

Chai Jing's *Under the Dome*: A multimedia documentary in the digital age

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ABSTRACT

Chai Jing's *Under the Dome: Investigating China's Smog* presents an unprecedented model of how a multi-media documentary can turn an environmental crisis into a dynamic media event that achieves mass virality. The "going viral" came about because of the interplay between unconventional multimedia documentary modes and an extensive digital network characterized by a large number of users resorting to various technologies. While the rhetorical persuasion built upon multimedia assets encouraged viewers to interact with or navigate through the story of an environmentally alarming reality, the digital media enabled citizens alerted to deadly environmental conditions to tap into a channel of green discussion and diverse voices. The irony of the film's initial virality provoking its short-lived circulation reveals once again the brute fact of media censorship and social-political constraints. In a polluted landscape and manipulated virtual space, open discussions and investigative exposures of environmental problems remain political and controversial.

After Chai Jing's multimedia documentary *Under the Dome* was released online on February 28, 2015, it received 117 million views and 280 million posts within 24 hours until the imposition of official censorship.¹ Why did the film have such an astonishing reception? In other words, why did it go viral? This paper attempts to answer these questions through the lens of a multimedia documentary and its Internet circulation. Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* is not a documentary film in a conventional form, such as direct cinema or cinema verite. It is a multimedia work that employs documentary modes, infographic designs, photographic images, audio/video tracks, textual citations, animated illustrations, and a TED Talk format. *Under the Dome* is also not simply 'a personal war against environmental catastrophe', as the filmmaker declares, because the film relies on digital channels and Internet users as co-agencies of communication and distribution. The combined media forms of the documentary and the role of the Internet challenge as well as change the conception of film production, perception, and distribution.

What has been newly generated is the notion of an interactive multimedia documentary able to flow across different fields of communication through digital channels. Recent scholarship on cinema and media studies proposes that 'any project that starts with an intention to document the "real" and that uses digital interactive technology to realize this intention can be considered an interactive [multimedia] documentary' (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012, 125–126). In the case of *Under the Dome*, combining the documentary

with the digital stimulates public response to and viewer participation in discussion of environmental issues. The dialectical interplay operates first on a rhetorical ontology, where investigation into air pollution reveals evidence and offers explanation through a multimedia documentary mode. In response, a worldwide network via the Internet accelerates distribution of the film through digital devices and engages viewers on-and-off-line in a paradoxical public sphere subject to constant negotiation and contestation. This essay examines how Chai Jing's multimedia documentary turns environmental reality into digital articulation with multifaceted database/artifacts as rhetorical components, and how the film's Internet circulation generates unprecedented interactivities between the institutional and the ordinary as well as the local and global.

The multiple documentary mode

Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* exemplifies a type of new media that features a multiple documentary mode. The innovative mode extends beyond a linear narrative or filmmaker/camera-framed reality. Instead, the multimedia assets – interviews, infographics, film footages, illustrated animations, numerical data – generate a multi-perspective presentation and unconventional documentary experience. *Under the Dome* begins with specific questions critical to the director as well as the audience: What is the smog? Where does it come from? What can we do about it? In response to these questions, Chai Jing curates her multimedia assets and interacts with her audience to make a compelling rhetorical appeal. The modes of persuasion make the work appealing to the audience (pathos) through the producer's credibility (ethos) and the work's logical reasoning (logos).

Personal/maternal voice

Narrative credibility and emotional response begins with a personal and maternal voice, creating a conversational mode between the filmmaker and her audience in order to bring attention to the catastrophe of smog. The story shared with the audience is that of Chai Jing's newborn baby and the medical operation to remove a benign tumor right after birth. The image of the ultrasonic picture of the unborn baby and the mother's description of the operation instill an anxious awareness that transfers to the problem of air pollution. This maternal position is further asserted via the director's interview footage with a six-year-old girl in Shanxi, who has never in her life seen a blue sky, or stars at night. With the maternal narrating voice and children presented as vulnerable victims, the audience on-site and online responds to the story with emotion and realizes that environmental pollution is the target of criticism. The maternal voice that urges protection of the environment and children echoes an eco-feminist claim that associates women with nature.

