

# Transnational Citizen Journalism for Resistance and Solidarity: The Case of a Sinophone Community on Instagram

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/hij](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/hij)**Yin Luo<sup>1</sup> and Kecheng Fang<sup>1</sup>** 

## Abstract

This study focuses on a new trend in journalism, which we conceptualize as transnational citizen journalism. We argue that the diasporic and transnational production and consumption of alternative and counter-hegemonic information by nonprofessional individuals have sparked fresh imaginations and opened up new spaces for journalism, particularly in authoritarian contexts. We specifically examine several prominent transnational citizen journalism projects that played a significant role in the large-scale protests against China's stringent Covid-zero policy in late 2022. Through a content analysis of the multimodal content posted on these projects' Instagram accounts, and semistructured interviews with account creators, we argue that these transnational citizen journalism projects have built a solidarity infrastructure, connecting individuals and communities who share the value of challenging authoritarianism but come from different localities and backgrounds. Its foundation rests on the passion of diasporic creators for their native country, the engagement of a largely youthful audience with public affairs, and a global platform enabling transnational information flow. This network also extends to international communities opposing oppression in nations such as Iran and Russia.

## Keywords

citizen journalism, transnational journalism, Instagram, authoritarianism, Sinophone

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## Introduction

An extraordinary wave of protests against China's strict Covid-zero policy broke out across Chinese cities in late November 2022. These protests, known as the "A4 Revolution" or "White Paper Revolution" because participants held blank A4 paper sheets symbolizing their unspoken voices under prevalent censorship,<sup>1</sup> quickly spread to cities all over the world, where members of the Chinese diaspora gathered to condemn the authoritarian regime and show solidarity with protesters inside China. In this large global social movement, a handful of Instagram and Twitter accounts emerged as hubs for information dissemination and mobilization. In fact, the term "A4 Revolution" was coined by one of the Instagram accounts, "Citizen Daily" (@citizendailycn).<sup>2</sup>

This study conceptualizes these social media accounts as "transnational citizen journalism," which refers to diasporic and transnational production and consumption of alternative and counter-hegemonic information by nonprofessional individuals driven by a desire for social change, usually on global social media platforms. The significance of this form of journalism extends beyond activism and beyond China. All the accounts that played a vital role during the A4 Revolution were created months or even years prior to the protests and had already evolved into spaces for disseminating and discussing pro-democracy information, connecting the Chinese-speaking community in different parts of the world. They continued to serve and shape democratic discourse after the movement. Similar endeavors are also seen in communities that are actively challenging the oppressive regimes of Iran, Russia, and others.

The power of transnational citizen journalism lies in the two key elements embedded in its name. First, it provides alternative viewpoints that often contest dominant narratives in society, an especially critical function in authoritarian contexts where media operate under tight controls (Thorsen 2020; Zeng et al. 2019). Second, its transnational scope enhances the impact and sustainability of these journalistic endeavors (Arafat 2021). In China, the domestic landscape for citizen journalism has worsened during Xi Jinping's tenure due to increased political and ideological restrictions. However, the shift from censored domestic platforms to international ones has carved out fresh avenues for both citizen journalists and their audiences. Despite the internet blocking system, a significant number of people in China circumvent these barriers using VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) (Zhang 2020), ensuring the continued reach of transnational citizen journalism. These platforms also garner substantial engagement from the Chinese diaspora, particularly among the young generation.

In this article, we seek to develop a deep understanding of transnational citizen journalism through the analysis of the Instagram accounts that made pivotal contributions to the A4 Revolution. We analyzed their multimodal content and conducted in-depth interviews with creators behind these accounts. Our findings highlight the spirit of citizen journalism embodied in these accounts and explicate the transnational dynamics that uniquely position them in the current information ecosystem. We argue that these transnational citizen journalism projects have built a solidarity infrastructure, connecting creators, followers, as well as fellow projects that cover other authoritarian regimes such as Iran and Russia, thereby contributing to international solidarity against authoritarianism.

## Literature Review

### *Citizen Journalism and Social Media*

Citizen journalism, despite being widely researched, still lacks a clear theoretical boundary (Miller 2019). Thorsen (2020) identifies two forms of citizen journalism. The first encompasses impromptu witnessing, documentation, and sharing of information during crises by individuals who find themselves in the role of reporters by chance. The second involves sustained efforts to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals and communities, thereby fostering empowerment. Both are characterized by the active participation of nonprofessionals in creating and distributing news. The second type can blur the boundaries between journalism and activism as these citizen journalists often challenge professional norms such as objectivity espoused by mainstream media. They are also referred to as “interlopers” (Eldridge 2018) or “peripheral actors” (Schapals et al. 2019) who conduct journalism with alternative perspectives and approaches.

Various factors have contributed to the rise of citizen journalism. External factors include the limitations of mainstream media in addressing the full spectrum of public interests and covering real-time events, especially in remote or less accessible areas (Wenzel 2019). Digital technologies have significantly lowered barriers to entry for reporting and distributing news, allowing citizen journalists to fill these gaps (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2022). Increased citizen participation and activism also lead to the prominence of citizen journalism (Banda 2010; Khamis and Vaughn 2011). Furthermore, studies emphasize that citizen journalism tends to be more prevalent during times of crisis, with coverage often focusing on topics such as vote-rigging, human rights, and political scandals (Allan 2013; Murthy 2013).

