into *abusing public power/resource*, *animal brutality*, *economic crime/conflict*, *incivility*, *indifference/disrespect/insulting*, *sexual offence*, *sexual scandal*, *demonstration of wealth/social status*, *traffic transgression*, *unpatriotic speech/action*, *unprofessional/unsafe conduct*, *violence/physical harm*, and *others* in this research. *Outcome* refers to how the case concluded, which is coded into *with institutional punishment* (when administrative or legal punishment from the government and any form of punishment from the target's employer is publicly announced), *with no institutional punishment* (when there is no institution involved or the institution announces no punishment after its investigation), and *unclear* (when no clear decision or no follow-up announcement are made after the initial institutional response of starting an investigation). It should be noted that in categories of *platform(s)*, *repertoire(s)*, and *justification(s)*, multiple codes can be applied to one case.

After the initial analysis, codes were grouped by year, counted, and compared in order to identify characteristics, changes, and trends of DV in China, supplemented with a close reading into some representative cases in order to provide a more detailed and in-depth description and analysis of general codes in the later discussion.

## Results

Based on coding and initial observation of the constructed case database, several characteristics and trends of Chinese DV activities can be identified. The most



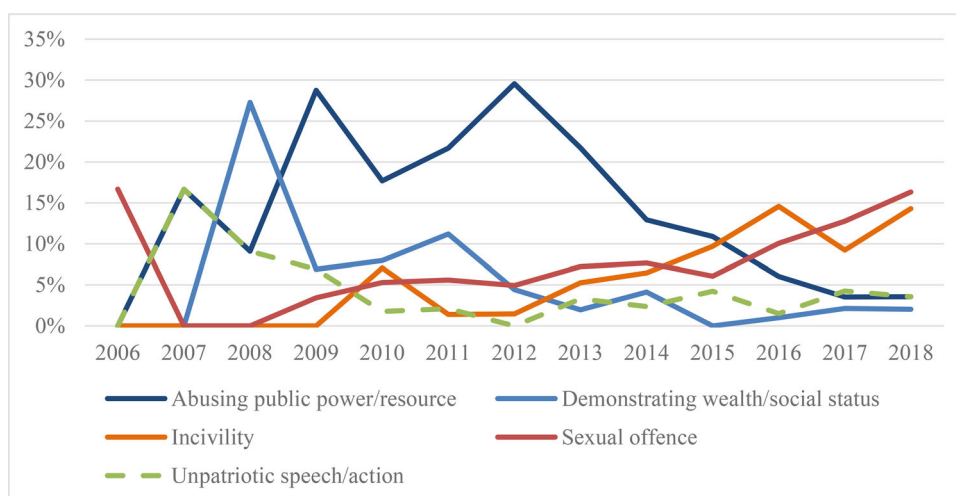
**Table 1.** Justifications of DV activities in China between 2006 to 2018.

Justification	Case Number
Violence/physical harm	388
Abusing public power/resource	235
Sexual offence	132
Indifference/disrespect/insulting	125
Incivility	118
Sexual scandal	115
Animal brutality	83
Unprofessional/unsafe conduct	81
Economic crime/conflict	76
Traffic transgression	70
Demonstrating wealth/social status	62
Unpatriotic speech/action	45
Others	62

