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(Trans)Locality in Social Media News Engagement: Geographic Effects on the Quality of Online Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Local news on social media usually attracts a translocal audience beyond geographic boundaries, raising questions about its impact on news engagement. Prior studies have examined the structural role of geography in online discussions, but little is known about its influence on the quality of news comments. Drawing on the issue public literature and the framework of locality in digital public spheres, this study examines the impact of translocal audiences on the quality of local news comments (civility, rationality, relevance, justification, constructiveness, and message length). Combining automated and manual content analysis, we analyzed domestic news comments from five major local media outlets on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. In general, our results suggest a “local advantage”: compared to local users, translocal users contribute lower-quality discussions on local news, but it is less pronounced in hard news discussions. Besides, we found little evidence to support the effect of translocal ties. This study highlights how geography shapes the discursive aspect of public communication and the formation of online issue publics at the local level, offering insights for local media and platforms to foster public-friendly discussions.


KEYWORDS

Translocality; local news; public sphere; discussion quality; social media; issue public

Local news, a common news genre targeting geographically limited audiences, once played a crucial role in disseminating local stories, fostering community cohesion, and promoting civic engagement (Hayes and Lawless 2021; Hess and Waller 2017; Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006). Nevertheless, the declining local journalism has recently shifted toward social media (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018; Toff and Mathews 2024) gaining a *translocal* readership that extends beyond geographic boundaries (Wehden and Stoltenberg 2019). Nowadays, local news on social media allows for a communicative space where worldwide opinions gather, resonate, or conflict. The local ties that traditional public spheres adhered to seem to have dissolved in the borderless cyberspace (Castells 2008).

The translocal engagement of local news, in a broader sense, touches on the fundamental debate on the relationship between geography and public communication.

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While extensive research has responded to this ongoing debate, more evidence supports the continued importance of proximity in the formation of online interactions (e.g., Casero-Ripollés, Micó-Sanz, and Díez-Bosch 2020; Lengyel et al. 2015; Samuel-Azran and Hayat 2020; Xu and Luttmann 2021). Yet, the scholarly interest in how geography configures interaction networks overshadows critical variations in content-related dimensions of interactions, such as discussion quality. Previous explanations for news discussion quality mainly focus on the news articles (Ziegele et al. 2020) or media features (Ksiazek 2018). Assessing the impact of translocal audiences, therefore, can supplement an audience perspective that clarifies the emerging geographic dynamics in online discussions.

A translocal public may enrich public discourse on local issues, but it can also present challenges such as inter-regional negative sentiment (Arthur and Williams 2019) and a lack of contextualized knowledge (Cammaerts and Audenhove 2005). These dual outcomes are particularly typical in contemporary China, where local media system operates under the direct control of local authorities (Tong 2010). Driven by the need to safeguard political and economic interests, local protectionism may constrain the constructive potential of local voices, sometimes making non-local attention a critical counterbalance (Hu 2023). Meanwhile, the hierarchically regional identities stemming from economic inequality often fuel social stigmatization (Li and Wei 2010; Peng 2021). Against this backdrop, this study asks how translocal audiences in China contribute to the quality of local news discussions on social media.

We introduce the framework of *locality in digital public spheres*, which assumes that the locality occurs “when actors from specific locations temporarily connect around issues of particular geographic scopes” (Pfetsch et al. 2021, 3647). This framework is particularly suitable for examining how these geographically relevant elements flexibly shape the formation of online issue publics—groups of individuals who selectively engage with issues that resonate with their interests (Converse 2006). In the context of local news, such local issue publics may be defined not only by geographic relevance but also by their personal interests. We assume that geographic relevance may motivate users’ engagement and affect their interpretation of local news, while geographic identity may shape their responses to other comments. These geographic effects characterize how the linkages of different locations impact the extent to which social media users discuss news stories in a polite, rational, and informative manner.

Empirically, we collected 364,567 domestic user comments on news posts published by five major local media on Weibo, one of the most influential social media in China. Similar to X, Weibo allows users to access news either incidentally via algorithmic curation and network sharing, or intentionally by following media accounts. This diverse exposure environment enables both local and translocal users to engage with geographically diverse content. Combining automated and manual content analysis, this study sets out three specific goals: (1) to evaluate the geographic composition of local news discussions from online local media; (2) to examine how translocal users (versus local users) and ties (versus local ties) affect the quality of news discussions, including civility, rationality, relevance, justification, constructiveness, and message length; (3) to explore the contingency of such geographic effects on hard news (versus soft news) discussions, given its unique role in public life and ability to draw translocal attention. Our study adds to the literature on geography and public communication

by incorporating discursive elements, which help evaluate the deliberative potential of translocal voices. Applying the locality framework to the context of local news engagement, we reveal the relevance-driven role of geolocation in the formation of online issue publics. Moreover, we offer evidence to inform reasonable local news-making and distribution strategies, which may guide local media and platforms toward forming an inclusive and public-friendly space.

(Trans)Locality and Issue Publics

Social media users exhibit selective exposure and engagement with different news topics, a phenomenon closely linked to the classic notion of issue publics. It posits that people are specialists in particular issues or domains that align with their interests or identities (Converse 2006). Given their limited motivation and attention, individuals do not necessarily understand all issues, but remain informed about those they personally consider important (Kim 2009) and relevant to their self-interest (Bolsen and Leeper 2013). One convenient approach to identify issue publics is to look at demographically defined groups. For example, American Jews prefer to express supportive opinions about Israel-related events (Page and Shapiro 1992).

This study focuses on another demographic dimension of issue public formation: domestic geographic affiliation. For local issues, residents within the corresponding area should demonstrate higher levels of self-interest and area-specific knowledge, forming what can be termed a “local” issue public. In fact, locality has long been a fundamental principle in organizing an effective public sphere. Traditional public spheres are primarily grounded in local communities, where interconnected citizens exchange ideas for public problem-solving (Friedland et al. 2007). Local news, whether urban or rural, serves as a crucial component of such local public spheres (Aldridge 2007; Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006). Exposure to local news engages physically present citizens in local negotiations, cultivating their sense of community and contributing to informed deliberations. Thus, locality emphasizes the citizens’ lifeworld, anchoring civil society in and structuring it by local places (Friedland, 2016).

