

The Changing Physical and Social Environment of Newsgathering: A Case Study of Foreign Correspondents Using Chat Apps During Unrest

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Abstract

Mobile chat apps have shaped multiple forms of communication in everyday life, including education, family, business, and health communication. In journalism, chat apps have taken on a heightened significance in reporting political unrest, particularly in terms of audience/reporter distinctions, sourcing of information, and community formation. Mobile phones are now essential components in reporters' everyday communication, and particularly during political unrest. In East Asia, the latest trends point toward private networking apps, such as WeChat and WhatsApp, as the most important digital tools for journalists to interact with sources and audiences in news production. These apps provide a set of private (and, increasingly, encrypted) alternatives to open, public-facing social media platforms. This article is the first to examine foreign correspondents' usage of chat apps for newsgathering during political unrest in China and Hong Kong since the 2014 "Umbrella Movement," a time when the use of chat apps in newsgathering became widespread. This article identifies and critically examines the salient features of these apps. It then discusses the ways these journalistic interactions on chat apps perpetuate, disrupt, and affect "social" newsgathering. This article argues that chat apps do not represent one interactive space; rather they are hybrid interactions of news production embedded in social practices rather than pre-existing physical/digital spaces. This research is significant as the emergence of chat apps as tools in foreign correspondents' reporting has implications for journalistic practices in information gathering, storage, security, and interpretation and for the informational cultures of journalism.

Keywords

mobile communication, journalism studies, professional norms and practices, political unrest, Hong Kong

In recent years, scholars have identified many of the ways social networking platforms have shaped journalistic practices and norms (Anderson & Caumont, 2014; Harrison, 2010; Hermida, 2010). These platforms have brought changes to fundamental aspects of journalism, such as crowdsourcing and verification practices (Wardle & Williams, 2010). Increasingly, researchers have explored how journalists have interacted with audiences and other journalists within digital spaces of production. In news production, these journalistic interactions have taken on a heightened significance by blurring familiar boundaries and allowing audiences to be co-creators in "new communicative spaces" (Peters, 2012, p. 4). Describing Twitter, Hermida coined the term "ambient journalism" to refer to "awareness systems that offer [journalists] means to collect, communicate, share, and display news and information in the periphery of a user's awareness" (Hermida, 2010). These digital spaces of journalistic interactions provide, as Couldry

argues, a platform for the emergence of "inter-local spaces" of news production and consumption, meaning increasing connection among different localities (Dickens, Couldry, & Fotopoulou, 2015). Online journalistic practices extend across wider communities of interest (Couldry et al., 2016) and can include "liminal viewpoints" (Papacharissi, 2014). Online journalistic interactions also often involve an element of "journalistic boundary work" varying across cultural, socio-political, and technological contexts (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Building on this

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burgeoning literature, this article explores how journalists use chat apps for newsgathering and the spaces of reporting that are emerging as a result of journalistic interactions on these mobile applications.

Mobile chat apps—referring to instant messaging or mobile messaging applications on mobile electronic devices such as smartphones or tablets—have the potential to transform online social interactions. Mobile chat apps have already reshaped multiple forms of communication in everyday life. In the literature on interpersonal, education, business, and health communication, there is a growing emphasis on mobile communication (e.g., Boulos, Giustini, & Wheeler, 2016; Siddiqui, 2014; Soffer, 2016). Within the context of journalistic communication, chat apps have become significant tools in coverage of political unrest, particularly in terms of audience/producer distinctions, sourcing of information, and community formation. Mobile phones are now essential for journalists communicating during unrest. In East Asia, recent instances of political unrest have shown that chat apps can serve as tools for journalists to interact with sources and audience in news production.

