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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Trustable News from China? How Chinese Journalists Negotiate Epistemic Authority in Transnational Digital News Production

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ABSTRACT


The adoption of social media platforms by news organizations invariably coincides with transformations in the production, expression, and acceptance of news as public knowledge claims. This study explores how a special subset of Chinese journalists—the foreign-aimed journalists—negotiate their epistemic authority while producing transnational news on foreign platforms. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews, findings reveal four major tensions as Chinese journalists strive to negotiate authority among foreign audiences: reaffirming professional boundaries; navigating the management directives; maintaining a state messaging position; and understanding digital infrastructure. This study further contextualizes how, parallel to digital transformations, cultural transformations around journalistic knowledge claims are linked to historically and socially embedded priorities and constraints. The established conceptualizations of digital journalistic authority require expansion, as China’s case illuminates the complex interplay between technology, politics, media regulation, and individual agency in shaping the epistemic landscape of contemporary journalism.

KEYWORDS

Platform; digital news production; epistemic authority; China

Sara Mohamed works as a digital editor for the Chinese state outlet *Sino Asia Herald*.¹ Her role involves producing China-related news stories for international audiences through platforms like Facebook and YouTube. One morning, Sara posted on Facebook about China’s Wuhan celebrating its reopening after a long pandemic lockdown. Her decision was well thought out: the coverage held news value globally, the positive angle of the news aligned with her organization’s typical “good China” coverage, and it offered hope to international readers still weathering the pandemic storm. To her surprise, however, most audiences interpreted it as showboating propaganda boasting about China’s handling of the pandemic. They not only contested Sara’s judgment but questioned her credibility by flooding scathing comments such as “liar” or “bullshit.” Fearing damage to their reputation and loss of readership, Sara’s boss requested issuing an apology post and canceling other Wuhan-related stories since their audience would “probably no longer see such content as valuable” (Sara, April 21, 2021).

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Today, China employs a large number of media professionals like Sara as its foreign-aimed journalists (*waixuan jizhe*). Working across a handful of different state-owned media organizations, their job largely serves the government's external propaganda initiative to project China's perspectives and stories globally and to establish pro-China narratives worldwide (Eisenman 2023). In recent years, with Chinese media increasingly utilizing Western platforms to bolster China's global influence (Bachman 2020), these journalists have predominantly shifted their news production and distribution practices to digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As demonstrated by numerous journalism studies, the adoption and normalization of such digital technologies invariably result in changes in the production, expression, and acceptance of news as public knowledge claims (Ekström and Westlund 2019b). Moreover, since social media not only empowered the audience to challenge journalists' claims but also made such opposition visibly apparent (Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020), the very role of journalists as authoritative information providers now faces potential renegotiation (Carlson 2017; Molyneux and McGregor 2022). Sara's experience emerges as nothing less than a vivid illustration.

Less clear, however, is how Sara negotiated her authority online as she navigated competing priorities such as political messaging responsibility, top-down management directives, and audience acceptance. The vignette of Sara's work sheds light on lesser-known aspects such as how journalistic practice is intertwined with political messaging, how journalists negotiate autonomy under state supervision, and how market pressures, an omnipresent reality for most American media, are essentially a non-issue in state-funded Chinese media. These unique considerations set Sara, and other foreign-aimed journalists in China, apart from assumptions embedded in prevalent Western models. The multilayered social, political, and technological tensions faced by these journalists thus add new dimensions to our understanding of how inhabiting digital spaces compounds tensions over journalistic authority. Hence, by examining the case of foreign-aimed Chinese journalists, this study contextualizes and advances the discussion surrounding how epistemological shifts unfold in digital journalism amidst historically entrenched tensions. It seeks to deepen our understanding of how embracing digital platforms, as universal technological transformations, comes paired with epistemic realignments where journalists renegotiate their authority, as context-specific cultural transformations.

Literature Review

Journalists and Epistemic Authority

Journalism has long been considered an influential institution, presumed to provide timely, reliable, and important information that people obtain as knowledge of the world (Ekström 2002; Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020). The very nature of news work—shaping the world into a credible news product—implies a certain legitimacy and right for journalists to be listened to (Carlson 2017). While journalists rarely label themselves as authorities, nor do they individually have the power to compel or outright determine the acceptance of their output, they do enjoy a socially granted position to speak about others and be perceived as authorized knowers (Ekström 2002).

This social *position*, as Carlson (2020) argues, resulted from journalists' defining and preserving boundaries between themselves—recognized as credentialed knowledge producers, and audiences—recognized as people that depend upon the knowledge. Quoting from Gieryn's (1999) discussion on scientists, Carlson (2020) further defines journalists' legitimate social position as their *epistemic authority*. The binary lens, which distinguishes between journalists as authority figures and audiences as subordinates, can be traced back to the early literature on authority. The modern definition of authority owes much to the advancement of bureaucratic organizations in the nineteenth century (Carlson 2017): these modern organizations were focused on shifting legitimacy from charismatic and traditional modes to favor rational-legal authority (Weber 1947). According to Weber (1947), institutional authority means both 1) individuals aspiring to wield authority as well as 2) the willing compliance of those subjected to such authority. In this light, the authority of modern journalism is best understood as "a contingent relationship in which certain actors come to possess a right to create legitimate discursive knowledge about events in the world for others" (Carlson 2017, 13).

