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**How has China's home-grown social media
Wechat changed the traditional media landscape?**

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1 Introduction: What is Wechat and why?

Wechat, a mobile messaging service developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd. in China on January 21, 2011, has become the most popular social network app in China. This chat service, similar to Whatsapp, enables users to send voice, video, pictures, text and online polls to their contacts. It is free to install, use, and download, and is supported by all smartphone platforms including iPhone, Android, and Windows Phone operating systems. Wechat offers an innovative way for people to connect with each other through text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, one-to-many messaging, photo/video sharing, location sharing, and contact information exchange.¹

Wechat has so far gathered a staggering 600 million monthly active users at the end of 2015 and is available in 200 countries and 20 languages. Wechat is now the mostly widely used social networking service in China.

Because social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are blocked in China, China's homegrown social media app Wechat has actually become a benefactor of the ban. It has become a powerful multi-media platform for computer-mediated communication.²

Wechat first launched its private account platform in 2011, like Whats App, where people can have private conversations online by sending text, audio and video. The multi-function and its support for multi-media messages quickly made it the dominant messaging app.

However, its far-reaching social influence and public media function did not emerge until Tencent launched its public account platform in 2012, where media companies, institutions, businesses and individuals are encouraged to register and use the system to offer content for their customers, for free. Via the public account platforms, operators can publish content and monitor the data and information of the readers

¹ "Wechat," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WeChat>, 2014

² Gao, F., & Zhang, Y, "Analysis of WeChat on iPhone", Atlantic Press, 2013

according to its backstage system while users have to subscribe to read the contents of a public account. If a subscriber forwards a post in his/her private account, only that subscriber's circle of friends can see it.³

This unique feature has made it transcend the social network spectrum. It has become a new, comprehensive media platform where the public can acquire information, engage in public debate and exchange opinions.

Wechat has been changing China's media landscape greatly. About 80 percent of its 600 million users subscribe to the public accounts and the total number of public accounts on Wechat has reached over 10 million. Amongst them, news accounts make up 1 percent of the total number. Readers' demand for news and information remain predominant. Over 41 percent of users follow public accounts mainly to acquire news and information.⁴

Wechat public account platform is becoming one of the major channels to obtain news and information. For this reason, it has become vital to look at Wechat among all the news accounts, and to examine what kind of qualities these articles have to make them popular on the public account platform. It is also important to find out the differences of different media companies and individual journalists when it comes to the news production.

My research focuses on the study of the news public accounts. This research is set out to answer two separate questions.

1. What kind of content is mostly liked on the Wechat public account platform?
2. What are the different strategies between different media companies when using the Wechat public account platform?

³ "The Internet: From Weibo to Wechat", *The Economist*,
<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21594296-after-crackdown-microblogs-sensitive-online-discussion-has-shifted-weibo-wechat>

⁴ "The first official Wechat report by the Tencent company in 2015",
<http://www.askci.com/bschool/2015/01/27/9395ctp0.shtml>

Why does this matter?

Why do I think my research on this topic is important?

Firstly, it is important to understand what sort of content is mostly popular on the Wechat public accounts. What makes good content on the news public accounts? Which are the factors that eventually determine the popularity of the public accounts? The best way to answer these questions is to analyze the most shared content on the most popular news accounts, for instance, CCTV News and Global Times.

Secondly, as the world has seen a decline of the traditional media industry, a large number of journalists left journalism and found jobs elsewhere. In China, there has been a rise in the number of individual journalists who have been exploring a way apart from mainstream media to have an independent voice by using Wechat. However, to date there has no guideline on what sort of articles and stories are mostly welcome on the Wechat public account platform.

Also, there have been few attempts to look at the public accounts of the traditional media and find out what impact it has imposed on the editorial rooms. There have a list of questions that have gone unanswered. For instance, what kind of approaches have they used to seize readers' attention and gradually gather a group of loyal fans who would love to comment, share opinions and exchange ideas by participating in various Wechat-related events? Do the public accounts of the traditional media differentiate themselves from the traditional media they are affiliated to and become more aggressive to tap into sensitive political issues?

Even though most of the public accounts are at a primitive stage, it remains important to look into the change and influence Wechat public account platforms have had on China's media landscape and political life.

By studying the most liked content, I hope to gain an insight into understanding the way Chinese media function and the engagement of readers.

Case study

To answer the research questions, I chose two official accounts of traditional media, CCTV News and Global Times, because they are among the most dominant traditional media in China, considering their authority and far-reaching influence among the public.

These two accounts have similarities and differences. Both of them are set up to influence people in a diversified, fragmented society. The two accounts are firstly designed to direct Internet traffic flow to their original platforms.

Most interestingly, different public accounts have different agendas and different approaches. There are similarities in the media environment that all of them are facing, but there are also significant differences in their way of management skills.

2. Methodology

As I noted above, I have to answer two questions, both of which require research data, which I have obtained from different channels.

2.1 Research material

My first research question is What kind of content is mostly liked on the Wechat public accounts?

This was best answered by content analysis of two public accounts of two traditional media outlets: CCTV News and Global Times. As already mentioned, both of them were chosen because they are among the most dominant traditional media all across China in terms of readership and social influence.

Both are influential. CCTV News ranks the second on the Newrank Top 500 public accounts, with over 2 million followers while Global Time ranks No.55 on the list, with 300,000 followers.

They are slightly different: CCTV is clearly defined as the official media, in which it receives subsidy from the government and serves as the mouthpiece for the government and the Communist Party, while Global Times, as a commercialized media, has no subsidy from the government but is essentially a pro-government paper.

I wanted to find out whether they have different strategies when it comes to reaching their audiences and readers. If so, what are these differences? I also wanted to look at how they attract users and keep them on Wechat public account as long as possible.

I wanted to find out how the Wechat public account practice reversely influence the editorial principles of the traditional media and media strategy of the Wechat public account platform operators?

To achieve the goal, I obtained two separate lists of the 150 most popular articles of CCTV News and Global Times from October to December 2015 from Newrank, a leading company who do ratings for the Wechat public accounts in China.

I collected a full data set including headlines, links, the number of clicks, the number of likes and the number of shares.

