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Select Committee on Foreign Interference Through Social Media
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Dear Committee Chair

Select Committee on Foreign Interference Through Social Media

Our submission to this inquiry focuses on the use of WeChat to spread misinformation online amongst Chinese Australian communities and the risk disinformation on social media platforms pose to Australian democracy.

What is WeChat?

WeChat is a multi-purpose messaging and social media app, owned by China-based corporation Tencent. There are estimates that 2.9 million Australians use WeChat on a monthly basis. As a comparison, Twitter has 5.3 million monthly Australians users.¹

There is a lot of confusion about how WeChat works. This is because it tends not to be used widely by those in media and politics. Its wide usage in Chinese communities in Australia is because WeChat, unlike other messaging or social media apps, is not blocked in China, making it easy to contact friends and family there. Furthermore, its functionality is such that you can use WeChat to pay at the shops or even transfer money to others. In Australia, over 10,000 stores are said to use WeChat Pay.²

Appendix A provides an overview comparison of WeChat personal accounts and platform accounts and how they differ. Both have the capacity to be used to promote misinformation and disinformation.

How misinformation can be spread on WeChat

The level of panic and misinformation around the corona virus amongst Chinese Australian communities based on rumours shows how easily WeChat disinformation campaigns could be waged. These WeChat disinformation campaigns are not a problem limited to Australia with similar instances in America.³ It should raise

¹ David Cowling (2019, 1 August). Social Media Statistics Australia – July 2019. SocialMediaNews.com.au. Retrieved from <https://www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-statistics-australia-july-2019/>

² Meg Jin Zeng (2017, 18 December). What you need to know about WeChat, China's tech juggernaut making waves in Australia. ABC News. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-18/wechat-what-you-need-to-know-about-china-social-media-juggernaut/9268036>

³ Chi Zhang (2018, 19 April). Study: Chinese-American immigrants fall prey to WeChat's misinformation problem. Columbia Journalism Review. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/wechat-misinformation.php

concern that actors for campaigns of disinformation could use WeChat during elections or around specific issues.

It has been harder to identify the scale of misinformation or disinformation because WeChat lacks transparency. Unlike Twitter and Facebook, WeChat does not have hashtags or trending topics. Instead, there are official accounts that provide content to subscribers. Content is primarily created and shared by individuals amongst their existing social networks, either through group chats or Moments, WeChat's news feed-like feature.⁴

More recent disinformation campaigns have been spread primarily by personal accounts through private or semi-private group chats that can have up to 500 members. The comparison is WhatsApp group chats where people establish group chats and invite large numbers to join. The role of WhatsApp in spreading false information during the Brazilian election has been well documented.⁵ There were also reports of similar tactics occurring during the last Indian election.⁶ Like on WhatsApp, the lack of public features on WeChat means it is far harder to watch for disinformation campaigns by individuals associated with a political actor.

WeChat also enables users to contact others with a WeChat accounts within a 3-kilometre radius of the user. This allows the creation of local groups and spread of information to those without existing ties. This function has played a role in circulating rumours about corona virus within Chinese communities by allowing the creation of geographically specific group chats.

This should act as a warning that similar strategies of spreading false information in languages other than English (as well as English) might also be used on other platforms such as WhatsApp as well as WeChat in the future using group chats unless action is taken.

Official accounts, however, may also be used to push certain content to subscribers. There is greater transparency but like with legacy media platforms, there is a risk that misinformation can be promoted to a wider audience in full public view. It should be noted that public subscription accounts are by far the most accessed news source by Mandarin-speaking communities in Australia.⁷

Policy challenges

The challenge faced by policymakers is how to respond when a social media platform is not only based overseas with no clear local presence but also used by

⁴ Chi Zhang (2017, 30 October). How misinformation spreads on WeChat. Columbia Journalism Review. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/wechat-misinformation-china.php

⁵ Ed Bracho-Polanco (2019, 9 January). How Jair Bolsonaro used 'fake news' to win power. The Conversation. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/how-jair-bolsonaro-used-fake-news-to-win-power-109343>

⁶ Kevin Ponniah (2019, 6 April). WhatsApp: The 'black hole' of fake news in India's election. BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47797151>

⁷ Wanning Sun (2018, 22 November). How Australia's Mandarin speakers get their news. The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/how-australias-mandarin-speakers-get-their-news-106917>

hundreds of thousands to maintain contact with friends and family as it is not blocked in China unlike other social media applications.

It makes it more difficult to regulate to prevent disinformation, as the sources cannot be easily traced, especially if it is occurring through group chats. Not only is content subject to Chinese Government legislation, it is difficult to track individuals without support from Tencent, as demonstrated during the 2019 Federal Election.⁸ It makes it difficult to take action against any individual or organisation that may have violated electoral laws or engaged in defamation.