Carlson (2017) argues that journalistic authority is characterized by its fundamental elements and social dimensions. First, the way news is produced and conceptualized reflects certain beliefs about what information is deemed legitimate and how individuals should engage with it as members of society (Carlson 2017). Put otherwise, journalists' epistemic authority "originates from conceiving news as a form of knowledge" (Carlson 2020, 233). Second, as authority relations arise through *discursive production*, "journalistic authority cannot be separated from news forms" (Carlson 2017, 15). News texts are strategic interpretations that enable journalists to establish moral authority and, consequently, gain influence (Broersma 2010). Moreover, journalistic authority is closely linked to journalists' *control over knowledge*. Through "institutionalized norms, roles, and practices in processing information and justifying knowledge in social contexts" (Ekström and Westlund 2019a, 2), journalistic practice is perceived and acknowledged as a set of legitimate knowledge-creating procedures.

Digital Transformation and Journalistic Authority (Re)Negotiation

Authority is inherently susceptible to contestation and change. According to Gieryn (1999), the boundaries between knowledge producers and those who rely on the knowledge are never fixed but socially fluid—authority is maintained through the contingent, malleable, and inconsistent boundaries that humans establish. In this vein, the epistemic authority of journalism is considered neither stable nor universal (Ekström and Westlund 2019a): any attempt to establish clear-cut distinctions between what qualifies as journalism and what does not would present challenges (Carlson 2017). The ongoing introduction of new communication technologies, for instance, has consistently transformed the journalism landscape, frequently sparking struggles that confirm and reconfirm the meaning of authority in journalism and to journalists. With the impact of the sweeping digital transformations, both the journalist-audience relationship and the institutional norms and practices in journalism are subject to serious reconsideration (McGuinness 2016; Russell 2011). This pertains to both the production side and the public acceptance side of news (Ekström 2002).

On the production end, scholars have observed changes in digital journalistic practices, including innovative sourcing methods (Thorsen and Jackson 2018; van Leuven et al. 2018), fact-checking procedures (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018), and assessment approaches (Christin 2020). Studies also highlight how the digital landscape has exacerbated, rather than resolved, longstanding tensions in newsrooms, such as the conflict between profit-making and public-facing goals in modern journalism (Hanusch and Tandoc 2019; Petre 2021). On the public acceptance end, the development of online media and digital infrastructures has put journalism scholars in a constant search of appropriate frameworks to capture the changing nature of news audiences (Caplan and Boyd 2018). Some, for instance, conceptualize audience as networked public (Ito 2008; Russell et al. 2016), understanding audience as a dispersed mass of people “actively and collaboratively producing and disseminating information” *via* digital networks (Loosen and Schmidt 2012, 871). Carlson (2020) advocates for considering both the production and reception of news in digital journalism epistemology, as the digitalization of circulation extends the legitimation of journalistic knowledge to technologies, practices, and agents beyond the journalist/audience binary. Carlson’s perspective challenges the notion that journalism’s epistemic authority is given. Instead, it emphasizes that authority is actively negotiated and earned through a complex interplay of factors in the digital age.

While providing meaningful insights, extant literature exhibits two primary limitations. First, it often focuses on Anglo-American journalism, which prioritizes serving the public interest over partisan agendas, failing to account for the diverse cultures and politics in different media systems. Second, the literature frequently assumes a normative causal relationship between technological transformations and cultural changes in journalism, overlooking how technological conditions are interwoven with the agency of journalists in their practices. These limitations underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of digital journalism epistemology in non-Western contexts.

Contextualizing China’s Foreign-Aimed Journalists

Examining the case of foreign-aimed journalists in China (*waixuan jizhe*) offers unique insights into how journalists from a state-backed media system navigate and (re) negotiate professional norms amidst a broader digital transformation. The existing literature illuminates the historical roots that have profoundly shaped how Chinese journalists enact their social position, which is closely tied to their function of creating and disseminating state-sanctioned narratives and advance government objectives (Dai 2013; Lei 2018). The distinct social function of journalists in China is grounded in its Leninist media model, which has firmly entrenched the notion of media as a tool for furthering the state’s goals and preserving social stability (Zhao 2011). Even in the digital age, where new channels of communication have emerged, it is believed that the Chinese government still exercises control over digital mediums to ensure that news production aligns with the regime’s narratives and objectives (Chen 2017; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). The role of Chinese media also extends into the sphere of international communication (Bandurski 2009; Jacob 2020; Shambaugh 2013). As China continues to expand its global media influence, the country has been adopting various strategies to disseminate pro-Beijing narratives to a wider international

audience, such as establishing oversea broadcasting offices and leveraging popular social media platforms (Bachman 2020; DiResta et al. 2020; Kurlantzick 2022; Qin 2018).