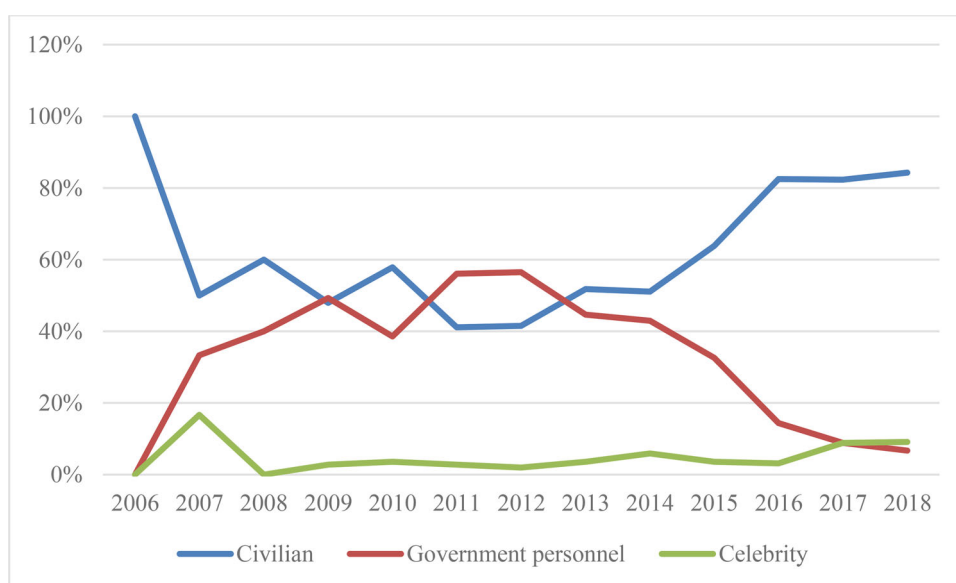
prominent characteristic of Chinese DV cases is that they are mainly initiated by individuals spontaneously rather than existing organisations. Among the 1265 Chinese DV cases between 2006 to 2018, there are only eleven cases that are started by organisations, most of which are media companies. Compared to DV activities in some countries like Russia (Gabdulhakov, 2018) and Slovakia (Vicenová, 2020), Chinese DV cases are rarely initiated by vigilante groups with a clear organisation and mission. This may result from the Chinese government's tight control over civic society, especially on forms potentially leading to collective actions (Herold, 2008). As demonstrated in Table 1, justifications provided by Chinese DV participants are highly diverse, ranging from illegal conduct, unethical behaviours, to some more controversial or less universal norms, with *violence/physical harm* as the most common justification. In many cases, multiple justifications are provided. For instance, a single anti-corruption case often includes combined justifications of *abusing public power/resource* and *sexual scandal/violence*. The justifications that rank top three in case numbers are illegal conduct, followed by conduct deemed unethical or immoral in China (e.g., *disrespect*, *incivility*, *sexual scandal*, *animal brutality*, *demonstrating wealth*).

In terms of the yearly differences in case numbers of each justification, visible patterns are found in categories of *abusing public power/resource*, *sexual offence*, *incivility*, *demonstrating wealth/social status*, and *unpatriotic speech/action*, while other categories remain steady or fluctuating without an identifiable trend (see the detail data in Appendix). The numbers of DV cases triggered by *abusing public power/resource* and *demonstrating wealth/social status* shown in Figure 1 demonstrate a shared trend of a higher frequency between 2007 to 2012. The decrease of *demonstrating wealth* from 2011 can be well explained by the intimidation caused by the high-profile Guo Meimei case<sup>1</sup> in that year. Meanwhile, the case numbers of some other DV justifications exhibit an opposite trend. Cases caused by *sexual offence* and *incivility* are gradually taking up a larger share during the period 2009 to 2018, which seems to be in accordance with relevant ideological debates or trendy topics on Chinese social media. In terms of DV activities targeting individuals who are spotted with unpatriotic speech or action, the case number peaks in 2007 and remains high until 2009, which can be explained by the relatively high level of nationalism in those years due to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Schneider, 2018). After a low point in 2012, such DV cases experience a mild increase from 2013 to 2018.





**Figure 1.** case number percentages of DV incidents with selected justifications from 2006 to 2018.



**Figure 2.** case number percentages of various DV targets from 2006 to 2018.

The data also show changes in DV targets as can be seen in Figure 2. From 2007, DV cases targeting government personnel start to increase gradually, matching Feng's (2012) finding of the shift in focus of HFS to public causes from 2007. In accordance with the trends of DV incidents caused by *abusing public power/resource* and *demonstrating wealth/social status*, such type of DV activity demonstrates a downward trend after 2012 while the percentage of DV cases targeting civilians understandably exhibits a reverse trend. Celebrities are always a marginal group to be targeted, yet a slight increase from 2016 can be observed from the data, as illustrated in Figure 2.

