

Popular, but not that Positive: Changing Chinese Media and Its Effect on Public Opinion of International Affairs

Fan Shiming*

I. Introduction

While arguments exist on media's effects on different people, it is shown by all kinds of surveys and well recognized that news media are basic channels for people to know the world. News media is very important in informing, entertaining, opinion-shaping and policy-catalyzing. The words, bites and sounds provided by television and newspapers make a "mediated world" for the public in which they think about events that can be hardly experienced. This is especially true in China where most ordinary people have not enjoyed traveling abroad until recently. The news media is not only ears and eyes for some people — it is, sometimes, the brain.

As part of China's huge economic and social change, news media in this country today also have shown different faces compared with before the opening and reform. Journalism, as well as media regime, is also penetrated more and more by market forces. Traditional media — the newspapers, television, magazines, and radio — are competing to cater the audience, while new media — the net — has already been used for public expression. Chinese opinion of international affairs are now shaping under a more open, diverse, and commercialized information environment. It is both a blessing and a misfortune.

II. Getting Popular

The Chinese media were believed to be more the mouthpiece of the party and the government than that of the ordinary people. This "mouthpiece" argument in Chinese journalism could explain the communication model which took upper-level leaders at the center. The news media listened up, and spoke down, with a lot of political pedagogue. The information and entertainment functions of the media were overlooked. Wanted to be amused? Well, not by the media.

Things started to change since early 1980s, when the news people joined

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* Associate Professor, School of International Studies, Peking University
E-mail: fansm@pku.edu.cn

discussions on the diversification of media language. A Chinese communication scholar later decodes it as not only a tactical change, but a substantial step to walk away from the idea of “news as political textbook”.¹ People in late 1980s witnessed push for making a media law in the Chinese People’s Congress, and its failure mainly because of the Tiananmen. In 1991, however, weekend newspaper editions with more information and entertainment surged in China, indicating another significant modification in Chinese journalism: the shifting thinking from “What I want people to know” to “what people want to know”. Media concern for the communicators was overlapped by that for the audience. Now popularity is competing with politics in Chinese media. Headlines are eye-catching, pictures are heart-striking, and arguments are often agitating. Infotainment is getting much room.

Actually the Chinese leadership has been basically supportive for the change, as old rigid media management could not match development of pragmatic reform. For instance, a high-rank party official responsible for propaganda appealed in spring 2004 that news organizations should get closer to reality, life and mass public.² Increasing popularity of state-owned media was in some way regarded as positive in improving government-public relationship and increasing legitimacy. It also provides a channel for social outlet. Direct administrative intervention into news reporting are still there, but in smaller range and with lesser intensity. The media is now encouraged to take care more of public needs and sentiments.

The right to know is one of the popular terms in recent years. Chinese audience now could receive information much faster than before, and from different sources. New papers are booming, new TV channels are in broadcasting, and net news is rolling. The 9.11 and the Iraq war were seen live on TV in China, as they were in the US, Japan and Europe. Events like the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade by US missiles or Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine were known immediately by the Chinese public through media, and got repercussion. It’s now hard to imagine that big news could be blocked for weeks before it became known by people in China, as happened time by time before the reform. Now we know the world, true or not, at real-time and global level. Another term is *surveillance* — the watchdog role. More and more critical coverage appeared and opinions were mobilized, thus led to action. CCTV’s Focus, a prime time program famous for scandal exposure, enjoys the highest rate for a long time and is regarded “powerful”. In 2004, newspaper and net opinion about Sun Zhigang generated an important legal revision at national level.³ That the media turns to function of public expression has significant implication in understanding

¹ Yu Guoming, What we experienced in the past 20 years — A historical review of Chinese media and its recent trend (Zou Guo Er Shi Nian: Wo Men Chang Shi le Shen Me? Gai Ge Kai Fang 20 Nian Wo Guo Da Zhong Chuan Mei Fa Zhan Gui Ji de Su Miao), see <http://academic.mediachina.net/lw_view.jsp?id=128>.

² Li Changchun: new progress should be made in the three “get-closers”, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2003-04/03/content_969993.htm>.

³ On March 17, 2003, Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old college graduate who was working for a graphic

Chinese messages — it is very necessary to discern whose voice it is in the media while not misunderstand either the government or the public.

III. Market Orientation

Behind popularity is profit. Popularity is shown by circulation, advertisement and rating, and these could only be gained through market competition. The Chinese media is soon moving into commercial management from administrative control. For example, media budget came largely from the government before 1990s while now most news organizations are running on advertisement and other commercial gains; almost all media personnel were on the “cadre-list” in the past but now quite a portion of media people are working on contract. The very reason of media existence in China is now colored more by profit than by politics.

