

The Manipulative Nature of the Articles Published by Influential Official Accounts on WeChat

Menglin Shi

National Junior College, Singapore 288913, Singapore

smenglin0101@gmail.com

Abstract. In China, more people started to get update of events happening around the world through social media platforms such as WeChat or Weibo. Even though these social media platforms provide a more entertaining and more convenient sources of information, the often have titles which appeal to readers' curiosity and emotions as well as contents that are infused with sensational phrasing, which greatly undermines the credibility of the information provided. Drawing upon the case study of Wanzhou Meng, the financial executive of Huawei Corporation and the daughter of Zhengfei Ren, the president of Huawei, this article investigated how social media platforms report the issue analyzing several dimensions of news-reporting, such as the choices of words as well as the news intentions.

Keywords: *WeChat, official accounts, social media, manipulation of public opinion*

1. Introduction

As smartphones and other electronic devices become widely available, the means through which people acquire news are no longer limited to only newspaper. In China, more people started to get update of events happening around the world through social media platforms such as WeChat or Weibo. The language used is rather humorous and sometimes exaggerated and people could easily glance through the news before replying their friends' message or posts. These social media platforms, thus, provide a more entertaining and more convenient sources of information. Nevertheless, these accounts are often not managed by news professionals who uphold the belief of producing news as close to the fact as possible. Rather, in order to attract more viewers, the news articles published on these social media platforms often have titles which appeal to readers' curiosity and emotions as well as contents that are infused with sensational phrasing. Even though, undoubtedly, these news articles offer some news perspectives and engage more people, the credibility of the information these sources provided is greatly undermined. In this research, drawing upon the case study of Wanzhou Meng, the financial executive of Huawei Corporation and the daughter of Zhengfei Ren, the president of Huawei, this article investigated how social media platforms report the issue. This article primarily analyses several dimensions of news-reporting, such as the choices of words as well as the news intentions. Meng's case is highly debatable and politically sensitive, which leaves enough room for information manipulation and emotional arousal by news and journalists.

2. WeChat and Official Account

Launched by Tencent in October 2010, WeChat is a social media platform in China. Since its establishment, WeChat has attracted large numbers of users, becoming a dominant way that Chinese people connect with each other. Up until 2018, WeChat has accumulated more than 1 billion monthly active users and managed to take up 34.0% of local network traffic in China as shown in figure 1. WeChat started with the very basic functions of social connections, such as chatting with their friends through the short-message application, posting and updating information related to their daily life through an application called "WeChat moment". With its development, WeChat continuously added more innovative functions to its platform, among which official account is the most relevant one to this paper. Launched in 2012, the number of official account experiences a sky-rocketing increase, with astonishing 200 million with active Official Account of 3.5 million.

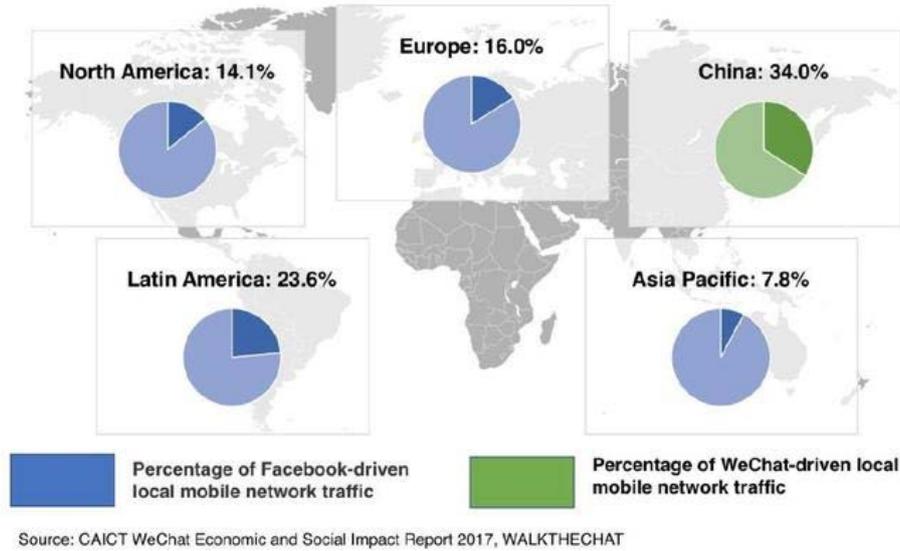


Figure 1. Amount of local traffic taken up by WeChat or Facebook

Official account (hereafter OA) allows any users who are interested in starting their own media outlets to generate contents and publish it for larger groups of active users on WeChat to view. According to WeChat Economic and Social Impact Report 2017, 40.2% of the OA are under the topic of news and 38.5% of OA are related to hobbies (figure 2). Other important categories include business job and personal services [1].

