

## Smartphones, Wechat and Paid Content

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# SMARTPHONES, WECHAT AND PAID CONTENT: JOURNALISTS AND SOURCES IN A CHINESE NEWSPAPER

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## ABSTRACT

*This article reports on research into the relations between reporters and sources in a Chinese newspaper in a transitional period brought about by the diffusion of smartphones and instant messaging. The article adopts the theoretical framework of political economy, supplemented by elements of the classic sociology of journalism that emphasise the routinized nature of journalist-source relationships. It argues that in the newspaper studied here the nature of that relationship is changing. The article reports on the ways in which technological changes have weakened the link between the reporter and her colleagues in the newsroom, which has been an important source of countervailing pressure to the influence of sources. It also shows how the economic effects of new technologies have forced the newspaper to increase its reliance on paid content and how reporters are expected aggressively to solicit this from their sources. Overall, both the reporters and the newspaper have become much more source-dependent than previously. The article closes with a discussion of how far these findings can be generalised, both within China and more broadly.*

**KEYWORDS:** China; digital; participant observation; newspaper; routine; sources

This article reports research on how relations between reporters and sources in a Chinese newspaper have changed as the result of the adoption of digital technologies of news production. Reporters, particularly “beat” reporters, are necessarily close to their sources and the newsroom provides a counter-influence preventing them from being subsumed by the values and priorities of their sources. This research examines the ways in which the introduction of smartphones and social media has changed that balance, rendered them more dependent upon their sources, and thus limited their scope to take journalistic decisions.

Most research has concentrated on developments in the advanced countries of the West. China today represents the major alternative to the western model of journalism and understanding how that model functions is central to any comparative project. Although the Chinese media differ in some important respects, they have experienced the impact of digital media as much as has Western media but have been less fully researched. The circulation of printed newspapers has declined, advertising has moved online, and newspapers have only captured a small segment of that new market. Audiences for news today access it predominantly through mobile phones and, if they engage with newspapers, it is primarily through news apps or their social media accounts (WeChat and Weibo in China). These changes, which tend to blur the distinction between news production and consumption, have had important consequences for the institutional structures of Chinese media, and these latter are the focus of this study.

The research upon which this article is based sought to understand the daily practices of journalists and therefore adopted participant observation as its main research method. This method is appropriate to enabling an understanding of the processes, constraints and decisions experienced by reporters in their daily practices. The reporters studied here write for both the printed and electronic editions of the paper and we were thus able to examine how their overall journalistic practices had changed as a result of recent developments. We were particularly concerned to differentiate between ways in which these new technologies have changed the working practices of individual journalists and how they have altered the overall news organization for which they work. We analyse how the two together have resulted in important changes in how journalists work and the kinds of material they produce.

We begin with a discussion of what is known about the relationship between journalists and their sources, using the theoretical framework provided by the political economy of the media, and show how this can be extended to investigate changes to journalism consequent on new media. Since the literature focusses very heavily on western experiences, we then consider how far this is appropriate for studying Chinese newspapers. A discussion of the methods employed is then followed by an account of the main findings and a discussion of their implications.

## **Literature Review**

This research is located within the framework of the political economy of the media but it attempts to rectify one of its major limitations. The strength of political economy lies in demonstrating how ownership and markets and, in China, politics, constitute the determinant limits of news production. In the Chinese case, political economy has been powerful at the macro-level in analysing how media are integrated into the apparatus of political power (Zhao 1998, Zhao 2000, Zhao 2008). It has also been powerful in analysing the changing constitution of the journalistic field, particularly as the result of the development of advertising dependence and the consequent tension between the commercial and political imperatives of journalism, exemplified by the rise of investigative journalism (Stockmann

2013, Tong 2011). More recently, with the shift online of much advertising, it has demonstrated the erosion of the social spaces within which critical journalism was able to survive (Tong 2017, Wang and Sparks 2018, Wang and Sparks 2019). The political economy of Chinese journalism, however, has a lacuna with regard to the actual practice of making news. As Schudson long ago remarked of the western tradition “it is hard to tie patterns of ownership to specific habits of reporting” (Schudson 1996, 144). The main aim of this article is to develop the relationship between political economy and the micro-sociology of journalism in order fill that gap.

