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Paper:

Wu, Y. & Wall, M. (2019). Prosumers in a digital multiverse: An investigation of how WeChat is affecting Chinese citizen journalism. *Global Media and China*, 4(1), 36-51.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2059436419835441>

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Prosumers in a digital multiverse: An investigation of how WeChat is affecting Chinese citizen journalism

Global Media and China
2019, Vol. 4(1) 36–51
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DOI: 10.1177/2059436419835441
journals.sagepub.com/home/gch



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Abstract

This article examines how WeChat, contemporary China’s most popular mobile phone application, is affecting digitally enabled citizen journalism. Based on focus-group research with WeChat users, and building on the insights of previous studies of digitally enabled citizen journalism within and outside of China, we find that WeChat’s integration of multiple communicative networks renders it a multiversal space where citizen journalistic practice can bleed across public, semi-public, and private spheres. We show that WeChat offers diverse communicative affordances facilitating practices of “metavoicing” as a form of citizen journalism, blurring divides between news production and consumption. This dynamic affects users’ experiences of news and can influence news agendas story lifecycles. WeChat also faces important limitations as a citizen journalism platform: it is a space where political discussion can be readily reported, where the tone of current affairs coverage is often sensationalized, and where the reliability of content can be difficult to discern.

Keywords

China, citizen journalism, digital multiverse, metavoicing, WeChat

Introduction

China’s Internet features a constellation of over 3 million apps and platforms (China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 2018)—many of which are popular domestically but have relatively low international (and particularly Western) market penetration (Harwit, 2016). Because these apps and platforms have unique combinations of affordances and user patterns, studying them can shed light not only on citizen journalism in contemporary China but also on how

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emerging Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are affecting citizen journalism globally. In this article, we focus on citizen journalism as practiced and experienced via “WeChat”—China’s most popular mobile phone application (CNNIC, 2017).

WeChat, released in mainland China in January 2011, markets itself as a “Swiss Army Knife app” (Clover, 2016). It offers, *inter alia*, text, voice, and video communication among different types of social networks, games, QR code scanning, mobile commerce, and phone payment functionality. From a Western perspective, it is as if WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Paypal, and Apple Pay were all contained in a single mobile application. The market penetration of WeChat in China is impressive. In 2016, approximately 80% of China’s 695 million mobile Internet users were estimated to have a WeChat account (CNNIC, 2017), and indications are that this proportion has grown in the intervening time (CNNIC, 2018). Heavy usage patterns accompany this impressive user base. Research published by WeChat’s parent company estimates that 61% of users open WeChat more than 10 times per day. Furthermore, more than half of WeChat users spend over an hour a day using the app (Tencent Penguin Intelligence and China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT), 2016).

WeChat provides enticing new affordances from the perspective of citizen journalism. The app’s core *qun* (群) function allows individuals to create a group of up to 500 members, send text, voice, photo and video messages to the group, and organize group calls. Over time, WeChat has layered on numerous additional features (Harwit, 2016). Both *Pengyouquan* (朋友圈friends’ circle) and its English version “My Posts” (similar to Facebook posts) were added in 2012. *Gongzhonghao* (公众号official accounts), a service introduced in 2013, allows individuals, government, media, and enterprises to set up official accounts that are used to “promote their brands to billions of WeChat users [...] thus reducing propagation costs, raising brand popularity, and building up more influential brand images” (WeChat, n.d., n.p.). Barot and Orwen (2015) argue that, as WeChat continues to add such features, the “point where a messaging app begins and ends will begin to blur” (n.p.).

In its current incarnation, WeChat facilitates content creation, curation, and dissemination in text, image, video, GIF and voice formats along a spectrum running from intimate contacts via *qun* to increasingly wide circles (via *Pengyouquan* and *Gongzhonghao*, respectively). As such, it provides an integrated set of technical and communicative affordances well suited to the practice of citizen journalism. However, while a growing literature has explored WeChat from a range of perspectives (Belair-Gagnon, Agur, & Frisch, 2016, 2018; Chen, 2017; Church & de Oliveira, 2013; De Luca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016; Harwit, 2016; Lien & Cao, 2014), its influence on the practices and dynamics of Chinese citizen journalism remains unexplored. It is this lacuna in the literature that this article most directly addresses.

