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CAA



Progressive Voices Fighting Right-Wing Disinformation

The 2021 CAA Convening on Chinese Digital Engagement

Introduction

Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) held its second annual Chinese Digital Engagement Convening in March 2021. Over 240 attendees joined the virtual conference to hear insights from journalists, filmmakers, and digital content creators discussing the practice and potential of Chinese-language online platforms to build a stronger progressive Chinese community. What follows is a collection of insights, inspiration, and potential actions that emerged from these conversations with leaders in the field.

Conservative activists have been highly visible on Chinese social media, especially on the app WeChat, which is used by immigrants to connect with friends and get information in Chinese. With 3 million daily users in the U.S., WeChat is a primary information source for monolingual Chinese speakers seeking news,

connection, and entertainment not available elsewhere. Similar to the disinformation found on Facebook, a lot of WeChat content is not grounded in fact. Conservatives have made successful appeals to immigrants' anxieties, motivating some Chinese Americans into taking political action offline.

In contrast, CAA uses Chinese social media platforms to share resources and information relevant to the lives of working-class Chinese Americans. Community members turn to CAA's WeChat account to learn about economic resources, understand immigration policy changes, and connect with direct services staff. Additionally, through fact-checking articles with thousands of views, CAA advances progressive narratives and centers racial equity in a social media space dominated by disinformation. CAA has built a virtual community of leaders and activists in support of progressive issues like affirmative action, immigrant rights, and community-based safety. These leaders engage users and create content explaining social justice issues.

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Lessons from the Convening

The March 2021 convening brought together leaders in digital media and journalism to share ideas on how to build support for progressive policies within the Chinese American community. Because of the outsized influence of the right wing online, many conversations touched upon ways to fight disinformation. First, we offer critical lessons that emerged from the convening and then delve into the insights shared by the speakers.

1. Despite a deluge of right-wing online content, active engagement and involvement in Chinese online spaces can be effective at moving Chinese Americans to become more progressive over time.

Access to factual in-language content and meeting others with shared values can change hearts and minds.

Progressive online engagement holds the potential to reach first-generation Chinese Americans on crucial social issues. “We need to see how we ourselves moved on issues,” speaker Helen Shi noted, citing her own experience as an immigrant whose online connections helped her develop progressive values. Access to factual in-language content and meeting others with shared values can change hearts and minds.

2. To counteract the growing online and offline power of conservatives, institutions must invest in resources and capacity for Chinese digital engagement. More progressive content creators and groups are needed.

Conservative groups in Chinese digital media are well-funded and organized. In contrast, there are only a few progressive Chinese social media accounts – such as the ones run by the speakers – and those tend to rely on volunteers who can only create content on a part-time basis. Philanthropy, nonprofits, and progressive groups should invest in staff to increase the availability of factual information in Chinese digital spaces.

3. In-language fact-checking and digital literacy training are greatly needed for immigrant communities.

As speaker Duan Qiao noted, “Fake news [is now] more outrageous than ever, with rumors spreading fast.” Increasing the number of online fact-checking accounts improves access to accurate information for immigrants. Multilingual trainings on how to recognize disinformation online could have a big impact. Fact-checking institutions must increase their in-language content and help small, grassroots fact-checking groups scale up their efforts.

4. Organizations can help cultivate a stronger sense of community and safety for progressive content creators. Solidarity is crucial to keeping grassroots writers supported and motivated. Panelists spoke about being doxxed and censored for their progressive views. Having more sources of progressive content, such as accounts run by nonprofits and community groups, would take the burden off of individual volunteers. In addition, as speaker Yi Chen emphasized, with more people seeking community online, “This is a good time to move people. Be a resource for new immigrants and build relationships.”

5. Chinese digital engagement helps people bridge differences and build interest in fighting oppression.

In-language content on topics such as Asian American history or Asian-Black solidarity can help start intergenerational conversations on racial justice. Speaker Steven Chen expressed gratitude for groups,

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like the student-run WeChat Project, that bridge cultural and language divides between generations of Chinese Americans. Speakers also advised progressives to highlight shared values and community needs in discussions about social justice.

6. In the wake of increased violence and hate against Asian Americans, Chinese-language digital spaces should be used to elevate humanizing stories about communities of color. As speaker Cynthia Choi noted, “Words matter.” Narratives shape people’s perspectives of different groups, including Asian Americans *and* other communities of color. Conservatives have used the attention on anti-Asian hate to push anti-Black narratives and amplify their own agendas. Progressive groups and institutions should use Chinese language platforms to share about the intertwined histories and continued struggles of various communities of color against white supremacy.

Key Insights

DAY 1

Day 1 focused on strategies for improving Chinese Americans' engagement online on key political issues, using the 2020 election as a case study.