Private networking apps, such as WeChat and WhatsApp, provide a set of private alternatives to open, public-facing social media platforms. Chat apps are scalable and can involve larger (sometimes *much* larger) groups. Several chat apps allow for hundreds of users to participate in a single closed discussion. In recent years, the number and uses of mobile chat applications have increased significantly (Rose, 2016). And the numbers of active users on several chat apps—including WhatsApp, WeChat, Snapchat, and others—now exceed active users on well-established social networking sites, such as Twitter (Duggan, 2015). While media companies are

still investing more time and resources into social networks like Facebook and Twitter than they are into messaging services, this will change as messaging companies build out their services and provide more avenues for connecting brands, publishers, and advertisers with users. (BI Intelligence, 2016)

One emerging area where these apps have been especially important has been in news coverage of political unrest in East Asia, such as by journalists witnessing events at distance or connecting with sources privately (Barot & Oren, 2015; Belair-Gagnon, Agur, & Frisch, 2016; Wei, 2016). Building on this development, this article explores the changing physical and social environment of newsgathering with chat apps in an area of the world that has experienced heightened political unrest since 2014: Hong Kong and China.

This article uses a case study of foreign correspondents covering unrest to explore journalistic interactions on chat apps and the ways that newsgathering evolves as a result of these interactions. By “political unrest,” we refer to a combination of lawful and unlawful collective action, such as general strikes or anti-government demonstrations aimed at

political authorities. There is a sizeable literature exploring journalistic uses of social media (primarily Facebook and Twitter) during political unrest. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring and other major instances of political unrest, researchers have explored social media interactions related to coverage of large protests (Lotan et al., 2011; Papacharissi, 2014; Piechota & Rajczyk, 2015). As chat apps become essential tools for newsgathering, it is worth examining how new online tools are reshaping the culture of journalism during unrest.

This study thus examines how foreign correspondents use chat apps, the forms of journalistic interactions on chat apps that have emerged as these journalists cover unrest, the salient features of these interactions on chat apps, and the ways these journalistic interactions on chat apps can perpetuate, disrupt, and affect newsgathering. This article argues that interactions on chat apps have a distinct and important set of implications for journalistic practices during political unrest. This article focuses on apps that journalists have told us they used in Hong Kong, primarily WhatsApp and (to a lesser extent) WeChat.

Mobile Chat Applications in the Journalism Studies Literature

With social media, scholars have identified ways for audiences and journalists to be connected to each other’s needs and interests in co-creating and distributing news with “the people formerly known as audiences” (Rosen, 2006). For instance, media platforms, such as blogs, offer forums for speech and networking opportunities and can be effective tools in promoting civic engagement (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011) and mobilizing local communities (Blom, 2013). Yet the degree of audience mobilization depends on how members of communities have internalized their participation (Robinson & Deshano, 2011). The way these scholars use the term “audience” may hint at a structuralist bias in their conceptualization of journalism and a participatory public. To a certain extent, the scholarly and journalistic use of the term “audience” demonstrates a structural role assigned to journalists and audiences. But if we take these categories (journalists and audiences) as given, in theory, journalistic uses of chat apps can foster democratic ideals of participation and promote wider sharing of information. In practice, these ideals are also shaped by the cultural, politico-economic, and technological contexts in which journalistic interactions take place.

We can also gain insights from the literature on journalistic uses of “traditional” social media (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014), such as Twitter. In much the same way that Hermida (2013) found that Twitter is a networked communicative space that takes on a mixture of old and new journalistic qualities, we find that chat apps have a hybridity of their own. They can bring together spatially dispersed users in a public conversation much like Twitter; at the same time, they

offer something conceptually distinct, in their capacity for private conversations of widely varied sizes (from one-on-one to hundreds).

Another important aspect of usage is the way different news organizations deploy social media in their reporting. As Engesser and Humphrecht (2015) found, elite media tend to use Twitter more frequently. At the level of individual reporters, Canter (2015) identified new routines in newsgathering and live reporting, and a resulting set of changes in gatekeeping and verification. In both an individual and institutional sense, the arrival of social media has brought not simply a transformation in practices but instead a complex mix of pre-existing and emergent reporting interactions.

This hybridity builds on old reporting habits and best practices and tries to take advantage of the new communicative features of social media (Peters, 2012). As a result, chat apps further enmesh journalists within audiences, allowing for a series of private and semi-private interactions with sources and fellow reporters. This new “reciprocity” (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014) often takes place in private spaces that are negotiated on the basis of trust, of each other and of the technology.

