



Narratives of COVID-19 in China and the World:

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY, & NATIONS

CENTER ON DIGITAL CULTURE & SOCIETY

8:30AM ON MARCH 19, 2021 TO
12:00PM ON MARCH 20, 2021

SCHEDULE

MARCH 19, 2021

8:30–8:45 AM EST

Welcome + Opening Remarks

John L. Jackson, Jr. (*Dean, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania*)

Guobin Yang (*University of Pennsylvania*)

8:45–9:45 AM EST

Digital Work and Infrastructures during COVID-19

Locked Down but Not Locked Out: DingTalk and Digital Workplace Surveillance in Times of COVID-19

Yizhou Xu (*University of Wisconsin-Madison*)

Desperately Seeking the Public: COVID-19 Tracing Apps as the Digital Infrastructures in China and the U.S.

Elaine Yuan (*University of Illinois at Chicago*)

Moderator: Julia Ticona (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Discussants: Jack Qiu (*National University of Singapore*)

Julia Ticona (*University of Pennsylvania*)

10:00–11:00 AM EST

China - Africa: Connections and Conflicts

What motivates the sharing of misinformation about China and Covid-19? A study of social media users in Kenya and South Africa

Herman Wasserman (*University of Cape Town*)

Dani Madrid-Morales (*University of Houston*)

Racializing the Pandemic: Chinese Debates over African Evictions in Guangzhou

Maria Repnikova (*Georgia State University*)

Moderator: Amy Gadsden (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Discussants: Amy Gadsden (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Silvia Lindtner (*University of Michigan*)

11:10 AM–12:20 PM EST

Racism against Chinese Students and Asian Americans

Cosmopolitan imperative or Nationalist Sentiments: Mediated Experiences of Covid-19 pandemic Among Chinese Overseas Students

Bingchun Meng and Zifeng Chen (*Department of Media and Communications, LSE*)

Jingyi Wang (*University of Cambridge*)

Freedom and Pandemic in the Eyes of Chinese Students in the U.S.

Yingyi Ma (*Syracuse University*)

Moderator: Scott Moore (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Discussants: Hongmei Li (*Miami University*)

Scott Moore (*University of Pennsylvania*)

1:30–2:30 PM EST

Voice and the Platformization of Truth

Fact-Checking the Crisis: COVID-19, Infodemics, and the Platformization of Truth

Kelley Cotter (*Arizona State University*)

Julia R. DeCook (*Loyola University Chicago*)

Shaheen Kanthawala (*University of Alabama*)

How Young People Used TikTok to Share and Distance from COVID-19 Realities

Daniel Klug (*Carnegie Mellon University*)

Moderator: Yue Hou (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Discussants: Lisa Keranen (*University of Colorado, Denver*)

Yue Hou (*University of Pennsylvania*)

SCHEDULE

MARCH 20, 2021

8:30–10:00 AM EST

Politics of Sharing, Connection, and Mourning on Social Media

Visible mourning on the Wailing Wall of the Internet in China

Cao Xun (*Soochow University*)

Runxi Zeng (*Chongqing University*)

The Politics and Politicization of a Global Pandemic: How Public and Private Sharing of Narratives on COVID-19 were managed on WeChat

Lotus Ruan, Masashi Crete-Ni Wesley, Jakub Dalek, Nicola Lawford
(*University of Toronto*)

Cultivating Safe Connections: Narratives and Practices of Access Collaboration in a Time of Distance

Zihao Lin (*University of Chicago*)

Moderator: Benson Zhou (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Discussants: Ruoyun Bai (*University of Toronto*)

Fen Lin (*City University of Hong Kong*)

Benson Zhou (*University of Pennsylvania*)

10:10–11:10 AM EST

Nations and Nationalism during COVID-19

Unpacking the 'K-quarantine': Biopolitical Nationalism and Narratives of 'Quarantine State' in the Era of Global Pandemic

Ji-Hyun Ahn (*University of Washington Tacoma*)

Rewriting China's Narrative of COVID-19 through Twitter Diplomacy

Wendy Leutert & Nicholas Atkinson (*Indiana University*)

Moderator: Jacques deLisle (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Discussants: Jacques deLisle (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Soomin Seo (*Temple University*)

11:20 AM EST

Concluding Remarks and Future Publication Plan

Catherine Cocks (*Michigan State University Press*)

Stephen Hartnett (*University of Colorado, Denver*)

Guobin Yang (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Funding support of the symposium comes from the Penn China Research and Engagement Fund of the Office of the Provost at the University of Pennsylvania.

PANEL: DIGITAL WORK AND INFRASTRUCTURES DURING COVID-19

Yizhou Xu, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Locked Down but Not Locked Out: DingTalk and Digital Workplace Surveillance in Times of COVID-19

Drawing from an autoethnographic and ethnographic account of my own experiences working in the tech industry in China during COVID-19, this project examines the imbrication of software and productivity tools into one's working routines that coincided with the increasing use of digital surveillance as part of China's COVID-19 lockdown. Specifically I am looking at the popular productivity software DingTalk that tech workers must interface in their everyday working lives. DingTalk, a product of the Chinese tech titan Alibaba, uses a mix of geolocation and time-stamping to track when and where workers should be working despite being relegated to telecommuting from home. This digitally-mediated workplace conforms to what Andrejevic (2007) considers as the notion of the "digital enclosure" where all interactions with software become incorporated as forms of labor that can be monitored and commodified. More importantly, working from home as a result of COVID-related lockdowns did not in fact grant workers the freedom to work in their own time and space but the exact opposite, a perpetual work culture that permeates every aspect of one's working life. Or what Gregg (2013) sees it as a form of "presence bleed", by which the never-ending work schedule spills over to the domestic sphere where one's personal domain also becomes subsumed by work. In other words, the COVID lockdown produces new intersecting layers of oppression and alienation for tech workers in China that are both enabled and impeded through the constant interfacing with software.

