

# Chinese-language Digital/Social Media in Australia: Double-Edged Sword in Australia's Public Diplomacy Agenda

## Introduction

Australia is a liberal democracy steeped in the Anglo-European social and cultural tradition. It is also geographically close to Asia and the Pacific region. While China is Australia's biggest trading partner, Australia has long considered the US as its closest strategic ally. This geo-political specificity determines that Australia's foreign policy towards China is fraught and complex (Gyngell, 2017).

An essential aspect of this foreign policy is public diplomacy through the media, as is made clear in the Australian government's 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper* (DFAT, 2017). The main objective of public diplomacy is to promote a country's goals and policies, communicate its ideas and values, and build common understanding (Leonard, 2002). In public diplomacy, state and non-state actors use the media—particularly international broadcasting—to influence foreign publics in order to promote their nations' interests (Gilboa, 2008). The British Broadcasting Corporation has long been hailed as the most effective advocate of the UK's public diplomacy agenda on the global stage. Similarly, China Radio International is charged with the responsibility of funnelling China's propaganda out into the world beyond China (Sun, 2015). These media and public diplomacy practices were mostly developed quite a few decades ago—when the migration of people and mobility of goods and ideas across national boundaries were relatively small in scale. It was also largely in the context of the pre-digital broadcasting era, when things were relatively uncomplicated by issues such as de-territorialisation and hypertextuality that were ushered in and ramped up by the advent and rapid growth of the Internet and social media.

Many Australian businesses are anxious to continue to project a friendly and attractive image of Australia to Chinese tourists, investors, businesses partners and prospective students (Thompson, 2018). Ao Wei Jia, the Chinese-language website of the Australia Plus news service, was charged to do precisely that. Designed to 'present and promote Australian stories, values and perspectives to the region' and as 'a platform to engage regional audiences with content about Australia' (Grigg, 2016), and formerly funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the site was launched as an instrument of Australia's public diplomacy towards China. But the initiative did not succeed. Operated by the ABC, the site has for a long time been criticised within Australia for its self-censorship on issues that may be sensitive to the Chinese government (Media Watch, 2016). In April 2018, the ABC announced that it would be shutting down [australiaplus.cn](http://australiaplus.cn) (Riordan, 2018). The failure of [AustraliaPlus.cn](http://AustraliaPlus.cn) in relation to China is a sobering experience for the Australian government, given its wish to project an attractive and friendly image of Australia to China.

Moreover, it highlights the incompatibility between the Australian government and business sector's shared public diplomacy agenda and the media's core mission to produce news without fear or favour. Similarly, the Australian government's official position is to actively engage in public diplomacy with Asian countries in order to promote Australia's geopolitical and economic interests (DFAT, 2017). In fact, Australia's *Foreign Policy White Paper* has identified diasporic communities and their media and communication platforms as key domains where such public diplomacy exercises can be undertaken. The White Paper makes it clear that 'the Government is committed to working with diaspora communities to promote Australia's image and reputation, to encourage trade and investment'. Furthermore, the White Paper emphasises the importance of pursuing this via social and digital media, since digital

communication ‘allows nongovernment actors and nation states alike to influence public attitudes at a pace and scale not witnessed before, for good and ill’. But would a business-operated, diasporic media-oriented model of public diplomacy have a better chance of succeeding than the ill-fated Australia Plus experiment? Could the Chinese-language media in Australia, already identified as potential agents of Australia’s public diplomacy, actually fulfil such an expectation?

