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Left behind and excluded?

Elderly people and the political economy of social media in China and Germany



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Point of departure

How do elderly adults relate to new media (internet and social media) in increasingly digitized societies and in times of health crisis? Do the mobility and contact restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic prompt them to seek alternative means to access (health care) services and to overcome social isolation, or do they rather withdraw from public life altogether? What kind of technical barriers did the public identify since the outbreak and what kind of solutions have different actors proposed to help the elderly navigate these restrictions? And if we look beyond our own backyard, how have the elderly in different societies coped with these challenges? Have aging societies in different political systems and from different cultural backgrounds dealt with these challenges in a different way? In particular, has the public in autocratic, Confucian-based China identified different problems and come up with different solutions when compared to Western democracies like Germany?

Reconstructing elderly people's situation through the lens of the public, my project aims at providing first answers to these questions by conducting a critical discourse analysis of Chinese and German online content published since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Inspired by Fuchs' (2020) critical theory of communication and his observation that digital capitalism characterizes internet economy in both liberal countries like Germany and authoritarian countries like China, the project sheds light on the question whether the elderly in the two countries have been impacted by different degrees of economic and political power constellations. Furthermore, against the backdrop of sociologist Eisenstadt's (2011) theory of multiple modernities, the project gives an insight into the kind of answers aging societies in different cultural settings provide to address some of the major challenges brought about by modernity – here: pandemics, population aging, and digitization. For an in-depth discussion of these issues with references to the original Chinese sources please refer to my publications listed at the end of this report.

Elderly people's internet use and living situation

Since China has become an aging society in year 2000 (Wang, 2020, p. 99), it shares with European countries not only the challenge to navigate digitization, but demographic change as

well. Although China has become the country with the largest number of internet users worldwide, elderly people's active use of digital technology and social media lags behind their growth as a demographic group of up to 249 million people (Zhang, 2020, p. 241). In 2018, 200 million Chinese people aged above 60 years have never used the internet (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019), with only 6.9% of the total amount of internet users being over 60 years old, as the following bar diagram illustrates (Fig. 1).

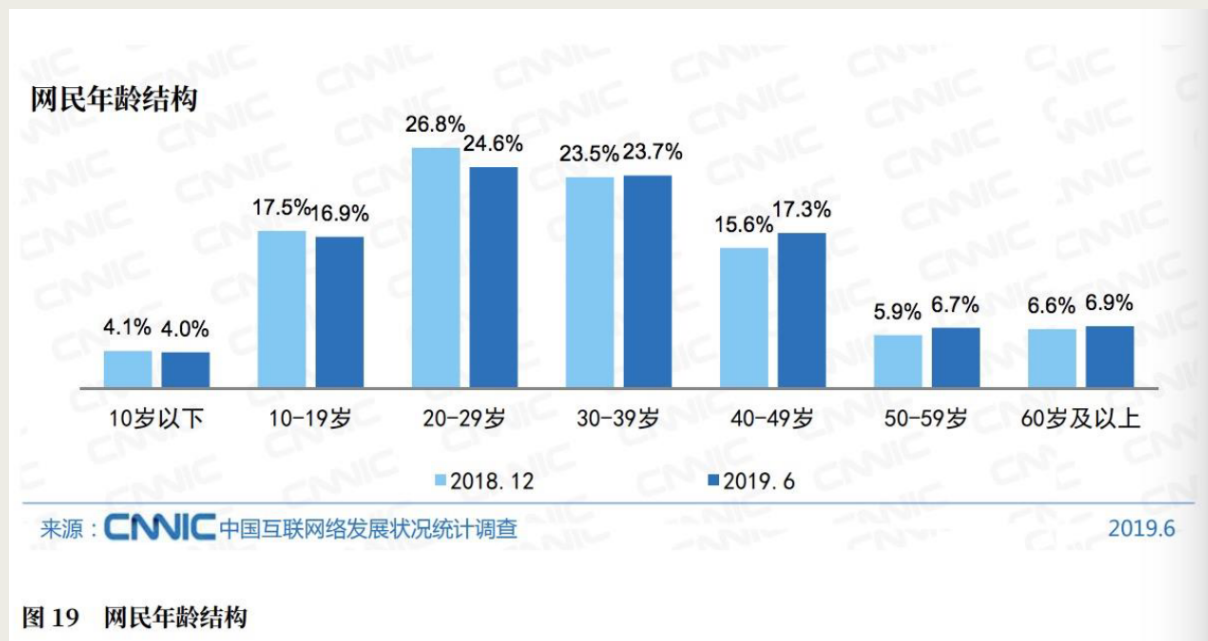


图 19 网民年龄结构

Fig. 1: 6.9% of Chinese internet users are over 60 years old (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019, p. 26)

Besides, more than half of Chinese people aged above 50 years have never used the internet for interaction with their doctor (Jiang, 2020, p. 347). This is due to the low quality of online health information and to elderly people's lack of trust – they are the major victim of online fraud, especially in the area of health (GroupM Think Tank, 2018). Hence, younger family relatives support their parents or grandparents when searching for online health information.

Another trend China is sharing with Germany is that the older generation increasingly lives in single-person households. In 2020, only 26% of the 254 million elderly people live together with their children or grandchildren (Phoenix.com Real Estate, 2021). This development poses a threat to Confucian East Asian societies where the family serves as the basic unit of society.

While modernization theories of the first half of the 20th century suggested that the Western model would prevail around the globe, the sociologist Eisenstadt (2011) observed that different societies would provide different answers to modern challenges, due to different institutions and cultural values. Similarly, this research project assumes that China and Germany will provide different solutions when it comes to the inclusion of elderly people in digitized societies. Furthermore, due to the accelerated pace of platformization of Chinese society (deKloet et al., 2019, p. 254) and the widespread use of social tagging techniques in China for the sake of epidemic prevention and control (Cha, 2020), it is assumed that Chinese elderly people have faced different technical barriers during the pandemic than those in Germany.

