University Library

MINERVA ACCESS

A gateway to Melbourne's research publications

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Yang, F;Martin, F

Title:
The 2019 Australian federal election on WeChat Official Accounts: Right-wing dominance and disinformation

Citation:
Yang, F. & Martin, F. The 2019 Australian federal election on WeChat Official Accounts: Right-wing dominance and disinformation. Melbourne Asia Review, 5, https://doi.org/10.37839/mar2652-550x5.8.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/322004

MELBOURNE ASIA REVIEW

December 15, 2020

The 2019 Australian federal election on WeChat Official Accounts: Right-wing dominance and disinformation

Edition 5, 2021
Fan Yang & Associate Professor Fran Martin
DOI: 10.37839/MAR2652-550X5.8

"It's terrible! These people committed suicide after the Australian election!"

"The Australian election took a surprising turn! House prices are escalating! It will affect Chinese people's lives in these ways…"

"After the election, tens of thousands of Australians are preparing to escape! 'We can't stay in Australia anymore!' Some have submitted immigration applications to other countries!"

Headlines like these—sensational, conspiratorial, demonstrably misleading and intentionally ambiguous—characterise the coverage of the 2019 Australian federal election on WeChat, a Chinese app used for messaging and socialising, among other things.

Such articles, produced by WeChat Official Accounts and circulated on the platform, mostly originated from news-focused accounts operated by individual bloggers or small-to-medium media organisations, and are based on translations of selective Australian media coverage. These striking headlines may not be fully representative of the prevailing discourse of Chinese-language news media in Australia, but they merit our attention as a window into the kind of information circulated in this ethnic

mediasphere.

The articles were overwhelmingly politically conservative and advocated for the interests of the Liberal Party.

The focus of this article is not on the possibility that the Chinese Communist Party was trying to influence the outcome of the election through WOAs. Some Australian media have mobilised erroneous assumptions that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s influence was clearly established and threaded through Australia-based news-focused WOAs, and that the 'interference' of Beijing was prevalent on WeChat during the 2019 election. Our research suggests, on the contrary, that the CCP did not demonstrate complete or direct political control over such accounts at that time. In fact, the political opinions espoused in the widely read and locally influential accounts we studied tended to directly counter those published by CCP affiliated WOAs during the election campaign.

What we looked at

To investigate the content mobilised during the May 18 2019 Australian federal election , we collected 318 election-related articles published on WeChat from February to May in 2019 and analysed their content. Our sample was produced by inputting a series of key search terms in Mandarin on the platform, which included 'Australian federal election (澳洲大选, 澳大利亚联邦大选 or 澳大利亚大选)', 'Liberal party of Australia (自由党or 自由党联盟)', and 'Australian Labor Party (工党 or 澳大利亚工党)'. Based on qualitative content analysis of the sample that this targeted search generated, we found that the articles were largely produced by means of free (rather than formal, direct) translation from mainstream Australian media including *The Australian*, *ABC*, *Financial Review*, and *Sydney Morning Herald*, but embellished with their own editorial spin.

WeChat and WeChat Official Accounts

WeChat (Weixin) is a social media service that was developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd. in Shenzhen, China in October 2010. It has since become the primary digital communication platform of Mandarin-speaking communities globally. People use it for diverse purposes, ranging from daily messaging and content publication and consumption to financial transactions, e-commerce, travel, and public health promotion. In 2020, WeChat was reported to have more than 1.2 billion monthly active users.

WeChat Official Accounts (hereafter WOAs), also known as WeChat Subscription Accounts or WeChat Public Platforms, perform an important information dissemination function. WOAs appear on a WeChat user's app in the form of a subscription folder where users can click through, read and respond to the articles published by the subscribed accounts. The function has the capacity to generate and circulate information and news stories among groups of subscribers both locally and transnationally. WOAs operate somewhat independently of the WeChat platform financially, and their revenue comes principally from advertising. Editors, journalists and stringers are employed by WOAs at the local level without any direct employment relationship with WeChat or Tencent. Many WOAs work with Australian advertisers and content producers located in Australia.

