Meso News-Space in China: Peripheral News Production of Platform Journalism

Qi Yin, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian, PRC
Zhenhan Fu, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian, PRC
Shiyu (Sharon) Zheng, Lancaster University, UK;
Email: Sharon.Zheng@lancaster.ac.uk (corresponding author)

Authors

Qi Yin, PhD, is Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Xiamen University. Her research interests include the corporate governance of media companies, media convergence, and internet platform governance.

Zhenhan Fu is a postgraduate student at the School of Journalism and communication, Xiamen University. Her research interests include media economies and journalism studies.

Shiyu (Sharon) Zheng, PhD, is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Digital Media and Culture at Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK and Panel Member of AHRC. She also serves on the editorial board of *Celebrity Studies*. Her research focuses on qualitative research, British/Chinese TV, gendered/transcultural fandom, digital media and cultural policy studies. She has published articles in *Feminist Media Studies*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *Cultural Trends*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *European Journal of Culture Studies*, etc.

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Abstract: Platform journalism in China shows a number of distinctive characteristics. This study employs Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik's concept of "meso news-space" and extends it from the social dimension to the institutional dimension to analyze peripheral news production by private digital news organizations on social media platforms in China. Based on interviews with 17 digital news practitioners and onsite participant observation, it reveals that such organizations practice peripheral news production by redefining news and using of strategic collaborations to build a "dual legitimacy". Their news production tends to follow a nonconfrontational approach emphasizing traffic priority over public interest, so that their contribution to the publicity of the news space is limited. These findings illuminate the particular context of the Chinese meso news-space by examining peripheral news production and the process of building a meso news-space in an authoritarian media landscape.

Keywords: meso news-space, social platform, platform journalism, news production, digital news organization

Platform journalism is an emerging form of journalism which employs the social

media platform as the space of news production. In using such platforms, an

increasing number of citizens and digital news organizations are able to engage in the

activity of news production previously dominated by the legacy media (Carlson and

Usher 2015; Russell 2019; Carlson 2018; Thorson et al. 2020). Participants on such

platforms, including journalists, audiences and digital news organizations, are able to

discuss news topics, forge their own social connections and negotiate identities in

order to form communities that constitute an online space between the private and

public domains dubbed by Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik (2020) a "meso news-

space".

Unlike various Western media landscapes such as US and UK, where

participants possess greater freedom to discuss news-related content online (Kligler-

Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020; Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik 2020), the online

news-space in China is bound by strict institutional constraints. With the help of the

rising social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao, over the past

decade private companies have become important new stakeholders in the journalistic

field formerly featuring state-owned media alone. These companies include not only

technology-driven news aggregators such as Toutiao News, and Tencent News, but

also content-driven digital news organizations such as Guyu Lab, The Livings, and

36Kr. These private companies are, de facto, carrying out routine news production

without being licensed to collect and edit news in China, and thus have needed to

explore peripheral methods of news production which benefit from platform development but are also subject to institutional restrictions. In this process, a *Chinese featured meso news-space*, one located between formal/public news production and individual/private news discussion, has begun to take shape.

In this Chinese featured meso news-space, such "newcomer" digital news organizations encounter the problem of "dual legitimacy" in not only gaining a professional identity as news media, but also an authorized license as peripheral actors to produce news reports. In this study, we refer to the activities of such organizations as *peripheral news production*. The practice of peripheral news production on social media platforms in China provides an institutional dimension for meso news-spaces different from that previously explored in non-Chinese contexts.

We begin with a review of the literature on platform journalism and meso news-spaces and its application to the Chinese context. Then, using data from interviews and participant observation, we qualitatively analyze the mechanisms of peripheral news production activities on social media platforms, and the formation of a meso news-space in the distinctive institutional context of China. Finally, we conclude with the implications of these results for understanding Chinese platform journalism and enriching existing scholarship on meso news-spaces.

Platform Journalism and Meso News-Space

Platform journalism is an emerging form of journalism in which social media

platforms provide the digital infrastructure for the creation of online spaces for news

production through which news-related content is shared, accessed, used and

monetized by various news players, such as news organizations, individual

journalists, and audiences (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2022; Van Dijck, Poell and De

Waal 2018). With the rise of platform journalism, social media platforms and the

news industry have become deeply intertwined. On the one hand, news production has

grown dependent on the digital tools and services provided by such platforms, and has

been significantly impacted by their algorithms, social attributes, and business

interests (Meese and Hurcombe 2021; Nechushtai 2018; Nielsen and Ganter 2022,

141, 150; Van Dijck et al. 2018, 50). On the other hand, news production has also

been empowered by the relative openness and neutrality of social media platforms

where news producers can develop original news production and marketing strategies

(e.g. Christin 2020; Pyo 2022) that drive user engagement (Rashidian et al. 2019),

provide public services, and create public spaces (Dommett 2021; Gillespie 2010).

Traditional journalistic norms and news production practices, including methods of

news gathering, forms of engagement, and objectives of public communication, have

all been challenged and reshaped in this platform-based online news space (e.g.

