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Media and Pollution in China: Mouthpiece or Watchdog?

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Abstract: *The media plays a vital role in spreading and communicating environmental issues to the public. It is widely accepted that China has become increasingly open toward environmental news. However, the Chinese media has long been understood to be the mouthpiece of the Chinese government. Social systems have the greatest power to influence news content in the hierarchical model. Hence, this paper has assessed to what extent the news content on pollution in China is produced under the influence of social systems. This study concludes that the Chinese media coverage favors topics that are positive towards China, thus using more Chinese sources that tend to put a positive spin on new content by framing pollution as a natural and global problem. However, some local and commercial Chinese media and CCTV, to some extent, do have some free space to investigate pollution news and to criticize the government so long as it is not extremely politically sensitive. This paper discusses the communist ideological forces in the social systems that have a huge impact on the news content in China. Another finding is that since the opening of the market in China, some of the commercial media is somewhat influenced by a liberal ideology and thus serves as a watchdog. This does not mean that the “Chinese government’s media control is dysfunctional.”*

Keywords: Media Coverage; China Pollution; Media Bias; Media System

Introduction

Many industrialized countries need to through the stage of facing pollution problems during the development of their economy (Chapman & Sharma, 2001). China is no exception, since it has the largest population and is the fastest growing economy in the world (Liu and Li 2017). Nowadays, China faces many environmental problems such as pollution (Zhong and Zhou 2012; Geall 2013). The environmental problems in China are becoming increasingly worse. In 2013, there was a huge blanket of smog in most of the cities in China which drew a lot of attention from the media (Chen 2014). The media plays a vital role in raising the government and public’s awareness of environmental issues (Lester 2020), especially as it could play a huge role in the shaping of the public perception of the current environmental situation (Liu and Li 2017). However, previous research suggests that the news on environmental issues does not accurately reflect the current environmental situation. It is manufactured or constructed instead (Hansen 1991). Meanwhile, there are many factors that can influence the news, such as individual factors, routine factors, organizational factors, social institutional factors and the social system itself (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). The influence of the social system refers to the news content that is influenced by the interests of a country and wider society (Duan and Takahashi 2017), which has the greatest power to influence news content in the hierarchical model (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). Meanwhile, China is framed as an “authoritarian or paternalistic state” (Zhang, Mol, and He 2016, 17). The Chinese media’s voice highly aligns with that of the government (Zhao 2008). However, previous research also suggests that since the development of technology, the Chinese media has had more freedom to make public the news on environmental problems (Tong 2014; Zhang, Mol, and He 2016; Zhang 2020a). The research question that arises is ‘To what extent is the news content on pollution in China produced under the influence of social systems?’ There are many research studies that have focused on the numerous examples of environmental news coverage such as climate change, but this paper will only focus on the pollution in China. Meanwhile, this paper also only focuses on the influence of the social system.

Methodology

In order to answer the research question, a literature review was conducted on the media coverage of pollution in China. This paper first searched for adequate articles using the key words “media

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coverage,” “China pollution” and “media bias” in the University of Amsterdam (UvA) library catalogue. The research by Duan and Takahashi (2017) was found, which is a key paper answering the research question. It also played a role in finding further literature (Tilt and Xiao 2010; Tong 2014). Through the search of the UvA library catalogue, the paper also found the research by Liu and Li (2017), which led to the paper by Chen (2014). By searching the UvA library catalogue, the work of Li and Svarverud (2018), Zhang, Mol, and He (2016) and Ma, Webber, and Finlayson (2009) were found. Meanwhile, in order to extend the research, this paper also used Google Scholar to search for “media coverage on Chinese pollution” and “media bias.” It was in this way that the research by Bai et al. (2015) was found. Except for the research by Bai et al. (2015), which is a working paper, the rest of the listed articles share some things in common in that they were all published in a renowned journal, the time period is from 2010 to 2018, they all focus on Chinese pollution and the study is written in English.