WOAs, news consumption and Australia's Chinese diaspora

In Australia, various individuals and groups, including individual bloggers, Chinese students, conventional Chinese-language media organisations and Chinese business entities, have gravitated to the scalable functionality of WOAs and their low barrier to entry, making WeChat increasingly central to news production, circulation and consumption in Chinese diasporic communities. In this context, local news-focused

WOAs—a particular genre of WOAs that predominantly engage in the production, reproduction and circulation of local current affairs—have been established in significant numbers within the platform. They are characterised by their capacity to provide news stories for Chinese migrant communities by appropriating and interpreting news content from Australian English-language media.

In 2018, a report on the news consumption habits of 522 Chinese migrants in Australia found that 60.3 percent named WeChat Official Accounts as their primary news and information source. Since WeChat content is overwhelmingly in Chinese, it is reasonable to suggest that linguistic and ideological proximity are significant factors in the media consumption practices of Chinese migrants. Especially for the first generation of migrant young people including Chinese international students and graduates who later settle down in the country, news-focused WOAs are often a preferable information source than news provided by Australian English-language media. The unfamiliarity of the English language and the strong ideological contrast in how China and Chinese people are represented tend to deter young first-generation Chinese migrants from Australian media.

Although operating in Australia, these news-focused WOAs sit somewhere between national and transnational mediaspheres: between traditional Australian Chinese ethnic media and a digital communication platform developed in and regulated from China. The operations of these media organisations are subject to Beijing's oversight and China's national jurisdiction. They are often able to dodge Australian media regulatory frameworks due to the language barrier.

WeChat offers opportunities to business and commerce in Australia, but it has been subject to constant speculation and interrogation by various commentators in Australian dominant national media since 2016. Concerns have been raised by some commentators about whether WeChat is channelling China's ideological influence in Australia. In February 2019, intensified attention was drawn to the platform when Australian leaders increased their use of WeChat as a means to engage with Chinese migrant voters. In connection with this, the ABC reported on concerns related to the

use of WeChat by senior Australian politicians and suspicions about some politicians' affiliations with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 2020, the debate about WeChat revealed the deepening divide between China and the West, and Australia specifically. This has not just been restricted to talk; in fact, the Australian government has made the platform subject to official security inquires and even potential sanctions. This context underscores the timeliness of investigating WeChat's influence in Australian political processes, and the extent to which locally produced WeChat content actually squares (or not) with the CCP's political line.

Translating the 2019 Australian federal election

In assessing how the 2019 Australian federal election was represented on WeChat, we manually collected articles published across Australia-based WOAs between early February and late May 2019. The timeframe was informed by the date when the two major political party leaders, Bill Shorten and Scott Morrison, representing the centre-left Australian Labor Party and the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition respectively, commenced their engagement with Chinese migrant voters on WeChat.

We found that four categories of WOAs—news-focused media enterprises, business entities, Christian social groups and Australian politicians—were involved in representing political campaigns for the election. These WOAs translated English media content, relevant policy proposals and election materials into Mandarin and published them on WeChat, accompanied by their own commentaries.

Significantly, Australian commentators often assume that WOAs simply parrot the party line of the CCP. However, our research indicates this is not the case. The CCP-affiliated Chinese-based commercial WOA *Tiexue Junshi* whose publications focus on military and international relations mocked Prime Minister Morrison and Australia during the campaign; whereas the articles in our sample collected from Australian-based news-focused WOAs overwhelmingly promoted the interest of the Liberal

Party. This further highlights the fact that news-focused WOAs form a space filled with ideological complexities and merit more nuanced understanding.

Despite WeChat's clearly stated policy of not selling or accepting political advertisements on its platform, articles sampled included both paid political advertisements and directly translated content from the Liberal Party website, in addition to election-related material from national media including *The Australian*, *ABC*, *Financial Review*, and *Sydney Morning Herald*. Two of the most popular accounts, *Australian Red Scarf* and *Melbourne WeLife*, ran paid political advertisements from the Liberal Party. These were distinguished from translated news by the note "materials provided by Liberal Party" at the end of the articles. The party's small-scale investment in WOA advertisements seemed to represent a new experiment in its electoral campaign in the interest of influencing the votes of Mandarin-speaking communities.