An alternative spatial approach to public spheres, known as translocality, has been blurring the geographic boundaries of local issue publics (Figure 1). Translocality refers to the pattern of linkages between specific locations and the resulting sense of connectedness (Wehden and Stoltenberg 2019). Rather than treating places as static and strictly bounded by national/global divides, translocality emphasizes the processual and intersubjective production of place across distances (De Vito, 2019). This perspective rejects a flat vision of “global connectivity” and instead insists on how places generate and interact. In digital journalism, for example, local content often attracts audiences far beyond its physical origin. Moreover, social media enhance user interactivity (Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard 2016), enabling interested translocal users to communicate their opinions with local citizens. These immediate connections between locations may renew the functioning of local public spheres, fostering unbounded citizenship in online public debates (Cammaerts and Audenhove 2005).

Translocality in digital spaces broadens the problem domain of issue publics, complicating our understanding of why people attend to distant events, how they engage with them, and what concerns shape their interpretations and responses. First,

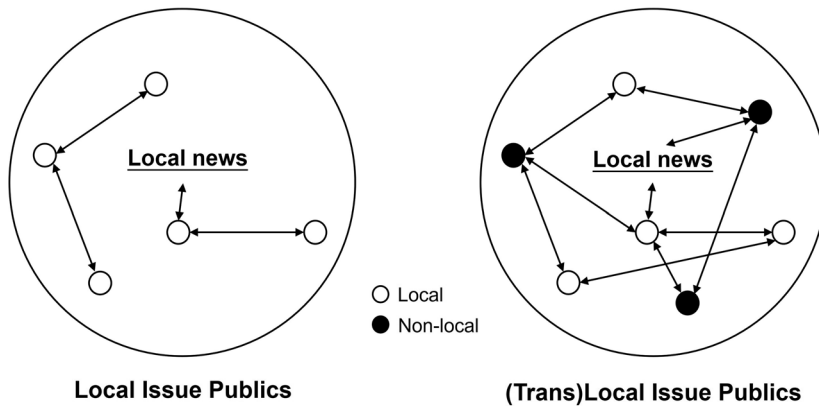


Figure 1. Illustration of traditional and (trans)local issue publics.

translocality enables publics to form around issues that manifest differently in specific sites yet resonate transversally, such as gender-based violence, thus fostering globally dispersed but locally rooted coalitions (Suk et al. 2024). As a result, issue publics are no longer strictly defined by geography, but can be driven by personalized interests. Second, it introduces productive frictions and translations, as issues acquire new meanings and emotional intensities when refracted through local socio-political contexts (Schachtner, 2015). Therefore, digital technologies can configure a translocal topology of issue public formation.

Locality and translocality should not be perceived as a pair of competing spatial patterns. Instead, from the perspective of translocality, locality may not be diminished but dialectically reinforced. Pfetsch et al. (2021) proposed a conceptual framework for analyzing such dynamics in digital spaces, including three dimensions: *actors*, *interactions*, and *issues*. Actors emphasize the geolocations of the speakers, who can communicate with neighboring and distant individuals. Interactions focus on the spatial nature of linkages with different actors; a local interaction could be established between actors with shared geolocations. Issues pertain to the topics around which actors engage in communication, encompassing the locations where events occur and citizens are impacted. Intersections of these three dimensions lead to varying configurations of locality. An entirely local public sphere is represented in the traditional form in Figure 1, where local citizens exchange opinions on local affairs. In contrast, a translocal audience of local news assembles into semi-local public spheres (Pfetsch et al. 2021). This framework is also echoed in Waldherr et al.'s (2024) work, which outlines the spatial arrangement of public spheres. It highlights the relational nature of space and provides a clear theoretical basis for the taxonomy of places and relations between them. For speakers in public spheres, the former can be interpreted as locations of actors, while the latter refers to interactions of placed actors. Moreover, Waldherr et al. (2024) complement the spatial analysis of public spheres with a discursive dimension, considering how place linkages emerge in the content aspect.

Following this line of conceptualization, we focus on the spatial membership of online issue publics, examining how local and translocal publics differ in their discursive style. Rather than ensuring the locality of actors by restricting users'

geolocations (Pfetsch et al. 2021; Waldherr et al. 2024), we identify issue publics through their engagement with clearly defined local issues (Burai, Solti, and Bene 2024). The rationale is that the locality of issues directly underpins the local issue public's assessment of their importance. Furthermore, unbounded discussions around area-specific news align more closely with actual online news engagement.

Local News Engagement on Social Media

We apply this (trans)locality framework to an online context: news discussions in local media. Local media can be broadly defined as opposed to national-level media (Guo and Zhang 2023), ranging from small-town journalism to metropolitan journalism with regional reach. This study focuses on the latter, examining audience engagement with local media outlets originating in major cities (Wehden and Stoltenberg 2019). Although many local media outlets publish news on social media, research on their audience engagement remains limited. A few studies examined how article features, media characteristics, and social contexts influenced local news engagement (Guo and Sun 2022; Le Quéré, Chiang, and Naaman 2022; Toff and Mathews 2024), but they did not consider any potential impact of audience structures, such as geographic affiliation.

From the audience perspective, their local news engagement on social media is shaped by users' personal and community-oriented meanings. Recent literature shows that audiences in Western societies do not experience local news in a uniform way. Some social media users rely rarely on local media accounts to meet their local information needs (Thorson et al. 2020). Besides, people often interpret local news through the lenses of personal relevance, geographic closeness, or community identity. These perceptions affect how users interact with content—whether through active commenting, sharing, or simply following posts from familiar local sources (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019). The participatory affordances of social media reinforce this dynamic, turning audiences into curators and amplifiers of local news (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018). In particular, local news outlets tend to maintain closer, more reciprocal relationships with their audiences than national media, fostering a sense of shared stake in community narratives (Almgren 2017; Thorson et al. 2020). These findings suggest that local news engagement is not only content-driven but also deeply embedded in audience experiences.

