

# Is Chinese-language media truly a security threat?

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In recent years, the narratives surrounding China's influence have mostly framed Australia's Chinese-language media as problematic.

Central to the narrative is anxiety about the Chinese government's possible use of diasporic Chinese communities and its media to push its agenda and influence.

Some claim that Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are primarily instruments of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and have asked if such heavily censored media platforms should be allowed to operate in Australia or outside China at all.

This is an argument made in a 2020 report produced by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

In the United States, similar concerns about Chinese-language media have been voiced.

WeChat, owned by China's Tencent, is often blamed for disseminating propaganda content from Chinese state media on the media feeds of Chinese diasporic communities.

Anxiety about China is neither new nor unique. Research suggests that the anxiety ranges from fear of military invasion to concerns about China's political, ideological and cultural influence and its threat to Western democracy.

There has been little in-depth research to support these claims.

Considering this, we undertook a five-year study with the aim of producing evidence-based knowledge about the Chinese-language media landscape in Australia—its structure, business models and industry operations.

The findings—published as *Digital transnationalism: Chinese-language media in Australia in 2023*—show how Chinese state media made early inroads into Chinese-language media in Australia through radio and newspaper outlets such as the *Tsingtao Daily*, *New Express Daily* and 3CW Radio. These media outlets have now largely ceased to operate for two main reasons: they could not compete with emerging digital media outlets and their collaboration with Chinese state media through content sharing did not retain or grow audiences.

Over the past decade, Chinese-language digital media outlets in Australia—from websites in the 1990s to WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs) since 2013—have grown into a vibrant and complex sector, to the point that they threaten the sustainability and survival of legacy media outlets. While the traditional media

consumed by Australia's Chinese communities slowly phased out, digital media outlets were able to grow exponentially by riding the wave of platformisation of cultural production via social media.

Perceptions of the Chinese- language media landscape in Australia can be, to some extent, ill-informed. Key to these misperceptions is a simplistic understanding of how influence through media works.

The ASPI's 2020 report emphasised the myriad 'connections' and 'links' between Chinese-language media and the Chinese government. This included media proprietors who have attended functions, meetings and events hosted by the Chinese government, embassy or United Front.

But little has been done to understand how Chinese-language media content is produced, distributed and consumed in Australia.

Our five-year study shows that the Chinese social media platform WeChat—and its Chinese version Weixin—is one of the main news channels used by people of Chinese origin living in Australia, with most news content provided through its subscription accounts and registration only available to Weixin accounts. WeChat has been changing how Chinese communities create, circulate and access news and information since 2013. Major digital Chinese-language content providers in Australia have chosen WeChat to deliver their content for its ease of setup and operation as well as its wide adoption by their intended consumers.

This is highlighted by data from the two surveys we conducted on the media consumption habits of Chinese Australians in 2018–19.

Over 60 percent of respondents in the survey reported that they 'always' used Chinese social media to access news and information, with fewer than 18 percent always using non- Chinese social media. Data showed that WeChat was the most used social media platform among respondents, with 92 percent—573 of 623 respondents—accessing it hourly or at least several times daily. A 2021 survey conducted by the Lowy Institute on media use among Chinese Australians confirms that this trend remains largely unchanged.

WSAs use a combination of revenue-generating mechanisms to attract as many readers and clicks as possible. A WeChat user who subscribes to a WSA receives notifications automatically and can repost WSA articles to their Moments feed or share them among their WeChat contacts and groups. The user-friendly nature of WeChat and the capacity for infinite reproduction of content through reposting ensures that online media outlets can maximise their reach, profit and impact.

This has given rise to a paradoxical situation in the Chinese-language media sector in Australia. These media outlets are Australian content providers that serve local markets, but are subject to Chinese platform and content regulations as China- registered accounts. Because of this, it is important to question whether and to what extent this sector is an instrument of the Chinese government's influence.

Our research reveals a more complex picture, which calls the statements made about the Chinese- language media sector's influence into question. For example, in his 2021 talk at Australian think tank China Matters, Australian Broadcasting Cooperation correspondent Bill Birtles expressed concern over the ideological rivalry between Australian English-language media and the Chinese-language space in Australia. He described the latter as 'a digital ecosystem' created by a 'foreign government' 'to control the narrative of some Australians in Australia'.

While there are individuals and businesses on WeChat that promote Chinese government interests, there is little evidence to support assertions that Australia-focused WSAs are systematically controlled by the Chinese government.

Chinese-language social media platforms in Australia are business operations and not funded by any government. In recent years, some have tried to produce original and independent content, but this aspiration to practice professional journalism is mostly overshadowed by the need to produce clickbait headlines.

Since maximising traffic, growing subscribers or followers, and securing advertising revenue are core to their business model, WSAs, for example, will do whatever it takes to provide what their intended users want. In

most cases, the intended users are first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants who are more interested in information relevant to their new lives in Australia than news reports about China.

Most of these WSAs have taken a pragmatic approach to their registration and operations. Our interviews with those in the industry over the period 2018–22 suggest that WSA's choose to focus on topics that are relevant to Chinese living in Australia. They refrain from publishing content critical of China not because they hold a strong pro-China stance, but because of their survival imperatives. Giving the consumers what they want, instead of risking offending them, takes priority over critical journalism.

As an editor of a popular news website lamented in one interview on the pitfalls of publishing China-related political news: 'We're attacked by both sides. Patriotic readers write to complain if we publish anything that sounds like a criticism of China. And readers on the other side of the spectrum write to complain that we don't criticise China. You can't win'.