Ecofeminism takes the 'women–nature connection' as a point of departure and views the domination of women and the exploitation of nature jointly, linking sociocultural oppression and ecological degradation (Warren 1993; Cuomo 2002; Wang 1999; Ruether 1993). The proposed connections present a theoretical and metaphorical framework, against which feminist concerns of women and ecological considerations of nature become reflexive partners in a shared rhetoric. Ecofeminism claims that 'we cannot end

the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression, and vice versa' (Birkeland 2010, 19). As appealing as this stance sounds, however, ecofeminism faces challenges from other theoretical schools or individual scholars. Critiques of ecofeminism cite its essentialist claim of a woman–nature connection, its ethnocentric exclusion of race, class, and ethnicity, and its worship of women as a caring source of nature. While I will not attempt a historical review of ecofeminism, I will argue that Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* presents a valid case for reconsidering ecofeminism against China's gender as well as environmental conditions.

The story of pollution harming children told in the voice of maternal explanation underscores the connection between the abused environment and victimized children. From an eco-feminist point of view, the damage to child and nature results from economic exploitation and the projection of social-political power. Thus, the mother-children-environment triad constructed in Chai Jing's film addresses the issue of the women–nature connection through rhetorical persuasion, a mode of discourse legitimized by maternal credibility (ethos), an appeal to the audience's emotional sympathy (pathos), and the logic of cause–effect reasoning (logos). The film refuses to render mother/nature as silenced victims but instead provides documentary evidence of an environmental catastrophe and offers critical rhetoric in an investigative mode. The film's discourse establishes Chai Jing's credibility as a concerned mother and a responsible citizen committed to environmental issues. Moreover, the identity shared with the public audience, especially with mothers and mothers-to-be, joined in the pronouns we and I, situates Chai Jing with ordinary people in a non-hierarchical manner.

The rhetoric of maternal persuasion and the proffering of an eco-feminist perspective has encountered unsympathetic criticism, however. Challenges to the maternal position and its reliability claim that Chai Jing's use of her child to engage viewers is sentimental and that the possible link between her daughter's tumor and air pollution is unscientific. One Internet user calls the mother–daughter narrative 'corny chicken soup', for instance.² The artist Ai Weiwei further asserts that 'her daughter's tumor may not be associated with smog, but the brain-damaged mother finds clear scientific data support', and 'those who comprehend the notion of smog only through Chai's womb must be brain-damaged, too'.³ The charges against the film and pointedly against the film director speak for a sexually oriented dichotomy, where reason and nature as well as body and mind remain a split power structure. The primary conception of a women–nature connection, and especially the mother–daughter narrative, reveals the soft spot easily challenged by both discursive rhetoric and the virtual Internet. In an authoritarian and economically driven society, it is difficult to grant women and children a privileged association with nature, as both remain subject to exploitation.

Furthermore, the victimization of women and children in regard to the environmental crisis cannot be viewed as a single relation. Differences in social class, economic conditions, and even geographical locations come into play. Two child figures in Chai Jing's film, one her baby daughter in Beijing and the other a six-year old in Shanxi, are portrayed as victims of air pollution. Familial and geographical differences generate distinctive rhetorical evidence and documentary effects. Chai Jing's baby is the victim needing protection, whereas the six-year old steps forward as a witness. In doing so, the camera always frames the former from behind to conceal her identity, but moves to an extreme close-up of the latter to capture her testimony. The back image of the toddler confined inside the house and the

frontal shot of the girl facing the audience make a sharp contrast, not only visually but also discursively. The manner of exposure to the audience through the camera lens suggests differences in social class, family orientation, and material relations with the environment.

The rhetoric carried through the maternal voice and personal perspective is further empowered by the film director's other credentials as an investigative journalist and environmental advocate. A former anchorwoman for CCTV well known for her investigative reporting, Chai Jing has been a household name and public figure in China.⁴ As a journalist-turned environmentalist, Chai Jing can approach issues with her investigative skills and environmental knowledge. In other words, as an erstwhile journalist, taking on a self-funded research project, Chai Jing can credential herself as a citizen concerned about air pollution as well as an experienced and knowledgeable speaker opposing the apologists for industrial production. Chai thus has the privilege of having access to a media network on the one hand and to scientific evidence on the other hand. The practice of investigative journalism in contemporary China, nonetheless, entails daunting challenges and risks. The shared principles of exposing social problems, serving the public interest, and holding the powerful accountable remain professional ethics among those dedicated to investigative journalism. These principles are difficult to uphold in reality, however, as authoritative power manipulates events to escape culpability. To survive as effective journalists, Chai Jing and others have to test boundaries and negotiate possibilities. Under these conditions, Chai Jing's continued commitment to investigative journalism led to her shift in status from official employee to independent journalist, a move facilitated by the unprecedented development of social media and the online network. The incorporation of investigative journalism into the medium of eco-documentary supports the ethos of narrative credibility and the pathos of audience perception, primarily through interviews and the social-visual evidence provided in documentary film.

