



Is There Any News Left after Gatekeeping? A Journalistic Perspective from Beijing on the Multi-Level of Analysis

Nairui Xu

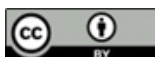
Beijing Normal University. Beijing, China. Email: [nairuixu\[at\]163.com](mailto:nairuixu[at]163.com)

Abstract

This study looks at how investigative journalists practice gatekeeping in the context of China. By combining with the hierarchical model of influence (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), this study revisits the relationship between influential factors from the aspects of politics, markets, and organizations, which are across all the levels. Based on the interviews with 25 investigative journalists in Beijing, this research suggests that influential factors do not always have a strong hierarchical relation between each other regarding what sort of information could turn out to be news. This situation is because journalists share varied perceptions about what influential factor can convert into a particular constraint.

Keywords

Investigative Journalism; China; Media; Gatekeeping; Journalism; Hierarchical Model of Influence



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons «Attribution» 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Остаются ли новости после Гейткипинга? Журналистский взгляд из Пекина на многоуровневый анализ

Сюй Найжуй

Пекинский педагогический университет. Пекин, Китай. Email: [nairuixu\[at\]163.com](mailto:nairuixu[at]163.com)

Аннотация

В данном исследовании рассматривается, как китайские журналисты, занимающиеся расследованиями, практикуют Гейткипинг. Используя иерархическую модель влияния (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), автор исследования анализирует соотношения между различными факторами с точки зрения политики, рынка и организаций, которые представлены на всех уровнях. Исследование, основанное на 25 интервью с пекинскими журналистами, практикующими расследования, показало, что факторы не всегда имеют устойчивую иерархическую связь между собой. Это зависит от того, какая конкретная информация может превратиться в новость. Подобная ситуация объясняется тем, что журналисты по-разному представляют себе, какой влиятельный фактор может превратиться в то или иное ограничение.

Ключевые слова

журналистские расследования; Китай; медиа; гейткипинг; журналистика; иерархическая модель влияния



Это произведение доступно по лицензии [Creative Commons «Attribution» \(«Атрибуция»\) 4.0 Всемирная](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Introduction

Gatekeeping widely refers to how raw information turns into news and the role that journalists perform in this process (Shoemaker, 2009; 2020). In journalism studies, various approaches have been used to investigate how gatekeeping is practised in different contexts encompassing many different social factors. In order to understand journalistic gatekeeping in non-Western areas, this study focuses on what gatekeeping means to Chinese investigative journalists, and how the gatekeeping practices influence the shape of news. Previous literature has examined how the selection of news among Chinese journalists is challenged by the triangulation of the Party-state, marketization and digital media and the way this challenge affects newsroom management, the individual activities of journalists, workflow and journalistic autonomy (Zhang, 2019; Brady, 2008; Cui & Lin, 2015). However, less research has centred on mapping out the relations between these items and what they bring to gatekeeping. In Beijing, the investigative journalism practiced there was seen as promoting the public interest, assuming a supervisory role with regards to public power and uncovering the truth for a long period of time (Li & Sparks, 2016). With the decline of this journalistic group in China, journalists' perceptions of what constraints caused such a decline are shifting. By looking into the investigative journalism in the case of Beijing, this study clarifies how journalists interpret the political, economic, and digital constraints on their reporting as influential factors over the process of news selection.

Moreover, political propaganda and disruptions from non-professional information outlets threaten news production worldwide (McNair, 2018; Waisbord, 2018), but the theoretical insights into this phenomena can become more nuanced with additional information from a non-Western context. By using empirical evidence, this study explores what constraints are taken into consideration as Chinese journalists select and process raw information into news and how they make sense of these constraints. This research shows that in the case of Beijing, journalists sometimes do not consider certain influential factors as constraints, and their experience shows that no factor is supremacy in deciding what information can pass the "gate".

Literature Review

What is gatekeeping?

Gatekeeping was initially introduced as a loosely-defined concept for understanding individual behaviour as well as the psychological reasons driving this behaviour (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). Lewin (1947) used the word "gate" metaphorically to explain how a decision is made and what occurs at the "gate" while a particular decision is being made. Such a decision concerns what fields can be entered and why, and what is rejected at the "gate" at an individual level.



Once gatekeeping was introduced to media studies, scholars developed a more contextualized understanding of gatekeeping to make sense of the relationships between the various media and journalistic practitioners and other social actors (Tandoc, 2018; Hellmueller & Li, 2015). As defined by Shoemaker (2020, online), “in addition to looking at various pairwise relationships between gatekeepers, gatekeeping theory should go beyond to instead consider the entire web of gatekeepers as a whole or system.” She reckoned that within the system, journalists are one of the elements working as gatekeepers (Shoemaker, 2020). Generally, gatekeeping explains how information is transmitted, communicated and delivered within societies by news organizations and how this processed information, namely, news, affects people’s knowledge concerning reality (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Valdeón, 2020). Inspired by Lewin (1947), Shoemaker (1991) subsequently developed this concept into a multi-level theory for addressing the connections between newsmakers and the environments within which they live. While newsmakers process information, their decision-making processes concerning what is deemed newsworthy are subject to their personal characteristics and experience, the cultures of the news organizations for which they work, and the ideologies of the social systems under which they live (Shoemaker, 1991; Valdeón, 2020). To Shoemaker, gatekeeping is the identification of the complexities inherent in news production and is a consequence of insufficient clarification concerning the various decisions that are made.

This concept of gatekeeping has become far more complicated in the digital age due to the media presence of citizen journalists, public opinion leaders, media activists and non-profit media organizations (Singer, 2014; Pearson & Kosicki, 2017; Wallace, 2018). As professional journalists and news organizations are vulnerable to both state and non-state forces, digitally-empowered social actors have complicated journalistic gatekeeping. Debates surrounding this issue have subsequently emerged. Critical enquiries will enrich this academic discourse into whether gatekeeping is still working today and how to update the gatekeeping model (Bruns, 2018; Vos & Thomas, 2019; Schwalbe, Silcock & Candello, 2015).

