

WeChat as a Semipublic Alternative Sphere: Exploring the Use of WeChat Among Chinese Older Adults

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In China, the emergence of WeChat—a comprehensive mobile application—has introduced millions of older adults to the digital world. This study conceptualizes the use of WeChat among Chinese older adults from the theoretical framework of alternative media. Based on four focus group discussions in Shanghai, China, with 35 individuals aged 50 years or older, the study found that WeChat exposes many Chinese older adults—for the first time—to a large amount of controversial information and viewpoints that are critical of the official discourse; it also enables some of them to participate in civic life online. The research also reveals a number of constraints such as Internet censorship and WeChat’s profit-driven environment, which to a large extent limit the potential of the mobile application to facilitate alternative communication among this group of people.

Keywords: alternative media, digital divide, social networking sites, mobile communication, ICT, civic engagement, public sphere, older adults, WeChat

As of June 2015, an overwhelming majority of Chinese Internet users (78.4%) were aged 10–39 years (CNNIC, 2015). In contrast, 4.4% of Internet users were aged 50–59 years, and only 1.7% were 60 years or older. The lack of the Internet access and/or computer literacy has prevented a large number of older adults from embracing the digital life. In fact, the digital divide may have especially far-reaching consequences in a society with a heavily controlled media environment. Whereas young citizens in China often turn to Internet-based media outlets for information that is usually ignored in the traditional news media (e.g., Guo, 2014; Reese & Dai, 2009), older adults on the disadvantaged side of the divide may remain much less informed. For example, older adults without Internet access or literacy tend to lag behind in knowledge on subjects such as social conflicts and governmental misconduct, topics generally ignored in China’s mainstream news coverage.

Whereas some new ICTs continue to widen the digital divide, others may have the potential to narrow the gap to a certain degree. The mobile Internet provides an example. The attribute of mobile convenience overcomes the limitation of time and space and allows users to access information more easily (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Mobile-based messaging and social networking services such as WhatsApp, KaokaoTalk, and Line have been created in many different parts of the world during the past few years (Ha, Kim, Libaque-Saenz, Chang, & Park, 2015; Shim, Dekleva, French, & Guo, 2013). Most of the Web-

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based social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo have also launched their mobile versions recently. As a part of this global mobile revolution, WeChat emerged in 2011 as the first mobile-based social application in the Chinese market. WeChat not only provides a new social network platform for young people but also has introduced millions of older adults to the digital world (CNNIC, 2014).

This new ICT trend in China warrants scholarly attention. This study aims to conceptualize the use of WeChat among Chinese older adults from the theoretical framework of alternative media. Alternative media provide content to challenge the dominant hegemonic articulations and/or to allow marginalized communities to participate in media production as a way to contest the concentration of media power (e.g., Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Downing, 2001). Owned by Tencent—a giant Internet company in China—WeChat, in general, does not qualify as an alternative media outlet. However, it may have the potential to serve as “an alternative channel of distribution” (Cammaerts, 2016, p. 2). It is likely that ordinary citizens can use WeChat’s various features to consume and produce alternative content that bypasses government regulation. Given that the mobile Internet may reduce barriers to online access for resource-constrained communities (Donner, Gitau, & Marsden, 2011), it would be interesting to examine whether and in what ways older adults use WeChat for alternative communication.

Methodologically, four focus group discussions were conducted in Shanghai, China, with 35 adults aged 50 years or older to explore their experiences and thoughts of using WeChat. The study focused on the analysis of this age group mainly for three reasons. Unlike young people who grew up with digital technologies, individuals aged 50 or older are often termed *digital immigrants* or a *precomputer generation* (Prensky, 2001). In China, citizens, especially women, can retire as early as age 50 in some institutions. Furthermore, people aged 50 years or older in China grew up in a society saturated with Communist education and government propaganda. Learning how they perceive alternative content and how they may potentially participate in the media production process offers a unique perspective to alternative media literature.

China’s Mobile Internet

The past few years have witnessed a trend of explosive Internet adoption in China, with mobile playing a vital role in getting people online. As of June 2015, the number of Chinese Internet users reached 668 million, with mobile Internet users representing 88.9% of the online population (CNNIC, 2015). The rise of more affordable domestic smartphone models as well as a better Internet infrastructure in the country may in part explain the boom.

Boasting of 600 million monthly active users, WeChat is a key player in China’s mobile communication landscape. Like China’s other online media, the popularity of WeChat in China is in part premised on the government’s ban on Facebook, Twitter, and other foreign social networking sites (SNSs; Sullivan, 2014). WeChat, or *Wei Xin* in Chinese, is a free, “all-in-one” mobile application service developed by China’s Internet giant Tencent in 2011. What is most unique about WeChat is that it was designed for smartphones initially and thus offers a superior interactive user experience than other media platforms including Weibo and QQ space, which started with desktop versions and later adapted the application for

mobile. This may partly explain why older users (i.e., 50 years or older) of WeChat are more representative of the entire Internet population compared with other SNSs (CNNIC, 2014).