Anderson 2016; Usher 2017; Nadler 2019; Russell 2019; Nielsen and Ganter 2022,

187).

The notion of a "meso news-space" proposed by Tenenboim and Kligler-

Vilenchik (2020) can be seen as an important conceptual tool for understanding these

changes in news production. A meso news-space is "an online space located between

the private and public realms, where a group of people are involved in news-related

processes" (Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik 2020, 2), whose key features can be

summarized as follows: (1) it is more likely to be created within the closed groups of

social media platforms; (2) its formations benefit from interactions between

journalists/news workers, audiences, and other actors which redraw the lines between

the public sphere and personal relationships; (3) its audience plays an important role

in setting the media agenda: things that matter to this audience may also become

news, broadening the definition of news; (4) a meso news-space can both enforce

formal rules specified by group administrators or regulators and feature informal rules

created by participants to enhance positive participation, to maintain reciprocal

interaction (Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik 2020; Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim

2020).

The concept of meso news-space provides a new angle by which to understand

news production on social media platforms, allowing researchers to pay more

attention to news production at the levels of group, community and space, and to

recognize users' participation in new methods of news production. However, existing

research on meso news-spaces is mainly based on the dimensions of individual

experience and social interaction, such as journalist-audience reciprocity on

WhatsApp in Israel (Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020), and journalist-foreign

correspondent interaction on Wechat and WhatsApp in mainland China and

Hongkong (Belair-Gagnon, Agur, Frisch 2017). Such research tends to assume that social and cultural structures, and institutional environments are largely consistent across countries. As Carlson (2016, 350) notes, "journalism should be understood as a cultural practice … embedded in specific contexts, variable across time and space, and inclusive of internal and external actors." Therefore, in different contexts, the concept of meso news-space may have very different connotations.

Contemporary China is characterized by a distinctive social structure of "strong state, weak society" (Zhou 2016), where civil society is less developed, and where established institutions strictly shape the practice of platform journalism. Here we define *institution* as a particular regulatory and organizing structure governed by the dominant ideology (Pan 2000). In China, online discussion about news-related content on social media platforms is tightly controlled. For instance, group discussions on Chat apps are regularly censored not only by the Chinese government but also by social media platforms themselves (Harwit 2017). Journalists can exchange information in groups but cannot publish or discuss news involving political issues or sensitive content. Therefore, a meso news-space for sustainable discussion (Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020) has experienced difficulties in taking shape in China.

Nevertheless, Chinese society is also in transition, undergoing continuous institutional reforms, in which there is still a residual *maneuver space* for journalistic practice (Pan 2000; Tong 2019). For instance, although certain private digital news

organizations do not enjoy certified status, they still play an important "informal" and "peripheral" role in news production. The rise of platform journalism in China has thus led to the formation of a new kind of meso news-space. In the next section, we focus on the nature of platform journalism and the meso news-space in China in order to expand our understanding of meso news-spaces from an institutional perspective in the non-Western context.

Chinese featured meso news-space and peripheral news production

In the past decade, with the rapid growth of the mobile internet and the wide use of smartphones in China, a number of popular social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and Douyin have emerged. Featuring a huge user base and a high degree of user stickiness, such platforms have become the main channel whereby news content reaches audiences within a short time. The legacy media, which are mostly state-owned, as well as digital news organizations and We-media, have also participated in great numbers on these social media platforms, forming a distinctively Chinese mode of platform journalism (Zhang and Li 2019). A survey released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2020) shows that social media are the most important channel for audiences to receive news. The vast majority of respondents (77.25%) get their news from WeChat, in sharp contrast to the audiences who get their news from TV or newspapers, both of which come in at below 7% (Tang, Huang, and Xu 2020).

Launched by Tencent in 2011 and originally designed as an instant messaging-

based social platform which provides a wide range of services such as messaging, group discussion, searching, e-commerce, and payment, WeChat has become an important platform for news production and dissemination in China. In 2012, WeChat launched its WeChat Public Platform on which individuals, media and other organizations can officially register accounts for the purposes of information dissemination and interaction. Such public accounts can actively recommend articles to user groups or subscribers; and subscribers can also access specific content and interactions by entering keywords and comments in an official account's message box. WeChat Public Platform quickly became a gathering space for news production and dissemination. In line with the national media convergence policy (2014), the state-owned media have accepted the operation of WeChat public accounts[1] as inevitable in a media space where they "occupy the high-end position of the online public opinion battlefield" (People's Daily 2018). A number of content-driven news organizations funded by private capital have also opened public accounts on WeChat, seeing the platform as an important space for them to participate in news production, including "The Livings" backed by NetEase and "Guyu Lab" backed by Tencent, as well as other venture capital-backed businesses.

