Audience engagement with news on Chinese social media: A discourse analysis of the *People's Daily* official account on WeChat

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Abstract

Delivering news on social media platforms is an increasingly important consideration in journalism practice. However, little attention has been paid to audience engagement with news on social media, especially the discursive presentation of news on the Chinese social media platform WeChat. Based on 36 news reports collected from the *People's Daily* official account, this study analyses how news discourse is constructed and presented to engage audiences. The results suggest that highlighting proximity, personalisation, positivity and human interest in news values are the strategies adopted by journalists to engage audiences. The headline tends to use forward-referring terms and performs the speech acts of assertives and expressives to construct news values of proximity and positivity. The news story makes use of particular addressing terms, reported speeches and evaluative markers to construct news values of personalisation, positivity and human interest. The study enriches the analysis of journalistic practice of news on social media in the Chinese context.

Keywords

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Introduction

Digitalisation and commercialisation of news reflects the changes in journalistic practice. Digitalisation has resulted in abundant information being posted every minute of the day, and browsing has become very convenient that audiences are not likely to spend much time on one website. Mitchell et al. (2016) suggested that attracting and holding audience attention to news is on the decline despite the exponential growth of news platforms. Meanwhile, commercialisation has resulted in a high demand for making profits among news organisations and journalists. Therefore, online news is 'always in competition for people's attention with other information' (Durant and Lambrou, 2009: 28), and is of great importance for newsmakers 'to live up to the preference of news consumers' (Burggraaff and Trilling, 2020: 115). The competition becomes even more severe as more audiences get access to news via mobile devices such as smartphones and pads. Audience practices of sharing news, giving 'likes' to news, and commenting on platforms 'contribute to a change in the traditional relationship between journalists as active and audiences as passive' (Andersena et al., 2019: 2480). In the face of fierce competition, news organisations must communicate with audiences to understand their needs and retain their attention and interest in the news (Nelson, 2019). This will certainly influence journalists' practice of information presentation.

To survive in the challenging digital era environment, news media in China have become enthusiastic about partnering with social media. Presenting news on official accounts on the social application called WeChat is a case in point. WeChat was established and run in 2011; the number of official accounts grew from 2,010,000 to over 20,000,000 within 5 years, and has been growing steadily in recent years.[1] Nevertheless, few systematic studies have been conducted so far on the ways and strategies exploited by successful WeChat official accounts to engage audiences. The present study is an attempt to examine how news on some WeChat official accounts successfully engage audiences through linguistic resources and discourse practices.

Audience engagement in media studies literature

Audience engagement with news refers to appealing to a wide range of audience for browsing and reading news, or to be generally informed about the news (Marshall, 2007). In the social media news context, engagement refers to the time that audiences are willing to spend on related content while reading (O'Brien, 2011); quality of audience attention (Chan-Olmsted and Wolter, 2018) and interaction among content, platform and audiences (Chen and Pain, 2019), including commenting on news stories (Opgenhaffen, 2011), exchanging opinions with other audiences, sharing news stories or creating personal profiles (Kirk et al., 2015). Audience engagement is of great interest to news organisations as it attracts wider readership (Mersey et al., 2010) and builds trust and loyalty towards news brands (Chung and Nah, 2009), which have a positive commercial impact on their business.

Existing studies on audience engagement are conducted primarily from the perspectives of news receivers (audiences) and news producers. Studies from the audiences' perspective address audience effect, audience motivation, audience perception and audience use of

