

Introduction: Fable of tomorrow

Imagine you are a part of some kind of a subculture.

It might not even be big enough to even be considered a subculture, just some small community with some common defining features. Maybe you're proponents a less than popular political or social idea. Maybe you're fans of some TV show or a type of music. Or maybe you just live together in the same neighborhood.

Whatever the case, the larger community which your smaller group is a part of is initially largely indifferent towards you. Suddenly, an event happens, or someone makes some public statements, and now this little community has been branded as reprehensible, deplorable, and morally decrepit. Everywhere you go, people who until recently have known little or nothing about it now treat it as a public scourge.

Your experience in this community hasn't been perfect, but it has been mostly positive. However, any current discussion about it, if there is any left at all, is now about how to solve the problem of its existence. All anyone is interested in is getting rid of what, to you, anyways, had been a good thing. Any positive experiences you might have had might as well not exist.

Well, under the official narrative, they don't.

Introduction

Storytelling provides numerous benefits for community building and development. In social movements, storytelling is used for constructing agency, shaping identity, and motivating action. Narratives are also useful for community development. The story itself allows for sharing and learning from each others life experiences and building connections with each other, while the method addresses typical barriers to knowledge transfer in the face of social change. By uniting under a purposeful narrative, diverse communities can be motivated into building social capital and working towards positive change (Prasetyo, 2017).

In some cases, a community might not be offered the chance to develop their own narratives. Vinegar Hill was a neighborhood in Charlottesville, Virginia that acted as a principal area of commerce for its African-American community, and was destroyed in the 1960s as part of an urban renewal campaign. Under the narrative of clearing a derelict slum, the city produced the nearly wholesale destruction of a neighborhood that was uncommonly rich in its own heritage, traditions and lore (Schwartz, 2005).

News media is often responsible for documenting and explaining the narratives behind ongoing events to the rest of the public. Called "ambient news" by Hermida (2010) and others, the high availability and near ubiquitous presence of such media allows it to influence the public as it is constantly played in the background of our daily lives. In this sense, the public audience acts only as a receiver for the information published by the journalists, with "no sense of agency over the news process."

However, that has changed as widely available digital social media has made it easier for anyone to reach a large audience. As users contribute to the creation, sharing, and interpretation of news, the media audience is somewhat able to take part in the process traditionally left to professional journalists. Hermida (2010) calls this widespread audience participation "ambient journalism," as the "small pieces of content" produced by users "can

be collectively considered journalism.” Social media services such as Twitter have been a “significant platform for people to report, comment and share news about major events.”

A Chinese microblogging site in a similar format as Twitter, Sina Weibo, has played a similar role, having revolutionized Chinese social media by providing a platform for public discourse, at least until the Chinese government “cracked down on this form of expression by targeting influential public opinion leaders” (McLauchlin, 2017). Over time, WeChat appears to have overtaken it in popularity. Its features have expanded to not only include social messaging in various forms, but games, mobile commerce, and payment as well. Users sharing, reposting, and commenting on content across WeChat’s public, semi-public, and private spheres similarly blurs the boundary between news production and consumption (Wu & Wall, 2019).

This paper will focus on how digital social media has affected journalism and its power to control its narratives. Specifically, it will compare the effects of Eastern and Western social media via case studies with Twitter and WeChat.

Literature Review

Twitter has turned into a convenient beat for reporters: it offers an accumulation of people sharing information and opinions and easy access to sources. Reporters often use tweets to access people that would be suitable as a source but would otherwise be unavailable through Twitter for quotes, humanize news stories by illustrating personal opinions and experiences, and to become the subject of a news story itself. This changes the relationship between the journalists and their sources: rather than a “negotiation process” between the two occurring in which sources provide information in exchange for news coverage, journalists simply use the information that is already published (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

Twitter itself has promoted its use by journalists, such as by creating Twitter for Newsrooms in 2011 (Broersma & Graham, 2013). While journalists rely on Twitter to collect information from sources, Twitter relies on the journalists to give itself credibility, making it more likely to be used similarly in the future. It can be argued that, through this interaction, Twitter is granted a sense of authority and legitimacy to the detriment of the journalists and their sources (Molyneux & McGregor, 2019).