The political advertisements published by these two influential accounts were later circulated by other WOAs with less influence and popularity. However, we should not assume that all of the accounts or media workers involved were necessarily formally aligned with the Liberal Party. For most news-focused WOAs in Australia, the commercial imperative is the priority. Being associated with one of the dominant political parties might be thought to increase accounts' credibility among both readers and other Chinese-language media organisations, and thereby further consolidate the accounts' ability to attract the advertisers that financially sustain their daily operations.

Aside from the Liberal Party political advertisements, WOAs' selection of election issues perceived to be at the centre of migrants' concern also demonstrated a tendency toward homogenisation around topics that reflect the overwhelmingly middle-class character of recent cohorts of Chinese skilled migrants. Issues canvassed clustered around immigration and education policies, property investment and finance, updates on electoral campaigns and results, predictions about China-Australia relations, and politicians from pan-Chinese backgrounds and their role in

Australian politics.

The WOAs we analysed may be described as being saturated with conservative content supporting the LNP, which then evolved into rampant disinformation through editorial crafting that seemed designed to fuel fear and panic in the interests of generating clicks. In the context of news-focused WOAs, translation is not a process of direct correspondence between linguistic terms, from one English word to one Mandarin character. Rather, it is an editorial practice that often involves distortion and displacement of meaning and connotation, and ideological shaping and reinvention. For example, a homophobic education-related scare campaign published by the *Ziyou Xi'ao* (content in Mandarin) news-focused WOA falsely claimed that the Labor Party-endorsed Safe Schools program would teach students how to have homosexual intercourse and thus 'wreck the morality' of Australian society. The content was framed in a crudely threatening way that implied that the to-be-introduced educational plan would 'emasculate' children. This disinformation was initially posted in 2017 and then recirculated in 2019 among WeChat groups to support the Liberal Party in the lead-up to the federal election. It was revealed that Liberal candidate Gladys Liu proactively encouraged her supporters to spread this disinformation within WeChat groups.

Another example relating to the immigration scheme framed the Labor Party's asylum seeker policy in frankly Islamophobic and racist terms. It was initially published in news-focused WOAs, and subsequently deleted but taken up within group chats in the form of screenshots, inviting panic within Chinese migrant communities over crime and security issues.

This points to a tactic prevalent among WOAs: to gain clicks, some accounts publish fake news but delete the articles before they can be reported for spreading disinformation, which could lead to account suspension by platform administration in China. Some WOAs use this strategy to navigate between the commercial imperative of reader clicks and the platform's regulatory oversight.

While we therefore couldn't track down the original source of all of these stories, our observation of the electoral campaigns on WeChat demonstrated that disinformation was being curated and disseminated public accounts as well as by individual WeChat users spreading such stories within WeChat groups. While the scope of our enquiry was limited to WeChat itself, such fake news can also be circulated via other transnational Chinese-language media platforms like Weibo, Zhihu and Douban, contributing to an overall atmosphere of apprehension that serves the interests of conservative political parties.

Six Chinese media organisations in our samples including *JuAo Media*, *Australian First Media*, *New OZ Group*, *OBQ Australia*, *Huayou* and *South Australia BBS* also actively engaged in covering electoral campaigns conducted by Liberal MP Gladys Liu (member for Chisholm) and George Hua, who ran for the seat of Hotham). Their partisan WeChat articles manifested in the form of pro-Liberal news reporting that made it difficult for readers to identify the provenance of the content. While these articles were not necessarily directly endorsed by the party, they appeared to be indicative of long-term business partnerships between Chinese ethnic media organisations and politically conservative small business owners, advocating as they did for the interests of migrant businesses.

This paper pivots from existing research on the 2019 election campaign on social media that has tended to focus on Anglo communities and Western media platforms, to redirect our attention toward overlooked instances of political representation on WeChat among Chinese migrant communities in Australia. As we will elaborate more fully in a forthcoming dedicated research article, we have identified that political and social conservatism, a pro-Liberal Party stance, and disinformation on local political and social topics were far more prevalent than direct CCP political influence in the WeChat public mediasphere during the 2019 Australian federal election. This points to the fact, often lost in Australian political commentary, that the interests and political orientations of Chinese diasporic communities may significantly diverge from, and even run directly counter to, those of the CCP.

Authors: Fan Yang and Associate Professor Fran Martin

Image: WeChat messenger application icon. Credit: BigTunaOnline/Shutterstock.