The rise and fall of investigative journalism in China: digital opportunities and political challenges

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The media under Xi Jinping

In February 2016, President Xi Jinping visited the three major state media outlets, People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV), where he emphasized the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) supreme role in media work. In no uncertain terms, Xi stressed the need to control the media and that the media should speak for and protect the Party, arguing that the ‘family name of the media is the Party’ (Wong, 2016). This was but the latest example of a tightening of the media environment since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. The rise of online public debates and critical and investigative reporting, well underway since 2003 and reaching a new height with the advent of microblogging in 2009, had stimulated close interactions between journalists, civil society actors, lawyers and concerned netizens (Svensson, 2012). The official concern and fear about losing the ideological battleground has been expressed and communicated in several important political speeches, propaganda directives, policy documents and different regulations and laws, and resulted in efforts to reassert control over both the Internet and traditional media (e.g. Creemers, 2016; Freedom House, 2016a, 2016b).

One of the earliest examples of a tightening media environment under Xi Jinping was the *Southern Weekend* incident in January 2013. The newspaper, one of the most

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admired outlets of critical reporting and a much-coveted work place for idealistic journalists, was the victim of an unusually heavy-handed censorship by the local propaganda department that journalists at the paper decided to openly defy and criticize on their microblogs. Their defiance got much support online, and a few supporters even ventured to stage a protest outside of the newspaper’s headquarters. But the protests were of no use, and instead, control of the paper and other papers within the Southern Daily Media Group, home to many of the journalists and newspapers discussed by Tong and Wang, has been reinforced. A restructuring in late 2015 to comply with new propaganda directives limited the scope of critical reporting even further. The CCP has also stepped up requirements of political education classes for journalists. Over the last 3 years, a number of celebrated investigative journalists in both the Southern Daily Media Group and other media outlets have left their jobs and journalism altogether (Chan, 2016; Philips, 2016). It is estimated that 75% of the original still rather small number of 300 investigative journalists surveyed by Shen and Zhang (2013) in 2010 have now left the profession (Zhang Zhi’an quoted in Wang, p. 50). At the same time, several journalists and editors have been targeted and accused of wrongdoings and economic crimes and paraded on state television. As of early 2016, 18 professional journalists were in detention or imprisoned. The most well-known case is that of Shen Hao, a much respected editor who had a distinguished career before he was arrested and sentenced to 4 years on embezzlement charges that many believed had been fabricated (Denyer, 2015; Freedom House, 2016b).

At the same time that traditional media and journalism have seen a more restricted environment, online debates on social media have also come under increasing scrutiny. During the summer of 2013, online ‘opinion leaders (yijian lingxiu)’ and Big Vs, that is, verified microblog users, with large followings were attacked and vilified. Several people, including both opinion leaders and ordinary citizens, were arrested for spreading ‘rumours’ and new regulations were adopted while the authorities stepped up real name registration efforts. The ideological work encouraged, also through mobilizing volunteers, the spreading of ‘positive energy (zheng nengliang)’ on different online platforms. The Chinese government attempts to ‘guide’ public opinion through these volunteers and other pro-official commentators, known as the 50-cent army, at the same time that they have set up their own microblogs to drown-out independent and more critical voices, including those of journalists. WeChat, a popular messaging app with many functions, that after 2013 began to be used as a crowd-funding news outlet by some enterprising freelancing journalists, has also faced stricter control. In 2014, several public WeChat accounts were closed and special permission was required in order to disseminate news. Recent developments make the future for investigative journalism in China look very bleak and contrast sharply with the more positive picture described by Tong and Wang.

**Understanding the development and limits of investigative journalism in China**

The two books under review are essential reading in order to help us understand the development of investigative journalism in China, how and why journalists came to link
up with civil society actors, their creative use of new digital technologies, as well as how and why some journalists later became more of activists. The books describe the background to investigative journalism in China, highlighting that it was partly a result of the central authorities’ own need for and encouragement of some form of watchdog journalism targeting local officials and social problems and environmental issues in the wake of the economic reforms. The official support and a changing commercial environment where such reporting also was in high demand among readers created a powerful stimulus for investigative reporting. Not all media outlets were interested and comfortable with this kind of reporting, however, and it remained concentrated to a few commercial media outlets in the more economically developed regions. As discussed by Tong and Wang, young, predominantly male, journalists came to dominate the field, although their numbers remained quite small (see Shen and Zhang (2013), and on gender issues, see also Svensson and Wang (2013)). The idealism of these young journalists has proven difficult to sustain when the media environment has become more restricted, and many have now left the profession altogether.

The fact that both authors have a background as journalists in China before becoming academics gave them a unique position, and it also helped ensure easy access to journalists and media institutions. The two authors combine interviews, participatory observations, and case studies with a close reading of news reports. Tong focuses on environmental reporting as a sub-genre of investigative reporting, whereas Wang paints a broader historical picture and focuses particularly on why and how some journalists in recent years have chosen to leave journalism and become activists. The books provide well-documented analyses of the rise and conditions of investigative journalism during a period when such reporting was much admired and had an obvious impact on the Chinese society. While Tong and Wang also address the constraints and difficulties of investigative journalism in an authoritarian society, they fail to fully explain the reasons behind the ultimate failure and limits of investigative journalism in an authoritarian society. The precarious situation of investigative journalism even during the more flourishing period discussed in the two books, that is, the late 1990s until 2011, and the lack of institutional and legal safeguarding of press freedom alert us to the limits of investigative reporting in China even at the best of times. Even environmental reporting, a field where there has been much more freedom and official tolerance as well exemplified by Tong, has seen many difficulties in recent years. It is not surprising that the well-known TV reporter Chai Jing in 2015 decided to side-step traditional media and instead use the format of an independently produced documentary film circulated online to address air pollution. It was watched by some 100 million people before being taken offline and becoming a non-topic in the official media. Another case is the chemical explosions in Tianjin in August 2015 that killed at least 173 people, where some individual journalists and netizens nonetheless attempted to defy restrictions on the media.