This paper, based on a pilot study, aims to provide some preliminary answers to three main questions: (1) What does the current Chinese-language digital/social media landscape in Australia look like? (2) How is its content generated, circulated and used? and (3) What role could this sector play in Australia’s public diplomacy agenda, given China’s rise and its intention to connect with the Chinese diaspora? The first part of the paper reviews some of the major developments in the Chinese-language media in Australia, paying particular attention to the key features of digital/social media since the arrival of PRC migrants. The second part presents examples from four key content categories: Australia-China relations; politics; economics; and cultural life. My choice of examples within each of these categories is not intended to provide a representative sample of the overall content of each category. Rather, my main criterion for selecting items for discussion was their capacity to demonstrate some distinctive features in the operation of a given category in terms of how content is generated/circulated/used. Both these parts of the paper take Sydney Today (今日悉尼; <https://www.sydneypost.com/>)—the most popular and widely read Chinese-language digital media outlet in Australia—as the focal point of discussion. Building on the discussion in these two parts, the last part of the paper discusses the challenges facing Australia in its attempt to engage diasporic media for the purpose of public diplomacy towards China. It also outlines the main methodological and analytical frameworks for future research.

### **Chinese Digital/Social Media in Australia: Developments and Issues**

The Chinese media in Australia have a long and tortuous history. Its rise and decline is often closely connected with changes in Chinese migration.<sup>1</sup> The *Chinese Advertiser* (英唐招贴), published by Robert Bell in Ballarat, Victoria, with a weekly circulation of 400 copies, emerged during the Gold Rush of the 1850s. This weekly publication, which operated for only a couple of years, is considered to be the earliest bilingual Chinese–English newspaper in Australia. Its main aim was to inform the Chinese gold-mining community about Government regulations. The first Chinese-language national newspaper, the *Chinese Australian Herald* (CAH), appeared in 1894; the second, the *Tung Wah News* (东华新报), came along in 1898; while the third, *Chinese Republic News* (民国报), emerged in 1913. The end of the 19th century saw the creation of various other Chinese-language trade-oriented and community-based publications, making the Chinese press the largest foreign-language media presence in Australia at the time (Kuo, 2013).

The introduction of the White Australia Policy, also known as the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, saw the number of Chinese-language publications dwindle almost to the point of extinction. However, following the implementation of the Colombo Plan in 1951, and especially after the abolition of the White Australia policy in 1974, the Chinese-speaking population in Australia began to grow again, largely due to the arrival of Indo-Chinese refugees and business migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This growth gave rise to a plethora of Chinese media outlets that still exist to this day. These either were subsidiaries of newspapers in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, or were owned and operated by migrants from these locations. In the print media sector, there are *Singtao Daily* (星岛日报),

the *Australian Chinese Daily* (澳洲新报), the *Daily Chinese Herald* (澳洲日报) and the *Independence Daily* (自立快报). Later arrivals included, in the radio sector, 2AC and 2CR in Sydney, both broadcasting in Mandarin and Cantonese, and, in the pay television TVB Australia.

From their inception a century ago until the 1980s, the Chinese-language media in Australia continued to be operated predominantly by migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia (Kuo, 2013). Mostly in the form of print media, this sector was largely disconnected from English-language media in Australia, and was mostly critical of the Communist regime in the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Gao, 2013).

Australia resumed direct immigration from the Chinese mainland in significant numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely as a result of the start of economic reforms in China in the late 1970s and the implementation of its open-door policy in relation to study abroad. As a direct result of Australia's greatly expanded intake of mainland Chinese migrants since the early 1990s, the country has seen a rapid and considerable increase in the size of its Mandarin-speaking population. In the last decade or so, the number of PRC arrivals under a range of permanent and temporary migration schemes, including international students, has increased steeply. Mandarin-speaking households now outnumber Cantonese-speaking households, and the PRC has overtaken Italy as the third-largest overseas birthplace after the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Jakubowicz, 2011). Importantly, the 1990s also saw a new, vibrant and competitive Chinese media sector spring up to contend with older media establishments with Hong Kong and Taiwan affiliations, as Chinese-language press and radio organisations owned by and catering to the needs of Mandarin-speaking PRC migrants began to enter the market.