Building on this, we examine how such dynamics function on Chinese social media. Compared to their Western counterparts, local news outlets in China are generally more institutionally constrained, often operating under the dominance of political control (Tong 2010). Since the 2010s, the nationwide digital transformation has prompted many local media organizations to establish a presence on WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. This government-led shift has transformed how local news is produced, often with a stronger focus on soft features, convergent media services, and audience-friendly formats to enhance visibility (Tai, He, and Liu 2023). But little is known about audience response to such online local news.

The Present Study: How Geography Affects Local News Discussions

This study investigates the quality of local news comments through the lens of audience geography. Informed by Masullo, Wilner, and Stroud (2022) normative framework

for evaluating digital public spaces, we specify civility, rationality, and message length as indicators of discussion quality, because they align with core democratic ideals in digital spaces and are well established in previous literature (Berg 2016; Esau, Fleuß, and Nienhaus 2021; Halpern and Gibbs 2013; Jaidka, Zhou, and Lelkes 2019; Stroud et al. 2015; see also Goddard and Gillespie 2023). Civility reflects whether a digital space ensures safety and invites friendly participation, both necessary for inclusive and respectful public conversation. Rationality, further captured through relevance, justification, and constructiveness, corresponds to the signal of “promoting thoughtful conversation,” which Masullo, Wilner, and Stroud (2022) view as essential to civic competence and informed public discourse. These elements show whether the public engages substantively and meaningfully. Finally, message length serves as a proxy for communicative depth: longer, more developed comments often indicate higher cognitive engagement and effort in discussion. Within the limited scope of this paper, these indicators operationalize both the ethical aspiration and the cognitive ambition of public-friendly discussion, providing a relatively grounded way to assess the comment quality of social medianews.

Based on the locality framework, we formulate our analytical framework in Figure 2 and elaborate on each element’s association with news discussion.

Actors

The first element of locality is actors with specific geographic affiliations, which define the membership of local issue publics in this case. Attention to specific issues depends on the information relevance to personal interests (Bolsen and Leeper 2013). Hence, people are generally interested in local issues with high familiarity, belongingness, and relevance to their personal and community well-being (McCullough, Crowell, and Napoli 2017; Park, Fisher, and Lee 2022). Additionally, people may access local news through incidental exposure (Gulyas, O’Hara, and Eilenberg 2019). Location-based algorithms enhance opportunities (e.g., notifications, feeds) to recommend local

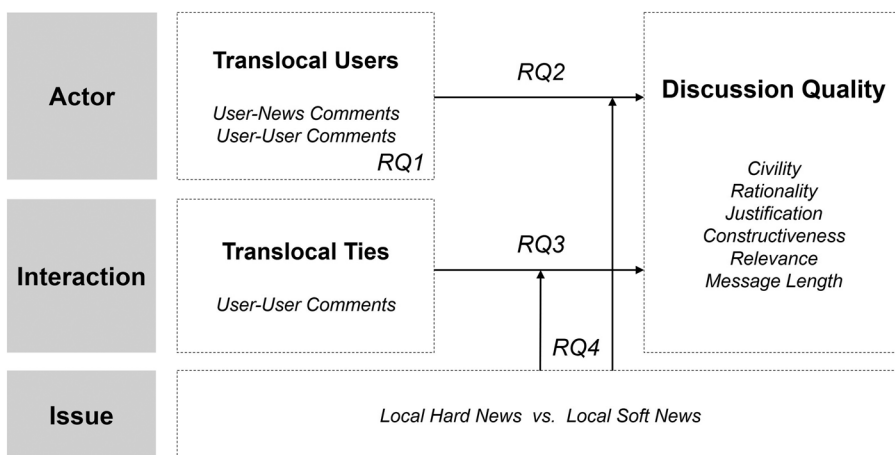


Figure 2. Analytical framework.

information to geographically relevant users (Kliman-Silver et al. 2015), which helps local citizens stay informed and engaged.

On the other hand, social networks and algorithms are also important forces nudging non-local news exposure. Since physical distance is not the sole criterion for algorithmic recommendation, issue publics can still be exposed to distant news with their interested topics. An investigation of German audiences indicated that around one-third of regional newspaper followers on Twitter belonged to different states, partly due to sports coverage (Wehden and Stoltenberg 2019). Information diffusion within heterogeneous social networks can also easily transport local news to other non-local audiences.

Whether purposive or incidental, news exposure may translate into corresponding engagement (Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018). Given the lack of evidence on the geographic composition of actors in local news engagement, we propose a descriptive question:

RQ1: To what extent do translocal users engage in local news on social media?

Issue public membership may also influence users' discussion styles through the spatial relevance of the topic. According to Construal Level Theory, spatially distant people, circumstances, or events are perceived as more psychologically distant, which are usually interpreted more abstractly and globally, while nearby objects' representations are more concrete and contextualized (Fujita et al. 2006; Liberman and Trope 2008). Previous studies indicate that physical distance plays a role in news perception (Skalicky et al. 2023), attribution (Sungur, Van Koningsbruggen, and Hartmann 2017), and issue campaigns (Lee, Hon, and Won 2018). Those distant events prompt macro-narratives (Kwon, Chadha, and Wang 2019) and negative judgments of immoral social events (Eyal, Liberman, and Trope 2008).

Geographically diverse users may adopt different construal levels when expressing their opinions. Local users, motivated by issue relevance and area-specific knowledge, may discuss in a more analytical and constructive manner aiming to contribute to social solutions. In contrast, translocal actors may offer less relevant and detailed perspectives and make biased judgments that conform to social stereotypes (Peng 2021). However, they may also introduce macro-level viewpoints into discussions, making public storytelling more diverse and objective. Meanwhile, viewpoint conflicts are sometimes accompanied by focused discussions, evidence-based justifications, and more extended expressions, which seem to support the positive effects of translocal opinions. To examine how translocal users influence different indicators of discussion quality, we propose:

RQ2: Do translocal users (versus local users) contribute to different levels of civility, rationality, and length in local news discussions on social media?