However, a controlled media system in China doesn't necessarily imply the absence of individual agency or the suppression of intentional authority negotiation among journalists (Polumbaum 2008). Closer examinations of the working conditions for Chinese journalists, for example, have revealed the covert and strategic negotiations employed by these professionals in maintaining critical voices towards social issues (Repnikova 2017). The subtle and bottom-up agency and watchdog positions of Chinese journalists have been further facilitated by the proliferation of new communication technologies in the recent decade (Bei 2013; Fu and Lee 2016; Tong 2015). Yet it is noteworthy that the introduction of digital technologies has demonstrated different impacts on journalists' epistemic practices in China (Tong 2015; Zhou 2011). In Western cases, the advent of digital transformation has intensified journalists' long-standing cognitive dilemma between their market-oriented and public-serving responsibilities (Petre 2021). In contrast, Chinese journalists oftentimes tend to normalize novel technologies within their ongoing negotiation of authority between their professional autonomy and state propaganda affiliation (Dai 2013; Jian and Liu 2018).

While previous research has addressed the tensions between technology and journalism practice in China, a significant gap persists: studies on journalistic authority in China focus almost exclusively on the domestic side, while those on foreign-aimed journalists overlook journalists' personal agency and simplify their role as mere alignments with state objectives (Cook et al. 2022). It is thus crucial to investigate how Chinese journalists, especially those engaging international audiences, negotiate their epistemic authority amidst the complex interplay of national agenda, technological changes, journalistic practices, and the constraints of an authoritarian media system. Hence, using China's foreign-aimed journalists as an illuminative case, I pose the following research question:

RQ1: *How has embracing foreign social media at work impacted the ways in which foreign-aimed journalists in China negotiate their epistemic authority?*

Data and Method

This paper developed from a larger fieldwork on how Chinese foreign-aimed journalists (*waixuan jizhe*) navigate and leverage non-Chinese social media platforms when targeting international audiences. The 4-month fieldwork was conducted in 2021 in Beijing, China through 26 in-depth interviews with foreign-aimed media practitioners in China. Details of the interviewing strategies are described below.

Case Selection and Recruitment

This study focuses solely on state-run media, as China's foreign-aimed journalism (*waixuan*) is predominantly led by state-level outlets including *China Global Television Network (CGTN)*,² *Xinhua*, *People's Daily*, *China News Service*, *China Daily*, *Guangming Daily* as well as *China International Communication Group (CICG)*.³ Journalists from these state outlets, therefore, have the most resources and responsibilities for

foreign-aimed news-making and political messaging (Brady 2015). I started from a small circle I previously associated with when I was a media professional. Their work significantly involves major foreign platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. I then used ethnographic skills to snowball the sample: I reached out to and cultivated relationships with more journalists through personal references, informal conversations, workshops, social events, and WeChat networking. To control the range (Small 2009), I include respondents with diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, nationality, work language, and the region/country they target.

In total, the sample consists of 26 journalists from 19 newsrooms/media brands across six state media organizations. The respondents range in age from 25 to 51 years old. 18 respondents are female, and 6 are foreign nationals working in China, representing 6 different home countries. One works in an overseas office, the rest are in Beijing; their career ranges from 6 months to over 20 years. They span administrative levels from freelancers to senior heads, targeting regions like East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South/Latin America. Languages used when producing content include English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Burmese, Bahasa Indonesian, and Esperanto. Major foreign platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, as well as Naver. See [Table 1](#) for respondent details.

Anonymity Protection

Considering that foreign-aimed journalism operates within a relatively small and specialized circle, the anonymity of the interviewees could be at risk if detailed information, such as news outlets, is disclosed, I implement three strategies to protect anonymity while humanizing the fieldwork data: (1) All respondents are referred to by pseudonyms assigned by the author. Chinese pseudonyms are randomly selected from the most common Chinese names, as per government records; likewise, foreign respondents are assigned a frequently used name in their respective home country. Interviewees have agreed to the assigned pseudonyms; (2) Specific target countries and real newsrooms are deliberately concealed (e.g., “Spanish-reporting” for an Argentina-focused journalist in a state newspaper); (3) Nationalities of foreigners are vaguely described (e.g., “East Europe” for a Bulgarian).

Interview Techniques

Interviews were hybrid due to the pandemic: 11 in-person, 10 over video calls, three over voice calls—all are recorded upon consent. Two respondents agreed to text-based interviews after private conversation in person, and I interviewed them over email. I use Mandarin Chinese when interviewing native Chinese and English when talking with foreign employees.

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol (see [Supplementary Material](#)) that asked respondents to share daily work routines, the use of foreign platforms at work, perceptions of the audience, news production and evaluation strategies, proud-est/least favorite work they've published, as well as their perception of their role as information and knowledge provider to a foreign audience.

