DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN CHINA

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5 The Tabloidization of Party Media

How the People's Daily and CCTV Adapt to Social Media

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Since the late 1970s, China's media landscape has been roughly divided into two camps: the mouthpieces of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that serve as propaganda tools to guide and shape public opinion, and the commercial media outlets that publish more diversified and mass-appeal content in order to survive and thrive in the market (Chan, 1993; Huang, 2001). The latter are still state-owned, but they have greatly challenged the Party mouthpieces, which used to be the dominant voice in China. As various scholars have argued, with press commercialization and the emergence of the internet, the circulation and impact of the Party's old propaganda machine had been diminishing (Lee, 2000; Pei, 1994).

To many observers' surprise, however, the Party media have been regaining their influence since 2012, the year when *The People's Daily*, the Central Party Committee's newspaper, launched its officia Weibo account. CCTV News, the news channel of the state-run China Central Television, joined at around the same time. Soon, they were among the most followed, shared, and liked social media accounts on Weibo and WeChat, China's two dominant social media platforms. Many of their posts have gone viral. In addition, a number of Party media have more than one 'sub-account' specializing in niche areas. *The People's Daily*'s sub-accounts 'Xuexi Xiaozu' (literally meaning 'The Group to Study Xi Jinping') and 'Xiake Dao' (literally meaning 'Knight's Island') are the most popular and influential ones (Wong, 2015). It should be noted that the print versions of the Party newspapers and magazines rely largely on mandatory subscription, but following their social media accounts is purely on a voluntary basis. Considering this difference, the popularity of their Weibo and WeChat accounts becomes even more striking.

The propaganda machine's adaptation to social media platforms poses important questions to students of Chinese media. It has drastically changed the power balance between Party mouthpieces and commercial media, and it has also altered China's social media landscape. In this chapter, based on content analysis of Party media's social media posts and in-depth interviews

with editors, I argue that officia media in China have been going through a process of tabloidization, which has been the most significant development of China's Party media during recent decade.

Party Media in China: Decline and Resurgence

The CPC considers propaganda as a key to its success in gaining and maintaining power – 'the shaft of the pen' is no less important than 'the barrel of the gun' (Brady, 2009). In the Mao era, Party media monopolized the information channel of the Chinese people and had great impact on them (Sukosd & Wang, 2013; Winfield & Peng, 2005). Since the start of economic reforms in the late 1970s, however, Party media lost their influence to a newly emerged group of media outlets – the commercial media, most of which were known as evening papers, metropolitan papers, or city papers (Chan, 1993; Huang, 2001; Zhao, 2000). They are still state-owned, but they enjoy relatively greater autonomy and publish more diversified, mass-appeal content to attract readers and advertising.

Studies have found that Party media performed much worse than their commercial counterparts in market competition, especially in the 1990s and 2000s (Huang, 2001). The gap between their advertising revenues were 'common across different regions, consistent in timing, and invariant in scale' (Chen & Guo, 1998, p. 70). The contrast is not surprising – after all, commercial outlets are meant to seek success in the market, while Party organs are more tightly controlled and have to invest most effort in disseminating officia information and serving as propaganda instruments in a top-down manner. To many Chinese, while officia media might be better for understanding the policies and goals of the government, it was the commercial media that addressed ordinary people's concerns and provided more unbiased information (Stockmann, 2013, pp. 163–168). As a result, commercial newspapers were mostly sold at newsstands and subscribed by private households, while Party newspapers largely relied on publicly subsidized, mandatory subscriptions.

With the popularization of the internet and social media, however, the trend has stopped and even reversed. It turns out that digital technology has been a curse rather than a blessing for commercial media. Consistent with the global journalism crisis resulting from the collapse of the business model, commercial media in China also experienced a sharp decline in readership and advertising revenues. A number of them, including some famous titles such as *The Beijing Times*, were forced to close (Wang & Sparks, 2019). The remaining news organizations have been struggling with the loss of revenue and talents and the decline in quality (Repnikova & Fang, 2015).