We begin by reviewing the literature on citizen journalism in the digital age, focusing on key features of the core concept and how these have evolved over time. We then overlay these insights with a review of core themes emerging from the study of Chinese citizen journalism. We group these latter studies according to their perspective on whether digitally enabled citizen journalism may disrupt China’s political regime and mainstream media system—categorizing them according to whether they view digitally enabled Chinese citizen journalism as either system-enforcing, system-disrupting, or mixed (i.e. with effects running in both directions). With this framework established, we outline our methodological approach, which involves the use of focus groups and an abductive process of theoretically informed thematic analysis. We discuss the benefits and limitations of this approach. We then outline our findings and conclude with a discussion of the substantive significance of our results, suggesting avenues for future research in this area.

Literature review

Conceptualizations and analyses of citizen journalism

“Citizen journalism” can convey a multiplicity of analytic and connotative meanings. It is often used interchangeably with phrases such as “participatory journalism” (Lasica, 2003), “grassroots journalism” (Gillmor, 2006), and “open source journalism” (Lievrouw, 2011). These synonyms cohere around the implication that citizen journalism comprises an amateur, bottom-up counterpart to a professionalized, narrower traditional journalism. The blurring of the demarcation between journalists and citizens first came to light in several incidents where amateur footage shot by “opportunistic/accidental journalists”—commuters and tourists armed with telephones, digital cameras, and camcorders—were quickly aggregated and disseminated via mainstream media organizations as well as independent or community journalism platforms (Bivens, 2008; Cooper, 2007).

Fragmentation and de-professionalization of journalistic content creation have marked the web 2.0 era, where web platforms allow individuals to produce, curate and disseminate news content, offering new opportunities for citizen journalism globally (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; O’Reilly, 2005). Another distinction that has been blurred by the advent of the web era is the one that separates news consumption and forms of digitally enabled citizen journalism practice. Instances of citizen journalism range from content creation via bearing witness (Allan, 2007) or current affairs commentary (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007), to content curation through “modifying or commenting upon news materials posted by other users or by professional news outlets” (Goode, 2009, p. 1288). As such, in addition to representing an increased number of journalistic practitioners, digitally enabled citizen journalism constitutes an expansion of the online activities that can be considered journalistic. This trend is well-captured by the concept of “metavoicing,” defined by Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, and Azad (2013) as engaging “in the ongoing online knowledge conversation by reacting online to others” presence, profiles, content and activities (p. 41). Metavoicing is a form of citizen journalism which adds metaknowledge to the content that already exists and takes many forms, including “liking,” reposting, voting, commenting on others’ posts, and so on.

The concept of citizen journalism is also closely linked to notions of disruption—both of media systems and of the wider political and social structures within which they are embedded. Digital technologies provide new communicative affordances that turn technologically savvy individuals into “a publisher, an eyewitness reporter, an advocate, an organizer, a student or teacher, and potential participant in a worldwide citizen-to-citizen conversation” (Rheingold, 2000, p. 133). The horizontal structure of citizen networking online (Castells, 2002) and the autonomous role of users make digital media an ideal tool to challenge the *status quo* and can generate new sets of socially and politically relevant identifications (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Ems, 2014; Ferdinand, 2000; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015; Theocharis & Lowe, 2016; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

Given these fundamentally unruly dynamics, it is perhaps unsurprising that mainstream media integration of citizen journalism in the West has been tepid. Media organizations largely view citizen journalism as a source for news stories, a platform for public discussion, and a mechanism for audience skill development via managed involvement in content creation (Wardle & Williams, 2010). Although content generated and curated by citizen journalists can be regarded as fast, authentic and democratic; at the same time, concerns remain about whether it is unethical, subjective, emotional, and lacking in technical quality or news values (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011; Niekamp, 2011; Nip, 2009). In theory, citizen journalists have entered an era of “produsage,” and

user-led content sees mainstream journalists performing less of a “gate-keeping” and more of a “gate-watching” function (Bruns, 2008). In practice, however, professional journalists retain substantial control over access to their media channels, and citizen journalists are pressured to “manage their own stories in line with traditional media sources” to receive coverage (Ali & Fahmy, 2013, p. 56).

