

## 2. What are the key misconceptions about censorship in Australia's Chinese-language media?

Wanning Sun

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*This is the second in a series of five briefs on Chinese-language media in Australia.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 briefs 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 brief, refer to Methodology below.*

### Key takeaways

- Compliance with state censorship by the People's Republic of China (PRC) is necessary if Australia's Chinese-language media want to maximise profit and minimise risk. In the case of WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs) in Australia, this compliance comes about as a result of the outlets having to use a social media platform preferred by their intended readers, not as a result of a decision to operate as a mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and an instrument of its propaganda.
- Some have argued that there is no need to make a distinction between the PRC's top-down censorship and self-censorship on the part of Australia's Chinese-language media, as both effectively lead to a similar outcome. But this simplistic equation denies the agency – however limited – of Australia's Chinese-language media, which find creative ways of getting around censorship.
- Most of Australia's Chinese-language media should be understood as a part of diasporic entrepreneurial endeavour, providing a niche cultural and informational product to an ethnic community that is ill-served by both mainstream English-language media and PRC state media.
- A precise understanding and use of key words such as 'control' and 'independence' is a crucial first step towards an accurate and realistic assessment of both the presence and effective of the PRC government influence exerted via Australia's Chinese-language media.

<sup>1</sup> Brief 1. 'Why apps are a game changer for Chinese-language media in Australia', October 20 2021, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/why-apps-are-game-changer-chinese-language-media-australia>>.

<sup>2</sup> 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 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. 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-language 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 PRC influence debate.

## Censorship and regulatory framework

Research shows that WeChat censorship works on two levels, that is, through state policies and platform regulations, via a combination of tactics.<sup>3</sup> This includes keyword identification; algorithmic recognition of politically sensitive images; close scrutiny of flagged individuals and organisations on the PRC government's watch list and those with more than 3,000 'friends' on WeChat. The censorship mechanism also includes heightened surveillance of 'high-risk' locations during politically sensitive times, or of politically sensitive issues. In addition to these centralised censorship mechanisms, WeChat also allows users to report any 'illegal' or 'forbidden' information they encounter through the 'Report' function embedded in the three key WeChat spaces: Chat, WeChat Moments, and WeChat official accounts. All articles and posts on WeChat are filtered by both automated processes and human censors.

The rules are often ambiguous and the boundaries of the permissible unclear; penalties can be imposed without warning or explanation, with the appeal mechanism perfunctory for WSAs and non-existent for individual accounts. The temporary blocking of chat groups comes in two forms: complete blocking of interactions of all users for a certain period of time; and blocking only domestic users in the PRC from posting or seeing anything in the group, but allowing overseas users to continue chatting freely.

WSAs are part of the censorship regime and network that combines the high-tech (machine-learning technologies) with the low-tech (user reports), both pre-publication and post-publication. Of all the popular features within WeChat, WSAs face the tightest content restrictions precisely because of their quick and easy reach to mass audiences when users/subscribers share posts with friends, in chat groups, on 'Moments,' on other apps and across the Internet generally.

The PRC authorities stipulate that only those media entities with news permits – outlets established in the PRC, with their editors-in-chief and core management all PRC citizens, and authorised by the state and its delegates – are allowed to engage in original news reportage. Private companies, foreign entities and Sino-foreign joint ventures are excluded from applying for a news permit.<sup>4</sup>

This means that most WSAs are not allowed to report original news (except those owned by officially registered news media recognised by the Chinese authorities), including Australia-focused WSAs. However, they can cite or re-post news items from official or authorised sources or platforms, while remaining subject to censorship by WeChat administrators, who can delete articles deemed to violate the regulations or even close down WSAs in serious cases.

3 See, e.g., Jeffrey Knockel and Ruohong Xiong, '(Can't) picture this 2: An analysis of WeChat's realtime image filtering in chats', *Citizen Lab*, July 15 2019 <<https://citizenlab.ca/2019/07/cant-picture-this-2-an-analysis-of-wechats-realtime-image-filtering-in-chats/>>; and Jason Q. Ng, 'Politics, rumors, and ambiguity: Tracking censorship on WeChat's public accounts platform', *Citizen Lab*, July 20 2015 <<https://citizenlab.ca/2015/07/tracking-censorship-on-wechat-public-accounts-platform/>>. For the most up-to-date and detailed rules and regulations of WeChat use for individual users, see Tencent's 'Standards of Weixin account usage' <[https://weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?t=page/agreement/personal\\_account&lang=en\\_US](https://weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?t=page/agreement/personal_account&lang=en_US)>.

