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Does media marketization since the late 1970s lead to the freedom of press in China?

The mass media, as one of the crucial information avenues, serves as a vital role in informing the public about politics. Everyday people are surrounded by numerous sources provided by media sector including newspapers, television, magazines, radio and Internet. In most western countries that adopt liberalism ideology, role of media is not only considered as a bridge connecting citizens with politics, but also is a channel for people to exercise freedom of press. However, role of media in China under authoritarian rule is different in essence compared with democratic countries since media fails to promote freedom of press in China.

Back to the history of media development path, since the founding of CCP till the start of 1970s, Media, deemed as “throat and tongue” of the CCP, has undergone strict regulation of all sources and information. All media receives money from state and thus state is fully in charge of media (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). At that time, only limited officially authorized media outlets are capable of circulating information and in fact citizens are basically exposed to similar contents (Shirk, 2011, p.7).

Till recently the economic reforms in the end of 1970s, Leaders of CCP have decided to loose its monopoly over media sector, during which newspapers, televisions, magazines and radios are gradually allowed to enter marketplace instead of previous solely state operation. (Shirk, p.49) It is worth noting that economic reforms did set foundations for the media marketization and further drive the transformations of Chinese media in numerous aspects. It has been witnessed that media reforms truly create an opportunity for media sector to start a new journey with increasing competition and diversified media coverage. As for competition in newspapers, Liebman (2005) contends that the number of newspapers in China increased from 69 in 1979 to a few hundred in the early 1980s to more than two thousand in 1997 and eventually to 2,035 newspapers in mid-2003 (p.17). Similar rapid growth applies to all media outlets. During the media revolutions, CCP interchangeably utilized partial privatization, deregulation and commercialization as three core methods for the sake of promoting the pace of marketization. Deregulation refers to lesser concentrations put by state in the process of media censorship. Commercialization gives rise to media operation catering to audience demands more effectively, thus emphasizing the target of making profits by introducing more advertisements. Privatization is concerned with transferring media structure from state ownership to more private ownership (Stockmann, 2011, p.12). Combinations of these three methods used by CCP directly portray the whole process of media marketization (Stockmann, 2012, p.8). Nevertheless privatization is incomplete at least now since still all major newspapers, radio and television stations are required to have no less than 51% ownership by state (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011, p.441). Similarly deregulation and commercialization are still in a developing stage without outstanding achievements. Overall media marketization is a historical breakthrough in media

sector, which seems to challenge the direct control of CCP and promotes the freedom of press. However the outcome is less pleasant. The truth is that despite the fact that Chinese media has been marketed dramatically via those aforementioned methods, CCP still tightly control the media sector and aptly regulate the information flows in various ways.

Though media marketization is always treated as a sign promoting freedom of press and even possible democracy in authoritarian state. China's media environment remains one of the most restrictive in the world for a long time. According to the freedom of press report, China always ranks poorly on freedom of press and is labeled as not free with score of 83 (Freedom House, 2013). In reality freedom of press fails to develop since CCP consistently utilizes three tools to censor the media sector, which include political approach of censorship, legal approach of censorship, and technology approach of censorship. Each approach directly hinders freedom of press exercised by citizens and people working in media sectors. Hence, media marketization does not necessarily result in existence of freedom of press in China.

Even though media marketization, to some extent, promotes the openness of media sector, political approach used by CCP relying on numerous censoring agencies still heavily regulate the media coverage and thus hinder the emergence of freedom of press. Controls, especially on the political subject areas, are still pervasive today. Due to the media commercialization happened in China, there is a increasing need of propaganda personnel. To CCP, controlling media is a fundamental task to achieve, which determines its legitimacy and regime stability.

China's systematic censorship agencies each has their own functions and work collectively to guarantee media coverage are uniform. The State Council Information Office is in charge of the content of Internet news sites. The Ministry of the Information Industry controls the Internet, but not the content. The Ministry of State Security (China's CIA) and the Ministry of Public Security (China's FBI) police Internet bulletin boards, blogs, and email. Currently along with General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), the most powerful monitoring agency is the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department (CPD), which has the dominant role in controlling all media outlets in China (Brady, 2006, p.58).

CPD owns the responsibility of making guidelines to explain what is allowed to report and what is not. To accomplish the goal of tightly controlling the media contents in unified form, CPD has various methods. Firstly, CPD may exert direct control via oral forms including meeting and making phone calls. For instance, CPD is able to connect with CCTV's senior editorial chambers using a special red telephone with a direct phone line (Brady, 2006, p.63). In addition, CPD regularly holds meeting with editors and journalists for the sake of informing them updated propaganda policy to make sure publications are accord with party doctrine. Further, journalist and editors are required to take political study class to fulfill their mission assigned by CCP rule (Brady, 2006, p.64). Through intensive push of CPD, journalists and editors are able to have a basic idea of what they are expected to report and what they are supposed not to report.