China's platform journalism faces the challenge of *asymmetric control* whereby state-owned media and private internet businesses are regulated differently in terms of their engagement in news production (Zhou, Xu, and Li 2018). According to "Regulations on the Administration of Internet News and Information Services"

(2017) and "Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Administration of Internet News and Information Services Licensing" (2017), organizations and individuals can only engage in news collecting and editing on social media platforms after obtaining licenses and press cards for collecting and publishing news on the internet. However, only state-owned media and their journalists and editors qualify for such accreditation. In March 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) released the policy document "A Negative List of Market Access for Media Practitioners (2022 Edition)", stressing that non-state-owned capital may not engage in news production, collection, editing, broadcasting, or distribution, nor invest in the establishment and operation of news agencies, websites, channels, columns, or public accounts.

Despite such restrictions, a unique phenomenon has emerged in platform journalism in China whereby institutionally uncertified private digital news organizations are actually producing news, and may thus be regarded as forming a new kind of news space. It is for this reason that we have applied Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik's concept of "meso news-space" to characterize a *Chinese-featured meso news-space* located between public news production and private discussion. Such a space is not fully public in the sense that the news produced by digital news organizations is not open to all users. For one thing, such non-state-owned news organizations are not officially licensed to produce news. For another, the news published in public accounts on social media platforms such as WeChat focuses on

limited person-to-small-group communication (Harwit 2016), where audiences can view such news only when they subscribe to these public accounts or their friends repost this content in their friend circles or groups. The space is also not fully private in the sense that these digital news organizations follow institutional conventions in producing and publishing news, making them different from private discussions such as communications between family members or close friends.

In characterizing this space, we would propose that the news production practices of such private digital news organizations in China constitute an updated practice of *peripheral news production*. As a social practice, peripheral news production is context-specific. In the West, from the perspective of professional boundaries and identity legitimacy, legacy media can be regarded as *core* actors and the emerging social media and digital news organizations as *peripheral* actors (Belair-Gagnon, Holton, and Westlund 2019; Cheruiyot, Wahutu, Mare, et al. 2021). As newcomers to the journalistic field, such organizations attempt to obtain *identity legitimacy* from social acceptance as professional journalists, which legitimizes them to offer the public goods of informing the public (Murschetz 2013). In China, the distinction between core and peripheral actors in journalism relates not only to their identity legitimacy, but also to their *institutional legitimacy*, that institutional recognition and acceptance which determines the capabilities and status of such news organizations in terms of resource control, authority hierarchy, and influence flows (Pan 2000, 256). Under the asymmetric control of platform journalism in China, the

state-owned media are positioned at the center of news production, whereas private

digital news organizations are at the periphery and face the "dual legitimacy"

dilemma of how to obtain identity legitimacy as professional news media despite

lacking the institutional legitimacy that would come with being licensed.

Previous research on digital news organizations in China has mainly focused on

such organizations' professional identity (Li 2019; Deng 2020), and business models

(Liu and Liu 2017; Huang and Fan 2018). The actual mechanisms of peripheral news

production by such private organizations remain to be explored. Therefore, in relation

to the Chinese featured meso news-space, we identify the following research

questions:

RQ1: What are the main characteristics of peripheral news production as

manifested on Chinese social media platforms?

RQ2: What are the forces that shape and influence such peripheral news

production activities?

RQ3: How does peripheral news production contribute to the construction of a

Chinese featured meso news-space?

Methodology

We employed two research methods. Firstly, we conducted 17 in-depth, face-to-face

or voice-call interviews via WeChat between October 2021 and May 2022 with an

average duration of one hour. Using both purposive and snowball sampling, we

recruited 17 interviewees of different genders, affiliations, positions, and work experiences, as shown in Table 1. At the time of interview, the 17 respondents were working in 14 content-driven news organizations operating on the WeChat Public Platform, such as The Livings, 36Kr, and True Story Project. 13 respondents were frontline staff members and 4 were senior managers; and 12 had previously worked for 15 state-owned media or we-media organizations. The interviews were semi-structured, and focused on three areas: the process of news or content production in their organizations, the internal and external factors impacting on news or content production, and their perceptions of news and journalistic professionalism.

Table 1. The list of interviewees

No.	Sex	Age	Position	Duration of Current position	Duration of Employment
01	Male	24	Content Specialist	4 months	11 months
02	Female	25	Content Specialist	4 months	13 months
03	Female	24	Editor	6 months	12 months
04	Female	24	Content Specialist	3 months	7 months
05	Female	24	Content Specialist	3 months	4 months
06	Female	33	Chief Editor	5 years	8 years
07	Male	39	Vice Chief Editor	2 years	2 years
08	Female	24	Content Specialist	7 months	12 months
09	Female	24	Content Specialist	7 months	2 years
10	Female	24	Content Specialist	9 months	4 years
11	Male	28	Content Specialist	6 months	3 years
12	Female	25	Public Relation	4 months	4 months
13	Male	40	Director	8 years	15 years
14	Female	24	Planner	4 months	1.5 years
15	Female	32	Editor	2 years	2 years
16	Male	35	Editor	2 years	10 years
17	Male	29	Senior Executive	4.5 years	4.5 years

Secondly, we collected data from participant observation. Such participant observation can provide greater detail as well as mutual verification with the in-depth interview data. By working between October to December 2021 as an intern at a content-driven digital news organization, one of the authors was able to document the process of news production. During this period, this author had informal conversations with two content editors and one chief editor and took notes after the conversations. The vice chief editor of this news organization also participated in an interview with the same author (No.7 on the list of interviewees above). Both conversations and interviews focused on the same research questions identified above.

