

1. Why apps are a game changer for Chinese-language media in Australia

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This is the first in a series of five briefings on Chinese-language media in Australia. The briefs are best read in conjunction with each other in the series, and readers may also benefit from reading the author's 2016 report for the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities,¹ which provides background, context and detailed information about major Chinese-language media outlets in Australia.

Data used in these briefs come from a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP180100663, Chief Investigators: Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu) 'Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power'. Empirical data included in these briefings have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals: Media International Australia; Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies; and Social Media & Society. For more information on data sources relied upon in this briefing, refer to Methodology below.

Key takeaways

- In the earlier part of the 2010s, WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs) transformed the way in which digital Chinese-language media content was delivered and distributed. Since 2016, in addition to via WeChat, digital content has also been delivered via apps that are custom-made by media companies themselves. As a result, most Chinese-language digital media in Australia now adopt a dual-platform delivery model.
- As a consequence of the widespread use of these apps, digital Chinese-language media have all but eclipsed traditional Chinese-language media in Australia in terms of reach and audience size.
- Digital technologies are beginning to break down the boundaries between Australia's Chinese-language ethnic media, Australia's English-language media, and Chinese state media, enabling the content of these hitherto disparate media to flow into each other's space. The increasing use of mobile devices is also collapsing the distinction between content produced by media organisations and that created by users of social media platforms.
- These developments may further complicate the issue of Chinese-language media and Beijing's influence. This suggests that the business models, reach, audience size and content – rather than the government of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) intentions, and alleged connections between media proprietors and the Chinese government – may be a more important benchmark in measuring the extent and impact of that influence.

¹ Wanning Sun, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments challenges and opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, September 8 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>>.

Introduction

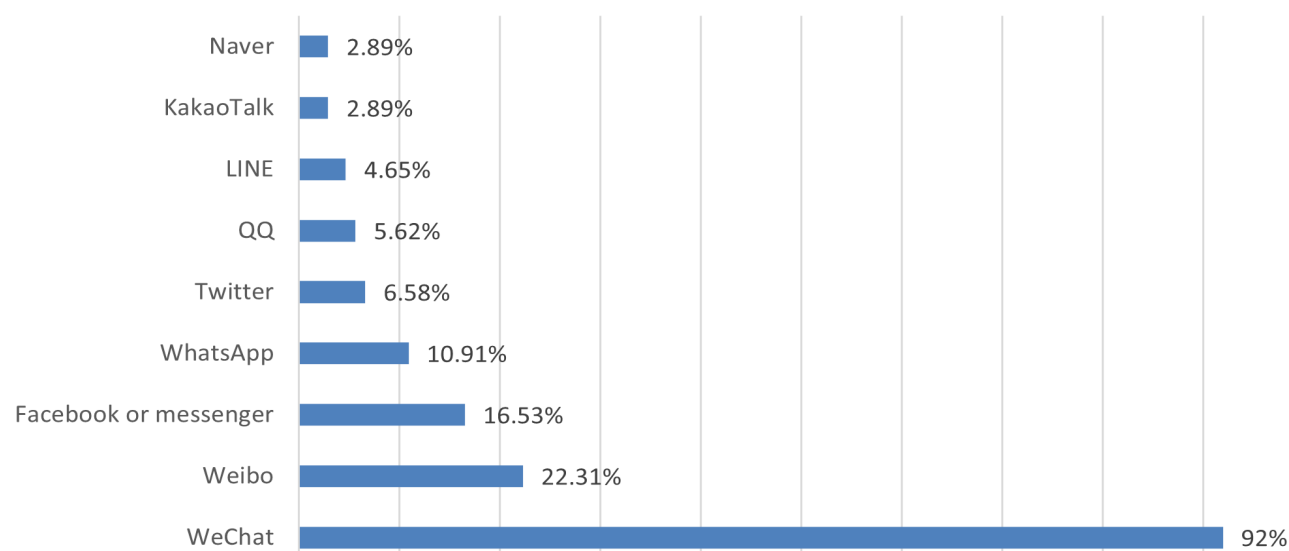
Chinese-language media in Australia include both long-established legacy media and more recently developed digital/social media. In recent years, this sector has come under increasing scrutiny, as it is believed to be influenced by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In September 2016, the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI) published *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities*, the first report on Australia's Chinese-language media, including print, electronic and digital media.² Since that report, Australia's Chinese-language media landscape has become even more complex, dynamic, and fluid. Digital technologies continue to transform the ways in which Chinese media content is produced, accessed, and consumed. Despite these rapid developments, public knowledge about how this new digital industry operates is still at best fragmented. The lack of this up-to-date and intimate knowledge may have accounted for some out-of-date, simplistic or even misleading statements often made in the China influence debate.

