

Facilitating Public Service Provision: The Emerging Role of Municipal Television News in China

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Abstract

Despite strict state controls, negative news about local officials is reported in China. Faced with political constraints and the incentive and pressure to earn profits, municipal television news programmes have developed and adopted the life news model (*minsheng xinwen*), which aims to help citizens solve problems. The production process of this news model has transformed the political role of the broadcast media at the local level. Many life news reports focus on disputes between citizens and local officials. Thus, addressing citizen grievances essentially facilitates public service provision. Based on an ethnographic case study of a municipal television news programme, this article finds that the production process of life news reports can facilitate public service provision by correcting local officials' behaviour, regardless of whether the news reports are eventually broadcast. This unintended role is a result of the power negotiation between local officials and journalists who face immense commercial pressure.

Keywords: public service provision; television news; media control; Chinese politics

Media control characterizes authoritarianism. In China, the news media are under strict state control, and although media reform has given Chinese journalists more freedom to cover news stories, both traditional and new media outlets still assume the political task of propaganda while being closely monitored and controlled by the state for politically sensitive reports.

Earlier studies have examined the news media's political role as well as the institutions and methods used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control the media.¹ As reform has granted more autonomy to Chinese journalists,² recent

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1 Liu 1971; Yu 1964.

2 Although there is now more autonomy to make decisions regarding personnel, content and internal organizational structure, the news media without doubt remains under the control of the CCP. For example, deliberate techniques such as not drawing a clear boundary for political reporting has led to self-censorship and more conservative news reports. See Stockmann and Gallagher 2011 and Hassid 2008.

studies have probed the evolving strategies used by the state to maintain its hold over the media,³ as well as the techniques used by journalists to test the boundaries of political reporting and dodge state control.⁴ A growing consensus in the literature is that the Chinese news media have moved away from “ideological brainwashing and conversion”⁵ and have become more skilled at propagating official ideologies and policies. They now use softer messages and more covert techniques to promote the image of the Party and justify its legitimacy.⁶ They have descended “from an ideological highland to a pragmatic publicity plateau.”⁷ For example, scholars have found that since the reform, the Chinese news media have helped to forge a consensus among the public by providing “social knowledge” and strengthening the basis for CCP rule.⁸

While the compelling arguments and evidence of these studies show how effective the news media have become, their findings are based upon the conventional notion that the media are political tools used by the CCP to influence the public. This is an important media function, but this assumption overlooks the circumstances in which local media may aim to influence lower-level government officials rather than the public. Therefore, a largely overlooked effect of the media reform is that limited autonomy and commercial pressure have led to local media being used as a political tool by local governments to rein in lower-level officials.⁹ The political nature of the news media lies not only in their function to manipulate public opinion but also in the role they play in influencing the behaviour of political elites.¹⁰

Based on an ethnographic case study of a nightly news programme produced and broadcast by a municipal television station in an eastern Chinese city, this article finds that municipal television news, often called “life news” (*minsheng xinwen* 民生新闻), has taken on a political role that facilitates public service provision at municipal, township and village levels by correcting local officials’ behaviour.¹¹ Despite political constraints, commercial pressure drives television journalists to report negative news stories that often disclose the incompetence or wrongdoings of local officials. The news production process sometimes

3 Hassid 2008; Stern and Hassid 2012; Stockmann 2011; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Tong, Jingrong 2010.

4 Hassid 2012; Tong, Jingrong 2007; 2011a.

5 He 2000, 144.

6 Brady 2008; Jiang 2010; Stockmann 2011; 2013; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Hassid 2008; Zhou 2009.

7 He 2000, 145.

8 Chang, Wang and Chen 1994.

9 There have been studies that investigate the role of the central-level news media, such as China Central Television (CCTV), in monitoring local officials for compliance (see e.g. Chan, Alex 2002); however, these studies do not investigate how local news media may be used as a political tool to rein in lower-level officials.

10 For an example of a study that examines how newspapers aim to attract the attention and readership of the senior leaders of different factions in addition to the general public, see Shih 2008.

11 While Chinese scholars unanimously use *minsheng xinwen* to refer to this type of news programme, there is no agreed English translation. Scholarly works currently use such terms as “livelihood news” and “citizen news.” See Yang 2010 and Miao 2011. In this article, I use the term “life news.”

induces local officials, especially those in low-level positions, to correct their behaviour and perform their duties properly. The consequence is not a direct challenge to the municipal or lower-level governments. Instead, through exposing but also correcting local officials' behaviour, television news actually helps municipal governments to resolve citizens' grievances and reduce their propensity to contentious politics, thereby enhancing government performance and accountability. Therefore, municipal television news is responsible for propaganda, as documented by existing studies, but also facilitates public service provision. This indicates a media function that is not captured by the traditional propaganda and censorship paradigm.

