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Moral Problems and Ethical Issues in China’s Media

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In 1978, China entered the era of Deng Xiaoping’s “Reform and Opening to the Outside World,” and since then a totalitarian state has gradually become a post-totalitarian one. Marxism-Leninism and Maoism are still the so-called “orthodox” ideology, but in fact few officials believe in them. People pay more attention to material life and wealth, and this country has become more and more capitalistic. A Mao cover photo in *Time* magazine described it as “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” in which the Mao suit that Mao is wearing is dotted with numerous trademarks of the LV brand (“China’s New Revolution,” 2005).

With the decline of traditional ideology, the rise of a market economy, and the emphasis on science and technology, China has said good-bye to the small number of media outlets in Mao’s era and now has a complete range of media systems equipped with modern technology.

The European author, Claude-Jean Bertrand, believed that codes of media ethics “can only exist in democracies,” and they “are only respected in the countries where there are a free press and a community of journalists with high-level ethical standards, and media and journalists are proud of their work.” Whereas in poor nations, there are less consumers and advertisements, and therefore there is a corrupt, state-funded and controlled press. Even though such poor countries may claim that there is democracy there, it is meaningless to talk about professional ethics of the media (Bertrand, 2006, p. 6).

According to Bertrand, media ethics cannot exist in “non-democratic” third-world countries. Sorry, I disagree with his absolutist view of “no democracy, no media ethics.” In such transitional countries as China and Russia, we have seen the beginnings of media divergence and professionalization, and discussions and debate on media ethics are often warm or even hot, although there are so many difficulties. On the other hand, it is true that poverty and the media’s ethical behavior cannot coexist long term. In most countries, most media are marketed-oriented and financially self-supported. The marketization of media is both a blessing and a curse, and has caused more and more ethical/morality-related criticism—Robert McChesney (1999) calls it “rich media, poor democracy.” However, good management and sound finance are the foundation of media independence and autonomy, and they are vital to maintaining the ethical and moral standards of the media.

The Party-State still controls such crucial resources of traditional media as ownership and power over personnel, and propaganda departments at all levels are still dominating the most
important news and opinions. But the traditional Soviet propaganda model has been challenged for many years and partially abandoned. China’s media have become more and more market/ advertisement-oriented, and there has been a kind of limited diversity within it.

Limited diversity does indicate some degree of media differentiation. In 2008, Hu Jintao, then Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party, introduced a classification of China’s news media. According to Mr. Hu, among three categories of China’s media, the first is the Party press and broadcast stations, that is, the Party’s organs or mouthpieces; the second is “metropolitan media”; and the third is online media (Hu, 2008, p. 1).

The first category Mr. Hu introduced is the Party/State media, which can be roughly divided into two sub-categories: the first is orthodox and privileged media, such as the People’s Daily, CCTV and the Xinhua News Agency; the main moral problems of these media are propaganda-related deceit and fabrication. The second is marginal and disadvantaged print media, such as newspapers and magazines sponsored by departments of the State Council. They have lost most of their readership and advertisers and are often in financial crises. In order to survive, they frequently extract payments through threats of negative information.

The second category Mr. Hu introduced is market/audience-oriented media. They also can be roughly divided into two sub-categories: 1) The first is the large number of sensational media, such tabloids as Evening News and Metropolitan News and some programs of local TV stations. Their problems are similar to those described by Western critics as “market-driven journalism,” such as the invasion of privacy, trial by media, and the cruel presentation of tragedy; 2) The second is the “glorious minority,” that is, the few quality newspapers and magazines modeled after American journalistic professionalism. These include the Beijing-based Media Group led by Ms. Hu Shuli, the most famous journalist in China, Caijing [Finance] magazine, the daily paper Beijing News, the Guangzhou-based weekly paper Southern Weekend, and the daily paper Southern Metropolitan News. These print media are seldom under moral criticism.