While my analysis will be primarily using autoethnographic and ethnographic approaches in interviewing actual workers on the ground, I also work to integrate the method of discursive interface analysis (Stanfill, 2015) to probe the affordances of DingTalk that workers must interface and navigate on a regular basis. In doing so I want to dissect the various institutional and infrastructural limits imposed on productive tech labor via digital software that opens for new ways of thinking about worker agency and means of resistance. I advance that while software-mediated workplace imposed new risks and precarity in regard to surveillance and exploitation, there are also distinct strategies and tactics employed by workers to circumvent and undermine such intrusive modes of digital oppression.

Elaine Yuan, University of Illinois at Chicago

Desperately Seeking the Public: COVID-19 Tracing Apps as the Digital Infrastructures in China and US

In the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies such as mobile tracing apps have been widely incorporated in public health measures. Far from sporadic applications of isolated technological tools, this essay argues, these apps were embedded in the broad socio-technological structures and practices. This essay aims to explain how digital technology intersects with the infrastructures of public health and digital governance in China and the US as manifested during the pandemic.

The essay comprises three main parts. First, it provides a comparison of the mobile tracing apps in the two countries along two dimensions: a) the technical dimension focuses on the characteristics of the means used; the types and forms of the data collected; the goals and the conditions of data collection, security, access, and use; b) the social dimension examines the conditions and processes of their development, components of Actors-Network assemblages involved, as well as the relative power of actors implicated.

Second, the essay proposes to conceptualize the apps as infrastructures of organization, mobility, and information in light of the critical roles they were assigned in the pandemic. It further situates the formation and function of these infrastructures in the contexts in which the two countries approach public health and public administration broadly. The connection between bureaucratic organization and social needs as well as the tension between public values and neoliberalist governance doctrines are the key to understand the strategies and practices adopted by the two countries during the pandemic. It provides the contexts for explaining how these infrastructures succeeded or failed to organize, or most of all, enable "the public" during the pandemic.

Lastly, the essay discusses the evaluative framework, which consists of the narratives and discourses that assign meaning to the socio-technological experiences and practices of the two countries during the pandemic. Critics and the mainstream media tend to focus on the implications of tracing apps for individual information privacy and security. They emphasize the values of voluntary usage, confidentiality and the anonymity of the individual user, the transparency and equality of algorithmic classification, limits on the scope of data collection, and information safety. News reports take issue with instances of technological glitches, inaccuracies in algorithmic classification, breaches of patients' privacy, the involvement of law enforcement authorities, and the collaboration of tech companies with the government in both countries. In contrast, this essay promotes deliberation on the principle of digital infrastructures for public welfare. What is at stake, this essay argues, is not simply how transparent, fair, or effective these apps are. As digital technologies are increasingly integrated into public health and public administration systems, they become infrastructures that are indispensable for public goods provision and public interest protection. In this sense, public infrastructure and public governance are mutually constitutive. The key is a

contextualized understanding of what or how the public is constituted both in principle and in practice before we can ponder how new technological means reproduce or restructure the existing institutions to support the public interests.

PANEL: CHINA-AFRICA: CONNECTION AND CONFLICTS

Herman Wasserman, *University of Cape Town*

Dani Madrid-Morales, *University of Houston*

What motivates the sharing of misinformation about China and Covid-19? A study of Kenya, Nigeria and the USA.

During the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was inundated with misinformation related to the virus and its origins, possible remedies and cures, as well as government's responses to the outbreak. Much of the inaccurate information circulating on social media was related to China, the country where the first cases of the disease were reported. In this paper, we investigate how social media users in Kenya and South Africa engaged with misinformation about China and COVID-19. Both countries have seen in the last decade an increase in mediated engagements with China. During the first days of the pandemic, Chinese media, diplomats and public information officers were extremely active in their communication efforts towards African audiences with the goal of managing public opinion, and reducing the amount of criticism the country was facing, particularly on social media. Using survey data (N = 1,961), we first examine attitudes towards China and COVID-19 among Kenyan and South African social media users. This is followed by an exploration of their views towards misinformation related to China during the first months of the pandemic. Finally, we use these data to better understand social media users' motivations for sharing some widely circulated hoaxes about China and COVID-19. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications of our findings for misinformation studies, as well as for scholarship on Africa-China relations.

Maria Repnikova, *Georgia State University*

Racializing the Pandemic: Chinese Debates over African Evictions in Guangzhou

The dramatic and widely recorded and publicized evictions of African residents in Guangzhou in the midst of the pandemic have spiraled into a public diplomacy crisis for China vis-à-vis Africa. For the first time in decades, the official narrative of China's friendship and generosity towards the continent was publicly fractured by accusations of racism and discrimination voiced by African leaders, journalists, and migrants. The Chinese government has attempted to bury the crisis by deflecting blame on Guangzhou officials and justifying discrimination as a safety precaution practiced against all foreigners. While officially, the Sino-African friendship has resumed its course, unofficially, the tensions are far from over.

