



Engaging Social Media in China

Edited by GUOBIN YANG and WEI WANG, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021, US\$49.95 (paperback), 352 pp

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BOOK REVIEWS

Engaging social media in China, edited by Guobin Yang and Wei Wang, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021, US\$49.95 (paperback), 352 pp.

With the overseas success of TikTok, Chinese social media platforms are increasingly important in the global communication and media landscape. Owing to the unique political, social, and cultural milieu, the Chinese social media landscape merits researchers' efforts to understand the histories, dynamics, and trends of these platforms. The current volume, *Engaging Social Media in China: Platforms, Publics, and Production*, edited by Guobin Yang and Wei Wang, offers a timely and in-depth scholarly response. The edited book is composed of ten chapters with multifarious perspectives of how Chinese social media are able to engage a broader audience in different contexts, with empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative methods. As Guobin Yang suggests, the state-sponsored platformization and the dual logic of politics and the market together shape the social media ecosystem in China. In addition, social media platforms and their privacy and security issues have been involved in the front line of US-China conflicts in recent years. Thus, the implications of this book go beyond the territory of media and communication studies but also illuminate pressing questions in political science, public diplomacy, and science and technology studies (STS).

The volume is organized around three areas that tap into the landscape of Chinese social media. The first part focuses on the structure, process, and consequences of platforms. Yizhou Xu and Jeremy Wade Morris demonstrate how Ximalaya FM, a popular radio app, reconfigures the audible publics in China. Tracing back to the broadcasting in Mao's era, when collective listening served as an essential political communication channel, this chapter shows us how mobile radio apps afford individualized audio consumption, while also allowing the state to penetrate them in nuanced ways, using the apps' walkthrough method.

Lin Zhang examines the tensions and disruptions during the infrastructuralization process of Alibaba via the assemblage approach. Revisiting the 20-year history of the e-commerce giant, Lin Zhang argues that Alibaba has transformed itself into a symbiotic relationship with the state from the previous role of serving as the alternative platform against it. In this chapter, the evolution of Jack Ma's empire has been problematized through reflecting its intertwining relations with political, social, and technological forces. Contrasting China's Wanghong industry with the social media entertainment in the West, Junyi Lv and David Craig propose the idea of interplatformization to account for both cooperation and competition among emerging social media platforms in China; however, the intraplatformization strategy adopted by their Western counterparts such as Google and Facebook, results in a more closed platform ecosystem. Wanghong is not simply considered as an equivalent of an influencer in the chapter but treated as an idiosyncratic term with cultural and social roots in the context of Chinese social media.

Michelle Murray Yang analyzes Twitter posts by Donald Trump regarding North Korea and US-China relations using the rhetorical approach. Drawing on works in public diplomacy, Yang shows how emotional and stereotypical Trump's social media discourse could be, which implies that neither simplistic Twitter-driven diplomacy nor the obsolete portrayal of North Korea in relation to China would contribute to meaningful advancement of US-China relations.

The second part of the edited book is devoted to the state media in China. Two chapters explore how Chinese state media engage the domestic and international audience on social media, respectively. Fengjiao Yang and Xiao Li pick the *Beijing News* as the exemplar to rethink how journalist professionalism revolutionizes in the production of short-form news videos. Specifically, the "office journalists" work closely with ordinary citizens by primarily conducting fact-checking and providing value-added information. The joint venture between the traditional newsroom and dominant online platform in the broader context of convergence culture shapes and is shaped by the reformation of news format as well as content production. Qingjiang Yao looks at the social media engagement strategies of Chinese official media such as *People's Daily* on Facebook and Twitter, two popular global social media platforms, yet banned in China. Results from binomial models suggest that social news, use of exclamation marks, and inclusion of pictures or videos greatly improve engagement metrics such as the number of comments and likes.

The third part of the collection includes four chapters studying engagement and disengagement from various perspectives. Wei Wang joins the academic debate over the state-society interactions in China by showcasing the everyday practices of country-level internet celebrities on WeChat. Bridging the state and the society digitally, the mediating agents are personified intermediaries that accommodate a political and social sphere with strong personal connections. Zimu Zhang describes exciting art practices and experiments on Chinese social media as prefigurative politics. The art projects reviewed in this chapter are socially engaged and technologically mediated. Combining aesthetic and creative intervention with urgent social issues, social media thus enables itself as another art medium and opens possibilities at the intersection of contemporary Chinese society and global communication.

Hepeng Jia and colleagues present findings of a comparative study about scientists' social media communication in China and the US. This timely research, in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, reminds us that scientists in the two research powerhouses have to mobilize the social media channel to facilitate both public education of and civic participation in science. In the last chapter of this book, Lei Vincent Huang tries to answer the question: How users opt out of communication technologies in everyday life. Huang explores this question by teasing out how interactive design, self-presentation norms, and the network nature of WeChat collectively contribute to the reluctance to use the most popular "all-in-one" application in China.


One of the most exciting contributions of the current collection is that internet service providers or content production receive considerable scholarly attention. The most popular emerging digital media technologies platforms, such as live-streaming and short video, are carefully examined in a number of chapters. Likewise, Zhang et al. (2021) explored how the algorithm is intertwined with

content producers for traffic media in China. Together, this book and the strand of work answer the call of pushing forward the field by constantly reflecting on technological advancement and its social implications on digital media technologies (Fuchs & Qiu, 2018). This volume also demonstrates diversity and inclusiveness through chapters adopting a wide range of methods and approaches such as web-crawled data, content analysis, interviews, and rhetoric discourse analysis. These methods allow all contributors to offer sound empirical evidence to account for the complicated and fluid relationship among the state, the technology, and the audience. The volume rejects the superficial “authoritarian determinism” (Guan, 2019) often found in Chinese studies; rather, it delineates the multiplicities of negotiations and ambivalences at the interface of heterogeneous forces and actors.

Yet, the book will benefit from the additional scope of other social media platforms. The current chapters mostly focus on market dominators such as WeChat and Twitter. While it is completely legitimate to prioritize platforms with the widest reach and largest influence, social media platforms that cater to niche markets would add nuances to the Chinese social media ecosystem. This volume situates the Chinese social media in the US-China relations and contains excellent comparative works; future research might explore the role of Chinese social media platforms at the global level. For instance, how digital communication technologies from China encounter local audiences, especially alongside its overseas presence such as the Belt and Road Initiative and infrastructure projects in Africa. To conclude, *Engaging Social Media in China* is a must-read for scholars, policymakers, government officials, industry leaders, and anyone who is interested in making sense of the rapid development of Chinese digital communication technologies and their global footprints and consequences in the critical era.

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