Meanwhile, the Party-state has been constantly adapting to digital media. In addition to censorship and the filtering of information, which have

been used since the early days of the internet in China (Roberts, 2018), the authorities have also gone from defensive to offensive and have been 'actively shaping cyberspace to their own strategic advantage' (Deibert, 2015, p. 64). They hire online commentators, or the so-called 'Fifty-Cent Party' (Han, 2015), to post pro-regime content and use 'positive energy' as an ideological tool to discipline people's subjectivities (Chen & Wang, 2019). The officia propaganda is found to be increasingly engaging and participatory (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). The government has also launched digital initiatives to 'occupy the online public opinion field' and disseminate soft propaganda content (Fang & Repnikova, 2021).

Party media have also been actively upgrading their propaganda, especially on social media platforms. As of late September 2021, *The People's Daily* had more than 140 million followers on Weibo, and CCTV News had more than 120 million, far more than any of their commercial counterparts. Their WeChat public accounts are also hugely popular – almost every article they publish has been viewed more than 100,000 times. The huge amounts of followers, views, shares, and likes Party media have received on social media indicate that they are regaining popularity and credibility they once enjoyed during the Mao era. In this chapter, I attempt to investigate this intriguing phenomenon and answer the following research questions: What kinds of content published by Party media's social media accounts have gone viral? What factors and promotion strategies have contributed to the virality? How does the political system contribute to the virality of Party media's social media accounts?

Data and Methods

To explore the factors that drive Party mouthpieces' social media accounts viral, I focus on the WeChat public platform. With the help of newrank.cn, a leading social media analytics company in China, I collected all the articles published by the two most influential Party media accounts (*The People's Daily* and CCTV News) during the first six months of 2018 (N = 4,553), as well as the amount of views and likes for each article. I adjusted the views and likes according to the follower growth rate for each account, so that articles published in June didn't gain advantage over those published in January. Because the distributions of pageviews and likes were highly skewed and had very wide ranges, I log-transformed them. The overall correlation between these two log-transformed, adjusted variables was as high as .87, so I combined them to create a new index for the popularity of each article. This index was used in the following analysis.

Besides the popularity of each article, I am also interested in article characteristics and their relations with pageviews and likes. I randomly selected

Table 5.1 Predictors of online content virality

Category		Previous literature	Examples from Party media's social media accounts
Information utility		Cappella et al. (2015); Hart et al. (2009); Thorson (2008)	'Zhong Nanshan's regimen: surprisingly, the most crucial thing is not exercise; it's . . .'
Emotional appeals	Novelty	Wu and Huberman (2007)	'The 7 things you should clean in your room, you will never guess'
	Anger	Guadagno et al. (2013)	'Shame on you, Western media which produce fake news about China!]'
	Sexual appeal	Porter and Golan (2006)	'Beautiful girl molested in the elevator . . .'
	Pride	Nikolinakou and King (2018)	'We always feel proud of being a Chinese'
Social influence, popularity cues		Fu and Sim (2011); Garrett (2011)	'The whole world is watching this small city'; 'Many people are reading this recently'
Multimedia material		Veale et al. (2015)	Posting photos, infographics, and videos
Targeting and tailoring		Rimer and Kreuter (2006)	'Those born in the 1980s should change your ID cards now'

20% of all the articles, resulting in a sample of 452 articles published by *The People's Daily* and 445 by CCTV News. Two research assistants hand-coded a set of content characteristics for each article, which were borrowed and adapted from previous studies on content virality (see Table 5.1 for a summary of predictors of virality). The inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's α) ranged from 1 on objective items (e.g., whether the article included a sentence explicitly requesting readers to share it) to .85 on more subjective items (e.g., whether the title elicited horror). A closer look at the coded items and their correlations with the popularity index revealed no significant difference between *The People's Daily* and CCTV News samples. Therefore, I combined the samples (N = 897) in the statistical analysis.

Numbers could describe the popularity and characteristics of media content, and reveal their relations, but they could not tell us about the production process behind the scenes. To get a more comprehensive picture, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 social media editors who managed the

officia Weibo and WeChat accounts of *The People's Daily* and CCTV News. The interviews were all face-to-face and were conducted between June and August 2015, with follow-up interviews in the summer of 2019. The average length for the interviews was between 1 and 1.5 hours. The major questions covered topics such as how they do their daily jobs, the methods and strategies used to promote the social media accounts, how they decide the content and the format, how they compete with other accounts, and how they interact with followers. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic in China, the interviewees were promised anonymity before they were interviewed.

