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Local News as Propaganda: Precarization and Media Control in Qinghai News

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Abstract

In this paper we report on the challenges that Chinese local news outlets face in the absence of independent newspapers and radio stations, the underfunding and under-training of journalists, and the effective use of digital-only local news outlets for state propaganda. To this end, we carried out in-depth interviews with 20 staff members, including department heads, editors, and journalists from *Qinghai News*, the local news outlet in the Chinese province of Qinghai, to examine the daily routine of a local news organization dedicated to state media propaganda. Our results also show that journalists are cognizant of the overzealous grip of the central government on the press, but that low pay, dwindling professional opportunities, limited financial support for career progression, and management inaction are the main reasons for the high attrition rate in the Chinese local news industry. The paper concludes with an overview of the local news industry in China and the relative differences to the sector in Western industrialized countries.

Keywords

Local news; Propaganda; China; Precarization; Qinghai; State media

Introduction

The reorganization of the news industry in the West was particularly damaging for local news outlets, which struggled to maximize their audience while also cutting on costs. The ensuing digital-only, and ultimately the platformization of the news industry, accelerated the concentration of resources in national mainstream media that managed to respond, and transition with relative ease, to the rapid rise of self-publishing platforms. Such reorganization of the news business was however not suitable for local news, whose fortunes followed continuous decline, funding shortages, and reduced traffic to their websites.

As a result, resources dedicated to covering local politics declined in the US during the early twenty-tens (Martin & McCrain, 2019), a trend compounded by the ensuing brain-drain that moved talent from local news outlets to large urban areas. During this period, the number of journalists in employment decreased and many local news outlets ceased to circulate (Nygren & Althén, 2014). These trends were consolidated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when much brick-and-mortar business that survived the digital upheaval finally closed (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Newman et al., 2016; Peterson, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2016).

This rather hostile economic environment for the local news industry is however largely circumscribed to Western industrialized countries. In China, local news outlets emerged during this period as digital-only, state-sponsored and controlled news outlets in a period of booming economic activity and media convergence (Li et al., 2021). Despite the relative lack of proper journalistic training, as the news outlets were established as government departments to relay official statements where journalistic standards are not usually observed, Chinese local news industry amassed considerable readership locally due to the authoritative and official dimension of the information they relayed and the support for the local communities where they operate.

It is indeed the state propaganda dimension of local news in China that makes *Qinghai News* an interesting case study. While considerable attention has been given to state-sponsored propaganda that crosses national borders, a set of influence operations broadly defined as foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), less attention has been given to domestic propaganda outside the literature on tabloids in Western-centric news outlets (Bastos, 2019; Chadwick et al., 2018). Chinese influence operations set in the global stage are dedicated to promoting nationalism with a narrative that elevates fighting and dominance using militaristic tropes. These tropes have been thoroughly explored in the Chinese corps of hawkish ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomats mirroring the patriotic blockbuster Rambo-style movie *Wolf Warrior 2*, where a Chinese commando saves compatriots in a war-torn African country by defeating Western-led mercenaries (Zhong et al., 2020).

These campaigns show a determination in propping nationalistic sentiments and the military prowess that boost China’s influence and control of global narratives (Hille, 2020), a strategic priority for the Chinese government in a period of growing international tensions (Griffiths, 2021). The narratives sponsored by the Chinese government present considerable variation, with the militaristic tropes and frames employed by national official press deviating from local propaganda initiatives, much like the frames of Chinese national propaganda differ from the cultural sensibilities of Western audiences even when addressing the same topic. Figure 1 unpacks these tangible differences with a set of military parades covered by photojournalists employed by the Agence France-Presse compared with a set of photos produced by the China News Service.



Figure 1: Coverage of military parades by the Agence France-Presse (left) and China News Service (right)

In the following, we unpack these questions by probing the working conditions of staff members of Qinghai’s local news outlet and the extent to which this local news outlet is indelibly tied to government propaganda, a trend that is also observed, albeit in a more limited capacity, in Western local news outlets. With most of the extant literature on local news dedicated to outlets in Europe and the US, we expect the results of this study to shed important light on how local news organizations are structured and have evolved to adapt to digital platforms in China.