4 See Cyberspace Administration of China, 'Stipulations on the management of internet news service permits', May 22 2017 <[http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/22/c\\_1121015789.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/22/c_1121015789.htm)>; Cyberspace Administration of China, 'Provisions for the administration of internet news information services', May 2 2017 <[http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/02/c\\_1120902760.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/02/c_1120902760.htm)>; and Tencent, 'WeChat personal account usage specifications' <<https://kf.qq.com/faq/120813euEJVf160303a2ueAV.html>>.

## Media entrepreneurs living with censorship

In order to construct an overview of a range of organisational factors of Australia's WSAs, the author gathered data over a one-week period (July 19–26 2019) from the top 50 WSAs<sup>5</sup> to get a clear sense of their subscription numbers, place of registration, ownership of accounts and business models.

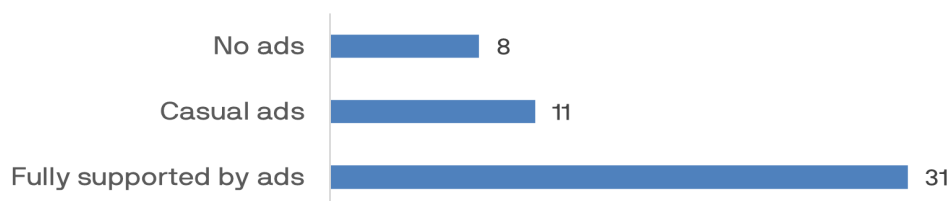
Analysis of the data showed that 27 of the top 50 WSAs also had websites that shared content on WSAs. The remaining 23 WSAs were WeChat-only self-media – that is, accounts set up by individuals and private companies as their sole digital platform and business operation through content production. Their market size, as measured by the number of subscribers and average views per article, was often on par with, and may even eventually surpass, some of the more established Chinese-language media platforms.

Among the WSAs analysed, 31 were registered under the names of private PRC companies, 14 were PRC ID holders, two were PRC state-owned companies, two were registered to the mainland Chinese offices of Australian public agencies (Tourism Australia, ranked 23rd; the University of New South Wales, ranked 28th), and one (Study Melbourne, ranked 43rd) had no registration information available. Eight of the top 10 WSAs were registered through a PRC-registered company, while two were registered through PRC citizens.

These figures suggest that Australia-focused entities take a pragmatic approach to operating their WSAs as business entities. It is easy, fast and free for someone based outside the PRC to register a WSA under the auspices of a PRC-based owner. Its biggest advantage is that account holders have a greater daily allowance of posts than owners of foreign-based accounts. This was confirmed by some WSA owners through interviews with the author. So, on paper, these Australia-focused WSAs appear to be connected with PRC companies and individuals, but this is mostly in order to get around the rules and regulations related to registration and content delivery restrictions for foreign entities, and to maximise capacity for content delivery to a wide range of WeChat users. This connection does not necessarily mean that the content is controlled by someone or some entity in the PRC.

Apart from the revenue they generate as traffic masters, the main source of income for Australia-focused WSAs is advertising. In order to make a profit, 31 of the top 50 WSAs investigated relied on advertisements of either Australia-based products and services or PRC-based products and services for the Australian market (Figure 1). Eleven are partially funded by advertising, while eight have no direct advertising in the sample, including three held by Australian government and public agencies, one immigration agency and four individuals and private companies run by Chinese-Australians.

Figure 1. Number of Top-50 Australia-Focused WSAs that rely on advertising



Source: Author's 2019 survey

<sup>5</sup> The list of top 50 WSAs relies on the ranking list from AoWeiBang <<https://rank.aoweibang.com/>>, which specialises in data collection about Australian-based WSAs (2019).

