

Integrate in US or Bridge with China? Four-in-one Media's Role during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Diasporic WeChat subscription accounts have emerged as a special media sphere in over 65 countries across five continents. This study explores their role and influencing factors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research sample comprised the “Big Two” of the US Chinese media: *Sing Tao* (US edition) and *The US China Press*. A computer-assisted content analysis on 2022 suggests that they primarily fulfil information and integration roles rather than a bridging role with China. However, in-depth interviews with 12 editors and scholars in the US provide opposite insights: diasporic WeChat subscription accounts find it difficult to achieve dynamic integration and bridging roles, because of the pandemic's impacts, insufficient income, shortage of professionals, and especially political impacts in China and the US. The results highlight (1) these special digital media's role overlaps content and social environment, local and global, and present and future, (2) the methodological differences between content analysis validity and in-depth interview.

Keywords: media role, diasporic media, WeChat subscription account, COVID-19, content analysis validity

1. Introduction

Nearly seven million people have died from COVID-19 worldwide, with over one million victims recorded in the United States (US).¹ Prior to this health crisis, a particular type of media group emerged in more than 65 countries across 5 continents,² known as four-in-one media – diasporic WeChat subscription accounts (DWSA).³ They deliberately expand their influence from overseas Chinese communities to local Chinese societies.

Four-in-one media integrate four identities: social media, diasporic media, global media, and the media in China. They belong to social media as WeChat subscription accounts, but they are a unique form of diasporic media that primarily target overseas Chinese people. Although these accounts appear “global” because they are accessible outside China, they must be registered in the mainland.⁴ Exhibiting these four characteristics, four-in-one media possess individuality in the global media sphere.

The researcher's investigations in Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom (UK) and the US reveal that four-in-one media are deliberately and openly exerting their influence on both diasporic Chinese communities and local Chinese societies. For example, political parties and local companies advertise on these accounts, with some even establishing their own accounts.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's global image became significantly negative (Tan, Lee, and Ruppner, 2022). Simultaneously, overseas Chinese people had an increasingly urgent need for information, including news on the pandemic. Four-in-one media were able to provide timely information; however, numerous DWSA accounts are based

¹ Johns Hopkins University & Medicine (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>), retrieved on June 3, 2023.

² This figure summarizes the researcher's on-site investigations and searches conducted on professional search engines, including WeChat and Sogou (搜狗).

³ The following accounts were not included in this study's analysis: accounts with “foreign names” primarily targeting the mainland market, whose editors are in China. Instead, this study focused on WeChat subscription accounts that published overseas content, targeted overseas Chinese people, and updated their content at least once a week.

⁴ According to Chinese regulations, WeChat subscription accounts must be registered in the mainland by Chinese nationals (holding a mainland ID Card) or companies.

in Western countries, where contemporary Sino-West relations have become extremely vulnerable and sensitive compared to past decades. Moreover, the Chinese government constantly tightens censorship, including oversight of the DWSA, which are required to be registered with the mainland.

Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sino-West dual framework, the role of four-in-one media during a public health crisis must be investigated. Do they promote Chinese nationalism or become more localized? What factors determine their functions within a local and global context? In a broader context, what are the differences and similarities between the Chinese diasporic media and other Asian diasporic media?

This study contributes to both society and academia. The results help mainstream societies and diasporic communities to comprehend the new concept of community media, while it assists the academia to gain fresh, first-hand, and insightful perspectives on media interactions among the homeland and host countries during a particular period.

2. Research Background and Questions

Since the early 20th century, researchers have focused on the functions of diasporic media, especially their role in providing information, bridging communities, and fostering integration. Scholars have also investigated how socio-political factors influence the media's role, providing valuable references for this paper.

Three roles in diasporic media research

The information role provides various messages to diasporic people coming from a different country with special needs in a new country (Stamm 1985). Early diasporic media, including *The Chinese Advertiser* (1854–1856), the earliest Chinese-English newspaper, played an information role by delivering various business messages, such as information about local groceries, food, and ship tickets to China (Wang and Ryder 1999).

The same informational function was found in the Californian Chinese papers between the 19th and early 20th century (Lai 1987). Contemporary diasporic Chinese media also reflect a similar orientation as Zhou, Chen and Cai (2006) found that a 60-year-old Chinese man was well informed about current issues in the US because he often read local Chinese newspapers.

The bridging role that diasporic media offer include the communication of various messages from the homeland and helping people living overseas to retain their connection with their homeland (Yin, 2009; Yin, 2015). It sets diasporic media apart from mainstream media, which do not typically publish this type of content but rather focus on providing homeland information for their audience.

Scholars, including Liu (2010), noticed this bridging role and concluded that Philadelphia Chinese papers' primarily function is "distributing homeland information" (ibid., 256). These papers frequently cover events in China that mainstream media do not cover, which can help alleviate homesickness among the Chinese in diaspora and maintain personal and business connections with their homeland.

In the social media era, the bridging role remains evident, as mobile platforms enable the easy transfer of information from the homeland to people living overseas. Sandel (2014) observed how students from the mainland use WeChat in Macao to connect with their domestic friends, relatives, and families.

The integration role of diasporic media assists their audience in adapting to a new culture and assimilating into the local society (Bai 2010). Park (1922) observed this role, but "the thinking of Park was later formulated in what we will call the 'community integration'" (Janowitz 1952, 4).