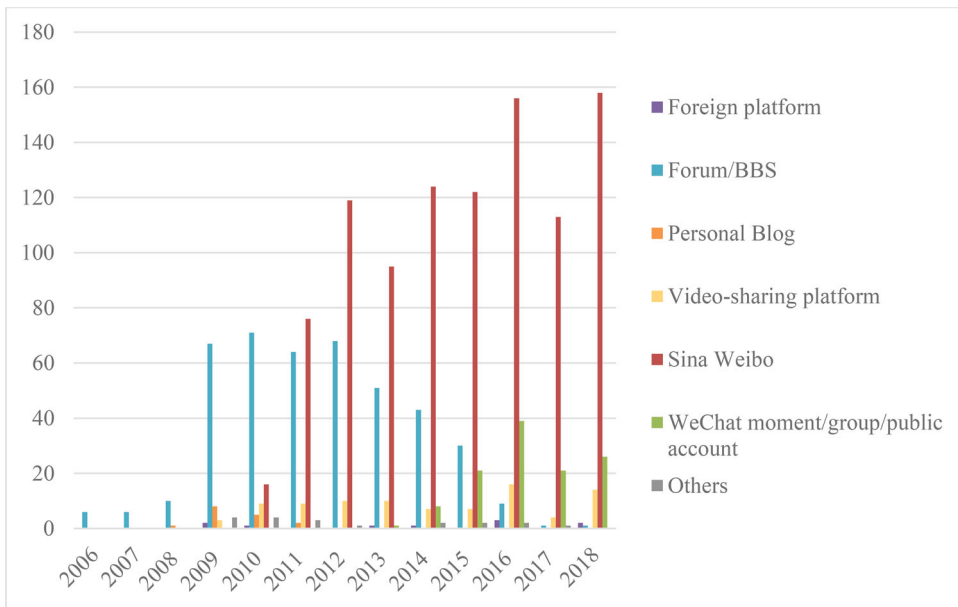
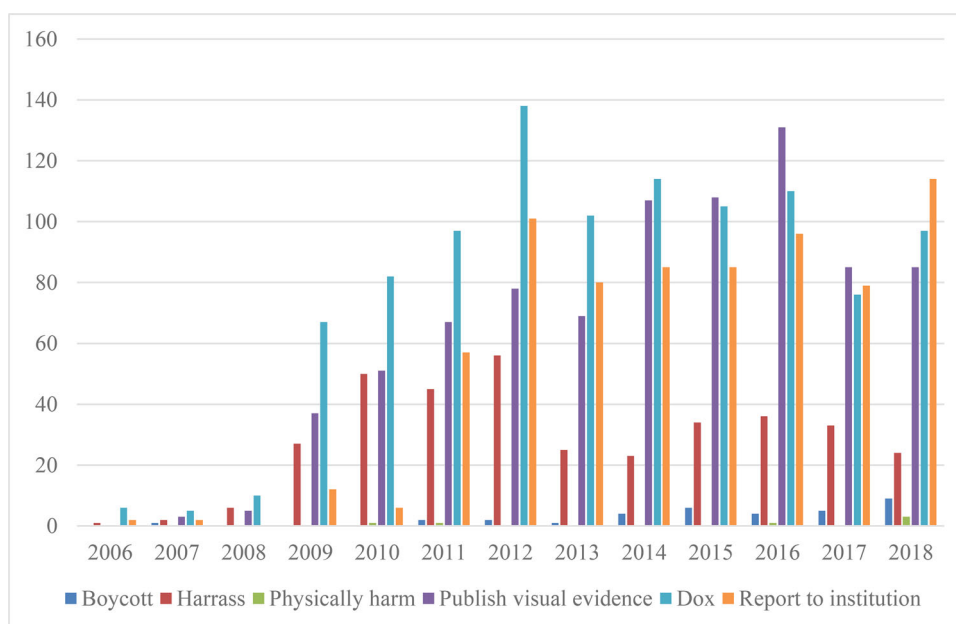


Figure 3. platforms used by DV participants in China between 2006 to 2018.

Illustrated by Figure 3, Chinese DV participants' platform choices vary during the thirteen years as well. From 2006 to 2010, forums and bulletin board system (BBS) are the main digital platforms used by DV participants, such as Mop Forum, Tianya BBS, Baidu BBS, and various local forums. These platforms share certain features and affordances that facilitate and encourage DV activities, which will be further explained in the discussion. As for Sina Weibo, even though it was established in 2009, it did not become the primary platform for DV activities until 2011, which coincides with the start of large-scale civic engagement on Sina Weibo in that year (Yang, 2012). Since then, Sina Weibo has always been the central platform for DV activities. In addition to Sina Weibo, WeChat—with its functions of Moment, group chat, and public account—has also become a popular platform for citizens to conduct DV from 2014. Some DV activities use both WeChat and Sina Weibo for maximum visibility. Besides above-mentioned major platforms, video sharing platforms are often used by DV participants since 2009, usually for initial discovery or evidence storage. The changes of platform choices coincide with the general Chinese Internet development history (Yang, 2012), and require further detailed analysis specifically in relation to Chinese DV activities in the latter part of the article.