Regarding internal motivators, scholars categorize citizen journalists into experts sharing specialized knowledge, activists advocating for causes, and community builders enhancing local connectivity (Kus et al. 2017). Their role perceptions vary, including populist mobilizers, adversaries, disseminators, interpreters, and civic contributors (Chung and Nah 2013). Despite their amateur status, citizen journalists often uphold professional ethical standards, driven by a public-service ethos to engage and inform on relevant issues (Mutsvairo et al. 2014). The pursuit of social change and impact is especially a strong motivator—citizen journalists are often guided by a sense of justice and a desire to highlight social issues overlooked by mainstream media (Pain 2018; Xin 2010), thus enhancing the representation of marginalized stories (Mapudzi and Osunkunle 2017).

Social media has transformed how news is shared and discussed, bolstering the practice of citizen journalism. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have become dual-purpose arenas for gathering and disseminating news. Hashtags, in particular, have emerged as potent instruments for curating discussions and knitting together community-driven narratives, enabling the swift spread of information through international networks. Within this digital milieu, citizen journalists have provided first-hand accounts from pivotal movements such as the Arab Spring (Lotan et al. 2011), Occupy Wall Street (Penney and Dadas 2014), and #BlackLivesMatter

(Richardson 2020), among others. These individuals have harnessed social media not only as a reporting tool but also as a means to galvanize and shape collective action.

Moreover, social media has empowered citizen journalists to establish specialized communities and alternative media outlets that address particular interests or perspectives, bridging the voids left by traditional media. This function proves crucial in regimes where press freedoms are curtailed, with citizen journalism on social media serving as a conduit for dissenting voices and a beacon for increased transparency (Khamis and Vaughn 2014; Wall and el Zahed 2015). As social media platforms evolve, the landscape of citizen journalism is constantly reshaping. In the context of our research, Instagram has surged as a leading platform for social activism and citizen journalism among the youth globally (Maheshwari and Issac 2024), signaling a shift toward more visually oriented forms of communication.

### *Global and Transnational Aspects of Citizen Journalism*

Citizen journalism has typically been examined within the nation-state container, in large part due to its focus on hyperlocal issues (Metzgar et al. 2011) and language barriers (Pain 2018). Examples include Ohmynews in South Korea (Kang 2016), The Forum in New Hampshire (Metzgar et al. 2011), and Malaysiakini in Malaysia (Chin 2003). However, citizen journalism has always had global and transnational aspects. Platforms like Indymedia connect independent media organizations worldwide, providing grassroots coverage of social and political issues (Milan 2013; Sullivan et al. 2011). Similarly, Global Voices is a volunteer-run blog site where contributors from various regions upload blogs and videos to amplify marginalized voices and foster cross-border understanding (Blaagaard 2013).

Globalization and digitization have given rise to a new scale of citizen journalism: the transnational scale. It goes beyond spatial extension and emphasizes activities that cross physical, cultural, and social boundaries. When citizen journalism projects propelled by a mission of social change cross borders, their role often intersects with transnational advocacy efforts, as exemplified in Arafat's (2021) study on Syrian diaspora journalists. In addition, citizen journalism has established a particularly important relationship with diaspora communities—those who reside outside their native countries while maintaining connections with their cultural roots. For individuals within the diaspora, citizen journalism serves as a vital channel for conveying news and narratives often absent from mainstream media coverage in their host nations or countries of origin. Through citizen journalism, diaspora communities can create a transnational space for dialogue, nurturing a shared identity that bridges their current and ancestral homelands, as well as contributing local insights to the global discourse (Ogunyemi 2015). The diaspora can also use citizen journalism as a tool for advocacy and policy influence. By sharing their stories and perspectives, they have the potential to shape international awareness and encourage action, as seen during the Arab Spring, when diaspora citizen journalists draw global support for democratic movements within their countries of origin (Howard and Hussain 2013).

Adopting critical perspectives is crucial for a nuanced comprehension of citizen journalism, especially in the transnational context. First, its impact may be limited by structural inequalities in global media communication systems (Couldry 2010). Citizen journalism faces the danger of being appropriated by Western mainstream media (Wall and el Zahed 2015) or strategically labeled as “subjective” and less credible (Wahl-Jorgensen 2015). Second, governments and corporations may tame and even exploit citizen journalism to further their own agendas, including surveillance (Treré 2015) and promoting commercial interests (Rone 2016). Third, biases embedded in the underlying technological infrastructure can exert a negative influence on citizen journalism (Milan 2015). The content produced by citizen journalists and how it is presented can be significantly shaped by technological mechanisms and algorithmic selections controlled by large social media corporations in Silicon Valley (Poell and van Dijck 2016). Moreover, lacking the support of well-established media institutions, citizen journalists may encounter heightened risks of legal consequences, political persecution, or physical danger in the transnational setting.

### *Citizen Journalism in China*

Mainstream media in China, overwhelmingly state-owned or state-affiliated, aligns its editorial lines with government policies and narratives. It acts as a mouthpiece for the party-state and guides public opinion, subject to direct censorship and complex red lines set by the government (Repnikova 2017). Citizen journalism emerges as a grass-roots response, operating independently through online platforms and social media to bypass state control, cover underreported stories, provide alternative narratives, and expose societal issues. However, this independence comes with risks, including legal repercussions and censorship (King et al. 2013).