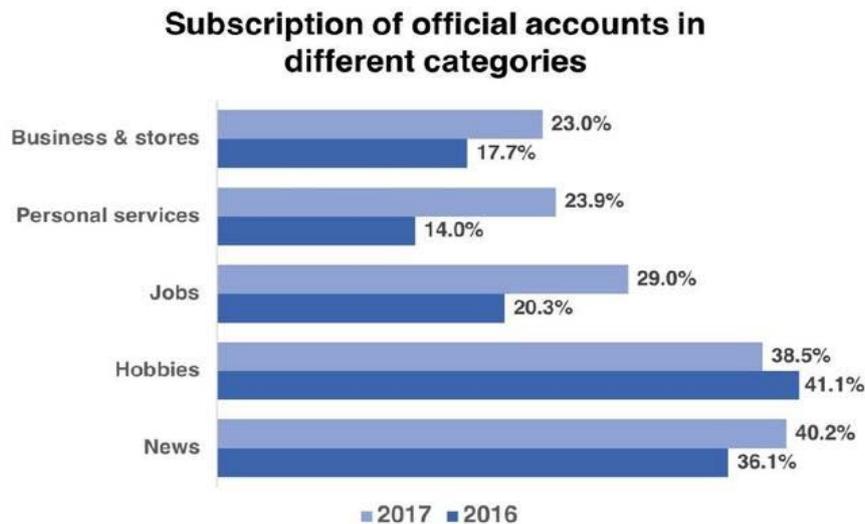


Figure 2. Percentage of subscription of official accounts in different categories

Even though OAs vary greatly in their active level and number of followers, influential OAs offer new perspectives into current affairs. However, to capture readers’ attentions, a lot of influential OAs customarily infuse the description of the current affairs with personal opinions through using informal or even ironic tones. In such situations, most of influential OAs failed to provide readers with a detailed description of events through using relatively objective languages.

3. Detailed Timeline of the Event Regarding the Arrest of Meng Wanzhou From 1 December 2018 to 13 December 2018.

Before delving into the analysis, a chronological review of timeline of the event is necessary. On 1st December, 2018, Meng was arrested by Canadian authorities in Vancouver, as response to Washington’s request. Meng was facing an extradition request from the United States. [2] On the

11st December, 2018, Michael Kovrig, the former Canadian diplomat and current senior advisor on Northeast Asia for the International Crisis Group, was taken into custody this week while on a trip to Beijing [3]. On the next day, Meng was granted 10 Million Canada Dollars (US\$7.5 million) bail by a Canadian Court [4]. On 13th December, 2018, Michael Spavor, another Canadian businessmen went missing after notifying the Canadian government that he was being questioned by the Chinese authorities [5].

4. Characteristics of Articles Published by OAs

4.1 Promoting Nationalism

The articles published by OAs at 1 December 2018 are a direct response to the incident that Ms Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Canada. Considering that the information regarding the incident was extremely limited at that time, the articles published provide a general description of the whole incident. Even if these articles end up with different conclusions—ranging from protecting the right of the Chinese citizens to how U.S. use despicable method to target Chinese enterprise—the emphasis remains consistent. Most of them highlight how the conflict is not merely economic related but also politicized and leveled up to international relationship dimensions. The actions carried out by both the U.S. and Canada, which could possibly be taken without any external motives or being influenced by other agencies, have been considered as a deliberately manipulation to cater to their national interests.

4.1.1 Use of Titles

Titles used in articles published by the OAs are characterized by using opinionated and biased frames, which leave readers the first impression that Meng was innocent that should be released immediately and United States and Canada did the thing out of their own national interests. For example, Xinhua News Agency, the most well-known China's state-run press, released an article on its OAs, titled "the Right of Chinese Citizen should not be infringed" [6]. This clearly states the viewpoint of the Chinese government in this incident, which reveal a strong belief that Canadian government's action should be not justified. Applying a biased title to one news article has impacts; especially when readers are not very clear what the whole picture of the events is. It makes readers believe that Meng was not fairly treated by foreign governments and thus actions carried by Chinese government are righteous and should be supported. These mind sets could lead to strong nationalism among Chinese readers. Although the article includes some facets of factual truth, in general, it is biased through merely providing particular dimensions.