All of the included research will be elaborated on regarding their research methods and overall findings. The paper will then offer a discussion of the research questions, followed by advice for future research, as well as addressing the limitations and presenting the conclusion.

Finding

In order to fully understand the influence of the social system on the news content on pollution in China, it is necessary to compare the previous body research in terms of three main aspects: which sources the Chinese media use to address the pollution argument, what topics the Chinese media usually covers, and how the Chinese media frames the pollution in China. However, it is unrealistic to expect all of the previous research to cover all three aspects. The list of previous research can, regardless, be used to conclude that the news content on pollution in China is highly influenced by the ideological forces present in the social systems (Duan and Takahashi 2017). Most of the research suggests that the Chinese media is more likely to use Chinese sources (Duan and Takahashi 2017), to frame pollution as a natural phenomenon (Liu and Li 2017) and to frame the Chinese government using a positive image (Liu and Li 2017), which leads to further discussion.

Methods of the Previous Studies

Many of the previous research studies conducted content analysis and frame analysis. However, some of the research focused on comparing the media coverage on China pollution between different countries (Duan and Takahashi 2017; Tilt and Xiao 2010). Some only focused on comparing between the different forms of Chinese media coverage on pollution (Tong 2014; Li and Svarverud 2018). However, Li and Svarverud (2018) also conducted interviews to examine the way that the Chinese media frames the air pollution in China. Meanwhile, Liu and Li (2017) also conducted a corpus-assisted discourse study to compare the Chinese and Anglo-American English-language newspaper coverage of the pollution in China. The previous research also used alternative methods to examine the different roles that the media plays when covering pollution in China. For instance, Zhang, Mol and He (2016), as well as Ma, Webber, and Finlayson (2009), used a literature review and the case study method to examine the Chinese governance on pollution and the role of the mass media in the transition of environmental governance respectively. Bai et al. (2015) used a survey to test the perception of their chosen audience in order to examine the government control and media bias related to the news coverage of pollution. Chen (2014) also utilized comparative analysis to examine the media attitudinal variations concerning the 2013 air pollution incident in China.

Sources of Media Use

In order to understand the influence of the social system on the news coverage of pollution in China, it is necessary to examine the sources that the Chinese media uses when covering pollution in China. Duan and Takahashi (2017) compared the news coverage of pollution in China between China and America. They found that the Chinese media is more likely to use Chinese official sources and Chinese social elite sources than the American media, and vice versa. This was confirmed by Bai et al. (2015) who showed that the Chinese official government documents are the major source of media news coverage on pollution in China.

However, Duan and Takahashi (2017) also found that China Daily includes US sources and NGO sources, but less than Chinese official sources. The American media also includes sources from the Chinese public and Chinese NGOs. The exposure of US sources and NGO sources in the Chinese media regarding environmental news implies that there is an increasing awareness of environmental considerations (Tong 2014), as well as more media freedom in terms of ideology when reporting environmental issues (Zhang, Mol, and He 2016).

Chinese Pollution Media Coverage Topics

The topics that the media covers play a role in understanding the influence of the social system on the news coverage of pollution in China, hence it is important to find the topics related to what the Chinese media covers on pollution. Duan and Takahashi (2017, 95) found that the Chinese media is more likely to cover the topic “strategies/ solutions to deal with pollution,” which indicates that the Chinese government is making an effort to solve the environmental problem, such as through policy and regulations. However, the New York Times (NYT) mostly covered the topic “links to other political issues in China” (Duan and Takahashi 2017, 95). Meanwhile, they also found that NYT covers the topic of the “influence on health risks” more than China Daily (Duan and Takahashi 2017). These findings imply that the American and Chinese media have different topics of interest, which is partially confirmed by Tilt and Xiao’s (2010) research. Tilt and Xiao (2010, 233) categorised the pollution media coverage topic into ten sub-topics. The topics they covered included “effects on infrastructure,” “responsibility or blame for the incident,” “government handling of information,” “science and water resources” and “water pollution,” and there were found to be significant differences among NYT, China Central Television (CCTV) and Xinhua News Agency (Tilt and Xiao 2010, 233).

