

Negotiating the boundaries of news reporting Journalists' strategies to gain access to and report on political information in China

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Abstract

Since Chinese politicians have the power to control the dissemination of political information, beat journalists must guard their relationship with the authorities in order to expand the boundaries of news reporting – that is, to gain more access to political information and report more sensitive news. What remains a puzzle is how beat journalists can possibly expand these boundaries. Data from participatory observation and in-depth interviews with journalists reveal that, in order to gain more access to political information, they not only serve as political advocates but also seize the opportunity to act as watchdogs. In order to report more sensitive news without being sanctioned or denounced by the authorities, they coordinate with peers both within and outside the news organization.

Introduction

Journalists are not fully autonomous when reporting the news; they are influenced by other actors, including media owners, advertisers, audiences, interest groups and politicians (McManus, 1994; Reese, 2001). Politicians shape how journalists report political news to a greater extent than other actors (Habermas, 2006). However, it is debatable whether politicians or journalists have a stronger impact on the reporting of political news. In West-

ern democracies, the politician–journalist relationship resembles a “tango” in which either party could take the lead (Gans, 1979, 2003).

As for China, many would believe that politicians dominate the production of political news. Media censorship is known to be strong and pervasive and all news organizations are requested to follow the party propaganda guidelines (Hao et al., 1998; Brady, 2008; He, 2008). In this context, the journalist–politician relationship can hardly be regarded as a “tango” – “puppet show” might be a more appropriate metaphor. Yet, any conclusion that Chinese journalists have no autonomy at all in political news reporting is somewhat subjective. For instance, the commercial pressure on news organizations has driven journalists to expand the boundaries of news reporting, which indicates the limit of political news reporting in China against political and social control (Lu, 2005; Zhang, 2008).

By political control, we mean the concrete control exercised by propaganda authorities when they send notices to the newsroom to define the reporting boundaries of a particular news issue (Lu, 2005). Social control, on the other hand, is defined as government officials’ control over journalists, whom they treat differently in accordance with the social relationship between the two parties. As opposed to their Western counterparts, Chinese governmental officials, who are synonymous with politicians due to the one-party political system, hold the power to decide whether or not to release news information to the media, how much they want to reveal, which news organizations they prefer to use, and whether or not they will request that the propaganda authority punish any journalists who have published negative news about them.

However, the fact that journalists are politically and socially controlled does not necessarily mean that they are at the mercy of the politicians; the latter also need journalists to disseminate their propaganda. One of the keys for politicians to move upwards on the career ladder is to have positive news published and to silence negative news.

Journalists, therefore, have some power to bargain with politicians to expand their reporting boundaries. How journalists can raise the stakes in negotiations with politicians is an important and interesting question. Based on empirical data from participatory observation at a commercial newspaper in China and interviews with the newspaper’s journalists, this article explores the strategies used by Chinese beat journalists to expand their news reporting boundaries for political issues.

Journalist–politician relations and news reporting

Journalists and politicians in Western democracies are mutually dependent on one another, but they have different professional objectives (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). In this symbiotic relationship, politicians require the publicity and visibility that journalists can provide, while journalists need high-level access to politicians for political information (Sigal, 1973; McManus, 1994; Davis, 2009). Consequently, an ongoing “tug of war” or “tango” takes place with the control shifting from the one side to the other (Gans, 1979). This is reflected in the

reporting of the news, which fluctuates between being more compliant and more critical of the politicians (Davis, 2009).

The question drawing the most attention is which side is leading this “tango”. Gans (1979, 2003) and Davis (2000) find that it is the politicians, while Strömbäck and Nord (2006, p.147) conclude that “it is the journalists not their political sources that lead the tango most of the time”.

According to Gans (2003, p. 46), American journalists report “what the sources tell them”, and they tend to index the range of political views to the presence of mainstream government actors who share those views (Bennett 2003, p. 125). Likewise, Davis (2000) found that the British media are becoming increasingly dependent on information supplied by external sources due to tighter editorial budgets. In the Netherlands, journalists are less likely to follow politicians’ views; yet, politicians tend to prevail since they very often seem to succeed in getting media attention and coverage (Brants et al., 2010, p. 37).