In general terms, there are several distinctive features about the new Mandarin print media sector. First, many of these publications are weekly or monthly, and are distributed free of charge outside grocery stores, restaurants and other business venues that are frequented by members of the Chinese community. Second, they mostly make money from advertising placed by businesses and services that are owned by and cater to the needs of the Chinese community. There is intensive competition between publications for advertising revenue, but typically they cannot procure lucrative advertising deals, particularly from major mainstream businesses. They exist mainly as small business enterprises, or, in some cases, as a means of promoting the main business arm of the company in some field other than media. Many of them do not have a long life-span because of the fierce competition. Third, not all of these media outlets are owned and operated by trained media professionals, and many do not have designated media professionals on staff as editors and journalists. Many of them employ volunteers, casuals and part-timers, as well as students studying media and journalism. From time to time there have been allegations that some have exploited Chinese students as a source of cheap labour. For most of the free publications, the main game is to make a profit from advertising; journalistic credibility is not their overriding goal.

Meanwhile, China's global media expansion has also led to the far-reaching export of Chinese-language content into overseas Chinese markets. Research has found that the content of China's state media has become intimately integrated into Australia's pre-existing ethnic Chinese media, in the form of what is referred to in China as 'external propaganda' (Sun et al., 2011a).

While these developments have been well documented (e.g., Sun et al., 2011a, 2011b; Sun and Yu 2017), a recent report (ACRI, 2016) points to a new and burgeoning Chinese-language digital news and social media sector in Australia. Thus, while Chinese migrant legacy media may have sought to keep pace with the digital revolution by establishing an online presence for their brand and content, Australian media consumers can now access digital Chinese-language content from all over the world—including, most notably, those Australia-based online-only publications that have emerged in the past few years and that seem to be proliferating. This is an extremely dynamic and fast growing field, boasting easily a dozen media outlets.<sup>2</sup> Some of these sites are global, with Australia being just one of the countries in which they are available. For instance, 6park.com, started in 2003, caters to Mandarin-speaking users in more than 200 countries and regions all over the world, and is one of the first Chinese-language sites to enter the top 500 sites in the world. Others are distinctively local, and target mainly but not exclusively Chinese users in Australia. Some online entities are increasingly becoming conglomerated, with the Media Today Group being the latest, fastest-growing and most extensive network, claiming to have up to seven million registered users of its various media assets, which include SydneyToday.com, melbtoday.com and other local versions in major capital cities in Australia. Owned and operated by mainland Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and catering mainly to new migrants from the PRC, this sector routinely draws content from, and sometimes provides news sources for, both China's state media and English-language Australian media. The emergence of this new digital/social media sector brings additional complexity to the diasporic Chinese-language media landscape in Australia.

One key difference between PRC migrants' digital/social media and traditional ethnic Chinese print media is audience size. For instance, Sydney Today, created in 2011 (<http://www.sydneytoday.com>), was the first site of its kind and, to date, the most successful. Such websites are usually owned, operated and staffed by young migrants who were until recently students from the PRC studying IT, business or media in Australia. Zhang Dapeng, the young man who started Sydney Today in 2011, is an IT graduate from UTS. The Media Today Group Pty. Ltd. is now an online Chinese media conglomerate that includes SydneyToday.com, MelToday.com (<http://www.meltoday.com/>), QldToday.com (<http://www.qldtoday.com/>), DomainToday.com.au (<http://www.domaintoday.com.au/>), TripDay.com.au (<http://www.tripday.com.au/>) and HealthDay.com.au (<http://www.healthday.com.au/>). According to SydneyToday.com's own claim, in 2011, SydneyToday.com had an Alexa ranking of 282, measured against other Australian portals. In 2014, the number of subscribers to SydneyToday.com via WeChat reached 50,000, 95% of whom were based in Australia (<http://www.sydneytoday.com/about/>).

Mostly financed through advertising revenue, these online media provide news and current affairs in addition to a wide range of information across all aspects of everyday life, including employment, study, housing, finance, real estate, tourism, health, shopping and eating out. The news and current affairs component features stories—both serious and flippant—about mainstream Australian society and Australia's Chinese community. News from China tends to be of a light and soft nature, usually eschewing serious and politically sensitive topics. Targeting mostly younger users and students, these outlets give disproportionate coverage to entertainment and celebrity gossip. Their tone is often strident, sensational or jovial, depending on the nature of the topic covered.