By comparison, some OAs run by self-media merely published articles with titles containing nothing but unfounded speculation. By generating news in a more opinionated way, they could attract large numbers of readers. Although as one of the most influential news agencies in China, Xinhua News Agency produced biased news articles, its contents are still made up by real actions carried out by Chinese governments. However, self-media OAs tend to publish articles with titles containing nothing but mere unfounded speculations. For example, the title of an article published by Zhan Hao (ID: Zhan Hao668) implies that there are external motives behind the arrestment of Meng [7] and the title of the article written by the editor of Global Times accuses US for their despicable actions against Meng [8]. These titles may lead readers to believe in an unproven theory and affect their perspectives when evaluating this incidence unconsciously.

4.1.2 The Choice of Words and Phrasing

OAs of the People's Daily generally published articles that are neutral and disinterested as it is a traditional news outlet. The article written on 13 December describes the incidence regarding the arrestment of two Canadians with a factual and neutral tone [9]. The content comprises of fact which could be easily cross-checked such as the names of the people arrested and the response given by Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affair. Hence, the reliability of the content is guaranteed.

In comparison, the articles published by some OAs such as Reference News are full of opinionated statements. For example, the articles published by Reference News on 13 December implied that the arrestment of two Canadians are a fight back from Chinese Governments and the sense of superior over the US and Canada as the arrestment of Canadians is justified in comparison to the arrestment of Meng [10].

Comments session below the articles published by OAs also influences people's attitude towards the incidence. These comments could be filtered by OAs and thus, OAs only filter out the comments that are aligned with their beliefs. Comments below articles published by traditional news outlets such as the People's Daily or Xinhua News Agency are generally patriotic statements, such as "Release Ms. Meng" [11] or "the right of Chinese citizens should not be infringed" [6]. In order to maintain a neutral stand points regarding the event, the OAs never replied to any of these comments. However, comments underlying other OAs are less controlled. For example, the comments below the articles published by Zhan Hao contain radical statements which believe that economic sanction or even military force is the best solution to Meng's incidence. Some of the comments also imply a sense of superiority and suggests this incidence is the best chance for China to show its power against the West. All these comments, radical and provocative, could easily gain thousands of likes and thus remain at the top of commenting session [12]. They may influence viewers' opinions in an unconscious and subtle way, which could eventually lead viewers to support China's economic sanction or military operations against foreign countries. Readers may also be conditioned into believing that using diplomatic methods to solve economic conflicts is a display of weakness instead of power. The owner of the OAs also reply to the comments, which would definitely show the stand that the OA takes and render the OA a biased source of information.

4.2 Divert Attention From the Conflicts

Instead of providing the detailed description of the cases, these articles focus more on the responses from the Chinese Government. From the articles, the responses given by Chinese Government include but not limited to condemnation on website of Chinese Embassy [11], reply from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [13] and critique of the incidence published on newspaper [14]. These components are featured in the articles and took up relatively large parts of the whole articles. The unbalance in the articles successfully diverted the attention of readers away from the underlying causes of the incidence. At the same time, the readers are also deeply impressed by the firm stand and flank responses by the Chinese Government, which unconsciously influences readers' mind set and improves the cohesion of the nation as a whole.

For example, some of the articles published by Global Times are titled "Meng has been humiliated and treated rudely after her arrestment. Is this how Canada protects human rights?" [15] and "Meng was granted bail. She was smiling at her husband with tears" [16]. These articles focus more on the treatments Meng received or the reactions Meng gave and both are hard to cross-check with other source of information, which makes the reliability of the articles questionable. Moreover, large portion of the articles are accusation of the actions taken by the US and Canada or praising of Meng's patriotism, while the description of the incidence itself is limited.

For OAs of traditional news outlets such as People's Daily, even though the articles written originally by themselves are factual, the articles they reposted can be rather biased and unreliable. For example, People's Daily reposted an article written by a self-media, Niu Tan Qin (ID: bullpiano), on 12 December which analyzed the underlying reasons behind the arrestment of Meng [17]. The reasons which the article lists all imply that the whole incident was manipulated by the US and Meng was the victim subject to the despicable actions taken by the US using a very convincing tone. The writer took an obvious stand to support the explanation offered by Chinese Government, which can be misleading and divert reader's attention towards the measures taken by Chinese Government. This works exceptionally well since all the other articles that have been published by People's Daily regarding have been rather neutral, which subtly increases the reliability of the articles which was not even written and vetted by People's Daily.