Due to ethical considerations of personal privacy and industrial confidentiality, both personal and organizational information about the interviewees was removed from the text upon the request of the interviewees. Following the guidelines for thematic analysis supplied by Braun and Clarke (2006), each author independently reviewed and manually coded data, including interview transcripts and field notes, and suggested suitable themes. The research team then jointly discussed potential themes, identified common narratives relating to the peripheral news production practices of each platform, and determined the themes used for coding.

Differentiated Tactic: Redefining News

Two sets of rhetoric about news

Unlike a number of news organizations and platform companies in the West that claim

to be technology companies rather than media or publishers to evade journalistic responsibilities (Manjoo 2017), private digital news organizations in China are unable to be publicly acknowledged as news media because they lack licenses for news collection and editing. In their names or publicity material, these organizations do not use the words "news" or "media" but rather terms such as "knowledge" and "content". For example, 36Kr, 1Talks, and Ciwei Commune characterize themselves as information or knowledge platforms, and The Livings, True Story Project, Guyu Lab, and ONE Lab as nonfiction writing platforms. Nevertheless, all interviewees firmly identified themselves as journalists, and regarded the content they produced as news:

> To outsiders, we call our organization a nonfiction writing platform. We do not call ourselves journalists but authors because we do not have the certified right to produce news. However, within our organization, we consider what we produce as news, and we also treat every colleague as a journalist. When we process or edit content, we ask ourselves to follow the standards of news production, including balancing news sources, (re)checking facts, triple-checking, and triple-proofreading, as per traditional media agencies. (Interviewee 09, a content specialist)

Practitioners in these news organizations employ two different sets of rhetoric for their occupations. In publicly presenting their business, they use words like "content products" and "authors" to avoid the risk of being accused of "unlicensed operation"; however, in terms of their self-identity as professionals, they use the discourse of

professional journalism to characterize and justify their practice.

Although the meaning of journalistic professionalism in the Chinese context is not entirely consistent with its meaning in other journalistic cultures, notions such as providing public services, being truthful and reliable, and aiming at impartiality are still regarded as necessary characteristics of journalism (Rui 2010; Ding and Wei 2014). Accuracy and fact-checking are issues constantly mentioned by these interviewees and used in publicity for their organizations. For example, a well-known news organization ONE Lab states: "All the writings published by ONE Lab are fact-checked. I hope that in this field, we will be the most professional, achieve the best results, believe in craftsmanship, not forget our responsibilities, and shine in the darkness" (ONE Lab 2017).

In our interviews and participant observation, we also observed that these news organizations follow traditional journalistic routines such as collecting clues, selecting topics, conducting interviews, and writing up new stories using triple reviews and proofreading which in combination constitute important guides for the practice of journalistic professionalism (Gitlin 1980, 249-282). Adhering to the practices of journalistic professionalism is an important basis whereby such organizations confirm their self-identity.

Privatized expressions of public issues

The so-called "softening of news" has been identified as an important trend in

journalism as reflected in two aspects: the subjects of news, and the story-telling

format of news (Boczkowski and Peer 2011). In our interviews and participant

observations, we noticed rather than focusing totally on non-public affairs, such as

entertainment, crime, sports, and technology, private digital news organizations in

China also demonstrated a significant preference for treating the kinds of public issues

relating to politics, government, business and international affairs which would

normally be defined as "hard news" (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter 2011). In

the context of the strict controls on platform journalism in China, and given the

mechanism of the social media platforms upon which these organizations rely, hard

news topics, however, can only be expressed in a "softened" way, we go on to explain

below.

In China, according to the "*Regulations on the Administration of Internet News

Information Services*" (2017), private digital news organizations without a news

collecting and editing license cannot report or comment on political, economic,

military, diplomatic or other public affairs, nor can they provide reports and

comments on social emergencies: they can only repost news published by state-owned

media. As Interviewee Six, a chief editor, told us, for major news events such as

national political conferences and national leaders, terror incidents, foreign-related

emergencies, major natural disasters, accident disasters, and public health incidents,

"internet platforms and digital news organizations can only use the original copy from

the *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News* and the government for reposts without any

additions". Such regulations make it impossible for digital news organizations to report directly on hard news, and forces them to find alternative perspectives and ways to report on public affairs.

The emphasis of social media platforms on social connection and interaction also has a direct impact on the news production of digital news organizations. As Interviewee One, a content specialist, stated, "WeChat and Weibo show typical circle features with more personalized content and higher adhesiveness of users, so when we do news reports, we need to start from a soft point of view, in order to stick users to us". The term "soft" here means news closely related to individual users and their emotions, which also means that news production of these organizations also takes a personal and emotional turn similar to Western digital/platform journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Interviewee 17, a senior executive, shared with us how they filtered news:

> News value is mainly reflected in three dimensions. The first is information value. For example, the war between Ukraine and Russia was obviously an event with information value. The second is emotional value, such as the crash of the China Eastern Airlines and the death of Yuan Longping[2]. These are events to which everyone will pay attention, because they can mobilize people's emotions and touch their resonance points. The third is topical value, that is, whether it has a controversial and discussable space.