Gatekeeping and levels of analysis

A growing body of literature on gatekeeping analyses how journalists process raw information into the news as they are constrained or facilitated by different social actors. Scholars (Shoemaker et al., 2010; Vu, 2014; Bruns, 2018) suggested that gatekeeping is more than an information selection process. It also reflects journalists’ perceptions of what has the potential to become news. Journalists’ conceptualizations of news are not always consistent with their practices due to the variability in their individual characteristics, role perceptions, organizational rules, workflows and social systems (Shoemaker, 1991; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011).

Combined with the hierarchical model of influence, this gatekeeping model provides a clear structure for examining where the factors affecting gatekeeping come from and how they impact news selection. In this model, the micro-level of



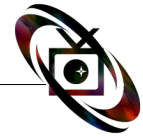
analysis investigates journalists' individual characteristics, which shed light on how demographics and unique experiences shape their practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The emphasis at this level of analysis is put on exploring the variability in journalists' perceptions of their roles and functions, thus potentially identifying different models of journalism, such as watchdog journalism and beat journalism (O' Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Skovsgaard et al., 2013).

Compared with this individual level of analysis, a routine level of analysis examines how the workflow in news production affects what news looks like (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). For example, the established patterns and routines of a newsroom force incoming journalists to fit into this existing scenario, acting as a potential constraint or an inspiration (Shoemaker et al., 2001). Evidence from digital journalism illustrates how a news routine is also conducive to the formation of a robust network among journalists employed by the same news organisation, thus potentially reinforcing journalists' perception of their roles as disseminators (Tandoc, Hellmueller & Vos, 2013; Aruguete et al., 2021).

An organizational level of analysis can be used to examine a broader range of elements. Organizational ownership, audience, market orientation and platform are among the organizational factors (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In addition to the advent of sophisticated media technologies, organizational effects have combined strongly with other factors to shape news-making. One of the most evident changes within news organizations has been the introduction of media convergence (Dwyer, 2010). This strategy has not just sped up news production in a way that has increased market competitiveness (McElroy, 2019; Le Cam & Domingo, 2015) and potentially overlooked the quality of the news being relayed, but it has also reformulated the workflow through models involving, for example, integration and cross-media with the aim of driving the costs of news production down (Li, 2018).

In a networked media environment, we cannot discuss the characteristics of news selection alone and neglect the institutional structure within which media organizations reside. Institutional level concerns how journalism's professional boundaries are constructed and maintained (Lowrey, 2015); despite this emphasis is underpinned by considerations of economic stature and the political agenda constraining journalists' professional judgments (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These considerations have been presented since journalism emerged as a profession (Vos & Finneman, 2017). The trend has been for media groups to form conglomerates, which has enhanced the control of the elite over media content and its dissemination (Tiffen, 2015). Despite this trend, journalists, particularly watchdog journalists, have striven to provide high-quality news, although they also cover content that audiences are interested in for economic gain (Abdenour & Riffe, 2019).

The social system level concerns how social institutions are structured and interact and what cultural meanings, values and assumptions are embedded in such relations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Analyses at this level explore the deep-rooted connections between cultural and social formations from an ideological perspective



and also examine the aggregated influences of individuals, routines, organisations and institutions on a culture (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Ferreira, 2018). For example, in an age of globalization, many scholars have commented on the fact that although globalization facilitates the global sharing of information, it also promotes the distribution of power within countries that hold more capital and resources than countries with poor sources of information (Valdeón, 2020).

As suggested by Shoemaker and Reese (2014), gatekeeping happens at all gates at different levels. Each level contains a wide range of influential factors, which never work alone (Vu, 2014). For instance, the influential factors contained in the level of social system can integrate into the newsroom routines as an internal force to exert its influence over other levels, and journalistic understanding of the organizational norms and rules can guide the way they practice professionalism (Tandoc, 2018). In the next section, I will look at the concept of gatekeeping in the context of China.

Gatekeeping in the context of China

Studies of Chinese investigative journalism demonstrate that the gatekeeping practices of journalists are constructed discursively. As scholars have overemphasized the political economy's impact on journalistic activities at the macro- level, little research has been done on combining the macro analysis with micro-observation. That is to say, within the Chinese context little work discusses how constraints resulting from influential factors are understood and how they work together as an aggregated force to challenge journalism.

Constraints on news selection

Yu (2011) argued that journalists in China perform a gatekeeping role by selecting and processing raw information into news, which is similar to what is interpreted in the West. However, they are faced with numerous constraints, especially with the prevalence of digital media. Scholars have identified these constraints as coming from political, economic, and technological considerations. From a political perspective, China's propaganda department has created an ever-growing list of forbidden topics (Tong, 2018; Wang, 2016). Journalists apply self-censorship to receive tips from sources and filter out sensitive content and taboo topics (Repnikova, 2017; Xu, 2015). Political interventions come not only from the central government but also from provincial and regional elites (Tong, 2011). This scenario forces Chinese journalists to turn to online sources of information and establish personal social media accounts to boost their impact (Bei, 2013; Hassid & Repnikova, 2016). However, some recent studies have suggested that journalists critically evaluate how digital media impacts their reporting activities (Li, 2018; Guo, 2020; Xu & Jin, 2017). On the one hand, it is undeniable that journalists can source valuable information online; on the other hand, the mis-/dis-information found there disrupts their investigations and makes finding the "truth" difficult (Xu, 2021). Moreover, journalists also select news that conforms to the tastes of their readers.