Combining features of a number of emerging media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, WeChat operates as a combination of an instant messaging communication tool and an SNS. Figure 1 provides a screenshot of WeChat's chat function. WeChat users can send individual or group text messages, voice messages, photos, videos, emojis, Web pages, and more. As Figure 1 illustrates, Group Chat—a popular WeChat feature—operates like an online chat room where up to 500 members can join the "group" conversations.



Figure 1. A screenshot of WeChat interface (Chats).

Source: <http://funappsarefun.com/?p=43>

Figure 2 presents the interface of WeChat's social networking feature, Moments, which is very similar to Facebook's Newsfeed. Unlike Facebook, WeChat users can see others' comments and "likes" only if they have added each other as contacts on WeChat. In other words, WeChat's social media feature is to some extent more "private" than other SNSs. Moreover, any Chinese business such as media organizations or any ordinary Chinese citizen can register an official account to push feeds to and interact

with subscribers. This provides another channel for users to disseminate and receive news and information on WeChat. For a typical WeChat user, more than 70% of the contacts are family members, friends, and colleagues (CNNIC, 2014). Most WeChat users (77%) use Moments, 61.7% use Group Chat, and 41% follow the news media's official accounts. Although WeChat is owned by a corporation, individuals have a certain degree of freedom to use the platform in ways not intended. This study explores whether WeChat has the potential to facilitate some features of alternative communication in China.

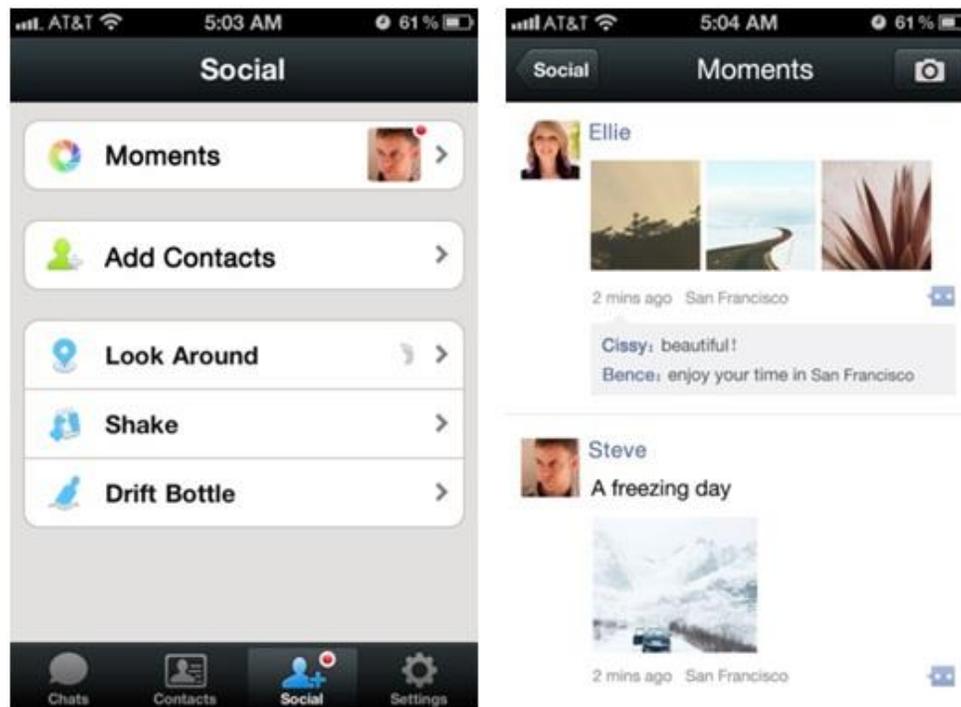


Figure 2. A screenshot of WeChat interface (Moments).
 Source: <http://www.earthandroid.com/wechat-the-new-way-to-connect/>

Alternative Media

Scholars have conceptualized alternative media from both content and the production process. Downing (2001) defines alternative media as the media that “express alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives” (p. v)—a content-oriented definition. For example, social movement organizations usually have their own media outlets to articulate and circulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, needs, and objectives. Focusing on the production process, Couldry and Curran (2003) define alternative media as “media production[s] that challenge, at least implicitly, actual concentration of media power” (p. 7). In other words, alternative media contest media power not only by providing alternative frames through which to understand social realities—a content approach—but also by

having ordinary citizens directly access and participate in the process of media productions so that they gain the power of defining themselves rather than being defined by others. Whereas a traditional Habermasian public sphere may exclude marginalized groups from participating, ideal alternative media serve as "alternative public spheres" (Fraser, 1990) where people can participate to express themselves and to engage in the dialogues of issues affecting the given community. In Western democracies, public-access television and community radio stations are examples of production-oriented alternative media (e.g., Guo, 2015).

In light of ICTs' rapid development, whether some of the emerging media platforms can be considered alternative media or can facilitate alternative communication has attracted much scholarly attention. The Internet has demonstrated its potential to facilitate the production and distribution of critical content and/or to create participatory experiences worldwide (Lievrouw, 2011). Information and counterinformation are now disseminated more rapidly and effectively on the Internet, especially on SNSs (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). When it comes to participation, social media allow ordinary citizens to participate in the agenda-setting process in many different forms (Goode, 2009). Users not only produce original content on these platforms (Bowman & Willis, 2003), they also engage in "social curation" by sharing, promoting, or commenting on content they consider important and relevant (Villi, 2012). All of these user-oriented practices challenge the media concentration by facilitating "citizen participation at various points along those chains of sense-making that shape news" (Goode, 2009, p. 1291).