Newrank is a company which tracks the most welcomed news accounts on Weibo (microblog), Wechat and other new media platforms in China. Its metrics rank the news accounts according to their overall readership, stories with the highest readership and so on.

My methodology is also a mixture of data analysis and in-depth interviews. I interviewed editors and journalists who run the public news accounts and asked them about their personal experiences with media censorship. I interviewed each of them for an hour online or by phone separately, asking in-depth questions about how they evaluate the possibility of their stories being censored, the motivation of reporting on sensitive topics and the ways they circumvent the censorship.

I also interviewed a manager of Newrank who is in charge of the observation and analysis of the news public accounts, and discussed the business model of these public accounts with him.

2.2 The most liked articles: classifications

I had a total of 300 articles from the two different platforms, which I classified by topic, headline, form, genre, angle of the article, and feelings.

These articles are from October to December 2015 for the research. Why did I select stories in those three months? Mostly because there were no big, major breaking news stories, such as those about natural disasters, social turmoil or major accidents, happening during that period, which might cause an anomaly in determining

information about people's readership. Furthermore, the last three months of a year is a barometer of what has happened in the year.

To find out what kind of content is the most popular, I cited the same methodology that former Reuters fellow Satu Vasantola used in her essay "Do you think it is sex? You are wrong!"⁵, when it comes to content analysis. In her essay, she classified articles into a wide range of genres, including topics, headlines, feelings, and length, in which I followed the same general classification at the very beginning but developed my own categories under each subtitle.

Topics

Traditionally, divided by areas of responsibility and expertise, news topics are divided into seven categories: domestic, foreign, health and science, sports, art, and lifestyle.

Considering the special feature of China's news, I divided China's news topics into nine categories: **politics, finance, civic, foreign, military, health & science, sports, art, and lifestyle.**

Politics, finance, civic, and military news belong to the big genre of domestic news. China's political news mainly focuses on the ruling Communist Party, which is different from the western political news that mostly focuses on elections. The Party and its decisions have imposed a huge influence on China's society, so I put political news as a separate category.

Civic news is another separate genre, because it refers to news that is closely related to people's livelihoods, which forms a large portion of the shared news. Civic news falls into the big genre of domestic news, paralleled by politics, finance, military, health, sports and lifestyle.

⁵ Satu Vasantola, "Do you think it is sex? You are wrong!", <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publication/do-you-think-it-sex-you-are-wrong>

Military news is targeted at articles that report on the military department.

Health and science is added because how to maintain youthfulness and live a long life has become a prominent topic in China. People are happy to read news and stories which teach them how to live a long life. Articles on health and science are widely shared on Wechat because Wechat links circles of friends, family members and acquaintances.

Lifestyle includes a wide range of content that not only concern personal choices in daily life but also refer to people's choice of their life's path and other life choices.

Headlines

There are different ways to categorize headlines in the traditional media, but few of them have tapped into the category of the headlines in the social media platforms, especially on the Wechat public platform.

I opted to classify headlines into different categories: fact, opinion, emotion and query. These categories are based on a different understanding about what kind of topics would be popular.

Fact means pure narration of the event. Basically, it relates what happened, pointing out the key information of the article in the headline, and it extracts the most important information of the content and it aims at grabbing people's attention at the first sight.

An opinion headline is the reverse of the fact-based headline, as it offers a personal, subjective opinion on topics that aimed at influencing readers. The opinion could come from the writer, the interviewee and someone else, as long as it express someone's own views.

Emotional headlines are very much looking at arousing people's emotional feelings, either making people happy, sad, sympathetic, hateful, and etc. It is subjective and could be packed with emotional words and aimed at invoking people's reactions.

The query category is intended to raise questions to provoke people to think, question, and ask for answers or a fantastic trigger to bring people into deep thinking/self-reflection.

Feelings

A 2015 Digital News Report⁶ found that people share when they are experiencing strong emotions such as anger, happiness, and sadness, which means the success of the most-shared content was the result of its capacity to tap into a deep emotional reaction among readers, which makes it important to look at how feelings make content go viral.

Ekman's list of basic emotions (1972) classified emotions as anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise. The most nuanced classification of emotions might be Parrot's (2001) theory that divided them up as love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness and fear. A New York Times study⁷ on what makes content go viral noted that the emotions that make people likely to pass along a photo or article could be divided into two different categories, the positive and negative. Positive emotions include joy and trust, while the negative emotions are fear, frustration, disgust, and anger.

Based on these classifications, I created my own classification: positive (including joy and trust), negative (such as fear, sadness, anger) and neutral (such as amazement, surprise and none).

Forms

⁶ Nic Newman, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Digital News Report 2015, <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publication/digital-news-report-2015>

⁷ Shlomo Sprung, What makes an article go viral, <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-makes-an-article-go-viral-2012-5>

There are six categories of form: articles, graphs, commentaries, video and multimedia, online live reports and others.

Further, I develop a sub-category for articles, as articles can be divided up by news and feature.

Genres of articles: news/feature

News and features are not easy to define. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary 'news' is 'newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events', while 'feature' is defined as a newspaper or magazine article or a broadcast program devoted to the treatment of a particular topic, typically at length.

Based on the existing definition, I am inclined to separate news from feature by its timeliness and the length, in that news points to events and issues which happened very shortly after the incident, and tend to be short while feature has less timeliness and always longer.

Commentary refers to "an expression of opinions or offering of explanations about an event or situation."

Graph is a new form of news reporting. For some big, significant, complicated issues, the newsrooms are getting used to drawing descriptive graphs, use images or animations to explain an event or situation to the readers. Because of its liveliness, it has been widely used on social media to explain complicated issues.

Video/multimedia refers to content with videos and multimedia.

Angles

The angle of an article remains an important question to understanding the media agenda of the public accounts.

Again, I borrowed this category from the paper by Satu Vasantola, as I consider her classification on the angle is compatible with Chinese media.

International: An article that adopted an international angle means stories related to international affairs.

National: Stories in this category had a nationwide influence or national perspective.

Local: Articles in this group are associated with community events and situations with limited influence.

Individual: An article that is written from a personal angle or perspective, for instance, from a person or a group of people.