Next, this article explains how this political role of municipal television news is possible in the current political and commercial environment by examining relevant factors that shape and determine the news. It shows how municipal television news can correct local officials' behaviour as a result of the power negotiation between journalists and local officials, and uses an ethnographic case study to illustrate the emerging role of municipal television news to facilitate public service provision.

A brief note on terminology is in order. First, "negative news," instead of "critical news," is used here to refer to the type of news story that has negative connotations for local officials. Many of these news stories expose negligence or a lack of competence, such as officials refusing to explain government policies to citizens and thus causing confusion, or officials failing to address problems such as dangerous bridges or poorly built condominium buildings. "Negative news" in this sense is not to be equated with media criticism of politicians in democratic societies.

Second, public service provision at the municipal level or below includes providing official documentation such as identification cards and household registration cards, repairing roads, and providing healthcare and retirement benefits to eligible citizens. Many of the grievances regarding public service provision centre on access to social welfare programmes or acquisition of government-issued documents.¹² In this article, the notion of public service provision focuses on the implementation of public programmes based on existing policies rather than the policymaking process that decides which public services are to be provided. Thus, the notion of public service provision can also be understood as the degree of local compliance within the single-party authoritarian political system in China.

News Media as Part of the Party-state

The news media can be understood as political, business and journalistic entities. In authoritarian countries like China, the news media first and foremost serve the

12 Recently, even Chinese premier Li Keqiang acknowledged the widely shared grievance about the difficulty in acquiring government-issued documents. See "Zongli 'sange gushi' jieshichu de wenti" (The problems uncovered by the premier's three stories), *Nanfang Daily*, 8 May 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2015-05/08/c_1115218572.htm. Accessed 8 May 2015.

regime by enhancing its political legitimacy. Legitimacy is a reflection of the appropriateness and lawfulness of the regime in the minds of the citizens.¹³ Although the Chinese central government enjoys a high level of trust, legitimacy is an important concern for the CCP.¹⁴ Thus, enhancing citizens' perception of the regime naturally makes media control a priority. According to a recent opinion-editorial published by the mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee, the *People's Daily*, the fundamental purpose of the Chinese news media is "to be a mouthpiece of the CCP and the people, and to lead the whole of society to solidify and practise socialist values."¹⁵

The news media are also an indispensable part of the Leninist party-state framework, through which "the party seeks to indoctrinate its members as well as the citizens under its rule with its political ideology, and uses or modifies its political ideology according to concrete or changing circumstances to justify its political leadership and political action."¹⁶ As early as 1902, Lenin pointed out that: "A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator but also a collective organizer."¹⁷ Lenin exercised control over the media in 1917 when he declared that "all bourgeois newspapers be shut down."¹⁸ Similarly, in China the CCP took control of and monopolized areas such as education, newspapers, magazines, television and radio broadcasting, and social science research, all of which "were regarded as tools of political indoctrination under the jurisdiction of the Party's Department of Propaganda."¹⁹ Similar to other types of authoritarian regimes, in China media control is exercised for the purposes of persuasion and indoctrination.²⁰

However, views have been developing about the political role of the news media within the CCP, especially since the media reform in the 1980s. While propaganda and thought work are still the media's dominant political tasks, the CCP has learned to use the news media to supervise local officials. Such evolving views are manifest in the notion of "supervision by public opinion," which entered the CCP lexicon in the late 1980s.

"Supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jian du* 舆论监督) is an official term which was first used in 1987 in the "Report to the 13th Party congress." The-then general Party secretary Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 stated that, "we should use all kinds of modernized news and propaganda tools to increase reporting on government and Party affairs, to let supervision by public opinion play a role, to support the masses criticizing weaknesses and wrongdoing in our work, and to struggle against

13 Chen, Cheng 2005, 4; Easton 1965; Lipset 1959; Muller and Jukam 1977; Nathan 2003.

14 According to the 2007 World Values Survey in China, 92.7% of respondents from a nationally representative sample said that they trust the national government.

15 Zou 2014.

16 Guo 2012, 24.

17 Lenin 1963–70, Vol. 5, 10–11.

18 Fu 1996, 144.

19 Ibid.

20 A recent study finds that propaganda in China can also signal the strength of the regime in maintaining social control and political order. See Huang, Haifeng 2015.

bureaucracy and other kinds of unhealthy tendencies.”²¹ The term has been mentioned in every Party congress report since. Legally, “supervision by public opinion” became part of the Regulations on Chinese Communist Party Intra-Party Supervision (Trial), which were implemented in 2004. In Article 33 of these regulations, it states that “under the leadership of the CCP and according to relevant rules and procedures, news media should perform the role of supervision by public opinion through either internal or public reports. Departments and cadres at all levels should emphasize and support supervision by public opinion, listen to criticisms and suggestions, and improve their work.”²² The major form of “supervision by public opinion” exercised by the news media is investigative reporting. Around 2003, there was a small peak in such reporting in China, with investigations targeting government agencies, public policies and business powers.²³