During these thirteen years, Chinese DV participants develop various combinations of repertoires in different periods. As observed in Figure 4, by 2010, the major repertoires are *doxing*, *publishing visual evidence*, and *harassing*—often used simultaneously. Since 2011, the repertoire of reporting to institution starts gaining popularity among Chinese DV participants; in 2018, there are cases where participants only resort to *reporting to institutions* without *doxing*. The shift of repertoire combinations occurs in 2011 when Chinese DV participants replace *harassing* with *reporting to the institution* when encountering offences. The data also shows that physically harming targets is always the least chosen repertoire. There is also a soft increase of *boycotting* as repertoire since celebrities become DV targets more often from 2016.



**Figure 4.** DV participants' repertoire in China between 2006 to 2018.

In accordance with the increase of reporting to institutions as repertoire, there are less DV cases left unpunished by the institutions, as shown in Figure 5. This trend is of interest when taking other trends into consideration, namely the decrease in cases targeting government personnel and cases with the justification of abusing public power/resources.

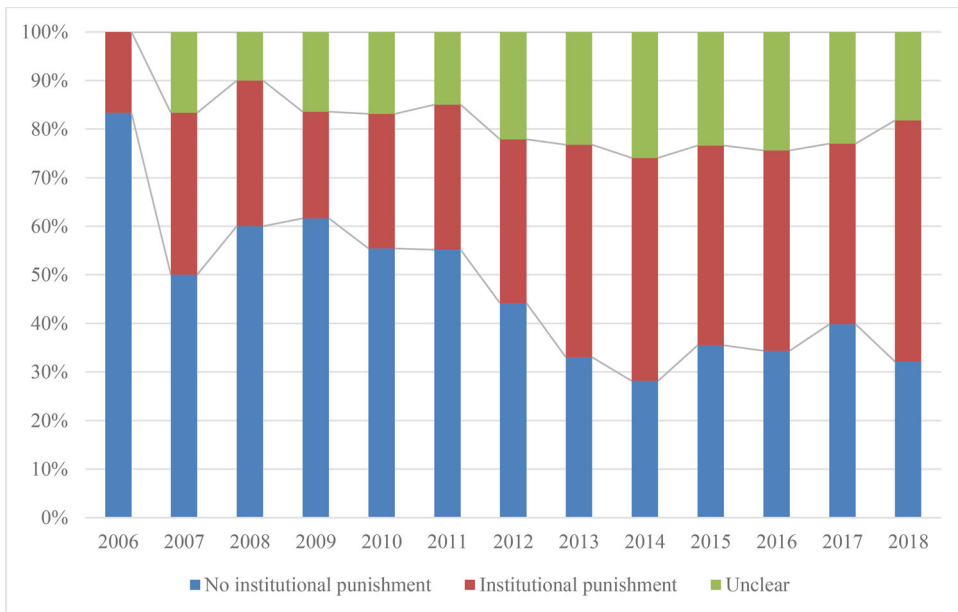
## Discussion

### *Mediated justice-seeking: platform affordances and DV practices*

DV is a form of mediated justice-seeking, and participants' chosen platforms are crucial in shaping the practice (Trottier, 2020). Therefore, to further understand the changes demonstrated in the results, an in-depth analysis of these platforms' features and affordances concerning DV practices is required.

In the late 1990s to early 2000s, China entered its web 2.0 era, which is signalled by the emergence of various video-sharing websites, blogs, and some early-stage social networking sites (Fang et al., 2014). Forums and BBSs are especially popular in this era, including Mop Forum established in 1997, Tianya BBS in 1999, and Baidu BBS in 2003. These platforms enable Chinese citizens to share experiences, emotions, and opinions through the connected network (Yang, 2012). These include content that angers citizens and challenges shared values and norms, such as infidelity and animal abuse as shown in the justification of DV incidents. Afforded by certain features, these forums and BBSs enable and encourage Chinese netizens to (re)act on offences they discover online, hence DV as a phenomenon emerges and popularises.