Interviews

The incorporation of documentary modes and investigative journalism reinforces the persuasiveness of *Under the Dome*. The mode of expository documentary establishes a point of view for the audience through an authoritative voice and the rhetoric of reason. The narrating voice, often with corresponding visual footage, attests the truth of the reporting. In a similar milieu, investigative journalism probes and describes issues of social (in)justice in critical depth and with extensive evidence. The ultimate mission is to 'seek above all to tell the documented truth' and 'to provide a voice for those without one and to hold the powerful to account'. *Under the Dome* thus investigates the causes of air pollution through critical interviews as primary narrative components of the film. The interviewees, including institutional representatives, government officials, science specialists, and western experts, respond to Chai Jing's questions about the nature of smog and its causes with scientific explanations and self-reflexive satire.

Accelerated by the soundtrack and film footage, interview sequences dramatize confrontations between the film director and the film subject, between discursive contest and environmental reality. A pre-recorded video interview, for instance, shows Prof. Avol at the University of Southern California on a large screen (see Figure 1). The expert is asked whether it is true that exposure to pollution helps



Figure 1. Screen caption from *Under the Dome*.

children adapt to the environment. With the image of the foreign academic and scientific publications superimposed as evidence, the interview presents authoritative explanations backed by academic credentials. The voice and the data are not necessarily synchronistic, as the interview intends to adduce the authoritative voice to explain environmental effects on children's lung function and cite scholarly publications to justify the claim. As a medical specialist on the faculty of a US university, the invited guest confers legitimacy on the logos of knowledge.

If the interview with the foreign specialist codifies the investigation, interviews with Chinese officials, especially from the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), reveal the complicated social-economic conditions under which economic development, people's livelihoods, and environmental protection come into conflict. Chai asks the official administrator of the MEP why nothing was done about environmental problems, given the ample film footage and other evidence of illegal activities. The official returns the question in a rhetorical tone: 'Would you make the decision to shut down production and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs, essentially destroying the economy of the entire province?' Chai strategically unveils the dilemma of environmental protection and economic development, as officials and ordinary citizens face complicated social-economic conditions.

The investigative interviews and expository mode challenge the powerful, holding them accountable in a self-reflexive and self-contradictory irony. In a double interview, Chai first questions the deputy of CRAES, asking why the fuel standard is not set higher. The interviewee says that the majority of the fuel-standard committee members come from the petrochemical industry. Chai then interviews the opposing party, the head of the National Oil Fuel Standard Committee, with questions about why the oil industry fails to regulate fuel standards and whether it should take social responsibility. The interview exposes with satirical mockery the irony in the role of the MEP in environmental



protection, as the oil industry manipulates the regulatory process. When subjects on opposite sides of the issue provide information and reveal problems side by side, Chai's interviews generate a self-reflexive rhetoric which catches the official system in contradiction. In this depiction of regulatory capture, investigative journalism works together with expository documentary to reinforce the mode of persuasion.

The most dramatic or satirical moment in a person-to-person interview with documentary footage comes from a scene where Chai Jing requires the vice general manager of a pharmaceutical company in Zhejiang province to explain a chemical odor. In a split screen, the audience is invited to witness the polluted water and landscape while hearing the film subject claim that his sense of smell is not as sensitive as Chai Jing's. The juxtaposition of verbal denial and visual evidence makes the official look not only at fault but also ridiculous. The interview ends effectively with a diagram that shows the network of corruption in the energy industry. The blend of documentary and journalism generates trans-media rhetoric in environmental discourse. As the lines blur between the two mediums, we witness differences as well as dynamics: journalistic sensibility and documentary consciousness, timely investigation and depth-driven exploration, person-to-person interviews and camera documentation. It is precisely the trans- or multimedia mode that allows the filmmaker as well as the audience to engage the subject of air pollution with critical depth.

In addition to the documentary mode reinforcing investigation, a multimedia presentation style further asserts rhetorical persuasion. To help establish herself as a knowledgeable environmentalist and media specialist, Chai employs visual graphs for illustration and brings in science professionals for justification. In this 104-minute film, for instance, Chai Jing effectively interweaves into her presentation numerous graphs, tables, charts, numbers, and documents. In order to explain what PM2.5 means as an indicator of fine particulate matter when the measure reaches 305.91 micrograms per cubic meter, a colored chart is inserted on the large screen (see Figure 2). The chart shows the limits for PM2.5 set by the World Health Organization, the US, Europe, and China as 25, 37.5, 50, 75, respectively. Therefore, 305.91 is

