

Chinese newspaper groups in the digital era

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Abstract

This article reviews the impact of digital technologies on Chinese newspapers. The diffusion of the smart phone has precipitated severe economic problems for the printed press. There have been falls in both readership and advertising revenues, which have had an effect on the structure of provincial-level press groups. The decline in economic viability has been felt most severely by the commercially-oriented titles, while the more politically-oriented papers have led the way in finding new sources of funding. These sources tend to tie journalism more tightly to political and economic power and for commercial goals to replace journalistic ones. This shifting balance of economic power has important consequences for the possibility of independent and critical journalism. The empirical material is specific to China, but it highlights more general theoretical questions as to the relationship between global change and national states and the balance between politics and economics in journalistic practice.

Keywords: China, newspapers, economics, digital, advertising, circulation, journalism

Chinese newspaper groups in the digital era: the resurgence of the party press

This article analyses the impact of new media on Chinese newspapers. The focus is on the newspaper groups that dominate the press at the provincial level. Characteristically, these groups contain a politically-oriented 'party' newspaper and at least one other, commercially-oriented or 'metro', title. While the former plays the central political role, the latter were until recently economically more successful, particularly in gaining advertising revenues. The main economic effect of the growth of the internet and mobile telephony has been to shift advertising away from the legacy media towards new online outlets. Consequently, there has been a fall in the revenues of the newspaper groups. At the same time, the readership of many printed editions has fallen. While some papers have had considerable success in attracting audiences to their online offerings, they have also faced competition from new, online only, entrants into the news market. In response, newspaper groups have developed new strategies, both in the editorial and business domains, in order to attempt to survive. This has entailed striking a new balance between the political and the commercial and, consequently, a new dynamic between media, politics and market is in formation.

Studies of the impact of digital technologies on the newspaper press have concentrated on the developed world, in particular the USA, and compared the latter with other advanced economies (Brügemann, et al., 2015). China remains, in World Bank terms, an 'upper middle income' country and socially and politically it is very different from the USA and Western Europe. This study therefore provides an important comparator to existing cases. It is a step towards answering the call to 'identify the patterns and sources of similarity and variance in newspaper crises around the world' and contribute to a better understanding the impact of these changes (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012, p. 1387).

This article focus on only one aspect of a complex of issues involved in this 'crisis around the world:' the political economy of the press. This approach is important since, while the actual ownership of the media remains disputed, the CPC controls every level of the system and is the ultimate arbiter of media content (Zhao, 2008, pp. 101-03; Brady, 2012; He Q. , 2007). At the same time, since the beginnings of liberalization in 1978, the media have been increasingly dependent upon subscription and advertising in order to survive. What had been a centrally controlled and politically subsidised media became, increasingly, decentralized, marketized, and open to limited private investment (Zhao, 1998; Sun, 2012; Stockmann, 2013).

The article begins by briefly outlining the general theoretical issues of political economy relevant to this study. Then it reviews some features of the Chinese press that render its response to this international situation distinctive. It presents evidence drawn from 104 interviews conducted with individuals of different ranks in 6 newspaper groups across China during 2016 and 2017. Based on this evidence, conclusions are drawn about how the changing situation and the strategic shifts it has provoked have altered the internal balance of Chinese press groups. Finally, the implications of these findings for the overall understanding of the Chinese press and, more generally, on the political economy of the media, are discussed.

State, market and media

The political economy of the media focuses on 'understanding the connections between the political and the economic' (Mosco, 2009, p. 29). This connection could be theorized in a number of ways, but in practice it has usually been defined with the state as representative of 'the political' and the market as the embodiment of 'the economic.' For most political economists, of whatever persuasion, the operating assumption has been that the

state and the market are poles of influence on the media and their relative strength has been seen as central to the extent to which the media can constitute something approaching a public sphere (Winseck, 2011).

There is a strong current in theories of globalization that suggests that a concern with the state in relation to media and culture is outmoded since 'the military, economic and cultural self-sufficiency, indeed self-sustainability, of the state – any state – ceased to be a viable prospect' (Bauman, 1998, p. 69; Beck, 2000; Pieterse, 2000). Quite apart from the case of China, there is ample evidence that the state remains an influential actor, able to employ coercive power, regulation, and the state budget, to achieve political outcomes desired by the governing classes (Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Draogmir, 2018). Latin America provides many well-documented examples of the continuing significance of the state for the media industries: governing parties of both left and right have used the state budget to support friendly media and repress oppositional voices (Benavides, 2000; Lawson, 2002, pp. 31-34; Hughes, 2006, pp. 202-05; Reilly & Gonzáles de Bustamente, 2014, p. 118; Waisbord, 2013)

There are conflicting views as to whether the state or the market best enables the desirable goal of democratic media. Scholars analysing the situation in Europe and North America from a variety of perspective have long seen the market as a negative factor which undermines the capacity for a plurality of public discourses and thus for the establishment of democratic public life in the form of a public sphere, however limited (Williams, 1966; Garnham, 1979; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Baker, 1994; Hamilton, 2004; McChesney, 2008). Some authors, in particular Europeans, have gone further and stressed the positive role of the state in remedying the shortcomings of the market and sustaining the media, both through its role as regulator of private companies and through the provision of public subsidy to remedy market failure (Golding & Murdock, 1991, p. 24). This widespread view

has meant that even one of the strongest European voices in favour of the market ended his remarks with the concession that: 'Corporations might have a significant presence in democratic media systems, but it is the challenge of regulatory agencies to check corporate power and make markets work for the public sphere' (Chalaby, 2005, p. 289). This widely-held view is based on the belief that 'the democratic state is the principal means by which people can change society' and that this democratic promise is embodied, albeit imperfectly, in public service broadcasters (Curran, 2002, p. 152). Under some circumstances, historically those prevailing in northern Europe, scholars point to the superior performance of public over commercial media in facilitating a public sphere (Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Benson, Powers, & Neff, 2017).