Namely, this crisis underscores the unresolved importance of race in China-Africa relations. This paper explores these racial at the societal level by analyzing Chinese social media narratives about the Guangzhou incident. The analysis finds racism framed as self-righteous criticism of illegal incidents and unethical behaviors, as condemnation of superior treatment of foreigners in China, and as concerns about China becoming a racially diverse country. While direct racist remarks are relatively less prominent, Chinese netizens largely justify the government's actions vis-à-vis African communities in Guangzhou and blame African residents as ignorant and as compromising the safety of Chinese nationals. These findings demonstrate that racism remains a pervasive problem in Chinese society—a problem that is likely to continue to challenge China's official efforts at building alliances in Africa.

PANEL: RACISM AGAINST CHINESE STUDENTS AND ASIAN AMERICANS

Bingchun Meng and Zifeng Chen, *Department of Media and Communications, LSE*

Jingyi Wang, *University of Cambridge*

Cosmopolitan imperative or nationalist sentiment? Mediated experiences of Covid-19 pandemic among Chinese overseas students

The Covid-19 pandemic is a watershed moment in the collective memory of overseas Chinese students, whose experience has been unique given the unfolding of the crisis. As the epicentre shifted from China to Europe and North America, Chinese students studying in these two regions on the one hand encounter increasing racial abuse and xenophobia, while on the other hand trying to negotiate with the polarising discourses on Covid-19 across multiple media platforms. The pandemic is poised to become the most significant global event that shapes the political outlook of a generation of young cosmopolitan elites, whose worldview come into formation at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions.

The aim of this research is two-fold. First, we will investigate how Chinese students studying in UK and U.S. universities have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic at both personal level in their daily life and at discursive level through media coverage. Second, we will further explore how the mediated understanding of this global crisis has turned into a critical juncture that prompts an elite group of Chinese youth to reassess and reformulate their views of contemporary geopolitical order.

Beck (2011) argues that the anticipation of global risks results in an 'everyday global awareness' among citizens of modern societies and gives rise to the 'cosmopolitan imperative' of corporation. But he also acknowledges the normative cosmopolitanism of a world without borders is far from being guaranteed. Global interconnectedness could very well lead to resurgence of nationalism and ethnic conflicts. Aside from emphasizing the pivotal role of mass media in staging the visibility of global events though, Beck falls short at analysing the communicative process that could lead to either stronger collaboration or deeper antagonism.

The outbreak of Covid-19 takes place at the high point of neoliberal globalisation, when both global interconnection and the backlash against it on various fronts have reached an unprecedented level. Economically and geopolitically, China now occupies a very different position in the global capitalist order as compared to the time of 2003 SARS epidemic. The communication landscape is also drastically different. For one thing, the Chinese government has made huge investment in expanding the operation of official English language media

channels targeting an international audience. For another, in the age of social media, Chinese diaspora now get information from both home country and host nation sources, which often provide diverging narratives about the pandemic.

Using in-depth interview as the main data collection method, we intend to address three sets of research questions:

1. What have been the lived experiences of Chinese overseas students in the U.S. and the U.K during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in relation to racism, xenophobia and nationalism?
2. What are the main discrepancies and incongruencies that Chinese overseas students have to negotiate with in their mediated understanding of the crisis?
3. Have Chinese overseas students' assessment of the political system in both China and their host country in any way affected by the pandemic?
4. Have their view of the global geopolitical order in any way affected by the pandemic?

Yingyi Ma, Syracuse University

Freedom and Pandemic in the Eyes of Chinese Students in the U.S.

This study will focus on Chinese international students in American higher education caught in the pandemic and rising geopolitical tensions between the two countries, highlighting their voices and agencies, paying particular attention to their evolving narratives on the role of individual freedom playing out in this pandemic. With ongoing semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese students from a diverse set of American higher education institutions, this study will employ the comparative lens to situate their narratives about their home and host country, as they straddle these two world leading powers during their formative years while they actively formulate and re-formulate their views about themselves and the world.

PANEL: VOICE AND THE PLATFORMIZATION OF TRUTH

Kelley Cotter, Arizona State University

Julia R. DeCook, Loyola University Chicago

Shaheen Kanthawala, University of Alabama

Fact-Checking the Crisis: COVID-19, Infodemics, and the Platformization of Truth

Following the 2016 U.S. election, platforms began to implement fact-checking programs via partnerships with third-party fact-checking organizations (Ananny, 2018). The strength and quality of these programs heavily shapes the visibility and circulation of misinformation about COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis has further evidenced the extent to which platforms' policy and design decisions and the ways they self-govern can have far-reaching impacts. In an attempt to mitigate the rampant spread of misinformation, platforms have sought to control the spread of COVID-19 misinformation by building an infrastructure for identifying problematic information and dealing with it according to new (and evolving) organizational policies. Platforms' role in the so-called "infodemic" symptomizes the "platform society" — how platforms have "penetrated the heart of societies—affecting institutions, economic transactions, and social and cultural practices" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2). In the platform society, platforms' private interests and values frequently conflict with those of the public. Moreover, there is an ongoing debate about what rights and responsibilities platforms have for their users' content and activity (e.g., DeNardis & Hackl, 2015; Gillespie, 2018b; van Dijck, 2013).