Broersma and Graham (2013) argue that several consequences arise from journalists’ use of tweets. First is that reporters have instant access to a wide array of sources. A quarter of their analyzed tweets contained vox populi or people involved. Secondly, information provided by sources is no longer exclusive to any one newspaper due to long-term relationships or reputation, as sources on Twitter are available to everyone. This leaves newspapers the role of aggregating and contextualizing tweets to stay relevant. It also reduces journalism’s ability to construct social reality. Not only can tweets be cited without verification or context, elite sources gain more control over public discourse by “dropping a tweet” instead of negotiating with journalists.

Korson (2015) argues instead that technology and citizen journalism undermine elite control of traditional news sources. Media itself acts as a political agent by setting the agenda for discussion, framing information, and setting timetables for the decision-making process. Alternative forms of journalism can thus play the same role. Citizen journalism, often free of oversight and censorship, allows individuals and audiences to participate by

reporting their own local realities in situations where traditional journalists are unable or unwilling to be present. Korson (2015) uses this to evaluate United Nations peacekeeping by analyzing the tweets of the peacekeepers.

Through the use of liking, reposting, and commenting on news stories, Wu and Wall (2019) claim WeChat enables “metavoicing,” allowing citizens to participate in news production by the addition of their opinions and speculation. Wu and Wall (2019) illustrate resistance to “a top-down form of agenda setting” by showing interviewees’ preferences to news that personally interests them or gathers lots of public attention. Another example of this was a case in which, after an attempt to “smother the expression of public opinion,” users changed their profile pictures in defiance. However, limitations exist in that user activity can be reported by peers and can be seen as untrustworthy sources of information.

Framework

Part of what makes citizen journalism so powerful is that it allows citizens to widely share and frame new information without initially going through traditional journalism sources. Often, the most accessible method of doing so is through social media like Twitter and WeChat. Neither Twitter nor WeChat exist on their own. Along with their own attempts to encourage the proliferation of certain types of users and posts while inhibiting others, they are subject to how their users wish to use their service as well as the governmental systems they operate in. They will thus be analyzed under an actor-network theory framework, where the online social networks are dependent on interactions with their users, governments, and traditional media.

Methods

Both services have provided platforms for regular users to report information and express opinions that may be inaccessible or avoided by traditional media. These social media services can serve many of the same roles that traditional news media normally serves. However, rather than simply shifting power from traditional news creators to their audiences, it must also be shared with the internet service itself.

I will use document analysis on news articles regarding the incidents, public statements from the parties involved, and public user posts to compare the actions of the two services. Their respective design and functionalities may also imply some differences in their philosophies. I plan to collect data to help describe WeChat and Twitter in two areas:

1. how they comply with government regulations
2. how they allow expression of public opinion

Data Analysis

While Twitter, Inc. is based in the United States and Tencent is based in China, they have both made efforts to expand globally. In order to comply with laws that regulate Twitter content in various countries, Twitter, after receiving a “valid and properly scoped request from an authorized entity,” will withhold access to content from within a particular country (*About country withheld content*, n.d.). Meanwhile, WeChat, operating in China,

is required to moderate content based on government regulations. A government-issued list of “vaguely defined” prohibited topics is released, and companies are held responsible for content on their platforms. Meanwhile, international accounts registered outside of China do not face the same restrictions (Ruan, Knockel, Ng, & Crete-Nishihata, 2016). In 2013, after it was reported that international users experienced censorship of certain words, Tencent claimed it was a “technical glitch” and it was quickly reversed (Millward, 2013):

A small number of WeChat international users were not able to send certain messages due to a technical glitch this Thursday. Immediate actions have been taken to rectify it. We apologize for any inconvenience it has caused to our users. We will continue to improve the product features and technological support to provide better user experience.