In Sweden, however, journalists sometimes have control over the media agenda, depending on the power of the politician they are facing and the news organization they serve. And when it comes to the framing and content of news stories, they have absolute dominance (Strömbäck & Nord 2006, pp. 148–9). These findings compare with those of Reich (2006) and Eriksson and Östman (2013), who suggest that journalists gain more autonomy in the later phases of the news production process.

The differing power balance between politicians and journalists from one news organization to another with respect to the media agenda is also seen in the US. American national news outlets, such as *The New York Times* and *ABC News*, lead political activities more often than they follow them, while most local news outlets tend to follow the lead of politicians (Bartels, 1996) – that is, they “index” news coverage (Bennett, 2003).

Journalist–politician relations and the news reporting boundary in China

This summary of the research on journalist–politician relations shows that there is no conclusive answer as to who leads the dance in democratic settings. In non-democracies, we would expect the answer to be more definite. In China, in particular, politicians and the government predominantly control news reporting. While Western journalists are secured a comparatively higher level of access to politicians and government by law (Larsson, 2002), Chinese journalists must find political sources that are less obligated to be transparent.

Chinese politicians do not only hold the power to control the dissemination of information, they are also able to retaliate against journalists who have published negative news about them. Journalists may be blacklisted from attending regular events for news information, or the propaganda authority may even ask to dismiss the journalist or their supervisors (Bennett, 2010).

In this sense, one might conclude that the journalist–politician relationship is more like a “puppet show” than a “tango”. However, studies show that Chinese journalists are not

that passive. Not only do they attempt to report sensitive news before the arrival of the propaganda notices from the communication authority, they also try to “play with the edge”¹ of the political bans (Kuang, 2012). This is possible because the party state supports media commercialization by loosening the strings on the news organizations so that they can win market share in order to avoid becoming dependent on state financial support (Wu, 2000). Yet, it is out of the question for the Chinese news organizations to gain as much autonomy as their counterparts in the West. Despite economic reforms, the Chinese media system is only moving from totalitarianism to market authoritarianism (Winfield & Peng, 2005). The journalist-politician relationship, therefore, is definitely not a tango, but neither is it a puppet show.

Journalists seem to know the boundaries of news reporting, which vary for different news issues. For issues referring to basic state policies – for instance, Tibet and family planning, the boundary is fixed. For issues that are considered too sensitive and have already triggered bans from the propaganda authorities, which send notices to the newsroom on an event-by-event basis, the freedom to report is diminished to nothing (Zhang, 2008). For the other issues, which offend neither state policies nor propaganda disciplines, the boundaries are elastic, and journalists try to stretch them.

Attempts to expand news reporting boundaries are spurred by pressures at the organizational level and individual level. First, since most Chinese news organizations are now commercial, journalists are encouraged to report on the news that attracts the largest audience (Zhao, 2000, p. 584). In a politically-controlled environment, the sensitive news that is not favorable to politicians is generally the most attractive to the public. Second, journalists have many motivations to expand the boundaries: to produce more news reports to fulfill their workload, to write good news, to make themselves competitive among their peers and to act professionally to meet journalistic ideals.

The boundaries of news reporting may also be expanded when politicians require positive news about themselves and the government units they are leading. Their dependence on commercial news organizations to spread propaganda is expected to increase as the commercialized media become more popular.

Expanding news reporting boundaries in China

Maintaining and improving social relationships with politicians, thus, becomes the key for journalists to expand the boundaries of news reporting by gaining more access to political information and publishing more sensitive news.

Gaining more access to political information

News source-journalist relations have a substantial impact on news production because the sources influence the reporting content (Cassaway, 1988; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). First, there is much information that “travels outside authorized, prescribed channels”. Whether

or not it is obtained and made into news depends on the source-journalist relationship (Gassaway, 1998). Politicians as the source of political information possess the power to prevent some of the information from being released to the news media (Davis, 2000). Even when journalists have access to the source, how much they can get from the source partly depends on the relationship between the two (ibid.).