The high usage of these social media platforms as the primary source of news also means that simply providing more information through traditional legacy news channels in English such as through fact checking may not be effective in countering misinformation.

Recommendations

There is a genuine risk of disinformation campaigns in Chinese Australian communities being waged through social media platforms but there are some practical steps that can be taken by the Commonwealth Government to reduce some of these risks.

Reducing the risk of disinformation during elections will require greater scrutiny of social media platforms such as WeChat and improved enforcement of existing electoral laws on those platforms. It will require greater resourcing for electoral authorities to employ additional individuals with Chinese language proficiency and actively ensure people are aware of requirements and electoral regulations. Enforcing penalties needs to be prioritised or else acts of disinformation become seen as low-cost, high-benefit actions with little consequence.

Tackling misinformation will require boosting our China capability within the Australian Public Service. A better understanding of the local Chinese Australian communities, their issues and being able to monitor what is going on is also necessary for improved policy responses. With only 130 non-Chinese Australians having the necessary language skills⁹, there will be a need to hire more Chinese Australians. We do note that there have been anecdotal reports of Chinese Australians either being treated with suspicion or having issues with security clearances in the APS when it comes to policy areas seen as security sensitive. It is possible that unconscious biases and security assessment processes are inadvertently excluding Chinese Australians because of increased risk aversion. These reports need to be taken seriously and investigated as it could undermine our capacity to deal with foreign interference and deliberate campaigns of disinformation within Chinese Australian communities.

⁸ Paul Karp (2019, 7 May). Penny Wong blasts 'malicious' WeChat campaign spreading fake news about Labor. Guardian Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/may/07/penny-wong-blasts-malicious-wechat-campaign-spreading-fake-news-about-labor>

⁹ RMIT ABC Fact Check (2019, 27 September). Are there only 130 Australians of non-Chinese heritage who can speak Mandarin? Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-24/fact-check-are-there-only-130-people-who-can-speak-mandarin/11235484>

Promoting media diversity is also important. It also requires a greater investment in Chinese language media content by the ABC Chinese and SBS Mandarin to provide trusted sources of information that are publicly accountable. This has to include more actively promoting these news services to Mandarin-speaking communities in Australia, using the social media platforms they access. We acknowledge that there have been restrictions placed on articles when published on WeChat, which may make it more challenging.

Unless we act, it is likely these disinformation campaigns on WeChat will become more frequent. They will be seen as being effective and difficult to combat, encouraged as a strategy by actors because they are able to occur without any significant cost, undermining our democratic processes.

Yours sincerely
Osmond Chiu and Kun Huang
13 March 2020

Appendix A: Comparison of WeChat Personal Account & Platform Account

| | Personal Account | Official Account |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Description | <p>WeChat provides text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast (one-to-many) messaging, video calls and conferencing, video games, photograph and video sharing, as well as location sharing. WeChat also allows users to exchange contacts with people nearby via Bluetooth, as well as providing various features for contacting people at random if desired (if people are open to it). It can also integrate with other social networking services such as Facebook and Tencent QQ. Photographs may also be embellished with filters and captions, and automatic translation service is available.</p> <p>WeChat supports different instant messaging methods, including text message, voice message, walkie talkie, and stickers. Users can send previously saved or live pictures and videos, profiles of other users, coupons, lucky money packages, or current GPS locations with friends either individually or in a group chat.</p> | <p>WeChat users can register as an official account (公众号; also called "public account" in English), which enables them to push feeds to subscribers, interacts with subscribers and provide them with services. There are three types of official accounts: a service account, a subscription account and an enterprise account. Once users as individuals or organisations set up a type of account, they cannot change it to another type.</p> <p>Official accounts can be used as a platform for services such as hospital pre-registrations, visa renewal or credit card service.</p> |
| Registration Requirement | Mobile Number | <p>Chinese Business Registration Certificated or</p> <p>Chinese Identity Card Number</p> |

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|-----------------------|---|--|
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| Communication Channel | <p>Person to Person (Maximum 5000 individual contacts per account)</p> <p>Person to Group (Maximum 500 individuals per group, no limit to number of group Individuals may join)</p> | Able to create 8 articles per day. All subscribers of the official account will receive the article chain. |
| Campaign Method | Individuals can create message or share stories urging people to support one political party. Either to individuals or in a group or on Moments. | Contents are created in the article format. Due to the registration requirement, any content created by the Official Account is perceived as having additional credibility attached to it. Clickbait is a tactic often used by various social media company by exaggerating the heading of articles. |
| Example | Individual Accounts, e.g. Gladys Liu's person account. | <p>Sydney Today</p> <p>WeSydney</p> <p>Mirror News</p> <p>Prime Minister Scott Morrison</p> |
| Issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contents are subjected to Chinese government legislation. - Difficult to track individual without support from Tencent. - No Tencent representative in Australia. - Difficult to prosecute anyone that has violated defamation or electoral law. | |