One crucial feature of forums and BBSs that makes citizens feel more secure in voicing their concerns on (perceived) social injustice is the relative anonymity these



**Figure 5.** case number percentage of DV case outcomes in China between 2006 to 2018.

platforms can provide users during its prime time in DV activities (2006–2011). Even though identity verification on the Internet was discussed and experimented in a small scale by the state since 2007 (Wang & Hu, 2016), it was not until 2012 when a universal identity verification system was put in place (Fu et al., 2013). Another critical feature of forums and BBSs is that they afford the formation of various communities, invoking DV activities against offences that challenge their shared values and norms. Most of these platforms connect people based on locations (e.g. local forums), lifestyle topics (e.g. Tianya Club), or beliefs/ideologies (e.g. Utopia Forum), which frequently blurs the online and offline boundaries (Yang, 2009, 2012). Because of the security provided by anonymity and the shared identity provided by the community, citizens engaged in these communities tend to feel more secure, obliged, and motivated to share experience and emotions about social injustice that also concerns other members who share local knowledge or values without the necessity to physically meet up. Some platforms also have features that provide their users with more tangible incentives. For instance, Mop Forum introduces the virtual currency system, in which users can acquire virtual currency when they provide useful information to other users' inquiries (Pan, 2010). Such incentive helps to create a larger pool of willing informants and thus produce more successful doxing. With positive experiences of acquiring useful information, users are more willing to make inquiries on the platform, leading to a cycle that fosters DV as a commonly accepted and utilised practice on these platforms.

After 2010, Sina Weibo starts to replace forums and BBSs as the primary platform for DV activities and some of its features afforded DV activities differently compared to its predecessors. Sina Weibo is a microblogging platform established in 2009, with similar features to Twitter such as a character limit and the function of tagging other users with "@" and following/participating in certain topics with "#". The function of tagging other

users facilitates DV participants to name and shame the target, as well as to inform relevant official accounts of the target's misbehaviour. The possibility of following/participating topics helps the participants to coordinate an ad hoc community that partakes in DV activities, keep themselves updated about an incident without the need of establishing a follower/followee relationship, and increase the visibility of an incident by posting and commenting with the hashtags (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Sina Weibo also allows users to directly embed up to nine pictures in the post, which is taken advantage by users for both presenting evidence and incorporating longer texts in a post by turning them into pictures to circumvent the word count limit. Videos from some third-party platforms are also allowed to be played embedded on Sina Weibo platform, which makes it more convenient for visual evidence of offences to spread. By allowing longer texts in the form of pictures, the platform facilitates storytelling for DV activities, which is important for the initial circulation in these incidents (Trottier, 2020).

After 2014, WeChat also joins Sina Weibo and becomes a key platform to initiate or participate in DV activities, and its half-public-half-private features (Wang & Gu, 2016) change some patterns of how DV is conducted. WeChat is a software launched by Tencent in early 2011 and soon develops into the most popular social media platform in China (Tu, 2016), affording users to send texts, voice messages, videos, and pictures in both private chats and group chats. WeChat groups can be created conveniently for various purposes, and there can be from three up to 500 members in each group. In addition to affording users' interpersonal communication, group chats can also function as a semi-public sphere to some degree (Wang & Gu, 2016), with pre-existing offline communities with a large number of members that are organised based on location (e.g., expat group, yezhuqun [property owners' group]), employment (e.g., company group), cultural identity (e.g., fan group), etc. Users are usually engaged in multiple groups simultaneously, and they might or might not share the same ideologies, values, and norms. WeChat groups, therefore, afford DV activities by providing pre-existing communities, organisation and mobilisation possibilities, and potential sites of debate. Similarly, WeChat Moments, a function allowing users to post their own or comment on others' status or things of interest, also offers DV participants a wide range of audiences based on personal connections, and a site to initiate and/or mobilise others to participate in DV activities. Besides, WeChat also complicates DV activities with its public account feature. This feature is established in 2012 and enables individuals and organisations to send multi-media and longer content, unlike microblogging, to their subscribers, which can be regarded as media outlets (ibid.). With no word count limit and the possibility to embed more visual material, WeChat public accounts can develop better storytelling and more in-depth analysis or critique of an event; with the subscription system, it is also easier for content not to be missed by users. Besides, the public account content can be conveniently forwarded to users' Moments and chats by clicking the embedded "Forward" button, which also boosts the circulation and dissemination of content—in this case, content related to DV activities.

### *Mediatised justice-seeking: media logic and DV practices*

As the previous discussion explains, DV practices are very much influenced by relevant affordances of platforms used by participants in different periods of times. However,

some changes cannot be explained solely by different platform affordances. Instead, considerations of how the Chinese society, especially institutions, have changed during the thirteen years in relation to DV practice changes are essential.