Scholars confirmed this role in other countries such as Australia (Gilson and Zubruzycki 1967; Bell, McKenzie, and Vipond 1991). In the 21st century, researchers, including Cunningham and Sinclair (2001), found that Chinese diasporic media provide extensive information about the host country and fulfil an integration function. Xu (2002) reviewed *The US China Press* through a content analysis and concluded that it promotes integration within the Chinese community through its diverse coverage of US news.

Socio-political environment's impact on media's role

A number of scholars, such as Adoni, Caspi, and Cohen (2006), have investigated the influential factors shaping the role of diasporic media in bridging and integration societies. These factors include the political environment of the homeland and host country, audience market, and media strategy. The other researchers, e.g. Oates (2008), Zoe (2014), hold similar opinions. These studies are the valuable references for this study.

Particularly, scholars have observed the influence of homeland politics on overseas Chinese media. Pan (1994) revealed how the corruptive Qing Dynasty and Republic Revolution Party attempted to manipulate Australian Chinese newspapers in the early 20th century. So and Lee (1995) discussed how Hong Kong's return to China impacted the content and role of Canadian Chinese newspapers.

Pal (2016, 69–87) explored the Chinese government’s impact on Spanish Chinese media and argued that excessive mainland management becomes a barrier to overseas Chinese media. Yu and Sun (2019) discussed how the mainland’s political economy affects the media’s role in Australian local WeChat accounts, highlighting the absence of sensitive issues.

Zhang (2022) revealed the negative function of diasporic WeChat subscription accounts through misinformation. A content analysis of 25 DWSA in the US identified a series of “misinformation,” including fabrication, bias, wrong translation, and intentionally amplification of the Left or Right. Zhang (2022) concluded that several influential factors contribute to this “misinformation,” including WeChat management, the Chinese audience’s background, and the US political media system.

In the “digital diaspora age” (Everett, 2009), scholars have increasingly examined the integration and bridging roles of diasporic media against an oriental-occidental background (Ogunyemi, 2015). Especially the two “neighbours” of the Mainland-Korea and Vietnam, their diasporic media also spread the world, and a number of scholars have investigated their functions with social political impacts in both North America and Europe (Phama, 2021; Lee, 2018). For instance, Yu (2015) conceptualized an “intercultural media system” to analyse Korean diasporic media in Vancouver and Los Angeles.

To our knowledge, only one project directly relates to COVID-19 and DWSA. Negro and Lulu (2022) examined WeChat subscription accounts in the Italian Chinese community at the pandemic’s onset in 2020. These accounts served two key roles: disseminating health information as a communication tool within the local Chinese community and fostering community solidarity as an ethnic tie. However, this research merely analysed reports in Factiva, without reviewing the actual subscription accounts.

Research questions

These references indicate scholars’ increasing interest in the three roles played by Chinese diasporic media and their influencing factors during the pandemic. For example, do DWSA fulfil a bridging role by publishing numerous China reports and informing the diasporic audience about homeland events? Alternatively, do they prioritize overseas content to aid the local audience’s survival during the pandemic and integration into the new country?

Reese and Shoemaker (2016) found that media group orientation, audience market, and social political environment are decisive factors influencing media roles. Especially, if “diasporic media are a window to a broader society” (Yu, 2018, 1), how do the current Sino-West political environments impact the role of DWSA?

This study investigates the following aspects and combines references with the current situations of DWSA:

- (1) What role do DWSA play in terms of content?
- (2) How does media strategy impact the media’s role in DWSA?
- (3) How does the audience market impact the media’s role in DWSA?
- (4) How do the host country and homeland environments impact the role of DWSA?

3. Methods and Sample

DWSA are distributed globally in large numbers, making it impossible to investigate all of them. Therefore, this study selected a representative sample by focusing on the US, which has the highest number of DWSA with over 500 accounts as of January 31, 2022. The US stands out for several reasons. First, it boasts an extensive Chinese population with diverse backgrounds, including age (young, middle-aged, and older adults), migration targets (study, business, travel, family, and illegal migrants), and origin (south, north mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). Second, US–Sino relations have a significant impact on the world, including DWSA (Zhang, 2022). Consequently, this study selected DWSA in the US as the research sample.

Furthermore, two notable accounts, Look New York (LNY, 瞧纽约)⁵ and Exploration on America (EA, 星条探索), were considered; these accounts belong to *The US China Press* and *Sing Tao Daily* (San Francisco edition), respectively, and can be considered the “Big Two” in the diasporic Chinese media market. *Sing Tao* is one of the most famous US–Chinese media groups worldwide. In 1975, the group launched the San Francisco edition, the first of its kind, starting a new era for Chinese diasporic media. *The US China Press* was founded in 1990 and is also one of the most influential Chinese diasporic media outlets in the US, with offices on the East and West coasts, and close cooperation with *The*

⁵ The name of this account, Look New York, has been changed to Vanguard Eye (前卫之眼) since 21, December, 2023.

China News Agency. Therefore, the “Big Two” have a mainland and Hong Kong background, and represent a diversity of overseas Chinese media.

LNY and EA are US WeChat subscription accounts, and their staff operate the accounts in the US, unlike some so-called “foreign accounts” that are actually based in China. These two accounts publish various content, including news, entertainment, and business information, covering the US, China, and the rest of the world. These two accounts were selected as case study for content analysis, because they are frequently listed among the top ten overseas accounts.