This endeavour is close to what Ryfe terms “a practice approach,” which stresses that news is produced as the result of the daily performance of journalism by journalists (Ryfe 2018). The approach has been valuable in exploring the relationship between the reproduction of social rules and processes of social change. This recognition of journalists as active agents in the production of news has been emphasised by the “second wave ethnography” of news production (Cottle 2000). In this study, however, much greater stress is placed upon the social determinants of individual performance, and in particular on the inscription of those determinants into routinized practices, notably source-journalist relations. The changes to journalism in the digital era cannot be explained adequately in terms of journalistic agency alone. In order to exist, a newspaper *must* incorporate a regular and predictable supply of “news,” and the reproduction of what Ryfe elsewhere calls the constitutive and regulative rules of journalism establish the framework within which that is achieved (Ryfe 2006). Ryfe tends to stress the uniformity of these rules across the range of journalistic practices but he perhaps underestimates their contested nature in contexts other than the USA. The routines that journalists are obliged to follow and the rules that these routines embody differ in important respects not only between countries but also, sometimes, within countries. These differences are not arbitrary but are the result of the legal, economic and political frameworks within which they work. These are not external to the practices of journalists but provide both the conditions for those practices and limit freedom of action. These frameworks can change, as they evidently have done in the recent past, and the rules of journalism are reframed within those new conditions. The view of the recurrent problematic of structure and agency that underlies these issues our approach gives relatively greater weight to structure than do many contemporary accounts.

Establishing journalism as an occupation in which routinized practice is essential to converting more or less unique and unpredictable incidents into standardized and predictable outputs was one of the central achievements of the “classical” sociology of journalism (Tuchman 1978, Gans 1979, 109-115, Schudson 2003). Subsequent research has tended to confirm this conclusion, at least for those journalists still working for offline media (Anderson 2013, 62). While the introduction of digital technologies has altered important aspects of routine, there is also evidence of a degree of continuity (Becker and Vald 2009). The major innovation in online journalism so far detected has been the ability to publish news more quickly, consequently leading to a stress on immediacy (Anderson 2013, 62, Usher 2014).

The analysis of routine in the production of ‘news’ out of ‘events’ foregrounds the relationship between reporters and sources, particularly those working regularly on one segment of news -- on a “beat” -- which Ryfe describes as journalism’s “basic habit” and the mechanism through which occupational socialization occurs (Ryfe 2012, 59). This relationship is primarily with official organizations and ‘the beat is a *social setting* to which the reporter belongs. The reporter becomes part of the network of social relations which is the beat’ (Sigal 1973, 30, Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1989). The bureaucracy around which the

beat is organized has routines for providing journalists with the information they need to construct their stories and therefore 'it is useful...to think of news as the outcome of two systems which produce accounts: a system of journalistic accounts and, underlying this, a system of bureaucratic accounts' (Fishman 1980, 141). The raw material for news is produced by a bureaucracy with which the reporter is in close, daily, personal, contact and with which she must establish a working relationship. This relationship is therefore inevitably one in which there is a degree of dependence of the journalist upon the official bureaucracy and journalists' "work processes are far more reflective of where the information comes from than the place that it ends up" (Reich 2009, 172).

This dependence is not, however, complete. The non-news bureaucracy also needs the journalist to give the best possible account of its work, so it makes efforts to provide the journalist with material that can readily be transformed into news. The reporter is responsible to her news organization and thus 'counter-pressure to dependence comes primarily from the newsroom' (Sigal 1973, 56). Relations with other journalists in the same organization are the main social mechanisms through which the rules of journalism are learned, confirmed and, indeed, revised. The official bureaucracy is an indispensable source of information for the journalist, without which it would not be possible to provide the flow of news needed by the parent organization, but the selection and framing of this information is governed by the norms of the journalistic community to which the reporter belongs (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1989, 377-78, Berkowitz and TerKuerst 1999). This journalistic community, and its 'professional' norms, provide a counter-balance to the 'instrumental' pressures exerted by the bureaucratic structures of the organisation with which beat journalists are obliged to spend the bulk of their working time (Revers 2014).

What eventually becomes news is primarily generated by a non-news organization pursuing its own ends but the journalist, however deeply imbricated in the social relations of the beat, selects and adapts from the bureaucratic offerings those elements which correspond to the expectations of a separate organization motivated by the logic of news. This material is further processed by another group, the editorial team, whose primary identification is with the news organization and who produce the kind of news that meets its expectations. The passage of an event into news is thus a 'co-production' involving negotiation rather than transmission (Cook 1996, 12).