FRAMEWORK: DISTINGUISHING MORALS FROM ETHICS

According to Professor Chen Lidan, a famous media scholar, there have been sixteen kinds of behavior that violate codes of ethics in China’s news media: 1) a confusion of responsibilities between editorial staffs and business departments, which leads to the flood of “paid news” and the regular practice of the “red envelope”; 2) the confusion of advertisements with news columns; 3) ad-sponsored news columns; 4) keeping one’s mouth shut after taking a bribe; 5) fake news; 6) making “pseudo events”; 7) getting various benefits from interviewees; 8) intrusion on privacy; 9) the infringement of copyright; 10) trial by media; 11) intrusive undercover interviewing and hidden cameras; 12) the refusal of correction and reply; 13) sensational coverage of celebrities’ affairs and criminal cases; 14) heartless news; 15) the clear pictorial presentation of violence, blood, disaster, sorrow and suffering; and 16) deceptive and vulgar advertisements (Chen, 2008, pp. 257–280).

It is not difficult to see that Professor Chen has given us a panoramic description and made some meaningful conclusions after listing so many immoral phenomena. But firstly, these phenomena are not at the same level and of the same nature; some are basically related to law, such as the infringement of copyright. Secondly, morally or ethically all the phenomena mentioned by Professor Chen are not wrong or evil. To be convenient for explaining and understanding, I distinguish between morals and ethics following the approach suggested by professors Clifford Christians, Philip Patterson and Lee Wilkins (Patterson and Wilkins, 2001, p. 2). Within their framework, my own definitions of morals and ethics are these: a moral problem is one going
against the traditional moral commandments and professional rules of the media; an ethical issue is one related to a moral dilemma of media professionals or a fierce controversy or hot topic in the media that lacks social and professional consensus. I think that the highly serious moral problems of the media are the ones that really make a difference between China and the West (Zhan and Peng, 2014, pp. 5–24).

Among the moral problems of China’s media, there are four that are the most important: 1) media professionals deceive the public by way of “positive propaganda,” paid silence and news-like ads after accepting ill-gotten benefits; 2) fake news, including fabrication, adulteration, plagiarism, falsification, staged pictures and concealment; 3) the media’s cruel presentation of pain and sorrow in tragedies; and 4) the media’s reporting of sex-related events in excessive and sometimes even illegal ways (Zhan and Peng, 2014, pp. 52–177).

While facing challenges due to severe moral anomie, five common ethical issues of the global media begin to emerge in and around China’s media: 1) how to draw a reasonable borderline between undercover interviewing and hidden cameras; 2) which is first for a journalist: saving life or reporting; 3) press freedom versus fair trial; 4) how to deal with news sources; and 5) violence in the media versus violence in the real world (Zhan and Peng, 2014, pp. 178–338).

MEDIA MORALS: AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

“Red Envelopes” and “Soft Articles”

A red envelope is a red paper containing money as a small gift in China. For a long time, it has been a custom to give red envelopes on all kinds of festival occasions. But now “red envelopes” have become a commonly used corrupt means among the Chinese. A briber gives someone a red envelope as pay for a “service” provided. Nowadays, receiving red envelopes is a common practice among civil servants, doctors, judges and teachers. In the press, the phenomenon of red envelopes is commonplace. It has become a so-called “severely afflicted area” among all kinds of media corruption, and it is a chronic illness and disease of China’s media. The sum of money varies from RMB hundreds to thousands, or even to tens of thousands.

According to journalists’ attitudes about receiving red envelopes, there are two kinds of behaviors: active and passive. Receiving red envelopes actively by journalists is a practice using their “power of publishing” to threaten interviewees, and if the interviewees give money, their negative news can be concealed; if they refuse, they will face the danger of exposing their scandals. This is actually a kind of blackmail under the guise of watchdog journalism. Receiving red envelopes passively by journalists is the practice of being approached by persons who take the initiative to contact journalists, asking them to do “positive reporting” for their work (“positive reporting” is not news essentially, because it has no news value). The persons’ wishes are to use media resources to sing praises, boast flattery, or eliminate its “negative” effects when so-called “Crisis PR” is needed. Or they want journalists not to publish critical reporting, and the expense for this kind of behavior is often referred to as “hush money.”