The existing literature on mobile chat apps in newsgathering is scarce and, like the broader literature on social media, identifies a mix of journalistic interactions mentioned above. Particularly during crisis events, chat apps have blurred formal audience/journalist distinctions and changed a variety of processes in news production (e.g., news selection or sourcing). For example, some news organizations have made use of chat apps as extensions of their production. Malka, Ariel, and Avidar (2015) described WhatsApp as “a unique combination of mass and interpersonal communication channels,” revealing the complexity of old and new user interactions and the ability of reporters to negotiate physical and digital spaces in their production of news. Scholars have also argued that chat apps can provide a sense of community engagement, in which users build long-term relationships. Geared toward a shared vision of a community in a state of relative stability, chat app groups can take on an added and unexpected significance in crisis situations. By soliciting tips and updates on these apps (Barot & Oren, 2015; Cooper, 2007), reporters can “witness” events from multiple vantage points, follow stories at a distance, and integrate user-generated content into their coverage (Mabweazara, 2011). As protesters coordinate and organize protests using Voxer, Viber, or WhatsApp, journalists have also sought to understand and put to use those apps (Lee, So, & Leung, 2015; Mottiar, 2014; Skålen, Abdul Aal, & Edvardsson, 2015; Stacey, 2015). For reporters covering sensitive political issues, encrypted chat apps such as Telegram, Signal, and, more recently, WhatsApp have allowed for secure communication channels with sources who may be at risk of surveillance (Crandall et al., 2013).

While this nascent literature on chat apps has offered preliminary observations about the interactive potential of these

apps, little academic study to date has used a case study to examine how these interactions have taken place in newsgathering (e.g., Barot & Oren, 2015; Benton, 2015). As these apps have become normalized tools of reporting during unrest, there is an opportunity to conceptualize journalistic interactions on chat apps. In these two respects—the empirical contribution of a case study in journalistic uses of chat apps and in the theoretical conceptualization of journalistic interactions on chat apps—this article adds to the literature on mobile chat applications. This article also offers a path for future research on how chat apps can challenge the ideal of a more democratic social web and blur the distinction between journalists and audiences in physical and digital spaces.

Methodology

This article uses an empirical and inductive case study approach, focusing on foreign correspondents posted in Hong Kong and mainland China. We examined how reporters used chat apps to cover political unrest that took place in Hong Kong and China from August 2014 to February 2016. Hong Kong and mainland China are relevant for several reasons. First, there is widespread use of mobile chat applications by journalists and audiences. Second, Hong Kong is the primary Asian hub for most global news organizations, as well as their correspondents and editors. And third, Hong Kong is a high-tech city with recent history of significant political activism, led by young and tech-savvy activists.

Several aspects of this time period make it an instructive moment for chat apps in news production. Since the Hong Kong “Umbrella Movement” protests of 2014, chat apps have become important tools of reporting and social engagement. Just as social media had break-out moments in other crises (e.g., the BBC’s coverage of the London bombings in 2005) (Allan, 2013; Belair-Gagnon et al., 2016; Sambrook, 2010), the Umbrella Movement of 2014 was a moment when chat apps, particularly WhatsApp, became essential tools for reporters and news organizations. Since 2014, Hong Kong and China have experienced heightened levels of political unrest. During the period this research was conducted, official sources such as government officials and activists served as news sources and as key innovators in their communication with the media, leaving news reporters to follow along, learn, and adapt. Chat apps have helped journalists manage a significant volume of high-velocity information digitally coming from multiple physical protest sites (Lee et al., 2015; Stacey, 2015). These have also enabled journalists to stay in contact with sources and verify information.

To explore journalistic interactions on chat apps, we interviewed foreign correspondents who used a variety of chat apps in their coverage of political unrest. We conducted 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews from June 2015 to February 2016 in Hong Kong and China. These interviews lasted on average 1 hr each. We began our research by

soliciting interviews from foreign correspondents who had covered the 2014 protests and then reached out others in journalistic communities in Hong Kong and China. The word of mouth method is useful as it enabled us to locate journalists who had established themselves as skilled users and leaders among journalists on chat apps during coverage of major events. Our interview sample included 15 women and 19 men. We used a purposive sample (Becker, 1998; Palys, 2008; Stake, 2005) and spoke to a diverse set of reporters and editors from digital news, broadcasts, and wire services. Unsurprisingly, social media editors and reporters covering protests made most extensive use of chat apps. Most editors encouraged reporters to use social media and chat apps in their coverage of political unrest. We anonymized all interviews to respect reporters' contractual obligations to their employers.