Despite obstacles, citizen journalism has thrived in China, thanks to the growth of social media. Platforms like Weibo and WeChat enable the dissemination of diverse viewpoints and community formation beyond state-controlled media. Weibo has been instrumental in covering various social events, with users acting as citizen journalists, verifying rumors, and coordinating rescue efforts (Zeng et al. 2019). WeChat’s role in citizen journalism is facilitated by features like *Gongzhonghao* and *Pengyouquan*, and the concept of “metavoicing” (Wu and Wall 2019). Despite concerns about reliability and sensationalism, users leverage WeChat to present personal news interpretations. However, there is skepticism about the potential of domestic platforms, which are under state regulation, to advance political democratization (Hung 2013) or foster social progress in China (Xin 2010).

### *The Transnational Trend and the Sinophone Community*

Seeing the limitations of domestic social media platforms, citizen journalists covering China started to seek refuge on overseas social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram. One example is the Twitter account @whyoutouzhele, which gained popularity during the A4 Revolution. Its owner, Mr. Li, switched to

Twitter in 2022 after all 49 of his Weibo accounts were banned due to speech restrictions (Li 2022). Li used Twitter to shed light on protests against the zero-COVID policy by sharing user-submitted footage, amplifying anonymous dissent voices.<sup>3</sup> This transnational trend of citizen journalism in China is not limited to @whyoutouzhel. Instagram, in particular, has emerged as a crucial platform for hosting similar projects that share China-related stories, connecting global communities, particularly the younger Chinese diaspora and domestic users bypassing the Great Firewall. These accounts often post content that cannot be discussed on China's domestic platforms, such as satirical content on Xi Jinping and memories of the 1989 student movement. This aligns with Instagram's growing global influence in news and political discourse among younger demographics, which deserve further scholarly attention (Maheshwari and Issac 2024; Olof Larsson 2023).

We label these initiatives as citizen journalism rather than activism because they primarily focus on content creation and dissemination instead of directly organizing communities or coordinating protests. The emergence of these citizen journalism projects on global platforms covering China issues has become a significant force reshaping the information landscape related to the authoritarian regime. However, there is limited understanding of their emergence, operations, and implications. This study aims to thoroughly examine these projects from the perspectives of citizen journalism and transnational journalism, guided by the following research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** What types of content do these projects publish?

**RQ2:** What are the driving factors behind the emergence of these transnational citizen journalism projects?

**RQ3:** In what ways do these projects engage and interact with their audiences and other creators?

Ultimately, through answering these RQs, we seek to gain insights into how these citizen journalism initiatives provide implications for journalism and transnational activism.

To contextualize these projects, we utilize the Sinophone framework (Shih 2010), which was initially developed in literature and film studies. Sinophone studies examine Sinitic-language cultures beyond the geopolitical and ethnic confines of the People's Republic of China (PRC), emphasizing a diverse and heterogeneous understanding of "Chinese" identities. This approach aligns with the transnational perspective that recognizes the fluidity of identities across borders (Zhao and Fang 2023), and challenges the hegemony of a singular "Chineseness." The Sinophone lens reveals that the subjects of these citizen journalism accounts often transcend mainland China's official narratives and reflect a broader, more complex spectrum of experiences, such as highlighting the Uyghur situation in Xinjiang. Thus, we define these platforms as Sinitic-language transnational citizen journalism that addresses China-related issues, rather than as Chinese transnational citizen journalism that implies a direct association with PRC or Han-centric views.

**Table 1.** Information of Analyzed Accounts.

Account	@northern_square	@confusingchina	@citizendailycn	@tears_in_rainbow
Followers	87,000	17,000	69,000	15,000
Date Joined	May 2020	July 2022	March 2020	August 2021
Total Posts	627	1,730	1,852	
Total Stories	69	72	154	

*Note.* The data was up to February 27, 2023. Tears in Rainbow was not included in content analysis; thus, its post and story numbers are not shown.

Data and Methods

This study combines content analysis and semistructured interviews. To address RQ1, we employed an inductive content analysis approach to systematically identify topics and patterns in transnational citizen journalism. We adopted the inductive approach due to its appropriateness for examining phenomena that have not been extensively explored in existing literature (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). Recognizing the limitations of content analysis in revealing the driving forces behind content creation (RQ2) and engagement practices (RQ3), we complemented it with semistructured interviews with creators. By integrating the quantitative rigor of content analysis with the qualitative depth provided by interviews, our approach captures both empirical patterns and contextual motivations and processes informing Instagram content creation. This mixed-methods strategy enhances our ability to offer a holistic analysis of political discourse on social media, particularly regarding sensitive or politically charged topics.