In this regard, "nonfiction writing" which uses storytelling to present real social narratives (Fan and Kuang 2017) has become a favored narrative approach for these

news organizations. As noted by interviewees, the news content of traditional news media puts more emphasis on timeliness, while the news content of digital news organizations takes on a more personalized flavor through the use of narratives. As Interviewee 10, a content specialist, said:

> Compared with traditional media, we also have some advantages. For instance, if we go to a disaster site, due to their emphasis on timeliness, traditional media are more likely to praise how fast the rescue is, instead of describing the suffering of real individuals. At this time, media like us that do not have editorial rights can surely reflect individual needs and express individual emotions.

At the same time, interviewees also acknowledged that private stories without public value are not news. Interviewee Nine emphasized the public interest behind the private story:

> Although we're more into telling personal stories, what we want to touch on are the issues behind these stories, such as gender, human trafficking, and disease. We hope to influence audiences' understanding and judgment of social events through our reports, so that audiences can improve their cognition of the world.

A personal and emotional writing style becomes the means whereby these digital news organizations can demonstrate that they are not institutionally illegitimate, and also reflects the expansion of personalization in news production. At the same time, taking traditional journalistic professionalism as the norm of news production practices by focusing on public issues and emphasizing the public value behind the

stories, these organizations are able to establish their identity legitimacy within the professional field of journalism.

Becoming an Intermediary: Building Strategic Partnerships

There are three main types of content production employed by private digital news organizations in China: (1) reposting news from state-owned news media; (2) user-generated content (UGC); and (3) original content. In practice, the lack of editorial rights and press cards limits the scope of news production practices by   these organizations; however, these organizations have also developed strategic partnerships with state-owned news media, journalists, and users to break through these limitations.

Whitelisting and profile writing

Currently, only state-owned news media in China enjoy the right to collect and edit news, and only state-owned news media can write and publish hard news on political, government, and business topics. This means that the high-quality news resources generated by state-owned news media represent essential sources of content for private digital news organizations. From our participant observation, we noticed that there are three main contexts of news production in which private digital news organizations depend on state-owned news media. First, state-owned media have a "whitelist" of particular digital news organizations which authorizes such

organizations to directly reproduce/repost news reports from state-owned media.

Second, if a digital news organization is not on the whitelist but requests access to

relevant news sources, it may contact other news outlets that publish similar content

to ask for permission to repost. Digital news organizations have established specific

departments for public/media relations and partnerships to handle media contacts in

these two contexts, but sometimes whitelists or permissions are also obtainable

through personal contacts and relationships. Third, digital news organizations have a

range of indirect solutions to deal with the problem of not being whitelisted or

authorized by official news outlets. Interviewee Four, a content specialist, shared with

us the method of using other outlets' news perspectives to develop news content:

> Since we do not have editorial rights, we extract the points that we think are worth digging
>
> into from other media, such as *The Paper* and *Beijing News*, and then choose an angle to
>
> gather all the media's descriptions of this point to create an article on our own.

This method is also called "material writing", that is, digital news organizations

produce content by integrating news articles related to the same topic, and marking

them as comprehensive or combined articles when they are published.

The lack of institutional legitimacy faced by digital news organizations is

accompanied by their lack of direct access to news information resources.

Whitelisting and material writing not only enable these organizations to utilize state-

owned media's resources and thus "borrow" institutional legitimacy from these

media, but also render their content production greatly influenced by the content and

issues provided by state-owned media.

Outsourcing and backdoor publishing

Compared to the news production teams of state-owned media, which often have more than a hundred people, the size of private digital news organizations is relatively small: usually up to a few dozen people at most. Therefore, when these organizations encounter breaking news or important news events, they often subcontract the necessary news gathering and writing to reporters from other news outlets, who are usually contacted through personal relationships. Interviewee Two, a content specialist, told us that to address this staffing shortage, their organization selected and confirmed topics and then handed over these topics to outsourced reporters. Interviewee Four described the ways she contacted the reporters and redeveloped the news published by them:

> I have a WeChat account that has many journalists, and sometimes I look at what they have posted in their friends' circles. I then talk with this journalist and put forward certain topics and information so that he/she can give priority to posts on our side once he/she writes the news.

Staff members at these digital news organizations also collaborate with journalists from state-owned media to write news and initially publish it on endorsed state-owned media in order to avoid the risks of reporting sensitive political stories or engaging in uncertified production. Interviewee Four called this "backdoor

publishing" and further explained that:

> Sometimes, the report was written by us, but it was first published by state-owned media
>
> (who have the news licenses) and then reposted on our account.