Our coding process emphasized journalistic perspectives and practices. We recorded all interviews and had the files transcribed professionally. We subsequently reviewed the interviews without coding the contents (Lindlof, 1995). Then we read through each interview closely and coded the contents. During coding, we tagged segments of interest related to newsgathering. These included collecting information (e.g., human sources, texts, video, audio, public records, and pictures of news characters), selecting stories, and verification (including fact-checking such as by geolocating posts or reverse image search).

We coded responses in terms of why journalists chose a particular app in a particular context, how reporters used each app, and what data their chosen apps generated. This approach allowed us to assess the comparative role and significance of each app. By studying multiple chat apps, we sought to understand the similarities and differences in how journalists used apps and the ways that for each app distinct journalistic interactions have emerged. Following the themes our interviewees identified, we developed a thematic code about journalistic interactions on chat apps.

Foreign Correspondents' Uses of Chat Apps

In this section, we survey how journalists used chat apps in their coverage of political unrest. An important finding is that the social media space influences the physical space, and vice versa. As in Juris' (2012, p. 259) analysis of listservs and websites during #Occupy, the journalistic uses of chat apps contributed to an "aggregation logic," whereas chat apps allowed for large masses of diverse individuals to mobilize in digital and physical spaces. And journalistic practice becomes entwined in chat apps' features (e.g., language skills, local and technological knowledge, limits of organizational resources, segmentation of audience across apps, surveillance, ability to witness in person or at distance, and the difficulty of verifying rumors).

In determining which chat apps journalists used, physical location mattered. Journalistic use of chat apps is correlated with the popularity of a given app in the local population (with exceptions in situations where journalists use encrypted apps to circumvent surveillance). This habit of going to the most used chat apps shows the tendency of journalists to follow the news, thereby leading newsmakers to the places where things are happening. Across East Asia, countries tend to be dominated by a single chat app. In Hong Kong, journalists primarily used WhatsApp to cover political unrest; in mainland China, WeChat; in Taiwan and Japan, LINE; and in South Korea, KaKaoTalk (Pettit, 2016).

In interviews, reporters identified several challenges in their usage of chat apps during political unrest. For example, because of language barriers (e.g., Mandarin on WeChat or Cantonese on WhatsApp), journalists with language knowledge or language support from their news organizations tended to use these apps more often than those with less knowledge of the local language. For instance, a social media savvy reporter mentioned,

I'm not super well versed in reading Chinese [. . .] If I really wanted to check something that was going on in Chinese social media I would probably just ask a researcher [. . .] just to help me out but that's a reflection more of my own limitations. (Interview, 13 January 2016)

Many interviewees emphasized the challenge presented by rumors on chat apps, as on social networking sites. For example, during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, rumors spread among the crowds that cellular networks would become overloaded or be shut down by the government. Over a period of a few days, many users downloaded FireChat, an open-access mesh network app able to use phone-to-phone Bluetooth signals to connect when cellular service is not available. Contrary to enthusiastic global news reports on the freely joinable mobile chat application FireChat (BBC, 2014; Cohen, 2014), four interviewees highlighted that FireChat's open-access model quickly made the app ineffective as a vector of organizational information. Rather than offering new clarity for participants, it became filled with rumor and unverified information, some spread as disinformation from Chinese authorities.

While there were challenges using chat apps, many journalists found them useful for newsgathering. These interactions took place between journalists on teams of varying sizes and within news organizations, as specialist editors used forensic techniques to verify user-generated content. In interviews, reporters indicated several advantages of using chat apps: the low cost of access to technology, mitigating surveillance, access to user-generated multimedia content that can be used to illustrate or fact-check stories, shareability of information within media organizations, and audience interaction. For journalists in large news organizations, chat

apps offered new opportunities for journalistic collaboration in the news production process.

