

Chinese-language media in Australia: Clickbait or security threat

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Recent narratives surrounding People's Republic of China (PRC)'s influence have framed Australia's Chinese-language media as problematic. Central is anxiety about the Chinese government's possible use of diasporic Chinese communities and its media to push its influence.

Some claim Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are primarily instruments of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). WeChat, owned by China's Tencent, is often blamed for disseminating propaganda to Chinese diasporic communities.

Anxiety about China is neither new nor unique. But little has been done to understand Chinese-language media in Australia. Considering this, a five-year study was undertaken.

This 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 Chinese Australians. This is highlighted by data from two surveys conducted on Chinese Australians in 2018–19. Over 60 percent of respondents reported they 'always' used Chinese social media to access news. WeChat was the most used social media platform, with 92 percent accessing it hourly or several times daily. A 2021 survey confirms this trend remains largely unchanged.

Among Chinese-language news media outlets in Australia, the most notable are the WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs), which are run by Chinese migrant content entrepreneurs to target Chinese migrants living in Australia. WSAs nestle in the Weixin ecosystem (thus subject to rules governing PRC users) and are popular among middle-aged and older users. They use revenue-generating mechanisms to maximise clicks and therefore income from advertising. The user-friendly nature of WeChat and the capacity for infinite reproduction of content ensures online outlets can maximise their reach, profit and impact.

This produces a paradoxical situation. These media outlets are Australian content providers that serve local markets, but are subject to Chinese platform and content regulations as China-registered accounts. It is important to question to what extent this sector is an instrument of Chinese government influence.

This research reveals a more complex picture, which calls into question some statements made about the Chinese-language media's foreign influence.

While some WeChat accounts promote Chinese government interests, Chinese-language social media platforms are business operations and not funded by any government. Some have tried to produce independent content, but this aspiration is mostly overshadowed by the need to produce clickbait headlines.

Since maximising traffic, growing followers and securing advertising revenue are paramount, WSAs will provide what their intended users want. The intended users are mostly first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants more interested in information relevant to their new lives in Australia than news about China. Like any international WeChat users, Australian WeChat users often subscribe to multiple WSAs from multiple sources (including those of the PRC official media), or are exposed to such content in their chat groups. They are also exposed to news from Western media outlets via social media platforms beyond WeChat or Xiaohongshu (popular among young people).

Most Australia-focused WSAs refrain from publishing content critical of China not because they hold a strong pro-China stance, but because of their survival imperatives. News editors note they are also wary of publishing politically sensitive issues involving Australia–China relations for fear of being labelled instruments of the CCP.

Producing content attractive to potential readers while ensuring compliance with Tencent’s regulations requires a pragmatic business model. All posts by WSAs are filtered by automated processes — pre-publication algorithmic censorship and post-publication human censorship. WSAs are part of a [censorship regime](#) that combines high-tech machine-learning technologies with low-tech user reports. Within WeChat, WSAs face the tightest content restrictions because of their 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 goes against China’s policies on national security, political unity, religion, public assembly or core socialist values.

Another complicating factor is that only media entities with state-authorized news permits in China are allowed to engage in original news reporting. Yet WSAs run by Chinese living overseas and for diasporic markets are subject to a much more flexible regime. They can push original news that focuses on local content and repost original or translated news from mainstream media outlets.

This means WSAs focus mostly on Australia-related news, news about Chinese communities in Australia and lifestyle news. Clickbait titles, sensationalist descriptions and visual appeal all attract more clicks.

The overemphasis on media control overlooks the bigger role WSAs play in the lives of Chinese Australians and undermines the agency of Chinese Australian content entrepreneurs. WSA self-censorship is more a business decision than political coercion. The status of WSAs are confined by a pre-existing technological infrastructure and regulatory framework, not direct intervention by authorities.

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

English-language news is often not just directly translated, but also editorialised. The source texts in English are points of reference to create commentary in Chinese.

For WSA editors, editorialisation is not about accuracy — but the cultural relevance of the story they create. There are very few articles directly translated from English. Content is compiled into one article and peppered with commentary from editors.

As anxiety about China grows, so does concern over the content published by Chinese-language media outlets. China’s influence via social media should be addressed with evidence-based research. It is misinformed to interpret an absence of China-critical content as evidence that the Chinese diaspora is acting on behalf of China.

Though many new Chinese migrants are patriotic, the majority of first-generation Chinese Australians are neither active conduits nor passive receivers of propaganda. First-generation Chinese migrants use a wide range of social media platforms to express an identity of in-betweenness and to cope with the daily challenges of being caught between two increasingly hostile countries.

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