

MSC 2020
**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.
COMMUNICATION»**

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS OF CHINESE LITERARY MAGAZINES ON
THE WECHAT COMMUNICATION RESOURCE**

Yuanyuan Zhao (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Zhejiang International Studies University, Zhejiang, China, ofyuan@icloud.com

Abstract

An analysis of the public account of Chinese literary magazines on WeChat is presented. The expediency of using such resources in print media is emphasized, their capabilities and advantages are described: technical simplicity and low cost of subscription, quick access to constantly updated materials, the ability to publish serious and profound works. In addition, magazine ads on WeChat are low-cost, and the platform brings readers together into a community, allowing magazines to send newsletters to subscribers. Also in the administrative panel of a public account, the WeChat system provides the owner with real-time data analysis. Author identifies the main factors that impede the full functioning of this communication tool. “Harvest” magazine’s account mainly includes texts and pictures, but audio recordings and videos are rarely published, which leads to the conclusion that the editorial board does not pay enough attention to the development of a public account on WeChat. Strategies aimed at development and contributing to overcoming identified problems are proposed. For example, the function of searching and accessing magazines published earlier than last year should be developed, the possibility of publishing audio recordings (inviting people who want to make voice recordings for publication in the journal account) and videos should be included, which will help the magazine become an independent digital publication. Particular attention is paid to “Harvest” magazine’s public account on WeChat, which is the leading periodical of this profile in China. Its public account attracts a large number of subscribers and keeps their attention with new articles.

2357-1330 © 2021 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: A public account on WeChat, Chinese mass media, digital transformation of print media, “Harvest” magazine, journalism, literary periodicals



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Currently, the entire process of digitalization of print publications can be observed throughout the entire world community. We agree with the opinion of Timofeeva (2019), that new information technologies influence the change of cultural paradigms. She writes about the so-called mosaic culture, clip culture. Very often, a student's knowledge of the object under study is only eclectic fragmentary in nature, demonstrates a one-sided approach. The format of communication has changed: from hierarchical to network, multipolar. Chats, blogs, tweets involve a huge number of interlocutors. Communicative deviations arise at different levels – from vocabulary to syntax. This phenomenon dramatically changes the activities of the print press: first of all, there are changes in the content and methods of its distribution; in addition, modern journalism professionals must be able to adapt to changing conditions, which means that new skills are coming to the forefront.

Yakovleva (2018) writes that the transition of the print press to the digital environment is a complex process – “it covers the production and distribution of content, the search for new business models, changes in editorial activity, and new skills of journalists” (p. 192). The scientific community cannot but study these processes, and as a result, more and more studies that can characterize the impact of digitalization on journalism practice are appearing. For example, in 2013, *Digital Journalism* (Routledge Taylor & Francis publishing outfit) and *Mobile Media and Communication* (SAGE publishing outfit) appeared. As researcher Smirnova (2013) emphasizes, “the study of the manifestation and signs of transformation, their impact on the production, content and consumption of newspapers and magazines; the causes of the transformations and the likely consequences for the media and society as a whole” is most actively happening (p. 37).

Most publications on the topic of digitalization of print media are empirical in nature: various problems that arise when newspapers move to digital space are considered. These include the problem of finding new business solutions and the changes taking place in the media economy. For example, researcher Angel Arrès (University of Navarra) emphasizes that the traditional business model of the print press always implied payment for content, but recently it has become obvious that modern readers are used to receiving content for free, which necessitates the search for new monetization models. In addition, researchers are attracted by the problem of the distribution and promotion of digital content: as a rule, in publications on this topic, social networks are considered as the main tool for achieving these goals. Also important is the study of the audience, the habits of its behavior in the digital space. Bastos's (2014) study on this issue is quite interesting: he analyzed how often the editorial board's choice of covering certain topics matches the readers' active response (it is expressed in “shares”, “likes” and “tweets”). He came to the conclusion that, as a rule, readers of newspapers and users of social networks are interested in quite different topics.

Thus, the digitalization of the press has given rise to many topics of interest, and the research is ongoing. It should be noted that the situation in the Chinese media sphere is still poorly researched. In this regard, it seems appropriate to characterize the main trends in the digital transformation of the Chinese media on the example of literary periodicals (first of all, the China's leading publication of this kind – “Harvest” magazine).