Content analysis category and validity

Park (1921), Pe-Pua, Morrissey, and Mitchell (1994), and Zhang (2022), have explored the information, integration, and bridging roles played by diasporic media through content analyses. So this study employs the same method and analyses DWSA content from October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022 for events such as different COVID-19 waves, working days, Christmas, New Year, Spring Festival, and October 1, the National Day of the People’s Republic of China. These events were expected to reflect editorial attitudes toward the hostland and the homeland, especially the Chinese National Day.

Regarding the content categories, the research team has been monitoring the two accounts since February 2018. The researchers initially identified six categories related to the research questions: China news, local (US) news, COVID-19 news, international news, advertisement, and other news. To assess the content quality, the researchers investigated exclusive, investigative, original reports, and video feature reports from these accounts. To discern audience responses, the three most-read and favourite articles were collected and analysed.

Then, the researchers input all data into computer and analysed by Excel. During the one-year coding process, the researchers focused on the validity of the content analysis, as highlighted by Krippendorff (2004, a, b) and Peter and Lauf (2002, 827), who emphasized the importance of external validity in a content analysis. Fico (1994) also questioned whether content analysis alone can fully reveal a story, citing the Gulf War as an example, and suggested combining qualitative methods. Therefore, this research employed in-depth interviews to test the validity of the content analysis and explored extensive answers regarding the media’s role and its influencing factors.

Three sections of the in-depth interviews

The first section of the in-depth interviews focused on the editor and associate editor of *Sing Tao* and *The US China Press*. However, their accounts may only represent the news media WeChat accounts. During the pandemic, medical WeChat accounts, emerged as a new category while commercial accounts were commonly seen in DWSA. Consequently, this study goes beyond the two research samples and investigates the extensive situation of DWSA.

In the second section of the in-depth interviews, four editors from the medical and business accounts were selected to discern their media roles and the impact of influential factors, and to identify similarities and differences among news, medical, and business accounts. The semi-open questions presented to the six editors were: account management, content selection criterion, and media strategy; the DWSA audience market in the US; and socio-political environment impacts in the US and China.

The third section focused on interviews with professional audiences. Owing to the US privacy laws, finding DWSA users within the country, especially during the pandemic, was challenging. Considering experts’ opinions would be more extensive, insightful, and representative, this research selected six senior media consultants and scholars for in-depth interviews.

We selected two media consultants with more than thirty years’ experience in either the US–Chinese media industry or local government, and four media and social science associates and full-time professors at US universities who were knowledgeable about DWSA and media environments. In the interviews they were presented with semi-open questions that included the role of DWSA, especially LNY and EA, the DWSA market in the US, and socio-political media impacts in the US and China. The interviewees’ written agreements were obtained by WeChat before the interview, and the interviews were conducted between April and December 2022. The results were an essential reference for content analysis validity, and provided insights to the media’s role and influence factors.

4. Results

Content: information, and integration rather than bridging role

Content analysis shows four significant characteristics of LNY and EA: an extremely large number of US reports, few China reports, rare readers’ favourites (below 60), and no original or exclusive reports. They suggest that both accounts primarily provide information and fulfil integrating roles. However, no original reports, and low number of audience reads and favourites suggest further examination of their insightful stories.

Content and role in LNY

Table 1 displays content categories published by LNY between October 1, 2021, and September 30, 2022. The account publishes diverse content, ranging between 46 and 77 articles each month. US reports account for nearly 86% of the content, namely, 662 out of 768 articles. In contrast, only one report on China was published during this period, making it the smallest category, even when compared to world news (6 pieces) and advertisements (99 pieces).

Table 1. Content category in Look New York (LNY), Oct 1 2021-Sep 30 2022⁶

Category	China News						US News						World News						AD	Total
Month	Pan	Pol	Eco	C/S	Others	Total	Pan	Pol	Eco	C/S	Others	Total	Pan	Pol	Eco	C/S	Others	Total		
Oct	0	0	0	1	0	1	12	8	4	33	8	65	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	77
Nov	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	9	3	23	3	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	46
Dec	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	3	3	35	15	66	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	73
Jan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	3	40	12	63	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	68
Feb	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	35	11	51	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	59
Mar	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	43	10	59	1	1	0	0	0	2	9	70
Apr.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	4	40	9	58	0	1	0	0	0	1	7	66
May	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	36	9	52	0	0	0	1	0	1	6	59
June	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	6	35	11	57	0	0	0	0	1	1	12	70
July	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	5	36	10	54	0	1	0	0	0	1	11	66
Aug	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2	30	8	46	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	55
Sep	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	3	32	11	51	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	59
Total	0	0	0	1	0	1	29	59	39	418	117	662	1	3	0	1	1	6	99	768

The only China report, titled “New entry policy in China”, was published on October 1, 2022, and covered new travel regulations to the mainland during the pandemic. No other reports on China were found, including reports on events related to China’s national day.

Among the substantial number of the US reports, the largest category focused on culture and society, with 418 pieces covering topics such as lifestyle, accidents, crime, environment, and family issues. For example, on October 1, 2022, two US reports were published: the New York municipal election (political news) and criminal cases in Flushing, New York (social news).