2.3 In-depth Interviews

To further understand the similarities and differences of both public accounts on Wechat platform, I conducted two-hour in-depth interviews with the operator of both Wechat public accounts via the Wechat voice phone.

By interviewing them, I wanted to find out the motivations, aims, and different practice of running the Wechat public accounts. I also wanted to ask specific questions regarding the personnel, the news production procedure, the interaction between the newsroom of the traditional media and the new media groups who run Wechat public accounts, by which we can have a clear idea how close the media professionals and the new media staff members work together and how the interaction between both sides benefit them.

I carried out my interviews in two separate phases.

First, when I started my research, I just asked basic questions about the operation of the public accounts, such as the motivations, the staff arrangement, and etc. Then, after

I finished my content analysis, I went back to them and interviewed them with more specific questions based on some of the key points I acquired by the content analysis.

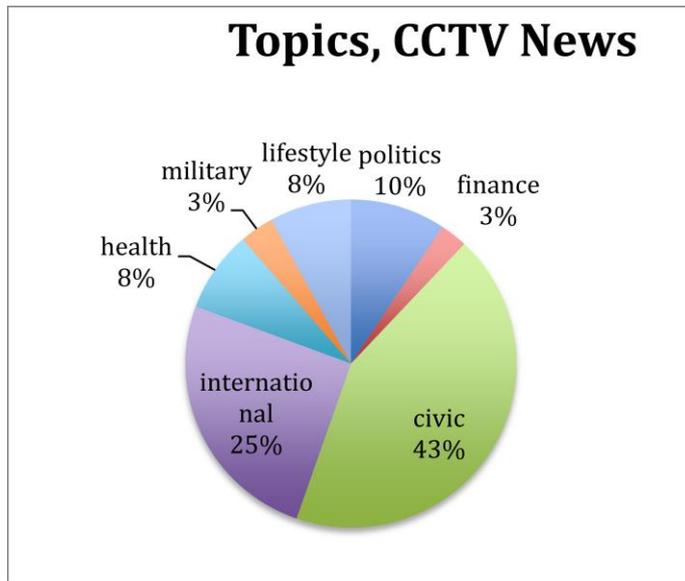
The questions I asked are as below:

1. What is the intention of your Wechat public account?
2. What is the target of your Wechat public account?
3. How do you measure the popularity of your public account?
4. What do you think are the key factors to produce the most popular articles on Wechat public platform?
5. Do you pay to buy in zombie followers (followers who are inactive)?
6. Do you face fierce market competition by running the public accounts?
7. Do you have regular story idea pitching meeting daily? Who decides the topics?
8. What kind of strategy do you adopt to attract the attention of the readers?
9. Do you organize offline events and activities to boost mutual interaction with the readers?
10. Do you deliberately differentiate Wechat public account platform from the traditional media organizations you are affiliated to?
11. What do you think is the most important to attract the attention on Wechat public platform?

3 Results: Classifications

3.1 CCTV News Account

Topics



A majority of the most liked content from CCTV News is civic news (43%) and international news (25%). Civic news takes the biggest proportion, as Wechat users care a lot about issues close to their livelihood.

Domestic news, which includes civic, finance, military and politics news, occupies over a half (58%) of the total number, which indicates domestic news is more popular among the readers.

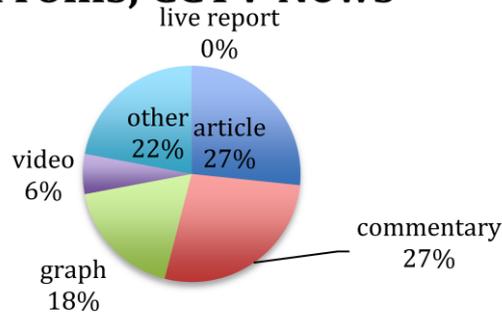
There are no articles on sports and art on CCTV Wechat public account platform.

Headlines

Headlines, CCTV News

emotion
7%

Forms, CCTV News



A large chunk of the headlines of the most liked content of CCTV Wechat public platform falls into the category of fact (37%) and query (2%). Emotion headlines occupy the least proportion, 7%, which indicates graphs have been widely used for policy changes or a big incident that needs adequate explanation to help the readers.

There was no live report.

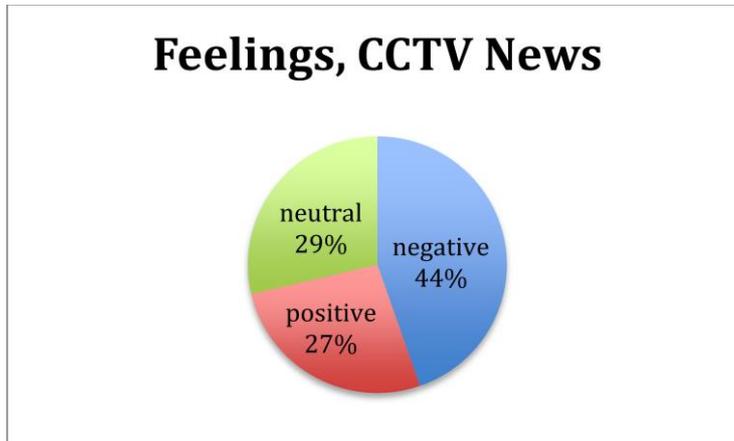
Among the articles, 82% are feature stories.

Forms and genres

Genre of articles



Feelings

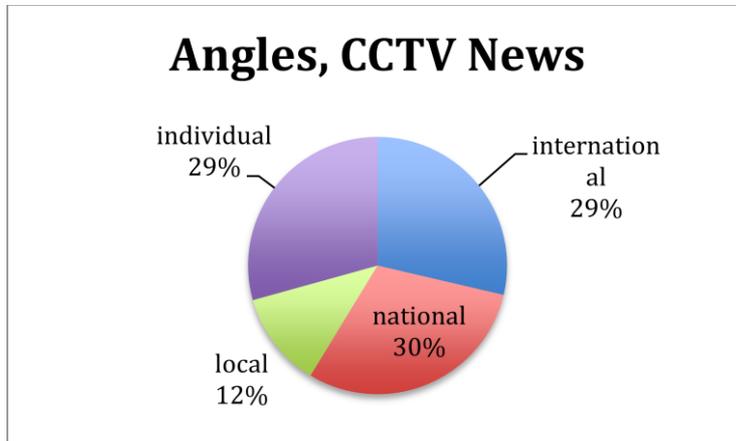


In terms of feelings, the category of negative dominated, occupying 44%.