 Sometimes, digital news organizations also effectively become "shell"

organizations for the state-owned media because they are not subject to close

oversight of Party and Government. Interviewee 10 recounted one of her reporting

experiences:

> Once, a report was finished, but the (state-owned) media organization was prohibited from
>
> publishing reports on this topic. That organization's leader and our manager are friends, so
>
> the report was published on our public account.

 Through such kinds of outsourcing and backdoor publishing, digital news

organizations and state-owned media are able to exchange resources and form

underground work networks in which the boundary between digital news workers

and journalists in state-owned media becomes blurred. As Interviewee 10 mentioned

when talking about exchanging news clues and cooperating in writing, "journalist

groups have always helped each other", which not only shows their self-recognition

as journalists, but also indicates that they have been accepted as journalists by

licensed media organizations and obtained a kind of identity legitimacy from them.

Production and reproduction of user-generated content (UGC)

Social media platforms are commonly considered hotbeds of "participatory

journalism" and UGC (Singer et al. 2011). For private digital news organizations in China, user participation is manifested not only through user's interacting with news stories through likes, shares, and comments, but also in their actively contributing content. The relationship between digital news organizations and users is often presented as a "partner dance", whereby staff from these organizations not only have a dialogue with their readers through messages and replies, but also cooperate with them on content co-creation.

Using the technical services provided by digital platforms, the staff of digital news organizations can screen user messages backstage, discover news clues and hot topics, and stimulate user creation through targeted invitations. However, as noted by Interviewee Two, that rarely are they directly able to use content submitted by users, typically such content needs to be rewritten by staff in digital news organizations:

> The articles submitted by users and writers are sometimes just 100 words, but published articles need to be at least 3,000 words. Therefore, the content is expanded by us. The content of the users' contribution is to provide us with reference information, not written expression.

Other forms of reproduction of UGC also exist, such as expansion and editing of content. In such cases, however, users are only information providers while the role of gatekeeper is reserved for digital news organizations. As Interviewee One noted:

> Sometimes a piece of news causes a strong reaction, but it is an independent event that we cannot follow up on. In this case, we compile messages or comments from our readers and publish them.

Through these partnerships, the interaction between state-owned news media, journalists, digital news organizations, and users features a kind of "reciprocity of practice" (Giddens 1981, 29). Through this reciprocity, the content produced by news media, journalists, and even users gains greater opportunities to be publicized, while digital news organizations obtain content and news media as well as access to the community of authenticated journalists. Moreover, when digital news organizations engage in news production, digital platforms not only become intermediaries connecting other stakeholders such as state-owned media and users, but also create personal networks for news production. In the process, digital news organizations not only avoid the problem of lacking professional identity and qualifications but also broaden the practice space of peripheral news production.

Rules of the Game: Political Correctness and Traffic Priority

Nonconfrontational and depoliticized news production

The rise of online space was once regarded as an arena for journalists and other professional groups to fight against Party-State control (Xu 2015), and digital news organizations were seen as a representative force for journalistic professionalism on the new arena of social media platforms (We Media Association 2016). Firstly, since private digital news organizations are not certified to collect and edit news, they are not obliged to comply with the content censorship rules of the official news media. Secondly, digital news organizations enjoyed a maneuvering space to report new

stories in innovative ways, and in the early years they benefited from the relatively loose control by the Chinese government of platform journalism (Fang, Pan, Li and Zhang, 2014), and the visibility of content on social media which enabled particular stories to be easily modified or even deleted (Lukacs, 2012). As Interviewee 11, a content specialist, noted: "in previous years, online media were less regulated, and the bottom line of online media was different from legacy media. Online media can publish the report first and then delete it." In this context, although in-depth reports and investigative reports that expose and criticize real social issues have shown a decline because of the state's increasingly tight grip on journalism in China (Wang 2021), nonfiction writing presented on social media can be regarded as a special feature which allows an alternative way of presenting investigative reporting. Interviewee Nine, a content specialist, also agreed that "the popularity of non-fiction writing on social media platforms provides some sensitive reporting topics with a space to grow, and is a kind of compensation for the decline in investigative journalism".

However, this situation has changed dramatically in recent years, as state control of content on social media platforms has strengthened. At the end of 2019, the "*Provisions on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content*" was issued, which emphasized that not only Party and Government but also the platforms, producers, and users of network information content have obligations and responsibilities. The platforms are required to take active measures to deal with

objectionable content and its producers, including suspension of publication, deletion of information, closure of accounts, restriction of functions, and blacklists. Platforms and producers must ensure all published content is in compliance with the policies and principles issued by the Party and the Government, and the kinds of content thereby censored include not only vulgarity, misinformation, and disclosure of privacy, but also certain sensitive and political topics. Interviewee 17 explained the increasing censorship of news reporting in recent years:

> In the past, there were some very sensitive events that the online media could report first, and then delete after being ordered to do so. This was the case a few years ago but now regulations are getting tougher and penalties are getting heavier. In the past, we could report some vague areas, but now we must report it for approval or not report it at all.