The situation in China is believed to be worse due to the fact that politicians have fewer obligations or incentives to report to citizens through the news media. This power imbalance has led Chinese journalists to see themselves more as opportunistic facilitators who convey positive aspects of government policies and leadership images than as detached watchdogs (Weaver, 1998). In the West, journalists seldom report on the achievements of politicians, which they generally consider to be non-news (Brants et al., 2010); in China, journalists have to do so.

Consequently, Chinese journalists have to put greater effort into maintaining relations with politicians than Western journalists in order to have access to the information they are supposed to acquire. Without these relations, journalists would never gain access to the regular press releases of the authorities – not to mention any exclusive information from them (Lu, 2005).

Despite the importance of this subject, not many studies have specifically examined how journalists can increase access to political information. Among the few, Pan (2000, pp. 83–90) found that Chinese journalists would write publicity contents and accept paid journalism, which brings them into a network providing them with the access to and verification of the news information required for their reporting. Such paid journalism stands in sharp contrast to the professional standards of journalism according to which journalists shall serve the public, not the government and public officials.

Publishing more sensitive news

As the Chinese news media become more commercialized, journalists are pressed to cover more sensitive news in order to attract audiences and readers. Politically sensitive news is primarily revealed by anonymous sources within the system although, in some cases, also by journalists from other news organizations who were unable to publish the news due to organizational policies (Zhang, 2008).

Maintaining relations with government officials also becomes the key to get access to sensitive news. It is even more challenging for journalists to publish sensitive news without being denounced or sanctioned by related authorities.

Some studies have scrutinized how Chinese investigative journalists do sensitive reporting. Tong (2007), for example, summarized five “guerrilla reporting tactics” used by Chinese investigative journalists to avoid sanctions when they report politically sensitive news while still meeting the requirements of their professional calling. These tactics include choosing a theme or aspects of an issue that would not breach the bottom line of the Communist Party, making political comment in the guise of constructive criticism, writing objectively,

quoting sources that are acceptable to officials and obtaining interviews by misrepresenting themselves. Zhang (2008) also found that investigative journalists would try to stretch the boundaries of reporting by studying the news bans to make “strategic breakthroughs” without stepping into political mine fields. Journalists have also been known to cooperate with peers from other news organizations in order to share the political risks.

Used by investigative journalists, however, these tactics may not be relevant for beat reporters. This is because beat reporters, who constantly rely on related authorities for information, must consider whether their reporting would be detrimental to their relationship with politicians. This is why it is so necessary to carry out research on how beat reporters deal with politically sensitive issues.

Research questions

This article seeks to answer a question that receives few attentions from academic circles despite its significance: How do beat journalists push the limits when reporting on political issues in China? In this context, news reporting boundaries are defined as the maximized limit of political news reporting, which can be expanded, depending on the ability of news reporters to gain more access to political information and publish more sensitive news despite the political and social controls imposed by Chinese authorities and politicians.

Two sub-questions are thus raised: 1) What strategies are applied by beat journalists to gain more access to political information? 2) What strategies are applied by beat journalists to publish more sensitive news without being denounced or sanctioned by the authorities?

Methods and data

The data come primarily from participatory observation at a Chinese newspaper. By working for three months as an intern at the Local News Division (LND) of Paper S, a province-level non-party newspaper, the author was able to record the whole process of how journalists communicate with local authorities, go about their reporting and write news reports. Both on-site and follow-up interviews were done with six journalists (four senior, two junior) at Paper S. A seminar organized by the LND of Paper S on reporting tactics and maintaining relationships with local authorities was also recorded. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, both the newspaper and journalists interviewed are kept anonymous.

Selecting Paper S as the entry to the field based on both theoretical and practical considerations. As a commercialized, non-party news organization, which is not considered as the official outlet for the government, the newspaper must invest greater effort than its party counterparts to improve or maintain its relationships with government officials, which makes the paper a good point for observing strategies for pushing the limits of news reporting. It was also easier for the author to gain access to Paper S because the author has a personal connection there, which is essential for data collection in China.