The essence of “soft articles” is to confuse the difference between news and advertising, that is, to do advertising under the cover of news reporting, in order to achieve the effect of “moistening everything silently.” The popular saying, “clever enterprises publish news, stupid enterprises do advertising” reflects the commonplace of illegal and immoral advertisements (Chen, 2009, no. 10). “Soft articles” first appeared in 1980s. In order to contact the media to advertise, many enterprises established PR departments. These departments do activities planning according to the needs of their marketing studies, and reporters and copy editors meet the companies’ needs
and publish copies written by PR workers but signed by reporters or others; journalists receive
the company’s “contribution fees” (or “red envelopes”, “traffic fees”, and so forth) (Wu, 2008,
no. 2). In the 1990s, PR companies acting as the “intermediary” between news enterprises and
the media arose at this historic moment, and promoted the process of collaboration among jour-
nalism, PR companies, and the media.

To control and wipe out the phenomenon of paid news as “red envelopes,” many national
agencies since 1985, ranging from the State Council to the Central Propaganda Department,
have issued dozens of documents forbidding “red envelopes” and “soft articles.” But instead of a
decrease in these practices, they have gotten worse. Now even when government departments and
universities hold press conferences, “red envelopes” must be prepared in advance.

Fake News

As mentioned above, fake news can be divided into six types: fabrication, adulteration, plagia-
rism, falsification, staged pictures and concealment. The first is fabrication, and fabricated news
is entirely fictional. It is not common, and usually has no relation to important events and figures.
But on the morning of 2013, Ta Kung Pao, a Hong Kong-based, pro-Beijing newspaper, printed
a long news story of China’s new leader Xi Jinping taking a taxi to travel incognito (“Xi Jinping
Travels Incognito,” 2013). But in the afternoon of the same day, Ta Kung Pao posted an apology
letter and said that Xi Jinping’s story was a fake. According to this author’s personal connection,
the two writers of the report are still on their jobs at the newspaper, and it is not unusual in China.

The second is adulteration: Adulterated news is much more than fabricated news. It often
adopts the technique of mixing the sham with the genuine. News elements such as time, place,
character are all in there, so it often is used for the production of various news. In the era of glo-
balization, it is necessary for us to guard against some semi-official and highly commercial media
that mix nationalistic propaganda with adulteration, falsification and other tricks. For example,
Global Times, a tabloid affiliated to the People’s Daily, made up a dialogue between the reporter
and a college student in an article related to google’s withdrawal from China (Zhan and Peng,
2014, pp. 88–90).

The third type of fake news is plagiarism, usually sharing some similarities with adulteration.
Facing deadline pressure, peer competition and a steady stream of writing demands, journalists
from the fledgling novice with an urgent need for professional achievement to the well-known
writer busy with column writing, it is hard to avoid taking words from others’ articles in a time
when it is so convenient to read and download online articles.

The fourth type is falsification. With the help of photoshop techniques, falsification is usu-
ally related to a photographers’ alteration of news photos to win awards. In recent years, some
award-winning news photos have been exposed for falsification by way of photoshopped techniques.
In addition, it seems that the Global Times is good at falsifying articles translated from for-
egn languages. In May 2009, the German correspondent of International Herald Leader, a
subsidiary of Xinhua News Agency, uncovered a Global Times’ article quoting a German local
newspaper that had falsified key facts (Zhan & Peng, 2014, pp. 108–110). This author found
that the Chinese translation of an Indian blogger’s article substituted key words (Zhan and Peng,

The fifth type is staged pictures, both still and movable. The early form of staged pictures
is posed photography. After the rise of television, to “capture” a sense of the news spot and the
decisive moment, to control production costs and to meet the need for propaganda, some Chinese
media and journalists break the basic journalistic bottom-line, and do such immoral practices as
posed photography and staged pictures. According to this author’s observation, CCTV frequently
uses such tricks, and in some cases they are captured and made public by clever Chinese netizens. One of these cases is about a CCTV’s live report on the great earthquake in Sichuan province in 2008 (Zhan and Peng, 2014, p. 116).