If government encouragement and change in Chinese journalism could be regarded as initiating political and professional push in reforming Chinese media, then market is playing perhaps the decisive force in reshaping it. To compete for advertisement, newspapers and television have to take good care of timeliness and content of reporting in order to improve circulation or rating. Newly emerged newspapers and new channels, as well as the internet, are replacing the party papers and the similar, to become the prime information sources of the public, mainly because of their flexibility in presenting and interpreting events. In Beijing, for instance, people are much more possible to get international news from *The Global Times* than from its parental newspaper, *The People's daily*. Market has made sources more diverse.

Competition for market leads to alignment, merger and the form of large media group. Chinese media thus now look more like an industry. The establishment of Guangzhou Daily Group in 1996 was soon followed by others first in the south, and then across the country. Electronic media also joined the “make bigger and stronger” wave. Among them, the Hunan TV Group and Shanghai Media Group are competing with the CCTV. Survival for the fittest. A 2003 government guideline pushed further the circulation by market instead of by administrative intervention,

design company in Guangzhou, was stopped by police. He was detained for not having proper identity papers and died in custody three days later. His case was picked up by a reporter from the Southern Metropolis News, and then hit the Net. Within two hours after being posted on China's largest news portal, sina.com, this news item generated 4,000 comments from readers. Almost immediately, the case was being discussed throughout Chinese cyberspace, from official sites to personal Weblogs and e-mail groups. The official media, including CCTV, soon picked up on the public outrage and reported heated debates over treatment of migrants living in the cities and police corruption. On May 29th, in an unprecedented appeal to the National People's Congress, four professors, including two from Beijing University Law School, called on the state prosecutor to investigate Sun's death. Three months later, the government abolished the entire Repatriation system, and the officials responsible for Sun Zhigang's death were convicted in court.

which might cause many small newspapers on government subsidies to parish.⁴

The government is trying to balance the media between making money and maintain stability. Market helps to improve governmental fiscal situation and alleviate pressure on personnel, increases GDP and satisfies social appetite for information, expression and entertainment. And the direction is in accord with the market orientation of the whole society. There is however a real political danger to let the market decide media. *Glasnost* partly contributed to the collapse of the former Soviet Union and it is understandable for the CCP to insist on opinion-lead and to consider where market does not work against itself. Taking political coverage, international reporting now seems comparatively more open for discussion, interpretation and argument.

China's joining into the WTO added new momentum for the media to go to the market, though the opening of media industry is not stipulated in the agreement. The globalization of western media conglomerates is making real the concern of the big wolf. Time Warner, Viacom, News Group and Sony stepped into China one by one, competing between each other and with Chinese media for information resources, talent professionals, audience and advertisement. Rupert Murdoch is cooperating with Hunan TV, while CNBC is jointly doing programs with Shanghai Oriental TV. The international flow of information and capital bring imminent pressure and force Chinese media to enhance its capacity to compete. Facing this challenge, a Chinese official expressed government determination in an interview to continue the market reform.⁵ Private investment is also encouraged to flow into the media industry.

IV. Stirring Up

One negative consequence of popularization and marketization is the sensationalization of news reporting. Information eyeball-catching or emotion-appealing gets rewarded by circulation or rating and thus flood in the media. People are now ~~endangered~~ *in danger!* of being misled by excess and miscellaneous information. The Chinese audience know the world more, but not necessarily accurate or on fair basis. (?)

International news is among the stirred-ups. Chinese readers interested in foreign affairs will find more threat, conspiracy, hostility and conflict around their country from newspapers, though the official line is that China enjoys the best period in its relations with neighboring countries. Why? Simple. Good news is no news — it does not sell. In 2001, a national newspaper published an article titled India nukes target China to eliminate China concern. In 2004, another paper said again that India

⁴ See Zhang Qing, Huang Lezhen and Gao pei: Change of China's media (Zhong Guo Chuan Mei Da Bian Ju), <<http://www.chinelections.org/readnews.asp?newsid=%7BFD7ECA6B-C11C-4116-B371-718F1E00BA5B%7D>>.