These digital news organizations are in a relatively disadvantaged position in interacting with China's powerful state, and lack the willingness and ability to actively confront the authorities. Interviewee Six explained the serious consequences of publishing inappropriate content:

> Internet giants, such as Tencent and NetEase, have their own content production platforms, and must comply with the Cyberspace Administration of China's regulation and management for commercial media or internet platforms; otherwise, the (Internet Content Provider) license for websites/platforms will be withdrawn. Therefore, these platforms must also strictly manage the content of the official account. If the account publishes inappropriate content, it will be banned, or the content will be deleted.

As a result, digital news organizations, as content producers, are obliged not only to passively comply with regulatory requirements but also to set up security review departments to conduct risk assessments of content and whitelisted media. At the same time, they commonly issue invitations to relevant government officials and certified journalists to provide internal training for their employees, conduct content reviews, and proactively advise on the need to discontinue or stay away from political and sensitive topics. As emphasized by Interviewee Three, an editor:

> A red line is that your political stance must be correct. Although some content is indeed attractive, you may need to give it up. In addition to detecting sensitive words using the auto-filter function of the platform, we also manually delete them to ensure the security of the content.

Hence these digital news organizations, in order to adapt to policies and regulations and maintain stable operations, adopt "political correctness" as their key operating principle.

Capital rules and web traffic priorities

Currently the main investors in digital news organizations in China are venture capital and/or platform companies, which enables closer interaction between their news production and the rules of capital. At present, digital news organizations still adopt the traditional content-audience-advertising business model, which means that it is the number of users attracted by their news content that determines their profit. At the

same time, social media platforms also pursue the maximization of user size and user engagement in order to enhance platform value. Therefore, not only do social media platforms provide digital news organizations with user monitoring services, but digital news organizations also view maintaining web traffic as a key priority. As Interviewee 17 explained:

> The internet pays attention to profit, and behind the profit is a kind of traffic thinking: that is, profit depends on how many people use our products. Therefore, our main evaluation indicators for these content products, such as daily active users and number of users, are used to examine whether the product has commercial value. Based on this logic, we need to find a hook to pull users in. So, hotspots, exclusives, and original topics are the hooks that allow more users to come in.

Although under the influence of capital rules and traffic logic, these organizations pay great attention to user needs, they rarely become involved in any hot topics related to the public scrutiny and criticism of political affairs that may be regarded as challenging the state's authority. As emphasized by Interviewee 17:

> While pursuing content that is attractive to the audience, we must ensure political correctness. Moreover, we now have more traffic and a high forwarding rate, so we must ensure political correctness. Otherwise, if the account is banned, our previous efforts will be in vain.

This provides a more in-depth explanation for why digital news organizations refrain from reporting directly on public issues: such issues tend to be avoided

because they are often highly politically sensitive and show poor profitability, so it would difficult to obtain capital support for a reporting policy which favored them. By contrast, personalized and emotional news content can arouse users' interest and encourage social interaction, and so are more favored both by digital news organizations and the capital behind them. Interviewee 12 explained the importance to these organizations of the individualization and emotionalization of news:

> When we want to send out a piece of content, we have to consider how our users will interact with us and whether it will cause anger, sorrow or pain. This is actually an operation because there is a reciprocal relationship between the producer and the user: it is not only about posts. When a user posts ten comments, that is definitely better than only one comment. Therefore, the objective is for users to spend more time on our platform and content.

Therefore, the dual pressure from state and capital not only makes it in the economic interests of digital news organizations to adopt a more nonconfrontational stance vis-à-vis the authorities, but also keeps their news content more privately-tailored than publicly-focused.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper extends Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik's concept of "meso news-space" from a social perspective to one relating to institutional dynamics, and argues that the peripheral news production characteristic of platform journalism can be regarded as an updated form of meso news-space in China's institutional context. Our study has

attempted to outline the operational paths through this Chinese featured meso news-space by describing how private digital news organizations have engaged in the process leading to a (re)definition of news, the establishment of strategic partnerships, a nonconfrontational style of news production, and a priority on web traffic. It not only offers an enriched understanding of China's platform journalism but also provides empirical insights that expand the concept of the meso news-space and its relevant research perspectives.

This study provides a number of original contributions. Firstly, unlike previous studies of meso news-spaces that have focused mainly on news production from the perspective of the interactions between journalists, audiences and other news producers on social media platforms, this study applies the concept of "meso news-space" and "peripheral news production" to the institutional dimension of the practices of Chinese private digital news organizations. We argue that in China's distinctive context of transitional society and the "asymmetric control" of platform journalism, the nature of peripheral news production by private digital news organizations forms a Chinese featured meso news-space located between public news production and private discussion. On the one hand, the formation of this meso news-space indicates that there is indeed maneuver room for innovative practices in China's platform journalism. Social media platforms play a key role in this process in that they provide spaces for "uncertified" news players such as private digital news organizations to obtain resources, channels and audiences for news production

previously monopolized by the state-owned media. This demonstrates that even under authoritarian regimes, social media platforms have the ability to break through strict institutional constraints. However, although these news organizations have managed to carve out a space to conduct news production through social media platforms, they must gain access to resources through full integration with these platforms, giving them a high degree of dependency on them. On the other hand, the crux to the continued existence of the Chinese featured meso news-space lies in the acquisition by digital news organizations of a dual legitimacy that is both institutional and identity-based. As peripheral subjects lacking certified status and functioning as newcomers to the journalistic field, digital news organizations face challenges in gaining both institutional legitimacy and identity legitimacy. All these institutional, technical and professional factors have jointly shaped China's meso news-space.