5. Conclusion

Drawing upon the case study of Meng Wanzhou, the essay illustrates the potentially misleading and agitating effects of the news articles published by OAs. With more people reading news through social media platform such as WeChat, they are more susceptible to be conditioned by the biased information provided by these OAs. As language constructs reality, the world that people believes to be is constructed by information they acquired bits by bits from different news sources. Their understanding of the world could be distorted and greatly deviated from the reality. The biased source of information could keep reinforcing such misconception. This could possibly be an outcome of censorship or political manipulation which can be potentially dangerous and even unethical. Future research could be developed in two ways. First, it could investigate whether or not people's beliefs could be affected by the ideas of the OAs. Second, whether or not some algorithms could be developed to detect the emotional-charged words or phrasings in news articles.

References

- [1]. Institute China Academy of Information and Communications Technology Industry and Planning Research (2018). WeChat Economic and Social Impact Report 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.caict.ac.cn/kxyj/qwfb/ztbq/201805/P020180529380481819634.pdf>.
- [2]. The Straits Times. (2018). Huawei exec's arrest: Who is Meng Wanzhou? Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/huawei-execs-arrest-who-is-meng-wanzhou>.
- [3]. The Straits Times. (2018). Canadian court grants bail to Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/americas/Canadian-court-grants-bail-to-huawei-cfo-meng-wanzhou>.
- [4]. The Straits Times. (2018). China indicates former Canadian diplomat could have broken foreign NGO law. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-indicates-former-canadian-diplomat-could-have-broken-foreign-ngo-law>.
- [5]. The Straits Times. (2018). Detained in China: Canadian businessman known for ties to North Korean leader. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/detained-in-china-canadian-businessman-known-for-ties-to-north-korean-leader>.
- [6]. Xinhua News Agency. (2018). The legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens are inviolable!. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/dStG_iLiwBc-lbQVVhbpvQ.
- [7]. Zhan Hao. (2018). Original Post| Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of Huawei's CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested, which could be a political trap! Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ZwM-CQ7p4rV0Jr3OKv3v3w>.
- [8]. Global Times. (2018). Hu Xijin: The U.S. government can't beat Huawei easily, and please don't take illegal and immoral actions. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/D9RMa5RePZcTEEn2rKYobfw>.
- [9]. People's Daily. (2018). [Focus] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that two Canadians had been arrested: local government has already informed the Canadian government. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bcJ4L9XN2LOd4qaTx9OFrQ>.
- [10]. Reference News. (2018). Ruirui | Could Chinese government have arrested a second Canadian citizen? There is one important factor must be considered. Retrieved July 26, 2019, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9228zfqgvNX_Oq3dwRmzaw.

- [11]. People's Daily. (2018). Chinese Embassy in Canada requests immediate restoration of Ms. Meng Wanzhou's personal freedom. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. Com /s/v9eFSWk7QW0KXMOm-WSOBw](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/v9eFSWk7QW0KXMOm-WSOBw).
- [12]. Zhan Hao. (2018). Original China issued a warning to Canada, and the case will be taken seriously! . Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. com/ s/fx Ebb TLF Zp Usv – fnChKbqg](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fxEbbTLFZpUsv-fnChKbqg).
- [13]. People's Daily. (2018). The former Canadian diplomat was detained and the Chinese Foreign Ministry responded. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. com/ s/9 _j swsKZhp_302SyjbpQrA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9_jswsKZhp_302SyjbpQrA).
- [14]. People's Daily. (2018). Breaking News! The People's Daily's writer "Zhongsheng" commented on the detention of Meng Wanzhou. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. com/s/Pr3GSdOc-uYWKDCxlltS7w](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Pr3GSdOc-uYWKDCxlltS7w).
- [15]. Global Times. (2018). After Meng Wanzhou was detained, she was treated inhumanly. Is this how human rights is protected in Canada? Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. com/s/qoFBGhzWpG6qd6u3s0avCQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qoFBGhzWpG6qd6u3s0avCQ).
- [16]. Global Times. (2018). Meng Wanzhou was released on bail and smiled at her husband while wiping tears. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. com/ s/FD DqsCHW LY11eqUvj6Cigg](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FD DqsCHWLY11eqUvj6Cigg).
- [17]. Niu Tan Qin. (2018). [Focus] Meng Wanzhou was finally released on bail, but the issue was not fully resolved!. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from [https:// mp. weixin. qq. com/s /S_ g7iy 3Of5SZy9O95TyblA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/S_g7iy3Of5SZy9O95TyblA).