One of the most visible changes—the decline of DV cases targeting government personnel for abusing public power or resources after 2012—is highly related to changes in Chinese political institutions. The official anti-corruption campaign led by Xi Jinping and Wang Qishan in 2012 institutionalised anti-corruption activities to maintain the legitimacy of the CCP by solving one of the biggest sources of public anger—corruption among CCP officials (Zhao, 2016). In December 2012, the party established strict restrictions on government personnel's public and private behaviours, set up more official internal reporting channels online, and imposed severe punishment on caught corrupted officials (Yuen, 2014). These implemented measures put government officials under high pressure, and most corruption cases were dealt with within the party. Hence, there is less corruption left for the public to expose. The second potential factor of the decline is the better (social) media literacy among government personnel. Many anti-corruption DV cases between 2009 to 2013 demonstrate the targets' lack of media literacy leading to their demise in the social media era. Some targets are discovered from their media presence, such as *tianjiayan juzhang* [*director with Sky-high-priced Cigarette*]<sup>2</sup> and *biaoshu* [*watch uncle*]<sup>3</sup>, who are spotted with luxurious consumption on media coverage and therefore doxed; some are put under the spotlight because their misuse of certain technology, such as *Weibo kaifang* [*get a room on Weibo*] *Director*<sup>4</sup>. Due to the media literacy improvement among the overall Chinese population and government's efforts of educating officials to be cautious about their public image on media (Wang, 2020; Zheng, 2013), opportunities to discover this type of target decrease accordingly. Let us also not forget the tightened control over public opinions since Xi took power in 2013 (Repnikova, 2017), which can be another factor of less DV cases targeting corrupted officials that successfully gain citizens' attention and media coverage. Therefore, changes in the Chinese political institution influence the justice-seeking via DV activities.

Meanwhile, as data has shown, institutions—especially the government—are increasingly involved in the outcome of DV incidents, which can be attributed to the increasing amount of verified accounts of government branches on Sina Weibo (CNNIC, 2019) and the increasing popularity of reporting to institutions as a DV repertoire. Also, DV cases with justifications that coincide with trendy public debate topics (such as sexual offence), that are more relatable (such as incivility), and supported by the government (such as unpatriotic conducts), are on the rise in the researched period. In addition, when choosing targets, Chinese DV participants start to give slightly more attention to celebrities. These trends illustrate the affordances of social media platforms and, more importantly, illustrate the *mediatisation* of Chinese citizens' justice-seeking activities. Mediatisation theory has been widely applied in studying the dynamics between media and society, especially in relation to politics, claiming that media has become an independent social institution that has its own logic and can challenge the logic of other social institutions (Hjarvard, 2008; Mazzoleni, 2017; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). This concept has also been used to discuss the interaction between digital media and political transformation in China (Sun,

2007; Sun, 2014; Meng, 2016; Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2020). Follow this path, the author explores how Chinese DV as a justice-seeking activity is mediated based on three signals of mediatisation in the context of social media platforms concluded by Hjarvard (2014): (i) the platform has created public spheres for other social institutions, thus become the connecting node between them; (ii) its logic accommodates, as well as challenges the logics of other social institutions, thus become an integral part of them; (iii) (social)media-related personnel and processes became part of the organisational changes in other social institutions.

These signals can be identified in the case of Chinese DV participants seeking justice on social media platforms. When shifting from forums/BBS to Sina Weibo, all actors are better connected on the platform, including the target, participants, and various social institutions, making Sina Weibo the connecting node.

Secondly, the popularity logic of social media platforms accommodates and challenges moral and/or political logics in the mediated justice-seeking process. Van Dijk and Poell (2013) establish popularity as one of the social media logics, referring to the platforms' efforts to enhance the platform's value and its users by strategically increasing certain users' visibility with various incentives. Such manipulation is afforded by standardised metrics and mechanism such as "likes" and "trending topics". Under this logic, topics and content that can generate a large-scale emotional response, especially fear and anger about outer-groups (Berger & Milkman, 2012), are favoured by platforms, and therefore strategically also favoured by social media content producers. However, the logic of vigilantism or any form of justice-seeking is supposed to be punishing and/or reintegrating perpetrators through various legal and/or informal measures (Nussbaum, 2016). These two varying logics and their dialectical relationship can be observed in Chinese DV cases. On the one hand, DV targets are punished when they are made visible unwantedly (Trottier, 2017) by the participants with the assistance of social media platform features and logics, illustrating how these platforms' popularity logic assists and accommodates the vigilantism logic. On the other hand, the justice-seeking logic is challenged by social media's popularity logic, which can be observed in the changes of DV justifications and targets, when DV participants tend to focus on specific offences and targets partially because more visibility and sometimes rewards of varying kinds can be other outcomes of their DV activities. The second signal of mediatisation proposed by Hjarvard (2014) can also be found in the increasing involvement of media actors, especially key opinion leaders and WeChat public accounts in the case development, taking advantage of the visibility brought by DV activities to acquire visibility and other incentives provided by platforms, which often interferes with the justice-seeking logic.