Given this context, we suggest that platforms' integration into existing regimes of fact-checking is altering truth-making practices. A particular institutional-political ethos guides platforms' approaches to fact-checking: the adjudication of false information by platforms rests on certain principles, values, and practices, which are rooted in existing content moderation policies (Gillespie, 2018a). This ethos may, in turn, impact norms and conventions in the broader fact-checking infrastructure. In this study, we aim to explore the "platformization" of fact-checking, in order to consider how platforms shape the flow of misinformation within the "infodemic." We ask: what are the principles, values, and practices that shape fact-checking on platforms, and how (if at all) are platforms shaping repertoires of fact-checking? To answer these questions, we will compare and contrast three major platforms' (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) public communications about COVID-19 fact-checking to consider how these platforms define their role and position themselves in the broader information infrastructure. To identify these communications, we will conduct keyword searches for "COVID-19" on the platforms' blogs, help pages, and policy documents, and

extract statements about fact-checking. We will use a mixed-methods approach to analyzing these statements to summarize, describe, and interpret platforms' descriptions of their fact-checking programs vis-à-vis the infodemic. We will then explore a case study of COVID-19 fact-checking implemented by the platforms to consider how they enact their role and what this means for the broader routines and discourses constituting contemporary fact-checking.

Daniel Klug, Carnegie Mellon University

How Young People Used TikTok to Share and Distance from COVID-19 Realities

Many U.S. citizens believe their overall social media use will drastically increase due to the COVID-19 quarantine and in fact social media platforms, such as Instagram or YouTube, are hitting an all-time high usage (Statt 2020). In addition, recent research shows that short-form video proves to be increasingly ubiquitous, providing an accessible means of online social interaction and creative expression for teens and young adults (Medina Serrano et al. 2020).

This paper looks at the short-form video platform TikTok as an example to study young people's consumption and creation of social media content during the COVID-19 quarantine. As a main user activity in social media participation (Burgess and Green 2018; Strangelove 2010), video creation and sharing mostly focuses on staged, choreographed, or remixed content (Yarosh et al. 2016) related to everyday life events (McRoberts et al. 2017). Therefore, it can be anticipated that incisive events, like social distancing during a pandemic, will be reflected in young people's social media content creation.

We conducted a qualitative interview study with 28 American TikTok users about their general consumption and creation of videos and how and why their routines changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In TikTok, users create 15 to 60 seconds to one minute long videos that can be shared with anyone with an account or access to the direct video link. In contrast to similar apps, such as Vine, TikTok allows users to add features like stickers, text, or visual effects to videos (Lu & Lu 2019). Creating TikTok videos is largely based on musical snippets, often popular songs, and users lip syncing lyrics and performing to the music (Bresnick 2019). As of 2020, TikTok is the most popular video sharing social media app with more than 800 million mostly female teenage users worldwide, US teenagers on average spent 95 minutes per day on TikTok in Q1 2020. This is very likely due to young people staying home and turning to TikTok to find distraction through video entertainment (Willingham 2020) as well as to socialize and stay up-to-date on political events.

Our results show that video consumption and creation skyrocketed for all interviewees right after COVID-19 restriction became effective. While interviewees at first used TikTok as distraction and pastime activity due to isolation at home, for many it soon turned into means of socializing with friends and peers through video content. Interviewees shared videos they found with friends and even made new online friends through the app based on commenting or receiving comments on their content - something that did not occur for the majority of

interviewed users before COVID-19. Around one month after the COVID-19 lockdown, the majority of interviewed users as well started to reflect their experiences with social isolation in their TikTok videos, in some cases deliberately using them as motivation or help for their online peer community or as semi-anonymous forum to seek advice from other users. Interviewees who either worked essential jobs or engaged in social activism online also specifically created TikTok videos to address misinformation, social experiences, or political opinions on the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

Our research provides detailed first insights into short-video practices and usage of teenagers and young adults as the key users of TikTok during COVID-19. We can see how users are adapting their content to the COVID-19 situation and what coping strategies Gen Z-ers develop and share with their online community during COVID-19 induced stress of staying at home. This paper will present the detailed results of this interview study using exemplary TikTok videos to illustrate practices and strategies of COVID-19 related content production and circulation on TikTok. As this is also an ongoing research project, at the time of the workshop we will be able to present data and results that reflect on TikTok and the COVID-19 situation as both aspects continue to develop.

PANEL: POLITICS OF SHARING, CONNECTION AND MOURNING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Cao Xun, Soochow University

Runxi Zeng, Chongqing University

Visible mourning, Invisible protests: Discursive politics on the Wailing Wall of the Internet in China

Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist in Wuhan, China, sent a screenshot of a medical diagnosis of “suspected SARS virus” to colleagues via his own WeChat (China’s version of WhatsApp) on Dec. 31, 2019 to remind them for protection. But he was charged with “spreading rumors” by Wuhan police. Several Chinese media outlets reported that Li was a whistleblower for the COVID-19 epidemic. Unfortunately, he was also infected in treating patients with COVID-19, and died on February 6. His last message on Sina Weibo, a Chinese microblog platform was on February 1, when he said he had been diagnosed with the COVID-19. In the months since his death, numbers of Chinese netizens have left more than a million comments on his last post. The post is also regarded as the “Wailing Wall of the Internet”. The comments on the “Wailing Wall of the Internet” can be regarded as the public participation of netizens in microblog and a kind of competitive discursive politics in cyberspace. With the epidemic continuing and applications for demonstrations extremely difficult to obtain, people have no way to demonstrate on the streets for Dr. Li. Instead, it prompts people to conduct political expression online, that is, Weibo became a platform for people to freely express themselves and actually acts as an alternative discursive space for specific democratic politics. This study aims to answer the following research questions: what discourse strategies do netizens use to express their appeals on Li Wenliang’s weibo? What are the political implications?

This study observed the emotional and discourse evolution of public comments for two months, and identified nine key moments that influenced the public agenda and formed a peak in the number of comments on Li Wenliang’s weibo as time windows for text sampling. In each time window, we selected 400 microblog messages as discourse analysis samples, so that a total of 3,600 analysis texts were obtained. We conducted content analysis of the text according to the theme, and got a total of 18 themes. On this basis, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory is used for discourse analysis.