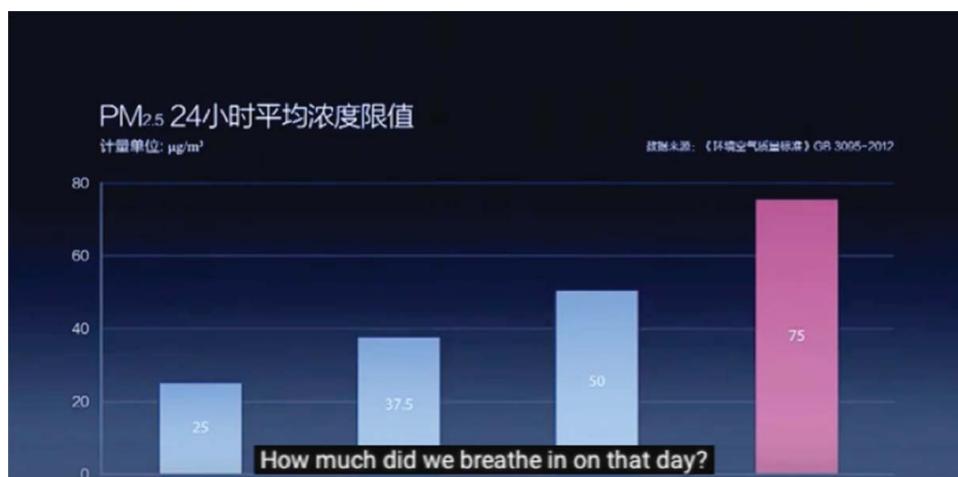


Figure 2. Screen caption from *Under the Dome*.

more than four times higher than the high Chinese standard. To further address how the PM2.5 level affects human health, Chai asks the scientist from Beijing University to analyze the particle elements, and among the 15 that can cause cancer, benzo[a] pyrene reached 176, fourteen times higher than the national standard. The example demonstrates how the juxtaposition of journalist and environmentalist creates a rhetorical appeal, presenting a reliable and trustworthy figure. In the position of environmentalist, for instance, Chai is able to bridge expert knowledge and scientific reasoning. As a journalist, Chai can cover the news through visual rhetoric. She offers the public audience an ethos of credibility, pathos of inspiration, and logos of reasoning, all on the subject of smog.

The style of Chai's presentation suggests inspiration from the TED talk model. The TED talk package contains multiple components unfolding through juxtapositions of narrative and narration, digital and textual, technological and pedagogical. Most important, the purpose and philosophy of TED aims to generate an authentic experience with an engaged audience through simplified storytelling and information sharing (Watson 2014). By applying TED rhetoric in her presentation, Chai Jing connects the Chinese audience with concurrent media discourse and references. Its immediate impact is on audience engagement, both onsite and off-line. We notice while viewing *Under the Dome* that the camera cross-cuts frequently between the presenter on the platform and the audience in the auditorium to create an interflow between presentation and reaction. The film, for instance, cuts to female viewers when Chai Jing describes her daughter's surgery, inserts a close-up of the audience with masks when screening polluted days, and captures the audience reaction when revealing a cancer patient on his deathbed.

The onsite audience, selected and rehearsed, reflects not a spontaneous presence but a rhetorical device forming a sense of community and creating identification with off-site viewers. We understand that in a TED-talk-type presentation, audiences are as important as the presenter, because they are part of the onsite community. Their interest in the topic and engagement with the presentation contribute significantly to the mission of rhetorical persuasion and identification. 'Traditionally, rhetoric has been understood as synonymous with persuasion; however, it has been characterized more broadly as identification' (Burke 1974, 19). Identification means establishing a common ground with others, whether conscious or not, in efforts to transcend various divisions of society (Burke 1974, 10). Thus, the mode of persuasion and identification generates a community space, where viewers concerned about environmental issues share and spread the message.

Animation

Counter to documentary conventions, *Under the Dome* inserts sequences of animation to convey scientific knowledge and to inspire citizen engagement in environmental protection. Alternative and experimental, the flash animation navigates between harsh reality and animated illustration, and between documentary-making and audience perception. The first animation sequence, inserted to illustrate how PM2.5 particles affect and destroy human health, makes medical science and environmental damage comprehensible for ordinary viewers (see Figure 3). In other



Figure 3. Screen caption from *Under the Dome*.

words, animation bridges the gap between ‘the apparently unknowable and seemingly unimaginable’ (Wells 1998, 51), between human physiology and environmental processes. Through the animation, the CGI personifies PM2.5 as warriors and the human respiratory system as a battlefield. As computer-designed cartoon figures invade the human body, the dubbed human voice-over explains the procedure. The animated image and embedded voice, accelerated by a music soundtrack, deftly visualize how PM2.5 particles travel through the nostril, throat, and lower respiratory system. The creative animation builds on the voice-over and visual illustration to foster public engagement in scientific education and environmental awareness. The teaming of documentary and animation, human narrator and cartoon images facilitates an understanding of scientific knowledge while challenging our conventional perception of documentary film as a transparent medium of realism.