China and citizen journalism

The empirical analyses underlying scholarly debates about citizen journalism reviewed in the previous sub-section predominantly focus on Western democratic countries. This lack of consideration of non-Western cases results in “a narrow and perhaps distorted view of what citizen journalism is or could be in different parts of the world” (Wall, 2015, p. 804). In this section, we will consider the case of citizen journalism in China. In analyzing citizen journalism in China, it is important to note that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has actively promoted digitalization in an array of areas, including e-government. According to a survey conducted in 2008 this process is viewed favorably by a large portion of Chinese web users: 72% agreed that online opinion expression had formed a new democratic channel with Chinese characteristics and 67% felt that public opinion expressed online “compensates for the differences between different social strata” (Xinhua Net News, 2008, n.p.). At the same time, there is evidence that political discussion, reportage, and activism online is tightly monitored by the state (Freedom House, 2017).

Baidu Baike (the Chinese equivalent to Wikipedia) defines citizen journalism as follows:

[T]he practices by “citizens” (i.e., non-professional media practitioners) in which they publish recent, special, or important information to society via mass media or personal communication tools. Or we could define it as news reporting from amateur journalists. Some scholars define citizen journalism as the practice and phenomenon of citizens selecting, writing, analyzing and communicating news information to the public via mass media or personal recording and communication gadgets (e.g., mobile phones, digital camera, digital camcorder, and the internet) [. . .] if you witness an accident and you publish your observation of the accident on Sina Weibo, you are acting as a citizen journalist, and your Weibo post is citizen journalism. (Baidu Baike, 2015, n.p.—translated by the authors)

This definition captures some essential “amateur” features of citizen journalism prominent in the Western literature, echoing the “non-professional” discourse as put forward by Chinese scholars such as Fan (2006), T. Guo (2008) and Cai and Guo (2008), although Xin (2010) reveals that off-duty professionals who use blogging and social media platforms represent a major portion of Chinese citizen journalists. One of the ways through which China’s complex context expresses itself is the nomenclature that surrounds popular discussion of Chinese citizen journalism. Citizen journalism in China translates as *zimeiti* 自媒体 which means: “self-media.” This phrase is notable for its depoliticization of the two constituent words “citizen” and “journalism” and their replacement with more anodyne terms.

The literature on Chinese citizen journalism published in English tends to contextualize citizen journalism as an aspect of the wider debate surrounding the effects of the Internet on Chinese media, politics, and society. In the following discussion, we categorize various pieces of research on the Internet/politics nexus in China as falling into one of three broad outlooks: *system-enforcing*, *system-disrupting*, and *mixed*. These categories, and the arguments and evidence that underpin them, provide the wider context within which the more focused scholarship on digitally enabled citizen journalism in China operates.

System-enforcing assessments tend to focus on the capacity of the mainstream media to incorporate user-generated content, and the ability of the CCP to leverage the surveillance and economic potentialities of the Internet to strengthen its regime (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Morozov, 2011; Wacker, 2003; Zittrain & Edelman, 2003). The instrumental use of citizen journalists by mainstream news organizations in China is documented by Xin (2010) and L. Guo (2014) who argue that citizen journalism is largely subject to either mainstream media or official control. In an exploration of the role Chinese citizen journalists play in breaking stories on social media platform such as Weibo, L. Guo (2014) reports that while they provide tip-offs for mainstream journalists, they can also use social media platforms to go around mainstream media to disseminate and amplify stories. Nevertheless, it proves to be difficult for citizen journalists to sustain long-term reporting of the stories that they break. (Hu, 2011) outlines three barriers faced by citizen journalists in China—control, competition, and credibility. First, journalists in China are under strict control from the state and citizen journalists have not achieved an acknowledged status with associated protections. Second, to protect their profession, mainstream journalists reject the idea of citizen journalism and work to discredit citizen journalists. Third, the public still has high expectations of professional journalists' capacity to address their problems through news reporting, and this credibility does not typically extend to citizen journalists.

Research that falls into the system-disrupting category, on the other hand, has noted a correlation between mass adoption of ICTs and the rise of public power in China (Shi & Yang, 2016; Svensson, 2016; Tai, 2006; Y. Wu, 2007; Zheng & Wu, 2005). Research that falls into this category emphasizes that the development of citizen journalism has intertwined with the quest for identity as part of the modernization process. The extension of the public sphere online and the democratizing influence of the web could potentially weaken the CCP's ideological control (M. Guo, 2018) and facilitate higher levels of civic engagement (Zheng & Wu, 2005). Y. Wu (2007) argue that the arrival of digital communication technologies provided Chinese users with a virtual civil space for identity construction, network building and social activism beyond national boundaries. Svensson's (2016) research on Sina Weibo contends that image sharing online often constitutes a meaningful form of civic engagement. Chinese citizen journalism also poses challenges to mainstream media based on its flexible business models, as well as an content production and dissemination process which can involve sensationalism, a lack of credibility, aggressive advertising strategies and infringement of intellectual property rights (Zhang, Liang, & Zhang, 2016).