Positive and neutral took almost the same proportion, 27% and 29% respectively. Most of the negative stories were international news while most domestic news were targeted at arousing people's negative feelings.

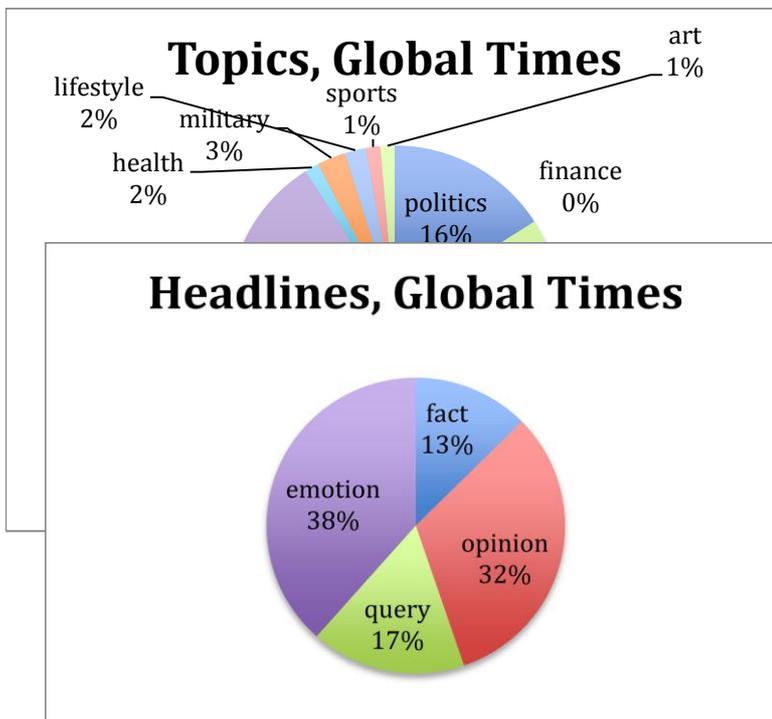
Angles

3.2 Global Times Account



In terms of angle, the results are quite evenly distributed. A large number of the articles fell into international (29%), national (30%) and individual (29%). International news takes significant proportion in both CCTV and Global Times, which are very popular on Wechat public account platforms. It is worth mentioning that art news, 1% of the most shared news, are politicized and increasing influence in the international community.

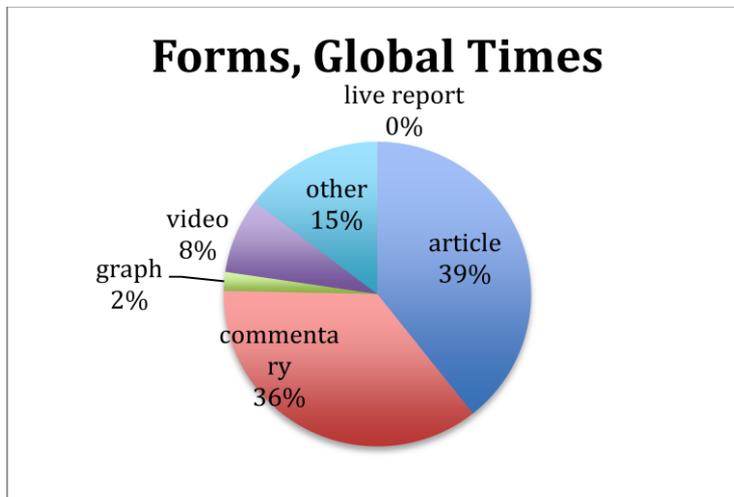
Topics



Headlines

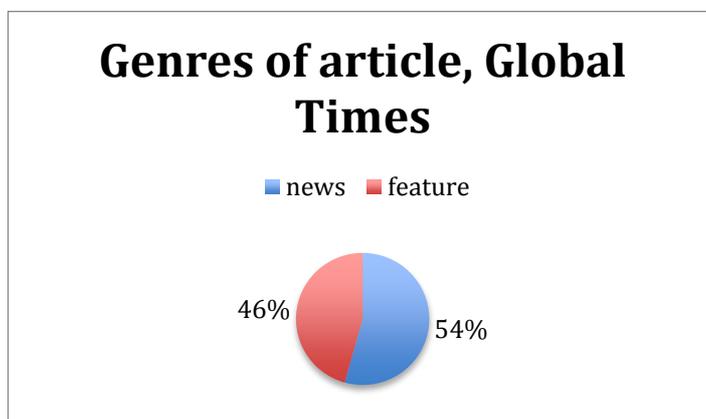
The largest number of the most liked stories from Global Times fell into emotion (38%) and opinion (32%). The rest of headlines were evenly distributed into fact and query.

Forms and genres

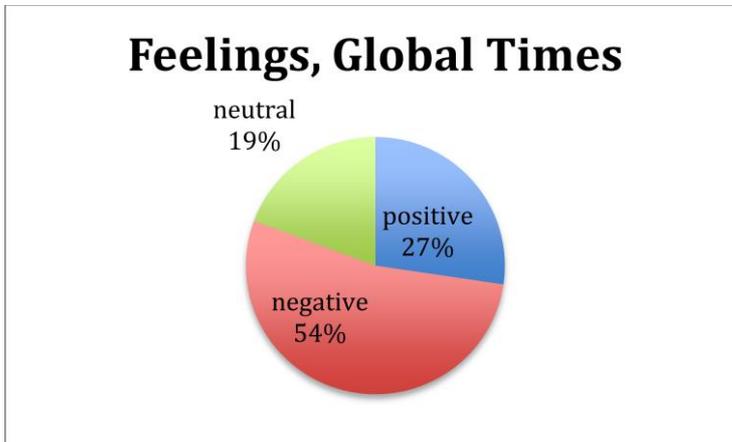


Among all the categories, two forms were remarkably large: article and commentary, occupying 39% and 36% respectively. The most liked articles were articles and commentary. Global Times cited some of its editorials from the newspaper on its Wechat platform, which occupied 30% of its total number of commentaries.