We may view the inserted animation as hyperrealism, a representation of the real via digital technology and computer programs. The concept of the hyperreal has increasingly blurred the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the actual and the virtual, reality and illusion. When viewed from conventional conceptions, animation may appear to be in conflict with the documentary mode, but the incorporated mediums function complementarily, as the increasing use of animation in documentary ‘provides visual interpretations and imagery when live-action footage is missing, censored, or unavailable’ (Ehrlich 2012, 73). Animation’s potential contribution to the documentary comes from its ‘indexical connection between the physical world and the animated illusion and mimetic qualities’ that facilitates the audience’s comprehension of reality through animated reference (Ehrlich 2011). Hyperrealist visualization, in other words, complements and incorporates different media for multifaceted communication, where the documentary mode presents original materials and animation provides illustration. ‘Consequently, although these animated images may not be visually realistic and/or physically indexical, they are undoubtedly informative and possess a truth value that legitimises them and should prevent



Figure 4. Screen caption from *Under the Dome*.

viewers from automatically disregarding them as fictional' (Ehrlich 2011). The indexical bridging between the animated sequence of PM2.5 particles invading the human respiratory system and film footage of an operation on a lung cancer patient self-reflexively provides a cause/effect explanation of the health consequences of smog. Even an audience without much knowledge of medical science will grasp the connection between air quality and human health.

The significance of animation lies not only in bringing knowledge to the audience but also in creating a participative mode, inspiring citizen engagement in environmental protection. In her response to the question of what we can do to fight smog, Chai Jing calls on environmental activists to act through individual participation. Again, animation is used to deliver the public message (see Figure 4). With hand-drawn visual images and a voice-over, the film invites viewers and citizens to participate in specific environmental protection activities: from taking public transportation to reducing energy consumption; from exposing illegal industrial sites to reporting commercial malfeasance. The hotline phone number managed by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, 12369, looms large on the screen and becomes the most appealing spectacle to the audience. The flash animation looks simple but its effect is significant when empowered by the social media of a hotline phone system and online web network. Chai Jing knows well how essential it is to have her message spread through social media, a primary component of China's green public sphere. In fact, phone calls to the hotline number 12369 increased 240% after the film was released online, a measure of the public response to the film's call for individual action against environmental problems. While connecting citizens and the government, phone lines cannot promise fundamental change over environmental conditions, however, as the green public sphere inevitably collides with the administrative sphere. This is especially true when the green public voice speaks of environmental protection in a way that threatens administrative and

enterprise interests in economic profitability and social stability. Meaningful public participation in policy changes and systemic reform is required.

Networked circulation and communication

When uploaded to websites and circulated through Internet, the multimedia-generated documentary work creates unprecedented interactivity in a digital fashion between film production and reception. The interactive mechanism and digital network make possible the popularity of the Internet and widespread social media in contemporary China that has facilitated the rise of a ‘green public sphere’, supposed to foster political debate and affect policy-making about environmental issues (Yang and Calhoun 2007). The formation of a green public sphere requires a green/public space where citizen participation involves discussion and vigorous debate over environmental issues. The question of just how green the public sphere can be, however, complicates the promising picture, as we consider the state censorship apparatus on the one hand and virtual online media on the other hand. Institutions and individuals with valid arguments who enter the public space to express ideas and perspectives are the primary participants. But the institutional side can take the role of a monitor and manipulate the discussion of public issues for its political interests and authoritarian purposes. China’s current political regime has declared that ‘the internet has become the main battlefield for public opinion struggle’.⁵ Tightened regulations and empowered censorship have showcased a sophisticated censorship apparatus capable of controlling the real and the virtual in the name of cyberspace sovereignty. Can the green space remain ‘green’ for Internet users when real-name registration laws require them to submit personal information into the hands of government agencies, when the Great Firewall software blocks and filters anything undesirable to government ideology, when (in)visible regulatory bodies patrol virtual space like prison guards, and when persecution or imprisonment could befall anyone caught violating administrative enforcement?

