

3. How does Australia's Chinese-language media negotiate between Australian and PRC state media?

Wanning Sun

November 3 2021

This is the third in a series of five briefs on Chinese-language media in Australia.¹ The briefs are best read in conjunction with each other in the series, and readers may also benefit from reading the author's 2016 report for the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities,² which provides background, context and detailed information about major Chinese-language media outlets in Australia.

Data used in these briefs come from a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP180100663, Chief Investigators: Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu) 'Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power'. Empirical data included in these briefs have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals: Media International Australia; Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies; and Social Media & Society. For more information on data sources relied upon in this brief, refer to Methodology below.

Key takeaways

- Wedged between two media systems, many Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians live in a highly conflicted information environment and experience a high level of ambivalence towards both Australian media and People's Republic of China (PRC) state media. As a result of this, many Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians suffer from cognitive dissonance as they are regularly exposed to both Australian media's coverage of the PRC and PRC state media's coverage of Australia.
- Many Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians are unable to identify with the news value of either media system. While many consider Australian English-language media to be more objective than PRC state media, they nevertheless feel alienated by the negative reporting on the PRC and on Chinese people. They seem to have more cultural affinity with PRC state media due to language familiarity, even though they don't rank its objectivity factor highly.

¹ Brief 1. 'Why apps are a game changer for Chinese-language media in Australia', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 20 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/why-apps-are-game-changer-chinese-language-media-australia>>; Brief 2. 'What are the key misconceptions about censorship in Australia's Chinese-language media?', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 27 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/what-are-key-misconceptions-about-censorship-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-media>>.

² Wanning Sun, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments challenges and opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, September 8 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>>.

- In order to deliver news and information products which speak to this sense of ambivalence and remedy this cognitive dissonance, many of Australia's Chinese-language digital media outlets function as content brokers and cultural intermediaries, and adopt a unique, highly processed and hybrid news genre.
- Most Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are not merely a blunt tool of the PRC government and its state media, nor just a ventriloquist for English-language media. Rather, they seem to exist profitably by actively giving voice to PRC migrants' sense of ambivalence towards both Australia and the PRC.

Introduction

Chinese-language media in Australia include both long-established legacy media and more recently developed digital/social media. In recent years, this sector has come under increasing scrutiny, as it is believed to be influenced by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In September 2016, the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney published *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities*, the first report on Australia's Chinese-language media, including print, electronic and digital media.³ Since that report, Australia's Chinese-language media landscape has become even more complex, dynamic, and fluid. Digital technologies continue to transform the ways in which Chinese-language media content is produced, accessed, and consumed. Despite these rapid developments, public knowledge about how this new digital industry operates is still at best fragmented. The lack of this up-to-date and intimate knowledge may have accounted for some out-of-date, simplistic or even misleading statements often made in the PRC influence debate.

Ambivalence and dissonance

As Australia's largest migrant group with a first language other than English, Chinese-Australians not only must navigate their way through mainstream Australian media using a second or third language, but they must also try to make sense of the contradictions, conflicts and gaps they confront when they seek to reconcile their experience of Australia's English-language media with their experience of Chinese-language media – in particular, the state-sanctioned media of the PRC.

In a 2019 survey conducted by the author of first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants in Australia, respondents were asked about their views on Australia-PRC relations and their positions on issues involving the PRC that are typically presented in a polarising manner by Australian English-language media. Survey results point to a high level of ambivalence regarding both Australia and the PRC. For example, a significant number of respondents said they sided with the PRC in relation to disputes over Huawei (73 percent) and the South China Sea (79 percent); however, support for the PRC was dramatically lower in relation to the issue of PRC influence in Australia (40 percent), trade disputes (38 percent), human rights (22 percent) and sports competition (41.72 percent). That said, while respondents did not back the PRC on these last four issues, they did not emphatically support the Australian position either. The number of respondents who chose 'not sure' on these four issues ranged from 32 percent to 45 percent. The only area where more respondents sided with the Australian rather than the PRC viewpoint was human rights – 46 percent compared with 22 percent.

The survey points a high level of cognitive dissonance between the Mandarin-speaking community and mainstream Australian society. In the same survey, respondents were asked, 'What is your view on the China influence debate in Australia media?' as the majority of respondents (58.9 percent) agreed with the statement that 'China's rise is inevitable but it will not pose a real threat to Australia'. 41.97 percent agreed with the statement, 'I think media exaggerates the China threat in order to attract readers'; 26.80 percent agreed that 'Australia's economy has benefitted enormously from China, and Chinese-Australians have made huge

³ Ibid.

contribution to Australian society, so the China threat rhetoric is simply ridiculous'. Only 18.33 percent agreed that 'excessive Chinese influence is a threat to Australia's democracy and national interest'.