Secondly, the nature of this dual institutional and identity legitimacy becomes an important basis for investigating meso news-spaces and peripheral news production in the Chinese context. This study finds that in the process of establishing dual legitimacy, digital news organizations adopted two strategic orientations to journalism: *connection* and *avoidance*. On the one hand, the *connection* strategy means that digital news organizations emphasize similarities and close relationships with state-owned media, selectively employing traditional news practices such as "truthfulness and fact checking", as well as public interest and journalistic routines (Tong 2018), to bring themselves into the field of journalism and establish their

identity legitimacy. At the same time, a reciprocal relationship is formed whereby digital news organizations establish connections with state-owned media to obtain the transfer of institutional legitimacy from these media through such practices as whitelisting, material writing, outsourcing, backdooring, and reproducing user content; while state-owned media and journalists benefit from increased access to news clues and content, the survival of feature and in-depth reports, and greater opportunities to publish reports. On the other hand, the *avoidance* strategy means that in publicizing themselves, digital news organizations avoid the use of terms directly referencing news journalism and in their public presentations emphasize their differences from state-owned media by characterizing themselves as "content producers" rather than "news media", and stressing the personalized and emotional features of their content in claiming to provide "soft" rather than "hard" news. This indicates that digital news organizations' understandings of news and journalism are not static, but rather context-based. Both these strategies of connection and avoidance aid digital news organizations in carving out their own space in the area of peripheral news production, which is essential to the continuation of the meso news-space.

Thirdly, although the peripheral news production practices of China's platform journalism are dynamic, they are also nonconfrontational and depoliticized to maintain the requirement of political correctness, which reflects the interplay between digital news organizations, social media platforms, capital, and the State. Previous studies of Chinese journalism have noted that media and journalists often use a

number of tactics similar to the strategies of peripheral news production in order to counter censorship, such as using direct quotes from sources accepted by the Party and Government, employing covert journalists, and publishing online first (Tong 2007; Xu 2015). However, in contrast to the resistance exemplified by legacy media and journalists, who possess the dual legitimacy to challenge political authority and embody journalistic professionalism, peripheral news production follows a more "nonconfrontational" line. In our interviews and participant observation, keywords such as "red line," "bottom-line thinking," "web traffic," and "hotspot" were frequently mentioned by interviewees. This indicates that although the process of peripheral news production is dynamic and strategic, it is still based on a specific context in which internal and external constraints, such as Party-State control, capital rules, and traffic logic, are intertwined. In particular, under China's authoritarian system and the State's strict control over platform journalism, private digital news organizations and platforms, through considerations of their own self-interest, demonstrate a bias toward web traffic and away from politics. Moreover, the investment capital behind these news organizations and the platforms also cooperates with the State in exchange for its acquiescence in or even support for peripheral news production. In this context, the dynamic strategies of digital news organizations are a pragmatic choice. The process of peripheral news production is more likely to be driven by utilitarianism rather than a desire to serve the public interest. Hence the trends in peripheral news production are more likely to be towards the tabloidization,

personalization and emotionalization of news, features which are widely attractive and profitable but do not challenge the state's authority, rather than towards the kind of public journalism that aims to serve democracy and revitalize public life (Ryan 2001). In this regard, the ability of peripheral news production in the meso news-space to serve the public interest and public social life, to which platform journalism might potentially contribute, is very limited.

Finally, our study of the peripheral news production practices of Chinese digital news organizations has demonstrated the potential of the academic concept of "meso news-space" and its distinctive local realization in China. The positive implications of this concept are that even given severe media censorship and governance, it is still possible to expand the meso news space through "unconventional" and peripheral methods. However, in a negative sense, our description of the Chinese featured meso news-space also indicates the dilemma faced by peripheral actors in news production. Such actors can only carry out activities in a very limited space, and it is difficult for them to exert any significant influence on China's public journalism, civil society and even political democracy. The analysis in this paper opens up new avenues of academic investigation into meso news-spaces characterized by multiple actors with diverse practices. This study has attempted to demonstrate an updated research perspective to deconstruct the notion of the meso news-space in a non-Western context. More research in this area is recommended to address the origins and motivations and updated news-space in different cultural territories.

Notes

[1] In August 2014, the policy of "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Convergence and Development of Traditional and New Media" was enacted. Under this policy, the construction of "Two We and One App" (i.e., creating accounts on Weibo and WeChat and launching applications) has become standard step for convergence transformation among state-owned news organizations.

[2] Yuan Longping, a famous agricultural scientist, known as the "father of hybrid rice" in China died on May 22, 2021, which gave rise to a great outpouring of public grief in China.

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