Table 1. Respondent information.

	Respondent	Country of origin	Target audience
1	Sara Mohamad	Foreign/North Africa	Southeast Asia
2	Kyaw Aung	Foreign/Southeast Asia	Southeast Asia
3	Zhang Wei	China	East Asia
4	Indah Sari	Foreign/ Southeast Asia	Southeast Asia
5	Zhang Ting	China	South Asia
6	Chen Tao	China	Southeast Asia
7	Chen Li	China	English-speaking
8	Jackson Adams	Foreign/North America	Southeast Asia
9	James Johnson	Foreign/North America	English-speaking
10	Zhao Dan	China	English-speaking
11	Li Jing	China	French-speaking
12	Yang Min	China	North America
13	Zhou Qian	China	French-speaking
14	Chen Yan	China	Arabic-speaking
15	Sun Yue	China	East Asia
16	Xu Na	China	English-speaking
17	Liu Xiaoyong	China	English-speaking
18	Oliver Smith	Foreign/West Europe	English-speaking
19	Wang Li	China	English-speaking
20	Ma Haiyan	China	Arabic-speaking
21	Liu Yang	China	English-speaking
22	Wang Zihan	China	Spanish-speaking
23	Li Xinyi	China	Southeast Asia
24	Huang Yuchen	China	Esperanto-speaking
25	Zhang Xiuying	China	North America
26	Li Peng	China	English-speaking

Thematic Analysis

Oral interviews lasted from 37 to 109 min. Audio recordings were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in their original languages. Chinese transcripts were translated into English before analysis. Transcripts were coded using qualitative analysis software Dedoose. I used a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), identifying major themes inductively through close reading and contextualized interpretation of subject intentionality. Specifically, I looked for commonalities, differences, and repetition when identifying themes. During the first-round coding, the interviews generated 4 codes and 16 subcodes associated with 543 pieces of data. For the second round of analysis, I then sorted these codes and subcodes into major groups: “professional boundary”, “management directives”, “state messaging position”, and “digital infrastructure”. These groupings eventually formed four major themes of the paper. Findings are discussed below.

Findings: Tensions in Journalists’ Epistemic Authority Negotiation

Liu Yang (English reporting) works for a Chinese state media as a digital news editor. In recent years, to align with the Chinese government’s oft-stated calls to “seize the trends toward mobility, socialization, and viscosity in international communication”,⁴ the organization where Liu Yang works has devoted substantial resources toward expanding its global digital readership and engagement. Their previous international broadcasting business, for example, has transitioned quickly to digitalized efforts: In almost all foreign-aimed newsrooms within the organization, younger, digitally-fluent journalists are now at the forefront of the efforts to expand a global readership

through platform-specific strategies. These efforts even receive ample governmental financial support. However, underlying these seemingly smooth *technological transformations* are intricate *cultural transformations* being navigated by individual journalists. While the resources and latitude are supposed to empower journalists to build their authority both digitally and transnationally, they end up introducing new struggles.

"We want to be heard, but it's frustrating when the audience barely seems to care. I feel like there are too many reasons for this lack of authority. Maybe our page is just not entertaining enough...Our management doesn't fully understand digital media...The ideological divide between China and many Western countries is definitely at play here... Oh, and those unpredictable algorithms too!" (Liu Yang, July 18, 2021)

Liu Yang's diagnostic reflections eloquently expose several key tensions she experienced as a Chinese journalist: First, the networked digital space filled with competing content challenged journalists' autonomous assessments of news value and publishing priorities (raising concerns that their content might not be "entertaining enough"). Furthermore, media management maintained tight oversight of output, limiting journalists' authority over publishing choices (holding the "management" accountable). Additionally, their identity as China-hired journalists situated them within debates over news values versus political/social duties, pulling in multiple directions ("ideological divide" at play). Lastly, unpredictable platform algorithms often perplexed journalists, frequently disempowering content reach and visibility (blaming the algorithms as "unpredictable"). The multifaceted tensions Liu Yang implied reveal the complex interplay between the technological transformations—digitalization at work and the cultural transformations—reconstruction of journalists' epistemic authority. In the following section, I then analyze how China's foreign-aimed journalists constantly (re)negotiate epistemic authority when their practice is mediated by platforms.

Reaffirming Professional Boundary

As China's state media have unexceptionally opened publisher accounts on Western social media, foreign-aimed news work in China is increasingly relied on and mediated by these digital platforms. An immediate impact of this technological shift is how journalists' authority as information providers is being seriously threatened, if not entirely eroded, by the empowered audience. As platforms exhibit algorithmic preferences for content optimized around engagement, they tend to incentivize information providers, including journalists, to pursue audience-targeting strategies. Sun Yue (East Asia reporting) has started integrating platform-provided analytics into her daily routine, explaining that this helps produce content that resonates with user tastes. On a daily basis, she would thoroughly review the metrics, analyzing factors that hook attention, prompt clicks, or spark comments.

