

We Chat, They Watch: How International Users Unwittingly Build up WeChat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus | The Citizen Lab

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A significant body of research over the past decade has shown how online platforms in China are routinely censored to comply with government regulations. As Chinese companies grow into markets beyond China, their activities are also coming under scrutiny. For example, TikTok, a video-based social media company, has been accused of censoring content on its platform that would be sensitive in China.¹ Grindr, a Chinese-owned online dating platform for gay, bi, trans, and queer people, fell under suspicion that it could be used to monitor, track, or otherwise endanger American users.²

WeChat is the most popular social media platform in China and third in the world.³ While the platform dominates the market in China, it also has made efforts to internationalize and attract users globally. Like any other Internet platform operating in China, WeChat is expected to follow rules and regulations from Chinese authorities around prohibited content. Previous Citizen Lab research shows the balancing act WeChat must maintain as it attempts to keep within government red lines in China and attract users internationally. WeChat implements censorship for users with accounts registered to mainland China phone numbers. This censorship is done without notification to users and is dynamically updated, often in response to current events.⁴

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