Australia-based WSAs receive no funding from either the PRC or the Australian governments. Furthermore, given their intended reader base in Australia is much smaller compared with Australia's English-language media, their advertising revenue is also much smaller. Against these odds, growing their subscriber base – and thereby securing advertising revenue – is core to their business model. As such, these companies need to carefully negotiate the increasingly competitive environment of Australia's commercial media sector, all the while carefully navigating their way through WeChat's content regulations.

### Giving readers what they want

Two insights emerged from the author's interviews with editors and managers of Chinese-language media outlets in Australia. On the one hand, there is no incentive for them to toe the PRC government's propaganda line as it does not make good business sense and would definitely alienate readers. On the other hand, these media outlets are acutely aware of the fact that, as political scientist Minxin Pei puts it, 'many Chinese are deeply conflicted: they may not like the Communist Party of China (CPC), but they are proud of their country and resent outside criticisms.'<sup>6</sup> They also know that in most cases their readership is comprised of new migrants from the PRC who are more interested in information relevant to their lives in Australia than critical reports about where they came from.

An editor of a popular news website lamented, 'We're attacked by both sides. Patriotic readers attack us if we publish anything that sounds like a criticism of China. Readers on the other side also attack us for not criticising China. You can't win.'<sup>7</sup>

An interview with an editor of another popular WSA based in a different city said that their biggest challenge was to 'maintain a politically neutral stance in the volatile battlefield of public opinion in Australia,' particularly on controversial and politically sensitive topics related to PRC influence in Australia. 'We choose to remain silent on such topics, because it is too risky to say anything without being labelled as Beijing's propaganda tools. We have to focus on survival first.'

The author conducted a content analysis of *Sydney Today*, Australia's most popular Chinese-language digital outlet, over the period July 1–31 2019 in order to identify the main issues covered by its content. The analysis found that the dominant topic among the 103 news and current affairs articles published about Australia was the Chinese-Australian community: 34 percent of items dealt with this. Ranked slightly lower than this was crime, at 32 percent, while issues related to immigration and international students from the PRC constituted almost 12 percent (Figure 2). A few observations can be made from these data. According to one of *Sydney Today's* editors, the outlet gives priority to the ongoing cultural needs of the Mandarin-speaking community which are not satisfied by English-language media outlets. As questions of personal and property safety are ongoing concerns for many in this community, it is not surprising that the number of stories about crime is disproportionately high.

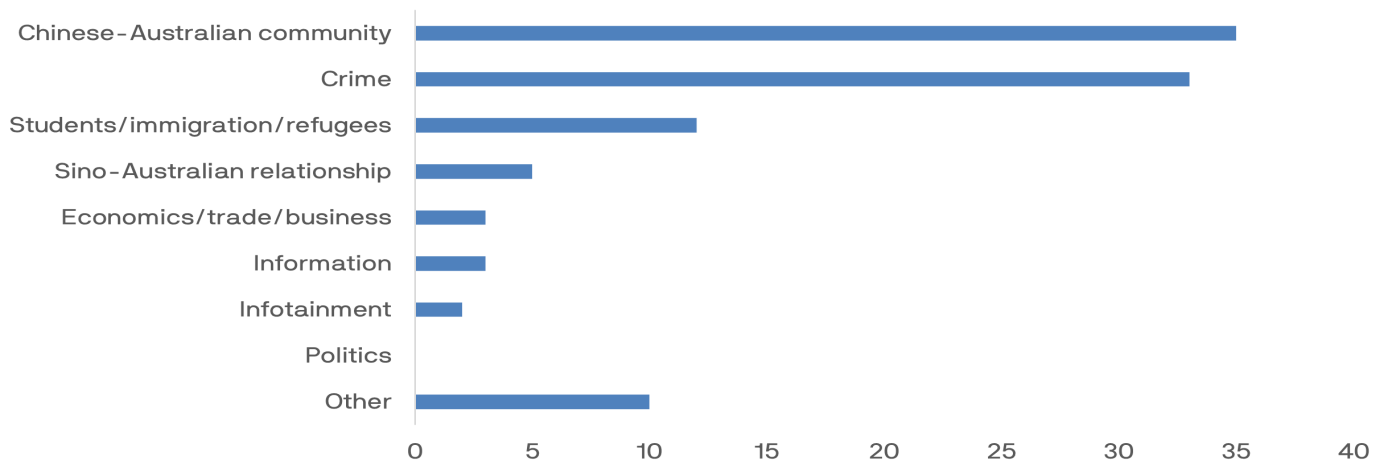
Most Chinese-language media outlets in Australia cannot afford to adopt the standard news-making practices known to the mainstream media in Australia. The usual 'hard news' topics that make up the staple diet of serious English-speaking news consumers – politics, economics, trade, and foreign affairs, including policy towards the PRC – represent a minuscule percentage. News values that guide selection in much of the English-language press – e.g., national relevance, timeliness, proximity<sup>8</sup> – do not necessarily apply. Cultural affinity matters more than journalistic balance and, as such, newsworthiness hinges on cultural resonance more than objectivity of the content.