WeChat as a game changer

In the same way that the arrival of Facebook and Twitter disrupted the operation of traditional media, WeChat, a Chinese app owned by TenCent, has facilitated the shift from digital Chinese-language media's reliance on website delivery to delivery via WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs).³ Since 2013, major digital Chinese-language content providers in Australia have chosen WeChat to deliver their content for its ease of set-up and operation, due to its wide adoption by their intended consumers. This shift in the model of distribution has significantly boosted the impact of digital Chinese-language media, and started to further threaten the viability of Chinese-language newspapers, radio and television.

Digital media content delivered via apps not only attracts young or first-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrants and students, they have also siphoned many older readers from traditional Chinese-language media. This can be illustrated by the data from the author's 2018 survey of the media consumption habits of Chinese-Australians (specifically, Mandarin-speaking migrants from PRC). Unsurprisingly, WeChat

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who reported accessing social media platforms or apps either hourly or multiple times per day



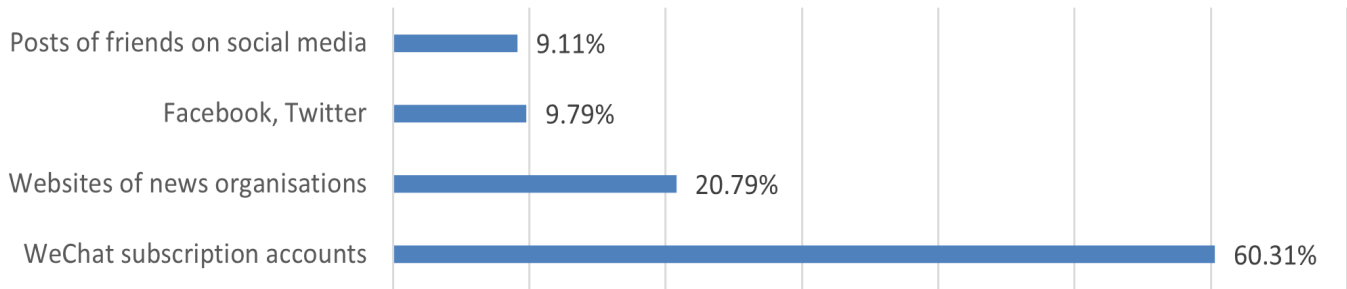
Source: Author's 2018 survey

² Ibid.
³ See Wanning Sun, 'Chinese diaspora and social media: Negotiating transnational space, *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias: Communication*, January 22 2021 <<https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-1146>>; Wanning Sun, 'Is there a problem with...WeChat?' policy brief, China Matters, 2019 <<https://chinamatters.org.au/policy-brief/policy-brief-april-edition/>>.

was the most used social media platform among respondents, with 92 percent (573 of 623 respondents) reporting accessing it either hourly or at least several times daily (Figure 1).