In 2016, Sydney Today launched the first Chinese-language media app in Australia, which has now been installed by 190,000 users (Ma, 2016). In contrast, Australia's biggest Chinese

newspaper, *Singtao Daily*, can only claim a daily circulation of up to 15,000 (ACRI, 2016), although the actual circulation may be much lower. Another factor that has had a profound impact on the print sector is the ubiquitous uptake of the social media platform WeChat by PRC migrants. Most online publications now have their own apps which enables their content to be delivered to mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets. In 2016, subscribers to Sydney Today via WeChat reached 370,000, 85% of them based in Australia (<http://www.sydneystoday.com/about/>).

As the ACRI Report indicates, these online Chinese-language services are local, commercial media organisations that provide news and current affairs about Australia and China. With advertising as its main source of revenue, this sector mostly provides content by translating material from English-language media in Australia or reproducing news from PRC media, while providing links to the original stories and sometimes adding their own editorial perspective. Their content is regularly distributed through subscription accounts in WeChat. As a result, the Chinese digital/social media sector has become a fluid and energetic space where information and opinions routinely interface with content taken from both English-language media and PRC media, as well as user-generated content from individual social media users. In this way, the WeChat subscription accounts of these online Chinese-language news media organisations exist in a symbiotic relationship with personal WeChat communications (Martin, 2016). For example, while individual WeChat subscribers can re-post links to stories from these online outlets, these organisations—as well as English language media—themselves frequently rely on user-generated material as a source for their own news stories. As a result, the audience for this content could be mainland Chinese, English-speaking Australians, diasporic Chinese in Australia or transnational Chinese in other parts of the world.

### **Foreign Policy, Politics, Economics, and Everyday Life: Some Examples**

We will now turn to some specific examples from Sydney Today in each of the four categories of interest in this paper—Australia-China relations, politics, economics and everyday life—to see how these media operate on a daily basis.

#### *Australia-China Relations*

On the 17th April 2018, the leading story on the Sydney Today website had this headline: ‘According to Australia’s previous ambassador to China, the Australia-China relationship has sunk to its lowest point since 1989. The difference between then and now is that China has become very strong’ (<http://sydney.jinriaozhou.com/content-101816242967015>). The story is accompanied by an eye-catching image of a ‘road sign’, with an arrow pointing to Australia in one direction and one pointing to China in another direction. Click on the image, and readers realise that this is a reprint of an article that was originally published in the *Global Times* a day earlier. The *Global Times* story is entitled ‘From the Australian media: The high cost of the Australian government’s anti-China rhetoric’, and it is in turn a translation of an opinion article by Jennifer Hewett in *The Australian Financial Review* (AFR) that had appeared three days before, on 14th April. What appeared in the *Global Times* seems to be a faithful translation of Hewett’s article, albeit with a different title: Hewett’s title was ‘Business is nervous about the Turnbull government’s anti-China rhetoric’, but the article was promoted online with the title ‘The cost of anti-China rhetoric’.

Thus, the same article was published in three very different media outlets, under three different titles. Originating in one of Australia’s English-language media outlets, it was then

picked up by the *Global Times*, China's most nationalistic paper—often described by Australian public commentators as the Chinese Communist Party's reliable, though more populist, mouthpiece—and finally by Sydney Today, Australia's most popular Chinese-language digital media outlet catering to predominantly Mandarin speaking PRC migrants and international students from China. In this way, the content of the article reached three very different readership cohorts: English-speaking, middle-class Australian readers; patriotic Chinese-reading media consumers in China, who may have less education and social capital than their *AFR* counterparts in Australia; and Chinese migrants and students now living and studying in Australia. The article has also traversed a number of journalistic media borders: both the *AFR* and the *Global Times* are print media outlets that also have digital and social media components, whereas Sydney Today is entirely digital, and delivered mostly to readers via social media.

