

WeChat and Weixin? The missing story behind the Coalition's outcry

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As we draw to the end of our three-year [study](#) of WeChat in Australia,¹ we have become increasingly certain about a few things. First, with the federal election looming, WeChat will become, again, a political campaign [battleground](#), although we must wait and see how differently things play out this time around. Second, for candidates of all political persuasions, especially those who will be fighting desperately to save their seats, the use of WeChat could make the difference between success and failure in winning the support of Mandarin-speaking voters. Third, it will be almost inevitable that the ways in which politicians and the major parties use WeChat during the election will again be newsworthy in mainstream English-language media.

What happened?

Two days before this year's Australia Day, the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* alarmingly [proclaimed](#) that Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's WeChat subscription account had been 'brazenly taken over, renamed, and basically hijacked' in a "blatant" act of political censorship', and that the account had been 'rebranded as a propaganda outfit' by the People's Republic of China (PRC)-based social media platform.

Other media outlets immediately seized on the story, with claims that the Prime Minister's account had been '[hacked](#)' or '[blocked](#)', and senior members of the Coalition directly [attributing](#) the development to interference by Beijing, [urging](#) the Australian public to reconsider their use of WeChat, with others [calling](#) for parliamentarians to boycott WeChat, citing national security. The Victorian Liberal MP Gladys Liu asserted that 'this sort of political interference' was 'unacceptable', and that she would 'no longer be using [her] official or personal WeChat accounts to communicate until the platform explains itself.'

As has become a recurrent theme, 'experts' – most of whom are not regular WeChat users, nor studied the platform in any depth – were on standby to [offer](#) their opinions. According to them, WeChat is a tool of the Communist Party of China, wielded to interfere in political processes, it is a security risk, and it should be banned. As predicted, with the help of these 'experts', the story ended up being written in terms of these standard themes.

In one sense, this is a perfect storm, having all the ingredients of a good story – domestic politics, the PRC, WeChat and censorship. In another sense, it is a storm in a teacup. And no storm is perfect without the intervention of the PRC's state media. Hot on the heels of *The Daily Telegraph*'s story, the Chinese-language edition of the *Global Times* [published](#) a piece calling the story fake news, engineered by the Australian Prime Minister and anti-PRC media outlets in the lead-up to the Australian federal election. The title of the story sums up the paper's stance: 'Mr Prime Minister, by all means tell lies to get votes, but leave China out of it'.

¹ In this study we ask whether the digital space of WeChat potentially can engender a more engaged form of civic behaviour within Chinese-Australian communities, and how WeChat is used to educate individuals about democratic systems and values. More specifically, we want to understand how some individuals engage in myriad digital practices in order to inform and influence fellow Mandarin-speaking citizens on a wide range of political and civic matters.

However, despite the huffing and puffing on both sides, WeChat's parent company Tencent [says](#) the issue is one of an ownership dispute between a PRC citizen (the owner of the Prime Minister's old account) and a technology services company (the new owner of the same account). They point out that neither the Prime Minister nor his office has ever directly controlled the account, which was registered and operated by a Mr Ji as a Weixin (*not* a WeChat) account – a mainland Chinese individual – using his own personal Weixin account.

Tencent's proffered explanation notwithstanding, the Prime Minister's Office continues to pursue the matter, [stating](#) they have been 'in direct discussions with the company about the matter and looks forward to a resolution'.

WeChat versus Weixin: One app, two systems

So, what is the distinction between WeChat and Weixin alluded to by Tencent? Very few in Australia understand the complexity of Tencent's business model. Weixin and WeChat are 'two systems' that operate on 'one app' platform: WeChat is designed for users whose mobile phone numbers are not based in mainland China, it is governed by local (not PRC) laws, and it is operated by WeChat International, based in Singapore.