As listed in Table 1, we focus on four Instagram accounts: Citizen Daily (@citizens-dailycn), Confusing China (@confusingchina), Northern Square (@northern\_square), and Tears in Rainbow (@tears\_in\_rainbow). These accounts were selected based on their active status, popularity (each having over 10,000 followers), and their mention in international media coverage.<sup>4</sup>

For the content analysis, we sampled from the first three accounts, as the last one (Tears in Rainbow) primarily posted screenshots of liberal and dissenting voices on Weibo, showing a distinct content style from others. Given that Instagram offers a variety of content-posting methods (Kreling et al. 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019) and that our sampled accounts frequently used both regular posts and ephemeral “Stories,” we considered it crucial to analyze both modes of content. For postsampling, we used a systematic sampling approach, starting with the most recent post and selecting every ninth post thereafter. To ensure data consistency, all sampled posts (n=407) were collected on February 27, 2023. For each post, we included the primary media content (photo, video, or GIF) without additional ones from “carousel” posts. In other words, we only collected the first visual content shown in the posts. We also documented post details such as text, date, and location (if available), which provided contextual information for the analysis.



Regarding Stories, which are only available for twenty-four hours, we sampled the visible ones from the three accounts at 11 am (UTC+8) every day over two weeks: February 21–27 ( $n=192$ ) and March 7–13, 2023 ( $n=103$ ). The Chrome extension StorySaver was used to download the Stories in .jpg or .mp4 formats. Ethical considerations regarding saving ephemeral content were taken into account, including consultation of previous literature (Bainotti et al. 2021). For this project, it was deemed ethically acceptable to save and analyze the stories since they provided publicly oriented content without personal information, and consent from the account owners had been obtained.

A codebook was developed based on previous scholarship (Rodriguez and Dimitrova 2011; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019). The variables included formats, genres, sources, topic scopes, topic themes, and the purposes of the contents, with slight variations for posts and stories (see Supplementary Appendices A and B for details). To ensure intercoder reliability, a random sample of 20 percent of the data was independently examined by two coders. Following four rounds of coder training, decision-making, and revisions, the coders achieved a high level of agreement for both posts ( $\alpha \geq 0.86$ ) and stories ( $\alpha \geq 0.93$ ) (Krippendorff 2004). Each of the two coders then coded half of the remaining sample.

To gain deeper insights into these accounts, we conducted semistructured interviews with the creators of the four accounts, involving one or two interviewees for each account. All interviewees reported that the accounts were voluntarily operated without any funding. The interviews took place online via voice communications between March 24 and April 3, 2023, with an average duration of approximately ninety minutes. Supplementary Appendix C provides detailed information about the procedures and questions. We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to examine the transcriptions of the interview recordings. To protect the interviewees from political risks, we did not collect any personal information from them.

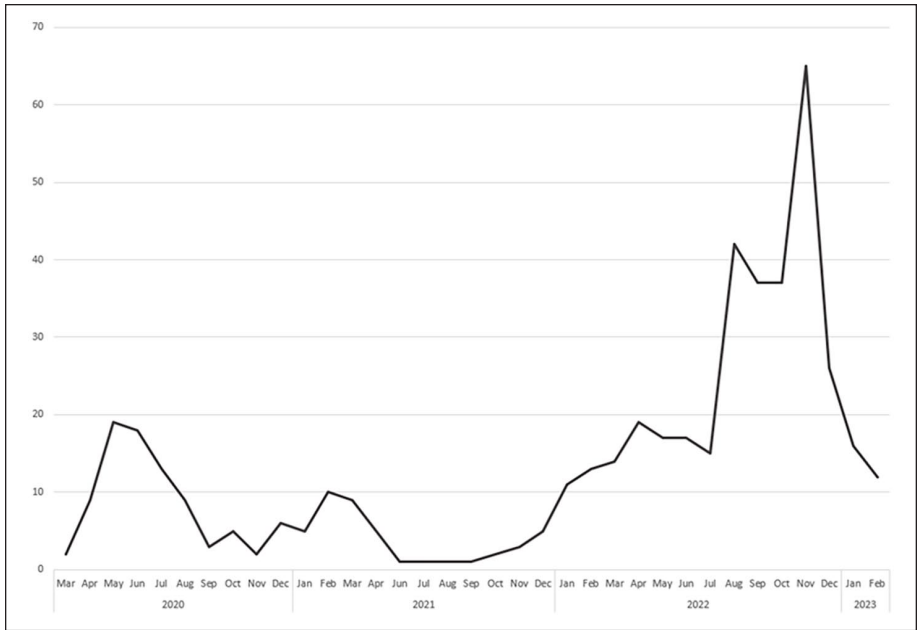
## Findings

Our RQs are designed to investigate three key aspects of these transnational citizen journalism projects: content, creators' motivations, and engagement strategies. While it is possible to present the findings for each RQ sequentially, we synthesize and integrate the responses within the frameworks of citizen journalism and transnational journalism. This approach not only enhances the richness and nuance of our findings but also contributes to the advancement of theoretical knowledge in the field. We also explain how these projects have built a solidarity infrastructure connecting creators, followers, and fellow accounts covering other authoritarian regimes.

### *The Spirit of Citizen Journalism*

Although these accounts do not explicitly label themselves as citizen journalism, the essence of citizen journalism can be implicitly inferred and observed in the following aspects: the contexts in which they emerged, the journalistic values reflected in their content, and most importantly, the spirit of citizen journalism they embody.





