

CRAYFISH, RABIES, YOGHURT, AND THE LITTLE REFUTING- RUMOURS ASSISTANT

Lorand Laskai

ON 26 JUNE, **Tencent** 腾讯 rolled out Rumour Filter 谣言过滤器 on its ubiquitous instant-messaging app, **WeChat** 微信. Since WeChat's launch in 2011, developers have tacked on feature after feature to keep the app central to the lives of Chinese users. WeChat users in 2016 could make restaurant reservations, transfer money, pay utilities, order a taxi, and even find a one night stand — all without leaving WeChat. Tech enthusiasts might not list a rumour filter as the most exciting new add-on of 2016 — that was probably WeChat Out 微信电话本, which allows users to call mobile phones or landlines, often for free. But it is a necessary bow to the Cyberspace Administration of China's 国家互联网信息办公室 (CAC) desire to control the spread of rumours online.

Rumour Filter functions much like WeChat's other public accounts. It publishes regular alerts, notifying users of rumours — some of which fall into the category of 'fake news' — circulating on the web. Does ham sausage when eaten with yoghurt cause cancer? No, says Rumour Filter. Can doing sit-ups paralyse you? Not unless you do them incorrectly, it says. The ac-



WeChat

Source: Xiao Chaoyu, Flickr



WeChat rumours

Source: wochacha.com

count also allows users to interact with it through a chat screen: users type in a potential rumour, contentious claim or possible item of 'fake news' and receive a prompt auto-reply from a 'little refuting-rumours assistant' 辟谣小助手 about the veracity of the claim. The 'little assistant' doesn't have all the answers, however. Ask, 'Did NASA fake the moon landing?' and it responds, 'there's no relevant information'.

The Chinese government has long identified online rumours as a threat to stability and Party rule, and WeChat, as China's largest online social platform, is a natural hotbed. Last year, a report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 中国社会科学院 (CASS) stated

that censors intercepted as many as 2.1 million 'rumours' a day on WeChat.²⁴ While many rumours are political in nature, even more are related to health, phony products, finances and lifestyle issues, sparking daily health scares and spreading fraud. WeChat's Rumour Filter appears to target the apolitical ones. Ask the Rumour Filter about (disgraced leader) Bo Xilai, 薄熙来 riots in Xinjiang, Xi Jinping's 习近平 hidden wealth or Tibetan independence, and the 'little refuting-rumours assistant' turns up empty handed. Ask if crayfish are insects, and the 'little assistant' produces a lengthy report saying they're not. At least that's cleared up.

TOP 2016 WECHAT RUMOURS, by Lorand Laskai

1. You're more likely to give birth to a boy if you raise a cat 养猫的孕妇更易生男孩.
2. The iPhone auto-suggests 'China' after 'sinking' to insult China 苹果输入法 '击沉中国' 涉及辱华.
3. Deleting twelve people from your WeChat contacts saves ninety-four megabits of storage 微信删12人就能节省94M空间.



Baby boys for those who raise a cat
Source: Marie L'Amuse, Flickr

4. If a girl drinks yoghurt after eating a persimmon, she'll become fatally poisoned 女孩吃完柿子又喝酸奶中毒而死.



The dangers of hair washing
Source: party_267, Flickr

5. Rabies infections can flare up in women, leading them into a biting frenzy [in response to a video that showed a wild woman with blood dripping from her mouth, trying to bite bystanders] 网传女子狂犬病发作疯狂咬人.
6. Washing your hair first when showering leads to a cerebral hemorrhage 洗澡先洗头, 会导致脑溢血.

7. People have caught swine fever virus from eating lamb meat 有人吃羊肉感染SK6病.
8. The US President Donald Trump was born in Zigong, Sichuan province 美国新任总统川普出生在中国四川自贡.
9. Pollution can turn your lungs black within six days 霾可使鲜肺6天变黑肺.



Is Donald Trump Chinese?
Source: iphonedigital, Flickr

10. China has become a global transmitter of rabies [in response to an article in the Hong Kong media that stated that most Chinese pets are not vaccinated for rabies] 中国成'狂犬病流行国'.

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