At the same time, CPD has the power of shutting down the publications that report undesirable contents according to party doctrine or firing or even jailing editors and

journalists. Overview, the domestic media environment of China is indeed hazardous for journalists. A French-based NGO, claims that China has more journalists imprisoned than any other country (Hassid, 2008, p.420). For instance, the chief editor of *Global Times* admitted that failing to report news within guidelines is the key factor leading to quit from his job (Susan). Also Xinrong, Gao was imprisoned due to the fact that he reported the undesirable truth under a seemingly pleasant project. He found out that there was severe corruption behind the irrigation project in regarding with 280 million yuan (He, 2004, p.17). More seriously, Zhaoxia, Feng who is an editor and journalist died because he reported scandals and corruption of ten notables from Xi'an (He, 2004, p.18). The two cases show that CCP tries its best to strictly controls media coverage even using brutal approach. Thus real freedom of press is still a long way to go though media reforms are undergoing.

Not only CPD exerts the most powerful control on media contents to limit freedom of press, but also any agencies belonging to the giant censorship system of CCP can prevent freedom of press in China. For instance, Television drama committee, as a subordinate sector of SARFT, possesses a series of duties to implement. Specifically, both domestic produced and imported dramas are among the lists of censorship. Most importantly, the television drama committee is expected to write in details about how to modify the drama contents and where in the drama violate the rule of guidelines (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, 2004, p.32). According to the functions of each censorship agencies in China, it could be argued that media marketization still cannot completely break the whole censorship system works. Furthermore, now those monitoring agencies are actively involving in censoring media contents without strike given by media revolutions. As long as media contents are still controlled by CCP through numerous agencies, freedom of press is still a long way to achieve.

Secondly, legal approach of censorship including enacting laws and regulations creates atmosphere against existence of freedom of press. No matter how dramatically media marketization is undergoing, all citizens and media workers cannot violate laws as a base line. Although Article 35 of Constitution ensures that citizens possess rights of freedom speech, press, and assembly, in reality such rights does not truly exist in China. As long as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) needs to maintain its monopoly of power, media is one of the most important targets that CCP desires to invest large amount of money and resources to control since freedom of press may threatens its power and legitimacy.

Later a series of laws are enacted for the sake of strengthening CCP rule at the expenses of freedom of press. For example, The "Protection of National Secrets Law" of 1989 argues that media is not allowed circulating any information in terms of military, social, economic, technology and any coverage that falls into the categories of state secrets. Actually the definition of state secrets is vague and lack of specific explanations to judge whether certain kind of information should be labeled as state secrets. Thus the unclear expression of state secrets offers CPD an opportunity to manipulate and censor any media coverage that the authority recognized as harmful to both the CCP rule and whole society stability. Also, the law claims that journalists have to gain permissions from government agencies while publishing information about government issues (Nhan, p.41). By so doing, it could be

expected that reporters and journalists have no real freedom of press since they are likely to be rejected from publishing any information that deem as unfavorable toward CCP rule.

In addition, The 1997 Criminal Law makes it criminal if individuals or organizations distribute information of “dividing nations” or “destroy national unity”. By so doing, individuals or organizations are subject to imprisonment from three to ten years (Nhan, p.41).

Not only aforementioned laws tightly suppress freedom of press, but also CCP has started to censor online information since 1993 during which only a small number of experts in computer science area possess technology skills to implement. In the beginning of 1993, the Temporary Regulation for the Management of Computer Information Network International Connection was passed, giving the state total control over the development of the Internet (Novick & Goddard, n.d.). However, this policy is later evolved into more detailed policies. Individuals might be prosecuted if they disobey the regulations and even worse network users may subject to death penalty if they purposely distribute so called state secrets online (Novick & Goddard, n.d.). Together all those laws and policies help to justify the censorship agencies responsibilities and make their actions legitimate. Hence, it could be anticipated that existence of freedom of press cannot coexist with laws intending to avoid freedom of press.

Both the political approach and legal approach has long traditions in China in order to censor the media sector. While the technology approach, to a large extent, is stimulated by proliferation of information via Internet in the recent 20 years. Lastly, media marketization indeed has catalyzed the emergence of Internet since 1990s and rapidly increased the number of people using Internet. Internet users in China have reached around 513 million, which stands for a quarter of all Internet users on earth. The large amount of people and continuing growth rate generates a huge challenge for CCP to censor information within Internet (Peter). Chinese government acknowledges the fact that Internet cannot be fully controlled since there are tons of individuals assessing Internet, thus choosing to push Internet providers to censor their subordinate users. But truth is that Internet made little contributions toward freedom of press in China. For instance, “The Great Firewall of China” known as GFW, operated by Chinese government aims to prevent people from assessing certain websites, especially some foreign websites (King, Pan, Roberts, 2013, p.328). Statistically, over 30000 people participate in censoring the Internet information via actively deleting undesirable contents from various channels, such as social networks, websites, chat rooms or blogs (Samantha). GFW is responsible of checking any information that flows in and out of China to make sure that citizens are not exposed politically sensitive contents. Basically, GFW is divided into two censorship focuses: the domestic websites and the foreign websites. To successfully achieve the target, GFW is designed to utilize various methods including IP blocking, DNS filtering and redirecting. Most time when Internet users accidentally opened a blocked websites, the user will encounter a “404 Error---Page not found,” or “The connection was reset.” According to the Open Net Initiative (2009), China owns one of the most sophisticated filtering systems to censor Internet worldwide. Among the list of blocked websites, King et al. (2013, p.328) contends that Facebook and Twitter are two familiar social network websites. At the same time, Chinese citizens are incapable of logging in to

