

Digital Media Experiments in China: “Revolutionizing” Persuasion under Xi Jinping

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Abstract

With the rapid decline of traditional media in China, the party-state faces the growing challenge of shaping public opinion online. This article engages with one response to this challenge – a state-sanctioned digital media experiment aimed at creating a new form of journalism that appeals to the public and helps to disseminate Party propaganda. We analyse the emergence of a national success story, Shanghai-based model media outlet *Pengpai*, and its diffusion across different regions. We argue that the synergy between local officials and media entrepreneurs has propelled *Pengpai*’s national fame. We further demonstrate that while there has been a cross-national attempt to diffuse this model, it has produced mixed results owing to a number of factors, including the superficial commitment of local officials and media professionals. These findings demonstrate that state-sanctioned decentralized experimentation can deliver unpredictable results in the sphere of media policy, and they further question the capacity of the party-state to effectively reinvent public persuasion in the digital age.

Keywords: China; new media; authoritarianism; persuasion; *Pengpai*; Shanghai; experiment; diffusion; decentralization

At the very start of his leadership, Xi Jinping 习近平 announced that winning the “battle” for public opinion was to be one of the key objectives of the Party.¹ At the first meeting of the Leadership Group on Internet Security and Information in 2014, President Xi declared that “captivating online public opinion is a long-term task that requires bringing forth new ideas to improve online propaganda ... stimulating the right energy, vigorously cultivating socialist values.”²

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1 Huang and Zhai 2013; “Xi Jinping zai quanguo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua” (Xi Jinping’s speech at the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference), 19 August 2013, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2014-08/09/c_1115324460.htm. Accessed 5 February 2019.

2 See “Xi Jinping zhuchi zhaokai zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinxi hua lingdao xiaozuo diyici huiyi Li Keqiang Liu Yunshan chuxi” (Xi Jinping presides over the first meeting of the leadership group on

The challenges posed by the internet to official persuasion efforts have long been recognized. The Hu–Wen administration was the first to attempt the rescue of the declining traditional media industry through state-driven media convergence (*meiti ronghe* 媒体融合) or the integration of traditional media with online platforms.³ In more recent years, the crisis facing traditional media has intensified. The print industry has lost about three-quarters of its advertising revenue in the past three years,⁴ and is facing increased competition from newly emerged “self-media” (*zi meiti* 自媒体),⁵ and big-data news aggregators like Tencent, Sohu, and Today’s Headline.⁶ In response, the party-state has reasserted its commitment to the digitalization of traditional media and has called for fresh ideas in combining traditional journalism with new media platforms that are interactive, fast and competitive in the internet age.

These high-level endorsements inspired a new local-level digital journalism experiment, an initiative largely overlooked by Western scholars⁷ and observers.⁸ Shanghai’s flagship digital news outlet, *Pengpai* (also known as *The Paper*), has emerged from this experiment as a model, attracting attention from the central state and regional authorities across China. Launched in July 2014, *Pengpai* is China’s first digital-only news outlet that features its own content.⁹ Combining quality political and investigative reporting with innovative propaganda and a slick digital interface, *Pengpai* has become the face of digital journalism in the Xi era. Subsequently, a number of regional officials and media professionals have attempted to emulate *Pengpai* with their own versions of modern, influential digital-only news outlets that can help guide public opinion.

footnote continued

internet security and information with Li Keqiang and Liu Yunshan). *Renminwang*, 27 February 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0227/c1001-24486430.html>. Accessed 5 February 2019.

- 3 During his visit to the *People’s Daily* in June 2008, Hu Jintao communicated with netizens on the *People’s Daily*’s online forum, arguing that the Party should “endeavour to let the internet become the frontline to spread advanced socialist culture” and “to form a new pattern for public opinion guidance.” See “Zai renmin ribao she kaocha gongzuo shi de jianghua” (Speech during an inspection of the work of the *People’s Daily*). *Renminwang*, 20 June 2008, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/7408514.html>. Accessed 5 February 2019; Cai 2008; Zhu, Liu and Yang 2014.
- 4 According to CTR Market Research, newspaper advertising revenue in China dropped by 35.3%, 38.7% and 32.5% respectively in 2015, 2016 and 2017. See “CTR: 2016–2017 nian Zhongguo guanggao shichang huigu yu zhanwang baogao” (CTR: 2016–2017 report on China’s advertising market and future trends). 199IT, 7 April 2017, <http://www.199it.com/archives/579617.html>. Accessed 5 February 2019; “Toutiao! CTR fabu 2017 Zhongguo guanggao shichang niandu shu ju” (Headline! CTR releases 2017 data for China’s advertising market). CTR, 31 January 2018, <http://chuansong.me/n/2170017551622>. Accessed 5 February 2019.
- 5 Self-media here refers to individuals setting up their own online dissemination channels through public accounts on WeChat, MiaoPai, Today’s Headline, etc.
- 6 These commercial news websites and apps aggregate content from other news outlets and are ranked top in terms of site traffic and daily active users.
- 7 One exception is Peter, Chen and Carrasco 2016. Their analysis, however, does not engage with the diffusion of the *Pengpai* model and mainly analyses the inner workings of *Pengpai*.
- 8 Speelman’s (2015) article in *Foreign Policy* is an important exception.
- 9 In the past, digital media in China such as “news portals” could only aggregate news content from other traditional media sources and were not permitted to publish their own independent reporting.

This study is the first in-depth investigation of this experiment, and as such, of the decentralized experimental approach towards upgrading digital journalism and persuasion in the Xi era. Our analysis examines the emergence of *Pengpai* as a model as well as its diffusion in other regions. We argue that the *Pengpai* model originates from a unique synergy between provincial-level officials and media entrepreneurs, a synergy which has turned out to be difficult to replicate and uphold in other regions.

Experimentation under Hierarchy: Meeting the Challenge of Digital Persuasion

Scholars and observers underscore the centralization of control in all governance domains, but especially in the media, as a defining feature of Xi Jinping's leadership. Recent studies show how regulation of the internet has been centralized through the creation of the Cyberspace Administration, the Central Leading Group of which is headed by Xi himself.¹⁰ Other works focus attention on the media crackdown, as the regime targets public opinion leaders online¹¹ while tightening its control over the traditional media, resulting in a decline in investigative journalism.¹²

While control presents one dimension of media policy, Xi, like his predecessors, faces the ongoing challenge of persuasion, or the effective shaping of public opinion, through media channels. Studies of media policy from Deng through to the Hu era highlight the state-directed commercialization and later conglomeration of the media, which was aimed at creating more appealing content within accepted political boundaries.¹³ More recently, since the mid-2000s, even commercialized media have begun to experience a rapid decline.¹⁴ Studies that examine the Party's adaptation to these changes analyse the creation of state-sanctioned digital spaces for public deliberation,¹⁵ as well as the state's use of social media commentators to spread regime-friendly content¹⁶ and distract the public.¹⁷