Scholars holding mixed view-points argue for multidirectional effects (M. Guo, 2018; Svensson, 2014; X. Wu, 2007; Yang, 2009). X. Wu (2007) argues that cyber-nationalism expressed online serves the core narratives and goals of the CCP and yet simultaneously holds the potential to develop into an autonomous political discourse challenging CCP authority. Svensson's (2014) study of Chinese micro-blogging reveals that although commercialization in the digital media sector gave rise to online opinion leaders, the Party-state has also successfully adopted measures in incorporating social media into its mechanism to shape public opinion. Also falling into the mixed category, Tang (2013) argues that in China, various rights defense incidents garnered considerable public attention online, and eventually shaped the outcome of several conflicts between the public and the state. However, most Chinese web users play the role of anonymous information carriers, and rarely situate themselves publicly as citizen journalists. Another insight that accords with the mixed perspective is that, despite official efforts to block and repress public discussion of sensitive issues, diversified viewpoints are still heard, debated and deliberated in Chinese cyberspace. For some, the liminal nature of the online space means that is comparable to special economic zones in China:

This [online] zone, the counterpart of the special economic zones set up by Deng Xiaoping 30 years ago to introduce a socialist market economy, has seen compromise and tacit negotiation between the state and the society. The internet, as an integral part of the special political zone, allows open discussions of social and political issues without overtly challenging the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. (Yu, 2011, p. 380)

Methodology

This study draws on a series of three focus groups conducted with UK-resident Chinese citizens in the Spring of 2017. All participants across the focus groups were WeChat users. The groups differed regarding their socio-demographic makeup. Two groups were comprised students who combined high degrees of digital literacy with an expressed interest in media. We considered these groups to be the most likely to be both engaged in and able to articulate patterns of citizen journalism emerging via WeChat. A final group was comprised of non-students from a wider variety of backgrounds and is designed to balance the first two regarding age and levels of political interest. Among a total of 17 respondents, 10 were aged 20–29, and 7 were aged 30–39, capturing the age brackets into which the largest proportions of Chinese web users fall (CNNIC, 2017, p. 49).

The principal advantage of focus groups as a research methodology for our purposes is that they encourage participants to share ideas that may be difficult to express due to their sensitivity (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Given the inherent riskiness of political discussion for Chinese citizens, this is highly important. In the same vein, while this research does not engage with users living in mainland China, a key advantage of talking to UK-resident Chinese citizens is the United Kingdom's relatively greater legal openness to discussing potentially contentious issues such as citizen journalism. An evident limitation of this approach is the non-representative nature of our groups' composition—most notably regarding the fact that all members were living outside of China when the research was conducted. We therefore see this research as providing early indications into the nature of emerging dynamics created by WeChat-based citizen journalism in China, which require further research. As such, we avoid extrapolating our findings to the Chinese population.

We followed conventional focus group guidelines (see Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009 for a summary discussion) which state that focus groups should last 1–2 hours, involve groups of 6–12 individuals, involve a designated moderator, obtain informed consent from participants, and maintain focus via a set of stimuli. In our case, these stimuli came in the form of a series of open questions about WeChat as a vector for current affairs produsage. The questions were posed in Chinese to each focus group by one of the authors, who also moderated the subsequent discussions. While an opening set of questions explored participants' broad usage of WeChat—looking at frequency and history of usage as well as number and type of connections—the subsequent two sections were more directly relevant for our analysis. Section 2 explored use of WeChat as an information source as well as a means of creating, curating and metavoicing content centered around current affairs. The discussion under this heading also examined how WeChat users engage with the different types of social networks embedded in the various aspects of WeChat when undertaking these activities. Here, the key opening question was, “How do you engage with news and current affairs via your connections on WeChat?” Section 3 of the focus group protocol investigated the “disruptive” nature of WeChat as a vector for citizen journalism. For this section, the opening question was, “Have you ever heard of or participated in any instances of activism organised via WeChat?”

