

Beijing Smog: The Fight for Accurate Pollution Reporting

SUMMARY

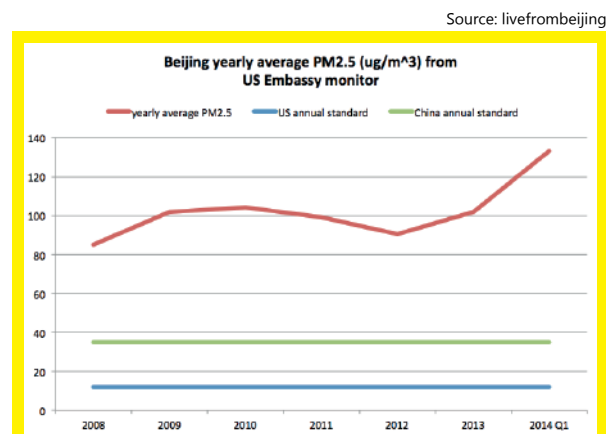
For several years after the 2008 Olympics, Chinese officials in Beijing reported “good” or “excellent” air quality in the city nearly 80% of the time. At the same time, a U.S. Embassy monitor showed the opposite: over 80% of days had unhealthy levels of pollution. This discrepancy peaked in November 2011 when Beijing's Environmental Monitoring Center reported the air quality as “slightly polluted,” while the U.S. Embassy’s reading was tweeted as “hazardous.” The Embassy readings were based on ozone density and PM2.5 (particles of 2.5 microns in diameter), “small enough to get into the lungs and bloodstream.” In contrast, the Chinese government’s measure only reported PM10, much larger particles.



The situation prompted public outrage, especially about health risks. Pressure increased in December 2011 when 700 flights were grounded due to smog. Many people from diverse sectors weighed in, particularly online, from blog writers, to an online poll on Sina Weibo (China’s version of Twitter), to a popular broadcaster on Central China Television (CCTV). People were very dissatisfied and distrustful of the government’s information dissemination, and were accessing parallel data streams from the U.S. Embassy and other unofficial sources. Chinese officials were pressed to address the public outcry and in January of 2012, Beijing monitors began reading PM2.5 and ozone, four years ahead of the original start date. The widespread public pressure was seen by many as a major factor in helping shift policy to PM2.5 readings.

ISSUE

- Extreme levels of air pollution in Beijing were reported as “good” or “excellent” by Chinese monitors using PM10 measurements, while simultaneous PM2.5 reporting by the U.S. Embassy cited air quality as frequently “hazardous”
- Mass public dissatisfaction and distrust of the country’s environmental protection apparatus



WHO

Journalists, netizens (avid internet users), and nongovernmental organizations in China

WHERE

Beijing, China

GOALS

As a spontaneous, dispersed campaign, there was not necessarily a universal goal, but many sought to allow Chinese citizens to have access to real-time, factual data on air quality and safety.



Source: <http://www.livefrombeijing.com>

STRATEGY

To pressure the Chinese government to follow worldwide trends of monitoring PM2.5 and ozone

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The campaign was mostly spontaneous and included many autonomous individuals who became outraged that China's air quality reporting was frequently inconsistent with the actual experience of citizens. As days covered in smog were listed by the Chinese government as good or slightly polluted, people began posting on various internet sites and apps to question the government's credibility. There were also some planned



Source: shanghaiidaily

activities like a Sino Weibo poll (similar to Twitter which is banned in China) conducted by real estate mogul Pan Shiyi. More than 90% of the approximately 40,000 people polled said that "authorities should adopt PM2.5 standard this year (2011)." As more celebrities with millions of online followers got involved, they played a key role in mobilizing even more people.

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed as distrust in the Chinese government's environmental protection apparatus and as a matter of safety for the Chinese people.

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

- Netizens, journalists, and news outlets in China, foreign and Chinese
- U.S. Embassy officials
- Nongovernmental organizations like Green Beagle that set up their own parallel air quality monitoring projects
- Real estate mogul Pan Shiyi and other Chinese celebrities with many online followers
- Eventually, Chinese government officials began making statements and policy shifts as a result of growing public dissatisfaction, including officials at Beijing's Environmental Monitoring Center and members of the State Council (the chief administrative authority of the PRC), such as Premier Wen Jiabao, Vice-premier Li Keqiang, and Minister of Environmental Protection Zhou Shengxian.

TARGET



As a spontaneous, mostly unplanned campaign, people focused on the Chinese central government in general rather than a specific person.

OPPONENT(S)

Chinese central government officials

TACTICS

- People posted online, especially on microblogs
- Risk level for participants was low to medium, depending on the level of anonymity
- Much of the action was dispersed, conducted by individuals participating across the internet
- Some aspects were concentrated, like an online poll, but these actions were still dispersed online rather than being a physical, concentrated gathering

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

At first, Chinese officials targeted the U.S. Embassy, claiming their data was confusing the public. Wikileaks revealed at least one tense conversation between the embassy and Chinese officials. The Chinese State Council began to realize, though, the mass nature of the dissatisfaction with air quality reporting. Premier Wen Jiabao commented that air quality data needed to reflect more closely people's actual experience. Vice Premier Li Keqiang called for the monitoring of PM2.5 and in December 2011, Minister for Environmental Protection Zhou Shengxian announced a detailed timetable for the monitoring of PM2.5 and ozone.

MEDIA & MESSAGING



PM2.5 became a rallying cry. However, given that the campaign was spontaneous and dispersed across the internet, people had their own autonomous voices. The main message seemed to be a call for PM2.5 monitoring and for the data not to be manipulated.

There was media coverage from foreign and domestic sources, e.g., Chinadialogue, China Daily, CCTV, Wall Street Journal, and CNN. The media coverage helped amplify and give credibility to the voices of netizens, adding to the decision dilemma for government officials.

OUTCOMES

In January of 2012, the government began monitoring PM2.5 in Beijing and other significant municipalities, with a nationwide rollout in place for 2016. This reaction to public pressure showed great possibility for the power of widespread mobilization over the internet.



China National Environment Monitor Centre workers inspect PM2.5 monitoring equipment in Beijing, January 2012.