There was no live report.



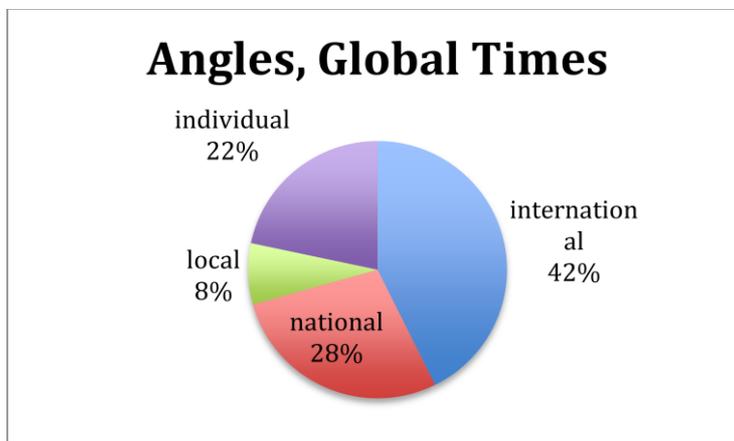
Feelings



In terms of feelings, the category of negative dominated, occupying 54%.

Positive and neutral took almost the same proportion, 27% and 19% respectively.

Angles



In terms of angles, the results are very obvious. International (42%) dominates. The national (28%) and individual (22%) follow closely. They also have a comparatively big proportion in the Global Times, which is focused on international reporting compared to national reporting.

4 Results: Mutual influence between traditional media and Wechat public platforms

4.1 CCTV News

China Central Television, commonly known as CCTV, is the predominant state television station in China. It is state-owned, which means it heavily relies on subsidies from the authorities. Also the central government plans for it to go global so as to exert the country's influence on the international community. So far it has reached a network of 45 channels broadcasting different programs.

CCTV has been long regarded as the mouthpiece for the Chinese government and the Communist Party. It has been seen as a state propaganda tool in the eyes of western media. The image of state-run CCTV as a firm watchdog of the national interests, a propaganda tool to enhance the country's global influence and transmit its value, is clearly defined.

For a long time, CCTV has also been criticized for its failure to engage with audiences to grab the public's attention.

However, the rise of Wechat news platform means that CCTV has had to change its strategy and it has made huge efforts to do so.

CCTV opened its official account on April 1, 2015. Its influence as the dominant form of normal media meant that this has had a huge impact. CCTV's news account gathered 220,000 followers within a day and received over 120,000 responding messages. So far, it ranks the second most popular news public account. It also faces intense competition from People's Daily, the Communist Party paper, which ranks first in the market. Nevertheless, the huge number of subscribers to CCTV is because of its big name and firm monopoly status.

The target of the CCTV Wechat public platform is to maintain its dominant influence and reach out to new audiences, especially young audiences. The primary target is to make sure the discourse of power is in the hands of the state-owned media.

It is not a secret that the public has been losing trust over the traditional media. People go online. Almost half of China's population is on the Internet, which makes the social media landscape vital to maintaining social stability. The central and local authorities have attached great importance to the social media platforms' vital role in maintaining the regime.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has made clear that "All news media run by the party bear the surname of 'party'" when in 2016 he took a high-profile tour of Beijing's major Party media companies. During his visit, Xi also told editors and reporters they must pledge absolute loyalty to the Communist party and closely follow its leadership in "thought, politics and action." (Guardian, February 2016). Previously, as Xi noted, the Party's ideological work is extremely important and "the Internet has become the main battlefield of ideology." (Bloomberg, November 2015).

To inherit this spirit, CCTV Wechat platform is important as a powerful weapon of the government's fight on the main battlefield of ideology.

"We focus on the news that people attach huge importance to. We do big stories matters vital to national well-being and but not politically sensitive stories," Huang Yuan, editor of CCTV Wechat public account platform said in a telephone interview with the author.

Similar to its TV channel, the Wechat account of CCTV stays close to the central government, giving intensive coverage of the events, activities and conferences attended by Chinese President Xi, major policy changing, and international issues. Its Wechat public account has the responsibility for passing on positive news to lead public opinion. Different from western media which are critical of politicians, CCTV coverage of the top leaders is positive and uncritical.

It seems that editors of CCTV News Wechat public accounts have no different media agenda to the TV news channel itself. They give up on making any attempt to do

stories that vaguely fall within grey areas, or go beyond the boundary to report on some sensitive news. They also admitted that they feel no obligation to tap into the 'hot water' or sensitive issues of China's fast-changing society.

On the Wechat public account platform, they report largely on civic news that is close to people's livelihood. They follow closely the policy changes and explain elaborately to the readers what kind of influence it might have regarding the change of the policy.

To attract a much younger online generation, CCTV has adopted a much softer strategy compared with its TV stations. CCTV's Wechat public account is less condescending because it largely supplies soft, informative news rather than hard news, as a different approach for the new audiences and followers on the new platform.

Instead of copying the news contents of its TV channel, CCTV organized a new media team, consisting of an editor-in-chief and a dozen of editors, to run the Wechat official account platform.

They work day and night shifts, on rotation. Their routine work is to find topics, collect information and discussion and write several pieces per day. Due to the time limitation, they are not involved directly in any frontline interviews. If any breaking news takes place, instead of sending out their own journalists, editors of Wechat public account phone journalists of the TV station to get information, and then write the stories themselves.

CCTV is one of several mainstream media outlets, including the People's Daily (Party's paper), and Xinhua News Agency, which have the privilege of sending out group messages up to ten times daily to subscribers. For other news agencies, they can only send one to three group messages per day.

Such a privilege has enabled CCTV to reach out to their readers by sending out a sea of information and pushing out breaking news.

Routinely, CCTV's public account would send at least one piece of clustered news at a fixed time, respectively at 9 am, 1 pm and 8 pm. Each time, they would send out 4 to 5 pieces of news in a cluster. In the evening, CCTV has a regular slot for its late-night program. Regularly at late night, the headline news is "CCTV commentary", then followed by a piece of graph news and news digest.