Interactions

Another important dimension of locality is interactions, which define the geographic linkage between the audience and their interlocutors. In social media contexts, it corresponds to conversations that occur when one user replies to another within

comment threads (Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard 2016). Geographic homophily, which suggests shared geographic characteristics among social actors, has been found to strongly affect the formation of network ties (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), even in computer-mediated environments (Yuan and Gay 2006). While this mechanism explains online interactions, few studies have examined its impact on discussion quality. People in the same area, who share similar life experiences and contextualized knowledge, may engage in friendly and informative conversations, and foster tolerance toward disagreements. Conversely, whether a spatially unbounded public could create meaningful conversations is an unsettled question (Cammaerts and Audenhove 2005).

Furthermore, in anonymous conversations, users make inferences about others' geolocation and adopt different reaction strategies. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978) posits that individuals favor ingroup members and negatively react to outgroup members under certain conditions. When geolocation becomes a prominent identity cue on social media, it can activate group identity and perceived similarity, leading to geographic intergroup differentiation. These regional boundaries may result in more disrespectful and irrational expressions in translocal ties. Yu and Margolin (2024) offered evidence that geolocation on social media intensified geo-based group division and conflict, fueling incivility in cross-provincial conversations. We test how translocal ties differ in the quality of news discussion:

RQ3: Do translocal ties (versus local ties) contribute to different levels of civility, rationality, and length in local news discussions on social media?

Issues

The final element of locality is issues. An issue can be understood as local to those living in the place where it occurred or was influenced. We look at a common classification: hard news and soft news (Reinemann et al. 2012). Compared to more relaxing and everyday topics in soft news, hard news typically includes political news and social events. These weightier topics, sometimes controversial, may lead to a higher level of aggressiveness (Gonçalves 2018), incivility (Coe et al. 2014), and impoliteness (Halpern and Gibbs 2013) in online news comment sections. Meanwhile, although less examined, soft news can carry public relevance and trigger alternative engagement, especially in contexts where radical political speech is constrained. Online discussions about parenting or sports, for example, may serve as surrogate arenas for voicing civic concerns and social values that indirectly touch on political life (Sun et al., 2021; Yan, Sivakumar, and Xenos 2018). Therefore, comparing hard and soft news allows us to assess how geography shapes public discourse across different levels of political salience, from formal sociopolitical issues to informal, yet civically meaningful, forms of discussion.

We expect that the potential geographic effects may depend on the issue type. Local sociopolitical events are often more controversial and widely relevant. When discussing such hard news, the impact of geography may be more prominent because local users may have more immediate and personal stakes in these discussions, contributing to more intense and serious interactions. On the other hand, hard news often holds more public value than local entertainment or cultural activities, making

it more likely to receive widespread attention from translocal users. Consequently, the geographic differences in the discussion quality may be weakened as sociopolitical events surpass regional influence. Therefore, we propose the final question to explore the heterogeneity of geographical effects:

RQ4: Are the above geographic effects on the quality of discussion more pronounced in local hard news (versus soft news) engagement on social media?

Data and Methods

Our data came from news comments associated with news posts published by major local media outlets on Weibo. As one of China's most influential social media platforms, Weibo has become a key site for media transformation under the state-led media convergence strategy (Lu 2020). Various local media outlets have launched verified Weibo accounts in the past few years. Structurally similar to X (formerly Twitter), Weibo features a two-level comment system: first-level comments appear directly under the post, while second-level comments are replies to those initial comments. Importantly, since April 2022, Weibo has publicly displayed user provincial IP locations in comment sections (Figure 3). These locations are automatically assigned based on users' network access points and cannot be altered manually. This mandatory rule offers a relatively reliable proxy for geographic identity (Zhou, Wei, and Liao 2024).

The data collection process consists of three steps (Figure 3). First, we compiled a list of online local media outlets (Table 1) based on the following criteria: (1) Developed from urban print newspapers; (2) Rooted in regional hubs or major provincial capitals with broad regional influence; (3) Their Weibo accounts have considerable followers, update frequency, and engagement intensity. Second, we scraped all the news posts using Python ($N=31,881$) from 1 August to 31 December, 2023. Third, we further scraped the comments of these news posts, including the top 100 first-level comments sorted by popularity and the top 10s-level comments replying to these comments¹. Weibo's proprietary algorithm determines comment popularity based on a combination of engagement metrics, user-account interaction history, user credibility, and content features². While algorithmic curation may introduce selection biases, these highly ranked comments represent the most prominent user contributions visible to the broader public. Because our purpose is to assess the quality of public-facing discourse, this visibility makes them a proper dataset. After data cleaning and excluding overseas comments, this step formed a final sample with 364,567 news comments (Sample 1), including 240,614 first-level comments and 123,953s-level comments. In addition, we randomly selected 400 local news posts and all their 3119 comments for content analysis (Sample 2).

To measure the multiple indicators of discussion quality, we utilized existing computational tools, self-defined dictionary, and manual coding.

Civility. Incivility is an expression of disrespect and offensiveness towards others (Coe et al., 2014). We employed Google's Perspective API to measure the civility of news comments, which returns a series of scores between 0 and 1, indicating the likelihood of the text containing various types of inappropriate content. Specifically, we used