This relationship between reporters and their sources is an aspect of journalism that the internet might be expected to transform, since it increases the amount of material readily available to journalists. Western studies show, however, that, far from broadening the range of sources, and thus freeing themselves from the worst aspects of source dependence, the majority of journalists tend to rely upon traditional primary sources and give only limited consideration to non-official sources (Loke and Grimm 2017, Manning 2012, Bergström 2011, De Keyser, Raeymaekers and Paulussen 2011). When they do use online sources, notably Twitter, these tend to be from the same elite groups that have always been prominent (von Nordheim, Boczek and Koppers 2018). The relationship between reporters and their sources remains a central phenomenon of contemporary journalism.

The fact that this relationship remains central to the practice of journalism does not, however, entail that it has remained the same. The introduction of digital technologies has manifestly led to many changes for both news organisations and journalists and our major research questions are how the relationship between those actors in the production of news and their sources has changed and what the consequences of any changes might be? This can be broken down into three separate dimensions: in what ways have the affordances of these technologies altered the routines individual journalists follow in order to generate news? In

what ways have these technologies changed the relationship between news organisations and their sources? What are the results of these changes upon the overall production of news?

### **The Chinese Newspaper Press**

Newspapers in China are, without exception, controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) (Zhao 2008). Although originally dependent upon state subsidies for their economic survival, after the turn towards the market economy in 1978 they became increasingly dependent upon advertising revenues and, by the start of the new century, this was the major source of their income (Zhao 2000). Discussions of Chinese newspapers distinguish between ‘political’ titles, whose main task is to represent the official views of the CPC, and the ‘commercial’ titles oriented on business success through raising circulation and selling advertising (Stockmann 2013). The newspaper in our study is a ‘political’ title and was therefore expected to devote its primary energies to producing news that propagates the views of the CPC and being a mouthpiece for the city government (Wang and Sparks 2019).

The latter point is significant because the press has a hierarchical structure mirroring the political structure of China. Lower-level officials need to ensure that higher-level officials are aware of their successes and their loyalty, since that boosts their promotion chances. One way of ensuring that is to enjoy frequent and positive coverage, not only in the political newspaper corresponding to your own hierarchical level but also, if possible, in the papers of higher levels (Wang and Sparks 2018). Our research site is a ‘city level’ newspaper, so its content is important to officials working for the city and its constituent districts and departments.

Chinese newspapers have been experiencing the economic effects of the diffusion of digital media. Audiences for most printed editions have been declining (Cui and He 2015). Economically more important, advertising revenue has been moving online. Like newspapers in the west, the Chinese press has been making economies – cutting wages, sacking journalists, reducing pagination, closing titles, and so on – and seeking new sources of revenue (Sparks, et al. 2016). At the same time, the Xi government has been pushing for a more aggressive use of digital technologies by the legacy media in order to counter the popularity of commercial online-only news sites (Xi 2014, Tong 2017, Jaros and Pan 2018). Chinese newspapers thus face new and tighter conditions, both economically and politically.

The newspaper in this study has experienced a decline in traditional advertising. It has reduced pagination drastically and sacked, or not replaced, many journalists. All the surviving journalists on traditional news beats are expected to write both for the printed newspaper and for the online outlets. Their submissions to the online outlets are reviewed by an editorial team before being posted.

In 2013, in order to raise new revenue, the newspaper formalized a system of paid content, known as ‘*TeKan*’ (特刊 – literally ‘Special Article’). A special page, with unsigned paid material from the government or state-owned businesses, solicited by the advertising department, has long existed but the new system expanded the practice to all journalists. They are set targets to secure contracts, mostly with governmental organizations, guaranteeing a certain amount of positive coverage during a given period. This subordination of editorial to commercial considerations directly contradicts the spirit of government regulations. At least for central-level papers, the policy is ‘to construct a news-reporting oriented structure which requires the complete separation of editorial work and advertisement work’ (Cai 2016, General Administration of Press and Publication 2017). While these policies do not apply

directly to city-level publications, they give a clear view of government thinking on what western journalists like to call ‘the separation of church and state.’ Government views are well-known to the employees of this paper but, nevertheless, the sale of *TeKan* is openly accepted.

The remuneration structure for journalists was re-organised to include a proportion of the value of any *TeKan* contract they secure: for example, an individual journalist is entitled to 8 per cent of the value of any contract they negotiate, and more for larger contracts. Reporters thus face both the journalistic and economic impacts of new technologies and are establishing new working patterns to survive in this changed environment.