2. Problem Statement

The problem of the research underlying this article is related to the current state of literary journals in China, which are in urgent need of effective strategies to increase their competitiveness on the market and in the era of information technology. Today we can observe the rapid development of new media and discover the predicament of traditional Chinese print literary magazines. To overcome the crisis at the beginning of the 21st century, many of these magazines began the digitalization process. According to E. Vartanova (2016), today “the digital direction is becoming almost all-encompassing, and it is likely to become the main one in the development of the segment which we still habitually call “periodicals” (p. 9).

The early stage of the digital transformation was characterized by the creation of personal websites for magazines, which mainly published news of new issues and links to subscriptions of publications, as well as duplicated part of the content of the printed version. Subsequently, using the websites of specialized electronic magazines such as “Dooland” (<http://www.dooland.com>), “Wuxizazhi” (<http://wuxizazhi.cnki.net>), etc., many publications tried to create a digital copy of their printed issues. But since a constant readership was not formed, and in addition, electronic resources were free to read, the magazines did not make a profit, as a result of which the continuation of electronic activities was deemed beyond the purpose. In this regard, the experience of the Chinese mass media is interesting. One of the articles examined is devoted to Pengpai news application, in which researchers note that the digitalization of newspapers in China depends not only on technological innovation and journalistic professionalism, but also on the state’s position.

However, over time, the popularity of social networks in China has grown, and literary magazines have entered a new stage of development, characterized by interactivity. Yan Xin (2019) writes that according to statistics in 2016, the number of Internet users in China reached 731 million people (p. 71). This figure is more than the total amount of Internet users in the USA and Europe. At first, the magazines created accounts in microblogs, but in such applications the message volume is very limited – 140 characters are maximum allowed, which is completely insufficient for posting an article. This made the editors think about creating public accounts with more features.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1. Show the benefits of using WeChat by literary publications.
- 3.2. Identify the main factors hindering their full functioning on this media platform.
- 3.3. Propose appropriate development strategies to help overcome identified problems.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to identify the features of the functioning of the public account of Chinese literary magazines on the WeChat communication resource.

5. Research Methods

- 5.1. The main research tools were the descriptive method that was used to characterize Chinese literary journals.
- 5.2. Genetic and problem-chronological methods which are necessary to recreate the processes of formation and historical development of “Harvest” magazine and its communication resource.
- 5.3. Content analysis used to determine the benefits of using WeChat by “Harvest” magazine.

6. Findings

6.1. Creation and functioning of public accounts of Chinese literary magazines.

In 2011 a Chinese company Tencent released the first release of the WeChat (Chinese mobile phone messaging program), mobile communication system for text and voice messaging, which quickly gained popularity among users. In August 2012, a new feature was added to WeChat – a public account consisting of subscription and service components, which provided magazines with an opportunity to choose the most convenient way to publish articles. A public account allows daily mass mailing of material, thus ensuring prompt transmission of information to subscribers. According to Tencent's financial reports (WeChat Annual Report, 2018), 11 billion people are network users, and its mobile application has become the most popular among the Chinese. Based on these data, we conclude that one of the main directions of development of literary magazines should be considered their popularization and promotion among users of WeChat.

Along with this, at present, a large number of people are accustomed to fragmentary reading. Mobile phone portability allows one to use breaks during the work day for reading. The editor-in-chief of “Harvest” magazine Ye Kai (2013) noted: “The habit of reading and the way people of new generation get information has changed. To achieve popularity, literary magazines should take into account modern requirements and adapt to them” (p. 12). In our opinion, literary magazines can increase their demand among readers by posting articles in a public WeChat account. Vakurova (2001) writes that when a newspaper, magazine, radio or television station creates a network analogue, the result is not a copy, but a different version of the media, which may look like the contents of a printed number (p. 45). But this is just one of many options. Therefore, when switching to the Internet, the resulting version differs from the original one not only in terms of type and type of publication, but also in socio-communicative properties.

Since the 1990s, the problem of reducing the number of readers and, accordingly, circulation has been relevant. The editor-in-chief of “Harvest” magazine Cheng (2013a) emphasizes: “We are facing complex challenges – confronting the process of marginalization of literature and bridging the cultural divide” (p. 10). As noted above, the number of WeChat users is about 11 billion. All these users are potential readers, whose attention can be attracted to a public account, and subsequently they will probably also start buying print media. Ryazanova notes (2015) that “in the context of accelerating processes of globalization, significant changes are taking place not only in the field of journalistic activities, but also in the language of modern Chinese journalism” (p. 110).

