Case Study: Case of Wei Zexi

**General case description**

On April 12, 2018, Wei Zexi, a 21-year-old Chinese university student, passed away at home because of cancer. However, things behind this case showed that Wei’s death had a considerable correlation with Baidu, one of world’s largest internet company. As reported by MIT Press, “Wei Zexi, a 21-year-old student Chinese student, was treated for a rare form of cancer with radiation and chemotherapy; when these did not work, he looked online for other options. He found a hospital in Beijing that claimed to have an experimental treatment for his condition, but after travelling to the hospital and taking the expensive treatment, he found it was neither effective nor experimental.”(MIT Press, 2016)

Wei Zexi had wasted a lot of time and money doing the useless treatment which was promoted to him by the searching results from Baidu. He told the media, “We thought: Baidu, a top-ranked hospital ... everything must be legitimate, A Chinese student in the United States helped me Google relevant information…Only then did we find out that American hospitals had long stopped using the technology (used in the treatment) due to poor results in clinical trials.”

The Beijing Armed Police Corps was the Hospital provided from Baidu to Wei when he was searching for treatment methods for his synovial sarcoma. Wei and his family chose this hospital because it ranked very high in the searching results and It’s advertisements on Baidu said it had highly efficient immunotherapy and cooperation with Stanford. It turned out later that this hospital had a high priority among all the searching results only because it had paid a lot of money to Baidu and set advertisement through Baidu marketing service. The information on its advertisement on Baidu are mostly false and this hospital was not a Top-three hospital as promoted on the advertisement on Baidu but a “Putian Medical Group” which refers to a groups of private hospitals.

Wei accepted the treatment from the Beijing Armed Police Corps because of the trust to the information from Baidu. He and his family are also promise by the person in charge in the hospital that the treatment can keep Wei safe for at least 20 years. However, after taking the treatment for four times and spending more than 200 thousand RMB, Wei didn’t get any better. Finally, Wei passed away at home and before his death he “blamed China’s largest search engine, Baidu, for directing him to the hospital by providing him with paid advertisements that masqueraded as objective information.” (MIT Press, 2016)

**Background of Baidu promotion service and Baidu’s relationship with Putian Medical Group**

Baidu is China’s largest search engine and the largest Chinese searching engine in the world. It owns more than 6000 million users and has approximately 70% market share. It has lots of products across hundreds of different fields including Baidu Online Marketing Service which may be one of the main reason for the tragedy of Wei Zexi.

Enterprises can set their advertisements on Baidu and try to get a high rank on the searching list of Baidu by giving money to buy the service. Baidu defined this service as a “promotion” instead of “advertisement” but actually Baidu doesn’t have a strict supervision on the advertisement it shows to the public and it mixes paid searching results with natural searching results. This kind of “paid listing” of Baidu has been under controversy from public for a long time.

The Putian Medical Group, including the Beijing Armed Police Corps in Wei’s case, is also benefit from Baidu promotion service. “The Putian Medical Group refers to an organized group of entrepreneurs that originally come from the city of Putian, Fujian province, and who have set up private hospitals all over China.” (Koetse, 2016) It turns out that there are close ties between Baidu and Putian. Baidu make fortune through the Putian Medical Group and Putian get more customers by paying money buying Baidu’s services. “Already in 2013, Putian’s Communist Party chief stated that Putian hospitals may have contributed 12 billion RMB of the total of 26 billion RMB in ad revenues reported by Baidu that year.” (Koetse, 2016)

“On the other hand, it is also because of Baidu’s top-ranking advertising space that the Putian Medical Group has been able to further expand their business and gain high profits within China’s healthcare industry.”(Koetse, 2016)

**Baidu response and public response**

After Wei Zexi passed away, on about May 1st, 2016, the case of Wei Zexi had raised a wide concern among the public and media. The public accused Baidu of seeking for money and ignoring its social responsibility. The government and relative department also investigated Baidu after this case.

On April. 28, 2016, Baidu respond to the media and public that they have check that the hospital which Wei received treatment in is a public professional hospital. Meanwhile, the relation advertisement of the hospital on Baidu were all deleted.

“On May 2nd , a joint investigation team ,which was set up by State Information Office, SAIC, the National Health&Family Planning Commission and the related Beijing authorities,stationed in Baidu. Investigations had been launched by the team, centered around the problems of Beidu Search in “Wei Zexi Incident”and PPC search mechanism defects of Baidu. The team believes that Baidu PPC search related keyword results objectively have an impact on Wei Zexi’s selection of hospital. In fact, Baidu PPC search mechanism really exists a lots of problems as high proportion of Paid bids, unclear business promotion identity,etc. These issues affect the impartiality and objectivity of search results, will mislead users easily, therefore must be immediate rectification.” (Admin, 2016) And Baidu responded to the team that it will take effect in 5 aspects:

1. “Baidu will immediately make a comprehensive review of all medical class of business promotion services, firmly refuse to provide business promotion to those medical institutions that not obtained the qualified approval of the competent authorities, at the same time timely offline the offending medical category promotional information (including drugs, medical devices, etc.)” (Admin, 2016)
2. “For commercial promotion results, Baidu will change its old price-based sorting mechanism to a new sorting mechanism of credibility with a price supplement.” (Admin, 2016)
3. “Control the number of results on Business promotion,strictly limit the number of business promotion information on the search result page, especially on the first page. And the proportion of the business promotion information on each page will be under 30%.” (Admin, 2016)
4. “Clearly marked all business promotion information in all search results to make effective risk warning.”(Admin, 2016)
5. “Strengthen the ecological construction of the medical content in search results. Establishing the rating system to medical content. United Methodist Planning Commission, the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and other institutions to improve the quality of medical information, helping users to get accurate and authoritative health information and services.” (Admin, 2016)

Koetse, M. (2016, May 4). Behind the Baidu Scandal: Baidu and the Putian Medical Group [Web log message] [Web log message]. Retrieved November 13, 2018, from <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/behind-baidu-scandal-baidu-putian-medical-group/>

MIT Press. (2016, May 11). Cancer and the internet: The strange, sad case of Wei Zexi. Retrieved November 13, 2018, from <https://mitpress.mit.edu/blog/cancer-and-internet-strange-sad-case-wei-zexi>

Admin (2016, May 18). Baidu Response to "Wei Zexi Incident”. Retrieved November 13, 2018, from http://www.yivadigital.com/blog/312\_20160518