The same survey also found that 60.31 percent of survey participants identified WSAs as their primary source of news and information (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who reported preferring a particular platform for accessing news and information

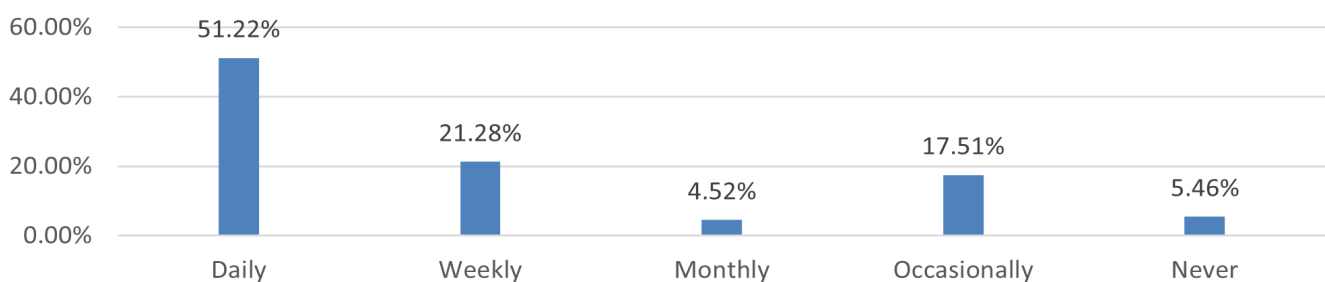


Source: Author's 2018 survey

The survey also indicates a high level of use frequency. More than half of the participants said they checked these accounts daily (Figure 3).

These findings strongly suggest that the arrival of WeChat was a game changer in Australia's Chinese-language media sector. While 2006–07 is now considered to be the period when social media platforms generally took off in the PRC and within the Chinese diaspora, it is 2011 – when WeChat started – that marks the beginning of the platform-delivery mode of Chinese-language news and information in Australia.

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who reported checking their WSAs at a given frequency

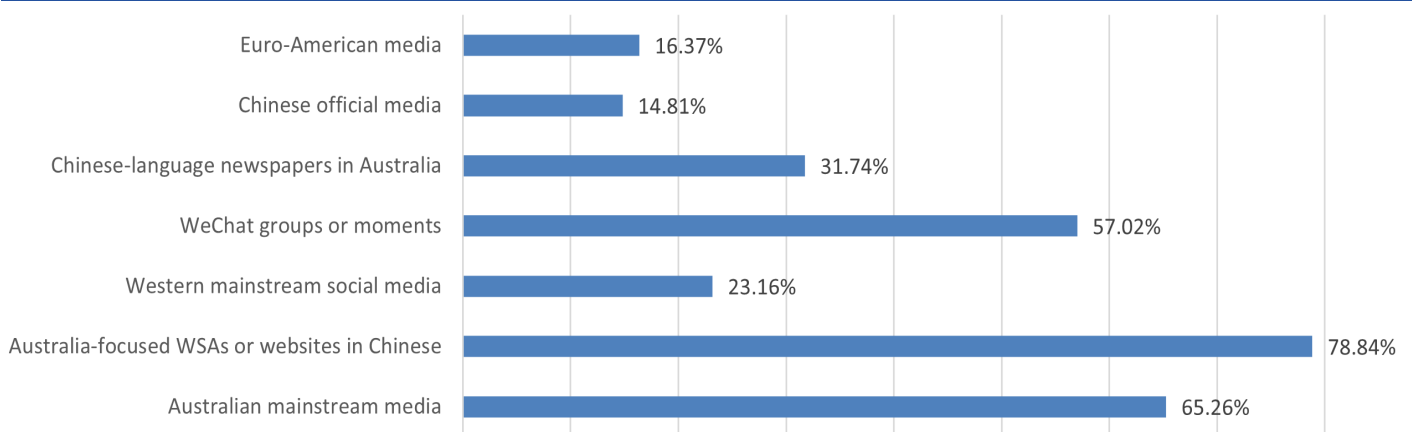


Source: Author's 2018 survey

In the author's 2019 survey, almost 79 percent of 898 respondents said that they accessed news about Australia via WSAs or websites in Chinese (Figure 4).