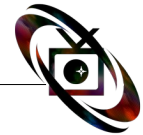


The interest of readers is a crucial parameter in gatekeeping (Shoemaker et al., 2010) because the audience has always been an important part of news production (Huang, 2016). Research also suggested that the audience has become one of the “gatekeepers” on Weibo with their demands for trending topics (Yang & Peng, 2020). Incorporating the demands of the audience is driven by the revenue needs of media organizations. In a case study of *China Youth Daily*, Wang, Sparks, and Yu (2018) observed that even the Party’s newspaper had started to give more space to infotainment in response to readers’ interests. Thus, what most concerns journalists is not the constraints they are up against but rather how to balance political requirements, the economic demands of news organizations, and the interests of their audience while maintaining the quality of the news. These factors influence journalists’ individual understandings of what counts as news and how to play that factor up in news production (Cui & Lin, 2015; Deng, 2018).

A “narrower” gate for investigative reporting?

As investigative journalism is deemed to be an expensive, prestigious and advocacy-based form of journalism, many scholars have focused on its contribution to exposing the misconduct of powerful elites and its reporting for the public good. In the context of China, the definition of investigative journalism shares some similarities to the Western definition regarding revealing social ills and speaking for the public, but the major difference is the political constraints Chinese investigative journalists encounter in their search for the “truth” (Tong, 2011).

The existing literature has emphasized that this type of journalism is experiencing a great decline in terms of its authority and the number of journalists working in the field (Zhang & Cao, 2017; Li & Sparks, 2016) against a backdrop of a growing digital media and tightened political controls. Tong (2011) has explained how organizational routines and workflow impact the activities of investigative journalists and showed that these journalists enjoy a certain degree of autonomy when selecting what to cover. Editors in news organizations are likely to support proposed investigations as long as there is no collision with political interests. In addition, Repnikova (2017) argued that some watchdog journalists, individually, in China still preserve the ideal of professionalism and endeavour to push the boundaries when reporting “sensitive” news. Increasing the awareness of the public, improving the freedom of press and reporting abuses of power are three key themes when examining investigative journalism. Parts of the pressures on investigative journalists also come from citizen journalism declaring that citizens’ reporting is fast and often first-scene reporting (Wu & Wall, 2019). However, fewer studies have examined how investigative journalists in China perform gatekeeping under the impacts of digital media. Therefore, this paper aims to take a holistic view of the factors influencing gatekeeping in this setting and to answer how these journalists in Beijing understand constraints on their news construction. I propose following two research questions:



RQ1: To what extent, journalists in this study consider influential factors as constraints?

RQ2: How do journalists in this study respond to these identified constraints?

Method

This study examines data from 25 in-depth interviews with investigative journalists who were working for mainstream news organizations in Beijing in 2017. Beijing has the largest number of investigative journalists in China, according to Zhang and Cao (2017). All interviews were carried out in the duration of September 2017 and December 2017.

Data collection

The participants were recruited from three ways, as shown in Figure 1. Five participants were selected by the media professionals I was acquainted with (Participant 1, 2, 3, 19, 25). I also contacted many journalists via social media, and five of them agreed to participate (Participant 4, 24, 13, 7 and 10). Snowball sampling was used to recruit the remaining 15 participants. This sampling strategy is primarily used to find participants who might otherwise remain hidden from the researcher (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The first generation consisted of the original ten journalists. The referrals resulted from multiple chains. In particular, Participants 12 and 14 had strong networks in the field. Participant 14 alone supplied four referrals from different news organizations.

In terms of demographics, there were 12 females and 13 males in the group. As the number of investigative journalists in China has been shrinking drastically and only 71 journalists identified themselves as investigative journalists in Beijing at the time (Zhang & Cao, 2017), the journalists interviewed in this study were from different media platforms. Four participants were from online news organizations, six participants were from weekly magazines, and ten participants were from newspaper groups. All the participants had experience in conducting investigations into different kinds of topics, such as the environment, science, technology, politics, and legal and criminal matters.

The structure of the interview were explained to all participants prior to the actual interviews. The identities of all the participants are anonymized in a consistent manner to protect their identities. The time of interviews ranged from 44 to 121 minutes in length. As the interviews were semi-structured, the interview questions mainly centred on how the participants select news from raw information, and whether there were any constraints they experienced while making decisions. For example, the participants were asked whether they had ever received guidance from editors concerning how to deal with source-provided information. They were also asked to list the news topics they preferred to source. In addition, the participants were asked to identify which institutional constraint (among the administrative orders issued by the Party) was a big issue when they carried out



investigations. Moreover, they were asked to list the important characteristics that (investigative) journalists should have in order to pursue the “truth”.