For example, one digital first news organization used Slack, which enables real-time messaging in addition to its archiving and search capabilities. Reflecting newsgathering simultaneously on physical and digital spaces, a digital news editor described the result as “an ongoing, rolling newsroom” (Interview, 13 January 2016). Some practices on chat apps mirror in the street practices; a reporter can multitask when reporting in the street while interacting on chat apps. We find that these practices reflect a tension between digital and physical spaces and sometimes work in opposition or accord with each other. Most reporters used WhatsApp during the 2014 protests and have continued to make active use of it since then. A former Asia foreign correspondent told us, “We used a WhatsApp chat room with somewhere between 12 and 20 people, including all of us reporters. It was really, really, really vital” (Interview, 12 January 2016). And other reporters, particularly stringers or reporters who work with smaller teams in Asia, used SMS groups or closed WhatsApp groups.

Our interviews also demonstrated ways that chat apps reshape journalistic sourcing, such as through temporal (timestamping) and spatial (geolocating) features. WeChat has a global positioning system (GPS)-based “friend finder” for meeting people nearby. In political protests, when large numbers of people are gathered together, journalists on WeChat can contact participants and access new sources. In a fast-moving protest movement, journalists we spoke to also used chat apps to communicate with their colleagues and share updates from different locations. An American news editor conveyed that during the 2014 protests, her news organization had an overnight schedule where people were posted at different places or in charge of monitoring events. Using WhatsApp,

If this person lives in a particular neighborhood near the protest site, they can check it out and say, “Hey, guys. There’s nothing going on here.” You know, just better coordinating, saving people the trouble of having to go all over. (Interview, 12 January 2016)

Having taken stock of ways journalists we spoke to used chat apps to cover unrest, our analysis now shifts to the journalistic interactions that are salient on chat apps and how these interactions reflect a complex and multifaceted web with qualities that are private.

Journalistic Interactions on Chat Apps

A chat app is not a single awareness system in the same way Twitter is. Chat apps typify a differentiated, connected, and complex system of software that offers both *atomized* and *compound* forms of journalistic interactions. First, *atomized interactions* involve “few to few” communication and take advantage of chat apps’ utility as tools for

rapid communication among a handful of people. These journalistic interactions reflect aspects of Hermida’s (2010) description of “broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on systems are enabling citizens to maintain a mental model of news and events around them, giving rise to awareness systems” (p. 298). But these interactions differ in the sense that chat apps provide closed networking capabilities closer to what the telephone offers. Second, *compound interactions* are larger and more complex, bringing together a wider set of participants from a variety of contexts (often at a distance). As de Souza e Silva (2006) argued in the context of mobile phone uses in cities, we found that often these spaces have an element of hybridity as they “migrate to physical spaces because of the use of mobile technologies as interfaces” (p. 261), allowing users to stay connected to the internet while wandering in urban spaces. By examining atomized and compound interactions, this section contributes to scholarly understanding of the ways mobile communication and social media shape journalistic interactions and news production.

Compound and atomized interactions are two broadly distinct forms of interactions (and coordination) on mobile chat applications. In our study, we found different patterns of interactions; the more compound or heterogeneous interactions became, the larger the pool of participants, the greater the degree of openness in interactions. As a result, a different set of communicative experiences and outputs emerged. Within compound interactions, power dynamics developed (e.g., professional and social standing to access private spaces, access such as with the emergence of the digital fixer or financial capabilities of news organizations to allocate time and funds). In atomized interactions, other forms of interactive dynamics emerged (e.g., professional and social standing to interact on leads or journalistic management of large set of data with crowdsourcing of online information). This framework allows us to understand journalistic practices, interactions, and power relations in networked communication.