A serious problem for all such publications is the high percentage of the elderly audience. At the same time, the “WeChat Data Annual Report for 2018” notes that only 63 million users of the already mentioned 11 billion are over 55 years old, that is, the vast majority of WeChat users are middle-aged and young people (WeChat Annual Report, 2018). In addition, according to the “Big Data Report of the Chinese Android Environment” (Big Data Report of Chinese Android Environment, 2016) in 2016 WeChat ranks second among all social applications in the number of users with higher education. But readers of literary magazines need to have basic knowledge. If the main users of WeChat are young and educated people, then first of all, efforts should be made to popularize literary magazines precisely among this category, forming a permanent consumer audience in the future. Kamenchenko (2019) writes that

modern social media and “new” media in the context of digitalization of society open up additional opportunities for individuals, groups and society as a whole for social and political communication (for example, for self-expression, exchange of views and expressing one’s own attitude on a particular issue) and mobilization. Thus, active participation and information exchange is more attractive for a person of a new era. (p. 103)

Let us consider the advantages of such a communication tool on the example of a public account of “Harvest” magazine (the leading literary periodical of China).

The Chinese literary magazine “Harvest” was founded by writer Ba Jin (a Chinese writer and translator) in 1957. In this magazine, for the most part, native novels and stories are published. The circulation of this magazine exceeded 100 thousand copies, the publication is one of the most influential literary magazines in China. This magazine refuses to advertise and is funded primarily by income from subscription readers. In November 2013, a public account of this magazine was registered on WeChat. Five years later, the number of subscribers to this account exceeded 200 thousand and 1,476 messages were published (The five-year anniversary of “Harvest” magazine’s public account on WeChat’s communications resource, 2018). Since 2015, a single message containing at least two articles has been posted on the public account every day. The regular practice of publishing in the account helped the magazine attract a large number of subscribers and keep their attention with new articles. An important factor in expanding the audience was the comfortable conditions for using this new media platform: technical simplicity and low cost of subscription, quick access to constantly updated materials.

One message sent by a public account, similar to a shortened literary magazine, may contain several articles. They do not limit the number of hieroglyphs, which makes up for the microblogging defect – the message is no longer fragmented, but quite comprehensively reveals the topic, and it becomes possible to publish serious and profound works.

One of the most popular social functions of the WeChat messenger is the Moments function. In fact, this is an analogue of the “wall” in any social network: users post their posts, which their friends can view, rate and comment on. The American sociologist Granovetter (1973) divides all social ties into two main categories: strong and weak (p. 1370). The vast majority of friends on WeChat are friends in real life, so their network connections are strong, and as a result, the information transmitted in this application will be

approved, will receive many reposts and create a wave of distribution on the network. Professor Ivchenkov (2018) rightly notes:

Journalism in the IT era is fundamentally changing its priorities. New communication models that destroy the canons of the so-called linear text are being built. The habitual construction of the media text turns out to be both immanent and representative of its interpretations. (p. 16)

A public account has two functions: it unites readers and popularizes the magazine, so the need of the print publication for interaction with it is obvious. In order to attract the attention of as many subscribers as possible, a two-dimensional public account code is placed on the cover of the printed publication. In turn, an increase in the number of subscribers strengthens interest in print media. Deputy editor-in-chief of "Harvest" magazine Zhong noted (2014): "Some of the subscribers of the account wrote to us that they are subscribing to our magazine. They said that the public account posts aroused their interest in literature" (p. 5). Publication of informational messages in a public account is free, so the cost of promoting magazines on WeChat is low. In addition, such newsletters of magazines draw attention only of subscribers who would be interested in a literary magazine, so it is more effective.

In the administrative panel of the public account, the WeChat system provides the owner with real-time data analysis in charts. The objects of analysis are user attributes of subscribers, the volume of attendance of each message, etc. With the help of such studies, a literary magazine can timely identify the most interesting topics for readers, thus guiding the development of print media.

Problems in the functioning of the public account of the "Harvest" magazine and their possible solutions.