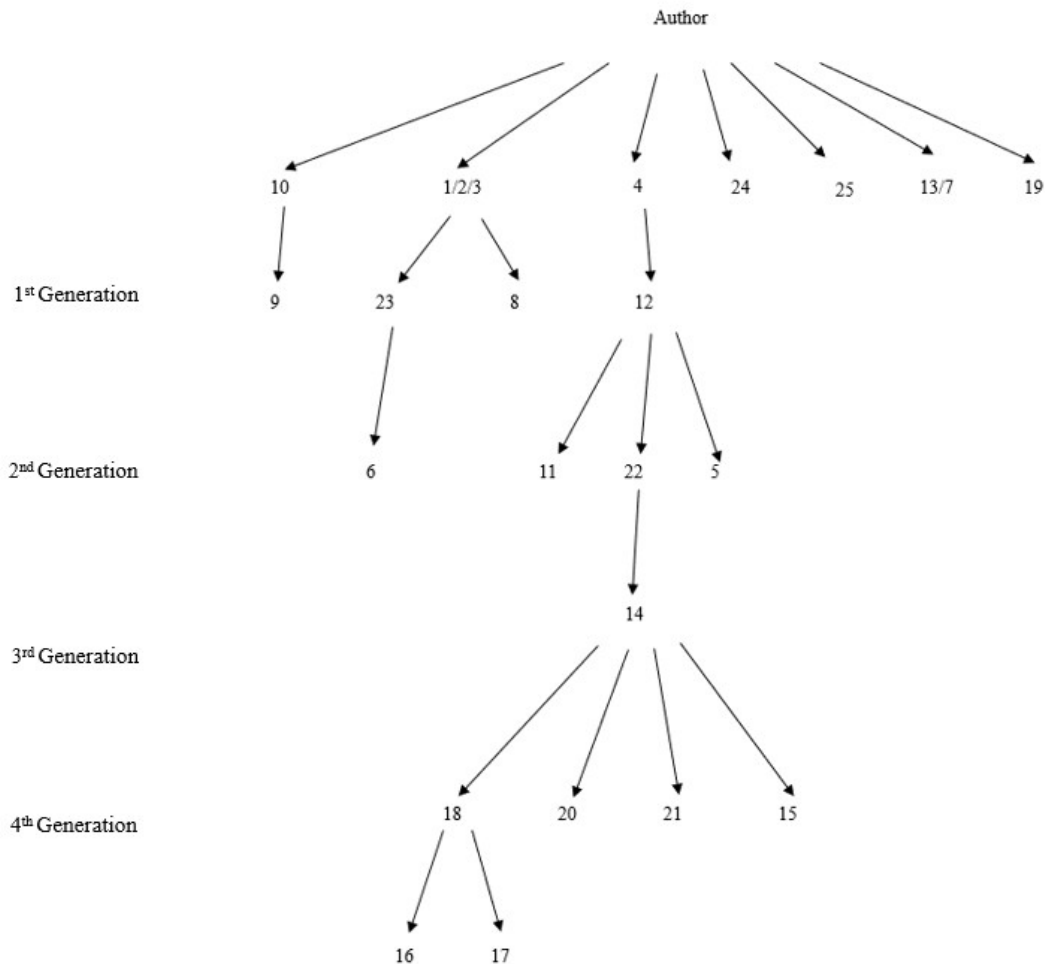
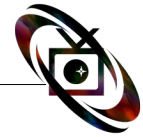


Figure 1. Snowball Sampling

Data analysis

Analysing the interview data involved translating and analysing the transcripts. Every interview was recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. I translated the parts of the interviews used in this paper. This study looks at what factors can influence gatekeeping practices observed by Chinese investigative journalists. The analysis aims to unpack these factors and make sense of the relationships among them. However, few of these journalists listed the constraints and restrictions they experienced in the course of their work in a straightforward manner. Participants explained the difficulties they met while investigating and writing by providing examples involving specific news events. The news events were filtered out in any descriptions of difficulties in order to analyse what factors were involved and how they might be related.



During the process of analysis, I used open coding which does not need to quantify the data. Open coding helps researchers to break down, examine and categorize data where key concepts emerged during the process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Combined with what was informed by previous literature, I firstly identified and categorized the parts where journalists mentioned constraints on their news-producing activities, including from the propaganda department, editors, interviewees, economic budgets and online media. Then, I mapped the relationship between these constraints and observed how they worked with each other. The quotations from my interviewees applied in this study translated by myself were checked by two researchers who are native to Chinese and specialized in media and communication studies.

Findings

The findings suggest that many factors are considered by journalists when they select and process raw information to deliver news and that these factors are interlocked. In many cases, the journalists would not consider some of the difficulties they met during their investigations as influential constraints for two reasons. First, these journalists were used to certain constraints forming their “reality”. Secondly, the journalists’ understanding of how constraints influenced their reporting varied individually. Both aspects are evident in the interviews.

Common sense or common constraints?

One of the participants who had worked as an investigative journalist for more than ten years for a commercial weekly magazine noted that the political impact on news production was a part of the “objective reality that journalists have to accept” (Participant 11). Similarly, Participant 10, a newspaper journalist, said:

The propaganda department resides in everyone’s mind. You could not tell what that feeling was, but you would gradually learn that was the rule. Reporting what is permitted keeps you safe.

Reporting news in China means facing censorship and controls (Svensson, 2012; Deng, 2018). This idea remains in every journalist’s mind, but it does not mean that journalists have to bow to political demands unconditionally. These journalists (Participant 10 and 11) did not mean that investigative journalists should be tamed, censored, and controlled by the Party without a struggle. They suggested that journalists must realize that some topics will remain forever out of bounds. This constraint has been integrated into the reality that journalists have to face. Participants also told me that since they knew what the taboo topics were, they would not expend much effort on them because the effort would be in vain. Indeed, investigative journalists in this study suggested they would not intentionally cover topics that are strictly forbidden.

According to Wang (2016, p. 55), forbidden topics include the pro-democracy movements in China, political dissent and national separatists. The journalists



(Participant 3, 12, 16, 17, 18 and 19) suggested that it is important for them to know to what degree their reporting on controversial issues might be banned and when the ban might be lifted (i.e., before or after the investigation). A veteran journalist from a newspaper group (Participant 19) said that it was difficult for novice journalists to navigate this issue.

For instance, the death of Li Wenxing, an undergraduate who fell victim to a pyramid scheme in Tianjin, was a significant news story in China in 2017. Participant 14 said the ban on reporting Li's death appeared later than expected, and Participant 12 said the ban was loosely given by the propaganda department. She told me that "the ban was not that strict, and we were able to report on the pyramid scheme, but we could not mention Li Wenxing, [in case the media would] sensationalize the news." Participant 12 also said that the department editors did not think there would be any follow-up reporting in the beginning. "I provided my reasons and persuaded them with the help of another journalist", she said.

Therefore, even though the investigative journalists were less likely to mention certain constraints as influential factors because they considered them to be the backdrop for news production in China or a common sense among journalists, it is undeniable that the coercive power of the Party is one of the constraints impeding journalistic investigations into the truth at the macro level.