On the surface, the word “supervision” indicates the willingness of the CCP to heed people’s concerns and criticisms; however, on a deeper level, “supervision” implies that the basic rules are still set by the CCP. The people can only supervise government officials according to *existing* laws and policies – which they cannot challenge. Therefore, the main function of “supervision by public opinion,” as implied in the Regulations on Chinese Communist Party Intra-Party Supervision, is to expose corrupt local officials. In this way, the central leadership can benefit by shifting the cost of monitoring local officials to the news media and the public. Yet, such a supervisory mechanism does pose a risk to the CCP’s political rule since too many corruption cases would ultimately undermine its own legitimacy. Therefore, the scope and depth of such supervision are limited. For example, there have not been any investigative reports uncovering corruption cases involving officials above the provincial level without the central leadership’s consent. This is essential to understanding why negative news exists under a sophisticated system of media control. Whilst the policy of “supervision by public opinion” should not be taken at face value, it has made the reporting of negative news possible.

Therefore, as part of the Leninist party-state, the news media are primarily seen as political entities under the regime’s control rather than as business or journalistic organizations. However, evolving views within the CCP about the role of the news media, as the policy of “supervision by public opinion” suggests, allow space for mild criticism. The immense commercial pressure, a result of the media reform, drives journalists to use that space and produce negative reports.

News Media as Constrained Business Organizations

The concept of the media market came to prominence after the media reform in the 1980s. Prior to the media reform, almost all of the media in China were

21 Zhao 1987.

22 For the full text of the regulations, see <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/1026/2344222.html>. Accessed 6 March 2015.

23 Tong, Jingrong 2011a, Ch. 4; Zhan 2007, 2.

completely state funded and under strict state control. After the reform, state funding was substantially withdrawn, leaving the media to rely on advertising and other sources of revenue to survive.²⁴ The media reform was characterized by deregulation, commercialization and partial privatization, and resulted in a sharp increase in the number of news outlets, which naturally led to intense competition for audiences in the media market.²⁵ The competition in turn influences the content of news. Specifically, in order to appeal to a broader audience, traditional news media such as television and newspapers have resorted to “vulgar” news that often involves sexually suggestive content, violence such as street fights, and sensational celebrity gossip as well as negative news that exposes official incompetence or wrongdoing.²⁶ For television stations, the instant success of television life news programmes, as their consistently high ratings clearly show, demonstrates a model of profitable news production.²⁷

The media reform transformed the political and business nature of the Chinese news media. Before the reform, mass media in China were seen by the CCP as tools for the dissemination of propaganda and instruments of political power. The most important function of the mass media was to “transmit the Party’s or state’s programs and instructions to the masses,”²⁸ and the media were “adjunct to the Party apparatus and must be controlled completely by it.”²⁹ After the reform, the news media “were intended to serve both the state and the market.”³⁰ While the media’s role as a propaganda tool remains true and important, the news media, state-owned and partially privatized alike, are also expected to generate profits. Reflected in the news content, in addition to carrying official information from the government, many television news programmes and newspapers now generate the types of news stories that actually appeal to the public. Some news outlets pursue life news to attract audiences, while others focus on investigative reports on issues of broad social concern. Both directions suggest a departure from the old model of propaganda production that existed prior to the media reform.

The existing literature has yet to explore fully the news media’s changing political role in light of the reform, and especially what impact this has had on local officials. Municipal television stations are now driven by commercial pressures to pursue negative news stories. The municipal governments, on the other hand, besides ensuring that the news content conforms to official guidelines and policies, have incentives to allow mild criticism of local officials. Negative news

24 Chan, Joseph Man, and Qiu 2002; De Burgh 2003; Esarey 2005; Volland 2012; Shirk 2011.

25 Stockmann 2013, 8.

26 Chen, Qi, and Han 2007.

27 For example, shortly after the initial launch of *Just in Nanjing* (*Nanjing ling juli*), a pioneering life news programme aired on Jiangsu Television Station City Channel, the ratings rose considerably to 9.2 per cent between January and April 2003 (Miao 2011, 103). In July 2004, the average ratings for *Just in Nanjing* were 8.3 per cent, with the highest ratings of the month being 17.7 per cent (Wang, Ruosi 2011).

28 Liu 1971, 6.

29 Ibid.

30 Stockmann 2013, 50.

programmes can help municipal governments to monitor lower-level officials and ensure that they perform their public service duties properly, and this in turn helps to reduce citizens' grievances and their propensity to contentious politics. Moreover, municipal governments have to give television stations enough space to report on the types of news stories that appeal to audiences, such as negative news, in order for them to survive financially.