The sixth type, concealment, refers to some Chinese media practices which—although under a degree of political and economic pressure—are in reality able to act as watchdogs, but they choose to abandon actual reporting. On one hand, this is more or less similar to the results of “red envelopes”, “soft articles” and “hush money”; on the other hand it is basically a timid self-censored behavior, especially when the public interest or even the nation are in great danger. It is unfortunate that in China so many journalists often either keep themselves mute and deaf for so-called political reasons or shut their mouths for economic reasons.

Tragedies, Sorrows and the Media’s Cruel Presentation

At the beginning of China’s “Reform and Opening-up,” pro-citizen evening newspapers sprang up all over China’s big cities. They not only brought news of the day to mass urban readers, but also to some extent played the role of environmental surveillance; citizens could read such tragic news as car accidents, fires, and thefts. From the early 1990s, with the speed up of the market economy, metropolitan newspapers emerged; unlike evening papers, they are morning ones, and common people, including migrant workers, could read such disastrous news as earthquakes and coalmine mishaps.

When journalists report tragic and disastrous news, they bring pain and harm to victims and their families. In China, reporters from evening and metropolitan papers often intrude on people who are in a sad mood after an accident or a misfortune. This conduct is called “intrusion into grief.” Common intrusion behaviors include: 1) interviewing with deceptive or coercive means; 2) forcefully opening interviewees’ painful memories; 3) inaccurate reporting; 4) reporting with indifferent or frivolous language and making fun of tragedy; 5) overstimulated pictures and verbal description (Wei, Xiao, 2007, no. 2). The conflict between journalists reporting tragedy and people frightened by tragedy is inevitable.

It seems that these problems are the ill effects of Chinese-style “market-driven journalism.” Professor Wang Dingding, a famous economist, points out that today’s journalism faces a dual dilemma. Firstly, we live in a period of the market craze. When the masses lose their common sense, there comes the market craze. Secondly, we live in a transitional society. The mass media, on one hand, must perform their function of “guiding public opinion.” (Professor Wang refers to the fact that the media should follow the Party’s propaganda instructions and carry out the policy of “positive propaganda” or “good news”). On the other hand, the media are immersed in the market, and become more and more profit-driven. Once the market is expanding wildly, and makes a society embedded within itself, the means become the end. When profit-making becomes the end, anything that makes a profit is “news.” In such a market-oriented society, the “society” is embedded within the “market,” so the mass’s behavior is consumeristic, short-term, without any thought for the ultimate meaning of life (Wang, 2007).

Private-affair Literature and Reckless Media Conduct

In the history of Western countries, privacy has mainly existed as a positive social value. But in China, where the state has been indoctrinating the people with state ideology since ancient times, privacy and its predecessor, private affairs, are understood in a quite negative sense. They refer to private affairs and a shady scandal, often sex-related, conflicting with traditional notions of family and state. From the beginning of the “Reform and Opening-up,” and especially in recent
years, the consciousness of sex-centered privacy began to grow among Chinese people. The era of mass media, especially the new media, is one when sexual topics become more and more open and would help to change social concepts about sexuality.

China’s ancient civilization is well known for the implicit style and low profile of its people, and its conservatism with sex. Sex is the number one topic of privacy in its history, and such a subject or issue has been a taboo in social places for a long, long time. After a mere 20 to 30 years, great changes have taken place. In some sense, China is becoming an erotic society. You can now say something about Mao’s private affairs with his mistresses. And in China’s traditional and new media, there are more and more sex-related news stories and commentaries which seem to conform to the public’s interest. While more and more individuals choose to make their private lives open in the media, the media pay more attention to look for and dig out such materials.