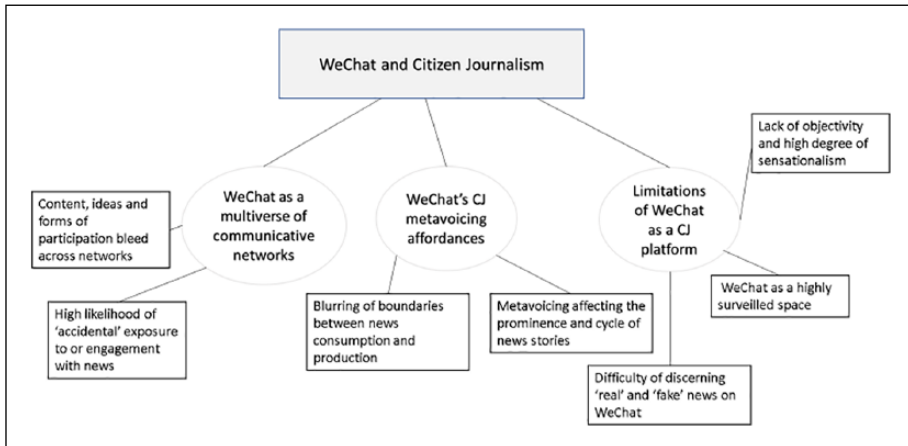


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes extracted from focus-group transcripts.

Regarding analysis, we followed an abductive process of engagement with the data. We subscribe to Timmermans and Tavory's (2012, p. 167) definition of abductive research as "a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence." The nature of the focus group design facilitated this approach, providing us with a wide-ranging set of qualitative data that emerged from broad opening questions. We followed a multi-step methodology for the thematic analysis of focus group data established by Braun and Clarke (2006). We began this process by creating a set of transcripts derived from a digital audio recording of the focus groups, which involved translating the discussion from Chinese to English. Following transcription, we parsed the discussions for segments that bore most closely on our research question of how WeChat is affecting citizen journalism in contemporary China. We grouped points, perceptions, and stories according to emergent themes, which we sought to summarize via thematic descriptions agreed between the authors. Armed with these descriptions, we then returned to the data for a second run-through, as a result of which we further refined our themes and sub-themes, leading to the final set displayed in Figure 1. In the analysis, we will elaborate on each theme and illustrate with relevant excerpts from our transcripts.

Throughout this process, we adopted a broad approach to the conceptualization of digitally enabled citizen journalism. For our purposes, content creation/dissemination and "metavoicing" (Majchrzak et al., 2013) practices can both be explored under this rubric, as can dynamics of user–user or user–group interaction around current affairs content. Indeed, our analysis suggests that the line between these aspects of contemporary citizen-journalism in China is being blurred by the multiple levels of networks and diverse communicative affordances contained within WeChat. This inclusive conceptual approach is also consonant with the development of the wider literature on citizen journalism outlined in the previous section.

Findings and discussion

WeChat as a multiverse of communicative networks

Our first major theme focuses on the multiplicity of communicative networks embedded within WeChat. We argue that the multifunctionality of WeChat means that a user can engage with a

multiverse of communicative networks that vary greatly in their openness; ranging from public to semi-public to private. We show that news content and metavoicing practices can bleed across different types of network, often leading users to experience “accidental” exposure to and engagement with news.

Gongzhonghao is the most open of the communicative networks facilitated by WeChat. It comprises public-facing official accounts run by news organizations, businesses, and individuals, which can be followed via subscription (which is usually free). One of our focus group members noted that it was possible for her to construct a personalized feed reflecting her diverse interests through subscription choices:

I subscribe to many traditional media official accounts such as CCTV Finance; CCTV Arts [...] I also subscribe non-traditional media outlets such as Take You Around in the UK; The Red Scarf in the UK and other accounts about time management, astrology; and huxiu.com (a digital technology and business information platform) (#8, female, student, 20–29)

Of course, WeChat itself sits within a broader ecology of other applications and platforms. Below, one of our respondents notes that the *Gongzhonghao* feed has perhaps less diversity of sources and a narrower range of topics than the microblogging site Sina Weibo, but that WeChat’s public accounts offer greater insight and more commentary, background information, analysis, and opinion:

Sina Weibo has a vast range of news sources. If I want to know a wide range of news events, I’ll go to Weibo. However, if I want to gain an in-depth analysis [of these events], I’ll use WeChat. Many WeChat public accounts offer in-depth reporting of the news event. (#7, female, student, 20–29)

Because phone notifications can deliver a “pushed” news feed and major news organizations regularly update their accounts, public accounts provide a sense of continuous connection and rapidity:

I got most of the important international news from my subscription to the BBC News feed because it just “jumped” out of the phone. (#1, female, student 20–29)

News from WeChat public accounts is fast and has been my first preference as a news source. (#11, female, student, 30–39)

Pengyouquan provides a semi-public sphere where “My posts” are viewable to “friends” within the social network only. Users reported heavy reliance on this aspect of WeChat for keeping abreast of current affairs:

I use WeChat to keep abreast with *Pengyouquan*. If I don’t use, I’ll have a panicked feeling that I have missed something important. (#8, Female, student, 20–29)

WeChat’s *qun* functionality allows users to contact friends on a one-to-one basis (often known as *Si Liao*, or private chat, by users) or one-to-many closed conversation (known as *Qun Liao*, or group chat by users). Messages sent on one-to-one basis or within a chat group can be perceived as the most intimate and *private* type of communicative network enabled by WeChat. Nevertheless, this forum is porous and well-connected to the app’s semi-public and public spaces—with content, ideas, and practices often bleeding across spheres:

There was once a man who drowned in the river in my neighborhood. Because the river is very close to a primary school, parents who came to pick up their children after school saw [the dead man]. Some parents took photos and circulated within WeChat groups. These parents act as citizen journalists. [...] Although a WeChat parent group usually consists of 50 people and is closed to the public, the message can still be relayed from group to group, and this news will be spread to a larger population. (#14, female, 30–39, professional)

In a context where news content and citizen journalism practices bleed across spheres in WeChat’s multiversal space, incidences of “accidental” engagement drawing users toward citizen journalistic practice become common, even among the two following respondents, both of whom professed to be uninterested in engaging with news on their WeChat profiles:

The news just “jumps” out from the mobile phone, you know? Then I look at my friends’ circle; everyone’s talking about it. (#16, female, 30–39, professional)

I heard about “One Belt, One Road” for the first time yesterday because someone in my WeChat group said that China is a strong nation now and the US, Japan, and Korea all decided to join the summit. I now know that a political summit is to be held in China. I hadn’t read any news about “One Belt, One Road,” even the message I read is nothing newsy, it is just a few sentences, not even sure from whom ... (#13, male, 30–39, professional)

WeChat’s citizen journalism metavoicing affordances

A second recurring theme that emerged from our discussions connects to the “metavoicing” concept outlined in the literature review. WeChat allows users to like and repost content across different communicative networks enabled by the app, as well as to comment on other users’ profiles or posts. It also allows users to respond to comments and vote either within the app or on the web extending beyond the app. These metavoicing affordances enable the communal creation of information about current affairs stories, which can then be accumulated, revised and augmented—blurring the lines between news production and consumption and altering the news cycles of stories. One respondent discussed how WeChat often allows him to understand news stories better by providing analysis, opinion, and alternative perspectives:

When you read news from WeChat, you are not looking for information about the event. Instead, you are looking for comments. WeChat users look for this kind of explosion of opinions. What kind of news source you use to a large degree, decides what kind of opinion you are after. (#6, male, student 20–29)

Several respondents indicated an instinctive understanding of the metavoicing concept, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

WeChat reposting, likes, or short comments are regarded as an attitude. (#10, male, student, 20–29)

Self-media is often biased in reporting news events and can rarely be objective. When you decide to repost news from self-media, you have always chosen your viewpoint. (#9, female, student 20–29)

News that I repost is often the news that I agree with. If I find some stories I totally disagree with, I’ll re-post and criticize it. (#7, female, student, 20–29)

“Like” is an attitude. You only “like” something if you agree. (#6, male, student 20–29)

This metavoicing affordance could also be realized in more private communicative settings. The incident of the drowned man in the river mentioned by participant 14 in the previous section gives a good example that how citizen journalists add speculation and opinion to prior knowledge via metavoicing:

Once the news photo [of the dead man] was circulated within the WeChat group, there was a discussion. Some parents asked: why did the man drown? Why there wasn't railing along the river? (#14, female, 30–39, professional)

All of these reflections leave us with an interesting question, “Do these activities of adding metaknowledge to news stories constitute news production or consumption?” We would argue that Bruns's (2008) concept of “produsage” can be adapted to reflect the fluid boundary created between news production and consumption on WeChat—meaning that many users are “prosumers,” moving between production and consumption of news without always being conscious of this. However, the effects of metavoicing via WeChat are not simply limited to the experiences and roles of users—they can culminate to affect both the overall news agenda and the news cycles of individual stories. Looking first at the news agenda affects, we can see resistance from our participants to a top-down form of agenda setting:

If it interests me, it is important news. (#10, male, student 20–29)

For me, news has to be interesting; and it has to be close to me (. . .) it has to be the news shared on *pengyouquan*. If one person posts a piece of news, it might not be hot news; but if everybody reposts, it must be hot news. (# 8, female, student, 20–29)

In general, I pay more attention to news about China. Brexit and news about Trump concern me because they happened when I was preparing for my trip to the UK. [. . .] If I hadn't planned to come to the UK, I wouldn't have had to spend time reading about these topics. [. . .] Trump's speech often influences the gold price in the international market, I had to care about him because I've invested in gold. [. . .] yes, news is what matters to me. (#15, female, 30–39, professional)

[Social media] re-sets the news values in each news event based on the attention received from users and decide which news items go first, which go last. (. . .) Whatever the public cares about is news—shouldn't that be the case?! (#17, female, 30–39, professional)

The notion that metavoicing could affect a story's news cycle is well-illustrated by the case of Yu Huan, a news story that was heatedly debated across almost all social media platforms in China when we conducted our focus groups. In February 2017, Yu Huan, a young man in his 20s from Shandong Province, was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing one of the four loan sharks who “taunted and exposed themselves to his mother while demanding a 1 million yuan (\$146,000) debt be repaid” (Reuters, 2017, n.p.). Although it was a mainstream media outlet, *Southern Weekly*, that first covered the incident on 24 March 2017, it was digital media that made it trending news and rallied public opinion on the issue. Through a combination of content creation and metavoicing, Chinese netizens expressed widespread sympathy for Yu's defense of his mother (ibid.). Posts and comments on Yu's case spread across search engines, micro-blogging sites, and WeChat like wild-fire and generated more than 100 million posts by 27 March. Several users mentioned this case during our research and noted that their *pengyouquan* were filled with news about Yu Huan:

One of my friends posted three pieces of news about Yu Huan in one go. The first two pieces were reposting; the last piece was reposting with an added comment. Most other friends were reposting, but with clear intention to show an attitude. (#6, male, student 20–29)

In the heat of the public debate, the local Jinan Public Security Bureau initially tried to smother the expression of public opinion, but this was resisted through subtle metavoicing practices, as one respondent recalled,

During the event [when public opinion was ignited for his life sentence], the official Weibo account from Jinan Public Security Bureau posted a picture in which a donkey was trying to head-butt a bus. The caption went like this: “Law cannot be changed by emotion.” The implied meaning is that internet users were like the donkey and trying to change the court decision and verdict. Jinan Public Security Bureau intended to tell internet users to give up [. . .] but many users then changed their profile photos to donkeys to show defiance. (#4, female, student 20–29)

Limitations of WeChat as citizen journalism platform

The well-connected social networks on WeChat make peer monitoring possible, as well as facilitating reporting, which can make for a riskier environment within which to engage in citizen journalism. One focus group participant shared his practice of reporting certain users:

If I see some WeChat post being too critical, condemning this and condemning that, I’ll report it. If you see any article on WeChat, including the article reposted, you will be able to see the URL, at the bottom of the article, there is a button for reporting. If you press the “report” button, you can choose the reasons for reporting, e.g., pornographic, propagating counterrevolutionary ideas, etc. I sometimes just put down “this person is sick.” [. . .] I know, if two people couldn’t agree with each other on certain issues, it is likely that one reports the other. (#13, male, 30–39, professional)

Many of our respondents are critical of the sensationalism of news from *zimeiti*, and regard traditional mainstream media as more authoritative in providing quality information:

Social media news has its own style. For example, [the headlines] go like this: “You are not Chinese if you don’t repost this”, or “men go silent, women go weeping after reading this.” Such “headline news” reads so negative (# 7, female, student 20–29)

I see fake news in my *pengyouquan*. For example, when Lotte Mart (a supermarket chain from South Korea) was targeted during the THAAD incident,¹ vandalizing Lotte Mart in different cities across China became a trending news. You saw such photos on *pengyouquan* and on Weibo. [. . .] Some social media influencers used this event to create opportunities for themselves, and live-streamed their vandalizing activities to attract attention so that they could have financial gains. (#1, female, student 20–29)

It is less likely for you to see fake news from traditional media organizations . . . Although CCTV chooses not to report certain news sometimes, they are taking a serious and cautious attitude towards news reporting. (#6, male, student 20–29)

The concern over fake news was listed as a final major inhibitor for participating in current affairs discussion on WeChat:

I rarely participate in current affairs discussion. [...] You often find that there are many opinions on WeChat surrounding one news event, and all these opinions are biased and subjective. It's difficult to tell true from false. Also, even a piece of "news" that was reported could be changed to something else later. (#13, male, 30–39, professional)

There's a huge amount of online information, but you can't tell which pieces of information are true and which are false. If you accidentally reposted a message which turned out to be false later, you will feel that you are losing a lot of face. There was a piece of information about computer virus causing the failure of university IT system circulated earlier [on WeChat]. I waited till the official news was released before reposting this to my family and friends. (#17, female, 30–39, professional)

Conclusion: WeChat as a citizen-journalism platform that blurs boundaries

This analysis of the use of WeChat as a citizen journalism platform shows that it is a technology that blurs boundaries between public, semi-public and private spheres. WeChat merges multiple communicative spheres into a single, multiversal communicative space. In this space, there exist receptions, interpretations, and practices of citizen journalism that are conditioned by the socio-political context of contemporary China. Both content creation and metavoicing citizen journalism outputs can bleed across different levels of this multiverse, leading to complex patterns of difficult-to-anticipate user interactions emerging. Users may intend content for a private audience and find it becoming public unexpectedly, while stories may "jump" out of their phones from public sphere stories and go on to bleed into their semi-public or private sphere discussions.

The technological metavoicing affordances embedded in WeChat also blur the divide between being a producer versus a consumer of journalism. WeChat as a platform driven by content curation, annotation, and dissemination allows users to engage in a sustained conversation surrounding trending issues, accumulate knowledge, and share information. Our findings suggest that WeChat aggregates official and non-official news sources and provides users with alternative perspectives on news information that is still largely dominated by mainstream media. The news consumption and meta-voicing patterns of WeChat users are largely self-directed and self-centered, but can, in some cases, cumulate to influence news agendas and news story life cycles. Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the blurred boundaries of WeChat as a citizen journalism platform limit its efficacy. While the app allows users to engage with multiple communicative networks, this engagement can be risky, as users can monitor and report each other's activities. The malleability of the produsage patterns enabled by WeChat leads to concerns about the nature and reliability of the information that is disseminated via the platform.

Citizen journalists have not been officially recognized in China and journalists outside of the mainstream media have not been granted press pass to gather news information. The prevalence of social media and chat apps such as WeChat enables Chinese citizen journalists "make their interpretation" of the news agenda set by the mainstream media "in the specific 'receiving context' of contemporary China" (Zhou, 2005, p. 780). Although mainstream media practitioners remain important gate-keepers, the research outlined in this article provides an early indication that meta-voicing practices in WeChat's multiversal space can create a second-level process that affects how stories are received and disseminated via reposting across various forms of communicative network, commenting, writing @ key news actors, tagging, and so on. In this second-level process, the information disseminated is free neither from mainstream media nor state control, is not always

reliable and engaging in critical conversation entails an element of risk of being reported. What remains to be researched is whether our findings are widespread among WeChat users in mainland China and, if so, what their implications may be for the balance of power between citizen, mainstream media and the state.

Funding


The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The United States claimed to begin deploying the first part of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) in South Korea in March 2017, which is regarded by China as a security threat. Chinese consumers' anger was later targeted toward South Korean retailer Lotte, which allowed THAAD to be installed on one of its sites. Vandalization in Lotte marts happened in several cities in China. In November 2017, South Korea and China agreed to end the conflict and South Korea suspended THAAD missile system.

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