One area that has received less attention is the Party's response to the growing journalism crisis, itself a global phenomenon, that has hit China in recent years. Aside from upgrading direct propaganda, the Party has come under pressure to transform the ailing media industry. As noted earlier, initial steps were taken during the Hu–Wen era under the rubric of media convergence.¹⁸ The few studies that examined these convergence efforts focused on the shift towards digital

10 Cairns 2016; Creemers 2017.

11 Creemers 2017; Nip and Fu 2016; Svensson 2014.

12 Wang, Haiyan 2016; Repnikova 2017.

13 Stockmann 2013.

14 Cui 2017.

15 Jiang 2009.

16 Han 2015a; 2015b.

17 King, Pan and Roberts 2017.

18 The first significant effort was led by the General Administration of Press and Publication in 2006. See Xiong and Zhang 2018.

platforms within large media groups, finding journalistic reluctance to embrace these state-directed efforts. Multiple studies showed that journalists were ambivalent about convergence owing to concerns with journalistic professionalism, digital skills and collisions of departmental interests, among other factors.¹⁹ A study of convergence efforts within the Shenzhen Press Group further highlighted journalists' displays of non-cooperation and non-acceptance as their main reactions to these policies.²⁰ Our study builds on these works and examines an experiment with convergence that turned into a national success story – *Pengpai* – as a new digital journalistic media platform producing original content, and how this model has been emulated by other media groups across China. As such, we examine the importance of local-level journalistic experimentation in addressing the journalism crisis in China.

Previous analyses of local-level innovation with media policy have looked at the successful and at times controversial satellite programming of Hunan satellite TV²¹ and the influential investigative journalism of Nanfang Media Group.²² Whereas these works present local-level innovations as creative transgressions from central-level media policy, with local officials and producers taking advantage of fragmentation in media policy, we examine local-level experimentation under the auspices or tacit endorsement of the central state. As we highlight in the analysis, Shanghai officials were attuned to the signals from the centre in supporting innovative media efforts, and *Pengpai* was recognized as an important model by the Central Propaganda Department.

We explore how an “experimentation under hierarchy” approach, as articulated by Sebastian Heilmann in the realm of economic policy, has been applied in the area of digital persuasion innovation and in media policy more broadly.²³ Heilmann argues that decentralized experimentation allows for creative and adaptive policymaking, whereby successful innovations with central directives at the local level can be adopted at the national level. A number of scholars have further applied the experiment framework to examine diverse issues, ranging from political reform²⁴ to rural healthcare financing.²⁵ The literature on decentralized experiments and policy diffusion presents diverse and somewhat conflicting explanations for successful diffusion of policies. Whereas Heilmann and other scholars of economic policy reforms depict the diffusion process as being substantially guided by the central state, with central authorities determining which experiments are worthy of national dissemination, other scholars point to a less orderly picture with local officials and local-level concerns being the more decisive forces. Ann Florini and colleagues, for instance, emphasize the role of

19 *Ibid.*; Shan and Liu 2017.

20 Yin and Liu 2014.

21 Zhong 2010.

22 Guan, Xia and Cheng 2017.

23 Heilmann 2011.

24 Tsai and Dean 2014

25 Wang, Shaoguang 2009

local officials in driving policy experimentation in transparency and public opinion surveying, among other areas.²⁶ Shaoguang Wang's study of healthcare experiments found locally driven experimentation to be more effective.²⁷ Sheng Ding's study found that obstruction at the local level prevented the diffusion of centrally endorsed transparency and accountability initiatives.²⁸ Referring to many of these works, Jessica Teets and Bill Hurst, in the introduction to their important edited volume on local-level experimentation, argue that diffusion should be studied as a political process of conflicting interests and not solely as a linear or what they call the "Darwinian" process orchestrated from the top.²⁹

Our study builds on and contributes to the debates on experimental governance and policy diffusion by highlighting not only the importance of initial central-level endorsement in inspiring local-level experimentation but also the overwhelming role that local officials play in successfully implementing and sustaining risky media ventures. Specifically, we find that, despite endorsements from the centre, most local officials only superficially adopted the *Pengpai* model, demonstrating inconsistency when it comes to supporting media innovation. In contrast to Heilmann's model, therefore, the national-level diffusion of the model was creatively forestalled by local-level officials. Moreover, similar to other scholars who point to the significance of policy entrepreneurs in facilitating diffusion outcomes, we show that it is the media practitioners themselves who drive the success of *Pengpai* as well as obstruct the implementation of the *Pengpai* model in other regions.³⁰ Finally, we argue that political sensitivity and the economic competitiveness of a sector matters when it comes to policy diffusion. The acute sensitivity of journalistic innovation that requires some official tolerance of critical and investigative reports explains local officials' reluctance to emulate the *Pengpai* model in other regions; it explains also why the central state is happy to overlook these apparent "failures." The competitive, geographically borderless nature of the online media sector makes it challenging for initiatives to successfully roll-out and compete cross-nationally, as the digital media sphere only allows for a handful of "winners."

Sources and Data

The analysis draws on fieldwork carried out in China in the summer of 2016, with some follow-up work completed in the summer of 2017. The two authors conducted in-depth interviews with 43 individuals, including members of the *Pengpai* founding team, former and current *Pengpai* journalists, Shanghai propaganda officials, executives and officials, as well as journalists from other digital media initiatives in eight provinces and municipalities, media investors,

26 Florini, Lai and Tan 2012.

27 Wang, Shaoguang 2009.

28 Ding 2009.

29 Teets and Hurst 2014.

30 Ibid.

experienced journalists in traditional media, and media scholars (see [Table 1](#) for more details).

The eight provinces and municipalities were selected based on their geographic representativeness – Shanghai and Jiangsu in the east, Chongqing and Xinjiang in the west, Beijing and Tianjin in the north, Guangdong in the south, and Hubei in central China. As of June 2016, there were 14 major state-sponsored digital news media initiatives all over the country; we included nine of them in our analysis ([Table 2](#)). We chose to focus on geographic representativeness to capture all possible variations in policy diffusion outcomes.

The interviews were semi-structured. The major questions concerned the process of launching the projects, the ownership structure and business models, the challenges and opportunities that these new media initiatives present for journalism work, and perceived competitors. Additional questions were included selectively, based on the position and knowledge of individual interviewees. The interviews lasted on average between 1.5 to 2 hours, and were conducted in Chinese without a translator. Considering the sensitivity of the topic in China, the interviewees' names have been anonymized.

In addition to interviews, the analysis draws on participant observation in the field. The authors visited newsrooms and also took part in dinners and informal gatherings which were attended by a diverse group of media professionals and scholars. At these meetings, we observed discussions on *Pengpai's* success and the feasibility of competitive digital news outlets. These discussions complement the interview data and enrich the analysis.