Appealing to the Mass Through Tabloidization

How do Party media manage to go viral on social media platforms? The first thing to note is that their social media content is vastly different from what they publish in traditional media (newspapers and TV programs). 'We only occasionally use the articles published in the paper – with titles changed and introductory paragraphs rewritten. More than 90% of the articles we publish on Weibo and WeChat are not seen in the paper', confided a social media editor at *The People's Daily* during an interview. Then, what do these social media posts look like, and which ones are more likely to go viral? To identify the determinants of an article's virality, I ran a hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting the popularity index. The regression model explained 30.5% of the variance in article popularity (see Table 5.2).

Several content strategies could be summarized from both the regression analysis and the interviews. First, information utility contributed to virality. For instance, both accounts publish articles on how the NPC (National People's Congress) and CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), the most important annual political meetings in China, would influence ordinary people's lives. Meanwhile, the print version of *The People's Daily* focused on how political leaders delivered remarks during the meetings. It was a clear comparison between Party media's traditional version and the social media appearance. Other viral informational articles include how to avoiding danger in daily life, health advice from a famous and widely trusted doctor, and so on. According to my interviews, useful information was indeed a major category of content on Party media's social media accounts. One of the editors shared the following story:

> One day another editor and I were stuck in an elevator. We complained in the WeChat group chat of our editorial team. Soon, they sent us the

Table 5.2 Hierarchical regression model predicting article popularity

	DV: Article popularity index
Topic characteristics	
Topic – Politics	−0.666*** (0.142)
Topic – Economy and business	−0.334 (0.175)
Topic – International news	−0.874*** (0.205)
Topic – National interest	0.858** (0.294)
Topic – Education	0.115 (0.263)
Topic – Culture, sports, and entertainment	0.207 (0.166)
Topic – Science and technology	−0.445 (0.241)
Topic – Health	0.090 (0.171)
Topic – Practical information	0.694** (0.165)
Topic – Self-help, chicken soup stories	1.371*** (0.182)
Topic – Other domestic news	Reference group
Targeting specific geographic area	0.356 (0.269)
Targeting specific age range	0.100 (0.257)
Title characteristics	
Title length	−0.030** (0.011)
Number of exclamation marks in title	0.329** (0.111)
Number of question marks in title	−0.098 (0.112)
'Recommended' in title	0.040 (0.195)
Negation in title	0.098 (0.195)
Popularity cues in title	−0.548 (0.545)
'You' in title	0.158 (0.138)
Xi Jinping in title	0.666* (0.320)
Main body characteristics	
Originality	−0.161 (0.115)
Amount of pictures (log transformed)	0.170* (0.066)
Amount of videos	−0.021 (0.091)
Emotions and appeals	
Novelty	−0.015 (0.172)
Anger	0.851*** (0.167)
Sexual appeal	−1.518 (0.879)
Pride	0.733** (0.206)
Request sharing and liking	
Request sharing in title	−0.649 (0.373)
Request liking in main body	2.090*** (0.267)
Request sharing in main body	−0.327 (0.319)
Constant	16.174*** (0.559)
Observations	897
R^2	0.331
Adjusted R^2	0.305

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

link to a Weibo post 'What to do when you are stuck in an elevator' –
and it was published by us! [Laughter] We suddenly realized that we
had collected all kinds of life tips that could be applied in every sce-
nario of our lives, such as how to make coffee, how to select wine, how
to cook celery, how to do laundry, what to do in a fire emergency, and
so on and so on.

Second, emotional appeals were widely used. Words like 'surprise', 'warning',
and 'heartbreaking' that could elicit emotional arousal were seen in the titles of
viral articles. Table 5.2 shows that including exclamation marks in titles could
significantly increase the popularity of an article. Anger and pride were also
powerful in driving user engagement. Interestingly – and absent from previous
literature – emotions related to family values were especially effective in the
Chinese context. For example, articles published during the Chinese New Year
emphasized the importance of family reunion. Those published on Mother's
Day about thanking our mothers were also very popular. On the anniversary
of the Wenchuan earthquake, China's most severe natural disaster in decades,
both of the accounts also published memorial pieces that went viral.