Variant understandings of constraints among journalists

Although all the journalists I interviewed conducted investigative reporting, they had different understanding of what factors influenced their work. These differences come from editors' preferences, experience, areas of specialization, and judgments concerning newsworthiness. Participant 17 who worked for a newspaper group, provided the following example:

There is a place called Songzhuang in Beijing. Many radical artists are based there. Once, I proposed a report on their poor living conditions. After negotiating with my superiors (editors), I learned that covering the stories about people in this (geographical) zone was forbidden.

On the one hand, three years of experience did not guarantee that this journalist is able to distinguish which topics could safely go through the "gate". On the other hand, the journalists who already knew this was a forbidden topic would not have proposed to investigate it. Thus, there is a great variability among journalistic perceptions regarding what constraints are influential on what stage of the investigation.

Apart from political constraints, the journalists abandoned some topics because they could not evaluate the feasibility of a news proposal. This evaluation process is referred to as processing news tips into "doable" topics in the West (Ettema & Glasser, 1987). Participant 15, a newspaper journalist with four years of experience, said:

I made a proposal about the arrest of Lai Changxing, (who was wanted by the Chinese government for corruption and smuggling and had fled to Canada)



because most of his assets were confiscated at customs as he fled China. By looking at the procedure used for confiscation, I noticed some legal issues. Our leader suggested this topic was very deep, so it did not pass.

According to Tong (2015), evidence is very important for investigative journalists; however, investigative journalism is not necessarily evidence-based journalism. Journalists have to filter and select what information can be used as evidence in their reporting. Participant 9 provided an example in which the absence of evidence constrained an investigation.

In April this year, we got a tip about a soakaway (polluted water pit) in Langfang, Hebei province. In the beginning, we learned that some villagers from a local chemical factory poured industrial waste (acid) into the soakaway from time to time, polluting it. Many people in the village got cancer, and the number of deaths kept increasing. We were told (by sources) that their tap water was polluted as well. What's more, some villagers said the head of the village had conspired with the chemistry factory causing the pollution. However, I have not been able to verify that because there is no direct (core) evidence.

Two-thirds of the participants said they had come across cases in which important information could not be verified with evidence for reasons other than politics. For instance, individuals could have distorted the facts to minimize the negative impact upon themselves (Participant 14 and 19).

Furthermore, the economic status of a news organization can influence the verification process. Participant 17 recounted the experience he had when he went to investigate the suicide of a pregnant female several hours before going into labour in Yulin hospital in Shanxi.

I was the only journalist assigned to investigate this event in my organization, and I spent a week there (Yulin). [...] My investigation there did not go well. It was assigned work and it was already late as I arrived there; this event was very complicated, and I was the only person sent [to investigate] by my organization. There were many aspects (sources) I could not reach in a short time. Another news organization in Beijing sent six or seven journalists to the scene.

The downsizing of investigative reporting departments has led to a shortage of investigative journalists in recent years. This situation constrains journalists' activities, as they need to cooperate with each other and find more sources for verification. It takes time for journalists to "make progress" (Participant 24) because not all sources, such as officials, are easy to access. This highlights the importance of collaboration among journalists when many stakeholders are involved in a news event. Each journalist is able to access one or two source(s) efficiently; after which, they can share and compare the information each has obtained from different sources.

Additionally, in a news organization with limited budgets, it is difficult for the editor-in-chief to decide who should be sent to the frontline, beat journalists or investigative journalists. A newspaper editor said that, in most cases, the investigative department had priority but that sometimes conflicts between departments



arose (Participant 19). The resolution of such a conflict depended on how the leaders of the departments negotiated with the editor-in-chief and each other.

In addition to the shortage of support from their organization, the journalists who were interviewed also noted that the editors or department leaders made up another influential factor concerning what news could be covered. Participant 12 who had been working for a leading commercial media organization for five years at the time of the interview, said that their editors did not force them to report on trending topics. “Our leaders will not ask us to follow trends because in-depth reporting is what they want to see.” Compared with veterans, novices receive more assignments to familiarize them with organizational goals, structures and writing styles. Novices do their reporting under the supervision of editors or veteran journalists (Participant 5).

Participant 16 who was also from a commercial news organization with ten years of experience, told me that he was asked to lead novice journalists in the follow-up reporting of a news event that he considered worthless. He said:

As the death of Su Xiangmao, an application programmer suspected of committing suicide after experiencing marriage fraud, became headline news in most Chinese media, our organization urged me to investigate this issue. I said that I would rather resign than cover this because it did not warrant investigative reporting.

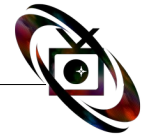
His reason for refusing to cover this event was based on his individual judgment that there was no evidence to prove Su’s death was directly due to marriage fraud. Participant 18 who had worked in this field for a decade, said that it was not unusual for them to have to report on something they did not want to report on:

A certain amount of the reporting that we wrote didn’t necessarily have much news-worthiness (meaningfulness) to justify investigating it, but journalists can still make that a piece of reporting which fills the assigned workload. We certainly want to write some good stories and do influential reporting, but journalists have to deal with their workloads by reporting on things that may not be that important (to society).

Reporting on items with little social significance is called “fake” in-depth reporting, according to Participant 18. Previous research has demonstrated that investigative journalists in China prefer to do in-depth and informative reporting covering significant public issues (Repnikova, 2017; Wang, 2021). However, they are under pressure from their news organizations to investigate trendy events to generate traffic.