"To have your content well-accepted, you need to understand your audience—metrics can help with that." (Sun Yue, July 1, 2021)

In theory, this approach risks allowing metrics to replace her own journalistic judgement: content decisions may be informed more by the journalist's insight into

which specific topics, formats, and timing tend to attract more traffic. Whereas in practice, that did not occur—at least not unconditionally. When I asked about the post Sun Yue has made that’s “the most popular ever,” she directed me to a video clip about a street scene of Beijing in the 1970s. Surprised as she was by the “random tweet(s) unexpected performance”, she had her professional interpretation: the nostalgic view likely appealed more to “people’s interest in an exotic culture” rather than serving “their quest for valuable information about China.” Though metrics may anticipate more lifestyle content among top-performing tweets, as a journalist she has deeper concerns about assessing news value, feeling responsible to present true and newsworthy stories about China, especially considering most of her target East Asian audience “probably have never visited China.” To keep the page lively, Sun Yue schedules lots of soft news or trending cultural topics—these are the occasions where she looks to metrics for inspiration. Yet for the most important tweets regarding serious news content, she tends to establish authority by affirming newsworthiness herself. By studying metrics yet refusing to “entirely subordinate to metrics”, Sun Yue strives to do boundary work to distinguish “likeable content” from “valuable news information”.

While Sun Yue did not use “boundary” explicitly, Oliver Smith (English reporting) did so when explaining an important divide between what he believes as “old-school journalism” and “social media journalism”. According to Oliver, the former requires “boundary work and qualification”, whereas the latter tend to “dethrone journalists’ real responsibility”.

“The old school journalism [requires] people being qualified to talk about something... [N]ow everyone can talk about something on social media, pretending they’re experts.” (Oliver, July 8, 2021)

Oliver’s real passion for the job is to create “factual, informative, observational, and interesting” content for foreign readers. He draws confidence from his unique positionality: as a journalism major, a 10-year China resident, and someone married to a Chinese wife, Oliver believes he understands “the ins and outs of Chinese society” yet retains a “Western perspective.” This balanced viewpoint, in his opinion, makes him “credible” as a transnational newsmaker. His confidence notwithstanding, Oliver’s standard of maintaining boundaries and upholding his epistemic authority seemed increasingly incompatible with others as his team was staffed with marketing specialists. The marketing people would sometimes offer analytics-based ideas that Oliver saw as “of little news value”. Over time, struggles and negotiations became commonplace as he strove to remain resolute, even at the risk of being seen as “a bad team player” creating content that “(the marketing people) don’t like.”

Neither Sun Yue nor Oliver denied the positive side of metrics: they both understand that in a platform-mediated space, the target audience now appears as an analyzable mass, reflected and embedded in platform metrics. However, they remain vigilant about how the digital space favors popularity over newsworthiness. Instead of ceding decision-making entirely to metrics, they both painstakingly negotiate boundaries on their terms, guarding what they see as the core value of foreign reporting: to inform overseas public with substantive, truthful news about China.

Navigating the Management Directives

After I started contacting these foreign-oriented journalists, it became evident that they typically enjoy a broader range of permissible topics when reporting internationally. This challenges the common stereotype of rigid control in domestic reporting in China. For instance, Ma Haiyan (Arabic reporting) pointed it out straightforwardly that she enjoys more room in news-making:

Ma Haiyan: Some topics off-limits domestically may be permitted for us since we are doing international reporting.

Author: Does management still come in anymore?

Ma Haiyan: Yeah. It's not like we're free from oversight. We still have the "triple proofreading" process and can't totally go without directives.

While journalists like Ma Haiyan may have more flexibility in their reporting compared to their domestically-focused counterparts, "more room to maneuver" does not necessarily translate into greater empowerment or ease in reestablishing authority among foreign audiences. Despite greater freedom in topic selection, Chinese journalists still face significant challenges in negotiating their epistemic authority, as media management's influence over news production often contradicts their efforts to build credibility. A prime contributor to this tension is the disconnect between senior management and the journalists and editors who are directly involved in day-to-day digital production. Senior management often issues directives "without decent insight of and necessary engaging with the day-to-day digital production" (Zhang Ting, May 16, 2021). Meanwhile, the journalists and editors who possess a deep understanding of the platforms and audience engagement are the ones actually shouldering the responsibility for daily content production and managing news distribution, yet they often lack the power to make all the decisions and must adhere to directives from their superiors. Another reason is that the management often adopts a utilitarianist view of platforms—while media management praises metrics that indicate content popularity, "they largely ignore providing much-needed guidance and freedom for producing meaningful, engaging stories suited to fast-paced platform delivery models" (Indah Sari, June 22, 2021).

Chen Li: You'd be surprised how little management understands foreign social media. They see [our YouTube page] as a shortcut to gain viewership and influence, expecting us to make anything they want to be popular go viral. We end up doing lots of political messaging rather than posting what we think is really valuable.

Author: So... there's a divide (between you and your boss)?