## Methods

This research took place in 2016. Our investigation used participant observation and structured interviews. These methods are well-established in the study of journalism in the west, but they are comparatively rare in China, although visits to newsrooms have long formed a part of the research effort for studies of journalism (Wang 2016, Li 2018, Polumbaum 2014, Zhang 2009, Pan 2000, He 2000). The ways in which journalists use online information for story leads, how they try to use the relative freedom of the online world to evade censorship, and their attempts to police the boundary between ‘professional’ and ‘citizen’ journalists have been extensively studied (Chen and Yang 2016, Liu 2012, Nip and Fu 2016, Hassid and Repnikova 2016). The working practices of journalists in this new environment, and particularly the practices of beat journalists working for local official newspapers, have attracted less attention (Jian and Liu 2018).

The lead author spent six months, working for five days per week, in the police news department. The choice of the police department was made by the Deputy Chief Editor of the paper. The newspaper, and the researcher’s immediate colleagues, were aware of her status and the project. Initially she was an assistant to the journalist reporting on the traffic police and later worked as an independent reporter on the same beat. She attended news conferences and other functions, and wrote stories that appeared both in the printed newspaper and in the news app. She participated in the production of more than 40 stories overall. She also observed the work of the editorial department of the newspaper. While she was working as a reporter she was on duty during normal working hours: from 10.00 to 18.00 each day. During her time with the editorial team, she followed their practice of working from 16.00 to 02.00. The researcher is a Chinese native speaker and all the primary research was undertaken in Mandarin Chinese.

The researcher worked with three groups of people: reporters and editors from the police beat of the newspaper; the collective of police beat reporters from the various media operating in the city; police officers, primarily those working for the publicity department. The journalists were mostly young: all of those in her own newspaper were under 30. While the police officers were overwhelmingly male, the journalists were divided roughly equally between men and women. The researchers’ co-workers granted permission for their words to be used in scholarly works. A research diary was maintained recording the major happenings on a daily basis. These field-notes were supplemented by recorded interviews, records of WeChat exchanges, and photographic evidence recording the social organization of space. Relevant documentation, both published and internal to the newspaper, was also analysed. Anonymity was promised to respondents, and to that end the title of the paper and the city of its publication have been withheld, no bibliographic details of internal documents are cited, and the names of all respondents have been removed.

## Findings

The most apparent effect of new technology is that the newsroom is no longer a central point in the journalists' routine. Instead of gathering together at given points in the production process, the journalists mostly work from home or from the Police Department. The physical re-location was made possible by the ubiquity of mobile phones in the news organization, and the habitual use of WeChat (a more sophisticated equivalent of WhatsApp). Reporters discuss with the editors over WeChat rather than being physically present in the newsroom. Both the filing of story proposals and the submission of the final copy are conducted electronically and discussions with other journalists and with their sources take place mostly using this medium.

The fact that visits to the newsroom are infrequent means that there is less time for journalists to exchange ideas and values with each other and their managers. Before the smartphone became ubiquitous, journalists were habitually present in the newsroom on at least three occasions – at 10.00 for a conference to agree which stories would be pursued, at 16.00 to report progress, and at 18.00 to submit their final copy. After gathering material for their assignments, journalists tended to remain in the office to finish their stories and submit them to the office system. This was an important time for socialising and for establishing links with other members of the news organisation. According to the editor of the police beat, with the previous technologies: 'Normally we could complete the writing within about an hour, and then we chatted until the next deadline...we got to know each other so well – good stuff and bad stuff.' According to a senior editor, looking back to when he was a reporter, there used to be a 'newsroom culture' where senior reporters helped their juniors and passed on the finer points of reporting. This, he said, had now gone and everyone needed to work completely independently. This perception was shared by other journalists, one of whom said: 'nowadays the newspaper organization is becoming so 'cold'...no-one knows each other and no-one connects with anyone.' In other words, prior to the introduction of this technology, the newsroom was an important social setting through which a group identity *as journalists working for this paper* was established and could act as the 'counter-pressure to dependence' identified by earlier studies (Sigal 1973, 56). This counter-pressure is now weaker.