This stress on the importance of public (that is, state) support for media as a necessary remedy for the failings of the market has found far less support amongst US scholars, although there is some evidence, albeit now rather dated, that public media perform better than commercial media from the point of view facilitating a public sphere. (Wasburn, 1995). The desperate situation of newspapers has, however, led to suggestions that the general hostility to government intervention in the news 'should not preclude government support for news reporting any more than it has for the arts, the humanities, and sciences, all of which receive some government support' (Downie & Schudson, 2009). Despite the financial pressure on journalism, such views have tended to be temporary and held by a minority of scholars, while the mainstream continues to adhere to the market as the sole guarantor of democratic journalism (Benson, 2017; Pickard, 2017, p. 53).

The relationship between state and market has also been a major theme in discussions of the Chinese media over at least the last three decades and the conclusions have been close to the dominant view in the USA (Lee C.-C. , 1994; Lee C.-C. , 2000; He Z. , 2003; Tong, 2011; Author, 2016b; Author, 2016d). Lee argued, in a famous article, that, in late-

developing countries like China, a 'liberal' political economy gave a greater purchase on reality, stressing that 'a freer market order, not abused by the state, offers an emancipatory alternative to...authoritarian dictatorship' (Lee, 2000, p. 36). Following this approach, many studies have demonstrated that market pressures opened spaces in which new forms of journalism could flourish, and in which at least some moderately critical reporting could be published (Hassid, 2015). One commentator summarised the resulting consensus on the Chinese press 'in the long term, these dynamics [of the introduction of market mechanisms] appear to lead to greater openness of space in news reporting..' (Stockmann, 2013, p. 5).

It is important to recognise that this 'greater openness' meant that papers were able to develop substantially new forms of journalism that met the diversifying needs of the increasingly prosperous Chinese citizens. Much of this new journalism was concerned with the provision of news, not just about public affairs, but about all of the accoutrements their readers were acquiring as a result of their increasing living standards (Saether, 2008, pp. 138-44). As Zhao put it: 'Mass entertainment, the mobilization of consumption, and stock analysis are politically safe and financially more rewarding' (Zhao, 2004a, p. 207). Some of this journalism, particularly in the commercial press but also in some party titles, investigated the abuses and crimes that accompanied the explosive growth of the economy and the huge social dislocations that it involved (Tong, 2011; Tong, 2015; Svensson, Saether, & Zhang, 2014; Author, 2016a). All media in China are responsible to different levels of the CPC apparatus – in the case of the provincial press groups we studied they report to the provincial CPC Propaganda Department. One common feature of investigation is that "higher" levels of responsibility mean that newspapers are able to investigate issues at "lower" levels. For example, when *Beijing News* was classified as a "central level" newspaper, it could investigate stories at the provincial and lower levels (Author, 2016d). This facility has always meant that newspaper have a certain leeway, indeed a duty to conduct 'public opinion

supervision' and to investigate problems, although always within very definite limits, and in some cases the higher levels of the party encourages their media, including the party media, to root out egregious examples of abuse at lower levels (Sun W. , 2010) The production of 'investigative journalism' in China has been extensively studied, with one analysis finding more than 120 articles dealing with the issue (Author, 2014). Perhaps the most famous of these reports was the 'Sun Zhigang case' in 2003. Following the death in custody of a young migrant worker, an investigation by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* eventually led to compensation for his family, the conviction of some of his assailants, and the abolition of the law under which he had been detained (Author, 2016a, pp. 30-31). Among many other cases was the investigation of an explosion that resulted in many fatalities at a gold mine in Shahe in 2002. The mine-owners and local officials tried to cover up the tragedy and bribed national and local journalists to produce distorted reports, but reporters from the central party paper *Beijing Youth Daily* uncovered and published the true death toll, leading to the arrest of those responsible (Chan, 2010). There are many other cases of corruption, crimes and tragedies that only came to light as a result of the courage and perseverance of investigative journalists.

The extent of the opening produced by market forces has been a hotly-debated issue. One influential current argues that there is an underlying conflict that will eventually produce a crisis of the press, paralleling a more general social crisis in which the conflict between the market economy and the CPC's monopoly of political power becomes unresolvable (Qian & Bandurski, 2011; Shirk, 2007; Shirk, 2011; Hassid, 2015). Against this, it has been argued that the marketization of the media was initiated, controlled and limited by the party. The CPC has always determined the degree to which any critical journalism could be published and the party has been able to build a working relationship with at least the majority of

journalists (Zhao, 1998; Zhao, 2008; Lee, He, & Huang, 2006; Lee, He, & Huang, 2007; McCormick, 2002/2003).

Overall, the evidence from a quarter of a century of shifting relations between the party and the journalistic workforce strongly suggest that the system is sufficiently robust to endure the strain and permit the relatively smooth continuation of the CPC's overall ideological control (Esarey, 2006; McCormick, 2009; Tong, 2014; Zhao & Sun, 2007; Repnikova, 2017a; Repnikova, 2017b). This relationship has always been problematic and there have been several instances where the contradictory pressures have led to serious clashes between journalists and the party, for example with regard to the famous liberal magazine *Southern Weekend* in the late 1990s, the *Freezing Point* supplement to *China Youth Daily* in 2006, and, on several occasions in the 2000s, with *Beijing News* (Cho, 2014; Hassid, 2008; Author, 2016a). Up until now, however, no-one has questioned that the development of the market in China has led to increased openings for journalists, working mostly but not exclusively in the commercial titles, who have been able to develop new forms of journalism and even to produce some mildly critical material on carefully selected topics. Contrary to the views of some western scholars, it is unquestionably the that the evidence demonstrates that, in the circumstance prevailing in China, the market has had a positive effect on journalism and that the state is an obstacle to the press helping generate a version of the public sphere.

