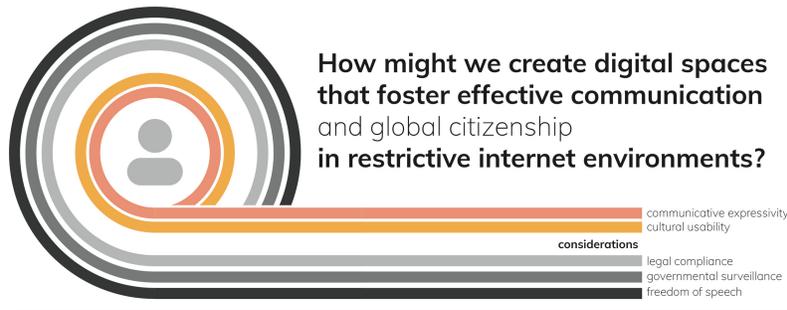


Design

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This piece is drawn in part from a senior thesis entitled, Virtually Chinese: WeChat as a Transnational Digital Space, which explores how the Chinese social media app WeChat fosters intimate forms of communication through expressively saturated mediums including voice, iconography, and financial transactions. Ultimately, the work compares the mobile app to the concepts of the panopticon, total institutions, and heterotopias. The implications of these conclusions are noted here through the lens of global citizenship; that the internet is channel for global citizenship is a misleading assumption, and designers should be prepared to challenge its effects in their work.

Over the past three decades, internet-based communication platforms have grown at unprecedented rates. Designers have played an essential role in the development and spread of these products. As they shape the world through new technologies, designers have a responsibility to understand the effects of their work globally.

As Keith Murphy, a design anthropologist writes, “one of the primary functions of the design world, in addition to generating economic value for designers through the financial valuation of their work, is to oversee the procedures through which certain classes of objects are made culturally meaningful, and to monitor the social terrain within which those meanings are delimited, elaborated, and contained....most designers do not see their work as overtly political, though most do subscribe to a general sort of politics of ‘care’ in their own lives that they would prefer their work to reflect,” suggesting an opportunity for us to reconsider the role designers play in technology development.

The speed at which digital products can scale makes the study of their “social terrain” particularly daunting. Not only are profitability and cultural resonance responsibilities of designers, but designers must be attuned to the global settings for which they are designing.

Perhaps the most notable artifact of globalized technology and its effect on social and communicative practices is the spread of the mobile phone, and with it, social media. While Facebook and WhatsApp have become household names in diverse linguistic and cultural communities, WeChat, the predominant social media platform used in China has

not captured a notable market share outside of China (where Facebook and Google are banned). What makes WeChat notable? The app, which is used by nearly a billion individuals, is subject to the Chinese government's surveillance and censorship practices (often referred to as the Great Firewall), even when users are situated outside of China. Outfitted with cultural iconography, including digitized "red packets", which are traditionally gifted on Chinese New Year, WeChat's design fosters forms of culturally-rooted intimacy within a surveilled virtual space.

From the Occupy movement, to the Egyptian Revolution, Brexit, and the elections of Presidents Obama and Trump, social media has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in politics over the past decade. If we are to imagine internet-based communication and social media as channels for global citizenship, we must recognize the designer's role in mitigating risk for users across political, linguistic, and social settings. In what ways are citizens equipped by digital media to voice dissent, express ourselves, and access information? As it is now, WeChat makes its users vulnerable for partaking in such forms of citizenship by consolidating a wide range of functionality in a censored space. Without the ability to communicate openly and safely, these internet users can never be truly global citizens.

By framing designs as contorted reflections of their surrounding social realities (heterotopias, in Foucauldian terms), designers can aim to reflect imagined realities in which global citizenship is accessible to internet users regardless of their geography. Of course this is easier said than done, but by recognizing that the internet is not the same around the world, and by treating it as such, designers might be able to lead the way to creating a safer, more inclusive internet.

Adam Mansour, *Designing Social Media for Global Citizenship*, 2017.

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