interactive features of news (Chung, 2008; Chung and Nah, 2009; Kang et al., 2013; Krebs and Lischka, 2019; Lischka and Messerli, 2015; O'Brien, 2011). For instance, O'Brien (2011) suggested that the organisation and aesthetic appeal of a news website can capture audience attention and interest. Kang et al. (2013) argued that highly-involved news reading has a significant effect on audiences' motives for news consumption. Krebs and Lischka (2019) found that serious news content is more appealing to audiences than any other form of audience engagement. These studies have provided solid evidence of how audiences perceive news while browsing and reading and, hence, given prominence to news interactivity of social media as a key feature of audience engagement. Nevertheless, these studies view news through the lens of what news producers should do rather than what they actually do. To understand audience engagement in news, conducting studies from the perspective of news producers is equally important – that is, how news is produced and presented. News content is an essential factor journalists depend on in presenting news stories for the purpose of attracting audiences (Barnes, 2014; Berger and Milkman, 2011; Hansen et al., 2011). For example, news content which evokes positive and negative high-arousal emotions is more viral (Berger and Milkman, 2011) while negative news is more retweeted than positive ones (Hansen et al., 2011). In today's digital world where various media outlets vie to report on the same event as soon as it occurs, content is no longer the primary way to engage audiences. Rather, the application of various linguistic strategies plays an important role in increasing audience engagement (Myllylahti, 2019). Against this background, an increasing number of studies on audience engagement have focused on verbal resources – that is, the way in which audiences engage discursively (Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 2017; Blom and Hansen, 2015; Cotter, 2010; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). We think that discourse analysis of news, which takes journalistic texts as social and semiotic practice, can probe into journalistic practice in a new light, thus complementing communications and journalism studies on audience engagement.

Studies on discursive audience engagement in news primarily focus on grabbing audience attention and communicating news values.

Audience attention

Research on digital journalism studies has looked at platform attention as a source of engagement (Myllylahti, 2019: 567–568), because in the so-called 'Clickbait Media' environment characterised by the fragmentation of audiences (Munger, 2019: 377), attention has become essential for the sustainability of journalism and has been regarded as a major dimension of audience engagement (Napoli, 2011; O'Brien, 2011). Audience attention on social media platforms includes the likelihood of browsing news while using the application and interactions such as the number of shares, likes or comments for a news story (Van Dijck, 2013).

Research on online attention has primarily focused on news headlines so far. Discourse devices for making news headlines appealing include specific illocutions, semantic macrostructures, narrative formulas, evaluation parameters and interpersonal and textual devices (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013); forward-referring terms (Blom and Hansen, 2015); foreground devices (Chovanec, 2008); allusions (Lennon, 2004) and visual prominence and typographical attractiveness (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020; Rony et al., 2017).

Inducing audiences to click the headline is an important strategy to grab their attention; yet, the mere attempt to maximise clicks is likely to cause problems such as deliberate ambiguity of headlines and misleading dissonance between the headline and the text (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). Clickbait has become problematic as it can devalue news content and erode audiences' trust (Zhang and Clough, 2020). Moreover, it may arouse audiences' curiosity but may not maintain their attention. To sustain audience attention, journalists should communicate news values instead of simply designing appealing headlines.

News values

News values in journalism studies 'are said to determine what makes something newsworthy—worthy of being news' (Bednarek and Caple, 2012: 103). From a linguistic perspective, news values are embedded in language or, more radically, construed in and through discourse (Bednarek and Caple, 2012). Under the guidance of this view, researchers have focused on the relationship between news values and linguistic devices since the 1990s (Bell, 1991; Fowler, 1991). For instance, Bell (1991) tied several linguistic devices including lexicon, evaluation, superlatives, labels/titles, deixis and time adverbials to news value. Following Bell (1991), other researchers (e.g. Bednarek, 2006; Ben-Aaron, 2005; Cotter, 2010) identified more linguistic resources that can construct news value. Based on the view that news values can be expressed, indicated, emphasised or highlighted in language, Bednarek and Caple (2014) introduced a discursive framework for the analysis of news values to scholars in critical discourse analysis. Bednarek and Caple (2017) also developed an inventory of linguistic resources to analyse news values. An approach called discursive news values analysis (DNVA) was proposed, which covers an open-ended range of resources, including consonance, eliteness, impact, negativity/positivity, proximity, personalisation, superlativeness, timeliness and unexpectedness. According to the meaning potential, typical usage and function, each resource constructs a specific news value. In journalistic writing, journalists can use evaluative language to indicate the stereotypical aspect of a news event to reach consonance with audiences. They can describe social status or use high-status role labels to emphasise eliteness to arouse certain emotions among audiences. They can emphasise the significance of the happening or construct causality to show the significant impact of a news event. They can also use evaluative language to arouse audiences' negative or positive emotions, or refer to a place or person near the target audiences to arouse audiences' intimate feelings. Moreover, journalists can refer to ordinary people's experiences or emotions to get closer to their audience. To highlight the importance or seriousness of an event, they can use superlatives such as intensifiers or quantifiers. Moreover, they may resort to tense, aspect and temporal references to foreground the temporality of an event. They can discursively construct an event as unexpected to arouse audiences' curiosity. Such linguistic resources are operationalised to ensure the trustworthiness and timeliness of the news story and to win trust and resonance among target audiences.

