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ACADEMIC JOURNAL ARTICLE

Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly

Professional Aspirations and Job Satisfaction: Chinese Journalists at a Time of Change in the Media

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Article excerpt

This study examines how Shanghai journalists' professional aspirations are related to their job satisfaction in times of social change. Similar to their counterparts in the West, Shanghai journalists derive satisfaction from job autonomy. However, those who prefer party media as ideal news outlets demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction. The reverse is not true for those embracing Western professional media as ideals. Job satisfaction is also positively associated with the journalists' emphasis on the interpretive role of the media, a belief rooted in Chinese party-press ideology. Stronger positive valuation of professional media relative to that of the party media strengthens the positive relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction. Implications of the findings are discussed in the understanding of media changes in China and journalistic professionalism in general.

If job satisfaction indicates a profession's well-being, the journalistic profession in the People's Republic of China (PRC) appears surprisingly healthy. A 1994 nationwide survey reports that 72% of PRC journalists were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their job.¹ The figure is comparable to that from a survey of American journalists in the early 1990s, in which 77% of U.S. journalists chose the same answers.² Another study conducted in 1996 and 1997 shows that, when compared with their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan, PRC journalists reported higher levels of overall job satisfaction.³

However, one cannot neglect what these findings might disguise. China's media reforms in the past twenty-five years have been beset by tensions, setbacks, and contradictions. Researchers have characterized the precarious steps in terms such as "commercialization without independence"⁴ or "professionalization without guarantees."⁵ Chinese journalists are said to be torn between two masters: the party and the public.⁶ While media reforms brought journalists higher degrees of day-to-day operational freedom,⁷ government control still reigns. Journalism remains under-developed in terms of both professional ideology and institutional framework.⁸

In such a context, from where do Chinese journalists derive their job satisfaction (or dissatisfaction)? What factors do they consider? The present study addresses these questions by way of the concept of professional aspirations. Professional aspirations refer to a set of normative ideals and beliefs that members of a profession uphold. For journalists, these include things such as job autonomy, journalism models, and ideal media roles.⁹ Focusing on professional aspirations, we seek to understand journalists not merely as workers within organizations but also as professionals within a social institution. This allows us to link journalists' job satisfaction to the (under)development of professionalism, a central theme in China's media reforms. This conceptual approach is particularly useful for understanding China's ongoing media reforms, which are changing both media organizations and the relationships between journalism and other social institutions.¹⁰ Although PRC journalists' professional aspirations have inspired many reform measures, they have also been tamed by persistent political control over the media on one hand, and by market corruption on the other.¹¹



The perspective adopted in this study is also important for studying the journalistic profession in general. Often seen as a vocation serving the public interest, journalism is regarded by many not merely as a career, but also a profession built on commitment to a set of broadly shared ideals.¹² Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to a theoretical understanding of the journalistic profession as much as it seeks to understand journalism in China.

Journalists as Professionals with Aspirations

Job satisfaction refers to a worker's overall evaluation of his or her job. It involves synthesizing various attributes of one's work and workrelated experiences in light of one's values, ideals, and beliefs. ...

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