Atomized Journalistic Interactions

Atomized interactions are ever-present, composed of many discrete units, and readily accessible, but are often detached from reporters’ specific inquiries. In a sociological sense, these interactions are deprived of meaningful ties to others; although they have connection to a larger sense of self, this reflects the atomization and depersonalization of mass society (Blumer, 1951; Durkheim, 1897; Gerhardt, 1998). Atomized interactions refer to the ways that journalists use chat apps to monitor events and keep in touch with a narrow set of colleagues. We found this was often the case with small reporting teams or stories involving sensitive content (e.g., human rights activism in China). In atomized interactions, information is interconnected, but not everything is accessible by everyone and everywhere at any time. Some information is cloistered by technological design, language

or user culture. Some reporters and subjects may prefer to keep conversations exclusive for fear of being noticed by governments or rival reporters. In short, information is messy, inconsistent, and unequal. The group and multimedia functions of chat apps allow this information to flow freely to those outside the immediate physical space surrounding a breaking news story. Reporters can gain access to snippets of text, sound, image, and video and follow up with individuals they reach through chat groups. Previously, this information would have flowed much more slowly through institutional networks and one-to-one communication (e.g., with the telephone).

To a greater degree than with “traditional” social media, chat apps have shifted journalistic functions of developing and querying sources, seeking verification, and obtaining multimedia. Digital reporting also generates advantages for those further down the news production line, such as editors, multimedia producers, and distributors. Initially, chat apps provided opportunities to minor players who were first-movers (especially freelancers and stringers without organizational constraints on their chat app usage). But established news organizations have also developed institutional strategies and dedicated significant resources to making chat apps work as scalable tools of news production.

During political unrest in Hong Kong and China, chat apps have been essential tools for anyone trying to make sense of large, multi-site protests. A wire service journalist reflected on the importance of chat apps in his reporting:

The amount of information was quite a spread-out event and we could be sitting on the grass one place and following all of it. It wasn't information that was even half an hour old. It was like 5, 10 minutes old so you could just go over there and see what had happened. (Interview, 13 January 2016)

In interviews, several reporters also emphasized ways chat apps allowed them to monitor events and debates among key participants. As an American wire service reporter described, “The way we found out about [the event] is through people sharing pictures on WeChat. And we were like, ‘Oh, what is this?’ And we ran out and covered the story” (Interview, 5 January 2016).

While in many ways journalists perceived the constant stream of information as a blessing, the volume of material created challenges. These included some weak and unsustainable relationships with sources. A technology-savvy reporter explained,

There is just so much stuff. You turn around for a second and then there is something new. I was the point person for that [in our bureau] because I was constantly on it. You have to have that desire. (Interview, 13 January 2016)

Different chat apps offer different ways of understanding atomized interactions because their functionalities vary (Bilton, 2015). For example, WeChat has open groups (or

“channels”). For reporters in mainland China, WeChat is the go-to chat app for the initial states of newsgathering:

Weibo¹ has sort of fallen out of favor and if I want to keep a pulse on things, I'll just check on WeChat. A couple of years ago there was a wave of protest around a chemical plant. And I was covering it from here because we just didn't think it was big enough of a story to actually send someone. Social media was tremendously useful then, because the protesters had formed their own WeChat groups and they were taking videos and sharing pictures, and all of that is done through WeChat. I don't think I would have been able to do it on the phone or using just text messages because it's just not as convenient, it's more expensive. (Interview with an American wire service reporter, 5 January 2016)

Another reporter noted,

In 2011 and 2012 [I was] using text messages. And there was finally a point where I realized I didn't have friends anymore. Because people kept on saying, “Hey, you have to download X and Y.” . . . Eventually so much of life moved into that zone that I had to come along with it. And now you can't get dinner with anyone unless it's in a WeChat group. (Interview with a columnist, 6 January 2016)

When the 2014 Hong Kong protests began, activist organizations, especially those with young leaders or supporters, created WhatsApp groups to distribute press releases and other content to journalists, thus creating the kind of hybrid physical/digital space de Souza e Silva (2006) conceptualized. Throughout each day of the protests, the youngest student group, led by 16- to 20-year-olds, made primary use of its WhatsApp groups to provide updates and other materials that journalists might find useful when covering the movement. “They'll send a blast just like, ‘We're calling a press conference in 15 minutes’” (Interview with a technology-savvy reporter, 13 January 2016). An American digital journalist said,

[WhatsApp groups were] for internal communicating, and it was great, because you could say, here's what. I am in [one protest site]. Here's what's happening. I am at [another protest site]. Here is what's going on here. Or I could ask, “Did you file this? Can you please?” So it was a really good way to collaborate. You could turn off the notifications, and tune in and tune out to that tracker [group], but as needed. It is so much better than having it all on email. (Interview, 6 January 2016)