In addition, the public space generated through the Internet and social media rather than conventional news or mass media opens up a virtual forum, where both the powerful and the ordinary exercise their agency over public issues. The networked online community, because of the virtual space, transforms the public sphere from singular to multiple and from exclusive to intersectional. The transformed media operating under the dominance and manipulation of an official apparatus can hardly promise a green public sphere, however. ‘The transformative effect of online activism in China is undeniable’, as Freedom on the Net reports, ‘yet the final outcomes of high-pressure encounters between netizens and officials typically fall short of systemic reform or democratic decision-making. Consequently, they fail to ensure meaningful accountability’.⁶ In other words, the supposedly shared or interactive online space/platform of public discussion actually exists as contested zones, where institutions and citizens negotiate and compete. *Under the Dome*, with its wide circulation and proliferating viewer discussion via the Internet, survived for only 48 hours, and presents salient evidence. The gap between the uses of social media and the needs of ordinary citizens regarding air pollution and environmental protection remains very wide indeed. The example of Chai Jing’s *Under the Dome* forcefully demonstrates how various Internet users in and outside government, domestic and

international, confront each other in an effort to establish or control a voice in virtual cyberspace.

The official

Different parties, officials or netizens, look to social media and the green space as a contested platform to express opinions or exercise power. The interactivity between the film's online distribution and the official response to it sparked an unprecedented dispute in China's contemporary media realm. Upon its release via major websites in China, *Under the Dome* surprisingly received official support. The government website, *People's Daily Online* (www.people.com.cn), provided the media platform where the filmmaker first uploaded the documentary and followed with an editorial interview. Chen Jining, Minister of Environmental Protection, sent a text message to the filmmaker to express gratitude. Four days after the release, however, after millions of views, the film was censored and taken down from social media by the official propaganda bureau.

Initial official support followed by sanctions indicated the continuing friction between individuals and the government, between netizens and authorities, over virtual online space. Censors and censored engaged in negotiations that featured a dynamic of intervention from participating parties. The upload and abrupt removal of the film from websites caused a stir in China's social media. 'It is precisely the event's temporality – its distinct relation to time', as Fan Yang rightly points out, 'that provides a valuable opportunity to rethink how we discuss Chinese pollution in the context of neoliberal globalization' (2016). The filmmaker played carefully with the schedule and online sites for the release of the film. Although challenging environmental policies, Chai Jing was an insider of the official media system, a former CCTV anchorwoman and investigative journalist, and had access to official web-channels and the online network. To that end, *Under the Dome* could be aired via people.com.cn, the flagship newspaper and website of the Communist Party. The official platform as well as the response sent a signal that the film may have been facilitating government environmental policy or speaking for official interests. Ironically, when faced with the pressure of public perception and collective reaction, the same media hierarchy removed the film offline.

The contradiction indicates that social media and censorship under China's current conditions appear paradoxical and competitive in a political fashion. The online/Internet space thus becomes a terrain where officials and netizens negotiate and dispute, with the former manipulating the media content and potential flow of information. Chai Jing's case presents strong evidence that virtual online space and social media channels are open to voices of opinion but closed down at the prospect of potential action. 'The purpose of the censorship program is not to suppress criticism of the state or the Communist Party', but rather 'to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected' (King 2013).

The netizens

Widespread reception of the film owed to the large number of Internet viewers, their critical response, and expansive digital channels. The manifold interactions on social media