In fact, even with connections, the author could not secure permission to enter the newsroom. The status of the author as a Chinese national working for a foreign university prevented him from working as a registered researcher at Paper S. An application made by the author, sponsored by a page editor and sent to the human resources department at Paper S, was rejected. Surprised by the restrictive policy with respect to having external observers, the page editor finally worked out a solution by making the author an unregistered intern, serving as an assistant to a senior journalist at the LND.

Even though the author was not registered at Paper S, many journalists at the LND were well aware of the author's position as an intern and a researcher. Nevertheless, because the author was not officially registered, he could not openly ask for an opportunity to follow other journalists than the senior journalist to do news reporting. However, the senior journalist was able to introduce the author to five other journalists with whom she had worked closely in the past.

Participatory observation as an approach to collecting data has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, by actively taking part in the routine work in the newsroom, the author had the opportunity to observe more. Moreover, only if the author was part of the newsroom could the journalists there be more open to his questions. On the other hand, the researcher's values and personality would have an influence on the objectiveness of the data from his observations. Moreover, some journalists might not feel comfortable when they realized that there was an observer. To compensate, the author made references to the literature on newsroom practices to verify points of observation from time to time. Moreover, he made efforts to reduce the awareness of the journalists that he was observing them, e.g., by offering help and working with them.

The author also used observation data to verify the reliability of the data from interviews. To protect the journalists being interviewed from any potential repercussions, the author had to keep both the newspaper and individual journalists anonymous. When this might undermine the perceived credibility of the interesting data, the author has tried to make the data collection process as transparent as possible to reduce the negative effects of anonymization.

Although the number of interviewees is only six, the data is unique, considering the difficulty of obtaining access to Chinese newsrooms and journalists. The interview data also serve to verify the data obtained via observation.

Major questions for the journalists include their descriptions of their relations with the government departments and officials they covered, the influence of such relations to their reporting, how they acquire news information and handle negative news, and their opinions on the essentials of being an excellent beat reporter in China. Follow-up questions were raised when the beat journalists referred to interesting circumstances.

Interview transcriptions and field notes were analyzed with reference to the four stages of the coding process described by Bryman (2008). In the first step, some major categories were produced, and text segments were subsumed under these category themes follow-

ing a thorough examination of the data. Next, the text segments under these categories were again examined and marked with specific codes. In the following step, the texts were systematically marked with the codes produced or new codes. These codes were reviewed, compared and integrated if they were found similar. In the last step, the reduced codes were analyzed to find the interconnections between them with reference to the existing research findings and the research questions.

Results

Beat journalists confirm that maintaining a good relationship with the authorities is essential to beat reporting. They have different opinions as to how close the relationship should be, but the bottom line is that journalists cannot be ignored, resisted or rejected when the authorities have information to release.

To push the limits for reporting the news, beat journalists must develop effective strategies. This section presents the two major strategies pursued by beat journalists to gain more access to news information, including “serving as political advocates” and “seizing the opportunities to be watchdogs” before elaborating on the strategy for publishing more sensitive news without being punished: namely, “coordinating with both internal and external journalists”.

Access strategies

Getting access to news information from the Chinese authorities is far more complicated than a Western journalist can imagine. Maintaining a regular relationship with the related party and government departments is not enough; journalists have to “serve as political advocates” and “seize the opportunities to be watchdogs”.

Serving as political advocates. Journalists at Paper S are proud of being part of the newspaper renowned for its “professionalism” in reporting negative news. Being well aware of the politicians’ power to withhold political information, however, the journalists also work to please the politicians whenever they are in need of propaganda so that they can trade propaganda for more access to the information released by the authorities.

Journalists did not deny working as “opportunistic facilitators”. One experienced journalist told his colleagues in an internal seminar at Paper S that repeatedly writing positive news about a politician could help them gain the politician’s trust, which could subsequently provide opportunities for exclusive interviews and being picked to ask questions at press conferences. Another journalist pointed out, “When the politicians want you to put feathers in their cap, you should do it nicely to make them happy so that they think of you whenever they need to do communication campaigns”.

Some journalists put special effort into attracting the attention of the high-ranking officials on their beat. One way of doing this was to highlight whatever the high-ranking officials said even if other officials appearing at the same event had offered something more

interesting. Some journalists went so far as to collect the news stories they had written on particular officials and send the collection to the officials to impress them.