However, the need for a large volume of information proves to be overwhelming for editors, as they have complained about "putting great efforts into looking for information to fill in the gaps."

Editors of CCTV's Wechat public accounts still manage to make sure original news takes over half of the total number of the stories. "We are looking for original content. We rely on our huge group of journalists on the frontline to send back original stories and then we reedit them," editor Huang Yuan says.

The biggest challenge for CCTV, as Huang put, is how to adapt to the different likes of different readers. "Considering we have such a diverse audience, it remains difficult for us to find exactly what the readers want," Huang said.

They have been testing the likes and dislikes of the readers. Some columns, such as "One graph tells you the whole story", "Night reading" and some other commentary columns have proved to be popular among the subscribers. "One graph tells you the whole story" has proved to be a success, as it uses a vivid, imaginative way of displaying the truth and explaining the news, and it has become one of the most popular programs on CCTV's Wechat public account.

Huang has found out that stories around 1,000-1,500 words are the most popular. "People are reading stories and articles on their mobile phones during their lunch breaks, morning and evening commuting, so we have to keep the content informative within around 1,000 words."

CCTV has a strict hierarchy. Editors cannot decide on what stories they can run on their own. Instead, they have to pitch their story ideas to the editor-in-chief who manages the whole team. The angle of the stories would also be carefully discussed between editors and the editor-in-chief.

It is not compulsory for CCTV journalists to contribute to the social media platform. However, the communication channel between the journalist and the new media team is smooth. Based on its massive network of correspondent stations in vast areas of China, the first-hand material obtained by its broad network of the journalist stations is an advantage for CCTV.

“We don’t face the intense competition from the market, but we face new challenges as the traditional media is on the decline; the new social media platform, especially Wechat, might be the future, and we have to understand the market and the readers by carrying out all sorts of experiments,” Huang said.

“It is a whole new world.”

4.2 Global Times

China’s society has been torn apart by its long-time disputes of “left” and “right”. These “left” and “right” labels are also applied to Chinese media outlets, whether it is appropriate or not. Except state-owned media outlets in China, other media companies that fall into the commercialized media outlets (receiving no subsidy from the authorities) are always differentiated by “left” and “right”.

However, “left” and “right” in China have very different meanings from those in the West. Roughly, in public discussions about the Chinese “left” and “right” media, “left” means conservative and pro-government, while “right” means more liberal and independent from government.

The Global Times, a Beijing-based subsidiary of the People’s Daily, falls into the category of a leftist paper as regarded by the public.

The Global Times, launched in 1993 in Beijing, is a spin-off from People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). With a widespread network of overseas correspondents in over 150 countries and regions, The Global Times became well known by its intensive coverage of international affairs.

In recent years, its editorials over controversial, significant issues on both domestic and international affairs have gained great popularity. Its sensational commentaries promoting nationalism are also controversial.

The Global Times print version has a daily circulation of 2.8 million copies (40 percent subscribers, 60 percent newsstand sales)⁸. Offline marketing and PR events and activities also bring in a certain amount of revenue. To comply with the central government's call for digital media, The Global Times started to make its presence felt on a certain number of social media platforms.

The Global Times media group continues to grow in recent years. Besides its Chinese edition newspaper, the whole organization has several other sections including its English edition newspaper (launched in 2009, averagely 70,000 to 100,000 sales per day), a news portal website and a public opinion polling center.⁹

The Global Times opened its official account in mid-2013. Initially, they mostly copied and pasted the content published on the newspaper, which resulted in poor performances. It now reaches over 300,000 followers, most of whom are university students, professionals, and citizens in urban areas.

The Wechat public account of the Global Times inherited the tradition of emphasis on international news, as the genre of international news takes the biggest chunk of the most popular stories and articles on the Wechat platform.

⁸ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, March 2013

⁹ *ibid.*

It is noteworthy that, even though Global Times has considerable independence from the government, its editorial management have still represented and interpreted the official stance of the government.

For example, China-Taiwan relations have traditionally become a very important topic for the Global Times Chinese edition itself, and it also finds its dominant place on Wechat public account platform. A large number of news and commentaries on Wechat public platform were about cross-strait relations, where the paper is pro-government and offers absolute support for the unification of Chinese Taiwan and the mainland.

One of the most popular is “Strong Nation Forum” (强国论坛), which publishes stories against the United States and Japan on its newspaper. Also, there are a comparatively large number of most popular stories on the Wechat public account platform featuring US-China and US-Japan relationships. These stories took a clear-cut stand in the defense of the national interest of Chinese citizens and included strong diatribes against the US and Japan.

Influenced by the characteristics of the newspaper, the art and sports stories on its Wechat public account platform are highly politicized. All the art and sports news are politics related, such as a Taiwanese singer’s tip-off about a separatist artist to the Taiwanese authorities and a Miss Chinese-Canadian who was banned by the Chinese government.

Unlike CCTV, the commercialized daily Global Times faces intense competition from the market, so the target of the Global Times Wechat public account is to enhance its influence and achieve commercial goals at the same time.

It has always been a key issue for the operators of The Global Times Wechat public account to find a way to win market recognition and gain market influence.

Hao Junshi, director of The Global Times Wechat public platform, admitted in an interview for this paper that it takes a long time to find the market and understand

what kind of content the readers are in need of. “We gradually realize that the media on Wechat have to be down-to-earth. We have to do stories that are close to people’s lives.”

“The homogeneity of the news is severe on the Wechat public platform. Some widespread articles would appear on different public account platforms, which is not good. We want to do original news that can pass on new values.”

To achieve this goal, Global Times Wechat team would take the initiative of inventing some hot, controversial topics, shape a public discussion platform and lead the public discussion. In a typical case, Global Times Wechat team followed an Intellectual Property Rights dispute over an electric bicycle between a Chinese technology entrepreneur and an Estonian designer, which was not a hot topic, but after its comprehensive coverage of the topic, the story soon went viral. More and more netizens got involved in the discussion. As a result, the Global Times Wechat did a follow-up story on the incident, bringing the topic into a broad discussion about the flaws of China’s IPR law and regulations. Eventually, the story became one of the most popular stories of Global Times Wechat public account platform.