Political economy thus faces a theoretical dilemma: there is strong empirical evidence from one part of the world, Northern Europe, that public support for media has beneficial consequences for public life, and strong empirical evidence from another part, China, that it is the market that provides such benefits. If the poles of state and market are alternatives, which pull in opposite directions, then there can be no general theory of the political economy of the media. The main theoretical contribution of this article, therefore, is that, through a close examination of the contemporary political economy of the Chinese

media, it permits a critical analysis of the extent to which state and market are the *necessarily* dichotomous poles within which discussion of the foundations of a democratic media must be articulated.

The impact of digital media

Unlike the newspaper press in the USA, the recent history of the Chinese press is marked by considerable growth. Newspapers in the US began to lose readers in the mid-1980s, but the circulation of the Chinese press grew vigorously up until 2012 (General Administration of Press and Publication, 2015). This growth was driven both by the expansion of the readership of existing titles and by the launch of new types of papers. The traditional ‘party’ press was joined by titles that, while firmly subordinate to the Communist Party of China (CPC), were much more ‘commercial’ in their orientation and which provided many new kinds of journalism (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2002). While this readership provided income through sales revenue, the latter was supplemented by advertising, which, after the ‘opening up’ of the late 1970s, steadily increased as a proportion of total revenue. By the turn of the century, it accounted for more than 60 per cent of total income and was projected to rise to 80 per cent by 2010 (Zhao, 2004a).

The impact of digital media, and in particular the rapid rise of the mobile phone in China, has fractured the delicate balance between market and political power. The developing market, both for news consumption and for advertising, has moved both readers and revenues away from the legacy media. This shift has been most pronounced in the newspaper press, and it has provoked a search for new organizational forms and new revenue sources that have undermined the fragile position of critical journalism. A shift in news consumption has had far-reaching economic consequences which have reinforced the effect of renewed political pressure on the media resulting from the shift towards ‘hard

authoritarianism' under Xi Jinping (Wong, 2016; Brady, 2017; Author, 2016b; Li, 2015; Shambaugh, 2014; Tong, 2017).

The rise in the circulation of newspapers reached a peak in 2012 and has declined sharply since then. This decline has been greatest amongst commercially-oriented newspapers and has been less severe for party-oriented newspapers, some of which have experienced a rise in their circulation (Author, 2016c). Unlike the USA, the value of newspaper advertising in China continued to grow longer into the 21st century. When it fell, however, the decline was even more precipitate. As Figure 1 demonstrates, after 2012 expenditure on advertising in Chinese newspapers fell rapidly, dropping in constant Renminbi (RMB – the Chinese unit of currency, also known as the yuan) from 40,956.4 million to 10,180.4 million in 2016, losing roughly 75 per cent of its value in five years. This is a financial shock almost as great as that experienced by the US press industry, but it has been concentrated over a very much shorter time span. In constant US dollars, press advertising expenditure there has fallen 82 per cent from its peak in around 2000 (World Advertising Research Centre, 2017).

[Figure 1 about here]

Such a rapid transformation of the economics of Chinese newspapers has had reverberations at many levels. The attempt to create new business models, particularly through exploiting the affordances of digital media, has had important effects upon journalistic activities and we have addressed these problems in more detail elsewhere (Author, Forthcoming). In this article, we concentrate on the ways in which the shifting economic situation has altered the balance between the party papers and commercial papers in provincial-level press groups. We explore the strategies these groups have developed, analysing the shifting patterns of revenues that the group has been able to command. We

explore the extent to which these shifts have impacted upon the kinds of journalism that they produce and thus upon the overall situation of journalism in China.

Methodology

The research team interviewed 104 respondents from 6 provincial-level press groups. The semi-structured interviews were preceded by a thorough review of the published scholarly and trade press material about the groups in question. All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese by native-speakers following the same outline structures for their questions. The press groups were selected to obtain as broad as possible a perspective on the provincial level press. Since there are 32 provincial level administrations in mainland China, it was not possible to interview individuals from all press groups in this category. The groups were selected so far as possible to reflect the regional diversity of China, in particular the differences between the highly-developed eastern coastal provinces and the much less-developed west of the country. Our choice of press groups was also influenced by the ease of access, although in practice there was a remarkable degree of readiness on the part of our informants to give up time for interviews and to share information very frankly.

Respondents were selected at different levels in the organizations, in order to reflect different experiences and functions. For this paper, we interviewed the leadership of the press groups for insights into the overall situation, dilemmas and strategies of the groups. We interviewed senior editorial and management staff from both the leading party title and the leading commercial title in order to understand the ways in which these developments have impacted on different kinds of newspapers. As part of the overall project, we also interviewed working journalists, to determine the impact of these developments was on journalistic morale and practice. The respondents were promised anonymity and both the press group in question and the name of the respondent involved have been replaced in this

article, using a numerical coding for the press group and an alphabetical letter for the individuals.

The interviewees were asked in advance whether the research team could record their interviews. When they consented, they were recorded and the interview transcribed in Chinese. Where the informant preferred not to be recorded a written note was made of the main points in the interview. The material was manually coded and the results were discussed amongst members of the research team in order to develop an overall sense of the direction of various developments. Selected portions of the transcripts were translated into English in order to enable the presentation of supporting evidence in articles written in that language. In Chinese-language publications the material remains in its original form.