**Figure 1.** Monthly posting frequency of the three accounts.

As mentioned earlier, citizen journalism often emerges during emergencies or political crises due to limited or biased traditional sources of information. This held true for the COVID-19 outbreak in China, which was both a health and social-political crisis. The pandemic served as the trigger for the creation of these accounts: Citizen Daily was launched in March 2020 following the death of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, Northern Square joined in May 2020 during the U.S. lockdown (where the creators were based), and Confusing China was launched in July 2022 when China implemented stringent pandemic prevention policies. In addition, many key moments during the pandemic became pivotal for their interactions with followers. As recollected by the creators of these accounts, they received a large volume of user-submitted posts during the A4 Revolution period. As shown in Figure 1, November and December 2022 saw a surge in posts, most of which were submitted by followers. Moreover, as mentioned during interviews, these accounts experienced rapid follower growth during key events such as the Sitong Bridge incident, the lockdown of Shanghai, and the A4 Revolution. Therefore, it is evident that these accounts followed news cycles in response to social events. Such cycles often witness a surge of interest followed by a gradual decline until another significant event captures people’s attention once more.

The posts of these accounts demonstrated a profound commitment to journalistic values and ethics. According to the interviews, the creators of these accounts used various methods to ensure accuracy, including conducting background research, cross-checking information, and delaying the release of posts. They assessed the credibility

of submitters by examining their Instagram profiles, reviewing previous submissions and interactions with the accounts, and posing follow-up questions to identify any logical fallacies. They cross-verified posts by comparing information from different followers and sometimes withheld posts until the news had been confirmed, prioritizing accuracy over timeliness. However, to maintain balance, these accounts avoided excessive screening based on ideological orientation. As stated by Northern Square, "All user-submitted posts that we do not agree with but are worthy of discussion will be published." Similarly, Confusing China refrained from using excessive captions to maintain a reasonably neutral portrayal of events. As compared with news values of mainstream journalism (Harcup and O'Neill 2017), these accounts placed a stronger emphasis on the use of audio-visual content for storytelling and encouraging audience participation in discussions. They created topics using hashtags that carried political meanings (e.g., #Myduty and #a4revolution) and established columns (e.g., Xinjiang Story) to foster audience engagement and encourage the sharing of unique stories.

More importantly, these accounts exemplified the spirit of citizen journalism by serving as an alternative to mainstream media and challenging dominant power structures. Mainstream media and domestic social media in China reinforce the narratives and priorities set by the state. In contrast, these accounts on Instagram endeavor to spotlight issues that were neglected by mainstream media in China, such as personal grievances and politically sensitive issues like the A4 Revolution and news related to Xi Jinping. Although the follower counts of these independent accounts may seem modest when contrasted with the billions of users on China's domestic social media platforms, the very existence and persistence of such citizen-led initiatives represent a significant phenomenon facing an authoritarian regime. It is important to note that they served as a critical counterbalance not only to state power in China but also to mainstream media in the West. In our interview, the creators of Citizen Daily shared their original intention behind creating the account:

Being mostly connected with overseas friends, we are exposed to Western media's portrayal of China's political environment. Dissatisfaction arises as we feel objectified and in need of rescue in the Western gaze, and we are also unhappy with the official narratives of the Chinese government. Our aim is to express our opinion without adopting either extreme perspective.

These accounts actively participated in collective actions and cyber-activism. We found that 9.15 percent of the posts and 9.83 percent of the stories aimed to mobilize individuals, with a significant number providing information on protests, sharing talks, and calling for participation. Citizen Daily's online "Teahouse" events provided a platform for sharing diverse voices, such as human rights activist Hao Jian's talk on the 1989 protests. They also shared events organized by other organizations, such as online commemorations of the June Fourth Incident.

In addition, we contend that these accounts not only represent citizen journalism within an authoritarian context but also reflect the perspectives of the younger generation. They intentionally chose Instagram as their primary platform for its popularity

among younger audiences. Their content sources and presentation styles embodied youth culture on social media, including user-generated content and various visual forms such as throwbacks, screenshots, memes, and graffiti. Moreover, the name “Confusing China” is a manifestation of youth slang, as “confusing” (*mihuo*) is a popular internet slang term among young people in China, referring to things that are perplexing, puzzling, or bizarre. Therefore, these accounts can be seen as a type of youth citizen journalism as they embraced and embodied youth culture through their use of technological tools and the symbolic and cultural resources embedded in their practices and expressions.

### *The Transnational Dynamics*

We now unpack the transnational aspect of these projects by examining the flow of information across borders, the characteristics of their content, and the participants involved.

For the transnational flow of information, an intriguing finding was that approximately 19.6 percent of the posts were screenshots, predominantly sourced from Chinese social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo, with a few originating from Twitter. Notably, Tears in Rainbow predominantly featured screenshots from Weibo, featuring personal stories and narratives that countered the official narratives, such as their frustration at the political system, and their hope for a free society. Consequently, it was not uncommon for the original posts on Weibo to end up being deleted. The presence of Tears in Rainbow on Instagram allowed these voices to be preserved outside of the Great Firewall. Similarly, Citizen Daily aimed to give more attention to voices that were difficult to hear and quick to disappear within China’s censorship regime. Therefore, we argue that the most important flow of information enabled by these accounts occurred across the Great Firewall of China. These accounts “smuggled” information by consciously bringing voices within the Firewall from domestic social platforms to the outside world via Instagram. Furthermore, the reversed direction of cross-platform flows was also possible. Northern Square discovered that some of its Instagram stories were reposted on Weibo by its followers (though they would eventually be censored), which allowed them to reach more Weibo users, some of whom would subsequently follow Northern Square on Instagram using VPN.