Identifying constraints as influential factors

The influential factors interviewees mentioned are based on their individual experiences, including the arrangements of editors, the economic statuses of their organizations, the institutional structure of the media system, and the “common sense” they exhibited regarding press freedom in China. It is important to differentiate between how influential factors work as constraints on reporting and how journalists see such influential factors as constraints. Neither aspect can be



neglected. The existing literature has concentrated on the political and economic aspects at the macro- and meso-levels in the examination of gatekeeping. This academic vein applies the Western approach to understanding journalism in China. Specifically, it views investigative journalism as being faithful to the truth and questioning power (De Burgh, 2008; Li & Sparks, 2016), but the case of China is neither simple nor complex. If we compare the threats journalists experienced in China with threats they face in the West, coercive power is one of the foremost enemies of Chinese journalists. For practitioners, this constraint has become “fact” and been integrated into their daily production of news.

Therefore, this paper suggests that, first, these influential factors can be understood as constraints imposed by the administrative orders from the Party-state or experienced editors who represent the interests of organizations. These constraints are derived from the special institutional setting of the media systems in China. Secondly, I emphasize that these constraints are based on the individual perceptions of journalists, although these individual perceptions do not relate completely to personal reasons. These perceptions incorporate journalists’ understanding of their occupation and their organizations’ goals, individual motivations in investigations, and personalities, all of which influence the decision-making of journalists in the long run. Shoemaker and Reese (2014, p. 243) carefully select the “terminology to suggest that one level of constraints or conditions is contingent on the influence of another”. This study echoes their argument that influential factors at one level could be contingent on those of another level. Furthermore, this research argues that what constrains journalistic practices may do so without the awareness of the journalists in Chinese context.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to the knowledge of investigative journalism in China and to the issue of understanding the gatekeeping in non-western societies. Specifically, there are two implications of these findings.

First, this study demonstrates that the complexity of journalistic gatekeeping with a particular focus on investigative journalism in China, is from the intertwined relationship between the influential factors. According to pioneering works (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014), the influential factors worked upon journalistic news-making are examined in hierarchical layers. But in this study, it is insufficient to say that certain factors always dominate the process of journalists’ constructing news, such as administrative orders and bans from the propaganda department. There are still spaces to negotiate, even though it is limited. Participants (1, 3, 12, and 13) agreed that the reason they work as investigative journalists is that they have certain autonomy to write stories based on their judgment, which makes them feel respected. It is much more complicated than we have been informed about how the factors beyond the political constraints impact gatekeeping. For instance, when a news organization is in financial jeopardy,

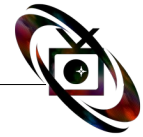


the shortage of journalists and financial support in terms of sourcing information to verify facts in a timely manner would put the organization into a difficult situation (Participant 18). In this scenario, editors would have to balance the importance of the news and decide to who and how many journalists would be assigned to investigate on the scene. Due to the disparities in the skills and knowledge of veteran and novice journalists, editors are more likely to assign veteran journalists to lead investigations that have the potential to attract more attention from their audience (Participant 16). However, veteran journalists find this sort of situation to be a constraint on their reporting, as they prefer to cover stories with significant social implications instead of trending topics. Because the field of investigative journalism is shrinking, very few journalists interviewed for this study said they had specialized areas of reporting. According to Participant 18:

I don't have any special topics or areas to investigate. When someone left the news organization, their personal relationship with investigating that area left along with them, but reporting has to carry on.

In this loop, the reason for the shortage of staff is twofold. On the one hand, we have been informed by previous studies that journalism in China shrinks because of the tight control of the Party (Wang, 2016). On the other hand, Participant 25 remarked that “as bombshells (breaking news) occur, no one (journalist) should be absent [from the investigation]”. He implied that news organizations should not miss the opportunity to report on trending events, as mis-/dis-information now appears along with breaking news online, the engagement of professional journalists is much more crucial. The findings suggest that these journalists still have a say in what information passes through the gate, although external factors (e.g. news audience, social media users) and internal factors (editors, working routines) change the flow of journalistic investigations.

Secondly, this research contributes to explaining how constraints from different levels turn into influential factors concerning gatekeeping in Chinese journalism studies. Put differently as a direct question, from an empirical perspective: how do the constraints influence journalists' decision-making? Although scholars (Shoemaker & Reese, 2016; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) have developed and improved the hierarchical influence model to show that the selection, process flow, and writing of news needs to take many factors into consideration, these factors may not work as constraints to completing a piece of reporting based on the perception of Chinese journalists. Less research clarified how Chinese journalists think about influential factors as constraints of sourcing, investigation, news writing, and publishing. The experiences of the journalists I interviewed showed that as they are immersed in a tightened controlled working environment, they gradually adapt to this environment. The practices of keeping seeking out ways to get their reporting published are no longer “improvised” practices (Pan, 2000) because it has become a part of their working routine to keep developing new strategies to publish the reporting and circulate the news. In this way, as influential factors are



routinized as daily working occurrences, it is less likely for journalists to consider them as constraints.

In addition, what influential factors could lead to constraints varies according to individual perceptions of journalists. The disparities among them at the micro-level remain extremely important within the context of journalism in the non-Western world, especially in Chinese journalism. As we have been informed extensively about how journalism practised in the grip of the Party which has become an assumption incorporated in Chinese journalism studies, knowing how journalists, especially investigative journalists, process news under this circumstance needs much more research than knowing how this environment has been constructed. To a certain degree, journalists, according to this study, still could practice journalism, like what western journalists did. The reasons for the news which did not pass the gate could be identified from the relationship between journalists, editors, and their interviewees. A recent study (Wang & Sparks, 2020) has provided indications that understanding Chinese journalism has to investigate the connection between political economy and micro-sociology.

In conclusion, this study explored how investigative journalists in Beijing selected news stories and what factors influenced their decisions regarding what news was eligible to pass through the “gate” and what should occur at the “gate”. Utilizing the hierarchical model of influence (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), I argue that to identify how journalists practice gatekeeping, it is necessary to first identify the constraints upon journalists coming from different social levels and discover why journalists consider these constraints work as influential factors. The gatekeeping practices of these investigative journalists in Beijing incorporated filtering taboo topics out of the story pipeline, making decisions about what crucial facts could be uncovered. Then, they evaluate whether the verified source-provided information could be accomplished within limited budgets, and negotiate with editors regarding the importance of news.