Keynote Speaker Yizhong Cheng

Yizhong Cheng is a renowned journalist who was censored in China for his work and now leads an American Chinese-language digital outlet. Cheng shared parallels he sees between propaganda from the Chinese government and disinformation shared by right-wing Americans. Commonalities include making individuals or groups scapegoats on political issues, weaponizing patriotism to counter dissent, and discrediting traditional media outlets. The disinformation has led people to doubt the efficacy of institutions, such as U.S. elections or the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

Panel: How to Improve Chinese Digital Engagement on Key Political Issues

PANELISTS:

- **Yi Chen** - Documentary filmmaker and director of "First Vote"
- **Elaine Peng** - President of the Mental Health Association for Chinese Communities and California chair of Chinese Americans for Biden-Harris
- **Dr. Helen Shi** - Founder of the civic engagement website "Chinese American Voter Alliance"
- **Haolan Wang** - Political writer, columnist for Inition Media and Ifengweekly, and founder of "Lanmu" WeChat account



How to Improve Engagement on Key Political Issues

- Be aware of barriers to political engagement for first-generation immigrants, such as fear and the discouragement of political involvement in China.
- Share humanizing stories about why and how individuals have voted or engaged.
- Reach Chinese Americans through multiple platforms: WeChat, Weibo, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Medium, and traditional ethnic news websites.
- Progressive content can be crowdsourced. Reach out to community members and ask them to contribute.
- Recruit volunteers to develop and disseminate progressive content.

The panel featured grassroots leaders who understand the cultural contexts of newer immigrants. They provided tips on reaching first-generation Chinese Americans who feel disconnected from U.S. politics. Some people are hesitant to engage due to the extreme views they see in Chinese-language online spaces. Speakers noted online engagement can be effective for progressive organizing and educating others on political issues, provided that there is a sense of community for users seeking to learn more. The panelists urged progressive groups to focus on developing personal relationships and using probing questions to get people out of social media echo chambers.

DAY 2

The second day of the convening highlighted the need for progressives to grow their influence in Chinese-language digital spaces to counteract disinformation and increase racial solidarity. Progressive online grassroots leaders

implored nonprofits and philanthropic leaders to build up a presence in Chinese digital spaces.

Panel: How Digital Engagement Can Fight Against Disinformation and Fake News

PANELISTS:

- **Moreless** - Freelance writer and fact-checker for “Justice Patch” WeChat account
- **Nick Nguyen** - Co-founder and research lead for the website “Viet Fact Check”
- **Duan Qiao** - Founder of WeChat public account “Oversea Anti-Rumor Center,” the first fact-checking public account in WeChat
- **James Tou** - Chief editor of Chinese-language news site “NYChinaRen” and “纽约时间 NYtime” WeChat public account

Speakers talked about the pervasive right-wing influence and nationalist perspectives in ethnic digital media. In the Chinese digital space, conservatives are translating pieces from right-wing English sites into Chinese. Immigrants



who cannot access mainstream English media face challenges discerning news from opinion pieces. Speakers also raised the challenges of countering disinformation beyond WeChat, given that the top Chinese language YouTube accounts are by the Chinese government or Falun Gong, a controversial religious group with right-wing affiliations. Additionally, tech

companies do not aggressively moderate for disinformation as this runs counter to their financial incentive to generate clicks.

Panel: Promoting Progressive Narratives on Affirmative Action, Black Lives Matter, and Racial Justice through Chinese Digital Engagement

PANELISTS:

- **Steven Chen** - Co-founder of CRW Strategy, editor of “TuJieUSA” WeChat account and the website “美国华人 ChineseAmerican.org”
- **Eileen Huang** - Co-founder of “The WeChat Project”
- **Na Peng** - Freelancer writer and YouTube Chinese language political commentator

The speakers talked about difficulties in bringing up race in Chinese-language digital spaces. They launched their accounts after being alarmed by racist and inflammatory content on Chinese social media. Speakers noted

Suggested Strategies to Effectively Fight Disinformation

- Provide media literacy trainings to recognize legitimate news sources and discern if content is a news article or an op-ed.
- Identify allies to bolster the amount of accurate information online and amplify fact-checking articles.
- Improve headlines and shorten content to appeal more to users.
- Use resources like PolitiFact and reliable English-language media outlets as information sources.
- Launch a coalition to hold social media companies accountable for moderating disinformation in immigrant online spaces.

By having an active presence in Chinese digital spaces, progressive groups can expand their reach, share about their resources, and provide community education.

that Chinese immigrants who arrived after the 1960s civil rights movement may not understand the barriers faced by other communities of color. They pointed out that while second-generation Chinese Americans do not typically use Chinese-language platforms, their voices are necessary in WeChat in order to build a more diverse and progressive Chinese digital space.

Progressives need to build a large network to provide both content and support, because writing about divisive topics like affirmative action can elicit online harassment. The panelists saw a need for greater support from nonprofits and foundations. Despite the massive reach of WeChat to the Chinese immigrant community in the U.S., few nonprofits and progressive advocacy groups use it. By having an active presence in Chinese digital spaces, progressive groups can expand their reach, share about their resources, and provide community education.