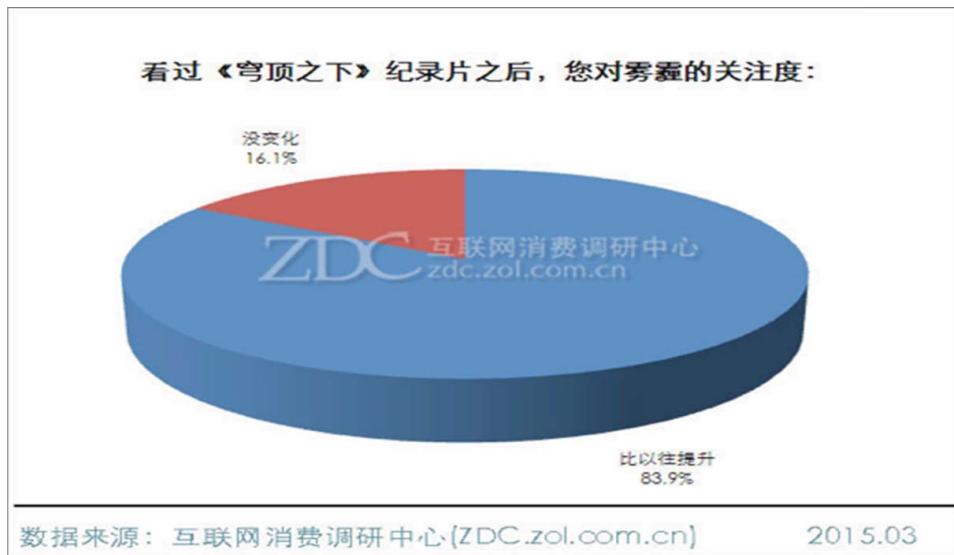


Figure 5. Still from zdc.zol.com.cn

suggest how its users create a green public sphere for environmental concerns. The response to Chai Jing's film can be measured in data collected by ZDC.⁷ We learn from its charts that over 80% of viewers were deeply concerned about air pollution in China (see Figure 5). About 70% of viewers watched the film in full and said that the film changed their view of haze and gave them a better comprehension of the problem. Over 75% expressed a willingness to restrict car/air conditioner usage and take public transportation. Moreover, viewers believed that official bureaus, emission companies, and legislatures should be accountable for environmental disasters.

According to online interviews and data collection, positive responses included enthusiastic engagement with viewing the film, acknowledgement of its implications, and willingness to take actions to protect the environment. At the same time, there was no lack of criticism from netizens, as evident in the heated online debate about the film. The public green space propagates a highly opinionated public sphere and defies simple analysis. The following comments indicate the range of opinions:

The director and the film speak for the interests of those well-off middle class elites through her celebrity social status.

Unreliable data collection and forged information.

Incredibility of maternal position that relates the air pollution with her baby's medical operation.

Real source of pollution results from a government that entitles absolute power.

Air pollution is human-made catastrophe and the problematic political institutions should be accountable for the course.

A new media model with the components of female elite, independent production, public concerned topic, potential audience perception and official resource support, and intention.⁸

Circulation of the film along with viewer responses to it creates an open, online space for discussions about environmental issues. The new green space comes with contradictions, however, as opinions are diverse and frequently clashing. The cited comments show that Internet users in China are not a homogenous entity, nor do they enjoy complete freedom of expression. In a place where the authoritarian hegemony restricts access to public or political discourse in physical settings as well as virtual spaces, an individual who addresses environmental issues and calls for mass reactions becomes a public target in both positive and negative ways. As a result, the consequences of participation in and engagement with green public space might vary widely. Public-minded netizens, for instance, would acknowledge Chai's effort and follow the issue even further to the irresponsible governmental system. Conspiracy theory holders, by contrast, would question Chai's credibility and her ties to the official system.

The International

As the media flow travels between domestic and international sites, one can take a global perspective on the exposure of China's environmental crisis. The flow of information and the online viewing of the film create a two-way traffic, a transnational integration between local production and global perception. Due to the Internet and social media, the environmental sphere has blurred the border lines between the local and global, thereby between production and perception. The title of the film, *Under the Dome*, for instance, originated from an American television series adapted from Stephen King's novel of that name and aired in 2013 by CBS. The story is about how a small town, Chester's Mill in Maine, becomes suddenly sealed off from the rest of the world by an invisible and impenetrable dome. The dome, a symbol in an allegory, suggests the mysterious alien world beyond the earth and the ecological problems that humans face; it suits Chai Jing's thesis well: the lethal hazards of microscopic airborne particles, like the overpowering dome, suffocate one's breath and promise no escape. The dome metaphor could also be read in terms of social and environmental politics, namely, the harmful effects of government censorship, corporate corruption, and destructive economic development. In taking the title of a foreign television series, the film producers adopt a rhetorical device with metaphorical intention.

In the west, social media responded to Chai Jing's film by comparing it with Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* or Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring*. Titles such as 'China's Inconvenient Truth' or 'China's Answer to An Inconvenient Truth' circled around the Internet within the Google network.⁹ It is true that both *Under the Dome* and *An Inconvenient Truth* deal with environmental subjects in the style of a TED talk. Nonetheless, the similar approach did not carry the same consequences and implications. *An Inconvenient Truth*, an Academy Award-winning film, brought Al Gore, the presidential nominee-turned environmentalist, the honor of a Nobel Peace Prize, renown as a leading climate change advocate, and a worldwide audience. In contrast, Chai Jing's film remained online for only four days, although its message of catastrophic air pollution and the urgent need for environmental protection are professionally delivered through a TEDx format. In other words, Chai Jing's *Under the Dome*, although adapting the TEDx style and claiming an independent production, could not share the platform and engage its audience like Gore had, largely because of official censorship in China. The similar TED rhetoric could not forestall a divergent outcome, as Chinese authorities monitored the news flow

between the local and the global. For the Chinese producer, the TED talk presentation struck local audiences as a profound new style while global viewers found a familiar format. Comparing the reception of Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* with Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* highlights the different media contexts in which the film narratives appeared.