Previous work

Local news has been pivotal in building a sense of community and democratic trust in the Western world (Abernathy, 2018), with reports often ascribing a central role for local news in the communities they operate (Nielsen, 2015), furnishing the commons and providing local social cohesion (Wadbring & Bergström, 2017) as well as a sense of belonging (Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2011). Local news is markedly defined by geography, culture, and audience distribution (Aldridge, 2007). This contributes to the expectation that it will signal and enforce norms and

traditions of a local community, publicize events in the region, and express social expectations and value norms that may in fact hold no news value (Bowd, 2017, 2021; Halpern, 2005). Ultimately, their local event-based coverage fosters the community sense of belonging by allowing the readership to ‘locate’ each other in the local context (Nielsen, 2015).

Local news coverage is of course supported by advertising (Reader, 2012), stemming in particular from local business and sponsorship (Martin & McCrain, 2019; McCollough et al., 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), including the critical financial support offered by political advertising from local governments (Franklin & Richardson, 2002). Indeed, localism remains central to regional newspapers, with front pages largely dedicated to local activities and dominated by local elite sources (Bowd, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016); reporting covers stories circumscribed to administrative boundaries; and the editorial process relies on narrower range of sources that are often authoritative (Bell, 1991; Franklin, 1986; O’Neill & O’Connor, 2008). This leads to the perception that many local news outlets are extensions of government propaganda, a predicament that is only worsened in contexts where the press is not free or only partially free (Franklin, 2008, 2010).

Despite the critical role in community building played by local news, the industry is facing a crisis of audience fragmentation and declining readerships – particularly in Western industrialized countries (Prat, 2018). Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) attribute the steady decline in local coverage to the growing preference for political information that has abated the news industry of recent. This trend is at odds with 20th century news coverage when newsprint was the primary vehicle for day-to-day information, and not only for political and hard news coverage (Martin & McCrain, 2019). This epochal transition in the patterns of news consumption unfolded alongside the development of “media for all and the spread of journalism careers”

(Bakker, 2012, p. 629) with attendant economic, quality, and ethical issues discussed in the literature (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016).

Local businesses and governments have taken note of this downward trend brought about by technological advances and invested in internet-based cultural media as a remedy to the failing fortunes of daily local newspapers (Nielsen, 2015). This included inroads into social media platforms to drive citizen engagement with politics and allowing space for citizens to hold politicians to account (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Hopkins & Pettingill, 2015; Shaker, 2014; Snyder Jr & Strömberg, 2010), all the while preserving the geographical component of the coverage that defines local and regional newspapers (Bowd, 2017). Unfortunately, digital platforms also maximized incidental exposure to news sources and allowed users to ‘find news’ across a number of websites and social media platforms (McCollough et al., 2017). Local news was poorly positioned to compete in the national or global wholesale market of news, as their business continue to report on local issues and rely on local politicians and government representatives as their primary sources (Nielsen, 2015).

National news outlets also experienced these downward pressures that led to staff redundancies and widespread closure of newsrooms (Zion et al., 2016), with the remaining workforce increasingly relying on government pre-packaged news and resisting to leave their comfort zone (Harcup, 2004; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015), pressures that compounded the lack of innovation in the newsroom and the tendency toward homogenization in reporting. These economic pressures exacerbated the employee retention in the local news industry, which was already contending with low wages, poor working conditions, little to no professional training, and long hours that led to high turnover and poor career prospects (Pecke, 2004). As such, and despite the crises observed in the news industry in the past two decades, journalism jobs

increasingly were increasingly concentrated in large urban areas with intense technological development and a concentration of new media industries (Ford & Ali, 2018), a development that further depressed the local news industry (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

These challenges faced by the press in the West differ in fundamental ways from developments observed in China. While the digital media transition in the West was driven largely by the parent company, which sought to provide staff with some leeway to adapt to the new environment (Jenkins & Jerónimo, 2021; Jerónimo et al., 2022), the transition from traditional to digital media in China was entirely set by the Communist Party's Central Reform Leadership Group. This centralized initiative established a timeline for reforms to be implemented according to local conditions, including the relative incidence of media convergence (Li et al., 2021; Yin & Liu, 2014), but in China the national press also adapted better, faster, and to greater financial success than the local new industry, which was portrayed as risk-averse and dependent on "government grants and poverty reduction funds" (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 37).