Weixin is designed for users with mainland Chinese mobile phone numbers, it is governed by PRC law, and it is operated by its PRC parent organisation based in Shenzhen. However, the two systems are interoperable – a Weixin user and a WeChat user can interact and communicate with each other on the same platform. The phone number used for registration determines whether it is a Weixin or a WeChat account. In addition to different governing laws, terms of service and privacy policies, Weixin and WeChat use different server architectures. Unlike Weixin, WeChat servers are all located outside mainland China. This style of operation was '[a conscious decision](#)' by Tencent, 'designed to serve different users while ensuring compliance with applicable laws across different jurisdictions'. Nevertheless, users often talk loosely about WeChat when they mean Weixin, and vice versa, but the two systems are governed by very different registration and regulatory regimes, and are subject to the laws of their respective spheres of intended operation.

There are often stories about 'censorship in WeChat' or 'state intervention in WeChat' or 'controversies' (real or manufactured) involving WeChat, when what they are actually talking about is the PRC-based Weixin service.

Reactions in the Australian media

While we predicted that the manner in which politicians and the major parties use WeChat during the election would in the lead up to this federal election again enjoy newsworthiness in mainstream English-language media, what we did not predict was how this development concerning the Prime Minister's Weixin account would take an interesting – or even a rather sinister – turn. We understand that many Australian politicians see Weixin/WeChat as a necessary evil. After all, the platform continues to be used by parliamentarians despite hawkish voices in both major parties arguing to ban the platform based on concerns about cybersecurity and national security. This is despite the fact that then-US President Donald Trump's executive order banning WeChat was [revoked](#) by President Joe Biden, who instead directed the US Commerce Department to evaluate and monitor the application and take action against any national security risks. Trump's orders had never taken effect, [blocked](#) by federal judges 'who said the former administration hadn't shown those apps in particular posed a national security threat justifying a ban.'

Weixin/WeChat is a double-edged sword – can't live with it; can't live without it – if politicians want to court the hearts and minds of Mandarin-speaking voters in Australia. Weixin/WeChat were launched in 2011. PRC migrants in Australia who arrived in Australia before 2011 mostly use WeChat, while most of those who arrived within the last 10 years use Weixin – there is nothing stopping them from continuing to use their Weixin account here, or getting someone in the PRC to open an account for them. Very few non-Mandarin-speaking individuals use Weixin. Our [research](#) from surveys in 2018 and 2019 have shown that WeChat/Weixin is the most used social media platform among PRC migrants in Australia – ahead of Weibo and Facebook – with 92 percent (573 out of 623 respondents) reporting hourly or daily access.

Both major parties [used](#) WeChat/Weixin extensively during the 2019 federal election. The Prime Minister was among one of the first Australian political leaders to have an account on the platform (in his case, one

opened on his behalf by a PRC national), [following the lead](#) of then-Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten. The Liberal candidate for Chisolm, Gladys Liu, [used WeChat extensively](#) to recruit volunteers and gain votes among the Mandarin-speaking community, eventually winning the seat.

As a result, we are baffled about the Coalition's portrayal of the Prime Minister as a victim of Beijing's censorship, and their chest-beatings as freedom warriors, when our Prime Minister's Weixin account drama looks more like an administrative error. If indeed it is not, the risk could have been easily foreseen in registering an account under a third party's name. The Prime Minister or his office could simply have opened and run *his own* WeChat account to communicate and engage with Chinese-Australians, if he took them seriously.

What is also interesting is how the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) has been written into the story. Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese's Weixin – yes, he has a Weixin account too – is still active. One ABC News story [cites](#) a security researcher, along with some government backbenchers, who argue that all parties should stop using Weixin/WeChat for campaign purposes. The Coalition strategy here appears to be an attempt to hold the ALP to ransom over WeChat/Weixin, their message being, 'If we're not using it, you shouldn't, either'.

In the framing of the developments relating to the Prime Minister's Weixin account, instead of acknowledging a possible layer in the story as being an administrative bungle by the Prime Minister's office, it is apparent that, once again, the Australian media have opted to proceed with the easy out of another '[China threat story](#)', exhibiting a reluctance to engage with other possible dimensions a story might lend itself to.

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