This also means that Hewett's article has generated comments and responses from three different cohorts of readers. The *Global Times*'s website shows, for instance, that 2,408 readers have used the interactive function of the piece, with 33 people following posts. As can be imagined, the comments from the *Global Times* readers are hostile to Australia, ranging from critical to downright vitriolic, and calling Australians 'kangaroos' and a bunch of ex-convicts' and 'criminals'. Comments from Sydney Today readers are also mostly negative, except that negative comments are generally directed at the Turnbull government, its pro-US stance, and the 'stupidity' of such a stance in view of China's status as Australia's key trading partner.

The first paragraph of Hewitt's opinion piece sums up the main gist of her argument: 'The Turnbull government might want to downplay the high levels of tension in Australia's relations with the Chinese leadership [but]... an apprehensive business community isn't buying it'. She argues that businesses are becoming increasingly nervous that the anti-China rhetoric will damage trade and investment with Australia's key trading partner. Despite this message, neither the *Global Times*'s readers nor Sydney Today's readers seem to want to acknowledge that Hewett's opinion piece testifies to the fact that, while anti-China rhetoric in Australia dominates public discourses, it is not without its critics, and that rational and reasonable voices are trying to provide a much needed corrective to the dominant anti-China discourse. In other words, the article could have been framed, through retitling, as a ray of hope and optimism in Australia-China relations. The reality, however, is quite the opposite. Australia's hostility to China seems further entrenched in the imagination of Chinese readers, those in both Australia and China.

### *Australia's Electoral Politics*

The Bennelong by-election—effectively a two-horse race between Labor's Kristina Keneally and Liberal candidate John Alexander—took place in December 2017. This was a crucial by-election for the Liberal-National Coalition government, the result of which could have pushed them into reliance on cross-bench support for its legislative agenda. Bennelong, located in northwest Sydney, has the highest proportion of residents of Chinese origin of any seat in the country—nearly 18%—so winning the support of Chinese-Australian voters was seen as crucial by both sides of the race. On 17 December 2017, Sydney Today ran a series of stories on the by-election—as did most other Chinese-language media outlets. One of these stories, to be analysed here, may offer some clues as to the *modus operandi* of Australia's Chinese-language digital/social media.

Entitled ‘A battle that could affect Australia’s political status-quo! Bennelong by-election takes places today; voters of Chinese origin crucial to the outcome’ (<http://sydney.jinriaozhou.com/content-101750641941001>). Attributing the original article to the *Daily Mail*, the story relies on material and images gleaned from a cluster of *Daily Mail* news stories on this topic. Having outlined the lay of the land based on the *Daily Mail* stories, the Sydney Today story goes on to provide further reporting of its own on the myriad efforts made by the two parties to attract Chinese-Australians’ votes. Drawing on reports from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*, the story ends with an online poll of its own, asking readers to predict who will win the by-election. When the piece was published, more than 77.67% of poll respondents predicted that Labor would win, while 22.33% predicted the opposite result.

Sydney Today was not the only Chinese media outlet that conducted a poll. *Singtao Daily*, Australia’s oldest and largest Chinese language newspaper, also ran a poll using WeChat, and also predicted a Labor win. Though the prediction turned out to be inaccurate—John Alexander won the by-election—it is worth noting that the polls conducted by both *Singtao Daily* and Sydney Today were cited by the *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 December 2017) and *The Australian* (13 December 2017) in their coverage of the by-election, both papers speculating on the likelihood that Chinese voters would be a decisive factor in determining the outcome.

In hindsight, we know that, contrary to what the Chinese polls predicted, the Coalition Government won the by-election. However, it is worth mentioning that this was the first time that English language media journalists had turned to the Chinese-language media to gauge the level of Chinese voters’ support for political parties. Also noteworthy is the fact that, even though there is no evidence linking Chinese voters’ support for Labor to political influence from China, this did not stop the English-language media from publishing such speculation. For instance, O’Malley and Joske’s article (2017) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* has this to say:

On Monday morning, the *People’s Daily*, a major Chinese state-controlled outlet, took a hard line against the Australian government, publishing an opinion piece decrying the allegations of influence as racist and urging the Australian government and media to ‘discard their political biases and prejudices’.