The official press in China sits in opposition to what is referred to as 'citizen media.' Citizen media lacks the resources of professional journalists working with the official press but offers a venue for citizens to report, comment, or share subjective opinions and hearsay. In comparison with 'citizen media,' the newsmaking process of the official press undergoes rigorous fact-checking, editorial oversight, and governmental curation, and thus offers some accountability and objectivity. By virtue of having little to no competition, the official press routinely shapes the public agenda by selecting which news stories to feature on the front page and which ones to conceal. More critically, the relative abundance of unverified and junk news on citizen media,

particularly on social media, provides a justification for ‘governmental intervention,’ i.e., the censorship of information by the Chinese regime (Wang & Mark, 2013).

Cognate research on the Chinese press often focused on media convergence, a process through which the official press would be slightly exposed to the commercial news industry. This body of work also explored the uneven state control over social media, which has occasionally forced regional governments to resolve local issues (Huang & Lu, 2017), and may have provided a relative respite from the strictures of the Great Firewall of China (Griffiths, 2021). While social media allow for a broader inclusion of opinions than found in the typical news broadcasts, the local news industry in China has largely relied on social media channels to offload traditional media content with little consideration to the affordances of social media (Li et al., 2021). Indeed, cognate research found that even when the commercial press in China is aligned with the standards of liberal journalism by practicing more watchdog journalism, it still placed an emphasis on the party as the source for news much like the official press (Wang et al., 2018).

There are however important differences in the news industry in China. Official and commercial press are segmented into different journalistic traditions or discourses that combine market-oriented newsmaking with state propaganda to various degrees. Pan and Lu (2003) contrasted the official press of the Communist Party that regards news organizations as propaganda outfits dedicated to promoting party policies with the Confucian intellectual discourse where journalism is expected to enlighten the public and serve the nation’s interests. These journalistic traditions intersect and interact with the values of professional journalism centered on objectivity, autonomy, and rationality, but also with the market-oriented journalism for whom news is a product for consumption. The coexistence of these journalistic traditions

show that professional norms and values can vary substantively across China, particularly within local news outlets (Meng & Zhang, 2022). These journalistic traditions also negotiate the strictures of the Marxist view of journalism to substantively different outcomes.

The Marxist view of journalism is based on the idea that journalism should free itself from the interests of the ruling class and media barons to serve the interests of the working class and oppressed groups in society. Grounded on Marxist political philosophy and influenced by the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the Marxist view of journalism emerged as an instrument to confront the country's historical dependence on imperial capitalism more than an effort to establish standards for quality journalism. As such, the Marxist conception of history lend itself into a primitive communist doctrine of the press that denounces journalism's subservience to capitalism (Rüdiger & Daros, 2022).

In the West, this tradition of journalism evolved from an agenda focused on promoting socialist values and ideas to a journalistic ethos dedicated to exposing and criticizing the inequalities and injustices of the capitalist system. In its original inception, however, the Marxist view of journalism defines the media as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion that can be used to promote revolutionary change. In the West, particularly during the Cold War period, the Marxist view of journalism was central in providing a critical perspective on political and economic issues, often offering a platform for alternative voices and marginalized groups in society. In the Western context, this tradition of journalism evolved to post-Marxist values dedicated to radical and democratic politics that became associated with the concept of 'media democracy' (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006), with a core belief that media ownership and control should be more widely distributed among the population instead of being in the hands of a few powerful corporations or individuals.

In the Chinese context, however, the Marxist view of journalism entails a doctrine dedicated to ensuring compliance. Editors and reporters across China are required to attend ideological training that imparts the Marxist view of journalism and have to pass multiple-choice tests on the subject. Journalists who publish stories that violate the Communist Party policy risk being fired and some have served time due to the stories they published (Zhao, 2016). The resurgence of heavily censored media directed by the Communist Party reasserted the Marxist view of journalism, heralded as a critique of journalistic professionalism in the Western liberal democracies. As a consequence, market-oriented legacy media in China have to strike a difficult balance between the journalistic professionalism and acceptable journalistic practices in China (Meng & Zhang, 2022).