There were 29 reports on the pandemic, showing a declining trend over a year. After 12 pieces on the pandemic were published in October and December, 2021, the number of reports declined sharply. There was only one report in February, May, and September 2022, and two pieces in March 2022, with no reports in the remaining months. This trend corresponded with the severity of the pandemic’s impact in the US.

The highest number of daily pandemic reports (4) appeared on December 21, 2021. The first news reports predicted that the number of deaths in New York could increase to 60,000, while the other three reported that eight new pandemic detection points had opened, an increase in the number of cases in New York’s public schools, and New Yorkers’ complaints about the long queues at the pandemic detection centres.

There were 80 advertisements in the content analysis, a relatively small number compared to the US category. Frequently, no advertisements were found on a given day. A review of these advertisements showed that they mainly came from local food companies, especially Chinese food establishments, migrant or study services, and various local business promotions.

Table 2 shows that no exclusive, investigative, video, or in-depth reports were published in all the categories. To confirm this, we conducted a critical review and word count analysis, and found that all the reports were shorter than 400 Chinese words and followed an informative style. Furthermore, these articles were either translated from English mainstream media or rewritten by an online source. Additionally, the critical review showed that no sensitive articles regarding the mainland or US politics were published, such as those related to the origin of COVID-19 and Sino-US trade war.

Table 2. Special reports in LNY

China News				US News				World News				Total
exclusive	investigative	original	video	exclusive	investigative	original	video	exclusive	investigative	original	video	
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

⁶ Pan, Pol, and Eco, C/S, T: Pandemic News, Political News, Economic News, Cultural and Society News, Total. Same as in Table 4.

Table 3 shows the rare audience reads and favourites. Over the one-year period, the three most popular reads were the New York snow storm (59), the spread of Omicron BA.2 (43), and New York food coupons (42). Compared with its 83,000 registered users, these two figures would be minimal. Table 3 also shows that all the reads and favourites were local US reports. Overall, the content analysis suggested that LNY serves an information and integration role, but the scarcity of original reports, reads, and favourites require further investigation.

Table 3. Top three Most Read and Most Favourite in LNY

Top three Most Read			
1	Apr 14	Murderer caught in Manhattan! Shot 33 times with ox	38000
2	Jan 3	New Yorker notice! Tomorrow big stow storm!	34000
3	Mar 17	Omicron BA.2 increase 25%	27000
Top three Most Favorite			
1	Jan 3	New Yorker notice! Tomorrow big stow storm!	59
2	Mar 17	Omicron BA.2 increase 25%	43
3	Sep 16	Notice! New York Food coupon increase 100 Dollar	42

Content and role in EA

Table 4 reveals the similarities and differences between EA and LNY. EA published 2,643 articles – 3.5 times more than LNY’s 768 pieces – although the content was proportionally remarkably similar, including a scarcity of original reports, most-reads, and favourites.

Table 4. Content category in Exploration on America (EA)

Category	China News						US News						World News						AD	Total		
	Pan	Pol	Eco	C/S	Others	Total	Pan	Pol	Eco	C/S	Others	Total	Pan	Pol	Eco	C/S	Others	Total				
Month																						
Oct	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	58	63	80	8	226	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	226
Nov	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	51	54	88	8	212	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	212
Dec	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	45	65	90	5	228	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	228
Jan	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	67	71	85	1	243	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	244
Feb	0	0	1	1	0	2	9	58	57	97	5	226	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	229
Mar	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	56	55	90	9	211	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	211
Apr	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	49	65	89	1	206	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	208
May	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	53	61	79	11	206	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	209
June	0	0	4	0	0	4	1	65	63	97	6	232	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	236
July	0	0	3	0	0	3	0	56	61	82	3	202	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	205
Aug	0	0	6	1	0	7	0	56	59	79	3	197	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	204
Sep	0	0	4	2	0	6	0	67	69	81	7	224	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	231
Total	0	0	22	4	0	26	85	681	743	1037	67	2613	0	3	0	1	0	4	0	0	0	2643

In Table 4, US news occupies the largest proportion of the content, accounting for 99% of EA’s total of 2,643 reports. Similar to LNY, culture/society is the largest category with 1,037 pieces (40% of the content), followed by the political and economic categories with 681 (26%) and 743 (28%) pieces, respectively. For example, eight US reports were published on September 29, 2022, including “Californian State Governor Gavin Newsom signs new law and supports abortion” (political news), “Gun case frequently emerges in Californian Oakland” (culture and society), and “San Francisco provides teacher apartments” (economy).

While LNY published only one piece on China news, EA featured 22 pieces, mostly economic reports on the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, including topics such as hi-tech companies, exportation, automobiles, products, and urban development. However, no content was published on October 1, 2021; China’s National Day events were reported on the second day (October 2).

There were 85 pandemic reports over the course of the year, with the number varying based on the severity of COVID-19 in the US. While 17 reports were published in October 2022, the coverage peaked in December (23 pieces), and then dropped in January (19) and February (9) 2022. Zero pandemic reports were published between July and September 2022. The pandemic reports primarily consisted of five types: daily news, medicine, vaccination, variants, and government regulations. For instance, on December 21, 2021, three pandemic news articles were published: New Yorkers complaining about the long queues at pandemic detection points; Chinese parents who were vaccinated but still

become infected; and the number of infected cases soaring in New York but the mayor insisting on not announcing a lockdown.