The public account of this magazine has opened an online store in WeChat, where one can subscribe to print publications and order expired last year issues of the magazine. The public account menu has a link to the online store. However, magazines from previous years (earlier than last year) are still inaccessible to readers. In contrast to the Pareto rule, according to which "20 percent of goods bring 80 percent of the profit" in the mass economy, the "long tail" rule proposed by Anderson (2006), editor-in-chief of "Wired" magazine, proves the opposite: goods that are not very demanded – those same 80 percent – can give profit hundreds of times higher than the profit from the sale of the hit goods (p. 132). The previous issue is sold until the latest issue is published. During this period of time, the publisher makes a profit from the sale of the magazine. Expired magazines, as a rule, have almost no economic value. A public account performs one main function – an automatic response, which helps expired magazines regain demand. Subscribers can send the magazine's serial number or keywords and get a link to read an expired magazine. In our opinion, it is worth developing the function of searching and reading expired magazines published earlier than last year in a public account, so that readers can get any number according to their requests.

Another weak point is associated with the form of presentation of materials. A public account can send messages in various formats, such as texts, images, audio and video materials, etc. Currently, messages in the "Harvest" magazine account primarily include texts and pictures. For example, photographs of writers that help reduce the distance between authors and readers. However, audio recordings and videos rarely appear here. Of course, the editors should not forget about the benefits of multimedia, especially

since the materials published in the account are quite voluminous and often difficult for an average reader's perception. New technologies are especially relevant for young people, for dynamic and busy people who can listen to a recording at any time convenient for them, for example during a training session, or preview a video to decide whether to spend time on a long read. After listening to an excerpt from the novel or getting acquainted with the accompanying video materials, they may want to purchase the full version in print format for reading. Along with this, many of the literary lovers have a penchant for recitation, so one can invite those who want to make voice recordings for publication in the magazine's account (of course, with careful editorial selection of the best participants). This way, interaction between readers and the magazine can be enhanced.

Finally, the editors of the magazine do not pay enough attention to the development of a public account in WeChat. The deputy editor-in-chief of "Harvest" magazine Hongming Zhong, who also serves as the editor of the mobile platform of this publication, noted: "Over the past five years, I was engaged in the business of this account only in my free time" (The five-year anniversary of "Harvest" magazine's public account on WeChat's communications resource, 2018). Using a public account will lay the foundation for the digital transformation of this magazine. The number of subscribers to his account exceeded 200 thousand, which means that the magazine has formed a stable readership among mobile clients, which in the future gives rise to creating the magazine's own mobile application. The editors tried to sell expired magazines in the Kindle application, but did not receive the planned economic profit. The editor-in-chief of Harvest magazine Cheng (20143b) noted: "For each magazine, the editorial board received 1 yuan from this application. This is too little" (p. 8). Now the time has come to increase the level of digital transformation of this magazine, it should become not just a supplier of materials for a mobile application, but a full-fledged and independent digital publication.

7. Conclusion

Creating public accounts in the WeChat mobile communication system is a well-thought-out solution, since these accounts contribute to the development of printed literary magazines. Thanks to digitalization, printed periodicals in China have received a new development vector, which has made it possible to use many additional features. Among them, it is first of all necessary to note a large number of WeChat users (11 billion people), which can provide wide coverage for publications posted in public accounts. In addition, the platform has the function of daily mass mailing, which also positively affects the coverage of published publications.

Changes regarding the audience of the public accounts which are being considered also deserve special attention. In this aspect, it is worth noting first of all that WeChat users are mainly young and middle-aged people, while the readers of the print press are mostly elderly. The use of WeChat public accounts allows for popularizing literary magazines among a younger audience, which positively affects their level of education and broadens their horizons. In addition, taking into account the advantages of WeChat public accounts (constant updating of materials and quick access to them, ease of use and low cost of subscription), one can say that in the future the audience of public accounts will grow.

Along with this, it should be noted that digitalization also affects the content of public accounts: here, first of all, it is worth mentioning the possibility of posting publications in larger numbers and more

quickly than in traditional print media. This allows both for timely notification of platform users about news, important events, and for preparing their readers for the release of significant works of art in small publications on this topic. Studying the audience's response to certain publications allows, in turn, to identify the most interesting and relevant topics for users, so the publication can revise or adjust its development direction.