Chen Li: Exactly! Only those of us engaging directly with the platforms daily have a sense of what would be good content. My bosses? They don't get it.

James Johnson (English reporting) shared a similar experience. He joined a Chinese outlet as a full-time digital marketing strategist when the team was seeking such expertise. Impressed by his background in digital marketing, the Beijing-based newsroom brought him on in 2017. James initially perceived his role as unambiguous and pragmatic: he should scrutinize platform metrics and analytics, providing the content

team with data-driven insights to optimize their news product and better cater to audience preferences and engagement. However, as time progressed, he realized that his initial assumptions were overly simplistic and naïve. While James had aspired to serve as a newsroom reformist—envisioning radically improved information flows and decentralizing media authority determinations, his leaders merely let him do “metrics beautician”—dressing up performance indicators through paid follower boosting and vanity traffic optimization. This allows executives to maintain facades that their pages exhibit robust engagement while still retaining control over content production. This strong management power undoubtedly hinders James’s marketing expertise:

“[Producing content on these platforms] has been very simple since the beginning of time. Whether you’re a novelist, or you’re in a newsroom, you have to create stuff that people want to consume. That’s it. But in reality, most events [the boss] asked us cover are boring and lack international interest. This is why I struggle so much.” (James, May 24, 2021)

While sometimes discouraged by the management, however, individual journalists in China never stop negotiating for possible autonomy as they produce platform-suited content. Those targeting general English-speaking audiences can hardly escape tight management directives, as such geographically diverse pages with larger followership are more likely to be utilized by leadership as vehicles to shortcut promoting political narratives. Nevertheless, some other journalists producing niche regional content or writing in other languages still manage successful pushes for flexibility against administrative pressures at times. For instance, Chen Tao, who covers Southeast Asia, leverages his expertise as an overseas correspondent and deep cultural knowledge to argue for autonomy in his work. Similarly, Wang Zihan, who reports in Spanish, asserts her negotiating position by showcasing her expertise on the Spanish-speaking world, thereby seeking a degree of autonomy in decision-making.

“Sometimes I discuss with [my boss], and I will explain the intention behind my decisions. I’d argue that ‘I have a better understanding of the people in the Spanish-speaking world,’ so what I suggest would be more helpful in building trust among our readers.’ You know sometimes the leadership will take your advice.” (Wang Zihan, July 9, 2021)

Maintaining a State Messaging Position

Navigating tensions between revenue-driven motivations and public interest obligations has long posed challenges for journalists in the digital age. For example, Petre’s (2021) research showcases how metrics have exacerbated persistent tensions in American journalism between editorial gatekeeping and profit pursuits. However, this historically entrenched tension does not exist in media systems such as that of China. Unlike most American media companies, Chinese media outlets are largely state-funded, which frees them from market concerns. For instance, foreign-aimed newsrooms in China do not rely on income generation through social media platforms, instead leverage these platforms as opportunities to develop readership worldwide. Rather than requiring state media outlets to generate revenue from digital platforms to sustain their operations, the Chinese government allocates substantial funds to encourage them to “create better content on platforms such as YouTube” (Li Jing, May 26, 2021). Although

this government support model allows Chinese journalists to avoid worrying about advertising revenue, it also means that their role is more closely tied to state propaganda.

“Every newspaper, [or] news agency [has] a mission. Western media tend to focus on the negative side because they want to improve the world. China, on the other hand, is trying to show the positive side... so that other people can follow.” (Sara, April 21, 2021)

However, journalists soon realized that producing news aligned with China’s interests sometimes jeopardizes their credibility among global readers, given most of them are “quite familiar with persistent Western media criticism” (Wang Li, July 7, 2021).

“[I]f you’re putting out China-related content, chances are, it’s not going to do well [on Facebook].” (James, May 24, 2021)

This conundrum forces journalists to continuously balance the need to build trust with their audience while combating entrenched opinions. Through talking with these journalists, I have observed two distinct strategies: “avoidance” and “countering”. *Avoidance* refers to a strategy taken by some journalists when facing or predicting hostile sentiment or pushback from their audience. For example, Sara, as described in the opening anecdote, proactively removed content to prevent potential audience backlash. Wang Li employed a similar strategy when she noticed that any post related to animals would trigger hostile responses, such as the stereotype that “all Chinese eat dogs.”

“We now tend to avoid animal imagery and news, trying not to get embroiled in endless arguments.” (Wang Li, July 7, 2021)

A sharply different yet equally common strategy is *countering* the hostile sentiment by knowingly creating content that may spur discussion, despite unfriendly comments. Journalists using this strategy believe sending information to those with different interpretations still constitutes knowledge sharing. Borrowing a buzzword from Chinese fandom, Liu Yang described this strategy as “even the anti-fans count”. When we discussed how hate comments can also be seen as knowledge being taken, Li Jing (French reporting) grew excited sharing an example of a Facebook page focused on Tibetan news. “Who do you think a page about Tibetan news would target?” she asked.

Li Jing: You’d assume it targets pro-China audiences, right?