The extent to which the use of smartphones has "displaced" journalistic practice is well-illustrated by the fact that one journalist spent a month more than a thousand kilometres from the newsroom, in another city, trying to resolve personal problems. He was not on leave, and he managed to file sufficient stories to meet his monthly quota without being present in the newsroom, or indeed anywhere near the city in which his paper is located. He managed this partly through his reliance on the press releases (通稿-- *Tonggao*) provided by the Police Department's public relations office (宣传科 -- the *Xuanchuan Ke*) and partly through the assistance of other journalists and police sources with whom he was in daily contact when he was physically present on his beat. This was an extreme case, but many journalists spend considerable amounts of time working from home and relying upon the *Tonggao* that they access through their mobile phones. The same journalist often produces between four and five articles in one afternoon, which he does entirely from the *Tonggao*. If prior to the wide dissemination of digital technologies the journalists inhabited two places, the newsroom and the police department, and were subject to the separate social influence of each, today news production occupies a single, virtual place with flexible spatial boundaries (Robinson 2011).



Reporters seldom enter the newsroom – normally only on one or two afternoons a week -- and meet their various deadlines through WeChat. Editorial intervention at the departmental level is relatively light. Before 10.00, the reporters simply file the titles of the stories they intend to work upon, and these are seldom rejected. Once the stories are written, the departmental editors ask them if they want to add or change anything. The editors make few changes to the stories, apart from correcting linguistic mistakes. Relations with senior editors, who take the final decisions about what will be published, are even more remote. The Editorial Department is separated from the reporters, working on a different floor and there is little contact between them.

The main social location for reporters is the police department. According to the same senior editor, reporters now spend roughly twice as much time in the police department than they did when he was a beat reporter. The reporters enjoy considerable privileges from their access to this location. They are not required to show identity cards, they use police offices and computers, and they enjoy free meals in police canteens. The police frequently provide transport to the location of stories they want covered. This is a considerable benefit for the reporters who, due to the financial restrictions upon their news organizations, are unable to claim for taxis. The main social grouping in which the researcher moved is made up of the police public relations apparatus, some police officers, and the five reporters from other media organizations in the city assigned to the traffic beat. Personal relations within this group are close and the reporters tend to absorb the values of this social setting rather than those of the newspaper. The reporters are, in practice, heavily dependent upon the police to provide them with information and suitable interpretations: field-notes reveal that the reporter with whom the researcher worked closely only consulted a non-police source on one occasion during the six months of close collaboration.

This dependence upon sources is not entirely a one-way traffic. The police department wants to ensure frequent and positive media coverage, as do its individual members, so there is a strong desire to maintain good relations with beat journalists. One senior journalist commented:

Beat journalists are famous for being close to their sources. This is an unwritten rule. We often go to the beat journalists when we need something from one of their sources. And these sources are ‘loyal’ to the beat journalists. I remember a few years ago there was a big traffic accident and our breaking news beat journalist arrived at the scene first. But the traffic police refused to be interviewed by anyone until the police beat journalist arrived.

The chief of the police public relations office regularly discusses the ‘newsworthiness’ of a particular item with journalists before sending out a press release because this increases the chance that it will get coverage. For example, he discusses the monthly release of the big data derived from traffic surveillance with the beat journalists to help find possible stories. Even in this situation where reporters are closely integrated into their source organization, relations between the two sides retain some aspects of the ‘negotiation’ identified by the classic sociology of journalism in determining which events might be transformed into usable news stories (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1989).

As in any party paper, journalists on this title have always enjoyed close relations with their sources. The first apparent effect of the new technology, however, is to further weaken the reporters’ links with their own organizations and to embed them more firmly in the world of the beat, with the implications of even closer relations with their sources. The routines of their professional lives are much more closely linked to the routines of the police

than previously and exposure to journalistic values is reduced, increasing the possibility that definitions preferred by the host bureaucracy become decisive in the selection and presentation of news. The countervailing influence of the news organization identified by the classical sociology of journalism as a balance to that of the beat community is thus attenuated by the introduction of the smartphone and WeChat.

In other respects, however, as Figure One shows, the routines of the newspaper remain remarkably unaffected. The editorial timetable of the newspaper remains unaltered and follows the rhythm of the printed edition. Key editorial decisions are routinely taken with the printed newspaper in mind and have remained unchanged since the title went daily many years ago. The editorial decision-making process has experienced no *major* changes as a result of the introduction of new technology. No important editorial decisions are made outside of the routine of print production and the various online offerings are subordinate to its needs in much the same way as research in the west has shown (Garcia 2008, Boczkowski 2010).

[Figure One about here]

The reporters share this relative under-evaluation of the online version of the paper. One told the researcher that they could write a quick report that ‘would be good enough’ for the online outlets but that they would produce a fuller and more professional account for submission to the printed edition. This attitude is partly a response to the reward structure. Online publication of an article counts towards the monthly quota but is worth only one third of an article in the printed paper; moreover, senior editorial staff often overlook online publication when calculating productivity. One reporter always shares her online publications on WeChat to make sure that her beat editor, the print editors and the online editors are all aware of her work. Even outside of the production of routine news, when the opportunity for rapid publication in response to an unexpected development might be expected to figure in editorial judgements, decisions are still made with the values of the printed edition in mind.