Press Groups

The structure of the Chinese press means that financial shock has produced different responses to those familiar from developments in the USA. Since the early years of this century, different titles have been consolidated into newspaper groups, which usually contain both political and commercial newspapers ('metro' papers), and often several other titles as well (Zhao, 2000; Zhao & Xing, 2012; Zhao, 2004a; Cui, 2005-2017). Since the commercially-oriented titles won a wider readership and more advertising than the directly political offerings, they were responsible for the financial successes of the group and often subsidized the lower-circulation and less innovative party title (Chen & Guo, 1998; Cui, 2005-2017). Within a press group, therefore, although the political paper remained central to the CPC's leadership, the commercial titles were economically more successful. They also enjoyed more prestige amongst journalists: one study of investigative journalists' attitudes found that their favourite Chinese news source was the 'metro' *Southern Metropolis Daily*,

far ahead of *Southern Daily*, the party paper leading the same press group. *People's Daily* was the outlet that received the lowest score (Shen & Zhang, 2014, pp. 44-45).

The former Deputy Editor in Chief of the main commercial title in an inland province, who is now the General Editorial Director of the whole group, explained the practical significance of these economic realities for the kinds of journalism that his title could publish in terms so vivid they are worth recording at length:

I joined the Metro in 1996, and in 1997 it started publication. I was the news director in the first year. I remember at that time the Group leaders said that was ok if it took several years for us to be able to make a profit. But we were making a profit in just one to two years. Suddenly we earned lots of money, tens of millions Yuan. That was in about 1999....The influence of the party newspaper was very weak at that time, and nobody read it even though they subscribed. But when it came to the Metro newspaper, it seemed everyone was reading it: on the street, in the restaurant, at home after a meal. And we had a great sense of being respected. Advertising was pouring in, money came in, Clang, Clang, Clang... Soon it increased to three hundred million, four hundred million, five hundred million, six hundred million.... [The party paper], on the other hand, only made twenty or thirty million. Such a difference!

Our reporting at that time was also very aggressive. The president of the group said, 'Besides me, no other editors or party members in the Group's executive board can interfere in the editorial decisions of the Metro'. At that time we did a lot of negative [critical] reporting. There were always people who wanted to stop us from publishing it. They would get the group executives to come to speak to us. I remember I had so many phone calls when I was on duty at night. But every time I received a phone call, I told them: 'You need to go to speak to the president. If he says 'withdraw it', I will withdraw it. Otherwise, I will do as I decide. I will continue to publish it. I will not listen to you. If I withdraw this report, and withdraw that report, how can I run a newspaper?'... At that time, truly, the Metro was, in one word, 'yingqi' [tough, firm, confident, proud etc.]! (Informant 5b, 10 May 2017)

The popular appeal and economic success of the commercial titles was recognized by everyone. The prestige conferred by the market did not give them political autonomy from the CPC but it did provide a significant counter-weight, at least against pressure from lower levels of the party.

Faced with an economic downturn, the press groups have been obliged to search for new strategies to generate revenue. The various titles within the group have different

opportunities in this respect. According to the General Manager of a provincial-level group located in the capital of a small and relatively poor inland province, in their peak year of 2011, the commercial title accounted for more than half of their advertising revenue, while the party paper accounted for about one quarter of the total. In 2015, this situation was transformed: the party paper now accounted for nearly half of the group's advertising revenue, at more or less the same level as that of the commercial paper (Informant 1a, 20 May 2016). While the overall advertising revenue of the whole group was now much smaller, that of the party press had proved more resilient than that of the commercial paper, and the former had even had opportunities to increase its income.

Complementing these economic pressures there are powerful political voices that demand a change in strategy. The economic downturn in the press coincides with, and is primarily caused by, technological developments that have been of considerable concern to the party leadership (Xiong & Zhang, 2018, pp. 89-93). In December 2016, 82 per cent of China's then 731 million internet users, or 614 million people, were accessing online news and 78 per cent of them used their mobile phones to do so (CNNIC, 2017, pp. 55-6, 61-62). Dominating this online space is a major objective of the CPC, which fears that the control of public discourse will slip away from the legacy media into the hands of large online commercial operators. Although the 'BAT' companies (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent), which run the most successful online sites, are not enemies of the CPC, the latter does not have the same grip over their policies and personnel as it does with newspapers and television. Consequently, it is concerned that it might not be able to exercise the same control over what they report and how they report it. Despite CPC limits on the content they can produce, the news sites of native internet companies are enormously popular and outstrip even the most successful online operations of legacy media (Huang, 2016; Tang & Huang, 2017). As the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the newsgroup of a large inland province told us: 'What is the

central government thinking? To build strong new media and to influence opinion, to defeat the commercial media [the popular digital offerings of companies like Tencent], and to control ideology' (Informant 5a, 9 May 2017).

For the CPC leadership, other factors, including the survival of commercial newspaper titles, is very much a secondary consideration. According to a senior manager of a newly-reorganised press group in an east coast city, the mayor addressed its leaders and:

....proposed that newspapers need to be reconstructed. He said 'Is it necessary to have so many newspapers? These newspapers were established in the Golden Age [from the mid-1990s to the early years of this century]. If we establish a newspaper, we expect this newspaper is going to make a profit.' So the first thing the media group did when it was set up was to close [a prominent evening commercial title]. (Informant 3a, 28 February 2016.)

The party newspapers do not face closure because the CPC is still committed to having a print-based voice, but the threat is real for the other titles in every press group. The party press has a range of income opportunities that are not open to the commercial press, and these have become much more important over the last few years. This economic shift has reinforced the increased political control of the press instituted by the Xi regime and is changing the balance inside the press groups.

Direct subsidies

The first of these opportunities is the revival of the direct subsidy. The CPC gives financial support to titles that it deems politically important. These subsidies tend to be to the 'political' titles directly tied to the CPC's propaganda goals: in the Southern Press Group, for example, the political paper, *Southern Daily*, receives a subsidy while the more commercial *Southern Metropolis Daily* does not. Some titles, therefore, have an alternative source to replace lost advertising and subscription revenues. These subsidies can be very substantial: according to several of the interviewees, the Guangzhou Daily Group received a subsidy of RMB350,000,000 (around \$US52,500,000) in 2016 alone. The party titles thus enjoy a

degree of security not open to commercial newspapers. As one informant told us, no matter how bad the general situation is, the party title in his group ‘will never be closed as long as the party still rules the country’ (Informant 5a, 9 May 2017).

