

Autonomy Overturning: Media Regulation in Critical News Reporting in China's Online News

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Abstract: Marketization as an ongoing process in China's online news industry has resulted significant "power-shifting": news media's function becomes more of social and financial, but less of the political. This leads to the changes of journalistic practice within the newsroom. Arguably, online news workers are going through a drastic change of media regulation. In time of reporting critical news, their gaining autonomy allows them to include/exclude news content in a market-driven environment. Conducting 20 in-depth interviews with China's online news workers from 2012 to 2018, this paper explores the internalization of media regulation within the newsrooms. It develops the triangular models of coordination/restrain to demonstrate how the inclusion/exclusion decisions are influenced throughout the process of online news production.

1. Introduction

Clarifying the protocol of reporting critical news within the online newsroom can explain at least two issues in the online news industry in China: How the online news media are regulated and internalized, and how the different professional roles (journalists, editors, and web administrators, etc.) of Chinese online news workers deal with inclusion and exclusion of raw news materials. This process of decision-making throughout the news production relies on what Palmer [1] calls "a system of criteria". This system is often reflected in self-regulations and autonomy of individual news workers.

Defining the scope of the 'self' here is important because in practice, journalists and editors may have different notions and definitions of what is being *self-* in news production. Horton [2] describes self-regulation as a restriction where people "deliberately" prevent themselves from expressing particular perspectives because it is likely to cause offence. This notion, however, is not equally valued across all cultures. Thus, Petley [3] argues that freedom of expression is not absolute in China or in other democratic societies. Particularly in the context of Chinese news media, there are certain perspectives or information understood by Chinese news workers as not suitable for transmission into news content. Despite the news value of these perspectives or information, they are considered socially sensitive and must be approached carefully in news production.

Like journalism in western liberal culture, Chinese journalism also relate to "... the context and environment in which they work and the economic and temporal pressures they are under" (Steel, 2012: 583). [4] Before the time of transformation in China, the loyalty of news media arguably lied

on the authoritarian state, but now it has showing signs of embracing marketization. Furthermore, it has been argued that media's loyalty is leaning on advertising, subscription dependence and capital investment (Winfield & Peng, 2005: 260) [5]. As a result, autonomy within the newsrooms is overturning [6]. Chinese journalists conceive of themselves as less dependent on the authorities and more so as a profession with a distinct social function. [7] This paper, therefore, investigates the situation of media regulation and internalization within China's online newsroom, and examines to what extent the journalistic practice and autonomy is influenced.

2. Methodology

For examining the impact of the media on decision-making and journalistic practice, this research chooses in-depth interview as the method. The aim of using in-depth interviews is to collect empirical data of perspectives on and experiences of media regulation and editorial process within China's online news media from Chinese online news workers. The interview was conducted from 2012 to 2018, covering 20 participants in total.

In-depth interviews are widely used as a data collection strategy in social science research. Semi-structured qualitative interviewing, in particular, has its advantage on emphasising on structure while accommodating "spontaneous, reflexive interaction" (McCurdy, 2009: 136) [8] between two parties – the interviewer and interviewee. For this study, all interviews are semi-structured. This type of interview can provide a breadth of data by asking open-ended questions with purpose, and its nature allows the researcher to adjust questions accordingly while the interviews are being conducted. [9,10] In order to capture their perceptions and experiences in the process of online news making, this research collected empirical data from three types of professions from online news media in China: online journalists, editors and web administrators

Thematic analysis is used as the conceptual tool in this research to utilize the data. This qualitative approach was informed by Schutz's theory of social phenomenology as both a philosophical framework and a methodology [11] Social phenomenology is interpreted by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2008: pp.81-2) [12] as a descriptive and interpretive theory of social action that "explores subjective experience within the taken-for-granted, 'common-sense' world of the daily life of individuals". In this study, the themes of media regulation and self-regulation that emerged during the process of data collecting and analysing are identified through what Rice and Ezzy [13] described as "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (1999: p.258). The data that describes the activities of operationalisation of media regulation within the processes of online news production are interpreted through a form of pattern recognition where these emerging themes above become the categories for analysis.

3. Result

3.1. Media Internalization

Interview with online news workers explores the cooperative relationship between the Chinese authorities and online news in the processes of online news production. This emerged as a significant factor when interviewees were found to have different understandings of what exactly 'self-regulation' includes and excludes, and in some scenarios they were referring to different kinds of self-censoring.

