WeChat Unites and Divides in America; on tech

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Highlight: The app, which unites families but also spreads Chinese propaganda, faces a ban in the United States.

Body

The app, which unites families but also spreads Chinese propaganda, faces a ban in the United States.

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Take the good and the bad aspects of using Facebook and magnify both.

That's WeChat, the do-everything app from China that is also used by millions of Chinese speakers in the United States to stay in touch with family members and form bonds in America.

Like other social media, WeChat can magnify divisions. There's also the added complication of the influence of Chinese government censorship and propaganda shaping what people read and say on the app.

I spoke with my colleague Nicole Hong, who wrote this week about Chinese immigrants and the diaspora using WeChat, about the productive and destructive uses of the app, and how those who have used WeChat feel about it possibly being banned in the United States.

Shira: What do people in the United States get out of using WeChat?

Nicole: Capturing the multitudes of WeChat is complicated. It's like asking an American whether texting is good or bad. It's both.

People say that WeChat has accelerated the formation of bubbles among Chinese immigrants, but I was also surprised by the role that WeChat played in helping them adjust to life in America. Some people said that the translation functions in the app have improved their English.

WeChat has also been a huge force in activism movements among Chinese people in the United States. When a Chinese-American police officer in New York was convicted of manslaughter, many Chinese immigrants felt it was unjust. Some people came out to protests for the first time in America because they heard about it on WeChat.

What are the bad elements?

Like on Facebook, people can insulate themselves in echo chambers of contacts who think exactly like them, and rumors can race through the Chinese diaspora in minutes.

But on WeChat there's also the added complication of information getting filtered through the lens of Chinese nationalism. In a large WeChat group, if a Chinese-American criticizes the Chinese government, they might be called a traitor.

And the hot topics on WeChat are often divisive ones, like issues that tend to pit Chinese people against other minority groups, including Black and Latino people or even other Asian-Americans.

How do people who use WeChat in the United States navigate the Chinese government's censorship?

Active WeChat users know to tiptoe around certain taboo topics like Tibet so their accounts don't get disabled or blocked. And the propaganda creates an environment in which people don't know what to believe and mistrust one another. I interviewed someone who said he was alarmed that his mother believed the one-sided propaganda she read on WeChat about the democracy movement in Hong Kong.

How did those you spoke to feel about the app possibly being banned in the United States?

It varied. People who had large numbers of family members in China said that despite the app's flaws, there was no other way to communicate with relatives. For the elderly in America who struggle with English, WeChat can be a tremendous source of comfort and emotional support during retirement.

Others were more focused on the propaganda and political arguments that they saw on the app. Some said they switched from WeChat to Telegram after the ban was announced and were actually relieved because they didn't have to fear talking openly about China's leader, Xi Jinping.

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Don't blame Facebook (for this one thing)

A new analysis of misperceptions about voter fraud suggests that online hot spots like Facebook and Twitter don't deserve as much blame for being a source of false information as they typically get.

Rather the researchers found that misinformation about voting originates primarily from President Trump and other powerful people who spread a false narrative of rampant election fraud, and news outlets that amplify those messages. (Voter fraud is extremely rare in all forms, including mail-in voting. Here is a guide.)

The in-progress research paper from the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University suggests that I and other tech obsessives have fixated too much on whether Facebook and Twitter should add context to misleading messages or remove dangerous posts about voter fraud, and that we have overstated the harm from trolls on these sites sowing inaccuracies about the reliability of voting by mail.

The researchers make some important points. The problem, in the researchers' telling, comes from the very top and filters to most Americans through conventional news media, particularly outlets like local TV stations that are influential with people who aren't glued to political news all of the time.

"The primary cure for the elite-driven, mass media communicated information disorder we observe here is unlikely to be more fact-checking on Facebook," the researchers wrote. "Our observations offer reason to be cautious about how important online misinformation and disinformation really is in American political communications."

The researchers aren't absolving social media sites. Powerful people use those sites to amplify false information about voter fraud online. And the researchers said Facebook does play a significant role in other societal problems, including online organizing of violent acts.

But if misperceptions about the reliability of casting a ballot aren't primarily because of online hot spots, it suggests that it's counterproductive to focus the bulk of our attention and resources there. The problem is that it may be easier to get Facebook to change than it is to get American political elites to change.

Before we go …

- Agreeing (mostly) on the problem but not a solution: Members of Congress are mostly united on the dangers of tech superpowers acting in ways that harm competition. But they disagree along party lines over possible legislative fixes, my colleagues Cecilia Kang and David McCabe wrote.
- This will surprise zero women who use the internet: An analysis of Twitter and Facebook posts directed at members of Congress found that abusive messages accounted for more than 15 percent of those directed at each female lawmaker analyzed, compared with about 5 to 10 percent of the men, The Washington Post reported. (Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, received an unusually high share of abusive messages for a male lawmaker.)
- Everything is politics today, sorry: Dating apps have become a battleground for protests in Thailand opposing the military government and the royal establishment, Foreign Policy reported. The government's restrictions on Facebook and other social media sites have pushed protesters to other arenas, including Tinder, to promote their message.

Hugs to this

You definitely want to watch Maple, the beaver, munching away on a Halloween pumpkin.

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