DAY 3

The last day of the convening showed how misunderstandings about communities of color influence personal safety. Speakers

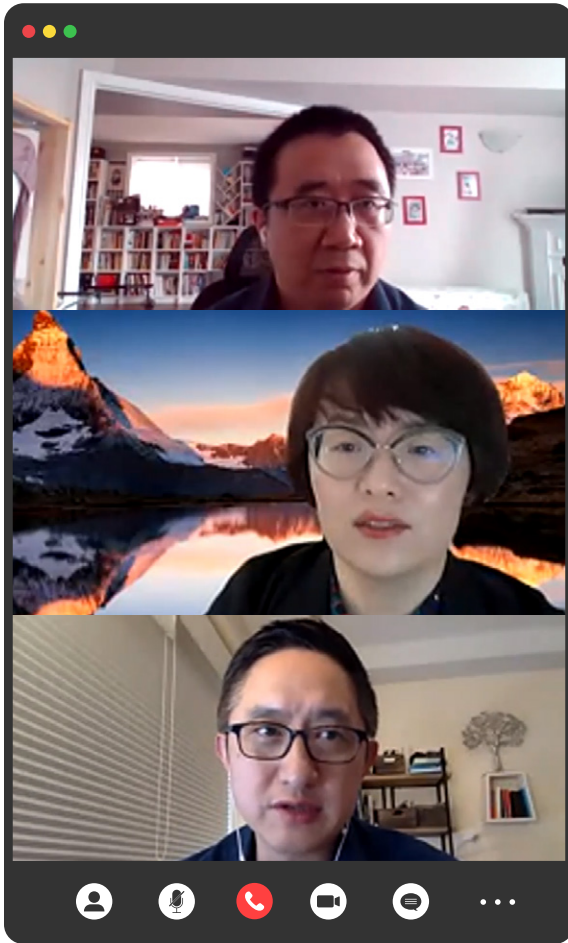
shared how dehumanizing narratives give the false impression that violence is acceptable. Not only can social media be a tool for people to speak up against violence, progressive digital engagement and content can help people draw connections between the history of oppression faced by communities of color in the U.S. and what's happening today, creating points of connection and empathy. This context would equip Chinese Americans to fight for the community's needs, as well as racial solidarity overall.

Panel: Improving Chinese Digital Engagement to Address Anti-Asian Hate and Build Solidarity Across Communities of Color

PANELISTS:

- **Feng Chen** - Chinese media expert and chief editor of "Canada and US Must-Read" WeChat account
- **Angie Jin** - Co-founder of "No Melon Group" WeChat and Weibo accounts, co-founder of "不亚于人" Club in Clubhouse
- **Hao Wu** - Director of documentaries "76 Days" and "All in My Family"

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Speakers provided context for the current rise in anti-Asian violence, noting the contributing factors of extremism on social media and the “model minority” myth hiding disparities within Asian American communities. The myth also prevents solidarity between different groups of color. The panelists shared their personal experiences with racism and called on progressive Chinese Americans to use online spaces to speak up on politics and racism. They also emphasized the possibilities of digital organizing for reaching the Chinese American community. As a documentarian, Wu has seen how digital media can tell real stories about communities that break through people’s misconceptions.

Panel: Conversation with Stop AAPI Hate Co-Founders

This panel focused on anti-Asian hate and violence that has taken place since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. The panel took place shortly after the targeted shooting of six Asian American women in Atlanta.

PANELISTS

- **Cynthia Choi** - Co-Executive Director of Chinese for Affirmative Action and co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate
- **Dr. Russell Jeung** - Professor at San Francisco State University’s Asian American Studies Department and co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stop AAPI Hate received thousands of reports from Asian Americans of harassment, shunning, physical assault, and other forms of discrimination. Seniors, youth, and women experience a disproportionate number of the hate incidents. Factors contributing to the rise of bias include racist stereotypes of Asians as disease-prone “perpetual foreigners,” and the U.S. government’s hardline rhetoric against China that conflates the Chinese government with Chinese people. Intervention against all forms of bias is necessary in order to prevent violence from happening.



How Digital Media Can Build Racial Solidarity and Fight Anti-Asian Hate

Digital media can be used to:

- Condemn violence and discrimination.
- Organize to fight for resources to end systemic racism.
- Share factual information about incidents of anti-Asian hate.
- Share information, including health and economic resources, for survivors and people experiencing fear.
- Educate about the history of Asian Americans in the U.S.
- Highlight the diversity and complexities within Chinese American and Asian American communities.
- Offer examples of cross-racial solidarity.

Conclusion

By growing networks of progressive voices in Chinese-language digital spaces, it is possible to not only counter disinformation, but also create trusted community networks, unite people across generations, and ultimately mobilize people to advance racial justice and create a more equitable society. This will take investment and time, but as CAA's work has already shown, Chinese digital engagement is a vital strategy to combat conservative narratives and grow the progressive movement.

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