There are also times when Chinese journalists feel they must work as an “advocate” rather than do what they prefer to do. Journalists explained that these “must do” cases usually apply to interviews with high-ranking officials such as leaders at the provincial or ministerial levels. One journalist offered an example:

Our colleague had gotten an exclusive written interview with the former provincial governor before he left office. But the interview protocol offered by the journalist was ignored by the officers under the governor. Instead, they sent us a dialogue with their own questions and answers, which mainly chronicled the economic development of the province during his term of office. But our newspaper published the whole dialogue. It was still an exclusive report since provincial or ministerial leaders rarely accept exclusive interview invitations from local news media.

Being an advocate also means that journalists accept material rewards from officials, which is in conflict with the norms of professional journalism. Although journalists denied that they had ever engaged in “paid journalism”, all of them admitted they would not reject the “red packet” (*hongbao*, cash wrapped up in red paper), which is a “small amount” of money ranging between 100 to 1,000 Chinese *yuan*. This “small amount” of money is usually put in an official envelop of the related government department and given to journalists invited to press conferences or events organized by the authorities. Journalists assessed whether it was “paid journalism” or not by the amount of money in the envelope and the intentions of the communication officers who gave them the money. One journalist related:

When you receive the communication package, you always check if there is a ‘thick’ envelope...if they obviously give you a big amount of money, especially when the money is supposed to be given to shut you up [after a negative event has happened] and to give you some instructions on [writing or not writing] specific content, you definitely cannot take it and should return the envelope. Most journalists react in this manner, and we report to our supervisors when this happens.

Another journalist took the red packet as an invitation by the authority in question to report in a particular “promised” way:

The red packet is nicknamed the ‘traffic allowance’. Only if it is not a ‘shut-up fee’, I personally believe that it is like the ‘lucky money’ you get [from your friends and relatives] during the Chinese New Year. It is symbolic. You don’t get rich from 200 yuan.

None of the journalists interviewed took the red packet issue seriously because it seems to have been normal practice. They felt that it was money that they “had to receive” rather than money they were “willing to take”. No journalist would reject the offer; otherwise,

they would be taken as either “not willing to cooperate with the authority” or “planning to get on the authority’s back”. The immediate result of rejecting the money is that they will not be invited to the next press conference or event.

Even when journalists accept the red packet, however, they do not feel as though they are obliged to publish the positive news report. Yet, they would try to write the news story as professional as possible to get it published, which was a win-win situation for both the authority and journalist.

Journalists obviously take the opportunity to publish positive news stories about the authorities in order to trade such stories for more future access to news information, even sensitive information. Many spoke of how they had made use of the communications officer performance evaluation scheme utilized by the government departments to maintain their relationship. As part of this scheme, government communication officers need a certain amount of positive news about their departments or leaders; in other words, they need the journalists’ help. Some journalists also related how maintaining such a relationship with politicians could occasionally provide journalists with exclusive information about the authorities and other politicians that could be used for critical reporting. They were hesitant to confirm that such information was released by politicians in order to denounce their political rivals within the system but admitted that the sources would request to remain anonymous in the news reports.

Seizing the opportunities to be watchdogs. It is important for journalists to act as political advocates, but news organizations would not survive in the market unless they also maintained their watchdog role. As such, journalists cannot avoid negative reporting. For those beat journalists who already maintain proper relations with the authorities, it is important to seize the opportunities to do critical reporting – for example, when the news is reported by journalists from other news organizations. Beat journalists can justify refraining from following an authority’s demand not to reprint or follow up on negative news: They bear the responsibility if they miss news that has been broken by their peers. Using this explanation, they can still keep their good relations with the authorities. More importantly, by following up on the negative news, journalists claim that they give the relevant government departments and officials an opportunity to “clarify” and “tell the truth”, which is also a bonus opportunity for the journalists to improve their relations with the authorities.