After that piece was published, the tone of coverage of the Bennelong by-election rapidly began to change in the Australian-based media. And that shift in the coverage may have proved crucial in deciding the outcome of the knife-edge election.

The Australian government and media’s allegations of influence have also been described as ‘racist’ by a number of Australian commentators, not the least of whom is the Race Discrimination Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission, Tim Soutphommasane (2018). As Drysdale and Denton (2018) argue, ‘there is an elevated demonising of China to quell deep and gnawing anxieties that surround the unpredictability of the US alliance under President Donald Trump’. In the context of the Bennelong by-election, it seems that the English-language media cited Australian Chinese-language media not only as a reliable gauge of Chinese voters’ preferences but also, and more importantly, as evidence that their preferences are influenced by China.

On 14 April 2018, Sydney Today published an original story in a category called ‘Today’s Topic’, on the delay in completing Sydney’s light rail project. The long title reads, ‘Speechless! That 24-kilometre light rail project is indefinitely delayed, yet again! This is because the contractor and the government are fighting with each other! One minute it’s because archaeological items have been found under the ground ... the next minute, architectural objects are found there ... What do you think? Have your say!’ (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/29A0qLmw4AABWAKbKgcLyQ>).

Between the editorial introduction and the summary at the end, the story mostly comprises many images of construction sites and poor road conditions, as well as images of government spokespersons and a representative of Acciona, the company building the project. The captions of these pictures, taken together, form a narrative of dispute between the two parties. One of the images on which Sydney Today’s narrative is based is a screen shot of a news story by Paige Cockburn (2018) taken from ABC online, which says, ‘Sydney light rail contractor Acciona suing NSW Government; further delays to construction likely’. But the Sydney Today story is not just a rendition of the ABC story with images inserted. It also takes information from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Mirror*, both of which are duly acknowledged at the end of the story as sources. Also embedded in the piece is a screen shot of half a dozen comments, written in Chinese, from Sydney Today’s readers. Entitled ‘Incompetent government meets rogue contractor’, this section is a compendium of individual readers’ gripes. One reader says, ‘Every time I drive by the construction site, I see a bunch of workers smoking and chit-chatting. You can tell at a glance the company’s work ethic is non-existent’. Another comments, ‘Bring in a Chinese construction company. It’ll be fixed in one year’.

Most noteworthy of all is a fresh slew of comments that appeared after the story was published. One reader asks why the contract was not awarded to a Chinese company, which would have been a lot more efficient: ‘The Spanish may be OK as tailors, but let them build a light rail? Come on. ... This is tax-payer’s money they’re squandering. My money’. In response to this reader’s question as to why it was not awarded to a Chinese company, another reader says, ‘They probably wanted to, but they don’t trust the Chinese’. Another chimed in, ‘They didn’t want to give the job to the Chinese because, as the Prime Minister has said, “Australians have finally stood up to the Chinese”. Ha ha!’.

It is clear that, while some readers of the story are based in Sydney, others live in China. One reader says, ‘I went to Sydney a couple of years ago, and it was chaotic there. I went there again in March this year, and it was still a mess. Unbelievable’. Another reader is clearly based in Sydney but says, ‘In China, a light rail takes less than two years to build, so the topic of Sydney’s light rail saga has become a running joke among my friends there’. And yet another reader says, ‘So, this is what a developed country looks like?’ and ends his/her laconic comment with five ‘chuckle’ emojis.

The Sydney light rail tale is a local issue, yet its likely resonance is clearly global. Prima facie, this story has nothing to do with Australia-China relations, yet, in the eyes of Sydney Today readers, it has much to do with this more consequential matter. Mandarin-speaking residents of Sydney resonate with the story not only as a local, tax paying Chinese-Australian citizen, but also as someone who is appreciative of China’s capacity for speed and efficiency, aware of Australia’s distrust of and anxiety about China, and concerned about the Australian



government's anti-Chinese rhetoric. This China dimension was missing from English-speaking readers' reactions.