The Emergence of a Model: Explaining *Pengpai*

Background and key features

As the first digital-only news outlet to produce original content, and as one of the most widely read news outlets, *Pengpai* symbolizes a new direction for media convergence in China.³¹ While its content and layout mimic those of popular commercial news outlets, its business model most closely resembles that of a state-owned news outlet and features a mix of state funding and advertising. Launched and owned by Shanghai United Media Group, *Pengpai* is completely state-funded and has over 300 journalists covering news nationwide. The initial funding provided by the Shanghai government is estimated to have been 300 million yuan, or US\$48 million.³² In its second year, *Pengpai's* advertising revenue

31 According to Alexa.com, *Pengpai's* global traffic ranking was between 5,000 and 10,000 in 2016 and 2017. It's a high ranking for a news outlet. For comparison, the global ranking of the influential newspaper *Southern Weekly* during the same time was around 40,000, and China's most circulated newspaper, *Reference News*, had a global ranking of between 10,000 and 20,000.

32 "Pengpai xinwen xianru liangnan shi mingzhong zhuding?" (*Pengpai* is destined to be trapped in dilemma?). *The New York Times* (Chinese website), 26 September 2014, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20140926/cc26pengpai/>. Accessed 14 February 2019.

Table 1: Interviewees

	Location	Media / Organization	Position	Date
SH-1	Shanghai	<i>Shanghai Observer</i>	Founding executive	28 June 2016
SH-2		<i>Shanghai Observer</i>	Journalist	29 June 2016
SH-3		<i>Shanghai Observer</i>	Journalist	29 June 2016
SH-4		<i>Pengpai</i>	Founding executive	29 June 2016
SH-5		<i>Pengpai</i>	Founding executive	1 July 2016
SH-6		<i>Pengpai</i>	Journalist	29 June 2016
SH-7		<i>Pengpai</i>	Journalist	30 June 2016
SH-8		<i>Pengpai / Sixth Tone</i>	Journalist	30 June 2016
SH-9		<i>Pengpai / Sixth Tone</i>	Journalist	30 June 2016
SH-10		<i>Pengpai</i>	Journalist	2 July 2016
SH-11		<i>Jiemian</i>	Journalist	18 June 2016
SH-12		<i>Jiemian</i>	Editor	27 July 2017
SH-13		Shanghai Municipal Party Committee propaganda department		Staff
SH-14		A media investment company	Chairman	29 June 2016
SH-15		Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences	Researcher	30 June 2016
SH-16		Fudan University	Researcher	1 July 2016
SH-17		Fudan University	Researcher	2 July 2016
SH-18		Shanghai Jiaotong University	Researcher	3 July 2016
NJ-1	Nanjing	<i>Jiaohuidian</i>	Founding executive	5 July 2016
NJ-2		<i>Jiaohuidian</i>	Journalist	5 July 2016
NJ-3		Nanjing University	Researcher	6 July 2016
GZ-1	Guangzhou	<i>Nanfang Plus</i>	Founding executive	15 July 2016
GZ-2		<i>Nanfang Plus</i>	Founding executive	16 July 2016
CQ-1	Chongqing	<i>Shangyou</i>	Founding executive	22 July 2016
CQ-2		<i>Shangyou</i>	Founding executive	22 July 2016
CQ-3		<i>Shangyou</i>	Journalist	22 July 2016
WH-1	Wuhan	<i>Jiupai</i>	Journalist	14 June 2016
XJ-1	Xinjiang	<i>Wujie</i>	Journalist	June 2016
XJ-2		<i>Wujie</i>	Journalist	July 2016
TJ-1	Tianjin	<i>News 117</i>	Founding executive	July 2016
TJ-2		<i>News 117</i>	Journalist	July 2016
TJ-3		<i>News 117</i>	Journalist	July 2016
TJ-4		Tianjin Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department		Former Tianjin chief
BJ-1	Beijing	<i>Caixin</i>	Journalist	July 2016
BJ-2		<i>Caijing</i>	Journalist	July 2016
BJ-3		<i>The Beijing News</i>	Journalist	July 2016
BJ-4		<i>Global Times</i>	Journalist	July 2016
BJ-5		Tencent	Journalist	July 2016
BJ-6		Sohu	Journalist	July 2016
BJ-7		<i>Today's Headline</i>	Executive	July 2016
BJ-8		State Council	Former official	July 2016
BJ-9		Central Propaganda Department	Official	July 2016
BJ-10		Peking University	Researcher	July 2016

Table 2: State-sponsored Digital Media Initiatives (as of June 2016)

Launch date	Name	Based in	Parent company	Sponsored by
1 Jan 2014	<i>Shanghai Observer</i> 上海观察 (later changed to 上观)*	Shanghai	Shanghai United Media Group	Shanghai
16 Jun 2014	<i>Zhejiang News</i> 浙江新闻	Hangzhou, Zhejiang	Zhejiang Daily Press Group	Zhejiang
22 Jul 2014	<i>Pengpai</i> 澎湃; <i>The Paper</i> *	Shanghai	Shanghai United Media Group	Shanghai
7 Oct 2014	<i>Jiemian</i> 界面*	Shanghai	Shanghai United Media Group	Shanghai
16 Sep 2015	<i>Wujie</i> 无界; <i>Watching</i> *	Beijing		Xinjiang
23 Sep 2015	<i>Jiupai</i> 九派*	Wuhan, Hubei	Changjiang Daily Press Group	Wuhan
23 Oct 2015	<i>Nanfang Plus</i> 南方+*	Guangzhou, Guangdong	Nanfang Daily Press Group	Guangdong
28 Oct 2015	<i>Fengmian</i> 封面; <i>The Cover</i>	Chengdu, Sichuan	Sichuan Daily Press Group	Sichuan
5 Nov 2015	<i>Jingui Zhou</i> 今贵州	Guiyang, Guizhou	Guizhou Daily Press Group	Guizhou
16 Nov 2015	<i>Mengma</i> 猛犸	Zhengzhou, Henan	Henan Daxiang Merged Media Group	Henan
17 Nov 2015	<i>Jiaohuidian</i> 交汇点*	Nanjing, Jiangsu	Xinhua Daily Press Group	Jiangsu
18 Nov 2015	<i>Shangyou</i> 上游*	Chongqing	Chongqing Daily Press Group	Chongqing
7 Jan 2016	<i>News 117</i> 新闻; 117*	Tianjin	Tianjin Daily Press Group	Tianjin
12 Apr 2016	<i>Beijing Times</i> 北京时间	Beijing	Beijing New Media Group (Beijing TV)	Beijing

Notes:

* Covered in our study

covered about half of its total running costs, which were about 120 million yuan.³³ Advertising has since been growing, with some sources suggesting that it is now breaking even, but no reliable data are available.³⁴ In December 2016, six Shanghai-based state-owned enterprises invested 610 million yuan in *Pengpai*, adding stability to its financial situation and freeing it from profit concerns.³⁵

The recognition of *Pengpai* as a model is evident from the widespread references to the “*Pengpai* model” (*pengpai moshi* 澎湃模式) in practitioner, public and academic discussions. Interviews with leading and retired journalists in Beijing all touched upon the emergence of *Pengpai*, and it has been a popular topic of debate on social media and in academic communities.³⁶ Moreover, as we explain further, central government’s tacit support of *Pengpai* and its diffusion symbolized its ascendance as a model for digital journalism.