The economic consequences of new technologies are more pervasive than the purely journalistic effects. As a consequence of the decline in advertising revenues, the paper needs to attract paid content and, in order to gather that, it imposes quotas upon its journalists. They are obliged to negotiate *TeKan* deals with the organizations they report on. This task is easier for the ‘party’ paper than for other titles since the organizations signing *TeKan* deals have powerful incentives to agree to arrangements that will ensure that they get regular, favourable, coverage in the party newspaper. The deputy chief editor of the paper explained ‘in an era when the political pressure is high, *TeKan* is a necessary tool for local government officials to show their loyalty and achievements to the central government.’ Senior officials in government and the CPC still rely upon the print edition for their information and base their decisions on the material it carries. According to the head of the editorial department, officials consider the printed newspaper ‘concrete printed evidence’ that they can use to make informed judgements, while the online versions can be changed and negative stories can be deleted very easily.

Contracts for *TeKan* involve a binding agreement that the organization will pay the paper a definite sum for the publication of a certain amount of coverage during a given period, for example four half-page stories during a particular month. One journalist told the researcher that:

Most deal contracts from the police bureau have requirements on the frequency and space of its media exposure. For example, I had a short-term contract of RMB 200,000 with the traffic police to promote its new all-female team, including one

police event and one full-page story. As the team would make its debut on 1<sup>st</sup> October, the *TeKan* had to be published the following day. [RMB is an abbreviation for the Chinese currency, the *Renminbi*. The contract would be worth roughly \$US29,000 at the time of writing.]

This form of finance is of central importance to the newspaper. According to staff members, traditional advertising revenue has fallen from a high point of RMB 600 million in the 2000s to RMB 50 million and shows no signs of recovering. Soliciting paid content is now a routine task for journalists that places much greater emphasis on maintaining excellent relations with their sources, but success in this task is also a major element in the newspaper's evaluation of their 'professional' value.

The need to maintain this income is deeply ingrained in editorial decision-making, alongside an acute consciousness of the political hierarchy in the city, both for the paper as a whole and for the individual journalist. The editor of the police beat told the researcher:

For the big bosses [referring to the chief editor and the deputy chief editors] the only news value is the political hierarchy. If we work on other topics or themes our efforts will be in vain. Why should we bother?

The editorial meeting at 18.00 demonstrates these 'news values' in action. The meeting makes decisions based on story descriptions that specify the name or title of the highest-ranking official mentioned. Beat editors present their stories in ways that prominently display this characteristic. For example, one story presented by the editor of the police beat was titled: (*Liu Yuanhui, Head of the City X Police Bureau*) *City X Police Association Founded*. The name and position of the senior official guaranteed that this story would be seriously considered for publication. Stories can be replaced at the last minute if the Chief Editor needs space to provide coverage of someone whose political or economic 'friendship' depends on getting media exposure that day. For example, one day around 11.30, after decisions had been made about which stories would run next day, the Chief Editor got a call from the local Civil Aviation Administration. They asked him to publish a half-page promotional article about airport expansion. He immediately agreed, without discussing this with his colleagues, and instructed them to free up half a page to accommodate such an important client.

In order to maintain these 'friendships' any form of critical reporting that reflects badly on officials is marginalized. This point is well-illustrated by an anecdote told about another, commercial, paper in the same city:

There was a journalist from paper Z who graduated from the journalism programme of an overseas university. She insisted on publishing a critical article exposing how the traffic police bureau publicly ranked the amount collected in traffic fines by each of their district-level offices. Under pressure, she resigned in 2011 and the traffic police refused to agree any *TeKan* deals or any kind of co-operation with the paper until [another journalist, who had an extremely close relationship with a member of the bureau] became the police beat journalist.

The police refused all co-operation with the paper until after a new police beat editor had managed to rebuild trust with the bureau. As one journalist said of the current situation: 'Following the source's requirements is the stepping stone to their paid information deals with us.'