It is worth noting that Figure 4 shows a high level of consumption of Australia's English-language media. Similarly, our online ethnography also suggests that English-language content is regularly picked up by local Chinese-language digital media outlets and delivered via WSAs. It also shows that personal communication functions on WeChat such as Moments and WeChat Groups are crucial spaces to (re)post Australia's English-language media content, but this content is often posted after it has been processed, curated, and framed within a particular editorial stance by bilingual gatekeepers within Chinese-speaking WeChat groups (more on this in a subsequent briefing).

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents reporting using particular sources to access news about Australia



Source: Author's 2018 survey

From WSAs to own apps – A dual-delivery system

While relying on WeChat for content delivery has been good for business for these Chinese-language digital media outlets, the 'free ride' comes with constraints and liabilities, since WeChat is subject to the PRC's regulatory framework (more on this in the next UTS:ACRI brief). In order to have the best of both worlds, in the last four to five years many Chinese-language outlets have started to experiment with a dual-delivery model by continuing to piggyback on WeChat while at the same time pushing readers to also use their own apps.

The last two or three years has seen phenomenal growth in the number of readers accessing media outlets' via the custom-made apps. For instance, *Sydney Today*, Australia's biggest digital Chinese-language news outlet, currently estimates that 60 percent of its readers access content via the *Sydney Today* app, another 40 percent from WeChat and the outlet's own websites combined. Similarly, *Yeeyi.com*, another popular digital media outlet, estimates that roughly users accessing content via its own app amount could be four times that of those who rely on WeChat.⁴

The majority of these digital media outlets' readers are based in Australia. However, given that WeChat is the preferred social media platform for personal use for most Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians and students, continuing to deliver content via WeChat makes perfect business sense, despite the availability of custom-made apps.⁵

Whether and how this dual-platform strategy will have an impact on politics-related content is still too early to tell. However, one thing is certain: the primary goal of most of Australia's Chinese-language media outlets, like all other commercial media in Australia, is to maximise profit, and their business models, distribution tactics and choice of content are all motivated by the logic of 'attention economy'⁶ – driving up the number of page-views and click-counts, directing and redirecting traffic volume to their content, thereby attracting maximum advertising and sponsorship.

Support for the CPC does not make business sense

The author's 2016 UTS:ACRI report finds that due to dwindling readership and advertising revenue, many of these Chinese-language newspapers were struggling to stay viable. The influx of students and migrants from the PRC had, to some extent, given these outlets a much-needed reprieve, and some of these media had also turned to the option of exploring partnerships with and gaining in-kind or financial support from the PRC's state media, a survival strategy which dovetailed with the PRC government's soft power objectives. For instance, the most established Chinese-language newspaper, *Sing Tao Daily*, which had operated for almost

⁴ Estimates are based on interviews with staff or senior management of these companies. It is difficult to be precise about the percentage of users' different two apps, since many users have both WSAs and outlet-specific app on their mobile devices.

⁵ Based on interviews with staff or senior management of these companies.

⁶ Thomas Davenport and John Beck, *The attention economy: Understanding the new currency of business* (Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

three decades in Australia, had switched from classic Chinese characters and a Hong Kong newspaper format to simplified Chinese characters and a PRC newspaper format to suit readers from the PRC. Furthermore, *Sing Tao Daily* had resorted to forging partnerships with PRC' media, including by content sharing. Research also indicates that its political stance vis-à-vis the PRC had gradually changed from hostile to favourable.⁷

Despite myriad measures aimed at saving an ailing legacy media industry, the drumbeat of digital disruption was getting increasingly close. Digital Chinese-language news and information outlets, catering mostly to first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants and international students from the PRC, have become more accessible, popular and influential compared to traditional Chinese-language media in Australia, such as television, radio and newspapers. Convenience of use aside, a further advantage digital media have over most traditional news media is that they are free of charge.