Unable to identify with either media system

The author's research points to the risk of making sweeping claims about the political stance of Chinese-language media outlets, or whether they are pro-Beijing or pro-Canberra. When 2019 survey respondents were asked how they felt about negative news about the PRC or the PRC government in the Australian media, they expressed a diverse range of opinions. Just over one-third (34.76 percent) of respondents ticked the box saying, 'No matter whether the report is truthful, I feel unhappy because of the hostility of the Australian media to China.' Another 34.76 percent ticked the box saying, 'I feel the Western media focus on negative news about China and do not report fairly on China.'

When asked to assess the level of objectivity of a range of media outlets, only 19 percent of participants who answered this question (163 out of 851) rated Australian English-language media such as the ABC, SBS, *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* as 'very objective'. Interestingly, about the same number of individuals (19 percent; 159 participants) also rated PRC state media such as China Central Television (CCTV), *Peoples' Daily* and *Global Times* as 'very objective'.

But this does not depict the full picture. If we combine the number of participants who rated these media categories as either 'very objective' or 'basically objective', a gap of nearly 13 percent opens up between mainstream Australian English-language media and PRC state media, with just over 79 percent of respondents giving a positive assessment of the objectivity of mainstream Australian English-language media outlets, while just under 67 percent felt the same way about PRC state media outlets.

That said, acknowledging the objectivity of mainstream Australian English-language media does not mean respondents prefer to consume content from these outlets. Data from the survey in fact point to the pulling power of linguistic familiarity. When respondents were asked why they chose particular media outlets as sources of news and information about the PRC, nearly 50 percent of participants answered that it was because they were more comfortable reading in Chinese than English. Even in relation to respondents' choice of media outlet for news about Australia, 36 percent answered that it was because they were more comfortable reading in Chinese than English.

The predominance of Australian content

The author conducted a content analysis of all the *Sydney Today* articles delivered via WeChat in a randomly selected month in 2019, in order to gain a clear sense of its content – topics, themes, genres – and, more importantly, to establish the source of the content. *Sydney Today* was chosen as it is the most popular Chinese-language digital outlet in Australia.

When news and current affairs items were differentiated with reference to geographical location, 66 percent (103) of the stories were about what happens in Australia, 13 percent were about the PRC and 21 percent were about places other than the PRC and Australia, such as Hong Kong. It is understandable that most news and current affairs-related content reports on what happens in Australia, since *Sydney Today* sees itself as the main Chinese-language platform delivering up-to-date news and information about Australia, especially to those who do not regularly access English-language media.

It is noteworthy that only a small percentage of content related to the PRC, with more news and current affairs-related content about places other than the PRC and Australia than there were reports on the PRC. Given that these outlets cater to PRC migrants, this seems counterintuitive. However, what happens in Australia is of more interest to readers – this is, after all, where they live. Furthermore, while PRC authorities regulate WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs), prohibiting the production of certain types of news content, news which is not about PRC is not of as much concern. Since Mandarin-speaking migrants from the PRC across the globe share a similar set of interests and concerns about certain issues, stories about these migrant communities in other parts of the world sometimes become stories of interest. This may help explain why 21 percent of content related to 'other' areas. It is also less risky to report or repost news about other such migrant communities elsewhere than to report what happens in the PRC. Of course, the PRC government

would welcome any reposting of content from its state media outlets, but, as discussed in Brief 2, ‘What are the key misconceptions about censorship in Australia’s Chinese-language media?’,⁴ it makes little business sense to repost propaganda content from the PRC.

It is worth noting that only seven of the 157 news stories were original stories produced by *Sydney Today*. Some 38 percent of stories (60) were reposts from elsewhere, but 57 percent (90) fall into the category of compilation. These translated, reposted, compiled and original stories were then further differentiated in terms of geographical location – were they about Australia, the PRC or somewhere else? Of the 103 news stories about Australia, 14 were reposts, 82 were compiled and seven were original stories. Of the 21 stories about the PRC, 16 were reposts and five were compiled – there were no original stories. Again, the absence of original stories and the relative lack of stories about the PRC can be explained in terms of the regulatory framework within which WSAs operate.