Nevertheless, scholars have also cautioned that the democratic promise of ICTs including social media can be constrained by many factors. The digital divide and corporate/state surveillance have presented two main challenges.

Alternative Media, Digital Divide, and the Mobile Internet

The digital divide was initially considered a gap between those who do and those who do not have access to information and communication technologies (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Katz & Aspden, 1997). As the penetration of ICTs continues to widen, researchers have turned their attention from mere access of technologies to the breadth and depth of the usage. As many have argued, having material access to ICTs does not necessarily lead to capacities and skills to use the technologies (Hargittai, 2008). Similarly, use of ICTs is different from engaging meaningfully with ICTs where the user exerts a degree of control and choice over the technologies and the content (Correa, 2010; Selwyn, 2004b). What is particularly relevant to the practice of alternative media is the *democratic divide*, which refers to the extent to which people use digital technologies to engage and participate in public life (Fuchs, 2009; Norris, 2001). According to this concept, the ICTs may serve to reinforce the activism of the activists and facilitate political participation for those who are already interested in politics. In other words, whatever the opportunities new ICTs provide, those who are disengaged from the politics of the real world may still lag behind in the digital world. In fact, empirical research has shown that those in higher socioeconomic status tend to participate more in online politics, which to a great extent replicates the trend of political participation offline (e.g., Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). In other words, the wide availability of ICTs and in particular SNSs will not necessarily empower certain groups of people.

Age, or generational difference, in using ICTs for alternative communication is of particular interest to this study. For all generations, the phase of childhood and adolescence has a significant influence on their technology attitudes and competency. As it turns out, older adults who were born and grew up before the existence of computer and the Internet are lagging behind digitally in many societies. They usually find difficulties in learning or using new technologies (Loges & Jung, 2001). Even for older adults who may have the necessary cognitive level, they demonstrate a degree of uncertainty and a distance from the digital world (Paul & Stegbauer, 2005; Selwyn, 2004a). Consequently, older adults have historically been late adopters of ICTs such as the Internet, and even when they go online, they may not use the Internet in ways that younger people do. Studies have shown that older adults mainly use the Internet for communicating with their family members and for entertainment (e.g., Bell et al., 2013), but lag behind in engaging in online political activities (Xie & Jaeger, 2008).

Many hope that the mobile Internet, which combines the ubiquity of the handset with data access, may narrow the digital divide in different levels. Compared with other ICTs such as the computer, the mobile phone is more affordable, portable, and easier to use. These notable advantages are found to be especially beneficial for the poor and elderly (Servaes, 2002, as cited in Rice & Katz, 2003). A Pew Research Center survey found that the mobile phone has filled Internet access gaps in the United States (Smith, 2012). According to the survey, 10% of mobile-primary Internet users reported that a lack of other access options is the main reason why they primarily use their phones to go online. Researchers also found evidence of considerable mobile Internet use among low-income communities in South Africa (Donner et al., 2011). However, as Donner et al. (2011) argue, the research community knows little about the implications of mobile-only or mobile-primary Internet users for the issue of digital divide at different levels. Empirical evidence remains scarce. It is unknown how digital laggards use the mobile Internet and whether the use is different from other ICTs at all. To narrow this gap, this study examined the use of the mobile Internet among Chinese older adults, a community traditionally considered to be falling behind digitally. The study not only investigated their access to the Internet via a mobile application but also to what extent they use the platform for participating in civic life online.

Alternative Media and Corporate/State Surveillance

The commercialization and institutionalization of the Internet present another challenge to alternative communication online. Atton (2004) suggests that researchers should consider the Internet as a global capitalist project. Many of the major SNSs were not created with the intention of fostering alternative communication. In fact, a few large transnational companies such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter control the vast majority of the social media market. Like the corporate traditional media, the corporate social media also accumulate capital by selling content and their user data to advertisers and therefore are likely to reinforce—rather than challenge—discourses that affirm capitalist society (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). In China, WeChat's owner Tencent and two other companies Baidu and Alibaba, collectively known as the "BAT trio," dominate the Chinese Internet market. Jin (2013) argues that these Chinese companies use the targeted advertising capital business model, which is "not different from U.S. Internet capitalism" (p. 166).

In addition to the corporate control, online communication in China also faces more direct government surveillance. In China, the central government maintains control of the fundamental press structure. Ordinary citizens are not allowed to launch their own media business (e.g., Winfield & Peng, 2005). For a long time, there was almost no alternative channel in the public domain for ordinary citizens to voice their personal opinions. In such an environment, the public's willingness to express was minimal (Shen, Wang, Guo, & Guo, 2009). The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) provides an extreme example. During the time period, some people would even feel hesitant about communicating their inner feelings with their significant others in fear that any disclosure of dissident views was likely to incur punishment (Liu, 1987). The older adults examined in this study share the collective experience of this era.