The official press faces no such pressures, but this comfortable position is largely restricted to Party media. Local news organizations in China have to content with limited resources, with the resource allocation following the agenda set by the government despite the existing income stream from advertising (Huang & Lu, 2017). The object of this study, *Qinghai News*, is no exception to these developments. Like most regional newspapers in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic countries (WEIRD), *Qinghai News*' focus is almost entirely dedicated to local news, with little room left for news outside their strict regional boundaries (Funk, 2013). But unlike news outlets in WEIRD countries, and much like most Chinese news outlets, *Qinghai News* is guided by the Marxist view of journalism working towards promoting Chinese traditional culture, a set of doctrines that is perhaps more aptly described as a multi-layered cultural industry controlled by the central government (Tong, 2010).

Despite the country's constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and of the press, these guarantees are in practice routinely violated with total impunity (Xu & Albert, 2014). Indeed, the

principle of party-controlled media is integral to Chinese Marxist view of journalism, which also entail propaganda efforts to instill the ‘party spirit’ and to translate Marxism to the masses (Ma & Liu, 2021; Yang, 2021), a set of guidelines that was later expanded to include initiatives to control the public opinion (Qing, 2021). Over the past decades, the Chinese Marxist view of journalism yielded a multi-layered cultural industry that enforced party ideology controlled in its entirety by the central government (Tong, 2010). The grip of the Communist party on Chinese press also extends to the material organization of the news industry, which was conceived in a three-tier system including local or provincial, municipal or regional, and finally district centers.

Objectives

In light of the above, we seek to probe whether the local news industry in China is a ‘mouthpiece’ of the Chinese Communist Party or, alternatively, provides news coverage of local events that are relatively independent from the central government propaganda machine. Our first research question thus consists of exploring the extent to which the newswork carried out by *Qinghai News* journalists is informed by the central government of China (RQ1). Our second research question takes stock of the literature on local news outlets and probes into the working conditions of staff members of *Qinghai News*, with a topical emphasis on the integration between content from the Chinese official press and social media platforms (RQ2).

Data and Methods

Qinghai News covers the northwestern province of Qinghai, a large landlocked province located on the Tibetan Plateau with relatively low population density. It borders Gansu, Xinjiang,

Sichuan, and of course the Tibet Autonomous Region on the southwest, with Tibetans accounting for a fifth of the population of Qinghai, and to which Qinghai is connected through the Qinghai–Tibet railway. As an ethnic minority region, Qinghai is a region of great cultural diversity that includes Tibetan, Mongolian, Hui, and Tu communities. The language barrier and cultural differences between ethnic groups in the region can lead to a conflict of values in the development and reporting of news, with journalists routinely carrying out work across different languages and dialects, which often compounds the challenges but also the opportunities for the work of journalists (Singer, 2004).

We devised an interview protocol and relied on semi-structured interviews thematically coded to explore the evolving landscape of local news in China, a method that has been extensively tested in the field (Bastos & Mercea, 2016; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). The open-ended and flexible nature of the method allows the researcher to probe with relative nuance the many conflicting views and insights from professionals that offer different perspectives (Dearnley, 2005). As such, the semi-structured interviews helped to explore individual's reflections on the evolving themes and their reaction to the research questions. After the data was collected, interview transcripts were processed with a combination of thematic and typological interview clustering procedures (Huberman & Miles, 1984).

The interview themes were then classified through a deductive and inductively coding process to identify excerpts that supported the research questions driving this study (Saldaña, 2016). To ensure a broad range of interviewees that could yield comprehensive insights, the research team classified the interviewee cohort into three groups based on the staff structure of *Qinghai News*. The first group consisted of labor contract staff, including journalists and editors, who are integral to the local news industry and could offer detailed information about the

newsmaking process in the organization. The second group comprised management staff, whose experience in the field provides important insights into the development of the local news industry in China. The final group consisted of former staff members who left the organization in the last five years.

A total of 23 employees were invited to partake in this study through the course of six months. From this cohort, we managed to interview 20 staff members who worked for the organization for an average of nine years. The relatively lengthy period allocated for interviews allowed our team to work around employment schedules, retirements, reassignments, and to meet the constrained schedule of those who were less available or willing to be interviewed. This approach, along with the extended period allocated to interviews, allowed us to achieve low attrition with a recruitment rate of 87%. From the 20 employees interviewed, eight are management, nine are active staff (including journalists and editors), and three are ex-employees who left *Qinghai News* in the last five years due to the limited development in the local news industry.