The issue of source is important. Of the 82 news stories about Australia, 75 – as much as 91 percent – came from Australian English-language media outlets and government organisations (e.g., the Australian Border Force, the Australian Tax Office). Seven news stories – nine percent – used a mixture of Australian English-language and Chinese-language media, including PRC state media and user-generated content on social media. Notably, there are no news stories about Australia that use exclusively sources from the PRC.

Cultural brokering through a hybrid news format

The author’s research on Chinese-language media uncovers a hyper-hybrid and somewhat unique news genre. These media outlets mostly adopt a form that involves translation, curation and editorialisation, plus occasional additional reporting. This style is taken for granted by the outlets’ intended Chinese-language audience, but may be somewhat novel to an Australian English-language audience.

As mentioned earlier in this brief, many readers prefer to read their news in Chinese, even though it is about what happens in Australia. But this preference cannot simply be explained in terms of language familiarity. A combination of reasons, including language, reading habits, and different perspectives on news values may help explain why a Chinese-language compilation of English-language news, translated into Chinese and presented in a culturally familiar narrative style is eminently more digestible.⁵

This hybrid news form has dual functions. First, the decision not to produce original news and instead mostly take content from myriad sources elsewhere is cost-effective – it costs much less to translate published material than to produce new reports. Second, there is a cultural reason underpinning the preference to synthesise material from different sources, including online and printed sources, and from established media organisations and user-generated content. It is a way to help readers work through the possible cognitive dissonance resulting from inhabiting different and sometimes conflicted worlds in their day-to-day existence. This is a cultural product which caters to the need for content that is hypersensitive to a community’s sense of ambivalence and unease while being caught in the middle.

In other words, producing this form of news is a type of cultural brokering. This brokering is crucial because it not only helps ‘translating tension’⁶ arising from living between two countries which are currently at odds, but, more importantly, brokering functions to cater to the cultural and informational needs of a community that is unmet by either Australian English-language media or PRC state media. While this practice is not unique to the Chinese-language media sector, this particular form of cultural brokering is vital to first-generation Mandarin-speaking readers in Australia at this particular historical juncture and in this specific geopolitical context.

4 Wanning Sun, Brief 2. ‘What are the key misconceptions about censorship in Australia’s Chinese-language media?’, Australia–China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 27 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/what-are-key-misconceptions-about-censorship-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-media>>.

5 This may also help explain why, when the content of the mainstream English-language media in Australia is translated and published in Chinese – such as by ABC Chinese and *The Australian* – it seems to be less known to, and less resonant with, Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians.

6 See, e.g., Fan Yang ‘Translating tension: Chinese-language media in Australia’, Lowy Institute, September 29 2021 <<https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/translating-tension-chinese-language-media-australia>>.

Conclusion

There is a widely held view that PRC social media platforms, especially WeChat, encourage Mandarin-speaking migrants to continue living in the information environment of the PRC, and isolate them from the Australia's information environment. This 'either-or' approach is ill-informed. The author's research suggests that Chinese-language media outlets have become a key space for Chinese-Australians to access news and information about Australia, including news from Australian English-language media.

Two things become clear from these data. First, contrary to popular belief, Australia's Chinese-language media outlets publish more content about Australia and from Australian sources than content about the PRC and from PRC sources. Second, the most successful Chinese-language digital media enterprises are not those that promote propaganda for the Communist Party of China (CPC) or those that benefit from financial or in-kind support from the PRC government. Instead, they are media outlets which know how to operate as content brokers and cultural intermediaries.

Methodology

Data and information used for this briefing come from a number of sources. The first is a survey conducted in February 2019. The survey, involving 927 Mandarin-speaking Chinese Australian participants, focused on the media and news access and consumption habits, and the preferred platforms or sources of the surveyed cohort. It was conducted through 'convenience sampling' – participants were recruited largely via social media platforms, primarily WeChat and Facebook. The second source is a quantitative survey of the articles published by *Sydney Today*, the most popular Chinese-language digital outlet in Australia, that were delivered via WeChat in a randomly selected month in 2019.

Author

Wanning Sun is a Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Technology Sydney. A fellow of Australian Academy of the Humanities since 2016, she is currently a member of the Australian Research Council (ARC) College of Experts (2020-2022). Author of a major report, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities* (2016), Wanning has led an ARC Discovery Project, 'Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power'.