THE GREAT JOURNALISTIC WALL IN CHINA: PREEMPTIVE BOUNDARY WORK IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI

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Introduction

This study explores how Chinese journalists perceive, use, and report on artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and the reflected journalist roles. Through qualitative analysis of 18 in-depth interviews with Chinese journalists from various news organizations, the study examines how journalists, as both users and mediators of algorithms, shape public understanding while influenced by the sociotechnical and algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017; Jasanoff, 2015) surrounding AI. The findings reveal that despite concerns over the opaque knowledge apparatus underpinning the AI value construction, Chinese journalists strive to maintain critical reporting without contributing to media hype. Engaging with the literature on the boundaries and boundary work of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, 2019), the study argues that Chinese journalists deploy preemptive boundary work to define their profession, as well as safeguard journalistic autonomy (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022), involving dismissing the potential benefits of GenAI tools, building AI anchors that are less 'real' so that people could easily identify the use of AI tools that justifies the investments in journalistic innovation, and insisting on human being the final gatekeepers. Positioned within China's unique political and media landscape, the research underscores the complexities of journalistic practice in the AI era.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the study engages works on boundary work in journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, 2019), which refers to the active process by which various actors define and delimit the contours of legitimate journalism. This concept is particularly relevant in the field of journalism due to the constant questions surrounding what counts as journalism and who can be considered a journalist, especially in the GenAI era. The study inquiries about the types of boundary works employed, including expansion, expulsion, and protection of autonomy, as well as the areas of focus, such as the actors, the practices, and the professionals (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, 2019).

In addition, journalism takes on a unique form in the Chinese context due to the country's political and cultural environment. This state-driven approach to journalism significantly influences the roles and responsibilities of journalists in China. Research on journalism in China reveals a complex landscape shaped by political, economic, and technological factors (Meng, 2018; Ren & Dan, 2022). Chinese journalists navigate between watchdog and loyal facilitator roles, critically examining algorithmic systems while portraying the state as a responsible steward of technological development (Ji et al., 2024).

Based on the above literature, the research questions were threefold.
First, we need to understand the actual cases of AI technologies being used in journalistic practice. Hence, the first research question asks:

RQ1: What AI technologies have been used or developed in what journalistic processes? What journalistic processes are the journalists not interested in involving AI?

Then, we dive into why the journalists want to or not want to use AI by identifying the opportunities and challenges they associate with AI:

RQ2: What are the promises and perils that journalists associated with using AI technologies in journalistic processes?

While RQ2 investigates the motivation to use or not to use AI, the conditions for such are also of interest. Hence, the third and final research question asks:

RQ3: What are the conditions that (could) further or hinder the use of AI technologies in the journalistic process identified by journalists?

Method and Data

Befitted by the research questions, this study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews and a thematic analytical approach to explore the Chinese journalists' algorithmic imaginaries, their strategies in navigating the AI hype, and the journalistic role reflected in the process. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who represent a diverse range of media organizations in China. The sample includes 18 journalists working in different beats, different formats of main journalistic outputs, and a mixture of types of media outlets at various levels (including one freelancer), and geographical locations, ensuring different media organizations operating in China were represented.

Data were collected by the author through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between February and September 2024. All interviews were transcribed by AI tools approved by the IT department and Ethical Review Board at [Blinded for review]. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo for qualitative data analysis. Inspired by an abductive approach to case study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) and thematic analytical method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three stages of coding were carried out to first generate descriptive code, then interpretive codes, and lastly, categorized into

larger categories based on reemerging patterns and were honed into four themes that corresponded with the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

To answer RQ1 of what technologies are used in what journalistic processes, Chinese newsrooms exhibit similarities as their Western counterparts of the 'bright and shiny syndrome' (Min & Fink, 2021) to some extent, experimenting with some AI tools, but sometimes without newsroom AI strategies. What is most striking is probably the use of automated 'content risk management' involving machine learning and computer vision in filtering sensitive images and texts in journalistic production. Chinese journalists expressed that they like the tool to avoid 'risks of making mistakes'. Moreover, the AI news anchor is increasingly popular with lower cost, but they were made deliberately not 'real' so that the newsrooms could 'show to the boss and audience that this is AI and journalistic innovation'.

In terms of RQ2 of the promises and perils, the Chinese journalists, unlike their Western counterparts (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024), who are eager to embrace GenAI, do not particularly believe in the 'transformative power' in their professional practice. While they talk about the advent of AI resembling another round of the industrial revolution on the societal level, they somehow do not see AI having a huge impact on their workflow, insisting on irreplaceable human journalistic experience, such as 'critical thinking,' 'writing with care,' and 'emotional values.' Chinese journalists insist on making human editorial decisions and 'humans in the loop' in China's news production value chain. To that extent, automation and adoption of AI are not necessarily desirable, as 'without humans in the loop, who's going to be held accountable when mistakes happen, especially political mistakes?'.

RQ3 identifies the conditions further or hinder AI innovation in newsrooms. Monetary resources are at the top of the list, followed by technical talents, organizational culture, journalists' personal interests, and policies and guidelines in place. In particular, despite the nationwide AI hype (Kuai, 2025) and China's AI ambition, the distribution of technology is unequal within the Chinese news media landscape, with central media receiving more support, both in terms of the availability of the tools and training programs, while local media struggles to make ends meet to implement any journalistic innovation.

The findings illustrate AI's role in shaping journalistic boundaries by introducing new mechanisms for not only content creation and distribution but also risk management. The question of who is responsible when AI makes a mistake, especially in politically sensitive reporting, reflects boundary work in Chinese journalism that blends technological advancement with governmental expectations. The findings highlight that the boundary work in journalism is highly contextualized. In addition, more attention needs to be paid to a constellation of actors in the wider AI-mediated information ecosystem.

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