For beat journalists who have difficulty gaining access to the authorities – especially those who have just started working on a new beat, seizing the opportunity to act as watchdog can open doors. New journalists who attended the internal seminar at Paper S expressed frustration about how some officials never invited them to press conferences and events. They wanted to “strike a small blow” via negative reporting so that they will not be ignored by the officials in the future. Their idea appeared to be supported by the experienced journalists, who had provided several examples of how that strategy worked.

However, the journalists emphasized that this strategy was only effective if journalists were denied access to the authority even though they had tried the ordinary methods of

relationship maintenance, including visiting the officers and sending gifts during major traditional festivals. “This may work once or twice, but it shouldn’t be used all the time. After all, journalists have to be on the beat for a long time”, one journalist explained.

Moreover, the strategy is not valid for journalists who are on the beat of several “highly important” party and government departments – for example, the party committee and discipline inspection commission. Negative news about these departments cannot appear in the news outlet because the “chief editors and directors would care more about their rice bowl [their job]”.

Reporting strategies for sensitive news

Journalists who cover beats other than the “highly important” party and government departments have much more autonomy with respect to reporting negative news, which is often sensitive news. They are also encouraged to cover sensitive news. “For a really good journalist, it is impossible not to do negative or sensitive reporting. If you only kiss the ass of the relevant authority, your supervisor will fire you”, one of them said.

Even though some authorities are more tolerant with respect to negative news about them, they are still conservative when it comes to “really big and negative news”; even more so are authorities with less experience in dealing with negative news. Thus, reporting more sensitive news is definitely detrimental to the journalist–authority relationship. Journalists may even be punished. The mildest punishment is blacklisting from press conferences and organized events, while a heavy one might result in the loss of one’s job if the related government departments request that the state propaganda authority, the body supervising all news media, replace or fire a journalist.

Journalists do not seem to be afraid of being punished if the news they report is “really big and negative”. If the journalists and their supervisors expect the sacrifice to pay off, they are willing to report stories that are sensitive enough to provoke sanctions. This is often because the journalists have proven that they are excellent journalists and, therefore, will have no problem finding another job in the media sector. Those who are denied access to the political information on one beat will typically be relocated within the news organization to cover another beat. Those who are ordered to be fired will be recommended for another job at other news organizations. One of them explained how this works:

The worst for us is to lose our job and even our journalist’s license...but there are many examples of journalists who lost their job because they did sensitive reporting – but are still working as journalists or commentators in disguise, using a pseudonym. Their real names can no longer appear in the news because news organizations must be able to prove to the authorities that they have respected the political order and fired the journalists in question. But, as excellent journalists, they can still write for other news organizations under a fake name...

The optimal situation for a journalist is to report on sensitive news while, at the same time, staying on the beat and not damaging their relationship with the authorities. This is especially true when the news is not sensational enough for the media organization to run the risk of a heavy punishment for a journalist. After all, the cost to develop a journalist as a knowledgeable and professional reporter in another area is high.

In fact, there are actually some journalists who have reported much sensitive, critical news and, yet, continue their job on the beat without problems. These journalists are all considered to be the most experienced and professional beat journalists in China. They manage to report sensitive news without provoking the “emotional resistance” of the officials. One such journalist revealed her secret: “you have to step on the spot where they [the politicians] feel pain. If you cannot do it professionally, it would be a joke for them”. Another shared a similar insight, explaining that reporting sensitive news professionally wins respect from the authority.

Coordinating with both internal and external journalists. Acting professionally in such a complex context is always easier said than done, but a number of tactics could be easily operationalized by ordinary journalists. Journalists who have been on the beat for some time have relatively accurate judgment of how sensitive the news is and the risk they take when they report the news. Most critical news stories are not risky to report, while some are. In these cases, journalists try to avoid the risks by coordinating with internal and external colleagues. These include “sending out other colleagues to report while pretending not to know about the news event”, “appearing on the scene but asking another journalist to join without giving notice to the authorities”, “leaking information to colleagues to write the news story without signing the report themselves” or “sharing information with journalists from other news organizations in order to share the risks”. Thus, while Western journalists favor breaking big news solo, coordinated news breaking is often the only sensible strategy for Chinese journalists to use if they are to report the news safely.