Overview of WeChat and the *People's Daily's* official account

Chinese journalism has undergone significant transformation since the introduction of market mechanism in the early 1980s. The change is even faster in the current digital era.

Today, news organisations publish online news reports on their official websites, official micro-blogs and WeChat official accounts. Being convenient and multifunctional, WeChat has become the most popular social networking platform, which influences the ideological outreach and commercial revenue of news organisations to a large extent.

WeChat, called Weixin in Chinese, 'is a mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd. in China on January 21, 2011' (Chen and Cao, 2014: 104). It is free to download and can be accessed anywhere in the world as long as there is network connectivity. WeChat has become the most influential social networking app used by people of all ages in China and abroad. By the first quarter of 2020, the number of WeChat monthly active users rose to 1.17 billion.[2] The WeChat official account, the WeChat equivalent of a Facebook page, is an interface that a brand can use for news updates and information broadcast. An official account can be created either with a Chinese ID or a local Chinese business license. The number of active WeChat official accounts reached 20,000,000 by early 2019.[3] Browsing official accounts is a daily activity for millions of Chinese people, with each WeChat user following between 10 and 50 accounts on average (Zhang and Clough, 2020). Despite the constant growth of official account followers, competition among news organisations for audience attention is rather intense. Of all the news official accounts, 24% have 100,000–500,000 followers, and only 0.03% have 500,000–1,000,000 followers.[4] According to the WeChat Index (WCI), 80% of the news official accounts have only 1000 page views on average (Shao and Tao, 2017).

However, some official accounts have managed to attract and maintain audience attention in successive years, such as *rmrbwx* (the *People's Daily's* official account). Opened in January 2013, *rmrbwx* delivers news information five times each day. The account features breaking news and political news; and releases news about people's livelihood, community services and local culture. As the official mouthpiece of the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China, the *People's Daily's* major duty is the dissemination of the official ideology. As the *People's Daily's* official account, *rmrbwx's* main concern is the promotion of dominant social values in the cyberspace. Although commercial success is not a major concern for *rmrbwx*, it has to compete for audience attention in the current context when Chinese media is 'facing an increasing tightening tension between the political power of the government and economic forces of the market' (Huan, 2016: 114).

Since its launch, *rmrbwx* has been ranked first in WCI prepared by gsdata.cn, an authoritative technological company of new media big data in China. ASKCI Consulting Co. Ltd. has ranked *rmrbwx* first in terms of the number of audiences successively from 2017 to 2020. The account had more than 700,000,000 followers from both home and abroad by the first half of 2019; on average, more than 100,000 people read the news released by its official account, and the news published during this period got 5,390,000 'likes'.[5]

Studies on news on WeChat have been increasing after the launch of the application, which primarily focus on the style of the news (e.g. Hua, 2020), communication function (e.g. Shi et al., 2020) and communication effect (e.g. Liang and Gao, 2020). Most studies analyse the news headlines, suggesting that interesting, novel and creative headlines are the key to audience engagement (Zhou, 2020). Some studies have examined the clickbait behaviour on WeChat (Zhang and Clough, 2020). However, research on the discourse practice of audience engagement within Chinese social media remains scarce.

Taking *rmrbwx* as a case, this study adopts a discursive view by limiting news engagement to linguistic resources and the platform to the Chinese social media WeChat.