Against this background, municipal television news programmes have developed and adopted life news, the production model of which is “helping ordinary people solve problems” (*bangzhu laobaixing jiejie wenti* 帮助老百姓解决问题). Such a model often pursues negative news stories that are mildly critical of local governments and officials. These news stories are popular with audiences because they focus on local events that happen to ordinary citizens. By trying to resolve disputes between citizens and officials, television life news not only has the element of contention that appeals to the viewers but also educates citizens who might encounter similar situations. Besides the benefits of high ratings and advertising revenue, this news production model essentially facilitates public service provision. Many disputes are owing to official incompetence or unwillingness to serve the public, such as failing to explain policies to citizens or ignoring dangerous bridges or poorly built condominium buildings. During my fieldwork, a veteran journalist suggested that the news production model of “helping ordinary people solve problems” reveals how incompetent and negligent government officials could be. In many cases, it is the journalists who urge government officials to attend to disputes and grievances, which is supposed to be government officials' area of responsibility. To date, almost all provincial and municipal television stations have adopted this news production model. Well-known programmes include *Ling juli* 零距离 (*Zero Distance*), airing on Jiangsu Television Station City Channel, and *Minsheng mianduimian* 民生面对面 (*Facing Livelihood*), which is broadcast by Liaocheng Television Station in Shandong province.

An important caveat is that such negative news typically does not stem from a journalistic aspiration to truly supervise the government and so does not fit the idealized notion of “the Fourth Estate.” There are at least two possible explanations. First, the government constrains reporting on topics with negative political connotations. Journalists face repercussions if they go too far when criticizing officials. Thus, the political constraints often lead to self-censorship and dampen any aspirations to fulfil the role of the Fourth Estate. Second, the market drives the news content. Journalists are incentivized to produce reports that viewers enjoy, including officials' wrongdoings. They understand that it is often the scandalous nature of the negative news that attracts audiences. In reality, most Chinese television journalists are not muckrakers; they simply look for negative news, some of which happens to involve government dirt. This is essential to understanding how Chinese municipal television news programmes are steadily kept within the political boundaries while navigating the political peripheries.

They are not serious challengers to the regime; they simply try to survive in a competitive media market.

Next, this article uses an ethnographic case study of a nightly news programme (hereafter referred to as A), which is aired on the news channel of a municipal television station (hereafter referred to as Z) in an eastern Chinese city (hereafter referred to as X) of around 4.5 million residents, to illustrate the news production process and the emerging political role of facilitating public service provision.³¹

Methods and Data

I spent the summers of 2012 and 2013 at the municipal television station Z conducting semi-structured interviews and non-participant direct observation. Z is the only municipal television station in X. Situated in the eastern coastal area, X's level of economic development is above the national average. However, the findings based on this case study have strong implications for other municipal television news programmes. Almost all other municipal television stations have adopted the model of television life news production. Based on information gathered from more than 30 hours of semi-structured interviews with Chinese media scholars, journalists, and producers from eight municipal television stations in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Wuhan, Changchun, Xi'an and Guangzhou, I found that municipal television news shares a similar style, including a colloquial language and a local focus. The individual grievances that tend to be reported in life news are a result of ineffective policy implementation by local officials, such as insufficient compensation for residents during demolition and relocation, negligence over roads and bridges that need repair, and failures to deal with illegally built houses in condominium complexes. Therefore, the content of negative news is also similar. These shared characteristics enhance the implications of the findings from this case study.

During my two-month ethnographic fieldwork at Z, I observed the day-to-day news production process of the nightly news programme A. My observation of each workday was divided into two parts. In the morning, I observed the journalists when they were assigned news stories by the producer and then went out to shoot raw footage of informants or of happening incidents. In the afternoon, I interviewed these journalists about specific news stories and general news production. This is based on the typical workday schedule for television journalists: they go out and collect material (interviews and shooting videos) in the morning, and then edit the material (transcripts and editing videos) in their offices in the afternoon, so that the news programme is ready for broadcast in the evening. In addition to the qualitative data, I also collected transcripts of a segment of news programme A from December 2011 to June 2013 and conducted content analysis. The results are discussed in detail below.

31 To ensure confidentiality and protect sources, this article uses pseudonyms for journalists and television stations.

News Programme A and the Immense Commercial Pressure it Faces

During my fieldwork at Z, I found that every journalist had the exact same two books on their desks: *What We Can Learn from Steve Jobs' Innovation* (*Feitong fan "xiang": Qiao Busi de chuangxin qishi* 非同凡“想”: 乔布斯的创新启示) and *Good Employees Dispense Positive Energy* (*Hao yuangong sanfa zheng nengliang* 好员工散发正能量). Both books are management titles for business organizations. A journalist told me that reading and understanding these books were part of his evaluation. Journalists have to pass an exam based on those books and official ideologies such as Marxist-Leninist news and propaganda theory. This strongly suggests the elevated status of the market in the news production process. Indeed, the producer of A admitted to me that ratings are one of the most important standards by which the success and continuity of a news programme were evaluated. This indicates a significant change in the nature of traditional Chinese news media, from being a purely political tool to becoming a journalistic entity that serves both the state and the market.