**Social ills and environmental concerns: the relevance of journalism in a period of rapid changes**

Tong’s and Wang’s books show how investigative journalism emerged at the backdrop of and as a result of a rapidly changing socio-economic environment with increasing
inequality and injustices coupled with serious environmental problems. As discussed by both authors, environmental reporting has been particularly vibrant for a number of reasons, one being that the government has been concerned about these issues and the other being that this is also something that has united people from different walks of life. The journalists have in some cases also been directly affected and concerned about the future impact of pollution and environmental degradation on their own families’ health. The individual motives and engagement is striking in the cases discussed by Wang, who shows how environmental issues often have prompted journalists to take up new digital tools and platforms, including blogging, and in some cases also abandoned their jobs for the life as a freelancing journalist or activist. Tong discusses some of the same cases, such as Xiamen PX, but her focus is more on traditional reporting and she hesitates to describe environmental journalists as activists and instead stresses their professionalism.

**Digital challenges and possibilities**

The birth and development of critical and investigative journalism in China is inseparable from the development and growing importance of the Internet and new digital platforms such as social media. This is revealed in the Sun Zhigang case, a high point in the history of Chinese investigative journalism, as well as in the context of rights activism. The most popular microblogging site, Sina Weibo, in many respects similar to Twitter that is blocked in China, was established in 2009 and rapidly gained an enormous popularity, changing how Chinese citizens receive and share information. Journalists were among the earliest users of Weibo and some famous investigative journalists amassed large followings, in some cases having hundreds of thousands and even millions of followers. Investigative journalists quickly realized its potential and used Weibo to acquire information and establish contacts with sources, follow hot topics and current debates, and also publish and circulate their own reports and those of fellow journalists (e.g. Fu and Lee, 2016; Tong, 2015). Investigative journalists, as discussed by both Tong and Wang, also used Weibo to publish information and news that they could not publish in the traditional media (see also chapters in Svensson et al., 2013). Weibo enabled them to bypass publishing bans and propaganda directives and thus undermined the authorities’ control of information and news. Weibo became an alternative and more reliable source of information than traditional media as first illustrated in the 2011 Wenzhou train crash reporting. The platform also enabled closer contacts between journalists and citizens and in some cases resulted in a kind of crowdsourcing of news. The Yihuang demolition and self-immolation case in September 2010 was one of the first and more widely published cases where ordinary citizens used Weibo to publish information about their plight and also interact with and get support from journalists.

Microblogging thus helped Chinese journalists become more visible to the general public and to find a new voice, in some cases turning them into important opinion leaders with large numbers of followers and/or helping them take the step into activism and engagement with civil society organizations. The most famous cases are those of Deng Fei and Wang Keqin discussed by Wang, who ended up establishing civil society organizations that provide school lunches in poorer rural areas in the case of Deng Fei, and help
migrant workers suffering from pneumoconiosis in the case of Wang Keqin. The boundary-spanning behaviour of investigative journalists, who expressed personal views and became engaged in different events, public debates and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), illustrate the journalists’ demand for more autonomy, their critique of their old CCP ‘mouth-piece’ roles and their newfound sense of professionalism and community outside of the All China Federation of Journalists. With increasing restrictions on Weibo after 2013, and experiencing difficulties within their own media institutions, a few journalists, including former Caijing journalist Luo Changping, decided to establish their own media outlets and took advantage of the fact that WeChat enabled users to set up subscription accounts. These efforts however soon caught the attention of the government and new restrictions on WeChat prevented it from becoming an economically viable platform that could have helped sustain investigative journalism outside of traditional media.

The future of journalism in China

For a brief moment, nicely captured by Tong and Wang, investigative journalism flourished in China. But since Xi Jinping came to power, the space for investigative journalism has shrunk at the same time that many media outlets are also having financial difficulties and a hard time to survive. Although the Internet and digital technologies for some time created opportunities for investigative journalists to connect and support each other, obtain information and reach out to ordinary citizens, as well as bypass censorship, the Chinese authorities have stepped up their control over cyberspace. The CCP has taken a renewed grip of the media, using traditional measures such as emphasizing and enforcing journalists’ political education and ensuring the control of propaganda departments over editorial positions and so on. But they have also adapted to the new digital environment and increased the official presence on different social media platforms, making use of apps, venturing into digitally based publications – one example being the Shanghai based the *Paper* – and using online video and web TV in order to reach audiences on the platforms they use while also updating the packaging of their political messages.

For those individuals who once thrived in media institutions that prided themselves for their open and critical reporting, the wake-up call has been painful. With a shrinking space to report, many erstwhile investigative journalists have left journalism altogether. Some have established start-ups or gone to work for big Internet companies such as Tencent and Netease, whereas others have ventured into philanthropic organizations where they can fulfil some of their idealistic ambitions (see also Chan, 2016; Philips, 2016). While Wang paints a rather rosy picture of the possibilities of alternative careers and activism, the harsh reality is that very few journalists have found such outlets for their idealism and professionalism. Freelance journalism is hardly a possibility in China today, and even environmental issues are no longer as easy to report on. The concomitant crackdown on civil society and rights lawyers in recent years illustrates that the Chinese media needs to be understood and studied within a broader socio-political framework. Tong and Wang provide ample evidence of the interactions between journalists and different groups in society, providing us with a fruitful way to study the role of journalism in China. There is
a need for further studies in order to understand to what extent the Chinese government is able to adapt to and take advantage of the digital age for propaganda and news production, and whether and how critical journalism can be reborn in the future.

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