In return for financial support, the government wants absolute loyalty from the party paper. If the paper has to think about economically-rational behaviour to survive, it is believed it may eventually come into conflict with the needs of the party. This means that direct subsidies are not perceived as an unalloyed benefit by their recipients. The party gives its support on carefully prescribed terms that match its political priorities. Quite apart from having to display uncritical loyalty to their benefactors, the recipients cannot use this income to support the general activities of the party title, let alone help the group as a whole. The bulk of these new subsidies are designed to help establish new media outlets:

...if there is a special project, the Party will give you funding. For example, the new media project, the media convergence project, they will give you money...As a political task, it must be carried out. We have to do it...It may succeed. But whose success? It is a success for the central government, creating greater influence and occupying an important position in directing public opinion. But to our newspaper it is a large investment with no economic gain. It is a loss. (Informant 5a, 9 May 2017)

While the CPC is prepared to provide funds to help the party press solve particular problems – in this case it did provide some subsidies to offset a shortfall in circulation revenues – the main investments it is prepared to make are designed to push the party press ever more firmly into the online environment.

Indirect subsidies

Other changes in CPC policy have also resulted in more funding to party titles in the form of indirect subsidies. The Deputy Chief Editor of another inland press group’s party paper explained how shifts in government policy provided opportunities for his title to expand both advertising and readership. The crack-down on local party leaders’ lavish expenditure on hospitality, meals, cars, overseas travel etc. has meant that the Propaganda

Department now has more funds for direct subsidies and other government offices have money to spare in their budgets (Informant 2a, 3 June 2016). If it cannot be spent on supporting the normal lifestyle of local political leaders, then they prefer to spend it on promoting themselves through advertising in the party press. The political crackdown has also affected the ambitions of local leaders. It is now much more difficult to amass a personal fortune through corrupt practices and, as a consequence, officials are more focused on their own political careers. To facilitate their advancement, they need good coverage in the party press. One way to get such coverage is to channel part of their official budget into advertising (Informant 5a, 9 May 2017). This government-based income has the great advantage that it is considered much more reliable than purely commercial advertising, not being directly subject to market fluctuations.

At the same time, the greater stress upon the importance of party policy to the daily conduct of government business has meant that the circulation of the party titles has actually increased. The close interpenetration between politics and economics in China means that relations between the business and professional classes and different levels of the CPC have always been a vital element for the conduct of daily life. In the relatively decentralised, and more or less openly corrupt, period before Xi Jinping's assumption of power, many of these relationships could be handled informally through personal contact. While the anti-corruption campaign has certainly not ended such practices, it has rendered them less central and less explicit. Learning about party policies through reading the party paper is now much more important as a basis for decision making on the part of a broad layer of the middle class who would previously have relied more on informal channels. One informant told us that the circulation of the party paper in his group had grown from 170,000 in 2015 to an estimated 200,000 by the end of 2016. This sales growth took place despite a 25 per cent rise in cover price, although this was admittedly only from 0.8 Renminbi (RMB) per issue to 1 RMB (1

RMB is worth US\$ 0.15 at the time of writing). As this informant said: ‘We not only increased the price but we also achieved a higher circulation: this is the advantage that the party newspaper enjoys’ (Informant 2a, 3 June 2016).

A higher circulation is not an unalloyed benefit either: ‘Every copy is a loss of money. It is sold at just a bit over one yuan per copy, but the cost is far more than one yuan’ (Informant 5a, 9 May 2017). The increased circulation of the political press is, however, a positive result so far as the CPC is concerned, since it still wishes to retain a powerful printed mouthpiece, and it is prepared to support titles who lose economically as a result of their political success.

Exploiting political advantages

In line with the new centrality of party and government advertising to the overall finances of the press group, the party newspapers are no longer simply the political leadership of the group but also take economic initiatives. In the case of Group 2, the Deputy Chief Editor leads delegations from all the group’s papers in visiting the party and government leaderships of the lower administrative levels in their province. When they arrive in a district, they promise to make full use of the group’s media resources to give positive coverage to every area of local activity, from the efficiency of government, through reporting social trends, to the successes of the local tourism industry. At the same time, they say directly to the local leadership that, in return, they expect them to spend money on advertisements in the group’s papers. As a result, the local officials see reports on their work in the provincial press as displaying their achievements to the provincial leadership and the arrangement is a ‘win-win’ situation for both sides (Informant 2a, 3 June 2016).

A second way in which the influence of the party title can be used to help the group as whole is in repositioning failing titles. The fall in advertising revenue means that some titles

are no longer viable. Several press groups told us that they had newspapers that fell into these categories: according to Informant 2a ‘we have several newspapers dying in our group now’ (3 June 2016). Another group had a weekly lifestyle newspaper that was too up-market for local conditions and considered closing it down. It has survived thanks to the provincial Forestry Office, which wanted to publicize its own activities, and undertook to subsidise the paper in return for editorial influence (Informant 1b, the group Deputy Editor in Chief, 21 May 2016). Another senior editor from Group 1 argued that seeking official sponsors for failing titles was the only way that newspapers could hope to prosper in the present climate:

In the current situation, newspapers can survive if they have backing, otherwise it is difficult to make a living. Without backing, it means relying on the market. When the market goes from bad to worse, it means that a newspaper loses its only source of support. (Informant 1c, 18 May 2016)

In order to find a source of support, the senior management of a newspaper group is prepared to alter the entire character of a newspaper, changing it, for example, from a commercial daily focusing on economic news into a party paper acting as the mouthpiece of a newly formed administrative area (Informant 2a, 3 June 2016).