The study found that Chinese netizens establish alternative discursive space through two strategies: first, to avoid being suppressed by directly challenging official authority, they express hidden protests through multi-voice, polyphonic mourning. The polyphony features of mourning are: mourning is regarded as a way to redress justice, advocate civil rights, and define social trauma. Second, through Li Wenliang’s Weibo, netizens can integrate personal micro narratives into collective memory, which acts as a new biography of citizenship and form a counter-memory space to resistant to normative narrative dominated by the authority.

It is embodied in the following aspects: recording, telling and inheriting on personal memories as political statements of “witness to the future”; Treat Li’s Weibo as a place for collective therapy and try to protect it from being shut down. The effect of alternative discursive space is reflected in the following two aspects. First, it constructed the Internet civil society. The significance of the digital activism through collective mourning is not only to tear ‘apparently tiny fissures in current media/social constellations’ (Macgilchrist and Böhmig, 2012: 83), but also has the potential to create an independent space different from the official narratives (at least coexist with them), and prompt the government to launch the political agenda in response to public opinion, which fully embodies the initiative of public participation in cyberspace. Second, it aroused the policy agenda. Protests by netizens aroused the Chinese government’s “toughness adaption”, namely the official absorb the reasonable demands of the public through technically rectifying (such as the central government sent a special investigation team, rescinded the reprimand, ratified him a martyr) on one hand, and ignoring public appeals on political reform, such as western-style freedom of speech on other hand. In this way, the government has effectively resolved the challenge of antagonistic discourse to its authority.

Lotus Ruan, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Jeffrey Knockel, Caroline Wesley, Jakub Dalek, Nicola Lawford, University of Toronto

The Politics and Politicization of a Global Pandemic: How Public and Private Sharing of Narratives on COVID-19 were managed on WeChat

The COVID-19 pandemic is accompanied by an “infodemic” (World Health Organization, 2020) where online platforms witness a wave of misinformation, disinformation, and politicization of narratives of the global health crisis. In China where the pandemic first started, information and narratives related to the COVID-19 outbreak have been strictly controlled since the virus’s discovery in December 2019 (Ruan et al., 2020). Given the involvement of both private and state actors in China’s information control system, how have the narratives of a national-turned-global public health crisis been managed on Wechat (China’s most popular social media platform)? More specifically, do information controls applied to the COVID-19 crisis target particular types of narratives and discussions, and do these controls change as the center of the public health crisis moved beyond China? Are the targets of information control different depending on the audience size of WeChat chats?

In this paper we answer these questions through a longitudinal study of how the narratives and information of the COVID-19 pandemic were managed across two different audience sizes on WeChat, one-to-one chat (i.e., a chat with two people) and group chat (i.e., a chat with three or more people). Between January 18 and August 16, 2020, we used a novel method to collect samples of keywords extracted from news articles and blog posts related to the COVID-19, and then documented which of them triggered censorship in WeChat’s one-

to-one chat, group chat, or both during our testing period. After detecting a combination of keywords that were censored, we then performed weekly tests to monitor whether and when censorship of a keyword combination continued or was lifted. We found a total of 3,065 keyword combinations related to the COVID-19 pandemic blocked in WeChat's group chat throughout our test period. Less than six percent of these keyword combinations were also blocked in WeChat's one-to-one chat. Overall, WeChat applied a broad restriction on the sharing of information and discussions related to the pandemic in group chat, a relatively more public-facing functionality on the platform. In addition to filtering rumours and speculative information on the pandemic, WeChat also censored government criticism, symbols or actions of online activism, as well as neutral references to Chinese government efforts on handling the outbreak and general health information. In group chat, the targets of information and narrative control extended beyond domestic politics to international organizations' responses to the pandemic and the politicalization of the pandemic around the world as the center of the global public health crisis moved away from China. In contrast, the targets of information control on WeChat's one-to-one chat were narrower and focused predominantly on China's leadership and criticism of its political system.

Our study adds to the literature through analysis of how censorship of a critical event changes over time and how WeChat censors content on different functionalities. Following the hypothesis that information control is primarily motivated to guide public opinion (Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Miller, 2019), censorship of an international dispute could be part of a government strategy to instigate nationalism to divert criticism of domestic politics and to ensure public opinion aligns with the government's foreign policy agendas. Conversely, the extensive censorship could be a result of WeChat's self-censorship of a topic it considers highly sensitive to the government. Our paper will conclude with potential explanations for these questions, discuss implications of the controlling of the flow of information on a public health issue, and present areas for future research.

Zihao Lin, University of Chicago

Cultivating safe connections? Narratives and practices of access collaboration in a time of distance

After COVID-19 hit the world, many in-person events start to take place virtually. While many students and faculty in the west talk about Zoom fatigue, the overload of information, and multitasking in front of a screen device, people also enjoy the novelty of being co-present in virtual spaces despite their physical distance across cities, countries, or even continents. Distinct from physical spaces, the internet as a multimedia infrastructure offers different possibilities for people to connect. In the meantime, more than 85 million people are estimated to have physical, mental, or linguistic disabilities in contemporary China (CDPF 2012); Even though the Chinese state has institutionalized a strong bureaucratic network to fund and oversee disability accommodation programs since the 1980s (Kohrman 2005), there continue to be many controversies about what makes a space or a technology "barrier-free" especially during the COVID-time when activities shift to virtual spaces. This brings

up interesting questions around what counts as efficacious online communication by and for disabled people? What makes an online event "accessible" and to whom? Who builds access and out of what motivations? How are disabled people making meaning and building digital social worlds (Hartblay 2015) otherwise not found in physical space?

