

Five ways reporters have used chat apps to cover political unrest



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Nov 1, 2016 · 4 min read

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With the ubiquity of mobile phones and social media, user-generated content has become an everyday part of newsgathering. Last July, [cellphone videos](#) emerged of the police killing of Philando Castille, among others, thanks to Facebook Live. The social web has changed how journalists and news organizations report and produce news, and how they engage with sources and audiences.

A wide range of journalists now use the technical capabilities of smartphones to keep in touch with sources. In addition to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, chat apps such as WhatsApp and WeChat are rapidly growing sources of information about newsworthy events.

Mobile chat apps are distinct from other social networking sites because of their size, demographics (e.g. young users, who are important for publishers or brands), higher user retention, and encryption). Some of these apps have large active user bases; there are 400 million users on WeChat and 1 billion on WhatsApp (as of 2016). Combined, the user base of the top four chat apps is larger than the base of the top four social networking sites.





















Chat apps have also become essential links between participants in newsworthy events and reporters covering those events. For foreign correspondents covering political unrest, chat apps have special importance. In developing countries, mobile devices are the primary means of internet access. Because political activists often communicate via

groups on chat app, journalists have been able to cultivate sources and gather news by gaining access to those conversations some private and other public.

In this context of rapidly growing chat app usage, what does the growth of private social networks such as chat apps mean for newsgathering?

Mobile Messaging Applications Functionalities

Last updated: 14 September 2016

App	Founded	OS	Monthly active users	End-to-end encryption	Voice calls	Voice group calls	Video calls	Video group calls	Location settings	Stickers	Private messaging	Language	Other
 Cryptocat	2011 (Nadim Kobeissi and contributors)		N/A	●					N/A	●	●	English, Catalan, French	Open-source desktop app with end-to-end encryption
 Facebook Messenger	2011 (Facebook)		1 billion+		●	●	●		●	●	●	Multilingual	
 Google Hangouts	2013 (Google)		540 million+ (MAU for Google+)		●	●	●	●		●	●	Multilingual	
 Kik	2010 (Kik Interactive)		300 million+ registered							●	●	Multilingual	Shake for random social discovery; anonymity; built-in browser
 LINE	2011 (Naver Corporation)		220 million	●	●	●	●			●	●	Multilingual	
 Slack	2013 (Slack Technologies)		30 million+ (3 million+ daily)		●	●				●	●	English only	Free, but with tiered pricing
 Snapchat	2011 (Snapchat Inc.)		150 million+ daily						●	●	●	Multilingual	Ephemeral messaging
 Telegram	2013 (Telegram Messenger LLP)		100 million+	●						●	●	English, Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Portuguese and Korean (officially)	Open-source software
 WeChat	2011 (Tencent)		800 million+		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	Multilingual	Can exchange contacts with people nearby via Bluetooth and provide features for contacting people at random
 WhatsApp	2009		1 billion+	●	●				●		●	Multilingual	

New Frontiers in Newsgathering: A Case Study of Foreign Correspondents Using Chat Apps to Cover Political Unrest

Colin Agur, Valerie Belair-Gagnon and Nick Frisch

Published by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University



In a study focusing on how foreign news correspondents covered the unrest during the 2014 Umbrella Movement up to today, Colin Agur, Nicholas Frisch, and I found several ways that chat apps have become essential in coverage of political unrest.

1. Reporters used chat apps to access multimedia content.

By following chat app groups related to the protests, reporters found images, videos, audio clips, memes, and other content that could be integrated into coverage. As with previous waves of user generated content, chat apps raised questions about how to

source and verify information. Some news organizations responded with a forensic approach, with teams of specialists able to trace content through chat apps and websites.

2. Protesters and, to a lesser extent, government officials used media chat groups to communicate political statements.

Chat apps functioned as long-running digital press conferences, linking members of the media with activists and allowing for an ongoing dialogue as events unfolded. In Hong Kong, student and civil society protest groups used WhatsApp extensively to communicate with journalists covering the protests. Such groups proved especially valuable for journalists who were not part of large news organizations (e.g. solo foreign correspondents or stringers).

3. “Digital fixers” emerged as new contributors to news production.

These individuals combined a knowledge of the local reporting scene with a strong grasp of the (often localized) social media landscape. Digital fixers allowed reporters with little knowledge of the culture and language to navigate the challenging informational terrains of chat apps.

4. Journalists used social media to organize newsgathering.

Journalists used WhatsApp to organize news production, both across news organizations and within them. Correspondents told us that they formed WhatsApp groups to manage large flows of information and verify content that might be included in news pieces. While large news organizations were able to use scale to their advantage (creating specialized positions to manage the flow), we also heard from reporters at a small capacity news organization, who found that their reporting team could synthesize information more quickly than ever before.

5. Chat apps allowed journalists to access private networks.

Over the course of the protests, journalists saw a movement of users away from public networks to private chat apps. This was partly because young mobile people prefer these applications for ease of use, and partly because of privacy and surveillance.

Overall, reporters suggested that the fundamental processes of reporting remain largely unchanged from one-to-one newsgathering by phone or email. Reporters still must find

newsworthy events, identify sources, get background information, get material for their stories, and verify facts. But the technology and terrains of reporting have changed.

This report will be launched November 4 at Public Radio International (PRI) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Register for the event on [eventbrite](#).

For more information on the report, visit the Tow Center for Digital Journalism on [CJR](#).

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