New Mainstream Media’s New Dilemma—Phenomenons, Limitations & Future Developments

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Abstract. On 18th Jan, an article calling for a journalist to “resign his job” was reposted with a massive number on the Internet. The journalist whom the article referred to was said to have written a press release in which an old, mute man “started talking” as he received a quilt from his local community. Such a paradox was speculated to occur as a result of the journalist carelessness as well as the press’ irresponsibility. The writer of the article comments: such an incident reflects the decay of the press media as well as the “Mainstream Media”. The Internet Era brings a wide variety of information sourced from unofficial organizations as well as individuals. The information is usually carried by non-objective opinions or specific interest-related demands. Nowadays, it is hard for an individual to tell whether the “news” is reliable or not. It is of great importance that Mainstream Media function as an official, reliable source of information and generate the so called “public interest” or “public values”, however such an expectation is not met [1]. What is (New) Mainstream Media and how should it position itself in the modern society? This paper analyzes the Qualitative Research Method (with case analysis) to conclude that the New Mainstream Media in China should function as the “Key Opinion Leader” of the Communist Party as well as its people, convey valuable information with authority and express the public needs of the whole society.

1. The concept of “New Mainstream Media”

The concept of “Mainstream Media” was originated from the west, firstly appeared during 1920s and carries multiple meanings and values. Chomsky (1997), in his work What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream, addressed this concept should also be referred as “Elite Media” or “Agenda Setting Media”, its major responsibility is to set the frame for news and guide the public opinion, while other media function under these settings. Mainstream Media produce and protect the mainstream and core values of the society.

Xinhua News Agency (2003) sets the “Six Principles” for Mainstream Media in China:

1. Speak for the Communist Party, the Government and its people;
2. Represent and convey mainstream social values;
3. Maintain reliability;
4. Record major events and track the pace of development;
5. Deliver to people of all social status;
6. Publish at a high volume, influence a wide range of people.

The Central Government of China firstly defined the idea of “New Mainstream Media” in 2014, in The Advice of Promoting the Co-Development of Traditional Media and Emerging Media. The Government urges to build “multiple New Mainstream Media with various forms, advanced means and great competitiveness. To interpret the above concepts, Shi (2015) noted that, Traditional Mainstream Media should be transformed into a more user-focused and open platform, under the help of Internet and other technologies that enable product developments, in order to sustain its leading position for public opinion guidance. Zhu (2014) pointed out that, it is “the guiding media that people first refer to when ambiguity rises”.

This essay suggests that, aligned with the above mentioned definitions as well as arguments, in
the modern world, it is the (New) Mainstream Media’s responsibility to screen out unreliable information, promote and protect social values and further tailor the media and information-related systems [2-4].

2. The Existing Defects & Limitations of Mainstream Media

2.1 “The Copycat”

In order to achieve the rapidity of reports, the whole process of publishing of traditional media, especially newspapers, is shortened and becomes less rigorous. Some journalists then started copying information or news directly from the Internet. Nowadays, it is a fairly common phenomenon for a newspaper article to share the exact content with its “Internet siblings”.

On 5th June, 2009, the well-known CCTV News reporter, Jing Luo, passed away. The news was immediately reported by Internet Media including Sina.com and Soho.com, while many mainstream newspaper agencies in Beijing stayed unconscious. Ironically, one of them started reporting this affair until the journalists read the Internet news. The news is published on another day and simply a direct copy from the Internet [5].

2.2 “The Invisible”

During the day of the massive explosion in Tianjin, 12th August, 2015, none of the local media reacted to the incident. Tianjin Daily, which was the fastest agency to report this event (the next day), mainly described about the “local government leaders’ instructions” and “touching moments” rather than the cause of the explosion and the impact of the disaster. The Tianjin Issue and Tianjin Safety failed to response to public’s major concerns, and were severely criticized by local citizens. Ten hours after the explosion, Tianjin TV was still broadcasting soap operas. People’s Daily and Guang Ming Daily (Central Government Media) did not report the incident until two days later, after President Xi and Prime Minister Li’s urge for public attention towards this disaster.

According to a research by ELEPHANT Research Institution, the top 5 rapid media reacting to this event were: Netease.com, Soho.com, Tencent, Sina.com and IFeng.com (all of which are business organizations) [6]. Such an “absence” of the Mainstream Media would necessarily lead to a failure to convey core and social values.

2.3 “The Exaggerator”

The Chinese Mainstream Media are now working in alliance in order to expand the spread of social core values, among which one is the “positive energy”. For instance, the Jiangxi Daily Press are now cooperating with the Official Website of Jiangxi Province to present a program called “Converging Positive Energy, Building China Dream-The Representatives of Jiangxi”, and this program is spoken highly by The Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs [7].

However, the concept of “positive energy” is ambiguous when noble behaviors are conducted. Furthermore, when it comes to donation, Mainstream Media tend to mistakenly equal the idea of charity with “touching, moving behaviors”. Little attention is being paid to the rationality or sustainability of the charitable behavior, it seems that the only criterion is whether the behavior is “touching” enough. In 2013, Guohua Sun, who retired from Caoqiao Junior High School, donated his private of 1.9 million yuan (leaving only 40 thousand yuan to himself as pensions) to his former employer as rewards to outstanding students & teaching staff and subsidies to students who have financial difficulties. Sun chose to, according to him, “donate to the nation” because his daughter who had suffered from cerebral palsy passed away early and his wife has senile dementia and “won’t spend much”. When receiving the donation, the Principle of the school mended a term so that under any expected circumstances Sun himself could use this fund as well, but the proposal was rejected.