Interviews with media scholars, *Pengpai* founders and propaganda officials reveal that the outlet’s original content and creative aesthetic make for its unique attraction. *Pengpai* has managed to skilfully fuse fast and in-depth reporting on socio-political issues with soft coverage of President Xi and Shanghai officials. Its popularity soared following its reporting of major anti-corruption investigations such as the Zhou Yongkang 周永康,³⁷ and Ling Jihua 令计划 and Ling Zhengce 令政策 cases,³⁸ which other media failed to cover in much depth owing to censorship pressures. *Pengpai*’s appeal further increased with its investigations of the Tianjin explosion,³⁹ the contaminated vaccine scandal,⁴⁰ and other controversial issues. “In a way, *Pengpai* has taken the space of Southern Media Group,” said one journalist, referring to an important shift in China’s media eco-system.⁴¹ As the famous Guangzhou-based critical news outlet has declined in recent years, it has left a vacuum in investigative journalism.⁴²

33 “Pengpai mingnian guanggao yuji 1.2 yi, shou zhi jiejin chiping” (*Pengpai* advertising is expected to be 120 million next year, and revenues and expenditures are nearly breakeven). *Sina*, 23 October 2015, <http://news.sina.com.cn/m/pm/2015-10-23/doc-ifxkaiqx4199337.shtml>. Accessed 5 February 2019.

34 Chinese media organizations seldom disclose their revenue and profit. We obtained the information from the source in the previous footnote and our interviews with *Pengpai* executives.

35 Zhang 2016.

36 As of late February 2018, a search for *Pengpai moshi* 澎湃模式 yielded more than 1,200 results on Google. A search on China Knowledge Index (CNKI) suggests that there are more than 150 academic papers on this topic. See, e.g., Gao 2016. However, most do not examine the experimental dimension of the *Pengpai* model, presenting instead descriptive accounts of its emergence.

37 “Da lao hu”: Zhou Yongkang luo ma” (“Big tiger”: Zhou Yongkang’s fall from grace). *Pengpai*, 29–31 July 2014, http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_25864. Accessed 5 February 2019.

38 “Ling Zhengce Pinglu wang shi” (Ling Zhengce’s Pinglu past). *Pengpai*, 28 June 2014, http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1252830.

39 “Baozha wu, huanjing yingxiang, jiu yuan fang’an – Tianjin baozha liu da guanjian yiwen dai jie” (Explosives, environmental impact, rescue plan – six big questions that need to be answered about the Tianjin explosion). *Pengpai*, 13 August 2015, http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1363734. Accessed 5 February 2019.

40 “Shandong feifa jingguan yimiao an” (Shandong illegal vaccine case). *Pengpai*, March 2016, http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26494. Accessed 5 February 2019.

41 Interview BJ-7.

42 Guan, Xia and Cheng 2017; Repnikova and Fang 2015.

While it investigates regional authorities across the country, *Pengpai* has largely stuck to soft propaganda when it comes to coverage of President Xi and Shanghai authorities. One widely read piece was “Class monitor Xi Jinping,” in which the author compared China to a class, arguing that students need a strong, authoritative “class leader” like Xi.⁴³ Our interviews revealed that top leaders praised this piece and the author received a large bonus from *Pengpai*. Interviews with *Pengpai* journalists confirm that infusing the site with lively propaganda pieces is an intentional strategy to maintain space within the system. “We knew that both central and local governments wanted us to present something about Xi, but we couldn’t publish a *People’s Daily*-style article, so we chose a popular style to ‘cutify’ Xi. It helped us gain trust from the government,” a founding executive of *Pengpai* told us.⁴⁴ In combining some critical journalism with propaganda, *Pengpai* is engaged in the same, albeit a more dynamic, dance that traditional news outlets have had to perform in the past, fusing the roles of public opinion guidance with supervision.⁴⁵

Other than the appealing content, the aesthetic of *Pengpai* has also played its part. The name itself is simple, memorable and distinct from typical titles of traditional Chinese propaganda outlets, like *People’s Daily*. “We decided to create a new brand to signal that *Pengpai* is a new initiative independent from any traditional media outlet that is considered obsolete in China,” one founding member of *Pengpai* shared in an interview.⁴⁶ “It’s crucial that the name doesn’t include any character that means ‘newspaper’ or the name of the province, and we believe the name itself is contributing to *Pengpai*’s success,” he added. Of course, the choice of *The Paper* as the English title for *Pengpai* also carries a degree of irony. The web design includes sophisticated modern features. For instance, a new section added in 2015 invites celebrities and those in the news to respond to questions from the readers.⁴⁷ The mixture of daring investigative reporting and skilful propaganda, as well as its unusual aesthetic and design functions, are the unique “selling” features of *Pengpai*. We now turn to the key forces behind the emergence of this innovative approach.

Experimentation under hierarchy: the making of a model

The heralding of *Pengpai* as a model in the media digitalization experiment is rooted in the opportunistic attitudes of local officials, riding a wave of high-level endorsements of media reform, and in a journalistic entrepreneurship aimed at the reinvention of the journalism profession. It was the recognition of these

43 “Banzhang Xi Jinping” (Class monitor Xi Jinping). *Pengpai*, 16 October 2014, http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1270242. Accessed 5 February 2019.

44 Interview SH-5.

45 Repnikova 2017.

46 Interview SH-4.

47 “Wenba” (Ask), http://www.thepaper.cn/ask_index.jsp. Accessed 5 February 2019.

efforts by the central state, and other provincial propaganda leaders, that earmarked *Pengpai* as a model for digital media experiments.