Third, self-help and 'chicken soup for the soul' type of stories were very
effective in attracting readers. Regression analysis shows that chicken soup
stories were significantly more popular than other types of content. 'We
publish a piece of chicken soup story every day at 10 pm', shared a WeChat
editor at *The People's Daily*:

It's perfect reading before going to bed. Sometimes we encountered
some technical problems and the story was delayed for like 30 minutes.
In such cases, we would get hundreds of messages from our readers:
'Where is today's night reading? I can't fall asleep without it!' We are
even called by some people as 'the best chicken soup account'.

Fourth, as demonstrated in Table 5.2, readers also showed great interest
in national interest articles, which could elicit nationalistic feelings. For
example, one viral article claimed that China's political system was supe-
rior to Western democracy. They also use sentimental expressions to criti-
cize US politicians who were involved in the trade war. These articles tried
to cultivate support for the regime, while at the same time they went viral
among the public.

Sometimes the Party media also held promotional events to harvest fol-
lowers, shares, and likes. For example, they send cash in 'red envelops' to
lucky users during the Chinese New Year.

In summary, it is clear that the viral content on Party media's social
media accounts appeals to the masses and bears similarities with articles in

tabloids. Interestingly, almost all the editors I interviewed denied that it was their intention to publish a lot of articles comforting hurt souls and explaining how to cook celery. As a group of intellectuals who graduated from the top universities in China, most of the editors are not consumers of the content they produce, and they clearly know that such content is of low taste. 'But after dozens of rounds of trials and errors, we found that these articles could produce the largest numbers of pageviews, shares, and likes', said an editor. 'We recently learned from a report that the majority of Weibo users are "three lows" – low education level, low (young) age, and low income. So it's natural that we publish these articles'.

Here comes the interesting contrast: The Party mouthpieces have become more mass-appeal than mass-appeal (commercial) media on social media platforms. 'We care about numbers very much', an editor put it bluntly. In order to get more views, sometimes they have to use sensational titles. Although many editors think it is 'unethical' or 'unprincipled' to do so, they still choose to do it. An editor said:

> We don't use the phrase 'If you don't share this, you are not eligible to be a Chinese' (*bu zhuan bushi zhongguoren*), but we actually have used similar expressions – 'every Chinese should remember this', 'share this for your fellow citizens', etc.

I regard the changes as a form of tabloidization, which refers to how 'quality' media adopt the characteristic of tabloid newspapers including sensationalism, oversimplification, and populist tendencies (Lefkowitz, 2016; Örnebring & Jönsson, 2007). Rather than engaging with the debate on tabloidization and public interest, which is central to scholarly discussions on tabloidization in Western contexts, here I use this concept only in terms of its certain styles and the motivation to seek mass audiences. It should also be noted that although the officia media's posts are sensational and appeal to the masses, they strictly stay within the Party line. Therefore, they frequently post nationalistic and 'positive energy' (Chen & Wang, 2019) content but never use content such as sex scandals and celebrity gossip to attract audiences.

Top-Down Guidance, Bottom-Up Innovation, and Peer Competition

What motivated Party media to pursue changes and actively adopt various strategies for achieving virality? Historical explanations could be provided. For example, the mass-appeal approach might be a result of the returning of Chairman Mao's mass line (Hammond, 1978). Individual-level

psychological explanations are also possible – more than one editor expressed in the interviews that 'seeing my articles going viral is a huge encouragement for continuing to produce more viral content'. But such explanation could be applied to other media organizations as well. What is special about Party media?