Both services are vague as to which content is removed. It would likely go against the spirit of these laws if they required these services to remove content, yet allow them to publish it elsewhere. However, Twitter is relatively more transparent in that blocked content is replaced with a notification that it has been blocked (Fig 1). They also report statistics about how many requests from different governments (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2018). WeChat has instead appeared to have become less transparent over time. In 2013, a sender would be notified if they used a restricted keyword. By 2016, messages containing restricted keywords in group and private chats would not be sent, with no indication to either user (Fig 2). Public posts are also removed in a misleading way, giving the impression that removals are due multiple reports by a user’s peers, leaving WeChat a neutral third party, despite evidence of automatic filtering (Ruan et al., 2016).

Li Wenliang

One case involving what could be considered multiple counts of citizen journalism through social media is that surrounding the Doctor Li Wenliang. On December 30, 2019, Li sent a message to a private WeChat group of his former medical school classmates to warn them about new patients with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). About an hour later, he corrected himself, calling it a new type of coronavirus infection. (The virus would later be named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or SARS-CoV-2.) He also requested that the information not be shared outside the group, and to tell loved ones to take precautions. Despite this, screenshots of his messages leaked online, and gained enough attention so that a few days later, on January 3, 2020, Li was summoned to the Public Security Bureau on account of illegally making false comments and disturbing the social order, and made to sign a written document agreeing to such. Li later caught the viral infection himself, and died on February 7th (Hegarty, 2020).

Li’s death would trigger an outcry of support from social media. However, news of his death would be tightly controlled by the official media, and his very name would become a filtered keyword on social media (Gilbert, 2020).

Before his death, China’s Supreme People’s Court would criticize the actions of the police punishing the early “rumors,” saying, “It might have been a fortunate thing if the public had believed the ‘rumors’ then and started to wear masks and carry out sanitization measures,

and avoid the wild animal market”(Jianhing & Shen, 2020). A report following an investigation after Li’s death concluded that Li had not disrupted public order and recommended that the reprimand against him be withdrawn. However, it maintained the information Li sent was not verified before it was sent, and was “not consistent with the actual information at the time” (Davidson, 2020).

@into_the_brush

In a different case of what could be described as citizen journalism, Twitter user “into_the_brush.” posted on March 2, 2020 a series of tweets detailing her experience in attempting to be tested for COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2. After claiming to experience symptoms, into_the_brush “decided to be responsible and go to get tested” due to working in a clinic with many elderly patients. She describes unsuccessful attempts to find test information by contacting a “corona[virus] hotline,” browsing websites of public health organizations, and calling primary care doctors, an urgent care center and a hospital. Only after contacting the hotline through the hospital was she told that she did not qualify for testing, as she had not recently left the country or have contact with a confirmed case of the disease. She would only be able to “get treated” if her symptoms worsened. By March 10, the original series of posts would be retweeted over 100 thousand times and liked over 300 thousand times (into_the_brush, 2020), experiencing “viral spread on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and other sites” (LaCapria, 2020).

Unlike Li, into_the_brush remains anonymous, and her story was unable to later be verified. Li detailed the existence of a new type of viral disease and human cases of it, both of which turned out to be true, while into_the_brush recounts difficulty in finding information and getting tested. Her final conclusion on testing eligibility coincides with the Center of Disease Control (CDC) testing guidelines as of February 29, which, contrary to her claims, were available on their website (*Evaluating and Reporting Persons Under Investigation (PUI)*, 2020a). However, as into_the_brush is speaking on her own experience, it is possible that this page was not seen, as this page was categorized at the time under a section intended to provide information to healthcare professionals that would be conducting the testing.

Another notable difference between the cases of Li and into_the_brush is how they made their initial posts. Li posted in a private group chat, only intending to warn his former classmates to protect themselves. It was only after screenshots were leaked against his wishes that he started to attract attention toward himself. Meanwhile, into_the_brush shared her story on publicly on Twitter, seemingly to being attention towards the lack of information testing and low availability of COVID-19 testing.