Table 4 also shows that no advertisements were found. However, in reality, EA had more advertisements than LNY, because in EA, advertisements are displayed in a separate column, whereas in LNY, news and advertisements are mixed together.

Table 5 shows no special reports in EA within a year. Most of the content offered consisted of rewritten or translated materials rather than original work. All the articles were shorter than 400 words and in an informative style. These patterns were consistent with LNY.

Table 5. Special reports in EA

China News				US News				World News				Total
exclusive	investigative	original	video	exclusive	investigative	original	video	exclusive	investigative	original	video	
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Similarly, Table 6 shows the most read and favourite articles, with the highest numbers being 9,415 and 23. Like LYN, these most read and favourite articles were local US reports. However, the figures for EA were lower than those for LNY. Similar to LNY, there were no sensitive articles on either the US or China in EA.

Table 6. Top three most-read and most Favourite in EA

Top three Most Read			
1	Jun 28	Get money! Californians can obtain upmost 1050 USD help since mid-Oct	9415
2	May 14	Californians can get financial help again	8534
3	Mar 11	Californians obtain government’s help on Petrol crisis in Russian-Ukraine War	6930
Top three Most Favorite			
1	Mar 7	20000 harbor workers deny to ship Russian goods	23
2	Jun 28	Get money! Californians upmost get 1050 USD, affect in mid-Oct	14
3	Mar 7	Famous anti-war organization together in LA and supports Ukraine	14

According to Park (1922), Stamm (1985) and Zhang (2022), content reflects the media’s role. Our content analysis shows that both accounts fulfilled the role of information and integration rather than bridging. Moreover, the similarities between these two accounts, including neutral political attitude toward the homeland and host country, insufficient special reports, and favourites and reads, require further investigation in a broader context.

Editors: information, rather than integration or bridging role

Although the content analysis reveals that LNY and EA play the information and integration roles, the in-depth interviews with six US media editors revealed a controversial story. DWSA primarily served an information role during the pandemic, rather than an integration and bridging role because of media group strategies, insufficient income, and talent gaps.

News media account strategy on media role

The editors from *Sing Tao* and *The China Press* media groups stated that providing information was their primary media strategy to inform their readers about what was happening in communities and the world. It enabled the audience to form their own opinions and make informed decisions. Therefore, these two media groups prioritized their role in providing information rather than focusing on bridging or integration functions.

The two editors also revealed that a significant proportion of US news was published because of its “closeness” to the local Chinese audience. Although the US–Chinese audience originated from China, they were now in a new country where survival was of utmost importance. Therefore, they saw an urgent need for local news rather than news from China. In particular, the pandemic threatened the Chinese people living in the US, so the media had to provide timely news to them. Accordingly, the two DWSA published extensive US news, which was certainly not related to an integration role.

Except for media orientation, the pandemic impacted funding and talent acquisition and created two barriers to their media role and content. An editor humorously observed, “[The] WeChat account is one of our ‘sons’ not earning money”. In large Chinese media groups such as *Sing Tao* and *The US China Press* there are a several “sons” in the “families”: the newspaper, magazine, website, micro-blog, video media, and WeChat account. Take *Sing Tao* as an example, the “son” that can earn most money now is web TV in YouTube. Unfortunately, WeChat subscription accounts are not profitable.

WeChat accounts primarily rely on advertisements from local US businesses, restaurants, law firms, migration and medical services, and mainland China. The former three industries were frequently closed because of lockdowns due to the pandemic, resulting in insufficient revenues for advertisements. Moreover, the mainland China channel was also seriously impacted by Sino–US relations, shipping disruptions, and quarantine during the pandemic.

WeChat advertisements cannot sustain media groups, making them reliant on subsidies. However, the pandemic significantly affected media groups, causing unprecedented financial difficulties. During the period under review, their major income source came from US federal and local government advertisements, particularly for public notices related to COVID-19, such as lockdown measures, mask requirements, and vaccination. However, there were also substantial expenditures within the groups dependent on this money, which limited the subsidy available for WeChat subscription accounts.

Therefore, the media groups were unable to hire professionals for WeChat subscriptions accounts and instead assigned existing staff responsible for website and micro-blogging operations. Despite the differences in format and editing style between WeChat and the other online media, similar (sometimes, the same) content was published on WeChat accounts.

Furthermore, the lockdowns during the pandemic and insufficient funding hindered journalists' outdoor investigation, so media groups allowed them to work from home for safety and cost-cutting reasons. Consequently, exclusive, in-depth articles, and video reports were difficult to produce. Mainstream media and online resources became primary resources, resulting in brief and shallow content on the WeChat accounts. As a result, there were fewer audience "favourites" on the two accounts. In summary, due to media strategies and the financial and logistical impacts of the pandemic, these two accounts primarily served an information role rather than functioning as integrators or bridges.

Medical account strategy on media role

Medical WeChat subscription accounts emerged as a new category during the COVID-19 pandemic. While their content and management differed from those in news media accounts, they shared similarities in media strategy, role, financial hardship, and staff shortages.

First, both medical editors believed that LNY and EA had not fulfilled a strong integration and bridging role but mainly played an information role. Local US news was often not strongly related to the integration role, and community media should offer much local information.