Data and method

News discourse from *rmrbwx* has been taken as the focal point of analysis for the following reasons. First, Chinese media have been undergoing structural changes since the introduction of market mechanism in the early 1980s. The study on *rmrbwx* can examine the features of Chinese media in an alternative context. The *People's Daily* is one of China's major traditional state-monopolised presses. The examination of how *rmrbwx* successfully survives in the digital media competition can provide suggestions for other similar traditional media regarding the structural changes of Chinese press in journalistic practices. Moreover, Chinese news discourse, especially news values, has been underrepresented in the journalism studies literature, and Chinese media on social platforms have been poorly understood.

The data cover 36 news stories collected from *rmrbwx* from 1 July to 15 July 2020. All the news stories received more than 10,000 'likes' within 2 days after posting, and the content is concerning people's livelihood. The headline and body text were both studied, while visual-centric items (e.g. photos and videos) were excluded.

Based on the framework of DNVA, the newsworthiness of the news headlines and stories is to be analysed for investigating how news reports on social media encourage audience engagement by constructing news values with linguistic devices. As mentioned by Bednarek and Caple (2017: 4) who proposed DNVA, news values have not figured prominently in most of the linguistic research on news discourse; the vast and diverse body of research on news values exists in 'non-linguistic disciplines such as journalism and communications studies, which lack a systematic analysis of verbal and visual text'. Therefore, the use of DNVA can shed light on the role that linguistic resources play in communicating news values. Further, based on the analysis of Chinese news reports (Caple et al., 2020), this framework proved to be feasible for analysing Chinese data. This study is hoped to manifest culture-specific features in the Chinese media context where the press and government are closely related. The open-ended nature of the framework allows us to analyse lexico-grammatical constructions specific to news on WeChat official accounts such as addressing terms, citations, sentence types and evaluative markers to see what dimensions from the framework have been chosen as the strategies for constructing news values. Subsequently, we relate these discourse practices to portray audience engagement in the media frame of news reports.

Headlines: Constructing proximity and human interest

WeChat limits the character count of a news headline to 60 Chinese characters; however, some types of mobile phones cannot display headlines of more than 16 characters. This places a higher demand on news headline writing, and it is not surprising that *rmrbwx* lays more importance on the choice and use of linguistic resources. The analysis suggests that *rmrbwx* uses two main linguistic devices – using forward-referring terms and performing the speech acts of assertives plus expressives – in the headlines.

Forward-referring terms are defined as 'reference to forthcoming (parts of the) discourse relative to the current location in the discourse' (Blom and Hansen, 2015: 87). Forward-reference in the collected data is prototypically expressed by the discourse deixical term (1 and 3), person deixical term (2) and temporal deixical term (3):

(1) <u>这</u>大爷！67岁一口气救下4个年轻人，上了岸连气都没喘

(July 10)

(1) <u>This</u> uncle saved four young people successively at the age of 67. He did not even pant for breath after going ashore.

(July 10)

(2) 去世前，<u>她</u>向身边的工作人员嘱咐了两件事

(July 2)

(2) When she was dying, <u>she</u> enjoined her close aide to do two things.

(July 2)

(3) 高考生突遇停电，<u>接下来这</u>一幕让人泪目

(July 6)

(3) Power went off unexpectedly during the college entrance exam. *Next, the* scene moves people into tears.

(July 6)

In the first headline, the demonstrative pronoun 这 *(this)* refers deictically to a forthcoming discourse segment in the news story. When reading the headline, audiences are inclined to think who 这大爷 *(this uncle)* is, and have to read the full text to understand the reference. According to discourse rules, third person deixis *(he, she, it, they)* is not used unless there is an antecedent (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). However, in the second headline, 她 *(she)* is used without any context. Audiences have to read the news story to identify her name or introduction about 她 *(she)*. The third headline uses not only the demonstrative pronoun 这 *(this)* but also the temporal deixical term 接下来 *(next)* to incite the audience to read the full text to know what happens next. The use of such empty deixical terms aims to create an information gap to generate suspense among the audience (Baicchi, 2004). Unlike 'clickbait'-styled headlines of some tabloids, especially commercial accounts, which design deliberate ambiguous headlines merely for luring audiences to click the link, the forward-referring headline attempts to invite audiences to devote attention to the full article where explicit information is displayed.