However, the topic of “science and water resources” and “water pollution” are lacking from both CCTV and Xinhua News Agency. They also found that the intensity of covering the first three topics is “greatest for the New York Times” followed by CCTV and Xinhua News Agency (Tilt and Xiao 2010, 233). More specially, they also found that NYT most frequently covers the topic of “responsibility or blame,” while the Xinhua News Agency has the lowest frequency for covering this topic. However, it was stunning to see that CCTV did not have a significant difference with NYT when covering the topic of “responsibility or blame.” This indicates that “Xinhua News agency used its platform as the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist” (Tilt and Xiao 2010, 241). CCTV, although highly censored by the Chinese government, applied an ideology “responding to a growing public interest and its own commercial orientation” (Ma, Webber, and Finlayson 2009, 76) when reporting on an environmental issue due to its “growing financial independence” (Tilt and Xiao 2010, 242).

Frame

The Chinese pollution news frame is also an important tool to use to explore the influence of the social system on the news coverage of pollution in China. Various research studies on the media framing of Chinese pollution focus on the comparison between the Western media and Chinese media, as well as making a comparison to the domestic Chinese media. Liu and Li (2017, 399) found that Chinese media is more likely to frame the current pollution issue as “a natural

phenomenon without serious impact on public health,” which conforms to the findings of Chen (2014, 345) who found that the current pollution in China is framed as “a natural weather phenomenon and a national internal affair.” Meanwhile, Chen (2014, 345) also found that the Chinese media makes negative judgments of foreign organizations on pollution in China, forming an ideological polarization where there is a “positive in-group ‘Us’ and a negative out-group ‘Them.’” More importantly, Liu and Li (2017) found that China Daily has made an effort to downplay the smog’s impact and to frame a positive image of the Chinese government, as confirmed by Duan and Takahashi (2017).

Meanwhile, Li and Svarverud (2018) also found that the Chinese media not only frames pollution as a natural weather phenomenon, but also as a global problem related to economic developments and industrialization. They found that the Chinese official media frames air pollution as a necessary path taken by all developing countries, connecting the current air pollution to London’s smog (Li and Svarverud 2018). It could be concluded that the previous research studies suggest that the Chinese official media tries to downplay the negative effect of China’s pollution while framing a positive image of the Chinese government.

However, unlike what was previously mentioned, Tong (2014) found that some Chinese commercial media also frame pollution in China as a social problem. This was determined through an analysis of the domestic Chinese media coverage of the pollution in China. More specifically, Tong (2014) suggested that the Chinese media has framed the news on environmental problems as a huge risk. It not only influences health but also interferes with the human rights of Chinese citizens, which is partially a governmental problem. In other words, the Chinese media also “criticizes and opposes the national priority for economic growth” (Tong 2014, 361). Although Tilt and Xiao (2010) found that China Daily still tries to downplay the negative effect of China’s pollution and to frame a positive image of Chinese government, CCTV in contrast has conducted an investigative report while being critical of the government in terms of the environmental problems due to its “growing financial independence” (Tilt and Xiao 2010, 242). However, this situation does not mean that the Chinese government has lost control regarding the news coverage or that it could represent the whole situation in China (Tilt and Xiao 2010; Tong 2014). This leads to further discussing research question.