‘Side-line businesses’

Another major concern of the groups’ management is with the ‘side-line businesses’ that have long been an important part of the overall revenue of both commercial and party titles. Newspaper groups have for years been the centre of a range of other commercial activities. Some of these, like property sales, are related indirectly to publishing activity but others, food supply for example, have no relationship with journalism. The Deputy General Manager of Group 1 described the current situation in his group in these terms:

We have a lot of businesses including printing, real estate, distribution, exhibitions and making small-scale loans. The business of printing and money-lending each makes more than 10 million yuan a year, and the real estate project makes more than 40 million. We also get project funds from the government. And advertising is still the biggest part of our income, but it has decreased from 130 million yuan to just over 80 million yuan per year. Newspaper sales make up

a relatively small proportion of this total. As everyone knows, subscriptions don't make any money: our daily paper sells for a few cents each but has quite a few pages. The business of newspapers hardly makes any profit. (Informant 1a, 20 May 2016.)

As advertising revenues and circulation decline, the side-line businesses have increased in importance and are now central to the strategic thinking of some groups. Group 1 envisages that they will come to dominate their entire activity:

Strategic planning for subsequent years is composed of numerous elements, but the core in the field of advertising and management is to allow the newspaper business to continue to develop. In order to do this, we need to shift the balance of our income. The current ratio is 3:7: that is, of every 10 yuan we earn, 7 comes from traditional activities associated with publishing and 3 comes from the non-newspaper businesses, such as exhibitions, commercial activities and project planning. We want to achieve a 5:5 ratio in order to make sure the company is safe. We would like to raise it to 7:3 so that we would have no need to worry about the fall in advertisements because other income would keep us going. I agree with this strategy, which is the direction every newspaper should follow. (Informant 1a, 20 May 2016.)

As these side-line businesses grow, the importance of the newspaper publishing that was the original purpose of the group becomes financially less and less important.

As a result, apart from the growth generated by the side-line businesses themselves, there is a strong pressure to utilize the material and journalistic resources of the newspaper to help them grow. Falling circulation means that newspapers find themselves with a disproportionately large distribution network designed for more prosperous times. These surplus resources are increasingly being utilized for non-journalistic purposes. Group 1 again provides a vivid picture of the synergies that they are trying to develop:

I have to make effective use of our distribution resources, including our vehicles and personnel...city XX is more than 400 kilometres from [the provincial capital]. Newspapers are printed at about 03.00 and the distribution vehicle drives to XX every day. In the past, it carried nothing on its way back. With our new service, the vehicle may come back laden with potatoes, farm products or other items. Previously, the delivery staff took newspapers to subscribers in the morning and had nothing to do later in the day. Now they take eggs and fruit to our customers in the afternoon. Overall, we aim to give you what you want. (Informant 1a, 20 May 2016.)

This example involves only transport facilities, but there are other initiatives which involve the papers more closely in directly commercial activity. One example comes from an east coast group which has been particularly active in launching new ventures:

Our advertising income from real estate is, in fact, declining, but we set up a platform dedicated to house purchases. We help real estate companies sell their products and provide a service to users. The platform is a bridge. Customers buy real estate via our platform and we get a commission. We are not agents; we do not participate directly in the deals. We just introduce people. In the past three years the total number of purchases is more than 10,000 and each one generally represents a commission of between ten and twenty thousand RMB. If we subtract the costs of providing the service, we are still making almost 1 billion RMB from this venture. (Informant 6b, 2 April 2016.)

The line between journalistic activity and commercial activity, was never sharply drawn in China (Xu, 2016; Zhang, 2009; Lee, Cui, & Zhang, 2015). It is, however, becoming increasingly blurred as the emphasis shifts towards the side-line businesses .

From print to mobile

The online audience in China is very large and ensuring that the voice of the CPC is dominant in this huge arena is one of the party's main ideological concerns. Given the structure of the Chinese online audience, this means a stress upon mobile phones. As the Deputy Chief Editor of a press group in an east coast province, who is responsible for new media initiatives, said:

Everyone knows, nowadays it is not enough only to publish newspapers. Even websites based on PCs are not enough. We must get into the mobile market... Also it is a must for political reasons. The party wants to maintain the high ground of directing public opinion, so we need to be able to support it. (Informant 4f, 19 April 2017.)

As a consequence, the CPC has pushed the news groups very hard to take a range of initiatives that will allow them to gain this 'high ground'. Once again, the outcome of these changes has been to shift the balance within the press groups.

For the party press, the transition certainly involved new ways of articulating the political objectives of the CPC, but it did not involve any serious questioning of the role of the newspaper. As the Deputy Manager of a major news group in an East-coast city told us:

For [the parent party paper], the biggest problem is how to present itself in an innovative way in the context of the Internet. This is the first time the newspaper group has done this. The goal is also very simple, for the party press there is no need to explore the functions or meaning of being a newspaper. Naturally, it represents the voice of the party committee. So the problem is how to do it innovatively. Hence, the transformation is almost painless. It does not need to explore the business model. Its target is the civil service community and the stakeholders within the city. (Informant 3a, 28 February 2016.)

The management did not need to worry about the economic consequences of an online launch since it was certain that it would continue to receive funding. The online title has a ‘core’ readership of party members and government officials but aims more widely, both socially in terms of those it describes as ‘city stakeholders’ and geographically in terms of people anywhere who need to know what is going on in the city who together constitute the potential audience for the expansion of the circulation of the party press (Informant 3b, 28 March 2016).