Our interviews demonstrate that support for new media initiatives was present at the highest levels of the Shanghai government. “Shanghai leaders have enthusiastically studied Xi Jinping’s speeches and seized on this opportunity,” noted an editor at *Shanghai Observer*.⁴⁸ According to interviewees who have worked with him, the Shanghai Party secretary, Han Zheng 韩正, had a special interest in media digitalization reform, as he genuinely believed that the time was ripe for change in the media industry: “Han Zheng himself doesn’t really read newspapers, he spends a lot of time on new media. He also thinks that old models of journalism won’t be able to attract Chinese youth, so he has endorsed a media transformation that would incorporate all media personnel.”⁴⁹ Our interviewees told us that from 2013 to 2017, Han Zheng made dozens of official visits to news outlets, and held a new media conference in February 2016. The Shanghai propaganda department has followed suit and has generally endorsed digitalization objectives, especially the successful initiatives such as *Pengpai*. “As a matter of fact, the department of propaganda has attached significant importance to *Pengpai* in many ways,” shared a Shanghai propaganda official.⁵⁰

This support translated into financial investment and visibility for the newly formed digital outlets. In 2016 alone, Shanghai invested 560 million yuan in the propaganda and culture sector, most of which went to digital media initiatives.⁵¹ Interviewees from *Pengpai* and other digital news apps in Shanghai shared that profit was not their top priority, as state funding was generally sufficient for them to expand their operations and not worry about attracting significant advertisements or gaining a wide readership in the short term. “We have a very clear business model: some advertising plus government subsidies,” a journalist told us, “so we are not so anxious about making money.”⁵² As for visibility, Shanghai authorities started to highlight successful initiatives like *Pengpai* at the national level from the very beginning. At the 2014 new media conference, for instance, *Pengpai* was allowed to bring three representatives, whereas other media were only granted one spot, indicating that preferential treatment was being given to *Pengpai*.⁵³

The Shanghai authorities were clearly opportunistic in their support as they took advantage of central-level endorsements to build Shanghai up as *the* centre for media innovation; they also used the new media outlets to promote their own image. “In the past, prior to the advancement of the internet age, Shanghai media

48 Interview SH-2.

49 Ibid.

50 Interview SH-13.

51 “Shanghai shi shi ji xuanchuan wenhua zhuanxiang zijin guanli banfa” (Shanghai municipality measures for the management of the special fund for propaganda and culture), <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/Attach/Attaches/201702/201702090423471415.pdf>.

52 Interview SH-6.

53 Interview SH-13.

were quite weak, weaker than those in Beijing ... and weaker than those in Guangzhou. The internet transformations have definitely presented an opportunity for Shanghai to ‘cut the corner’,” shared a founding executive at *Pengpai*, referring to the opportunity for Shanghai to finally outcompete other national media capitals like Beijing and Guangzhou.⁵⁴ In addition, creating successful digital outlets also translates into propaganda opportunities for Shanghai. “*Pengpai* makes leaders shine,” shared a Shanghai-based editor.⁵⁵ “*Pengpai* has done well in positive propaganda reporting. For instance, when Han Zheng goes somewhere for an inspection, *Pengpai* comes along to do a video broadcast, a 360 degree angle report,” related a Shanghai propaganda official with enthusiasm.⁵⁶

In addition to the support from Shanghai officials, the rise of *Pengpai* is also rooted in bottom-up journalistic entrepreneurship. The former head of the *Pengpai* editorial team, Qiu Bing 邱兵, and the other co-founders are a uniquely ambitious group of media professionals who realized that media transformation is a matter of professional survival. The majority of *Pengpai*’s founding members came from *Oriental Morning Post*, the newspaper that first exposed the contaminated milk powder scandal in 2008.⁵⁷ Qiu himself was also the founding deputy editor of *Oriental Morning Post*, after spending 13 years at Shanghai’s major daily newspaper *Wenhui bao* 文汇报. Based in China’s financial capital and most international city, these journalists were the first to sense the changes in the media landscape. “We are polar bears on a melting iceberg. If we jump into the sea, we may have a chance to swim to the shore. If we don’t do anything, we will starve to death,” shared one of the founding members of *Pengpai*.⁵⁸ Another admitted that he had “no nostalgia for the print media era” and fully embraced digital experiments.⁵⁹

Fuelled by this survival instinct, the *Pengpai* team attracted top talent from all over the country. The competitive salary and rare opportunity to practise professional journalism have lured in a diverse group of media professionals, including seasoned investigative journalists from the Southern Media Group, young start-up entrepreneurs in their 20s, and data journalists from top graduate programmes in the United States such as the Missouri School of Journalism. Feng Hongping 丰鸿平, a senior journalist who spent 12 years at the Southern Media Group, joined the founding team as an editor. Wang Zuozhongyou 王左中右 was hired as *Pengpai*’s founding chief operation officer after popularizing the Weibo account of the Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* in China by injecting it with some unique content and style. These journalists dared to experiment

54 Interview SH-5.

55 Interview SH-12.

56 Ibid.

57 Svensson, Sæther and Zhang 2013.

58 Interview SH-6.

59 Interview SH-5.

with critical reporting as well as with new journalistic formats such as satire, online documentaries and HTML5-based interactive mobile pages.

The success of the synergy and negotiation between Shanghai-level authorities and media entrepreneurs in the making of *Pengpai* was solidified in the implicit recognition by the centre of Shanghai as the model for digital media experiments. This recognition manifested itself in symbolic gestures like the Central Propaganda Department's hosting of a media digitalization conference in Shanghai in 2014, the promotion of Shanghai officials to central-level posts, and the rare high-level access granted to *Pengpai* journalists. First, selecting Shanghai as the conference venue was a clear indication of the central state's support, as hundreds of regional propaganda officials and heads of news outlets travelled to Shanghai to learn from its experience. During the conference, *Pengpai* was held up as a model of successful digital journalism. As for promotional rewards, in 2016 Xu Lin 徐麟, the head of Shanghai's propaganda department, was promoted to the head of the Cyberspace Administration of China, the most prestigious and influential party-state bureau in relation to internet management. While there is no official proof that his promotion was directly linked to *Pengpai*'s success, a number of interviewees in Shanghai suggested that the official was rewarded for launching the model for media digitalization.⁶⁰ One of the founding members went as far as to argue that "the only ones who have truly benefited from *Pengpai* success are local officials, especially Xu."⁶¹ Finally, *Pengpai* is the only digital news outlet that has been allowed to cover Xi Jinping's travels, speeches and other high-level events, including his visit to the United States – the first time a non-official news outlet has covered a high-level state visit.⁶² *Pengpai* was also among the nine mainland media outlets that raised a question during Premier Li Keqiang's 李克强 2017 annual press conference.⁶³ Other journalists observed that many high-ranking officials accepted *Pengpai* interview requests, which is a sign of respect and trust,⁶⁴ especially when considering how difficult it is for the Chinese media in general to gain official access.⁶⁵

To conclude, the emergence of the *Pengpai* model sprang from the opportunistic attitudes and strategizing of local officials and media professionals who recognized the opportunities on offer in the internet age to create an innovative media platform that would rescue journalism from extinction as well as elevate Shanghai as a digital media capital. The recognition given to these efforts by the central state has signalled to other regions that Shanghai is an example to

60 Other possible explanations for Xu's promotion include his loyalty to Xi and his subtle and discreet nature in contrast to Lu Wei, his predecessor, who is now under investigation for corruption.