### *Everyday Life*

Another of the categories in Sydney Today is simply called 'Discussion Topics', and it reports on issues that resonate with Chinese migrants—both potential and actual. A quick browse through the most popular stories in this category yields an assortment of topics: 'Which suburbs in Sydney are the safest to live in and which are the worst?'; 'Which suburb in Australia is most liveable?'; 'How do you find a boyfriend/girlfriend in Australia?'; 'Do you think Australia's road conditions are more suitable for sedan cars or SUVs?'; 'Flat White or Latte: which is more popular in Australia?'; 'If you had another chance to decide which country to migrate to, would you still choose Australia?'; and 'Based on your interactions with Australian people, what kinds of stereotypes do you think they have of Chinese people?'

One discussion topic that has attracted many comments is 'If you return to China after having lived in Australia for more than a year, what are the things that you are no longer used to there?' (<http://sydney.jinriaozhou.com/gambit-101806665023015>). Many readers' responses paint a rather unflattering picture of China: 'dirty, chaotic and shoddy'; 'public toilets don't have toilet paper'; 'no buttons to press when you want to cross the road, and cars don't stop for pedestrians'; 'too many smokers and spitters in public spaces'; 'no awareness of the need to queue, and queue-jumping seems perfectly normal'; and 'cars blowing their horns a lot'. Other comments conjure up a China that is hi-tech, modern, efficient and convenient, with its 'proliferation of courier services' delivering goods fast and reliable ways'; 'faster Internet speeds'; and 'more convenient methods of paying bills and buying merchandise with smart phones'.

The tone of discussion in this category is mostly calm and friendly—e.g., 'Each country has its strengths and weaknesses'; or 'The lifestyle in Australia is better without a doubt, but I feel more at home in China'. One comment, phrased as a perfect rhyming couplet, repeats a popular saying among the PRC Chinese community comparing life in China with life in the West: 'China is dirty and chaotic but jolly good fun, whereas Australia [New Zealand, the USA, Canada] has beautiful mountains and beautiful rivers but is dead boring'. However, debates such as these can easily get heated, with a few readers hurling insults at each other. Defenders of Australia demand to know why detractors still remain here, instead of 'buggering off back to China'. Those who prefer China to Australia call Australia-lovers 'traitors'.

Online forums such as 'Discussion Topics' on the Sydney Today platform go above and beyond the scope of the user-generated content enabled by most online news media. They provide Mandarin-speaking migrants from the PRC a valuable virtual space in which they can try to make sense of their experience of migration, and, as such, play a crucial role in users' re-articulation of their own cultural identity, their sense of belonging, and their formation of new subject positions. Here, new and old sensibilities jostle with and contest each other, and in many cases a primordial attachment to the motherland co-exists harmoniously—or not—with an appreciation of the better things that their adopted country has to offer. Unlike the news stories and feature articles discussed in the previous categories, this is user-generated content, and judging by the location indicated with each post, most participants currently live in Sydney/Australia. Topics are mostly to do with cross-cultural observations, peppered with the triumphs of overcoming cultural differences, or grievances resulting from an inability to do so. This forum is also of particular interest to friends,

relatives and families of migrant individuals who live, work and study in China and other parts of the world.

Such user-generated content may in fact be functioning as an effective instrument of people-to-people diplomacy. Since the judgements and opinions that users express about Australia's suitability as a place worthy of consideration in terms of business, tourism, education or migration come from individuals rather than from the Government, corporations or the media, they may be considered to be more trustworthy SMIs – 'social media influencers' (Freberg et al, 2011; Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015) – than recommendations, advertisements or opinions that clearly come from some official source. Thus, the speculation that such user-generated content could already be operating as a de facto agency of nation-to-nation diplomacy, one post at a time, certainly warrants further investigation—especially given that, while any such agency has the potential to spread highly positive grassroots messages about Australia, China or the relationship between the two, it also has the capacity to have an extremely negative and damaging impact on the fragile relationship between the two nations.