“It is not about how fast we can spread the information. It is about how deep we can go. We always think about what kind of new angles or what new perspectives we can introduce into the news and refresh it,” says Hao Junshi.

“We are never afraid of involving any controversy.”

“We regard the news incident as a chain of the interaction with the readers; we would participate directly or indirectly to accelerate its development.”

To make a sensational story, the Global Times Wechat public account team would grab big headlines by crushing rumors or misleading information created by some “unprofessional journalists and editors.”

“A good strategy is that we try to crush rumors invented by some disqualified media/individuals, such as superstition or misunderstanding about the health

maintenance skills and primitive errors created by some unprofessional journalists and editors.”

Rumor is a collective distortion of the fact. “Before it was realized to be just a rumor, it has already become viral on the Internet. Hence, any articles or stories aimed at crushing the rumor can seize great attention in a short time,” says Hao Junshi.

It is important to check out the information on the social media platforms. Anti-rumor campaigns are one of the favorite strategies for the authorities to maintain social stability. Wechat offers an official reporting system on its public platform. Any content that falls under the suspicion of being pornography, violence, misinformation, scam and frauds, would be reported to the Tencent Company and be dealt with. Users are encouraged to report any offensive content according to their own judgment of its authenticity. Usually, Wechat censors would delete rumors, but it remains unknown what schemes the censors use to decide whether or not to delete/block the rumor.

Before a rumor was deleted, there would be a “window period” that allows rumors to be transmitted for a limited time. Hence, The Global Times regarded publishing stories to crush rumors as a good strategy to attract users. They have published comparative content aimed at clarifying rumors.

Wechat public account operators also face intense market competition. Hao Junshi, director of Wechat public account platform of Global Times, has thought about diverse ways of making a profit. Currently, the advertisement department of the newspaper works closely with Wechat public account platform operators and introduces advertisement implants at some points but it is far from sustaining its operation. It currently relies mostly on the revenue from the newspaper.

The uniqueness of the popularity of the stories, as Hao puts it, is offering a unique and surprising angle to dig deeper into the story.

They cannot beat CCTV news on the timing. Instead, they have found a way to make analysis stories based on experience and materials they have collected.

“We always publish our investigative story within 24 hours after the breaking of news. We aim at offering different angles to interpret the story,” Hao said.

5 Discussion

Based on my research on Top 150 stories, I now summarize three key observations: the different strategies of different media, the importance of sensational headlines, and the need for close engagement with readers.

Different strategies of different media

Judging from the results, we can clearly draw a conclusion that different media have different strategies with regard to their most liked content.

CCTV, a state-owned media outlet, has to preserve its image as being neutral, reliable, impartial and authoritative. It is supposed to represent the highest media standards across the nation. Therefore, the Wechat public account of CCTV sticks to the rule and holds a comparatively independent, objective stance on both domestic and international issues.

A majority of the headlines of the most liked stories of CCTV Wechat public account are fact-based, and the articles are traditional news and features.

The Global Times has been attracting attention from the public in a different way, by passing on strong emotional feelings and critical comments over the issues.

For example, The Global Times Wechat public account has run a huge number of stories with sensational headlines, mostly aiming at arousing people's emotional feelings and stirring up their deep thoughts about the related issues.

Sensational headlines matter a lot

Articles with the number of likes above 100,000 are regarded as most popular articles. These articles go viral. However, going viral is like alchemy, and there is no simple formula for viral success. Of course, stories about celebrities, pop stars, writers, musicians and films, can drive huge volume of traffic. But it is not the only factor that might grab huge attention from the public.

In my view, to make viral articles in the news industry on Wechat public platform, the topic has to be a hot topic already. Topics that have already gained the most attention in different social media platforms and might lead to the exposure on the mainstream media press would have more opportunities to create viral content.

Also, the most liked headlines also tended to generate emotional feeling among the readers. Surprise /amazement was a big driving force for the viral content. News stories that amuse users and make them happy also help with its popularity.

Marketo's 2013 survey with Brian Carter¹⁰ on why people share on Facebook found that people love to share content that amazes them. This view is supported by several other surveys.

One of the most interesting findings is that indirect headlines that could stir up people's curiosity can become viral on the Wechat public account platform. A lot of headlines of the Global Times are indirect, ambiguous, which means you cannot tell what the story is about simply by reading the topics. Such a strategy arouses people's curiosity to click on the headlines and read the whole story. Most headlines of the most liked stories of the Global Times are also sensational, either with strong opinions, strong contrast or queries. For instance, one of the most liked story headlined with "Absolutely nothing? sensational: ordinary people get duped 100% by the scam." The story got over 100,000+ number of likes, because it invented a strong contrast.

High-quality content is a necessity of a viral article.

Nowadays, the high-quality content mainly relies on a unique angle, an in-depth investigation, and an appealing conclusion that can convince readers and surprise them as well. People would like to read news and articles that have a thorough

¹⁰ Steve Rayson, How to go viral: lessons from the most shared content of 2015, <http://buzzsumo.com/blog/go-viral-lessons-shared-content-2015/>

investigation about the topic and also bring in new perspectives to deepen the discussion on the topic.

In conclusion, to create viral content on Wechat public platform is a combination of hot topics, sensational headlines, and quality content.

Close engagement with readers

Both CCTV and Global Times admitted they have no intention to differentiate themselves from the traditional media companies they are affiliated with. They consider that they pass on the same values in conjunction with their sister paper/TV station.

For instance, The Global Times Wechat account stays close to the obvious characteristics of the “leftist” daily, publishing nationalist stories when it comes to international issues. Operators also cite editorials of the newspaper from time to time when they feel obliged to or as a result of orders from the editor-of-chief of the daily.

They regard the social media platform as “an extension of the traditional media”, and if there is a difference, it lies in the different levels of understanding about readers and varied ways of reaching out to readers. They both agree that they have a better understanding about the readers compared with the editors and journalists of the traditional media companies.

This is not difficult to understand, for down-to-earth Wechat public account operators, whether or not they can connect with readers, matter greatly to success. They put a lot of effort into understanding their readers.