At the same time, despite all the advantages of public accounts in WeChat for literary magazines, strategies for maintaining an account and using some functions are still not fully understood and formed. This demonstrates the need for a thorough study and testing of all the features offered by the platform, which is a promising area for further research. Here it is appropriate to recall the words of Gorbunova (2015), who notes that

digitalization can become not a break point, dividing and deepening the technological and cultural gap of world society, but an integrating force of concentration of human capital, a pledge of the evolutionary progress of mankind, a new breakthrough into the field of the unknown, but of managed for the benefit of people, discovering huge horizons of understanding the world around us and our own identification. (p. 203)

References

- Anderson, C. (2006). *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. Hyperion Books.
- Bastos, M. T. (2014). Shares, Pins and Tweets. News readership from daily papers to social media. *Journalism Studies*, 16(3), 305-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.891857>
- Big Data Report of Chinese Android Environment. (2016). <https://tech.qq.com/a/20160919/006770.htm#p=3>
- Cheng, Y. X. (2013a). *A high percentage of elderly readers of literary magazines*. <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/1209/c40606-23785719.html>
- Cheng, Y. X. (2013b). The Current State of Fiction Magazines. *Rénmín Ribào*, 12.
- Gorbunova, N. V. (2015). Kulturnyj kapital – dvizhushchaya sila razvitiya obshchestva [Cultural capital is the driving force behind the development of society]. *Vestnik of Saratov State Socio-Economic University*, 5(59), 201-204.
- Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-1380.
- Ivchenkov, V. I. (2018). Zhurnalistika i internet: teksto-vebovaya kogerenciya. [Journalism and the Internet: text-web coherence]. In V. P. Vorobyov (Ed.), *Multimedia Journalism* (pp. 14-17). BSU.
- Kamenchenko, D. I. (2019). Sravnitelnyj analiz informacionnoj povestki dnya sredstv massovoj informacii i sovremennyh socialnyh media [Comparative analysis of the information agenda of the media and modern social media]. *Mediascope*, 4, 3. <https://doi.org/10.30547/mediascope.4.2019.3>
- Ryazanova, A. Y. (2015). Osobennosti razvitiya setevoy zhurnalistiki v Kitae [Features of the development of online journalism in China]. *RUDN Journal of studies in literature and journalism*, 1, 108-112.
- Smirnova, O. V. (2013). Strategii pechatnyh media v epohu cifrovyyh tekhnologij [Print Media Strategies in the Digital Age]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 10. Zhurnalistika*, 6, 26-37.
- Timofeeva, N. P. (2019). Osobennosti yazyka i internet-kommunikacii v epohu cifrovizacii [Features of language and Internet communication in the digital age]. In A. A. Zarajskiy (Ed.), *Linguistic and cultural identity in the digital age* (pp. 7-18). AMIRIT.
- The five-year anniversary of "Harvest" magazine's public account on WeChat's communications resource. (2018). https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xUAT_ce0ql0am5vrsYbWXg
- Vakurova, N. V. (2001). Konceptii sovremennyh rossijskih Internet-izdaniy [Concepts of modern Russian Internet publications]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 10. Zhurnalistika*, 6, 44-45.

- Vartanova, E. L. (2016). Gibridizaciya pressy: objedinyaya tradicii i innovacii [Hybridization of the press: combining tradition and innovation]. *Mediaalmanac*, 5, 8-10.
- WeChat Annual Report. (2018). <https://support.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmsupport-bin/getopendays>
- Yakovleva, T. V. (2018). Osnovnye podhody k issledovaniyu transformacii gazet v epohu cifrovizacii. Analiz publikacij v zarubezhnyh zhurnalakh [The main approaches to the study of the transformation of newspapers in the digital age. Analysis of publications in foreign journals]. *Vestnik of Volzhsky University after V. N. Tatischev*, 1, 191-196.
- Yan, X. (2019). Transformaciya tradicionnyh sredstv massovoj informacii v Kitae v usloviyah cifrovizacii [Transformation of traditional media in China in the context of digitalization]. *Ideas and innovations*, 7(2), 66-74.
- Ye, K. (2013, November 26). "Harvest" magazine's public account sent its first message to subscribers yesterday, Wenhueibao Newspaper. <https://ru-ru.facebook.com/pg/Harvestmagazine/posts/>
- Zhong, H. M. (2014). *Literary magazines sequentially open a public account on WeChat*. Rénmín Ribào.