61 Interview SH-7.

62 Interview WH-1.

63 "Li Keqiang jiu 70 nian chanquan daoqi da pengpai wen" (Li Keqiang answers the question raised by *Pengpai* on the 70-year term of property ownership). *Pengpai*, 15 March 2017, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1639769. Accessed 14 February 2019.

64 Interview WH-1.

65 Repnikova 2017.

follow, stimulating widespread attempts at cross-national learning.⁶⁶ We turn to this learning process next as we examine the diffusion of the *Pengpai* model.

Horizontal Diffusion

Evidence of attempts at diffusion

At the peak of *Pengpai*'s popularity (late 2014 to 2015), a number of similar news outlets began to appear across China (Table 2). Specifically, by June 2016, 14 digital news outlets had been launched in 12 provinces. Our interviews illustrate both direct and indirect attempts at diffusion of the *Pengpai* model.

The direct diffusion attempts include cross-regional learning efforts via visits to *Pengpai* for officially sanctioned conferences and tours as well as informal networking events. The 2014 new media conference, mentioned above, is a prime example of state-sanctioned diffusion, but Shanghai propaganda officials have also arranged one-day tours of successful Shanghai news media organizations for regional officials and journalists. One of our interviewees jokingly remarked that the “Shanghai propaganda department started to resemble a regional tourism bureau.”⁶⁷ “I often see officials and editors wondering around the offices, asking questions, but generally just speaking to leaders,” shared a *Pengpai* reporter.⁶⁸ Many of these visits are of an unofficial nature, with individual editors coming to network with *Pengpai*. “The editor himself visited *Pengpai* several times,” noted a journalist from Tianjin-based outlet, *News 117*.⁶⁹ “At *Pengpai*, he studied content and technology, as well as business strategies,” he added. Similarly, a founding member of *Nanfang Plus* shared that when his team were developing their app, they “visited *Pengpai* and used it as a major example and reference.”⁷⁰ A *Jiupai* 九派 editor said that he often followed up with his colleagues from *Pengpai* informally after his visits, exchanging ideas about content creation and delivery.⁷¹

Indirect learning is also evident in many of these outlets' aspirations to be like *Pengpai* and even compete with it, as well as in their adoptions of similar key features. A number of regional editors referred to their news outlets as “mini *Pengpai*.”⁷² Some, such as the Chongqing-based *Shangyou* 上游, deliberately promoted this association by publicizing a slogan: “Eastern *Pengpai*, Western *Shangyou*.” “We proposed this slogan because we learned a lot from *Pengpai* and we aspired to undertake similar original, quality reporting,” a founding

66 It is important to note here that Shanghai was also a safe choice for central authorities to endorse, compared to Guangdong and Beijing. Shanghai has a more politically conservative media environment. Lee, He and Huang 2007.

67 Interview SH-13.

68 Interview SH-10.

69 Interview TJ-3.

70 Interview GZ-2.

71 Interview WH-1.

72 See, e.g., interviews WH-1, CQ-1.

member at *Shangyou* told us.⁷³ When asked about their competitors, the heads of these new platforms mentioned *Pengpai*, signalling their aspirations to rival its national influence. Even outlets which did not envision realistically competing with Shanghai, such as *Jiaohuidian* 交汇点 in Nanjing, still strove for national influence by choosing an app name that obscured regional location. “If the name includes Jiangsu, people in other provinces won’t download it,” shared a senior editor at the outlet.⁷⁴

The key features of these news apps follow the *Pengpai* model, including the emphasis on content, the initial dependence on state funding and the creative design aesthetic. “The original model was pretty much that of *Pengpai* – start with high quality, original and innovative content, expand influence, attract investment,” reported a former editor at *Jiupai*.⁷⁵ Most of the editors and founding executives that we interviewed shared a similar initial prioritization of good quality journalism, including in-depth and investigative reports. Even executives at small outlets like the Tianjin-based *News 117* specified “media supervision” (*yulun jian du* 舆论监督) as one of their specialties.⁷⁶ “If you want big influence, you have to compete with others, and this competition starts with content; if your content is a little better, then your chances are higher,” noted a former journalist at *Wujie* 无界, a Xinjiang-sponsored Beijing news outlet.⁷⁷

Like *Pengpai*, these outlets relied on state funding and had no apparent strategies for commercial success. According to our interviewees, local officials invested heavily in these news apps: Nanjing-based *Jiaohuidian* received 50 million yuan (US\$7.5 million) from the government in 2015,⁷⁸ *Nanfang Plus* also received a comparable subsidy from the Guangdong government,⁷⁹ *Shangyou* received 60 million yuan (US\$9 million) from Chongqing,⁸⁰ and *Jiupai* was promised 80 million yuan (US\$12 million) in government funding.⁸¹ One interviewee from *Wujie* compared official investment in new media with that in the soccer business: “It is all politically motivated, you are not pursuing profits ... in the first two to three years the expectation is that you’ll be losing money.”⁸²

Finally, the look and the functionality of these media platforms mimicked those of *Pengpai*, including the creative naming of the apps (something that our interviewees indicated they learned from *Pengpai*) and the introduction of similar web features. Following the *Pengpai* approach, for example, these news apps generally organized their content and their teams into dozens of small sections or columns (*lanmu* 栏目), for example “anti-corruption news,” rather than

73 Interview CQ-1.

74 Interview NJ-2.

75 Interview WH-1.

76 Interview TJ-1.

77 Interview XJ-1.

78 Interview NJ-1.

79 Interview GZ-2.

80 Interview CQ-1.

81 Interview WH-1.

82 Interview XJ-1.

into bigger news categories such as “political news.” Initially, therefore, we found both direct and indirect attempts by regional officials and media practitioners to learn from *Pengpai*. However, there has been a backsliding in this learning, which has put into question the diffusion of the experiment, as we explain below.

Ambivalent aftermath: the dissolving of the Pengpai model

Although the *Pengpai* model at first spread in accordance with the “point to surface” logic of China’s experimental policymaking, these efforts turned out to be limited and fleeting. The diffusion proceeded unevenly, with a selective number of regions and cities attempting to create “mini *Pengpai*.” None of these initiatives, moreover, managed to become national success stories, as they had initially hoped. Most of the outlets diverged from their model of producing quality journalism and shifted towards serving as local communication channels. As we explain, this outcome was the result of inconsistent support from local officials and a shortage of journalistic entrepreneurship.