Regarding their own WeChat accounts, they prioritized providing information as their primary responsibility and their media strategy was to provide various messages related to COVID-19. As an editor explained:

We are the doctors in the US with a Chinese background. The community is facing a severe illness, so we hope to help the people with professional knowledge, and try our best to offer the pandemic news, medicine, patient cases and research reports.

They explained why bridging roles did not interest them:

Honestly, it is not our editorial strategy to show what happens in China, if not related to COVID-19. It does not mean we are not concerned about the country. But as doctors, we have our concentration, that is: save people's lives with professional medical experience. So, we cannot distract our focus to China news.

Likewise, integration was also not part of their media strategy:

As doctors, we won't think about too much patients' identifications, rich or poor, rural or urban, especially 'integrated' into America or not, we are not professional on that. We just hope everyone can get a qualified medical treatment. So, we try our best to offer COVID-19 information, not integration.

Similar to LNY and EA, these two accounts also encountered difficulties in funding and talent acquisition. Taking one of the medical accounts as an example, this doctor initially registered the account as an individual and collaborated with five colleagues from different hospitals to manage it without income. Since they were highly paid medical professionals in the US, they could manage the expenditures. However, as the account's influence grew and required frequent updates, they had to hire assistants, which posed a salary issue. Fortunately, they received advertisements from American publication companies that wanted to improve Chinese medical scholars' academic writing. This partly solved the funding problem, but not entirely.

As medical accounts, they required professionals skilled in both WeChat management and medical knowledge. However, finding this type of talent with a low salary seems impossible in the US. So both accounts mainly translated medical journal articles and English language media reports into Chinese, which allowed them to fulfil a fundamental information role during the pandemic.

Business account strategy on media role

Situations and difficulties in commercial WeChat subscription accounts were similar to those in the abovementioned accounts. One of the business account editors explained:

We can understand what *Sing Tao* and *The US China Press* do, as they just sell “information” for survival, more than bridging and integration, same to us. The goal of our account is to attract audience to buy something, so providing business information is our first target.

He further explained:

We do hope China is better, that might give us more opportunities to earn money. But we mainly concentrate on export commerce and grocery in the US, so we do not specifically publish China news, if not related to our business. This is the reason why bridging role is not our orientation. The same, we mainly focus on the US local Chinese market, so whether or not they integrate into the mainstream society, is also not our strategy.

These editors also highlighted that the content and role of their WeChat accounts were significantly impacted by the pandemic. Initially, these editors were the “bosses” of restaurants and travel agencies. When they realized that owning newspapers could save advertising fees, they ventured into the Chinese media industry, and later, established websites, micro-blogs, and WeChat subscription accounts for “business promotion.” However, COVID-19 significantly affected the restaurant, travel, and commercial industries, forcing them to reduce investment and involvement in their accounts.

Similar to LNY and EA, the two account editors revealed:

We never make exclusive or video reports, too. We only translate articles from mainstream English media, and sometimes, the Chinese language media, because professionals and funding are always not enough in our media, especially in the pandemic.

Contrary to the content analysis, these interviews demonstrated that news, medical, and business accounts primarily served an information role rather than an integration and bridging role due to their media strategies, limited funding, and staff shortages. The in-depth interviews not only provided a comprehensive answer for content analysis validity, but also delineate how media strategy and the pandemic impact the media’s role during a special health crisis.

Audience market: information rather than bridging or integration role

The twelve interviewees, consisting of editors and scholars, believed that DWSA would mainly play an information role rather than integration and bridging roles in the US–Chinese audience market because audience background, career impact, and the complexity of the reception process collectively decided the media’s role.

“The more loyal the audience, the more difficult to integrate”

The in-depth interviews with editors and scholars provided a unique perspective on the audience market of Chinese diasporic media: the more loyal the DWSA audience, the more difficult it is to become integrated into mainstream US society. Specifically, marginalized Chinese people living in the US form a loyal audience for diasporic social media; however, because of their background, they are less likely to be integrated into mainstream society, regardless of how much US reports they read on WeChat. In other words, diasporic media contribute little to their integration processes.

Who are the people who make up the loyal DWSA audience? Based on the US migration census, scholars consider six categories of Chinese migrants: namely, H1B visa holders, businessmen, students, migrant workers, family migrants, and illegal migrants. The people who are not proficient in English become the loyal DWSA audience, especially those who belong to the last two categories.

A study analysed the integration role of four categories of Chinese migrants. Illegal migrants can only survive within the diasporic community, leading to exclusion from the mainstream society despite receiving some government assistance. For several migrant families, their connections with the US are limited to their families, providing them few opportunities to engage with the mainstream society. As for some students, their relations would be limited to campus. Many new migrants are less likely to obtain stable jobs in the mainstream society due to the language barrier and insufficient local experience.

Essentially, these people depend on the diasporic Chinese community and find it challenging to survive in the mainstream society due to their background. They become a loyal audience who frequently reads US reports by DWSA, but their integration into mainstream society remains unlikely. Consequently, DWSA are more likely to play an information role rather than the integration role in the audience market, because of the background of some Chinese audiences.

“The more successful the Chinese, the weaker the DWSA’s integration role”

Interviewees also concluded that audiences’ vocations have a significant impact on the media’s role. Unlike the marginalized Chinese people mentioned earlier, others obtain stable jobs in mainstream US society, which leads to a more dynamic integration compared to DWSA.