For the reporters, *TeKan* represent an additional burden imposed upon them over and above the production of regular news reports, but it also has some rewards. Before the sale of *TeKan* became an essential part of the journalists' job and income, it was possible to take a more selective approach to events, depending upon the journalist's judgement of their newsworthiness. Now, however, pleasing the source is a major priority and there is little room for such independence. One journalist remarked:

Before we became salespeople, the police would sometimes beg us to go to some boring media events. But now, we have to pretend to be interested in these events in order to make them happy...sometimes the police just expect us to show up at these events like their little puppy.

On the other hand, unlike regular news stories, where the journalist is provided with most of the raw material by the police department, they have to gather material for *TeKan* themselves. Very often, they need to think not only of the story angle but the event itself. The amount of coverage being paid for is specified, but often the decision about what will be covered is left to the journalist. This is more demanding than retailing news handouts but it can be a welcome opportunity to display initiative. For example, in the case of the contract to provide coverage for the new all-female team, it was the journalist who came up with the idea of staging a 'flash mob' dance in a city square in order to provide something that could be presented as a news story. The journalist told the head of the unit 'only by doing this can they attract public attention, which is the best way to promote your team.' The head of the unit accepted the proposal and the team staged the dance, which did indeed gather significant (free) news coverage.

The production of *TeKan*, which is important both to the organization's overall revenue and to the individual journalist's pay, tends to take priority over news reporting. On one occasion, a journalist persuaded someone else to write a story about a talk on the subject of 'being safe at school.' The request was made because the journalist needed to finish a full-page *TeKan* about the achievements of a district level police office and did not have time to complete both tasks by the deadline. On another occasion, a journalist did not attend a scheduled talk on an anti-drug campaign because 'I prefer to go to the bureau to discuss my new *TeKan* idea.'

The importance of *TeKan* to the finances of the newspaper means that their production gives the beat journalist a degree of power relative to the editorial department. Because the newspaper has a contract with a governmental organization to print a certain amount of copy within a given time-frame, a journalist who has an urgent need for the space to fulfil the contract is in a position to negotiate with the Editorial Department about its timely appearance. Reminding the Chief Editor that a story he is planning not to run is *TeKan* is an effective means of ensuring that a journalist's work appears. For example, one journalist successfully used the demands of his main client for coverage on the same day as the visit of a very senior politician to the city as a negotiating tool to get his material into the paper.

## Conclusions

The proliferation of digital media has meant changes for newsrooms around the world. Whereas scholarly attention has been centred on the consequences of these changes to journalism, the majority of studies have neglected the "practice approach" (Ryfe, 2018). From the perspective of journalist-source relations, this study examined the impact of digital media upon the news production routine of both journalists and their organization in China.

In terms of the first dimension of our research question, at the individual level the consequences of technological change have tied the journalists more closely to their sources. The smartphone allows the journalist to avoid a physical presence in the newsroom. They have a greater degree of flexibility as to where they choose to be, but it also introduces new problems. The abandonment of the newsroom reduces the ‘countervailing influence’ of journalistic culture, disrupts their organizational identity, and exposes the reporter to a higher risk of source dependence (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). The main community within which they now operate is structured around their sources, both in the physical sense of where they work and in the social sense of the people with whom they socialise and upon whose goodwill they depend. Their working world is located electronically on WeChat, in a space shared both by journalists and representatives of the source organization. Discussions which in the offline world could take place ‘backstage,’ privately between individuals, are moved ‘front stage’ by WeChat, which records all of the messages in any conversation and makes them available to any member of the group. Relations between the journalists and their sources are thus formalized by the technology itself.

In terms of the second dimension, at the organizational level the economic effects of digital technologies tend in the same direction. Previously, dependence upon advertising revenue allowed journalists, even on an official paper, a degree of autonomy from their sources. The increasing importance of paid content pushes both the whole organization and individual journalists into dependence upon the largesse of officials. In order to sustain the flow of funding, the organization systematically subordinates journalistic news values to those based on the hierarchy of the city government: senior officials will get coverage irrespective of the ‘news value’ of whatever they are doing. Individual journalists, too, will not only cultivate close relations with their sources and produce flattering news coverage but also, for preference, spend their time on the production of paid content.

It is important not to overstate the novelty of these arrangements. This is a study of a party paper whose explicit role is to present the party, and thus the government, positively. Many of the practices identified here build upon relationships that predate the introduction of smartphones. Chinese journalists have long had relations with their sources that would be regarded as corruption in a western newsroom, and contemporary practices are simply a continuation (Xu 2016, Zhang 2009, Lee, Cui and Zhang 2015). Those working for party papers were always under pressure to provide positive coverage. Despite the pressures driving news organizations into the arms of sources, there still remains a degree of the negotiation between the interests of sources and the demands of news logic. For example, the decision not to run a story, considered very important by the police, about the fining of overloaded trucks, was spiked by the journalists because there was no official documentation to support the police actions. While the journalists, more than ever, need their sources, these sources, in turn, still need the journalists to ensure that their achievements are publicized in a newspaper their superiors are certain to read.