The use of forward-reference like 她 *(she)* in (2) gives audiences the feeling that they are in the same discourse context with the journalist and person being referred to. The journalist supposes that an introduction or name of the person being referred to is not necessary as they are known to the audience. In this way, the distance between the journalist, the person being referred to, and the audience is reduced. Similarly, 这 *(this)* in (1) which refers to an unknown man produces a feeling that the journalist and audience are geographically nearby. It also creates a psychological proximity between the audience, the journalist and the person being referred to. In doing so, the journalist attempts to arouse emphatic responses from the audience. The time-indicating reference 接下来 *(next)* in (3) is in the category of timeliness according to the DNVA framework because it reports what happened shortly after the event. Such temporal positioning with respect to events not only suggests the newness of the report but also that the event is ongoing and, thus, may arouse audiences' expectations. Such time-indicating reference also performs the function of proximity in terms of time, because it manages to produce a feeling of temporal nearness for the audience. In other words, timeliness may invite audiences into the immediate context and develop a feeling as if they were with the journalist when the event occurred.

As a portal to the news story and textual negotiator between the news and its audience, the news headline functions primarily to give a condensed version of the story. It is not surprising, therefore, that a large majority of the headlines in the collected data play the speech act of assertives (88.9%). Yet, almost all the assertive headlines contain expressives. Thus, apart from revealing information, the news headlines of *rmrbwx* try to evaluate the reported events or people involved, as shown by the following two examples.

(4)   <u>痛心</u>！贵州公交坠湖已致21人死亡

(July 7)

(4)   <u>Distressful</u>! The bus falling into the lake in Guizhou has caused 21 deaths.

(July 7)

(5)   刚下考场就上"战场"！小伙子，<u>好样的</u>！

(July 14)

(5)   The young man went to 'the battle field' as soon as he finished the exam. <u>Great</u>!

(July 14)

The speech act format of (4) is expressive + assertive, while that of (5) is assertive + expressive. Placing the evaluative terms 痛心 *(distressful)*, which passes judgement on the accident, and 好样的 *(great)*, which expresses the attitude towards the young man being reported in the headlines set in advance the negative or positive tone of the event, thereby influencing public opinions. More importantly, such comments give

audiences the impression that the news stories are emotional. Audiences may notice that these reports are of human interest and become more inclined to read and accept them.

News story: Constructing personalisation, positivity and human interest

The design of headlines decides whether audience attention is grabbed, while the writing of the news story determines whether audience attention is maintained. The analysis suggests that *rmrbwx* uses three main linguistic devices – particular addressing terms, reported speeches and positive evaluative expressions – in the news bodies to invoke the news values of personalisation, positivity and human interest.

First is particular addressing terms. Two types of addressing terms are found in the collected data: one to address the hero in the news event and the other to address audiences. Informal kinship terms are most widely used in our data to address the heroes in the news stories, such as 大姐 *(elder sister),* 阿姨 *(aunt)* and 小哥 *(little brother)*. For example, 大爷 *(uncle)* is used to address a man who saved four people (Example 1), and in another news story, 小哥 *(little brother)* is used to address a delivery man. It is a typical feature in Chinese culture where kinship terms are used to address non-kin people to show close relationships. Such addressing terms may bring about a sense of intimacy among audiences towards the heroes who are completely unknown to them; a pseudo-intimacy (Rubino, 2016) between audiences and the news story is likely to be constructed. Other social terms which usually refer to 'ordinary' people, such as 师傅 *(Master)* and 老人 *(the elderly person)*, are also used frequently. Such personalised addressing terms can give audiences a feeling as if the referred people were members of their community, and the news is given a 'human' face (Bednarek and Caple, 2017: 61). For instance, when 刘师傅 *(Master Liu)* is used to refer to a bus driver whose surname is Liu, a special bond and trust in the news story is likely to develop among audiences. Moreover, audiences' curiosity about what has happened to the 'ordinary' person can be aroused more easily. Therefore, compared to the portrayal of generalised processes or concepts, reference to 'ordinary' people is more likely to attract audiences.