When being asked about how to allocate the fund, Sun said, “As long as the money goes to outstanding students, the allocation does not really matter,” and “It is not of my business”. The Jiangsu Modern Times reported this story and elected Sun to be “2013 the top 10 inspiring persons
of Jiangsu”, “Chinese outstanding teacher”, “Chinese good man” and “2013 the most noble teacher in Jiangsu”. Sun’s local community even described Sun’s behavior as a collective honor.

The Mainstream Media as well as the governments did not realize that such a donation reflects an aged person’s financial awkwardness, his state of “choicelessness”, but were too busy converting this news into the propaganda of governments’ merits and “the Return of the Humanity”. In fact, Sun said that he has “heart, lung diseases and bad teeth” but that did not attract much attention.

A similar but better-know case is from Fangli Bai. In 1987, mister Bai donated 5 thousand yuan to support local students as he noticed that most of the teenagers in his village could not afford to receive education. Nevertheless, as a retired person, he could not sustain the fund. He then restarted his job as a pedicab driver. During the 18 years ever since he donated 350 thousand yuan to over 1000 students, and died because of malnutrition. In his final days, only one student who received his help paid a visit and left 5 thousand yuan. Bai said he felt guilty for his children as he had never provided any support to them under any condition, his reason was simple: they are grown-ups, and my support will only go to the young ones who cannot afford to receive education.

Five days after his death, an article titled with The Legend of Fangli Bai Reflects the Faultiness of Chinese Education System appeared on Renmin Website, with a final comment saying: Mister Bai has no choice but to become the modern Xun Wu (a beggar who supported countless students during Qing Dynasty), it is time that we invest more on education system [8]. Economist Dingding Wang commented: the tragedy just doubled, the society forces the poor kids outside the school and forces the poor, elderly to become the hero. The situation is even worse than Xun Wu’s [9].

As a matter of fact, in the western societies, there is a clear division between two types of donations: Charity and Commonweal. The former tend to be more individually-generated, and usually takes only a small part of the whole social donation funds; the latter one plays the major role, and is described as “the third force” apart from the government and the market. Commonweal are normally run by specific third parties, call for donation from individuals, but usually with a strictly limited amount. Its goal is to diminish “One Person Charity”. In the US over 70% of normal households support the Commonweal funds, and in average each individual would provide with 300 dollars to the organizations each year. There are over 1 billion people taking part in voluntary activities to raise funds annually. Such organizations boost the employment, and many of the employed are elites of various fields, as “how to spend the money” requires much professionalism and knowledge: Carnegie, in his work The Gospel of Wealth, expressed the idea that human beings need equal intelligence and ability to spend money wisely as to earn. Rockefeller explained that, an individual had to study and research on the project that he or she was donating to, and that required a great deal of time as well as effort. The only two choice is first, leave it to an agency or second, to stop donating. However, the latter one for him is impossible [10]. Jack Ma donates 20 million US dollars to University of Newcastle in Australia annually, while ascertaining the situation himself every five years in order to allocate the funds more rationally [11].

Yet as time goes by, tragedy of mister Bai and Sun in which elderly has to become the hero keeps on emerging. The Mainstream Media, at the same time, keep on reporting the “touching moments” without deeper thinking.

3. How to Build Mainstream Media Mainstream Consciousness

3.1 Strengthening the responsibility

Mainstream Media serve as spokesperson of the Communist Party and its people, facing citizens of different classes. What the Mainstream Media records must be able to stand the test of time and history. Mainstream Media people must take their professional responsibility and hold their bottom line. Actor Daoming Chen argued that the bottom line that a conscious person must hold is never be destructive to others and the society. Furthermore, Mainstream Media must be the protector of peoples’ interests. Yongyuan Cui revealed that some illegal businessmen invited him to endorse inferior products, while promising a payment over 1 million yuan. He said that, it does not matter whether he successfully created a TV program; but it does matter whether he leads the public to
buying inferior, hazardous products [12]. Mistakes and fault behaviors would be reduced with such professional responsibilities. Additionally, there is an urgent need to publish new, related laws including Information Law, Contract Law and Communication Law.

3.2 Mainstream media as a tool to diminish social gaps

We are experiencing an age where needs of individuals are divergent and mentalities of different social groups are likely to be unbalanced. Mainstream Media, with its significance and position, should be the major force to diminish these gaps. Mainstream Media, when it comes to social controversies, should view the issue with comprehensiveness and objectiveness, focusing on the Party’s as well as the government’s key policies, the practical difficulties, the concerns from the people, help to put the whole society’s various ideas into shape, while analyzing pros and cons for different classes and provide the potential social solutions. The leading position is not granted, only when Mainstream Media fully takes the responsibility and continuously innovates could it sustain its position.

3.3 Improve professionalism through various methods

3.3.1 University Education

In developed countries, these years have witnessed the rise of sub-majors including Politics Journalism, International Journalism and Sports Journalism. Such new subjects are the results of requirements for high quality news reports, and many journalists with specialism arise. Chinese Universities are now enrolling more students with science background as they own better stronger logical thinking abilities, which are vital in journalism.

3.3.2 In-job Training

Nowadays news and information are divided into specific fields including vehicles, sports, politics and etc. Some media agencies even position themselves as single field-oriented. Therefore the training program should not only focus on reporting-related technics but also the field knowledge that the person is attached to.

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Reference

[4] News Websites including websites of Xinhua and Renmin Press, for the definition of “New Mainstream Media”.