I explore these questions by ethnographically following people who share an interest in the project of building a "barrier-free environment" in China. As a hearing, sighted graduate student, I am the co-host of one Summer 2020 event series, the China Disability Studies Reading Group, in which around 20 Chinese people meet up in Zoom weekly to discuss social sciences texts. The discussion participants also communicate via a private chat group in WeChat, a super-sticky digital platform (Chen, Mao, and Qiu 2018) in contemporary China. I use this event as a study site and reach out to the sighted, hearing, or deaf informants with various backgrounds: special educators, social workers, theater artists, students in foreign universities, film producers, and sign language interpreters. Drawing from participant observations in online spaces and carrying out in-depth interviews, I look into not only what people have shared during the discussions about disability, but also how their life trajectories and bodily experiences have shaped the ways they understand and construct access for each other in the virtual space.

I refer to "access" not as an established technical infrastructure that people take as given; rather, I argue that it is about moral orientation (Green 2014), wherein people enact a sense of connection through learning to be attentive to each other's needs in situ. In this light, access constitutes a performative project that calls for constant collaboration, with or without people's conscious awareness of such labor. Building on this framework, I analyze the notion of "sense of safety" – a curious word my informants refer to a lot – and the affective labor in access creation.

Firstly, I ask how the "sense of safety" plays a role in narratives of access and people's imaginations of their mediatized personal spaces, the Chinese state, and the transnational encounters in a time of distance, or standing apart. Furthermore, I draw attention to affective labor not recognized by the technical standards of web accessibility. I juxtapose these technocratic narratives with the messiness of building access from scratch in the online reading group: the recruitment of sign interpreters without a decent budget, the awkward, inaccurate real-time voice transcriptions, and people's frustration with bad internet connections that cut discussions off.

To summarize, I argue the labor of trust-building and affective interventions shift people's ways of being together. Exploring the narratives and practices of such collaborative labor helps to clarify what counts as accessible and efficacious online communication for and by disabled people in a time of distance.

PANEL: NATIONS AND NATIONALISM DURING COVID-19

Ji-Hyun Ahn, *University of Washington Tacoma*

Unpacking the “K-quarantine”: Biopolitical Nationalism and the Narrative of “Quarantine State” in the Era of Global Pandemic

Amid the ongoing public health crisis, the call for “big government” solutions has intensified as each nation’s government seeks to control the spread of the disease so as to protect its citizens. Thus, a form of biopolitical governmentality wherein sovereign power is exercised at the level of population—as astutely analyzed by theorists such as Foucault (2008) and Agamben (1998) in the previous century— seems to be operative in most countries, to greater or lesser effect.

Notable in the COVID-19 regional safety assessment conducted by the Deep Knowledge Group (2020) is the relatively high ranking of most East Asian countries: South Korea (hereafter simply Korea) is ranked third, Japan fifth, China sixth, Singapore ninth, Taiwan thirteenth, and Hong Kong fourteenth as of July 30, 2020. As Kloet, Lin, and Chow (2020) observed, East Asian countries, as they combat the virus, are competing for the right to claim that “we are doing better.” These scholars coined the term “biopolitical nationalism” to describe a situation in which “biopolitics has morphed into a field of competition, of rivalry, of nationalistic power games” (p. 635).

While their analysis focused on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, I insist that South Korea is particularly exemplary of the development of biopolitical nationalism in East Asia. South Korea has been praised as a model case for its successful control of the virus, including the effective and innovative use of digital technologies such as a self-quarantine app, CCTV, and GPS to track the infected. Indeed, in response to requests from numerous countries, the Korean government has offered webinars to share the experiences of Koreans combating the coronavirus and strategies that have proved effective. As of August 2020, nine of these webinars have been offered, with approximately 900 individuals from 73 countries participating in the first one on May 4. The Korean government also took the initiative to systematize its “K-quarantine” model and implement it as a global standard. The term “K-quarantine,” which was proposed by the Korean government and popularized by the mainstream media, makes clear the nationalist context in which this approach has been framed as the successful model.

In this paper, I examine critically the discourse about the K-quarantine model in and beyond Korea from a critical media studies perspective. Specifically, I describe the Korean government’s efforts to establish the K-quarantine model as a national brand through the

standardization of specific technologies and global distribution of domestically produced biomedical products. In doing so, I consider the manner in which the Korean government exercises biopolitical power through the K-quarantine project. Through a careful examination of policy documents, media reports, and newspaper articles on the K-quarantine, I document changes in the narratives of the role of the “quarantine state” at a time of a public health crisis that is simultaneously national and global. Building on this analysis, I investigate multiple junctures inherent in the K-style quarantine model—between surveillance and privacy, border-opening and border-closing, and disclosure of information and stigmatization of the infected. By studying the discourse of K-quarantine as a primary case, I aim in this paper to advance the understanding of the operation and transformation of biopolitical governmentality during the global pandemic.