The following three segments are taken from transcriptions of interviews, who described different types of media regulation, in which some of their response to censorship pressure, like being directly contacted and instructed to comply during the process of online news production, were also interpreted as another form of self-regulation within the online newsroom. Their nuances

were distinctive. Schudson and Anderson (2009: p.94) argue that in China the social function of the objectivity norm is different to that in Western journalism, such as American and British. [14] The three sets of data above reflect this argument, as they highlight the taboos of criticizing social issues. These sensitive topics are not within the framework of a western understanding of news values, such as reference to elite people, negativity, meaningfulness (Brighton & Foy, 2007: p.7), [15] importance, novelty, and story quality [16]. In some scenario, media regulation was interpreted as a process of how news workers perceived the boundaries of writing publishable news, whereas others, it was referred to a form of editorial process or an embodiment of internal regulation. In these scenarios, self-regulation and the editorial process of online news production were incorporated in the perspective of participants. It also, therefore, refers to a process of individual conception or an editorial teamwork activity,

These scenarios also reflect the characteristic of gatekeeping in China's news media, which is synchronization of the tone of social and economic development. [17] From the historical perspective, it is understood that nationalistic salvation has been adopted as one of the key concepts in the publicity strategy. Communism, along with Maoism, for instance, integrated the idea of liberty with nationalism and salvation [18], and became a significant strategy for publicity ever since. [19,20] Its essence still addresses the importance of media stability and synchronization. The emphasis on maintaining a harmonious society and developing the economy as priorities remains a guideline for gatekeeping in news media, online news included.

3.2. Individual Conception

Different online news workers also respond to internalization differently. Significant activities exemplifying the online news workers' struggle and resistance were also found. A few journalists and editors challenged instructions and self-regulated to meet the standard more subtly. Also, there were a number of online news workers who were found to be taking a balanced attitude. The resistant acts against administrative pressure and ensuring the safety of online news content, hence, required journalistic tactics which some online news workers called "journalistic tricks".

Journalist interviewees openly revealed their feelings about regulating themselves in writing stories. These confessions were labelled as 'individual conception'. Generally, the stage of individual conception lies between the pre-production briefing and editing. It is a stage in which the online journalists internalized the pressure of censorship, self-edited the words of news stories and self-regulated the depth of reporting, based on their individual understanding of the administrative instructions. It is also a process through which they carefully deal with raw news material that needs to be categorized into either inclusion or exclusion. [21,22] Bearing in mind political sensibilities, material that is judged as 'contentious' (Petley, 2009: pp.3-4) [3] or deal with 'taboos' (Tong, 2009: pp.607-8) [23] may be excluded.

Usually, the conception process is followed by the online journalists when they are writing up stories on their own. Their sensitivities and personal knowledge and experience influence the way they write their stories. Individual conception is no doubt an almost certain universal requirement for journalists who write their stories, not only limited to Chinese online news workers. However, the distinctiveness of this individual conception in the online newsroom in China is that journalists and editors are consistently reminded by their supervisors to maintain the political correctness of online news content. Meanwhile, their personal judgment of the raw material also influences news content. Online news workers have to approach news material carefully and examine whether it is suitable for conversion into news stories. This is a practical phenomenon in Chinese online newsrooms where news workers "deliberately" [2] avoid including news material that may cause offence. These concerns reflected in their individual conception and eventually the news product.

3.3. Individual Conception

Arguably, the editorial process is also considered to be a process of internalization, as inclusion and exclusion are understood to be practices of the politics of self-censorship (Tong, 2009: p.594). [23] Editing can appear as self-adjustment in responding to censorship pressure. Thus, this self-regulation was recognized as submissive rather than partially voluntary. Bearing in mind that the intention of self-censoring news material is to comply with political concerns (Petley, 2009: pp.101-2) [3], editorial control is considered to be a stage where self-regulation of both the individual online news workers and the editing/sub-editing process occurred. Overall, these mechanisms of media regulation within the online newsroom examine, digest, and filter online news content to ensure the inclusion of news content is suitable for release.

Some editors prefer editorial control to be a process filled with discussions, negotiations and collaborations. They believe that this kind of atmosphere enables online journalists to share the responsibilities in the newsroom. However, the interactive atmosphere does not equal the editors' preference for journalistic proactivity in the industry in China. The hierarchy in the newsroom determines different levels of autonomy for different professions. Editors appear to have more influence on the output of news content. The construction of online/offline news organisations, previously reviewed by Zhao [6], Lee [24] and McNair [25], for instance, ensures that instructions coming from superiors are considered mandatory, with little room for discussion at the lower level. In this sense, the dynamic of the production process may be limited due to the hierarchy.