The news programme A is seen as a flagship programme at Z. A was launched in 2001, a time when television life news had just started to attract audience attention. The news programme A had gone through a period of high ratings in the early 2000s. However, as with many other television life news programmes, in the mid-2000s, its ratings dropped to sustainable but mediocre levels. The viewers seemed to have wearied of news stories that often focused on street fights and sensational stories with little social impact.

The current producer of A joined the programme's staff in 2011 when they were under great pressure to maintain and revive the dominant status of A in the local media market. To motivate the journalists, the producer designed a monthly evaluation system which was directly linked to their monthly bonus payments. Specifically, the producer gives a grade to each news report; the grades are then added up, averaged, and ranked monthly for every journalist. These rankings are posted in the large office space shared by the journalists, so everyone can see each other's grades as well as the monthly bonus amounts. According to the producer, this is meant to motivate the journalists to work harder. "When those journalists who lagged behind saw the ranking and the difference in bonuses," the producer said, "they would try harder next time and produce better reports."

The producer rated news reports on both technical and qualitative grounds. Technically, a sound news report has no grammar mistakes or factual mistakes, and protects the informant's identity. Qualitatively and more importantly, a news report has to have an angle that appeals to the audience, such as finding a unique perspective of a story in order to capture broad social implications. For example, during my fieldwork, programme A received a hotline call about an old lady who had fallen victim to a fraudulent medical scheme to buy expensive medicine. The journalist who was assigned to this story successfully framed it into a lesson for all senior citizens in the city, who are easy targets for such medical scams.

As a result of this incentivized evaluation system, journalists are attracted to negative stories involving government officials, as these have particular audience appeal. During my fieldwork, I followed a journalist named Zhang for a week. Zhang described to me how he was no longer a welcome guest of a district government under municipality X. In early 2013, Zhang used a hidden camera whilst investigating an accusation that a deputy chief of the district government had beaten a pregnant staff member.³² Zhang was initially told that the perpetrator was a temporary member of staff rather than the deputy chief, but his meticulous investigation proved otherwise. After his report was broadcast on television, Zhang was not allowed to go near the district government building again. This example illustrates the difficulties and consequences journalists encounter when investigating negative stories involving government officials. Nevertheless, compensated with bonus incentives and under commercial pressure, journalists adapt. They often utilize compelling arguments when negotiating with government officials. During my fieldwork, I discovered that journalists frequently use the notion of “the public’s right to know” (*zhìqíng quán* 知情权) to negotiate for more reporting space.

Power Negotiation: The Public’s Right to Know

Municipal governments have the power to terminate news reports deemed to be excessively critical. However, there are also incentives for them to permit the mild criticism of local officials, as discussed earlier. Thus, the degree to which they concede to negative news reports is a result of the power negotiation between journalists and government officials. While it is possible for municipal governments to concede, journalists have to negotiate for more reporting space. Building on the official media function of supervision by public opinion, journalists have developed and adopted the notion of the public’s right to know to bargain and press for more information from government officials.³³ The argument is that ordinary citizens have at least the right to know what has happened, if not to press for government action to solve problems, as government officials are supposed to serve the public.

For example, Zhang followed up on a hotline call about a man who was unable to get a healthcare insurance card from the municipal healthcare insurance bureau. According to the relevant policies, this man was entitled to claim the healthcare insurance benefit from his employer. However, citing a complex policy change, the government official who dealt with his case refused to issue an insurance card. In fact, this man had been trying for nine years to get an insurance card. After hearing the story, Zhang accompanied the man to the municipal healthcare insurance bureau to investigate why he was being denied the card.

32 In China, the use of hidden cameras in news reports is not uncommon. Whether this violates individual privacy is a grey area in Chinese society, and depends on how the hidden camera is used.

33 Zhang 2007.

As a result of Zhang's initial investigation, the case was resolved in just 20 minutes. Zhang told me that the key to this fast resolution was that instead of questioning the policy, he pointed out the unhelpful attitude of the official who was dealing with the case. He reasoned that, as a public servant, he or she should at least let the ordinary citizens know what the policy was. This was the public's right to know. After the story was broadcast, the bureau chief called the producer of A and told him that he had criticized and educated that official. In this case, choosing a proper perspective was important. Focusing on the unhelpful attitude of the government official and invoking the notion of the public's right to know helped the journalist investigate the news story. At the same time, it also helped a citizen to resolve his grievance.

Facilitating Public Service Provision

The political constraints, commercial pressures and journalistic techniques used in power negotiations illustrated so far mean that negative news stories generated through the life news model can often lead to an improvement in the provision of public services. This unintended role has emerged for the following possible reasons. First, most journalists do not intend to challenge the regime. By using the notion of the public's right to know, journalists avoid directly challenging government officials or pressing for action. Instead, they only ask for basic and often uncontroversial information. Because most television journalists know not to cross the political line, government officials trust them enough to give them the space for negative news reports.