To illustrate this point, two studies in California examined Chinese professionals living in San Francisco. The city is home to several diasporic Chinese people, with some working as IT professionals. Despite exposure to local Chinese media, these professionals are minimally affected in terms of integration. While several Chinese IT professionals do register with DWSA and read US news there, they realize most US reports in DWSA are available in the mainstream media, as DWSA frequently translate mainstream media reports in their accounts. Meanwhile, their vocation and environment play a stronger integration role. The nature of their work demands frequent use of English media and liaising with various people in the US. As IT professionals, they must adapt to and embrace the “silicon culture”, and collaborate with colleagues from various backgrounds. Gradually, they acquire more local information, customs, work culture, and personal relationships, and eventually adapt to their new environment. In other words, DWSA contributes minimally to these processes.

Scholars propose a “more and less model” for the integration role. Usually, successful Chinese immigrants in the US frequently need to interact with mainstream society and use English-language media, leaving less time and energy for Chinese media interaction. Conversely, their vocation and living environment play a more significant role in their integration processes than diasporic Chinese media, including DWSA.

Complexity of audience reception processes

The complexity of audience reception processes suggests that DWSA may not play a dynamic integration role in the US–Chinese audience market. Both editors and scholars pointed out that the regular Chinese DWSA audience might not necessarily change their attitudes after reading US news.

One scholar presented a case regarding US policy in the pandemic Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). Based on this policy, local companies could receive the government’s financial assistance, but companies without an American background were excluded. He asked,

When some US Chinese businessmen read this news, do they support or disagree? How can they feel integrated into the US society?

Another scholar gave his own family as an example:

We have US citizenship, living here for many years. But when we read some news on WeChat subscription accounts, we still do not feel at home, such as folk music and special local policies. We just think they are for the Americans, not us. Also, when we read local COVID-19 news, we are often unsatisfied with local governments’ low efficiency! If we do not feel integrated, how can the newer Chinese audience?

Other scholars also pointed out the plausibility of audience integration through a “magic bullet theory”. In the age of social media, DWSA users are certainly not the target of the “magic bullet”. Particularly, many young audiences have had their own personal experiences and viewpoints before checking WeChat subscription accounts, making them less easily convinced by DWSA reports. This is why few readers click the “Favourite” button. They may read the US news but not necessarily engage with it on a deeper level, viewing it as normal information. Therefore, DWSA are less likely to play an integration role in the US–Chinese audience market due to the complexity of the audience market and reception processes.

Nevertheless, all the interviewees agreed on the essence and importance of the information role in the Chinese audience market. The LNY editor observed:

We are proud of readers’ comments: your account [is] more important than food and water.

During the pandemic, before going out to buy water and food, the audience certainly checked DWSA to confirm which areas were locked down, if there had been an increase in affected cases, and if they would succeed in shopping. The medical editors also provided similar positive feedback, stating that the audience obtained essential medical information and guidance for safety. Therefore, the information role cannot be overlooked in DWSA, especially during a pandemic.

US and China: neither integration nor bridging role

All the editors wanted their media to play a dynamic bridging and integration role in both the homeland and host country. However, all the interviewees revealed that contemporary socio-political environments, especially the US’s

hostile attitude and censorship in China, have become two crucial influential factors on DWSA. Consequently, four-in-one media are unable to fulfil their bridging and integration role, and can mainly serve as information platforms.

US: no integration or bridging role

The editors described the US's social environment toward China and the Chinese people as a "chilly winter". The *Sing Tao* media editor cited the PPP as an example, saying

Actually, we are a locally registered American company, and most staff have US citizenship. But the governments suspended us because we are Chinese language media. [...] This policy is just an example; the other similar policies and attitudes are like a "black cloud" over our head. As local media, we should be a part of the community and hope to contribute to the community integration process. But if we are excluded, how can we play this role?

Another editor revealed that some local advertisers had terminated cooperation and questioned their Chinese background during the pandemic:

We have to explain that we are an American ethnic media and work for the local community, but it seems we are kicked out of the community.

The editors concluded that their accounts were unable to publish many reports about China to avoid suspension by the US government and a backlash from the community. Extensive coverage on the homeland could raise problematic questions, such as, "Why do you publish so many reports about China?" or "Are you speaking for China?" As a result, minimal China coverage also weakened the bridging function.

The scholars analysed the impact of host country on diasporic media using a historical event as an example. They cited the ban on Japanese newspapers in the US during World War II due to the enmity between the two countries. Currently, the US perceives China as its largest threaten and rival, leading to a similar hostile attitude towards Chinese diasporic media.

Furthermore, scholars highlighted that the integration function might have been effectively terminated by the US government and mainstream society. They argued that the Chinese people are no longer allowed to join their "big family" (melting pot) and are not trusted anymore. Whether the Chinese people and media are willing to be "integrated," is a secondary question. The primary issue is the multiculturalism policy, which is symbolized by "the door" that has been closed to them. Therefore, the contemporary US socio-political environment significantly impacted the bridging and integration roles during the pandemic, leaving only the information function intact.

China: branding but no bridging role

Editors and scholars asserted that China's political environment has become another vital factor influencing the bridging and integration roles, especially during the pandemic. Although DWSA may be labelled as "overseas media", they are required to register in China, making them still classified as "domestic media" and subject to Chinese government regulations, including oversight from the "propaganda authorities" and "special audience".