Entering the twenty-first century, a strange phenomenon began to appear in China’s media. Each time a female official fell from power for graft and bribery, gossip about her would be flying in society and the media, especially in metropolitan newspapers and magazines. It would be difficult for a reader to distinguish real messages from false. Eventually, to safeguard their personal rights, some of these former officials entrusted their family members to take legal action against the media for defamation. The reason why these female officials are harassed by such sex-related gossip is that there has been a stereotype about female officials among so many Chinese media and common people.

To charge big contribution fees, some veterans who consistently make-up stories dare to coin any “story,” to fabricate lively “details,” and to declare somebody guilty of any crime before decisions by procuratorates and courts. Completely deviating from the principles of factual and objective reporting, what they do is just tap their keyboards, then let a corrupt official say or do something they want to, and describe every corrupt official as a harem who has both a wife and many concubines, stopping his walk whenever he sees a beauty.

MEDIA ETHICS: WESTERN AND CHINESE STYLE

Undercover Interviewing and Hidden Cameras

Nearly 100 years ago, some Chinese journalists began to use the technique of undercover interviewing. Today, the combined techniques of newspaper-derived undercover interviewing and TV-derived hidden cameras have become one or two of the most controversial and exciting interview techniques all over the world. Undercover interviewing and hidden cameras are highly controversial, because journalists can get news by means of deception; secondly it is good for exposing the unknown and “shady.” Though controversial, it is unwise to throw them away, because in China, where there are numerous cases of corruption. It would be very difficult for journalists to expose them unless they used these two effective weapons.

Chinese scholars hold different views about the boundary of undercover interviewing. Professor Chen Lidan takes a negative attitude toward undercover interviewing and hidden cameras on the whole. In an interview by Southern Weekend 2010, he said, “undercover interviewing should not be done.” Many years ago, Professor Chen criticized Focus Interview, a famous CCTV program, for excessively using undercover interviewing. He said that 90 percent of the undercover interviewing done by the Chinese media is unnecessary, and the motive of most journalists who did it is to get dramatic materials (Huang, 2010). It seems that the All-China Journalists Association, a semi-official body, picked Professor Chen’s brains; its 2009 edition
of the Chinese Journalists’ Professional Codes of Ethics, states that journalists “should get news material through legal means and ways.”

This author has a reservation about Professor Chen’s negative attitude toward undercover interviewing. Undercover interviewing and hidden cameras are typical issues of media ethics which are hotly controversial at home and abroad, but whose abolition does not seem desirable, and at the same time is not workable. In light of the value of undercover interviewing in investigative reporting, most scholars agree with a limited use of undercover interviewing for TV news (Guo and Zhan, 2006, pp. 137–222). If journalists do not consider other alternatives before using undercover interviewing, they are likely to damage the public trust for their work and journalism. Therefore, if the news subject is of serious public interest, undercover interviewing in news reporting should be allowed.

Whether Journalists Should Save Lives

Should a journalist save a person’s life or continue to do reporting/photographing when an interviewee is at risk or in a dangerous zone? In China, this is a much more controversial issue than the use of undercover interviewing and hidden cameras. If journalists prefer reporting to saving a life, the public often criticizes this behavior or choice. And if journalists prefer to save a life, quite a number of people may think that they should not display their acts of kindness, because it may be seen as a “show.” In such cases, journalists are often caught in a dilemma; they cannot make a choice that will satisfy all sides. There are roughly three views on this issue in China.