Even allowing for these reservations, however, the situation is one that is both new and perceived by journalists as new. There is a strain of nostalgia for times past, when journalists could choose which events offered by their sources were worth pursuing, and where reporters could mingle and gossip in the newsroom. In the new situation, they are stripped of most opportunities to take initiatives and, as one of them said ‘any 19-year old could do our job.’ On another occasion, the same journalist commented that dependence on sources was limiting the journalists’ role and ‘maybe sometimes we should act our professional watchdog role. We report shit for them and listen to them. They don't even cooperate with us.’ What was previously a relationship of mutual dependence is evolving into

one in which the journalists are definitely junior partners. The one area in which the journalists feel they have some room for agency is in the production of publicity material for their sources. The same journalist boasted that, as a result of his talents for producing *TeKan* ‘the police bureau really respects me.’ It is only in developing *TeKan* that the police are prepared to discuss seriously with the journalists rather than giving them what amounted to orders.

As with any qualitative study, there is a question as to how far these findings can be generalised. Certainly, some aspects of the situation in which journalists on this paper find themselves are unique, but some are common across Chinese newspapers: the loss of both readers and advertising revenue has been going on for several years (Sparks, et al. 2016). Using the privileged position of the party paper to gain official advertising exists elsewhere (Wang and Sparks 2019). Some newspapers offer explicitly to act as public relations organizations on behalf of both official and commercial organizations (Wang and Sparks 2018). Studies of other party newspapers would likely not produce identical results, but it is reasonable to claim that we have identified a general trend.

In terms of theoretical development, these findings demonstrate that political economy does not directly determine every aspect of the changes to journalistic routines and the nature of the news that they produce. The evidence shows that the ubiquity of the smartphone and the resources of WeChat allow journalists to relocate themselves, either to their homes or to the police offices, while at the same time weakening their participation in the social relationships of the newsroom. The boundary between journalistic work proper and the negotiation of newsworthiness with sources is eroded by the amalgam of both in dedicated WeChat groups. These changes allow journalists to manage their routines differently but they do not necessarily imply any change in the nature of the material they produce. While the weakening of the daily ties with their colleagues and editors, and the closeness of their contacts with their sources, certainly increases the dangers of source dependence, they do not entail it. Other things being equal, it would still be possible for the newspaper to exert countervailing pressure on their journalists.

The economic consequences of the shift in advertising revenue resulting from the general diffusion of online technologies, however, has altered the pressures upon the whole organization. This has changed both the behaviour of the organization and the work of the individual journalists. The new economic situation obliges the newspaper to seek new sources of funding and the pressure to secure these extends into the daily practical routines of journalists. The organization’s primary goal is no longer defined in terms of news, or even propaganda, but in using all of its resources to win subsidies from government departments. The pressure on beat journalists to conform to a news logic is replaced by a pressure on them to follow a business logic. What “performing journalism” in our newspaper means is to follow a clearly defined set of practices explicitly designed to achieve political and economic goals quite independent of any “professional” conception of news values. The production of “news” and the production of “paid content” are seamlessly integrated into one journalistic routine.

That is not to say that journalists retain no space for agency: in fact, the evidence suggests that it is in the production of *TeKan* that they can exercise independent creativity most freely. Overall, however, it is difficult to argue for the existence of an autonomous professional field independent of political and economic determination. Studies of Chinese journalism have long argued that there is a ‘tug-of-war’ between the political and economic pressures on decision-making (He 2000). The situation analysed here is radically different. The long-standing political pressures upon Chinese journalists continue, but in our case they

combine with the new economic realities to operate not simply as external constraints but as constitutive of journalistic decisions with regard to news production. To the extent that there remains a “negotiation of newsworthiness,” power in that relationship has shifted to the source, both at the meso-level of the organization and at the micro-level of the individual journalist. The space for the exercise of significant journalistic autonomy has correspondingly been reduced. Political economy not only provides a clear account of the overall structure of the news industry and of the ways in which changes to economic and political structures alter and define the shape and organization of the field, but it also provides a powerful tool for analysing the micro-sociology of the nature of journalistic practices.

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