Wikipedia, YouTube and Flickr simply because government cannot control information within these websites. Under such strictly controlled Internet environment, Reporters Without Borders find out that 50 out of 64 people who are sentenced due to online activity are from China, which indicate the CCP's desperate desire of controlling information flows in and out the Internet.

Despite "The Great Firewall of China", "keyword blocking" is another powerful tool used by CCP to restrict freedom of press via disallowing Internet users to post sensitive words or phrases. For instance, "hexie" in Chinese is always written in another way as "river crab" in English. Also, "ziyou" in Chinese is replaced with "eye filed" in English. Similar strategy is used in several sensitive phrases to suppress freedom of press (King et al., 2013, p.328).

Regardless of CCP's numerous methods to control media, it is worth noting that China has been witnessed a trend with increasing amount of investigative reports in media sector since late 1970s. The economic reforms and the subsequent media marketization did stimulate investigative reports seen in newspapers, television and other sources of media. Chinese journalists have gradually got rid of the constraints of serving only for party doctrine. They are more willing to take risks for the sake of reporting truth behind the news. Usually the contents of investigative reports reflect the darkness of government and society, ranging from ineffectiveness and corruption of government, brutality of police, illegal labors, and all kinds of crimes. Admittedly, it is undeniable that the rise of investigative reports is considered as the monumental breakthrough of freedom of press in China. A specific example occurs with the Guangzhou-based *Southern Weekend*, which is regarded as the model of print media outlet to report investigative journalism (Wang, 2008, p.8).

Also, *Dahe Daily* is dedicated in reporting truth behind news and disclosing undesirable facts in society. Quickly renowned as its "Public Opinion Monitoring Reports" and its "Critical Reports", *Dahe Daily* concentrates on report people who are classified as lower class and even live in the extreme poverty. It could be expected that those reports are unfavorable by CCP ruling. Recently, *Dahe Daily* reports certain sensitive issues and later leads to its executive Editor-in-chief, Ma Yunlong, lose his job. Eventually the whole newspaper team was obliged to study "Marxist News Ideology" for three months (Tong & Sparks, 2009, p.339).

At the same time, turning the view to television, China Central Television (CCTV), as the heart of party's broadcast, actively joins the investigative reports by creating two flagship programs, which include *Focus Interview* (1994) and *News Probe* (1996) (Tong & Sparks, 2009, p.339). These two brand new programs aim to initiate the explore of investigative reports in depth, promoting the society to embrace freedom of press.

It is obvious that the rise of investigative journalism in China has made giant progress to stimulate freedom of press. Media coverage today is composed of more diverse contents that people are prohibited to see in the past. However, as the case of *Dahe Daily*, investigative journalism may finally leads to the adverse impacts toward individuals and the whole newspaper team. Turning the view on mainstream of media sources, CCP still tightly control the information represented in the public.

From what has been discussed above, we may finally draw the conclusion that tremendous progress has made due to the media reforms starting in the late 1970s. One crucial progress is the emergence and later the increasing coverage of investigative reports, which to some extent promotes the freedom of press. Nevertheless, the mere fact that emergence of investigative reports is insufficient to conclude that freedom of press has formed in modern China. In fact investigative journalisms are more often relates to issues that cannot threaten the stability of regime or monopoly of CCP rule directly. Expanding to nationwide, investigative reports only stands for a small portion of the information circulating in the media sector and its popularity cannot win over the CCP's control of media contents. The truth is that still numerous cases mentioned above indicate how CCP desperately devotes resources and money to censor the mass media via legal, political and technology approaches. As long as CCP is the only dominating party in China, freedom of press in the mass media is hard to fully accomplish and thus freedom of press will remain elusive in China.

For long-running perspective, it is highly suggested that CCP could gradually allow the free flow of information in the mass media since the existence of freedom of press is critical to build a vibrant society with well-informed citizenry. People who are well-educated via absorbing information from the media outlets are more likely to participate in politics and give valuable opinions to help build up a more effective government. Thus in return, freedom of press cultivates a win-win society in which individuals are connected with their government and their state knows how to serve the will of people based on their feedback after receiving information from the media sector.

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