The emergence of the Internet has helped loosen the controlled speech environment to some degree. Chinese citizens began to use blogs, bulletin board systems, and emerging SNSs to expose the government's wrongdoings, spread news about social conflicts, and share their thoughts on a variety of public issues (e.g., Guo, 2014; Reese & Dai, 2009). In the meantime, however, a vast government Internet monitoring system has been in place, where news, information, or opinions that challenge the official discourse are considered a threat to social stability and are not allowed. In practice, major Internet companies in China all closely work with the government and self-censor contentious expressions and sensitive facts on their sites (MacKinnon, 2008). Moreover, a recent study estimated that the Chinese government fabricates and posts about 448 million social media comments per year to regularly distract the public from discussing controversial issues (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2016).

Still, the Internet has brought unprecedented opportunities for Chinese citizens to access information and voice their needs as they otherwise would never be able. Cammaerts (2016) argues that Internet-based media increasingly constitute "alternative channels of distribution," which are "instrumental in their efforts to bypass the oligopolistic grip of the mainstream media on the public space" (p. 2). In particular, SNSs afford more efficient communication because of their networked features and large user base. Sometimes the dissemination of information on social media is even more efficient than online censors can keep up with (Sullivan, 2014). Alternatively, young, tech-savvy Chinese citizens have used a number of creative strategies to circumvent outright Internet censorship. For example, people tend to use coded terms and spoofs to communicate "sensitive" information and thoughts with each other on these sites (Meng, 2011). Recent research also has shown that China's censorship program is more tolerant of social media posts that criticize and challenge the government as long as the content does not aim to mobilize real-world events (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2014). Overall, the intensity of social media use leads to increased willingness to participate in the discussion of government and politics in China (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012). Therefore, it is worth exploring the potential of social media, despite the challenges being experienced, to serve as an "alternative channel of distribution" in China's political landscape. Focusing on the use of WeChat among Chinese older adults, this study examines what motivates older adults to use WeChat and to what extent this mobile media platform allows them to participate in the world of online politics, if at all.

Method

This study used focus groups to examine the use of WeChat among Chinese older adults. Four focus group discussions were conducted with individuals aged 50 or older in Shanghai, China, in July 2015.

Participants were first recruited through the Neighborhood Committee, a self-managed, government-regulated social organization that provides services such as public safety and social welfare for a given area (Choate, 1998). One important responsibility of the committee is to organize recreational activities to serve its older residents, providing a space for them to socialize after retirement. The committee chosen for this study is located in a district in Shanghai with medium household incomes. It administers more than 1,000 households from seven distinct residential communities. The committee's volunteers helped send the focus group invitation to older residents who lived in their communities and who used WeChat.

Taking classes at an open university is also a popular activity among older adults in China. As of 2015, there were nearly 60,000 elder education institutions in the country with about 7 million students (Cao, 2015). Any retiree with a high school degree can apply to take classes on a first-come-first-serve basis. A recent report shows that open university students are from all walks of life and have different social backgrounds (Ge, 2012). For this study, students of a Shanghai-based university for the elderly who used WeChat were contacted. This study also used a "snowball" method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), asking recruits to invite other potential participants. A total of 35 individuals—about half recruited from the Neighborhood Committee and half from the open university—participated in four focus group discussions, each with six to 12 participants. Groups were formed in a way that gender and age varied within each group. A point of saturation was reached after completing the fourth group.

Before each focus group, participants were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire to collect their basic information (see Table 1). Among the 35 participants, 22 were women. The average age of the participants was 60 years, ranging from 51 to 71 years. Most participants ($n = 22$) had a high school degree, and 25 had retired. About two thirds had used WeChat for more than one year. The majority of the participants used WeChat at least once a day. Among those daily users, half spent more than one hour on the mobile application per day.

During the discussions, participants were asked a list of open-ended questions including "How would you describe 'the Internet'?" "What motivates you to use WeChat?" "What kind of news and information do you read via WeChat?" "What kind of content do you usually post or share on WeChat?" "What motivates you to post or share information on WeChat?" For this study, I acted as a focus group facilitator to moderate the discussion¹ and to ensure that there was a balance of responses among the participants. Follow-up questions were asked to enable the flow of conversation. All focus group discussions were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. I then read the transcripts repeatedly until major themes and patterns emerged.

¹ It is a limitation that the study's researcher, rather than an independent interviewer, moderated the focus group discussion.

Table 1. Basic Information of Study Participants.

Category	Frequency
Gender	
Male	13
Female	22
Education	
Middle school	4
High school	22
Some college	8
University degree	1
Employment status	
Retired	25
Part-time	7
Full-time	3
How long have you used WeChat?	
<1 year	10
1-2 years	14
2-3 years	6
>3 years	5
How often do you check WeChat?	
≥Once a day	28
4-6 times a week	6
2-3 times a week	1
How much time do you spend on WeChat per day?	
<30 minutes	8
30 minutes to 1 hour	9
1-2 hours	11
>2 hours	7
How many contacts do you have on WeChat?	
1-50	23
51-100	6
101-200	6

Results

A High-Tech Innovation Without Sounding "High-Tech"

It is helpful to report the participants' general use of WeChat first. The participants reported that they mainly use WeChat for three purposes: chatting with their family and friends, following each others' life updates, and reading and sharing news and information. For most of them, WeChat has become indispensable in their lives. The participants used words such as "viral," "crazy," "universal," or even

"opium-like" to describe the wide popularity of WeChat among their peers. "Everyone [my age] is using WeChat. If you don't use it, you are almost marginalized," said a participant. "I feel like I cannot live without WeChat right now," said another. Yin Ming² (age 63) has used WeChat for more than three years and spends at least one or two hours on the app per day. "I usually check WeChat while lying down on my bed. That somehow reminds me of people smoking opium," Yin said with a laugh, adding, "I am almost addicted to WeChat."

