

MASTER'S THESIS

The canary in the coal mine: Beijing News and the crisis of Chinese journalism

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Date of Award:
2014

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Abstract

Based on three-month ethnographic fieldwork among investigative journalists in *Beijing News*, this dissertation is about the transformation of printing journalism in a time of crisis. This study explores what specifically constitutes the crisis of Chinese printing journalism in general and investigative journalism in particular, and how they respond to the crisis. Existing western debate of newspaper crisis predominantly revolves around the rapid technological and economic change. Rooted in the 'liberal-pluralist' political economy of communication, however, my dissertation suggests that we also need to take the political factors into consideration when discussing the crisis of traditional media in China-an authoritarian country without media freedom. I argue that the crisis of Chinese printing journalism is not only the shrink in circulation and advertisement revenue and the technological impinging on traditional way of producing and distributing news, as their western counterparts; but also the increasingly narrowing space for critical coverage that Chinese political and investigative journalists appreciate and expect. The three facts-political control, economic recession, and technological innovation-are interwoven together and profoundly shape the Chinese printing journalism.

Under such situation, Chinese newsroom is under transformation. Taking an approach of sociology of news, my paper also examines how *Beijing News* and its investigative reporting team reshuffle the organizational structure to overcome the crisis. On the one hand, the reorganization is aimed at adapting to and

adopting new technologies to gain a toehold in the new editorial and business model; on the other hand, it is a rearrangement of its strategy in overcoming the political constraints and carrying out critical reporting. Different from the opinion from Tech-Utopian or Tech-Determinism who suggests that technology will completely reshape the structure of newsroom and journalistic practice, I argue that organizational tradition and culture make the complete redefinition impossible. Based on the reform strategy what I called a combination of 'convergence' and 'de-convergence', I suggest that *Beijing News* successfully keeps a balance between 'embracing the online world' and 'keeping its tradition of pursuing for original and investigative journalism'. The well-established organizational routine should not be deemphasized in discussing the reconstruction of traditional newsroom at least for two reasons. Firstly, the professional routine overcomes the potential negative impact of new technology on quality journalism. Secondly, what strategies are adopted in the newspaper transformation is closely relevant to its structural and cultural feature. As a canary in the coal mine, *Beijing News* sets an example for many other printing newspaper around the country with difficulty in addressing the crisis, coming from whatever political, economic or technological aspects.

Acknowledgments

There would be entirely impossible for me to write the dissertation without my supervisor Professor Colin Sparks. In the past two years, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my admirable supervisor, who patiently guided through my process of struggling for a better scholar in the future. He generously spent numerous time in advising my research and reading my dissertation line by line. It is impossible for me to forget the picture that he told me how to make a clear argument based on strong evidence on summer afternoon with the sun seeping in. His stimulating suggestions and kind encouragement helped me all the time during my study in Hong Kong. Particularly, throughout the entire process, which started from writing research proposal to finishing up the dissertation, Professor Colin Sparks, with his expertise in political-economy, the crisis of traditional journalism and Chinese journalism, played an irreplaceable role. He helped me push the bureaucratic restriction on Mphil students' time of collecting data and supported me to finish the three-month field work; He pointed to me the theoretical edge my dissertation could pose even if he was pushed for time to catch up a flight; He could always clarify the unclear points in my paper; He offered valuable advices on the proposal and my dissertation, ranging from the dissertation title, structure, content, to English writing; He was always with me when I felt pessimistic and blue. There are too many scenes I can't forget, in which his intelligence and personal charisma embedded in. I am deeply in debt to Professor Colin Sparks's consistent support and significant

contribution to my study and my research project, from the very beginning to the end. He is a wonderful mentor. Before him, any language will be pale.

I am grateful to Professor Chin Chuan Lee in City University of Hong Kong, who guides me to take an interest in sociology of News. I thank Professor Steve Guo, Ringo Ma, and Dr Song Yunya, who provide me suggestion, enlightenment and encouragement in the different period of my study in HKBU.

My field work in *Beijing News* was the memorable experience, and I showed my great respect and gratitude to the journalists I have met there. Without their support, this project is impossible to finish.

Last, but very importantly, I wish to thank my family: my parents and my husband. Their unconditional love and support help me survive any difficulty, pressure and challenge I have faced. I should like to give my particular thank to my husband, who patiently reads my every assignment in the past two years. He could always propose valuable suggestions and help me revise English.

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