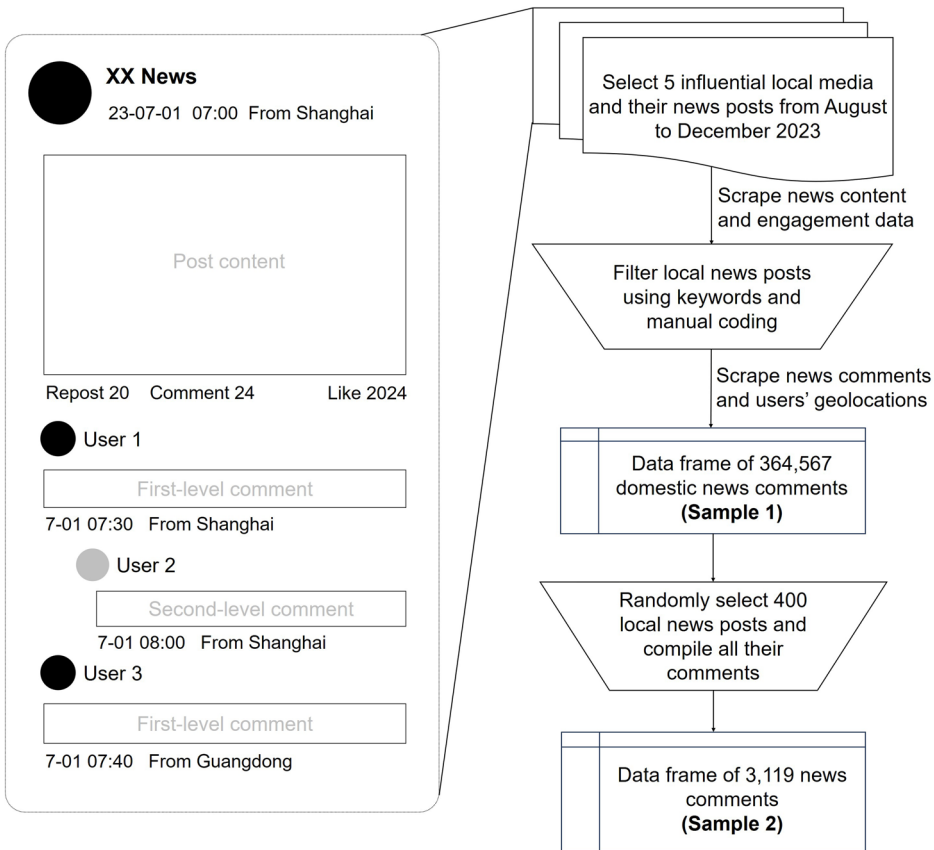


Figure 3. The process of data collection.

Table 1. The list of selected local media accounts.

Weibo account	Local print media	Newsroom location	Followers (million)	Num. of post
Cover News	West China City Daily	Chengdu	32.65	6245
Jimu News	Chutian Metropolis Daily	Wuhan	21.75	5402
Southern Metropolis Daily	Southern Metropolis Daily	Guangzhou	18.91	5883
The Beijing News	The Beijing News	Beijing	46.58	5119
The Paper	Oriental Morning Post	Shanghai	31.06	9232

two indicators: TOXICITY, which reflects general rude or disrespectful language, and SEVERE TOXICITY, which captures more extreme and hateful content that is very likely to make a user leave a discussion³. Because the API provides a probability score rather than a direct measure of intensity, we classified comments with scores above 0.5 as uncivil (0) and those below as civil (1). There were 7,405 comments identified as uncivil based on TOXICITY (2.03%), and 1,128 comments based on SEVERE TOXICITY (0.31%). Comments containing only emojis or meaningless characters were automatically excluded. We validated the scores generated by Google’s Perspective API by human coding (see [Supplementary Appendix A](#) for details).

Rationality involves reasoning and argumentation (Gastil 2008), characterized by analytical languages and the citation of evidence to justify one's claims. Due to the inadequacy in accurately identifying these specific discourse strategies in Chinese, we developed a 127-word dictionary based on Stromer-Galley (2007) measurement on rationality, proposing multiple categories such as cause and effect, logical connections, example, evidence, hypothetical statements, and reflexive argument. All the comments containing at least one keyword would be coded as 1 (12.70%, see [Supplementary Appendix A](#) for details).

In addition to these explicit rational languages, we further conducted manual content analysis on sample 2 to capture more specific dimensions of rationality. *Relevance* refers to the connection between the content of the news comments and the news post itself (Janssen and Kies 2005; Stromer-Galley 2007), emphasizing whether the commenter is addressing the specific news topic rather than diverting to unrelated subjects or providing irrelevant output. *Justification* is defined as reasoned opinions when the commenter uses external evidence (such as data, links, policies, regulations) or personal experiences to justify their viewpoint (Stromer-Galley 2007). *Constructiveness* reflects the author's attempt to move the conversation forward, build and bring about consensus, and seek further clarification and social solutions (Jaidka, Zhou, and Lelkes 2019). Two graduate students in social sciences were invited to complete the coding task. After initial training and several rounds of discussions, they achieved acceptable reliability at 10% of the sample. Following an additional discussion to ensure consensus, the two coders independently completed the coding of the remaining sample. Of the total comments, 2977 (95.45%) were identified as relevant, 640 (20.52%) provided justification for their viewpoints, and 339 (10.87%) were deemed constructive. Detailed coding rules, process, and inter-coder reliability are reported in [Supplementary Appendix B](#).

Message length was measured by the number of characters in each comment. We removed reply markers (@user), hashtags, links, etc., and then calculated the number of characters in the remaining text. We performed a logarithmic transformation due to the severely skewed distribution ($M=2.48$, $SD=0.93$).

At the news post level, we identified *local news* using a two-step process. First, we filtered posts based on keywords that referenced specific cities and provinces, as place-naming is a common narrative element in news coverage. For example, a post from *Cover News* should include mentions of "Chengdu" (city name) or "Sichuan" (province name). Second, we manually reviewed the filtered posts, excluding those where place names were used in subordinate contexts or where the event covered a broader area. For instance, posts from *the Beijing News* that mentioned "Beijing time" (the standard time zone in China) but occurred outside the city were recognized as non-local. This procedure allowed us to identify 3,858 local news posts (12.10%), indicating that online local media in China are expanding their coverage to attract a broader audience (see [Supplementary Appendix C](#) for further details). Besides, we categorized the *issue type* using a TextCNN-based supervised learning classifier⁴. We first manually coded all local news into two categories: hard news (e.g., government and officials, social events, legal affairs) as 1, and soft news (e.g., weather, entertainment, sports, leisure, and cultural activities) as 0 (Reinemann et al. 2012). These results served as pre-training data for the classifier, which then predicted the

topic types of the remaining non-local news. Ultimately, 60.97% of the news posts were classified as hard news.

At the comment level, we identified *translocal users* by matching each user's IP location with the region of the local media outlet⁵. For example, for comments on news from *the Beijing News*, only users with IP locations in Beijing were considered local (coded as 0), while others were translocal users (coded as 1, 88.98%). *Translocal ties* specifically pertain to second-level comments, depicting the consistency between the repliers and the original commenters' locations. Interactions between users from the same location are defined as local ties (coded as 0), while those from different locations are marked as translocal ties (coded as 1, 83.19%).