WeChat, as opposed to other SNSs such as Weibo and QQ space, has become so popular among older adults mainly because it is perceived to be manageable. Jiang Liwei (age 60) said that he has never used the computer for accessing the Internet and now uses WeChat daily. As he described, "Using WeChat doesn't sound very high-tech. Most people my age know how to use it." Like Jiang, nearly one third of the participants reported that they never or rarely use a computer for the Internet. In other words, WeChat serves as their primary means to connect to the online world.

Interestingly, the participants find the user experience on WeChat so intuitive that some did not even realize that they are in fact "going online." When asked about what "the Internet" means to them, quite a few participants expressed that they know nothing about the Internet despite the fact that they are accessing it via WeChat daily. "I haven't gotten to the level of 'the Internet' yet," said Hanxue You (age 61), who has used WeChat for nearly two years. "I've never dealt with the Internet. What is it exactly?" asked Huang Xin (age 68), who had just described her use of WeChat to share pictures and videos. As these participants elaborated, they considered going online to be "complicated," "profound," and "high-tech." Some even naturally associated going online with the use of a computer. "Getting online" is something for my kids. People in my age don't use the computer that much," said Zhou Fuliang (age 53), who believed that using WeChat did not lead to the using the Internet. To Zhou and some other participants, the world of the Internet/computer belongs to the younger generation, whereas WeChat is accessible to people of all ages.

It is worth noting that none of the research participants have used Weibo, arguably the most popular SNS in China prior to the emergence of WeChat. As mentioned earlier, Weibo was initially launched as a Twitter-like, microblogging website for computer users, and the company later developed the application for mobile devices. The finding that older adults prefer WeChat to Weibo is in line with previous literature that mobile communication has considerable advantages for communities that are digitally behind (Donner et al., 2011). To be sure, it is WeChat, the mobile application, rather than the availability of the smartphone or mobile Internet that introduced the older adults to the Internet world. Several participants even did not use a cellphone before they began using WeChat. Zhang Hong (age 63) mostly stays at home after she retired in her early 50s. Before WeChat entered her life, Zhang rarely socialized with anyone outside of her family. She said, "I didn't use cellphone that much because there was no need and also because I thought it was for youngsters. But now I am with my cellphone all day long for WeChat." The mobile application has returned retirees such as Zhang to a more social life.

² All names used in this article are aliases.

As the focus group discussions demonstrate, WeChat has brought a considerable change to the lives of many participants. It is also interesting to see that generational arguments apply to many ICTs such as computers, the Internet, or even cellphones, in some cases. The mobile application WeChat, however, has become an exception and is gradually narrowing the age-generated digital divide at least in terms of the access to the Internet.

Caution and Conscience: WeChat for Alternative Communication

The participants receive all kinds of information on WeChat through Group Chat and Moments and by subscribing to official accounts. The types of content that mostly attract this group of people include health care, breaking news, inspirational stories such as those in the heartwarming collection *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and entertainment. Like their younger counterparts, the older adults share news and information, as well as produce their own messages such as selfies and travel posts on this social networking platform.

In particular, the participants in all four focus group discussions reached a consensus that the use of WeChat exposes them—for the first time—to a large amount of controversial information and viewpoints that are critical of the official discourse. Quite a few could recall one or two stories they had recently read through WeChat that they believe would never be reported by the government-regulated news organizations. Even for participants who are not at all interested in politics, they are still more or less exposed to such information because of others' sharing. "I never look for this kind of information, but it just comes to me," said Hu Yueying (age 57). With respect to the participation dimension of alternative communication, some of the older adults also participate in the content production and sharing on WeChat.

It should be noted that this observation was true for participants either with or without prior online experience. The participants who do know how to get online via a computer revealed that their informational use of the computer-based Internet is limited to visiting portal websites such as Sina.com and Sohu.com or the Chinese-language search engine Baidu, all of which work closely with the Chinese government for monitoring online activities on their sites. When it comes to the use of WeChat, they now receive and share news and information from a variety of sources.

To better organize the analysis, Figure 3 visualizes the different uses of WeChat. As the figure shows, the *x*-axis represents the extent to which one has access to and reads alternative content, which refers to information and opinion that challenge the hegemonic policies and perspectives (Downing, 2001). The *y*-axis represents the degree of "participation," which refers to content production, commenting, sharing, or other news-making practices (Goode, 2009; Villi, 2012). In this study, users who rated high in both alternative content access and participation are considered "activists," whereas those who rated low in both dimensions are considered "nonalternative media users." "Lurkers" read alternative news and information from a medium to high degree, but they are not engaged in any content production and sharing. "Cautious watchdogs" regularly consume alternative content, but participate in a smaller scale compared with activists. They only share alternative content or their own opinions with family and friends. "Filterers" read less alternative information and news than activists and cautious watchdogs because they

are critical of such content. They do actively participate in the media production process, but are more inclined to produce and spread messages that support the mainstream discourse. Based on the focus group discussions, the filterers and cautious watchdogs emerged as two major types of WeChat users among the older adults.