These coordination plans vary, depending on the situation at hand. According to the journalists, it is not always a story of “the greater the sensitivity, the greater the risks”. If negative news is not too significant, the beat reporters may remain behind the scenes but ask colleagues to go and report the news, fearing their presence would “harm the relationship on the beat”. But if it is explosive negative news exposed by other news organizations and thus the officials cannot avoid being questioned about the news, beat reporters will handle it themselves because, not only are they less likely to be punished, they are the ones who are capable of writing a professional piece. Besides, since they have a better “personal relationship” with the officials at the related government department, they can obtain more exclusive information from the officials by “protecting them without pointing out the source”, as indicated earlier.

Journalists will most likely remain behind the scenes when the news appears to be sensitive news yet far from being extremely sensitive. The interviewees all admit that they will either “emotionally” or “strategically” avoid reporting sensitive news due to the risk of being

blacklisted, but there are also times when they cannot judge whether the breaking news will be “really big and negative” or not. In these cases, two journalists will be sent to report the news, one making their presence known by engaging the authority, the other remaining in the crowd. In that way, if one journalist is constrained by the authority, the other can still obtain exclusive information and write a good story. As one interviewee explained:

The purpose of doing this is to have one journalist distract the attention of the authority, so that the other is free to obtain more news information in critical situations. At intense events, officials will keep a close eye on journalists. If we have another journalist who is disguised, they would have more freedom to report once the official keeps the exposed journalist away from the negative news.

More importantly, even if the disguised reporter comes back and writes an extremely sensitive or critical news story, the beat reporter can pretend not to know anything when the communications officer of the authority turns to them after the news is published. In this way, beat reporters can maintain their relationship with the authority without being blacklisted from future press releases and events.

If the news is not too sensitive and assumed to be tolerable to the authority, beat reporters make themselves co-authors of the news story. If the news were too sensitive, they “would not have their names printed in the news reports” even though they actually participated in reporting it.

There are also situations in which beat journalists acquire exclusive and sensitive “materials” from informants with whom they have developed a confidential relationship in the past. Some of these “materials” may be passed on to other journalists; but, once journalists feel that the news may become a sensation, enabling them to “achieve success and win recognition”, they do the reporting themselves even at the cost of being removed from the beat or even fired.

In addition to internal coordination, external coordination between journalists and peers from other news organizations is also used by journalists to avoid being removed, fired or blacklisted by the authorities. As one journalist explained,

There is some massive negative news for which one news organization may not be able to carry all of the responsibility by itself. If the news is an exclusive report by us, we might not be able to resist the pressure from the authority, so we may find a few other news organizations to do it together with. Thus, it is easier to resist the pressure if the risks are shared. When the news is reported by several news organizations together, the influence will be stronger. This is good for us, as it expands the boundaries of reporting.

Another journalist revealed that some reporters from different news organizations working the same beat have informal agreements about not doing exclusive news but, instead, sharing it with peers. In so doing, the journalists not only have others with whom to share the risks, they also avoid being criticized by their supervisors. Moreover, the journalists

may gain understandings of relevant government departments by saying that they have to report the news just like every other news organization.

Discussion

As demonstrated by the existing research on the influence of politicians on journalistic practices, our findings confirm that government officials have considerable power to withhold and distribute political information. Chinese politicians not only can but do withhold political information to a much higher degree than in Western democratic settings.

The journalist–politician relationship in China is neither a “tango” like its counterpart in Western democratic settings nor a “puppet show” as might otherwise be imagined. First, Chinese news organizations are permitted some measure of autonomy by the party state due to the media commercialization process. Second, Chinese politicians need positive news about themselves and the government departments they govern to move upwards to higher ranks. Journalists, thus, hold the chips when negotiating reporting boundaries with politicians.

Under such conditions, Chinese beat journalists are required to master the art of handling the relations with politicians. The strategies they use to maintain their relationships with the authorities are shown in their attempts to expand their news reporting boundaries – namely, to gain more access to political information and to publish more sensitive news. This resonates somewhat with those strategies used by investigative journalists, summarized by Tong (2007) and Zhang (2008). They are just more sophisticated. The tactics used by investigative journalists – including writing objectively, avoiding the bottom line of the authority’s tolerance (Tong, 2007) and cooperating with peers from other news organizations (Zhang, 2008) – are also used by beat journalists, but there are more tricks available for beat reporters to do their job well. This is so because beat reporters must maintain a long-term relationship with officials, whereas investigative journalists have no such need.