The transnational nature of information was also evident in the content they produced. Results of the content analysis revealed that about 16.2 percent of posts and 26.5 percent of stories directly referenced countries and regions outside of China. Additionally, 3.2 percent of posts and 4.41 percent of stories discussed Hong Kong and Taiwan-related issues. The countries and regions could be divided into three categories. The first category consisted of authoritarian or oppressed countries and regions, including Iran, Ukraine, Thailand, and Hong Kong. These locations were mentioned because they shared similarities with domestic issues in China and could provide insights for addressing them. Some frequently referenced events included the Russia-Ukraine war, the Iran feminist movement, and the 2020–2021 Thai protests. For example, the Iran feminist movement and the Xuzhou chained woman incident in

China echoed each other, highlighting the joint oppression of women by the state and society. Similarly, according to Confusing China, the Hong Kong 2019 protests and the A4 Revolution had commonalities “as they both involve the process of people organizing and expressing their demands under political pressure.” In addition to highlighting commonalities, these accounts also aimed to offer a more diverse perspective. Citizen Daily, for instance, published content related to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine to demonstrate that the Chinese people did not hold a singular, pro-Russian stance as portrayed by domestic media narratives.

The second group of countries that appeared in their content was liberal democracies, such as the United States, the U.K., and Canada. These countries were referenced as a relative contrast to China’s authoritarian system. In addition, they were the countries where protests by overseas Chinese took place, such as the protest in the United States opposing Apple’s AirDrop wireless file-sharing restrictions between iPhones in China, which was implemented to prevent protesters from spreading messages.

The third category involved countries related to international humanitarian issues. For example, some posts called for donations to aid the victims of earthquakes in Turkey.

Given the choice of a global platform and the presence of international content, it is not difficult to predict the transnational characteristics of the creators and the followers. In general, the creators and operators of these accounts were individuals born and raised in China but resided abroad at the time of the interviews. This diasporic nature is evident in these projects, as the creators are simultaneously insiders with a deep understanding of Chinese society and culture and outsiders who can critique and analyze their homeland from a distance. This dual perspective allows them to bridge communities and facilitate cross-border dialogue. The geographical separation from China provides these creators with the freedom to express viewpoints that might be censored or discouraged within the country, while their cultural ties ensure their content remains relevant and resonant with Sinophone communities.

As for the followers, although demographic data were not directly available, the creators shared with us user summary data as shown in Instagram’s dashboard. Around 20 percent to 30 percent of users were from mainland China, 10 percent to 20 percent were from Hong Kong, and the rest were scattered worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Based on the available data and assumptions about these accounts, it can be argued that they attracted individuals who shared the common characteristic of belonging to the global Sinophone community with overseas backgrounds. In addition to liberal-minded individuals in China who used VPNs to access Instagram, followers outside China were likely current or former overseas students or members of the Chinese diaspora.

As reminded by the creators during the interviews, it is crucial to recognize the power dynamics within the Sinophone community, which may influence the content and reach of these accounts. For example, a significant proportion of Chinese international students come from affluent families, which may shape their interest in and understanding of social issues. Having grown up in relatively privileged environments, they may have limited exposure to or personal experience with the challenges faced by certain less-advantaged populations in China, potentially limiting the depth and nuance of their engagement with certain topics. Moreover, the social networks of

**Table 2.** Typology of Target Audiences.

Engagement/ Understanding Levels	High Engagement	Low Engagement
Deep understanding	Precious dissidents	Cautious disengagers
Limited understanding	Uninitiated watchers	Contented mainstream

these followers may be largely composed of individuals from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, which could restrict the diversity of perspectives they encounter and the connections they can make.

In sum, by examining the information flow across borders, the international feature of their content, and individuals involved, we could see how these citizen journalism projects transcended the boundaries of the nation-state. The transnational expansion of citizen journalism led to the creation of a new virtual space for Sinitic-language-speaking communities worldwide, especially among the younger generation. It facilitated the sharing of information, viewpoints, and personal experiences, which were predominantly liberal and critical toward the authoritarian rule of China.

*Transnational Citizen Journalism as a Solidarity Infrastructure*

After explicating the citizen and transnational characteristics of these accounts, we now turn to a deeper discussion on how these transnational citizen journalism initiatives serve as a solidarity infrastructure, fostering connections among creators and followers, in both the virtual and physical realms, within and beyond the country borders, as well as between the Sinophone communities and other suppressed communities.

*Connections between Followers and Account Creators.* We learned from the interviews that these accounts shared a common intention of influencing and connecting with people, particularly young individuals. They developed a perception and imagination of their target readers through interactions with them. Based on their insights, we developed a typology to categorize the target audiences of these accounts into four groups along two dimensions: their levels of understanding of and engagement with China-related public issues (Table 2). Note that this typology represents the intended audience they wanted to reach, not necessarily those they had already reached.