Party A thinks that priority should be given to saving lives. There is a general view inside and outside the press that believes moral sympathy should be the number one option. First of all, reporters/photographers are members of the human community before they are journalists. A media worker wrote, saving a life first is a natural thing to do when somebody is in danger; what the journalist does is something anyone would do in such a case, to help in a crisis. If he/she does not save the life, any reason would be an excuse for avoiding moral duty, and any explanation is pale, fragile, even though it seems to be high-sounding, clear and logical. How can saving a life be made conditional? No reasons are needed to defend a person for choosing to save a life (Jia, 2005, no. 7).

Party B thinks that reporting is preferred. This group does not think that journalists should play the role of a rescue hero. They believe, based on journalistic professionalism, a qualified journalist would rather be a recorder than an intruder, and he/she must act as a detached judge rather than a tendentious lawyer. When journalists are in an emergency, more tolerance should be given to them, to let them do their job of telling the truth about good or evil. Nobody wants to see the fact that the “heroic” journalist intruded. As an opinion article of the China Youth Daily states,

If you can’t stop a war, then you can reveal the cruelty of war. Similarly, although difficult to avoid suspicion, the photographer at least showed the cruelty of a disaster to the public through shooting the scene; let people take warning through a reflection on the tragedy, to improve the level of security. In this sense, shooting a disaster is also a way to save lives, but this way will hurt people’s nerves, urge people to reflect, in order to minimize and avoid disasters. (Zhao, 2009)

Party C pays attention to a middle course and concrete situations. This group argues that debates about media ethics must consider different contexts in different societies. Critic Chang Ping thinks that this is a postmodern question in Western countries, where societies have been fully modernized, journalists have been fully professionalized and truths have been fully told.
Only after the modernization process can come the contradiction between highly professionalized journalists and common humanity. In China, the reality of a pre-modern country tells us that our main tasks are still how to cultivate the professional spirit and how to tell the truth (Chang, 2007, no. 4).

Press Freedom and Fair Trial

According to the framework of this chapter, “trial by media” in the UK and USA is a typical moral problem, and it refers to the media’s practice of violating the legal principle of the assumption of innocence. Very interestingly, after a long-distance cross-cultural journey, “trial by media” has become a hot ethical issue in China. Entering the twenty-first century, increasing attention has been paid to it, and many theses have been written by teachers and students at schools of journalism and law. Generally, most observers are concerned about a growing number of misbehaviors, “trial by media,” and sharply criticize them. But there are now highly differential views on “trial by media” among journalism and law scholars and among media and law professionals. It is especially worthwhile to examine the arguments held by representative media law experts.

Ms. Xu Xun, a senior journalist and a media law expert, argues that the phenomenon of “trial by media” does exist in China, but it does not mean the term can be used as one pleases. If “trial by media” refers to all the media’s reports and comments on legal cases, this sort of sweeping generalization is unacceptable, and it will lead to unreasonable restriction of the public’s right to know and their right of free speech. Before a case occurs and after its first instance, especially after its final instance, reports and comments on it should not be regarded as “trial by media.”

If Ms. Xu’s viewpoint can be referred to as “drawing a clear borderline” theory, then Zhou Ze, another media law scholar and journalist/lawyer, strongly questioned whether there is a kind of Western-style “trial by media” that could interfere with judicial judgment in China. The lawyer Zhou Ze, with qualifications, admits that this phenomenon may indeed exist. In China’s present judicial practice, that is to say, judges are apt to be influenced by public opinion and public opinion is apt to be misled by the media’s improper reporting. And this situation also shows that there are problems in the configuration and operation of judicial power in China, namely courts are unqualified, some judges are unprofessional, incompetent and unqualified, trials are not independent and do not meet the requirements of fair trial prescribed by the conventions of international human rights. Obviously it is not the media and public opinion that hinder the independent judgment of Chinese courts.

Zhou Ze argues that, if China’s judiciary were independent, its courts qualified, and judges competent enough to correctly understand and regard media reporting; and if leading officials had the basic concept of the rule of law, did not make instructions on cases as they please, and did not intervene on the judiciary with their administrative power, then courts would not be misled by the media’s reporting, even though there are big problems in the media’s reporting.