Second, knowing the political boundaries, journalists typically focus on government bureaus and officials below the municipal level, such as district and township governments and village committees. They may also focus on government bureaus of less political importance, such as the education and health insurance bureaus. These government bureaus are nonetheless important actors in the provision of public services. For local officials, especially those in low-level positions, being approached by a news crew with a camera and a microphone has an instant effect, forcing them to perform their duties and provide public services. Failing to do so could have consequences not only for the overall image of the government but also for the official's own political career.

Finally, the types of negative news stories journalists tend to choose focus mostly on personal grievances. When government officials are involved, journalists typically try not to suggest that there are broader problems. Moreover, journalists avoid naming government officials. For example, in June 2013 the news programme A broadcast a story about the major roads in X being flooded because the city's drainage system was unable to cope with the rain. Instead of blaming the apparently incompetent or negligent government officials, the anchor commented innocuously that, "we hope relevant government bureaus and leaders can quickly solve this problem." Owing to the individual nature of most negative news stories and the journalists' skilful handling of them, it is

often easier for officials to resolve grievances and provide public services than to confront journalists and turn the aggrieved citizens away.

It is important to note that local governments are fully capable of preventing a negative news story from being broadcast if they so wish. This factor, however, does not necessarily undermine the role of municipal television news to drive public service provision. The producer of A told me that more than half of the aired news stories came via hotline calls, the majority of which were reporting individual grievances. The remaining news reports typically promote government policies, publicize political leaders' activities, or cover neutral or positive local news. Therefore, even though local officials can terminate negative reports at any stage of the news production process, the model of "helping ordinary people solve problems" and the heavy reliance on hotline calls for news sources demonstrate a consistent pattern in news production that gives voice to aggrieved citizens and facilitates the provision of public services. Next, I discuss how the production process of a news story that was not ultimately broadcast led to public service provision anyway.

Producing a News Story: A Migrant Worker's Insurance Benefits

Journalist Zhang received an assignment following a hotline call. A young female worker, who had migrated from a rural township to work in an urban district of municipality X, called programme A's hotline number in the hope that the journalists would help her collect the retirement benefit she believed she was entitled to. During the phone call, she detailed the policy as she understood it, and said that her employer should pay 20 per cent of the annual cost of her pension. However, her employer only paid 18 per cent, and the 2 per cent difference was taken out of her salary and paid to the pension bureau. She wanted the 2 per cent difference to be paid back to her from the pension bureau.

Zhang met the young woman outside the pension bureau. Zhang first asked her to reiterate her grievance briefly for the camera. Zhang promised to blur her face to conceal her identity if the story was broadcast on television. During the interview, her voice was trembling, and I could see she was holding back tears. After hearing the story, Zhang said, "Let's go inside and take the 2 per cent back!"

When we went inside, the officials at the bureau were unfriendly, if not hostile. As soon as they saw the camera in Zhang's hand, they knew Zhang was a television journalist. They told us they had no comment to make and asked us to leave. Physically, Zhang kept a distance of about two metres from the desks where the officials sat. Zhang explained that he was a journalist working for programme A, and that he would like to interview someone who knew about this migrant worker's case. The officials refused to answer Zhang directly. They kept saying they had no comment and declined to be interviewed. Seeing that the conversation was going nowhere, Zhang switched to a milder tone, saying that he was not looking for trouble. He just wanted to know what the policy was and whether

there was any mistake in handling the case. Zhang was invoking the notion of the public's right to know, which was difficult for the government officials to dodge or ignore.

Zhang's approach worked. The request resonated with one of the officials in the room who appeared to be a leader, and he started to explain the policy to us. It turned out that the migrant worker's employer was a small business, and that according to the relevant government policy, small businesses qualified for a reduction in their employer contributions towards employees' pensions. Therefore, her employer was indeed supposed to pay 18 per cent of her annual salary towards her pension fund. It was unclear, however, who should pay the 2 per cent difference.

Knowing this, we left the bureau. The migrant worker was disappointed. She said that 2 per cent of the annual contribution to her pension fund was about 600 yuan, which was a substantial portion of her monthly salary. In the end, this story was not broadcast on television. Later, Zhang informed me that this was because the producer thought that tensions did not escalate enough and that the information was of not much interest to the audience. Nevertheless, the process of news production did indeed propel the government officials to explain the policy to the migrant worker. Although this type of news does not directly challenge local governments or result in institutional change, it provides a public service by correcting local officials' behaviour and resolving individual grievances.

In fact, television news has become so effective at resolving issues that some citizens look towards television stations as the authority when they cannot resolve their grievances through official channels. As mentioned above, more than 50 per cent of programme A's news stories came via hotline calls. Many of these calls reported individual grievances. For instance, on 10 June 2013, a local resident called programme A and complained about the poor quality of the road outside his residential complex. The staff member who answered the call said she would write down the information but she could not promise that the producer would choose to investigate the story. She explained to the caller that this story was not real news: "We are a television news programme, not a government bureau." Her response implies that she had probably received many similar calls which had not resulted in news stories being broadcast on television. However, the fact that citizens kept calling and turning to journalists for help shows precisely the emerging political role played by municipal television news in facilitating public service provision.