Wendy Leutert and Nicholas Atkinson, *Indiana University*

Rewriting China’s Narrative of COVID-19 through Twitter Diplomacy

Between December 2019 and June 2020, more than 13 Chinese ambassadors opened Twitter accounts, a sharp increase from the 18 accounts active from 2015 up until that time. This recent wave of Twitter debuts reflects a concerted, coordinated effort by Chinese officials to reshape global narratives about China and COVID-19. In this paper, we conduct the first systematic study of China’s Twitter diplomacy using quantitative and qualitative analysis of an original dataset of all Chinese ambassador Tweet activity between June 2018 and June 2020. We find that Chinese ambassadors used original posts and retweets to laud China’s domestic defeat of the virus and early economic recovery, highlight Beijing’s provision of medical supplies to countries worldwide, and stress the importance of multilateralism in fighting the global pandemic. At the same time, however, Chinese ambassadors sharply criticized U.S. statements about China and the U.S. COVID-19 response. By combining positive messaging with digital displays of anger, China seeks to construct alternative narratives about COVID-19 and the desirability of a multipolar international order while fostering favorable public opinion at home. More broadly, Twitter diplomacy reflects China’s embrace of Western social media platforms to pursue discourse power on a global scale.

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Ji-Hyun Ahn is Associate Professor of Communication in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences at the University of Washington Tacoma. Her research interests include global media studies, critical mixed-race studies, national identity and racial politics in contemporary East Asian media culture. She is the author of *Mixed-Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018). She won several Top Paper Awards for her work and has published numerous book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals including *Media, Culture & Society*, *Cultural Studies*, *International Communication Gazette*, and the *Asian Journal of Social Science*.

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Nick Atkinson is a graduate of the Hamilton Lugar School of Global International Studies at Indiana University, where he is currently a research fellow in the East Asian Languages and Cultures Department. His current work addresses the evolution of China's media engagement and public diplomacy strategies during the Covid-19 era. Other areas of his research include China's efforts to reduce global poverty and build stronger trade ties with Europe.

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Xun Cao is associate professor at Department of Digital Communication, School of Communication, Soochow University, China. Her publications cover topics such as online political participation and civil society, discursive politics and the internet, youth subculture in digital age, symbolic resistance in popular culture, convergence media and E-government.

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Zifeng Chen is a PhD student in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, and also holds a PhD degree in literature at Peking University. She works part-time as a research fellow in Capital Normal University of China, as well as a commentator for various newspapers. Her research interests include popular culture, cyber-nationalism and political ideologies in China. She has published on these topics on many Chinese and English journals, and her dissertation *The Discourse Field of Contemporaneity: The Construction of "Traditional Culture" Imagination since the 1980s* has received Outstanding Dissertation Award from PKU.

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Kelley Cotter is a postdoctoral scholar in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Arizona State University. She received her Ph.D. in information and media from Michigan State University and a master's degree in library and information science from Drexel University. Her research explores how data-centric technologies shape social, cultural, and political life, and vice versa. Her most recent work focuses on how people learn about and make sense of algorithms, and how such insight may be mobilized in efforts to govern platforms. Dr. Cotter's work has been published in *New Media & Society*, *Information, Communication & Society*, and the proceedings for the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI).

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Daniel Klug is a faculty member at the Institute for Software Research at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. His research focuses on Media Sociology, Human-Computer Interaction, and computer-based analysis of audiovisual media artifacts. From 2008 to 2018 he was a research assistant at the Seminar for Media Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland. He has published numerous journal articles and book chapters on reality TV, music videos, and methods of popular culture analysis. His current research focuses on creative practices and communicative strategies in short-video creation on social media. Daniel Klug co-developed TRAVIS GO (<http://travis-go.org/en>), a freely accessible tool for simple and collaborative video annotation.

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Wendy Leutert is the GLP-Ming Z. Mei Chair of Chinese Economics and Trade at Indiana University. Her research addresses China's economy and politics, with specific focus on state-owned enterprises, corporate governance, and international investment and trade. Her research is forthcoming or has been published in journals including *World Development*, *The China Quarterly*, *Pacific Affairs*, *China Perspectives*, and *Asia Policy*. Her commentary has been featured in media outlets including the *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, *Reuters*, *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and *South China Morning Post*.

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Zihao Lin is a hearing, sighted doctoral student (he/his/him) in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. Trained in Communication in China and Germany, Lin uses Social Network Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, and ethnographic methods to understand human practices and meaning-making processes in the increasingly digitalized world. Lin's current research interest includes the politics of disability and deafness, access intimacy, and the technical and affective labor of "information barrier-free" projects in contemporary China.

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Yingyi Ma is an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Director of Asian/Asian American Studies. She is the Provost Faculty Fellow on internationalization at Syracuse University. In 2019, she was selected as a Public Intellectual Fellow at the National Committee on US-China Relations. Professor Ma is a sociologist of education and migration. She has published extensively in the areas of college major choices, international student mobility and higher education in China. Her new book, *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese Undergraduates Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education*, is published by Columbia University Press in Feb 2020, and has since been featured in various national and international media outlets such as *Washington Post* and *Times Higher Education*.

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Dani Madrid-Morales is Assistant Professor of Journalism in the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston, USA. He has published extensively on global communication flows, the impact of digital media in Kenyan and South African societies, and the influence that foreign countries (e.g. China and Russia) have on Sub-Saharan African media markets. In his most recent work on misinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa, he has measured the prevalence of inaccurate information on the continent (*African Journalism Studies*), and described users' motivations for sharing misinformation (*International Journal of Communication*). In his most recent project, Dr Madrid-Morales is investigating how South Africans, Kenyans and US citizens engage with hoaxes about COVID-19 and China. Information about his work on misinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa is available at disinfoafrica.org. Alongside Herman Wasserman, he is finalizing an edited collection title *Rumors, False News, and Disinformation in the Global South*, scheduled to be published by Wiley during the first quarter of 2021.