### **Public Diplomacy via Digital Diaspora – Opportunities and Challenges**

Australia's stated goal of engaging with the digital Chinese diaspora has a number of obstacles: (1) the impact of China's ascent as a global economic powerhouse, its global media expansion, and its newly articulated role for the diaspora as its propaganda vessel; (2) growing levels of anxiety and fear among the Australian public and in media discourses in relation to China's influence and anti-Chinese rhetoric; and (3) the fact that the prevailing—and escalating—'digital disruption' has given rise to a transnational, hypertextual, interactive and multi-platform communication context. These three obstacles intersect to ensure that the digital Chinese-language news media sector in Australia is operating as a double-edged sword.

It seems clear from this discussion – as provisional as it may be – that the Chinese-language digital/social media now exist between ideologically competing journalistic systems, and are dominated by state Chinese media, on the one hand, and English-language media, on the other. Despite this, or perhaps even because of this, this sector is potentially both an important asset and a liability from the point of view of Australia's public diplomacy agenda. Furthermore, though this needs to be further substantiated with more systematic and extensive data, this discussion seems to suggest that the Chinese-language media in Australia may not be just a blunt tool of the Chinese government and its state media, nor just a ventriloquist for English-language media. Rather, wedged between an anti-Chinese public rhetoric in Australia and anti-Australian responses in China's state media, this sector seems to exist profitably by actively giving voice to PRC migrants' sense of ambivalence towards both Australia and China.

This sector also needs to be understood in the context of digital disruption. We know that digital/social media are changing patterns of information production, distribution and circulation, which in turn impacts on our conceptualisation of 'media influence' (Flew, 2014). We have evidence that mobile devices and technologies are changing the way media and communication are understood and analysed across the globe (e.g., Goggin et al., 2016), and social media play a prominent role in mediating sociocultural controversies (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016). Digital communication and social media are also changing the ways in which journalism is understood and practised. Increasingly, news-making has to rely on 'producers' (Bruns, 2008)—that is, 'amateurs' (Hunter et al., 2012) and citizens (Bossio and Bebawi, 2016) who combine their role as users/consumers of digital media with their

activities as producers of content, software and other digital products. This disruption has also given rise to the importance of notions such as a ‘digital diaspora’ (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010) and a ‘hypertextual diaspora’ (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2011). All these insights bear direct relevance to our understanding of how Chinese-language digital media operate.

This discussion also points to the importance of further research aiming to provide a detailed and systematic mapping of Australia-based Chinese-language digital media content, using both quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis methods. Such a mapping exercise should aim to identify the main patterns of information flow between this sector, mainland Chinese (especially state) media and English-language media in Australia. It should also seek to identify narratives that either promote or jeopardise Australia’s and China’s respective public diplomacy aspirations. Further analysis needs to explore the mechanisms that enable the flow of content between Australia-based media and Chinese state media; to identify the specific pathways by which amateur ‘produser’ individuals generate content within social media; and to understand how, why, when and by whom information is sourced and reproduced (i.e., from Chinese state media, transnational Chinese media elsewhere, or English-language media in Australia).

As the examples cited in this discussion testify, the three source domains of digital media content mentioned above are no longer discrete domains, and the flow of content among them has become not only transnational but also multi-directional. This makes the provenance of certain news stories difficult to identify for some less discerning readers, and means that issues that threaten Australia’s public diplomacy agenda may take place in highly unpredictable places, times and circumstances. In order to get to the bottom of this complex and fraught issue, future research may do well to start by (1) carefully charting the directions of flow of content in this discursive space; (2) systematically analysing how this space works to use and mediate between competing and conflicting semiotic spheres; (3) examining the critical junctures whereby content from one particular source is reframed to suit a certain editorial position; and (4) outlining the process by which opinions and ideological positions expressed in user-generated content and institutionally produced information compete with or co-produce each other.

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<sup>1</sup> For an historical outline of the Chinese migration in Australia, see Sun et al (2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a list of the most popular websites of this kind, see ACRI (2016).