The limitations of this study come from the research sample. There are very few remaining journalists who do in-depth or investigative reporting in China nowadays. It was hard to recruit participants and obtain permission to record them. The sampled journalists were from various media organizations, both online and offline, so their experiences varied. Moreover, these journalists all worked for news organizations in Beijing, although the headquarters of some of the media groups represented were not registered in Beijing. Regardless, the analysis and argument were largely based upon the experiences of journalists in Beijing. As Beijing is the political center of China, the media groups in Beijing are expected to be more heavily controlled by the propaganda department. Hence, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other areas of China.

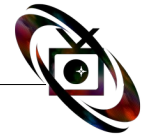


Acknowledgments

This paper draws from my PhD thesis completed at Lancaster University. I thank the guidance and help my supervisors, Dr. Robert (ted) Gutsche Jr. and Prof. Anne Cronin, provided to me. I thank Zizheng Yu and Lixiong Chen for their valuable suggestions on the early drafts.

References / Список литературы

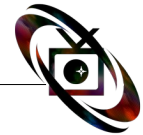
- Abdenour, J., & Riffe, D. (2019). Digging for (Ratings) Gold: The Connection Between Investigative Journalism and Audiences. *Journalism Studies*, 20(16), 2386–2403.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1598887>
- Aruguete, N., Calvo, E., & Ventura, T. (2021). News Sharing, Gatekeeping, and Polarization: A Study of the #Bolsonaro Election. *Digital Journalism*, 9(1), 1–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1852094>
- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies. *Social Research Update*, 28(1), 93–108.
- Bei, J. (2013). *How Chinese journalists use Weibo microblogging for investigative reporting*. Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, University of Oxford.
- Brady, A.-M. (2008). *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Breed, W. (1955). Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis. *Social Forces*, 33(4), 326–335.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2573002>
- Bruns, A. (2018). *Gatewatching and news curation: Journalism, social media, and the public sphere*. Peter Lang US. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b13293>
- Burnes, B., & Cooke, B. (2012). Kurt Lewin's Field Theory: A Review and Re-evaluation: Kurt Lewin's Field Theory. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 15, 408–425.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2012.00348.x>
- Cui, D., & Lin, T. T. C. (2015). Professional intervention and organizational incorporation: Examining journalistic use of microblogs in two Chinese newsrooms. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 25(4), 351–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2014.960878>
- De Burgh, H. (2008). *Investigative Journalism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Deng, J. (2018). The Paper Janus: How exceptionalism based on regaining influence and doing new media help a Chinese mobile news app negotiate censorship for better journalism. *Communication and the Public*, 3(2), 113–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047318770466>
- Dwyer, T. (2010). *Media convergence*. Open University Press.
- Ettema, J., & Glasser, T. (1987). On the Epistemology of Investigative Journalism. In M. Gurevitch & M. R. Levy (Ed.), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* (Vol. 6). Sage.
- Ferreira, G. B. (2018). Gatekeeping Changes in the New Media Age: The Internet, Values and Practices of Journalism. *Brazilian journalism research*, 14(2), 486–505.
<https://doi.org/10.25200/BJR.v14n2.2018.1026>



- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *Grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishing Company.
- Guo, L. (2020). China's "Fake News" Problem: Exploring the Spread of Online Rumors in the Government-Controlled News Media. *Digital Journalism*, 8(8), 992–1010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1766986>
- Hanitzsch, T., & Mellado, C. (2011). What Shapes the News around the World? How Journalists in Eighteen Countries Perceive Influences on Their Work. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16(3), 404–426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161211407334>
- Hassid, J., & Repnikova, M. (2016). Why Chinese print journalists embrace the Internet. *Journalism*, 17(7), 882–898. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915592405>
- Heinderyckx, F. (2015). Gatekeeping theory redux. In T. Vos & F. Heinderyckx (Eds.), *Gatekeeping in transition* (pp. 267–282). Routledge.
- Hellmueller, L., & Li, Y. (2015). Contest Over Content: A longitudinal study of the CNN iReport effect on the journalistic field. *Journalism Practice*, 9(5), 617–633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.987553>
- Huang, D. (2016). Historical constructions of journalistic communication in China: On three definitions of news. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(3), 215–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1198491>
- Le Cam, F., & Domingo, D. (2015). The tyranny of immediacy: Gatekeeping practices in French and Spanish online newsrooms. In T. Vos & F. Heinderyckx (Eds.), *Gatekeeping in transition* (pp. 123–140). Routledge.
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in Group Dynamics: II. Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research. *Human Relations*, 1(2), 143–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674700100201>
- Li, K. (2018). Convergence and de-convergence of Chinese journalistic practice in the digital age. *Journalism*, 19(9–10), 1380–1396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918769463>
- Li, K., & Sparks, C. (2018). Chinese Newspapers and Investigative Reporting in the New Media Age. *Journalism Studies*, 19(3), 415–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1192955>
- Lowrey, W. (2015). Ecologies and fields. In T. Vos & F. Heinderyckx (Eds.), *Gatekeeping in transition* (pp. 141–160). Routledge.
- McElroy, B. P. (2019). Experimenting with interaction: TV news efforts to invite audiences into the broadcast and their effects on gatekeeping. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 25(3), 449–465. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736975>
- McNair, B. (2018). *Fake News: Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- O'Sullivan, J., & Heinonen, A. (2008). Old values, new media: Journalism role perceptions in a changing world. *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 357–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780802281081>
- Pan, Z. (2000). Spatial configuration in institutional change: A case of China's journalism reforms. *Journalism*, 1(3), 253–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490000100302>
- Pearson, G. D. H., & Kosicki, G. M. (2017). How Way-Finding is Challenging Gatekeeping in the Digital Age. *Journalism Studies*, 18(9), 1087–1105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1123112>
- Reese, S. D., & Shoemaker, P. J. (2016). A Media Sociology for the Networked Public Sphere: The Hierarchy of Influences Model. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(4), 389–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1174268>