For the purpose of establishing shared experience, local-global interplay extends the western reference to historical documentation. In *Under the Dome*, the film director takes the audience on a journey to London and Los Angeles, two cities that have had a history of devastating pollution. The Great Smog of 1952 in London serves as historical evidence for Chai's *Under the Dome*. The film cross-cuts between flashbacks to film footage of the London smog and Chai Jing's onsite explanations or interviews. The juxtaposition of different times and places deepens the environmental discourse by investing contemporary reality with apposite historical references. The historical citation and film footage mean to educate a Chinese audience to the fact that the unfolding environmental catastrophe can be controlled should China choose to enforce regulations on fuel use and emissions. The comparison between London fog and China smog, in terms of their lethal effect, does show similarities. But the kind of legal regulation and policy implementation that occurred after the 1952 catastrophe in London is unlikely under Chinese conditions.¹⁰ Historical footage and other documentary evidence cannot claim to be the complete truth when used to support a specific environmental problem in a different social-political context.

Without English subtitles, the audience outside China might not have had access to Chai Jing's film. The translingual process between Chinese and English generates another trans-national link between China and the world. Of course, global warming as well as the news flow is not simply a national issue. But few viewers would have guessed that two high school students in China had initiated the 'mission' of English translation which brought the film to the world's attention (Berman 2015; Tyson 2015; Fox-Lerner 2015). With help from hundreds of volunteers worldwide, crowdsourcing subtitle translations into English, the two teens re-uploaded the film to YouTube, and it has remained online after the film was taken down by government-controlled media in China. The film has since been translated into French and Japanese, and a German version is on the way. The sensibility of a rising young generation about environmental issues and youth's immersion in the digital world has extended the green public sphere from local to global. In circumventing the cyber-wall, the work of these teens demonstrates the significance of digital media and the networked international community.

Conclusion

Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* presents an unprecedented model of how a multi-media documentary can turn an environmental crisis into a dynamic media event that achieves mass virality. The 'going viral' came about because of the interplay between unconventional multimedia documentary modes and an extensive digital network characterized by a large number of users resorting to various technologies. While the rhetorical persuasion built upon multimedia assets encouraged viewers to interact with or navigate through the story of an environmentally alarming reality, the digital media enabled citizens alerted to deadly environmental conditions to tap into a channel of green discussion and diverse voices. The irony of the film's initial virality provoking its short-lived circulation reveals once again the brute fact of media censorship and social-political constraints. In a polluted

landscape and manipulated virtual space, open discussions and investigative exposures of environmental problems remain political and controversial. Yet, *Under the Dome* not only presented Chai Jing's personal war against an environmental outrage, it also inspired public consciousness of grim environmental realities. For those who are ecologically concerned, it is good news that after its erasure online in China, the film remains available via the international network. Despite the filmmaker's punishment with 'soft' house arrest, narratives of an impending environmental apocalypse continue to unfold. Discursive negotiations between the government and the netizens will never cease so long as China has widespread social media, an informed public, and dedicated professionals.

Notes

1. The film is still available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6x2uwIQQQ>.
2. See her twitter post at <https://twitter.com/WilderMohn/status/572916785508458497> (Accessed 3 March 2015).
3. See Ai Weiwei's post on twitter at <https://twitter.com/aiww/status/572913514341269506> (Accessed 3 March 2015) and https://commondatastorage.googleapis.com/letscorp_archive/archives/85583
4. Chai Jing, former investigative journalist and CCTV reporter, is known for important and popular television programs she hosted in China, including *Horizon Connection*, *One on One*, *24 Hours*, and *Seeing*. She earned her professional credential and investigative reputation by confronting and handling tough events or crises, such as the SARS outbreak, the Wenchuan earthquake, and coal mine accidents.
5. See Freedom on the Net: China. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/china>
6. Ibid.
7. ZDC refers to an online center for consumer research and analysis: zdc.zol.com.cn.
8. Examples are selected from <http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2015/03/201503012302.shtml#.VqpUAFJgmXs>, <http://www.momscleanairforce.org/chai-jing-air-pollution>.
9. Titles and postings on Google can be found at <http://docsinprogress.org/2015/04/underthe-dome/>, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/08/china-s-inconvenient-truth-documentary-about-the-airpocalypse.html>.
10. Parliament passed the Clean Air Act in 1956, restricted the burning of coal in urban areas, and helped households to use alternative heating materials.

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