The interview protocol was designed to explore the different professional roles played by the interviewees, with a common thread that explored the development of the local news industry in China and a set of questions that elicited thoughts on the talent shortage in the local media industry. While the questions were tailored to the roles performed by the interviewee, the interview process remained flexible and allowed interviewees to address the limited development of local journalism in the area. Given the relatively broad composition of the interviewed cohort, the interview process was segmented across two key themes: government propaganda and the local news industry, the central research questions that informed this study. The interviews ranged from half an hour to two hours and were conducted in Chinese. Informed consent was

sought and obtained from interviewees prior to the interview. Interview data was anonymized to preserve the identify and privacy of the participants in this study.

Results

Local News as Government Propaganda

Qinghai News was established in 2001 and is the most visited government news website in the Qinghai province. It falls under the jurisdiction of the *Qinghai Internet News Center*, a governmental institution that reports to the Publicity Department of the Qinghai Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, which also oversees the Qinghai Provincial People's Government Website and the Qinghai Provincial Government Tibetan Website. Both the *Qinghai News* and the Qinghai Tibetan Website follow a similar workflow where content that appears on the website is also shared on public WeChat channels, which account for a considerable share of the traffic to the organization's websites. Figure 2 shows the public WeChat channels of both news organizations side by side.



Figure 2: *Qinghai News* (left) & *Qinghai Tibetan News* (right) public WeChat channels. The screenshot of *Qinghai News* shows public announcements about sports and arts events, while the screenshot of *Qinghai Tibetan News* features festive celebrations and announcements about public service.

The Qinghai Internet News Center has 53 full-time staff members, with an average age of just over 35. From this cohort, 11 hold a higher education degree and are dedicated news professionals, including journalists and editors, with 7.5% also holding a Master’s degree. The

Publicity Department of Qinghai Province Committee is a fully-fledged propaganda arm of the government that manages public affairs, ‘public opinion guidance,’ and of course Qinghai-Tibetan-related information, propaganda included. *Qinghai News* is therefore fully funded by the government and therefore no reporting critical to the government is featured on its pages. As such, *Qinghai News* plays a pivotal role in the censorship program of the Chinese regime, which is often referred to with the euphemistic notion of ‘public opinion guidance’ and ‘public opinion regulation.’ The most common description of *Qinghai News* used by interviewees was indeed ‘mouthpiece of the government.’ Figure 3 shows the *Qinghai News* front page in 18 October 2022.



Figure 3: frontpage of *Qinghai News* on 18 October 2022 showing news related to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

We approach the first research question driving this study by identifying the extent to which the work carried out by Qinghai News journalists is directed by the central government. News outlets in China are either commercial or government websites (Zhang, 2012), with the former being driven by market economy and the latter constituting an integral part of the political system and an outright tool for political propaganda (Tong, 2010). Party media is a central component of Chinese Marxist doctrine (Yang, 2021) and *Qinghai News* is no exception. News coverage is not only aligned with the central government policies, but it also echoes the Chinese Communist Party talking points, a state of affairs often subsumed in the assertion that *Qinghai News* is a ‘mouthpiece’ of the Chinese Communist Party used to maintain and enforce political homogeneity, policy enforcement, and the dissemination of ideology.

The principle of Party-controlled media was developed by the CPC over decades and is an important constituent in the Party’s continued grip on power following the Chinese Communist Revolution (Wang, 2021). The Central People’s Broadcasting Station (CPB) designs propaganda rules for Chinese media and indicates how news should be reported, including the specifics to the scope of the coverage (Brady, 2017). This centralized approach to information management and censorship that shaped the Chinese Marxist doctrine of journalism relies on regional hubs to spread and maintain ideological congruence and homogeneity, commonly depicted as civic cultures and identities (Ewart, 2000).

The directive to celebrate the local culture often translates to news articles covering the economic development and regional culture of the region. *Qinghai News* thus features the ‘Qinghai Tour’ yearly in July to showcase the unity of the Qinghai region and the economic development of the population. This is not too far a departure from local news outlets in Western

countries that are equally bounded in space and time, often established to maintain the community informed, to publicizing events in the region, and that actively encourage citizen participation to forge a sense of community (Hess, 2013; Nielsen, 2015). But unlike local news outlets in the West, the scope of the coverage is defined by the Marxist view of journalism. Interviewees mentioned that their reporting is either changed or deleted entirely whenever they write about social issues or socially contentious events that deviate from this format.

