

Abstract

Filipino migrants in China tread a fine line between tacit subservience and surreptitious circumvention as they experience digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. Through descriptive and reflexive phenomenology, this master's thesis delves into the lived experiences of fifteen Filipino migrants who have worked or stayed in China to find out how they understand the phenomena, scrutinize the issues they have faced with them, and determine whether these experiences impact their digital communication behaviors. Their lived experiences, fleshed out by my reflexive role as a researcher-translator, reveal a potential "pseudo-surveyor" role, shedding light on the boundaries of agency in resistance to surveillance. This is crucial, especially with how Filipino migrants on WeChat self-censor and regulate group communication dynamics to address the app's tendency to become an online dragnet for digital surveillance and censorship. The experiences also suggest an ambivalence toward change in digital communication behavior since digital communication attitudes and diversionary tactics on WeChat may contribute to stronger resistance.

This study expands the discussion about digital authoritarianism, particularly in light of growing concerns among journalists and academics about how China's digital surveillance and censorship technologies and strategies can be imported or are already being used by other states for discriminatory, commercial, or political purposes. This study's findings can be used to inform mechanisms, regulations, or research in local communities and global contexts where digital surveillance and censorship strategies intersect with digital governance and social media lifestyles.

Keywords

Digital censorship, digital surveillance, WeChat, phenomenology, Philippines, China, digital authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism

Title

WeChat in Silence? How WeChat surveillance and censorship experience impacts the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China