Abstract

Based on three-month ethnographic fieldwork among investigative journalists in Beijing News, this dissertation is about the transformation of printing journalism in a time of crisis. This study explores what specifically constitutes the crisis of Chinese printing journalism in general and investigative journalism in particular, and how they respond to the crisis. Existing western debate of newspaper crisis predominantly revolves around the rapid technological and economic change. Rooted in the ‘liberal-pluralist’ political economy of communication, however, my dissertation suggests that we also need to take the political factors into consideration when discussing the crisis of traditional media in China—an authoritarian country without media freedom. I argue that the crisis of Chinese printing journalism is not only the shrink in circulation and advertisement revenue and the technological impinging on traditional way of producing and distributing news, as their western counterparts; but also the increasingly narrowing space for critical coverage that Chinese political and investigative journalists appreciate and expect. The three facts-political control, economic recession, and technological innovation—are interwoven together and profoundly shape the Chinese printing journalism.

Under such situation, Chinese newsroom is under transformation. Taking an approach of sociology of news, my paper also examines how Beijing News and its investigative reporting team reshuffle the organizational structure to overcome the crisis. On the one hand, the reorganization is aimed at adapting to and
adopting new technologies to gain a toehold in the new editorial and business model; on the other hand, it is a rearrangement of its strategy in overcoming the political constraints and carrying out critical reporting. Different from the opinion from Tech-Utopian or Tech-Determinism who suggests that technology will completely reshape the structure of newsroom and journalistic practice, I argue that organizational tradition and culture make the complete redefinition impossible. Based on the reform strategy what I called a combination of ‘convergence’ and ‘de-convergence’, I suggest that Beijing News successfully keeps a balance between ‘embracing the online world’ and ‘keeping its tradition of pursuing for original and investigative journalism’. The well-established organizational routine should not be deemphasized in discussing the reconstruction of traditional newsroom at least for two reasons. Firstly, the professional routine overcomes the potential negative impact of new technology on quality journalism. Secondly, what strategies are adopted in the newspaper transformation is closely relevant to its structural and cultural feature. As a canary in the coal mine, Beijing News sets an example for many other printing newspaper around the country with difficulty in addressing the crisis, coming from whatever political, economic or technological aspects.
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