Reconstructing public perceptions of elderly people's media use during pandemic

In order to find out which role digital technologies played in elderly people's attempts to deal with a restricted access to health care services, to public places, and to social gatherings, I have conducted an explorative discourse analysis of Chinese public online communication. Using the Chinese search engine Baidu and searching in the popular micro-blogging service Sina Weibo, I have collected around 250 publications, including policy papers from government agencies, media articles by journalists, and user generated content in discussion forums and social media networks published since the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic in December 2019 until the end of 2021. I used different search words such as "elderly adults", "grandparents" or "loneliness" in combination with words like "technology", "Internet" or "artificial intelligence" and selected those texts that address (technical and social) barriers and solutions. By these means, I reconstructed the perception of elderly people's situation through the eyes of different discussants, ranging from government officials, journalists and IT-firms to internet users.

Mutual transformation of media users and media environments

During local lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, Chinese state media and internet users raised public attention to the fact that elderly people lacked access to food supply and medicine because they did not know how to use smartphones for online shopping, as the case of Tonghua city in Jilin province in January 2021 illustrates. Younger internet users (here: Chaohua Weibo community) expressed their concern for elderly people's hardship and created hot topic tags to make the topic rank prominently in Weibo's list of trending topics. Elderly people were less present in public discourse. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the few young elderly who utilized social media to organize neighborly help for the older elderly and who informed the general public about their situation were staged as role models by state media (Wan, 2021).

After lockdown, in their attempt to re-integrate into public life, elderly people continued to face technical barriers, as they could not generate QR-health codes with their smartphones necessary for entering and leaving residential areas, for accessing public places and for using public transport. Reports and videos on social media went viral that showed elderly people being refused to use the bus (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Denied travel

Source: Owl video. (2021, May 24). *#The Internet exposes an elderly women kneeling down in front of the bus driver# Elderly people can't ride the bus because of missing ID card* [Video]. Weibo. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from <https://m.weibo.cn/5444894547/4640458644391265>.

As a result, journalists observed how elderly people withdrew from public life (Zhang, 2021). However, it is not only the elderly who – due to technical barriers imposed by epidemic policies (e.g. QR health codes) – change their behavior (e.g. retreat from public life). Technology is also getting adapted to the behavior of the elderly. For instance, national tech-giants like Alibaba have developed the so called “elderly mode” to offer platforms that are easier to navigate for the elderly (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: The interface of Alipay's pay app, original version (left) and elderly mode (right)

Source: US Stock Research Institute (2021, June 10). *The Alipay app under Ali has launched the elderly mode, and the icon is larger than the normal version.* Baidu. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1702148167605374070&wfr=spider&for=pc>

In addition, QR codes have been integrated into physical social security cards so that elderly people do not have to rely on smartphones to use public transport (Fig. 4).

Apart from such technical solutions (improving smartphone interfaces or using offline alternatives for epidemic control), the state instructs medical staff and social workers at nursing



Fig. 4: Staff helps elderly residents to integrate their QR-health code into their physical social security cards at an IT-terminal in a residential community in Jiading district, Shanghai

Source: Shanghai Jiading. (2021, March 23). *#Technological development should not forget about the elderly#*. Official Weibo account of Shanghai Jiading district. Retrieved October 14, 2021, from https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/235277647.html?weibo_id=4617933487868046.

homes and medical care centers to assist the elderly in using smartphones to keep contact with relatives (General Office of the State Council, 2020). In response, state and commercial media document nursing staff's efforts to realize such government policies (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Stay in contact with relatives

Source: This matters in Huzhou. (2021, February 1). #huzhou[chaohua]# [#huzhou# Visiting through the glass. New measures for nursing homes under the epidemic]. Weibo. Retrieved October 21, 2021, from https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/253745475.html?weibo_id=4599835679005491.

Hence, we witness a mutual transformation of media users and media environments. Furthermore, during the epidemic's first wave, we observe that the participants of public discourse diagnose among the Chinese elderly an increased level of loneliness that is regarded as a threat to social cohesion. The findings from my analysis of Chinese discourse are elaborated further in my paper published in the German journal *Berliner Debatte Initial*, 33(1) (reference below).

The analysis of the German public discourse is still in progress. Next, a cross-cultural comparison is conducted whose findings will be published in an international journal.

Publications

Bogen, C. (2022). Einsam in China: Digitale Mediennutzung älterer Menschen in der Corona-Pandemie [Lonely in China: Elderly people's use of digital media in times of the Covid-19 pandemic]. *Berliner Debatte Initial*, 33(1), 110–122.

Bogen, C. (2022). Wenn Ältere an digitalen Technologien scheitern – Projektergebnisse aus China und ihre Relevanz für Medienvertrauen und Medienpädagogik in Deutschland [When elderly people fail at digital technology: Project results from China and their relevance for trust in media and media pedagogy in Germany]. *Medien & Altern. Zeitschrift für Forschung und Praxis*, 20, München: kopaed, S. 35-59.

In preparation

- Publication on cross-cultural comparison of German and Chinese public discourse on elderly people's digital media in times of the Covid-19 pandemic (peer-reviewed journal paper)
- Several publication projects about media education and media-pedagogical work with elderly people in Germany within the joint research project "Digital Germany" ("Digitales Deutschland", <https://digid.jff.de/>). As a research associate for culture and media studies at PH Ludwigsburg University of Education, Cornelia Bogen is part of the academic staff that works on this project, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ).

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