These editors note that it is not just content that is critical of China that could land them in trouble. They are also wary of publishing politically sensitive issues involving Australia– China relations, for fear of being labelled an instrument of the CCP.

An interview with an editor of another popular, Australian-based WSA revealed 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 such as the debate on China's influence in Australia. 'We choose to remain silent on such topics, because it is too risky to say anything without falling victim to some kind of conspiracy theory. We have to focus on survival first'.

In sum, the unwillingness of WSAs to choose sides on politically sensitive topics is not necessarily a response to the Chinese government's censorship on WeChat, but more likely a survival tactic as a media content production business that must meet the needs of its main consumer base.

Producing content that is attractive to potential readers while also ensuring compliance with Tencent's content regulations requires the adoption of a pragmatic business model. The overriding mandate of these digital content providers is to survive in a competitive market: by getting their content through the censorship mechanisms while giving their intended readers what they want and refrain from publishing content that may put them off or offend them.

All articles and posts produced by WSAs are filtered by automated processes—pre-publication algorithmic censorship and post- publication human censorship, completed via user reports and human content moderators. Any article that is deemed 'sensitive' or illegal by these processes will either be rejected during the pre-publication review process or deleted after publication.

WSAs are part of a censorship regime that combines high-tech machine-learning technologies with low-tech user reports, both pre- and post-publication. Of all the popular features within WeChat, WSAs face the tightest content restrictions because of their quick and easy reach to mass audiences.

All WSAs must comply with Tencent's service and user agreements, as well as meeting Chinese legal requirements. This includes prohibitions against spreading information that is false, pornographic or causes ethnic division; that goes against China's policies on national security, political unity, religion, public assembly, copyright or Chinese core socialist values; and that distorts the Party and national history.

Another complicating factor is that only media entities with state- authorised news permits established in China—and whose editors-in-chief and core management are Chinese citizens—are allowed to engage in original news reporting. Private companies, foreign entities and Chinese–foreign joint ventures are excluded from applying for a news permit.

WSAs run by Chinese living overseas and for diasporic markets are subject to a much more flexible content regulation regime. They can push original news that focuses on local content relevant to the countries where they are hosted and repost original or translated news from mainstream media outlets in any language, as long as it can pass through the Great Firewall.

This reality means that as content providers, WSAs focus mostly on Australia-related news, news about Chinese communities in Australia and social and lifestyle news from their local markets in Australia. Clickbait titles, sensationalist descriptions, exaggerated storylines and visual appeal are all part of the package to attract more clicks.

The overemphasis on media control and censorship by Tencent and Chinese authorities often overlooks the bigger role that WSAs play in the lives of Chinese Australians and undermines the active agency of Chinese Australian content entrepreneurs. While WSAs are subject to the censorship and regulatory regime of the Chinese authorities, their compliance is more a business decision than a result of political coercion.

Self-censorship is driven by a desire to survive as a business, not a desire to toe the CCP line or subject oneself to the control of the Chinese government. It is important to remember that the status and influence of WSAs are confined by a pre-existing technological infrastructure and regulatory framework, rather than through active and direct intervention by any specific authority, media outlet or platform.

Chinese-language digital outlets are also careful not to repost articles directly from Chinese official news sources, fearing they might be scrutinised as agents of Chinese influence in Australia. Nor do they repost Chinese versions of English news from Australian mainstream media due to concerns of copyright infringement.

The key business strategy has been to publish locally oriented news and information from multiple media outlets, rather than producing original news about China or Australia. In a sample of 87 news and current affairs posts, 74 were translations of English-language news from Australian media outlets, which were then compiled with reports in Chinese from other Chinese-language media outlets in Australia.

English-language news published on WSAs is often not directly translated but also editorialised. That is, the source texts in English are selected as points of reference to create content in Chinese that is based on the judgement of the editor (known as *xiaobian* in Chinese), who then adds their own comments.

For WSA editors, editorialisation is not about accuracy but rather cultural relevance of the story that they create for readers. There are very few, if any, articles that are directly translated from English or reposted from an English news outlet.

Content materials from different sources are compiled into one article and then peppered with opinion commentaries from the *xiaobian* to make it more appealing to readers.

Most list their news sources at the bottom of their articles. In other words, editorialisation plus compilation is the main stock in WSA reportage.

While the *xiaobian* editorial strategy aims to attract readers with attention-grabbing headlines rather than to promote certain political agendas, closer examination by media regulators may be warranted to ensure ethical and legal compliance.

As anxiety about China grows, so too does concern over the content published by Chinese-language media outlets. While concerns about China's military power, cultural and ideological influence and economic and technological rivalry need to be considered, China's influence via social media should be addressed with evidence-based research of a sizeable data across diverse cohorts of Chinese communities in Australia. It is both simplistic and misinformed to interpret an absence of content that is critical of China on Chinese-language social media platforms as evidence of China's influence or interference, or as evidence that the Chinese diaspora is acting on behalf of China's public diplomacy agenda.

Even though many new Chinese migrants are patriotic and do not want to see China unfairly criticised, the majority of first-generation Chinese Australians are neither active conduits nor passive receivers of Chinese government propaganda, as some commentators in Australia want the public to believe. On the contrary, first-generation Chinese migrants use a wide range of social media platforms to express and negotiate an identity of in-betweenness and to cope with the daily challenges of being caught between two countries that have grown increasingly hostile towards each other.

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