Discussion

As they have attempted to expand their global reach, Twitter and WeChat have had to adapt to more and less, respectively, government regulations regarding content moderation. WeChat, similar to its practices under Chinese regulation, appears to have taken a more proactive role in adjusting policies than strictly required by removing keyword filtering for international users. Meanwhile, Twitter withholds content only upon request, leaving the “authorized entities” the task of locating the content deemed to be illegal and asking for its removal. By these actions, both services continue to follow the roles they take in their

home countries. In the United States, under the Communications Decency Act, internet services are not liable for the content of their users. Twitter thus continues to rely on other parties to report potentially illegal content. Due to an aversion to censorship and attraction to transparency, content is left visible in countries where it is not illegal, and users are informed of its withheld status in countries where it is. Meanwhile, China does hold internet services responsible for moderation. The moderation policy of WeChat is then adjusted as Tencent expands out of China. However, given their response, the change in policy appears to be more of a pragmatic move aiming to appeal to more international users rather than an adoption of foreign values in overseas operations.

The posts of both Li and into_the_brush paint a picture of the low degree of preparation for a new virus outbreak using information from their own personal experience. Li wanted his medical school classmates to take precautions, despite how officials initially downplaying the contagiousness of the infection and issued no guidance to protect doctors. China would later declare the outbreak an emergency on January 20 (Hegarty, 2020). into_the_brush wanted to get tested, seemingly as a precaution in order to work among elderly patients, only to go on a lengthy search for information to find out she did not fit the CDC testing guidelines. By March 25, the testing guidelines would expand, grouping “symptomatic healthcare workers” as highest priority for testing and other individuals with symptoms as “Priority 3.” Contact with a previously confirmed case appeared to no longer have been required. A page on a new “Symptoms & Testing” section of the CDC website links to these guidelines, making them more visible for potential patients (*Evaluating and Reporting Persons Under Investigation (PUI)*, 2020b).

As citizen journalists, their social media posts helped bring attention to issues not officially acknowledged at the time. However, due to the nature of the experiences of these non-journalists being shared almost immediately after they happened to them, imprecise language, incorrect breaking information are used to cast doubt on their stories by more traditional sources.

While I personally believe that neither Li nor into_the_brush acted out of malicious intent, the lack of oversight compared to traditional media opens up the possibility of that being the case. In the case of Li, the official story appears to be what is considered the “actual information,” so any contradiction in Li’s account of the virus can still be declared false. For into_the_brush, the lack of prior information from the author supporting the story and factual inaccuracies in her assertions could potentially cast doubt on the entire story. Both stories could alternatively be interpreted as a political attack against decision-makers, rather than attempts to inform colleagues or bring light to new issues.

Conclusion

As these social media services grow and gain more users, they become ample opportunities as platforms for citizen journalism, as individual users gain the potential to reach a larger audience. Despite the existence of a new place to share ideas, they may still face similar challenges, where local governments or traditional media sources stifle, ignore, or downplay the veracity of the individual’s claims. However, without claims would often never be made in the first place without the availability of these services.

Appendix

This Tweet from @username has been withheld in <country> based on local law(s). [Learn more](#)

Figure 1. An sample message of what would be displayed in place of a withheld Tweet (*About country withheld content*, n.d.).