The process of editorial control can also be seen as a result of the development of gatekeeping. In his discussion of the transformation of gatekeeping in online news media, Canter [26] argues that the traditional gatekeeper becomes a professional verifier of online news media. This paper examined how these Chinese online news workers fulfil their traditional roles of acting by using the Internet as a news medium, a role that Canter (2014: p.112) outlines as watchdogs, quality controllers, analyzers and storytellers. However, evidence has also shown that there is a certain degree of resistance in online newsrooms, where internal ideological and power struggles play out (Lam, 2000: p.42) and motivate online news workers to strive for autonomy. [19] In terms of social sensibilities and ambiguous critical news, there are arguably sensitive areas that online news media have to approach carefully. The gatekeeping ensures that this criticism gets filtered in the online newsroom, and that the official doctrine for "constructing a modernized socialist country" [17] is priorities. In the era of undergoing media transformation [27, 28] and press commercialization [5,29], advocating this doctrine may seem like a difficult task as perceived. It may undermine a set of news values which are commonly seen by western academics as important to consider in the process of composing news, such as for instance, relevance, timeliness, unexpectedness, meaningfulness, and predictability/unpredictability. [15, 30]

4. Discussion

Deriving from interviews, this research formulates the triangular models of the mechanism of media regulation (see figure 1 below). They were refined to demonstrate important aspects discussed in this study, including the autonomy of online news workers in the newsroom, journalistic professionalism and news values in China's context, and the. By doing so, the models explain operationalisation of media regulation in the process of online news production.

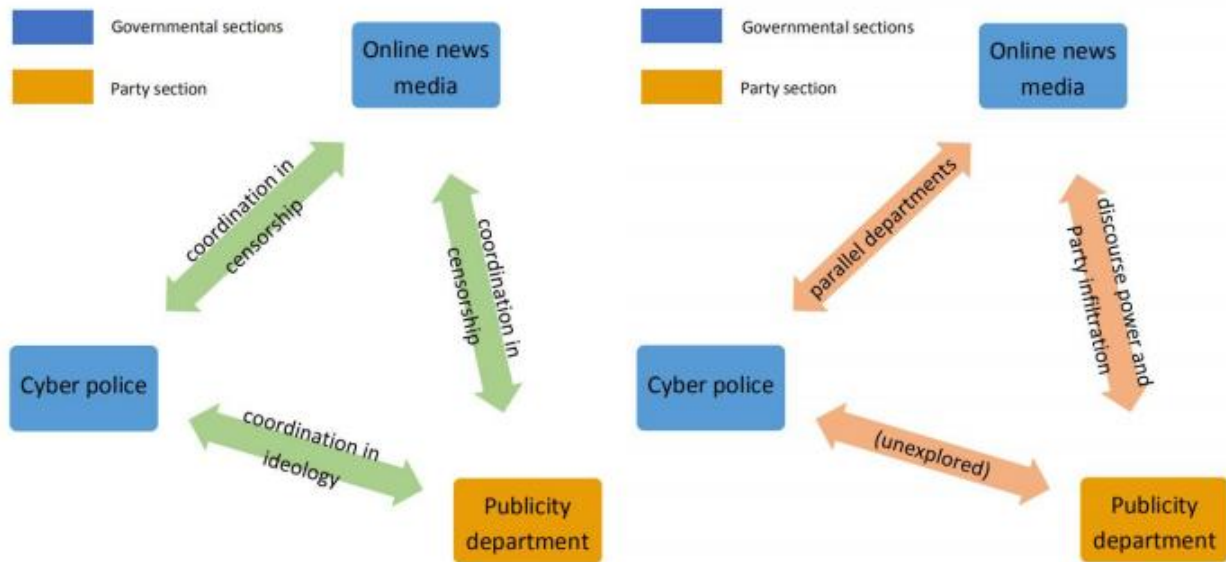


Figure 1: Coordination and restriction triangular models of online censorship.

The models consist of three entities: the online news media, government censors, and the publicity department. The green arrows represent their relationships in coordination, while the red arrows represent their relationships in restriction. The models present a stable and fundamental protocol of online censorship where all three entities coordinate and restrain each other. They form two enclosed matrices.

4.1. Coordination

One of the core words in these triangular models of dynamic mechanisms is ‘coordination’. The impression given by some existing literature suggests that, if pursuing freedom of speech and freedom of press is unquestionably ethical virtue for journalists, the Chinese authorities must play the role of the oppressor. The Chinese authorities are against freedom and liberty and censor those news workers who are striving for the ethical virtues. However, the Chinese online news workers may find that the notion of ‘virtues’ is ambiguous in their journalistic practice. The impression that authorities and online news workers were in opposition was found to be arbitrary and biased while other literature suggests there is a trend that press commercialisation has shifted media’s loyalty from the authorities to its financial supporters. [23,31,32] The development of the Internet is arguably an important factor that accelerates this process. [6,17,33] This dynamic change explains the relationship between online news media and the publicity. Online news workers have overturning autonomy in the process of news production which officials now cannot arbitrarily interfere with. The publicity also has shown friendly gesture that can be interpreted as the result of online news media’s influence over public opinion. A sign of willingness to coordinate was found; the media interference was not always aggressive, and the news workers were not always weak and submissive. Online news in the triangular matrix also possess autonomy, it was not as simple as one versus the other but a dynamic coordination process.