Author: Right, I’d assume so.

Li Jing: Nope! It targets Tibet independence supporters (zang du). But it worked—a lot of people came to the page to curse the editor. The editor would carefully comment back one by one. He doesn’t argue, he uses stories and information from his years in Tibet. He’s established his influence among [people who hate the Chinese government].

Understanding Digital Infrastructure

When discussing how journalists can renegotiate their authority on digital platforms, practical adjustments are often the first solutions that come to mind. Chinese journalists, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have proactively adapted their

content strategies to better suit the requirements of digital platforms. This includes modifying the format, length, and frequency of their posts to optimize engagement and reach. However, these operational adjustments alone have proven insufficient in enhancing their authority—there remain “invisible hands” behind the platforms.

“The backstage logic of these platforms is more complex than it appears. It’s not as simple as making good content and assuming users will follow you.” (Zhang Wei, April 30, 2021)

Zhang Wei’s emphasis on the “backstage logic” of social media platforms reflects a growing understanding among journalists that establishing authority online involves more than just human practices. Digital infrastructure itself, including the algorithms and mechanisms that govern content visibility and user engagement, plays an increasingly pivotal role in shaping a journalist’s authority. When I spoke with Chen Yan (Arabic reporting), her newsroom Facebook page happened to be on forced hiatus as the page editors’ accounts had been suddenly suspended. Debriefing in frustration, she explained:

Chen Yan: It becomes increasingly apparent to me that the rules of these platforms are for show. Facebook constantly plays with us by degrading our roles from “editor” to “moderator” with no explanation.

Author: Is that beyond your control?

Chen Yan: Absolutely. It’s all about the backend. We just got a nice series of feature stories approved based on analytics. But now we can’t post them since our page is completely suspended.

Author: So when this happens, would you review for any missteps?

Chen Yan: But how can I know my missteps when I haven’t even done anything?

Chen Yan’s experience reveals how digital infrastructure imposes constraints when journalists negotiate their epistemic authority. She favored analytics-optimized stories, yet the platform blocked her attempts for reasons she didn’t even know. This resonated with many peers who faced barriers like suspensions, advertisement rejections, or traffic limits when posting stories. Journalists aim to make content appealing to audiences yet unrestricted by platforms. Gradually, unpleasant interventions bred a common disempowerment, a feeling that “American platforms aren’t friendly toward us [Chinese media]” (Zhang Wei, April 30, 2021). For example, Facebook started labeling state-affiliated media in 2020, and Twitter followed in 2021. As major platforms increasingly intervene in publication logistics, infrastructure poses mounting “panopticon” which hinders journalists’ epistemic negotiation—any further attempt they make in the hope of gaining trust and authority risks unpredictable ramifications. Zhao Dan (English reporting) thoroughly expressed her thoughts on this:

“Now that we are labelled, it did influence how our content gets exposed to users. Perhaps they have less chance to see your posts, or don’t trust you even if it appears in their feed because you are ‘CCP-controlled media’. I still don’t know exactly how platforms regulate publishers. How are we gonna run a publisher account in the future? No answer yet.” (Zhao Dan, May 26, 2021)

Any authority negotiation attempt as a Chinese journalist is both mediated yet confined by digital infrastructure. “No answer yet” indicates that making sense of

foreign platforms in China will likely remain an ongoing challenge. Moreover, unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese journalists lack avenues for troubleshooting with platform companies since these companies do not have businesses or professional teams in China. Senior office head Li Peng (English reporting) said that it would help to directly reach platform teams when problems arise that journalists are unequipped to address. In his experience, leveraging foreign platforms meant facing many “troubles and bugs” without the resources to solve them. “You either guess or wait,” he shrugged, noting “it would really help to talk directly to the customer service teams.” He even tried reaching out to the headquarters *via* international agents in Hong Kong, though later found it unhelpful.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines how China’s foreign-aimed journalists, whose practice was previously seen as merely tied to government aims, negotiate their epistemic authority transnationally amid the sweeping digital transformation in the newsroom. It demonstrates how adopting popular Western platforms has led to complex (re)negotiations around journalists’ authority in China’s state-controlled media system. While *technological transformations* in journalism (e.g., the normalization of digital platforms such as Facebook) may be similar across different contexts, the associated *cultural transformations* (e.g., journalists’ authority negotiation) are more complex, context-dependent, and iterative. This is because the ways journalists establish and maintain their epistemic authority are heavily influenced by specific historical and social pressures. Specifically, this study identifies four key tensions that Chinese journalists face as they negotiate their epistemic authority while experiencing the digital shifts, namely, *reaffirming professional boundary*, *navigating the management directives*, *maintaining a state messaging position*, and *understanding digital infrastructure*.