Lastly, Sina Weibo and WeChat have become an integral part of how actors interact with each other in the justice-seeking process. Reporting to institutions online by tagging relevant ones has become a crucial part of the standard repertoire combination for DV participants. Deleting their social media content and cancelling their social media accounts has also become a common practice in response to the online naming and shaming for the target. These social media platforms, especially Sina Weibo, have become the predominant locale for relevant institutions to respond to DV reports and announce their decision on these matters. Hence, represented by Sina Weibo, social



media platforms have been institutionalised by all actors, which signals the mediated justice-seeking in Chinese DV activities.

## Conclusion

By constructing and analysing a case database of DV incidents between 2006 to 2018, the research provides a comprehensive longitudinal review of DV activities in China. By adopting a perspective of historical development, the author is able to identify patterns and trends of Chinese DV activities instead of viewing them as a monolithic phenomenon as commonly done before. The analyses on these patterns and trends demonstrate that Chinese DV activities are mediated and more importantly mediated justice-seeking practices, which are not only afforded by social media platforms but also influenced by their logic and conditioned by the ubiquitous state power in China.

This research, however, is not able to take into account DV activities that lack media coverage. Research on such less visible Chinese DV incidents can also provide crucial knowledge about the Chinese media landscape and socio-political conditions because it can provide insights on factors that lead to a lack of news coverage and the state's censorship. Also, due to its scope and objective, this research only provides an overall account of the traits of DV practices, which should be supplemented by more detailed and in-depth qualitative analysis on motives, public discourse, and social impacts of DV activities in China in order to further understand the phenomenon.

## Notes

1. In June 2011, Guo Meimei, a Chinese Internet celebrity, caused outrages on Sina Weibo and Chinese society due to her posts of conspicuous consumptions and lavish lifestyle, which also led to Chinese citizens' distrust on Red Cross China because of Guo's verification as a senior manager to a company affiliated to the Red Cross.
2. In 2008, a district level official Zhou Jiugeng was found consuming luxurious cigarettes in meetings covered by media, causing online suspicion and official investigation.
3. In 2012, a provincial level official Yang Dacai was given the nickname "watch uncle" or "watch brother" because netizens found his luxury watch collection that is clearly beyond his salary in his previous media presence, causing online outrage and later official investigation.
4. In 2011, a city level official Xie Zhiqiang was mocked by netizens and then investigated by the local government because he misunderstood Sina Weibo as private messaging platform and flirted openly with his mistress.

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## Appendix: Case number of DV justification in China from 2006 to 2018.

Year ( 20_ _ )	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Abusing public power/resource	0	1	1	25	20	31	60	33	22	18	12	5	7
Animal brutality	2	1	0	3	9	4	5	4	8	10	10	16	11
Economic crime/conflict	1	0	0	4	8	3	7	12	4	7	11	9	10
Incivility	0	0	0	0	8	2	3	8	11	16	29	13	28
Indifference/ disrespect/insulting	0	0	0	7	4	15	18	13	10	7	20	10	21
Sexual offence	1	0	0	3	6	8	10	11	13	10	20	18	32
Sexual scandal	1	0	1	3	10	16	16	11	24	12	14	6	1
Show off wealth/ social status	0	0	3	6	9	16	9	3	7	0	2	3	4
Traffic transgression	0	0	0	3	6	10	15	5	7	6	5	6	7
Unpatriotic speech/ action	0	1	1	6	2	3	0	5	4	7	3	6	7
Unprofessional/ unsafe conduct	0	0	0	10	6	7	7	12	8	8	10	6	7
Violence/ physical harm	1	1	3	12	19	24	49	30	49	61	57	36	46
Others	0	2	2	5	6	4	4	5	3	3	6	7	15
Sum	6	6	11	87	113	143	203	152	170	165	199	141	196