The commercial titles have different strategies, both editorially and commercially. While most newspapers have long had web-based online editions, today they have expanded into the whole range of possible outlets, tailoring them to the mobile phone-dominated habits of Chinese audiences. Some of these initiatives are driven by editorial experimentation. One example is an online-only newspaper launched in a major east coast city. Directly supported by the local party and subsidised at least in its initial phase, this title is self-consciously experimental in organizational structure and in journalistic practices. As one senior journalist told us: ‘We cannot entirely copy the contents of the printed newspaper. In the new media era, readers do not need us to provide a whole section of news. They only need specific useful information that can be sent to them directly’ (Informant 3c, 12 March 2016).

In this title, the managers and journalists claim that their motivation is primarily journalistic and that, at least at the time of the interviews, commercial motivations were kept at a distance from editorial decisions. While there was some interchange between journalists and the advertising department, this remained limited (Informant 3c, 12 March 2016). In other groups, however, the commercial imperatives are primary. One east coast provincial group has branched out very widely from journalistic activities, purchasing online gaming companies amongst other projects. These acquisitions are legitimized on the grounds that they attract large numbers of active gamers who might, potentially, be transformed from users of gaming sites to an audience for the group's news sites (Informant 6d, 1 April 2016).

From news to services

The pressure to succeed online is leading to a redefinition of journalism, away from informing the public towards servicing them as consumers. The pressure to provide services is particularly acute in the commercial newspapers. According to the Editor in Chief of the commercial paper of another inland Group, 'making a profit on news is difficult.' The group found that its 'hotline,' which it set up to allow readers to ring in with story leads, was less and less used, since people now turned to social media to spread interesting stories and tips. The 'hotline' has been converted into a community-service channel. The paper has used its prestige to link up with hundreds of local merchants and calls to the hotline provide links to the goods and services they offer:

Service is the extension of media influence and credibility. Based on them, service extends to the field of community service. It could merge into every field of city life, with lots of information such as household goods, education, leisure, tourism and pensions. And these services could be organised into an industry which could be operated on the basis of endorsements using the credibility of the media. The social influence of our newspaper group is fairly strong in this city ... so we can achieve that goal. Our reputation is derived from our strict regulation of the participants. When a merchant enters our platform and makes a deposit we investigate their service – its cost, the process involved, and the way it is regulated. If there is a complaint it is handled by the newspaper rather than by an

individual consumer. If the consumer wants a refund, we compensate them immediately. If the customer wants an investigation to establish compensation, the media has the power to publicize the problem. This all sustains our credibility. (Informant 2b, 3 June 2016)

This view is widespread – the Editor in Chief of a famous commercial paper on the east coast told us: ‘the way to make money is to provide information and services, not the news’ (Informant 4a, 27 April 2016).

The attempt to shift business from unprofitable news to the provision of services has led to closer links between the media groups and other local organizations, both political and commercial. One large eastern group, for example, has set up a travel media centre which brings together journalists and other organizations in the travel business (Informant 6c, 3 April 2016). According to the Deputy Manager of this media group, they still ‘pursue the authenticity of news and unbiased news coverage’ but ‘in general what we are doing is “news” plus “services”’ (Informant 6a, 3 April 2016).

These service-oriented initiatives have built new links between the news groups and government, since many of the organizations involved are official ones. As one leading manager said of their newly launched app:

The standard definition of [our] goal is to be [the province’s] authoritative voice. We want to offer governmental services to serve [the province’s] people and people who are concerned about [the province]....We must get into the mobile market. It is a must for economic reasons. Information is valuable, especially credible and authoritative information...in addition to providing news, we also want to do a more [commercially] valuable job. That is, to provide services, including governmental services and people’s livelihood services. People need to deal with the government all the time: to pay traffic fines to the police, to make appointments at the hospital, to register their marriage with the department of civil affairs, to pay taxes, to register properties, etc. We can make a link. People can find the government through our mobile services. (Informant 4f, 19 April 2017.)

The government is very concerned to be seen to be the motivating force behind the provision of these services. Consequently, this app originates from the party paper rather than its much more famous commercial sister. A similar desire by the CPC to be identified as the motivator

of these new initiatives occurred with Group 5. According to the Deputy General Manager of their online presence, the group had long had a very successful web presence named for the region it serves. The director of the provincial propaganda department visited the group and insisted that it renamed its online presence, both on the web and their mobile app, after the provincial party paper. Echoing a famous phrase by Xi Jinping, he claimed that ‘all new media projects should have the surname of the party paper’ (Informant 5c, 11 May 2017).

Discussion and conclusion

The evidence reviewed here demonstrates that technological change has altered the political economy of the industry in important ways. As a result of the affordance provided by online technologies, and notably the mobile phone, audience attention and commercial advertising revenue has ebbed away from legacy newspapers. Like media organizations everywhere, the Chinese press has attempted to overcome these problems. In the Chinese context, almost all of these new mechanisms have involved a much greater role for the party press. Subsidies, both direct and indirect, have re-emerged as significant parts of the overall revenues of newspaper groups and these have mostly accrued to the party titles. When groups have attempted to find sponsors, or to trade promotional advertising for editorial support, it has been the political clout of the party paper that has been decisive. The move online has been encouraged and partly financed by the CPC and has led to the press groups playing a more prominent role in publicizing government services. Symbolically and practically, these new services have been branded under the name of the party paper. Many of the new services have little relationship with ‘news’ as traditionally understood and some involve the direct engagement of the news group in political and commercial activities.

Overall, the cumulative effect of these changes has been to strengthen the position of the party press and to increase the dependence of the whole industry on one form or other of

government support and to increase pressure on journalists. A senior editor on a metro paper, told us that:

I have worked in this newspaper for nearly 20 years. Now is the most difficult time. The editor in chief is under great pressure. I think he has aged much faster than usual in the past year. His hair is completely grey now. I feel pity for him. (Informant 4c, 10 May 2016)

The paper has cut its staff from 2000 people to around 1,300 and there are rumours that there will be another 500 cuts soon (Informant 4d, 17 April 2017). In April 2016, the Chief Editor said that there was now an ‘editorial staff of 500, which is still very big but it is much smaller than when the paper was in its Golden Years.’ Reporting budgets are tight and there are no longer the resources to make the major investments in big news stories that there were, for example, at the time of the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 (Informant 4d, 27 April 2016).