On the condition that there are so many problems with the configuration and operation of China’s judicial power, it is difficult to ensure fair trial of a specific case, even without the reporting of the media and attention of public opinion. Furthermore, one can say, without media and public opinion, some trials would have been even more unfair.

As a result, it is simply meaningless to talk about the intervention into judicial operations by the “trial by media” and “trial by public opinion” (Zhou, 2004, no. 4).

Shortly after Zhou printed his essay, Dr. Benjamin L. Liebman, Director of the Center for Chinese Legal Studies at the School of Law, Columbia University, published an epic 157-page
paper in the *Columbia Law Review* titled “Watchdog or Demagogue: The Media in the Chinese Legal System” (January 2005). As a China expert, Liebman argues that in countries and regions of the Anglo-American legal system, “trial by media” means that the media’s reporting and comments may exert a direct influence on a jury, and could finally lead to an unfair trial. But in China, the media’s reports and comments may put a direct effect on Party/State officials before they may put pressure on dependent courts. Therefore, unlike the general understanding of “trial by media,” the basic mode of the Chinese media’s influence on the judiciary is “the media influences officials, and officials influence courts.”

Professor Wei Yongzheng, a senior media law scholar, basically agrees with Liebman and Zhou. However, going even further, Professor Wei suggests a novel idea about “trial by media.” There is a distinction between the concepts of “behavioral offense” and “consequential offense” in criminal law. Professor Wei argues that it is improper for us to assert whether a case is influenced by news reporting that is described as “trial by media.” But this is not contradictory to the stance of opposing “trial by media.” If they do not follow legal procedures, somewhat like a conduct of “behavioral offense,” these news reports are harmful, even though they eventually do not have an effect on the court trial. In terms of the so-called “consequential offense,” that is, the media’s direct influence on decisions of courts and judges in China, Professor Wei has a doubtful and negative view. He points out that,

> Once the media’s reports and comments have an effect on leaders of the Party, delegates of the National People’s Congress or the heads of the government and its departments, these figures would impose substantial influence on the judiciary that judges are unable to resist.

(Wei, Yongzheng, 2007)

**How to Treat News Sources**

For the news media, sources are fundamental to making a living. Media with a broad and powerful network of sources often scoop the news competition. But if they use and treat sources improperly, trouble will come, because most of the factual errors come from sources. Anonymous sources may become a hotbed of fake news and frequently cause lawsuits, and finally lower the level of the media’s credibility. In China, anonymous sources do not directly lead to lawsuits as yet, but misuse of them is beginning to occur in journalistic practice.

There appears to be an increasing number of controversies and criticism over the relationship between journalists and sources, and these cases are mainly related to metropolitan newspapers and magazines as well as to the Party’s organs. Regardless of promises made by journalists, some media disclose confidential sources. In order to reverse a libel lawsuit, a Beijing-based newspaper, at its lawyer’s suggestion, successfully persuaded an anonymous source to reveal her identity and submit her recordings to the court (Liu, 2014). As mentioned above, in their international reporting, such highly politicized tabloids as the *Global Times* are known to make up sources or tamper with original texts. A CCTV’s female journalist was charged with accepting a large bribe from a source; the court made a decision stating that the two were lovers, and the journalist was put on probation (Zhan and Peng, 2014, pp. 281–282).

**Violence in Media and Violence in the Real World**

In terms of the relationship between violence in the media and violence in the real world, a dominant view tends to believe that exposure to violence in the media will increase the risk of aggressive behavior. Most Chinese people seem to share this view, and when similar killings
occur successively and are reported by journalists, they usually criticize the media fiercely and believe that the media encourage violence and incite people to crime (Zhan and Peng, 2014, pp. 303–304).