⁵ See Hu Aijun: Media reform speed up (Chuan Mei Gai Ge Jia Su).

strategic missiles aimed at big Chinese cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou and Wuhan. Similarly, the sense of possible western containment is also exaggerated in the media. American move to Japan, India, Mongolia, Philippines and central Asian countries are interpreted from time to time as inter-linked strategic maneuvers circumscribing China's emergence. Expert criticized that these coverage were not accurate and misleading.⁶

Explosion of international coverage shortens the geographic distance between China and the outside world, but not the psychological one. People are not rightly informed by specious words and are deprived of forming insight opinion. From Chinese media, for example, the public get an impression that Japan is facing a real danger of going back to militarism, while most people outside China don't think it true, even conservatism is surging in that country. Chinese media sometimes garble foreign news and leave an incomplete conclusion to the public. When a Chinese newspaper quoted a German magazine on evaluating Chinese economy, it remained the rose picture while leaving problems out. Sensationalism balanced by political correctness also leads to partial interpretation. Democracies of foreign countries in Chinese media are full of money politics, cheating, power struggle and scandals.⁷

Mainstream media people spoke frankly in close discussions that they were under commercial pressure and have to make words stimulating and pictures striking. "We know some scholars and government officials are critical to media sensationalism," says a famous news host, "we are however concerned more about rating and advertisement, and would continue to play the edge ball".⁸ Not all edge balls are for commercial purpose, but stirring up or catering public emotion would surely contribute to biased opinion and problematic policies. Rising Chinese nationalism since 1990s roots deep in modern Chinese history and experiences, but also has something to do with the media.

V. The New Media

The booming internet industry enriched China's news and opinion sources, and also pushed traditional print and electronic media to change. Net surfers could verify their information from sources abroad. One-way communication gives way to multi-directional exchange on the net; time and space are not as precious as they are for TV and newspapers.

China had 8.7 million internet users in a survey in summer 2004.⁹ The internet

⁶ See Yu Fei, Don't Exaggerate the Threat to China (Bu Yao Kua Da Zhong guo Mian Lin Wei Xie), in *Global Times*, page 19, September 3, 2004

⁷ See Shen Qi: the gaps and errors in international news (Hai wai Xiao Xi de Ce Liang Wu Cha), in *Journalists*, page 32, No. 6, 2004

⁸ Author's discussion with a Shanghai TV host in May 2005.

⁹ 14th statistical survey report on the internet development in China, July 2004, *China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC)*, page 5.

is meaningful for the net people not only in information access, but in public expression. In terms of discussions on international affairs and foreign policy, the internet forums are now important opinion shapers. The China Forum (qiang guo lun tan) on the *People's Net* appeals people all across the nation to speak out their minds. People get to the net, debate on the United States' world and regional strategy, Sino-Japanese relations, and the Taiwan problem, and often challenge official line. It is here that they find a room to express their frustration, hope and anger. Discussions however often turned into emotional outcries. Internationalists who support moderate approaches, cooperation or even concession are usually accused of selling the country by nationalists. The silent spiral sometime appeared especially when strong emotion surge. The government sometimes has to shut up or suspend some chat-rooms in order to lower the heat. Nonetheless, net opinion has become a mirror for public emotion.

Net opinion on the Beijing-Shanghai express railway program could in some way illustrate how the new media could be used to form and express sentiment. In spring 2003, information was leaked out that the Japanese Shingensen might be chosen by the Chinese government to be applied between Beijing and Shanghai. This decision was strongly criticized on the net. 82,752 net users signed, in the cyber space, a protest within 10 days, and some of them went to the website of Chinese Foreign Ministry to show their dissatisfaction. The organizer of the online protest movement said that they would start a petition to the high level government, and even if it was not accepted, their voice had been heard. Chinese officials later responded that the final decision should be made after listen^{ing} extensively to the public for different opinions.¹⁰ Many people believe that the difficulty in decision-making on the express railway program is purely political, say public resent, not technical.

Internet is used not only to show public emotion to the Chinese government, but also to foreign governments and organizations. Chinese hackers attacked websites in America, Japan, Indonesia and other areas to show their anger after events like the embassy bombing, Yasukuni shrine visit and anti-Chinese riots. This is not recommendable but happens as we have seen.

VI. Conclusion

Chinese media is changing fast. Popularity now goes hand in hand with politics. The media is rapidly commercialized in an incomplete open political environment. News organizations are dancing on the balance among power, profit and the public.

The openness and diversification of news sources and opinion are encouraging, but also confusing. People in China know more about the world, which might be misrepresented. Sensationalism hurts truth, as happens elsewhere in the world. The

¹⁰ See <<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-08-04/15541475533.html>> and <<http://www.phoenixtv.com/home/news/inland/200308/11/95038.html>>.

Media sometimes favors those cry out, with overheated head. China's foreign policy makers are no longer free from public pressure. With changes of Chinese media, China is more transparent to foreign observers, only if they could interpret messages well.

Just like millions of cars appeared on Chinese streets, the information and opinion situation look a bit wild either in this country. More openness, increasing public rationality and media self-discipline may help to shape a new media landscape in China.

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A Book Title or
speech (?)

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