First, it is important to note that these digital media initiatives were only launched in richer provinces: seven of the top ten provinces, according to GDP per capita ranking, implemented digital initiatives, and only two of the bottom ten provinces joined the experiment.⁸³ The two less developed provinces, moreover, have a strong media and technology presence. Sichuan is home to several reputable media outlets such as *West China Metropolis Daily* and *Chengdu Business Daily*, and Guizhou is now the leading province in big data and digital technology.⁸⁴ On the whole, the poorer provinces, and those lacking a pool of reputable traditional media and experienced journalists, were left out of the experiment.

Moreover, the initiatives we analysed have had mixed rates of success when it comes to competing nationally or even upholding the initial *Pengpai* model of digital journalism. As of summer 2017, none of these new outlets had attracted any national attention for their coverage. According to data analytics company analysys.cn, by the end of 2016, *Pengpai* ranked as 15th among all news apps in the Chinese market with daily active users of more than 3 million, while all other similar news apps ranked below 50.⁸⁵

More importantly, most of these outlets, including the promising *Jiupai* and *Shangyou*, have shifted away from the original objective of offering quality investigative reporting and towards focusing on big-data journalism and local news. Just prior to the launch of *Jiupai* in September 2015, its management structure

83 Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong and Chongqing are among the top ten provinces and municipalities; Sichuan and Guizhou are in the bottom ten.

84 For example, Guizhou ranks top in government use of new media, and Tencent launched a new media institute in Guizhou. See “Guizhou shixian Zhongguo shou ge xin meiti zhengwu juzhen” (Guizhou launches China’s first media government matrix). *Chinanews.com*, 21 June 2017, <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2017/06-21/8257341.shtml>. Accessed 5 February 2019.

85 The most popular news apps are aggregators such as Tencent News, Today’s Headline, and Sohu News. Data retrieved from <http://zhishu.analysys.cn/>. Accessed 13 September 2017.

was altered in favour of a semi-commercial, big-data model, abandoning the *Pengpai* experiment entirely. “The change happened so quickly that a number of previously planned stories got cancelled and the majority of journalists resigned in two months,” shared a founding member of *Jiupai*.⁸⁶ Months into its operation, *Shangyou* cancelled its entire politics section (*zhengqing* 政情) and switched to local news in which they were more experienced. “Our resources are concentrated in Chongqing, we should make better use of them,” a founding member of *Shangyou* told us, “plus, it’s too expensive to send journalists to other provinces for an investigative story that might get censored.”⁸⁷ Interviewees in Jiangsu and Guangdong also noted that providing local news and information for local governments, rather than national investigative reporting, was now their key objective. “As a provincial newspaper group, we have strong connections with local governments and other institutions. That’s our advantage and opportunity,” related an executive at *Jiaohuidian*.⁸⁸ Overall, most of these news apps have downscaled their ambitions to focus on either the more technical work of big-data aggregation or on local news provision.

Explaining the mixed results

The ambivalent results of the *Pengpai* diffusion stem from the non-committal attitudes of local officials and media professionals in regard to creating a sustainable model for digital media. In contrast to Shanghai authorities, the local officials in the regions we surveyed were driven less by the desire to reform their media industry than by the wish to superficially support central-level initiatives. When asked about the motivating forces behind these news apps, our interviewees in Nanjing, Chongqing and Guangzhou generally regarded “implementing the spirit of Xi Jinping’s speech on new media” as the first and the most important factor. In explaining the failure of *Pengpai*’s imitators to live up to their ambitions, a *Pengpai* founding member highlighted the skewed motivations of local officials: “Other than the fact that *Pengpai* got there first, the key factor is that these initiatives lacked internal dynamism, and were mostly driven by political rationale, with local officials noticing *Pengpai* success and hoping to create something similar to showcase externally. So it was really a political tactic or a strategy, but it lacked an endogenous impetus,” he noted.⁸⁹

This weak impetus translated into wavering support among regional officials for the *Pengpai* model, as they expressed initial enthusiasm and then retracted to more conservative, less politically sensitive models of online journalism. Local officials were torn between the dual objectives of effective persuasion, which requires some quality political coverage, and upholding political stability, which can be potentially endangered by investigative reports. The switches

⁸⁶ Interview WH-1.

⁸⁷ Interview CQ-1.

⁸⁸ Interview NJ-1.

⁸⁹ Interview SH-7.

towards big-data journalism at *Jiupai* and towards local news at *Shangyou* were largely owing to official pressures. “Local government changed their mind,” explained a founding member of *Jiupai*, “in getting rid of investigative journalism and changing to an aggregator based on big data, they wanted to reduce the cost and minimize the risk.”⁹⁰ “*Pengpai* would follow *Jiupai*’s path if Han Zheng withdrew his support,” commented a founding member of *Nanfang Plus*.⁹¹

Since most Chinese media conduct extra-territorial investigative journalism (*yidi jiandu* 异地监督), local officials are less preoccupied with media revelations about their work than with pressures from other regional authorities that could, in turn, damage cross-provincial relations. The most dangerous scenario, however, is when these news outlets air criticism aimed at the centre. An extreme case of this was the Xinjiang-sponsored, Beijing-based *Wujie*. Funded by Xinjiang officials who wanted to improve their persuasion capabilities, *Wujie* was a promising news outlet staffed with top talent until it came under fire for publishing an anonymous letter calling for Xi’s resignation. Our interviews with former *Wujie* journalists suggest that it was a technical error, but the editors were held in detention for a long time after this incident, and the Xinjiang authorities, of course, quickly withdrew their support and shut down the outlet.⁹² This case has likely sent a signal to others about the potential, unanticipated political repercussions that can occur with digital media experiments.

In addition to the official ambivalence that translated into superficial and often short-lived support for the *Pengpai* model, the media entrepreneurs involved in these news outlets also lacked a clear competitive strategy and an adequate talent pool to move forward. These outlets positioned themselves in competition with all national media, ranging from data aggregators to quality journalism outlets like *Caixin* 财新. *Wujie* considered its major competitor to be *Pengpai*.⁹³ A founding member of *Jiupai* explained that “all national media, traditional or digital, are our competitors.”⁹⁴ Even after switching its focus to Chongqing, *Shangyou* still wanted to compete with other national news apps and be the first with breaking news.⁹⁵ By trying to do it all, these outlets lost their competitive advantage. In addition, the mission to be of national relevance was not matched by the talent pool. “It is hard to attract young talented people to join the media ... It’s especially hard to attract people with technical skills. *People’s Daily* has managed to poach some talent from Baidu and other successful start-ups, but we don’t have similar salaries and resources to offer,” shared an editor at *News 117* in Tianjin.⁹⁶ With the exception of *Wujie* and *Jiupai*, regional

90 Interview WH-1.

91 Interview GZ-1.

92 Interview XJ-1.

93 Ibid.

94 Interview WH-1.

95 Interview CQ-1.

96 Interview TJ-2.

news outlets faced an uphill battle when trying to recruit the best journalists, as there were higher paid opportunities for them in the tech sector. Even attracting journalists to join the Wuhan-based *Jiupai* was not an easy task, according to some interviewees. “If you are in Beijing and you are offered the same salary in Wuhan, would you stay in Beijing? I think most people would stay in Beijing. Beijing has more resources, and it is more familiar,” noted a former journalist at *Wujie*.⁹⁷ Unlike *Pengpai*, which attracted the boldest editors and reporters in the nation, these copy-cat outlets suffered from a shortage of enterprising talent that would push forward successful digitalization initiatives from the bottom up.