This practice was also common within major news organizations with enough reporters to sustain large internal digital communication networks. For instance, one American online reporter highlighted,

It is #editorial [on Slack], so that is everybody you know, and no matter what time of day or night. Or if you have a question about something. Or you can tune it out and then there's hashtags for

all of the other topics, and you make them depending on what is going on. (Interview, 6 January 2016)

Conceptually, chat apps have aspects of classic one-to-one communication (e.g., face-to-face interviews, phone calls, classic emails, and texts) which is exclusive but highly atomized. Chat apps also have aspect of many-to-many platforms (e.g., Twitter feed or open Facebook groups) where information is so public that the individual journalist organizations can have no exclusivity in newsgathering. Chat apps thus afford a range of “some to some” connectivity that can be calibrated to reporting needs. Some-to-some information gathering is atomized, allowing journalists to curate source streams of incoming data and follow from there as breaking news requirements may dictate.

Compound Journalistic Interactions

Compared to atomized journalistic interactions, compound interactions involve more participants. Like crowdsourcing, compound interactions involve sourcing and sharing information within and across news organizations. In these interactions, journalists combine ingredients as parts of a larger whole. Compared to chat apps, conventional foreign news reporting has higher barriers to entry and favors established news organizations with resources (e.g., travel budgets, equipment, a deep bench of local expertise, membership at a correspondents’ club, news assistants with local language skills monitoring the wires and official media, and other types of institutional support). Compound journalistic interactions include direct and intentional exchanges between two or more app users. As a digital editor described, WhatsApp’s functionalities allowed for a range of journalistic activities, from large-scale newsgathering to small-group discussions among colleagues (Interview, 11 January 2016).

In interviews, journalists suggested that chat apps provide an opportunity for faster sourcing and verification of information. A European digital editor said,

The format has gotten many people used to the idea that their photos and their videos are being viewed by a large audience, so if, for example, they take footage of a protest or an accident, or some worldwide breaking news, and then people have contacted them asking, “oh, can you confirm these details for us? Did you take this?” They will usually respond. (Interview, 12 January 2016)

While we have no measure of how much data news organizations had to manage, a wire service social media reporter explained that editing was an ongoing process, with editors actively involved in conversations with everyone contributing to the reporting:

During the 2014 protests, we had a WhatsApp group that was firing 24 hours a day. It included text reporters, the editors,

video, and photographers. There were shifts all the time. All the information about what is happening, quotes, color, basically all, anything we would type it into the WhatsApp group, and then the editors would monitor the WhatsApp group and then take the quotes and color and information that they wanted, and type it into the draft from the office. (Interview, 13 January 2016)

Previously, this kind of background information, which usually did not make it into the final news product, was limited to phone calls and textual information. In interviews, journalists suggested that chat apps have made it easier and cheaper for reporters to share multimedia images and videos.

At the same time as journalists made active use of chat apps, many also sought to reinforce their professional boundaries (cf. Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Tong, 2015). Over time, interactions between sources and journalists led to a routinization of the chat app as news beat. For example, a journalist said, “All these student groups had WhatsApp groups and that’s how they would communicate. It was just a matter of checking everything to see where someone happened to be posting” (Interview, 13 January 2016). Also in these everyday uses of chat apps, the protests changed newsgathering routines and expectations, drawing journalists and news organizations into the kind of online interactions favored by a young, urban demographic.

Another important aspect of compound interactions is that they acted as sources of non-governmental information for reporters, especially those operating in politically repressive environments. While this is true of chat apps, it is also true of Facebook and other social media. But chat apps enable journalists a more direct, systematic, and verifiable information link with citizens, allowing the transmission of time-stamped and geo-located multimedia information (e.g., video or text). That richness of “multimedia” and direct information to contextualize data represents a step beyond conventional phone calls, awaiting information from sources and personal reporting from the field. Optimally, for reporters we interviewed, chat apps offered a wider set of sources, more detailed information, and real-time updates by the core participants in protests, within a more restricted and exclusive network than social media.