On the other hand, some researchers believe that although there is a kind of correlation between violence in the media and violence in the real world, this correlation is negative, and not positive; that is to say, violence in the media could reduce the amount of violence in the real world. Those who hold this view developed the idea called “symbolic catharsis.” According to this doctrine, exposure to violence in the media can make an angry or frustrated audience give vent to their feelings, so that they are unlikely to exert aggressive behaviors after viewing violent images in the media.

Others argue that there is no relation between violence in the media and violence in the real world. They believe that even though the two are relevant, there is no direct correlation between them as some people imagine. Prof. Éric Maigret, a French scholar, argues that rather than making real-world violence, media are often used by murderers to construct their own violent world to meet their horrible imagination, thinking that they can be recognized from now on (Maigret, 2009, p. 33).

In China, few books on violence in the media have been published. Professor Long Yun conducted several empirical researches, and published them as a monograph. Professor Long investigated the conditions of public security, the “media reality” the audience contacted, and ordinary people’s fears of the local conditions of public security in Lanzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. Her conclusion is that for the broadcasting and viewing of prime-time TV programs, there were no significant differences among the “media realities” in these three city-areas. But differences in the real-world conditions of public security were quite significant. The trend of the audience’s fear is consistent with that of the local conditions of public security. Professor Long concluded that in these considerably different regions, the media had limited influence on the audience’s cognition of public security. Rather than the media’s description, people preferred to rely on their cognition of actual local conditions to construct their own understanding of public security (Long, 2005, p. 187).

CONCLUSION: RICH MEDIA, POOR ETHICS?

Since the “Reform and Opening to the Outside World,” China’s media, traditional and new, have become much stronger. They have had great and broad influence on society, and have shown their economic dynamics with some big media being good at making big money. On one hand, to some extent, China’s media have contributed to social development and progress; on the other hand, they themselves have accumulated a lot of problems.

One of the problems is that, with the passing of traditional morals and ethics in the post-Mao era, rapid economic development coupled with the weakest rule of law, have led to widespread corruption among political and business fields, and inevitably spread to the media world. Both the authorities’ old-fashioned propaganda and undue control, and unhealthy political and commercial forces, have made many journalists frustrated. These are the fundamental external causes of excessive corruption in China’s media. Some of them have lost journalistic ideals and turned to other goals and personal interests. A few of them have even degraded themselves to rent-seeking by way of news for money. Section 2 of this chapter reveals and criticizes several kinds of immoral phenomena in the media world.

Since the whole society and media world are highly corrupt, it is very difficult to solve such serious immoral problems in the media world. The combination of a tyrant regime and a market-oriented economy, although it made some miracles, has generated so many internal and
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external ills that it has produced what I call the most corrupt press in the world (Wong, 2015). Just like political corruption, there are two basic types of media corruption: extortive and collusive corruption (Bruneti and Weder, 2003). While the first type is related to media morals, the second one refers to both media morals and criminal activity. What we usually focus on is the latter, because it is explicit and easy to be exposed. However, it is a pity that we pay less attention to the former in our research due to the hidden nature of collusive corruption.

On the other hand, China’s news media has attracted many talented young people to work for it. They are good at learning from new theories and lessons, domestic and foreign; they work hard and add much luster to the profession. Furthermore, China’s news media has also greatly benefited from the progress of journalism education and higher education as a whole. Professor Clifford G. Christians’ classic textbook, *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning* (Christians et al, 2016), has been translated into Chinese, and the minds of future journalists are broadened in their studies and application of the principles of media ethics. In both the media world and academic circles, there are more and more discussions and research results. The last section of this chapter explores several hot topics on media ethics, and in this respect, the Chinese people are a quick study.

NOTES

1. Every year dozens of journalists from these media are put under sentence.
2. According to Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based NGO, the Press Freedom Index of China has been among the worst ten countries since 2002. The index for 2015 for China was 175 out of 180 countries and regions (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Press_Freedom_Index).

REFERENCES