To conclude, neither the official entrepreneurship nor the journalistic agency matched that which spurred the success of *Pengpai*. Most local officials were only half-committed to this initiative, paying lip service to central-level directives, while at the same time obstructing the success of these nascent news outlets in order to cut costs and minimize the risks that come with political sensitivity. Media entrepreneurs, in turn, set ambitious untenable goals and lacked an adequate competitive edge to evolve into national players. As such, the popularity and influence of these projects remain questionable when it comes to fulfilling the national agenda of revitalizing persuasion online.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we examine a unique experiment in digital journalism, the emergence of *Pengpai* and the cross-regional diffusion of its model. As we demonstrate, initially the experiment adhered to the point-to-surface approach introduced by Heilmann and examined by other scholars of Chinese governance. The subsequent failure of the diffusion, however, points to the importance of consistent local-level official support and journalistic entrepreneurship for ensuring the long-term success of media policy diffusion. The analysis, therefore, complicates the point-to-surface narrative and reasserts the relative significance of the local state and other policy entrepreneurs in policy diffusion processes.

We further argue that given the sensitivity and competitiveness of the digital media sector, the diffusion of digital media experiments can be an extremely volatile process. The tension between controlling information and enhancing media credibility dates back to the Mao period and has only intensified with media commercialization and digitalization. As argued in other works, the party-state is schizophrenically oscillating between tolerance and censorship to boost official responsiveness at minimal risk.⁹⁸ This balancing act is especially apparent at the local level, with most local officials, as we argue, settling for a conservative approach and mimicking innovation within a politically controlled environment. Even the authorities in Shanghai have allegedly started to impose more

97 Interview XJ-1

98 Repnikova 2017.

censorship on *Pengpai* after being pressured by other regional authorities to stop negative investigative coverage.⁹⁹ Some Beijing-based journalists referred to *Pengpai* as “old leaves in a new pot,”¹⁰⁰ and others said that it had passed its peak and was becoming more conformist in political coverage. Our latest analysis of *Pengpai*’s reporting finds it to be still relatively daring in its investigative coverage when compared to its competitors.¹⁰¹ Its readership also continues to be high: latest estimates (August 2017) suggest that it draws more than 8.5 million daily active users, with page views of more than 20 million on some popular articles.¹⁰² Nonetheless, its capacity to survive as a credible critical news outlet is not guaranteed.

Other than political sensitivity, the unusually high competition for readership is another obstacle for policy diffusion. According to a 2017 report by the Boston Consulting Group, a typical Chinese user would frequently use only six apps, including social media, maps and other essentials.¹⁰³ New local-level news platforms are an unlikely choice. In the past, provincial newspapers had their designated areas of circulation, allowing for each province to have a few successful newspapers; however, the internet is less tolerant of diverse regional voices. “The news app market is already small given the large shares taken by aggregators such as Tencent News and Today’s Headline. It only has room for one *Pengpai*,” commented a media researcher in Shanghai.¹⁰⁴

Even maintaining a successful national digital outlet is a struggle over the long term owing to talent mobility in the fiercely competitive new media sector. In June 2016, *Pengpai* CEO Qiu Bing left the company, along with the core editorial team, to start up a new digital video platform, Pear Video. Interviews with some members of this team suggest that they were attracted by the better financial rewards offered by the new venture. The same opportunistic media professionals who launched *Pengpai* had moved on to become “real” entrepreneurs with financial stakes in their own businesses, something that was not possible with the state-owned *Pengpai*. One founding member expressed his dissatisfaction with the set up: “We put so much effort into *Pengpai*, but it 100 per cent belongs to the government, not to us. Even if it made a profit, we wouldn’t have a share in it.”¹⁰⁵ If even the most successful initiatives experience such a rapid turnover in talent, then what hope is there for more localized state-owned media that struggle to attract top professionals in the first place?

99 Interview SH-4, SH-8.

100 Interview BJ-5.

101 For example, it published in-depth investigations into the Three Gorges Dam, the Tianjin explosion in 2015, and the Beijing kindergarten sex scandal in 2017. Some of the stories were subsequently censored by the authorities.

102 Li 2017.

103 See “Boshidun zixun: jiedu Zhongguo hulianwang tese” (Boston Consulting: interpreting China’s internet). *199IT*, 14 September 2017, <http://www.199it.com/archives/633046.html>. Accessed 5 February 2019.

104 Interview SH-18.

105 Interview SH-7.

The challenge of public persuasion in the digital age is not unique to China; rather it fits the broader pattern of the demise of the traditional news industry and, most recently, the rise of misinformation and fake news in the West. Enterprising digital journalism initiatives have also sprung up in other contexts, with journalists often driving these initiatives.¹⁰⁶ What is unique about China's experiments with digital journalism is that they remain state-driven, both in terms of their political agenda and, especially, their financial support. On the one hand, China seems to hold more promise for journalistic innovation given the seemingly infinite funding allocated for these initiatives. On the other hand, as this analysis of *Pengpai* demonstrates, state-driven innovation can also be an unpredictable and stifling force in the competitive and fast-evolving social media sphere. The initial official support may help to create a successful news outlet but it comes with political strings and may not be enough in itself to stem the flow of talented journalists from branching out on their own to pursue more lucrative independent initiatives.

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摘要: 随着传统媒体在中国的快速衰落, 中共政权在引导网络民意方面面临着越来越严峻的挑战。本文研究的是中共针对这种挑战作出的回应之一: 一个由国家批准的数字媒体实验项目, 它旨在创造一种新形式的新闻, 既能够吸引大众, 又可以帮助扩散党的宣传。我们分析了该实验中获得全国性成功的案例——位于上海的澎湃新闻, 以及其模式扩散到其他地区的情况。我们认为, 地方官员和具备企业家精神的媒体人之间的协同合作, 推动了澎湃在全国范围内的声名。我们的研究还显示, 在全国范围内推广这一模式的尝试, 只取得了不确定的成果, 这背后有多重因素, 比如

106 Boyles 2016.

一些地方官员和媒体人的投入是非常表面性的。这些研究发现说明，在媒体政策领域，国家批准的去中心化实验是非常不稳定的，这也对中共在数字时代重塑说服工作的能力提出了疑问。

关键词: 中国; 新媒体; 威权主义; 说服; 澎湃新闻; 上海; 实验; 扩散; 去中心化

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