Another key component of the Chinese Marxist view of journalism is the notion of ‘national character’ (Wang, 2021), which pivots along the lines of educating, reflecting, and learning from the people, usually subsumed under the Marxian term ‘masses.’ In practice, however, interviewees note that only a limited range of sources feature in the news composition, and therefore only a limited set of frames, so that the ‘voice of the masses’ is a rather unidirectional stream of political propaganda stemming from the central government leadership, with different voices being notably unseen or unheard, and the purported masses largely left out of the journalistic reporting. Indeed, interviewees mentioned that the largest audience for *Qinghai News* is the very Communist Party leadership, with the website becoming a showcase for the work of the local government.

Under the constraints of Chinese party committee media, *Qinghai News* plans and produces content focused on key economic developments and major activities in Qinghai area while also providing basic information about the Qinghai province. But interviewees were in relative agreement that the local news industry is directly controlled by the government. Information sourcing is therefore closely dependent on the local government, a process that necessarily sets the agenda of news selection and production (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). Journalists and editors work much like government employees, enjoying the prestige conferred by position and

enforcing the party line rather than reporting the news (Hong, 1998; Zhao, 1998). In this context, actual news coverage critical to the regime is banned (Tong, 2010) and investigative journalism is incipient if at all existing. In summary, the data collected from our set of interviews largely confirms our expectations about RQ1, as the work carried out at *Qinghai News* is heavily influenced, if not directly determined, by the central government.

Newsmaking in Qinghai News

We approached RQ2 by asking interviewees to describe their daily routine and their work toward the integration of legacy and digital media. Unlike national newspapers or radio and television stations, *Qinghai News* has no media credentials of its own. As such, the workflow in *Qinghai News* is relatively simple and entails a single website, a public WeChat account, and the Damei Qinghai Cloud App. Content that appears on the organization's website is later posted on WeChat and the app with little adjustment to the interactive nature of social media platforms. Politicians routinely assign topics to be covered by journalists and may also determine which sources of information will be featured in the story (Tong, 2010). *Qinghai News* is nonetheless quite effective in its mission by quickly disseminating information, propaganda or otherwise, to its large and interactive audience. Interviewers also mentioned that *Qinghai News* plays the role of an intermediary between the public and the Chinese government, but the interviewed cohort refrained from unpacking how this intermediary also monitors and enforces the party line.

There are substantive impediments to investigative reporting in *Qinghai News*. Developing stories usually break on social media, which are then checked and identified by the journalist assigned to cover it. News production usually starts with assignments to journalists who promptly contact their sources and networks. The reporting regulations, however, prevent

reporting directly based on social media messages, so the story needs to be verified before it can be reported. Once the story appears on the website, editors and journalists share the top stories of the day on social media. Journalists are however prevented from placing any comments as a participant that may be perceived as detrimental to party principles. Three participants in the group endorsed this policy and questioned the credibility of public comments in addition to the fact they run counter to the doctrine that public opinion must be ‘regulated’ or ‘guided’ in the right direction.

One in four interviewees, however, mentioned that the process for sourcing information invariably goes through local liaison officers. Indeed, the protocol for obtaining information in *Qinghai News* requires contacting such government officers. There is an intricate web of departments from central, provincial, and district information and publicity departments that need to be informed in writing and in advance so that the work can proceed. This unsurprisingly imposes a restriction on the scope of what can or cannot be reported. Indeed, 55% of interviewees mentioned several constraints to the reporting of news with *Qinghai News*, including the lack of financial compensation, with only a small number of interviewees (10%) pointing that *Qinghai News* is getting better.

Unlike news organizations in wealthy urban centers, organizations operating in poorer and less densely populated areas suffer from chronic news drought (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). All interviewees mentioned that *Qinghai News* has very limited access to capital, technology, and talent. Journalists are reduced to spokespersons of government organizations, who also provide guidance on how the news should be presented, edited, and ultimately published. This renders the practice of verification (multi-sourcing, verification, and corroboration), a common denominator to many news organizations’ code of practice, all but impossible. Newsmaking at

Qinghai News is often reduced to using prepackaged news endlessly rewritten and republished by the news organizations (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008).