Several addressing terms are often used to refer to the same person in one news story. For example, a news story published on 2 July used three addressing terms to refer to the heroine. In the beginning, 申纪兰 *(Shen Jilan)* is mentioned to introduce the heroine. Later, 老人 *(the elderly woman)* is used to address her. Subsequently, the kinship term 申大姐 *(elder sister Shen)* is used twice. According to the news story, Shen did such a big deal that audiences tend to regard her as a distinguished elite. However, when she is called 老人 *(the elderly woman)*, the image of an ordinary person is constructed. Although 老人 *(the elderly woman)* is still a stranger to the audience, a respectful and empathetic feeling may be aroused as respecting elders is a part of the Chinese culture. When 申大姐 *(elder sister Shen)* is used in the final part of the story, the psychological distance between the audience and the heroine is reduced significantly, thus cultivating the former's empathy with the heroine who is actually unfamiliar.

Further, 网友 *(fellow netizen)* is used to address the audience. The character 网 *(web)* suggests that it is a virtual world in which netizens do not know each other, but the second character 友 *(friend)* connotes personalisation, thus reducing the social distance

between them. When audiences read such expressions as 网友评论 *(Fellow netizens comment)*, they may feel that the comments are more convincing because they are made on behalf of ordinary people. They may naturally regard themselves as in-group members and are most likely to accept opinions expressed by 网友们 (*fellow netizens*). In this sense, personalisation can help the journalist win agreement from audiences by inviting them into the same community and making them part of the news experience (Opgenhaffen, 2011).

The second linguistic device used is reported speech. The use of reported speech constructs personalisation if it represents the views, experiences or thoughts of ordinary news actors (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). All the news stories we collected contain reported speech. Scholars of academic writing have explained that one of the reasons writers refer to the ideas of others is to align themselves with a particular group (Thompson and Tribble, 2001). This explanation is suitable for news discourse where audience engagement is salient through the exploration of reported speech. Constrained by the principle of objectiveness, journalists usually avoid expressing their thoughts and invite others to speak on their behalf. Two kinds of reported speech are found in our data: quotes from an individual and quotes from people in general. For example, in (6), words of the hero's father and the village director are quoted to show the excellence of the hero and strengthen reverence to the hero who died saving a drowning child.

(6)   翁佳浩的父亲翁先生悲痛不已

       "他（曾经）说自己是军人

       这个时候就应该冲在最前面

       我们也只好由他了"

       . . .. . .

       村主任谢学良

       与深汕特别合作区相关部门沟通

       "（深圳）政府工作人员也很受感动

       表示要为翁佳浩申报'见义勇为'"

                                                                                              (July 4)

(6)   Weng Jiahao's father, Mr. Weng, was overcome with grief.

       'He once said that he was a soldier,

       So, he should act before others at such moments.

       We have to listen to him.'

       . . .

       The director of the village Xie Xueliang

       communicated with the relevant department of Shenshan Special Cooperative Region,

'The government officials (of Shenzhen) are rather moved,

saying they are going to apply for "Award for Voluntary Felon-Fighting" for Weng Jiahao.'

(July 4)

The father's remarks merely explain why Weng performed this brave deed and what personality Weng had. This information would not sound convincing if not uttered by his father – his closest kin. Moreover, the village director's words are simply constative – that is, stating the fact – but his identity as the leader of the village and his job of reporting the heroic deeds to the relevant official department make his words more convincing. Although both direct and indirect speeches construct personalisation, direct quotes are more personal. As in (6), the direct quotes can help audiences access the voices of Weng's father and the village director; thus, the emotions of being touched and admiration towards the hero are more manifest to the audience.

Similarly, fellow netizens' comments are often cited to implicitly express what the journalist wants to say. Most of these comments are cited at the end of the news story. Our data show that nearly half of the news stories cite fellow netizens' comments while concluding the report. Let us consider the following example:

(7)   网友点赞宋宇翔：

        小男子汉！

(July 15)

(7)   Fellow netizens gave 'likes' to Song Yuxiang:

        Great young man!