Chinese beat journalists are in a comparatively weaker position than their Western colleagues when they face political power. Their position is neither comparable with that of Swedish journalists, who can lead the tango with the politicians in Strömbäck and Nord’s (2006) study, nor with the journalists in Gans’ (1979, 2003) and Davis’ (2009) studies, who can, at least, do a tango dance with the political sources. This requires them to “pull all the tricks”. In order to gain more access to political information, they must serve as “opportunistic facilitators” like those described by Weaver (1998). Like the journalists in Pan’s (2000) research, they have to please politicians with positive reporting and even accept material rewards, the “red packet” – practices that stand in strong contrast with Western professional journalism to which many Chinese journalists claim to aspire. If they act as advocates for certain politicians, beat journalists may also obtain some critical information about the authority or other politicians, who are very likely rivals of the politicians they serve. The findings also suggest that Chinese journalists are not pure “opportunistic facilitators”. They use,

instead, both “carrots and sticks”. For beat journalists who have already developed a close relationship with the authorities, they can seize the opportunities to do critical reporting when the news is revealed by journalists from other news organizations. Conversely, those without access to political information must seize the opportunities to write critical news about the authorities, who may offered journalists the access to stop them from producing more such news.

In order to get more sensitive news published without being sanctioned or denounced by the authorities afterwards, most Chinese beat journalists will carry out coordination plans with colleagues from their own and other news organizations. The plans – including “sending out other colleagues to report while pretending not to know about the news event”, “appearing on the scene but asking another journalist to join without join without giving notice to the authorities”, “leaking information to colleagues to write the news story without signing the report themselves” and “sharing information with journalists from other news organizations in order to share the risks” – serve to fulfill journalists’ responsibilities and, at the same time, allow them to avoid damaging their relationship with politicians and even being punished by the authorities. These findings are unique and in sharp contrast with those from the West in which journalists try their best to preserve a “scoop” for themselves; sharing it with an external journalist would be the last thing they would ever do.

The findings suggest that the strategies do help expand the boundaries for reporting. These unique strategies are more than tips for young journalists; instead, they reflect the power relations between the political and media elites. Political elites are in an advantageous position in their relationship with the journalists and can, therefore, make journalists work for them, while the journalists can only try those methods that work best for the news media they serve. They are “two-faced” journalists: in positive reporting, they generously pay compliments, whereas they want to “step on the spot where the politicians feel pain” in negative reporting. While this might sound all too interesting to outsiders, it is only a “forced choice” for the Chinese journalists.

In such an environment, there is no such thing as a “professional journalist” in the Western sense, but a real professional journalist in the eyes of Chinese journalists is someone who can “change faces” and work comfortably with the strategies.

Since the public has a vague understanding of what a professional journalist is in the Chinese context, some real opportunists may emerge. Our interviewees were extremely skeptical of journalists who try to make themselves well-known by triggering government sanctions. An example may be a journalist who purposely exposes himself to sanctions in critical conflicts between the public and the local authorities, portraying himself as a victim afterwards. A real professional journalist, as described by the interviewees, is someone who tries his best to protect himself and does as much good reporting as possible.

With data from participatory observation in the newsroom and interviews with journalists, this research reveals more about the journalist–politician relationship and how beat reporters in China report the news. Future research may focus on how Chinese politicians

use journalists to work for them, their strategies to control reporting about them and their perception of their relationship with beat reporters, although these would be even more challenging research topics, considering the access to the field.

The participatory observation approach can generate more unique and reliable data. However, it could cause validity problems without constant use of existing literature to verify the points of observation. Besides, researchers using anonymous sources are expected to make the data collection process as transparent as possible so that readers can have a chance to validate the empirical data.

Notes

- 1 The term “playing with the edge” is borrowed by the Chinese journalists from table tennis. It means doing news reports from an angle that neither offends nor pleases the propaganda authority.

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