The economic pressures have had a cumulative effect on the status of journalists and their ability to resist censorship. The words of a senior editor from an inland metro paper contrast sharply with the quotation above about a similar paper 15 years before:

When we did well [economically], the government respected our newspaper. The reporters enjoyed high social status. Even the most junior ‘little reporter’ was great. I remember one of the most influential reports we did was a series on ‘bans.’ We ran eight articles in which we examined how the different bans issued by the government were implemented. Which was enforced, which not enforced, and why there were these differences. When we ran the eighth report, the government was clearly worried. The propaganda director asked to see me and said: ‘Can we discuss this? Can you stop for a while and perhaps you can continue next year?’ That was the manner in which the propaganda director talked to us. He discussed with us and wanted us to understand his reasoning. Now, it is simple and direct: ‘No reporting on this! If you do, you face punishment! There is no room for negotiation.’ (Informant 1c, 18 May 2016.)

Certainly, some of this change in attitude is the result of the much more repressive political environment of the last few years, but the decline in economic fortunes has not simply been a business matter: it has impacts on the status of the commercial papers and thus on the degree to which they can continue to ask awkward questions and publish embarrassing reports.

This article contributes to broadening our understanding of the problems facing the newspaper press through the provision of data from outside of the developed west. Our conclusions must be tentative, since they are based upon a relatively limited sample of press groups. There are 32 such groups in China, and a total of more than 1000 daily newspapers of all levels. Further investigations, involving quantitative rather than qualitative methods, would be necessary to test the extent to which the rich data presented here is representative of the overall situation in China. Even with that limitation, this research identifies strong commonalities operating in both contexts as consequences of digital technologies. The major variation in the international pattern is that, in China, revenue falls were later but more rapid than in the west.

From a comparative perspective, there are some striking similarities in the ways that the industry has responded to this global phenomenon. Newspaper companies everywhere have cut costs, including editorial costs. The use of editorial credibility to attract party sponsorship is not fundamentally dissimilar to the use of the same asset to attract native advertising, or even, as has been alleged against some newspapers, promising positive coverage in return for corporate sponsorship (Cusick, 2018). The use of the newspaper's brand to promote 'side-line' businesses is, in principle the same in both cases. For example, *The New York Times* advertised 10 branded conferences in three continents from May to December 2018 (The New York Times, 2018a). Among their offerings was the 'Higher Education Leaders Forum' in New York (The New York Times, 2018b). Tickets for this two-day conference were \$1,450, which makes the ICA look a real bargain (The New York Times, 2018b).

On the other hand, many responses to this global development are distinctive, since they depend on national social and political structures and journalistic practices. Politically, the concern of the CPC to maintain its domination over the symbolic environment has led to a

degree of subsidy, both direct and indirect, that is unknown in the West. By the same token, private subsidy by rich individual owners, as in the case of the *Washington Post*, is unthinkable in mainland China. Journalistically, the relatively weak division between the business and editorial functions of the press amongst Chinese journalists has permitted a more unproblematic and complete embrace of commercial imperatives than in the west. The pervasive role of politics in all social decisions in China is clearly a distinguishing factor in most comparative studies, and further work would be necessary to determine how far the changes we have recorded are in fact the result of economic factors and how far the consequence of political changes.

The argument that the market did indeed broaden the range of journalism in China, as it did at least for a time in the post-communist countries of eastern Europe, is correct (Author, 2008). But, more recently, the market has had the opposite effect. The choices made by advertisers in placing their material are as much market choices as those made by readers deciding whether to buy a newspaper and which title to select, and in practice much more important to its survival than sales. Market forces have moved the advertising subsidy away from the commercial press and plunged the latter into financial problems which have had severe impacts on journalism. The revenue streams which have replaced the lost commercial advertising are more dependent upon political favours and have increased the relative power of the party titles. As Xi's regime has tightened its political grip over the media, the market has not acted as a counterweight to this pressure but as an auxiliary force pushing newspapers and journalists to conform to the CPC's demands for neutered journalism (Svensson, 2017).

The implication is that considering state and market as antithetical forces which struggle to impose their teleologies upon the media is mistaken in the Chinese case. As Zhao

put it ‘one of the fallacies of the state-versus-market dichotomy is that it assumes an inherently antagonistic relationship between the Chinese media elite, their core urban readership, and the dominant Party elite’ (Zhao, 2004b, p. 66). That is not to say that the relationship is harmonious: any society developing very rapidly will display considerable strains within elite groups, even when they are highly integrated, as in China. For a period of time, the developing market allowed some of those strains to emerge into limited public view. Today, that market is acting to help close such opportunities. The market has no *necessary* function pushing towards a more open media system. The relationship between state and market, even in a highly authoritarian society with a powerful state apparatus like China, is not a static one but varies according to technological, economic and political factors.

It follows that any general theory of the political economy of the media will need to reconsider the dichotomy of state and market. The empirical evidence demonstrates that in China the relations between the two varied, with an authoritarian state always in the dominant position. In northern Europe, the empirical evidence demonstrates that democratic states have acted to ameliorate the negative effects of the market and to sustain a more plural public life. We can generalise neither from the Chinese nor the Northern European model to a global political economy of the press in which the roles of state and market are fixed. The precise results of the interaction between state and market are not given; rather they are the contingent consequences of concrete circumstances which have to be analysed in detail rather than derived from theoretical presuppositions.

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