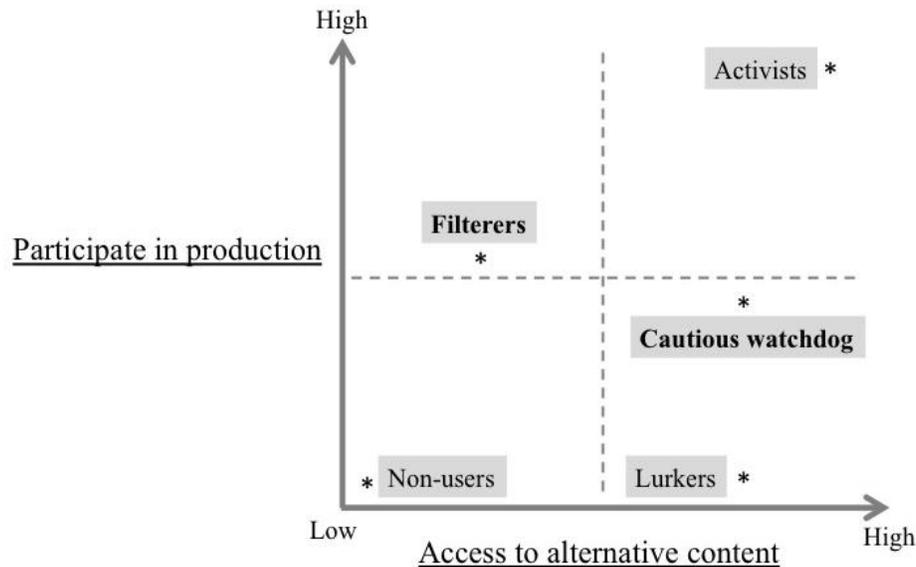


Figure 3. The use of WeChat among Chinese older adults.

The Filterers

The majority of participants keep a critical attitude toward any nonofficial news and information they receive via WeChat for various reasons. Almost all of the participants firmly trust the government-regulated media because they are “formal,” “serious,” and “credible.” As one participant defined, “credible media are those media controlled by the government.” In contrast, they used words with negative connotations such as “grapevine,” “gossip,” and “illegitimate” to describe any other sources on WeChat. It is important to clarify that a good number of nonofficial sources on WeChat do not aim to produce “alternative content.” Indeed, WeChat was created as a for-profit project and the platform is open to all. It is likely that many individuals and groups would disseminate controversial and most often sensational content as a marketing strategy to attract users’ and ultimately advertisers’ attention (Jin, 2013). According to a blue paper on new media released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in June 2015, nearly 60% of “fake” news and rumor are first reported on Weibo and Tuesdays usually see the peak of such content on WeChat (“60 percent,” 2015). These posts typically have catchy headlines and

focus on topics such as food safety, health, finance, and parenting techniques. Several participants noticed the phenomenon and complained about the large amount of untrustworthy information on WeChat. "I always found news on WeChat like some political figure dies or certain fast food chains use mutated chicken with six, eight or even 10 legs. It turned out all those rumors were refuted later. So I don't take it serious anymore," said Hanxue You (age 61).

Partly because of the prevalence of fake news and rumors on WeChat, quite a few participants considered many nonofficial sources misleading and, therefore, called for more government regulation on WeChat. Zou Qin (age 58) complained, "Anyone can say something on WeChat. No one is regulating that." Ye Shaoliang (age 61) also discussed his preference for government regulation of media:

Young people are more liberal-minded [about different viewpoints]. But we would like to hear authoritative voices. Sometimes I feel a little bit lost about all sorts of information on WeChat. I think a certain level of government regulation is necessary.

In contrast, the participants said that they could tell that some independent and alternative content circulated on WeChat is credible and plays a positive role in exposing political corruption or corporate wrongdoings that mainstream media could not. "Take the example of food safety. *Xinmin Evening News*³ would not necessarily report the issue because of the complicated relationship between the business and government under the table. But anonymous individuals could do this," said Ye Shaoliang.

However, many participants considered it not appropriate to read or distribute any information that is critical of the government and society, even though they believe the information is credible. The participants expressed that they worried about the potential ramification of reading or sharing such content on an online public platform. In the focus group discussions, many mentioned the WeChat features that facilitate self-censorship on the platform. There is a click box below each post for any WeChat users to anonymously report suspicious content. For WeChat groups, there is also an option to report suspicious individual or group behaviors. Hu Yu (age 60) liked to read and talk about politics on WeChat and used to post such content quite often, such as his thoughts about the Tiananmen Square protests. But one of his lawyer friends advised that he should avoid discussing sensitive subject matters on WeChat to avoid any potential trouble. Due to the concern about Internet surveillance, some participants even had a "no-politics" policy for their group discussions on WeChat.