The backstage operation system of the Wechat public account makes it possible for the operators to get hold of the readers. Operators can see clearly the fluctuation of the number of subscribers, the curve diagram of the viewing numbers and other reader-related data. By analyzing the data, it is the first time that media workers can clearly locate their readers and push out tailored-content to them.

“For traditional media, the difficulty lies in how to find the readers: Who are they? What do they want? For us, we come to know exactly who our readers are and what sort of stories they are expecting,” Hao said.

For The Global Times Wechat editors, the engagement with readers runs from the very beginning to the end. Global Times editors pitched story ideas from the hottest topics on Sina Weibo, which lists and updates with the newest, most popular topics on the Twitter-like platform. (This is different from CCTV operators who acquired story ideas by reading through the big main-stream media, such as Xinhua News Agency, People’s Daily and the CCTV website.) Editors then collected, analyzed and synthesized different opinions on Weibo, made judgments and shared values by publishing stories.

Editors of Global Times also organize readers’ clubs by organizing different online and offline events. They have set up three QQ chatting groups so that they can communicate with their readers directly via online chatting. In some typical cases, online subscribers/fans were encouraged to contribute to the story. In a story of a public debate over whether or not the Chinese customs have imposed an extra tax on overseas online shopping items, two subscribers, an official of Beijing customs and a PhD candidate, were interviewed by editors of Wechat public account and offered professional opinions, which eventually was compiled into the story. In another case, the Global Times Wechat editors have tried to bring in new readers by covering issues that matter to certain occupational groups. So far, they have published articles promoting the interest of doctors, policemen, teachers, and LGBT groups. Wechat public accounts of Global Times value human rights of the disadvantaged, which helped boost its popularity among the readers.

Compared with a relatively fixed readership of Global Times, CCTV has a much broader range of readers stretching over the whole country. Hence, CCTV reaches

out to their readers by offering informative, pragmatic news and stories to cater to the different likes of the readers.

“We push out the digest of news in the morning and bedtime stories in the evening, to meet the need of different readers,” Huang Yuan said.

Compared with CCTV, Global Times has attached greater importance to the engagement of readers. For instance, Editors of the Global Times spend hours reading through the hot topics lists on Sina Weibo to follow closely the most discussed and most popular topics, and find and collect enough information that reflect the public opinion on these topics before they produce their content.

6. Conclusions

Even though the traditional media industry has been declining in China and all across the world, the rise of Wechat has rejuvenated the traditional media landscape and introduced new elements to the media content.

Examining the most popular content of the traditional media offers guidance for the editor and journalists of the Wechat news public accounts for creating audience engagement.

The results of this study shows that producing viral content on the Wechat news public accounts largely depend on the capability of tapping into the hot topic and bringing in a unique angle for the popular content. According to the results of the study, people are looking for inspiring, personalized, and interesting news and content on Wechat news public accounts. Good content should be able to amuse the readers and show strong opinions.

I conclude the study with eight recommendations or observations:

1. Good content is the king

Don't worry about the decline of the traditional media industry. Quality journalism based on robust investigation, solid analysis and in-depth stories is the key to media success.

2. Pragmatic information in great need

Unlike the traditional media industry in which hard news takes the biggest chunk of the total number, readers of Wechat public accounts prefer pragmatic information of how to become successful, maintain a long life and make money.

3. The lack of news and live reports

On Wechat public account platforms, people are no longer expecting news without ideas. More and more news and feature stories are a mixture of investigation and the

writer's personal view. As people's subscriptions to the Wechat news account indicate people's personal taste and opinions, journalists are more inclined to write stories in a personalized angle.

Stories that aimed to arouse people's negative emotions, for instance frustration, anger, hatred and so on, seem to be more popular on Wechat public accounts.

4. The rise of video and graph journalism

The success of the program on CCTV Wechat public account, "One graph tells you the whole story," represents the increasing use of graphs, videos and audios on Wechat.

Some popular news accounts, including CCTV, send voice messages of the news digest to users daily during the morning. It has become a new news form that most of the users found convenient.

5. Stories around 1,500 words are the most liked

Chinese scholars hold different opinions on the most ideal length of the stories on the Wechat public account platform. Some may consider that the longer the story is, the more possibility there is that the story might grab people's attention. Some have different ideas on the issue.

The in-depth interview with editors of Wechat public accounts shows that stories around 1,500 words have the biggest possibility to go viral. "It cannot be too short. Stories around 500 words cannot tell a really good story, and people would expect more. Stories above 2,000 words are too much. The ideal is around 1,500 words," Huang Yuan says.

6. Worries about quality news

Any information supplied on social media needs to be checked out thoroughly. Rumors, especially those that are partly based on truth but are being twisted can be

widespread on Wechat public accounts. It has become a problem for the readers how to distinguish the false rumors from the quality news.

The state-backed Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) revealed that 2.1 million WeChat “false rumors” are deleted daily. The most widespread “false rumors” are related to events leading to negative emotions such as fear and anger, or where the articles are related to food safety, safety incidents, or an alleged health crisis.¹¹

The central and local governments have been launching massive anti-rumour campaigns on the Internet, especially Wechat public accounts, as historically rumours have the nature of being used to stir up things, disrupt the social order and subvert the regime. A reporting system has also been adopted by Tencent to encourage its users to report any rumours or information relating to pornography, violence, misleading information, or the disruption of social order. By clicking on the “Report” button on the Wechat public account platform, users can report any suspicious content to the company. The company also launched an official account to quash any rumour. In short, widespread rumours make readers worry about the quality of the content.

7. Content that amuses the readers is most popular

Unlike traditional media, users of Wechat public account look for fun. They are expecting useful, interesting, inspiring stories on Wechat public accounts instead of serious news. If it is possible, try to amuse your readers and make them laugh.

8. Inspiring stories go viral

People are looking for inspiring stories that make them feel good. Stories that are creative can be spread widely on Wechat public platform. Also, use data journalism, make videos and animation would help its popularity.

¹¹ Walk the chat, <https://walkthechat.com/centership-of-wechat-rumors-on-wechat-2-1million-rumors-deleted-daily/>

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