6 Project Syndicate, 'Minxin Pei says more', interview, August 26 2019 <<https://www.project-syndicate.org/say-more/ps-say-more-minxin-pei>>.

7 These interviews took place over the period of 2019–2021. The majority of these interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity, hence names and other identifying details have not been included.

8 Fiona Martin and Timothy Dwyer, *Sharing News Online: Commentary Cultures and Social Media News Ecologies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

**Figure 2. Number of news and current affairs articles about Australia on various topics published by *Sydney Today* via WeChat, July 1-31 2019 (total = 103)**



Source: Author's 2019 study

## Conclusion

In short, two factors account for the absence of content that is critical of the PRC, in particular, the Chinese government, in most Chinese-language media outlets in Australia. The first is top-down censorship from the PRC; there is little point in producing critical content knowing for certain that this content would simply be deleted or accounts shut down. The second factor is the economic imperative to grow a local, Mandarin-speaking, WeChat-using readership. As content providers, Australia's Chinese-language media outlets have to live out the tension between 'local' operation and 'foreign' regulation, and between 'content' and 'platform'.

In order to fully understand how Chinese-language media outlets in Australia operate, it is crucial to know the distinction between WeChat as a platform and the content that it carries – between WeChat as subject to censorship by PRC authorities and WeChat as an instrument of propaganda on behalf of the CPC; and between WSAs as commercial units and WSAs as media or content distribution platforms.

Issues of control and propaganda need to be understood by taking into account an entire constellation of factors, including ownership, funding model, business modus operandi, audience's platform preference, as well as regulatory framework. In discussing Australia's Chinese-language media, Australia's mainstream media, politicians and commentators need to exercise care when making claims about 'control', 'censorship', or 'independent media'. In the same way that anti-CPC media are not necessarily 'independent',<sup>9</sup> those which refrain from publishing criticisms of the PRC are not necessarily controlled by the CPC.

<sup>9</sup> This is most clearly demonstrated in the three-part investigation, 'The power of Falun Gong', on ABC Radio National's Background Briefing, particularly part 3 on how it is connected with some Chinese-language media outlets in Australia <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/the-power-falun-gong-3/12519278>>, and in this article about the newspaper *The Epoch Times*, also published in Australia: Simone van Zuylen-Wood, 'Mega-land's favourite newspaper: How *The Epoch Times* became a pro-Trump propaganda machine in an age of plague and insurrection', *The Atlantic*, January 13 2021 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/inside-the-epoch-times-a-mysterious-pro-trump-newspaper/617645/>>.

# Methodology

Data and information used for this brief come from a number of sources. The first is a study of Australia's top 50 WSAs over a one-week period (July 19–26 2019). The second is a study of 103 news and current affairs stories from *Sydney Today* over a one-month period in July 2019. The third is a number of interviews with editors and managers of four media companies over the period of February 2019 to October 2021. Finally, general information about Australia's Chinese-language media readership and their preferred platform comes from 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.

## Author

Wanning Sun is a Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Technology Sydney. A fellow of Australian Academy of the Humanities since 2016, she is currently a member of the Australian Research Council (ARC) College of Experts (2020–2022). Author of a major report, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities* (2016), Wanning has led an ARC Discovery Project, 'Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power'.