Results

The Geographic Composition of Local News Comments (RQ1)

Figure 4(a) presents the proportion of translocal users among all commenters on local news published by five local media outlets on Weibo. Except for Southern Metropolis Daily, located in China's most populous province, approximately 70–80% of comments on local news come from translocal users. This suggests that translocal users are the majority in discussions of local news, though local users still represent a substantial share when considering the absolute number of netizens across regions.

In addition, Figure 4(b) uses *Cover News* as an example to illustrate the geographical distribution of its commenters. The color intensity reflects the relative number of commenters (dividing the absolute volume of comments by the netizen population in each region), with darker shades indicating higher engagement. The left panel shows comments on all news, where Sichuan province—home to *Cover News*—displays higher engagement than most other provinces, though not as high as in economically developed eastern cities like Beijing and Shanghai. However, when focusing on local news from *Cover News* (the right panel), local users from Sichuan not only dominate but also exhibit a wider gap compared to other regions. This suggests strong local interest in local news engagement.

The Geographic Effects on the Quality of News Comments (RQ2 & 3)

To estimate the effects of translocal users and ties, we performed a series of logistic (or OLS for message length) regression models, and summarize the coefficients across four subsamples in Table 2 (see Supplementary Appendix D for full results). The first column presents findings for non-local news comments, serving as a baseline for general news contexts. The subsequent columns focus on local news comments, with particular attention to first-level and second-level comments. According to the second column, compared with local users, translocal users are associated with a 21.4% decrease in the odds of civility (based on TOXICITY: $b = -0.241$, $OR = 0.786$, $SE = 0.115$, $p < .05$), a 39.9% decrease in the odds of avoiding SEVERE TOXICITY ($b = -0.493$, $OR = 0.611$, $SE = 0.200$, $p < .05$), a 8.5% decrease in the odds of rationality ($b = -0.089$, $OR = 0.915$, $SE = 0.044$, $p < .05$), and a 7.9% decrease of message length ($b = -0.079$, $SE = 0.012$, $p < .01$) in their local news comments. Interestingly, in the non-local news sample, the coefficients were either non-significant or in the opposite direction,

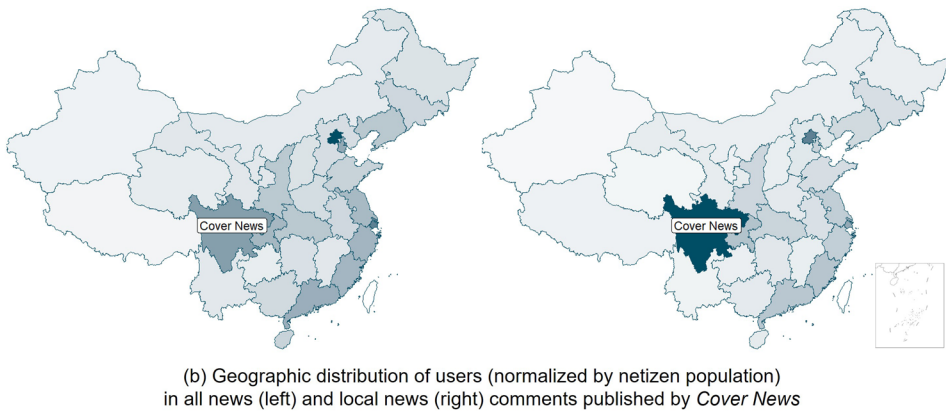
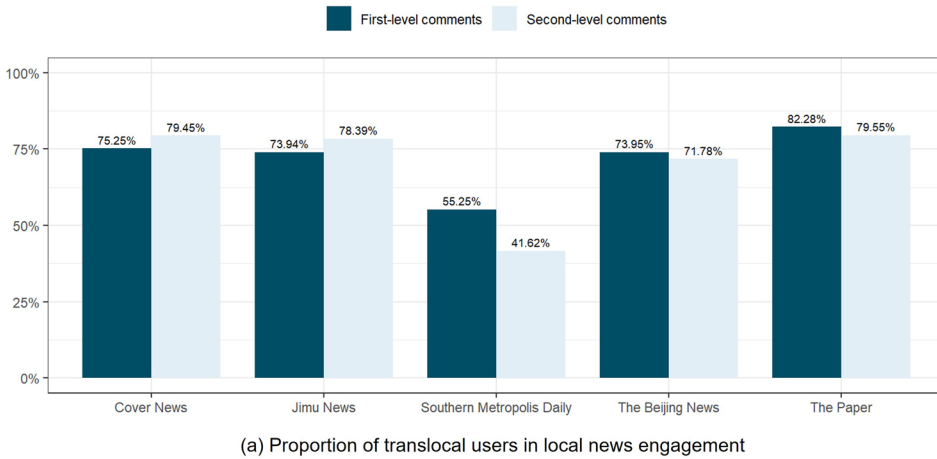


Figure 4. Distribution of user comments across online local media. (a) Proportion of translocal users in local news engagement. (b) Geographic distribution of users (normalized by netizen population) in all news (left) and local news (right) comments published by *Cover News*.

indicating that the observed negative impacts of translocal users are specifically tied to the local nature of the news being discussed.

Complementing these results, our manual content analysis further reveals the nuanced geographic effects on rationality. While translocal users are significantly less likely to provide justification ($b = -0.204$, $OR = 0.815$, $SE = 0.112$, $p < .1$) and constructiveness ($b = -0.510$, $OR = 0.600$, $SE = 0.134$, $p < .01$) in their comments on local news, their comments show no significant association with relevance. These findings collectively point to lower quality expressions from translocal users, particularly evident in their first-level comments. As seen in the third column, translocal users are less likely to express respectful, lengthy, justified, and constructive opinions on local stories.

Regarding the role of translocal ties, we found little evidence of statistically significant effects on most indicators of discussion quality. The notable exception is that translocal ties negatively predict the justification of second-level comments on local news ($b = -0.449$, $OR = 0.638$, $SE = 0.215$, $p < .05$). This suggests that users from different regions are less likely to provide evidence-based arguments or personal experiences in their conversations.

Table 2. Logistic or OLS regression models predicting the quality of news comments.