The first category, “precious dissidents,” constituted the core followers of these accounts. These individuals possessed a keen interest in and a deep understanding of political and social issues in China. They willingly expressed their opinions on social events, even though their voices were often censored on domestic platforms. We use the word “precious” because the account creators considered this type of followers relatively rare and highly valuable in the face of an oppressive regime. These accounts hoped to connect with them to prevent isolation by the Great Firewall, often using hashtags like “free souls behind the high walls.” The creator of Tears in Rainbow shared that, “connecting people is meaningful, so we need to find a place and a way to connect everyone in a manner that they won’t be easily deleted.”

In contrast, the “contented mainstream” had neither a high level of interest nor a deep understanding of Chinese social issues. Referred to as “people living a contented and peaceful life” (*suiyue jinghao*) by Confusing China, they might belong to the middle class, have successful businesses, or be overseas students with affluent family backgrounds. Prior to following these accounts, their opinions were largely shaped by the portrayal of the country in mainstream Chinese media. Moreover, they might have benefited from the current system and thus held a more positive perception of the state. Nonetheless, these accounts aimed to capture their attention with visually appealing content on Instagram and gradually introduce them to the comprehensive history and diversity of Chinese society.

These accounts also sought to connect with broader Sinophone communities, including the “uninitiated watchers” who had an interest in Chinese society but limited opportunities to deepen their understanding. Many belonged to Sinophone communities outside mainland China. This was why both Tears in Rainbow and Confusing China used traditional Chinese characters in their captions, as they believed it would be easier for people from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and other places to understand. These accounts provided diverse personal perspectives and presented a multidimensional view of China for the Sinophone communities. For example, Confusing China often used survey-style stories to ask questions like “As a Taiwanese, what would you like to say to friends in the mainland?” and “As mainland Chinese, what would you like to say to friends from Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan?” The answers were featured in their story highlights, allowing for long-term exposure and promoting mutual understanding.

The final group is the “cautious disengagers” who possessed a relatively high level of understanding regarding Chinese society but chose to refrain from engaging with it. On China’s domestic platforms like Weibo, the dominant narrative is often progovernment, and the most influential accounts tend to be nationalistic “little pinks” (Fang and Repnikova 2018). This led some liberal-minded individuals to feel upset, angry, frustrated, and disappointed. They uninstalled apps like Weibo to protect their mental health but still maintained curiosity and empathy toward events in China. The creators believed that by presenting high-quality commentary, such as the Weibo screenshots posted by Tears in Rainbow, they could “pull back in” the disengagers. An example was during the A4 when many disengagers started paying attention to what was happening in China.

In the perception of the account creators, they had established mutual trust and connection with a substantial portion of their followers. These accounts became a democratic wall for their followers to regularly share their daily lives through private messages or Q&As. During the A4 Revolution, followers would send photos of posters or gatherings they attended to these accounts, who would then post most, if not all, of this timely content in their stories to reach a wider audience in a timely manner. The daily limit of 100 stories was often reached. Additionally, these accounts even acted as connectors between their followers and the outside world. For example, when journalists sought out the creators of these accounts to find appropriate interviewees, they would ask their followers for recommendations. Thus, interactions and collaborations between followers and these accounts fostered connections and solidarity.

*Connections Among Account Creators.* Among these transnational citizen journalism accounts, connections were formed through collaboration and interaction. Reposting and coediting content were the most common ways of establishing such relationships. What's up Beijing, the English version of Citizen Daily, would translate Tears in Rainbow's Chinese posts into English to increase the content's reach and influence. Additionally, during our interviews, more subtle and hidden connections between these accounts were revealed. They found inspiration in each other's work. For example, Northern Square was inspired by other accounts to use old photographs to express opinions and to use anonymous story surveys to collect personal stories. Similarly, Confusing China found inspiration from others and learned to create posters for events.

Furthermore, these accounts were also linked to similar citizen journalism accounts resisting other oppressive regimes, further demonstrating their transnational nature. For example, Citizen Daily shared that they interacted with accounts on activism in Iran (e.g., @from\_\_\_iran and @doctorminoo) and Hong Kong (e.g., @students4hk). They learned from them about effectively managing online groups, publishing information clearly, and organizing gatherings safely. According to Citizen Daily, they borrowed many practices from their Iranian counterparts throughout the entire process, from ideation to implementation.

These accounts did not perceive each other as competitors. Instead, they developed a cooperative relationship, supporting each other and growing together. Given that new accounts often struggled to attract followers on Instagram, established accounts were willing to repost and share their content to help them reach a wider audience. For example, during its early stages, Tears in Rainbow's content was frequently reposted by Northern Square, which helped it gain more followers. Later, Tears in Rainbow did the same for a Ukraine-related citizen journalism account. This, in the words of Citizen Daily's creators, "built international solidarity" across borders.