Although the resulting product may be of poor journalistic quality, *Qinghai News* has no direct competitor and enjoys a monopoly on the dissemination of news in the province. As such, regional and provincial news outlets such as *Qinghai News* are ultimately the only sources of information available in the region. News items that featured on *Qinghai News* are aligned with content that appeared in the Qinghai Daily Newspaper, but the *Qinghai News* staff work in day and night shifts to cover emergencies and publish breaking news. The Qinghai Provincial Government Tibetan Website, also under the Qinghai Provincial Party Committee of the CPC, is another branch of the government focused on uniting minority groups, celebrating local culture, and providing information to the Tibetan areas of Qinghai through a variety of propaganda channels from newspapers to mobile and WeChat accounts.

The result is a workplace with high turnover and volatile employee attrition. Interviewees agree that talent is not retained, a problem compounded by the economic crisis and an employment model in the news industry leading to an increasingly casualised workforce (Bakker, 2012). In the case of *Qinghai News*, 41 of the 52 members of staff had no job security and are under temporary contracts. In sharp contrast, all eleven members of the management team are civil servants of the provincial government. All respondents said that good talent could not be retained, as they were unable to earn sufficient income. In an attempt to buck this trend, *Qinghai News* carried out a personnel reform in June 2022 that raised the number of professional staff from 21% to 34%.

The asymmetries between civil servants and the casualised workforce extend beyond salaries, with expenses report being also another point of contention for *Qinghai News* staff.

While civil servants are given a corporate card to cover their expenses, the remainder of the staff needs to secure approval beforehand, pay for the expenses out of pocket, and then file a report for vouched reimbursement. Interviewees complained that receipts often fail to comply with the regulations, and they have no option but to pay for them. Indeed, one in five interviewees mentioned that *Qinghai News* is in a constant state of financial crisis. Another frequent objection from staff refers to the inability of senior management to develop tools and strategies to accelerate convergence across media formats. *Qinghai News* was recently restructured to make room for a new department dedicated to digital media. For most interviewees, however, the creation of the new department had a direct impact on their workload, with the tasks increasing across media formats despite the absence of new staff.

The high workload is another problem mentioned by the interviewed cohort, a problem compounded by poor resource allocation, limited if existing training support, and the absence of guidance from staff members in positions of leadership. While *Qinghai News* offers regular training sessions every year, 35% of interviewees mentioned that there was no training related to professional skills. *Qinghai News* has only five full-time journalists, and 20% of interviewees credited the absence of professional staff to the news drought experienced in the organization. The staff nonetheless strives to explore social platforms as a channel for information diffusion and often experiments with different formats, including H5, posters, and AI bots that are featured in their WeChat public video channel. Staff are often expected to juggle multiple tasks from news editing to business management.

The digital media department of *Qinghai News* encapsulates the precarity of the work that we sought to chart with our second research question. While the digital media department includes about 10 employees, none of them are civil servants, as permanent staff contracts are

restricted to department leaders, a problem that is then compounded by the limited cooperation across departments. Efforts to translate the rigid news content of the Chinese official press to digital platforms rest on individuals who often have to work against senior management, whose dedication to the news organizations is limited because the leadership of the Qinghai Internet News Center, to which Qinghai News is a subsidiary, changes every three years with substantive impact to the workflow of employees. This sense of alienation from the workplace is reinforced by the limited opportunities for promotion extended to the staff of *Qinghai News*. In addition to low pay, no job security, high workload, and minimal training, the precarious working conditions of local journalists and the absence of other opportunities lead to low motivation, dwindling readerships, and homogenous content.