(July 15)

The main event of the news is that Song Yuxiang, a 14-year-old, donated his marrow to save his father. The journalist ends the report by citing fellow netizens' comments on the event. Similar to expressives in headlines, the citation provokes the audience's emotional responses. Yet, unlike expressives, which express emotions directly, borrowing fellow netizens' words makes the report objective. It also stirs up audiences' emotions more effectively because it is easy for them to empathise with their fellow netizens' heart-warming comments. Moreover, as fellow netizens represent ordinary citizens, citing their words suggests that the journalist is speaking on behalf of the ordinary people, which is more likely to win audiences' trust.

Generally, the concluding part of a news story illuminates the significance of the news to give audiences a deep impression. Citing fellow netizens' comments to end the story can be more effective as it has a wider appeal among audiences than journalists' comments. Further, citing others' comments suggests that the journalist acknowledges and connects to the audience, recognising their presence and pulling them along with the

emotions expressed in the text. According to the appraisal theory (Martin and White, 2005), citation falls in the category of acknowledgment, which is obviously dialogic because the authorial voice is engaged interactively with those voices external to the text and alternative views are anticipated. In (6), citing Weng's father and the village director indicates that the journalist anticipates and makes space for those who hold individual views. In (7), citing fellow netizens' remarks suggest that the journalist hopes to ingratiate with the audience. Moreover, quoting fellow netizens' comments is a method of content-interaction engagement (Chen and Pain, 2019); it means that web users have read the news and provided feedback, indicating that others have verified the news and, hence, is worth reading.

The third linguistic device is positive evaluative markers. Evaluative markers, which are used to convey excitement or emotion, are common in advertising and informal correspondence such as email texts, but are used less frequently in news reporting, which aims to highlight the information's objectivity and the journalist's impartiality (Weng, 2008). However, even a cursory survey of the collected data reveals that *rmrbwx* frequently uses evaluative markers in the news stories. Altogether, 83 instances of evaluative markers are found in our data – more than 2.3 per news item. This suggests that *rmrbwx* does not rigidly follow the principle of traditional news reporting but priorities value-laden expressions instead, which are more likely to be of interest to the audience. Nearly all evaluative markers are positive in meaning, which are used to express wishes or appreciation, and often appear at the end of the news story. For example, three exclamatory sentences are used at the end of a news report about how the education bureau staff did their best to help the candidates in a flood-stricken area to attend the college entrance examination.

(8)   感谢守护者们！

2207名高考生，加油！

祝你们乘风破浪、金榜题名！

(July 8)

(8)   Thanks to the guardians!

2207 candidates, come on!

Wish you success in the exam!

(July 8)

Each of these exclamatory sentences contains evaluative expressions, including 感谢 *(thanks),* 加油 *(come on)* and 乘风破浪、金榜题名 *(success)*. The expressions of positive emotions and wishes can arouse audiences' attention to the very point that the journalist wishes to initiate. They encourage an image of the event – that is, attending the college entrance examination – as positive and motivating. Moreover, such expressions

are inclusive. As the journalist is included in the community of the general public, the initiation is more likely to be successful. Further, such expressions acknowledge and connect with audiences who are invited into the community, thereby evoking their feeling of gratitude and wishes. Expressing positive emotions in news reports is more in tune with the positive culture advocated by the Chinese government in the digital era.

Similar to the headlines, the citation of fellow netizens' comments and the use of evaluative expressions at the end of the news report may also leave audiences the impression that the journalists are compassionate. Such news values can engage audiences more easily than impersonal objective reporting.