The triangular models present fluid loops where all three entities involved are active, communicative and coordinative. The publicity and the news media maintained a close relationship and frequent exchanged of opinion during critical incidents such as natural calamities and man-made misfortunes. Evidently, directives for critical news coverage are the outcomes of these timely

and flexible corporations between these three parties. The flexibility of the directives is embodied in different ways. Firstly, the scope of the directives may be vague. Directives normally include a summary of a few topics that the media should avoid reporting due to their social sensitiveness. Secondly, what has been suggested by Zhao [27], Winfield and Peng [5] about the impact of financial autonomy on news content is also found applicable to online news media. For instance, the use of moderate and suggestive terms such as 'should' and 'avoid' rather than strong terms such as 'must' and 'prohibit', and the vague term 'which may arouse public criticism' suggests that the instructor did not strictly stipulate the boundary of news exclusion. thirdly, these directives were often not delivered in hard-copy but by word-of-mouth. This suggests that the publicity lacked written protocols to direct online news in reporting emergent incidents, and the oversight is not systematic nor consistent.

The lack of systematic control and flexibility reflects Lam's argument about institutional loopholes that allow news workers to circumvent limitations (Lam, 2000: p.42). [19] The existence of loopholes in media regulation and the vague nature of the directives from the censors enhanced the importance of individual conception in the news production process. This goes back to, again, the need for online journalists and editors to internalise the directives, and probe and guess how much criticism can be tolerated based on their personal judgement and journalistic experience. Overall, as their financial autonomy is gradually gained, online news workers are in a position to make decisions on inclusion and exclusion according to their public audiences. The publicity, on the other hand, appeared less hostile to online news organisations and their interference in the process of news production had shown signs of cooperation.

4.2. Restriction

Another important aspect of the triangular models is that they present another force that operates between these three parties but has hitherto been ignored: restrictions. The red arrows in the figure represent the dynamic cycle of restrictions, and between every random two parties, a red arrow represents a restrictive force. Notably, neither of any force has the authority to overrule the others. The effective restriction leverage for online news is recognised as media platform's influence of the public, it reflects the publicity's misgivings about the influence of the public that online news possesses. There is a reasonable explanation for this harmonised relationship. It indicates that the media censors are lack of possessing enough manpower and material resources to maintain a refined online news filtering operation.

The models also testify that the Internet and the popularity of online media have helped China to transform authoritarianism and pursue the objective of building democracy and free media as noted by McNair [25]. In terms of striving for their autonomy in the processes of online news production, this study found that Chinese online journalists learnt to harness their influence over public opinion in their journalistic practice. The publicity, on the other hand, are found to be constrained by media supervision, which corroborates McNair's argument. [25] At the current stage of reformation, the dissents between Chinese online news media and the publicity may be unavoidable. [34] Nevertheless, news workers, who are considered as anti-traditional reformists of the media, have found themselves in the position of having autonomy and being able to leverage with the authorities.

In sum, what needs to be highlighted is the confirmation of autonomy in the online newsroom, where online journalists and editors do not submissively accept instructions and comply with them without resistance. Apart from their call for professionalism, [7,25] autonomy cannot be gained without media transformation, reformation of organisation, and the changing of political landscape. In addition, the marketization of online news has already had an impact on the output of news content and has shaped the way Chinese online news workers understand their transitional nature

and political vigilance in journalistic practice. Reporting critical news regarding government policies and individual officials before the era of media transformation may be seen as an act of intolerable, but may now be part of journalistic routine as a result of commercialisation.

5. Conclusion

In the context of China's news media industry, this paper examines the operationalization of media regulation and self-regulation by the formulation of its triangular models. At its core, the models recognised the different forces at play between the authorities and online news. Within the online news organisations, its construction can ensure the political demands of supporting the ideology. [6,25] But at the same time, some aspects of journalistic professionalism that have been discussed by western schools of thought, such as objectivity, quality, legitimacy and credibility, [14,25,35] negativity, meaningfulness (Brighton & Foy, 2007: p.7), [15] truthfulness, sense of humanity [4] also can be attend to.

The formulation of the models presents fluid loops where dynamic interactions, leveraging and negotiation were involved in the news production. It supports the argument that the news workers' responses to the mechanism of media regulation are dynamic and transforming. [27,32,36,37] It also explain the necessity of coordination and restriction for the authorities in a time of happenstances, which might develop due to critical news. Some researchers have argued that this transformation was resulted by commercialisation, which has already made Chinese online news a freer place with less institutional interference. [38,39,40] This paper verifies this argument and further concludes that journalistic practice throughout the process of online news production is too influenced. Online news workers' autonomy is overturned and their daily routine within the newsroom is inclining to market-driven.

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