Studies on local protests in China have pointed out that by attracting media attention, protesters are more likely to elicit a response from government, or even a resolution.³⁴ Thus, resorting to the news media has become a common strategy for some protesters. The hotline calls examined in this study certainly included disputes that involved more than one individual, such as migrant workers asking for delayed wages. However, most individuals who called the hotline were not

34 See, e.g., Chen, Xi 2009; 2012; Li, Liu and O'Brien 2012.

serious challengers to the local government. They rarely planned any collective action if the television news failed to elicit a positive outcome. The producer told me that the majority of the grievances were individual in nature. In fact, most fell into the realm of requesting basic public services rather than of accusing local officials of major wrongdoing or challenging the existing policies or political system. This not only makes it easier for journalists to report on such stories but it also makes it possible for local officials to resolve some of the grievances.

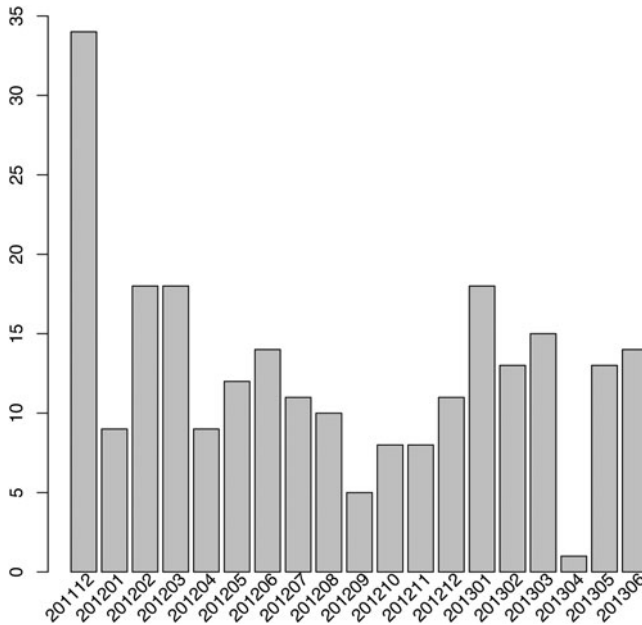
If the news stories fall into the same grievance category, the producer typically picks stories from different areas to prevent too many negative reports focusing on just one locality, which would generate tensions with the local officials. Moreover, owing to commercial pressures, the producer is unlikely to report on the same type of grievance excessively within a short time period, because the audience would grow tired of watching too many similar reports. Therefore, despite the many common grievances reported via the hotline calls, the news stories are unlikely to generate a discontented atmosphere that poses a serious challenge to the local government.

The Emerging Political Role

The ethnographic case study of programme A points to the emerging political role played by municipal television news in facilitating public service provision. It also reveals the importance of political timing in producing negative reports.

During important political events or politically sensitive times, the number of negative news reports declines. I conducted a content analysis of 241 reports from the first segment of the nightly hour-long news programme A from December 2011 to June 2013. I found that the number of critical reports generally fluctuates in correspondence to important political events. According to the producer of programme A, the first segment was created in December 2011 in accordance with the official media function of supervision by public opinion. Consequently, it is dedicated to negative news reports. The rest of programme A consists of roughly ten reports, each two to three minutes long, covering local stories, followed by an in-depth report on a local issue and a quick reading of headlines from national and international news. Ideally, programme A would have one negative report in the first segment every day. However, as shown in [Figure 1](#), there were only five negative reports in September 2012 and one negative report in April 2013. The producer informed me that the reason for such a sharp reduction was political. Tourism is one of the main industries in the municipality, and the municipal government launches tourist festivals from time to time in order to attract tourists and improve the local economy. Two such festivals were staged in September 2012 and April 2013. Based on an implicit agreement between the television station and the municipal government that too many negative reports would tarnish the municipality's image, there was a sharp drop-off in the number of negative reports during those two months. In addition, there was another decline from September to November 2012. This was owing to the

Figure 1: **The Number of Negative News Reports in the First Segment of Programme A**



Source:

Author's transcripts collection, from November 2011 to June 2013.

18th Party Congress, when Xi Jinping 习近平 and Li Keqiang 李克强 were selected as the new generation of Chinese leaders. During such a politically sensitive time, it was necessary to tone down negative reports.

Taken together, while the number of negative reports was the highest in the first month after the segment was created, negative reports stabilized afterwards, averaging about nine reports every month. This suggests that even though local officials may obstruct news production, negative reports have a constant presence in local television news. Moreover, as the above case shows, sometimes the news production process alone, regardless of whether reports are eventually broadcast, can result in positive changes in local officials' behaviour. The production and airing of such reports can improve the provision of public services.