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Maria Repnikova is an Assistant Professor of Global Communication at Georgia State University. She is a scholar of China's political communication, including critical journalism, propaganda, and most recently China's soft power campaigns in Africa. Dr. Repnikova is the author of *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge University Press 2017), which was awarded the best book of the year prize by the International Journal of Press and Politics in 2019. Her articles have appeared in *New Media & Society*, *Journalism*, *Journalism*, *China Quarterly*, and *Comparative Politics* amongst other venues. In addition to China research, Repnikova has engaged with comparative dimensions of journalism and censorship in China and Russia, and has written widely for international media, including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Foreign Policy*. Dr. Repnikova holds a doctorate in Politics from Oxford University, where she was a Rhodes Scholar. She is now working on a book on China's soft power in Africa as a Wilson Fellow.

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Lotus Ruan is a researcher at the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab. She received her Master's degree in Asia Policy Policy Studies from the University of British Columbia and is pursuing a M.A. in Political Science at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on the roles of government and private actors in shaping Internet governance agendas and digital rights. She has published in *China Quarterly*, *Internet Policy Review*, *China Information*, amongst others, and has contributed to published books and policy papers.

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Herman Wasserman is Professor of Media Studies in the Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. He has published widely on media in sub-Saharan Africa, the intersection of geopolitics, media and power, and disinformation in Africa. His latest book is *The Ethics of Engagement: Media, Conflict and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford University Press). He is Editor-in-Chief of the journals *The Annals of the International Communication Association* and *African Journalism Studies*. He is a Fellow of the International Communication Association.

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Yizhou (Joe) Xu is a PhD student in Media & Cultural Studies at UW—Madison's Department of Communication Arts. His research interest deals with the mobile tech industry in China, particularly at the intersections of platforms, labor and state policy. Prior to the UW—Madison, Joe was a documentarian and broadcast journalist based in Beijing working for new agencies including CBS News, NPR, and Swiss TV. His work has been published in *Social Media + Society* and *Communication and the Public*.

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Elaine Yuan (Ph.D., Northwestern University) is an associate professor in the communication department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research focuses on how new and emerging media technologies mediate social institutions and relations. She has researched extensively on the subjects of network and mobile communication, social media, activism, and social change. Her new book "The web of meaning: the Internet in a changing Chinese society (2021, The University of Toronto Press)" examines the role of the Internet in constituting symbolic fields for the contested formation of network privacy, cyber-nationalism, the network market in China.

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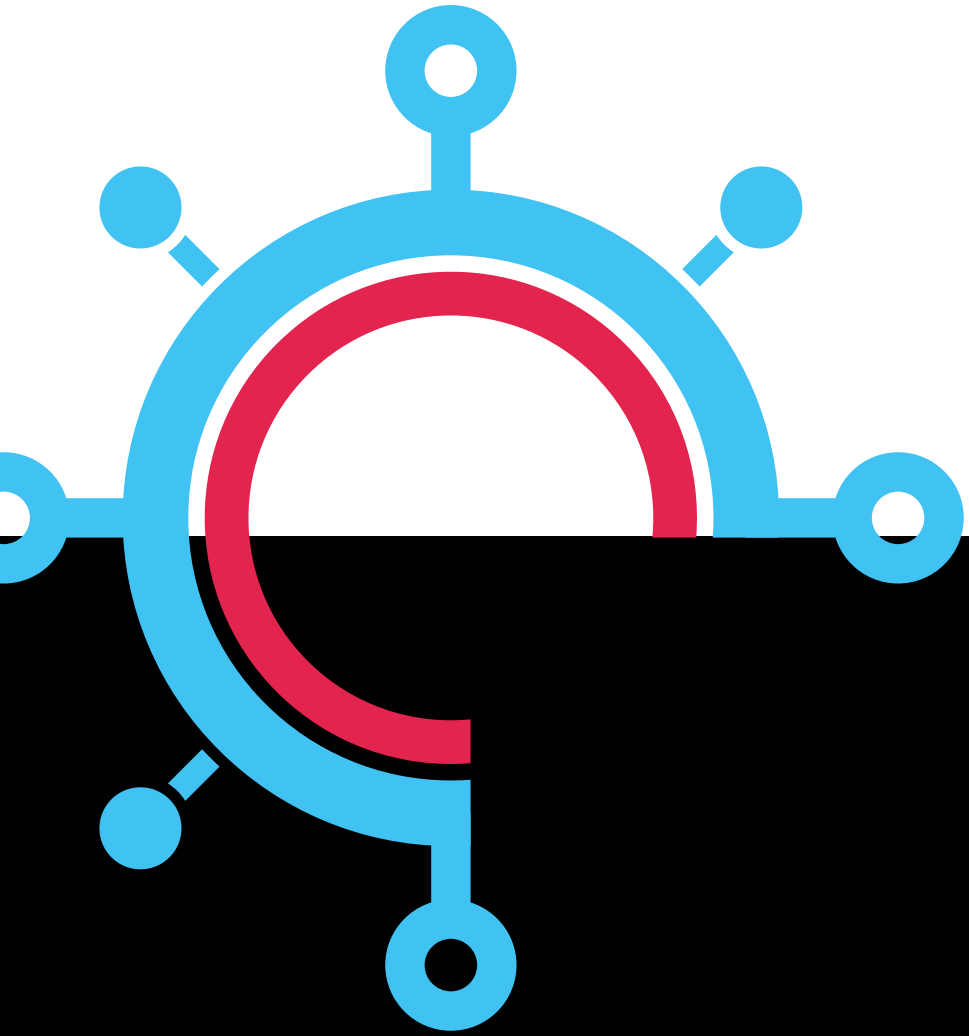
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