	Non-local news (baseline)	Local news		
		Both levels	First-level	Second-level
DV: Civility (based on TOXICITY, Sample 1)				
Translocal users	0.018 (0.041)	-0.241** (0.115)	-0.197 (0.150)	-0.278 (0.193)
Translocal ties				-0.231 (0.193)
N	330,281	31,044	21,478	9,403
DV: Civility (based on SEVERE TOXICITY, Sample 1)				
Translocal users	-0.007 (0.065)	-0.493** (0.200)	-0.644** (0.263)	-0.262 (0.321)
Translocal ties				-0.173 (0.318)
N	330,281	31,044	21,478	9,403
DV: Rationality (Sample 1)				
Translocal users	-0.011 (0.018)	-0.089** (0.044)	-0.062 (0.058)	-0.099 (0.073)
Translocal ties				-0.057 (0.781)
N	333,255	31,312	21,715	9,434
DV: Message Length (Sample 1)				
Translocal users	0.026*** (0.005)	-0.079*** (0.012)	-0.088*** (0.014)	-0.039 (0.024)
Translocal ties				0.003 (0.024)
N	333,255	31,312	21,715	9,434
DV: Relevance (Sample 2)				
Translocal users		-0.053 (0.220)	0.064 (0.245)	-1.128 (0.811)
Translocal ties				-0.898 (0.781)
N		3,119	2,303	796
DV: Justification (Sample 2)				
Translocal users		-0.204* (0.112)	-0.351*** (0.133)	0.216 (0.232)
Translocal ties				-0.449** (0.215)
N		3,119	2,303	796
DV: Constructiveness (Sample 2)				
Translocal users		-0.510*** (0.134)	-0.388** (0.158)	-0.900*** (0.286)
Translocal ties				0.266 (0.305)
N		3,119	2,303	796

Note. Unstandardized coefficient with standard errors in parenthesis. Controls include issue type, media account dummies and week dummies. For full regression results, see Appendix D.

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

The Moderating Role of Issue Type (RQ4)

Furthermore, we explored the moderating effect of news issue type on these geographic effects, with results visualized in [Figure 5](#) (see [Supplementary Appendix E](#) for full results). Our analysis revealed that while translocal users typically post shorter comments compared to their local counterparts, this disadvantage is less pronounced for hard news topics: the difference between two geographic groups narrows in the context of hard news discussions (see the left panel). Likewise, translocal users are far less likely than local users to offer justification in their comments on soft news. But when it comes to hard news, the level of justification provided by translocal users is comparable to that of local users (see the right panel). These findings suggest that

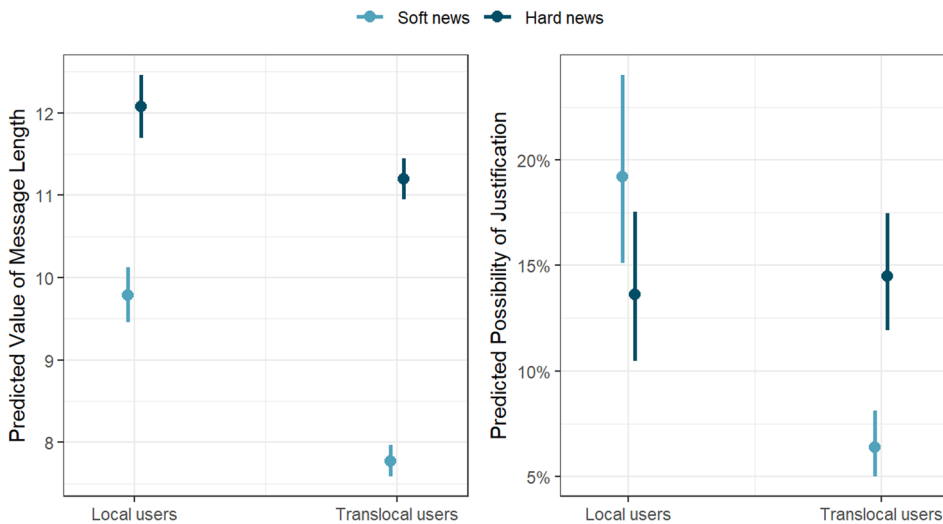


Figure 5. Predicted possibility or value of discussion quality by issue type. *Note.* The bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

hard news issues may weaken the relationship between geography and certain aspects of discussion quality, implying that translocal users may also respond thoughtfully to sociopolitical news occurring in the distance. We did not find such interaction effects in other indicators of discussion quality.

Discussion

Given that translocal engagement continues to grow on social media, our study systematically assessed its deliberative consequences in the context of local news discussions. Our investigation across three dimensions of locality—actors, interactions, and issues—reveals an interplay of both local and translocal dynamics in China’s online local news engagement. Despite the majority of users expressing their opinions on distant stories, we observed a clear preference for local users to engage in local news published by local media, which echoes previous findings that proximity shapes online interactions (Almgren 2017; Casero-Ripollés, Micó-Sanz, and Díez-Bosch 2020; Xu and Luttman 2021). Motivated by vested interests, local users are more attuned to their immediate environment and more inclined to participate in local negotiations, such as policies, public safety, or weather events. Moreover, they benefit from richer channels (e.g., offline networks) that provide access to local stories, making them more likely to share their insights when encountering relevant topics on social media.

We also compared the discussion quality of these geographically defined groups, indicating that the presence of translocal users may not be conducive to the healthy functioning of the digital local public sphere. Specifically, they are less likely to engage in civil, rational, and informative discourse or offer justifiable and constructive assertions. This disparity can be attributed to self-interest, relevance, and psychological distance. For local users, who can be potentially the “local issue public,” the events discussed in local news are not just abstract phenomena but are deeply intertwined

with their personal lives and social contexts. This proximity leads them to engage more seriously, thoughtfully, and analytically, often incorporating their nuanced knowledge of local matters into their comments (Lieberman and Trope 2008). As a result, their comments are usually contextually informed and reflect their personal interest in the issues at hand. For translocal users, however, devoid of the same level of personal relevance and detachment from the local context may limit the depth and quality of their contributions. Their contributions thus tend to be relatively abstract, brief, and generic, offering less in the way of detailed insights or actionable input.