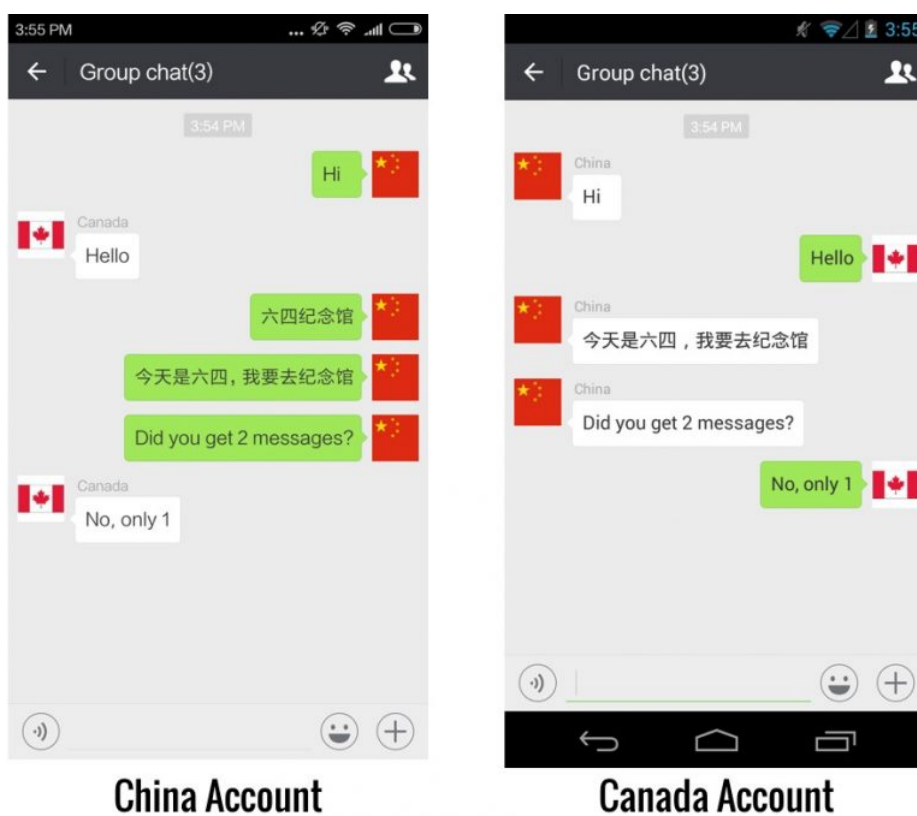


Figure 2. An example of the silent hiding of messages containing blocked phrases (Ruan et al., 2016).



Figure 3. Screenshots of Li's leaked Wechat messages.

(CST 17:43)

Li: There are 7 confirmed cases of SARS at Huanan Seafood Market.

Li: (Picture of diagnosis report)

Li: (Video of CT scan results)

Li: They are being isolated in the emergency department of our hospital's Houhu Hospital District.

(CST 18:42)

Someone: Be careful, or else our chat group might be dismissed.

Li: The latest news is, it has been confirmed that they are coronavirus infections, but the exact virus is being subtyped.

Li: Don't circulate the information outside of this group, tell your family and loved ones to take caution.

Li: In 1937, coronaviruses were first isolated from chicken. . .

Figure 4. A transcription of Li's leaked Wechat messages, translated into English.

I live in Seattle, I have all symptoms of COVID-19 and have a history of chronic bronchitis.

Since I work in a physical therapy clinic with many 65+ patients and those with chronic illnesses, I decided to be responsible and go to get tested. This is how that went.

I called the Corona hotline, was on hold for 40 minutes and gave up.

So I looked at the CDC and Washington public health websites. They told me to see a primary care doctor, but there's no information about testing.

I called 2 primary care doctors. One told me they don't know where to get testing, and that I should not to seek out testing. The other one told me to go to an urgent care or ER.

I called the Urgent Care, they also had no idea where tests are, but told me to call the hospital.

I called the hospital. They do not have tests, but transferred me to the COVID-19 hotline to "answer my questions". Since I was transferred on a medical provider line, I actually got through. Progress!

The lady with the hotline was very kind and professional and understood my concern about my own health and those at my clinic. (Which is currently being sanitized). However, I was told I do not qualify for testing. And I was not given a timeline or info on current resources.

So. Who does qualify? Those who have been out of the country in the last 14 days, and those who have had contact with one of the few people who have been tested and come up positive. That's it.

The only way I can get treated is if my symptoms get so bad I develop pneumonia or bronchitis, which is very likely in my case. Then I'll be in the ER and quarantined for several days while waiting for a test and for the results to come back.

This is all incredibly frustrating because I am trying to do everything right in a system that punishes moments of "weakness" like taking days off.

It's also scary to know that I won't be able to get help until I need life support.

To sum up: this is not contained. No one knows what the fuck is happening. I can't work. WASH YOUR FUCKING HANDS.

Ah fuck! Didn't realize there was a hashtag just for lil ol' me! Check out above thread #CoronaVirusSeattle

Figure 5. A full transcription of @into_the_brush's original series of Tweets (into_the_brush, 2020).

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