Twitter Thread by Rui Ma ■■



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Allen Zhang the creator of WeChat (I am a fangirl) gave a 2 hr long speech yesterday abt his thoughts on the product on the eve of its 10th anniversary.

It's a lot on Channels (the new video function in WeChat).

Here are my notes & comments in parentheses:

WeChat daily usage looks like this:

1.09 Bn users log in, 330mm use video chat
780mm users view Moments feed (like FB feed), 120mm users post to Moments
360mm read articles, 400mm use mini programs

Why're we going after video?
In last 5 years, users are sending 33x more video msgs in chat, 10x more videos into their Moments feed.
Not everyone can write long content, but doing video requires new acct system (current public acct system is subscription based), we tried in 2017

but didn't get too far. But since video SO obviously the big thing in next 10 yrs, we began working on it for real in 2019. (Very late, if you ask me).
Channels is NOT like your WeChat ID, which is for PRIVATE comms. It's WeChat's foray into public content.

So now, you need a new Channel ID to make content, but not view content (use your existing WeChat ID & leverage social network / relationships).
WeChat tried 3 separate internal algo teams. Found that algo rec was much worse than people rec content performance.

"WeChat style is to improve product not get better at operations (growth etc.)" (Stab at ByteDance, which is known for excellent operations?)
But it's not that algos are bad, more that algos need large existing pool of content (this is true, ByteDance began w ”stealing" content).

Allen predicted ratio of videos you see will be:
Follows : Friend Rec : Machine Rec :: 1 : 2 : 10
Apparently right now it is already 1:2:9.
Friend Rec likely to be "knowledge based" content, Machine Rec likely to be brainless entertainment content.

What should the videos look like in Moments? Should they be links or "video files"?
Allen thinks video "files" will die. They don't make sense bc value of video is so much the creator info & viewer interactions. So that is how Channel Videos show up on Moments (link / cloud).

Long vs. Short Video
Most ppl distinguish short video as <1min. But this is artificial, we don't have a limit. Just that the 1st min becomes the "intro" to a "long" video.
We hope more long videos come to WeChat. (Woah, shots fired?)

We hope Channels becomes place of expression for everyone. We see hope bc lots of users putting their Channels ID/link up on their WeChat profile.
Side note: lots of WeChat users now use "Last 3 days only" for their WeChat Moments feed. (I use 6 mos, LOL). So not much shown when

ppl clickthru. Why didn't we give ppl option to have a "favorites" to showcase best photos / Moments? (FB does). Bc we thot then it would be too static, ppl would keep same. But Channels content is diff. It is dynamic / alive.

How does Allen think abt display format? (ie full screen vs multiple videos / Moments per page).
It's all abt "hit (clickthru) rate." It's like ur Pub Accts, the more u subscribe, the less ur hit rate. So we added "Frequently Read" at top (shows as circles on top of your feed).

When Channels started, the hit rate was v low cuz not much content. So we were half screen. In 2H, content was better, hit rate improved, we started testing full screen, it's a better user exp. But full screen means we need better algo since user can't choose.

Side note: followed Channels views went down after full screen, but machine rec went up. We need to also adjust algo of Followed account videos (not too surprising to me, I think ByteDance does this mix of follows / machine rec super well).

On Livestreaming.
Content always goes to lower barrier of creation. Livestreaming is easier than short video. It's just chatting (I think he's oversimplifying but yes, it's easier to get started). A meteor shower livestream got 1mm viewers just thru social WoM. Was surprising.

WeChat does not have direct livestreaming link yet (u go thru Channels) but will soon. Already have Nearby for livestreaming.
We're enhancing livestreaming functionality in mini programs for ecommerce. (This we already covered on @techbuzzchina Ep. 75).

We're gonna have some special surprise re: livestreaming for Chinese New Year's (Feb. 12) bc that's a lot more like tradition of going over to each other's houses than just digital red packet grabbing.
(OK I think this is GENIUS esp w new lockdowns due to COVID flareup.)

Are we gonna pay for content (ie every other Chinese platform has creator funds / major subsidies)?
In typical Allen style, NO.
We're not gonna spend any money bc the platform when well designed should be able to let creators feed themselves. We also want authentic content.

(LOL more jabs at "operations" which is really growth bc many Chinese companies have extremely sophisticated & manual operations staff. Sep thread on this some time.)

At WeChat we want the product to speak for itself, not rely on operations. (OK I get it Allen!)

Allen: the joy of product is to have some crazy ideas (ie have 10mm ppl each draw a dot on a canvas, what will that look like?) lots have to be discarded, but after very deep thinking, some work out, then u build it, and that's very satisfying.
So now here are the crazy ideas:

1) Expressions. You can tickle someone right now on WeChat (you tap on their profile photo) and anyways 120mm users set it up (I just did, see below) & tens of mms of users use it every day. (Expect more expressions is what I'm getting from this? incl his fave: blow screen open)

2) Statuses.
Your profile should reflect your state. We tried to have video profile but was hard. But still abt 1mm use it a day. We'll give ppl ability to write something (text, not video) very short re: their state. Purpose of social network is to find like-minded folks.

3) Music
After video, lots of ppl aren't "listening" to music except when driving since they're "watching" so much stuff. Allen feels strongly current players suck, just show a rotating record (who still has records these days? oh yeah my hipster husband does.)

But yeah we want to better visualize music. Can you see what others are seeing when u are listening to same song? This really hard tho. (unclear to me when this is coming out?)
4) floating windows. I hate these, but since u can get interrupted in middle of long content they're

necessary. WeChat now has "Unfinished Content" option so you can go back easily. (really! I didn't know this, this is super helpful.)
5) Input keyboard. We are R&Ding our own. Lots of ppl think we sell ur chat history, no. We don't analyze it at all. (So do 3rd party keyboards?)

6) Team. I think teams should be fast. Ppl think we are slow now but actually we are always this speed. I always say if you can't solve a prob in 3 days, either move on, or find another soln bc u won't solve it in 3 mos either.
Either u not sure what u're doing and do nothing, or

move very fast (ofc he quotes Sun Tzu here haha).
Channels is only 1-200 folks, incl 3 algo teams, this includes everyone, backend, ops etc. (OK this is legit a v small number of ppl, cuz Chinese internet cos are HUGE generally, 1-200 is a small Series A/B prod, since 2010.)

10 yrs of WeChat, if had to use 2 words:

1) Connect 2) Simple.

Lots of social products connect just ppl, but we connect info, services, currency etc. We focus on decentralization, bc connection implies decentralized. (Lots might disagree but I agree, esp vs other Chinese cos)

Simplicity is great (here he bashes Wang Xing's Twitter clone, Fanfou).
We've added a lot of functions, but today's WeChat is still as simple as when we started (oh boy, I saw lots of folks disagreeing w this).
I hope it maintains its soul, beauty, creativity and style.

That ends his 2 hr, 20K word speech.
I'm MUCH more optimistic about Channels after his speech (yesterday's lady was NOT good). There's a lot of intention here and a lot of detail, I still have Qs & doubts but I'm overall very eager to see Channels evolve.

I think Allen is a TREMENDOUS product thinker, I think EVERYONE in tech should read him & that is in fact one of the things I'm trying to build, elevate TOP thinkers from China to rest of world bc everyone can learn from each other. (And also bc dude, enough Musk).