The introduction of apps for the delivery of digital content means that Chinese-language newspapers' chances of surviving the competitive market have grown increasingly slimmer. If the main Chinese-language newspaper titles were struggling to reach the target of 10,000 per day a few years ago,⁸ the further loss of readers and advertising to digital media has proven to be devastating. In contrast, *Sydney Today*, Australia's most successful digital Chinese-language media outlet, reached its goal of attracting 100,000 daily active users as of February 2020.⁹ One report estimates that Media Today Group, the parent company of *Sydney Today*, has a circulation figure of 600,000.¹⁰

The recent closure of *Sing Tao Daily* in Australia – despite its collaboration with PRC state media and its adoption of a favorable stance towards the PRC – as well as the cessation of the pro-Beijing Chinese-language newspaper *New Express Daily*,¹¹ demonstrates that support for the Communist Party of China (CPC) alone does not guarantee economic survival. The demise in July this year of Ostar International Media Group owned by Tommy Jiang, who used his numerous Chinese-language newspapers, radio and digital TV stations in Australia to carry content from PRC state media,¹² was the latest case in point.

Five questions need to be pursued in sequential order before the genuine presence of PRC influence can be firmly established:

1. Are there any connections between the PRC government and the Chinese-language media outlet?
2. Are they the sort of connections that could lead to the media outlet's content being dictated by the CPC?
3. What evidence is there to demonstrate that these connections are actually dictating the content of the media outlet?
4. If the content is so dictated, is it having a significant and tangible impact on intended audiences?
5. If there is a significant impact on audiences, does this translate into actions, practices and behaviours which harm – or are likely to harm – Australia's national interests?

To date, most efforts have been directed towards Question 1 – assessing the CPC's influence on Chinese-language media in Australia. In this vein, much has been made of the myriad kinds of 'connections' and 'links' between Chinese-language media and the PRC government – e.g., media proprietors who have attended functions, meetings and events hosted by the PRC government, embassy or United Front.¹³ But little has been done to address the remaining four questions.

7 Wanning Sun, 'China's vessel on the voyage of globalization: The soft power agenda and diasporic media responses', in Jessica Retis and Roza Tsagarousianou (eds.) *Handbook of diasporas, media and culture* (Wiley Blackwell, 2019) pp. 165–178.

8 For self-reported circulation figure, see Wanning Sun, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, September 8 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>>.

9 Based on interviews with senior management of *Sydney Today*.

10 Fan Yang, *Translating tension: Chinese-language media in Australia*, Lowy Institute, September 29 2021 <<https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/translating-tension-chinese-language-media-australia>>.

11 Heidi Han, 'Chinese newspaper Sing Tao Daily to close', *The Australian*, February 9 2020 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/chinese-newspaper-sing-tao-daily-to-close/news-story/52fae2a6f08874b9fb512175d204b72f>>.

12 Michael Li '澳洲中文传媒大亨姜兆庆创立的澳星集团遭破产清算 (Australia's Chinese-language media tycoon Tommy Jiang's business Ostar International Media Group has been seized by liquidators)', *ABC Chinese*, July 21 2021 <<https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2021-07-21/chinese-media-ostar-group-liquidators-australia-tommy-jiang/100308438>>.

13 See, e.g., Alex Joske, Lin Li, Alexandra Pascoe, Nathan Attrill, *The influence environment*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, December 17 2020 <<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/influence-environment>>.

Methodology

Data used for this briefing come from a number of sources. The first source is two surveys conducted in September 2018 and February 2019. The first survey, with 646 participants, addressed the media access and usage patterns of Mandarin-speaking migrants from the PRC, while the second, with 927 participants, focused on the media and news access and consumption habits and preferred platforms or sources of the same cohort. Both were conducted through ‘convenience sampling’—participants were recruited largely via social media platforms, primarily WeChat and Facebook. The majority of respondents were Australian permanent residents or naturalised Australian citizens (over 90 percent in survey one, and over 67 percent in survey two); most of them (over 85 percent) had an undergraduate degree or higher, and most (over 70 percent) were working. The second source is interviews conducted with senior management in a number of Chinese-language digital outlets in the period of 2020-2021. The third source, used to a lesser extent in this brief, is data from the Australian Research Council Discovery Project’s longitudinal immersive ethnography.

Author

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