Other participants genuinely believed that they should respond to the government's call to keep the online space "pure" and "positive." In all of the four focus group discussions, the participants recurrently used the phrase "transmitting positive energy" to describe their activities on WeChat. "Positive energy," or *Zheng Neng Liang*, is a new catchy phrase the Xi Jinping administration uses to regulate news, arts, and culture. Like its earlier version "harmonious society" (introduced by the former president Hu Jintao), the term *positive energy* emphasizes the importance of encouraging positive attitudes and uplifting content as opposed to critical and negative ones, particularly in regards to online political expressions. Bandurski (2014) shows that the phrase had been frequently used in China's mainstream

³ A government-regulated newspaper published in Shanghai.

media coverage since the start of the Xi administration in 2012. As the focus group discussions revealed, the idea has been successfully transferred from the mainstream media to the minds of many older adults. When asked about their thoughts on critical or negative content disseminated on WeChat, most participants responded that they would “*just take a look*” at it. They then insisted that they would not “take it seriously” or repost “negative energy,” which includes news and information about social conflicts, government corruption and scandals, and violence and crimes. Zhao Lin (age 55) exemplifies this attitude by using the Jinshan incident as an example. In June 2015, a planned chemistry plant in Jinshan, a distant suburb of Shanghai, spurred several days of street protests by residents concerned about the potential environmental impact. The information about protests was strictly banned in the mainstream media, but the texts, images, and videos sent by the protestors and other Jinshan residents were circulated on Weibo and WeChat for a few days before the online censors were able to crack down on all of the relevant content. This is a typical case that social media help distribute the information about social conflicts. Unlike the younger generation, older adults such as Zhao did not welcome such content because it would lead to social instability:

I recently received the news about that street protest in Jinshan from one of my chat groups. I would *just take a look* at news like this and would not distribute such “negative energy” any further. I believe that the government will solve problems like this appropriately. There is no need for us to comment on this.

Like Zhao Lin, quite a few participants serve as filterers on WeChat by filtering out negative energy and by promoting positive energy such as news and information favorable to the government and society. “I like reading news about what the Xi administration has done for the public and their vision for China’s future,” said Sun Ting (age 68), “I tend to share content like this on my Moments, and I often see my friends repost my stuff.” Other examples of positive energy include nationalist or patriotic comments, health care knowledge, and moral stories such as “what makes a good woman.” Although the filterers participate in content creation and sharing on WeChat, they do this to defend the status quo and therefore their messages to a large extent reinforce the mainstream voices.

The Cautious Watchdogs

Other participants conveyed, explicitly or implicitly, their interest and curiosity in alternative news and information that they would never see from the mainstream media such as the Jinshan incident. The dilemma is that, on the one hand, similar to the filterers, they also feel that they should stay away from negative energy. On the other hand, they could not resist the appeal of “learning about the truth” through various alternative sources on WeChat. A quote from Ye Feng (age 63) nicely illustrates these contradictory thoughts:

For many of us of a certain age, we would still prefer [to read and share] “positive energy,” or positive news. But we are also interested in knowing about the negative side [of the government and society]. To be honest . . . you’d better show us everything. Let us know about the truth. We’ve felt kept in the dark about a lot of things for our whole lives. . . . Whenever I see something negative on WeChat, I feel so eager to read about it.

Several participants shared this sentiment. Having been born and having grown up in a media environment dominated by positive energy and propaganda, learning about many different aspects of the society through WeChat was an eye-opening experience for many older adults. Han Xueyou (age 61) reported that he felt "more informed" because of WeChat and provided an example. He recently watched a parody video on WeChat about the 2015 Chinese stock market crash in which millions of individual investors, including himself, suffered outsized losses. The video provided an analysis of the market failure from the angle of a small investor, alluding to the government-inspired bubble as the main reason for the crash. "The video sort of helps express our voices," said Han, adding, "Official media will never talk about that." Han shared this video with his friends in several chat groups to bring their attention to the problem as well.

It is important to note that whereas activists share alternative content with as many people as possible through all available communication channels on WeChat, the cautious watchdogs mainly use Group Chat to communicate with people they trust. The participants consider Group Chat to be more "private" than other sharing features, such as Moments, where the posts are viewable to all of their contacts and potentially to online censors. "I want to learn about the truth and I also would like my family members and friends to learn about it," said Dong Dewei (age 58), who described his sharing of stories about the government's misdeeds in several of his chat groups. Dong then emphasized, "I would only share such content with my family members and close friends [via chat groups]. I would never 'disseminate' it beyond that." Likewise, Ye Feng only posts politically contentious comments in some selected chat groups, fearing that distributing negative energy on Moments or elsewhere would attract the attention of online censors.

As the focus group discussions demonstrate, the feature of Group Chat has presented a special form of the "alternative public sphere" (Fraser, 1990) for at least a group of older adults to voice and share their alternative thoughts. To be more accurate, it can be considered a semipublic alternative sphere. Group Chat is semipublic because the users consider it private, and that perception reduces the barriers to speaking up in a more public space. Here, one barrier refers to qualms about the potential ramifications of transmitting negative energy on a public platform. Chat groups on WeChat, however, are not isolated private spaces; rather, information is spread efficiently from one group to another on this mobile platform. In other words, the older adults' participation in these semipublic spheres in fact contributes to the circulation of alternative information and content in the wider public sphere. In some ways, the mobile application and its features blur the boundary between private and public spheres, introducing a unique form of civic participation in China's political context.