First, working for China’s foreign-aimed reporting, these journalists’ authority negotiation starts with constant boundary work. This aligns with the notion that the maintenance of epistemic authority always involves ongoing efforts to define and explain a fluid boundary (Gieryn 1999). Likewise, as Chinese journalists endeavor to solidify their authority on digital platforms, they participate in an iterative process of boundary reaffirmation. Consistent with the mainstream conclusions of previous research, while this authority negotiation is frequently influenced by platform metrics (Christin 2020), journalists also rely on their confidence in the expertise and value of the news they produce and deliver (van Leuven et al. 2018). However, what is unique is that Chinese journalists’ maintenance of their authority boundary is more focused on China-related information: the information gap between journalists themselves and international readers on China-related issues gives Chinese journalists more confidence to negotiate their authority digitally.

Second, Chinese journalists negotiate their epistemic authority while navigating a powerful media management culture. In contrast to Western media companies, where management is primarily market-oriented (Petre 2021), Chinese media management exhibits stronger bureaucratic characteristics. The management’s prevailing utilitarian approach towards social media often clashes with journalists’ aspirations to act as a trustworthy news provider. As a result, journalists must learn to bridge the significant

gap between the top-down directives and the bottom-up audience preference. Drawing on Carlson's (2020) framework, the author argues that management tends to restrict journalists to the role of directive takers, discouraging the adaptation of novel practices. Yet despite these constraints, Chinese journalists still endeavor to engage in what Carlson calls circulation practices—actively studying their audience's behavior such as timing of media consumption, preferred formats, and content preferences. The findings also demonstrate that journalists targeting non-English niche audiences have a better chance of striking a balance with management.

Third, the epistemic authority of Chinese journalists remains open to what Carlson (2017) terms "contestation" on an international level: Their role as Chinese media representatives closely links them to China's propaganda efforts, posing additional challenges to their authority when confronted with an international audience. While these journalists are liberated from the revenue pressures often described in Western contexts (Hanusch and Tandoc 2019), they face challenges to their authority when confronted with international criticism and anti-China sentiment online. Their experience illustrates that journalistic authority is challenged not only by technological advancements and economic imperatives (Ekström and Westlund 2019b) but also by underlying mistrust arising from geopolitical tensions or ideological discrepancies. These interrelated factors collectively shape how journalists approach and contend with divergent knowledge claims in transnational news-making.

Lastly, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on Chinese journalists' use of domestic platforms like Weibo to reinforce their propagandist role (Jian and Liu 2018), the adoption of Western platforms has rendered journalists' epistemic practices more intricate. The complexity arises from the necessity for journalists to navigate both the material aspects of these platforms and the political potential these platforms afford. China's simultaneous banning of Western sites and leveraging them for propaganda purposes demonstrates how digital infrastructure is inherently intertwined with political control and media regulation. While studying Chinese journalists supports Carlson's (2020) argument that digital circulation extends the legitimation of journalistic knowledge to "technologies, practices, and agents" (243), it also underscores the need to fully understand how politics surrounding technology (such as government regulations) and the affordances of technology (such as connectivity of platforms) intertwine to influence journalistic claims.

In general, studying China's case reveals that a distinct sociopolitical and technological context could lead to a multifaceted authority negotiation process, highlighting the need to consider the nuances and differences across various contexts when examining the impact of digital transformations on epistemic shifts (Carlson 2020). Moreover, this study also demonstrates how Chinese journalists continually work to understand both the platform-mediated audiences and the platform per se. It is important to recognize the complex interplay between technology, politics, and media regulation in shaping the epistemic landscape of contemporary journalism. As for future research, to fully understand the epistemic authority of journalists, scholars must move beyond focusing solely on technological features and affordances (Ekström and Westlund 2019b). Instead, more studies should investigate how politics and values shape the engineering backends of emerging technologies, bridging the gap between journalism scholarship and that of science and technology studies.

The author also acknowledges the limitations of this study. First, the positionality and constraints, including limited fieldwork opportunities and time constraints, may have restricted the depth of the author's understanding. Second, including journalists from diverse backgrounds in a small sample may risk overgeneralization. Third, the initial interview protocol lacks questions regarding specific tensions arising from technological changes in China, which may limit the author's ability to fully explore how journalists interpret these phenomena. However, ongoing research on digital journalism and Chinese media should persist in exploring the evolving journalistic epistemology and its implications for transnational news. There is a need for increased focus on journalist-centered analyses in the Chinese context, as this approach offers valuable insights into the complex evolution of journalism epistemology in the digital era.

Notes

1. This is a fabricated brand to protect the respondent's identity.
2. CGTN is a rebranded flagship outlet formed from the merger of three state media entities, *China Central Television (CCTV)*, *China Radio International (CRI)*, and *China National Radio (CNR)*. CCTV and CRI have a foreign-aimed business.
3. Including major brands such as *China.org.cn*, *Beijing Review*, *China Report*, *China Hoy*, *People's China*, *China Pictorial*, etc.
4. Xi Jinping's 2019 speech ("把握国际传播领域移动化□社会化□可视化的趋势"). See http://www.qsttheory.cn/zhuanqu/2021-06/02/c_1127522386.htm.

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