*Connections Among Followers.* From the content and comments on these accounts, we could clearly see the connections among followers. Many followers actively responded to the questions posted in Stories, sharing their experiences and providing advice to fellow followers. Topics ranged from the safety of returning to China to the process of applying for U.S. student visas. They also left messages to support and encourage other followers who had become targets of nationalistic trolls, to seek companionship for joining protests, and to share their own experiences and insights on demonstrations. Through this type of content, we could observe that followers used these accounts as a platform and channel to amplify their voices and connect with others. They sought to engage in dialogues with a broader audience, including Chinese citizens at home and abroad, and even the international community. An example of such cross-border ties between followers can be seen in Figure 2. Shared by Citizen Daily through story, it featured a march in Berlin involving overseas Chinese participants, alongside international feminist, LGBTQ+, and other alliances, particularly women's groups from Afghanistan and protestors from Iran. This case once again exemplified the transnational dynamics and integration among these accounts.





**Figure 2.** An instagram story on citizen daily calling for participation in a March in Berlin.

In sum, we argue that these accounts, serving as a solidarity infrastructure, played a crucial role in fostering transnational connections, amplifying marginalized voices, and facilitating dialogue among creators and followers from a variety of backgrounds. This collective effort created a sense of international solidarity, bridging geographical

and cultural boundaries, and empowering oppressed individuals to share their stories and perspectives on China and beyond.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, we focus on a new trend in citizen journalism, specifically examining several prominent projects that cover China-related issues from a diasporic and transnational approach. We develop and employ the conceptual lens of transnational citizen journalism, which emphasizes cross-border social and cultural connections and the shared counter-hegemonic stance. These projects, predominantly active on Instagram, embody the spirit of citizen journalism in terms of challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalized voices. They also showcase various transnational dynamics, especially the flow of information across the Great Firewall and the diasporic status of the creators and many followers. We argue that these transnational citizen journalism projects have established a solidarity infrastructure, connecting individuals and communities who share the value of challenging authoritarianism but come from different localities and backgrounds. This solidarity infrastructure is made possible by a combination of factors, including dedicated creators who reside outside China but care deeply about China issues, a growing number of predominantly young followers who maintain their interest or knowledge in public issues in China, and a global platform that facilitates the transnational information flow. Another important finding of the study is that these projects showcase citizen journalism conducted by young creators targeting young audiences. Their content and style exhibit strong features of youth culture and provide a new imagination of citizen journalism amid global democratic backsliding.

This study advances the theories of citizen journalism and transnational activism and contributes to the broader understanding of global media landscapes and social movements. We uncover the resilience and adaptability of individuals navigating the complexities of authoritarian regimes in a digitally interconnected world. Citizen journalists are increasingly becoming key players in shaping global information flows. They bypass traditional gatekeepers, offering on-the-ground perspectives—often marginalized or silenced within their home countries—and disseminating them on uncensored global platforms. This democratization of news production has the potential to foster a more inclusive media landscape where diverse voices contribute to global dialogues.

The interconnection between citizen journalism and transnational activism extends beyond information sharing; it is deeply interwoven with the cultural and political fabric of societies. The Sinophone citizen journalists we studied, for example, not only highlight local issues but also connect them to broader narratives of human rights, environmentalism, and social justice, thereby forging transnational communities of solidarity. This process of community formation carries significant cultural implications, particularly regarding identity. Citizen journalism becomes a means through which diasporic populations negotiate their place in the world, reflecting and reinforcing a collective identity that transcends national boundaries. The use of humor, for instance, as well

as the adaptation of messages to online contexts, points to the emergence of a shared cultural experience among the communities, even as they are geographically dispersed. Our research also demonstrates that the affordances of visual-focused, youth-populated platforms, which prioritize shareable images, short videos, and emotionally resonant content, are shaping both the message and the mobilization strategies of transnational social movements.

However, it is also important to note that within the Sinophone community, there are varying degrees of political, social, and cultural capital that can shape the narratives and reach of citizen journalism projects. These power dynamics may manifest in terms of whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized, the access to resources and networks, and the ability to navigate and influence transnational spaces and discourses. For instance, age, education level, and cultural capital can shape the opportunities to lead conversations and initiatives, affecting the flow and framing of information. Our study reveals that these projects exhibit a pronounced bias toward participation from the highly educated young demographic. It is also crucial to acknowledge the role of platforms in shaping this emerging media landscape. The algorithms that determine content visibility, as well as the platforms' policies on content moderation, can significantly impact the reach and impact of citizen journalism efforts.

We have also made methodological innovations by systematically analyzing their multimodal content on Instagram, which is an increasingly important but understudied platform for global journalism. We have developed a codebook for Instagram posts and stories, providing analytical dimensions for analyzing both citizen journalism and general content on the Instagram platform.

It is particularly encouraging that the accounts we study have also built international solidarities with their counterparts covering other authoritarian regimes such as Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Afghanistan. It on the one hand points to the potential generalizability of the findings in this study, and on the other hand further underscores the significant implications of this solidarity infrastructure and its transnationality. Future research could investigate transnational citizen journalism projects in diverse political and cultural contexts and examine the interconnections among these projects across different environments. Scholars might also explore how citizen journalists manage the complexities of reporting on sensitive political issues across borders and how they foster networks of collaboration and solidarity with other activists and journalists globally. Additionally, examining the perspectives of followers within the transnational citizen journalism sphere would provide deeper insights into the dynamics and interconnectedness of these communities. Finally, investigating how these accounts sustain themselves, particularly during quieter periods in the news cycle, would be a valuable area of study.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

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