Discussion

Based on the previous findings, the paper concludes that the Chinese media prefers to cover the topic of the “strategies/solutions to deal with pollution” using Chinese sources. This reflects Zhang’s (2020b) study stating that the Chinese media prefers to use domestic sources to support the Chinese government’s position. Moreover, this study also found that the Chinese media usually ignores mentioning some topics, which is partially reflected in Zhang’s (2020b) study showing that the Chinese media filters the information in order to construct a biased social reality that is positive in relation to the Chinese government. This paper also found that the Chinese media mostly frames pollution as a natural and global issue, and to form a positive image of the Chinese government. The findings imply that the social system influences the news content in China (Duan and Takahashi 2017). The Chinese media is known as a party-state political apparatus (Duan and Takahashi 2017) that is owned, funded and controlled by the Chinese government (Chan and Qiu 2001). The Chinese government utilizes the media as a tool to spread its fundamental ideology (Duan and Takahashi 2017). As Reese and Shoemaker (2016) claimed, ideology can have a huge influence on the news content, which is confirmed by this paper. The Chinese media is more likely to use Chinese sources, to favor the Chinese government and to form the ideological polarization of “positive in-group ‘Us’ and the negative out-group ‘Them’” (Chen 2014, 345). This means that the media content is framed by the government in a positive light.

However, although the Chinese media coverage on pollution is positive towards China by preferring to use Chinese sources, the Chinese media also keeps some space concerning the topic of “responsibility or blame” and it is open to some alternative sources. Meanwhile, there are also some Chinese commercial media that frame pollution as a social problem, and criticize the role of the Chinese government in terms of environmental governance. China started its economic revolution in the late 1970s, which led to the Chinese media gaining more flexibility and freedom (Ma, Webber, and Finlayson 2009; Zhang, Mol, and He 2016). Hence, the Chinese media is not only influenced by the government but also the wider market (Ma, Webber, and Finlayson 2009; Meng and Rantanen 2015). In other words, the Chinese media still remains an affiliate of the party-state but commercialized as well (Ren et al. 2014). It also sometimes plays the role of watchdog (Lee 2000). There is some space for the Chinese media to frame pollution as a social problem, and to blame the Chinese government for not solving environmental problems. This conforms to Tong’s (2014) finding that the Chinese media is more open to reporting environmental issues so long as the issues are not politically sensitive. This paper argues that the Chinese media still remains an affiliate of the party-state and plays the role of mouthpiece. Additionally, the media content is influenced by the Chinese communist ideology. However, due to the influence of the market, the news content is also partially influenced by the liberal ideology in order to serve the public and commercial interests and to offer a public sphere for interaction (Ma, Webber, and Finlayson 2009; Zhang 2020a).

Conclusion

The media can play a vital role in communicating environmental issues to the public (Lowrey et al. 2007). Previous research has found that China is becoming increasingly open towards environmental news (Ma, Webber, and Finlayson 2009; Tong 2014; Bai et al. 2015). Hansen (1991) suggests that environmental news is influenced by many factors. Reese and Shoemaker (2016) suggest that social systems have the greatest power to influence the news content in the hierarchical model. This paper has examined to what extent the news contents on pollution in China is produced under the influence of the social system as a whole.

This paper has found that the Chinese media favors topics that do not harm the government’s image. This is done by using more Chinese sources and tending to put a positive spin on the news content. This was done here by framing pollution as a natural and global problem. However, some of the local and commercial Chinese media and CCTV have more space to investigate pollution news and to criticize the government so long as it is not extremely politically sensitive. This paper concludes that the communist ideological forces in the social systems have a huge influence on the news content in China, which is the same as what Duan and Takahashi (2017) found. However, this paper also argues that since the opening of the market in China, some of the commercial media is also influenced by the liberalist ideology to some extent, thus serving as a watchdog. However, this does not mean that the “Chinese government’s media control is dysfunctional” (Tong, 2014, p. 362).

Although this paper has utilized the existing literature to find out to what extent the news content on pollution in China is produced under the influence of the social system, it does not mean that the paper is without limitations. Firstly, most of the previous research only used samples from China Daily, which is well known to be a mouthpiece of the Chinese government. This may decrease the validity. Secondly, most of the literature used content analysis. However, the sample quantity is different across the different studies and the samples are relatively small and event-driven overall. Meanwhile, the study only focuses on the macro-societal level of analysis, neglecting the individual and other levels of influence concerning the media coverage. Future studies should engage with a relatively high number of news stories in order to conduct content analysis to consider the other variables as well in order to test the media coverage under the influence of social systems.

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