Concluding Remarks

Beyond media politics, the findings of this article have implications for China's neoliberal policies and civil society. Since the reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, the CCP has led China to embark on a neoliberal path to economic prosperity that complies with authoritarianism.³⁵ The pursuit of a capitalist

35 Harvey 2005, 120.

market de-emphasizes equity and social justice.³⁶ Although there have been policy initiatives to ameliorate the widening wealth gap and the lack of social justice, such as former president Hu Jintao's 胡锦涛 "socialist harmonious society," redistribution still follows the neoliberal logic of market relations.³⁷ The prevalence of local grievances, a major source for municipal television news programmes, is an indication of how the pursuit of neoliberal policies has resulted in class polarization and injustice. While some aggrieved citizens resort to governmental channels such as the letters and visits system, or non-governmental channels such as protests, many turn to the news media in the hope that by publicizing their grievances they can achieve a successful resolution. Indeed, as discussed earlier, broadcasting examples of successful grievance resolution encourages aggrieved citizens to pursue the same route. The power of publicity enables the media to correct local officials' misconduct and thus helps to improve public service provision. In this way, the emerging political role of municipal television news can also alleviate some of the negative repercussions of neoliberal policies.

Although still in its "incipient" stage, Chinese civil society may benefit from the emerging political role played by municipal television news.³⁸ Although some scholars are sceptical about whether Chinese civil society can be truly autonomous³⁹ and fulfil the ideal type of Habermas' concept of civil society,⁴⁰ others note the changes and growth in this area that have been effected by socio-economic development, natural disasters and the rise of the internet.⁴¹ Municipal television news also has the potential to foster the growth of civil society. The hotline calls, a major source of material for municipal television news, are made by citizens who are willing and determined to use a non-governmental channel to address grievances and injustice. In the long term, the redress of grievances publicized by the media will likely empower civil society. People may perceive the media as an effective advocate for the vulnerable. There is much debate about the hurdles Chinese civil society face and how much space there is for growth, but continuous reports of ordinary citizens' grievances and social injustice are likely to foster a shared sense of urgency that demands immediate resolutions for widespread social problems.

More broadly, the findings reinforce the long-held Chinese ideology of a well-intentioned central government harmed by corrupt local officials. Since imperial times, rulers' intentions have largely been perceived as being moral and benevolent.⁴² This notion is cultivated by the ruling party⁴³ and accepted by a public that blames the local government for incompetence whilst rewarding the central

36 Wang, Hui 2009.

37 Hong 2010.

38 Yang 2003.

39 Huang, Philip C.C. 1993; White 1993.

40 Habermas 1989.

41 Gallagher 2004; Teets 2009; 2014; Yang 2003.

42 Leung and Nann 1995, 6; Lu 1998, Ch. 6; Pye 1995.

43 Tong, Yanqi 2011b.

government with trust and support.⁴⁴ The political role played by municipal television news reinforces and nurtures this perception. By exposing but also correcting the incompetence and wrongdoings of local officials, municipal television news bolsters the image of “central good, local bad.”⁴⁵

The duration of CCP rule is partly dependent on the extent to which citizen grievances can be resolved. Municipal television news has become an effective channel through which many citizen grievances are redressed. Television journalists like such news stories because they are popular with audiences. Local officials can use negative reports to monitor lower-level officials, and thereby enhance government accountability and reduce tensions. For the central leadership, the inability and/or unwillingness of local governments to provide public services is partly mitigated by the fact that negative news production can sometimes correct local officials’ behaviour. The findings of this study indicate that the emerging political role played by the media has expanded to include not just influencing public opinion but also exerting an influence over the behaviour of the political elite. If such a political role persists, in the long term municipal television news will contribute to the legitimacy and resilience of authoritarian rule in China.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank John James Kennedy, Haifeng Huang, Michael S. Rabin, and the participants at conferences where earlier drafts of this paper were presented, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Biographical note

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摘要： 尽管中国新闻媒体受政府的控制，关于地方官员的负面新闻并不少见。基于商业利润的诱惑和政治因素的限制，市级电视台的新闻节目采取了民生新闻的模式，注重帮百姓解决问题。民生新闻的制作过程转变了地方电视媒体的政治角色。许多民生新闻的报道着重于百姓与地方官员的纠纷，所以帮百姓解决问题实际上是促进地方公共服务的提供。基于对一个对市级电视台的民族志个案研究，本文发现通过纠正地方官员的行为，民生新闻的制作过程能够促进公共服务的提供，不管新闻故事是否最终播出。这个意料之外的政治角色是地方官员和承受商业压力的记者进行力量协商的结果。

关键词： 公共服务的提供；电视新闻；媒体控制；中国政治

44 Li 2004; 2008; 2013; 2016.

45 Chen, Dan 2016.

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