- Repnikova, M. (2017). *Media politics in China: Improvising power under authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schwalbe, C. B., Silcock, B. W., & Candello, E. (2015). Gatecheckers at the Visual News Stream: A new model for classic gatekeeping theory. *Journalism Practice*, 9(4), 465–483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1030133>
- Shoemaker, P. J. (1991). *Gatekeeping*. Sage.
- Shoemaker, P. J. (2020). Gatekeeping and Journalism. In J. Nussbaum (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.819>
- Shoemaker, P. J., Eichholz, M., Kim, E., & Wrigley, B. (2001). Individual and Routine Forces in Gatekeeping. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 233–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900107800202>
- Shoemaker, P. J., & Reese, S. D. (2014). *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930434>
- Shoemaker, P. J., & Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping theory*. Routledge.
- Singer, J. B. (2014). User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space. *New Media & Society*, 16(1), 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813477833>
- Skovsgaard, M., Albæk, E., Bro, P., & de Vreese, C. (2013). A reality check: How journalists' role perceptions impact their implementation of the objectivity norm. *Journalism*, 14(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884912442286>
- Svensson, M. (2012). Media and civil society in China: Community building and networking among investigative journalists and beyond. *China Perspectives*, 2012(3), 1928. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5934>
- Tandoc, E. C. (2018). Gatekeeping Influences and Journalistic Capital: Proposing a mechanism of influence. *Journalism Studies*, 19(16), 2344–2358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1345320>
- Tandoc, E. C., Hellmueller, L., & Vos, T. P. (2013). Mind the gap: Between journalistic role conception and role enactment. *Journalism Practice*, 7(5), 539–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2012.726503>
- Tiffen, R., & Domingo, D. (2015). Whose Hand on the Gate? Rupert Murdoch's Australian and News Coverage of Climate Change. In T. Vos & F. Heinderyckx (Ed.), *Gatekeeping in transition* (pp. 180–200). Routledge.
- Tong, J. (2011). *Investigative Journalism in China: Journalism, Power, and Society*. Continuum.
- Tong, J. (2015). *Investigative Journalism, Environmental Problems and Modernisation in China*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tong, J. (2019). The Taming of Critical Journalism in China: A combination of political, economic and technological forces. *Journalism Studies*, 20(1), 79–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1375386>
- Valdeón, R. A. (2022). Gatekeeping, ideological affinity and journalistic translation. *Journalism*, 23(1), 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920917296>
- Vos, T. P., & Finneman, T. (2017). The early historical construction of journalism's gatekeeping role. *Journalism*, 18(3), 265–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916636126>



- Vos, T. P., & Thomas, R. J. (2019). The Discursive (Re)construction of Journalism's Gatekeeping Role. *Journalism Practice*, 13(4), 396–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1478746>
- Vu, H. T. (2014). The online audience as gatekeeper: The influence of reader metrics on news editorial selection. *Journalism*, 15(8), 1094–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913504259>
- Waisbord, S. (2018). Truth is What Happens to News: On journalism, fake news, and post-truth. *Journalism Studies*, 19(13), 1866–1878. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1492881>
- Wallace, J. (2018). Modelling Contemporary Gatekeeping: The rise of individuals, algorithms and platforms in digital news dissemination. *Digital Journalism*, 6(3), 274–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1343648>
- Wang, D., & Sparks, C. (2020). Smartphones, Wechat and Paid Content: Journalists and Sources in a Chinese Newspaper. *Journalism Studies*, 21(1), 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1620115>
- Wang, H. (2016). *The Transformation of Investigative Journalism in China: From Journalists to Activists*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wang, H. (2021). Generational Change in Chinese Journalism: Developing Mannheim's Theory of Generations for Contemporary Social Conditions. *Journal of Communication*, 71(1), 104–128. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa040>
- Wang, H., & Sparks, C. (2019). Chinese Newspaper Groups in the Digital Era: The Resurgence of the Party Press. *Journal of Communication*, 69(1), 94–119. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy061>
- Wang, H., Sparks, C., & Yu, H. (2018). Popular journalism in China: A study of *China Youth Daily*. *Journalism*, 19(9–10), 1203–1219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917691987>
- White, D. M. (1950). The "Gate Keeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News. *Journalism Quarterly*, 27(4), 383–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769905002700403>
- Wu, Y., & Wall, M. (2019). Prosumers in a digital multiverse: An investigation of how WeChat is affecting Chinese citizen journalism. *Global Media and China*, 4(1), 36–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436419835441>
- Xu, D. (2015). Online Censorship and Journalists' Tactics: A Chinese perspective. *Journalism Practice*, 9(5), 704–720. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.982968>
- Xu, Y., & Jin, J. (2017). The Hierarchy of Influences on Professional Role Perceptions Among Chinese Online Journalists: A multilevel analysis. *Digital Journalism*, 5(2), 194–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2016.1162662>
- Yang, T., & Peng, Y. (2020). The Importance of Trending Topics in the Gatekeeping of Social Media News Engagement: A Natural Experiment on Weibo. *Communication Research*, 009365022093372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220933729>
- Yu, H. (2011). Beyond gatekeeping: J-blogging in China. *Journalism*, 12(4), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884910388229>
- Zhang, Z., & Cao, Y. (2017). Report of Chinese investigative journalists in the era of digital media (Xin meiti huanjing xia zhongguo diaocha jizhe hangye shengrain bianhua baogao). *Modern Communication (Xiandai Chuanbo)*, 11, 27–33.