Discussion and conclusion

The above analysis of linguistic resources in news stories on *rmrbwx* reveals that proximity, positivity, personalisation and human interest are the main news values employed to achieve audience engagement. Proximity in the headline is achieved through forward-referring terms, which place audiences in the same context with the reported event and the journalists. Such practices can make audiences feel personally connected to the event and people in the news, arouse their anticipation, guide them to a certain point in the text and reduce the force of imposition when directing them to think or act in a way determined by the journalist. Moreover, such reporting can help increase audience engagement as most of the reported events lie beyond the immediate interest of the audience. Therefore, creating psychological proximity reflects the journalists' attempt to involve audiences as co-participants to reach an agreement. Positivity and negativity are two poles of news values. Generally speaking, negativity is considered 'the basic news values' (Bell, 1991: 156), for news workers tend to think that 'if it bleeds, it leads' (Bednarek and Caple, 2017: 60). Although *rmrbwx* conveys negativity when reporting some accidents, as in (4), most news stories construct positivity. As the government mouthpiece, one of the primary duties of *rmrbwx* is to channel and guide opinions and mediate emotions of the public. It is argued that 'each affective contribution by an online news site user could inspire further affective contributions from others in an ongoing feedback loop' (Barnes, 2014: 134).

Positivity as a news value may not be powerful enough to attract audiences on social media. Yet, when it is presented with emotive expressions, the value can be construed as an appeal to audience attention. More often than not, concerned, considerate or affectionate attitudes are apt to get people's acceptance. Likewise, emotive remarks made by journalists in news reports could provide audiences with mental comfort, make them feel the beauty of life and contribute to affective responses from audiences, which in turn may lead to a physical reaction, such as leaving comments or sharing news stories. Therefore, we include human interest as one of the strategies used by *rmrbwx* to maintain audience attention, although the framework of DNVA does not cover this.

Since the high status of individuals or organisations can help establish the credibility and authority of the news, *rmrbwx* is expected to foreground the news value of eliteness. However, personalisation rather than eliteness is found to be more prominent in their news. This way of reporting follows the fundamental 'three-closeness principle' of Chinese media – close to the fact, close to daily life and close to the mass – proposed by

the government (Huan, 2016: 117). The three closeness maxims, especially closeness to daily life and the mass, suggest that news about ordinary people could attract a large readership and help promote dominant social values. Moreover, reporting the life of ordinary people or the personal aspect of an event may show the human face of issues and happenings (Huan, 2016: 116), and, therefore, is more likely to win audience approval. Thus, the news value of personalisation can help disseminate the official ideology on the one hand and attract audience attention on the other.

The exploration of linguistic resources and journalistic practices demonstrates media-shaped and culture-specific means of audience engagement on Chinese social media. Rather than assuring audiences of the importance of the news, as is the principle of designing news headlines, headlines on WeChat lay more emphasis on arousing audiences' curiosity, and construct the values of proximity and positivity/negativity. Likewise, news stories do not rigidly follow the principles of objectiveness and impartiality. Instead, journalists' attitudes and emotions are displayed; and the values of personalisation, positivity and human interest are established and highlighted. These practices are driven by media organisations' survival instinct in this era of rapid digitalisation. Further, the analysis reveals features of news values constructed by social media in the Chinese context, where media and the government have an intimate relationship. For political and economic purposes, *rmrbwx* prioritises news values of personalisation and proximity in news reports. Therefore, tailoring news reports to satisfy the mass is a discourse strategy employed to achieve the final purpose of promoting dominant social values. Since building online bonds with audiences can affect audience engagement in unprecedented ways, journalists must break away from the conventions of journalism and try to engage audiences by foregrounding particular news values according to specific cultural contexts.

Apart from the linguistic resources analysed in this study, *rmrbwx* employs other ways of audience engagement. For instance, keywords are presented in different colours; some news stories are formatted in the form of poetry, some punctuation marks are omitted deliberately and pictures and videos are inserted in the stories. Multimodal practice contributes to attracting audiences, and makes browsing and locating key information within a limited time easy for audiences. These are interesting topics for further studies on news engagement in the digital context.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Notes

1. The statistics are collected from a report 'Statistics of WeChat users, official accounts and mini programmes in China in 2018' published on www.chayxx.com, one of the largest and most authoritative providers of industry information in China.
2. The statistics are obtained from https://www.businessofapps.com/data/wechat-statistics/#1.
3. The statistics are obtained from https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/2187537.
4. The statistics are obtained from http://www.mediacircle.cn/?p=22438
5. The data are collected from www.askci.com.

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