This “local advantage” in discussion quality also shows contextual sensitivity. We find minimal effects of translocal users or ties on most indicators in second-level comments, a space that typically serves as an interactive forum. One possible explanation is that when users respond not to the news post itself but to specific arguments from others, the conversation becomes more concentrated and limits the psychological differences in thinking and expression, leading to more uniform discussion quality across user groups. This context-dependency implies a multi-layered relationship between geography, discussion structure, and comment quality.

Another core finding is that hard news weakens the negative impact of geographic factors on the discussion quality. While translocal users generally engage with less depth and rationality, these tendencies are more pronounced in discussions of soft news—issues tied to daily routines and leisure that carry strong local resonance. In contrast, many sociopolitical events may foster a shared sense of urgency nationwide and offer lessons applicable beyond the immediate locality, eliciting broader public resonance. Hard news, by its nature, is more translocal. It enhances psychological proximity between translocal users and local events, prompting them to adopt a mindset similar to that of local users. Thus, limited geographical effects on hard news may be less vulnerable to the fragmentation of digital local public spheres. These findings also offer a new perspective to understand issue locality. The locality of issues is traditionally defined by the geographic scope of events (Pfetsch et al. 2021). Our study, however, explores another dimension of issue locality—the translocal potential inherent in the attributes and dissemination value of news stories. In China, local matters such as wage disputes or juvenile delinquency, while geographically bounded by the event’s occurrence, reflect broader social patterns that resonate across many regions. Thus, they can successfully evoke translocal engagement.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study looks at the new dynamics of (trans)locality in digital public spaces and adds to the classical debate on geography and public communication. Our findings extend the impact of geography from structural considerations to the discourse content, demonstrating that it remains a critical factor in shaping the nature and quality of public communication. Prior work on globalization has emphasized the challenges of transnational publics (Cammaerts and Audenhove 2005) and the continued centrality of nation-states (Flew and Iosifidis 2020). At the translocal level, we reveal the relatively lower quality of translocal voices, which depends on the engagement level and issue type. Our study follows recent literature that highlights local spatial dimensions (Burai, Solti, and Bene 2024; Waldherr et al. 2024), calling for attention to broader implications of social media users’ geographic affiliations on a more nuanced scale.

Besides, we provide a geographic explanation for news comment quality, enriching the understanding of (trans)locality in the formation of online issue publics. By integrating the geographic dimension into the analysis of discussion quality, we can better appreciate the spatial dynamics that underpin public communication and their deliberative implications. While much attention has been paid to how individuals mobilize around specific issues based on their relevance, interest, and perceived impact, our findings highlight the role of geographic proximity in this process (Burai, Solti, and Bene 2024). Therefore, issue publics are not just formed around the issues themselves, but also around the socio-spatial contexts in which these issues are experienced and understood, even in seemingly borderless social media contexts.

Our study also holds practical implications for both local news production and distribution on social media. Online local media need to adapt to the reality of significant translocal audience subscriptions and engagement in local news. To enhance the quality of translocal news engagement, local media should balance local information with non-local needs, emphasizing the universal public relevance and translatability of local news topics, especially hard news, to encourage translocal audiences to play a constructive role in the local public sphere. For social media platforms, local news distribution rules typically consider users' geographic locations and personal interests. Future algorithmic improvements could customize users' personalized news experiences, encouraging more participation in local issue discussions (Oppegaard and Rabby 2016). Additionally, improving local news engagement mechanisms and interface design, such as enhancing the visual association between local news and similar stories, may guide translocal users to adopt more civil and rational discussion styles.

Limitations and Further Work

Our study attempts to reveal the overlooked geographic dimension of social media news engagement. However, relying on provincial-level geolocation data limits the ability to capture the finer nuances of locality, as many public issues are rooted at the city or community level. In China, large cities with their heterogeneous populations often dilute clear geographic patterns based on provincial affiliation. Yet, we selected two clearly defined cities as the locations for local media. Other locations chosen are influential provincial capitals, where provincial users might develop a sense of belonging and connection to local news. Future research could consider collecting city- or community-level data, combined with more contextualized designs, to better assess the impact of geolocation on intra-regional discussions.

Second, this study operationalized discussion quality in terms of several indicators, without fully exploring other crucial dimensions such as reciprocity and diversity (Berg 2016; Stromer-Galley 2007). While translocal audiences are less likely to post comments of similar quality to local users, they may be more politically outspoken (Lane 2020) and introduce diverse viewpoints. Lacking formal rationality or even civility, some comments might still offer critical perspectives beneficial to local publics. Thus, our assessment did not detail the specific viewpoints of users, and conclusions should be treated cautiously.

Finally, further research can focus on the micro-mechanisms behind the geographic effects revealed in this study. Geographic homophily can influence the structure and

content of online discussions under certain conditions, but the specific social or psychological mechanisms remain unclear. For instance, the rationality of opinion expression on social issues may vary among users from different regions. Employing experimental methods to validate potential underlying mechanisms, such as psychological distance and social identity we have mentioned, could enhance causal explanations of these geographic effects.

Notes

1. Through this step, we can collect up to 1,100 user comments from each post, far exceeding the average number of comments for all news posts ($M=54.55$). Hence, although we did not collect all news comments in full, the collection strategy has ensured that most influential comments are included.
2. See <https://kefu.weibo.com/faqdetail?id=21187>.
3. See https://support.perspectiveapi.com/s/about-the-api-attributes-and-languages?language=en_US.
4. See http://github.com/yifanhunter/textClassifier_chinese.
5. There seems to be a disconnect in this operationalization: relying on Weibo's provincial IP data does not accurately reflect users' true residential locations, as IP addresses are transient and may not align with users' actual geographical affiliations. We argue that while local media may be nominally centered on a single city, their news coverage often spans the entire province. For instance, West China City Daily, based in Chengdu, also targets audiences in medium and large cities across Sichuan Province. We also included media from two province-level cities, Beijing and Shanghai, where users' locations and local news coverage align directly. Finally, locality is a fluid, relative, and contextualized concept. People may be physically elsewhere due to travel or remote work but remain engaged with news from their temporary location due to its immediate relevance, such as weather or transportation updates.

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