Editors indicated that they faced two levels of administration. The first level is the "authorities", including the Department of Publicity Communication and the Office of Cyberspace Administration. They are also under the surveillance of "special audience", often referred to as "Revolutionary People" or "Chao Yang Masses."⁷ If an "unsuitable" article is published, these "people" would report to the "authorities" and cancel it. In more severe cases, entire accounts could be disabled. Editors admit that during the pandemic, this "tip-off" culture has become increasingly "popular". The number of sensitive reports, including ideological debates, political figures, historical events, and other articles based on the political climate have increased consistently.

Under this complicated censorship system, all accounts find it difficult to publish reports related to their homeland. News media accounts, such as LNY and EA, perceive exclusive or in-depth reports as potentially containing "negative" content, leading to the belief that the "safest" or "best" approach is not reporting. Medical accounts face similar difficulties.

To avoid political issues, medical accounts rarely cover mainland events and instead adopt a scientific media orientation. However, one editor pointed out that "science is not just 'science', science is sometimes also politics". For example, an article on the side effects of the Pfizer vaccination in the US was cancelled because the vaccination's negative effects could not be publicized in China, even if they occurred overseas. In other words, overseas scientific coverage also faced cancellation if it contradicted the current political climate in China.

⁷ www.supchina.com: tip-off culture, a network of granny informers

Meanwhile, scholars revealed that the Chinese government does hope overseas Chinese media can fulfil branding rather than a bridging role. Bridging means that communicators and receivers respect each other and engage in equal communication based on facts; however, the Chinese government does not want overseas people to know about negative events in China. Instead, they expect overseas Chinese media, especially DWSA, to publish positive rather than negative news so that this positive news can establish a good image overseas. Essentially, the media role desired by the Chinese government is one of branding rather than bridging, as their policy of “telling China’s story well” essentially means “telling good stories about China”.

Nevertheless, this branding function raises suspicion from the host country’s government. As mentioned before, the US government questions the motives behind the four-in-one media and questions why they advocate for China in the US. This also threatens these media outlets’ survival, rendering them willing but unable to comply. Together with the homeland and host country’s socio-political impacts, the viable path for DWSA is to assume the fundamental information role.

5. Conclusion: Present Similar to Past, Local Similar to Global?

By taking DWSA in the US as an example, this study closely examines functions and influencing factors in four-in-one media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This special type of social media resembles a prism, reflecting content and role, audience market, and social environment impacts, as well as the past and future of diasporic media in a local and global framework.

Although DWSA primarily serve an informational role in the US, their significance should not be overlooked during the pandemic, especially for those not proficient in English media, these digital diasporic media were vital to their survival. These media also achieve the bridging and integration roles by relevant reports, albeit weaker than their informational role. They can certainly play more dynamic roles in both the diasporic community and mainstream society, as long as they could have a positive and supportive social environment.

In addition, this research is valuable in terms of its results. Since early 20th century, a number of scholars, e.g. Park (1920), have considered that extensive host country reports can reflect the integration role. However, in-depth interviews in this paper show a totally difference story. Although there are a multitude of the hostland reports published in these four-in-one media, they are unable to fulfil strong integration. This is because the influences of the pandemic, media strategy, audience market, and socio-political environments in the homeland and host country relations.

This research reveals the methodological difference between content analysis and in-depth interview. While content analysis suggests a strong integration role, the in-depth interviews show an opposite story. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods would make the research results more objective and complete, and then the researcher can obtain insightful stories.

This research establishes a link between the past, present, and future of Chinese domestic impacts on diasporic media. From the early 1910s to the 1990s, Chinese overseas newspapers were impacted by domestic political forces and host country governments (Lai 1987; Pan 1994). Now, in the 21st century, the new media represented by diasporic WeChat subscription accounts share similarities with Chinese newspapers from a century ago. In the future, the strong political impacts from the mainland on these new diasporic media are likely to continue. In other words, these media platforms remain “unfree” in a press-free country.

This research refers the US Chinese community/media to those in the other countries. Emerging in more than 65 countries, DWSA continue to increase because of the proliferation of overseas Chinese people. These accounts display a great diversity in a global context. By referring to this research and investigating local Chinese communities, their stories can be unveiled. For example, in the UK and UAE, some accounts are more influential than many in the US, garnering significantly more reads and favourites. One possible reason for this could be that the local Chinese people in these countries collaborate with local governments, communities, and organizations, stemming from these countries’ stronger relations with China.

This research also delves into the differences and similarities between the Chinese and other nations’ diasporic communities and media. For instance, similar to the Chinese diaspora, the Korean media in Vancouver and Los Angeles are significantly impacted by their homeland – “Korean waves” (Yu, 2015). The local audience market becomes a decisive factor on Vietnamese media in Germany (Phama, 2021). Differences and similarities among these diasporic media are closely connected with the histories and present realities of these diasporic groups.

Finally, this research connects diasporic media and communities with mainstream societies. Although this paper examines the digital diasporic WeChat subscription accounts, much of their content and influences comes from the mainstream societies, and the diasporic communities and media might certainly become a part of the society.

Therefore, as a fresh format of diasporic media, these four-in-one media platforms, DWSA, truly overlap social and traditional media, China and overseas, local and global, and past and future. Subsequently, scholars can continue to investigate this special media sphere and reveal more insightful and original stories for academia, media industry, and the societies.

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