Discussion

China's ambitions and strategic control of the media market have intensified in the aftermath of the 2018 US-China trade war, with Chinese state media addressing not only the domestic audience through a controlled media environment, but increasingly more so diverse audiences that are local and international, including foreign social media platforms that are censored or banned from operating in China. This concerted effort dovetails different narratives centered around China's role in the world and counter Western narratives that stoke fear of China's global influence. This strategic goal is encapsulated in Xi Jinping's 2013 directive to 'tell the Chinese story and to tell it well' (Huang & Wang, 2019), a frame that is often construed as positive stories about the party, the leader, and the country with little room to critical or negative stories. This directive has led to a substantive increase of investments fronted by the Chinese state media across the world, often through the state-run foreign-language news channel China Global

Television Network (CGTN) that is owned by the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV). These efforts by the Chinese official press to engage Western audiences are accompanied by local initiatives to control narratives in the regional media that reflect China's global media strategy.

Such media strategies have tangible consequences to local news outlets like *Qinghai News*, which operates more like a government department than a media organization. Our set of interviews shows that this structure is particularly detrimental to the training and progression of talented and competent journalists who often work for the state media machine because independent journalism in China is highly restricted, so the struggle for quality journalism in China often takes place within the official press that is guided by the strictures of the Chinese Marxist view of journalism. These strictures represent a considerable departure from the Marxist tradition of critical journalism in the West, which has since moved from journalism criticism to a broad denunciation of the civil and ideological alienation promoted by the economic exploitation of sensationalism and the tabloidization of the news. This body of post-Marxist work is marked by an agenda dedicated to radical and democratic politics that is best positioned in the field of democratic theory (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006), whereas the Chinese Communist propaganda theory, and to a certain degree the broader Marxist view of journalism that undergirds it, stems from the original Soviet model with a highly centralized control of the information (Rid, 2020).

Conclusion

The picture portrayed by the interviewees is a challenging one due to underfunded and deteriorating working conditions (RQ2) on top of a highly centralized censorship system that

dramatically limits what can be reported as news (RQ1). Underpaid and understaffed newsroom are given assignments by government officials to provide a steady supply of propaganda, which is purposefully designed as a tool to regulate and monitor the public opinion. The geographical distance from the political center—Beijing—and the fact that Qinghai is an ethnic minority region deepen the government urge for effective propaganda strategies and policy campaigns that can reach the 56 ethnic minorities, where information needs to be tailored for multilingual and multiethnic regions.

The limited investment and the delayed development of Chinese local news outlets, largely reduced to government propaganda and outreach venues, is reflected in the workflow of *Qinghai News*. Chronically understaffed, journalists limit their activity to the website and WeChat public channels. This is in line with the reporting strategy of their sister news outlet, the *Tibetan WeChat public channel*, where audio news reporting features prominently. *Qinghai News* contributes to this propaganda effort by providing a means for government officials to liaise with hard-to-reach populations, including young people, in poorer and less densely populated areas in China.

Qinghai News funding, one must note, is entirely dependent on the local government. With no funding stream of its own, newsmaking is also tied to the government who is simultaneously the information source and the employer, a financial and incentive structure that is at odds with the requirements for independent, quality journalism. The local news industry in China thus put in perspective the dwindling fortunes of the local news industry in Western industrialized countries, where it also has little contact with the public and has been described elsewhere as ‘coldly detached’ (Batsell, 2015).

Qinghai News, finally, is part of a the large Chinese state media complex that is not only dedicated to the production and dissemination of news; it is primarily engaged in what has been referred to as ‘value expression’ (Bai, 2018), a top-down editorial directive that is adapting surprisingly well to algorithmic filtering, distributed gatekeeping, and other forms of automated control of information built on top of content recommendation systems. Indeed, the Chinese state media has successfully developed ‘mainstream algorithms,’ which are then embedded into social media platforms (Yu, 2017) to allow for government intervention and to provide a framework for ‘sharing responsibilities’ among stakeholders (Helberger et al., 2018). The successful implementation of such algorithms enables the Chinese state media to analyze user behavior data and monitor public opinion at scale and in near real-time, a security measure that is strategic for the Chinese Communist Party.

Despite the substantive investments in AI made by the Chinese government, and the ensuing development of sophisticated algorithms for monitoring public opinion, the interviewed cohort systematically identified that the institutional mechanisms in place—largely centered around daily newspapers, local radio, and television stations that continue to track well with older demographics—as not fitted for the development of digital media content. In the end, the study of *Qinghai News* shows that the adoption of digital technologies in China can be rather advanced in the national level but arrested in local areas, with evidence that it can be both fast-paced and lagging at the same time.

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