While solo reporters and small news organizations can benefit in an absolute sense (compared to their reporting capacities of pre-chat apps), a question remains whether chat apps provide a relative advantage to larger reporting teams. Some journalists we interviewed at large news organizations—which use chat apps as extensions of newsrooms and integrate them into complex news production processes—insisted that their type of usage could not be matched by smaller outfits. Yet we also found individual journalists and members of small reporting teams who were equally confident that chat apps might tip the balance in favor of small, nimble operations.

Conclusion: Challenges and Future Research

The findings of this research are not fully generalizable to *all* news reporting using chat apps because of their focus on global news media elite (from the United States and Europe) located in a specific part of the world (Hong Kong and mainland China) where chat apps have a heightened significance in everyday activities. This article offers a rich and systematic case study analysis of foreign correspondents' use of chat apps during political unrest. This exploratory article offers a foundation for future studies to pursue other analyses and draw broader conclusions about online communicative changes and power relations.

This article has shown that in recent foreign reporting in Hong Kong and mainland China, mobile chat applications have become the sites of significant journalistic practice. Chat apps constitute diverse, open, and broad communities during political unrest news coverage. We find that the routinization of chat apps has brought more granular information to news narratives since chat apps offer a constant stream of specific points in a larger context. But the greater availability of on-the-ground information did not preclude legacy media hewing to an established narrative that could have been disproven by facts on the ground.

In addition to interactions among journalists, chat apps also open up possibilities for audience involvement in news production. Frequently in interviews, the following questions arose: "Have chat apps muddied boundaries between audiences and producers?" "Have chat apps blurred the practices and spaces we think of these people inhabiting?" "Have chat apps shifted the power of who gets to decide what is "news"?" Certainly, this would be in line with recent trends and the romanticization of audience participation in news-gathering. As journalism has become more digitized, scholars have suggested that audiences could become more part of the process. Yet in practice, journalists and news organizations have tended to control user engagement, thus leaving little place for users to shape the news (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). This case study confirms that even within the category of chat apps, there are multiple pathways in relationships between journalists and audiences.

In a sense, journalists' interactions on chat apps resurrect some of the social features of speakeasies: conversations were private and often held quietly, and journalists needed to be in the know to have access to certain conversations. Today, journalistic interactions on chat apps vary in size, and a small reporting team (or even a single tech-savvy reporter) can manage large conversations and flows of multimedia data. In mainland China and Hong Kong, chat apps have provided a way to circumvent government monitoring of activities.

Atomized and compound journalistic interactions on chat apps are not absolute categories but instead broad terms for the morphed outcomes of interactions between journalists

and audiences in physical and digital spaces. Reflecting on the theory of space, Lefebvre (1991) wrote, "what is involved, is a production—the production of a space. Not merely a space of ideas, an ideal but, a social and a mental space" (p. 260). By physical, social, and mental space, Lefebvre meant that our mental space is a representation of physical and social interactions in those spaces. Our mental space is constituted of history (or culture) learned by past experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. To that extent, chat apps do not represent one interactive space. Chat apps are complex and hybrid interactions of news production embedded in social practices. The interactions on these apps are limited by the social, digital, and physical world that reporters inhabit.

The challenge of undertaking research on journalistic interactions on chat apps (private or public) is that while these interactions are becoming normalized as the technology becomes more pervasive for users, the spaces and nature of interactions continue to evolve. By analyzing interactions on chat apps, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of journalistic practices and norms and understand the significance of new journalistic interactions involving journalists and audiences. Looking ahead, it would be useful to explore the extent to which chat app interactions are produced and reproduced in other contexts of crisis and everyday reporting.

Future studies could explore more how chat app practices fit in the literature on user participation and social media. Researchers could also consider how these private interactions co-exist with the more democratic and social web, as well as how journalists communicate within and across these interactions. While this article examined changes in journalistic practices in digital and physical spaces (mobile chat applications), an important question remains: What does it mean for journalism when the spaces of communication reporters co-create and inhabit require them to rely increasingly on digital spaces and less on reportage from the physical sites of events?

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Note

1. Weibo is an open microblogging platform in China equivalent to Twitter.

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