In China's centralized political system, top-down guidance and encouragement remains a key factor in leading to changes in the officia organs. The same is true for Party media's adaptation to social media. As an editor suggested,

> the first and most important factor is that the central Party committee wants to see the changes. Several years ago, everyone knew that the influence of the so-called mainstream media (i.e., Party mouthpieces) was almost gone. We were disconnected from the latest development in the media landscape. So the Party felt the urgency in catching up with the changes and being a crucial part of the game.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, there are multiple policy formulation and implementation bodies, government agencies, Party documents, and government regulations centred on guiding online public opinion. For example, the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization, launched in early 2014 and led by Xi himself, describes part of its mission as using 'innovative methods to spread mainstream values and stimulate positive energy while maintaining proper guidance of public opinion in terms of timing, intensity and impact' (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). The new State Internet Information Offic also partly aims at strengthening the Party's ability to shape online opinion. In recent years, officia discourse repeatedly highlights the importance of renewing Party media in the digital environment.

With the encouragement from the top leaders, Party media enjoy privileges over commercial outlets. As informed by an interviewee, the Cyberspace Administration deliberately picked several Party media and granted them permission to publish multiple times in a day on WeChat. By default, a media account could publish only once a day. But *The People's Daily* and CCTV News's accounts could publish more than ten times in one day – by publishing more, they become more visible, and more likely to go viral.

In addition, Party media tend to get more human resource input in social media departments. Both *The People's Daily* and CCTV News have more than ten full-time staff and several interns working for their Weibo and WeChat accounts, which is unimaginable for many commercial media that usually have fewer than five social media editors.

But for successful changes, top-down encouragement has to be accompanied by bottom-up innovations. The various content strategies discussed previously were not designed by top leaders, but proposed by editors and tested through trial and error. 'You could easily tell our director's personal input from our Weibo content', an editor said during the interview. 'Many followers guess that our Weibo's chief editor is a woman, because the language is rather feminine. In fact, he is a man who used to be [a] poet when he was young'.

Besides top-down and bottom-up, peer competition is also a driving factor of Party media's virality on social media. During the interviews, editors at *The People's Daily* and CCTV News frequently mentioned the pressure to compete with each other. 'At first, we posted on Weibo every 40 minutes', said an editor at *The People's Daily*, 'then CCTV News sped up the posting process to every 20 minutes, thus doubling the content and raising the visibility. We had no choice but to follow, otherwise we would be lagged behind'. The Party mouthpieces also imitate each other in promotion strategies. Said an editor,

> When we found CCTV News's articles went viral because they often featured sanitation workers and added 'will you share it for the workers?' in the title, we quickly learned this tactic and posted similar articles and called readers to share for other types of workers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored a recent phenomenon that is central to China's media landscape – the popularity of Communist Party mouthpieces on China's social media platforms. I collected both quantitative and qualitative data to answer questions on multiple levels. In summary, driven by top-down guidance, bottom-up innovation, and peer competition, Party media adopt a results-oriented approach and produce tabloidized content for social media platforms.

The resurgence of Party media in the era of social media is an important change for the press-politics relation in China. It has reversed the trend during the last three to four decades when Party mouthpieces were losing ground to commercial outlets. It has also changed the perception that Party media are incompatible with and opposite to mass-appeal media. The original 'division of labour', where Party organs are supposed to air official information in a top-down way, and the commercial media are close to ordinary people and voice their experiences and feelings from below (Huang, 2001), no longer holds true in the current social media environment. By providing chicken soup stories and useful life advice, the Party mouthpieces are closer to ordinary people than perhaps ever before.

Of course, there are also potential problems and challenges for Party mouthpieces' social media presence. First, the propagandist role of Party media seems to give way to the entertaining role in the process of tabloidization, posing questions about the effects of such a strategy. Second, there are still tensions between mass appeal and political safety. As an editor suggested, 'we have to be cautious not to make top leaders angry, but if we are always mediocre, we will lose audience'. Third, while these accounts are influential among grassroots, it's much more challenging for them to reach and persuade elites by posting chicken soup stories and sensational titles. Fourth, a number of editors said that they felt tired and bored by the work. As the daily content gets increasingly schematized and repetitive, the editors tend to lose a sense of accomplishment and are less motivated in work.

Nevertheless, the Party media have been very successful so far in terms of going viral on social media and regaining influence among the Chinese public from commercial media. It shows that Party media could be increasingly sophisticated in adapting to and taking advantage of digital technology.

Acknowledgement

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