After all, WeChat provides a platform for both filterers and cautious watchdogs to participate in public life. Many participants expressed that they feel a sense of fulfillment through their participation on WeChat. Filterers believe that their distribution of positive energy helps strengthen social stability. As for the cautious watchdogs, sharing alternative content helps inform their family and friends. A quote from Liu Hua (age 61) illustrates how WeChat enriches his life after retirement:

I retired last year. Honestly speaking, I don't think retirees like me are able to create social change any more. . . . Now with WeChat, I learn more and I can pass along important information to my friends and kids. Somehow this makes me feel I am still useful.

For the society in general, the older adults play a special role in interweaving mainstream and alternative voices on this online public forum. On an individual level, WeChat empowers at least a group of older adults by providing opportunities for them to add their voices to the digital world.

Discussion

This article presents empirical evidence of WeChat use among older adults in China. Building on the theoretical framework of alternative media, the study demonstrates that WeChat does have some potential to serve as an alternative channel of distribution for many Chinese older adults by allowing them access to content that challenges the hegemonic perspectives and policies (Downing, 2001) and by encouraging at least some of them to participate in the media production process (Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Goode, 2009). Although other social media platforms in China such as Weibo may have similar features, they are not considered as accessible to the older adults as WeChat, a mobile application that provides a perceived "low barrier" user experience. In other words, some older adults have begun to access the Internet and, more importantly, have begun to consume and produce alternative content online because of WeChat. However, the study also revealed a number of constraints such as Internet censorship and WeChat's profit-driven environment, which, to a large extent limit the potential of the mobile application to facilitate alternative communication. Some specific findings are worthy of further discussion.

The study found that WeChat provides older adults with their first encounter with a large amount of information and viewpoints, with many of them alternative to the hegemonic policies and visions (Downing, 2001) such as content about social conflicts. In particular, a group of older adults (i.e., the cautious watchdogs) feels extremely curious about a world portrayed so differently from that in China's mainstream news media and thus craves such information shared on WeChat. They also demonstrate a unique version of civic participation on WeChat. Because of concern about transmitting negative energy in a public forum, the older adults choose to share their alternative thoughts with family and close friends through the Group Chat feature—a semiprivate, but networked space. Ultimately, their microlevel participation may contribute to the circulation of alternative information and opinions in a wider public sphere. In this light, some of WeChat's unique features demonstrate the potential to bridge the age-generated digital divide in terms of not only material access to the Internet (Donner et al., 2011) but also the democratic divide (Fuchs, 2009; Norris, 2001), at least for a group of older adults. This finding demonstrates how the affordance of new ICTs may introduce alternative approaches of alternative communication.

However, not all of the participants feel empowered by being able to access alternative news and information on WeChat. Despite the opportunities WeChat affords, the age-generated democratic divide remains in the online realm for many older adults. Whereas young people in China tend to embrace the democratic potential of social media and are willing to engage in the conversation about controversial

subject matters online (e.g., Guo, 2014; Meng, 2011), many older adults (i.e., the filterers) maintain a cautious attitude. As people who grew up in a government-regulated media environment, they are particularly concerned about the government's regulation of sensitive speech; others genuinely consider it more appropriate to read and share positive messages about the government and society. To them, reading and sharing alternative content may lead to potential trouble, for both the society and themselves. The finding reflects the power of Internet censorship in China and the impact of hegemonic discourses such as harmonious society and positive energy on this particular group of people. This finding also enriches our understanding of audiences and readers of alternative media, an understudied subject in alternative media research (Downing, 2003): The access to alternative content is not necessarily empowering for certain audiences and readers.

WeChat's potential to facilitate alternative communication is also limited in the fact that WeChat is a commercially driven project. Many individuals and groups produce and distribute controversial, oftentimes inaccurate, content on WeChat mainly for the purpose of attracting online traffic. The prevalence of such content would impair the credibility of WeChat as a whole, thus undermining users' trust in any nonofficial sources on the platform. To some degree, the control of fake news and rumors justifies the government's actions of regulating alternative, dissenting voices on WeChat. Moreover, the self-censorship features on WeChat also prevent many older participants from freely expressing themselves on a larger scale.

To conclude, this exploratory study sheds light on how WeChat, a comprehensive mobile application, may facilitate online civic expression among older adults in Chinese society, but to a limited extent. The study has a few limitations. The findings of the qualitative project were based on a small sample of older adults living in Shanghai, China's biggest city and a global financial hub. Future research should consider adopting quantitative methods such as a survey to analyze a more representative sample in Shanghai or elsewhere and to systematically investigate intragroup variations. Second, future research should further explore different media sources on WeChat. Researchers may also consider investigating the use of WeChat or similar mobile applications among other underprivileged communities such as people of lower socioeconomic status, migrant workers, and LGBT communities in China and abroad.

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